Some general notes, directed especially towards Central/Eastern Europe

- it is impossible to overstate the importance of the two key antonyms used in the evaluation of applications by ERC panels: 'ground-breaking' *vs* 'incremental'
→ any project deemed by the panel to be incremental will almost inevitably fail to advance to step 2
  [this does not reflect a value judgement on the part of the panel: the research proposed may very well be considered to be of excellent quality and significance; but the ERC tells panels not to advance incremental research to step 2, on the understanding (mistaken, unfortunately) that high-quality incremental research can be funded at the national level]
→ the ERC decided, from its inception, to fund only 'ground-breaking' research — where 'ground-breaking' is of course a highly flexible notion
→ applications <u>must</u> make it explicit in what way(s) the research proposed breaks new ground

- another central evaluation criterion is the tandem 'high risk'/'high gain'
→ panelists and external reviewers are asked to comment directly on whether we are dealing with a 'high-risk/high-gain' project
→ it is usually not very difficult to evaluate the potential for high gains
→ it is incumbent on the PI to spell out clearly in what way(s) the proposed project is high in risk
→ risk assessment and management is a difficult matter, one with which academics in the humanities and social sciences as a rule have much less experience than researchers in the hard sciences
→ for research involving an experimental component, spelling out the risks is usually not particularly difficult
→ for research of a purely theoretical nature, risk assessment and management may be quite hard — one way to work it out is in the form of a family of hypotheses that interlock in such a way that if one of the central hypotheses should fail to be confirmed, there is an alternative lined up for which, in turn, there is a contingency plan if that hypothesis is not confirmed either; spelling this out in detail is a task not to be underestimated by the PI

- this is a natural segue to the significance of clear research hypotheses and <u>specific</u> research questions which the hypotheses help answer
  – the application text should explicitly contain **both** one or more hypotheses **and** a set of research questions, the former at the service of the answering latter
  – both the hypothesis/hypotheses and the research questions that underlie the project should be **clearly** spelled out, ideally in the form of numbered items or bullet points so that they can be easily retrieved by panelists and external reviewers
  – ideally, there is a good balance between hypotheses and questions
  – with respect to the research questions, two approaches are likely to lead to failure:
    (a) too many questions without even the beginnings of answers being offered in the application text [this suggests the PI does not have much of a clue as yet];
    (b) too many of the questions being explicitly answered in the application text [this suggests that the PI/field has most of the answers already, and that hence the project will not advance significantly beyond the state of the art]

- in light of the preceding bullet points, it is not surprising that at the ERC, projects that generate the greatest enthusiasm are those whose PIs are clearly 'thinking outside the box'
→ 'thinking outside the box' tends not to be stimulated or even encouraged in Central and Eastern Europe: there is a strong tendency in these parts for both researchers and local funding agencies 'to like what they know'
→ but projects building directly and exclusively on what is already known are by definition incremental, hence as a rule deemed ineligible for ERC funding
→ therefore, the PI will be well advised to approach the writing of an ERC project, right from its inception, from the mindset of breaking through the barriers of what is familiar
→ the entire process of writing an ERC application is profoundly different from the process of writing a typical application for a local funding agency (whether in Central/Eastern Europe or elsewhere) — a good approach to the writing of an ERC application is to start with a clean slate, setting aside the kinds of constraints that would apply if the PI were to submit something to their local funding agency
→ one consideration that is worth bearing in mind is that in Central/Eastern Europe it is not unusual for funding agencies to ask the PI to emphasise the links between the project proposed and the PI's previous research — PIs who are used to being required to firmly embed their project in their previous research have an inclination to do the same in their ERC applications, which is counterproductive: for the ERC, it is essential to spell out how the project goes *beyond* the PI's previous research or marks a clear break with what the PI worked on in the past
→ another thing to stress is that local funding agencies in Central/Eastern Europe have a tendency towards what one might call 'provincialism', with an emphasis on the local research community, not on the international research community — taking such a 'provincial' approach to writing an ERC application would again be counterproductive
→ related to the previous remark is the tendency on the part of PIs from Central/Eastern Europe to 'nail their project shut' already at the application stage when it comes to personnel: it is common (in response to expectations raised by the local funding agencies) for PIs from these parts to have all the PhD and postdoc positions created by the project assigned ahead of time to specific individuals, usually mentioned by name and often hailing from the university or country where the project will be housed; while it certainly is not a bad idea to mention one or two names (esp. if the researchers in question are already well-established entities in their field, and are not from the hosting institution), it may be better to reserve the name-dropping for an advisory board and to leave the PhD and postdoc positions open

- it is important to bear in mind that research funded by the ERC is expected to foster opportunities for early-career researchers — therefore, applications that are heavy on postdocs and leave little or no room for PhDs are vulnerable to criticism; the PI's belief that 'there are no local candidates to fill the PhD positions' (cf. the earlier remark about provincialism) is not a valid defence: candidates for the PhD positions can be recruited from all over the world
→ an important question to ask in connection with the assignment of tasks to the PhD students employed on the project is whether these tasks are such that they will naturally be able to culminate in a doctoral dissertation: it is not unusual to see PhD students on a project being given roles that are purely supportive (statistical analysis; logistical work in connection with experiments) and which by their very nature cannot result in a thesis; for technical support, it will be better to employ research assistants (which are usually cheaper, freeing up space on

the budget for other items), <u>not</u> PhD students

- regarding the budget, it will be good to keep in mind that there is no need to 'go for the maximum': it is not the case that projects that are relatively 'cheap' will not be taken seriously — what matters, first and foremost, is the content of the application and the excellence of the PI; budgetary considerations will play a role only if the panel find that the justification for certain budget items is not adequate (so there is more likely to be discussion about extraordinarily expensive projects than about 'cheap' ones)

→ every year, each panel is allotted a specific amount of the ERC's overall spending budget,but this amount is not entirely set in stone at the point at which decisions are finalised in step 2; changes in the allocation of funds per panel usually happen once the panel's decisions are all in and the exact total allotted to the ERC is known, which means that it is possible that a particular panel ends up being able to fund more projects than anticipated — in this connection, 'cheap' projects have the potential advantage of being able to be 'squeezed in' relatively easily

→ the bulk of the budget (esp. in the case of SH applications) will always be personnel, for which it is important to bear in mind that the ERC stipulates that remuneration for persons employed on ERC-funded projects must be in line with (and cannot exceed) the standards set in the host country — this has the side effect of making projects hosted in high-wage countries such as Israel very heavy on their staff budget, whereas projects hosted in Central/Eastern Europe will generally be 'cheap' (which, in connection with the previous remark, gives the latter an edge if there turns out to be more money available for the panel in question in the end)

Summary

- the two key antonyms used in the evaluation of applications by ERC panels:
  – 'ground-breaking'
  – 'incremental'

- to facilitate the evaluation of the potential risks and gains of the project, research hypotheses and research questions should be formulated explicitly, and as clearly and specifically as possible (ideally in the form of numbered items or bullet points)

- at the ERC, projects that generate the greatest enthusiasm are those whose PIs are clearly 'thinking outside the box'
→ it is important to spell out how the project goes *beyond* the PI's previous research or marks a clear break with what the PI worked on in the past

- research funded by the ERC is expected to foster opportunities early-career researchers; PhD students employed on the project must be assigned tasks that will naturally be able to culminate in a doctoral dissertation

- regarding the budget, there is no need or expectation to 'go for the maximum'; there are advantages to keeping the budget lean