

**Researchers at Risk in MSCA**  
**Preliminary assessment of current obstacles & related suggestions**

**MSCA eligibility criteria:**

- 1) **MSCA mobility rules:** The standard MSCA fellowship criteria state that the researcher cannot have resided or carried out his/her main activity in the country of the beneficiary for more than 12 months in the three years immediately before the call deadline. However, given the time and conditions required to prepare a competitive MSCA individual fellowship application, an at-risk researcher is often best placed to apply for such a fellowship when they are out of immediate danger, and temporarily in a more stable situation. For example, a candidate who is already in a first or second 1-year temporary placement within a SAR member university in Europe or elsewhere, or at a German university in receipt of a two-year Philipp Schwartz Initiative fellowship, or at a French university in receipt of a PAUSE fellowship, is usually in a better position to apply for an MSCA fellowship than someone who is still facing risks in Syria or Turkey. If such candidates are already in the second year of their temporary placement, they are not eligible to apply for an MSCA fellowship, but these may be the very candidates who are more likely to submit competitive applications.

**Suggestion:** Might the current exception that applies to those in the process of obtaining refugee status be extended also to those identifying as ‘at-risk’ but who are *outside* the asylum-seeking process? (Many researchers at risk are in “hosting agreements”/temporary visiting researcher positions at universities across Europe with temporary visas, and not in the refugee process.) If the mobility rule allowed for 24 months residency (instead of 12 months) in the country of the beneficiary in the preceding three years, this should open the opportunity to more competitive researchers at risk. If it were extended further to allow 36 months in the preceding five years, this would be even better, enabling those who need additional time to stabilize their situation in the host country (in order to take language classes, find accommodation, jobs for spouses, schools for children etc.) to retain eligibility to apply.

- 2) **Timeline for applications:** One intake per year with an approximate six-month gap between the time of application and the decision makes it unlikely that those facing immediate risks will be availing of the mechanism as an emergency opportunity. Other fellowship programmes or international networks, and universities themselves will need to continue filling this urgent gap with their own fellowships.

**Suggestion:** A second annual intake would mean more candidates might benefit. An alternative might be an ad-hoc procedure for researchers at risk on the basis of a quota (up to a certain number of scholarships per year). We understand that this would require a major overhaul of the current peer review process and evaluation system which we presume is unlikely to occur in the near-term but wished to include mention of this important obstacle for researchers at risk and a possible longer-term measure to consider.

- 3) **Joint nature of applications:** For some researchers at risk who do not have strong pre-existing contacts or networks within Europe, it is challenging for them to find a supervisor for their MSCA project.



**Suggestion:** If the MSCA mobility rule that currently applies to those in the refugee process can be extended to those in the “at-risk” category, this will allow the researcher additional time in a safe place to deepen contacts within Europe and find a supervisor for a joint MSCA application. This will not resolve the issue entirely but should help.

If it were possible for researchers to apply as individuals without the need for a host institution at the time of application, this would simplify the process further, of course, for researchers at risk. Successful applicants would then only need to approach host institutions if they are informed that their MSCA application is successful pending an offer from a host institution, which they could then work to secure.

### **MSCA announcement/application stage**

**Application:** The language of EU calls for applications can be confusing for those applying for EU/MSCA funding for the first time. Norms around ethics, open science, research integrity etc. are not always immediately understood by applicants new to the system.

**Suggestion:** An invitation at the MSCA announcement/call for proposals stage for researchers at risk (and presumably also those with refugee status/in the asylum-seeking process?) to signal their interest in an advisory service for those intending to submit MSCA applications would be helpful. The InSPIREurope project of course includes limited funding for a pilot of such a coaching service (25 to 35 researchers over three years coached on accessing EU and national fellowship funding). This is an area that might be expanded in the future, together with the MSCA country contact points. Of course such tailored advice specific to the application process cannot correct for the longer-term disadvantages experienced by many as outlined briefly below, but it will certainly be helpful for some applicants.

### **MSCA evaluation criteria:**

**Excellence:** Many researchers at risk have significant gaps in their track record of publications and their teaching experience. This might be due to the need to escape a situation of violence (e.g. Syria), or firing by their institutions (e.g. signatories of the Academics for Peace petition in Turkey), or if publishing academic articles in their area of expertise was deemed threatening to authorities and put them at risk of censorship or arrest so they instead chose not to publish (e.g. women’s rights scholars/political scientists in Iran). Many have not had the opportunity to travel abroad on a regular basis to conferences in their field. Many have not had access to state-of-the-art laboratory facilities that many of their European competitors for MSCA fellowships will have had. Many lack excellent European language skills. A number have had to deal with censorship of online content in their home countries, denial of publication or research funds for politically-sensitive work, or denial of access to online journals containing recent research in areas deemed politically sensitive in their home countries. The accumulation and intersection of all of the above possible hurdles and disadvantages creates an uneven playing field with their competitors for MSCA fellowships who may have worked within well-resourced, stable institutions within stable countries their whole research lives.

**Suggestion:** Evaluation criteria should take the above factors into account as far as possible when defining and assessing research excellence. If there is a will to increase access of this target population to MSCA fellowships, either through earmarked funding or other means, the following steps might be helpful:



- a) A check-box in the MSCA application process for both researchers at risk and their host institutions to identify the application as involving a researcher at risk. (Definition to be discussed further, but a field would need to be created in the form for inclusion of this definition). Given that the check-box is not a supportive measure in itself, it would need to be clear on the form why this information is requested, and the related reasons to check the box. If by checking the box the application is then treated differently (for example if any of the options outlined in (b), (c), (d), or (e) or other will apply) it will be important to make this clear before or at the check-box stage. The advisory service noted under Announced/Application stage above would then be offered.
- b) Development of a weighted formula impacting on the threshold in the MSCA. (This would be a big step of course, but it is a step that could be considered if the preference is for researchers at risk to remain within the general MSCA evaluation process rather than applying a separate, parallel process with earmarked funding).
- c) More openness in the evaluation process to non-linear career tracks (including explained interruptions in track record/publications), alongside a continued strong focus on the quality of the research idea in the MSCA proposal, as well as continued broad consideration of the immense value of the fellowship both to the host institution (its faculty and students) and to the individual researcher at risk (as outlined in MSCA Impact, sub-criteria 2.1).
- d) Inclusion of experts or a separate expert panel integrated into the evaluation process to comment on short-listed applications from researchers at risk.
- e) Consideration of earmarked funding for a number of researchers at risk once the threshold has been reached. For this and other EAC programmes perhaps additional funding from other DGs, such as AMIF, or Neighbourhood or Development could be explored.

### Sustainability

Continued MSCA support for Europe-wide coordination of efforts on behalf of researchers at risk will be key in sustaining, expanding and improving existing support measures.

### Preliminary additional suggestions for support to researchers at risk:

- 1) **Conference travel fund for researchers at risk already in Europe** (not recipients of MSCA fellowships) to travel to conferences in their field.
- 2) **Support for researchers at risk still in countries of origin.** This might be in the form of:
  - a) **Remote fellowships:** Some universities in the SAR network are now providing unpaid remote fellowships in the form of in-kind support to researchers still in their home countries. The level of such support varies but it can be very valuable to researchers and may include the use of a university email address so that they can use this to submit articles to academic publishers, as well as online access to journals, libraries, data repositories and other electronic resources to enable researchers to continue their work, or remote access to English-language classes and other career development supports. This enables researchers to maintain a vital connection to colleagues outside their home country. Of course, *paid* remote fellowships to individuals would



be even more useful to those who cannot travel or whose families cannot travel and who wish to stay in the home country if it is still possible, in the hope that conditions will improve. This could be in the form of a stipend for researchers to teach via remote connection from their own country, or participate in working groups and committees, most likely with an administrative affiliation to an institution outside of the home country. Or in the form of a scholarship/funding allocated either through a (possibly international) host institution located in the country of origin or directly to the researcher themselves.

- b) Conference travel fund:** For those who still have passports and can travel within the region or across Europe, a small fund to enable them to travel to conferences in their areas of expertise would help them to stay connected to counterparts across Europe and stay informed of the major debates in their field.
- c) Expanding EIDHR urgent support:** An assessment of the current EIDHR urgent support mechanism is needed for its suitability to support researchers at risk in their home countries. More visible inclusion of academic freedom within the EIDHR priorities and more explicit support for at-risk members of the academic community would be helpful. SAR's experience suggests that at-risk academics often do not self-identify as 'human rights defenders', nor consider themselves at risk for their human rights work, but rather for their research or academic work, for their status as academics who undertake international travel and collaboration, or in some cases, because their universities have become sites of violent conflict. For example, the eligibility criteria outlined [here](#) for EU-funded grants for human rights defenders states that the applicant "is facing risks because of his/her human rights work". Often in the case of clients assisted by the SAR network, the individuals are academics quietly pursuing their scholarly work who become human rights defenders 'by accident', after they are targeted because their academic work is deemed politically sensitive (e.g. questioning the reliability of census data and transparency of census procedures) or because they undertake international travel to conferences, or because they are caught up in a situation of war or conflict. For example, a marine biologist detained upon return from an international conference and accused of sharing state secrets; or a food scientist conscripted to the army in Syria, defecting and fleeing, or a literature professor facing charges of "membership in a terrorist organization," apparently based on studies at a Gülen-affiliated educational institution in Turkey and possession of US dollar bills.

Of course, a sub-set of researchers at risk applying for support will also meet the definition of human rights defenders as currently articulated above and will be eligible to apply for EIDHR emergency grants. Further examination of the existing support mechanism is needed and further consultation between organizations supporting researchers at risk and EIDHR would be useful. The project partners will work to make more specific recommendations in this regard in the course of the InSPIREurope project.

