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By Pola Lem

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Vaclav Stetka

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My winning proposal: Landing a major bid as a first grant

Early-career researcher Vaclav Stetka would not have thought to apply for £817,000 with his first bid to the ESRC if a senior colleague had not encouraged him, he tells Pola Lem.

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Vaclav's top tips

- Be ambitious if you can justify it; don't be afraid to go for more big grants early in your career.
- If your scheme has no deadline, use the time to fine-tune all the peripheral elements of your bid.
- Recruit diverse project partners and capitalise on existing relationships.
- If your bid is robust, topicality should only enhance its chances.

Vaclav Stetka is a lecturer in communication and media studies at Loughborough University. In February, he won the largest responsive-mode Research Grant awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council to Loughborough University in the past five years. It is also the first UK grant that Vaclav applied for as principal investigator.

The project will involve a comparative analysis of the relationship between news consumption and political attitudes in four central and eastern European countries—the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia—at a time when the region is witnessing a resurgence of illiberal nationalism and a shift towards more openly authoritarian forms of government.

ESRC Research Grants range from £350,000 to £1 million and are open year-round without a deadline.

How did you come up with the idea for your proposal?

It stems from a long-term research interest that I'd been pursuing before the start of my appointment at Loughborough. I come from the region which is the subject of the project and am intimately familiar with the media and political realities of the region. This was an opportunity to explore the issues in a much more comprehensive way than I'd ever attempted before. Although I'd pursued research in the overall area before, it had usually been restricted to smaller, more specific projects.

What gave you the idea to apply for such an ambitious grant?

It was part of my probation requirement to submit a grant application, but honestly I hadn't thought of applying for such a big grant, and it's not something that's normally expected for probations. Usually people with my level of experience in UK academia don't go for such a big grant as their first one. I was encouraged by my probation adviser at the time, Sabina Mihelj, to think big. She's now a collaborator on the project and a big source of inspiration.

Did you think of applying elsewhere?

I scanned the research environment and various types of schemes and funding bodies, but this one came out as the most relevant for our topic and overall design of the project. There were other options, but this one was a logical decision. It's perceived as rather difficult to obtain funding from the ESRC for media and communication studies projects because it isn't officially recognised as a subfield and doesn't have its own panel. But we tried not to be influenced by that.

How did you find working collaboratively?

In this case the collaboration was very natural. We have a collegiate and friendly relationship, which helped in developing this project. The fact that there is no deadline for Research Grants was helpful. They accept applications on a rolling basis. We didn't feel rushed or that we had to sacrifice quality because of the time pressure. We spent a long time chatting about it and drafting it. We also benefited from the internal peer review that we have at our university. I'd recommend that other applicants also lean on the internal review process as much as possible and ask colleagues informally for their views.

How else did the extra time benefit the proposal?

We are working with a broad network of partners, and it took a while to invite respective members of our advisory board, many of whom are well recognised. I don't think the board would have been as impressive if we'd been under greater time pressure. We also took the time to get good letters of support from our partners.

What role do your partners play in the project?

Some organisations will be involved in the dissemination of our results. That's something we would have much more difficulty doing without them. We want to target not just the general public but specific types of stakeholders, for instance media regulators. The European Federation of Journalists will help us facilitate this kind of contact and outreach. They will also help us get feedback on one of the outcomes of the project, which will be a toolkit or guidelines for journalists or regulators that we hope to write. Some other partners will host stakeholder meetings and help with the publishing of the report using their platforms.

What's in it for these organisations?

The benefit for them is being networked through our project to one another. It doesn't happen too often that these organisations share the same platform with each other. We've had other organisations expressing interest in joining the project as well.

How did you obtain the support of your partners?

It came about quite naturally because in my previous research I'd developed quite an extensive network of contacts within these organisations, having been invited to speak at conferences, summer schools and so on. I was fortunate to be able to capitalise on this. I didn't really have to convince anyone.

Why do you think your bid was so successful?

Certainly, having such a diverse and high-level network of partners was one of the key aspects in the success of the proposal. We were able to demonstrate that there's a high potential for significant impact. We certainly highlighted that in the bid. The impact component is extremely important and sometimes overlooked. It really is something that funding bodies are keen on seeing. Beyond that, I think it helps that I chose a topic that's really relevant for academia and other actors too. You can argue that problems of polarisation and illiberalism are among the most debated ones in the public domain at the moment across all western countries, not just in central and eastern Europe.

What advice do you have for other early-career researchers bidding for Research Grants?

Be bold. Think big. Sometimes, early-career researchers are not encouraged enough or don't think it's appropriate for them to apply for bigger schemes. You have to have some previous experience and expertise in the field but you don't necessarily have to go through the successive stages of applying for a small grant and then bigger ones. I do think that research bodies recognise and reward ambition if it's justified.

What advice do you have for the bid itself?

Try to develop an innovative methodology. I think a further reason for our success was that we incorporated a way of collecting data that has never been attempted before. [The abstract talks of "a novel multi-method analytical framework that combines survey data, digital tracking of media consumption, as well as media diaries and qualitative interviews with audiences in four central and eastern European countries".] So there was a strong innovative element. Also the toolkit can be used in other countries, meaning that there is potential for the research output to inform the general discipline.

CV: Vaclav Stetka

2016-present Lecturer, department of social sciences, Loughborough University

2013-2016 Senior researcher, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

2009-2013 Senior research fellow, department of politics and international relations, University of Oxford

2006-2009 Assistant professor of media studies and journalism, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

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