

Prof. Dr. Aleksey Kostenko
Jadranska ul. 21
1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
Work: +386 1 4766-714
Aleksey.Kostenko@fmf.uni-lj.si

A. Kostenko · FMF UL · Jadranska 21 · SI-1000 Ljubljana

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Dear Ms. Dobnik,

I'm glad that we've managed to talk after the meeting in SAZU on Wednesday, March 11. However, I decided to put some of my remarks and further thoughts in a more structured way. I apologize in advance for an unexpectedly long letter.

When explaining mathematical theories to students, it is always helpful to have a simple and clear running example. That is why I wanted to demonstrate the reports I've got last year to all the participants of the discussion in SAZU. It seems to me that looking closer at my concrete case would help to indicate many crucial problems with the current evaluation and decision-making process.

I came to Slovenia from Austria. I entered Austria as a Lise Meitner Fellow in 2011, a grant program for talented non-Austrian young researchers. My research is partially funded by the FWF for 15 years already, 4 projects have been accomplished and I'm still a PI of a research project in TU Graz (one can easily get all the info here <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/discover/research-radar>). This is to emphasize that I know another funding agency reasonably well. No need to convince you that the FWF is experiencing the same problems as ARIS, that is why it might be very instructive to compare the processes.

In 2025, I submitted a grant proposal to the FWF, on a different topic of nonlinear PDEs to avoid any potential conflict. The application was filed in March 2025. The decision was made early July 2025. It was negative – my proposal was rejected. I've got two detailed reports with grades varying from Excellent to Outstanding (the meaning of those is different from the ARIS grades: FWF's *Excellent* = *among the best 10% in the field worldwide*, and *Outstanding* = *among top 5%*), however, the decision was *Major Revision*. Being surprised with the final outcome from the perspective of grades and reports received, I asked panel members responsible for my submission to explain the negative decision and got an immediate reply: the major reason was a comment by one of the referees that in his/her opinion the recent literature was not properly reflected in my proposal. Even despite the fact that the overall grade of that particular referee was *Outstanding, Funding with highest priority*, the competition was so high that this literature remark was decisive. Taking into account the received feedback, I made minor changes, wrote a letter explaining why that particular literature comment is irrelevant and, in fact, incorrect, and resubmitted my proposal

at the end of July, 2025. In October 2025, my project was approved for funding. Take into account that they invited one more new referee to evaluate my resubmitted proposal. That is, they kept the most critical one to re-evaluate my resubmission and have replaced the second one with the new referee in order to hear one more opinion. The entire process took less than 7 months. The webpage of FWF says that in the year 2023 the agency funded 2.600 projects. I'm also saying all that because one of the speakers has used Austrian FWF as an example.

I applied for ARIS grants in 2024 and 2025. Now I have all the reports, including the original reports from the referees. Therefore, I can compare the processes. In particular, if you are interested, I can also show you my FWF reports to demonstrate the significant difference in reports quality.

The sad truth is that, in my opinion, there are serious problems with ARIS decision-making at every stage of the process. I am well aware that it is always easier to criticize; however, in my position, the only thing I can do at the moment is to point out a potential problem.

- **Choice of the referees.** According to current rules, the pool of referees is created by asking heads of programs to nominate people. With all my respect, the whole idea sounds like a huge conflict of interest. When I was asked to do that, my reaction was a complete shock.

The choice of referees for a given project is made by ZEP, which consists of 17 people. How careful can they be when assigning referees to 1.100+ projects? In 2025, there were 40+ applications in PE1 in total. Already the task of assigning referees to 40+ applications requires, to say the least, an outstanding mathematical qualification. As far as I was explained, currently the choice of referees proceeds in a rather random fashion based on a formal correspondence of keywords with, presumably, some control of referees' qualification on ZEP's side. The latter, however, will be touched in the next paragraphs.

- **Reports.** The year 2024. One referee graded BT1 "*Scientific Excellence of the researchers*" of my application with 5.0, the second one – 4.7. They "agreed" to assign 4.9 for BT1. There were 5 more applications graded with 4.9 for BT1 that year and 1 more application even got 5.0. Irrespectively of my BT1 grade, I'm afraid such statistics cannot reflect the existing reality.¹ This immediately raises concerns regarding professionalism of the referees, as well as on their standards. Most importantly, why does nobody in ARIS care about such anomalies? As you will see below the year 2024 wasn't an exception, rather the opposite.

Of course, my judgement can be wrong. However, in that case the question would be whether the existing evaluation and decision-making match this extreme level of competition?

In PE1 in my category that year, the **approval rate was below 6% as only 1 out of 18 applications got funded**² (the approval rate for ERC grants is approximately 13%). My total score was 14.5. The project which took all the money got 14.6. The 0.1 difference in our grades was for BT2. ZEP sees only coordinated grades. Let me emphasize that in the FWF procedure, panel members (several mathematicians!³) see everything and then they decide. I believe ARIS could consider following that example. *Agreed grades and reports* do not exist in the FWF evaluation procedure, however, **in the current ARIS procedure the decision is, in fact, in the hands of two referees.** If referees are aware of this and then taking into account the current way of making a pool of referees, this might easily create a room for misuse and manipulations.

¹In 2021 I was an Invited Speaker at the 8th ECM (<https://euromathsoc.org/ecm>); in 2023, I got Zois Award; my monograph got ARIS Odlični Znanosti distinction in 2023 (and my proposal can be seen as a further development of this work). Already this list, seems, sets a rather high bar.

²<https://www.aris-rs.si/sl/progproj/rproj/rezultati/24/rezult-razp-rp-2024.asp>

³<https://www.fwf.ac.at/ueber-uns/organisation/gremien/kuratorium>

The year 2025. I decided to improve my application and resubmit, the application which received excellent grades⁴ in the 2024 call: BT1 - 4.9; BT2 - 4.8; BT3 - 4.8. This time, however, all the information in the coordinated report I've got was erased by the use of LLMs (let me stress, however, that one of the two original reports was AI generated too: <https://users.fmf.uni-lj.si/kostenko/Referee1.pdf>). The issues from 2024 did not disappear, however, the situation became even worse. I must add one more thing. Referee #2 criticised part BT3 of my proposal, however, I'm not so sure whether he/she had a moral right to use those arguments taking into account the quality of his/her reasoning in BT1 and BT2, especially in BT2! (<https://users.fmf.uni-lj.si/kostenko/Referee2.pdf>), the most important ones in my opinion.

Notice that ZEP did not even notice that the reports are AI generated.⁵ They did not notice that the text there is a mathematical nonsense (as an argument confirming this claim, notice that the coordinated report I've received is at least two times longer than the two original reports altogether! <https://users.fmf.uni-lj.si/kostenko/MediatedReport.pdf>)

Nevertheless, ZEP and ZS made a decision and you approved it. However, **a decision based on what???** That was the major point of my open letter sent to you in January.

- **Feedback.** My comment that the report is a nonsense generated by LLMs was not even taken into consideration since referees agreed on grades. However, I wonder how did the referees manage to agree on this if one report is AI generated and another one was written by an incompetent referee? (A little bit of mathematical culture is enough to notice this; in particular, it is clear that the referee has serious problems with the terminology). The most important question is **how to improve a rejected application with excellent grades?** None of three reports say anything useful in this regard. Hence, neither ZEP nor, in fact, anybody in ARIS can help me with this issue, whereas I would expect concrete guidance on how to improve my application, given that it was deemed unfit for financing.

I'm afraid, all the above said is just a tip of an iceberg of fundamental problems with the decision-making procedure. You are definitely right that one of the reasons is that these problems have accumulated for so many years.

However, I wish to emphasise the major point of my short speech in SAZU on March 11th. Several people including the head of ZS said that the very first step in solving the poor decision-making issue is **TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF GRANT APPLICATIONS!** I do not see how this will help to solve any of the issues which I have indicated above. Actually, it seems that only one out of all the first part speakers in SAZU pointed out that the current decision-making is of poor quality,⁶ which seems to be another serious problem, perhaps the crucial one. As I said, to me the phrase in capital letters is the same as **NO MAN, NO PROBLEM.** It is allegedly attributed to Stalin, who seems never have said it, but it is easy to believe that it was his motto.

Establishing artificial barriers is yet another terrible idea! First of all, there is a conflict: ARIS asks international experts to evaluate proposals, however, thresholds will be established based on local standards. Just one example. My younger colleague was not allowed to apply in the 2024 call because of some artificial restrictions as he publishes rarely. However, all his publications are extremely good! Last year his paper was accepted in *Journal of the European Mathematical Society* (<https://ems.press/journals/jems>). It took almost 4 years from submission to publication

⁴In fact, according to the 2024 terminology, all 3 grades are counted as *Outstanding* (= 4.7 and higher).

⁵Not only mine, as so far I'm unaware of a single example of an applicant with a proper report.

⁶M.Humar on one of his slides stated that his colleagues compare the current procedure with a **lottery**; in PE1, however, a rather common opinion at the moment that **it would be much better to have a lottery instead!**

there, which is the usual story with top-journals in mathematics. Publishing there is indeed an achievement. For example, another colleague of mine got *ARIS Odlični v Znanosti* distinction for a publication in this journal in 2021; actually, this same colleague unsuccessfully applied in 2022 and 2023, and in the 2022 call, his BT1 grade was 4.3 points, which placed him #15-16 out of all 18 applicants in that category!⁷ He is one of the best mathematician in Slovenia in his generation, however, recall that in the 2024 call there were 7 applications with grades 4.9 and higher for BT1 and the situation was absolutely the same in the 2022 call.

For younger researchers, it is crucial to get scientific independence in order to develop and strive, but the proposed change would achieve exactly the opposite! ARIS needs to encourage people to apply by creating a healthy and competitive environment, and not to discourage them by establishing artificial bureaucratic barriers. **A healthy competitive procedure will reduce the number of applications by eliminating a considerable amount of weak applications in a natural way.** On the other hand, I'm convinced the number of really strong potential applications in any discipline per year does not oscillate highly and, in particular, cannot be seriously affected by the development and implementation of an AI. However, not well thought artificial barriers will only help to reduce this important number. **Having insufficient number of strong applications defies the reasons for ARIS' existence.**

As I mentioned on Wednesday, the current state of decision-making process is already having the effect of reducing the number of strong applications in mathematics. Indeed, I can give you at least four names from our department who explicitly told me that they do not see any sense in applying for ARIS grants.

I decided to reduce my interactions with ARIS to a minimum as well. In particular, I'm not interested in applying for ARIS grants until the situation with decision-making will improve considerably. *Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*

A couple of years ago, Prof. Pavel Exner, a founding member of the ERC (I quoted him in my Open Letter), was very surprised to hear that ARIS has no panels. In his opinion, this is the only way to proceed. Perhaps, it is like with democracy – not ideal, but other options are much worse. I'm afraid, the only right way is to reconsider and restructure the whole decision-making process. This is certainly a very difficult, complicated, and ambitious task. However, it is definitely doable, and these changes are of vital importance.

To finish this long letter, let me say that there is no drama on my side as it is by far not for the first time when my grant application was rejected. At this stage of my career and with my standing, ARIS is not of vital importance neither for my research, nor for my development. I'm afraid the real drama is on another side – fundamental problems that are either not being seen or are being deliberately ignored, perhaps both. The comments and complaints raised during the second part of the meeting in SAZU can be compared with the situation of a patient coming to a doctor with a huge variety of symptoms indicating cancer at a critical stage (let us remain optimistic). And then that doctor, instead of looking seriously into this case, suggests vitamins and herbal tea.

This is what I saw in SAZU on Wednesday, March 11th.

This is the drama.

Yours sincerely,

Aleksey Kostenko; <https://users.fmf.uni-lj.si/kostenko/>

⁷<https://www.aris-rs.si/sl/progproj/rproj/rezultati/22/rezult-razp-rp-2022.asp>