Single Market Programme (SMP COSME)

Call for proposals

SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVENESS IN TOURISM

Supporting Tourism SMEs to become more competitive as they transform into more sustainable and resilient

(SMP-COSME-2026-TOURSME-01)

Version 1.0
3 March 2026

Call: SMP-COSME-2026-TOURSME — SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVENESS IN TOURISM - Supporting Tourism SMEs to become more competitive as they transform into more sustainable and resilient.

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HISTORY OF CHANGES				
Version	Publication Date	Change		Page
1.0	3 March 2026	Initial version.		

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EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL AND SMEs EXECUTIVE AGENCY (EISMEA)

EISMEA.I – Innovation ecosystems, SMP/Entrepreneurship and Consumers
EISMEA.I.02 –SMP/SME Pillar, Internal Market and Support to Standardisation

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

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0. Introduction

This is a call for proposals for EU action grants in the field of Tourism under the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs strand of the Single Market Programme (SMP/SME Pillar).

The regulatory framework for this EU Funding Programme is set out in:

– Regulation 2024/2509 (EU Financial Regulation)[1]

– the basic act (SMP Regulation 2021/690[2]).

The call is launched in accordance with the 2025-27 SMP Work Programme[3] and will be managed by the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) (**'Agency'**).

The call covers the following topic:

SMP-COSME-2026-TOURSME-01 - SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVENESS IN TOURISM - Supporting Tourism SMEs to become more competitive as they transform into more sustainable and resilient

Applicants (beneficiaries and affiliated entities) may submit only ONE proposal under the same call (and be awarded a funding).

Applicants may NOT participate in several proposals. If they participate or submit several proposals, only one application will be accepted and evaluated; the applicants will be asked to withdraw from the other applications (or they will be rejected).

We invite you to read the call documentation carefully, and in particular this Call document, the Model Grant Agreement, the EU Funding & Tenders Portal Online Manual and the EU Grants AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement.

These documents provide clarifications and answers to questions you may have when preparing your application:

– the Call document outlines the:

– background, objectives, scope, activities that can be funded and the expected results (sections 1 and 2)

– timetable and available budget (sections 3 and 4)

– admissibility and eligibility conditions (including mandatory documents; sections 5 and 6)

– criteria for financial and operational capacity and exclusion (section 7)

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[1] Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/2509 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 September 2024 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union (recast) ('EU Financial Regulation') (OJ L, 2024/2509, 26.9.2024).

[2] Regulation (EU) 2021/690 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing a programme for the internal market, competitiveness of enterprises, including small and medium-sized enterprises, the area of plants, animals, food and feed, and European statistics (Single Market Programme) (OJ L 153, 3.5.2021, p. 1).

[3] Annex 2 to Commission Implementing Decision C(2024) 8194 final of 29.11.2024 on the financing of the Programme for the internal market, competitiveness of enterprises, including small and medium-sized enterprises, the area of plants, animals, food and feed, and European Statistics and the adoption of the **work programme for 2025-2027**, as amended by Annex 2 to the Commission Implementing Decision C(2025)6215 final of 17.9.2025.

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- – evaluation and award procedure (section 8)

    - – award criteria (section 9)

    - – legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements (section 10)

    - – how to submit an application (section 11)

  - – the Online Manual outlines the:

    - – procedures to register and submit proposals online via the EU Funding & Tenders Portal (**'Portal'**)

    - – recommendations for the preparation of the application

  - – the AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement contains:

    - – detailed annotations on all the provisions in the Grant Agreement you will have to sign in order to obtain the grant *(including cost eligibility, payment schedule, accessory obligations, etc)*.

You are also encouraged to visit the EISMEA website and in particular the webpage dedicated to this Call for proposals. Information about projects in the area of tourism funded previously can be found on the EU Funding and Tenders portal.

1. Background

Tourism remains one of the key ecosystems of the European economy, contributing significantly to economic growth, regional development, and employment across the European Union. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector has begun a gradual recovery.

In 2024, nights spent in EU tourist accommodation went up by 2.7% compared with 2023 and for the first time exceeding 3 billion nights (Eurostat).

555.3 million international arrivals to the EU in 2024, meaning 5.4% up from 2023 but still 1.3% below the record 562.5 million in 2019 (ETC data). These mean longer stays and increase in expenditure.

However, this recovery is taking place in a global context marked by persistent instability and uncertainty. Geopolitical tensions—particularly the ongoing war in **Ukraine following Russia's aggression and the conflict in Israel**—have disrupted travel flows, increased energy costs, and heightened security concerns. Additionally, volatility in international markets, influenced by evolving U.S. policy directions, continues to impact tourism demand and investment.

The EU tourism ecosystem faces complex and interrelated challenges that will shape its development in the coming years. Increased resilience, sustainability, digitalisation, and innovation—including the adoption of new business models—are not only challenges but also essential success factors for the future of tourism in Europe. At the same time, increasing competitiveness and promoting prosperity across regions are vital to ensuring that tourism continues to be a driver of inclusive and sustainable growth.

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In recent years, the EU has introduced a series of legislative packages[4] targeting sustainability, which significantly impact all ecosystems, including tourism. These measures are designed to support the transition to more sustainable business models, while enhancing the competitiveness of European enterprises.

Key EU strategies such as the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy, Circular Economy Action Plan, Renovation Wave, Biodiversity Strategy, EU Plastics Strategy, Farm to Fork Strategy, and the European Climate Pact all contribute to shaping a more sustainable and competitive tourism ecosystem.

In terms of skills, upskilling and reskilling the workforce is a top EU priority to improve working conditions and boost competitiveness. This is particularly relevant for the tourism ecosystem where small companies are predominant. The EU Pact for Skills[5], launched under the European Pillar of Social Rights, extends its support to tourism. The PANTOUR project[6] (Pact for Next Tourism Generation Skills), co-funded by Erasmus+, is developing a sectoral blueprint to address skills needs. Key outputs include the Sectoral Skills Intelligence Monitor, Skills Lab, and Resource Books for Trainers, which are highly relevant for this call for proposals.

Digitalisation is another cornerstone of competitiveness. The Digital Compass 2030[7], unveiled by the European Commission, outlines four key areas: skilling, secure digital infrastructure, digital public services, and business digital transformation. A key target is ensuring that at least 90% of SMEs achieve a basic level of digital intensity by 2030.

These efforts align directly with the objectives of this call for proposals, which aims to **reinforce the sector's competitiveness by increasing its resilience and capacity to face** unexpected crises and challenges.

To support SMEs in their transition toward sustainable business models, the EU has been offering a wide range of assistance mechanisms (non-extensive example):

1. Access to funding through local financial institutions in EU countries, offering loans, microfinance, and guarantees.

2. Enterprise Europe Network (EEN)[8] provides tailored services, including sustainability advisors.

3. European Cluster Collaboration Platform[9] connects SMEs with sustainability-focused organisations.

4. European Digital Innovation Hubs[10] offer technical expertise and experimentation opportunities to support digital transformation.

5. European Capital for Smart Tourism and European Green Pioneer of Smart Tourism competitions promote sustainable practices and peer learning.

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[4] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en
https://commission.europa.eu/topics/climate-action/delivering-european-green-deal/fit-55-delivering-proposals_pt
https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/industry/transition-pathways_en
https://digital-markets-act.ec.europa.eu/index_en
https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act
[5] https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/about/industrial-ecosystems-and-partnerships/tourism-ecosystem-and-lsps_en
[6] https://nexttourismgeneration.eu/pantour/
[7] https://transition-pathways.europa.eu/retail/policy/2030-digital-compass-european-way-digital-decade
[8] https://een.ec.europa.eu
[9] https://www.clustercollaboration.eu/find-clusters-partners
[10] https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/home

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6. Single Market Programme (SMP)[11] co-funded initiatives have supported SMEs in developing innovative and sustainable solutions

Finally, the ongoing evaluation of the Transition Pathway for Tourism[12] and the Council's EU Agenda for Tourism 2030[13], together with the upcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy, planned for 2026, demonstrate that tourism is high on the EU's political and economic agenda. These strategic developments reaffirm the EU commitment to foster a competitive, resilient, and sustainable tourism ecosystem that can thrive in the face of future challenges.

Support measures, actions, and programmes aimed at enhancing resilience, sustainability, and digitalisation must consider the cross-cutting nature of tourism and its interdependencies with other ecosystems such as transport, cultural and creative industries, agriculture, fisheries, or sports.

To reinforce the resilience and competitiveness of the tourism sector, the European Commission—within its competences—aims to strengthen the sector's ability to withstand future crises, foster innovation, and promote sustainable prosperity across the EU.

In this evolving context, strengthening the resilience and economic sustainability of the tourism ecosystem—and enhancing the competitiveness of tourism SMEs— requires increased awareness of current and future policies, as well as improved access to EU funding opportunities. These funds are designed to support the green and digital transition, which will in turn improve service quality and accessibility at tourist destinations, and among tourism stakeholders.

The Guide on EU Funding for Tourism[14], first published in May 2021 and regularly updated, serves as a key resource to facilitate access to funding information for the tourism ecosystem.

The pilot project Building Capacity for Tourism Stakeholders[15], supported by the European Parliament, is currently conducting a comprehensive analysis with the overall goal to ensure that tourism SMEs are better prepared and equipped with the necessary knowledge to participate (and obtain) EU funding opportunities. To bridge the gap between available funding and SME uptake, this pilot project is preparing a dedicated EU Toolkit[16] on funding sources for tourism SMEs while the EU Tourism Platform is there to support the tourism ecosystem stakeholders[17].

By empowering SMEs to access these funding opportunities, the EU is taking a critical step toward enabling micro enterprises and SMEs to leverage EU support, form partnerships and consortia, adopt best practices, and utilize other supportive tools.

Amid growing consumer awareness and shifting preferences, SMEs face specific challenges in adopting more sustainable business practices and enhancing their resilience. These challenges stem from complex administrative and legal procedures, reduced resources and personnel, as well as a lack of clarity regarding the issues to be addressed and the most effective implementation strategies. Therefore, SMEs

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[11] https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/single-market-programme_en
[12] https://transition-pathways.europa.eu/tourism
[13] https://tourisme-project.eu/european-agenda-for-tourism-2030-sets-an-ambitious-sustainability-vision/
[14] https://managenergy.ec.europa.eu/publications/guide-eu-funding-tourism_en
[15] https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/funding-opportunities/calls-tenders/pilot-action-building-capacity-tourism-eismea2023op0024_en
[16] https://touringproject.eu/funding-toolkit/
[17] EU Tourism Platform | EU Tourism Platform

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require targeted guidance and clear, actionable information to navigate this transition successfully. Tourism SMEs need targeted support to integrate resilient management models, behavioural change, and sustainability principles into their business strategies. This includes reflecting on their broader impact on society, the environment, and the local economy.

The tourism ecosystem is diverse, with deep differences across subsectors such as accommodation, restauration, tour guiding, and travel agencies. Partnerships with experts, innovation hubs, cross-sector businesses, and training centres—adapted to specific needs—can significantly support SME development and competitiveness.

Encouraging collaboration among stakeholders, fostering knowledge-sharing platforms, and providing dedicated support services are essential to empowering SMEs to capitalise on digital opportunities and navigate the challenges of the digital era. This comprehensive approach not only strengthens the resilience of tourism businesses but also drives long-term competitiveness and growth across the tourism ecosystem, while promoting sustainable and innovative European tourism industry.

Against the context described above, this call for proposals aims to support the development and consolidation of sustainable touristic routes and the strengthening of the ecosystems built around these routes.

Touristic routes act as structuring instruments that connect destinations, experiences, and stakeholders into coherent, marketable, and resilient tourism offers, while fostering cooperation across regions, sectors, and value chains.

By design, touristic routes encourage integrated destination development, linking cultural, natural, gastronomic, sport-related, industrial, or thematic assets within and across regions. This approach supports diversification of tourism products, reduces seasonality and concentration of visitor flows, and promotes balanced territorial development, including rural, peripheral, coastal, insular, and less-developed areas. In doing so, touristic routes contribute to spreading the economic benefits of tourism more evenly.

The development of touristic routes enables the creation of local and regional tourism ecosystems composed primarily of SMEs—such as accommodation providers, restaurants, tour operators, tourism guides, transport services, cultural and creative actors—as well as public authorities (national, regional and local), destination management organisations, training providers, innovation hubs, and civil society organisations.

These ecosystems foster collaboration, joint product development, shared branding, and coordinated promotion, enhancing the visibility and competitiveness of participating SMEs within the Single Market and beyond. Furthermore, this interconnected network serves as a vital backbone for crisis management; by establishing pre-existing channels of communication and trust, these routes allow destinations to disseminate urgent information rapidly and coordinate collective responses to unforeseen disruptions.

Through ecosystem-based cooperation, SMEs are better positioned to adopt sustainable business practices, develop low-impact tourism offers, and integrate

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circular economy principles. Touristic routes provide a practical framework for implementing the green transition at destination level, for example through collective approaches to mobility, resource efficiency, biodiversity protection, and sustainable visitor management.

The routes can act as a strategic tool for climate change impact adaptation. They enable destinations to diversify their geographical and seasonal offerings, reducing the pressure on climate-vulnerable "hotspots" and spreading footfall to more resilient areas. By monitoring shared environmental data, the ecosystem can implement adaptive measures—such as rerouting trails to avoid erosion-prone zones or adjusting seasonal activities—to ensure long-term viability in a changing climate. Simultaneously, they facilitate the uptake of digital solutions—such as shared booking systems, digital storytelling, smart destination tools, and data-driven visitor management—supporting the digital transition of tourism SMEs.

Beyond territorial cohesion, the development of these ecosystems is instrumental in opening unexplored areas, shifting visitor flows away from saturated hubs towards rural and remote areas where tourism acts as a catalyst for regional development. By linking these territories through transnational routes, deep cross-border cooperation is fostered, harmonising quality standards and storytelling across national boundaries.

This connectivity ensures that peripheral destinations are no longer isolated; instead, they become integral parts of a larger European narrative, leveraging shared infrastructure and collective marketing to transform untapped natural and cultural assets into sustainable economic drivers for local communities.

Touristic routes development allows for capacity-building and skills development. By bringing together multiple stakeholders, they enable targeted training, peer learning, and access to expertise in sustainability, digitalisation, innovation, and business management. This collective approach reduces barriers for SMEs, fostering a culture of continuous resilience.

In the face of systemic shocks, the shared knowledge base within a route ecosystem ensures that even the smallest operators have access to risk assessment tools and recovery strategies that would be unreachable individually. This collaborative intelligence transforms a simple geographic path into a robust, adaptive socio-economic network.

A very important aspect is the consolidation of a sustainable and fully operational governance of the routes.

By leveraging this collective strength, touristic routes drive social sustainability through community-led governance and the preservation of local heritage, while accelerating green sustainability by scaling carbon-neutral mobility and biodiversity conservation across the entire corridor. The integration of digitalisation—from real-time data sharing to AI-driven predictive maintenance—provides the technological backbone needed for precise resource management.

Ultimately, this synergy secures economic sustainability by diversifying revenue streams and reducing overhead for SMEs, creating a high level of resilience that allows the destination to not only withstand crises but to evolve and thrive in an increasingly volatile global landscape.

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2. Objectives — Themes and priorities (scope) — Activities that can be funded — Expected impact

2.1. General Objectives

The general objectives of this call for proposals are the following:

- Leverage tourism as a key driver of sustainable economic growth, job creation, and regional development across the EU and SMP associated countries, particularly in less-developed, rural, and transition regions, contributing to economic diversification, social cohesion, and balanced territorial development.

- Strengthen the global competitiveness of European tourism by supporting innovation, quality upgrades, digitalisation, and sustainable value creation, enabling tourism businesses—especially SMEs—to increase productivity and attract higher-value market.

- Promote regional cooperation.

- Support the competitiveness, twin transition and sustainability of European tourism.

- Increase the resilience and adaptability of tourism destinations and businesses by improving the ability of tourism actors to anticipate and respond to climate, economic, and market challenges through sustainable, digital, and diversified tourism models.

- Support the twin transition of SMEs through strengthened business models, sustainable and environmentally responsible practices, innovation, digitalisation and resilience.

- Enhance the competitiveness, long-term viability and sustainable growth of the tourism SMEs and the tourism ecosystem as a whole.

- Support the transition to inclusive tourism business models.

- Promote balanced territorial development and cohesion through tourism by supporting tourism-driven economic diversification in rural, remote, coastal, and less-developed regions, contributing to social cohesion.

2.2. Specific objectives

- Creation of thematic and/or geographic touristic routes by involving relevant stakeholders, mobilising and strengthening the tourism ecosystem.

- Support balanced tourism development, addressing both over-tourism in saturated destinations and under-tourism in less-visited areas.

- Promote diversification in the tourism offer, tackling seasonality.

- Encourage regenerative and sustainable tourism that respect the authenticity of local tourism offerings.

- Promote both thematic, and special-interest tourism encompassing cultural, gastronomic, sports, nature-based experiences, including both tangible and intangible heritage.

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- Contribute to the well-being and sustainable development of local communities.

2.3. Themes and priorities (scope)

The purpose of this call for proposals is to support the establishment of thematic and/or geographic touristic routes and development of associated tourism ecosystems. The routes are expected to be fully functional and self-sustainable at the end of the co-funding period.

What is a 'route' and what is expected from a 'route'?

This call for proposals aims to support the development of new, and consolidation of existing incipient sustainable touristic routes and the strengthening of the tourism ecosystems built around them.

Touristic routes are structured, often themed itineraries that function as strategic instruments for integrated destination development, connecting destinations, experiences, and stakeholders into coherent, marketable, and resilient tourism offers. By fostering cooperation across localities, sectors, and tourism value chains, touristic routes contribute to enhancing the competitiveness, sustainability, and resilience of the tourism ecosystem.

By design, touristic routes link cultural, natural, gastronomic, industrial, and other thematic assets within and across regions, creating curated visitor experiences for leisure, education, and recreation. This integrated approach supports the diversification of tourism products, reduces seasonality and the geographical concentration of visitor flows, and promotes more balanced territorial development.

The development of touristic routes is underpinned by a strategic and coordinated management approach, encompassing planning, governance, branding, and promotion. Routes may operate at local, regional, national, or cross-border level and can rely on different modes of transport, including road, trail, cycling, or water-based itineraries, supported by appropriate physical and digital infrastructure such as signage, interpretation tools, and visitor services.

In summary, touristic routes may be organised around a shared theme **("thematic routes"), connecting sites through a common narrative** regardless of geographical proximity, or around physical continuity **("geographic routes"), linking geographically connected sites within a** defined territory, which may extend across regional or national borders.

Illustrative examples of thematic routes:

- European Industrial Heritage Route, connecting significant industrial sites and museums across different countries.

- Literary Routes, following the lives or works of authors (e.g. Shakespeare, Kafka, or Cervantes) across multiple locations.

- Religious or Spiritual Routes, such as pilgrimage routes connecting key sites associated with a common faith tradition.

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- Gastronomic Thematic Routes, focusing on a single product or tradition (e.g. cheese-making, olive oil, or beer culture) across distant regions.

- Handicrafts and traditional products routes. Handicraft products as traditional products, produced by hand or with traditional methods, originating from a specific place, region or country or the product's given quality reputation or other characteristic that confers it with artisanal value.

Illustrative example of geographic routes:

- Coastal routes linking ports, fishing villages, and maritime heritage sites along a continuous shoreline.

- Cross-border nature routes, such as routes following river basins or protected natural areas shared by neighbouring countries.

- Cycling or hiking routes following rivers, coastlines, or mountain ranges.

- Cultural heritage routes connecting towns and villages within a single historical or cultural region.

- Wine routes within a defined wine-growing region.

When proposing and designing a touristic route, applicants should adopt a holistic approach that reflects the specific identity, assets, and needs of the territories concerned. Routes should be firmly rooted in local relevance and identity, highlighting the distinctive characteristics of the region, such as traditional settlements, endemic natural features, local landscapes, historical architecture, craftsmanship, or other unique cultural and natural assets.

Proposed routes shall be embedded within and contribute to a broader tourism ecosystem, fostering cooperation among local stakeholders and ensuring coherence with existing strategies, services, and value chains. Particular attention should be paid to sustainability and resilience, with routes designed to promote low-impact and climate-friendly forms of tourism—such as walking, cycling, or water-based activities—while supporting climate adaptation, environmental protection, and community resilience.

In addition, touristic routes could encourage slow tourism approaches, including multi-day itineraries and extended stays, in order to maximise local economic impact, strengthen links with local businesses, and promote more sustainable visitor flows across the territory. The development of routes in less-known or unexplored regions, particularly in rural areas, is especially encouraged, for instance touristically less crowded areas and off-the-beaten-path destinations.

Applicants are encouraged to showcase diverse cultural narratives and authentic, autochthonous experiences, ensuring that routes reflect the richness and plurality of local heritage and living culture. Inclusivity and accessibility should be integral to route design, including the provision of accessible infrastructure and services and collaboration with disability advocacy groups and inclusive tourism experts. In addition, applicants should consider targeted outreach and product adaptation to address the needs of underrepresented groups, seniors, families, people with disability, LGBTQ+ travellers, and other diverse visitor profiles.

To ensure the long-term viability and resilience of these initiatives, the implementation of a consolidated governance model is essential. This framework

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should leverage the multi-disciplinary competences of route members—integrating expertise in environmental management, local heritage, marketing, and public policy—to foster a collaborative ecosystem. By formalising these diverse skill sets into a unified management structure, the route can maintain consistent quality standards and adapt to evolving challenges, effectively ensuring its duration and continued relevance for future generations.

Route ecosystems

Route ecosystems refer to structured and collaborative networks built around a tourism route, bringing together Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and a wide range of complementary stakeholders. These may include regional and national business support organisations (BSOs), cultural and heritage institutions, environmental and civil society organisations, transport and mobility providers, as well as public authorities at local, regional, and national levels. Together, these actors form a dynamic and interconnected community, characterised by continuous interaction, shared responsibilities, and joint value creation across the entire route.

The development of route ecosystems is essential to move beyond isolated tourism products towards integrated, experience-based destinations. By fostering cooperation rather than competition, route ecosystems enable stakeholders to align their objectives, pool resources, and co-create coherent narratives and visitor experiences. This collaborative approach enhances the visibility, attractiveness, and resilience of the route, while ensuring that economic benefits are both more widely more evenly distributed among local businesses and communities.

Involving local SMEs and key tourism stakeholders is particularly important, as they are the backbone of local economies and play a central role in delivering authentic, place-based experiences. Their active participation helps ensure that routes reflect local identity, cultural heritage, and natural assets, while remaining responsive to market demand and visitor expectations.

While DMOs typically act as the driving force behind the establishment and coordination of the route and its ecosystem, effective partnerships with relevant stakeholders are crucial throughout the conceptualisation, development, and operational phases. DMOs shall therefore facilitate inclusive governance structures, ensure transparent decision-making, and actively foster commitment and long-term engagement from all partners involved. A strong sense of ownership among stakeholders is key to the success and durability of the ecosystem.

The establishment of the route ecosystem should therefore follow a structured, bottom-up approach to ensure long-term sustainability and shared ownership. Central to this approach is the co-creation of the ecosystem by DMOs, SMEs, and other **relevant stakeholders, who must jointly define the route's vision, governance, and** development priorities. This collaborative process shall be operationalised through the project activities, notably via engagement and capacity-building measures (See activities under work package 2.1 below) and concrete financial support to SMEs (See set of activities under work package 2.2 below), which together foster active participation and joint value creation. Through targeted engagement initiatives and training, stakeholders are equipped to engage effectively in the ecosystem, while dedicated financial support empowers SMEs to implement tangible improvements aligned with the common route strategy.

These steps—engagement, education, and empowerment—must be clearly elaborated through the project proposal though a set-up of a robust system of activities to be implemented by the consortium. The goal is to develop a participatory co-creation

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and co-management framework for the ecosystem establishment, where DMOs act as facilitators of a resilient and collectively owned route ecosystem.

Proposals shall already outline a clear concept for the route and its associated ecosystem, whether at an initial, embryonal or early stage of development, or in the case of revitalising an obsolete or previously underutilised route. Importantly, route development shall be understood as an adaptive and non-linear process. Rather than following a fixed trajectory, it functions as a self-reinforcing loop, shaped by continuous feedback from SMEs, other stakeholders, and end users. This iterative approach allows the route to evolve over time, balancing economic potential with environmental, social, and cultural sustainability, and ensuring long-term relevance and positive impacts for destinations and communities alike.

Crucially, touristic routes enable the creation and consolidation of local and regional tourism ecosystems composed primarily of SMEs—such as accommodation providers, restaurants, tour operators, guides, transport services, and cultural and creative actors—alongside public authorities, destination management organisations, training providers, innovation hubs, and civil society organisations. These ecosystems foster collaboration, joint product development, shared branding, skills development, and coordinated promotion, thereby strengthening the visibility, market access, and long-term competitiveness of participating stakeholders within the Single Market and internationally.

Importantly, route development should be understood as an adaptive and non-linear process. Rather than following a fixed trajectory, it functions as a self-reinforcing loop, shaped by continuous feedback from SMEs, other stakeholders, and end users. This iterative approach allows the route to evolve over time, balancing economic potential with environmental, social, and cultural sustainability, and ensuring long-term relevance and positive impacts for destinations and communities alike.

The consortium shall establish and develop at least one of the following configurations:

- Minimum one transnational route (thematic or geographic);
- In case of no transnational routes, minimum two national routes (thematic or geographic) implemented in two different eligible countries.

Proposals including a higher number of routes (national and/or transnational) are encouraged.

In case of national routes, the proposals shall clearly explain the added value of international consortium cooperation and DMO partnerships.

Transnational routes are routes covering a minimum of two eligible countries (EU Member States or SMP/SME pillar associated countries).

As a result of the action (at the end of co-funding period), routes and their associated ecosystems shall be fully operational and supported by a thriving, well-structured, and collaborative network of SMEs, DMOs, and relevant stakeholders which form the associated ecosystem.

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2.4. Activities that can be funded (scope)

The following type of activities are eligible under this call for proposals. The work packages listed below are mandatory, but the type of activities listed thereunder are indicative and not exhaustive. Applicants may propose other activities that contribute to the objectives of developing sustainable touristic routes and strengthening their associated ecosystems.

Work package 1 - Establishment or Redesign of the Route and the Ecosystem

Activities under this work package focus on the conceptualisation, design, revamp, or expansion of the touristic route and its ecosystem. This applies both to newly proposed routes and to existing routes that are underutilised or in need of upgrading. This set of activities also covers the development and the engagement of all the relevant stakeholders within the route ecosystem, and in particular of DMO clusters and local SMEs.

Non-exhaustive list:

- Refining or further elaborating the central theme or binding element of the route.

- Developing or updating the route content, including attractions, points of interest, and visitor experiences.

- Mapping and framing the ecosystem, identifying all relevant stakeholders, with particular attention to local SMEs.

- Engaging stakeholders to ensure commitment – SMEs, public authorities (national, regional and/or local), destination management organisations, training providers, innovation hubs, civil society organisations, and others, through training sessions, community building, etc. To this end, possibly already at the stage of the proposal, the consortium can collect letters of intent of local authorities and other stakeholders which do not form part of the consortium.

- Consolidation of a sustainable and fully operational governance of the routes.

- Identifying and analysing the targeted users of the route.

- Conducting impact assessments, including KPIs related to visitor flows, economic benefits, environmental impact, inclusivity, and digitalisation.

- **Defining or redefining the boundaries of the route's ecosystem.**

- Revising the initial route concept based on stakeholder input and new knowledge.

- Setting a strategy and/or business plan.

Note: Route development is an iterative, adaptive process, informed by continuous feedback from SMEs, stakeholders, and end users, ensuring sustainability, relevance, and positive impacts over time.

Activity under work package 1 shall result in a clearly defined and strategically positioned touristic route, embedded in a structured and committed ecosystem of stakeholders. The route concept shall be validated through stakeholder engagement, supported by a defined governance framework, identified target groups, and a coherent strategy ensuring long-term sustainability and operational viability.

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<u>Illustrative list of sub-deliverables</u>:

- Route Concept and Thematic Framework.
- Ecosystem Mapping and Stakeholder Engagement Report (including letters of intent).
- Route Strategy and Business Plan.
- Impact and KPI Framework.
- Stakeholder**s'** mapping
- Stakeholders' commitment – e.g. Memoranda of understanding, Letters of Intent
- Governance body/model.

Work Package 2 – **Development and engagement of the route's ecosystem**

This activity set has a dual objective. First, it aims to strengthen stakeholders' understanding of and engagement in the route ecosystem and build their capacity to actively participate in and benefit from it (Work package 2.1). Second, it seeks to ensure the meaningful engagement of local SMEs—by empowering them to contribute **concretely to the route's development and implementation** (Work package 2.2). By fostering ownership and positioning SMEs as co-creators rather than passive beneficiaries, this activity will support the long-term commitment and self-sustainability of the route and its ecosystem.

Work package 2.1 - **Stakeholders'** engagement and capacity building

The consortium shall actively engage a broad range of stakeholders—including local authorities, DMOs, BSOs, civil society organisations, and community groups—in all activities related to the development, consolidation, and governance of the touristic route and its ecosystem. The aim is to foster long-term ownership, collaboration, and sustainability of the route, ensuring that stakeholders become active co-creators rather than passive participants.

In parallel, the consortium shall provide targeted capacity-building and training activities to equip stakeholders with the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to contribute effectively to the ecosystem. These activities should focus on the domains most relevant to building, maintaining, and further developing the route ecosystem, with particular emphasis on sustainable business practices, green and digital transition, crisis management, and resilience.

<u>Engagement activities may include:</u>
- Community Co-Creation Workshops with local SMEs, residents, cultural associations, and tourism offices to co-design route experiences, identify thematic elements, and co-create storytelling content for the route.

- Community Engagement Programmes – such as educational activities and competitions in local youth groups (e.g., mapping local heritage, creating digital content, or designing mini-itineraries) to involve local youth in promoting the route and raise awareness of sustainable and inclusive tourism practices.

- Stakeholder Networking and Site Visits, guided site visits, study tours, or networking events that bring together SMEs, DMOs, local authorities, and civil society organisations to explore the route, share experiences, and identify opportunities for collaboration and joint initiatives.

<u>Capacity-building activities may include</u> training sessions, workshops, webinars, study visits, educational materials, advisory services, mentoring, and certification schemes.

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Indicative list of topics:

- Marketing strategies and promotion

- Access to funding, investment attraction, and financial management

- Risk assessment, contingency planning, and emergency protocols

- Supply chain management and resilience mechanisms

- Adaptive destination management

- Regulatory compliance and governance

- Equitable and inclusive tourism practices, including participatory workshops, community engagement, and training on accessibility and disability etiquette

- Digital tools and solutions for business operations, visitor management, and sustainability monitoring, including AI applications and data analysis

- Sustainable tourism practices, such as Greenhouse Gas (GHG) reduction, energy efficiency, eco-labels, waste and water management

- Educational initiatives for schools and community programmes.

Target groups for capacity-building and engagement activities shall include, but are not limited to:

- Local SMEs

- Local communities

- Local authorities and tourism offices

- Civil society organisations, interest groups, and cultural or recreational associations

Illustrative deliverables may include:

- Engagement programme for youth groups

- Community co-creation workshops

- Training schemes, workshops, and mentoring for SMEs

- Capacity-building activities for local community stakeholders (tourist offices, interest societies, CSOs such as climbing or hiking clubs)

- Training and advisory sessions for local authorities and DMOs

In their proposals, applicants shall clearly indicate the engagement and capacity-building activities they plan to organise, the stakeholders they intend to target, and the expected outcomes in terms of skills development, ecosystem involvement, and long-term ownership.

Work package 2.2 - Direct Financial S**upport to third parties' scheme** (FSTP)

The consortium selected under this call for proposals shall design and implement a transparent and competitive mechanism to provide direct financial support to tourism SMEs (Financial Support to Third Parties – FSTP) whose activities contribute concretely to the development, consolidation, and functioning of the touristic route ecosystem. This mechanism shall be aligned with the overall objectives and strategy of the route and embedded within the broader ecosystem-building approach of the project.

FSTP shall support individual SMEs in developing and implementing products, services, processes, or business concepts that are directly instrumental to:

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- establishing, strengthening, or upgrading the touristic route and its joint offer.

- **ensuring the route's long**-term environmental, economic, and organisational sustainability, including the uptake of environmentally sustainable and digitally enabled practices (twin transition).

- enhancing the visibility, branding, promotion, and overall attractiveness of the route.

- diversifying the tourism offer, including thematic and seasonal diversification.

- fostering cross-sector integration and cooperation with complementary ecosystems such as culture and creative industries, agri-food, leisure, sport, digital, construction, textiles, proximity and social economy.

The financial support scheme shall be tailored to the specific needs and maturity level of the participating SMEs and designed to incentivise concrete measurable improvements aligned with the route strategy. Through this targeted support, SMEs shall be empowered to upgrade their services, innovate, collaborate with other actors along the value chain, and strengthen their active role within a thriving and self-sustainable route ecosystem.

When setting up the FSTP scheme, the applicants must comply with the following requirements:

1. Entities eligible to receive the third-party support:

   Eligible entities are SMEs active in the route ecosystem. They do not necessarily have to be geographically located/established within the limitation of the ecosystem but do have to take part of the route ecosystem tourist or economic activity (conducive to the functioning of the route).

   Examples of SMEs within the route ecosystem include:

- Traditional Sectors SMEs: Those operating in tourism, gastronomy, sports and cultural activities, tour operators and travel agents, local supply chains, and construction or heritage-related projects such as eco-lodges or adaptive reuse of historic buildings.

- Digital Solutions providers - SME providers of specialized web development and mobile applications that enhance the visitor journey, such as digital wayfinding, booking platforms, or immersive augmented reality (AR) heritage tours.

- Tech Infrastructure developers – SMEs developers of smart-tourism tools or data-driven management systems that optimize local supply chains and resource efficiency.

   These SMEs directly contribute **to the route's experiences, services, and overall** sustainability.

2. Eligible activities for which a third party (SME) may receive financial support:

   Eligible activities under the FSTP scheme include the development and implementation of products, services, or business concepts that directly support the establishment, enhancement, or sustainability of the touristic route. This covers initiatives that improve visitor experiences, promote the

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route, integrate complementary sectors, or advance environmentally and digitally sustainable practices, such as:

- Development and implementation of new business ideas, products, and market studies related to the route ecosystem.

- Digital innovation, including AI, AR, e-commerce, CRM systems, virtual experiences, data analytics, and accessibility solutions.

- Design of new tourism products and services aligned with trends (e.g., regenerative tourism, wellness, creative industries).

- Costs related to certification and compliance with sustainability, digitalisation, and resilience standards.

- Local sourcing, short supply chains, low-impact mobility, and cross-border collaboration activities

- Adoption of environmental and sustainability standards (e.g., EU Ecolabel, EMAS) and climate adaptation strategies.

- Risk management planning and business continuity measures.

- Business model innovation, circular economy approaches, and cross-sectoral cooperation.

- Consultancy and support on green certifications, sustainable procurement, and impact measurement.

- Adoption of social responsibility initiatives, inclusive practices, and ethical governance.

3. The criteria for calculating the exact amount of the financial support/ Methodology to set the FSTP amount(s).

The amount of each FSTP (given to the third party (SME) in a form of a lump sum) must be between EUR 7 000 and EUR 15 000 per SME. In the proposal, the applicants must set the criteria for calculating the specific lump sum amount(s).

Note: there can be different sets of lump sum amounts given to third parties (e.g. three sets: 7000 EUR, 10 000 EUR, and 15 000 EUR).

The consortium shall aim to engage in this FSTP activity the **maximum number of SMEs possible**. This effort towards maximising the development of ecosystem through the FSTP scheme shall be one of the elements of the evaluation of the projects.

The number of SMEs to be awarded must be between 10 and 30 SMEs.

4. Conditions for participation of SMEs and list of criteria for awarding financial support:

The selection of the SMEs shall be organised through a 'call for financial support to third parties' by the consortia selected under this call for proposals. In their proposals, the applicants must explain their selection procedure and criteria, ensuring transparency and equal treatment, in line with the aforementioned conditions for (i) eligible activities, (ii) eligible entities (SMEs), (iii) exact amounts of the financial support.

These criteria shall take into account the following elements:

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- Relevance of the SME initiative within the ecosystem development objectives

- Feasibility of realisation of the initiative

- Capacity and commitment of the SME.

In addition, in the proposal, the applicants shall explain quality insurance and monitoring setup for the implementation of the awarded financial support projects.

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- FSTP scheme and rules and conditions thereof are governed by this Call for Proposal and grant agreement (see Article 6.2 of the Model Grant Agreement (MGA) and Annotated Grant Agreement (AGA)). Applicants are also invited to consult the Guidance on FSTP. This guidance is only a complementary document meant to provide general information and help with the implementation of FSTP schemes. In case of inconsistencies of the Guidance document with the call for proposals and the grant agreement, the rules and conditions of the Call and grant agreement prevail.

- As financial support to third parties is understood a monetary, financial transaction from the beneficiaries directly to the supported third party (SME) costs for non-financial support or support given in-kind by the consortium (e.g. vouchers for services paid to the service providers different from the partners involved in the collaborative concept or idea) must be declared under other cost categories (e.g. as cost for purchases of vouchers) and most comply with the rules of that cost category.

- FSTP shall be awarded following the launch of the call(s) by the beneficiaries. These calls must conform to EU standards concerning transparency, equal treatment, conflict of interest and confidentiality. In addition, the calls must remain open for at least two months. The outcome of the call must be **published on the participants' websites, including a description of the selected** projects, award dates, project durations, and final recipient legal names and countries.

- The financial support cannot be used to reimburse or purchase services provided by or to the selected consortia.

- If applicable to the specific type of costs and activities, the SMEs identify autonomously and freely the service provider(s) from whose services or products they will benefit. If the selected consortium wants to advise the SMEs on the selection of service providers or products, the list(s) of such providers must be established in a transparent way, with pre-defined criteria. The consortium cannot impose the use of any particular service provider on the SME.

- **The assessment and evaluation of the SMEs' initiatives must be organised in** an objective way, respecting equal treatment and transparency, and avoiding conflicts of interest.

- Each consortium must monitor closely the SMEs participating in the support scheme, as regards the implementation of their projects, and report regularly on the progress to the granting authority. The consortium must also support the third parties to ensure their successful outcome and achievement of the expected results.

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- The financial support scheme itself is NOT an EU action; the beneficiaries selected under this call for proposals are providing the financial support in their own name and under their own responsibility within the conditions of the project selected under the present call. When promoting the EU action, the financial support must therefore NOT be presented as directly provided by the EU **but as '(co)funded by the EU'**.

Work package 3 - Communication, promotion and branding of the route ecosystem

Work Package 3 shall result in a coherent communication, branding, and promotion framework that enhances the visibility, recognition, and market positioning of the route and its ecosystem at regional, national, and transnational level. Through strategic communication actions and user-friendly digital tools, the route ecosystem shall increase stakeholder engagement, attract targeted visitor segments, and strengthen its overall competitiveness and outreach.

Non-exhaustive list of activities:

- Development and implementation of a comprehensive communication strategy, including definition of target audiences, key messages, channels, and performance indicators.
- Creation and deployment of a coherent branding and visual identity for the route ecosystem.
- Design and implementation of marketing initiatives and targeted communication campaigns at regional, national, or transnational level.
- Organisation of networking and promotional events (e.g. festivals, thematic or cultural events) that foster visibility, inclusiveness, and stakeholder participation.
- Implementation of social media campaigns and collaborations with relevant influencers or content creators to enhance awareness and outreach.
- Development or upgrade of user-friendly digital tools and infrastructure (e.g. websites, apps, interactive maps, booking interfaces) supporting promotion and visitor engagement.

Illustrative list of deliverables:

- Communication and Branding Strategy, including target audiences, key messages, channels, and measuring performance in line with the Commission's Communication Indicators (EC Comm Indicators)
- Communication and Branding Strategy aligned with Destination Europe framework and ensure synergies / compatibility with Visit Europe portal and **with national "visit portals"** (national promotion websites).
- Visual Identity Package, comprising logo, brand guidelines, and promotional templates.
- Route Website or Digital Platform, integrating user-friendly information, booking links, and interactive tools.
- Marketing and Outreach Report, summarising implemented campaigns, networking events, social media actions, and related performance metrics.

Work package 4 - Production of best practices and case studies for future improvement

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This work package aims to capitalise on the experience gained throughout the implementation of the action by identifying, documenting, and systematising best practices, success stories, challenges encountered, and lessons learned. These best practices may be also collected from existing Routes that are fully functioning and serve as inspiration for the project. The objective is to facilitate knowledge transfer, inspire replication, and support other destinations and stakeholders in developing or upgrading their own touristic routes and ecosystems.

In addition, training and capacity-building activities implemented under the project may be documented, structured into reusable formats, and shared as practical learning resources for other stakeholders. This may include training materials, methodologies, toolkits, or guidance documents that can support the establishment and management of similar route ecosystems.

To maximise outreach and impact, beneficiaries shall disseminate the results and materials produced under this work package through the EU Tourism Platform.

Non-exhaustive list of activities:

- Identification and documentation of best practices and lessons learned, including interviews with SMEs, DMOs, and other stakeholders involved in the route ecosystem.

- Development of case studies highlighting successful governance models, stakeholder engagement approaches, sustainability measures, or digital solutions implemented within the route.

- Preparation of practical replication toolkits or guidance documents (e.g. step-by-step methodologies, templates, training materials) to support other DMOs/regions/municipalities in developing similar routes.

- Organisation of knowledge-sharing webinars, peer-learning workshops, or dissemination events, organised under other work packages and publication of results and materials on the EU Tourism Platform.

Illustrative list of deliverables:

- Compendium of Best Practices and Lessons Learned
- Set of Case Studies
- Replication Toolkit or Practical Guide, including methodologies, templates, and training materials to support other stakeholders in establishing similar routes.
- Training and Capacity-Building Package, including recorded training sessions, presentations, methodological materials, and practical tools developed during the project, made accessible online.
- Strategy and business plans.

In their proposals, applicants shall clearly indicate the activities and deliverables related to the production of best practices and case studies.

2.5. Expected impact

- Strengthened sustainable competitiveness of the European Tourism ecosystem

- Increased competitiveness of European tourism SMEs, through innovation, quality upgrades, digitalisation, and the development of high-value tourism offers.

- Enhanced resilience of tourism SMEs, improving their capacity to respond to economic, environmental, and societal challenges.

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- Greater adoption of sustainability, digitalisation, and innovation, including greener practices, new technologies, data-driven solutions, and circular approaches.

- Strengthened tourism-driven economic growth and job creation, particularly in rural, remote, coastal, and less-developed regions, supporting economic diversification and social cohesion.

- Promotion of sustainable and inclusive tourism business models, integrating environmental responsibility, accessibility, diversity, and community involvement.

- Balanced territorial and tourism development, addressing both over-tourism in saturated destinations and under-tourism in less-visited areas.

- Advancement of the twin green and digital transition, through sustainable practices, digital tools, circular economy approaches, and innovation adoption by SMEs.

- Enhanced cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation, knowledge sharing, and peer learning along the tourism value chain.

In addition, the granting authority will collect information on the overall impact of the action implemented through this call for proposals. In particular, it will collect the indicators related to:

- Number of countries and partners participating in transnational cooperation projects.

- Replicability of projects supported, as assessed by the consortia under supervision of EISMEA, and their relevance to the policy priorities as detailed in the Transition Pathway for Tourism.

- Quality and impact of the dissemination by the consortia of the results, best practices and developed solutions.

- Number of SMEs supported.

To this end, and within the implementation of the action and as part of the reporting obligation, the beneficiaries and third-party support recipients will have to fill in the survey related to the implementation of the action. This survey allows for monitoring and evaluation of the actions and related impacts developed under the SMP programme and feeds the future programming activities. The beneficiaries will be provided a link to the survey in due time. The third-party recipients have to possibility to fill in the survey in their national languages.

3. Available budget

The estimated available call budget is EUR **6 900 000.**

This budget might be increased by maximum 20% to fund an additional proposal, depending however on the availability of additional call budget.

We expect to fund around 5 projects.

We reserve the right not to award all available funds or to redistribute them between the call priorities, depending on the proposals received and the results of the evaluation.

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4. Timetable and deadlines

Timetable and deadlines (indicative)	
Call opening:	3 March 2026
Deadline for submission:	20 May 2026 – 17:00:00 CET (Brussels)
Evaluation:	June-July 2026
Information on evaluation results:	Aug-Sep 2026
GA signature:	Oct-Nov 2026

5. Admissibility and documents

Proposals must be submitted before the call deadline *(see timetable section 4)*.

Proposals must be submitted electronically via the Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Submission System (accessible via the Topic page in the Calls for proposals section). Paper submissions are NOT possible.

Proposals (including annexes and supporting documents) must be submitted using the forms provided *inside* the Submission System (⚠ NOT the documents available on the Topic page — they are only for information).

Proposals must be complete and contain all the requested information and all required annexes and supporting documents:

- Application Form Part A — contains administrative information about the participants (future coordinator, beneficiaries and affiliated entities) and the summarised budget for the project *(to be filled in directly online)*

- Application Form Part B — contains the technical description of the project *(template to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, assembled and re-uploaded)*

- mandatory annexes and supporting documents *(templates to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, assembled and re-uploaded)*:

  - Detailed budget table (*mandatory Excel template available in the Submission System, and to be submitted as an Excel file*)[18];

  - List of previous key projects carried out in the last four years *(mandatory table already included as an Annex to the Application form Part B available in the Submission System)*;

  - CVs of core project team (preferably in the Europass format; mandatory annex to be uploaded in the Submission System). In addition, short CV outlines of all project personnel is to be provided within the Application

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[18] Please read carefully the instructions on how to fill in the detailed budget table. Only cost categories eligible for this call for proposals can be filled in. Please take the following steps before filling the Excel table in with your budget data: 1. Open "EC Data" sheet; 2. Click the button "Unprotect all Sheets (Configuration)"; 3. Insert the value 0 in Column B "1=Yes/0=No" for cost categories D1 (financial support to third parties) and D2 (PPI procurement costs); 4. Click the button "Save & Update Detailed Budget table"; 5. Start filling in the Detailed Budget Table.

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form Part B (table to be filled in already forms part of the application form Part B.

– Potential letters of Intent (see Work Package 1) – to be uploaded into the Submission System **under "other annexes".**

Please note that the amounts entered into the summarised budget table (filled in directly online) must correspond to the amounts calculated in the detailed budget table. In case of discrepancies, the amounts in the online summarised budget table will prevail.

At proposal submission, you will have to confirm that you have the mandate to act for all applicants. Moreover, you will have to confirm that the information in the application is correct and complete and that all participants comply with the conditions for receiving EU funding *(especially eligibility, financial and operational capacity, exclusion, etc)*. Before signing the grant, each beneficiary and affiliated entity will have to confirm this again by signing a declaration of honour (DoH). Proposals without full support will be rejected.

Your application must be readable, accessible and printable (please check carefully the layout of the documents uploaded).

Proposals are limited to maximum 50 pages (Part B). Evaluators will not consider any additional pages.

You may be asked at a later stage for further documents *(for legal entity validation, financial capacity check, bank account validation, etc)*.

ℹ For more information about the submission process (including IT aspects), consult the Online Manual.

6. Eligibility

Eligible participants (eligible countries)

In order to be eligible, the applicants (beneficiaries and affiliated entities) must:

– be legal entities (public or private bodies)

– be established in one of the eligible countries, i.e.:

– EU Member States (including overseas countries and territories (OCTs))

– non-EU countries:

– listed EEA countries and countries associated to the Single Market Programme or countries which are in ongoing negotiations for an association agreement and where the agreement enters into force before grant signature (list of participating countries).

Indicative list of relevant entities eligible: destination management organisations (DMOs)[19], business support organisations (BSOs)[20], training institutions, local

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[19] Within the scope of this call for proposals, a **DMO** is defined as a public or private stakeholder, an authority that manages a local, regional or national tourism strategy in one of the countries forming part of the consortium. DMO responsibilities may include, but are not limited to, taking responsibility for the local tourism offer, sustainable tourism planning/development, and the impact tourism has on the territory. The DMO typically also undertakes additional activities such as business analysis, marketing, strategic and policy implementation, inter-institutional and international relationships.

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administrations, national competence centres, professional trade associations[21] destination branding agencies[22], technology providers (TravelTech)[23], environmental & heritage NGOs, tourism observatories[24], transportation authorities ("last-mile" connectivity and sustainable mobility).

Beneficiaries and affiliated entities must register in the Participant Register — before submitting the proposal — and will have to be validated by the Central Validation Service (REA Validation). For the validation, they will be requested to upload documents showing legal status and origin.

Other entities may participate in other consortium roles, such as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions, etc. (*see section 13*).

Specific cases and definitions

Exceptional funding — Entities from other countries (not listed above) are exceptionally eligible, if the granting authority considers their participation essential for the implementation of the action.

Natural persons — Natural persons are NOT eligible (with the exception of self-employed persons, i.e. sole traders, where the company does not have legal personality separate from that of the natural person).

International organisations — International organisations are eligible. The rules on eligible countries do not apply to them.

Entities without legal personality — Entities which do not have legal personality under their national law may exceptionally participate, provided that their representatives have the capacity to undertake legal obligations on their behalf, and offer guarantees for the protection of the EU financial interests equivalent to that offered by legal persons[25].

EU bodies — EU bodies (with the exception of the European Commission Joint Research Centre) can NOT be part of the consortium.

Associations and interest groupings — Entities composed of members may participate as **'sole beneficiaries' or 'beneficiaries without legal personality'**[26]. ⚠ Please note that if the action will be implemented by the members, they should also participate (either as beneficiaries or as affiliated entities, otherwise their costs will NOT be eligible).

Countries currently negotiating association agreements — Beneficiaries from countries with ongoing negotiations for participation in the programme *(see list of participating countries above)* may participate in the call and can sign grants if the negotiations are concluded before grant signature (with retroactive effect, if provided in the agreement and covering the budget year of the call).

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[20] Within the scope of this call for proposals, a **BSO** relates to a business incubator/accelerator, start-up, lab, innovation hub, university or educational institution, research centre and any other relevant organisation with a proven capacity and experience in running business support activities focused on SMEs.

[21] National or regional bodies representing specific activities, such as Hospitality Associations (Hotels/restaurants), Tour Operator Unions, or Rural Tourism Networks, etc.

[22] While DMOs manage strategy, specialised agencies focus on the creative implementation of the "Destination Brand" and digital identity.

[23] Companies or NGOs providing SaaS solutions for tourism management, smart-city integrations, or data analytics platforms.

[24] Academic or independent bodies that focus exclusively on data collection, visitor flow statistics, and economic impact monitoring.

[25] See Article 200(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

[26] For the definitions, see Articles 190(2) and 200(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

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EU restrictive measures — Special rules apply for entities subject to EU restrictive measures under Article 29 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and Article 215 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU)[27]. Such entities are not eligible to participate in any capacity, including as beneficiaries, affiliated entities, associated partners, subcontractors or recipients of financial support to third parties (if any).

EU conditionality measures — Special rules apply for entities subject to measures adopted on the basis of EU Regulation 2020/2092[28]. Such entities are not eligible to participate in any funded role (beneficiaries, affiliated entities, subcontractors, recipients of financial support to third parties, etc.). Currently such measures are in place for Hungarian public interest trusts established under the Hungarian Act IX of 2021 or any entity they maintain (see Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/2506, as of 16 December 2022).

ℹ️ For more information, *see Rules for Legal Entity Validation, LEAR Appointment and Financial Capacity Assessment*.

Consortium composition

Proposals must be submitted by a consortium of applicants (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities), which complies with all following conditions:

✓ minimum five (5) and a maximum eight (8) independent entities

✓ minimum three (3) destination management organisations (DMOs) from minimum 2 different eligible countries.

✓ minimum two (2) business support organisations (BSO) from minimum 2 different eligible countries.

Eligible activities

Applications will only be considered eligible if their content corresponds wholly (or at least in part) to the topic description for which they are submitted.

Eligible activities are the ones set out in section 2 above.

Projects should take into account the results of projects supported by other EU funding programmes. The complementarities must be described in the project proposals (Part B of the Application Form).

Projects must comply with EU policy interests and priorities (such as environment, social, security, industrial and trade policy, etc.). Projects must also respect EU values and European Commission policy regarding reputational matters (*e.g. activities involving capacity building, policy support, awareness raising, communication, dissemination, etc*)[29].

Financial support to third parties is mandatory and must comply with the conditions set out in *section 2.4 and 10* of this call for proposals

The proposal must also clearly describe the results to be obtained.

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[27] Please note that the EU Official Journal contains the official list and, in case of conflict, its content prevails over that of the EU Sanctions Map.

[28] Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget (OJ L 325, 20.12.2022, p. 94).

[29] See, for instance, Guidance on funding for activities related to the development, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of Union legislation and policy.

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Geographic location (target countries)

Proposals must relate to activities taking place in the eligible countries *(see above)*.

Duration

Projects should normally range between 30 months and 48 months. Extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment.

Project budget

Project budgets (requested grant amount) are expected to range between EUR 1 200 000 and EUR 1 400 000 per project.

This does not however preclude the submission/selection of proposals requesting other amounts. The grant awarded may be lower than the amount requested.

7. Financial and operational capacity and exclusion

Financial capacity

Applicants must have stable and sufficient resources to successfully implement the projects and contribute their share. Organisations participating in several projects must have sufficient capacity to implement all projects.

The financial capacity check will be carried out on the basis of the documents you will be requested to upload in the Participant Register during grant preparation *(e.g. profit and loss account and balance sheet, business plan, audit report produced by an approved external auditor, certifying the accounts for the last closed financial year, etc)*. The analysis will be based on neutral financial indicators, but will also take into account other aspects, such as dependency on EU funding and deficit and revenue in previous years.

The check will normally be done for all beneficiaries, except:

- public bodies (entities established as public body under national law, including local, regional or national authorities) or international organisations

- if the individual requested grant amount is not more than EUR 60 000.

If needed, it may also be done for affiliated entities.

If we consider that your financial capacity is not satisfactory, we may require:

- further information

- an enhanced financial responsibility regime, i.e. joint and several responsibilities for all beneficiaries or joint and several liability of affiliated entities *(see below, section 10)*

- prefinancing paid in instalments

- (one or more) prefinancing guarantees *(see below, section 10)*

or

- propose no prefinancing

- request that you are replaced or, if needed, reject the entire proposal.

For more information, see *Rules for Legal Entity Validation, LEAR Appointment and Financial Capacity Assessment*.

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Operational capacity

Applicants must have the know-how, qualifications and resources to successfully implement the projects and contribute their share (including sufficient experience in projects of comparable size and nature).

This capacity will be assessed together with the 'Quality' award criterion, on the basis of the competence and experience of the applicants and their project teams, including operational resources (human, technical and other) or, exceptionally, the measures proposed to obtain it by the time the task implementation starts.

If the evaluation of the award criterion is positive, the applicants are considered to have sufficient operational capacity.

Applicants will have to show their capacity via the following information:

– general profiles (qualifications and experience) of the staff responsible for managing and implementing the project, including:

- CVs of the core project team

– description of the consortium participants, including specifically:

– list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years; *template available in Part B*).

Additional supporting documents may be requested, if needed to confirm the operational capacity of any applicant.

As a minimum, the following requirements must be met:

-Project Manager/Coordinator with at least five (5) years of experience in transnational project management (CV);

-Deputy Project manager/Coordinator with at least three (3) years of experience in transnational project management (CV);

-Two experts with at least three (3) years of experience in communication and PR (CV);

-One expert with at least five (5) years of experience in capacity building activities (CV);

-One expert with at least three (3) years of experience in SME support/consultancy in tourism sector (CV).

The applicants have to clearly indicate in the CV of each personnel of the project team and in the application form Part B (where appropriate) that the above required operational capacity requirements are appropriately met.

Exclusion

Applicants which are subject to an EU exclusion decision or in one of the following exclusion situations that bar them from receiving EU funding can NOT participate[30]:

– bankruptcy, winding up, affairs administered by the courts, arrangement with creditors, suspended business activities or other similar procedures (including **procedures for persons with unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)**

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[30] See Articles 138 and 143 of EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

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– in breach of social security or tax obligations (including if done by persons with **unlimited liability for the applicant's debts)**

– guilty of grave professional misconduct[31] (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

– committed fraud, corruption, links to a criminal organisation, money laundering, terrorism-related crimes (including terrorism financing), child labour or human trafficking (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

– shown significant deficiencies in complying with main obligations under an EU procurement contract, grant agreement, prize, expert contract, or similar (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

– guilty of irregularities within the meaning of Article 1(2) of Regulation No **2988/95** (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

– created under a different jurisdiction with the intent to circumvent fiscal, social or other legal obligations in the country of origin or created another entity with this purpose (including if done by persons having powers of representation, decision-making or control, beneficial owners or persons who are essential for the award/implementation of the grant)

– intentionally and without proper justification resisted[32] an investigation, check or audit carried out by an EU authorising officer (or their representative or auditor), OLAF, the EPPO, or the European Court of Auditors.

Applicants will also be refused if it turns out that[33]:

– during the award procedure they misrepresented information required as a condition for participating or failed to supply that information

– they were previously involved in the preparation of the call and this entails a distortion of competition that cannot be remedied otherwise (conflict of interest).

8. Evaluation and award procedure

The proposals will have to follow the standard submission and evaluation procedure (one-stage submission + one-step evaluation).

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[31] 'Professional misconduct' includes, in particular, the following: violation of ethical standards of the profession; wrongful conduct with impact on professional credibility; breach of generally accepted professional ethical standards; false declarations/misrepresentation of information; participation in a cartel or other agreement distorting competition; violation of IPR; attempting to influence decision-making processes by taking advantage, through misrepresentation, of a conflict of interests, or to obtain confidential information from public authorities to gain an advantage; incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence or similar activities contrary to the EU values where negatively affecting or risking to affect the performance of a legal commitment.
.
[32] 'Resisting an investigation, check or audit' means carrying out actions with the goal or effect of preventing, hindering or delaying the conduct of any of the activities needed to perform the investigation, check or audit, such as refusing to grant the necessary access to its premises or any other areas used for business purposes, concealing or refusing to disclose information or providing false information.
[33] See Article 143 EU Financial Regulation 2024/2509.

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An evaluation committee (assisted by independent outside experts) will assess all applications. Proposals will first be checked for formal requirements (admissibility, and eligibility, *see sections 5 and 6*). Proposals found admissible and eligible will be evaluated against the operational capacity and award criteria *(see sections 7 and 9)* and then ranked according to their scores.

For proposals with the same score (within a topic or budget envelope) a priority order will be determined according to the following approach:

Successively for every group of *ex aequo* proposals, starting with the highest scored group, and continuing in descending order:

1) Projects focusing on a theme that is not otherwise covered by higher ranked projects will be considered to have the highest priority.

2) The ex aequo proposals within the same topic will be prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the award criterion 'Relevance'. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion 'Impact'. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion 'Quality'.

3) If this does not allow to determine the priority, a further prioritisation can be done by considering the overall project portfolio and the creation of positive synergies between projects, or other factors related to the objectives of the call. These factors will be documented in the panel report.

4) After that, the remainder of the available call budget will be used to fund projects across the different topics in order to ensure a balanced spread of the geographical and thematic coverage and while respecting to the maximum possible extent the order of merit based on the evaluation of the award criteria.

All proposals will be informed about the evaluation result (evaluation result letter). Successful proposals will be invited for grant preparation; the other ones will be put on the reserve list or rejected.

⚠ **No commitment for funding** — Invitation to grant preparation does NOT constitute a formal commitment for funding. We will still need to make various legal checks before grant award: *legal entity validation, financial capacity, exclusion check, etc.*

Grant preparation will involve a dialogue in order to fine-tune technical or financial aspects of the project and may require extra information from your side. It may also include adjustments to the proposal to address recommendations of the evaluation committee or other concerns. Full compliance will be a pre-condition for signing the grant.

If you believe that the evaluation procedure was flawed, you can submit a **complaint** (following the deadlines and procedures set out in the evaluation result letter). Please note that notifications which have not been opened within 10 days after sending will be considered to have been accessed and that deadlines will be counted from opening/access *(see also Funding & Tenders Portal Terms and Conditions)*. Please also be aware that for complaints submitted electronically, there may be character limitations.

9. Award criteria

The award criteria for this call are as follows:

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1. **Relevance (30 points):** clarity and consistency of project, objectives and planning of the project; extent to which proposals match the scope and priorities and objectives of the call; trans-national dimension of the project/route; possibility to use the results in other countries; potential to develop cross-border cooperation.

2. **Quality (60 points):**

   – **Project design and implementation (30 points):** technical quality of proposal; route and ecosystem design; methodology for implementing the project and activities, risks identification, monitoring and risk timeline; cost effectiveness (sufficient/appropriate budget for proper implementation; best value for money).

   – **Project team and cooperation arrangements (30 points):** quality of the consortium and project team setup, appropriate cooperation procedures and problem-solving mechanisms.

3. **Impact (10 points):** ambition and expected long-term impact; number of SMEs supported under FSTP and other activities (capacity building); appropriate dissemination strategy; environmental and economic sustainability of the route; sustainability of results after EU funding ends.

Award criteria	Minimum pass score	Maximum score
Relevance	16	30
Quality — Project design and implementation	16	30
Quality — Project team and cooperation arrangements	16	30
Impact	6	10
Overall (pass) scores	70	100

Maximum points: 100 points.

Individual thresholds per criterion: 16/30, 16/30, 16/30 and 6/10 points.

Overall threshold: 70 points.

Proposals that pass the individual thresholds AND the overall threshold will be considered for funding — within the limits of the available budget (i.e. up to the budget ceiling). Other proposals will be rejected.

10. Legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements

If you pass evaluation, your project will be invited for grant preparation, where you will be asked to prepare the Grant Agreement together with the EU Project Officer.

This Grant Agreement will set the framework for your grant and its terms and conditions, in particular concerning deliverables, reporting and payments.

The Model Grant Agreement that will be used (and all other relevant templates and guidance documents) can be found on Portal Reference Documents.

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Starting date and project duration

The project starting date and duration will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 1)*. Normally the starting date will be after grant signature. A retroactive starting date can be granted exceptionally for duly justified reasons — but never earlier than the proposal submission date.

Project duration: *see section 6 above*.

Milestones and deliverables

The milestones and deliverables for each project will be managed through the Portal Grant Management System and will be reflected in Annex 1 of the Grant Agreement.

Minimum required deliverables resulting from the implementation of the activities set within the mandatory Work packages are presented throughout the Section 2.

Form of grant, funding rate and maximum grant amount

The grant parameters *(maximum grant amount, funding rate, total eligible costs, etc)* will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 3 and art 5)*.

Project budget (requested grant amount): *see section 6 above.*

The grant will be a budget-based mixed actual cost grant (actual costs, with unit cost and flat-rate elements). This means that it will reimburse ONLY certain types of costs (eligible costs) and costs that were *actually* incurred for your project (NOT the *budgeted* costs). For unit costs and flat-rates, you can charge the amounts calculated as explained in the Grant Agreement *(see art 6 and Annex 2 and 2a)*.

The costs will be reimbursed at the funding rates fixed in the Grant Agreement (100% for the costs for providing financial support to third parties and 90% for all other cost categories).

Grants may NOT produce a profit (i.e. surplus of revenues + EU grant over costs). For-profit organisations must declare their revenues and, if there is a profit, we will deduct it from the final grant amount *(see art 22.3)*.

Moreover, please be aware that the final grant amount may be reduced in case of non-compliance with the Grant Agreement *(e.g. improper implementation, breach of obligations, etc)*.

Budget categories and cost eligibility rules

The budget categories and cost eligibility rules are fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 3, art 6 and Annex 2)*.

Budget categories for this call:

- A. Personnel costs
  - A.1 Employees, A.2 Natural persons under direct contract, A.3 Seconded persons
  - A.4 SME owners and natural person beneficiaries
- B. Subcontracting costs
- C. Purchase costs
  - C.1 Travel and subsistence (Unit costs)
  - C.2 Equipment (Depreciation)

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- – C.3 Other goods, works and services
- – D. Other cost categories
  - – D.1 Financial support to third parties
- – E. Indirect costs

Specific cost eligibility conditions for this call:

- – personnel costs:
  - – SME owner/natural person unit cost[34]: Yes
- – travel and subsistence unit cost[35]: Yes[36]
- – equipment costs: depreciation
- – other cost categories:
  - – costs for financial support to third parties: allowed for grants or similar; maximum amount per third party is EUR 15 000 EUR.
- – indirect cost flat-rate: 7% of the eligible direct costs (categories A-D, except volunteers costs and exempted specific cost categories, if any)
- – VAT: non-deductible/non-refundable VAT is eligible (but please note that since 2013 VAT paid by beneficiaries that are public bodies acting as public authority is NOT eligible)
- – other:
  - – in-kind contributions for free are allowed, but cost-neutral, i.e. they cannot be declared as cost
  - – kick-off meeting: costs for kick-off meeting organised by the granting authority are eligible (travel costs for maximum 2 persons, return ticket to Brussels and accommodation for one night) only if the meeting takes place after the project starting date set out in the Grant Agreement; the starting date can be changed through an amendment, if needed
  - – project websites: communication costs for presenting the project on the participants**' websites or social media accounts** are eligible; costs for *separate* project websites are not eligible
  - – other ineligible costs: No

Reporting and payment arrangements

The reporting and payment arrangements are fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4 and art 21 and 22)*.

After grant signature, you will normally receive a prefinancing to start working on the project (float of normally 70% of the maximum grant amount; exceptionally less or no prefinancing). The prefinancing will be paid 30 days from entry into force/10 days before starting date/financial guarantee (if required) — whichever is the latest.

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[34] Commission Decision of 20 October 2020 authorising the use of unit costs for the personnel costs of the owners of small and medium-sized enterprises and beneficiaries that are natural persons not receiving a salary for the work carried out by themselves under an action or work programme (C(2020)7115).

[35] Commission Decision of 12 January 2021 authorising the use of unit costs for travel, accommodation and subsistence costs under an action or work programme under the 2021-2027 multi-annual financial framework (C(2021)35).

[36] See EU Grants AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement, art 6 on eligible costs: travel and subsistence costs must be declared using the unit cost according to Annex 2a of the grant agreement. If a particular instance of travel, accommodation or subsistence in the action is not covered by one of the unit costs mentioned in Decision C(2021)35 the actual costs may be used.

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There will be one 1 interim payment at the project's midterm (with detailed cost reporting).

Payment of the balance: At the end of the project, we will calculate your final grant amount. If the total of earlier payments is higher than the final grant amount, we will ask you (your coordinator) to pay back the difference (recovery).

All payments will be made to the coordinator.

⚠ Please be aware that payments will be automatically lowered if you or one of your consortium members has outstanding debts towards the EU (granting authority or other EU bodies). Such debts will be offset by us — in line with the conditions set out in the Grant Agreement *(see art 22)*.

Please also note that you are responsible for keeping records on all the work done and the costs declared.

Prefinancing guarantees

If a prefinancing guarantee is required, it will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4)*. The amount will be set during grant preparation and it will normally be equal or lower than the prefinancing for your grant.

The guarantee should be in euro and issued by an approved bank/financial institution established in an EU Member State. If you are established in a non-EU country and would like to provide a guarantee from a bank/financial institution in your country, please contact us (this may be exceptionally accepted, if it offers equivalent security).

Amounts blocked in bank accounts will NOT be accepted as financial guarantees.

Prefinancing guarantees are normally requested from the coordinator, for the consortium. They must be provided during grant preparation, in time to make the prefinancing (scanned copy via Portal AND original by post).

If agreed with us, the bank guarantee may be replaced by a guarantee from a third party.

The guarantee will be released at the end of the grant, in accordance with the conditions laid down in the Grant Agreement *(art 23)*.

Certificates

Depending on the type of action, size of grant amount and type of beneficiaries, you may be requested to submit different certificates. The types, schedules and thresholds for each certificate are fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4 and art 24)*.

Liability regime for recoveries

The liability regime for recoveries will be fixed in the Grant Agreement *(Data Sheet, point 4.4 and art 22)*.

For beneficiaries, it is one of the following:

- limited joint and several liability with individual ceilings — *each beneficiary up to their maximum grant amount*

- unconditional joint and several liability — *each beneficiary up to the maximum grant amount for the action*

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or

- individual financial responsibility — *each beneficiary only for their own debts*.

In addition, the granting authority may require joint and several liability of affiliated entities (with their beneficiary).

Provisions concerning the project implementation

IPR rules: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 16 and Annex 5):*

- rights of use on results: Yes

Communication, dissemination and visibility of funding: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 17 and Annex 5)*:

- communication and dissemination plan: Yes

- additional communication and dissemination activities: Yes

Specific rules for carrying out the action: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 18 and Annex 5): not applicable*

Other specificities

Consortium agreement: Yes

Non-compliance and breach of contract

The Grant Agreement (chapter 5) provides for the measures we may take in case of breach of contract (and other non-compliance issues).

For more information, *see AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement*.

11. How to submit an application

All proposals must be submitted directly online via the Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Submission System. Paper applications are NOT accepted.

Submission is a 2-step process:

a) create a user account and register your organisation

To use the Submission System (the only way to apply), all participants need to create an EU Login user account.

Once you have an EULogin account, you can register your organisation in the Participant Register. When your registration is finalised, you will receive a 9-digit participant identification code (PIC).

b) submit the proposal

Access the Electronic Submission System via the Topic page in the Calls for proposals section (or, for calls sent by invitation to submit a proposal, through the link provided in the invitation letter).

Submit your proposal in 3 parts, as follows:

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– Part A includes administrative information about the applicant organisations (future coordinator, beneficiaries, affiliated entities and associated partners) and the summarised budget for the proposal. Fill it in directly online

– Part B (description of the action) covers the technical content of the proposal. Download the mandatory word template from the Submission System, fill it in and upload it as a PDF file

– Annexes (*see section 5*). Upload them as PDF file (single or multiple depending on the slots). Excel upload is sometimes possible, depending on the file type.

The proposal must keep to the page limits *(see section 5)*; excess pages will be disregarded.

Documents must be uploaded to the right category in the Submission System, otherwise the proposal may be considered incomplete and thus inadmissible.

The proposal must be submitted before the call deadline (*see section 4*). After this deadline, the system is closed and proposals can no longer be submitted.

Once the proposal is submitted, you will receive a confirmation e-mail (with date and time of your application). If you do not receive this confirmation e-mail, it means your proposal has NOT been submitted. If you believe this is due to a fault in the Submission System, you should immediately file a complaint via the IT Helpdesk webform, explaining the circumstances and attaching a copy of the proposal (and, if possible, screenshots to show what happened).

Details on processes and procedures are described in the Online Manual. The Online Manual also contains the links to FAQs and detailed instructions regarding the Portal Electronic Exchange System.

12. Help

As far as possible, *please try to find the answers you need yourself*, in this and the other documentation (we have limited resources for handling direct enquiries):

– Online Manual

– Topic Q&A on the Topic page (for call-specific questions in open calls; not applicable for actions by invitation)

– Portal FAQ (for general questions).

Please also consult the Topic page regularly, since we will use it to publish call updates. (For invitations, we will contact you directly in case of a call update).

Contact

For individual questions on the Portal Submission System, please contact the IT Helpdesk.

Non-IT related questions should be sent at the latest 5 working days before the call submission deadline to the following email address: EISMEA-SMP-COSME-ENQUIRIES@ec.europa.eu.

Please indicate clearly the reference of the call and topic to which your question relates *(see cover page)*.

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13. Important

⚠️ IMPORTANT

- **Don't wait** until the end — Complete your application sufficiently in advance of the deadline to avoid any last minute technical problems. Problems due to last minute submissions *(e.g. congestion, etc)* will be entirely at your risk. Call deadlines can NOT be extended.

- Consult the Portal Topic page regularly. We will use it to publish updates and additional information on the call (call and topic updates).

- Funding & Tenders Portal Electronic Exchange System — By submitting the application, all participants accept to use the electronic exchange system in accordance with the Portal Terms & Conditions.

- Registration — Before submitting the application, all beneficiaries, affiliated entities and associated partners must be registered in the Participant Register. The participant identification code (PIC) (one per participant) is mandatory for the Application Form.

- Consortium roles — When setting up your consortium, you should think of organisations that help you reach objectives and solve problems.

  The roles should be attributed according to the level of participation in the project. Main participants should participate as beneficiaries or affiliated entities; other entities can participate as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions. Associated partners and third parties giving in-kind contributions should bear their own costs (they will not become formal recipients of EU funding). Subcontracting should normally constitute a limited part and must be performed by third parties (not by one of the beneficiaries/affiliated entities). Core project management activity cannot be subcontracted. Subcontracting going beyond 30% of the total eligible costs must be justified in the application.

- Coordinator — In multi-beneficiary grants, the beneficiaries participate as consortium (group of beneficiaries). They will have to choose a coordinator, who will take care of the project management and coordination and will represent the consortium towards the granting authority. In mono-beneficiary grants, the single beneficiary will automatically be coordinator.

- Affiliated entities — Applicants may participate with affiliated entities (i.e. entities linked to a beneficiary which participate in the action with similar rights and obligations as the beneficiaries, but do not sign the grant and therefore do not become beneficiaries themselves). They will get a part of the grant money and must therefore comply with all the call conditions and be validated (just like beneficiaries); but they do not count towards the minimum eligibility criteria for consortium composition (if any). If affiliated entities participate in your project, please do not forget to provide documents demonstrating their affiliation link to your organisation as part of your application.

- Associated partners — Applicants may participate with associated partners (i.e. partner organisations which participate in the action but without the right to get grant money). They participate without funding and therefore do not need to be validated.

- Consortium agreement — For practical and legal reasons it is recommended to set up internal arrangements that allow you to deal with exceptional or unforeseen circumstances (in all cases, even if not mandatory under the Grant Agreement). The consortium agreement also gives you the possibility to redistribute the grant money according to your own consortium-internal principles and parameters (for instance, one beneficiary can reattribute its grant money to another beneficiary). The consortium agreement thus allows you to customise the EU grant to the needs inside your consortium and can also help to protect you in case of disputes.

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- **Balanced project budget** — Grant applications must ensure a balanced project budget and sufficient other resources to implement the project successfully *(e.g. own contributions*, *income generated by the action*, *financial contributions from third parties, etc)*. You may be requested to lower your estimated costs, if they are ineligible (including excessive).

- **Completed/ongoing projects** — Proposals for projects that have already been completed will be rejected; proposals for projects that have already started will be assessed on a case-by-case basis (in this case, no costs can be reimbursed for activities that took place before the project starting date/proposal submission).

- **No-profit rule** — Grants may NOT give a profit (i.e. surplus of revenues + EU grant over costs). This will be checked by us at the end of the project.

- **No cumulation of funding/no double funding** — It is strictly prohibited to cumulate funding from the EU budget ., any given action may receive only ONE grant from the EU budget and cost items may under NO circumstances be declared under two EU grants; projects must be designed as different actions, clearly delineated and separated for each grant (without overlaps).

- **Combination with EU operating grants** — Combination with EU operating grants is possible, if the project remains outside the operating grant work programme and you make sure that cost items are clearly separated in your accounting and NOT declared twice *(see AGA — Annotated Grant Agreement, art 6.2.E)*.

- **Multiple proposals** — Applicants (beneficiaries and affiliated entities) may submit only ONE proposal under the same call (and be awarded a funding).

  Applicants may NOT participate in several proposals. If they participate or submit several proposals, only one application will be accepted and evaluated; the applicants will be asked to withdraw from the other applications (or they will be rejected).

- **Resubmission** — Proposals may be changed and re-submitted until the deadline for submission

- **Rejection** — By submitting the application, all applicants accept the call conditions set out in this this Call document (and the documents it refers to). Proposals that do not comply with all the call conditions will be rejected. This applies also to **applicants: All applicants need to fulfil the criteria; if any one of them doesn't, they** must be replaced or the entire proposal will be rejected.

- **Cancellation** — There may be circumstances which may require the cancellation of the call. In this case, you will be informed via a call or topic update. Please note that cancellations are without entitlement to compensation.

- **Language** — You can submit your proposal in any official EU language (project abstract/summary should however always be in English). For reasons of efficiency, we strongly advise you to use English for the entire application. If you need the call documentation in another official EU language, please submit a request within 10 days after call publication (for the contact information, *see section 12*).

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- Transparency — In accordance with Article 38 of the EU Financial Regulation, information about EU grants awarded is published each year on the Europa website.

  This includes:
    – beneficiary names
    – beneficiary addresses
    – the purpose for which the grant was awarded
    – the maximum amount awarded.

  The publication can exceptionally be waived (on reasoned and duly substantiated request), if there is a risk that the disclosure could jeopardise your rights and freedoms under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights or harm your commercial interests.

- Data protection — The submission of a proposal under this call involves the collection, use and processing of personal data. This data will be processed in accordance with the applicable legal framework. It will be processed solely for the purpose of evaluating your proposal, subsequent management of your grant and, if needed, programme monitoring, evaluation and communication. Details are explained in the Funding & Tenders Portal Privacy Statement.