



Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)

Call for proposals

CEF-Digital - Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways

(CEF-DIG-2026-GATEWAYS)

Version 1.0
17 March 2026



HISTORY OF CHANGES			
Version	Publication Date	Change	Page
1.0	17.03.2026	Final version	



HEALTH AND DIGITAL EXECUTIVE AGENCY (HaDEA)

HaDEA B - Digital, Industry and Space
HaDEA.B.1 - Connecting Europe Facility - Digital

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Introduction	5
1. Background.....	6
2. Objectives — Scope (including digital security requirements) — Expected Impact	7
2.1 CEF-DIG-2026-GATEWAYS-WORKS - Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways – Works.....	7
Objectives	7
Scope.....	7
Security requirements	11
Expected impact	13
2.2 CEF-DIG-2026-GATEWAYS-STUDIES - Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways – Studies	13
Objectives	13
Scope.....	13
Expected impact	14
3. Available budget	14
4. Timetable and deadlines	14
5. Admissibility and documents	15
6. Eligibility.....	16
Eligible participants (eligible countries).....	16
Consortium composition	19
Eligible activities.....	19
Geographic location (target countries).....	19
Duration	20
Project budget.....	20
7. Financial and operational capacity and exclusion.....	20
Financial capacity	20
Operational capacity	21
Exclusion	22
8. Evaluation and award procedure	23
9. Award criteria.....	23

10. Legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements.....	25
Starting date and project duration	25
Milestones and deliverables.....	25
Form of grant, funding rate and maximum grant amount.....	25
Budget categories and cost eligibility rules	26
Reporting and payment arrangements.....	28
Prefinancing guarantees	28
Certificates	28
Liability regime for recoveries	29
Provisions concerning the project implementation	29
Other specificities	29
Non-compliance and breach of contract	30
11. How to submit an application.....	30
12. Help	31
13. Important	32

0. Introduction

This is a call for proposals for EU action grants in the field of "Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways" under the Digital strand of the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). This call aims to fund backbone connectivity projects that contribute to the security, redundancy and resilience of European digital infrastructures. "Digital Global Gateways" calls also contribute to the digital strategic autonomy of the Union.

The legal framework for this call is set out in:

- Regulation 2024/2509 ([EU Financial Regulation](#))¹
- the basic act (CEF Regulation [2021/1153](#))².

The call is launched in accordance with the CEF-Digital [2024-2027 Work Programme](#)³ and will be managed by the European Health & Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) (hereafter 'the Agency').

The call covers the following **topics**:

- **CEF-DIG-2026-GATEWAYS-WORKS - Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways – Works**
- **CEF-DIG-2026-GATEWAYS-STUDIES - Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways - Studies**

Each project application under the call must address only one of these topics. Applicants wishing to apply for more than one topic must submit a separate proposal under each topic. Preparatory studies related to a works proposal should be submitted within the works proposal to the WORKS topic. See Section 2.1.

NOTE: The term 'project' used in the call documentation is synonymous to the term 'action' used in the CEF Regulation 2021/1153.

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)

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) 2021/1153 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the Connecting Europe Facility (OJ L 249, 14.7.2021, p. 38).

³ Commission Implementing Decision C(2026) 552 final of 4 February 2026 amending Implementing Decision C(2024) 6891 final of 9 October 2024 on the financing of the Connecting Europe Facility – Digital sector and the adoption of the multiannual work programme for 2024- 2027.

- 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 HaDEA website to consult the list of projects funded previously.

1. Background

Backbone connectivity, including submarine cables, is essential to ensure the availability of very high capacity connectivity throughout the EU, including in the Outermost Regions (ORs⁴) and Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs⁵). These infrastructures are also crucial to provide the EU with efficient international connectivity with its third-country partners.

The 2023 first [Report on the state of the Digital Decade](#) and subsequent reports recommended Member States to step up investments and ensure that all European digital infrastructures, including submarine cables, are secure, redundant and resilient. The [2024 White Paper "How to master Europe's digital infrastructure needs?"](#) (White Paper) and the January 2026 Commission proposal for a [Digital Networks Act](#) provide the broader strategic and policy context for stepping up investment in digital connectivity infrastructures.

The first CEF-Digital Work Programme had a strong focus on territorial digital inclusion and the contribution to achieve the 2030 Digital Decade targets. While this objective is still at the heart of CEF-Digital, current geopolitical tensions, such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the conflicts in the Middle East and the recent tensions in the Arctic Sea raise concerns about the protection of digital infrastructures and the risk of critical dependencies. Furthermore, the CEF-Digital work programme 2024-27 focuses also on deployment of connectivity infrastructures underpinning the EU competitiveness objectives, as indicated in the Commission proposal for a European Competitiveness Fund under the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

In February 2024, the European Commission published [a report on the cybersecurity and resiliency of the EU communications infrastructures and networks](#), followed by the [Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2024/779 on "Secure and Resilient Submarine Cable Infrastructures"](#) ("the Commission 2024 Recommendation"). On 21 February 2025, the Joint Communication of the Commission and the High Representative of the

⁴ Outermost Regions https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/outermost-regions/

⁵ Overseas Countries and Territories https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/overseas-countries-and-territories_en

Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted the “[EU Action Plan on Cable Security](#)”, which highlighted the importance to strengthen the security, resilience, and strategic autonomy of the EU’s digital infrastructure. This Action Plan also underlined that it is paramount to boost EU investment into submarine cable infrastructures and pointed at CEF-Digital as an effective funding instrument for such purpose. The White Paper, complemented by the Recommendation on Secure and Resilient Submarine Cable Infrastructures, envisaged to establish a list of strategic Cable Projects of European Interest (CPEIs). CPEIs are priority areas where additional investment in submarine cables would enhance EU resilience but are not necessarily commercially viable and may require funding from the EU and Member States to bridge funding gaps.

Following up on the Commission 2024 Recommendation and 2025 EU Action Plan on Cable Security, the European Commission published in October 2025 an [EU risk assessment on submarine cable infrastructures](#), and in February 2026 an [EU Cable Security Toolbox, including infrastructure and resilience-related options, and a priority list of areas for the deployment of](#) CPEIs. The risk assessment, Toolbox, and list of CPEIs areas were prepared by a group of experts chaired by the Commission and composed of representatives of authorities from Member States as well as ENISA.

The expert group drew up the list of areas where CPEIs deployment must be prioritised to address identified risks, vulnerabilities and dependencies in the EU backbone infrastructure hampering its resilience and security.

The investments needed for its implementation are expected to rely on private financing complemented, when necessary, by EU and national funds, as well as financial instruments, when possible.

CEF-Digital is one of the EU funding instruments mentioned in the Action Plan to support the deployment of CPEIs. In this respect, the second CEF-Digital multiannual Work Programme for the digital sector of CEF for the period 2024-2027 foresees the possibility to allocate Union financial support to CPEIs. During the evaluation of proposals, under the “Priority and urgency” criterion, particular attention will be given to projects in priority areas identified as [CPEIs](#) Stage 1.

Member States can also support projects receiving CEF-Digital grants with other complementary sources of funding such as RRF, NDICI, ERDF/EAFRD, and national funds. In case of co-financing with funds managed by Member States, State aid rules may apply.

2. Objectives — Scope (including digital security requirements) — Expected Impact

2.1 CEF-DIG-2026-GATEWAYS-WORKS - Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways – Works

Objectives

The objective of this call is to support the deployment or significant upgrade of backbone networks – in particular submarine cables but also terrestrial backbone networks and satellite infrastructure – that address risks, vulnerabilities and dependencies in the EU backbone infrastructure.

Scope

Proposals must meet **one** of the following conditions:

- connect at least two Member States. In the case of terrestrial backbones, only cross-border segments necessary to interconnect national backbones will be funded;
- connect a Member State with one or several of its islands, outermost regions, or overseas countries and territories;
- connect one or several Member States and third countries, including accession and neighbourhood countries, directly, or indirectly via other cable infrastructures linked to the Union.

Proposals must concern the deployment or significant upgrade of a backbone network that addresses a market failure⁶ in at least one of the following scenarios:

- a) The project concerns a route where there is a lack of redundancy⁷; and/or
- b) The project concerns a route where existing backbone infrastructures cannot satisfy current or expected demand⁸; and/or
- c) The project concerns a route subject to regulation because it is not considered competitive by the competent national regulatory authority. This scenario only applies to projects where the infrastructure will contribute to increase competition in the concerned route and will offer wholesale access to third parties under fair and non-discriminatory conditions.

For the purpose of assessing scenarios a) and b), only EU-controlled infrastructures are taken into account.

In the case of submarine cables, proposals should specify whether they contribute to the resilience and security of submarine cables connectivity in CPEI Areas 1-13 (except Areas 8 and 10), and in particular Areas 1-7 from the [CPEI list published in February 2026](#), as projects contributing to such areas will be scored positively under the evaluation criterion "Priority and Urgency".

The proposed project should be self-standing by providing connectivity to users. Projects that will require the deployment of an additional segment to meet this requirement could only be taken into account if the proposal includes a commitment to complete the deployment and a sound financing plan for the entire network (including the above-mentioned additional segment). The evaluation of a project will take into account, as a positive element, its contribution to a wider objective (e.g. completing a cable ring or system can bring additional benefits to those intrinsically associated to the project).

Applicants may choose the technological solution that they consider more suitable, which may include submarine cables systems, terrestrial backbone networks and satellite infrastructure. Applicants should justify their technological choice and should also explain how they will ensure the supply chain security, as regards availability of components, technologies, systems and knowhow required in the planning, acquisition, construction, operation, maintenance and repair of the backbone infrastructure.

This Call encourages:

⁶ Applicants will describe in section 5.1 of the application part B the market failure that justifies the proposed project.

⁷ When verifying if a route is served already by at least two present or credibly planned backbone infrastructures, applicants can justify the exclusion of backbone networks that are reaching the end of their life.

⁸ Applicants can take into account the expected increase of demand linked to ongoing or planned investments in access networks to meet EU connectivity objectives as defined in the Communication "2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade" COM(2021) 118 final as well as demand increase linked to connectivity of data centres and other digital capacities entailing intense traffic.

- the deployment of “smart” cable technologies, which can use the actual length of the cable by attaching sensors and/or by other probing techniques at the edge, to observe and monitor displacement and/or acoustic signals. Beneficiaries are expected to ensure the use of data gathered through such technologies with Regional Cable Hubs and/or authorised relevant stakeholders (e.g. the scientific and academic communities for environmental monitoring and civil protection purposes);
- the provision of wholesale access to third parties;
- the promoters of complementary projects to exploit possible synergies for instance, reusing or extending existing studies or works, sharing or upgrading capacities to fulfil the needs of the concerned stakeholders;
- the combination with funding from other EU programmes such as NDICI, ERDF or IPA III. In case of co-funding by EU programmes under shared management (including Cohesion Funds), State aid rules may apply (see section 10 of the Work Programme for detail)⁹.

Support will be given to:

- **Works** to construct the described networks, from end to end (i.e. until the infrastructure interconnects with existing backbone networks on both ends), including cable landing stations, branching units or satellite ground stations. The choice of the technical solution shall be supported by the description of the technical specifications needed to meet the Call objective and an analysis of the cost effectiveness.

In addition, projects may cover the following:

- o ancillary costs required to extend the backbone in the newly served area to locations where Socio-Economic Drivers are present, if no fixed backhaul network based on fibre (or on other technologies able to provide the same level of performance and reliability as fibre) serves or is credibly planned to be deployed in such locations. Such ancillary costs must not exceed 5% of the entire project costs.
- o synergetic (ancillary) elements relating to another sector of the CEF programme, i.e. energy and transport, if these synergetic elements allow to significantly improve the socio-economic, climate or environmental benefits of the action. CEF co-funding may be provided as long as the cost of these synergetic elements does not exceed 20% of the total eligible costs of the action.
- o costs linked to the construction of satellite ground stations and their interconnection with local backbone networks are within the scope of the call. Projects to deploy such satellite infrastructure can be funded if they concern territories (e.g. small islands, hard to reach mountainous regions or territories with limited population density) where satellite infrastructure is the most cost-efficient method to deliver backbone connectivity. Furthermore, the proposal should indicate the planned satellite constellation infrastructure on which the ground station will rely upon so that the sustainability, security and resilience of the end-to-end connectivity is also evaluated.

⁹ In particular, Article 52b(4).(d) of Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty (OJ L 187 26.6.2014, p. 1) declares compatible under certain conditions, without the need of a notification and Decision from the Commission, the co-financing with State aid of certain cross-border sections of a submarine cable network financed under this call or awarded a Seal of Excellence as described in Section 8.

- o Exceptionally, a limited percentage of the costs of the project can consist in the acquisition of an “Indefeasible Right of Use (IRU)”. These costs would normally be classified as *rental/leasing of the equipment/infrastructure/asset* according to the full cost option foreseen under Article 6.2.(c)(2) of the MGA, but exceptionally may be assimilated to the costs of purchasing equipment, infrastructure or other asset where the rental/lease is concluded effectively for the lifetime of the equipment during which it will be fully depreciated. In any case such costs must be clearly identified in the proposal. Every situation will be assessed case-by-case to confirm that the acquisition of an IRU in a segment of the infrastructure complements a substantial investment in the deployment of new infrastructure and is the most cost-effective solution. An example is the case of a submarine backbone network project that builds a branch connecting an island to a third-party cable system where capacity is still available and can be purchased as being the most efficient manner of bringing connectivity to this island. To be noted, however, that proposals relying on an IRU may contribute to a lesser extent to the security, resilience and reliability of backbone infrastructure than proposals deploying new secure infrastructures. This point will be taken into account in the evaluation of proposals.

Works projects must indicate the ownership of the deployed infrastructure during and after the completion of the project and describe the mechanism to be used to provide services, including the related business models. In particular, any arrangements for providing services to different market players, as well as the relationship(s) between the owner of the infrastructure, the entity operating it and any entities using/accessing it should be described.

- **Studies** including all preparatory work required prior to signing a contract with a supplier, such as marine ground surveys for submarine cables and the application for any required permits.

Applicants may apply for grants for works and studies. Studies activities must be executed in separate work packages and can then benefit from the funding rate specific for studies (see Form of grant, funding rate and maximum grant amount). Note that the **higher funding rate for works in outermost regions** (see Form of grant, funding rate and maximum grant amount) **does not apply to studies** activities if included in the same proposal.

Support will **not** be given to:

1. projects that concern routes already served by at least two present or credibly planned submarine cables, capable of delivering performances matching the current and foreseeable demand and compliant to EU security standards¹⁰.

However, on the grounds of EU security and resilience considerations, the CEF intervention is justified if a route is not served by at least two existing or credibly planned infrastructures that fulfil the conditions set out under Section 8 of the Work Programme. An intervention may also be justified if it concerns a route considered non-competitive and subject to regulation.

2. any costs for operating the infrastructure during its lifetime.
3. extra components at the landing sites not required for the end-to-end connectivity such as data centres, hosting facilities and other services.

¹⁰ in particular regarding ownership and high-risk suppliers as described in section 8 of the CEF-Digital Work Programme.

Applicants (beneficiaries and affiliated entities) can be operators, utilities, authorities, investors and vendors i.e., entities supplying hardware (including cables, equipment, devices) or systems (including software) that are essential for the project.

Security requirements

Digital infrastructure is critical to the Union’s strategic interests. Therefore, this call is subject to strict security requirements as provided under sections 8.3 and 8.4 of the Work Programme, as specified below and under section 6 of this call document.

Security declarations

All the proposals submitted to this topic must include **security declarations** by the participating entities¹¹ receiving funding for the deployment of equipment and technologies. The declarations should demonstrate that the digital infrastructure (i.e. network technologies and equipment, including software and services) funded by the grant will comply with this call’s security requirements (as defined in the declaration), in accordance with the applicable EU law, national law, and EU guidance in place on cybersecurity¹².

In addition, the declarations must:

- For projects where network technologies and equipment funded by the grant could interconnect with other network technologies and equipment not funded by the grant (or are part of the same network), in a way that could undermine the security of the funded infrastructure, demonstrate that compliance with the security requirements of this call will be also ensured in relation to any network technologies and equipment that would represent a risk as regards the security of the funded infrastructure.
- Confirm that the results of the CEF funded action shall remain with the beneficiary/beneficiaries during the action and for 10 years after its completion.
- Demonstrate that effective measures are in place to address underlying security issues, including, wherever relevant, measures to avoid falling under non-eligible third country jurisdiction obligations, or influence, during the project and for a minimum of 10 years after its completion.
- Demonstrate the project’s compliance with the strictest cybersecurity requirements, imposed by national law, in accordance with the 5G toolbox (where applicable) and other relevant EU guidance, of all the eligible countries where the infrastructure is deployed.
- Demonstrate, where relevant, that the project takes into consideration the relevant risk scenarios identified in the [EU risk assessment on submarine cable infrastructures](#)

¹¹ In line with Council Decision (EU) 2021/1764 of 5 October 2021, persons and entities established in overseas countries and Territories (OCTs) are eligible for funding subject to the rules and objectives of the CEF and possible arrangements applicable to the Member State to which the relevant overseas country or territory is linked.

¹² As defined in the [EU coordinated risk assessment on cybersecurity of 5G networks](#) and provided in paragraph 8.2 of the Work-Programme, “Cross-border and internal member state infrastructures funded under CEF must comply with the highest security standards because they underpin the entire economy and society and vulnerabilities of those infrastructures can undermine public order and security within the Union. The Second report on Member States’ Progress in implementing the EU Toolbox on 5G Cybersecurity, published in June 2023 concluded that there is a “clear risk of persisting dependency on high-risk suppliers in the internal market with potentially serious negative impacts on security for users and companies across the EU and the EU’s critical infrastructure. A lack of swift actions by Member States regarding high-risk suppliers could also affect over time the EU consumers and companies’ trust in the internal market, and increase the risk of spill-over in case of cyber-attacks, especially where MNOs provide cross-border services and in case it affects critical 5G use cases or other sectors dependent on telecoms.”. For these reasons, the Communication on the implementation of the 5G cybersecurity toolbox should apply in this call.

and relevant mitigating measures identified in the [EU Cable Toolbox \(EU toolbox on security and resilience of submarine cable infrastructures\)](#).

The content of the declarations and commitments in the project proposal will be assessed during the evaluation phase but they should remain valid throughout the lifetime of the project.

In case of infrastructures **connecting the EU with third countries** and in particular in the case of a project of common interest involving the territory of one or more third countries as referred to in Article 5 or 11(5) of the CEF Regulation or international waters, where there are no legal entities established in the associated third countries or in other third countries participating as beneficiaries, activities taking place in the territory of third countries are eligible upon submission of:

- A security declaration, provided by each applicant in the proposal, that covers the compliance of the digital infrastructure built in the third country territory and in general of the activities performed in the third country with the Call security requirements.
- A security guarantee approved by the third country certifying compliance of the third parties, if any (i.e. subcontractor) involved in the action implementation with similar conditions as for security guarantees obtained in case of inclusion of a third country entity as beneficiary.

Digital Security section of the proposal

In the digital security section of the application form (part of section 4.3 Social, environmental and other impacts of the Technical Description – Part B), proposals must consider risk scenarios and mitigating measures as described in:

1) the **EU cybersecurity Toolbox**¹³, notably:

- measures adopted to exclude or restrict the involvement of high-risk suppliers (such as those addressed in the [Commission communication on the implementation of the 5G cybersecurity toolbox](#))¹⁴ insofar as they may affect critical and sensitive key assets, including measures to avoid dependency on such high-risk suppliers;
- measures to promote supply chain resilience and strategic autonomy¹⁵;
- security requirements for the involved network operators (e.g. strict access controls, rules on secure operation and monitoring, limitations on outsourcing of specific functions, etc.);

¹³ NIS cooperation Group: *Cybersecurity of 5G networks EU Toolbox of risk mitigating measures* – 2020

¹⁴ As defined in the [EU coordinated risk assessment on cybersecurity of 5G networks and](#) provided in paragraph 8.2 of the Work-Programme, "Cross-border and internal member state infrastructures funded under CEF must comply with the highest security standards because they underpin the entire economy and society and vulnerabilities of those infrastructures can undermine public order and security within the Union. The Second report on Member States' Progress in implementing the EU Toolbox on 5G Cybersecurity, published in June 2023 concluded that there is a "clear risk of persisting dependency on high-risk suppliers in the internal market with potentially serious negative impacts on security for users and companies across the EU and the EU's critical infrastructure. A lack of swift actions by Member States regarding high-risk suppliers could also affect over time the EU consumers and companies' trust in the internal market, and increase the risk of spill-over in case of cyber-attacks, especially where MNOs provide cross-border services and in case it affects critical 5G use cases or other sectors dependent on telecoms.". For these reasons, the Communication on the implementation of the 5G cybersecurity toolbox should apply in this call.

¹⁵ Principles underlined in the 5G cybersecurity toolbox and the related measures apply mutatis-mutandis to backbone infrastructures.

- measures adopted to prevent unsolicited transfer to, or access by third parties to data (personal or non-personal) stored or transported via the project infrastructure.
- 2) the **EU Cable Toolbox** (if the proposal involves submarine cables), notably:
- one or more of the risk scenarios from the [EU Cables Risk assessment](#),
 - one or more of the risk mitigating measures from the [EU Cable Security Toolbox](#), considering in particular strategic measures 1, 3 and 6, and technical measures 1, 2 and 3 therein.

Based on the security declarations in the proposal, as well as the evaluation carried out by independent experts, the granting authority, where appropriate, may carry out a security assessment, including the beneficiaries' suppliers and sub-contractors at any level in accordance with Article 136 of the Financial Regulation. Funding for actions which do not comply with the conditions related to security issues may be suspended, terminated, or reduced at any time in accordance with the Financial Regulation.

For further background on security requirements, please see sections 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4 as well as section 2.2 (paragraph "Strengthen cybersecurity and resilience") of the CEF-Digital Work Programme.

Expected impact

The expected impact of the supported project include:

- significantly improved security and resilience of the EU backbone networks;
- strengthened quality of connectivity within the Union as well as with third countries;
- capacity, security and resilience of the overall backbone network infrastructure benefit all EU end-users;
- benefits surpass those directly related to the individual supported projects and contribute to bridging the digital divide and ensuring widespread access to the Gigabit networks for all EU end-users and businesses.

Key performance indicators for this topic will include: i) the total length of the backbone, and ii) the additional (significant) transmission capacity created as a result of the projects supported by CEF. For submarine cables the number of fibre pairs, the current capacity per fibre pair, as well as the technology chosen and whether the system is repeated or unrepeated should be mentioned in the proposal, too.

2.2 CEF-DIG-2026-GATEWAYS-STUDIES - Backbone connectivity for Digital Global Gateways – Studies

Objectives

Studies related to the deployment/significant upgrade of backbone networks that address risks, vulnerabilities and dependencies in the EU backbone infrastructure¹⁶.

Scope

Support will be given to studies for the deployment of backbone connectivity meeting **one** of the following conditions:

¹⁶ Such identification must be in line with the Commission 2024 Recommendation and the work carried out by the expert group.

- connect at least two Member States. In the case of terrestrial backbones, only cross-border segments necessary to connect national backbones will be funded;
- connect a Member State with one or several of its islands, outermost regions, or overseas countries and territories;
- connect one or several Member States and third countries, including accession and neighbourhood countries, directly, or indirectly via other cable infrastructures linked to the Union.

Proposals should specify whether they contribute to the resilience and security of submarine cable connectivity in CPEI Areas 1-13 (except Areas 8 and 10), and in particular Areas 1-7 from the [CPEI list published in February 2026](#), as projects with such characteristics will be scored positively under the evaluation criterion "Priority and Urgency".

The following activities can be funded:

- all preparatory work required prior to signing a contract with a supplier, such as marine ground surveys for submarine cables and the application for any required permits;
- studies for possible follow up/deployment of cable projects of European interest during the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 are also eligible.

Expected impact

The expected impact of the supported project include:

- Improved quality and maturity of future EU backbone networks development, in particular CPEIs.

3. Available budget

The available call budget for both topics is **EUR 180 000 000**.

This budget might be increased provided that the total additional budget cumulatively allocated to the topic across all calls of the work programme is lower than 20% of the total budget of the multiannual plan.

We reserve the right not to award all available funds, depending on the proposals received and the results of the evaluation.

4. Timetable and deadlines

Timetable and deadlines (indicative)	
Call opening:	17 March 2026
<u>Deadline for submission:</u>	<u>30 June 2026 – 17:00:00 CEST</u> (Brussels time)
Evaluation:	Q3 2026
Information on evaluation results:	Q4 2026
GA signature:	Q1 2027

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 [Search Funding & Tenders](#) 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 (*to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, then assembled, and re-uploaded*)
- Part C (*to be filled in directly online, for Works topic only*) containing additional project data
- **mandatory annexes and supporting documents** (*to be uploaded*):
 - detailed budget table per WP (*template available in the Submission System*)
 - activity reports of last year (unless exempted from operational capacity check; see *section 7*)
 - list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years) (*template available in Part B*)
 - timetable/Gantt chart (*template available in the Submission System*)
 - letters of support from all Member States benefitting from the project (MS agreement) (*template available in the Submission System*¹⁷)
 - ownership control declarations, including for subcontractors and associated partners¹⁸ (*template available in the Submission System*)
 - security compliance declarations signed by the participating entities (*for Works proposals only template available in the Submission System*)
 - security guarantees approved by the respective authorities of the associated third country or other third country, in case of third country entities participation, or by the authorities of an EU Member State in case of non-EU controlled entities established in the EU
 - declaration from the coordinator, on behalf of the consortium, that the planned backbone infrastructure addresses a market failure in terms of lack of redundancy, capacity or another type of market failure as

¹⁷ The list of the national contact points can be found here: [National Contact Points \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁸ If not provided at submission stage, the ownership control questionnaire for subcontractors will be requested later during the grant agreement implementation in order to perform the ownership control assessment.

described in section 2 (*for works proposals, to be uploaded in the Submission System in "Other annexes"*)

- business plan financial spreadsheet (**for Works proposals only**, template available in the Submission System)
- 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 the 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**.

Proposals are limited to maximum **120 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.*).

 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)
 - third countries associated to the CEF Programme (list of participating countries)¹⁹ **unless the topic is subject to specific restrictions (see below)**

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.

¹⁹ See Art 5.2 of CEF Regulation 2021/1153: the third countries associated to CEF and entities established in those countries, may not receive financial assistance under CEF except where it is indispensable to the achievement of the objectives of a given project of common interest or a project in accordance with Article 7(1) of this Regulation and under the conditions set in the work programme. In addition, the eligibility of associated countries is conditional to the entry into force of the Association Agreement by ratification by the respective national parliaments.

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

Please note that this call is subject to restrictions due to security reasons. This means that only the following countries are eligible: **EU Member States**.

Moreover:

- participation in any capacity (as beneficiary, affiliated entity, associated partner, subcontractor or recipient of financial support to third parties) is limited to entities from eligible countries
- entities must not be directly or indirectly controlled from a country that is not an eligible country (ownership control restriction)
- project activities (included subcontracted work) must take place in eligible countries (*see section geographic location below and section 10*)
- the Grant Agreement may provide for IPR restrictions (*see section 10*).

 For restrictions limiting participation to specific eligible countries:

The condition must in principle be fulfilled already at proposal submission stage (call deadline); you cannot change status during GAP — unless agreed by the granting authority.

The following participants (beneficiaries, affiliated entities, associated partners and subcontractors) will be checked by the EU. Other participants must be checked by the consortium.

For the EU checks, the participants must register in the [Participant Register](#) (i.e. have at least a draft PIC). For beneficiaries and affiliated entities, the checks will be done on the basis of the validated PIC data. For other participants, the checks will be done on the basis of publicly available information.

 For ownership control restrictions:

'Control' means the possibility to exercise decisive influence on the participant, directly or indirectly, through one or more intermediate entities, 'de jure' or 'de facto'. This includes not only ownership of more than 50% (shareholding), but also any other elements and/or rights that can amount to control.

The condition must in principle be fulfilled already at proposal submission stage (call deadline); you cannot change status during GAP — unless agreed by the granting authority.

The following participants (beneficiaries, affiliated entities, associated partners and subcontractors) will be checked by the EU. Other participants must be checked by the consortium.

For the EU checks, the participants must register in the [Participant Register](#) (i.e. have at least a draft PIC). They will be required to fill in and submit an [ownership control declaration](#)* as part of the proposal (and later on be requested to submit supporting documents). Where guarantees are allowed, ineligible entities will be requested to fill in the [guarantee template](#)*, have it approved by the competent authority of their country of establishment, and submit it to the granting authority which will assess their validity.

For more information, see [Guidance on participation in EU restricted calls with ownership and control restrictions](#)*.

Specific cases and definitions

Exceptional funding — Entities from other countries (not listed above), namely entities established in third countries associated to the CEF Programme and entities established in third countries not associated to the CEF Programme, are **exceptionally** eligible for projects of common interest, if the granting authority considers their participation indispensable for the implementation of the action, and on the condition that those entities provide **security guarantees**, approved, on the basis of national law, by the country in which they are established.

Legal entities that are established in EU Member States, but are not EU controlled, shall also be eligible to participate on the condition that they provide **security guarantees**, approved, on the basis of national law, by the EU Member State in which they are established.

In case the ownership control assessment concludes that an entity established in the EU is not controlled from a EU Member State, this entity will be notified of the outcome of the assessment and shall be obliged to provide the security guarantee, approved, on the basis of national law, by the EU Member State of establishment, within **30 working days** of the receipt of the notification and **at the latest before the signature of the Grant Agreement**.

The above-mentioned **security guarantees** shall certify that the legal entity:

- a) Exercises full control over its corporate structure and decision-making process in a manner that does not restrain or restrict in any way its ability to perform and complete the action;
- b) Is not subject to non-eligible third country jurisdiction obligations that may undermine the security of the Union;
- c) Ensures that the results of the CEF funded action shall remain with the beneficiary/beneficiaries and shall not be subject to control or restrictions by non-eligible third countries or non-eligible third country entities during the action and for 10 years after its completion.

Concerning eligible legal entities established in third countries, the “non-eligible third countries” mentioned above under points (b) and (c) should be understood as any third country other than the country of establishment.

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 persons²⁰.

²⁰ See Article 200(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2024/2509](#).

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

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)²¹. 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 - Following the Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/2506, as of 16th December 2022, no legal commitments (including the grant agreement itself as well as subcontracts, purchase contracts, financial support to third parties, etc.) can be signed with Hungarian public interest trusts established under Hungarian Act IX of 2021 or any entity they maintain. Affected entities may continue to apply to calls for proposals.

However, in case the Council measures are not lifted, such entities are not eligible to participate in any funded role (beneficiaries, affiliated entities, subcontractors, recipients of financial support to third parties). In this case, co-applicants will be invited to remove or replace that entity and/or to change its status into associated partner. Tasks and budget may be redistributed accordingly.

For more information, see [Rules for Legal Entity Validation, LEAR Appointment and Financial Capacity Assessment](#).

Consortium composition

There are no specific eligibility conditions concerning consortium composition for this call.

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 already 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*).

Financial support to third parties is not allowed.

Geographic location (target countries)

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

Activities may take place in the territory of third countries and associated expenditures may be eligible if the project of common interest (article 8, article 9 (4)

²¹ 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](#).

(d) and point 3 of the CEF Regulation Annex Part V²²) involves the territory of one or more third countries or international waters, and where the activities taking place in the third countries are indispensable to the achievement of the objectives of the project. The security declaration of the beneficiaries should cover, amongst others, the compliance of the activities performed in the third country/ies with the call security requirements (see above).

Duration

Works projects should normally be up to 36 months (extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment).

Project budget

The maximum requested grant amount should not be higher than EUR 20 000 000 per project for the works topic, and EUR 5 000 000 per project for the studies topic.

In the following exceptional cases, proposals may benefit from a higher grant amount, not exceeding EUR 60 000 000, in either or both of the following cases:

- proposals combining systems, still under development by different promoters, that achieve a greater geographical reach and avoid overlapping segments; applicants will have to demonstrate that earlier studies and works, developed or implemented separately, will be integrated in one single global project. In order to benefit from this higher grant amount, applicants will have to justify a greater impact (e.g. synergy leading to substantially higher geographical scale, etc.) and catalytic effect (e.g. synergy between different promoters resulting in substantial cost-efficiency gains).
- proposals whose scope is entirely and significantly contributing to one of the areas identified as CPEIs Stage 1 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/submarine-cable-security-toolbox-and-cable-projects-european-interest>. In order to benefit from this higher grant amount, applicants will have to justify a greater EU priority and urgency (underpinning a specific CPEI priority area) as well as high levels of maturity and quality.

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 responsibility 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](#).

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:

- description of the consortium participants
- applicants' activity reports of last year
- list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years)

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

Public bodies, Member State organisations and international organisations are exempted from the operational capacity check.

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 participate²³:

- 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)
- 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 misconduct²⁴ (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 EU Regulation [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 resisted²⁵ 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 rejected if it turns out that²⁶:

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

²³ See Articles 138 and 143 of EU Financial Regulation [2024/2509](#).

²⁴ '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.

²⁵ '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.

²⁶ See Article 143 EU Financial Regulation [2024/2509](#).

- 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).

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 (for each topic) against the operational capacity and award criteria (3 phases: individual evaluation, consensus phase and panel review) and then ranked according to their scores (*see sections 7 and 9*).

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

1. Score obtained under the 'Priority and urgency' criterion
2. Score obtained under the 'Maturity' criterion
3. Score obtained under the 'Catalytic effect' criterion
4. Score obtained under the 'Impact' criterion
5. Score obtained under the 'Quality' criterion.

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. Proposals that are below the budget threshold (i.e. passed, but not ranked high enough to receive funding) will be awarded a [Seal of Excellence](#).

 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:

1. **Priority and urgency:** evaluating correspondence of the proposal with the sectoral policy objectives and priorities measuring its EU added-value and in

particular whether the proposal addresses one of priority areas identified in the Cable Projects of European Interest (CPEI) list Stage 1, and where applicable assessing the possible synergies with other sectors or CEF-Digital topics and, where applicable, ensuring a geographical balance of the CEF-Digital support in the respective area. (5 points)

2. **Maturity:** assessing the maturity of the action in the project development. The criterion will measure, among others: i) the readiness/ability of the project to start by the proposed start date and to complete by the proposed end date; ii) the status of the contracting procedures and of the necessary permits; and iii) information on the availability of the financial resources needed to complement the CEF investment. (5 points)
3. **Quality:** evaluating the soundness of the implementation plan proposed, both from the technical and financial point of view, the architecture and design approach, the organisational structures put in place (or foreseen) for the implementation, the risk analysis, the control procedures and quality management and the communication strategy. This assessment of this criterion will also consider the infrastructure to be built or upgraded. Moreover, when applicable, it will also assess the information related to the maintenance strategy for the completed project. (5 points)
4. **Impact:** assessing, when applicable, the economic, social, competition and environmental impact, including the climate impact, and other relevant externalities, as well as the impact on the resilience of EU backbone infrastructures. This criterion may be substantiated by a Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA), in which case the evaluation will look at the soundness, comprehensiveness, and transparency of the analysis as well as proposed means to monitor its impact. This criterion will also assess, where applicable, the safety, security, cybersecurity of electronic communication networks, interoperability and accessibility aspects of the proposal, innovation and digitalisation, its crossborder dimension, and contribution to network integration and territorial accessibility, including in particular for Outermost Regions and islands. Moreover, the criterion will assess, where applicable, potential complementarities with other public funding programmes. (5 points)
5. **Catalytic effect:** evaluating the effect of the EU financial assistance on the realisation of the project, for instance by i) overcoming a financial gap generated by insufficient financial viability and high upfront costs; or ii) increasing the capacity to mobilise differentiated investments sources; or iii) improving the quality or the scope/size of the project; or iv) accelerating the overall investment plan. (5 points).

Award criteria	Minimum pass score	Maximum score
Priority and urgency	3	5
Maturity	3	5
Quality	3	5
Impact	3	5
Catalytic effect	3	5
Overall (pass) scores	15	25

Maximum points: 25 points.

Individual thresholds per criterion: 3/5, 3/5, 3/5, 3/5 and 3/5 points.

Overall threshold: 15 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](#).

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.

Beneficiaries will also be invited to check and update information about output indicators.

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 (maximum **50 %** for the costs of studies, maximum **70 %** for the costs of works in outermost regions²⁷, and maximum **30 %** for all other costs categories ('project funding rate')).

You can apply for a higher project funding rate if your project concerns:

- strong cross-border dimension: 50%

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*).

 Please be aware that project management costs (including related tasks, such as consortium-internal progress meetings, project reporting etc) should not exceed 10% of total costs for the project. Costs exceeding this limit will be rejected during grant preparation.

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
 - C.2 Equipment
 - C.3 Other goods, works and services
- D. Other cost categories
 - D.1 Financial support to third parties
 - D.2 Studies
 - D.3 Synergetic elements
 - D.4 Works in outermost regions

²⁷ Not applicable for "studies" in a works proposal, which are funded at 50%.

– E. Indirect costs

Specific cost eligibility conditions for this call:

- personnel costs:
 - average personnel costs (unit cost according to usual cost accounting practices): Yes
 - SME owner/natural person unit cost²⁸ : Yes
- subcontracting costs:
 - country restrictions for subcontracting costs: Yes, subcontracted work must be performed in the eligible countries or target countries
- travel and subsistence unit cost²⁹: No (only actual costs)
- equipment costs: full cost
- other cost categories:
 - costs for financial support to third parties: not allowed
 - studies: Yes
 - synergetic elements: Yes
 - works in outermost regions: Yes
 - land purchases: No
- indirect cost flat-rate :0% of the eligible direct costs (categories A-D, except volunteers costs and exempted specific cost categories, if any)
- VAT: VAT is NOT eligible
- other:
 - in-kind contributions for free are allowed, but cost-neutral, i.e. they cannot be declared as cost
 - 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
 - eligible cost country restrictions: Yes, only costs for activities carried out in eligible countries or target countries are eligible
 - other ineligible costs: Yes, costs related to purchase of land

 Please be aware that in case of significant changes to the circumstances that have an impact on the project budget, you may be asked to request an amendment to reduce the maximum grant amount. If you do not comply with this request, we may have to terminate the grant and reduce it from our side (see art 32).

 Similarly, you may be asked to request an amendment to reduce the maximum grant amount, if your project encounters major delays during the project

²⁸ 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).

²⁹ 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).

implementation. If you do not comply with this request, we may have to terminate the grant (see art 32).

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. The amount will be established based on the grant type or estimated project duration at the time of grant signature and will be 30%. The prefinancing will be paid 30 days from entry into force/financial guarantee (if required — whichever is the latest).

There may be one or more **interim payments** (with detailed cost reporting).

In addition, you will be expected to submit one or more progress reports not linked to payments.

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*
- 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

Security rules: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 13 and Annex 5)*

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: No
- additional communication and dissemination activities: Yes
- special logos: No

Specific rules for carrying out the action: *see Model Grant Agreement (art 18 and Annex 5)*:

- Member State information: Yes
- specific rules for digital infrastructure projects: Yes
- durability: Yes
- specific rules for blending operations: No
- special obligations linked to restrictions due to security:
 - implementation in case of restrictions due to security: Yes

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 4 parts, as follows:

- 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
- Part C containing additional project data (for Works proposals only). To be filled in directly online.

Annexes (see *section 5*). Upload them as PDF file (single or multiple depending on the slots; the budget table and business plan financial spreadsheet can be uploaded as Excel file).

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)
- call information on the [HaDEA website](#).

Please also consult the Topic page regularly, since we will use it to publish call updates.

Contact

For individual questions on the Portal Submission System, please contact the [IT Helpdesk](#).

Non-IT related questions should be sent to the following email address: HADEA-CEFDIGITAL-CALLS@ec.europa.eu. Please submit your questions no later than 10 days before the submission deadline. Questions received after 19 June 2026 may not be answered. Please indicate clearly the reference of the call and topic to which your question relates (see *cover page*).

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).
- **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.

- **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 (except under 'EU Synergies actions'). Outside such Synergies actions, 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 may submit more than one proposal for *different* projects under the same call (and be awarded funding for them).

Organisations may participate in several proposals.

BUT: if there are several proposals for *very similar* projects, only one application will be accepted and evaluated; the applicants will be asked to withdraw the others (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 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*).

- **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](#).