



Single Market Programme (SMP COSME)

Call for proposals

EU-Ukraine Cluster Partnership Programme
(SMP-COSME-2024-CLUSTERUA)

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EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL AND SMEs EXECUTIVE AGENCY (EISMEA)

EISMEA.I – Innovation ecosystems, SMP/Entrepreneurship and Consumers
Unit 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 clusters' support under the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs pillar of the **Single Market Programme (SMP COSME)**.

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

- Regulation 2018/1046 ([EU Financial Regulation](#))
- the basic act (SMP Regulation [2021/690](#)¹).

The call is launched in accordance with the 2024-27 SMP Work Programme² and will be managed by the **European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA)** ('Agency').

The call covers the following **topic**:

SMP-COSME-2024-CLUSTERUA-01 EU-Ukraine “Cluster Partnership” Programme

Applicants can NOT submit more than one proposal under this call.

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)
 - evaluation and award procedure (section 8)
 - award criteria (section 9)
 - legal and financial set-up of the Grant Agreements (section 10)
 - how to apply (section 11)
- the [Online Manual](#) outlines the:

¹ 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).

² Commission Implementing Decision C(2023) 8926 final of 21.12.2023 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 2024-2027.

- 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 to consult the list of projects funded previously.

1. Background

Industrial policy of the European Union

Europe is embarking on a transition towards climate neutrality and digital leadership. The European industrial strategy aims to ensure that European industry can lead the way as we enter this new age. On 10 March 2020, the Commission laid the foundations for an industrial strategy that would support the twin transition to a green and digital economy, make EU industry more competitive globally, and enhance Europe's open strategic autonomy. On 11 May 2021, the Commission [updated the EU Industrial Strategy](#) to ensure that its industrial ambition takes full account of the new circumstances following the COVID-19 crisis and helps to drive the transformation to a more sustainable, digital, resilient and globally competitive economy.

Clusters are a significant part of the European industrial landscape. They are dynamic geographic concentrations of interconnected firms and related economic entities that have reached a sufficient scale to develop specialised expertise, services, resources, suppliers, and skills. They include business companies of different size, but also other essential entities of an industrial ecosystem such as research and knowledge institutions, science and technology parks, talents and financial service providers, non-profit organisations, related public bodies.

Clusters connect all industrial players active in a specific industrial ecosystem, covering critical value chains in their or across ecosystems, with a broad variety of actors from smallest start-ups in social economy to the largest companies in traditional industries, from basic research in academia to commercial uptake of research, from input providers to users. They are represented by a balanced mix of cluster organisations³ at different development stages i.e., potential, emerging, established or declining from more developed, transitional, and less developed EU regions which operate across borders, inside and outside the EU.

Clusters have a positive impact on economies. The [European Panorama of Clusters](#) provide evidence that companies within industrial groupings are more innovative than those operating alone, create more and better jobs, conduct more market research, register more international patents and export more than other companies.

Clusters are bridge-builders, change agents and multipliers. Clusters could therefore play a significant role in the economic recovery and longer-term economic success: accelerating the twin green and digital transition and building resilience in line with the updated EU industrial strategy.

³ *Cluster organisations* are legal entities that support the "enhancement of collaboration, networking and learning" in innovation clusters and act as innovation support providers by providing or channelling specialised and customised business support services, especially to SME. For more information see the EU Cluster Portal at www.clustercollaboration.eu

Ukrainian integration in the Single Market and business cooperation

The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, including its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), has been in force since 2017. Few days after Russia launched its full-scale unprovoked and unjustified aggression, Ukraine applied for EU membership at the end of February 2022. The Commission presented its Opinion on the application in June 2022, and Ukraine was granted EU candidate status by all EU Member States that same month. On [14 December 2023](#), the EU leaders agreed to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and reconfirmed their commitment to continue strong support to the country and its people as long as it takes.

On [1 February 2024](#) EU leaders gave their greenlight to the Commission's proposal to provide Ukraine with regular and predictable financial support through the so-called 'Ukraine Facility'⁴. The latter will make available up to €50 billion in grants and loans until 2027. These funds will be used to cater for Ukraine's immediate needs, recovery, and modernisation on its path towards further EU integration.

Ukraine and its citizens have demonstrated their commitment to democratic values, economic development and strengthening their ties to the EU. The first results of this partnership are already visible. For example, the [Ukrainian Cluster Alliance](#) (UCA) created in 2022 as a result of the general mobilization of clusters of Ukraine to the challenges of the war, is now a fully acknowledged member of the [European Cluster Alliance](#). The UCA's goal was to jointly strengthen the economic stability of the regions and industries they represent. Then, UCA underwent rapid development in several directions, from export and internationalization to innovative fundraising.

The Ukrainian clusters are young structures with semi-volunteer management and weak business and public funding support. Currently around 25 cluster organisations are part of UCA and many other could join if they had sufficient capacity. Developing capacities of Ukrainian clusters is in line with the EU cluster policy.

Business to business cooperation is very much encouraged through the [Supply Chain Resilience Platform](#). The platform is powered by the [Enterprise Europe Network](#), in collaboration with the [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#), with support from the European Commission and EISMEA. It counts already for over 200 Ukrainian potential business partners.

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

General Objective

The integration of Ukraine into the Single Market is a key EU priority, in parallel with reinforcing the accession process. It is essential to boost business collaboration between the EU and Ukraine, promoting regional economic growth and development and bringing people and economic actors closer together.

The action will support Ukrainian business integration in EU value chains and the development of cooperation projects and partnerships between European and Ukrainian clusters and business network organisations. It is based on the understanding that promoting clustering and strengthening and creating new cluster organisations in Ukraine are highly effective ways to facilitate economic competitiveness and industrial transition to the benefit of the entire value chain. Furthermore, it is expected that supporting cooperation between clusters will

⁴ [The Ukraine Facility - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

successfully lead to increased trade, investment and partnering projects between participants.

In line with the EU industrial strategy and the Expert Group recommendations for EU clusters, partnerships should promote the transition of Ukrainian companies to greater sustainability.

Themes and priorities (scope)

Specific industrial ecosystems have been significantly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine⁵. They are of particular importance for the reconstruction of Ukraine and have substantial potential for collaboration between European and Ukrainian cluster organizations and enterprises. Hence, proposals should be focused on only one of the [industrial ecosystems](#) listed below:

- Aerospace & Defence,
- Agri-Food,
- Construction,
- Digital,
- Electronics,
- Health,
- Mobility-Transport-Automotive,
- Renewable Energy.

The term “Cluster Partnerships” (referred to as Partnerships) used in this call for proposals refers to the consortia of cluster organisations or business network organisations that manage joint activities, facilitate networking, and provide or channel specialised and customised business support services to their members and related actors.

In practice, the activities will be implemented by consortia of organisations that are interested in establishing and running a Cluster Partnership (referred to as Partnerships).

The Partnerships will be formed through this call for proposals that will bring together cluster organisations and other business network organisations from the EU Member States or other countries participating in the SME pillar of the Single Market Programme (SMP) and from Ukraine, interested in teaming up.

Specific objectives

The proposal shall address both specific objectives:

1. **Developing value chains interlinkages** between EU and Ukrainian companies (networking).

The objective is to connect EU and Ukrainian companies to strengthen ‘the value chains’ ability to cope with challenges and undergo green, digital and resilient transitions. This will be enabled by the integration of different actors, competences, and solutions. The Partnerships will contribute to building resilience by mobilising different actors who have complementary and related assets and talents from the EU and Ukraine.

⁵ [UA RDNA3 report EN.pdf \(un.org\)](#) p.35

These Partnerships should create a strong result-oriented network to ensure for example: the diversification of production inputs in different EU Member States and Ukraine; an increase in the customer base of EU and Ukrainian companies within and across the ecosystems; the pooling of supply or demand; the mobilisation of joint investments and production facilities; the development of technologies in particular to increase resilience and strategic autonomy of EU and Ukrainian economies; upskilling of the workforce and collaboration to reach international markets, where applicable.

2. **Fostering the cluster capacity-building and the professionalisation of support** for both EU and Ukrainian SMEs.

The objective is to foster the capacity-building of EU and Ukrainian cluster organisations and to promote cross-cluster learning to help cluster managers, cluster organisations and their members acquire the necessary skills and take actions to explore and take up new solutions. This should include trainings along the value chain which will enhance cluster managers' skills, develop, and implement a comprehensive portfolio of new services for companies, organise twinning and learning activities and provide adequate support for the possible implementation to foster cross-cluster learning.

The EU partners of the Partnership are expected to share their experience in analysing, designing and delivering a common strategy and/or implementation roadmap on skills for the clusters. The Ukrainian partners are expected to develop their portfolio of services and implement collaborative actions to build up their training infrastructures, knowledge, and capacities to facilitate the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce, to enhance the skills related services that they could provide to their members, to engage in national, regional skills ecosystems and to cooperate with vocational training organisations.

It will foster cluster capacity-building, the professionalisation of support for businesses, especially for SMEs, and strengthen economic ties between European and Ukrainian ecosystems, regions and cities.

Activities that can be funded (scope)

To achieve the general and specific objectives set out above the Partnerships may undertake for example activities such as:

1. Organising twinning, networking and learning activities and projects that aim at cooperation and capacity building. The activities can cover, amongst others, efforts to boost internationalisation, market research, foresight and trends analyses, mapping of joint activities, technology/knowledge transfer, and promote companies' uptake of innovation, digitalisation, and resource-efficient and carbon neutral solutions. This can thus include, for instance workshops, study trips and training and education activities for cluster organisations, business network support organisations, SMEs and public authorities and innovation agencies working with clusters⁶;
2. Supporting the development of a comprehensive cluster strategy for the individual clusters, including activities to strengthen collaboration and

⁶ Please be aware this call doesn't allow Financial Support to Third Parties, for further information on eligible costs please consult Section 10 below and the Article 6 of the Annotated Grant Agreement.

partnership development along and across value-chains between the EU and Ukraine;

3. Enhancing clusters' capacities to provide high quality added-value support services for businesses, especially SMEs;
4. Organising and implementing a mobility scheme for beneficiaries' staff members. This shall cover promotion of the scheme, recruitment, matching and follow-up of short-term visits or exchanges for professionals.

Expected impact

High quality management of cluster organisations helps in providing professional services to their members, notably SMEs. They assist their companies to add value, to become innovative or access global markets successfully, and to enhance strategic collaboration, networking and learning. Professional cluster management contributes to raise the innovation capacity and competitiveness of cluster firms in a wider sense.

European clusters and companies are expected to benefit from these partnerships with the Ukrainian clusters by establishing new business relations with Ukrainian partners and through the re-building of supply and value chains that were disrupted by the war.

This implies that capacity-building efforts will improve the cluster management skills of cluster managers, the support services that cluster organisation offer and develop strategies that drive cluster initiatives towards self-sustainability and wider economic impact.

On the Ukrainian side, the expected impact is more integration of Ukrainian businesses into the EU single market and EU value chains through connecting and developing collaboration between members of clusters and/or between cluster organisations or business support organisations.

Deliverables and indicators

Applicants must propose a clear list of deliverables stemming from the actions chosen and well covering the main outputs of the various tasks. Deliverables must be clearly described in terms of format and content.

In addition to the above, the proposal must include the following compulsory deliverables: Two **technical progress reports**⁷ not linked to the payment.

These are reports that will describe the progresses of the project implementation against the workplan, main achievements, deviations, challenges, risks, as well as the progresses of the key performance indicators (KPIs) towards the set targets.

Key Performance Indicators

Applicants must propose a comprehensive set of KPIs (with SMART indicators, targets, sources for the measurement and a clear measurement methodology) to measure the performance of the proposed activities and their impact.

⁷ Project will be divided in 3 equal periods (eg.: 18 months long project: 6, 12 and 18 months). Every 6 months the project is expected to provide a progress report, except if the periodic report is due in that moment. A customised template will be provided by EISMEA to all beneficiaries in due time.

Such indicators can be a mix of qualitative and quantitative, outputs or outcomes indicators.

In addition to each project-specific set of KPIs, proposals must also measure the following indicators⁸:

- number of SMEs, clusters and business network organisations, and business support organisations receiving support from the programme, in particular for internationalisation, digitalisation and sustainability
- number of companies supported having concluded business partnerships
- number of entrepreneurs benefitting from mentoring and mobility schemes, including young, new and female entrepreneurs, as well as other specific target groups
- client satisfaction rate for flagship support services for SMEs.

Other indicators (depending on activities proposed):

- Number and type of activities undertaken to improve support services by cluster organisations for supporting the growth and competitiveness of their members (e.g. twinning, training, benchmarking, etc.).
- Number of cooperation agreements, joint projects, business agreements, memoranda of understanding and inter-regional partnerships resulting from interactions with other businesses, investors, SME intermediaries, scaling-up support organisations and regional authorities.
- Number of cluster development plans, strategies, implementation roadmaps and new or enhanced mission statements and vision statements for the cluster.
- Number of analyses, mappings, trends and foresight studies, surveys and workshops undertaken.
- Number of staff from clusters, support organisations, (i.e. relationships achieved) in an exchange scheme, and quality of exchanges measured by feedback questionnaires to participants.

The set of proposed indicators, including the above listed compulsory KPIs, must be included in the Application Form (Section 3.1. Impact and Ambition).

3. Available budget

The estimated available call budget is **EUR 3 000 000**.

We expect to fund 6 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.

4. Timetable and deadlines

⁸ See Annex IV of the Regulation establishing the Single Market Programme.

Timetable and deadlines (indicative)	
Call opening:	19/03/2024
<u>Deadline for submission:</u>	<u>04/06/2024 – 17:00:00 CET (Brussels)</u>
Evaluation:	June-September 2024
Information on evaluation results:	October 2024
GA signature:	January 2025
GA starting date:	01 February 2025

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 and then assembled and re-uploaded*)
- **mandatory annexes and supporting documents** (*templates available to be downloaded from the Portal Submission System, completed, assembled and re-uploaded*):
 - detailed budget table/calculator
 - CVs (short outlines) of core project team
 - list of previous projects (key projects for the last 4 years) (*template available in Part B*)
 - Eligibility Checklist and Ecosystem Selection “Annex 5 to part B” that can be downloaded from [EISMEA’s call page](#) and will need to be uploaded duly filled and signed together (as a single document) with the technical annex of the proposal entitled Application Form Part B (SMP COSME) document. (Please check carefully Section 6 ‘Eligibility’ of this call for proposals).

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 **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*).

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

6. Eligibility

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 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 ([list of participating countries](#))
- be or be entitled to represent:
 - a cluster organisation (see definition below)
 - business network organisations that manage joint activities, facilitate networking and provide or channel specialised and customised business support services to their members and related actors
 - other types of “support organisations” supporting green and digital transitions and build EU resilience from the country eligible under the Single Market Programme. These support organisations may include technology centres, research institutes, fab labs, (digital) innovation hubs, creative hubs, resource-efficiency service providers, incubators and accelerators, and public authorities at both regional or city/administration levels and innovation agencies.

<u>Definition of cluster organisation</u>

For the purpose of this call for proposals, **cluster organisations** have to be understood as the legal entities that support the strengthening of collaboration, networking and learning in innovation clusters and act as innovation support providers by providing or channelling specialised and customised business support services to stimulate innovation activities, especially in SMEs.

They are usually the actors that facilitate strategic partnering across clusters.⁹

When a cluster organisation has no legal personality see below under 'specific cases'¹⁰.

Cluster organisations or cluster networks must be registered or have submitted a registration on the [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#) (ECCP) by the submission deadline of this Call for proposals and provide the link to the completed cluster organisation profile for each applicant registered on the Platform (proof to be provided through **Annex 5 to Part B - Eligibility Checklist and Ecosystem Selection**)

Moreover: Applicants **cannot participate in several Partnerships** under this call for proposals. If such a case is detected by the funding body, it will lead to the ineligibility and exclusion of the organisation concerned. The respective consortia affected by the exclusion of (a) partner(s) must still fulfil all the eligibility criteria stipulated in this section 6.

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

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 (except for 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 persons¹¹.

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

⁹ Source: [Cluster Definitions | European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#)

¹⁰ See Article 197(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹¹ See Article 197(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

Associations and interest groupings — Entities composed of members may participate as 'sole beneficiaries' or 'beneficiaries without legal personality'¹². ⚠️ 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 and if the association covers the call (i.e. is retroactive and covers both the part of the programme and the year when the call was launched).

EU restrictive measures — Special rules apply for certain entities (*e.g. 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)*¹³). 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).

Following the [Council Implementing Decision \(EU\) 2022/2506](#), as of 16 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](#).

The identity of the applicant (and compliance with general eligibility conditions) will be verified through the documents provided in the [Participant Register](#) during legal entity validation (copy of the resolution, decision or other official document establishing the entity, etc).

Consortium composition

Proposals must be submitted by a consortium (Partnership) of at least 3 applicants (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities), which complies with all the following conditions:

- minimum 3 independent legal entities from 3 different eligible countries
- at least one beneficiary must be a cluster organisation established in the territory under the control of the Ukrainian government, at the submission of the proposal.
- at least one must be a cluster organisation established in an EU Member State.

Eligible activities

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

¹² For the definitions, see Articles 187(2) and 197(2)(c) EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹³ 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](#).

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.*).

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).

Duration

Projects should normally range between 18 and 24 months.

Extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment.

Project budget

Project budgets (maximum grant amount) are expected to be EUR 500 000 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 in order to respect the maximum grant amount condition.

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 these 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:

- profiles (qualifications and experience) of the staff responsible for managing and implementing the project
- description of the consortium participants
- 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.

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 participate¹⁴:

- 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 misconduct¹⁵ (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

¹⁴ See Articles 136 and 141 of EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

¹⁵ Professional misconduct includes: violation of ethical standards of the profession, wrongful conduct with impact on professional credibility, false declarations/misrepresentation of information, participation in a cartel or other agreement distorting competition, violation of IPR, attempting to influence decision-making processes or obtain confidential information from public authorities to gain advantage.

- 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).

Applicants will also be rejected if it turns out that¹⁶:

- 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)

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) The *ex aequo* proposals 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'.
- 2) 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 and number of Ukrainian partners involved, or other factors such as ensure a balanced spread of the geographical and thematic coverage related to the objectives of the call. These factors will be documented in the panel report.

¹⁶ See Article 141 EU Financial Regulation [2018/1046](#).

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. 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. Relevance:** clarity and consistency of project, objectives and planning; to which extent the suggested strategy for promoting cluster creation and strengthening ties between clusters from Ukraine and other SMP countries takes into consideration the current ties and the collaboration dynamics (including the cooperation with UCA and ECA); contribution to the EU strategic and legislative context; extend to which proposal address challenges of the priority industrial sectors (see section 2 above); European/trans-national dimension; **(30 points)**
- 2. Quality:**
 - **Project design and implementation:** technical quality; logical links between the identified problems, needs and solutions proposed (logical frame concept); methodology for implementing the project (concept and methodology, management, procedures, timetable, risks and risk management, monitoring and evaluation); feasibility of the project within the proposed time frame; cost effectiveness (sufficient/appropriate budget for proper implementation; best value for money) **(30 points)**
 - **Project team and cooperation arrangements:** quality of the consortium and project teams; appropriate procedures and problem-solving mechanisms for cooperating within the project teams and consortium **(30 points)**
- 3. Impact:** ambition and expected long-term impact of results on target groups/general public; impact/interest for a number of countries (EU or eligible non-EU countries); possibility to use the results in other countries; potential to develop mutual trust/cross-border cooperation; comprehensive, coherent, clear and realistic set of KPIs proposed; appropriate dissemination strategy for ensuring sustainability and long-term impact; sustainability of results after EU funding ends **(10 points)**.

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](#).

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.

Compulsory deliverables are mentioned in 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 (maximum 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 rate fixed in the Grant Agreement (**90%**).

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
 - C.2 Equipment
 - C.3 Other goods, works and services
- D. Other cost categories : not applicable
- E. Indirect costs

Specific cost eligibility conditions for this call:

- personnel costs:
 - SME owner/natural person unit cost¹⁷: Yes
- travel and subsistence unit cost¹⁸: Yes
- equipment costs: depreciation
- other cost categories:
 - costs for financial support to third parties: not allowed
- indirect costs flat-rate: 7% of the eligible direct costs (categories A-D, except volunteers costs and exempted specific cost categories, if any)

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ 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), as amended by Decision Commission C(2023) 4928 of 26.7.2023.

- VAT: non-deductible 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.

There will be no interim 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 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

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

- list of background: No
- rights of use on results: Yes
- access rights to ensure continuity and interoperability obligations: 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)*:

- specific rules for PPI Grants for Procurement: No
- specific rules for blending operations: No

Other specificities

n/a

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 EU Login 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 [Search Funding & Tenders](#) 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:

- 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 might 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](#)
- FAQs 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 5 working days before the 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*).

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). 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).
- **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. If you would like to nonetheless benefit from different EU funding opportunities, 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 can NOT submit more than one proposal under this call. Multiple proposals will be rejected.
Organisations may NOT participate in several proposals.
- **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](#).