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# EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021 Baltic Research Programme Guide for Evaluators

The 3<sup>rd</sup> call of the Baltic Research Programme  
Coordinated by Latvia

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Further call information and guides are available on:

<http://www.viaa.gov.lv>

## 1. Objectives of the Baltic Research Programme

There are **two main objectives** of the EEA Grants; namely to reduce social and economic disparities in Europe and to strengthen bilateral cooperation of the targeted countries and Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.

The **main goal** of the Baltic Research Programme is to **enhance research-based knowledge development in the Baltic States through research cooperation with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein**. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are all targeted in the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), which is the first macro-regional strategy in Europe, approved by the European Council in 2009. The aim is to enable the Baltic Sea region to achieve a sustainable environment and an optimal economic and social development. This is the framework within which the Baltic Research Programme relates. The EEA Grants provide instruments for the realisation of the joint Baltic research cooperation aimed at approaching important challenges. As such, the Baltic Research Programme represents a true innovation, implemented in cooperation with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.

The Programme is designed, through competitive and open calls for proposals for research projects, to ensure the quality and high level of research. Estonian Research Council operates the first call and the next ones will come in Latvia and in Lithuania.

### **Regional added value of the programme**

The Baltic countries share many cultural, geographical, political and social characteristics, and they face many of the same challenges. The collaboration should create outcomes and impact of greater value for the countries involved than could be achieved through national activities alone. Examples of such added value could be building critical mass; networking; sharing data, infrastructures and resources; enhancing scientific excellence; creating societal impacts; and contributing to research-based policymaking.

The projects funded under the programme should have a detailed communication and knowledge exchange strategy. Where appropriate, the strategy should describe the processes by which research-based knowledge can feed into practice and policy in collaboration with stakeholders.

### **Design of the programme and aims**

The programme is designed, through competitive and open calls for proposals for joint research projects, to ensure the quality and high level of research. Estonian Research Council operates the first call and the next ones will come in Latvia and in Lithuania.

The Programme shall strengthen multilateral relations with the aim of stimulating long-term cooperation, capacity and competence building, and shall provide a step for future collaborative research projects on EU and regional level. An important objective of the Programme is to strengthen human resources in research through the facilitation of international relations and involving PhD students and postdoctoral researchers (hereafter – postdocs) in the projects.

**The aim** of the Programme is to foster the exchange of scientific knowledge between Norwegian, Icelandic, Liechtenstein's (hereafter Donor States) and Baltic States' researchers

and to establish advanced collaborative research between research institutions in donor states and Baltic States.

The Programme will be implemented through joint research projects, enabling research teams to bring together complementary skills, knowledge, and resources to jointly address specific research tasks.

The Programme shall contribute to strengthen existing and create new long-term scientific relations between Baltic and Donor States' research institutions and research teams.

Some examples of expected results of the Baltic Research Programme:

- Internationally refereed joint publications published in the best journals of respective areas as part of the projects: in a joint capacity minimum 2 Baltic States with least 1 Donor State (Norway, Iceland and/or Liechtenstein);
- New scientific methods acquired/training in relation to the scientific methods as part of the project, developing scientific methodology;
- Active involvement of PhD students and postdocs in the project;
- Preparation of joint applications to be submitted for further funding (e.g. EU framework programmes);
- Close cooperation between the partners involved in project from Baltic States and Donor States with the aim for building sustainable cooperation for future activities;
- Knowledge transfer, sharing experiences and best practices.

The Programme is open to the projects

- with or without additional funding from other sources;
- with different kind of and number of project partners involved;
- with already established cooperation with the project partner(s) to be involved as well as projects with the aim of establishing and building up new partnerships;
- with or without a link to other programmes.

**Please note** that these conditions (pre-existing collaboration, pre-existing publications, extra funding etc.) will not place any project automatically in a more favourable position compared to others in the evaluation process. **No additional points** based on these aspects will be awarded.

The programme shall fund collaborative research projects in basic and applied research. For the Latvian call in 2020, the research proposals should focus on at least one of the following five thematic priorities and topics:

#### **1. Public health; e- health**

The research projects in the thematic area should contribute to knowledge about disease prevention and patient-centered health care system.

The research proposal should be focused on at least one of following topics:

- Population based studies on health behaviours (alcohol and drug use and addiction; physical activity, sedentary lifestyle and diet; and mental health) and implications for disease prevention.
- E-health and integrated care.

- Cardiovascular disease and cancer prevention, their personalized and patient-centered care.

## **2. Migration; social inclusion**

The thematic area contributes to exploring migration processes and tackling challenges that arise from migration, as well as studying other challenges and topics related to social inclusion and equality:

- The study of social inclusion involves identifying patterns and trends of social inequality in a broad perspective, e.g. economic inequality, inequality of education, inequalities between geographic areas or minority and majority groups, as well as exploring causes and consequences of these patterns.
- Research proposals can investigate third country migration into EEA/EFTA countries, as well as inter-EEA/EFTA migration.
- Migration between the Baltic countries and Scandinavia is an area of special interest.

Proposals on migration are encouraged to not only explore and identify solutions for challenges, which arise from immigration, but also challenges around emigration such as brain drain and depopulation.

Proposals should aim to deliver policy impact via policy recommendations and other pathways.

## **3. Cyber security; public security**

Thematic area of cybersecurity and public security will contribute towards research challenges surrounding resilient public and private infrastructure (especially critical infrastructure) and overall safety of digital life in EEA/EFTA countries especially for protecting people against malicious cyber activities:

The research proposal should be focused on at least one of the following topics:

- Proposals on cybersecurity should explore questions surrounding data protection and safety of online activity for public and private institutions and society in general.
- Proposals in public security should be focused towards research to optimize the functionality of different emergency services and the criminal justice system.

## **4. Regional economic development; employment, labour market regulations and social policy**

In the context of urbanisation, emigration and ageing society, the economically lagging regions experience decline of their populations, low productivity growth and a strain on their social services. The research proposals should focus on at least one of following topics:

- addressing the challenges of societal and economic transformations in regions in the context of declining and ageing population and low productivity growth;
- delivering quality social services and implementing viable and equitable labour market policies;
- solutions for increasing the prosperity of regions, comparatively examining social policies, labour market policies and their effects on individuals and households.

The use of advanced quantitative methods using a wide range of available datasets (e.g. big data) is encouraged.

## 5. Innovative solutions for efficient and sustainable use of resources

This thematic area addresses how to tackle global issues of energy efficiency, decarbonisation and more responsible use of resources. Research proposals should focus on materials, technologies, digital solutions and socioeconomic aspects in at least one of the following topics:

- Efficient urban energy systems (buildings, industry, services, transport and mobility).
- Renewable energy for local energy systems.
- Alternative fuels for transport and heating.
- The development of waste-to-resource (can refer to any kind of waste, e.g. food, materials, water – and technological solutions converting it into a new resource).
- Safe and sustainable food systems.
- Sustainable management of water and aquatic resources.

## 2. Evaluation

### 2.1. Eligibility of proposals

Only the proposals that meet the eligibility and administrative criteria will be subject to content-related evaluation. The appraisal of administrative and eligibility criteria is carried out by the SEDA.

The following administrative and eligibility criteria apply to all proposals submitted under the call:

1. Project proposal is written in English and is submitted electronically via the on-line submission system within the deadline set in the call for proposals. (N)
2. Eligible project promoter from Latvia and project partner from Latvia, if applicable, is a research institution registered in Latvia which complies with the criteria of a research organization defined in the Article 2.8 of the Regulations for the implementation of the activity "Baltic Research Program" and the activity "Scholarships" of the program "Research and Education" of the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism and Norwegian Financial Mechanism for the period 2014-2021 (hereinafter- the Regulations). (N)
3. Project partners are at least one research organization registered in Estonia or Lithuania and at least one research organization registered in the donor country (N);
4. A confirmation letter is signed by the legal representative of the project promoter or appropriate authorisation is provided. (N)
5. Project proposal is filled completely and all requested Annexes stated in the call of the project proposal are attached (N)
6. The activities planned in the project are with non-economic character as stated in the Article 2.3. of the Regulations. (C)
7. The calculations of eligible costs are precise and comply with the requirements specified in the call of the project proposals. (C)
8. Eligible costs in the project correspond to the list of eligible expenditures stated in the Article 22 of the the Regulations and the project costs planned in the project application complies with the amount of project funding specified in the Article 7.1.1. and 7.1.2. of the the Regulations. (C)

9. Project promoter and Latvian partner (if applicable) have no tax debts, including social security charges in the Republic of Latvia, each of which in total exceeds 150 euros. (C)

\*N – if the criterion has not been fulfilled, the proposal cannot be amended and will be rejected;

\*C – if the criterion has not been fulfilled, the proposal can be amended and the necessary information will be requested from project promoter by the SEDA.

## 2.2. Evaluation process

The evaluation of the proposals submitted to the programme includes the following steps:

- 1) SEDA as the implementing agency of the programme checks the proposals against the administrative and eligibility criteria listed in this guide. If the proposal do not comply with the administrative criteria, it is not evaluated any further. If the proposal is approved with condition, the project promoter submits additional information after which another decision is made by SEDA.
- 2) SEDA selects independent international experts for those proposals which “do comply”, or “comply” with the condition and ensures quality assessment.
- 3) Each eligible proposal is sent to three independent international experts based on their closest possible competence in relation to the topic of the proposal and expertise necessary to cover the evaluation criteria set. SEDA appoints one of the experts as a rapporteur, responsible for preparing the consensus report on the proposal.
- 4) Each expert examines the received proposals individually and submits an individual evaluation report on each proposal separately through the [rsgrants.viaa.gov.lv](https://rsgrants.viaa.gov.lv) (hereinafter referred to as – rsgrants system) by a given deadline. The proposals are evaluated on the basis of their individual merits applying the criteria presented in this guide, according to the principles of confidentiality and the conflicts of interest rules.
- 5) After the deadline of submissions set for the evaluators, the rapporteur goes through the individual evaluation reports of the proposals under his/her responsibility and prepares in the rsgrants system a consensus report which must be approved by all the experts working on the same proposal.
- 6) Based on the evaluation outcomes (evaluation by experts and list of proposals passing all thresholds), SEDA draws up a list of any proposals having been found ineligible during the evaluation and ranking list of the proposals submitted under the Call to be discussed and recommended by the Programme Committee.
- 7) If the proposal is approved with the condition, the clarifications by project promoter should be submitted to SEDA before the signing of the project contract.
- 8) The Programme Committee is presented with a list of proposals to be selected for funding by SEDA, including the suggested financial contribution for each proposal. The Programme Committee shall make a recommendation to SEDA on the award of grants, taking into account available budget.

## 2.3. Role of persons involved in the evaluation process

### 2.3.1. Role of evaluator

Evaluators are international, independent experts (with a doctoral degree) in a specific subject who are invited to evaluate a research proposal closely related to their field of expertise and

to submit a written individual report. Each eligible proposal is sent to three independent international experts.

They are requested to:

- Carefully read the Programme documents and the present Guide for Evaluators;
- Sign in advance a Confidentiality Agreement;
- Thoroughly read the assigned proposal;
- Complete and submit an individual evaluation form providing comments, justification and individual scoring of the proposal.

SEDA briefs the experts in writing on the evaluation process and procedures as well as the selection criteria to be applied before the assessment of the proposal. SEDA concludes a contract with each expert. It specifies the description of work, associated deadlines, condition of confidentiality and fairness and condition of payment.

When evaluating proposals, evaluators should comment briefly on each selection criterion to the best of his/her abilities, his/her professional skills, knowledge and ethics. The proposals are evaluated on the basis of their individual merits applying the criteria presented in these guidelines, according to the principles of confidentiality and the conflicts of interest rules.

Each expert examines the received proposal(s) individually and submits an individual evaluation form on each proposal separately through the rsgrantssystem by the deadline set. SEDA helpdesk is always ready to assist and can be reached by email [info@viaa.gov.lv](mailto:info@viaa.gov.lv) or phone ..... (Daily from 9 am to 4 pm (EET)). In case of any major problems, the materials can be sent by e-mail.

**Please note** that editing and modifying of the individual evaluation forms is possible in the rsgrants system until the deadline set for the evaluators.

### 2.3.2. Role of rapporteur

Rapporteur is one of the evaluators working on the same proposal appointed by the SEDA to make him/her responsible for formulating a consensus report on the proposal and submitting it through the rsgrants system within the set time limit.

Rapporteur has access to the individual evaluations and to the consensus report form. Consensus report has to be approved by all experts. In the case, that it is impossible to reach a consensus, the report sets out the majority view of the experts and records any dissenting views from particular expert(s) Comments given in the consensus report must be suitable for feedback given to the proposal's Project Promoter.

The SEDA will take the necessary steps to assure the quality of the consensus reports, with particular attention given to clarity, consistency, and an appropriate level of detail. If changes are necessary, the reports will be referred back to the rapporteurs concerned.

**Please note** that only the proposals passing all thresholds in the consensus report will be considered for funding. Nevertheless, due to budgetary limits, not all of them will be awarded with grant.

### 2.3.3. Role of the Programme Committee

The Programme Committee consists of eight persons (2 from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Norway) representing the members of the research community in the Baltic States and Donor States (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein). The FMC and the National Focal Point shall be invited to participate in the selection procedure as observers.

In particular, the Programme Committee is to support the SEDA and to monitor the implementation of the programme. The tasks of the Programme Committee include:

- responsibility for proposal evaluation (in accordance with the selection criteria) within the reasonable time, ensuring objectivity and accuracy during the evaluation process
- determining that the binary criterion (criterion No. 1 Scope – Relevance in relation to the objective of the Call for Proposals) has been evaluated incorrectly by the experts or during the Consensus Assessment and change it to the another result, which may result in a change of recommendation whether to award a grant to the project proposal
- following the principle of confidentiality
- approving the selection criteria and the texts of the calls for proposals
- recommending to the SEDA which proposals to select for funding and final awarding of grants\*
- reviewing progress made towards achieving the objectives of the programme
- in case the decision is not supported by evidence then the Programme Committee is allowed to invite additional expert for the final decision
- reviewing annual programme reports
- proposing revisions of the programme likely to facilitate the achievement of the programme's objectives
- adopting the guide for applicants and guide for evaluators

\*The Programme Committee selects at least one project proposal from each thematic priority, which is above the threshold (12.5.). If in some of thematic priorities the project proposals have not reached the threshold, then the rest of the funding will be distributed according to the overall project-ranking list.

### 2.3.4. Role of SEDA

SEDA will check the proposals against the administrative and eligibility criteria and will support involved experts during the evaluation process. The Programme staff will take care that the Programme rules and procedures are respected. They do not provide any information regarding the status of the proposals to the applicants while the evaluation procedure is in progress and until the funding decision has been made.

## 3. Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest

### 3.1. Confidentiality

All research plans and evaluation statements are confidential documents. Application documents should therefore be handled with care and treated as confidential before, during and after the evaluation process.

Evaluators, Programme Committee members and observers must not disclose any information concerning application documents or evaluations to outsiders, nor should they use confidential information to their own or any other party's benefit or disadvantage.

Evaluators, Programme Committee members and observers must not communicate with applicants on topics related to applications.

Evaluators' and Programme Committee members' advice to the SEDA on any proposal may not be communicated by them to the applicants or to any other person.

The evaluators will be held personally responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of any documents or electronic files sent, and for returning, erasing or destroying all confidential documents or files upon completing the evaluation as instructed.

Evaluators and Programme Committee members and observers may not show the contents of proposals or information on applicants to third parties.

## 3.2. Conflict of interest

All persons involved in the evaluation process are required to declare any personal interests according to the following criteria.

### 3.2.1. Circumstances in which a conflict of interest may exist

Circumstances that could be interpreted as disqualifying Conflicts of Interest (Col) are laid down in the following criteria:

1. First-degree relationship, marriage, life partnership, domestic partnership;
2. Personal interest in the application's success or financial interest by persons listed in the numbers 7-12;
3. Current or planned close scientific cooperation;
4. Dependent employment relationship or supervisory relationship (e.g. teacher-student relationship up to and including the postdoctoral phase) extending five years beyond the conclusion of the relationship;
5. The affiliation or pending transfer to the applying institutes/organisations;
6. Researchers who are active in a council or similar supervisory board of the applying institution are excluded from participating in the review and decision-making process for applications originating from this institution;

Potential Conflicts of Interest (Col) may exist, even in cases not covered by the clear disqualifying conflicts indicated above, in the following circumstances:

7. Relationships that do not fall under no. 1, other personal ties or conflicts;
8. Financial interests of persons listed under no. 7;
9. Participation in university bodies other than those listed under no. 6, e.g. in scientific advisory committees in the research environment;
10. Research cooperation within the last three years, e.g. joint publications;
11. Preparation of an application or implementation of a project with a closely related research topic (competition); and
12. Participating in an on-going scientific or inter-personal conflict with the applicant(s).

Persons involved in the evaluation process must also declare a conflict of interest at any time during the process.

### 3.2.2. Inability to perform obligations and termination

If for some reason the experts are not able to fulfil their obligations for a given work, the SEDA should be informed immediately. The work cannot be delegated to another person without the prior written agreement of the SEDA.

## 4. The Principles of the Evaluation Procedure

### 4.1. The core evaluation criteria, scores and thresholds

The experts are invited to review the quality of the submitted proposals based on three core evaluation criteria. Evaluation scores will be awarded for each of the three criteria (according to the scoring scale; see section 4.2). Each criterion will be scored out of 5. If the evaluation of the proposal in the relevant criterion exceeds the requirements of the previous lowest evaluation, but does not fully meet the requirements of the next highest evaluation, the evaluation may also be expressed by awarding a half-point score. No weightings will apply.

| Criteria   | Aspects to be evaluated   | Score | Threshold |
|--|---|-------|-----------|
| <b>Scientific and/or technical excellence</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sound concept, and quality of objectives</li> <li>• progress beyond the state-of-the-art</li> <li>• quality and effectiveness of the scientific methodology and associated work plan</li> <li>• innovation and new approaches</li> </ul>   | 0-5   | 4         |
| <b>Quality and efficiency of the implementation and the management, added value from the international cooperation</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appropriateness of the Project Promoter and Project Partners participating in the project</li> <li>• appropriateness of the work plan</li> <li>• appropriate allocation and justification of the resources to be committed (personnel, travel, subcontracting and other costs)</li> <li>• appropriateness of research environment for the proposed research</li> <li>• researcher training</li> <li>• strengths of consortium complementarity of skills</li> <li>• international cooperation beyond the project, quality and sustainability of forward looking cooperation between the partners</li> </ul> | 0-5   | 3,5       |

|   |  |     |     |
|---|--|-----|-----|
| <b>Potential impact through the development, dissemination and use of project results</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relevance of the proposal in relation to the objectives of the Programme and challenges of the call</li> <li>• impact from the project to research-based knowledge development in the Baltic region</li> <li>• potential of the research topic to be internationally relevant</li> <li>• take up and potential use of the project results' by end-users including the clarity, appropriateness and efficiency of the planned knowledge transfer measures</li> </ul> | 0-5 | 3,5 |
|---|--|-----|-----|

**Total: score 0-15, threshold 12.5.**

#### 4.2. The scoring scale

For each criterion under examination, score values indicate the following assessments:

| Score | Grade          | Description   |
|-------|----------------|---|
| 0     | Unsatisfactory | The proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information. |
| 1     | Poor           | The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.                          |
| 2     | Fair           | The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.                         |
| 3     | Good           | The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.                        |
| 4     | Very good      | The proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.             |
| 5     | Excellent      | The proposal fully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.             |

Experts examine the issues to be considered comprising each evaluation criterion, and score these on a scale from 0 to 5. Half point scores may be given.

The half point scores will be presented as follows:

| Score | Grade                 |
|-------|-----------------------|
| 0     | Unsatisfactory        |
| 0,5   | Unsatisfactory - Poor |
| 1     | Poor                  |
| 1,5   | Poor - Fair           |
| 2     | Fair                  |
| 2,5   | Fair - Good           |

|     |                       |
|-----|-----------------------|
| 3   | Good                  |
| 3,5 | Good - Very good      |
| 4   | Very good             |
| 4,5 | Very good - Excellent |
| 5   | Excellent             |

**Please note** that the use of the whole scale is recommended and evaluators should not hesitate to score below “3 - Good” when appropriate. Due to budgetary limits, many projects that will pass threshold will ultimately not be funded. Therefore, experts are advised consider carefully their “very-good”, “very good-excellent” and “excellent” grades, as 0.5 point will likely have decisive role in funding decision.

**Please note** that comments for every score to justify the opinion should be given.

## 5. Meeting of the Programme Committee

According to the Guideline for Research Programmes, the Programme Committee shall provide input to the strategic direction of the Baltic Research Programme. The Programme Committee shall recommend to the SEDA which proposals to select for funding and final awarding of grants. The recommendation is as follows: the Programme Committee selects at least one project proposal from each thematic priority, which is above the threshold (12.5.). If in some of thematic priorities the project proposals have not reached the threshold, then the rest of the funding will be distributed according to the overall project-ranking list. The Programme Committee may also determine that the binary criterion (criterion No. 1 Scope – Relevance in relation to the objective of the Call for Proposals) has been evaluated incorrectly by the experts or during the Consensus Assessment and change it to the another result, which may result in a change of recommendation whether to award a grant to the project proposal. The Programme Committee evaluates the proposals based on the ranking list as well as checks separate list of any proposals having been found ineligible during the evaluation submitted by the SEDA based on the evaluation scores, and according to the proposals’ relevance to the call.

The Programme Committee will make its final decision to support or not support the proposals on the basis of the ranking list proposed by the experts’ and the Programme Committee’s final evaluation. SEDA should address any aspects that would need to be modified during negotiation, based on the advice of the experts. A number of proposals may be kept in reserve to allow for eventualities such as the failure of negotiations on projects, the withdrawal of proposals, budget savings agreed during negotiation, or the availability of additional budget from other sources.

Before the evaluation, meeting Programme Committee members have to declare if they have conflict of interest with any submitted proposal. If a conflict of interest appears, the committee member should immediately inform the chairperson about this. If a Programme Committee member has a conflict of interests with respect to an item on the agenda, the expert must declare this at the start of the meeting, remove him or her from discussions of such an item on the agenda, and leave the meeting room for the time of discussion.

The outcome of the evaluation meeting is a report entailing a final report for each proposal, including explanatory statements, scores based on consensus report. The final report shall also include a recommended amount of grant following the evaluation. If the recommended grant is different from the grant requested by the applicants, an explanation shall be included.

Within the groups of equally scored proposals, the criteria for ranking are applied in the following order:

- 1) proposals are prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the criterion „Scientific excellence“;
- 2) proposals are prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the criterion „Quality and efficiency of the implementation and the management, added value from the international cooperation“ paying special attention to Baltic regional added value and sustainability of bilateral cooperation
- 3) proposals having a good gender balance (project promoter) are considered to have the priority.