



Ministry of
Education, Science
and Innovation

RESEARCH GRANTS PROGRAM FOR PROMOTING EXCELLENCE 2024



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INTRODUCTION

Program Adoption Basis

In early July 2024, the Government of Montenegro adopted the **Scientific Research Strategy of Montenegro 2024-2028 with an Action Plan for the period 2024-2025**¹, which represents the most significant sectoral strategic document in the field of science and research.

The Strategy identifies three strategic objectives, the second of which pertains to “**Strengthening Human Resources and Institutional Capacities in the Field of Science and Research**”. To achieve this strategic objective, one of the key operational objectives is **Operational Objective 2.2: Support for Enhancing Scientific Research**. Under this objective, **Activity 2.2.2** involves **the allocation of research grants for excellence aimed at strengthening human and institutional capacities**. The primary goal of this activity is to support the most promising scientific research teams within licensed scientific research institutions in Montenegro by awarding research grants for excellence. These teams must collaborate with at least one other national licensed research institution from a different scientific field, as well as with a foreign scientific research institution, in order to promote interdisciplinary research and facilitate knowledge and technology transfer from leading international research institutions to Montenegro.

In addition to mandatory partnerships with scientific research institutions in Montenegro and abroad, the program also allows for collaboration with the business sector in Montenegro, aiming to generate new commercially viable knowledge.

The Strategy outlines the following priorities for scientific research activities²:

- Sustainable agriculture and the food value chain;
- Energy and sustainable environment;
- Sustainable and health tourism;
- Science, education, and culture;
- Medicine and health;
- Socio-political and socio-economic challenges of Montenegrin society;
- New materials, technologies, products, and services;
- Disaster risk management; and
- Information and communication technologies.

¹ <https://www.gov.me/clanak/strategija-naucnoistrazivacke-djelatnosti-2024-2028>

² Pursuant to Article 9, paragraph 2, item 1) of the Law on Scientific Research (“Official Gazette of Montenegro”, No. 080/10, 040/11, 057/14 and 082/20).

The 2024 Action Plan of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation,³ under the section Science and Innovation: Other Activities, includes the implementation of the **Program/Call for Grants** for preparing scientific research⁴ institutions and excellent teams for centers of excellence in the fourth quarter of 2024.

The legal basis for adopting the Research Grants Program for Promoting Excellence is established in the **Law on Scientific Research (“Official Gazette of Montenegro,” nos. 080/10, 040/11, 057/14, and 082/20)**, as follows:

- **Article 10** stipulates that scientific research priorities are pursued through programs of general interest, including those that: *“contribute to the development and strengthening of the national economy, enhance the overall standard of living, and promote the creation of a knowledge-based society”*. These priorities also encompass *“nationally significant, interdisciplinary programs”* as well as *„other initiatives essential to the advancement of scientific research“*;
- **Articles 10, 11, and 12** specify that the Ministry prescribes:
 - Conditions for approving and utilizing state budget funds, allocated through the Ministry, for programs of general interest;
 - Qualifications required for managers of scientific research programs and projects, and team members, along with the necessary funding for program/project implementation; and
 - Criteria for appointing experts and the procedure for evaluating scientific research programs of general interest, as well as other state-funded programs and projects, which are evaluated by experts in the relevant scientific field;
- **Article 13** establishes that The Ministry issues a public call for funding scientific research programs of general interest, and mutual rights and obligations are regulated by a contract between the Ministry and fund recipients; and
- **Article 16, paragraph 2, point 2)** stipulates that the Council proposes programs of general interest for the current year.

To establish a program of general interest in accordance with legal provisions, outline all necessary legal conditions for its implementation, and set the stage for announcing a public call, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation, following the proposal of the Scientific Research Council, ⁵has proposed the adoption of the **Research Grants Program for Promoting Excellence**. This program shall:

- Contribute to the development and strengthening of the national economy, raising overall living standards and fostering the creation of a knowledge-based society;
- Be of national significance and interdisciplinary in nature; and
- Supports national connectivity in priority research areas, while strengthening both human and institutional capacities.

In the context of EU integration in science and research, one of the key objectives is Montenegro's full integration into the **European Research Area (ERA)**. **ERA Priority 3**⁶ focused on **“Widening access to excellence in research and innovation across the Union”**, includes **Action 16** which aims at **“Enhancing access to excellence across the European Union”**. The aim of key initiatives within this action is to harness all scientific potential and resources across Europe, with particular

³ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/42e9ec5c-df47-4ed6-b6ca-2286f5189fd5>

⁴ SR – scientific research

⁵ Conclusion by the Scientific Research Council No. 04-082/24-1124/4 dated 13 September 2024.

⁶ <https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu/documents/european-research-area-policy-agenda-2022-24>

attention to countries with lower research and innovation performance. The objectives of the Research Grants Program for Promoting Excellence are aligned with the aforementioned development directions, aiming to strengthen and consolidate Montenegro's scientific research potential and elevate its visibility on the international stage.

Program Adoption Rationale

Research grants for promoting excellence serve as one of the primary tools for enhancing the research capabilities of scientific institutions, with the goal of increasing Montenegro's competitiveness in international science and translating research results into commercial applications.

The research grants program for promoting excellence aims to integrate scientific potential across several priority research areas in Montenegro, making the research more visible, relevant, and applicable to the global challenges of the modern era. Additionally, the grants are designed to foster international cooperation, which is crucial for achieving scientific excellence, enhancing global competitiveness, and participating in large-scale scientific projects and infrastructures.

It is expected that, following the completion of these grants, Montenegrin research teams will have acquired the competencies and knowledge necessary to compete effectively within the highly competitive European and global scientific communities. The skills and expertise gained, along with networking with leading scientific institutions, will better position research teams to secure European and other international funding, particularly through the European Union Framework Program for Research and Innovation.

The program also emphasizes the career development of young researchers, particularly those at the doctoral level, by providing them with opportunities to work on their dissertations within funded projects and conduct research under the mentorship of top domestic and international scientists.

The research grants program for promoting excellence also provide support for the commercial activities of scientific research institutions by co-financing applied and developmental scientific research, as well as fostering collaborations with the business sector. This creates opportunities for the development of innovations, patents, and other commercial scientific outputs, which will contribute to strengthening Montenegro's economy.

Finally, the achievements resulting from these research grants for promoting excellence will lay a strong foundation for building the capacities of scientific institutions and excellent teams. This will help them evolve into internationally recognized centers of excellence in the near future, positioning Montenegro as an attractive destination for top scientists, including those from its diaspora.



1. BACKGROUND ON THE RESEARCH GRANTS PROGRAM FOR PROMOTING EXCELLENCE

1.1 Program Focus and Objectives

The program focuses on providing non-refundable grants to support research excellence, interdisciplinarity, national and international networking, and collaboration with industry.

The main program objective, which is expected to be achieved through its continuous implementation, is to enhance the capacities of scientific research institutions/teams in Montenegro, to strengthen high-quality and sustainable partnerships at both national and international levels and to promote excellence. This contributes to the development of a knowledge-based society and bolster the international competitiveness of Montenegrin science. The program will also contribute to the creation of commercially viable knowledge, thereby enhancing the economy's competitiveness through knowledge transfer from the scientific research sector.

The program specific objectives, expected to be realized five years after the completion of projects funded by research grants for promoting excellence, include:

- Strengthening the capacities of scientific research institutions to conduct top-tier research;
- Developing the careers of early-stage researchers;
- Creating a database of high-quality projects ready for further development and commercialization;
- Strengthening interdisciplinarity among domestic research teams; and
- Increasing the international visibility of local research teams.

The expected outcomes immediately following the completion of projects for which research grants to promote excellence have been awarded are as follows:

- Greater involvement of staff from scientific research institutions and enterprises in research activities;
- Enhanced knowledge and skills essential for conducting scientific research;
- Improved access to research equipment for conducting high-level research;
- Increased activities related to knowledge and technology transfer;
- Enhanced international mobility;
- Strengthened collaboration between domestic and international scientific research institutions; and
- Strengthened collaboration between scientific research institutions and enterprises.

1.2 Priority Research Areas

The program is structured around the priority research areas **outlined in the Scientific Research Strategy of Montenegro 2024-2028**, including:

- Sustainable agriculture and food value chain;
- Energy and sustainable environment;
- Sustainable and health tourism;
- Science, education, and culture;
- Medicine and health;
- Socio-political and socio-economic challenges of Montenegrin society;
- New materials, technologies, products, and services;
- Disaster risk management; and
- Information and communication technologies.

The focus of projects applying for research grants to promote excellence must fall within one of the above-listed priority areas.

1.3 Program Financial Framework

The total funding for the Research Grants Program for Promoting Excellence is set at €2,100,000 for the 2024-2027 period. For 2024, €700,000 is allocated to co-finance the first year of research under the program and its accompanying Call for Proposals. ⁷

Funds amounting to €700,000.00 for 2024 have been approved under the **Law on the Budget of Montenegro for 2024⁸, specifically: Org. code 40701 – Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation; Program 19 040 - Development of Science and Technology; Subprogram 19 040 001 - Scientific Research Activities; Activity 19 040 001 001 - National and International Programs and Projects; 431-9 - Other Transfers to Institutions.**

Non-refundable grants for promoting excellence are awarded for a duration of 3 to 4 years.

To implement and finance this program, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation will issue a **Call for Proposals for awarding research grants for promoting excellence⁹.**

⁷ Given the complexity of the Program, as well as the intricate process of preparing project applications and the evaluation process that will take several months, it is certain that the allocated funds will not be utilized in 2024 but only after the project contracting process, which is optimistically expected to occur by the end of March or early April 2025.

⁸ <https://www.gov.me/clanak/zakon-o-budzetu-crne-gore-za-2024-godinu-sluzbeni-list-crne-gore-broj-124-2023-od-31122023>

⁹ Pursuant to Article 13, paragraph 1 of the Law on Scientific Research ("Official Gazette of Montenegro" No. 080/10, 040/11, 057/14 and 082/20)

1.4 Application Conditions – Applicant and Partners

1.4.1 Applicant

The Applicant **must be a licensed scientific research institution** based in Montenegro in accordance with the Law on Scientific Research (“Official Gazette of Montenegro”, No. 80/2010, 40/2011, 57/2014, and 82/2020).

Additionally, depending on the type of institution, the following conditions must be met:

- a. If the institution is **a research entity from Montenegro**, it must qualify as:
 - a “research and knowledge dissemination organization’ or ‘research organization’ This includes entities such as universities, research institutes, technology transfer agencies, innovation intermediaries, and research-oriented collaborative entities (either physical or virtual), regardless of their legal status (organized under public or private law) or funding mechanisms. Their primary goal must be to independently conduct fundamental research, industrial research, or experimental development, and to widely disseminate the results of these activities through teaching, publication, or knowledge transfer, in accordance with the EU Framework for State Aid for Research, Development, and Innovation (2022/C 414/01), Chapter 1.3, Paragraph 16 (ff)¹⁰.

- b. If the institution is a **business entity**, it shall:
 - be registered in the Central Registry of Business Entities of Montenegro;
 - be headquartered in Montenegro;
 - fulfill all obligations related to the regular payment of taxes and contributions;
 - not be undergoing pre-bankruptcy, bankruptcy, or liquidation proceedings, nor have regular business activities suspended, in accordance with national regulations; and
 - not be classified as an undertaking in difficulty based on its financial statements for the previous year (2023).

1.4.2 Mandatory Partners

The Applicant is required to implement the project in cooperation with at least two partner institutions:

- c. one must be a licensed scientific research institution from Montenegro;
- d. the other must be a scientific research institution based outside of Montenegro.

Eligible mandatory partners under point (c) must meet the same conditions as the Applicant referred to in points (a) or (b).

Eligible mandatory partners under point (d) are scientific research institutions based outside of Montenegro, which can include universities, research institutes, or virtual collaborative research entities, regardless of their legal status (organized under public or private law). Companies engaged in research and development activities are also eligible.

¹⁰ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022XC1028\(03\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022XC1028(03))

1.4.3 Other partners

In addition to the two mandatory partners, the Applicant may have other project partners, such as:

- e. business entities based in Montenegro; or
- f. other scientific research institutions from Montenegro or abroad.

Eligible partners under point (e) do not need to be licensed scientific research institutions but must meet the same additional requirements as the Applicant referred to in point (b).

Eligible partners under point (f) must comply with the following conditions: if they are scientific research institutions from Montenegro, they must be licensed in accordance with the Law on Scientific Research ("Official Gazette of Montenegro", No. 80/2010, 40/2011, 57/2014, and 82/2020) and meet the same additional requirements as specified for the Applicant referred to in point (a).

If eligible partners under point (f) are scientific research institutions from abroad, they can be universities, research institutes, or virtual collaborative research entities, regardless of their legal status (organized under public or private law). Companies engaged in research and development activities are also eligible.

Non-refundable funds awarded to Applicants referred to in point (a) and partners referred to in points (c) and (f) do not constitute state subsidy, provided they are research and knowledge dissemination organizations ("research organizations") and do not meet the conditions for being classified as entrepreneurs. The conditions do not depend on the legal status of the organization, whether established under public or private law, or its economic nature (profit-oriented or not). What is crucial for not meeting the criteria to be classified as an entrepreneur is that economic activities involving the provision of products or services in a specific market do not exceed 20% of the organization's total annual capacity. In cases where a research organization engages in both economic and non-economic activities, public funding for non-economic activities will not be covered by Article 107, paragraph 1 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, provided that the two types of activities, their costs, financing, and revenues can be clearly separated to effectively avoid cross-subsidization of the economic activity. The Applicant referred to in point (a) and partners referred to in points (c) and (f) are required to review the **Guidelines for Users related to the application of state aid rules** and confirm the compliance with the main provisions by the Statement of the Applicant/Partner (Statement on Non-Economic Activities).

The grants awarded to Applicants referred to in point (b) and mandatory and other partners that are also legal entities constitute de minimis aid as defined by the Law on State Aid Control ("Official Gazette of Montenegro," no. 012/18).¹¹

1.5 Financial Conditions and Project Duration

The value of the research grant to encourage excellence for each individual project may range **from €200,000.00 to €350,000.00 covering a period of 3 to 4 years of research.**

The total value of an individual project includes:

- Grants that will be awarded to the individual project by the Ministry to cover a portion of the eligible project costs; and
- Funds from the Applicant/Partners to co-finance the remaining eligible costs.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/c44499b7-4a41-4758-a8db-ea55d5358c3a>

1.6 Co-Financing by the Applicant/Partners

The Applicant commits to providing co-financing from its own funds, funds from partner institutions, or external financing (excluding any public national or international funding).

The program allows for co-financing from the Ministry of up to 90% of the total project value (up to €350,000.00), while the Applicant is obliged to secure at least 10% of the co-financing from the total project value from its own funds/funds from partner institutions/external financing.

Project co-financing must be provided exclusively in cash and can be secured by multiple institutions, e.g., the Applicant, project partners, donors, etc.

Co-financing funds may only be used for eligible costs in accordance with Section 1.11 of this Program, which are necessary for the implementation and achievement of the project objectives.

1.7 Double Funding

The principle of prohibiting double funding implies that the same costs are not funded from the state budget, EU programs, international sources, or other state aid providers.

Applicants must not seek or be beneficiaries of funds from the state budget, EU programs, international sources, and other state aid providers for costs that will be reimbursed under the submitted project and for co-financing of the approved project.

1.8 Number of Applications per Applicant

An applicant may submit multiple project proposals; however, the same costs may not be financed twice from the state budget, EU programs, and international sources for the same individual grant recipient.

1.9 Eligible Project Activities

Funds allocated by the Program are intended to cover part of the eligible project costs, which must include:

1. Research activities within the project;
2. Strengthening the capacities of scientific research institutions;
3. Purchase of research equipment and materials;
4. Short-term mobility of researchers, which includes activities related to mobility and networking, such as participation in conferences, field trips within Montenegro for the purpose of collecting materials and data related to research, stays at research organizations abroad, attending seminars, and various types of training that contribute to the professional development of researchers by enhancing their research competencies and helping achieve the general and specific project goals;
5. Medium-term mobility of researchers, which includes activities related to mobility and networking, specifically stays of researchers at partner institutions abroad lasting from 1 to 6 months, contributing to the achievement of the general and specific project goals; and
6. Supporting consulting services that include necessary services for achieving project goals or knowledge transfer, such as expert consultations in areas not covered by the project team. This may include, for example, analyses of scientific results, consultations on the commercialization of scientific results, etc.

1.10 Ineligible Project Activities

Funds allocated by the program **shall not** be used for:

- Purchase of used equipment;
- Purchase of passenger, freight, and commercial vehicles;
- Renting equipment, tools, and materials;
- Any types of construction work;
- Purchase/lease of real estate;
- Withdrawing cash from the project account.

Additionally, any other activities not listed in Section 1.9 of the Program are considered ineligible.

1.11 Eligible Costs

Eligible costs include:

- Direct Costs

1. **Costs related to purchasing equipment** exclusively for the project research. This may include specific IT equipment and software solutions, provided they are necessary for conducting the research. Eligible costs also encompass associated expenses such as delivery, installation, calibration, and any training provided by the equipment supplier. Equipment refers to items with a unit value exceeding €300.00, excluding VAT. The Applicant must justify the necessity of the equipment for the project implementation, proving that the project cannot be realized without it. *Only the Applicant and the mandatory partner from Montenegro are eligible to purchase equipment valued at more than €1,500.00.*
The total cost of equipment shall not exceed 50% of the total project value.
2. **Costs for using equipment of another institution, based on the institution's official price list, if necessary for the project's execution.** *Only the Applicant and the mandatory partner from Montenegro are entitled to use such equipment.*
The total cost for this category shall not exceed 40% of the total project value.
3. **Costs for consumables required for the project, which refer to materials and devices with a unit value of less than €300.00, excluding VAT.** *Only the Applicant and the mandatory partner from Montenegro are entitled to purchase consumables.*
The total cost of consumables shall not exceed 30% of the total project value.
4. **Costs for research personnel, which include newly hired staff working on the project and overtime pay/compensation for existing employees.** *Only the Applicant and the mandatory partner from Montenegro are eligible for research personnel costs.* These costs include costs related to new hires, with whom the Applicant/partner will sign employment contracts (Gross 2 type), which covers the annual salary and mandatory social security contributions. Benefits such as jubilee awards, gifts for children, bonuses, etc., are not eligible for co-financing under the program. For existing staff, supplementary work/remunerations are allowed, with funding available up to a maximum of 30% of the "Gross 2" salary¹².
The total cost for research personnel shall not exceed 30% of the total project value for projects that do not involve new hires, or 40% for projects that include new hires.
5. **Costs for short- and medium-term mobility related to project implementation**, including per diems (for short-term travel only), accommodation, transportation, and registration fees.
The total cost of mobility shall not exceed 20% of the total project value.

¹² Gross salary (Gross 1) includes net salary, personal income tax, and mandatory social security contributions paid by the employer on behalf of the employee. However, these are not all the fiscal obligations that the employer pays; there are also local taxes and contributions borne by the employer, which, when added to "Gross 1," form what is known as "Gross 2."

6. Costs for consulting services required for the project, where the project team lacks the necessary expertise. These costs may include services such as scientific result analysis and consultations on the commercialization of results, etc.

The total cost of consulting services shall not exceed 20% of the total project value.

7. Dissemination costs, including expenses for publishing scientific papers, proofreading, registration fees, travel, accommodation, per diem expenses, and the organization of workshops or conferences related to the proposed project. Only the Applicant and the mandatory partner from Montenegro are eligible for dissemination costs.

The total cost of dissemination shall not exceed 20% of the total project value.

8. VAT on eligible costs, if the Applicant/partner is unable to claim a VAT refund.

- Indirect Costs

Indirect costs arising from project implementation borne by the Applicant's institution may amount to up to 10% of the total project value. Only the Applicant can claim indirect costs.

Indirect costs arising from project implementation do not need to be itemized in the financial report and may include:

- Facility maintenance costs (legally required periodic inspections, replacement of consumed materials and components, periodic and emergency repairs);
- Utility costs, including heating/cooling, electricity, water, and waste disposal;
- Costs associated with equipment procurement, such as customs and administrative fees, freight forwarding, storage, handling, etc.
- Costs of minor supplies.

1.12 Ineligible Costs

Ineligible costs are those that cannot be classified as eligible costs.

1.13 Requirements for the Project Leader and Project (Research) Team

Project Leader Requirements:

- Must have held a PhD for at least 5 years as of the application deadline,
- Must have an employment contract with the institution submitting the application for the research project aimed at promoting excellence.

The Project Leader's research and management capacities will be assessed by evaluators based on their CV, including the quantity and quality of scientific publications, the number and scope of projects they have led or contributed to, scientific and research awards, intellectual property activities, international collaboration, and partnerships with the business sector.

The Project Leader can only apply as the lead for one research project under the grant for promoting excellence.

Minimum Requirements for a Member of the Research Team:

- Must hold a higher education degree of at least 240 ECTS credits.

The research capacities of the team will be assessed by evaluators based on their CVs.

1.14 Ethical Issues

During the preparation of the project application, the Applicant is required to comply with ethical principles and regulations.

If the project proposal presents any ethical concerns, the Applicant must submit approval from the Ethics Committee (if applicable) and/or provide other relevant evidence of how the ethical issue is being addressed.

1.15 Application Content

The project application shall include:

- a) A signed and stamped/electronically signed Application Form from the Applicant;
- b) Project financial plan;
- c) CVs of the Project Leader and key project team members (up to five researchers in the research team);
- d) A statement from the Applicant confirming secured counterpart funding for the project's implementation;
- e) A statement from the partner confirming their participation in the project and outlining their contribution;
- f) A statement from the Applicant affirming the accuracy of the provided information, the avoidance of double financing, and acceptance of the terms of the Call, signed and stamped by an authorized person;
- g) A statement from the Applicant and the partner regarding non-economic activities, signed by an authorized person—this applies only to those meeting the criteria of licensed research institutions under the Law on Scientific Research ("Official Gazette of Montenegro," no. 80/2010, 40/2011, 57/2014, and 82/2020) and classified as "research and knowledge dissemination organizations" according to the EU Framework for State Aid for Research and Development and Innovation (2022/C 414/01), Chapter 1.3, Point 16 (ff), or Commission Regulation (EU) No. 651/2014, Article 2, Point 83¹³; and
- h) A statement regarding non-recoverable VAT, signed by a representative of the organization (the Applicant and/or partners).

The statements listed in points d), e), f), g), and h) must be notarized.

Additionally, the business partner—a company based in Montenegro—shall submit the following:

- A copy of the Excerpt from the Central Registry of Business Entities;
- Financial statements for the previous year (2023);
- Proof of settled tax obligations or an appropriate document regarding the reprogramming of tax debt; and
- A certificate or confirmation that bankruptcy or liquidation proceedings have not been initiated against the business entity.

¹³ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AAOJ.L_2014.187.01.0001.01.ENG#:.:text=COMMISSION%20REGULATION%20%28EU%29%20No%20651%2F2014%20of%2017%20June.of%20Articles%20107%20and%20108%20of%20the%20Treaty

1.16 Grant Award Procedure

1.16.1 Application Procedure

The Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation will announce a Call for awarding research grants to promote excellence.

The Call will remain open for a minimum of 60 days.

The following steps are taken in the project applications review process:

1. Administrative check of project applications;
2. Evaluation of project applications based on established assessment criteria; and
3. Acceptance or rejection of projects for co-financing.

1.16.2 Administrative Check of Project Applications

The Ministry will conduct an administrative check of all project applications submitted in response to the Call.

The administrative criteria are as follows:

- a) All required documentation specified in point 1.15 must be submitted;
- b) The documentation must be signed and stamped or electronically signed by authorized individuals;
- c) The application must be completed using the prescribed forms provided by the Ministry, which are an integral part of this program;
- d) The Applicant must be a licensed research institution in accordance with the Law on Scientific Research ("Official Gazette of Montenegro," nos. 80/2010, 40/2011, 57/2014, and 82/2020);
- e) The Applicant must meet the definition of a "research and knowledge dissemination organization" as outlined in the EU Framework for State Aid for Research and Development and Innovation (2022/C 414/01), Chapter 1.3, Point 16 (ff), or Commission Regulation (EU) No. 651/2014, Article 2, Point 83, and must be registered in the Central Registry of Business Entities of Montenegro;
- f) Partners from Montenegro who are research organizations must also be licensed research institutions in accordance with the Law on Scientific Research ("Official Gazette of Montenegro," nos. 80/2010, 40/2011, 57/2014, and 82/2020) and must meet the definition of "research and knowledge dissemination organizations" as outlined in the EU Framework for State Aid for Research and Development and Innovation (2022/C 414/01), Chapter 1.3, Point 16 (ff), or Commission Regulation (EU) No. 651/2014, Article 2, Point 83, and must be registered in the Central Registry of Business Entities of Montenegro;
- g) The economic activities of the Applicant and Montenegrin partners that qualify as "research and knowledge dissemination organizations" which consist of offering products or services in a given market, must not exceed 20% of the total annual capacity of the research organization;
- h) The Applicant and partners that are enterprises must be registered in the Central Registry of Business Entities of Montenegro and have fulfilled all obligations for regular tax and contribution payments. They must not be in pre-bankruptcy, bankruptcy, or liquidation proceedings, nor have regular business activities suspended, and must not be classified as entrepreneurs in financial difficulty according to the financial statements for the previous year (2023);

- i) The application must be submitted in the manner and within the deadline specified in the Call;
- j) According to the Financial Plan, the amount of non-repayable funds requested from the Ministry must be no less than €200,000.00 and no more than €350,000.00;
- k) The project duration must be at least 36 months and no more than 48 months.
- l) The project must align with the scientific research priorities outlined in the Montenegrin Scientific Research Strategy 2024-2028 and the Action Plan for the period 2024-2025.

Applications that meet the administrative criteria will advance to the evaluation phase based on the assessment criteria.

1.16.3 Evaluation of Project Applications Against Assessment Criteria

Once the project applications have been submitted, each will be reviewed by three assessors, all of whom are international experts in the specific research field to which the project pertains.

The Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation will, along with the documentation required for the Call, prepare a Conflict of Interest Statement for the assessors, as well as the Procedure for Conducting the Project Evaluation Process (assessment). Additionally, the Ministry will issue an international Call for Expressions of Interest for assessors to review applications submitted in response to the Call for Research Grants to Promote Excellence.

The criteria for assessing project applications are as follows:

1. 1. Scientific Quality, Originality, and Feasibility of the Proposed Research, evaluated based on three distinct sub-criteria

- 1.1 1.1 Does the proposed research make a significant contribution to the field of science to which it belongs?

This criterion assesses how the proposed research advances its scientific field. Does it contribute to the development of new knowledge, and how significant is its potential to generate results important for future studies? What is the scientific quality of the research? Does the proposal offer a novel approach to the research topic?

- a) The proposed research is of critical importance to the field. It demonstrates high scientific quality and originality, with significant potential to enhance understanding of the topic;
- b) The proposed research is relevant, though it does not represent a major breakthrough in the field;
- c) The proposed research has limited significance and does not stand out in comparison to existing research on the topic;
- d) The proposed research lacks significance within its field and does not offer advancements compared to current studies; and;
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information for a thorough assessment of this criterion.

- 1.2 Are the goals, purpose, and expected outcomes of the proposed research clearly defined and justified?

This criterion examines whether the goals, purpose, and anticipated outcomes of the proposed research are clearly articulated and well-justified. Can we objectively measure whether the

proposed goals and expected outcomes of the proposed research will be achieved or not? Are the proposed goals and expected outcomes of the proposed research attainable?

- a) The project goals, purpose, and expected outcomes are exceptionally well-defined and justified;
- b) The project goals, purpose, and expected outcomes are generally well-defined and justified, with only one aspect lacking clarity or justification;
- c) The project goals, purpose, and expected outcomes are well-defined and justified in part, but multiple sections of the proposal lack sufficient clarity or justification;
- d) The project goals, purpose, and expected outcomes are not clearly defined or justified; and
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information for a thorough assessment of this criterion.

1.3 Feasibility of the Proposed Research

This criterion evaluates whether the proposed research is feasible based on the proposed methods, work plan, financial plan, and whether it can realistically be completed within the proposed time frame.

- a) The proposed research is entirely feasible;
- b) The proposed research is feasible, but there is a specific aspect of the research whose feasibility is in question ;
- c) Certain parts of the proposed research are feasible, but the feasibility of several sections is doubtful;
- d) The proposed research is not feasible; and
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information for a thorough assessment of this criterion.

2. Research and Managerial Qualities of the Project Leader and the Project (Research) Team, evaluated based on three distinct sub-criteria

2.1 Research Qualities of the Project Leader

This criterion assesses the Project Leader's previous research accomplishments, based on the quality and quantity of scientific publications, participation in projects as a leader or collaborator, scientific and research awards, intellectual property protection and usage activities, international cooperation, and collaboration with the business sector.

- a) The Project Leader has achieved significant research accomplishments throughout their career;
- b) The Project Leader has achieved very good research accomplishments throughout their career;
- c) The Project Leader has achieved some research accomplishments throughout their career;
- d) The Project Leader has achieved minimal research accomplishments throughout their career; and
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information for a thorough assessment of this criterion.

2.2 2.2 Managerial Qualities of the Project Leader

This criterion evaluates the managerial skills of the Project Leader based on their experience in mentoring postgraduate students and leading or participating in research projects.

- a) The Project Leader's previous achievements demonstrate excellent managerial abilities;
- b) The Project Leader's previous achievements demonstrate very good managerial abilities;
- c) The Project Leader's previous achievements demonstrate good managerial abilities;
- d) The Project Leader's previous achievements demonstrate minimal managerial abilities; and
- e) The available documentation does not provide enough information to thoroughly assess this criterion.

2.3 Research Capacity and Quality of the Project (Research) Team

This criterion evaluates the research team's quality, specifically whether the team's structure and competencies are appropriate for the successful execution of the project.

- a) The structure and competencies of all team members are excellent;
- b) Most of the team has adequate competencies, and the team's structure is very good;
- c) Part of the team has adequate competencies, and the team's structure is satisfactory;
- d) The structure and competencies of all team members are minimal;
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information to thoroughly assess this criterion.

3. Potential of the Proposed Research for Forming a Research Team Capable of Conducting Outstanding Research, evaluated based on two distinct sub-criteria

3.1 Quality of the Partnership between the Applicant and Partners

This criterion evaluates how the proposed research can contribute to the professional development and future collaboration among project team members. Is there a plan for collaboration after the project completion, along with a clear outline of subsequent activities?

- a) A comprehensive plan for future collaboration is presented, detailing specific projects and activities. This collaboration represents a logical and clear continuation or enhancement of the project activities and the application of anticipated outcomes;
- b) Future collaboration after the proposed research is completed is adequately planned and described, indicating a satisfactory, clear, and mostly realistic continuation or enhancement of project activities or the use of expected research outcomes;
- c) The planned future collaboration following the proposed research's completion is unclear, lacking a specific plan for subsequent activities. The project proposal does not suggest that the proposed research will produce results that allow for the continuation or enhancement of project activities, and the planned collaboration activities are neither realistic nor relevant in the context of the proposed research;
- d) There is no plan for future collaboration after the project completion, indicating a lack of strategy for further activities. The project proposal does not demonstrate that the proposed research will yield results enabling the continuation or enhancement of project activities; and
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information for a thorough assessment of this criterion.

3.2 Potential of the Proposed Research for the Career Development of Early-Stage Researchers

This criterion assesses how the proposed research can support the career development of early-stage researchers, particularly in acquiring new knowledge and skills, obtaining doctoral degrees, gaining relevant international experience, or developing innovation-related expertise.

- a) The proposed research will significantly contribute to the career development of early-stage researchers;
- b) The proposed research will substantially contribute to the career development of early-stage researchers;
- c) The proposed research will somewhat contribute to the career development of early-stage researchers;
- d) The proposed research lacks potential for fostering the career development of early-stage researchers; and;
- e) The available documentation does not provide enough information for a thorough assessment of this criterion.

4. Potential Sustainability of the Proposed Research, evaluated based on two distinct sub-criteria

4.1 Potential of the Proposed Research for Achieving Outstanding Scientific Results and Ensuring Future Sustainability through Competitive Funding Sources

This section evaluates the extent to which the proposed research can achieve outstanding scientific results, foster international collaboration, and acquire new knowledge and skills that will contribute to attracting international funding from programs such as various European Union research and innovation initiatives or similar funding sources.

- a) The proposed research has excellent potential for attracting international funding;
- b) The proposed research has very good potential for attracting international funding;
- c) The proposed research has good potential for attracting international funding;
- d) The proposed research has no potential for attracting international funding;
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information for a thorough assessment of this criterion.

4.2 Potential of the Proposed Research for Generating New Knowledge with Commercial Applications

This section assesses how the proposed research may contribute to the development of new knowledge applicable in the economic sector, including innovations, commercial applications, patents, spin-offs, and other methods of protecting and utilizing intellectual property.

- a) The proposed research will significantly contribute to the development of knowledge that could be commercially viable;
- b) The proposed research will greatly contribute to the development of knowledge that could be commercially viable;
- c) The proposed research will somewhat contribute to the development of knowledge that could be commercially viable;
- d) The proposed research has no potential for developing knowledge that could be commercially viable;
- e) The available documentation does not provide sufficient information for a quality assessment of this criterion.

Assessors assess the individual sub-criteria that make up each evaluation criterion, rating each sub-criterion on a scale from one to five – 1 - 5. The score for each criterion is calculated as the average of the scores for the individual sub-criteria.

The assessors' scores for each criterion carry equal weight, allowing for a straightforward average calculation. Assessors are expected to provide comments alongside each score in a format that offers clear feedback to the applicants.

The final score (K) is determined based on the following formula:

$$K = 0,30I + 0,20II + 0,30III + 0,20IV$$

where I, II, III, and IV are the average scores assigned by three assessors for the respective criterion, and **K** is the final score of the project application. The final score is rounded to two decimal places.

For a project application to qualify for co-funding, **it must achieve a final score (K) of at least 4.00.**

1.16.4 Acceptance/Rejection of the Project for Co-financing

Based on the final score (K) of the submitted projects, a final ranking list is created. Applicants will be contacted by Ministry officials according to their position on the ranking list and in line with the available budget, after which the terms for project implementation will be agreed upon. The selected applicants will be required to provide the following additional documentation:

1. Documentation related to the calculation of salaries/remuneration:
 - 1.1. For new employees, submit a draft (unsigned) contract, as well as the document used to determine the salary;
 - 1.2. For existing employees, submit payroll slips for the three months preceding the publication of the Call.
2. A valid offer for costs exceeding €6,000.00, except for the costs mentioned in point 1;
3. A cooperation/consortium agreement between the Applicant and all partner institutions involved in the project implementation, regulating mutual rights and obligations. This agreement will outline: the roles of the project partners, the duration of the partnership, the intellectual property contributed and developed, as well as any "know-how" that may arise during the project implementation, relationships concerning fund transfers, confidentiality of information, reporting, and retention of project documentation;
4. A procurement plan; and
5. A de minimis aid declaration form (for the Applicant and project partners engaging in economic activities).

If the assessors have provided comments for improving the project application or modifying the Financial Plan, the Ministry will contact the Applicants to submit revised project applications and Financial Plans in accordance with these comments.

After negotiations are concluded, decisions regarding the acceptance or rejection of projects for co-financing will be issued.

For applicants whose projects are accepted for co-financing, an **Agreement on Research Grants for Promoting Excellence** will be signed with the Ministry, defining the mutual rights and obligations between the Applicant (Beneficiary) and the Grant Provider (the Ministry).

The list of beneficiaries who have signed the Agreement on Research Grants for Promoting Excellence will be published on the Ministry's website.

The following details will be made public:

- Name of the Beneficiary;
- Names of partner institutions;
- Project title;
- Amount of non-repayable funds (grant) awarded to the project, along with the amount of the Beneficiary own co-financing; and;
- A brief project description.

The Beneficiary is required to maintain appropriate documentation for every eligible and accepted project expense, except for indirect costs, to substantiate expense.



2. IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING OF RESEARCH GRANTS FOR PROMOTING EXCELLENCE

The Beneficiary of the research grant for promoting excellence is required to submit an **Annual Report on the implementation of the research grant for promoting excellence, including a Financial Report** and a Work Plan for the following year, using the form prescribed by the Ministry.

Upon completion of the project funded by the research grant for promoting excellence, the Beneficiary must submit a **Final Report on the implementation of the research grant for promoting excellence**, along with a Financial Report, using the form prescribed by the Ministry.

The procedure for evaluating the Annual and Final Reports, including the Financial Plan, will be detailed in the Grant Agreement.

The Ministry will also monitor the implementation of the project for which the research grant for promoting excellence was awarded. This will involve verifying the level of completion of the activities specified in the accepted project application, reviewing the execution of the Financial Plan, as well as overseeing the dissemination of results and promotion of project activities.



3. REPORTING METHOD AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

The Ministry will prepare an annual report on the implementation of the Research Grants Program for Promoting Excellence, which will be an integral part of the Ministry's Annual Report, adopted by the Government of Montenegro.

Upon the completion of the Program, the Ministry will conduct an external evaluation of the Program. Financial resources for the evaluation will be provided from the national budget and will be planned in a timely manner for the fiscal year in which the obligation for the evaluation arises.



**Ministry of
Education, Science
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