

CALL: Large projects for excellent researchers

(Shortened English version for evaluators)

(with additional remarks)

Objective and purpose of the call:

The call will support top research teams led by excellent researchers from Slovakia and abroad, who will carry out their research at research or innovation institutions in Slovakia. The application shall be submitted by the institution (applicant) together with an excellent researcher (principal investigator). The institution must allow the excellent researcher the freedom to carry out his/her own research, its focus, to apply for funding from other sources as well as to select researchers to the team, while respecting the rules of recruitment of researchers.

The aim of the call is to attract or retain and support individual excellent researchers and their teams in carrying out research at research institutions in Slovakia. The support will be directed towards building and developing its own research team built around a particular excellent researcher/principal investigator. The call is open to internationally recognised researchers, both from Slovakia and abroad, who will carry out their research in Slovakia.

The aim of the support is to improve the quality of research and innovation in strategically defined themes, thus to improve the situation of human resources while increasing the international recognisability of research teams, making them more competitive when participating in European projects, improving equipment and stabilising human resources. Projects must comply with the smart specialisation domains defined in the Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Slovak Republic.

Duration of the project

The time eligibility of the project starts at the earliest on the date of application submission, i.e. the implementation of the project¹ may not start before the application submission.

The project's eligibility period ends, i.e. **research activities must be completed and expenditure reimbursed no later than 30. 6. 2026.**

Applicant is obliged to plan the duration of the project implementation according to the complexity of research activities and expected results of the project, so that the project duration is appropriate.

Minimum requested amount

1 500 000 EUR

Maximum requested amount

3 000 000 EUR²

¹ start of implementation of research and/or development tasks within the project

² including VAT

Eligible applicants

Eligible applicants are the **non-business research organisations and research infrastructures** (non-undertakings) which do not represent an undertaking in accordance with Art. 107 par. 1 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU and will not perform economic activities on the project; as well as **business entities - undertakings** in accordance with the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.

Eligible applicants are from:

- a) the **state sector**, which consists of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and legal entities carrying out research and development established by central state administration bodies,
- b) the **sector of public research institutions**, which consists of public research institutions,
- c) the **higher education sector**, consisting of public universities, state universities, private universities and their established legal entities carrying out R&D;
- d) the **non-profit sector**, consisting of non-profit organisations, civic associations and associations of legal entities carrying out research and development;
- e) the **business sector**, consisting of entrepreneurs who also carry out R&D as part of their business activities (micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (so-called SMEs); large enterprises).

Purpose of the call

The purpose of the call is to support large projects of fundamental and applied (industrial) research carried out by excellent researchers and their teams in strategically defined areas. **Projects must be implemented at research and innovation institutions in Slovakia.**

The objective is to:

- Attract or retain and support individual excellent researchers and their teams in the implementation of research in Slovakia.
- Support the building and development of the research team of an excellent researcher (principal investigator).
- Improve the equipment.
- Increase competitiveness in engaging in the European projects.

Applications must be in line with the smart specialisation domains defined in the [Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Slovak Republic](#) (hereinafter referred to as SK RIS3 2021+) as further described in the [EDP Summary Report on SK RIS3 2021](#):

- Innovative industry for the 21st century
- Mobility for the 21st century
- Digital transformation of the Slovakia
- Healthy society
- Healthy food and the environment

The application and its activities must be linked to at least one of the listed domains. The link and compliance with the identified domain/domains of SK RIS3 2021+ shall be described by the applicant in Annex 6 'Project description' and it will be subject to assessment by expert evaluator.

In the application form, the applicant must identify an excellent researcher (principal investigator) at the career stage of R3 or R4, as demonstrated by his/her CV (part of Annex 6 'Project description'). Applicant assigns the appropriate career level to the principal investigator, according to his characteristics, competencies and experience at the time of submitting the application. Assignment will be based on [the European Framework for Research Careers](#) or [the Research Profiles Descriptors](#).

The accuracy of the assignment of the researcher's career stage will be assessed during peer review evaluation.

The applicant must allow the excellent researcher the freedom to carry out his/her own research, its focus, to apply for funding from other resources and to select researchers for the team. At the same time, the rules on recruitment of researchers must be respected³.

The recommended amount of working time of an excellent researcher/principal investigator for the implementation of the project is 100 % (full-time). The minimum working time of the researcher for the implementation of the project is 50 % of full-time. Evaluators will be provided with information on the working time of the excellent researcher/principal investigator for the project to assess ambitiousness and feasibility of the project.

Projects must focus on research activities as well as the development/improvement of equipment.

The **results** of the implementation of the project **must be specific deliverables**, which the applicant is obliged to identify in the project application. **Planned deliverables must be proportional to the project budget and achievable during the project implementation period.**

There must be milestones during the whole project implementation period. Milestones in the project must be clearly defined, appropriate, realistic and achievable in relation to the proposed activities.

Eligible project activities

Type of research for research organisations/research infrastructures (non-undertakings with a non-economic project):

1. **Independent research** – is of a non-economic nature and represents experimental or theoretical work carried out with the aim of broadening knowledge and better understanding of given topics, including research collaboration, where the research organisation or research infrastructure engages in effective collaboration. Activities of fundamental research, applied research and feasibility studies that reach the **maximum TRL 3** – experimental proof of concept, resulting in demonstration of the functionality of the concept and the potential of the concept to further develop are eligible. Experimental proof of concept also includes demonstration of the concept at laboratory level, while there is no development of prototypes and/or validation of the product/project/system/programme itself as a result of the intended concept.

This type of research is relevant exclusively to entities that do not constitute an undertaking and will not carry out activities of an economic nature within the project.

Type of research for undertakings or economic projects of research organisations/research infrastructures:

1. **Fundamental research** – means experimental or theoretical work carried out to acquire new knowledge of the essential foundations of phenomena and observable facts without the intended direct commercial application or use. Only activities that reach the **maximum TRL 1** are eligible. They can result in a preliminary evaluation of the potential benefits of the concept against the existing ones.

2. **Industrial research** is a planned research or critical survey aimed at acquiring new knowledge and skills for the development of new products, processes or services. Activities that reach the **maximum TRL 3** – experimental proof of concept, resulting in demonstration of the functionality of the concept and the potential of the concept to further develop are eligible. Experimental proof of concept also includes demonstration of the concept at laboratory level, while there is no development of prototypes and/or validation of the product/project/system/programme itself as a result of the intended concept.

The accuracy of the assignment of a type of research according to its nature will be subject to a peer review.

Eligible costs

Eligible direct costs:

- a) **Salary/staff costs** - the total cost of the work of persons to the extent that they are directly involved in the project. The amount of eligible direct salary/staff costs is set in the form of **unit personnel costs at EUR**

³ [European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers](#)

3 684 EUR/person for 100 % of the working time on the project (total cost of the work) for the following eligible positions:

- key researcher;
- researcher;
- technical and other auxiliary worker
- project/financial manager – **maximum of 5 % of the total salary costs**

The sum of 3 654 EUR represents unit cost for 1 month of work by an employee at 100% full-time for the project. Based on the working time and the number of person-months determined in the application, the maximum amount of total eligible costs on staff costs for the project will be calculated. The calculated total eligible costs will be used by the applicant for salary costs in accordance with the remuneration policy set in the organization, i.e. applicant determines the super-gross salary of each employee on the project, which may be an amount higher or lower than the unit amount of 3 654 EUR. The applicant will be obliged to fill the positions on the project with specific employees and prove their employment with an employment contract, which will prove the working time spent on the project.

Example: There are 2 employees employed in the project for 12 months - the principal investigator and the project manager - both have 100% employment during the entire 12 months - the amount of total eligible costs for personnel costs will be $(3\,654 \times 12) \times 2 = 87\,696$ EUR - the applicant based on his salary policy decides that the principal investigator will have a monthly super-gross salary of 5 000 EUR and the auxiliary worker 2 308 EUR during 12 months.

- b) Expenditures on **setting up and/or upgrading research infrastructure** (procurement of tangible and intangible fixed assets) where the research infrastructure will be used exclusively or almost exclusively for non-economic purposes, i.e. the annual capacity allocated to the accompanying economic activity shall not exceed 20 % of the total annual capacity of the infrastructure concerned **(for non-undertakings only)**.
- c) Expenditures on construction work and construction modifications (only if they are necessary for the installation of the infrastructure acquired under the project) **(for non-undertakings only)**.
- d) Depreciation of capital assets (tangible and intangible) within the scope and period of its use within the project. Depreciation of tangible assets is eligible up to the amount of tax depreciation at maximum, calculated on the basis of the straight-line depreciation method. (Depreciation of capital assets is not eligible in the case of existing assets for which any funds from public resources have been provided in the past) **(for undertakings only)**.
- e) Expenditures on knowledge and patents purchased or licensed from outside sources on an arm's length basis.
- f) Expenditures on obtaining, approving and protecting patents and other intangible assets **(for non-undertakings only)**.
- g) Consumables, other goods and services.
- h) Travel refunds.

Indirect costs - set at a flat rate up to 7% of eligible direct costs. Indirect costs are those that cannot be directly attributed to research activities, but arise in connection with the implementation of the project (e.g. running of the organization, i.e. personnel, accountant, rent, energy, water, sewage, publicity, communication, etc.).

Ineligible costs

- a) Expenditures on the preparation of the project application
- b) Expenditures on construction works and building modifications (if they are not necessary for the installation of infrastructure purchased from the project);
- c) Expenditures on the procurement of vehicles;
- d) Expenditures on setting up and/or upgrading research infrastructure (for undertakings);
- e) Expenditures on the procurement of long-term tangible/intangible assets (for undertakings);
- f) Depreciation costs (for non-undertakings);
- g) Exchange rate losses;
- h) Excessive or disproportionately high expenditures;

- i) Expenditures incurred during the suspension of project implementation;
- j) Reserves for future losses or debts;
- k) Expenditures and fees that are not necessary for the implementation and are not directly related to the project;
- l) Debts and associated fees, owed interest, penalty fees, fines and penalties, or other penalties whether agreed in contracts or arising from other causes;
- m) Local fees that are not directly related to the project;
- n) Interest from credits and loans; expenditures for setting up and maintaining an account or accounts and for financial transactions on this account and other bank fees;
- o) Direct taxes (real estate tax, motor vehicle tax, etc.);
- p) VAT, if its refund is applicable according to national regulations;
- q) Expenditures that do not meet the condition of time eligibility.

Maximum funding rate for non-business entities (non-undertaking): 100%

The intensity of aid⁴ for entity that is considered an undertaking and will implement fundamental and/or industrial research within the project will be determined depending on the size category of the enterprise.

Evaluation process

Applications that are compliant with all conditions of the call will be subject to **peer review**, the purpose of which is to verify and evaluate the professional quality of the project, its impact, and the quality of the proposed implementation.

Peer review will be realised by foreign external independent expert evaluators, each application evaluated by at least 3 evaluators. They assess the fulfilment of the following criteria, considering the following aspects:

Criteria for the assessment of applications	Maximum score per criterion
Excellence	5
<p>Excellence and experience of the principal investigator.</p> <p>Relevance of the project or its linkage and contribution to the objectives and areas targeted by the call.</p> <p>Scientific quality and experience of the principal investigator.</p> <p>Relevance of the problems/needs at which the project is aimed.</p> <p>The project goes beyond the currently available technical solutions, procedures, products, etc. <i>“beyond the state of the art”</i>.</p> <p>Compliance of the project with strategic documents at national and/or European level and linking the activities of the project to the European Research Area.</p> <p>Compliance of the project with smart specialisation domains in the Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Slovak Republic.</p> <p>Appropriateness, timeliness and relevance of the proposed methodology to the objectives of the project.</p> <p>Quality of use and management of research data and outputs within the project, integrating the principles of open science.</p>	
Impact	5
<p>The credibility of the proposed procedures, the likelihood that the project will achieve the expected results and will have the expected impact.</p> <p>The significance of the anticipated impact – on the given area of knowledge and the scientific community, on the economy, on society, on the environment.</p> <p>Adequacy of expected results and impacts of the project – qualitative and quantitative.</p> <p>The appropriateness and quality of the proposed measures to maximise the results and impact of the project.</p> <p>The quality of the proposed IPR management strategy for project results (if relevant).</p>	

⁴ Aid intensity represents the level of financing for entities that will be financed under the applied state aid scheme

Implementation	5
<p>Quality and efficiency of the project plan, feasibility of planned activities.</p> <p>The coherence and logic of the work packages and the adequacy of the allocated resources, the adequacy of the proposed milestones and outputs.</p> <p>The capacity and tasks of the applicant; description how an applicant has the necessary expertise and material and technical equipment.</p> <p>Estimation of implementation risks, quality of proposed measures.</p> <p>Coordination and management of the project.</p> <p>Quality of project management and processes.</p> <p>Quality of ensuring gender equality and equal opportunities within the project.</p>	
<p>The evaluator assigns a maximum of 5 points to each criterion, with a possible resolution to ½ points.</p> <p>The condition will be met by those applications that get score above the threshold:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for an individual criterion, gain a minimum of 3 points from the majority of evaluators, i.e. from at least two of three evaluators; • for the overall score – a gain of at least 10 points, the overall score is determined as the sum of the averages of each criterion (the average of each criterion is calculated from the evaluations where the criterion fulfilled the conditions (at least 3 points)). 	
<p>Template of project application and its annexes to be filled by an applicant with all the required aspects is available here: https://vaia.gov.sk/en/2023/10/05/large-projects-for-excellent-researchers/</p> <p>Documents for applicant can contain more information necessary for the preparation of the project application.</p> <p>The Shortened English version for evaluators contains information necessary for evaluators, however they can obtain more information in the above-mentioned documents, if needed.</p>	