

Open Call for Consultancy Services

Title: Capacity Building of Research & Innovation National Contact Points in the Western Balkans

Contracting Authority: Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Secretariat

Reporting to: RCC Secretariat

Duration: October 2021 – December 2021

Application Deadline: 25 October 2021

Reference Number: 099-021

Eligible: Individual experts/ respective consulting companies/ /individual experts within bidding consortia

TERMS OF REFERENCE:

I. BACKGROUND

Purpose

The purpose of the assignment is to support the implementation of the Common Regional Market (hereinafter: CRM) Action Plan. The Leaders of the Western Balkans endorsed the Declaration on CRM and the respective CRM Action Plan 2021-2024 at the Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process in November 2020. The CRM aims to enable an unobstructed flow of goods, services, capital and

people making the region more attractive for investment and trade, while accelerating convergence with the European Union (EU), to bring about prosperity to citizens of Western Balkans.

One of the priority actions of the CRM's Regional Innovation Area component is the introduction of the Western Balkans Innovation and Research Platform aimed at supporting, *inter alia*, the region's economies full integration into the European Research Area (ERA). The integration of the region's research and innovation frameworks into the ERA is a necessary step for EU accession. This has been reinforced by all Western Balkan economies that pledged to increase their support for research, innovation, education, training and culture at the Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms on Education and Training & Research and Innovation held on 2 December 2020.

The key instruments for implementing the ERA are the EU Framework Programmes for Research & Innovation (R&I). To assist the process of project proposal preparations and provide advice and guidance during the implementation of R&I projects funded by the EU, the National Contact Points (NCPs) support structures have been introduced. NCPs key role is to provide valuable information and practical advice to potential applicants and beneficiaries in their languages. In some cases, more experienced NCPs are rotated with less experienced NCPs which causes bottlenecks and lowers the quality of support provided to the R&I community. This may lead to missed opportunities for the R&I community, in particular among modest innovation ecosystems as is the case in all Western Balkan economies. In recent months the NCP structures also changed around the Western Balkans to reflect the needs of the new EU programming period.

The specific purpose of the assignment is to: (1) provide training designed to enhance the competence of less experienced NCPs in the Western Balkans to be able to provide hands-on support to researchers and research organisations in the process of project proposal preparation and project implementation, (2) create a practical manual on the EU's R&I programmes to be made available freely online; (3) offer mentoring support to less experienced NCPs in the region, and (4) prepare a set of recommendations to encourage regional cooperation and know-how sharing among NCPs and strengthening institutional capacities of key infrastructures to assist the research community to absorb EU funds.

Background information

The Common Regional Market Action Plan 2021-2024 endorsed by the Western Balkans Leaders, under its Regional Innovation Area component, includes supporting the Western Balkan economies' full integration into the European Research Area (ERA). The critically important instruments for implementing the ERA are the EU Framework Programmes for R&I. Horizon Europe, the current 9th European Union Framework Programme for R&I is expected to play a major role in the process of Europe's economic post-COVID-19 recovery and future resilience. Horizon Europe aims to strengthen Europe's knowledge base, support the development and use of innovative solutions, and help tackle important industrial challenges. Other auxiliary R&I programmes, such as Eureka and EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities focus on innovative initiatives and knowledge commercialisation.

To bridge the gap between EU's formal rules and procedures, and the needs of researchers, innovators, SMEs and start-ups, each European economy has National Contact Points (NCPs) support structures¹. The NCP systems can vary from highly centralised to decentralised networks and different actors, from ministries to universities, research centres and special agencies to private consulting companies. NCPs provide information and practical advice to potential applicants and beneficiaries, through the project life cycle, in their languages. In addition, the NCPs role is to ensure that Horizon Europe Framework Programme becomes known and readily accessible to all potential applicants. Nominated NCPs should be specialists in their fields and fully acquainted with the objectives, principles and content of key R&I programmes. NCPs should at least be aware of opportunities provided by related programmes and be familiar with the relevant sources of advice in the economy concerned. NCPs should be knowledgeable about all aspects of Horizon Europe beyond their specialist area and willing to participate actively in transnational networks in line with the collaborative nature of EU programmes and the ERA's goals. NCPs core functions

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ncp-guiding-principles_he_en.pdf

include: informing and awareness raising; assisting, advising and training; and signposting and cooperation.

NCPs have become an essential component in the implementation of previous Framework Programmes and significantly contributed to an increased performance of the Western Balkans' R&I institutions and individual researchers and innovators. Thanks to NCP structures the Western Balkan economies' success rates have considerably increased in the previous framework programmes. Funding of Western Balkan research projects has tripled between 2014 and 2019, while the participation of Western Balkan researchers has increased by 50% since 2016. In ideal circumstances, NCPs should be supported within their respective host organisations or by authorities in their economies. However, this is not necessarily the case in all WB economies, particularly due to the Covid-19 pandemic shifting priorities. In addition, the Western Balkan economies are currently aiming to associate with Horizon Europe. It is expected that the full association will be completed by the end of 2021. EU member states have introduced functional NCP structures in place since the beginning of the Horizon Europe programme while the time lag in the Western Balkans association to Horizon Europe has resulted in lower engagement of NCPs and knowledge and skills shortages, principally among newly appointed NCPs. The EC provides continuous support to its NCP structures to ensure higher absorption of the EU funds because some of the newly appointed NCPs are not fully familiar with all nuances of the EU's R&I programmes. Some of these practical types of assistance are not fully available to NCPs outside the EU. To bridge this gap and assist the region's NCP structures to become fully operational quickly, tailor-made training designed to support their actions would be welcome as confirmed by several Western Balkan economies.

II DESCRIPTION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Objectives and scope of the assignment

The ultimate goal of this consultancy is to increase the quality of proposals submitted to the EU's main R&I programmes by enhancing the competence of NCPs in the Western Balkans. The secondary goal is to encourage regional cooperation between NCPs in the future. The special focus should be placed on assisting less experienced NCPs to gain knowledge and skills through suitable training sessions and exposure to good practices, both from the region and wider Europe. The set of training sessions should be tailored according to the priorities of the NCPs concerned and deliver

tangible benefits to NCPs. Therefore, the bidders are encouraged to submit flexible work programmes and employ different approaches such as focused pieces of training covering most pertinent dimensions of the NCPs scope of work or joint workshops with experienced and inexperienced NCPs. The gender dimension of R&I should be carefully covered as an integral part of the training.

The specific objectives of the assignment are to:

1. Equip the region's NCPs to offer high-quality support to researchers, innovators, SMEs and start-ups about the key EU R&I instruments such as Horizon Europe;
2. Provide key insights into opportunities offered by Eureka Network and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology's Knowledge and Innovation Communities;
3. Assist upskilling of NCPs in the region to support their beneficiaries prepare and submit high-quality project proposals and assist implementation of approved projects;
4. Create a practical and user-friendly manual on the EU's R&I programmes with tips and tricks;
5. Suggest a mechanism for know-how sharing among NCPs in the Western Balkans to nurture the development of a regional innovation ecosystem and strengthening institutional capacities of key infrastructures to assist the research community to absorb EU funds.

Tasks

The hired experts will be tasked to:

- Meet the representatives of the RCC Secretariat (physically or online) to agree on the final version of a draft work programme;
- Establish contacts with NCPs in each Western Balkan economy and promote training opportunities while securing the RCC's adequate exposure;
- Design structure and content of comprehensive online tailored training sessions that should cover the following topics:
 - o Horizon Europe (at least 50% of the training),
 - o Eureka, and

- EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities;
- Deliver online tailored training sessions,
- Create a practical and user-friendly manual on the EU's R&I programmes with tips and tricks including examples of good practices that should be made available freely online;
- Provide mentoring support to inexperienced NCPs in the region, where necessary, after the completion of training sessions;
- Submit a final report summarising key achievements of the assignment including a set of recommendations for encouraging regional know-how sharing among NCPs and strengthening institutional capacities of key infrastructures to assist the research community absorb EU funds.

The task will be implemented in close consultation with the RCC Secretariat. The contracted bidder will report to the Senior Expert on Human Capital Development at the Regional Cooperation Council.

Timeframe and deliverables

The engagement will be starting on end of October 2021 and finishing by 31 December 2021 with extended individual support to NCPs until mid-2022.

DELIVERABLE	DEADLINE/TIMEFRAME
Detailed work programme	End of October 2021
Established contacts with NCPs in each Western Balkan economy and promoted training opportunities	1 st week of November 2021
Designed structure and content of online tailored training covering the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Horizon Europe (at least 50%), - Eureka, and - EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities 	Second week of November 2021
Tailored online training sessions delivered	Mid-December 2021

Practical manual on EU's key R&I programmes including examples of good practices created and made available freely online	End of November 2021
Mentoring support to inexperienced NCPs in the region	Throughout the assignment
Submitted final report including a set of recommendations for encouraging regional know-how sharing among NCPs and strengthening institutional capacities of key infrastructures to assist the research community absorb EU funds (maximum length 20 pages)	End of December 2021

III. COMPETENCIES

RCC is looking for consultants with strong NCPs backgrounds and demonstrated knowledge of the Western Balkans. RCC is encouraging consortia of experienced NCPs fluent in major languages spoken in the Western Balkans to apply.

The consultants are expected to dedicate the agreed time for this assignment.

Qualifications

Education:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ University degree or advanced university degree.
Experience:	<p>Qualifications required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ At least seven years of experience in providing consultancy support on the EU's key R&I programmes; ▪ Demonstrated knowledge of the Western Balkan region;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experience of working in more than one economy in the region, knowledge of major languages used in the region and previous NCP experience will be considered an asset; ▪ <u>Proven analytical skills and ability to conceptualise and write concisely and clearly;</u> ▪ Proven communication and presentation skills and ability to work in an environment requiring liaison and collaboration with multiple actors including government representatives, international organisations, civil society institutions and other stakeholders.
Language requirements:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fluency in English, as the official language of the RCC; ▪ Knowledge of other RCC languages is an advantage.
Other:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Familiar with MS Office applications.

Core competencies

- Demonstrates professional competence to meet responsibilities and post requirements and is conscientious and efficient in meeting commitments, observing deadlines and achieving results;
- Results-orientation: Plans and produces quality results to meet established goals, generates innovative and practical solutions to challenging situations;
- Communication: Excellent communication skills, including the ability to convey complex concepts and recommendations in a clear and persuasive style tailored to match different audiences;
- Teamwork: Ability to interact, establish and maintain effective working relations with a culturally diverse team; and
- Client orientation: Ability to establish and maintain productive partnerships with regional and national partners and stakeholders and pro-activeness in identifying the needs of beneficiaries and partners, as well as matching them to appropriate solutions.

Core values

- Demonstrates integrity and fairness by modelling RCC values and ethical standards;
- Displays cultural, gender, religion, race, nationality and age sensitivity and adaptability.

IV QUALITY CONTROL

Quality control by the Regional Cooperation Council

The consultants' outputs shall be reviewed by the Regional Cooperation Council. The approved output will be subject to a quality assessment by the Senior Human Capital Development Expert in the Programme Department of the Regional Cooperation Council.

V. APPLICATION RULES

The application needs to contain the following:

- Technical Offer;
- Financial Offer.

Technical Offer

For companies and consortia:

- Company profile including a brief description (up to 2 pages) of the company. In case of a bidding consortium, the team leader should submit the profile of the consortium;
- Copy of Company's Registration Certificate (in case of consulting companies);
- In case of bidding consortia of individual consultants participating in this Call, they must indicate the members and show how the work is divided between them. Specifically, all members must name the team leader and authorise this member to represent the consortium and receive payments on behalf of the other members. A corresponding written authorisation, power of attorney must be attached to the bid;

- Financial records - company's balance sheet and profit-and-loss statement for the past 2 years (only in case of a bidding of consulting companies);
- CV of the consultants, outlining relevant knowledge and experience as described in the Terms of References, along with contact details of referees;
- An outline work programme of a maximum of 2 pages;
- Application Submission Form (Annex I);
- Signed Statement of Availability (Annex II).

For individual consultants:

- Letter of Interest;
- CV of the consultant outlining relevant knowledge and experience as described in the Terms of References, along with contact details of referees;
- An outline work programme of a maximum of 2 pages;
- Application Submission Form (Annex I).

Financial Offer (Free format)

The financial offer should reflect the following:

- All figures should be expressed in EUR;
- VAT amount, if applicable, should be presented.

When preparing the financial offer, the applicant should take into account the following:

- Use a free format for the budget providing the global price for the work to be provided.

NOTE:

When preparing the financial offer, the applicant should take into account that the fee rates should be broadly consistent with the regional framework rates for these types of professional services for consultants.

Submission of applications:

Applications need to be submitted by 25th October 2021 to the following address ProcurementforRcc@rcc.int

- Please make sure that the application is submitted in two separate folders one containing Technical Offer and the other Financial Offer. The documents should be submitted in a form of copies of the originals.

VI. EVALUATION RULES:

- The consultancy will be awarded to the highest qualified bidder based on the relevance of skills and expertise to this assignment;
- The applications are evaluated following these criteria:

EVALUATION GRID	Maximum score
A. Technical Offer (A.1+A.2+A.3)	100
A.1. Work experience, references list: Relevant work experience; evidence of other contracts of the size comparable to that of the Call; experience with clients comparable to the Contracting Authority.	35
A.2. Quality and professional capacity of the consultant(s): CV(s) satisfy the criteria set forth in the Terms of Reference, education and experience demonstrate professional capacity and experience required.	35
A.3 Quality of the work programme: An outline of work programme describing the main issues, information, data sources, research and analytical tools to be employed by the author, as well as the timeline.	30
B. Financial Offer/ lowest price has maximum score	100

Score for offer X =

A: [Total quality score (out of 100) of offer X / 100] * 80

B: [Lowest price / price of offer X] * 20

In addition to the results of the technical and financial evaluation, a competency-based interview may be held with the selected bidder.

Information on selection of the most favourable bidder

The RCC Secretariat shall inform candidates and bidders of decisions reached concerning the award of the contract as soon as possible, including the grounds for any decision not to award a contract for which there has been competitive tendering or to recommence the procedure.

Standard letter of thanks for participation to unsuccessful bidders shall be sent within 15 days after the contract is signed with the awarded bidder.

The candidates and bidders wishing to receive a feedback may send a request within 15 days after receipt of the standard letter of thanks.

The request may be sent to the e-mail address ProcurementforRcc@rcc.int or to the address of the RCC Secretariat:

Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat
Attention to: Administration Department
Building of the Friendship between Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina
Trg Bosne i Hercegovine 1/V
71000 Sarajevo
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Appeals procedure

Bidders believing that they have been harmed by an error or irregularity during the award process may petition the RCC Secretariat directly. The RCC Secretariat must reply within 15 days of receipt of the complaint.

The appeal request may be sent to the e-mail address ProcurementforRcc@rcc.int or to the address of the RCC Secretariat:

Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat
Attention to: Administration Department
Building of the Friendship between Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina
Trg Bosne i Hercegovine 1/V
71000 Sarajevo
Bosnia and Herzegovina

ANNEX I: APPLICATION SUBMISSION FORM

REF: 099 -021 Open Call for Consultancy Services

Subject: Capacity Building of Research & Innovation National Contact Points in the Western Balkans

One signed copy of this Application Submission Form must be supplied.

1 SUBMITTED by:

	Name(s) and address(es) of the bidder submitting this tender
Full Name of the Entity	

2 CONTACT INFORMATION (for this Call)

Name	
Surname	
Address	
Telephone	
Fax	
e-mail	

3 **DECLARATION**

[Name of the Entity/ Individual Consultant] _____ hereby declares that we have examined and accepted without reserve or restriction the entire contents of the Open Call for Consultancy 099-021.

And we are not in one of the following situations:

- (a) Bankrupt or being wound up, are having their affairs administered by the courts, have entered into an arrangement with creditors, have suspended business activities, are subject of proceedings concerning those matters, or are in any analogous situation arising from a similar procedure provided for in national legislation or regulations;

- (b) Have been convicted of an offence concerning their professional conduct by a judgment which has the force of res judicata;
- (c) Have been guilty of grave professional misconduct proven by any means which the Contracting Authority can justify;
- (d) Have not fulfilled obligations relating to the payment of social security contributions or the payment of taxes in accordance with the legal provisions of the country in which they are established or with those of the country of the Contracting Authority or those of the country where the contract is to be performed;
- (e) Have been the subject of a judgment which has the force of res judicata for fraud, corruption, involvement in a criminal organisation or any other illegal activity.
- (f) Are civil servants or other agents of the public administration of the RCC Participants, regardless of the administrative situation, excluding us from being recruited as experts in contracts financed by the RCC Secretariat.

We offer to provide the services requested in the open call for consultancy on the basis of supplied documentation subject of this call, which comprise our technical offer and our financial offer.

Name and Surname	
Signature	
Date	

ANNEX III: STATEMENT OF AVAILABILITY

REF: 099-021-021

By representing the Entity _____ we agree to participate in the above-mentioned tender procedure. We further declare that we are able and willing to work for the period(s) foreseen for the position for which our CVs have been included in the event that this tender is successful, namely:

Full Name	Available from (Date)	Available until (Date)	Acceptance by signature	Number of man-days associated to each task from the ToR