National Research Council

Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding

THE NATIONAL PLAN FOR RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION 2022-2027, PNIV

5.1 – IDEI Programme

Exploratory Research Projects
2026 Call for proposals

Guidelines for Expert Evaluators

https://cncs-nrc.ro
https://uefiscdi.gov.ro

Dear Expert Evaluator,

On behalf of the National Research Council (CNCS) and the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), we would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to contribute as an expert evaluator to the 2026 Exploratory Research Projects (PCE) call. The goal of this call is to support and promote fundamental and/or exploratory scientific research in Romania. The call is addressed to researchers with strong scientific achievements, both Romanian and foreign citizens, who wish to lead high-level scientific research projects in Romania.

Your expertise, independent judgment and commitment to scientific excellence are essential to ensuring a rigorous, fair and transparent evaluation process. We greatly value the time and care you devote to evaluating research proposals and helping identify ambitious, original and high-quality research.

We kindly ask you to read the following guidelines carefully before starting your evaluation. They explain the evaluation criteria, the successive stages of the evaluation process and the responsibilities expected of each evaluator. Particular attention should be given to confidentiality and conflicts of interest, evidence-based comments, consistency between scores and comments, and the principles of responsible research assessment.

We encourage you to assess each proposal on its own scientific merits, with openness to innovative ideas and justified scientific risk, while maintaining impartiality and respect for the Project Directors. Your thoughtful and constructive engagement throughout the individual evaluation, consensus and panel stages, where applicable, is invaluable.

Thank you once again for your collaboration and for supporting the quality and credibility of research evaluation in Romania.

With sincere appreciation,

National Research Council (CNCS)

Summary of the call PCE2026

The call	Evaluation essentials
Up to 36 months; maximum grant 1.200.000 lei (~230.000 euro)	At least 3 independent expert evaluators from abroad
Total call budget: 80.000.000 lei (~15.400.000 euro), estimated ~66 grants	Scientific merit assessed through peer review
Evaluation criteria	Project Director (Principal Investigator – PI further on) 40%; Research Project 60%

Read this first:

- Assess the proposal as submitted, on its own merits; do not rewrite it or recommend improvements.
- Use only the official criteria; ground strengths and weaknesses in the proposal and align them with scores.
- Apply qualitative, context - sensitive assessment in line with CoARA; avoid journal - and institution - prestige proxies.
- Disclose conflicts of interest immediately and maintain confidentiality throughout the process.
- Do not use AI tools to prepare the evaluation. The use of generative AI tools for proposal evaluation may constitute a breach of your contractual confidentiality obligations and violation of the IP rights of the applicant.

1. Roles, responsibilities and safeguards

1.1. Who does what

Actor	Responsibility
CNCS	Scientific coordination; verification of Project Directors' (PI) minimum scientific eligibility standards through own expertise.
UEFISCDI	Administration of the call, administrative eligibility verification, evaluator contracting and allocation, evaluation logistics, and subsequent project monitoring.
https://uefiscdi-direct.ro/	Online submission and evaluation platform
Expert evaluators	Independent scientific assessment against the published criteria, including qualitative assessment of the Project Director (PI); active participation in consensus and, where applicable, panel discussions.
Rapporteur	Evaluator designated by the score closest to the median; drafts the intermediary and consensus reports and facilitates discussion.
Scientific Monitor (SM)	CNCS-nominated procedural quality monitor; flags inconsistency in reporting and rule application, without influencing scientific judgments.

1.2. Eligibility versus scientific evaluation

Administrative eligibility check was carried out by UEFISCDI. Compliance with **minimum scientific eligibility standards** for the Project Director (PI) was verified by CNCS. Eligibility is binary: ELIGIBLE / INELIGIBLE. A discovered failure to satisfy any eligibility condition leads to exclusion. These verifications are carried out prior to scientific evaluation of the Project Proposals.

Scientific evaluation is a separate merit-based, multi-stage process carried out by independent external experts. Project Proposals subject to scientific evaluation have all passed the administrative eligibility check and verification of compliance with minimum scientific eligibility standards.

1.3. Confidentiality and contract

Evaluators must sign and upload the contractual agreement and its appendices on https://uefiscdi-direct.ro/ before individual evaluations. They must not disclose proposals, reports, deliberations or fellow evaluators' identities to third parties. GDPR and applicable national data-protection rules apply.

Contractual remuneration: €60 per individual evaluation (€54 net); €60 additional per proposal as Rapporteur (€54 net); €295 per panel day (€266 net). Late upload of contractual documents may delay payment.

2. Conflict of interest: check before accepting

Declare any circumstance that could compromise impartiality—or reasonably create an appearance of bias-before gaining full access to a proposal, and immediately if it emerges later.

STEP 1 Review identity and proposal summary
On the evaluation platform, check the Project Director (PI) and host institution.

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STEP 2 Screen for disqualifying information or potential conflicts
Consider collaborations, employment, co-authorship, relationships and personal interests.

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STEP 3 Declare and notify UEFISCDI
Do not proceed to full scientific review where impartiality is in question.

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STEP 4 Await eligibility to proceed
UEFISCDI verifies the reported issues and reassign the project to another expert if a conflict is indeed established.

2.1. Examples of disqualifying conflicts

- Participation in drafting the Project Proposal, or participation as Project Director (PI) or team member in PCE 2026.
- Direct or indirect benefit from funding; close family/personal relationship; ongoing scientific or interpersonal conflict.
- Employment/other contractual relationship with the proposal's host institution during the previous five years, affiliation or pending transfer to the relevant host institution.
- Co-authored publication with the Project Director (PI) or named team member in the previous five years; doctoral supervision of the Project Director (PI) or a named team member.

2.2. Potential conflicts and consequences

Potential conflicts include research collaboration contracts with the Project Director (PI) or host institution (including in the preceding five years), and other facts that could reasonably call impartiality into question. Where categories overlap, disclose the circumstances to UEFISCDI rather than classifying the case independently.

Concealment of a known conflict may result in nullification of the evaluation, reduction/recovery of remuneration or termination of the evaluator's contractual agreement.

3. Core principles for every evaluation stage

Do	Avoid
Assess the proposal as it stands and on the published criteria.	Suggestions on how the Project Director should improve the Project proposal.
Write concrete strengths (+) and weaknesses (−) supported by facts from the Project Proposal.	Generic summaries, unsubstantiated opinions or unsupported speculation.
Judge research quality and the PI's scientific contributions qualitatively.	Using journal impact factor, h-index or institutional prestige as substitutes for quality.
Take career breaks and life events explicitly stated in the CV into account.	Penalizing productivity because of documented career interruptions.
Recognize research ambition and justified scientific risk.	Applying irrelevant requirements (e.g. TRL for exploratory fundamental research).
Address each weakness once, under the most appropriate criterion.	Double penalization across criteria or contradictory comments.

3.1. Evidence-based comments

For each criterion/subcriterion, provide distinct lists of Strengths (+) and Weaknesses (−), with 200–6.000 characters per criterion/subcriterion as specified in the Information Package. Statements must make clear why an aspect is a strength or a weakness. Scores must follow the evidence recorded in the comments.

3.2. CoARA-aligned assessment

For the Project Director (PI), evaluate the trajectory, independent creative thinking, most significant scientific contributions, leadership, mentoring and fit with the proposal. The narrative CV and the ten selected scientific outputs may include publications, patents, technologies and other achievements. Quantitative indicators may support expert judgment only if meaningful and relevant in context; they must not replace it.

3.3. Fairness and tone

Treat all project proposals equally. Avoid discriminatory references to gender, age, ethnic background, nationality and personal identity. Do not use the reputation of the host institution or journals as a proxy for excellence. Ensure that every comment is constructive in tone but evaluative, not advisory.

4. Evaluation workflow - at a glance

1 INDIVIDUAL EVALUATION
At least three independent evaluators; scores 0-5 in 0.5 increments.

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2 INTERMEDIARY EVALUATION REPORT (IER)
Median-score evaluator acts as Rapporteur; forum discussion and voting.

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3 REBUTTAL
Optional; within 3 working days; maximum 6.000 characters including spaces.

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4 CONSENSUS REPORT (CR)
Review rebuttal, deliberate, vote; Scientific Monitor conducts procedural check.

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5 PANEL SESSIONS
Projects with scores ≥80 and projects without consensus; final score by majority vote.

Lack of agreement on the Intermediary Evaluation Report (IER)

If the initial IER does not obtain unanimous agreement, a fourth expert evaluator is assigned and the Rapporteur prepares a revised IER taking all individual assessments into account. This revised IER is decided by majority vote. If agreement is still not reached, the evaluation process is resumed, as stipulated in the call guidelines.

Panel sessions

A panel considers proposals without consensus following the later consensus-stage discussions and all proposals with scores of at least 80 after consensus. The full procedural sequence matters: the IER and CR disagreement pathways are not interchangeable.

5. Stages I - II: Individual evaluation and intermediary report

5.1 Individual evaluation

- Read the call documents, Project Proposal, narrative CV and track record; check conflicts and confirm competence to evaluate.
- Assess Criterion 1 and Criterion 2 with its three subcriteria; provide criterion-specific strengths and weaknesses and justified scores.
- Use 0–5 scores in 0.5-point increments. Align the degree of criticism with the proposed score and avoid double penalties.
- Once individual evaluations are submitted, read other evaluations and use the discussion interface to resolve contradictions or differences in interpretation.

The funding application includes the Project Director’s (PI) CV and track record.

5.2. Intermediary Evaluation Report (IER)

The evaluator whose total score is closest to the median becomes Rapporteur. If unable to serve, the next evaluator closest to the median is selected. The Rapporteur drafts the IER using the individual evaluations and online forum discussion, documenting agreed strengths, weaknesses and scores.

Situation	Next step
All evaluators agree with IER	IER is validated by unanimous "agree" vote.
At least one evaluator disagrees	Add a fourth independent expert; Rapporteur redraws the IER using all evaluations.
Revised IER after fourth evaluation	Majority vote determines validation.
No consensus after revised IER	Evaluation process is resumed according to the call for proposals.

The Information Package specifies five calendar days for the initial IER vote. Evaluators should monitor platform notifications and respect all deadlines.

6. Stages III - V: Rebuttal, consensus and panel

6.1. Rebuttal - the Project Directors response

The IER, including scores, is communicated to the Project Director (PI). The PI may respond within three working days, with a maximum of 6,000 characters including spaces. The response must address expert evaluator's criticism; additional data or supplementary materials cannot be introduced. Submission of rebuttal is not mandatory; its absence does not affect the continuation of the evaluation process.

6. 2. Consensus Report (CR)

The evaluators and the Rapporteur read and discuss any rebuttal on the platform. Valid scientific counterarguments may justify revising the initial assessment. The Rapporteur finalizes the CR, which is submitted to an agreement/disagreement vote. If unanimity fails, an online meeting is convened; unresolved cases move to the panel.

6.3. Scientific Monitor (SM): procedural quality check

The CNCS-appointed SM checks the consistency of strengths/weaknesses with scores, use of only published criteria and conformity with the Information Package and Guidelines for Expert Evaluators. SM observations are discussed for projects reaching panel. SMs do not score scientific merits and cannot intervene by changing expert decisions.

6.4. Panel meeting and final evaluation

Panels are organized for each of the 13 domains. Rapporteurs and relevant evaluators consider unresolved cases and proposals scoring ≥80. A second panel member is designated to review the dossier alongside the Rapporteur. The panel considers the project proposal, individual evaluations, IER, rebuttal (if any), CR and SM comments; it determines the final score by majority vote.

A Final Evaluation Report (FER) is prepared for each panel-discussed proposal. If the panel accepts the CR, that report becomes the FER. The panel Chair is a CNCS or external scientific expert of one of the CNCS committees from outside the panel's domain. The Chair's role is restricted to moderating the discussions without participating in the scoring decision.

7. Evaluation Criteria

Criterion 1 - Project Director (PI) | 40% of total score

Assess	Look for evidence of
Exploratory research and originality	Capacity to conduct exploratory research; independent, creative thinking; original scientific directions or methods.
Recognition and significance	International recognition; acceptance or influence of research directions, theories, approaches or outputs.
Leadership and mentoring	Experience leading national/international projects and training or mentoring young researchers.
Relevance to proposed work	The relationship between previous achievements, relevant expertise, prior projects and the new scientific questions.
Trajectory and context	Narrative CV; ten selected outputs (not limited to papers); career breaks or circumstances disclosed in the CV.

How to assess:

- Provide a holistic qualitative judgment, not a count of publications or citations.
- Recognize the importance of a few breakthrough contributions compared with numerous incremental outputs.
- Consider the Project Director scientific independence, leadership and ability to undertake the proposed exploratory work.
- Do not equate journal prestige, institutional reputation or raw bibliometric indicators with scientific quality.

Criterion 2 - Research Project | 60% of total score. Score each subcriterion separately; avoid double penalization across the assessment.

2.1 Ambition and feasibility | 50% of Criterion 2

Assess	Look for evidence of
Importance of the scientific challenge and its relation to the state of the art	Project's scientific motivation, clearly articulated and justified in relation to the current state of the art.
Originality, novelty, ambition, potential to advance knowledge and move beyond the state of the art	Novelty, originality, and ambition of the proposed research, ensuring it adds distinct value in comparison with the current state of the art.
Scientific soundness and appropriateness of the proposed methodology, including novelty of methods where relevant	Scientific soundness and appropriateness of the proposed methodology in achieving the scientific goals.
Distinctiveness from the Project Director's previous work on similar topics, if applicable.	Relationship between previous work and the novel elements of the current project proposal.

2.2 Impact | 30% of Criterion 2

Assess	Look for evidence of
Potential for significant scientific results and impact beyond the immediate research topic	Project's potential to generate a significant scientific impact within the broader scientific field.
Expected contribution to the research team and host institution	Positive impact on both the host institution and on the project team.
Potential scientific, societal and economic opportunities, where relevant to the proposal and research area	Broader societal, technological, economic, or cultural impacts outside of academia (where applicable).

2.3 Implementation | 20% of Criterion 2

Assess	Look for evidence of
Coherent, measurable/verifiable and achievable objectives; credible implementation of high-risk exploratory research.	Research objectives that are clear, coherent, achievable, measurable, and verifiable. A credible implementation plan that supports high-risk exploratory research.
Adequate timescale, work packages, schedule, deliverables, milestones, Gantt chart (mandatory) and justified resources.	Appropriateness, necessity and adequacy the requested resources; An adequate timescale, well-defined work packages, a realistic schedule, clear deliverables and milestones, a mandatory Gantt chart.
Appropriate dissemination, Open Science, FAIR-aligned research data management and ethical treatment, where applicable.	Adequacy of the proposed measures for disseminating scientific outputs, the implementation of Open Science practices, and compliance with the FAIR data management principles.
Attention to equality, inclusion and diversity (where applicable).	Institutional mechanisms ensuring gender equality, inclusion, and diversity.
Adequately justified budget.	Reasonableness and justification of the requested budget in relation to the proposed research activities.

Avoid criterion overlap!

Use 2.1 to assess the scientific rationale and methodological soundness; use 2.3 to assess the operational delivery plan, implementation resources and management of the scientific work. This is an interpretive clarification for consistency; the official criterion wording above remains controlling.

Scoring and report quality

Score	Descriptor		Interpretation in the Information Package
0	**Absent**	The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.	Criterion not addressed or cannot be judged.
1	**Unsatisfactory**	The criterion is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.	Inadequate response or serious inherent weaknesses.
2	**Satisfactory**	While the proposal broadly addresses the criterion, there are significant weaknesses.	Broadly addressed, but significant weaknesses.
3	**Good**	The proposal addresses the criterion well, although improvements would be necessary. A number of weaknesses/shortcomings are present.	Addresses criterion well; weaknesses/shortcomings remain.
4	**Very good**	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although certain improvements are still possible. A small number of weaknesses / shortcomings are present.	Addresses criterion very well; a small number of weaknesses/shortcomings.
5	**Excellent**	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.	Addresses all relevant aspects; shortcomings, if any, are minor.

Only half-point increments (0.5, 1.5, …, 4.5) are permitted.

Scores should reflect the documented balance of strengths and weaknesses.

The application guidelines state that a score below 5 (including 4.5) requires identified weaknesses;

Where no weakness is identified, the score should be 5.

Minor shortcomings are described as not affecting the score.

Definitions for score descriptions

- A **'minor shortcoming'** is an issue that relates only to a marginal aspect of the proposal with respect to the criterion and/or can easily be rectified (it will not impact the score).
- A '**shortcoming**' is a problem that relates to an important aspect of the proposal. It impacts the score but does not render the proposal inappropriate for funding, i.e. the proposal is still expected to lead to useful results with positive impact.
- A '**significant weakness'** means that the proposal addresses the criterion in a limited and/or not sufficiently effective way (will lower the score below threshold). This can also be the case when the proposal includes a large number of shortcomings, each one of them not rendering the proposal inappropriate for funding, though all together make the proposal not addressing the criterion sufficiently in an effective way.

Weighted score (0 - 100)

The final score will be automatically calculated as a weighted sum of the scores for each subcriterion multiplied by 20 (final score between 0 and 100), when introduced into the online platform.

Final grade = 20*[s1*40/100 + (s2.1*50/100 + s2.2*30/100 + s2.3*20/100)*60/100], where si.j is the score for criterion/subcriterion i.j

Final report check: five tests

Check	Question
Concrete	Does every comment point to evidence in the Project Proposal?
Complete	Are all relevant aspects of each official criterion considered?
Consistent	Do the strengths and weaknesses justify the score, without contradictions?
Courteous	Is the language respectful, impartial and non-discriminatory?
Explanatory	Does each comment explain why the issue matters scientifically?

Do not penalize the same weakness under multiple criteria.

Final evaluator checklist and transparency

Before submitting an individual evaluation

- ☐ Conflict of interest status confirmed and any concerns disclosed.
- ☐ Scientific judgment based only on the published PCE 2026 criteria.
- ☐ Distinct strengths (+) and weaknesses (−) for each criterion/subcriterion.
- ☐ Each comment is evidence-based; no irrelevant demands or advice to improve the proposal.
- ☐ Scores use the official 0–5 scale and are consistent with the comments.
- ☐ CoARA-aligned qualitative review of the PI and appropriate consideration of career breaks.
- ☐ No double penalization; respectful and non-discriminatory wording.

During IER / CR / panel discussions

- ☐ Participate actively in the platform forum and required voting stages.
- ☐ Review the Project Director Rebuttal without treating new material as admissible evidence.
- ☐ Correct inconsistencies; do not yield scientific judgment to procedural provisions.
- ☐ Observe platform deadlines, confidentiality and reporting requirements.

8. Transparency

After the call, UEFISCDI publishes the list of participating expert evaluators without disclosing their assignment to individual proposals.

Selected references

CoARA (2022), Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment — https://www.coara.org/agreement/the-agreement-full-text/;

ALLEA (2023), The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, revised edition — https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/;

European Commission (2025), Horizon Europe Proposal Evaluation — Standard Briefing (v13.0, 01.12.2025);

European Research Council (2025), Guide for Peer Reviewers — Starting and Consolidator Grant Calls (v6.0, 30.09.2025);

H2020-MSCA EJD Manual for Experts (2019); European Commission peer-review guidance;

PCE 2026 Information Package https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-832224-Information-Package-PCE-2026.pdf;

Useful web sites: www.cncs-nrc.ro; www.uefiscdi.gov.ro; https://uefiscdi-direct.ro/.