



Announcement of the EU RURAL TOURISM 2nd open call for rural tourism SMEs

Action acronym:	EU Rural Tourism
Action grant agreement number:	101074557
Call identifier:	SMP-COSME-2021-CLUSTER
Action full name:	Eurocluster Rural Tourism
Open call Publication Date:	16/11/2023
Open call Deadline Date:	16/01/2024
Total EU funding available:	305.000 Euro
Expected duration of participation:	5 months
Service pack valued at	EURO 5000 per SME.

Information and contacts:

Web address for further information (full call text/proposal guidelines):

<https://www.euroclusterruraltourism.eu/en/calls/>

Email address for further information: info@euroclusterruraltourism.eu

This Call for proposals is available in English.



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I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

a. The EuroCluster Rural Tourism Project

The EuroCluster Rural Tourism Project (ECRT), funded under the [EU COSME Programme](#), will support at least 190 rural tourism SMEs by improving selected digital, green and soft/social competences. This project addresses specifically the needs of these micro and nano SMEs that are still lagging behind in the green and digital transition. Rural Tourism and similar services such as Eco-Tourism, Farm-Tourism etc. respond to new trends of the European and worldwide tourism demand, increased by the COVID-19 pandemic that generated additional demand for services of this type. This project provides a unique opportunity to upscale activities and at the same time, create a critical mass of European rural tourism services in 15+ countries that are supported under this form of collaboration with a vision of internationalization. This project aims to alleviate "digital and green fear" by offering straightforward, easy-to-understand knowledge enhancement tailored to the current situation of SMEs. It presents practical solutions for digital and green internal management, marketing, and product development that align with the realistic human and financial capacity of micro-SMEs. The project establishes a unified and coherent access point for fundamental training, tools, and supplementary resources for micro-SMEs. Additionally, it defines a methodology and tools for SME business support structures that can be replicated, adapted to specific local needs, and translated into various languages to address the challenge of staying up-to-date with emerging trends, including digital and green innovations. Support will be provided through pre-approved external Assistance Service Providers (ASP) selected through an open call. The SME may select another ASP for the delivery of support, but the consortium needs to approve and to train them in order to ensure the quality of the services offered.

b. Objectives of the Call

A first call for SMEs' proposals was published in July 2023 and closed on 10 September 2023, with a result of 134 SMEs selected for funding. Through this second call for proposals, the EU RURAL TOURISM project will support up to 61 more rural tourism SMEs, by improving their digital, green and social maturity, skills, and capacities. The participants will be working closely with experts to bridge their digital, eco-sustainability and soft/social skills gaps. The following table shows the total budget of this Call and its distribution between the Consortium



Partners:

Partner	Total indicative available budget	Minimum number of SMEs per partner
Venetian Cluster	35,000.00 euro	7
Czech National Cluster Association	-	0
Asociatia de Dezvoltare Intercomunitara Harghita	30,000.00 euro	6
Asociación Cluster De Turismo Sostenible de Aragón	40,000.00 euro	8
Federation Europeenne de Tourisme Rural (Ruraltour)	120,000.00 euro	24
EURACADEMY Association	80,000.00 euro	16
TOTAL	305,000.00 euro	61

The ECRT publishes its open call, respecting the principles of transparency, equal treatment, absence of conflicts of interest and confidentiality. In particular, the call is carried out by respecting the following principles:

Excellence. The proposals selected for funding will demonstrate a high quality based on the criteria set out in the call;

Transparency. The funding decision will be based on the clearly described rules and procedures stated in this call, and all applicants will receive feedback on the outcome of the evaluation of their proposals;

Fairness and impartiality. All proposals submitted will be treated equally. They are evaluated impartially by evaluation committees on their merits, irrespective of the origin or identity of the applicants;

Confidentiality. All proposals and related data, knowledge and documents are treated in confidence;

Efficiency and speed. The evaluation of proposals and the award of the financial support will follow the agreed



timetable and will respect the legal framework.

c. Benefits for the beneficiaries

The direct support package to SMEs consists of:

Phase 1

- Initial and final capacity building event for all supported SMEs in a region
- Self-assessment of the current situation in order to address needs for improvement
- On-site audit, revision of the product idea and improvement plan

Phase 2

- Mentoring, technical advice and support during the implementation process.
- Budget for additional external services that may be needed for implementation
- Final evaluation and follow-up visit by advisor
- Final meeting and discussion of results of the supported actions amongst all assisted SMEs

The following list of 12 specific actions and support areas with the highest needs of improvement from the fields of digital, green and soft/social competences were defined by the consortium. Each SME will be guided during project implementation to choose and improve at least 4 out of the 12 action areas, that preferably address at least 1 from each field (digital, green and sustainable, and soft/social).

DIGITAL
Digitalization of the processes in SMEs
Digital marketing and promotion
Marketing intelligence, data analysis, marketing strategy based on data
GREEN and SUSTAINABLE
Sustainable management practices for SMEs



CO2 management and reduction to address climate change
Sustainable mobility
Gastronomy and food based on local supply chains
SOFT / SOCIAL
Social-cultural skills (host visitors from different cultural background)
Experience generation for visitors (includes development of corresponding products)
Inclusive Tourism / Visitors with special needs
Integration with the local community
Interpretation techniques for cultural, historic, natural etc. resources

The participants selected to receive Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP) are entitled to receive a service pack, valued at EURO 5000, that enables them to design and develop a new Tourism product for international markets by integrating digital, sustainable and socio-cultural improvements into their business.

SERVICE	DETAILED CONTENT OF THE SERVICE
PHASE 1	
Participation at initial national / regional meeting	A national/regional meeting will be organised, in presence or online, in which all beneficiary SMEs are requested to participate.
Self-assessment and preparation of new product outline	Mentorship and support for self-assessment and vision outline of at least one new product.



Audit visit, report, improvement plan	Assistance to the SME to respond to the self-evaluation results, define needs for improvement, and elaborate an individual Improvement plan (implementation and reporting). Digital, green and sustainable, soft/social skill needs will be addressed and integrated in the improvement plan. The audit visit will be face to face and the travel and accommodation costs of the expert will be covered by the SME allowance through the Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP).
PHASE 2	
Mentoring and advisory during assistance	Mentoring and advice during the full period from start of self-evaluation to final evaluation report, as specified in the individual improvement plan.
Budget for specific additional external services	Specific services that are required as a result of the improvement plan. Examples are website design, translations, certifications, SM campaigns, etc.
Second audit visit, final report	Second visit by mentor, final report. The audit visit will be face to face and the travel and accommodation costs of the expert will be covered by the SME allowance through the Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP).
Final meeting and discussion of results of the supported action amongst all assisted SMEs	A final meeting will be organised, in presence or online, in which all beneficiary SMEs are requested to participate.
Other services	Country/region specific contingencies or additional actions, contests, participation at fairs etc.

II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

a. Eligibility of applicants

This project addresses specifically the needs of micro and nano SMEs and how to cover them under the Cluster concept. Such SMEs respond to the following profile:

- Micro businesses run by individuals or by a family, with a history of operation covering at least 1 year at



the moment of submission deadline (i.e. already open and operative at the 16th of January 2023) and with maximum 10 employees.

- Located in the countryside, or in villages or towns in rural areas.
- Accommodation providers (agritourism, farm tourism, small hotel, guest house, holiday cottage, etc). Priority will be given to providers offering extra services such as food service (breakfast, half/full board), nature or farm activities, classes (culinary, crafts), guided tours, etc.

This Call is open to SMEs that comply with the following NACE classifications:

- Accommodation (I55)
- Travel agency, tour operator reservation service and related activities (N79)
- Other NACE codes or in general other activities (where NACE code does not exist) referred to the rural tourism sector

The official registration certificate provided by responsible tourism or enterprise authorities for one of the above is sufficient even if it does not contain the NACE classification code.

b. Geographical Eligibility

Participation is limited to SMEs established in the following EU member states or specific regions within a Country, as well as in the following third countries participating in the COSME programme or their regions, under the condition that at least one external Assistance Service Provider (ASP) per category of service (digital, green and sustainable management, soft/social skills) has responded to the ASP Call and has been approved by the Consortium. The maximum number of SMEs that can be selected per country to receive FSTP is expressed in brackets after each Country:

- Belgium - limited to Wallonia region (max 4 SMEs)
- Bosnia-Herzegovina (max 7 SMEs)
- Estonia (max 9 SMEs)
- Georgia (max 10 SMEs)
- Greece (max 14 SMEs)



- Ireland (max 5 SMEs)
- Italy (max 7 SMEs)
- The Netherlands (max 10 SMEs)
- North Macedonia (max 3 SMEs)
- Romania - limited to the Harghita region (max 6 SMEs)
- Slovenia (max 7 SMEs)
- Spain - limited to Aragón, Cataluña, La Rioja, Navarra regions (max 9 SMEs)

Expected total number of SMEs to be financed: 61

Received proposals from these eligible countries will be evaluated based on the criteria explained at Section IV. Evaluation Procedure.

c. Liability

The ECRT Project Consortium cannot be held liable for any damage caused to the Third-Party Beneficiaries as a consequence of implementing the action, including for gross negligence. Beneficiaries shall comply with the obligations set out in this Call for Proposals and in the Grant Agreement to be signed with the funding ECRT partner. Applicants must provide complete and accurate information and data as requested in the application form.

d. Reduction and Revocation

At any moment of implementation of the action and afterwards, the Consortium has the right to carry out checks, reviews and audits, to ascertain:

- the proper use of the lump sums as FSTP and the production of required deliverables and results;
- compliance with the obligations laid down in the Call;
- the truthfulness of the declarations and information produced by the applicants.



The contribution is reduced, rejected or revoked by the Consortium in the following cases:

- the implemented activities do not comply with the agreed activities stated in the signed bilateral Grant Agreement
- reporting does not comply with the requirements set.

e. Conflicts of interest

The Consortium must take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the action is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest (“conflicts of interest”). Participation in the selection phase is strictly forbidden to any SME applicants which, at the time of the present Call publication, have any links with any consortium partner e.g. being part of its organisational structure, and/or as a shareholder participating in the SME.

f. Exclusion Criteria

Applicants will be excluded from the evaluation process if they present the following:

- Already selected for receiving FSTP in the first Call for SMEs of the EU RURAL TOURISM project
- Receive funds and support for the same activities from other public funds (European, National, Regional, Local funds), as double funding for the same action is not allowed;
- Present the characteristics of a “company in difficulty,” as defined by EU Commission Regulation No.651/2014;
- Lacking the necessary administrative, technical, operational and financial capacity to implement the project activities, as defined in Article 125 of EU Regulation No. 1303/2013.

g. Confidentiality

Access to the received applications will be given to the ECRT Team and its Evaluation Committees. Only the title and applicant name of each selected project will be published on the ECRT platform. During the implementation of the action and for five years after the payment of the balance, all parties must keep confidential any data, documents or other material (in any form) that is identified as confidential at the time it is disclosed



(‘confidential information’).

The confidentiality obligations no longer apply if:

- (a) the disclosing party agrees to release the other party;
- (b) the information becomes generally and publicly available, without breaching any confidentiality obligation;
- (c) the disclosure of the confidential information is required by EU or national law.

All requested data will be used only in the framework of this Call, in line with art. 13 of the EU Regulation n. 2016/679.

III. PAYMENT OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The ECRT financial support is paid in lump sums. Payments will be made against deliverables, no financial report is required from the beneficiary since the principle is payment against expected results directly to the selected SMEs. The ECRT financial support will not be paid in the unfortunate event of SME not attaining its objectives at a promised standard, set up case by case in the initial Agreement.

The financial support will be based on the following principles:

Equal treatment: The general principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination requires that comparable situations are not treated differently unless differentiation is objectively justified.

Transparency: the financial support shall be awarded following successful evaluation of applications submitted under this Call for proposals by the established Evaluation Committee.

Non-cumulative award and no double financing: Each action may give rise to the award of only one financial support pack per SME.

Non-retroactivity: Financial support shall not be awarded retroactively or for activities outside the set duration of the project. Expenses must be incurred during the projects’ implementation period.



IV.EVALUATION PROCEDURE

a. Evaluation process

Proposals will be evaluated following the process described here below, the evaluation process will check the administrative eligibility and then attribute scores to each received proposal, SMEs will be awarded based on their ranking order up to the availability of fund, meaning that funding will be awarded on the basis of a shortlist starting from the highest score down, per Country, within the limits of the available call budget.

The result of evaluation can be:

- **Eligible and selected for funding** (up to 61 SMEs totally): all requested administrative documents are submitted, the description of the project received a score over the minimum threshold and the proposal is highly ranked within the number of SMEs per country that can receive funding among the available budget
- **Eligible but not selected for funding:** all requested administrative documents are submitted, the description of the project received a score over the minimum threshold, but the proposal is ranked in a lower position, whit not available budget in that country: depending on the score and consequent ranking, the proposals with higher score will be inserted in a reserve list, in case SMEs selected for funding fail to sign the Agreement or withdraw from the project.
- **Not eligible:** some administrative documents are missing even after request for integration, the description of the project in the application form received a score lower than the minimum threshold; those proposals are excluded from the list of eligible projects and cannot be selected for funding.

Additional proposals scoring above the minimum threshold for eligibility, but ranked lower than the 61 eligible for funding, will be highlighted as “not selected for funding because of lack of funds”. In fact, a ranking list divided per Country will be published, based on evaluation scores obtained, in order to duly inform the applicants.

Country	SME	Result
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...	...	Selected for funding/not selected for funding because of lack of funds
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If a partner encounters a situation where they lack sufficient eligible applications, or applicants withdraw by month 2 after the signature of the GA, the ranking list will become a shared resource and it will be used when a partner exhausts their eligible applications.

The evaluation process of the applications to the present Call for Participation will take approximately 3 weeks after the Call is closed. The steps are described below:

1. The Project Partners will start the administrative revision of all relevant applications and request additional documentation, if needed.
2. The “Eligibility criteria” (listed in ANNEX III) will be applied to discard non-eligible proposals. Proposals being marked as non-eligible will get a rejection letter for being classified as non-eligible.
3. Each Partner will set up a two-member Evaluation Committee for the country or countries the partner is responsible for. All eligible applications will be distributed to the Evaluation Committee members for a check of conflicts of interest.
4. If a conflict of interest for an evaluator is detected, another evaluator shall be nominated.
5. Each Evaluator will record his/her individual opinion on a standard evaluation form (Annex III). The evaluators will assess the proposal in two parts:
 - a. Part A will concentrate on the proposal's quality, with a maximum achievable score of 115. To meet the minimum standard, an overall score of at least 60 is necessary.
 - b. Part B will primarily consider business-related criteria, with a maximum achievable score of 15. To meet the minimum standard, an overall score of 9 is necessary. To meet the set requirements for Part B, a minimum threshold of 2 out of 5 is required for each single criterion, nevertheless the overall score for part B must reach at least 9 to be considered as positive.



6. The Evaluation Committee of each partner will reach a consensus on all eligible applications they have received. During this phase, if there are ties among applications (same scoring and position), and a selection is needed to prioritize one company over another, as well as in case of applications where scores diverge significantly between the 2 individual evaluators, the Consortium Evaluation Committee will be authorized to assess these applications; the evaluation of such applications might be asked to a different pair of evaluators (of another Partner), randomly selected by the Consortium Evaluation Committee Chairman, always respecting the principle of absence of conflicts of interest. The outcome of this evaluation will then be considered as final and the resulting score will be used to rank the applications accordingly.
7. Each Partner will collect their assigned Evaluation Forms and submit them to a second level Consortium Evaluation Committee. All Partners will be represented by one member in this committee. The six-members committee will review all the evaluation forms, approve the selection of SMEs and generate a ranked list from the highest scored application to the lowest, for each geographical area.
8. The Consortium Evaluation Committee will notify each partner about the number of SME selected, which should add up to 61 SMEs. Furthermore, up to 18 additional applicants (distributed among partners) could be placed on a reserve list.
9. The ECRT will publish the results of the Call for SMEs, including number of proposal (automatically attributed during the submission phase) and country of origin of all received proposals, and a final list of selected SMEs, including the SMEs pointed out as “not selected for funding because of lack of funds”, final recipients' legal name, country of origin, date of award, and duration of the support. The results will be published on the official website of the European Cluster for Rural Tourism (ECRT) at https://www.euroclusterruraltourism.eu/en/services/#Financial_support, on the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (<https://clustercollaboration.eu/>) and promoted as well on ECRT's social media channels. Additionally, each consortium partner will share the list of awarded SMEs on their respective websites and social media channels.
10. In case of manifest procedural errors or shortcomings envisaged by applicants and affecting the final decision on whether to fund the proposal, concerned applicants may inquire about the reasons for the rejection



of their application by sending an email to info@euroclusterruraltourism.eu within 5 days after the publication of the results, including the following information:

- contact details and number of the application;
- the subject of the complaint;
- information and evidence regarding the alleged breach.

The partner responsible for the evaluation of the application will answer within 5 working days and, under request, will supply an unsigned version of the evaluation forms from the two evaluators, ensuring that their names are not disclosed. In case the complaint is grounded, a re-evaluation procedure will take place: the submitted application will be re-evaluated by the Consortium Evaluation Committee, analysing the former evaluation forms and the issue of the complaint; eligibility will be checked again (administrative documents, call requirements, etc.) and a new score will be given to the submitted application. This score is the final one and will be included in the ranking.

11. Once the evaluation process is completed, selected successful applicants shall be informed by email asking for confirmation of reception. A letter of acceptance will be forwarded to them in due course.
12. The letter of acceptance shall be signed by the selected applicant within 7 days after receiving the notification, otherwise the applicant's interest in participating in the Programme will be considered withdrawn, and its spot will be offered to the next ranked applicant from the reserve list.
13. If applications do not reach the minimum score defined in the Full Call Details to cover the assigned number of SMEs for each partner, the call may be reopened at a later date following the above procedure.
14. Signed individual and consensus forms plus other relevant documents shall be retained by the respective project partners / beneficiaries for at least 5 years.

b. Evaluation criteria of applications

Each partner will delegate the task of evaluation to two competent evaluators, fluent in the language of the applicant (in order to check administrative documents) in the countries covered by the Call for SMEs (with English as evaluation transversal language). An evaluation form will be completed for each eligible applicant.



Only proposals ranked equal to or over 60 points in the Proposal Evaluation Form, Section A, and have successfully reached the minimum threshold of 9 in Section B, will be pre-selected.

V. POST-SELECTION PROCEDURE AND REPORTING

a. Grant Agreement between ECRT and SME

After receipt of the letter of acceptance, a Grant Agreement (Annex IV) will be prepared by the partner responsible for each country or region and will be sent to each SME. The selected SMEs might be requested and are expected to provide evidence of financial standing (either an official copy of the profit and loss account, balance sheet, or income tax statements demonstrating good financial capability, for the previous year, or alternatively for the last year for which accounts were closed). Each beneficiary and each ECRT partner (funding entity) will sign a bilateral specific agreement; by signing this agreement, the beneficiary agrees and accepts the financial support and commits to implement the activities under its own responsibility, in accordance with the agreement's conditions and obligations.

Both parties need to sign the Grant agreement that includes: introduction and definitions, grant offer, purpose of the Grant, grant funding period, amount of the grant, timing of Grant payments, reduction and recovery of Grant, Managing the grant, confidentiality, visibility, amendment, liability, force majeure, payment arrangements, settlement of disputes, conflict of interests, ethics and values, general information obligations, record keeping.

Following the approval of the individual improvement plan, a complementary agreement will be signed by both parties committing both to the actions foreseen by the plan and the cost of each action.

b. Transfer of funds

The payment of the financial support instalment will be done directly to the SME as a reimbursement for already received services, within 30 days from the validation of the final technical reporting. This reporting shall include all documentation and proof that justifies that planned and financed activities have been fully implemented.

The FSTP will be disbursed by each partner at the conclusion of the support period, contingent upon the



successful fulfilment of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the project. To validate their completion, each SME is required to produce specific deliverables. These deliverables serve as the basis for justifying the payment, which will be provided in the form of a lump sum.

Rules of payment will be detailed within the Grant Agreement.

In order to better monitor the progress of each project, two phases are defined, with a report due after each phase.

For Phase 1, there are specific deliverables associated with the interim report. These include:

- participation at initial national / regional meeting;**
- self-assessment and preparation of new product outline;**
- audit visit, report, improvement plan.**

In Phase 2, the specific deliverables associated with the final report are:

- implementation of the improvement plan;**
- public visibility of the new product that was created through this plan;**
- second audit visit, final report;**
- final meeting and discussion of results of the support action amongst all assisted SMEs.**

A dedicated reporting template will be provided to all participating SMEs.

Once the partner conducts a successful review and approves the SME's reports, a payment of 5,000 Euro will be disbursed to the SME.

VI. PERSONAL DATA PROTECTION



Any personal data provided under this Call, in any of the documents or forms on the on-line platform, will be processed by each Consortium partner in compliance with article 13 of EU Regulation 2016/679. "Information to be provided where personal data are collected from the data subject".

In the forms, filled in by the participants, the Consortium will indicate specific information about Personal Data responsibilities and roles of each national partner.

VII. HOW TO APPLY

a. General rules and deadline for submission of applications

Participation in this call for proposals is completely free of charge for SMEs.

This call is published for 60 days on: European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP), Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), Funding and Tenders Portal (F&T), EuroCluster Rural Tourism website (ECRT), each Consortium Partner's individual website and Euroclusters' and Consortium Partners' social media channels. If any changes are made to the call deadline, they will be published immediately on the call page and all potential applicants will be informed.

The application form is available on the following website: https://clustersubmissionplatform.eu/eurocluster_post/2nd-eururaltourism-smes-open-call/ and can be submitted only through this web page.

You can find in annex a copy of the application form (Annex I).

Only one application per applicant can be submitted. Different applications or multiple submissions of the same application by the same applicant will be rejected, and the most recent application will be used.

The Application Form (Annex I) has to be filled ONLINE and will be checked for eligibility.

The following should be attached with the application:

- **registration of the business with the responsible local, regional or national authorities (tourism authorities, chambers of commerce or similar);**



- **personal data of the legal representative (copy of ID or passport), this person must be coincident with the name that appears in the registration of the business with the abovementioned authorities;**
- **CV with list of projects and experiences from core staff;**
- **duly signed declaration form (ANNEX II of the Call for SME).**

In case an applicant has applied in the First Call for SMEs and already submitted the required documents, that applicant can declare in the online application form that documents were already submitted and they will be retained for the evaluation, unless the applicant prefers to re-upload the updated documents.

Proposals must be submitted online in **ENGLISH only**. All legal documents (registration, ID) and any other relevant supporting materials can be uploaded in the national language of the proposer.

An automatic acknowledgement of receipt is provided upon reception. **In case a receipt is not received immediately after submission, the applicant should get in contact with info@euroclusterruraltourism.eu.**

After the date and time of closure of the call, any modifications to an already filed application will be discarded.

Further information about applications: Questions may be sent by e-mail no later than 7 days before the deadline for the submission of applications to the following e-mail address info@euroclusterruraltourism.eu, indicating clearly the reference of the Call and the question. The EuroCluster Rural Tourism Project Consortium partners have no obligation to provide clarifications to questions received after this date. Replies will be given no later than 5 days before the deadline for the submission of applications.

b. Where and how to send applications

The application shall be completed exclusively online at this [link](#).

(https://clustersubmissionplatform.eu/eurocluster_post/2nd-eururaltourism-smes-open-call/).

Paper/printed versions submitted by post or other means will not be accepted. Hand-written applications will not be accepted.