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# Open Call for Women-Led Deep-Tech Startups

Guidelines for applicants – Version 1.0

# Glossary

| TERM   | DEFINITION   |
|--|--|
| <i>Acceleration+ Programme</i>               | EPIC-X's comprehensive support scheme combines equity-free funding, business coaching, capacity building, cross-fertilization events and access to the broader EU innovation network.  |
| <i>Beneficiary/ Third Party</i>              | A women-led startup selected through the EPIC-X Open Call that receives financial support under a Sub-Grant Agreement.   |
| <i>Deep-tech innovation</i>                  | Aims to provide concrete solutions to societal problems by leveraging cutting-edge scientific advances and discoveries. It is characterized by a deep interaction with the latest technological developments, constantly staying at the forefront through ongoing engagement with new ideas and results, with the goal of producing a profound impact in the targeted application areas.   |
| <i>Financial Support to Third Parties</i>    | The "cascade funding" mechanism allows EPIC-X to provide sub-grants directly to selected EU startups.  |
| <i>Industrial Applications</i>               | Practical uses of deep-tech solutions in sectors such as healthcare and life sciences, energy and environment, manufacturing and industry 4.0, transportation and mobility, agriculture and food systems, finance and fintech, cybersecurity, education and edtech, retail and consumer goods, aerospace and defence.  |
| <i>Innovation Gender Barriers</i>            | Challenges that impede the development and adoption of emerging technologies while also hindering equitable participation in innovation ecosystems. These include technological integration difficulties, regulatory and market adoption issues, security and privacy concerns, high costs and infrastructure requirements, as well as gender equality barriers, i.e., systemic challenges (including limited funding, mentorship, networks, and societal biases) preventing women from accessing equal opportunities, resources, and support. |
| <i>Lump-Sum Grant</i>                        | A simplified funding mechanism where the EU contribution is paid as a fixed amount without the need to report actual costs. Payments are made based on the completion of predefined and agreed activities, not based on real cost reimbursement. This model makes the process more efficient for beneficiaries.  |
| <i>Market-Product Fit</i>                    | The stage at which a product or service meets the needs of its target market, demonstrating strong customer demand and satisfaction. It indicates that the product has been validated through user engagement, feedback, and sales, positioning it for scale. This means a Technology Readiness Level (TRL) between 6 and 8.   |
| <i>Moderate Emerging Innovator Countries</i> | EU Member States classified in the European Innovation Scoreboard 2023 as moderate or emerging innovators. EPIC-X focuses its support on these countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain) to reduce the innovation gap across Europe.  |
| <i>Quadruple Helix Nodes</i>                 | Key audiences addressed, targeted, or benefiting from the solutions developed by EPIC-X startups, namely the academy, industry, government, and civil society.   |
| <i>Round Financing</i>                       | A stage in the financial lifecycle of a start-up where the company raises capital from external investors. The term "seed round" refers to the early stage of funding, often used to develop the product and enter the market. In contrast, "later rounds" indicate more advanced funding stages aimed at scaling operations.  |
| <i>Smart Specialisation Strategies</i>       | Regional innovation strategies that identify priority areas based on local strengths and assets to foster growth and competitiveness through targeted investment and research.   |
| <i>Small Medium Enterprises</i>              | As defined in Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC: A medium-sized enterprise employs fewer than 250 persons and has either an annual turnover of up to €50 million or a balance sheet total of up to €43 million, while a small enterprise employs fewer than 50 persons and has either an annual turnover or balance sheet total of up to €10 million.  |
| <i>Technological Domains</i>                 | The fields of science and technology where deep-tech innovations emerge, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, quantum technologies, biotechnology and synthetic biology, advanced materials and nanotechnology, robotics and autonomous systems, blockchain and distributed ledger technologies, photonics and advanced optics, internet of things and edge computing, advanced computing and high-performance computing, clean and renewable energy technologies.  |
| <i>Technology Readiness Level</i>            | Scale used to measure the maturity of a technology, ranging from the initial concept (TRL 1) to a fully proven system in its operational environment (TRL 9). It evaluates the overall timeline of technological development, from basic research to market-ready products.  |
| <i>Unbiased Missions</i>                     | In the context of gender, it refers to a mission, initiative, or objective that actively avoids perpetuating or reinforcing gender stereotypes, discrimination, or inequalities. It is grounded in principles of fairness, equality, and inclusivity, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of gender, are provided equal opportunities, resources, and representation.  |
| <i>Women-Led Start-ups</i>                   | A startup, compliant with the SME definition provided by the EU, in which at least one woman holds a founder or C-level position (such as Chief Executive Officer, Chief Technology Officer, or Chief Scientific Officer) and maintains a minimum of 25% ownership or equivalent decision-making power within the company.   |

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# 1 Introducing EPIC-X and Understanding whether to Apply

## 1.1 Preamble

Welcome to the EPIC-X Open Call.

EPIC-X is here to accelerate innovation and unlock excellence by connecting regional ecosystems across Europe.

**Our mission** is to empower and support women-led startups<sup>1</sup> in deep-tech<sup>2</sup> across 16 moderate and emerging innovator countries<sup>3</sup> through a holistic approach that combines networking, tailored acceleration, cross-border collaboration, and smart policy action.

### Our promise:

- A total amount of €1.2 million made available,
- A simple application,
- A fair and transparent selection,
- A supportive implementation journey,
- And a vibrant network that stays with you beyond the programme.

This document explains, step-by-step, how to apply, what to expect during selection and implementation, and how the support works once you are selected.

We look forward to receiving your application and assisting you in shaping the next generation of European women's deep-tech success stories.

## 1.2 About EPIC-X and the Acceleration+ Programme

EPIC-X is a European acceleration initiative designed to **empower women-led deep-tech startups to grow, connect, and scale across Europe**. Funded by the European Union under the Horizon Europe European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) programme, EPIC-X focuses on 16 moderate and emerging innovator countries, helping close the innovation gap and strengthen regional excellence. There is a pressing need to address the innovation gap between Europe's regions, particularly in moderate and emerging innovator countries, where deep-tech ecosystems are less developed. **Women-led startups in the deep-tech sector face unique challenges, requiring targeted support to unlock their potential and drive growth.** Strengthening regional excellence through collaboration, capacity building, and connecting local strengths is essential for fostering a more equitable, innovative, and competitive European innovation landscape.

Our mission is to accelerate innovation and unlock excellence by linking regional ecosystems, building on local strengths, and promoting collaboration between startups and key players.

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<sup>1</sup> Startups, compliant with the SME definition provided by the EU, in which at least one woman holds a founder or C-level position (such as Chief Executive Officer, Chief Technology Officer, or Chief Scientific Officer) and maintains a minimum of 25% ownership or equivalent decision-making power within the company.

<sup>2</sup> Aims to provide concrete solutions to societal problems by leveraging cutting-edge scientific advances and discoveries. It is characterized by a deep interaction with the latest technological developments, constantly staying at the forefront through ongoing engagement with new ideas and results, with the goal of producing a profound impact in the targeted application areas.

<sup>3</sup> EU Member States classified in the European Innovation Scoreboard 2023 as moderate or emerging innovators. EPIC-X focuses its support on these countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain) to reduce the innovation gap across Europe.

At the heart of EPIC-X lies its innovative **Acceleration+ Programme**<sup>4</sup>, a model built on extensive research and a deep understanding of the needs of women founders in deep tech. The programme is structured around key pillars such as advanced deep-tech development, Smart Specialisation Strategies<sup>5</sup> (S3), and the specific unmet needs of women entrepreneurs. This ensures a holistic approach that combines business growth, technological excellence, and entrepreneurial empowerment.

Selected startups join the EPIC-X Acceleration+ Programme, lasting six months, which combines:

- **Equity-free Grant:** Each selected start-up will receive an equity-free grant of up to €60,000 (lump sum<sup>6</sup>) to support their growth.
- **Business Coaching:** Each of the 20 selected deep-tech startups will benefit from 15-20 days of business coaching. This coaching includes business development support, leadership guidance, and strategic advice on topics like investment seeking, deep-tech-specific challenges, scaling up, promotion and communication, internationalization, commercialization, and legal matters. As part of the application process, each applicant must provide a needs assessment and a clear plan to address their business coaching requirements. This plan will serve as the foundation for the coaching activities, ensuring that each startup receives the most relevant and targeted support throughout the Acceleration+ Programme. Coaching will be delivered by pre-validated experts, either from the EPIC-X stakeholders' network or coaches proposed by the selected startups. The validation process, which takes place at the start of the programme, will ensure that all coaches are free from conflicts of interest, have the relevant expertise, and possess the necessary high-level qualifications to provide impactful guidance tailored to the needs of the startups
- **Support/Follow-up:** up to 10 follow-up sessions will be provided per startup, focusing on refining business strategies and overcoming challenges as the start-ups grow through the programme.
- **Capacity Building:** The capacity-building program consists of one session every month, two per each of the core EPIC-X pillars: women-led start-ups; deep tech prospects; and local-placed innovations supported by interconnected actors and ecosystems.
- **Cross-fertilization:** Cross-fertilization activities include four meetings (one in-person) designed to foster synergies, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration among the participating start-ups. It also includes an innovative mobility scheme that will allow startups to engage with other innovators across regions (one visit to a counterpart is foreseen). Moreover, six webinars will facilitate peer-to-peer learning, allowing startups to explore new opportunities and technologies.
- **Multiplier Event:** Selected start-ups are expected to showcase their results at a multiplier event.
- **Demo Day:** A key event will be organized, gathering selected start-ups to pitch their business to investors, demonstrate growth potential, and create further networking opportunities.

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<sup>4</sup> EPIC-X's comprehensive support scheme combines equity-free funding, business coaching, capacity building, cross-fertilization events and access to the broader EU innovation network.

<sup>5</sup> Regional innovation strategies that identify priority areas based on local strengths and assets to foster growth and competitiveness through targeted investment and research.

<sup>6</sup> A simplified funding mechanism where the EU contribution is paid as a fixed amount without the need to report actual costs. Payments are made based on the completion of predefined and agreed activities, not based on real cost reimbursement. This model makes the process more efficient for beneficiaries.

**Costs linked to business coaching, on-site participation in the in-person cross-fertilization session, visit to a counterpart, (co)organization of the multiplier event and attendance to the Demo Day are integrated in the FSTP grants (EUR 60,000 per startup).**

Through targeted financial support and this flexible programme that allows you to learn from experts and peers, test solutions in real settings, and grow within a trusted European community, EPIC-X creates a perfect platform for startups to turn cutting-edge technology into market success while joining a European movement that champions women in deep tech and drives innovation without bias.

### 1.3 Scope of the Open Call

The **EPIC-X Open Call** is rooted in a place-based innovation approach that builds on the specific strengths, assets, and opportunities of Europe's diverse regional ecosystems. This approach is supported by an extensive research and mapping process carried out by the EPIC-X consortium, which analysed regional S3, deep-tech capabilities, and women founders' unmet needs across the 16 moderate and emerging innovator countries.

**The findings informed the creation of a comprehensive innovation matrix that connects four essential dimensions:**

- key deep-tech technological domains driving scientific and technological advancement,
- major industrial and sectorial fields of application where these technologies deliver impact,
- the quadruple helix nodes that participate in or benefit from innovation outcomes and,
- innovation and gender equality barriers representing Europe's most pressing transformation priorities, especially in moderate and emerging innovator countries.

#### *Deep-tech technological domains*

EPIC-X supports startups working in advanced technology areas that fuel Europe's competitiveness and sustainability, including:

- Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning
- Quantum Technologies
- Biotechnology and Synthetic Biology
- Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology
- Robotics and Autonomous Systems
- Blockchain and Distributed Ledger Technologies
- Photonics and Advanced Optics
- Internet of Things (IoT) and Edge Computing
- Advanced Computing and High-Performance Computing
- Clean and Renewable Energy Technologies

#### *Industrial / Sectorial fields of application*

These technologies are applied across multiple strategic and emerging markets such as:

- Healthcare and Life Sciences
- Energy and Environment
- Manufacturing and Industry 4.0

- Transportation and Mobility
- Agriculture and Food Systems
- Finance and Fintech
- Cybersecurity
- Education and EdTech
- Retail and Consumer Goods
- Aerospace and Defence

### **Quadruple helix nodes**

Quadruple helix nodes are key participants or beneficiaries in the innovation ecosystem, grouped as.

- Academy – research and higher-education institutions generating knowledge and talent.
- Industry – companies and investors transforming technologies into market solutions.
- Government – public authorities enabling innovation through policy and regulation.
- Civil society – citizens, communities, and NGOs ensuring societal relevance and adoption.

### **Innovation and gender equality barriers**

To ensure focus and maximise impact, EPIC-X identified innovation and gender-equality barriers representing the main challenges for moderate and emerging innovator countries:

- **Technological development and integration**

The rapid pace of technological advancement, particularly in AI, quantum computing, and blockchain, presents integration challenges for businesses looking to incorporate these innovations into existing infrastructures. This requires complex systems that are flexible, scalable, and compatible with traditional industries, which often rely on legacy systems. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of technological solutions across sectors creates hurdles in achieving seamless interoperability and wide-scale adoption.

Deep tech startups can capitalize on this challenge by developing unified, scalable platforms that bridge the gap between new technologies and existing infrastructures, making it easier for companies to adopt and integrate advanced tech solutions without significant overhauls.

- **Regulatory and market adoption**

Regulatory landscapes are often slow to evolve, particularly in industries where new technologies face stringent standards and lengthy approval processes. Furthermore, a lack of harmonization across regional and international regulations can slow down the adoption of deep tech innovations, creating barriers for startups aiming to expand across borders. Additionally, the uncertainty surrounding regulatory frameworks for disruptive technologies such as blockchain and AI adds a layer of complexity for businesses seeking market entry.

Deep tech startups have an opportunity to build solutions that not only comply with current regulations but also anticipate future regulatory needs, creating adaptive platforms that can evolve with regulatory changes, thereby accelerating market adoption and facilitating cross-border expansion.

- **Security and privacy**

The growing complexity and scale of cyber threats, especially with the rise of IoT and AI-driven systems, make securing sensitive data and systems increasingly challenging. As more

industries adopt deep tech, the potential for breaches and misuse of data rises, particularly in sectors handling personal, financial, or health data. Ensuring privacy and maintaining trust in these technologies is becoming more difficult as both the volume of data and the sophistication of cyberattacks increase.

Deep tech startups can lead the way in creating next-generation security solutions, such as AI-powered threat detection systems, blockchain-based data integrity platforms, and privacy-preserving technologies. These solutions provide industries with the tools to protect sensitive information while maintaining compliance with global data protection laws.

- **High costs and infrastructure requirements**

Deep tech innovation often requires high upfront capital investment and access to specialized infrastructure, such as supercomputing resources, advanced labs, and state-of-the-art manufacturing facilities. The high cost of acquiring and maintaining such infrastructure can be a significant barrier for startups, particularly in underfunded regions. Additionally, the capital-intensive nature of scaling up technology can limit opportunities for early-stage startups without access to venture capital or government funding.

Deep tech startups can focus on developing cost-effective, scalable solutions by leveraging cloud-based infrastructure, offering services that minimize the need for large capital expenditures, and providing modular, as-a-service models that make cutting-edge technologies accessible to a broader range of businesses, especially SMEs.

- **Gender-related challenges**

Deep-tech innovations often lack diversity in their development processes, which can lead to products and solutions that inadvertently exclude or disadvantage underrepresented groups. Biases in technology, particularly in AI algorithms and data-driven decision-making systems, continue to perpetuate gender imbalances and other forms of discrimination in technology. Moreover, the gender gap in STEM education and leadership positions continues to restrict the participation of women in shaping technological advancements.

Deep tech startups have the chance to lead in inclusive innovation, ensuring that their technologies are unbiased, inclusive, and designed with diverse user needs in mind.

**Examples of unbiased missions<sup>7</sup>:**

1. Design AI models that are free from bias and serve all users equitably, ensuring fairness in decision-making processes across various applications.
2. Foster inclusive research and development in quantum technologies, ensuring diverse participation and equal opportunities in this transformative field.
3. Develop biotechnological solutions that account for gender differences, enhancing outcomes in health and sustainability across a wide range of applications.
4. Innovate in materials and nanotechnology to create safe, accessible products that serve diverse populations, from wearables to medical devices.
5. Create robotics and autonomous systems that cater to all users, ensuring they are effective and adaptable across different environments.

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<sup>7</sup> An unbiased mission, particularly in the context of gender, refers to a mission, initiative, or objective that actively avoids perpetuating or reinforcing gender stereotypes, discrimination, or inequalities. It is grounded in principles of fairness, equality, and inclusivity, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of gender, are provided equal opportunities, resources, and representation.

6. Develop blockchain technologies that provide equal access to decentralized systems, empowering underrepresented groups and ensuring inclusivity.
7. Advance photonics and optics technologies that address the needs of diverse populations, ensuring they are equitable and effective in applications like medical imaging and communications.
8. Develop IoT systems that prioritize security, privacy, and inclusivity, ensuring equal access and protection for all users across diverse applications.
9. Build high-performance computing platforms that support diverse datasets and ensure equal access to computational resources for all users.
10. Create sustainable and affordable energy solutions that meet the needs of underserved populations, empowering women with access to clean energy.

**Each applicant must clearly:**

- Demonstrate the alignment of its business or innovation with **at least one deep-tech domain and at least one industrial/sectoral field of application**, which needs to be relevant for the S3 of the respective country.
- Describe **which quadruple helix node(s)** is(are) targeted, addressed, or benefiting from the innovation, and explain how.
- Identify the barriers the application contributes to solving or mitigating, considering that 1) **gender-related barriers are compulsory** and 2) the applicant will need to identify **the most relevant unbiased mission for the application**. In addition to the gender-related barriers, other innovation and equality barriers can be further identified and justified by the applicant, if relevant.

## 2 Preparing and Submitting your Application

### 2.1 Admissibility Criteria

The **Application form** consists of a single document to be completed and submitted by each applicant. It must include administrative information about the applicant, a description of the proposed project or action (aligned with the evaluation criteria), an Ethics Self-Assessment, formal declarations, and a projected budget. In addition, applicants are required to upload a **2-minute pitch video** and the supporting documents to the verification of the eligibility of the applicant, namely:

- **Annex 1: [Legal Entity Form](#) and official related supporting documents**, including registers of the company, articles/certificate of incorporation and VAT registration and address of the headquarters.
- **Annex 2: [Women's leadership declaration and description of the leadership structure](#)**, including description of founders and executive team (e.g., a company leadership list or organizational chart) and declaration signed by the legal representative confirming that at least one woman holds a position with at least 25% ownership or equivalent decision-making power.
- **Annex 3: [Business coaching plan](#)**, including a detailed outline showing that the applicant conducted a self-assessment to identify their strengths and weaknesses, selected the required profile for the business coach, defined clear goals for the 15-20 day's coaching relationship, and determined the structure and communication format for the coaching sessions.
- **Annex 4: [Market fit or/and investment documents](#)**, including evidence that the product has been commercially validated or adopted in the market as well as investment agreements, bank statements or financial documents showing investment and funding rounds documents. Additionally, applicants should provide evidence of alignment with priority criteria, such as being identified as a scale-up in Horizon Europe (e.g., through the EIC Scaleup 100 action or EIT-supported companies), being part of the Digital Europe Programme (e.g., through European Digital Innovation Hubs), or having received funding from national programmes, particularly those part of the "Plug-in" certified programmes.
- **Annex 5: Declaration of Honour**, signed by the legal representative, confirming that the applicant is not in any exclusionary situation.

#### Important to note when submitting your application, it must:

- be submitted by January 5, 2026 at 17:00 CET
- be submitted electronically – paper or emails submissions are not accepted – through the [EU Survey Link \(hyperlink embedded\)](#)
- be submitted in English
- respect the number of characters, as indicated in each section of the Application form
- be submitted by an eligible applicant (review section 2.2 of this document).

*Before you begin writing your submission, you can review the [blank application form here](#).*

## 2.2 Eligibility Criteria

### 2.2.1 Eligible Applicants

To be an eligible applicant, applications must be presented by a single legal entity that fulfils the following criteria:

- **Legal form:** Under Horizon Europe, a start-up is understood as a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME)<sup>8</sup> in the early stages of its life cycle. As such, start-ups must meet the criteria of an SME as defined in [EU Recommendation 2003/361/EC](#). They should also have been founded before 1st January 2024.
  - *Verified against Annex 1.*
- **Geographical scope:** Established in one of the 16 moderate and emerging innovator countries, as identified in the *2023 European Innovation Scoreboard*<sup>9</sup>.
  - *Verified against Annex 1.*
- **Women leadership:** A startup, compliant with the SME definition provided by the EU, in which at least one woman holds a founder or C-level position (such as Chief Executive Officer, Chief Technology Officer, or Chief Scientific Officer) and maintains a minimum of 25% ownership or equivalent decision-making power within the company. The word 'woman' equates to a cis woman, or a transgender woman who is legally defined as a woman.
  - *Verified against Annex 2.*
- **Business coaching plan:** a plan informed by the results of a self-assessment with clear goals for the 15-20 days and at least EUR 20,000 of the grant for the coaching relationship.
  - *Verified against Annex 3.*
- Applicant entity must have either **achieved market-product fit**<sup>10</sup> or have **raised at least a round of financing** (seed or later)<sup>11</sup>. While the call is open to all start-ups demonstrating traction, priority will be given to scale-ups identified in Horizon Europe, as well as those recognized in the Digital Europe Programme. Start-ups funded by national programmes, particularly those part of the “Plug-in” certified programmes, will also be prioritized. This priority is reflected in the possible attribution of bonus points (cf. evaluation criteria).
  - *Verified against Annex 4.*
- **Not be under liquidation or are an enterprise under difficulty** according to the [Commission Regulation No 651/2014, art. 2.182](#), or that are excluded from the possibility of obtaining EU funding under the provisions of both national and EU law, or by a decision of either national or EU authority.
  - *Verified against Annex 5.*

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<sup>8</sup> As defined in Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC: A medium-sized enterprise employs fewer than 250 persons and has either an annual turnover of up to €50 million or a balance sheet total of up to €43 million while a small enterprise employs fewer than 50 persons and has either an annual turnover or balance sheet total of up to €10 million.

<sup>9</sup> [European Innovation Scoreboard 2023 - Publications Office of the EU](#)

<sup>10</sup> The stage at which a product or service meets the needs of its target market, demonstrating strong customer demand and satisfaction. It indicates that the product has been validated through user engagement, feedback, and sales, positioning it for scale. This means a Technology Readiness Level (TRL) between 6 and 8. TRL is a scale used to measure the maturity of a technology, ranging from the initial concept (TRL 1) to a fully proven system in its operational environment (TRL 9). It evaluates the overall timeline of technological development, from basic research to market-ready products.

<sup>11</sup> A stage in the financial lifecycle of a start-up where the company raises capital from external investors. The term "seed round" refers to the early stage of funding, often used to develop the product and enter the market. In contrast, "later rounds" indicate more advanced funding stages aimed at scaling operations.

### 2.2.2 Eligible Activities

Applications must focus on **innovation, acceleration, and market-scaling activities** aligned with the EPIC-X objectives:

- Deep-tech innovation development (e.g., prototyping, testing, demonstration, validation, scale-up).
- Business acceleration and go-to-market activities (e.g., market studies, investor preparation, growth and internationalization strategy).
- Capacity building and business coaching (e.g., participation in the Acceleration+ Programme meet ups and masterclasses, business coaching, support/follow-up sessions).
- Cross-border collaboration and visibility (e.g., participation in networking events, the EPIC-X Demo Day, cross-fertilization activities, mobility scheme and multiplier events).

All proposed activities must fully comply with applicable EU, international, and national law, and uphold the **highest ethical standards** throughout implementation. Projects must respect EU values, as set out in [Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union](#) and [Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#).

### 2.3 Multiple proposals

Applicants are allowed to submit multiple proposals for different projects under this call. However, it is important to note that **only one proposal can be awarded funding**, as the maximum grant limit of EUR 60,000 per third party/beneficiary<sup>12</sup> applies under the Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP) mechanism. If there are several proposals for *very similar* projects, only one application will be accepted and evaluated; the applicants will be asked to withdraw one of them (or it will be rejected).

### 2.4 Available Budget

**EPIC-X has allocated a total budget of EUR 1,200,000** to support women-led start-ups in their growth and coaching needs, to be distributed through the single open call. The call for applications defines a **fixed equity-free lump sum of EUR 60,000 per selected project**. The budget requested by applicants in the application must be equal to this amount. Lump sum is a streamlined funding model where a set of pre-defined amount of money is received upfront and payments are made once certain pre-established tasks or goals are completed, rather than reimbursing based on actual costs incurred. This approach helps to make the funding process quicker and more efficient for the recipients.

There are two important aspects to consider when thinking of your project, its budget and implementation. You must remember the following rules:

- **No-profit rule:** If you receive an EPIC-X grant, the funding must be fully used to carry out the proposed project activities. The grant cannot generate any direct financial profit. In other words, it should only cover the actual costs of carrying out the project. However, the results or solutions developed through the project may later be commercialised or generate profit beyond the funding period.

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<sup>12</sup> Referring to the women-led startup selected through the EPIC-X Open Call that receives financial support under a Sub-Grant Agreement.

- **No double funding:** No cumulation of funding/no double funding – It is strictly prohibited to cumulate funding from the EU budget. Any given action may receive only ONE grant from the EU budget and cost items may under NO circumstances be declared under two EU grants. If you would like to nonetheless benefit from different EU funding opportunities, projects must be designed as different actions, clearly delineated and separated for each grant (without overlaps).

To justify the grant amount for which you are applying, you must provide cost estimations for your action. These estimations will be entered directly within the application form, where a table is provided. You must include the estimated total budget per category, reflecting the resources needed to implement your proposed activities.

Each **selected beneficiary will receive a fixed lump-sum grant of EUR 60,000**, combining financial support for market growth and a mandatory business-coaching component

Out of this amount, a **minimum of EUR 20,000 must be forecasted exclusively for business coaching activities**, as a compulsory element of the Acceleration+ Programme. This allocation ensures that all participating startups benefit from **15-20 days of tailored business coaching** delivered by qualified experts, in line with the EPIC-X Acceleration+ framework.

Additionally, the applicant will need to forecast costs for other components of the Acceleration+ Programme, namely the **on-site participation in the in-person cross-fertilization session, visit to a counterpart, (co)organization of the multiplier event and attendance to the Demo Day.**

**The budget categories are as follows:**

- **Personnel Costs:** Estimated expenses for staff working on the project, based on expected effort and standard salary levels
- **Subcontracting:** Costs for external providers contracted to perform specific tasks that cannot be carried out by the project beneficiary
  - *This category must include the compulsory EUR 20,000 allocation for business coaching.*
- **Travel and accommodation-related expenses:** Costs related to travel required for project implementation, including transportation, accommodation, and per diems. Travel must be directly linked to project activities
  - *The estimated budget presented must consider the costs linked to the on-site cross-fertilization meeting, mobility scheme (visit to a counterpart) and participation at the EPIC-X Demo Day. As a reference, applicants may consider an indicative amount of EUR 650 for each of these three trips.*
- **Equipment:** Costs for purchasing or using equipment essentially for carrying out project activities
- **Other goods, works and services:** Expenses for other items or services directly linked to the project (e.g. certification costs, production of communication, dissemination or marketing materials, software licenses, etc).
  - *The estimated budget presented must consider the costs related to the (co)organization of the multiplier event. This event can be held online.*

## 2.5 Timeline

| MILESTONE               | INDICATIVE DATE                      | DESCRIPTION  |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Call Launch             | <b>November 3, 2025</b>              | Publication of Guidelines, Application Form, and opening of the EU Survey submission platform. |
| Deadline for Submission | <b>January 5, 2026</b>               | Final date and time (17:00 CET) for electronic submission via the EU Survey platform.          |
| Evaluation Period       | <b>January 6 – February 27, 2026</b> | Eligibility check and full in-depth evaluation is conducted.                                   |
| Notification of Results | <b>March 6, 2026</b>                 | Applicants informed of evaluation and selection results.                                       |
| Contract Signature      | <b>March 2026</b>                    | Sub-grant agreements signed.   |
| Acceleration+ Programme | <b>April 1 – September 31, 2026</b>  | Implementation period of 6 months.   |

## 3 Evaluation and Selection

The evaluation and selection of the applications will go through the following stages:

### STEP A | Administrative and Eligibility Check

The Administrative and Eligibility Check will be completed by the EPIC-X Consortium. Only those applications that meet all requirements outlined above will pass to Step B.

### STEP B | Evaluation of Eligible Projects

All admissible and eligible applications will be evaluated by a panel of jury members, made up by consortium partners and the ecosystem builder representing the applicant's respective country. Each application will be assessed by four jury members following a two-stage process, first reviewing the summary and pitch-video, and then the full application dossier. To uphold the integrity of the evaluation, all jurors are required to sign a declaration of confidentiality and absence of conflict of interest, and must adhere to strict standards of impartiality, transparency, and fairness throughout the process. Any juror with direct or indirect interest in an application will be excluded from evaluation of that proposal. **The evaluation will be based on a two-stage approach:**

#### B.1. Stage 1 – Relevancy Pre-Screening

Jury pairs will assess the summary section and the 2-minute pitch video of each application. This assessment will be conducted on a scale from 0 to 10 points, reflecting the degree of relevancy alignment with the objectives of EPIC-X and the Open Call.

Only proposals that achieve an average score equal to or above the threshold of 5 points will move forward. From these, a maximum of the 15 highest-ranking proposals per country will be shortlisted to proceed to stage B.2 Stage 2 – In-Depth Full Application and Evaluation.

#### B.2. Stage 2 – In-Depth Full Application Evaluation

Each juror will conduct an in-depth full application evaluation. The Evaluation will be based on a 100-point score considering the following criteria and weighting as per the table below:

| Main Criterion                             | Sub-Criterion  | Description  | Max Points | Min Threshold |
|--|--|--|------------|---------------|
| A. Excellence and Innovation               | A.1 Relevance to the EPIC-X Scope  | The extent to which the proposed project demonstrates alignment with relevant deep-tech and sectoral domains linked to the national S3 priorities, clearly identifies and the targeted quadruple helix actors and their engagement, and effectively addresses the innovation and gender equality barriers. | 15         | 7.5           |
|  | A.2 Unbiased Mission   | The level of originality, technological advancement beyond the state of the art, and overall feasibility of the proposed deep-tech innovation in addressing the identified unbiased mission, while integrating gender equality considerations.   | 10         | 5             |
|  | A.3 Needs Assessment and Business Coaching Plan  | The clarity and coherence of the needs assessment, demonstrating a sound understanding of the applicant's challenges and opportunities (and how the proposed business coaching plan will effectively address them) as well as the regional and target group needs.   | 10         | 5             |
|  | A.4 European Added Value   | The potential to generate value beyond the national, regional, or local context, including through transferability, scalability, or other relevant dimensions that allow broader uptake or learning from the project's results   | 5          | 2.5           |
| <b>TOTAL – Excellence and Innovation</b>   |  |  | <b>40</b>  | <b>20</b>     |
| B. Impact and Market Potential             | B.1 Impact on Growth, Market Positioning and Sustainability                                  | Extent to which the project will generate short, medium and long term impact for the selected entity's growth, market positioning and sustainability.  | 15         | 7.5           |
|  | B.2 Technological, Societal, Environmental and Economic Impact within the Regional Ecosystem | The contribution to technological, societal, environmental, and economic impacts within the applicant's regional ecosystem actors and respective S3.   | 10         | 5             |
| <b>TOTAL – Impact and Market Potential</b> |  |  | <b>25</b>  | <b>12.5</b>   |
| C. Implementation and Capacity             | C.1 Quality and Feasibility of the Work Plan   | The adequacy of the methodology to the objectives pursued by the project, considering the current level of maturity and growth potential.  | 20         | 10            |
|  | C.2 Team and Resources   | Capability and experience of the team (especially women in leadership roles), adequacy of resources and skills to deliver the project.   | 10         | 5             |

|  |  |            |             |
|--|--|------------|-------------|
| <b>C.3 Budget and Cost-Effectiveness</b>   | Appropriateness and realism of the proposed budget | 5          | 2.5         |
| <b>TOTAL – Impact and Market Potential</b> |  | <b>35</b>  | <b>17.5</b> |
| <b>SUB-TOTAL</b>                           |  | <b>100</b> | <b>50</b>   |
| <b>BONUS POINTS</b>                        |  | <b>5</b>   | <b>-</b>    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                               |  | <b>105</b> |             |

The overall score of the evaluation will be submitted to the following:

- **Minimum thresholds:** Proposals must achieve at least 50 points of the maximum score in each individual evaluation criterion, as well as a total score of at least 50 points at the end of the B.2. Stage 2. Proposals failing to meet these thresholds will be considered of insufficient quality and rejected.

Once all assessments are submitted, the project team will compile the results, calculate average scores, and identify significant discrepancies between reviewers. When necessary (when discrepancies in the total score are of 15 or more points), jurors will engage in consolidation meetings to agree on a final, harmonized score.

## STEP C | Ranking

A Ranking Meeting will be held with all jurors. During this meeting, the numerical rankings will be presented, based on the outcomes of the **Stage 2 – In-Depth Full Application Evaluation** plus the awarding of **bonus points**. **Applicants will receive 5 bonus points** if they can demonstrate prior recognition as a scale-up or innovator within key EU or national programmes. Specifically, if they have been identified as a scale-up in Horizon Europe (e.g., through the *EIC Scaleup 100* or *EIT-supported companies*), are part of the Digital Europe Programme (e.g., through *European Digital Innovation Hubs*), or have received funding from national programmes, particularly those certified under the “Plug-in” schemes.

Based on the final scores, a ranking list will be established. The top-ranked application in each of the 16 eligible countries will be awarded. In addition, the four highest-scoring proposals across all 16 countries will also receive funding, respecting a maximum limit of three awarded beneficiaries per country. This ranking process ensures a fair, transparent, and balanced distribution of support, promoting geographical diversity and excellence across all participating regions.

In the event of a tie in the final scores, the following criteria will be applied sequentially to determine the final ranking:

- Final score in the **C.1 Quality and Feasibility of the Work Plan**
- Final score in the **A.1 Relevance to the EPIC-X Scope**
- Final score in the **B.1 Impact on Growth, Market Positioning and Sustainability**

Notifications are sent to all applicants, informing them of the process and results (rejected due to non-admissibility and eligibility, rejected due to scores below thresholds, not selected due to lack of funds and awarded).

## Redress Process

All applicants will be informed of the evaluation results via email, sent to the main contact point indicated in the proposal. The notification will include an Evaluation Summary with both qualitative feedback and the final score, reflecting comments and assessments from the evaluation panel. If an applicant believes a procedural error occurred during the evaluation process that may have affected the outcome of their proposal, they may request a redress. Redress requests are strictly limited to procedural issues such as:

- Failure to follow the evaluation procedure as described in the call documentation.
- Misapplication of the published award criteria.
- Administrative or factual errors in the handling of the proposal.

Applicants must submit their request for redress within 5 working days from the date the evaluation results were communicated via email. The request must clearly explain the grounds for the complaint and include any supporting evidence.

The redress request will be reviewed by an internal committee. Please note that this process does not involve a re-evaluation of the proposal's content, but a verification of whether a procedural error occurred and if it had a potential impact on the outcome.

Applicants will be informed of the final decision in writing via the main contact point indicated in their proposal. All redress decisions are final and not subject to further appeal.

## 4 Contract Signing

After the period of contestation, selected applicants will be notified, via email, about their application results and be informed that they have now reached the Contract Signing Stage. At that moment, selected applicants will be requested various administrative and financial documents, including:

- Declaration of Honour - verification of non-exclusion
- Financial Capacity Check – verification of financial status and definition of the payment scheme.

*Please note that the documents listed above will not be submitted during the application process, they will only be requested from selected applications.*

Additionally, selected applications will undergo an ethics appraisal to identify any potential ethical issues. Should any be found, appropriate mitigating measures will be incorporated into the contract.

The selected applicants will be asked to sign the contract which highlights the general conditions between the selected applicant and the EPIC-X Consortium. A copy of the contract to be signed can be found on our website.

In line with transparency obligations, upon the conclusion of the contracting step, an official list of selected beneficiaries will be published on the EPIC-X website.

### 4.1 Payment Arrangements

Payments will be made in Euro to the bank account of the Beneficiary. The payment schedule will be:

- **Advanced Payment (40%):** Following the signature of the Contract
- **Mid-term Payment (40%):** At the halfway mark of the project, with the approval of a mid-term report detailing the achievements of the milestones, and KPIs stated in the proposal, as well as taking into account the financial execution and the level of completion of the business coaching plan.
- **Final Balance Payment (20%):** Following the submission and approval of the Final Report

## 5 What Should I Know Further?

Before applying, we encourage you to consult the following resources and support channels to ensure a smooth application process:

- **Official Open Call Publication:** The EPIC-X Open Call to Support Multi-Actor Teams Initiatives is published on the Funding & Tenders Portal of the European Commission.
- **Contact for Questions and Support:** For any questions related to the application process, eligibility, or technical support, you can reach out to the EPIC-X team at [general@epic-x.eu](mailto:general@epic-x.eu). This technical support is available until 24 hours before the deadline.
- **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ):** You can also visit the EPIC-X website for details about eligible activities, selection, reporting, and contractual matters.
- **Attend the Webinar – Information Sessions:** Join one of our live information webinars to get an overview of the call objectives, application procedure, and tips for success.

- **Webinar #1** | November 17, 2025, 11h00 – 12h00 CET
- **Webinar #2** | December 4, 2025, 11h00 – 12h00 CET
- **Webinar #3** | December 15, 2025, 11:00–12:00 CET



To join the webinar, please register through the following link: [Open Call for Women-Led Deep-Tech Startups](#)

## 6 Confidentiality and Data Protection

**GDPR compliance:** The General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679/EU) guarantees that the processing of data is carried out in compliance with the fundamental rights and freedoms, as well as the dignity of the data subject with particular reference to confidentiality, personal identity and the right to data protection. By applying, the applicant agrees to the storage and use of their personal data for the execution of the EPIC-X objectives and work plan.

The personal data collected includes the applicant's name, gender, address (of the main applicant), contact details (such as E-Mail address) and their institution. It will only be used to facilitate the call process and will be deleted at the end of the project. The EPIC-X Consortium commits to handling personal data confidentiality except for the call results, which will contain the following information:

- Information about successful EPIC-X funding support applications that will be made publicly available before the end of the project.

The processing of personal data that EPIC-X Consortium intends to carry out will be based on lawfulness and correctness in the full protection of its rights and its confidentiality pursuant to the general principles of the GDPR and its art.24. Therefore, the applicants are informed that their (personal) data will be used solely for the purposes of the specific procedure to which their application refers. The applicants can exercise their rights towards the data controller, pursuant to article 12–22 of the GDPR. For any inquiries regarding the processing of your personal data, please read more about the privacy policy of EPIC-X at the following link: [Privacy Policy – EPIC-X](#) or contact us at: [general@epic-x.eu](mailto:general@epic-x.eu)