1. Purpose of this document

Thank you for agreeing to act as an external reviewer for the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ) calls for research proposals in 2026. This document provides guidance for reviewers assessing full research proposals in stage 2.

These guidelines explain:

- what is your role in the evaluation process,
- what documents you will receive,
- which criteria and scoring scale to use,
- what kind of written report is expected,
- how to handle confidentiality and conflicts of interest.

Please read this document before starting your reviews.

2. Your role in the evaluation process

The proposals are evaluated in two stages:

- Stage 1: short proposals evaluated by panels.
- Stage 2: full proposals evaluated by external reviewers and panels.

You are involved in Stage 2. For each proposal assigned to you, you are asked to:
1. Read the full proposal and supporting documents.
2. Assess the proposal in four evaluation domains.
3. Assign a score from 1 to 5 for each domain.
4. Provide a concise written justification (strengths and weaknesses) for each domain.
5. Comment on any ethical or research integrity issues that you identify.

Your review will be considered alongside other two external reviews at the panel meeting, leading to the creation of the finalized ranking lists and a recommendation to the Management Board of the Croatian Science Foundation.

Expected workload: 5-10 proposals; 15 pages per proposal.
Call duration: 26 March - 27 April 2026
Review process: 1 – 14 May 2026
Additional comments (optional; in case of substantial score discrepancies between reviewers): 15-18 May, 2026
Process completion: no later than May 20, 2026

3. General principles for work

3.1 Confidentiality

By accepting to review, you agree to treat all materials and discussions as strictly confidential:

- Do not share proposal as a whole or in parts, reviews, or any related documents with other persons.
- Do not discuss the content of proposals or your assessment with third parties.
- Do not use any ideas, methods, data, or unpublished results from the proposals in your own work.
- Delete or securely destroy all electronic and paper copies of proposals and review forms once the evaluation process has concluded, in line with instructions from HRZZ, no later than 1 June, 2026.

3.2 Conflict of interest (COI)

Before reviewing, you must declare whether you have a conflict of interest with any proposal or applicant. You should consider declaring a COI if, for example:

- You have recently co-authored publications or shared grants with the applicant(s).
- You are in a close personal, family, or supervisory relationship with the applicant(s).
- You have a direct financial interest in the project's outcome.
- You feel unable to provide an impartial assessment for any reason.

If you believe a conflict exists, inform HRZZ immediately. You must not review proposals where you have a conflict of interest.

3.3 Using the full scoring scale

Please use the full scale (1–5) in a way that not every proposal is automatically a "4" or "5". Reserve 5 (Outstanding) for proposals that clearly match the provided descriptors. Use 1 or 2 when serious weaknesses are present, as described. The principal task of reviewers is discrimination between excellent and less developed proposals, in contrast to useless averaging of scores and provision of overly similar scores that do not manage to identify excellent proposals.

4. Materials you will receive

For each proposal, you will receive the full proposal form, including:

- The PI's CV,
- Project summary and objectives,
- Description of significance, novelty, and methodology,
- Work plan and timeline,
- Team composition, resources, budget summary, and risk analysis.

5. How to approach each review (step-by-step)

1. Read the project summary and objectives to understand the overall idea.
2. Scan the PI's CV, focusing on relevance and career stage.
3. Read the proposal sections on:
   - Significance, background, and objectives,
   - Methodology and research plan,
   - Team, resources, risk and feasibility.
4. For each of the assessment domains:
   - Compare what you see with the descriptor for scores 1–5,
   - Decide which score best fits the proposal,
   - Write 2–4 bullet points summarising strengths and weaknesses.

Your role is to provide independent, evidence-based judgments guided by the scales below.

6. Scoring domains and detailed scales

6.1 PI CV (section 1 of the stage 2 application form)

Guidance. Three domains considered together: outputs, grants, and other achievements. Assessment is relative to career stage, field norms, and documented career breaks.

5 – Outstanding: Strong track record relative to career stage across all three domains:
(a) several high-quality, competitive outputs with leading/senior roles,
(b) clear evidence of competitive grant leadership or strong potential (for first-time PIs, previous research output can be used as a proxy),
(c) substantial other academic achievements (keynotes, awards, industry/policy/public engagement) relevant to the proposal, with clear international visibility.

4 – Very good: Very good track record in most domains:
(a) strong publication record at national or international level, with some leading/senior roles,
(b) experience in managing competitive national or institutional grants,
(c) some other relevant academic achievements. Overall an excellent track record at least at national level.

3 – Good: Solid and credible track record:
(a) reasonable number of relevant outputs,
(b) some experience in grant management (e.g. local PI or team member on larger projects; for first-time PIs, a strong output record may be used as a proxy),
(c) limited but visible other achievements. Clear potential to lead the proposed work.

2 – Weak
(a) limited publication record and/or weak relevance to the topic,
(b) little or no experience in grant management,
(c) few other achievements. Potential is visible but the track record is modest for career stage.

1 – Poor Very limited or no relevant research outputs, no evidence of grant management capacity, and no relevant other achievements. Track record does not support leading the proposed project.

6.2 Excellence (Section 3)

Guidance. Assess excellence in four domains: significance/importance (section 3.1, in part), originality/innovativeness (section 3.1, in part), conceptual clarity and methodological rigour and research design (section 3.2 and 3.3).

Significance / importance reflects how important are the project objectives for the field of research? Does the project have potential to advance knowledge, theory, methods or data in a meaningful way? Does it address a clear gap or limitation in current knowledge or practice?

Originality / innovation refers to the perceived novelty of ideas, perspectives, hypotheses or approaches? Does the project combine theories, methods or data in a creative or unusual way? Is there potential to open new directions or lines of inquiry?

Conceptual clarity & coherence refers to clearly formulated and logically connected objectives and hypotheses. Is the theoretical or conceptual framework well described and appropriate? Is the narrative coherent – do the aims, background and methods fit together?

Methodological rigour & research design refer to appropriateness of proposed methods, including study design (sampling, controls, measurement, statistics, modelling; where applicable)? Are bias, confounding, power, reproducibility, validity, reliability addressed where relevant? Are there elements that show advanced data handling and triangulation of research data from multiple lines of work (pseudoreplication/replication)? Is study protocol published ahead of measurement process? Does analysis show elements of truncated analysis due to saturation or staggered design, aiming to provide less cost for satisfactory power? If present, do preliminary data/pilot demonstrate promising results?
Proposals that do not credibly address research integrity and validation cannot be scored above 3 in Excellence, regardless of rhetorical quality.

5 – Outstanding: Proposals that identify top-level objectives of high scientific or societal importance, with clear novelty. Methodology is very strong, well-justified, and includes advanced elements of research integrity like validation, sensitivity analysis or equivalent robustness checks. Research plan is coherent and realistic, with excellent value for money. Outcomes clearly match the objectives and have potential for international impact. No major shortcomings; any minor issues can easily be addressed.

4 – Very good: Proposals that identify important objectives with very good, though not ground-breaking, novelty. Methods are appropriate and mostly well described; the research plan is coherent with good value for money. Outcomes are realistic and likely to have national or international impact in the field. Some weaknesses can be identified, but they do not substantially increase the risk of failure.

3 – Good: Proposals that address relevant topics, with limited or moderate novelty. Methodology is generally adequate but with some gaps or limited justification. The plan and resources are broadly aligned but not optimised; outcomes have moderate expected impact. Shortcomings require clarification or revisions, but the proposal remains viable.

2 – Weak: Proposals that address topics of limited significance or are poorly articulated, with serious weaknesses or insufficiently justified methods, leading to questionable value for money. Outcomes are vague or of low impact. Substantial revisions would be required to make the project fundable.

1 – Poor: Proposals where objectives are unclear or misaligned with the call and overall significance is low. Methodology is inappropriate or not credible, and the proposed work is unlikely to deliver meaningful outcomes regardless of funding.

6.3 Impact (section 4)

Guidance. This domain assesses the expected influence of the project on the research field and related disciplines scientific impact (section 4.1), wider research community, society, economy, culture or policy, where relevant (section 4.2), including the quality of the dissemination, communication and open science plans (section 4.3).

Scientific impact. Will the project advance knowledge in the field (new theories, methods, data, concepts)? Is there clear potential to influence future research (e.g. new datasets, tools, infrastructures others will reuse)? Is there a plausible path to high-quality publications (journals, monographs, conferences appropriate for the field)?

Impact on the research and general community. Will the project help train early-career researchers (PhD students, postdocs, young team members)? Does it contribute to building or strengthening a research group / network? Are there activities that foster collaboration, interdisciplinary work, or community resources (software, databases, guidelines)? Are there clearly identified stakeholders (e.g. public bodies, industry, NGOs, professionals, patient groups, cultural institutions; where relevant)? Is there a realistic pathway for non-academic uptake (policy briefs, practice guidelines, prototypes, outreach, co-creation)? Do planned activities go beyond generic claims and show concrete mechanisms for influence?

Dissemination, communication and open science. Are dissemination and communication plans specific, targeted and realistic (who, what, how, when)? Are open access and data management plans in line with good practice (FAIR principles, repositories, licenses), given the field? Is there thought about responsible communication (avoiding hype, respecting ethical and legal constraints)?

Note that not all projects need to deliver strong non-academic impact to score highly. For some areas, scientific impact and capacity-building are the primary drivers. Reviewers should judge non-academic impact in proportion to what is reasonable for the topic and field.

5 – Outstanding: The project shows very high potential to significantly shape or advance the field or to generate clearly defined, credible societal, economic, cultural or policy benefits. Plans for publications, data, tools or infrastructure are strong and likely to be influential. Dissemination, communication and open science plans are excellent, specific and realistic, with clearly identified audiences and channels. Additional for UIP: the project is very likely to establish a visible, sustainable research programme and group.

4 – Very good: The project is likely to have substantial positive impact on the field and/or on relevant stakeholders. Scientific outputs and resources are well thought out, with a good chance of being widely used or cited. Dissemination and open science plans are convincing, though some aspects could be sharper or more detailed. Additional for UIP: clear contribution to building a competitive group, with only minor uncertainties about longer-term visibility.

3 – Good: The project is expected to produce useful contributions to the field, but with limited reach, novelty, or clarity about who will use the results. Dissemination and communication plans are present but relatively generic or modest. Non-academic impact is either limited in scope or somewhat vague, relying on general statements rather than concrete pathways. Additional for UIP: group-building and training effects are present, but insufficient or underdeveloped.

2 – Weak: Likely impact on the field is unclear, modest or poorly argued; it is not obvious who will benefit or how. Dissemination plans are minimal, vague or unrealistic; open science aspects are weak or missing without justification. Non-academic impact is claimed but not credibly described or not connected to the actual project activities. Additional for UIP: limited contribution to independent group-building; the project risks remaining a small, self-contained activity.

1 – Poor: Likely impact on the field is unclear, modest or poorly argued; it is not obvious who will benefit or how. Dissemination plans are minimal, vague or unrealistic; open science aspects are weak or missing without justification. Non-academic impact is claimed but not credibly described or not connected to the actual project activities. For UIP: limited contribution to independent group-building; the project risks remaining a small, self-contained activity.

6.3 Feasibility (section 5)

Guidance. This domain assesses whether the project can realistically be completed as planned, within the constraints of time, team and resources available (including those provided by the project).
Elements to evaluate include clarity of the work plan and timeline (section 5.1 and 5.3); adequacy and complementarity of the research team with the amount of time (FTE) that the PI and team can devote to the project (section 5.2); access to necessary infrastructure, equipment, data, and other resources (section 5.2); identification of key risks and the quality of mitigation strategies (section 5.4); proportionality and justification of the requested budget (you are not asked to check numbers in detail, but you may comment on obvious issues). For UIP projects, also consider: whether the plan to establish and maintain a core research group is realistic, and the feasibility of training and supervising at least one PhD student during the project (section 5.2).

5 – Outstanding: Very low overall risk. The team has all key expertise and an excellent track record with similar work. Access to all critical data, resources, and infrastructure is secured or clearly guaranteed (no foreseeable risks). Work plan and timeline are realistic with realistic margins for delays. Risks are systematically analysed with clear mitigation measures and credible backup strategies.

4 – Very good: Minor risks, all manageable. The team has the necessary expertise, with some external support where needed. Most resources are in place and any remaining dependencies are low-risk. The work plan is well structured and the risk analysis is present and mostly adequate.

3 – Good: Some moderate risks regarding data access, recruitment, methods, or dependencies on external partners. The team is generally capable but with some gaps; the plan is workable but tight in places. Risk analysis is present but limited, making feasibility acceptable but not fully convincing.

2 – Weak: Substantial risks in key elements (team skills, data and resources, regulatory approvals, external dependencies). Timeline and plan appear optimistic, and risk analysis is superficial. There are substantial doubts that the project could deliver as proposed.

1 – Poor: Major, unresolved risks and/or missing critical expertise and resources. No credible plan to mitigate problems, leading to overall very low feasibility.

6. Ethics, research integrity and data management

All proposals include a section on Regulatory items (section 6), including ethics and data management plan. Please flag any ethical issues you believe are not adequately addressed (e.g. work with humans or animals, sensitive data, dual use, safety risks). Also, comment if you see serious concerns about research integrity (e.g. potential for questionable research practices, poor data handling). Check whether plans for data management and open access to results are reasonable and in line with good practice in the field.

You do not need to act as an ethics committee, but you should highlight any significant concerns in your review so that HRZZ can follow up if necessary.

7. Writing good reviewer comments

Your written comments are important for both assessment but also applicant's career development. Please write specific, brief and evidence-based comments. Instead of: "Weak methodology", say: "The sample size justification is missing and no power calculation is provided, making it unclear whether the study is adequately powered." Comment on both strengths and weaknesses (at least one bullet of each per domain, if possible). Align your comments with the score: a "4 – Excellent" should not read like a "2 – Weak" or vice versa. Avoid personal remarks or value judgments about individuals, excessive jargon, or direct comparisons to other named proposals or people. Please avoid comments that are purely personal (e.g. about individuals or institutions), discriminatory or biased, or vague and unsupported by the content of the proposal. Your comments will be anonymized and sent to the applicant verbatim.

If you have questions about the process or the guidelines, please contact HRZZ using the contact details provided in your invitation letter.

Thank you very much for your contribution to the evaluation process.