1. Purpose of this document

Thank you for agreeing to act as an external reviewer for the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ) calls for the PDIP 2026 call. This document provides guidance for reviewers assessing the proposals.

These guidelines explain:
- what your role is 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 one stage. You are expected 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 two external reviews, leading to the creation of the finalized ranking lists and a recommendation to the Management Board of the Croatian Science Foundation.

Expected workload: 5-15 proposals; 5 evaluation pages per proposal (excluding regulatory submission elements).
Call duration: 16 February - 6 May 2026
Review process: 7 – 16 May 2026
Additional comments (optional; in case of substantial score discrepancies between reviewers): 16-18 May, 2026
Process completion: no later than May 20, 2026

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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- Do not use any ideas, methods, data, or unpublished results from the proposals in your own work.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,
- Resources, budget 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.
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 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 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 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 the proposal excellence in four domains: background and objectives (section 3.1 of the application proposal), methodology (section 3.2), impact (section 3.3) and dissemination plan (section 3.4).

Assess 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? Is the narrative coherent – do the aims, background and methods fit together? In terms of 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? If present, do preliminary data/pilot demonstrate promising results?

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 Feasibility (section 4)

Guidance. This domain assesses whether the project can realistically be completed as planned, within the constraints of time and resources available (including those provided by the project). Assess if the resources fit the workplan and whether the workplan is feasible. Score according to these criteria:

5 – Outstanding: Very low overall risk. 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. 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. Risk analysis is present but limited, making feasibility acceptable but not fully convincing.

2 – Weak: Substantial risks in key elements (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 5), 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 both for the assessment and for providing useful feedback to applicants. 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.