

EU4INNOVATION CHALLENGE FUND

1ST CALL FOR PROPOSALS



Guidelines for Applicants

IPA ANNUAL ACTION PLAN IN FAVOUR OF ALBANIA FOR 2021

IPA III WINDOW AND THEMATIC PRIORITY 4: COMPETITIVENESS AND
INCLUSIVE GROWTH

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION OF APPLICATIONS
22 DECEMBER 2023, 18:00 HRS

Contracting Authority

Partners Albania for Change and Development

Challenge Fund | EU4Innovation Phase II, 2023 – 2026

Guidelines for Applicants

IPA III Annual Action Plan in favour of Albania for 2021

IPA III Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth

Deadline for submission of online Application

22 December 2023, 18:00 hrs.

The European Commission Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA II) 2021-2027, through its Action Programme 2021 supports growth and competitiveness with the aim to facilitate Albania in its accession process. Such support includes private sector development, trade, research, and innovation. Funded by the European Union, and with additional support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) as well as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the “**EU for innovation – phase II**” project interventions will support the development of a dynamic and innovative ecosystem in Albania by providing technical and financial support to start-ups and ISOs. The focus of EU4Innovation is to increase the maturity and exposure of the Albanian start-up and innovation ecosystem and its stakeholders. The project will run until June 2026 and is implemented by GIZ and the Swedish Embassy Tirana. The project has a budget of up to 11.750.000 EUR (EU contribution: 10.000.000 EUR, German contribution: 1.200.000 EUR; Swedish contribution: 550.000 EUR).



Challenge Fund - 1st Call for Proposals

Guidelines for Applicants

This document relates to the “Challenge Fund - 1st call for proposals”, which provides an opportunity for funding for Albanian MSMEs, start-ups with innovative solutions, start-ups with a prominent tech content and with the potential to go global and grow fast. These guidelines provide information about the “Challenge Fund - 1st call for proposals” including eligibility criteria, the application submission process, the evaluation process as well as general information about the fund.

Applicants should have read through these guidelines before applying to the “Challenge Fund - 1st call for proposals” in order to ensure an adherence to its rules and criteria.

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1. Introduction

This is a guide for the start-ups applying to the “Challenge Fund - 1st call for proposals”. The document clarifies who can apply for a grant, what costs the grant can cover (i.e. eligible and non-eligible activities and costs), the evaluation process, conditions and criteria, the data and documentation which have to be submitted, as well as technical guidelines and rules for the application processes.

- All information about the “Challenge Fund - 1st call for proposals”, as well as other useful tools can be found on the website <https://challengefund.euforinnovation.al/>
- Please note that the application is to be submitted online. When filling out the online application we also recommend consulting the document **Application Instructions**, which guides you through the use of the online platform.
- In case of any discrepancy between this Guidelines and the online application, the online application shall prevail.

2. What is the “Challenge Fund”?

The Challenge Fund is the grant scheme of the project EU4Innovation, Phase II, 2023-2026 in support of innovative start-ups. The objective of the Challenge Fund is to boost a vibrant innovation ecosystem in Albania, by offering an opportunity for access to finance to Albanian start-ups through an open, transparent and competitive application process, which provides applicants with a one-off, limited duration grant to overcome the uncertainties that inhibit innovation, research, and development. The assumption is that without challenge-fund support, such activities are either unlikely to happen, or will occur at a later stage, with reduced developmental effects. The fund is managed by The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and implemented in cooperation with Partners Albania for Change and Development.

The fund is open to start-ups created around innovative business concepts, registered or to be registered and operating in Albania.

Applications are only accepted in **English language** to allow a transparent selection process.

***Start-ups** are individuals and natural or legal persons, which have been conceived, created and operate, up to 5 years, with the aim of starting the realization and development of a business model, product and innovative and/or special technological service, with rapid growth potential, for the significant improvement of business models, products and existing services.*

Innovation is defined as “*the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations (OECD).*”

In relation to the “Challenge Fund” innovation will be assessed in the Albanian context, i.e. is this a pioneering venture within this region?

The Challenge Fund is open to three subcategories of start-ups:

- **Lot 1: Idea and Validation stage start-ups**, i.e. a founder or a team in the early stages of developing an innovative business idea (not registered in QKB).
- **Lot 2: Growth stage start-ups**, i.e. a registered business entity (MSME¹) within the first 12 months of operation (from the official registration of the business entity at QKB to the date of publishing the Call for Proposals).
- **Lot 3: Scale-up stage start-ups**, a registered business entity (MSME) within the first 13 months to 5 years of operation (from the official registration of the business entity at QKB to the date of publishing the Call for Proposals).

The Challenge Fund is open to all applicants that meet the following eligibility criteria. The grantees will be selected on a competitive basis.

The overall fund of the Challenge Fund which will be distributed in three (3) Calls for Proposals, in the period of 2023-2026, is **EUR 1,000,000**. The fund will support up to 50 start-ups, with an average of 16 - 17 grantees from all subcategories of start-ups awarded in each Call for Proposals.

3. Who can apply?

The Challenge Fund is open to Albanian start-ups created around an innovative business concept.

A start-up within any sector is eligible to apply. There are no limits in terms of sector or business focus apart from those normal in donor support such as alcoholic beverages, tobacco, weapons, etc. Nevertheless, the Challenge Fund will give priority to the sectors with considerable importance to the current Albanian economy and/or in which Albanian economy is considered to have comparative advantage in a regional, EU or global contexts, such as *tourism and its related industries; agriculture and Agri-related industries, green economy including climate smart innovations and energy, not excluding ICT which is regarded as enabling (cross-cutting) technology for various sectors*. Start-ups operating in disciplines with generally stronger women participation, such as tourism, Agri-processing and the creative sector are also particularly encouraged to apply.

The evaluation process is carried out in a transparent manner based on specific criteria, involving an evaluation committee with national and international expertise. The evaluation team will especially consider the following criteria:

- **INNOVATION** - the uniqueness of the business concept in the Albanian context and its innovative character.
- **FEASIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY CRITERIA** - commercial viability, the credentials and past business record of the entrepreneur, the qualifications of the team and their organizational and technical capacity, the correlation between the activities, the resources and the expected results, the potential for fast growth, the willingness of the entrepreneur/team to share the costs of the business proposal, as well as the likelihood of

¹ Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise

sustainability.

- **ADDITIONAL CRITERIA** - the ability to generate employment and business linkages, diverse teams and women led ventures, improved quality of life for the beneficiaries, positive environmental impact, development of local value chains, linkages to academia, other businesses and relevant research, secured additional funding, and start-ups located outside of Tirana.

3.1 Eligibility criteria

Apart from falling under one of the three above-mentioned start-up categories, the applicant must also satisfy the following eligibility criteria to be eligible for a grant under the Challenge Fund:

- be a legal person (business entity - MSME) already established in Albania (*applicable only for Lots 2 & 3*);
- ensure that the start-up will be registered as a business entity - MSME and operate in Albania (*applicable only for Lot 1*) (hence also Albanian diaspora, and non-Albanian residents in Albania would be eligible to apply as long as the business is assured to take place in Albania);
- **not** have performed registered activity for more than 5 years from the date of publication of this Call for Proposals;
- must provide minimum co-financing share of the total value of the proposed budget, in the respective %, as provided in section 4.2. of this guidelines;
- has no tax payment obligations to national and local authorities (*applicable only for Lot 2 & 3*);
- be directly responsible for the preparation and implementation of the activities outlined in the application.

3.2 Non-eligibility criteria

Potential applicants are **not eligible** to a grant from the Challenge Fund if:

- a) they are bankrupt or being wound up, are having their affairs administered by the courts, have entered into an arrangement with creditors, have suspended business activities, are the subject of proceedings concerning those matters, or are in any analogous situation, arising from a similar procedure provided for in the national legislation;
- b) they have been convicted of an offence concerning professional conduct by a judgment which has the force of res judicata (i.e., against which no appeal is possible);
- c) they are guilty of serious professional misconduct proven by any means;
- d) they have not fulfilled obligations relating to the payment of debts to the consolidated state budget;

- e) they have been the subject of a judgment which has the force of res judicata for fraud, corruption, involvement in a criminal organization or any other illegal activity detrimental to the national financial interests;
- f) they have been declared to be in serious breach of contract for failure to comply with their contractual obligations in connection with a procurement procedure or other grant award procedure financed by the national budget, or international donors;
- g) are subject to a conflict of interests; the conflict of interests represents any circumstances that may affect the assessment or implementation process, in an objective and impartial manner. Such circumstances may result from economic interests, political or national preferences or family connections;
- h) are guilty of misrepresentation in supplying the information required by the Challenge Fund team as a condition of participation in the call for proposals or fail to supply this information;
- i) have attempted to obtain confidential information or influence the evaluators during the assessment process of current or previous calls for proposals;
- k) they **do not** fulfil standard requirements with regards to wages or accept the decent work agenda (i.e. adhere to offering productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity);
- l) any entity that has been found to have misused Sida or other donor or public funds in the past;
- m) political parties, groupings, or institutions or their subsidiaries and affiliates;
- n) applicants that advocate, promote, or espouse anti-democratic policies or illegal activities;
- o) applicants whose objectives are for discriminatory and religious purposes, and whose main objective for the grant is of a religious nature;

3.3 Number of applications

An applicant may not submit more than one (1) application under the 1st call for proposals for the Challenge Fund.

4. The grant

4.1 The grant amount

Under **this call** the three subcategories of start-ups are eligible for a grant from the Challenge Fund of the following amount:

- **Lot 1: Idea and Validation stage start-ups** - maximum 10 000 EUR [a founder or a team in the early stages of developing an innovative business idea (not registered entity)]

- **Lot 2: Growth stage start-ups** - maximum 20 000 EUR [a registered business entity within the first 12 months of operation from the official registration at the QKB to the date of publishing of the Call for Proposals]
- **Lot 3: Scale-up stage start-ups** - maximum 30 000 EUR (a registered business entity within the first 13 month and 5 years of operation from the official registration of the business entity at the QKB to the date of publishing of the Call for Proposals)

The total grant amount from the Challenge Fund may not exceed:

- **Lot 1: Idea and Validation stage start-ups** - 95% of the total budget
- **Lot 2: Growth stage start-ups** - 80% of the total budget
- **Lot 3: Scale-up stage start-ups** - 70% of the total budget

4.2 Cost-sharing

An important element in any challenge fund instrument is the cost-sharing aspect. The Challenge Fund grant is also given on a cost-share basis, i.e. the applicant is expected to co-share the costs. For any start-up funds are scarce and that is why the co-shared amount may be in cash or in-kind contributions such as salaries, reinvested profits, and assets. In case of Fix Assets, the Net book value should be equal or higher than the amount of co-shared and will be justified with proper documentation as relevant.

The applicant must provide minimum co-financing share of the total value of the proposed budget, in the respective %;

- **Lot 1: Idea and Validation stage start-ups** - minimum 5% of the total budget
- **Lot 2: Growth stage start-ups** - minimum 20% of the total budget
- **Lot 3: Scale-up stage start-ups** - minimum 30% of the total budget

4.3 Eligible costs and activities

The Challenge Fund aims to boost start-up creation and facilitate start-up growth. Each start-up is unique and has unique needs in terms of the allocation of funds. Therefore, the funds from the Challenge Fund may be utilised for a variety of activities, as long as these are deemed to be reasonable and in line with the business proposal objectives.

4.3.1 Examples of eligible activities

The following list offers **some examples** of eligible activities (not-exhaustive):

- developing new products (including protecting intellectual property rights and standards);
- diversification of new products, processes or services through new and innovative solutions;

- development and improvement of new organizational models and working processes; purchase/development of equipment and software for technological advancement (Note: if it proves to be justified (price, purchase option or the like), the purchase of used equipment from a legal entity is allowed) (Note: the bought equipment cannot be subject of transfer of ownership for at least two years after the validity period of the grant contract) (Note: The bought equipment cannot be pledged as a security for a loan for at least two years after the validity period of the grant contract);
- development or improvement of production processes that can lead to an increase in production capacity or new product characteristics;
- development of new energy-efficient solutions.

4.3.2 Non-eligible activities

The following types of activities are **not** eligible for a grant from the Challenge Fund:

- activities which endanger the environment;
- activities concerned only or mainly with individual sponsorships for participation in workshops, internships, professional courses, seminars, conferences, and congresses;
- activities concerned only or mainly with individual scholarships for studies;
- activities linked to political parties;
- activities which fall within the general activities of competent state institutions or state administration services, including local government;
- activities confined to charitable donations;
- purchasing of vehicles, computers, mobile phones. Such actions may be considered for acceptance only if crucial for the implementation of the action;
- humanitarian activities.

4.3.3 Eligible costs

All costs added in the budget section of the Financial Form must fulfil **all** of the following criteria:

- a) they are incurred during the implementation period of the grant;
- b) they are in accordance with the budget proposal in the Financial Form;
- c) they are necessary for the implementation of the business idea which is the subject of the grant;
- d) they are identifiable, verifiable and documented (e.g. contract, invoice, order form), in particular being recorded in the accounting records of the beneficiary and determined to the applicable accounting standards;
- e) they comply with the requirements of applicable tax and social security legislation;
- f) they are reasonable, justified, and comply with the principle of sound financial management, in particular regarding economy and efficiency;
- g) they incurred in accordance with Albanian national legislation;
- h) they are not listed as an ineligible expenditure;

- i) one expenditure item cannot be covered under more than one expenditure category or under more than one budget line under a given expenditure category;
- j) they are used for transport, installation, guarantee for the period of implementation and training of workers on purchased equipment;
- k) co-financing rate as stipulated in the Contract, is applied to any eligible cost under all expenditure categories.

4.3.4 Non-eligible costs

The following costs are non-eligible:

- a) value-added tax costs;
- b) custom duties;
- c) debts and debt service charges (interest);
- d) provisions for losses or potential future liabilities;
- e) costs declared by the beneficiary and financed by another project or programme;
- f) purchases of land or buildings;
- g) currency exchange losses;
- h) bank guarantee costs or any other guarantees;
- i) credit to third parties;
- j) fines, financial penalties and expenditure on legal disputes and litigation;
- k) costs of leasing;
- l) products or services which belong to specific sectors that are not eligible in accordance with EU practices (alcohol production, tobacco, gambling, military);
- m) business registration fee.

4.4 Duration and disbursement

The period for the implementation of the business proposal will be **maximum 12 (twelve) months** and the grant must be utilized within this period.

The setup of the disbursement of the grant will be assessed on a case-to-case basis, depending on the specific circumstances and needs of each start-up. The funds may therefore be allocated in two or more tranches. The final tranche, representing 10% of the total eligible costs at the end of the action, will be allocated after the approval of the final financial report.

5. Cross-cutting issues

The Challenge Fund supports gender equality improvements in employment rate, increased number of women entrepreneurs, women founded start-ups and gender diversity in the team. In the evaluation process additional value will be given to women founded start-ups, women-owned businesses and gender diverse teams. Women led business ventures are therefore especially encouraged to apply.

It is a requirement of the donors that all projects take into consideration environment and climate aspects. Environmental and climate issues will be taken into account in the selection process, and business ideas, innovative products and processes that are focused on environmentally friendly technologies, energy saving and using alternative energy sources will be prioritised. Therefore, innovative start-ups providing potential solutions to such issues are highly encouraged to apply.

Start-ups with a prominent tech content and with potential to go global and grow are also highly encouraged to apply.

6. The application and evaluation process

6.1 The application process

Applications must be submitted **ONLY** online in the Challenge Fund platform. All applications submitted by other means (mail, e-mail, hand delivery, etc.) will be rejected.

The basic steps in the Challenge Fund application process are as follows:

- A call for proposals, including a deadline for submission of proposals, is announced on the Challenge Fund website under Challenge fund - 1st call for proposals and the online application form becomes accessible.
- The applicant registers and creates an account in the Challenge Fund platform to start an application.
- The applicant fills out the online application form, which consists of the following sections:

1. Information about the start-up
2. Business Proposal
3. Attach relevant documents, as follows:

Lot 1: Idea and Validation stage

- i. Financial Form, including Budget (sheet 1), Key metrics (sheet 2), Cash Flow (sheet 3), Financial Data in the first three years after the Challenge Fund grant (sheet 4); - *excel format*
- ii. Canvas business model - *PDF*;
- iii. ID of the founder - *scanned as PDF*;
- iv. CV of the legal owner or administrator-*PDF*;
- v. CV of relevant team members -*PDF*;

- vi. Document issued by the Court certifying that the founder of the start-up has not been convicted, issued within one month from the application date; - *scanned as PDF*
- vii. Document issued by the Prosecution certifying that the founder of the start-up has not any pending court cases, issued within one month from the application date; - *scanned as PDF*

Lot 2: Growth stage & Lot 3: Scale-up stage

- i. Financial Form, including Budget (sheet 1), Key metrics (sheet 2), Cash Flow (sheet 3), Financial Data in the first three years after the Challenge Fund grant (sheet 4); - *excel format*
- ii. Canvas business model; - *PDF*
- iii. ID of the legal owner or administrator; - *scanned as PDF*
- iv. CV of key staff, including CV of the legal owner or administrator; - *one merged document as PDF*
- v. The registration acts (NUIS) in accordance with relevant national law, issued within one month from the application date (source: <https://e-Albania.al/>); - scanned as *PDF*
- vi. Historical extract issued by National Business Center (QKB), issued within one month from the application date (source: <https://e-Albania.al/>); - scanned as *PDF*
- vii. Last Financial statements (Profit Loss Accounts and Balance Sheets). Certified copies by Tax Authority issued within one month from the application date (if registered in 2022); - scanned as *PDF*
- viii. Certificate of tax payment obligations (no debt), issued within one month from the application date (source: <https://e-Albania.al/>); - *PDF*
- ix. Certificate of local tax payment obligations (no debt), issued within one month from the application date (source: <https://e-Albania.al/>); - *PDF*
- x. Document issued by the Court certifying that the founder of the start-up has not been convicted, issued within one month from the application date; - scanned as *PDF*
- xi. Document issued by the Prosecution certifying that the founder of the start-up does not have any pending court cases, issued within one month from the application date; - scanned as *PDF*

For more information about the application process, please see **Application Instructions**.

Any questions related to the application process should be sent in writing via e-mail no later than **15 days** before the application submission deadline. The contracting authority has no obligation to provide clarifications to questions received after this date. Questions should be sent to the address indicated below, indicating the reference of the call for proposals.

Email address: challengefund@euforinnovation.al

We therefore strongly encourage all applicants not to postpone the submission of the application form until the last day before deadline.

Replies will be given no later than **11 days** before the deadline for the submission of applications. To ensure equal treatment of applicants, the contracting authority cannot give prior opinion on

the eligibility of applicants, or actions. No individual replies will be given to questions. All questions and answers will be published on Challenge Fund website under “Challenge fund - 1st call for proposals”. It is therefore advisable to consult the abovementioned website regularly in order to be informed on the questions and answered published.

6.2 The evaluation process

The basic steps in the “Challenge Fund” evaluation process are as follows:

- Stage 1: Administrative check consisting on the assessment of the basic application criteria along with requested application formats and supporting documents;
- Stage 2: Technical evaluation of proposals. For this stage’ evaluation, applicants that have successfully passed Administrative check, will be requested to submit/upload supporting documents regarding cost-sharing and evidence of market research for budget lines supported through the Challenge Fund. A signed Declaration on Honour will be also requested to be submitted/uploaded. This stage consists in two steps:

- Step 1: Evaluation by an evaluation committee consisting of international and national experts.
- Step 2: On site monitoring and checks to ensure that the applicant has submitted all requested documents related to Stage 2 evaluation process, and that the information provided in the application form and supporting documents is in line with the situation in the field, ensuring that the applicant has all the preconditions to implement the business proposal proposed.

- Stage 3: Pitching event, consisting of an open competition during which the selected applicants present their business proposal in front of a panel of international and national experts. The pitching event takes place in Tirana. The selected applicants are expected to participate at this event at their own expenses. The presentation will be done following a template that will be provided to the selected applicants.

Following each stage in the selection process the applicants will be notified if they have been selected or not to proceed to the next stage of evaluation.

7. Contracting

Prior to signing the contract, the Contracting Authority (CA) reserves the right to negotiate the budget proposed with the applicant in order to:

- Ensure cost efficiency of the action;
- Ensure a fair balance between operational and non-operational costs;
- Reflect real market costs;
- Reflect costs in accordance with proposed activities.

The negotiation should in no way change the substantial part of the proposed action, but rather to be in line with the administrative/financial/HR/programmatic rules of the donor and of the CA.

It is a requirement for all applicants selected in **Lot 1: Idea and validation stage**, to be registered as a business entity (MSME), in one of the registration types listed in the

application form, before signing of the grant contract.

Contracts with the final grantees will be signed approximately 4 months following the deadline for submission of applications.

The maximum 12 (twelve) months implementation period includes regular reporting to the project team as well as financial and legal checks. All start-ups will be audited at the end of the implementation period.

8. Indicative Timetable

	DATE	TIME
1. Publication of 1st Call for Proposals	17.11.2023	-
2. Deadline for Q&A about the Call for Proposals	07.12.2023	-
3. Deadline for the Q&A clarifications issued by CA	11.12.2023	-
4. Deadline for submission of applications	22.12.2023	18:00 hrs
5. Initial assessment/administrative check (Stage 1)	January 2024	
6. Technical Evaluation (Stage 2)	March 2024	
7. Pitching event (Stage 3)	April 2024	
8. Grant Contracts signature	April 2024	

All times are in the time zone of Albania.

This indicative timetable refers to provisional dates (except for dates 1, 2, 3, and 4) and may be updated by the contracting authority during the procedure.

9. Complaints

The applicants will be informed in written by the CA concerning their application and, if rejected, the reasons for the negative decision. An applicant believing that it has been harmed by an error or irregularity during the award process may lodge a complaint within **5 (five) working days** from the day when the rejection letter/email has been received. The complaints will be answered within **5 (five) working days** from the receipt of the complaint. The complaints should be sent to the email address: challengefund.complaints@euforinnovation.al

10. Information sessions

To assist all interested applicants in the 1st Call for Proposals, on-site and online information sessions regarding the procedures and the application process will be organised in the following dates and locations:

DATE	TIME	LOCATION
23.11.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Universiteti “Aleksander Xhuvani”, Elbasan
24.11.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Universiteti “Ismail Qemali”, Vlorë
30.11.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Online link
01.12.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Innovation and Technology Hub, Korçë
04.12.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Online link
05.12.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Qendra Rinore Multifunkionale, Berat
06.12.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Universiteti “Eqerem Çabej”, Gjirokastër
07.12.2023	10:30 - 12:30	Universiteti “Luigj Gurakuqi”, Shkodër

All interested applicants, are requested to express their interest to participate in one of the information sessions, at least two days prior to the selected information session, by sending an email to challengefund@eu4innovation.al, specifying the selected session.

Interested applicants to participate in the online information sessions, are requested to register in advance in the link provided in the table above.

The deadline for submission of applications is 22 December 2023, at 18:00.

Applications received after this deadline will be rejected.

11. List of annexes

1. Application Instructions - *for information only*
2. Application forms -*for information only*
3. Financial Form, including Budget (sheet 1), Key metrics (sheet 2), Cash Flow (sheet 3), Financial Data in the first three years after the Challenge Fund grant (sheet 4) - *to be completed in English and uploaded in excel format.*
4. Canvas business model - *to be completed in English and uploaded in PDF format.*
5. Declaration on Honor - *to be completed, signed and uploaded in scanned PDF format, **ONLY** by applicants that will be selected for Stage 2 of the evaluation process, upon request by the Contracting Authority.*
6. Power Point Presentation form for the Pitching Event - *to be completed and uploaded in the online platform by applicants that will be selected for Stage 3 of the evaluation process: Pitching event, upon request by the Contracting Authority.*



Additional information regarding the “Challenge fund- 1st call for proposals” can be found on <https://challengefund.euforinnovation.al/> including information days, the Application Instruction, the online application forms, all relevant dates for application submission, etc. You may also send an email to challengefund@euforinnovation.al.