



# REGIOSTARS 2026

GUIDE FOR APPLICANTS

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# REGIOSTARS 2026

REGIOSTARS are the annual competition organised by DG REGIO since 2008: it has become Europe's label of excellence for EU-funded projects that demonstrate the impact and inclusiveness of regional development. In 2026, projects will compete in five categories, detailed here below. By showcasing solutions to common challenges and tapping into major opportunities, the REGIOSTARS has inspired regions to deliver increasingly impactful EU regional policy. We especially encourage applications from less-developed regions in Europe and from all programme areas. The REGIOSTARS application form on EUSurvey is open until 22May 2026.

The REGIOSTARS are awarded to projects in five categories.:

- **Category 1) A COMPETITIVE AND SMART EUROPE**  
*Promoting competitiveness, innovation and economic resilience*
- **Category 2) A GREEN EUROPE**  
*The green transition as the enabler of regional development*
- **Category 3) A CONNECTED EUROPE**  
*Enhancing mobility and connectivity between regions*
- **Category 4) A SOCIAL AND INCLUSIVE EUROPE**  
*Achieving a more inclusive Europe by harnessing regional talents*
- **Category 5) A EUROPE CLOSER TO THE CITIZENS**  
*Fostering the sustainable development of all types of territories*

A panel of high-level academics in the respective fields will assess the submitted applications and select the finalists. Finalists will then be invited to a “final round” of selection during the European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels.

As in previous years, the public will have the opportunity to vote for their favourite finalist for the Public Choice Award. All winners will be announced during the REGIOSTARS ceremony, to be held also during the European Week of Regions and Cities.

The winners of the five categories and the public choice award winner will be involved in follow-up activities, managed in cooperation with DG REGIO, to promote the awarded projects in their region.

This guide for applicants provides a detailed description of the award categories, the eligibility and award criteria. Answers to frequently asked questions can be found on the FAQ document available on the [REGIOSTARS website](#).

We are looking forward to receiving your project application, and good luck!  
The REGIOSTARS team

# Competition Categories

## Category 1 – A Competitive and Smart Europe

*Promoting competitiveness, innovation and economic resilience*

Category 1 focusses on projects in support of Policy Objective 1, to achieve a competitive and smart Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity.

Since 1993, the Single Market is at the heart of the European project, enabling people, services, goods and capital to move freely, offering opportunities for European businesses as well as greater choice and lower prices for consumers. It is the backbone of Europe's resilience. It enables citizens to travel, live, work or study wherever they wish. Overall, it helps the European cities and regions to deepen their integration into the European Union. It is a major objective to provide a frictionless single market, where companies of all sizes and in any sector can compete on equal terms, and can develop, market and use digital technologies, products and services at a scale that boosts their productivity and global competitiveness, and where consumers can be confident that their rights are protected. Through a single market, the European Union is committed to strengthen its position on the global market, become a global digital player, and to provide a fair and competitive digital economy. At the same time the European Commission is placing competitiveness at the heart of its economic agenda.

The Commission is determined to make this Europe's "Digital Decade" and thus to implement a human-centric, sustainable vision for a digital society while aiming for digital sovereignty. The EU's digital strategy aims to make this transformation work for people and businesses, while helping to achieve its target of a climate-neutral Europe by 2050. The twin transition – the green and digital transition – should ideally reinforce each other. These transitions reinforce labour markets call for highly qualified and skilled workers. Reskilling, upskilling, and reintegration into labour markets are thus key to ensure that the green and digital transitions are socially fair and just.

We are looking for good projects that promote innovative and smart economic transformation in line with the goals of the twin transition and the EU's competitiveness agenda. This includes projects that enhance digitalisation processes, skills and show innovative approaches to implementing Research and Innovation Strategies involving stakeholders, or fostering the smart cities and villages agendas. Projects that prepare European SMEs for competing in a globalised economy are welcome and may involve, for example, activities that develop new technology and products, improve innovation systems, build competitiveness through design and creative industries, foster social entrepreneurialism, enhance social and service innovation, support new

business models and practice-based innovations. Contributing to sustainable regional innovation systems, support Europe's industrial autonomy or further the job market in the digital industries could be features of such projects.

#### Useful references:

- European Digital Decade: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/europes-digital-decade>
- European Industrial Strategy: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-industrial-strategy\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-industrial-strategy_en)
- European Green Deal Industrial Plan: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/green-deal-industrial-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/green-deal-industrial-plan_en)
- European Chips Act: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-chips-act\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-chips-act_en)
- Twin Transition: [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/twin-green-digital-transition-how-sustainable-digital-technologies-could-enable-carbon-neutral-eu-2022-06-29\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/twin-green-digital-transition-how-sustainable-digital-technologies-could-enable-carbon-neutral-eu-2022-06-29_en)
- Smart Specialisation Platform: <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu>
- 30th anniversary of the single market: [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/single-market/30th-anniversary\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/single-market/30th-anniversary_en)
- The Single Market at 30: [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/publications/single-market-30\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/publications/single-market-30_en)
- European Smart Villages: [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal_en.html)
- European Competitiveness: [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness_en)

## Category 2 – A Green Europe

### *The green transition as the enabler of regional development*

Category 2 focusses on projects in support of Policy Objective 2, to achieve a green and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility.

The European Union strives to be the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. With the ambitious European Green Deal the European Union aims to improve the well-being and health of citizens and future generations by providing (1) fresh air, clean water, healthy soil and biodiversity, (2) renovated, energy efficient buildings, (3) healthy and affordable food, (4) more public transport, (5) cleaner energy and cutting-edge clean technological innovation, (6) longer lasting products that can be repaired, recycled and re-used, (7) future-proof jobs and skills training for the transition as well as a (8) globally competitive and resilient industry.

At the heart of the European Green deal lies the preservation and protection of Europe's seas, oceans, and environment which are a source of natural and economic wealth for Europe. Overall, it includes protecting the EU's biodiversity and ecosystems, reducing air, water and soil pollution, moving towards a circular economy, improving waste management and ensuring the sustainability of the blue economy.

The Green Deal provides an important framework for a variety of initiatives. With the REPowerEU Plan the EU aims to support the saving of energy, producing clean energy and diversifying the energy supplies. To achieve climate neutrality the Commission proposed the European Climate Law, which also sets a new, more ambitious net greenhouse gas emissions reduction target of at least -55% by 2030, compared to the level of 1990. The Regulation on land, land use change and forestry (LULUCF, revised in 2023) sets out how the land use sector contributes to the EU's climate goals with a separate land-based net carbon removals target of 310 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent by 2030.

Europe also aims for a shift in the agricultural and food system that makes the EU the global leader in terms of safety, security of supply, nutrition and quality. The Farm-to-Fork Strategy, for example, aims to accelerate the transition to a sustainable food system. Europe's green transition can also be a motor for Europe's digital, energy and industrial transition as foreseen by the so-called twin transition. The Just Transition Mechanism supports the transition towards a climate-neutral economy happens supporting territories that are the most carbon-intensive or in which the most people working in fossil fuels live.

We are looking for good projects that promote a greener and more resilient Europe and help achieve the European Union's Green Deal goals of climate neutrality and improve the

environmental conditions. Amongst others, projects can include investments in green initiatives that improve air and water quality, promote sustainable agriculture, preserve environmental systems. Creating an effective circular economy, transforming towards a resource- efficient economy or transitioning to renewables can also be features of such projects.

**Useful references:**

- European Climate Law: [https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/european-climate-law\\_en](https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/european-climate-law_en)
- European Green Deal: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)
- Farm to Fork: [https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en)
- Environmental Policy: [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/index_en)
- The Green Deal Industrial Plan: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/green-deal-industrial-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/green-deal-industrial-plan_en)
- EU rules on land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF): [https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/land-use-sector\\_en](https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/land-use-sector_en)
- Just Transition Mechanism: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism_en).

## Category 3 – A Connected Europe

*Enhancing mobility and connectivity between regions*

Category 3 focusses on projects in support of Policy Objective 3, to enhance mobility and connectivity.

A connected, modern, secure and smart infrastructure will be key to achieving cohesion and to delivering the European Green Deal. As such the European Union is committed to support the development of high performing, sustainable and efficiently interconnected trans-European networks in the fields of transport, energy and digital services. Transport policy at the European level aims to ensure the smooth, efficient, safe and free movement of people and goods throughout the EU by means of integrated networks using all modes of transport (road, rail, water and air).

Energy Policy works towards a continent-wide energy system where energy is flowing freely across borders, based on competition with effective regulation of energy markets at EU level where necessary, and to deliver secure energy provision to citizens. As such the policy outlines the goal of a resilient Energy Union with ambitious climate objectives at its core. This means to provide EU consumers – households and businesses – with secure, sustainable, competitive and affordable energy.

At the same time, in its Digital Strategy, the EU formulates the goal for Europe to be the most connected continent by 2030. In order to achieve this, for example, the EU is developing harmonised rules for connectivity services, introduced the European electronic communications code, supports wireless networks. The main goal for connectivity in the Digital Decade is to have access to high-speed internet coverage for every European household by 2025 and gigabit connectivity by 2030. The Connecting Europe Facility Digital Programme supports for example twelve “digital cross-border corridors”, established to accommodate live tests of 5G for Cooperative Connected and Automated Mobility. The Connecting Europe Facility continues to support investments that fill the missing links in Europe's energy, transport and digital backbone.

We are looking for good projects that promote the delivery of a more connected Europe. This includes projects that support efficient, safe and environmentally friendly mobility solutions within the EU and create the conditions for a competitive industry generating growth and jobs. These can also include wide-ranging issues such as passenger rights or clean fuels. Projects can also help achieve goals of the Trans-European Networks in the field of energy, transport or digital connectivity. Explicitly, projects can showcase the development of new energy or transport infrastructure, or the rehabilitation or upgrading of existing one. They can also showcase the development of safe, secure and sustainable high-performance infrastructure including Gigabit and 5G networks; increased capacity and resilience of digital backbone infrastructures; or the digitalisation of transport and energy networks.

### Useful references:

- Digital Agenda for Europe: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/64/digital-agenda-for-europe>
- Energy Policy: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/68/energy-policy-general-principles>
- Energy Union Strategy: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2015:80:FIN>
- A clean energy transition: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/energy-and-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/energy-and-green-deal_en)
- Connecting Europe Facility: [https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/connecting-europe-facility\\_en](https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/connecting-europe-facility_en)
- 5G cross-border corridors: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/cross-border-corridors>
- Transport Policy: [https://transport.ec.europa.eu/facts-fundings\\_en](https://transport.ec.europa.eu/facts-fundings_en)

## Category 4 – A Social and Inclusive Europe

*Achieving a more inclusive Europe by harnessing regional talents*

Category 4 focusses on projects in support of Policy Objective 4, to achieve a more social and inclusive Europe by implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The European Union is based on the values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. In line with that, the EU is taking huge efforts in combating discrimination of any kind and enhancing the equality of treatment of all Europeans, including gender equality, integration of migrants, and the accessibility for disabled persons. Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights clarifies that any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, nationality, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation is against the values of a European Model of Society and shall be prohibited in the EU.

In line with these, the 20 principles under the European Pillar of Social Rights are guiding the EU towards a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity for everyone. This includes equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and the right to adequate social protection and inclusion. The ensuing Action Plan shall assure to reach three ambitious targets until 2030. First, this is to have at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 in employment; second, to have at least 60% of all adults participating in training every year; and third, to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million people.

Challenging drivers around the European skills agenda are, amongst others, the proceeding of the demographic change towards an ageing society and the global crises that impact on Europe. More than three quarters of companies in the EU say they have difficulties finding workers with the necessary skills; in particular, this concerns jobs in industries of high-technology and digitalisation. The rapid shift towards a climate neutral Europe and digital transformation is changing the way we work, learn, take part in society and live our everyday lives. For Europe herein lies an opportunity to become more social and inclusive if its people develop the right skills.

In order to become a more social and inclusive society the EU also broadens its agenda and funds for example projects in line with social and affordable housing goals or for supporting better healthcare.

We are looking for good projects that contribute to a more inclusive society at large, non-discrimination of any person, and gender equality within and beyond the EU. In particular, projects shall be supportive of the 20 principles as well as of the three targets of the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This may, for example, involve activities on the labour market, in the education sector, in local communities and international networks. Explicitly, projects shall demonstrate innovation in terms of fostering active inclusion of discriminated persons or persons

at the risk of discrimination, easing the reintegration of disadvantaged persons into the labour market, contributing to gender equality and diversity through management strategies, or creating jobs in course of integration work and anti-discrimination efforts. Projects are welcome that engage with care of children, the elderly as well as the youth, and more generally health and contribute to a good work-life balance.

**Useful references:**

- Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>
- The European Pillar of Social Rights: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights_en)
- The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)
- DG JUST, Gender Equality: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality_en)

## Category 5 – A Europe Closer to the Citizens

### *Fostering the sustainable development of all types of territories*

Category 5 focusses on projects in support of Policy Objective 5, to foster the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives.

The European Union is committed to the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas through local initiatives. Key to achieving European cohesion is to overcome multi-thematic challenges for an integrated regional development across sectors. With the introduction of this cross-cutting Policy Objective, the EU aims to recognise the importance of integrated investment strategies targeting different territorial scales – for example cities, rural areas, metropolitan areas and functional regions) where people work, live and commute daily.

The EU aims to respond to these challenges identified within a certain territory, for which local stakeholders develop local solutions. Having an explicit territorial focus means that needs, challenges and opportunities for development must match the appropriate spatial scale and territorial context. The Commission recognizes the role of small and medium size cities and functional area approaches as important driving forces for regional and rural attractiveness and development by creating positive spill-over effects between urban areas and other territories, and reinforcing urban-rural linkages.

During 2021-2027, in each Member State at least 8% of the ERDF resources are set aside for cities of all sizes and their metropolitan and functional areas through territorial and/or local development strategies, i.e. using Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI), Community-led Local Development (CLLD) but also similar tools supporting integrated approaches designed by Member States. Territorial strategies provide the opportunity to build capacity and initiate local actions contributing to European policies, including green and digital transitions.

We are looking for good projects that support the implementation of local and regional strategies, such as, for example, Sustainable Urban Development (SUD) strategies or territorial and local development strategies. Projects shall as such contribute to the wider local and regional development and develop spill-over effects. Projects can also showcase specific areas of improvement for citizens daily life and support capacity building. Projects aim to help the region encounter specific development challenges in a functional urban area or territory and address these through an integrated approach. In doing so the projects make Europe more tangible for citizens.

#### **Useful references:**

- European Citizens Initiative: [https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/get-involved/european-citizens-initiative\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/get-involved/european-citizens-initiative_en)
- Territorial Cohesion: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/what/territorial-cohesion\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/what/territorial-cohesion_en)

- Handbook of Urban Development Strategies:  
<https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/urbanstrategies/territorial-focus#the-chapter>
- Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies:  
<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC130788>

# Eligibility and Award Criteria

## **Eligibility criteria**

All applications for the REGIOSTARS Awards shall meet the following **eligibility criteria**:

- (1) The application shall be submitted via EUSurvey no later than 22 May 2026, 23:59:59 CET.
- (2) Applications must be in one of the official EU languages.
- (3) The application shall include an endorsement letter from the relevant Managing Authority. The endorsement letter should be either a completed endorsement form signed by the Head of the Managing Authority or an email from the Head of the Managing Authority with equivalent information confirming endorsement. The endorsement letter should be uploaded as a PDF together with the application. (Please note that it is possible to submit up to five projects per programme; the Managing Authority is responsible for respecting this limit.)
- (4) The application shall refer to a project that received EU co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Social Fund, Just Transition Fund or from any strand of Interreg programmes, with funding starting no earlier than 1 January 2014.
- (5) Only completed projects are eligible. A completed project is a project which has carried out all the planned activities, received its final financial contribution and has been declared closed by the project beneficiary and/or the Managing Authority.
- (6) The project must clearly refer to one of the 5 award categories.

## **Award criteria**

All eligible applications will be assessed by the REGIOSTARS jury against the following **award criteria**:

Cohesion	Contribution of the project to economic, social and territorial cohesion at large; with a supra-regional to European perspective. A project's added value for cohesion will be evaluated here.
Impact	The local and regional impact of the project and the quality of final results. How did the project change something for the better in its region?
Innovation	The innovative character of the project within the logic of the chosen award category. What is new or has not been done before? Innovation may be understood in economic, social and/or ecological terms.
Sustainability	The potential of the project to continue into the future, in terms of economic sustainability. Efforts of the project to live beyond its lifetime should be demonstrated.

Citizens	How citizens and actors of civil society got involved in the development and/or implementation of the project
Transferability	The potential of the project to be transferred to other regions in Europe and, ideally, upscaled and rolled out across the European Union.

## Timeline

Event	Date
Competition launch	Tuesday 10 February
Deadline for applications	Friday 22 May
Information about the eligibility check	Friday 5 June
Announcement of the finalists	Tuesday 14 July
Start of the Public Vote	Thursday 3 September
Online training on pitching project to finalists	mid-September
End of the public vote	mid-October (tbc)
Finalists' pitch and panel discussion with jurors; REGIOSTARS Ceremony	mid-October, in Brussels (tbc)
Follow-up with winners	From 1 November on

## Conversion Table

Projects should apply within the category that corresponds to the policy objective under which they have been funded. For the projects funded during the 2014-2020 period, the applicants should refer to the competition category corresponding to the thematic objective under which they have been funded as indicated in the table.

Thematic Objectives 2014-2020	Policy Objectives 2021-2027
TO 1; TO 2; TO3;	PO1- More competitive and smarter Europe
TO4; TO5; TO6	PO2- Greener and low carbon Europe
TO7	PO3- More connected Europe
TO8, TO9, TO10	PO4- More Social Europe
ITI, CLLD, UIA	PO5- Europe Closer to citizens

Projects from 2014-2020 falling under Thematic Objective 11 should be placed in one of the five categories according to their specific topic.