

## National Scientific Program “VIHREN-2021”

Guide for applicants– specific conditions for the program

Addition to the General Guidelines for the National Research Programs “Peter Beron i NIE” and  
“VIHREN-2021”

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## **Objectives and principles of National Scientific Program “VIHREN-2021”**

The National Scientific Program “VIHREN-2021” sets out the objectives and principles of funding, designed to support excellent Principal Investigators (PIs):

The **Leading researcher** Grant scheme is designed to support excellent Principal Investigators at the career stage at which they are already established research leaders with a recognised track record of research achievements.

The **Established researcher** Grant scheme is designed to support excellent Principal Investigators at the career stage at which they are consolidating their own independent research team or program.

Principal Investigators must demonstrate the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of their scientific proposal. The “VIHREN-2021” frontier research grants operate on a 'bottom-up' basis without predetermined priorities. Applications can be made in any field of research with particular emphasis on the frontiers of science and engineering. In particular, proposals of an interdisciplinary nature, which cross the boundaries between different fields of research, pioneering proposals addressing new and emerging fields of research or proposals introducing unconventional, innovative approaches and scientific inventions are encouraged.

### **Specific definitions**

**Action** refers to the individual research project proposed for funding.

The **Beneficiary** is the legal entity that signs the Grant Agreement and has the complete responsibility for the proper implementation of the action. Grants are awarded to the host institution that engages and hosts the PI. The PI will be employed by the host institution. Host institutions must provide conditions for the PI's independence to direct the research and manage its funding. The eligibility conditions for beneficiaries – host institutions are outlined in the General Guide for the National Research Programs.

The **Leading researcher** (LR) is already established research leader with a recognised track record of research achievements which **must be confirmed by a ten-year track record** and a **list of achievements** (if applicable) at the end of the previous calendar year:

1. At least ten publications from the last ten years in major international peer-reviewed multidisciplinary scientific journals and / or leading international peer-reviewed journals, leading peer-reviewed articles for conferences and / or monographs in the relevant research field of scientists (including relevant bibliometric indicators);
2. Research monographs and any translations thereof (if applicable);
3. Patents (if applicable);
4. Prizes/ Awards/ Academy memberships;
5. Invited presentations to internationally established conferences and/or international advanced schools;
6. Research expeditions that the applicant Principal Investigator has led or specialized collections created by the researcher.
7. Organisation of international conferences in the field of the applicant (chairmanship or

membership in the scientific and/or organising committee);  
8. Major contributions to the early careers of excellent researchers;

The **Established researchers** (ER) are excellent investigators at the career stage at which they are consolidating their own independent research team or program. ERs must provide a list of achievements reflecting their track record. The applicant should list at the end of the previous calendar year:

1. At least five publications in major international peer-reviewed multidisciplinary scientific journals and / or leading international peer-reviewed journals, peer-reviewed articles for conferences and / or monographs in the relevant research field (including relevant bibliometric indicators), without the participation of the researcher's doctoral supervisor (PhD supervisor); the PhD degree must be awarded no more than fifteen years before the submission of the project proposal;
2. Research monographs and any translations thereof (if applicable for social sciences and humanities);
3. Patent (if applicable);
4. Prizes/Awards/Academy memberships;
5. Invited presentations to internationally established conferences and/or international advanced schools.

## **1. BUDGET, TIMETABLE, AND HOW TO SUBMIT**

### **General goal of the program**

The **General long-term goal** of the national program is a significant increase of the quality of human resources for conducting research in Bulgaria at the highest level, along with a sustainable positive change in the institutional support of research. The National Scientific Program “VIHREN-2021” will support excellent Principal Investigators (PIs) at the career stage at which they are already established research leaders with a recognised track record of research achievements or they are consolidating their own independent research team or program. Principal Investigators must demonstrate the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of their scientific proposal. The “VIHREN-2021” frontier research grants aim to empower individual researchers and provide the best settings to foster their creativity. Applications can be made in any field of research with particular emphasis on the frontiers of science, scholarship and engineering. In particular, proposals of an interdisciplinary nature, which cross the boundaries between different fields of research, pioneering proposals addressing new and emerging fields of research or proposals introducing unconventional, innovative approaches and scientific inventions are encouraged.

### **Specific goals**

The National Program is aimed to achieve the following specific objectives:

- a) to recognize and support the individual potential for conducting research at the top level and for attracting external funding for research in Bulgaria;

(b) to create a supportive institutional environment for the work of the research team, formed and led by the principal investigator;

(c) to improve the administrative and technical capacity of the basic organization to support the preparation and implementation of national, European and international projects.

The implementation of the program will contribute to the following additional tasks:

(a) to support the rapid build-up of a critical mass of promising scholars in a field to work together on a highly competitive original scientific topic led by an established / leading researcher according to the rules of the European research programs;

b) to stimulate long-term individual research potential at high level through effective support measures and structural changes in the institutional environment to create and support future opportunities to attract additional funding and accelerate the transformation of new knowledge and ideas into innovative products, services and processes;

(c) to improve the training of young researchers (junior researchers, PhD and post-doctoral students) who work in the team of scientists on a common scientific subject;

d) to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of higher education in Bulgaria by transferring modern scientific fields, knowledge, skills and technologies to the educational and training process in Bulgaria.

### ***1.1. INDICATIVE BUDGET***

The budget for the first year is BGN 1,500,000 for the financing of 6 research projects. The projects will be financed for a period of 5 years with a total budget of BGN 1 500 000 per year. This amount includes BGN 1 425 000 for project financing and BGN 75 000 (5% of the total budget of the program) provided for the evaluation process, for monitoring and evaluation of project implementation, and for promotion of the program by Research Fund as a funding organization.

The program is implemented by the Bulgarian Science Fund. The financing of its activities is carried out through the budget of the Ministry of Education and Science.

The program is implemented by applying two separate procedures, respectively for the two project calls for "Established researcher" and for "Leading researcher".

The budget per proposal depends on its duration and is calculated as a maximum amount of BGN 265 000 per year for "Leading researcher" grand and a maximum amount of BGN 210 000 per year for "Established researcher" grand for a maximum period of five years. The project budget will be reduced *pro rata temporis* for shorter project duration.

The Principal Investigator, the host institution and the funding body (NSF) will sign a contract for implementation of the project proposal.

### ***1.2. INDICATIVE TIMETABLE***

Publication of the call	24.09.2021
Opening of the call	24.09.2021
Deadline for submission of proposals	9.11.2021
Eligibility check	12.11.2021
Evaluation of proposals	10.12.2021
Decision for financing of the proposals and information on the outcome of the evaluation	13.12.2021
Indicative date for Contract signature	17.12.2021
Indicative date for grant transfer for the first year	20-21.12.2021
Possible start date of the Action	1.02-1.06.2022

### ***1.3. PROPOSAL SUBMISSION***

Proposals must be submitted electronically to the Bulgarian Science Fund (Funding agency). The documents, specified in the General Guide for the National Research Programs, have to be submitted in Bulgarian to the National Science Fund before the call deadline. Administrative part of the proposal (part A) has to be submitted both in Bulgarian and in English.

The proposal (parts B1 and B2) should be prepared in English by the Principal Investigator. The host institution (applicant legal entity) must confirm its association with and its support to the project and the Principal Investigator. As part of the application the institution must provide a binding statement that the conditions of independence are already fulfilled or will be provided to the Principal Investigator if the application is successful. The host institution support letter (following the template) needs to be printed on the paper with the official letterhead of the Host Institution, originally signed, stamped and dated by the institution's legal representative. **Proposals that do not include this institutional statement will be declared ineligible.**

The Principal Investigator is responsible for the submission of the proposal and all other actions that follow this procedure such as withdrawal, correctness of the information, etc. **In order to be eligible for the call, the electronically submitted proposal have to be signed electronically by the official representative of the applicant organization and submitted not later than 17:00 o'clock (Sofia time) on the date of the deadline for submission.** Incomplete proposals (where parts or sections of the proposal and/or the host institution's commitment statement are missing) may be declared ineligible and will not be evaluated. The proposal must be submitted **before the relevant deadline of the call.**

Only one proposal per researcher may be submitted to this call. However, note that a host institution can be involved in more than one proposal.

## **2. PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS**

### **2.1. BENEFICIARY**

Beneficiaries are Bulgarian scientists and scientists residing in Bulgaria, together with Bulgarian universities or research organizations that are accredited to train doctoral students. The beneficiary - a higher school or scientific organization (see Definitions) is the host organisation located in Bulgaria which satisfies the conditions outlined in the General Guide for the National Research Programs. The applicant legal entity commits itself to host and engage the principal investigator for the duration of the grant. The beneficiary signs the Contract, receives funding, claims costs, and takes complete responsibility for the proper implementation of the action.

### **2.2. OBLIGATIONS OF BENEFICIARIES**

Beneficiaries must provide conditions for the PI's independence to direct the research and manage its funding. The host institution hosts the PI promoting open recruitment and attractive working and employment conditions. All beneficiaries must take all measures to implement them in line with the provisions of the Contract.

## **3. ELIGIBILITY CONDITIONS**

Proposals for National Research Program “VIHREN-2021” involve a *single* beneficiary – host organisation, located in Bulgaria.

The “VIHREN-2021” Grants are divided into three evaluation panels and provide financial support of excellent Principal Investigators (PIs). Applicants have to indicate at submission stage the most relevant review panel (a Primary Review Panel) for the evaluation of the proposed research. The allocation of the proposals to the various panels will be based on the expressed preference of the PI. In the case of cross-panel proposals the PI may indicate a ‘secondary review panel’. The primary panel will then decide whether the proposal is indeed cross-panel and if its evaluation requires expertise from other panels. Despite the initial allocation being based on the preference of the PIs, when necessary due to the expertise required for the evaluation, proposals may be reallocated to different panels during the course of the peer review evaluation. Note that the budget allows to support only one proposal for “Leading researcher” and one proposal for “Established researcher” per review panel. If in some of the panels no proposal for a leading / established researcher is proposed for funding, the amount may be used to fund a project proposal from the reserve list of the same panel for a lead / established researcher. If there is no reserve project proposal, the amount can be used to finance a reserve project proposal from another panel. Decisions are made by the funding organization.

The “VIHREN-2021” call consists of one call with a single deadline applying to the three main research domains and respective review panels:

- Physical Sciences & Engineering (PSE Panel),
- Life Sciences (LS Panel)

- Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH Panel).

Applicants submitting proposals may request up to three specific persons who would not act as peer reviewers in the evaluation of their proposal.

1. Scientific excellence is the sole criterion on the basis of which research grants of “VIHREN-2021” program are awarded.
2. Applications can be made in any field of research.
3. Researchers working or living in Bulgaria or in any other country can apply for “VIHREN-2021” grant together with a Bulgarian host organization. No age, sex, or nationality restrictions apply.

The beneficiary must check the information regarding the principal investigator's eligibility at the call deadline (i.e. CV, track record, etc.). In case of doubts about the researcher's eligibility, the submission of documentary evidence may be requested by the Funding Agency after the call deadline.

#### **4. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON DURATION OF THE PROPOSAL, MOBILITY AND COMMITMENTS**

##### ***4.1. DURATION OF THE PROPOSAL***

The duration of “VIHREN-2021” project is between 36 and 60 months.

##### ***4.2. DUTY OF COMMITMENT***

Obligation of the researcher to be set as part of the project proposal is to prepare and submit by the end of the project implementation a proposal for an ERC procedure. If the researcher decides to apply for an ERC grant with another basic organization, then the host organization of the “VIHREN-2021” project is bound by the end of the implementation period of the “VIHREN-2021” project to support the application of another researcher for an ERC procedure or to apply for ERA Chairs programme (or their corresponding programs with the same focus and objectives in the 9th Framework Program of the European Commission for Research and Innovations "Horizon Europe").

In case that the “VIHREN-2021” PI obtain an ERC grant before the completion of the “VIHREN-2021” project, the PI and the host organization have to decide on one of the following options:

- (a) the “VIHREN-2021” project may continue provided that double funding will be avoided and the PI will have sufficient time to work on “VIHREN-2021” project. In such case the time in which the PI works on the project may be reduced below the minimal values stated in Section 5 but not below 40% for Established researcher and 30% for Leading researcher, and the work program and funding may be reduced, if this is suggested by the PI.

- (b) the “VIHREN-2021” project may continue with another researcher as PI who satisfies the eligibility conditions for the specific category and have similar expertise as the initial PI. In such case the track record of the selected new PI should be reviewed by the Chair or a member of the corresponding review panel and in case of positive recommendation the appointment of the new PI can be done by the Executive Board of the funding agency. If the recommendation is negative or the new PI is not appointed by the Board, then the “VIHREN-2021” project terminates earlier following option (c).
- (c) the “VIHREN-2021” project terminates before the intended completion date. In such case both the funding agency and all personnel and students hired on the project have to be informed not less than 4 months before the termination of the project. If there are PhD students that will not finish their theses, the host organization takes the obligation to complete their education as it may appoint additional supervisor for them. The support for the PhD fellowships will continue till their completion (with total duration of 3 years).

### **Progress report**

One month after completion of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year of the project Scientific progress reports and Financial reports of the project have to be submitted by the PI to the Funding agency. The reports have to be complemented by a statement by the Head of Host institution on the progress of the work and by an audit statement. The Scientific progress reports are subject of external review and evaluation by the Funding agency that may affect the amount of the funding for the next period.

## **5. FINANCIAL ASPECTS**

The financial support for “VIHREN-2021” takes the form of a grant covering 100% of the action’s eligible costs. These are calculated based on unit costs and the fixed amounts set out in the National Research Program “VIHREN-2021”. The costs are counted per month and for 100% working on the project. A breakdown by reporting period (budget table) is requested for the evaluation process and have to be provided as annex to the Contract.

### **Resources (incl. project costs)**

State and fully justify the amount of funding considered necessary to fulfill the objectives for the duration of the project. To facilitate the assessment of resources by the panels, the use of the attached budget table is strongly suggested. All eligible costs requested, should be included in the budget. **Please use whole BGN values only.**)

Detailed information on eligible and non-eligible direct and indirect costs as well as the different cost categories is provided below. State the amount of funding considered necessary to fulfil the objectives for the duration of the project. The resources requested should be reasonable and fully justified in the proposal. The requested grant should be in proportion to the actual needs to fulfil the objectives of the project.

The researcher, the host organization and the funding organization sign a tripartite contract

for the implementation of the project proposal. If the researcher is already employed and holds an academic position in the basic organization, during the project he / she retains this position, working on the project not less than 70% of the total working time for the procedure “Established researcher” and not less than 50% of the total working time for the “Leading Researcher” procedure. She / he receives a salary for the project, corresponding to the working hours for the project, and the payment for the academic position (with all supplements to it) is reduced in accordance with the national labor legislation. The same requirements for a minimum percentage of time for the researcher to work on the project apply if the researcher has not been employed by the host organization before the start of the project. If during the implementation of the project the researcher receives funding from the European Scientific Council, similar programs of the European Commission or other international or foreign organizations, the minimum time that the project leader will work on the project can be reduced to 40% for an established researcher and up to 30 % for lead researcher.

Describe the size and nature of the team, indicating, where appropriate, the key team members and their roles. The participation of team members engaged by another host institution should be justified and the corresponding cost to the project should be calculated on the base of time for work on the project.

Specify any existing resources that will contribute to the project. Describe other necessary resources. It is advisable to include a short technical description of the equipment requested, a justification of its need as well as the intensity of its planned use. When estimating the costs for travel, please also consider participation of the PI and team members in conferences and dissemination events.

The budget per proposal depends on its duration and is calculated as a maximum amount of BGN 265 000 per year for "Leading researcher" grand and a maximum amount of BGN 210 000 per year for "Established researcher" grand for a maximum period of five years. The project budget will be reduced *pro rata temporis* for shorter project duration. The contributions and rates under this action are set out in Part IV of the National Research Program “VIHREN-2021” and cover:

## **Direct costs:**

### **1. Personnel costs:**

- the salary costs of academic members of the team:

Payment to the principal investigator/researcher (including social security and all other payments from the beneficiary organization): up to 6000 BGN/month for 100% time working on the project.

The remuneration of each senior associate and post-doctoral student hired by the team will be up to BGN 4 500 and BGN 3 500, respectively, and of a young scientist without PhD degree - up to BGN 2 000 per month.

The mentioned remunerations also include the employers' insurances. In the case of part-time work, wages are reduced proportionately.

It is required that within twelve months after the start of the project, the team of the lead scientist consists of at least two people from the above categories - young scientists, postdoctoral fellows or senior associates.

The beneficiary must appoint the PI and the project staff, under an employment contract.

## **2. Costs for scientific work of the team:**

- the cost of paying members of the team for administrative and technical work:

Payment to non-academic staff - technicians and administrative staff (including social security and all other payments from the beneficiary organization)

- the costs of carrying out the scientific work of the team (without scientific infrastructure, allowing for the purchase of office equipment, including computer equipment, based on a clear justification in the project proposal). Those costs may include consumables, scientific services, travel for dissemination of the results and networking, organization of events, etc. Eligible costs of the project are also fees for the application of team members (translation / legalization for a diploma, entrance exam, visa fee), tuition fees, fees for training courses, fees for degree procedures, etc.

When necessary for the effective implementation of the project, changes within each of the two groups of direct eligible costs may be made by the project manager without the need for the consent of the funding organization. Changes between the two groups of direct eligible costs are made by the procedures of art. 72 of the Rules of the NSF, and changes in the work program or in the term for implementation of the project shall be made respectively by the procedures of art. 73 and Art. 75 of the Regulations.

*Beneficiaries are committed to ensuring that within the working time of funded employment relationships, researchers will not work on scientific research that is not fundamental. This circumstance is subject to review by the national Science Fund as part of the ongoing monitoring of the program and according to the rules adopted by the Executive Board of the Fund.*

## **3. Indirect costs:**

- indirect institutional costs: 10% of all other planned (direct) costs.

Those costs include administrative management and institutional costs. In this cost category the cost for financial audit of the all periodic financial reports have to be included. The audit report have to be submitted together with the corresponding scientific and financial report.

All direct costs have to be confirmed with relevant financial/accounting documents.

*It is necessary that within twelve months after the start of the project, in accordance with the date recorded in the funding agreement, the research team consists of at least two people from the above categories - young scientists, postdoctoral fellows or senior staff. To report this, the leading / established researcher shall, within 10 calendar days after the end of the twelfth month, submit a technical report listing the appointees, supplemented by copies of their appointment contracts verified by the host organization. If the requirement is not fulfilled the Contract will be canceled and all unused funding should be returned to the funding agency. The Executive Board of the Funding Agency may decide part of the spent funding to be returned to the funding agency.*

## **6. THE EVALUATION PROCESS**

## **6.1. GENERAL**

A single submission of the full proposal will be followed by a two-step evaluation. The evaluation will be conducted by high level peer review panels composed by independent foreign experts, satisfying the requirements for evaluators for ERC. The panels may be assisted by other independent experts working remotely. The applicant Principal Investigator can request during the electronic proposal submission that up to three specific persons should not act as an evaluator in the evaluation of their proposal.

The evaluation of the project proposals under the R3 Established researcher and the R4 Leading researcher fully reproduces the criteria and procedures for assessing the ERC's Consolidator Grant and Advanced Grant procedures. Independent foreign experts who meet the ERC rating criteria will be selected for evaluators. Project proposals of scientists who in the last two years have applied to the ERC with a Bulgarian university or research organization as a host organization eligible for a beneficiary of the program, and were evaluated with category A in the final evaluation, but not funded by the ERC, are financed directly, without further evaluation, and the financial plan of the project is adjusted in accordance with the terms of the program VIHREN-2021.

**Experts** perform evaluations on a personal basis, not as representatives of their employer, their country or any other entity. They are required to be independent, impartial and objective, and to behave throughout in a professional manner. They sign an expert contract, including a declaration of confidentiality and absence of conflict of interest, before beginning their work. Confidentiality rules must be adhered to at all times before, during and after the evaluation.

In each of the three scientific areas (panels) a **Chairperson ("Chair")** will assist funding agency staff with the management of the evaluation. Chairs are distinguished members of the scientific community. Their tasks include the following: participation in the assignment of panel members, chairing the panel meetings (remote), checking the quality and consistency of the evaluation reports, reporting the decisions of the panels on evaluation and ranking of the proposals for funding.

Under the terms of their contract, all experts must declare beforehand any known **conflicts of interest**, and must immediately inform the responsible funding agency if they detect a conflict of interest during the course of the evaluation. The expert contract also requires experts to maintain **strict confidentiality** with respect to the whole evaluation process. They must follow any instruction given by the funding agency to ensure this. Under no circumstance may an expert attempt to contact an applicant on his/her own account, either during the evaluation or afterwards.

## **6.2. ELIGIBILITY AND ADMISSIBILITY CHECK**

All proposals submitted through the electronic submission system before the time and date specified in the Indicative timetable will be registered in a database. Any proposal received via any other means or after the time or date specified above will not be taken into account.

Admissibility and eligibility criteria for each proposal are checked by funding agency staff.

Proposals which do not fulfil these criteria will not be evaluated or financed. Applicants will be informed by the time specified in the Indicative timetable about the outcome of the admissibility and eligibility check. Note that a proposal may be declared ineligible or inadmissible at any stage.

To be considered admissible, a proposal must be:

(a) submitted in the electronic submission system before the deadline given in the call conditions;

(b) readable, accessible and printable;

(c) complete and include the requested administrative data, the proposal description, and any obligatory supporting documents specified in the call;

(d) official documents from the beneficiary organization, described in the General guidelines, must be deposited in the funding agency.

Applicants should follow the template and instructions for drafting the Part B included in this guide.

A proposal will only be considered eligible if its content corresponds to the topics and funding scheme, including the specific eligibility conditions set out in the relevant parts of the General guidelines for the National research programs and Specific guide for applications for this program, and if it fulfils all the eligibility criteria. Where there is a doubt on the eligibility of a proposal, the peer review evaluation may proceed pending a decision on its eligibility by the Executive Board of the funding agency. If it becomes clear before, during or after the peer review evaluation phase, that one or more of the eligibility criteria has not been met, the proposal is declared ineligible and is withdrawn from any further examination.

### **6.3. EVALUATION OF PROPOSALS**

#### ***Proposals Type 1***

Proposals Type 1 are project proposals of scientists who in the last two years have applied to the ERC with a Bulgarian university or research organization as a host organization eligible for a beneficiary of the program, and were evaluated with category A in the final evaluation, but are not funded by the ERC, are financed directly, without further evaluation, and the financial plan of the project is adjusted in accordance with the terms of the VIHREN-2021 program.

#### ***Proposals Type 2***

Proposals Type 2 are those submitted in response to the present call directly and do not fall into Proposals Type 1. Those proposals are evaluated initially at step 1 within the frame of the call by respective scientific panel. Those of them that pass the step 1, will be included in the list of proposals considered at step 2.

#### ***Eligibility Check***

Proposals are first checked to ensure that all of the eligibility criteria are met. A proposal must fulfil all of the following eligibility criteria:

- It must be submitted before the single submission deadline.
- It must be complete (i.e. all of the requested forms, parts or sections of the proposal, and supporting documents must be completed and present).
- Its content must relate to the objectives of the “VIHREN-2021” call.
- It must meet the eligibility requirements of the respective grant “Leading researcher” or “Established researcher” as well as other criteria mentioned in the relevant call for proposals.

The eligibility is checked on the basis of the information given by the PI in the proposal. Where there is a doubt on the eligibility of a proposal, the peer review evaluation may proceed pending a final decision by the eligibility review committee. If it becomes clear before, during or after the peer review evaluation phase, that one or more of the eligibility criteria has not been met (for example, due to incorrect or misleading information), the proposal will be declared ineligible and not considered any further.

### **Peer review evaluation of proposals**

A single submission of a proposal Type 2 will be followed by a two-step peer review evaluation. Grant applications are assessed by 3 peer review evaluation panels: Physical Sciences and Engineering (PSE), Life Sciences (LS), Social Science and Humanities (SSH), which may be supported by external experts. At step 1, the extended synopsis, the Principal Investigator's track record and CV will be assessed (not the full scientific proposal). At step 2 the complete version of the retained proposals will be assessed (including the full scientific proposal) as the project proposals may also be sent for opinion to external experts who are not members of the panel. The panels assess and score the proposals on the basis of the individual evaluations of the panel members and on the panel discussion which follows them. Based on the budget available for the call, to one proposal of Leading researcher and one proposal of Established researcher per panel will be offered an “VIHREN-2021 grant” as the panel may also recommend reserve proposals. The peer review evaluation process of “VIHREN-2021” program has been designed to identify scientific excellence of researchers willing to work or working for Bulgarian research organisations or universities, irrespective of their gender, age, and other potential biases and to take career breaks as well as unconventional research career paths into account. The evaluations are monitored to guarantee transparency, fairness and impartiality in the treatment of proposals.

### **Evaluation criteria**

For all “VIHREN-2021” frontier research grants, scientific excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation. It will be applied in conjunction to the evaluation of both: the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of the research project; and the intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment of the Principal Investigator. During the evaluation of ‘Established researcher’ proposals, the phase of the Principal Investigator's transition to independence will be taken into

account. For ‘Leading researcher’ call Principal Investigator is already established research leader with a recognised track record of research achievements. Benchmarks set in the relevant profiles above including the expected minimum working time to be spent on “VIHREN-2021” projects, will also be taken into consideration. In general, projects wholly or largely consisting in the collation and compilation of existing material in new databases, editions or collections are unlikely to constitute ground-breaking or "frontier" research in themselves, however useful such resources might be to subsequent original research. Such projects are therefore unlikely to be recommended for funding. Plagiarism detection software may be used to analyse the submitted proposals. The detailed evaluation elements applying to the excellence of the research project and the Principal Investigator are set out below.

<b>1. Research Project</b>	
<b>Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility</b>	Score
<b>Established researcher and Leading researcher Grand</b>	
<b><i>Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project</i></b> <i>To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?</i> <i>To what extent are the objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?</i> <i>To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain?</i>	
<b><i>Scientific Approach</i></b> <i>To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain (based on the Extended Synopsis)?</i> <i>To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?</i> <i>To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?</i> <i>To what extent are the proposed timescales and resources necessary and properly justified (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?</i>	

<b>2. Principal Investigator</b>	
<b>Intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment</b>	
<b><u>Established researcher Grant</u></b>	
<b><i>Intellectual capacity and creativity</i></b> <i>To what extent has the PI demonstrated the ability to propose and conduct ground-breaking research?</i> <i>To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative independent thinking?</i> <i>To what extent have the achievements of the PI typically gone beyond the state of the art?</i>	
<b><i>Commitment</i></b> <i>To what extent does the PI demonstrate the level of commitment to the project necessary for its execution and the willingness to devote a significant amount of time to the project (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?</i>	

<b><u>Leading researcher Grand</u></b>	
<b><i>Intellectual capacity and creativity</i></b> <i>To what extent has/have the PI(s) demonstrated the ability to propose and conduct ground breaking research?</i> <i>To what extent does/do the PI(s) provide evidence of creative independent thinking?</i> <i>To what extent have the achievements of the PI(s) typically gone beyond the state of the art?</i> <i>To what extent has the PI demonstrated sound leadership in the training and advancement of young scientists?</i>	
<b><i>Commitment</i></b> <i>To what extent does the PI demonstrate the level of commitment to the project necessary for its execution and the willingness to devote a significant amount of time to the project (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?</i>	

### **Application of Evaluation Criteria / Scoring**

Each evaluation criterion will be marked on a scale of 1 to 4. Half points may be given.

The scores indicate the following with respect to the criterion under examination:

1. – Not competitive.
2. – Very Good.
3. – Excellent.
4. – Outstanding.

### **Award criteria**

The proposals will be evaluated against the evaluation criteria of the present call adopted from ERC-AdG and ERC-CoG award criteria, described above. The evaluation step 1 will be used to establish the retained list of proposals type 2 which will be evaluated at step 2. Evaluation scores will be awarded for each of the two criteria (see table above). All of the separate elements of each criterion will be considered by the experts in their assessment. Proposals are evaluated remotely and the review panel discussion will be done remotely. Each panel will select at most 3 proposals of Established researcher and 3 proposals of Leading researcher to be included in the list of proposals in the evaluation step 2 as those proposals should have not less than 70% of the maximal possible evaluation score. Those selected proposals will be considered in the step 2.

### **Overview of the evaluation process**

In order to conduct the evaluation of all eligible proposals submitted to the “VIHREN-2021” call, the following actors support the funding agency (under a contract covering confidentiality and remuneration). All panel meeting will be performed remotely.

<b>Actor</b>	<b>Role</b>
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Chairs	Assistance in the assignment of panel members, chairing the panel meetings (both remote and on site), checking the quality and consistency of the evaluation reports, reporting the decisions of the panels on evaluation and ranking of the proposals for funding.
Panel members	Evaluation of the proposals at step 1 and step 2. The number of panel members for step 2 may be reduced depending on the number and subjects of the proposals to be evaluated.
External experts/Evaluators	Assist the panel members via remote evaluation of the proposals (if the review panel decide that they are necessary)
Ethics experts	Ethics review of the proposals likely to be funded

The evaluation process follows the following steps in chronological order:

<b>Evaluation step</b>	<b>Output</b>	<b>Actor</b>
Eligibility - Admissibility checks of the complete version of the proposals will be assessed (including the full scientific proposal).	Ineligible and inadmissible proposals are removed from the evaluation process. Applicants are notified about their ineligibility/inadmissibility.  However, a proposal may be declared in eligible or inadmissible at any time during the process.	Funding agency staff
Applicants may file a complaint about their ineligibility or inadmissibility.	If grounded, the evaluation will resume. Any information not present in the submitted proposal will be discarded.	Funding agency staff
Assignment of evaluators (among the review panel members) to proposals type 2	A first draft assignment is done by matching the keywords of the proposals with the expertise of the evaluators.	Funding agency staff and external assistants
Peer review evaluation of the extended synopsis, the Principal Investigator's track record and CV will be assessed (not the full scientific proposal).	Evaluation of the proposals type 2 at step 1. The panels assess and score the proposals on the basis of the individual evaluations and on the panel discussion which follows them.	Panel members
Feedback to applicants	All applicants receive the Evaluation	Chair of the panel

	Summary Report of their proposal.	and Funding agency
Assignment of evaluators for step 2 (among the review panel members and other experts, if the panel decides) to proposal included in the list for step 2 (selected proposals type 2 from the step 1)	Assignment of evaluators of each proposal against the proposal and evaluators' expertise in order to obtain the best match.	Funding agency staff and external assistants with assistance of the Chairs
Individual Evaluation of the full scientific proposal	Each proposal is remotely evaluated in an individual and independent manner.	Panel members/Evaluators
Review panel discussion (the full scientific proposal)	The review panel discussion will be based on the Individual Evaluation Reports. The discussion will be preceded by interview with the applicant. The goal being to reach a consensus to which proposals to offer the "VIHREN-2021" grant. Report is submitted to the Funding agency. The panel selects also a reserve proposal if by some reason the first selected proposal is not funded.	Review panel Chairs
<b>Ethics screening</b> (the full scientific proposal)	Proposals likely to be funded are subject to an ethics screening and an "Ethics Summary Report" informs the applicants about the potential ethics requirements to be fulfilled.	Ethics experts
<b>Decision for financing</b>	On the base of the reports from the Chairs of the review panels the Executive Board will take decisions for financing the selected proposals.	Funding agency
<b>Feedback to applicants</b>	All applicants receive the Evaluation Summary Report of their proposal.	Funding agency

### **Interviews with Principal Investigators\_**

The review methodology for the call includes interviews with PIs of proposals at step 2 conducted by the relevant evaluation panel. Depending on the panel, interviews will last approximately 30 minutes in total. The first part will be devoted to a presentation on the outline of the research project by the PI. The remaining time will be devoted to a question and answer session. The PI should expect questions also related to the content of the budget table, which is part of the application. Should a planned interview not be possible for reasons beyond the control of the NSF, the panel will have to take its decision based on the information made available to it.

### ***Scientific Misconduct and Research Integrity***

Issues of scientific misconduct and research integrity are taken very seriously. Appropriate action such as termination of the Contract Preparation phase or, if the Contract has been signed, the implementation of liquidated damages and financial penalties, suspension of payments, recoveries and termination of the Contract, will be taken against any applicants/beneficiaries found to have misrepresented, fabricated or plagiarised any part of their proposal.

## **7. PROPOSAL SUBMISSION FORMS (PART A OF THE PROPOSAL)**

The submission of the proposals is described in a separate document.

Any data provided in the Proposal Submission Forms (Part A) should correspond to the Part B. This information will be used to verify eligibility.

**Specific attention** should be given to the **choice of the scientific area and descriptors** (keywords) since this will guide the Funding agency in the selection of the most appropriate experts-panel members for the proposal evaluation. A full list of descriptors can be found in the document adopted by ERC.

Please select in order of importance the descriptors, the first being the most important and most relevant for the proposal.

## **8. PART B OF THE PROPOSAL**

### **8.1. GENERAL INFORMATION AND INSTRUCTIONS**

The **Part B is the core part** of the proposal; it contains the details of the research proposal, the objectives of the research proposal and how they will be achieved. The document will be used by the independent experts-panel members **to undertake their assessment**. Therefore, please address each of the award criteria as outlined in the following sections. The explanatory notes below serve to explain the award criteria without being exhaustive.

Applicants shall use the template of Part B, available (as a Word version) as part of the call documentation, in order to ensure that:

- the experts assess the proposal within a familiar structure

- all core information of Part B is present
- the page limit is respected (*after the call deadline, excess pages above this limit will not be taken into consideration by the experts*).

Proposals must respect the following minimum standards:

- a minimum font size of 11 points, except for the Gantt chart and tables where the minimum font size is 8 points
- single line spacing
- A4 page size
- margins: 2 cm side 1.5 cm top/bottom
- a clearly readable font (e.g. Arial or Times New Roman)

Tables are for illustrating the core text of the proposal. They cannot be used to contain the core text itself.

The page formatting will be systematically checked. The excess pages will subsequently be disregarded.

**Literature references** should be given in separate sheet. They will not be count towards the page limit. Any other information included in a footnote will be disregarded.

Please make sure that the Part B of your proposal carries on **each page**, as a **header**, the **proposal acronym**. All pages should be numbered in a single series on the footer of the page to prevent errors during handling. It is recommended to use the numbering format "Part B - Page X of Y".

Applicants must submit **two separate PDF documents** in the as Part B of their proposal:

### **Part B-1:**

It should be composed as follows (detailed description below):

- **Cover Page:** Name of the Principal Investigator (PI); Name of the PI's host institution for the project; Proposal duration in months
- **Proposal summary** (identical to the abstract from the proposal submission forms A, section 1). There is a limit of 2000 characters (spaces and line breaks included); Explanation and justification of the cross-panel nature of the proposal (a limit of 1000 characters, spaces and line breaks included)
- **Section a:** Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal (max. 5 pages)
- **Section b:** Curriculum vitae (max. 2 pages, see the template)
- **Section c:** Track-record (max. 2 pages).

### **Part B-2:**

*The scientific proposal* (max. 15 pages), not evaluated in Step 1

- Section a. State-of-the-art and objectives
- Section b. Methodology
- **Section c. Resources (including project costs)** - State and fully justify the amount of funding considered necessary to fulfil the objectives for the duration of the project. The use of the budget table below is strongly suggested.
- Letter of commitment of the host institution for “VIHREN-2021”.

## Budget table

Cost Category	Year 1		Years 2+3		Years 4+5		Total	
	PM <sup>a</sup>	Sum <sup>b</sup>						
<b>Direct costs</b>								
<b>1. Personnel</b>	PM <sup>a</sup>	Sum <sup>b</sup>						
PI								
Senior Staff								
Postdocs								
Junior researchers without PhD degree								
Technical/administrative								
<i>Total Personnel Cost</i>								
<b>2. Other costs</b>								
Consumables								
Scientific services								
Travel								
Small equipment								
Other								
<i>Total Other Direct Costs</i>								
<b>Total Direct Costs</b>								
<b>3. Indirect costs</b>								
<b>Total Estimated Costs</b>								
<b>Total Requested Grant</b>								

a: person-months calculated with the accounting the actual percentage of the time in which the person works on the project.

b: the sum is calculated by multiplying the PM by the corresponding unit cost described in Section 5.