



# **CALL FOR APPLICATIONS**

## **VALIDATION BOOSTER (VB)**

<b>Opening Date</b>	<b>18 February, 2025</b>
<b>Closing Date (Deadline for application)</b>	1 April 2025, 23:59 CET
<b>Grant Budget Ranges</b>	Grants for initiatives – ceiling of up to USD 3,000 Grants for individuals – ceiling of up to USD 3,000 Grants for media outlets / organizations – ceiling of up to USD 5,000



## 1. BACKGROUND

“Greening the Narratives: Advancing Awareness of the Green Transition in the Western Balkans”, supported by Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans, aims to widen public awareness and adoption of the green transition in the Western Balkans. Main objectives are to **increase transparency of the renewable energy sector, promote public awareness, and support the democratization and decentralization of energy markets** through more robust media coverage. It consists of several interconnected activities designed to enhance media reporting on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans:

1. **Innovation Hub** - it will help **identify new actors and journalistic solutions** that are able to bring media coverage of green transition to a new level;
2. **Validation Booster** - a 6-month programme focused on testing and validating new ideas. It involves online workshops, mentorship, and peer learning to equip participants with the tools and knowledge for media product validation;
3. **Covering Green Transition** - a fellowship for journalists and content producers providing them with expert knowledge, skills and networking opportunities through workshops, e-learning resources, mentorship, collaborations, and production grants.

As a result, media workers in the region should be able to cover the Green Agenda in a more systemic, nuanced and effective way.

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE CALL

The Validation booster is a tailor-made acceleration programme for media outlets, networks, initiatives and individual content creators who want to learn **how to do validation of new media products, services, and process**. It applies methodology which is commonly used in tech startups for validating innovative ideas and builds upon lessons learned from the previous and ongoing media development projects.

**In addition to the financial support through awarded grants, successful applicants will benefit from mentorship and capacity-building within the Validation Booster programme.** Successful applicants are expected to be fully committed during the whole six months of the programme, including:

- Active participation in 12 online workshops over 4 months (each workshop lasts 4 hours);
- So-called “validation execution” over 2 months where successful applicants are expected to use learned tools to research and validate their hypothesis - or to change / adapt their initial idea in line with the inputs from the research and validation process;
- Lastly, at the end of the project, create a pitch deck to formulate and explain their new idea in the best and most effective/comprehensive way to anyone they address (audience, potential donors, future clients, etc.).



During all three segments listed above, successful applicants will have one-on-one mentoring sessions and full mentor support.

The programme targets journalists/media outlets **reporting on ecology and green transition (development and deployment of clean energy technologies) willing to test and validate new ideas or products that aims to increase transparency of the renewable energy sector, promote public awareness, and support the democratization and decentralization of energy markets.** The ideal participant is a person or team with capacity, capability and high interest in spearheading innovative ideas and demonstrated commitment to participate in the programme.

Besides traditional media and journalists, we encourage unconventional media representatives, individuals working for media organizations and/or those performing as individual content producers and creators, media CSO, media outlets, youth media outlets, women-led media, and niche media to apply.

After completing the Validation booster beneficiaries will develop skills which will enable them to:

- Clearly define their idea/purpose;
- Test, validate and evaluate their idea; and
- Develop materials required to present and communicate their validated idea to interested parties and potential donors;

**List of areas/topics that may be proposed for validation:**

\* Note: Do not stick to these areas only. They are used only as an example.

- Validation of a new subscription-based service to diversify revenue streams;
- Validation of crowdfunding campaign;
- Validation of a paywall system to monetize premium content;
- Validation of a mobile app to enhance user experience and engagement;
- Validation of an AI-based tool for automated content tagging and organization;
- Validation of a podcast form as a platform for socially relevant topics;
- Validation of email newsletters, tailored in line with different audience segments.

**IMPORTANT: The topic needs to be in line with the call objectives - increase transparency of the renewable energy sector, promote public awareness, and support the democratization and decentralization of energy markets through more robust media coverage.**

**To attend the programme, applicants have to have a good command of spoken English.** The programme has a total duration of 6 (six) months and will run from June 2025 until November 2025. Please note that the application deadline is **1 April 2025, by 23:59 CET**.

### **3. PROFILE OF POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES**



The Validation booster is intended for:

1. **Organizations** – media outlets, both traditional and online media, groups/teams of journalists with the status of a legal entity (e.g. associations, formally established networks, etc.) and non-profit media organizations from the Western Balkans;
2. **Individuals** – media professionals, stand-alone journalists, young journalists, students and media content creators and producers;
3. **Initiatives** – actions or informal groups of professional individuals or regional initiatives with focus on environment or green transition.

The applicant should consider eligible and ineligible costs when developing the idea and clearly stating it in the Application Form.

**Eligible costs** include human resources, necessary audience and market research costs, outsourcing expert help, all validation process-related costs including piloting/testing activities such as events, episodes, platforms, software, local transportation etc., and renting equipment and space needed for the purpose of piloting activities.

**Ineligible costs** include costs for buying office equipment, construction costs, entertainment and excessive transport and event costs, restaurant bills or hospitality costs for personnel not directly participating in the project; bank costs charged by the beneficiary's bank for transfers from the granting authority; currency exchange losses.

The activities should be implemented in one of the Western Balkans countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia).

## 4. AVAILABLE FUNDING AND ALLOCATIONS

### Minimum and Maximum Grant Award

Grant Budget Ranges:

- Grants for individuals – ceiling of up to USD 3,000
- Grants for informal initiatives – ceiling of up to USD 3,000
- Grants for media outlets / organizations – ceiling of up to USD 5,000

No co-financing from the applicant's side is expected or is obligatory.

### 4.1. Instructions for application submission

The **Validation booster** grant process starts with this Call that will be open until 1 April, 2025 23:59 CET. Upon the closure of the call, all applications that fulfil technical requirements – eligibility check - will be evaluated by a jury against four criteria - Quality and Relevance, Potential and Social Impact, Future Sustainability, and Value for Money. For more details see subsection 4.2.



Following the evaluation phase, a grant allocation will be made, and the best three applicants will start with the programme.

#### 4.1.1. Application Form

To apply for the Validation booster (VB) applicants will need to **fill in the application form, including the proposed budget, via the JotForm platform** on the following [LINK](#). Application should be completed in English.

Regional jury will review submitted proposals and recommend up to 3 beneficiaries to join the programme. Any error or major discrepancy related to the Application Form instructions may lead to its rejection.

#### 4.1.2. Application deadline

The applicant must submit the Application Form by 1 April 2025 by 23:59 CET. Applications submitted after the deadline will not be considered for funding. The deadline applies to all parts of the application, including supporting documentation.

#### 4.1.3. Clarifications, Questions & Answers

Requests for clarification should be submitted in English language on the following email address, no later than 25 March 2025 by 23:59 CET: [NerminaS@thomsonfoundation.org](mailto:NerminaS@thomsonfoundation.org)

**For FAQ, please check the recorded Validation Booster info session available [HERE](#).**

### 4.2. Evaluation and selection

The evaluation will be conducted in three (3) steps:

#### **STEP 1: ADMINISTRATIVE AND ELIGIBILITY CHECK**

During this step, the application will be assessed whether:

- Application Form is filled as per instructions provided in this Call and in the Application Form;
- All required documents are submitted;
- The requested budget amount is within the given threshold; and
- Clear consent (if selected) that the applicant will be committed during the whole duration of the programme - six months.

The application that does not meet the above listed criteria will be rejected and the applicant will be notified accordingly. The application that passes this check will be evaluated further.



The Project will ask the grant recipient to submit a post-grant report that includes a narrative description of project outcomes and a financial report backed up by eligible costs. The narrative and financial report template will be shared by Thomson Media (TM).

## **STEP 2: EVALUATION CRITERIA (PROPOSAL QUALITY)**

The application is assessed based on these criteria:

### **Quality and Relevance of the Proposal (40 points)**

- How well does the application align with the specified objectives (green transition)?
- What is the level of innovation and originality in the proposal?
- How clearly defined and feasible is the proposal?

### **Potential and Social Impact (30 points)**

- What is the expected impact on the target community or audience by the proposed idea?
- How will the proposed idea address or solve specific social issues, needs or challenges?
- What are the potential long-term benefits of the idea, if validated?
- How well does the proposed idea promote inclusivity, and positive social change?

### **Future Sustainability (20 points)**

- Whether the proposed idea includes validation of content, services or products?
- Whether the proposed idea tests some innovative modalities toward its digital platform and media?
- Whether the proposed idea has potential to help build sustainability?

### **Value for Money (10 points)**

- How cost-effective is the proposed budget in relation to the proposal's objectives and expected outcomes?
- Are the expenditures justified and reasonable for the scope of work?
- Does the budget demonstrate a clear and efficient allocation of costs including human resources, necessary audience and market research costs and all other validation process-related costs?

The application that does not meet the above listed criteria will be rejected and the applicant will be notified accordingly. The application with higher scores will be recommended by the evaluation panel for possible grant awarding, subject to available funding.

## **STEP 3: DUE DILIGENCE**

This process will be conducted in parallel with the evaluation process. The Due Diligence will be conducted through the Due Diligence Checklist which will be provided to the applicant by the project team.

The Due Diligence Checklist is a self-declaration document to be filled by the applicant and will be confirmed by TM. Any missing supporting document or any incoherence between the declaration by the applicant and the supporting documents may lead to the rejection of the application on that sole basis. Any rejected application will be replaced by the next best placed application on the reserve list that falls within the available budget for this Call for Applications.

The applicants will be informed in writing, by email, on decisions concerning their application. TM reserves the right to propose budget changes to maximize budget utilization, ensuring that the principles of value for money and the overall project efficiency are applied. Successful applicants will receive a Grant Agreement. All projects must be completed in accordance with their Grant Agreement.

#### **STEP 4: FINAL NOTIFICATION**

The following is the indicative table of the application, evaluation and notification process:

<b>Call for Application process</b>	<b>Date / Month</b>
<b>Launching of the Call</b>	18 February 2025
<b>Deadline for requesting any clarifications</b>	25 March 2025, 23:59 CET
<b>Deadline for submission of applications</b>	1 April 2025, 23:59 CET
<b>Notification to rejected applicants on the results of the administrative check (Step 1)</b>	14 April 2025
<b>Notification to applicants on the results of the qualitative assessment and due diligence (Step 2 &amp; Step 3)</b>	12 May 2025
<b>Grant Agreement Signature</b>	2 June 2025