

Fifth REINFORCING Open Call on “Responsible Digitalization” (Incubator Call)

Introduction

REINFORCING supports organizations and institutions in Europe to transition to a new paradigm where responsibility and openness drive research and innovation (R&I) processes. The green and digital transitions have become of paramount importance to address the societal challenges that European societies currently face. The twin transition will bring enormous benefits but also undesired externalities and implications. In this regard, EU institutions and territories need to shift to more open and transparent R&I practices in which all actors share responsibility to develop services and products that are acceptable, sustainable and bring social satisfaction.

The Open and Responsible Research and Innovation (ORRI) approach promotes collaborative efforts, sharing research outputs as early as possible for engaging citizens in co-creation processes and opening R&I to the whole society. Implementing Open and Responsible Research and Innovation (ORRI) can seem a daunting task. Over the past decade, many resources and tools have been created, but an effort to systematize, curate and create a single-entry point was still missing. REINFORCING is this much-needed European central hub for ORRI. The REINFORCING platform (<https://reinforcing.eu/oss-platform>) is the entry point to knowledge, training, ORRI skills matchmaking and capacity building for organizations interested in starting or continuing their journey to creating an inclusive R&I ecosystem. Furthermore, the project brokers unique networking opportunities for organizations, institutions and territories interested in becoming part of the European ecosystem that is transforming the R&I system by bringing it closer to society and societal needs.

To support this change, REINFORCING has ring-fenced funding to invite institutions from around Europe to develop projects aiming at implementing new modes of doing R&I that drive more just transitions. All the Calls have supported and will support territories and organizations experimenting with ORRI for the first time (ORRI Incubator Open Calls) as well as those scaling up their ORRI activities (ORRI Booster Open Calls).

Open Call description

Over the past decade, digitalisation has increasingly permeated devices and processes that were once analogue and transparent. The rapid growth of the Internet, the World Wide Web, mobile technologies, and digital infrastructure has profoundly transformed how citizens interact with both their physical surroundings and legal systems. The rapid advancement, deployment, and adoption of digital technologies in modern society have brought emerging opportunities for citizens

and organisations alike. Thanks to digital technologies, we can work remotely, track our health in an app, or communicate with a person speaking a foreign language.

On the flipside of these developments, issues associated with the speed and spread of digitalisation are starting to emerge. The rapid pace at which the physical and legal space has been digitized has given rise to both institutional and social challenges. Automation, for example, often makes transparency difficult, leading to growing distrust in public institutions. Institutional concerns also include the automation of biases and discrimination and the potential threats to critical infrastructure, which can compromise the security and fairness of digital systems. The digital divide complicates the standardisation of new procedures or communication platforms, risking the exclusion of vulnerable groups. Technological solutions have been preferred by policymakers as a 'silver bullet' to fix the multiple emerging crises, putting focus on the speed of digitalisation rather than its direction. It is crucial to understand and assess societal needs before deploying digital technologies, ensuring their sustainable and equitable implementation. Citizens' interaction with digital services also presents complex issues, such as the proliferation of misinformation and propaganda online, privacy concerns, and labor precarity driven by digital platforms. These are just some of the challenges that need careful consideration and response.

The ORRI approach can help address some of these shortcomings and challenges by ensuring a responsible approach is taken, making research and innovation development ethical, legitimate, reflective, and societally relevant by design. By embedding a more thoughtful and responsible approach to the development and use of digital technologies—especially by considering their ethical, legal, and social impacts—organizations can help guide the digital transformation of society in a way that is fair, sustainable, and beneficial for everyone. The increasing scrutiny organisations face in terms of societal responsibility means that accountability goes beyond the financial bottom line. Thus, it is important to develop evaluation frameworks and KPI's that can assist organisations in tracking their progress and communicating it in order to successfully value their efforts.

Specific challenges “Responsible Digitalization” could address

While the list of challenges is non-exhaustive, two key challenges have been identified for this ORRI Incubator Call under the topic of 'Responsible Digitalization':

- **Privacy, transparency, and trust in digitalisation tools and services:** The deployment of digital technologies demands a continual and built-in adherence to basic human rights and obtaining societal legitimacy in a specific region.
- **Misinformation and manipulation:** Digital technologies have created new and powerful vehicles for old problems around communication and public debate. It is a key challenge to design/pilot internal organisational or regional processes that aim to institutionalize an ORRI approach that can tackle misinformation.

Crucially, applicants must demonstrate how their project addresses one or more of these challenges through a process of starting to embed and institutionalize ORRI within their organisation or territory, through experimentation with organisational processes and procedures that ensure long-term commitment to *Responsible Digitalisation*.

Alternatively, applicants may apply for addressing other topics related to the start of institutionalization of *Responsible Digitalisation* in their organisation, which they have identified, by justifying the selection in the application process.

Projects should consist of several activities, examples of what those specific activities in potential projects could be are listed below. Please note that the list is non-exhaustive and should serve as inspiration rather than a task list. Please note that applicants are expected to perform different complementary activities within the 12-month period of the supported project, not just one particular activity.

Potential activities:

- Designing and implementing co-creation processes to develop digital solutions and services in the context of "Responsible Digitalization".
- Developing and formalizing an internal ORRI strategy for digitalisation.
- Designing and testing a stakeholder or citizen engagement model (e.g., user panels, community advisory boards, citizen juries) that can potentially be used regularly in digital development decisions, AI strategy or policies related to digitalisation.
- Future scenario or visioning workshops within a particular organizational or local/regional context with stakeholders, including citizens, that address potential ethical, legal, and social implications of the deployment of digital technologies into particular contexts.
- Developing internal KPIs or evaluation frameworks for ORRI (e.g., tracking how often stakeholder feedback changes product direction, or inclusion metrics in data governance).

Please note that **REINFORCING does not fund**

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- Training or consulting activities for institutions, organizations and territories that are not part of the consortium, since institutional changes are requested to be visible and measurable in the funded entities (grantees), at least in the Coordinator (main beneficiary) of the project.
- Activities related to technological developments and/or proof of concepts, while REINFORCING could support co-creation and/or visioning workshops linked to those activities - if coherent with the scope and the requirements of the Call.
- Activities of any kind in which artificial intelligence-based systems or techniques are used or developed. Reflection on AI ethics and responsibility can instead be part of the funded actions - if coherent with the scope and the requirements of the Call.

Call requirements and details

This call is **open to public and private organizations of all sizes**, including startups and SMEs. Their agility and adaptable structures allow them to integrate ethical considerations, transparency, and societal engagement into digital innovation processes from the outset, without being constrained by legacy systems or bureaucratic inertia. Their close relationships with specific user communities and stakeholders provide valuable insights into real-world concerns around data use, privacy, inclusion, and algorithmic fairness, enabling them to co-develop digital solutions that are not only technically sound but also socially responsive. Moreover, their innovative mindset and desire to stand out in a competitive landscape encourage them to pursue purpose-driven, trustworthy digital products and

services, making ORRI a strategic asset. Nevertheless, all kinds of organizations that can apply for Horizon Europe funds are welcome to apply for the REINFORCING grant.

The REINFORCING Fifth Open Call, as an Incubator, has specific and mandatory requirements to comply with:

- The consortium should include at least 2 entities based in EU countries (Member State or associated country), including their outermost regions or associated countries eligible to receive Horizon Europe grants, provided that the applicants are not covered by the Council sanctions in force. The main applicant (in terms of budget and activities) - the project Coordinator - must have little or no experience in ORRI.
- Release an ORRI resource (or ORRI Tool) to be inserted into the REINFORCING online platform. The resource should be included in the proposal text as one of the results to be delivered and its development in the list of activities to be performed.
- Attend the online internal 5th REINFORCING Open Call Kick-off meeting and online monthly meetings with the 5th REINFORCING Open Call Coordinators and REINFORCING consortium representatives.
- Partake in the REINFORCING ORRI training workshop on-site in Brussels (costs related to training can be funded by the grant), led by REINFORCING partners.
- Take part in the online 5th Open Call mid-term review meeting.
- Join the online internal 5th REINFORCING Open Call Final Event.
- Participate in the public 5th REINFORCING Open Call Webinar at the end of the projects.
- Contribute to the online communication and update of the REINFORCING project channels (e.g., website, social media, etc.) with grantees' achievements and information.
- Engage in peer learning activities.

Opening date: **5th June 2025**

Closing date: **5th August 2025 at 17:00 CET (Brussels time)**

For the 5th REINFORCING Open Call (Incubator Call), no more than 12 consortia implementing projects lasting 12 months will be supported with grants of up to 60,000 euros each.

Please note that different durations of the projects (less or more than 1 year) are not possible and will be considered not eligible.

Please also note that all the funded projects will **start all together on 1st November 2025 and end up on 31st October 2026. No change in these dates can be negotiated.**

Information on application procedures is available on the REINFORCING website, where the Guide for applicants and the Frequently Asked Questions can be downloaded here: <https://reinforcing.eu/open-calls/current-calls>.