

CEFTA RESEARCH AWARD 2026

Call for Policy Research Papers on themes aligned with CEFTA 2026 Priorities

Full Call Dossier & Participation Package

Preparation of the 1st CEFTA RESEARCH
AWARD OPEN CALL facilitated by

1. CEFTA Research Award - OVERVIEW & RATIONALE of the Call for Policy Research papers

The CEFTA Research Award is an open, competitive call for Master's thesis candidates and PhD students to develop Policy Research Papers with actionable recommendations whose implementation can contribute to the strengthening of regional cooperation and the acceleration of convergence with the EU Single Market.

The CEFTA Research Award aims to support the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan 2025–2028, building on the objectives and the vision defined in the EU Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova. The first call for the CEFTA Research Award is aligned with the CEFTA 2026 priorities, focusing on research areas where academic analysis can provide practical support to the implementation of priority measures in CEFTA's work.

Inspired by successful academic-policy integration models in the EU, this award aims to bridge rigorous academic research with actionable CEFTA policymaking. It seeks to institutionalize structured, evidence-based dialogue between academia, research institutions, think tanks, and the CEFTA bodies.

The Award is part of the CEFTA Academic Network, developed under the 2026 Albanian CEFTA Chairmanship with the support of the Open Society Foundations for the Western Balkans.

2. ELIGIBILITY & PARTICIPATION RULES

Applicants must:

- Come from a CEFTA Party.
- Currently be enrolled as Master's thesis candidates or PhD students at a higher education institution.

- Focus their research on CEFTA and demonstrate direct relevance to CEFTA's policy agenda, with clear implications for intra-CEFTA trade, regulatory convergence, or EU integration.

Academic staff of the respective institutions may serve as academic supervisors but may not act as author or co-author.

3. CEFTA RESEARCH THEMES & EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Participants shall frame their research project under one of the following three CEFTA Research Themes:

1. Trade in Agri-food Products

Agri-food trade is highly sensitive to procedures, controls, documentation and timing, particularly where products are perishable. Within CEFTA, this area is closely linked to food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary controls, inspection practices, testing and certification, electronic data exchange, and the practical management of crossings.

Research under this thematic area could help identify the main challenges faced by producers and traders, examine how controls can become more risk-based, for example by focusing inspections where risks are higher and simplifying procedures for compliant operators or lower-risk consignments, and propose practical steps to reduce waiting times, administrative burdens and duplicative checks, while supporting better alignment with EU requirements.

Of particular interest for stakeholders are the operational management of crossing points for perishable goods, including the coordination of working hours and joint customs and SPS controls at crossing points, the role of quality infrastructure such as laboratories and accreditation bodies in enabling the recognition of testing results, monitoring plans and surveillance programmes, the use of electronic SPS certificates and pre-arrival data exchange, and the contribution of digital tools such as SEED+ and electronic documentation to faster and more predictable clearance of agri-food consignments.

Suggested topics:

1. Facilitating trade in agri-food products through food safety, testing and certification: A sector-specific assessment (applicants are invited to select one agri-food product sector of their choice, i.e. products of animal origin, products of plant origin or processed food products).
2. Aligning CRM 2.0 commitments with the EU Growth Plan and Reform Agendas: Implementation gaps and policy coherence in agri-food trade within CEFTA
3. Authorised Economic Operator status as a trade facilitation tool for agri-food products: EU experience and application within CEFTA.

2. Trade in Industrial Products

Industrial goods account for a major share of intra-CEFTA trade flows, and businesses continue to face costs linked to procedures, documentation, technical requirements and controls. These include waiting times at crossing points, customs procedures, data exchange, risk management, and duplication of testing, certification or conformity assessment requirements. Reducing these frictions can make trade faster, cheaper and more predictable. At the same time, industrial products are central to the gradual integration of CEFTA Parties into the EU Single Market, where standards, accreditation, conformity assessment, certification and market surveillance play a key role.

Research under this thematic area could therefore examine how CEFTA cooperation can facilitate intra-CEFTA trade while preparing businesses and public administrations for deeper EU Single Market integration, including through the recognition of conformity assessment results, stronger quality infrastructure cooperation encompassing laboratories, accreditation and certification bodies, and progressive alignment with relevant EU acquis.

Stakeholders will benefit from deeper insights on the operational dimension of crossings: research could look at pre-arrival processing, risk-based selectivity and

the practical implementation of measures to reduce duplication of controls at crossing points.

Suggested topics:

1. Recognition of conformity assessment results within CEFTA: Compliance cost reduction and competitiveness benefits for the private sector.
2. Market surveillance, consumer protection and industrial product safety in CEFTA: The role of quality infrastructure, information sharing and rapid alert mechanisms in strengthening consumer protection and alignment with the EU market surveillance framework.
3. Intra-CEFTA Recognition of Conformity Assessment Results and ACAA: Complementarities and pathways towards EU Single Market integration.

3. Trade in Services

Services are an increasingly important dimension of economic integration within CEFTA, yet their potential remains far from fully realised. This thematic area covers the liberalisation of service provision, recognition of professional qualifications, tourism, IT and digital services, e-commerce, parcel delivery, and labour mobility. Further liberalisation and facilitation of services can support the competitiveness of CEFTA Parties, create new opportunities for service suppliers, and contribute to the implementation of the Common Regional Market 2025-2028 (CRM 2.0).

Research could examine the challenges faced by service providers operating across CEFTA, the scope for expanding recognition of professional qualifications, and practical steps to improve conditions for tourism, digital services, e-commerce and parcel delivery. In the area of e-commerce, research could also address cross-CEFTA payment systems and logistics as practical obstacles to a more integrated digital market.

Stakeholders will greatly benefit from deeper focus on labour mobility what are the trends in the movement of workers across CEFTA; regulatory and administrative

challenges related to work permits and the recognition of qualifications; skills-matching and the attraction of workers to CEFTA and / or assessment of alignment with the services liberalisation framework under Additional Protocol 6.

Suggested topics:

1. Tourism as a driver of services integration within CEFTA: opportunities and challenges for a more connected market (research under this topic may examine aspects including cross-CEFTA labour mobility and work permit frameworks in tourism and hospitality, skills mismatches and vocational training in the sector, service quality standards and their harmonisation across CEFTA Parties, as well as other areas of interest).
2. Synergy between CRM 2.0 and the EU Growth Plan: advancing services integration within CEFTA (applicants are invited to focus on one area of their choice: the technical and regulatory conditions for recognition of trust services and digital interoperability, or the implementation and expansion of recognition of professional qualifications).
3. Alignment with the EU Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act: implications and opportunities for intra-CEFTA e-commerce.

Digitalisation as a Horizontal Principles

Digitalisation should not be understood as a separate thematic area but as a cross-cutting dimension of all three areas described above. Whether the subject is the clearance of agri-food products at crossing points, conformity assessment procedures for industrial goods, or the provision of services and e-commerce across CEFTA, digital tools, interoperable systems, data exchange and electronic documentation are integral to how these processes function and how they can be improved.

Research proposals may address digitalisation wherever it is relevant within any of the three thematic areas, and applicants are encouraged to consider its role in reducing costs, improving transparency, strengthening risk management and supporting the gradual

integration of CEFTA with the EU Single Market, even where digitalisation is not the primary focus of their proposed work.

Important Note: Broader questions about the coherence between CEFTA and CRM 2.0 commitments, the EU Growth Plan, and the Reform Agendas of CEFTA Parties may also be explored under each thematic area. Applicants may propose other research topics under each theme described above, provided that they are clearly linked to CEFTA priorities, CRM 2.0, gradual integration with the EU Single Market and the development of actionable policy recommendations.

1. TWO-STAGE PROCEDURE & OFFICIAL TIMELINE

The Call for Policy Research Papers and the subsequent Award process will follow a two-step approach:

Stage 1. Concept Note for Policy Research Paper

- Publication of the Open Call for Policy Research Papers on themes aligned with CEFTA 2026 Priorities | 11 May 2026
- Deadline for submitting written requests for clarification on the procedure and research themes | 31 May 2026, 17:00 CET (consolidated answers will be published on the CEFTA website no later than 7 June 2026 and will be available to all applicants simultaneously)
- Submission of Concept Notes (max 5 pages) | 15 July 2026, 17:00 CET
- Peer commentary & shortlisting by Selection Committee | by 7 August 2026

Stage 2. Policy Research Paper

- Policy Research Paper development and Submission by 6 shortlisted candidates from the moment of notification until 31 October 2026, 17:00 CET
- Evaluation | Final scoring, and winner selection by Selection Committee | November 2026 |
- Award Ceremony | Announcement, prize presentation, and policy forum | CEFTA Week, 7-11 December 2026

2. Participation REQUIREMENTS

Each participant should fill and send the following documents:

Stage 1. Concept Note for Policy Research Paper

*Completed Applicant Identification & Eligibility Form
(CRA2026_Applicant_Identification_Eligibility_Form)*

Concept Note (CRA2026_Concept_Note_Template)

Declaration of Honour and Conflict of Interest (CRA2026_Declaration_of_Honour)

Stage 2. Policy Research Paper

Policy Research Paper following the Policy Research Paper Template

3. SUBMISSION CONDITIONS

With respect to any submission, the following conditions shall apply:

- All submissions must be made via the Submission Portal: www.cefta.int/...
- Late or incomplete submissions will not be evaluated.
- Submissions may not plagiarize existing works and may not be the result of generative artificial intelligence. Any use of AI-assisted tools must be disclosed.
- Submissions may not be edited after submission.
- By filing a submission, participants confirm that they have read, understood, and accept the conditions and all rules governing the CEFTA Research Award. Any submission constitutes full acceptance of these conditions.

4. SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

Submissions shall adhere to the following requirements:

- All submissions shall be drafted in English;
 - Formatted in Times New Roman font, font size 12, 1.5 line spacing; footnotes in Times New Roman font, font size 9;
 - Files shall be submitted in PDF format;
 - File names shall follow the following format:

Name_Surname_ThemeCode_DocumentType.pdf

For ThemeCode, applicants shall use the following theme codes:

- *AGRI for trade in agri-food products;*
- *IND for trade in industrial products;*
- *SERV for trade in services.*

For DocumentType, applicants shall use the following document type codes:

- *APEF for the Applicant Identification & Eligibility Form;*
- *CN for the Concept Note;*
- *DH for the Declaration of Honour and Conflict of Interest.*

8. EVALUATION CRITERIA

The submission shall be evaluated on the basis of the following criteria:

Concept Note **for Policy Research Paper** (Score 0–100)

- Relevance (30%) — alignment with objectives and thematic priorities
- Quality of Methodology (20%) — clarity, rigor, feasibility
- Feasibility and Work Plan (50%) — realistic timeline and approach

Evaluation criteria for the Policy Research Papers will be communicated to the short listed candidates in the second stage of the call.

9. SELECTION COMMITTEE

- The Concept Note and the Policy Research Papers shall be evaluated by a Selection Committee established and supported by the CEFTA Secretariat.
- The Selection Committee shall be composed of independent university professors or senior academic experts selected by the CEFTA Secretariat on the basis of their expertise and experience and with due regard to balanced representation of all CEFTA Parties.

10. SELECTION PROCEDURE

- The Selection Committee shall evaluate the Concept Notes and the Policy Research Paper on the basis of the respective applicable Evaluation Criteria.
- Two submissions per research theme shall be shortlisted.
- Submissions shortlisted at the Concept Note stage shall receive structured and anonymised feedback, which may include comments and peer observations, to support the refinement of their Policy Research Papers.

General conditions

- All evaluations and deliberations of the Selection Committee shall be confidential.
- All applicants shall be treated equally and impartially throughout the evaluation process.
- The decisions of the Selection Committee shall be final and non appealable.

11. AWARDS, FINANCIAL & TAX CONDITIONS

- **Awards**

The CEFTA Research Award consists of the following awards:

- 3 Winners: EUR 4,000 each
- 3 Runners-Up: EUR 1,000 each
- Total Award Budget: EUR 15,000

The CEFTA Secretariat retains full discretion over the selection process and the granting of awards on the basis of the criteria outlined herein.

Payment Conditions

The awards shall be disbursed within 30 days of the award ceremony upon submission of the Award Acceptance Form and valid bank details. Bank transfer charges shall be borne by CEFTA, but CEFTA shall not bear any extra charges or the currency exchange costs that may be levied by the receiving bank.

The Award constitutes a “Research Prize” and does not constitute a salary, grant, or procurement contract. The Award is made in recognition of an achievement, not in exchange for services. No employment, consultancy, procurement, grant support or any other contractual relationship is created between the award recipients and the CEFTA Secretariat.

Submissions are voluntary and competitive and submission alone does not give rise to any entitlement to an award, reimbursement, or other financial claim against the CEFTA Secretariat and the CEFTA Parties.

Tax conditions

Each award recipient is responsible for declaring and paying any applicable taxes or other charges due on the basis of applicable legislation. The CEFTA Secretariat shall bear no tax liability.

12. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, PUBLICATION & TRANSPARENCY

- The authors of the submissions shall retain full copyright of the respective *Policy Research Papers*.

- By accepting the award, award recipients grant the CEFTA Secretariat an exclusive, royalty-free, perpetual license to publish, translate, distribute, and use the *Policy Research Papers* for policy analysis, public communication, and institutional training.
- All awarded *Policy Research Papers* will be made "Open Access" upon publication. Authors may be invited to present findings at CEFTA policy forums, academic workshops, and stakeholder dialogues.
- The CEFTA Secretariat will publish all awarded *Policy Research Papers* on its official platform, ensuring transparency and public availability as per the above Guiding Principles.

13. DATA PROTECTION, LIABILITY & LEGAL TERMS

Data Protection: Personal data shall be processed in compliance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and any other applicable laws and regulations solely for the administration of the call, the evaluation of submissions, and the award management. Applicants may request data access or deletion at cefta@cefta.int.

Non-Binding Participation: Submission does not create any institutional partnership, membership, or financial obligation beyond the prize terms.

Liability Disclaimer: The CEFTA Secretariat and the CEFTA Parties shall not be liable for any costs incurred during the preparation of the submissions, nor for any policy decisions taken by third parties based on submitted Concept Notes and Policy Research Papers.

Verification Rights: The CEFTA Secretariat may verify the eligibility, academic status, and originality (plagiarism/AI disclosure checks). Fraudulent submissions, including submissions containing plagiarized content or content originating from generative artificial intelligence, shall result in disqualification and, if an award has already been awarded, award revocation.

Dispute Resolution: Any dispute shall be governed by the laws of the CEFTA Secretariat's host jurisdiction. Amicable dispute resolution shall be preferred.

Force Majeure: The CEFTA Secretariat reserves the right to modify any deadlines or submission requirements in case of extraordinary circumstances with timely notification.

14. CONTACT & SUPPORT

- Academic & Technical Queries: researchaward@cefta.int
- Submission Portal: www.cefta.int/

The CEFTA Secretariat reserves the right to issue clarifications or addenda prior to the deadline for the submission of the Concept Note. All updates and clarifications will be published on the official CEFTA website www.cefta.int.