



## ERCI Innovation Awards 2026 – Regulations

### Article 1: Purpose

The ERCI Innovation Awards 2026 are intended to promote innovative projects, services or products implemented by enterprises (manufacturing or services providers) to meet the needs of the railway sector in Europe (freight and passengers).

The Awards are organized by ERCI (European Railway Clusters Initiative), the European network of Innovative Railway Clusters.

Two categories of enterprises will be awarded: one product or service or project from an SME and one product or service or project from a Large Enterprise. After the determination of the winners in the SME and Large Enterprise categories, the Jury will award one special prize “Coup de Cœur” among the remaining applicants.

As a rule, the company submitting the innovation is also the one that developed the innovation. However, the company may have done so in collaboration with others. The company must, however, have been involved in the innovation process and must benefit from the innovation (either by using it itself or by marketing it).

**Please note:**

**Research centres and universities cannot apply alone to the ERCI Innovation Awards 2026. If a consortium of industry and academia applies, it must be ensured that the main applicant is from industry (SME or Large Enterprise).**

### Article 2: Rules to apply and criteria

#### 2.1 Rules to apply and eligibility criteria

Applications **must only** present innovation developed and close to be commercialized or already commercialized (TRL=7 or higher).

**Please note:**

**The applicants must demonstrate that the innovation is TRL 7 or TRL 8 or TRL 9, according to the definition of TRL:**

HORIZON 2020 – Commission Decision C(2014)4995 - Technology readiness levels (TRL)

Where a topic description refers to a TRL, the following definitions apply, unless otherwise specified:

- **TRL 9 – actual system proven in operational environment (competitive manufacturing in the case of key enabling technologies; or in space)**
- **TRL 8 – system complete and qualified**
- **TRL 7 – system prototype demonstration in operational environment**



- **TRL 6 – technology demonstrated in relevant environment (industrially relevant environment in the case of key enabling technologies)**
- **TRL 5 – technology validated in relevant environment (industrially relevant environment in the case of key enabling technologies)**
- **TRL 4 – technology validated in lab**
- **TRL 3 – experimental proof of concept**
- **TRL 2 – technology concept formulated**
- **TRL 1 – basic principles observed**

Candidates for the Awards must send by e-mail their applications filled in English to the cluster of the country or region in which their entity is located according to the regulations in that specific region or country.

Candidates must send the

- application form (maximum 1000 characters including spaces per criterion of the innovation's detail in word format, including a description of the innovation in a press-ready format)**
- 5 slides (in ppt format)**
- as well as **additional documents** to illustrate the innovative product/service/project presented to the jury (meaningful photos with a minimum resolution of 300 dpi, certification reports...) with reminder of the entrant's identity and the name given to the equipment presented.

**Please note:**

**a) and b) are mandatory (maximum lengths of text indicated in the application form template (a) and number of slides (b) have to be strictly respected.). If missing or incorrect, the application will be automatically rejected for formal reasons.**

The individual member clusters of ERCI will determine a maximum of three (3) nominees for the ERCI Awards out of the applications according to their local rules.

**Please note:**

**1) The cluster managers check through their jury whether the application fulfils the criterion TRL=7 or higher.**

**2) The cluster managers must check that an application does not concern the same product that has already won an ERCI Innovation Award in previous years.**

**3) If a cluster organisation nominates an application that is identical in content to an application that has already been nominated by another cluster organisation, the application in question must be rejected and the cluster organisation in question must be informed of this fact. The cluster organisation in question then has the opportunity to nominate an alternative application by the deadline.**

**4) All the clusters, currently part of ERCI, are strongly invited to nominate up to 3 candidates.**



The individual member clusters of ERCI must send the applications of their nominees to the organising cluster for the Awards.

## 2.2 Organising cluster & Deadline for applications

For the year 2026 the organising cluster for the Awards is *Rail.S e. V. (Germany)*.

All applications nominated by the individual member clusters of ERCI must be sent by e-mail and are to be received by the cluster management organisation *Rail.S* not later than **15 June 2026, 24:00 CEST** (UTC+2). All applications must be directed to a unique e-mail address of the organising cluster: **marketing@rail-s.de**.

**Please note:**

- **Only this official e-mail address will be considered.**
- **Applications that will send after the deadline mentioned above will be rejected.**

## 2.3 Selection criteria

Firstly, each jury member assesses whether the applications correspond to a TRL=7 or higher. The absolute majority of the jury members counts.

**Please note:**

**Applications that do not meet the criterion TRL = 7 or higher according to the majority opinion of the jury will be rejected.**

Then jury members will assess the applications (containing as much detail as possible) following the listed criteria.

Criteria	Weight	Explanations
Innovative level of the product/ service/project with respect to the state of the art	3	The Jury will assess the <b>potential</b> of these innovations to be appreciated in relation to their ability to raise new markets for the partners involved, and in terms of <b>scientific and technical advances</b> . The best project will bring a major innovation into the railway market. R&D will be provided corresponding to a <b>market issue</b> and the link with this issue will be highlighted.
Economic benefits produced	2	The Jury will assess the economic benefits the innovation will bring to the buyer of the innovation.

Criteria	Weight	Explanations
Competitive advantage the Innovation brings/can bring to the enterprise	2	The Jury will assess the competitive advantage the project will bring to the developer of the innovation: development of business activity, <b>new markets opportunities</b> , jobs created or to be created, R&D.  In addition, the following are also positive indicators of impact: <b>patenting, contribution to future standardization, creation of new businesses, structuring a research team, ...</b>
Positive Societal impact the Innovation brings with respect to the Societal and Competitive Challenges defined at European and International level	1	The Jury will make sure the project is developed in coherence with of the White Book for transport and other initiatives like Europe's Rail and ERRAC SRA / Visions to 2050 ( <b>Safety, Security, Capacity, Energy efficiency, Maintainability, Interoperability, Intermodality, ...</b> )
Creation of the Innovation by networking (with other enterprises or research bodies)	1	The Jury will assess if the product developed is the result of a <b>cooperation</b> and the <b>added value</b> of the team work.
Effect scope (country, Europe, world – geographic aspects)	1	The Jury will assess if the company took into account, in its state of the art, <b>European projects and even international projects</b> if it is relevant to the targeted market.  The jury will also assess if the project will affect the <b>international strategy</b> of the companies by creating new market opportunities internationally.

According to the following system, each Jury member will grade the application in each of the aforementioned sections:

Grade	Implied Points	Explanation / Quality assessment
A	6	Outstanding
B	5	Very Good
C	4	Good
D	3	Average
E	2	Below average
F	1	Poor

Implied points will be multiplied with the section weight and, thus, the total section result will be determined. The sum of all section results will determine the overall score.



The winning categories “Best SME” and “Best Large Enterprise” will be determined according to the overall scoring. In the event of a tie, the Chairperson of the Jury will have a casting vote.

The determination of the winner in the “Coup de Cœur” category takes place immediately after the winners in the “Best SME” and “Best Large Enterprise” categories have been determined. For this purpose, all jury members are asked to compile a TOP 5 ranking of their favorites **already during the evaluation process**. The TOP 5 rankings submitted together with the jury members’ evaluations form the basis for awarding 5 points, 3 points, and 1 point to the highest-ranked applications that are not already winners of the “Best SME” and “Best Large Enterprise” categories. The application with the highest total number of points determined in this way is the winner of the “Coup de Cœur” category.

In case of ex-quo, the Jury Chairperson will have a casting vote.

## [2.4 Calendar](#)

**Please note:**

**All the dates in this Regulation must be respected. Candidates or Clusters delivering late contributions will be rejected.**

## **Article 3: European Jury**

A European Jury composed of railway professionals from Academia/Research Centres and Industries, will be assembled to rank entries based on the criteria indicated above.

**Please note:**

**The jury members must come from Academia or Industry, including final customers (train operating companies, infrastructure managers) or being part of the jury.**

**Please note:**

- **Each Jury member must sign a self-declaration of not being involved in the innovations participating to the ERCI Innovation Awards 2026.**
- **The participating clusters must take this into account in advance when selecting their jury members.**

**Please note:**

**The jury members shall have no doubts about the TRL – When filling the evaluation table, in the Eligibility Check (“Is the TRL=7 or higher”) the only available answers will be “Yes” or “No”; the answer “Unclear” would not be possible.**

**Please note:**

**Jury member assembly: The ambition is having 2/3 from industry and 1/3 from academia.**



Each ERCI member cluster has the right to nominate one Jury member. The Chairperson of the Jury shall be nominated by the organising cluster for the Awards according to the decision of the ERCI Steering Committee.

**Please note:**

**If during the assessment a Jury member has to resign, the corresponding cluster will immediately inform the organising cluster for the Awards at its unique e-mail address and nominate a substitute.**

The Jury members must be nominated with full names, title, function and contact details **by 1 June 2026** by each ERCI member cluster to the organising cluster management organisation to its unique the e-mail address as previously indicated.

The organising cluster for the Awards will contact the Jury members after nomination and ask them to sign a brief confidentiality declaration.

The organising cluster for the Awards will provide all applications, the evaluation grid and manual to all Jury members **by 18 June 2026**.

**Please note:**

**The only rules to be followed by Jury members are those contained in this regulation. The evaluation grid must be fully filled and according to the rules requested. No deviation will be accepted.**

All Jury assessments must be returned to the organising cluster for the Awards at its unique e-mail address until **20 July 2026**.

#### **Article 4: Decisions of the Jury**

The decisions of the Jury are final and without appeal.

#### **Article 5: Awards Ceremony**

The ERCI Innovation Awards 2026 Ceremony is planned to take place at InnoTrans (Berlin - Germany) latest on 25 September 2026.

#### **Article 6: External Communication**

Entries entail candidates' consent to the use of the material they provide in communications related to ERCI or the clusters involved in the contest organisation.



#### Article 7: GDPR Privacy Policy

For the ERCI Innovation Awards 2026, all data provided by the candidates through their clusters of membership will be collected and stored by *Rail.S* and by Jury members. The legal basis for processing the data is the “ERCI Innovation Awards 2026 – Regulations”. The data provided will be used for the selection of ERCI Winners and for communication purposes at European level. The data will be stored for 5 years and then automatically cancelled. Earlier requests of cancellation of own data from databases of the organising cluster of the Awards and Jury members must be sent to its unique e-mail address.



**Consent and self-declaration of Jury member:**

I agree with the above rules and declare that I will treat the content of all applications for the ERCI Innovation Awards 2026 confidentially and according to GDPR rules. In case of formal request from applicants sent to *Rail.S*, I will cancel the relevant data from my database.

- I will also treat the final results of the contest confidentially until the Award Ceremony that will take place at InnoTrans in Berlin latest on 25 September 2026.
- I also declare that I am not involved in any innovation applying for the ERCI Innovation Awards 2026.

***Name of Jury member:***

***Representing the Cluster:***

***Date and signature:***