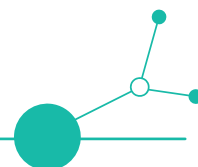


Joint Strategy Agenda

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Disclaimer

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1. Introduction

The Joint Strategy Agenda (JSA) is a strategic document that consolidates results of pilot activities, research findings and practical experiences of ISIHUBs across the five partner regions involved in the TASK4ISI project (Transnational Action to advance SKills and competences FOR Inclusive entrepreneurship and Social Innovation).

The purpose of the JSA is to provide a shared strategic framework for **advancing inclusive entrepreneurship**, and to support its integration into S3 and S4+ strategies at the regional and transnational level.

The JSA is addressed to policy-makers, regional authorities, innovation and business support organisations, and other stakeholders involved in entrepreneurship and innovation policies.

2. Analytical Framework

2.1. Key Analytical Questions & Framework

The analytical framework for regional profiles and the cross-regional synthesis is structured around three key questions that guide both the analysis of regional transformation and its operationalisation within innovation policy.

1. WHAT do regions prioritise? (Smart Specialisation - S3 and S4+)

Smart Specialisation provides the strategic framework through which innovation priorities are defined and aligned. This dimension covers existing S3 priority domains and innovation directions. More recently, the framework has been expanded to integrate sustainability, digitalisation and inclusion as core dimensions of innovation-driven regional development – a broadened approach commonly referred to as S4+ (Smart Specialisation Strategies for Sustainability and Inclusion).

2. HOW do ecosystems enable entrepreneurship? (Innovation Ecosystem and Enabling Conditions)

This dimension provides a contextual reading of the regional innovation ecosystem and the conditions it creates for entrepreneurial activity. Depending on data availability across partner regions, the analysis draws attention – to the extent possible – to:

- the regional economic and innovation context, including dominant sectors, the role of SMEs and self-employment, main innovation assets (R&D base, hubs, clusters), and relevant demographic or territorial dynamics (ageing, youth outmigration, urban-rural divides);
- enabling conditions for aspiring and early-stage entrepreneurs, with particular attention to access to finance, business support services, regulatory and administrative accessibility, and access to markets and networks.

Where evidence allows, the analysis also reflects on the role of coordination between actors and intermediary organisations in linking entrepreneurs to available support.

3. WHO participates? (Inclusive Entrepreneurship)

This dimension examines the extent to which different groups are able to access and benefit from entrepreneurial opportunities, with a particular focus on under-represented groups (e.g. women, youth, migrants, long-term unemployed, persons with disabilities).

It analyses:



- participation patterns and gaps across different groups;
- observed linkages (or lack thereof) between S3 priorities and inclusive entrepreneurship measures;
- barriers affecting entry, survival and growth of businesses for under-represented groups;

Together, these three questions provide a consistent analytical structure that is applied across regional profiles and translated into strategic priorities and a policy mix of measures.

2.2. Data collection methodology

The analysis combines two complementary sources of evidence: structured desk research and practice-based evidence from pilot activities and ISIHUB operations. Together they provide both a consistent factual baseline across regions and a grounded understanding of how support systems function in practice.

2.2.1 Desk research

Desk research follows the three analytical questions set out in Section 2.1 and provides a common factual reference point for interpreting the conditions for inclusive entrepreneurship across partner regions. The objective is not an exhaustive statistical assessment of regional economies, but a consistent context within which regional findings can be compared.

Evidence was drawn from:

- regional baseline profiles and peer review materials prepared within the project;
- official statistics and publicly available socio-economic data, where relevant;
- regional and national policy and strategy documents, including Smart Specialisation Strategies;
- indicative information on entrepreneurship support structures and programmes.

2.2.2 Evidence from pilot activities and ISIHUB operations

This evidence was gathered through:

- implementation of pilot activities (Business Skills and Matchmaking Programmes) across partner regions;
- targeted stakeholder interviews;
- structured pilot reports prepared by every partner region – five Business Skills Programme reports (D.3.1.2) and six Business Matchmaking Programme reports (D.3.2.2) – Central Hungary delivered two, documenting delivery between September 2025 and June 2026.

The combination of pilot delivery, interviews and ISIHUB exchanges produces qualitative material on the day-to-day operation of inclusive entrepreneurship support – including the experience of target groups, the operational constraints faced by support organisations, and the patterns of cooperation observed within the ISIHUB network. Findings derived from this evidence are presented in Sections 3.1 (regional profiles), 3.2 (cross-regional synthesis) and 3.3, which consolidates what the ten pilot reports demonstrate about the design and delivery of inclusive entrepreneurship support.



3. Analysis of the State and Potential of Inclusive Entrepreneurship in Partner Regions

3.1 Regional Profiles

3.1.1 Italy - Emilia-Romagna

Emilia-Romagna is a highly developed and industrialised region in central-northern Italy, with a population of approximately 4.47 million (2025)¹ and a density of 198.4 inhabitants/km².¹ The demographic structure reflects ageing dynamics, with a high old-age dependency ratio (39%), while foreign residents account for 12.9% of the population (approximately 580,000 people).²

The labour market is relatively strong, with labour force participation for ages 20-64 at 79%, although a notable gender gap persists (men 86.1%, women 72%). The unemployment rate is 4.3%, while the youth NEET rate is reported at 9.6%, indicating that certain groups remain at risk of labour market exclusion despite generally favourable employment conditions.

The regional economy is diversified and strongly export-oriented. Key sectors include advanced manufacturing (mechanical engineering and Industry 4.0), the automotive cluster known as “Motor Valley”, and the agri-food ecosystem often referred to as “Food Valley”, alongside growing capabilities in biomedical and pharmaceutical industries and the data economy.

From an enterprise perspective, the region recorded 432,563 registered enterprises (September 2025),³ confirming its position as one of Italy's most entrepreneurially dense regions. The business fabric remains characterised by a strong presence of micro firms, particularly in Romagna, where the vast majority of enterprises employ fewer than 10 people. Recent trends show a contraction in youth-led businesses (-1.1% year-on-year as of mid-2025),⁴ in line with the national slowdown, while foreign-owned enterprises continue to account for a growing share of the regional business fabric, representing a key driver of entrepreneurial dynamism. The negative trend for female-owned businesses continues (-1% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2025), at a faster rate than in previous years.

Smart Specialisation (S3) Priorities⁵

Emilia-Romagna's Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) 2021-2027, adopted by the Regional Legislative Assembly on 30 June 2021, is structured around production systems combined with cross-sectoral thematic areas, meaning that priorities are framed primarily as industry and value-chain domains, complemented by horizontal themes addressing broader societal and territorial challenges.

S3 strategic specialisation areas include:

- Agri-food

¹ Wikipedia, Emilia-Romagna (ISTAT data, 2025): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emilia-Romagna>

² InfoMigrants / IDOS Migration Statistics Dossier 2025, data as of January 2025: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/68045/italys-emiliaromagna-region-has-greatest-number-of-foreignborn-residents>

³ Unioncamere Emilia-Romagna, *Movimprese - terzo trimestre 2025* (elaboration based on InfoCamere data): <https://sestopotere.com/unioncamere-emilia-romagna-per-le-imprese-saldo-positivo-nel-terzo-trimestre-2025/>

⁴ Camera di commercio della Romagna, *Imprese giovanili - dati al 30 giugno 2025* (Osservatorio economico e sociale, elaborazioni Infocamere-Movimprese): <https://www.chiamamicitta.it/camera-commercio-romagna-nel-riminese-imprese-giovanili-in-calo/>

⁵ Regione Emilia-Romagna, *Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) 2021-2027* - Programma regionale FESR: <https://fesr.regione.emilia-romagna.it/erdf/s3>



- Building and construction
- Mechatronics and motoring
- Health and wellness industries
- Cultural and creative industries
- Innovation in services
- Digital and logistics
- Energy and sustainable development
- Tourism

Two additional areas with high growth potential are identified: the Space Economy and large/complex critical infrastructures.

The strategy also defines 15 cross-sectoral priority thematic areas cutting across these production systems, tackling challenges ranging from climate and natural resources to the blue economy, from manufacturing 4.0 to sustainable mobility, and from personal well-being to social inclusion and cohesion. These thematic areas are organised around five key dimensions: sustainable transition, digital transformation, health, well-being and nutrition, and territories, cities and communities.

Within this architecture, inclusion and social cohesion are embedded as explicit cross-sectoral priorities rather than as secondary concerns. Two of the fifteen thematic priority areas are dedicated precisely to these themes: "Social innovation and participation" (Area 14) and "Inclusion and social cohesion: education, work, territories" (Area 15). In the strategy's framing, inclusion sits alongside sustainability and digitalisation as one of the major challenges guiding investment priorities.

The strategy is also being operationalised through dedicated policy instruments: the first regional Bando Innovazione Sociale (2024), funded under ERDF Regional Programme action 1.3.5, mobilised €11 million of overall investment (€5.1 million in regional funding) and financed 75 projects focused primarily on inclusion, social cohesion and social innovation.

Innovation Ecosystem⁶

Entrepreneurship support in Emilia-Romagna is delivered through a well-developed regional innovation ecosystem involving public institutions, intermediary organisations and local authorities.

A central coordinating actor is ART-ER, the regional agency for research and innovation, which manages initiatives related to mentorship, funding facilitation and collaboration with municipalities, universities and innovation actors.

In the Romagna area, ART-ER collaborates with cities including Cesena, Ravenna, Rimini and Forlì to promote start-ups and entrepreneurial activity through co-working spaces, incubators and innovation hubs, as well as through the EmiliaRomagnaStartup platform, which provides information, networking and support services for entrepreneurs.

Overall, the regional support landscape includes a range of innovation platforms, incubator networks and collaborative hubs, although available evidence suggests that services remain more concentrated in certain territories and sectors, with stronger support structures for technology-oriented entrepreneurship compared to traditional or service-based activities.

ISIHUB Insights & Pilot Delivery

⁶ Source: TASK4ISI project (Interreg Central Europe), Peer Review Reports – Region: Emilia-Romagna, v1.2, February 2025, sections 1.2, 3.1, 3.6 and 3.7.



Pilot delivery. The Emilia-Romagna pilot is delivered through a two-organisation structure combining a non-profit and a municipal actor, with administration, communication and direct participant contact distributed across both. Both programmes ran from October 2025, the Business Skills Programme concluding in June 2026.

The Business Skills Programme attracted 37 applications; the group narrowed to 25 and then to 20 participants who completed the required attendance. Each participant received at least 30 hours of support, structured as 16-20 hours of plenary and sub-group training and 10-14 hours of individual tutoring, mentoring or specialist consultancy. The participant profile is distinctive in its diversity: 75% young people, 60% women, 20% migrants and a smaller share of seniors. Participants with health conditions or learning disorders were also reached, but these were not declared at application and emerged only during delivery. Consistency of attendance proved the main operational difficulty – attributed by the partner to work, study and family commitments rather than to programme quality – and was addressed through evening and Saturday slots, hybrid delivery, an assigned tutor for catch-up activities and continuous individual contact.

The Business Matchmaking Programme engaged 20 participants and operated as a complementary rather than sequential offer, positioning ISIHUB Romagna as a bridge to the existing entrepreneurial ecosystem. Those taking part were predominantly young people under 35 and women, with 15% from a migratory background and a further 5% from other vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities. Its most significant finding for this strategy is sectoral: the business ideas developed mapped across the region's S3 production systems – cultural and creative industries (26%), digital and logistics (21%), agri-food (16%), innovation in services (16%), health and wellness (11%) and tourism (5%) – demonstrating that support to under-represented groups does not come at the expense of economic relevance. Formalised cooperation with trade associations CNA and Confartigianato, alongside the Chamber of Commerce, employment centres and universities, carried outreach; from January 2026 the combination of training with informal meetings and networking events proved the single most effective instrument for sustaining engagement. Efforts to reach neurodivergent participants, in particular individuals with autism, were unsuccessful owing to difficulties in involving families, and the partner concludes that such groups require a more gradual and specialised approach.

Governance and ecosystem positioning. The public-civil society co-ownership model is a notable feature of the Emilia-Romagna hub: the municipal partner brings institutional legitimacy and access to public resources, while the non-profit brings proximity to vulnerable groups and operational flexibility. This combination addresses, in practice, the governance anchoring challenge identified across the partnership. The hub operates across two locations within the Romagna area, with some activities held online; for a territory of this size, maintaining multiple local access points is more effective than centralisation – an argument for distributed hub models in regions with significant internal geographical dispersion. Hub coordination is active, with core members meeting monthly, and the partnership is exploring EU funding pathways to sustain operations beyond the project cycle.

Strategic learning that informs the framework. Three operational lessons translate directly into the JSA framework:

- Training must be highly individualised, or the participant group must be sufficiently homogeneous from the outset – mixed-readiness groups require significantly more adaptive capacity from facilitators.
- Flexibility to adjust programme content along the way should be built into design rather than treated as a fallback.
- Participant selection works best when conceived as a multi-step journey with milestones that allow re-routing across modules based on evolving readiness.

The hub model the team is working toward is explicitly integrative: an ISIHUB conceived as a network bridge connecting existing support structures, with a deliberate focus on vulnerable groups. Within a regional



context that offers a wide range of widespread and specialised services for high-value-added start-ups, it is crucial to strengthen enterprise-support frameworks for disadvantaged target groups, capable of offering dedicated, tailored, and low-threshold support and learning pathways.

3.1.2 Croatia - Split-Dalmatia County

Split-Dalmatia County had 423,407 residents (2021 census), down from 454,798 in 2011, representing a 6.9% population decrease. Subsequent DZS (Državni zavod za statistiku - Croatian Bureau of Statistics) estimates indicate a gradual recovery: 426,054 inhabitants mid-2023 and 428,680 mid-2024 (+0.62% year-on-year, making it the fifth-fastest growing Croatian county in relative terms).^{7 8} Population density was approximately 93.3 inhabitants/km² (land area basis, 2021 census), with strong concentration in urban areas, particularly the city of Split, while hinterland and island areas remain sparsely populated.

The demographic structure reflects pronounced ageing trends: 21.8% of the population was aged 65 or older at the 2021 census, placing the county among Europe's oldest regions (comparable to Italy, Finland, Germany and Portugal). Depopulation pressures are particularly visible in rural hinterland and island communities, reinforcing the region's pronounced urban-rural and mainland-island divide.

Economic activity is strongly shaped by tourism and hospitality, which remain the dominant sectors of the regional economy. Other important activities include retail trade, specialised construction, food production and public services, alongside a growing ICT segment – the county now hosts more than 560 ICT companies, supported by the regional technology hub Digitalna Dalmacija.

The labour market is characterised by strong seasonality effects linked to tourism: in April 2025, accommodation and food services accounted for 33.3% of all new employment relationships nationally, with Split-Dalmatia County leading Croatia in absolute hiring volumes (2,733 persons, or 20.6% of national total).⁶ At the same time, Split-Dalmatia County consistently records the highest absolute number of registered unemployed in Croatia: 10,685 persons in July 2025 (14.6% of the national total), rising to 14,409 persons at end-2025 (17.4%) due to seasonal effects. ⁹Women traditionally represent the largest unemployed group in absolute terms.

Entrepreneurial activity is SME-dominated, with a large share of small and micro enterprises operating across services, tourism-related activities and trade.

Smart Specialisation (S3) Priorities

Croatia's Smart Specialisation Strategy to 2029 (S3 2029), adopted by the Government on 13 December 2023, is structured around seven vertical Thematic Priority Areas (TPAs). These priorities are framed as societal and economic challenges linked to innovation and industrial transformation, rather than as a simple sector-based list. The strategy operates alongside Industrial Transition Plans for Northern, Pannonian and Adriatic Croatia (the latter covering Split-Dalmatia County), delivered through the Integrated Territorial Programme.¹⁰

S3 2029 Thematic Priority Areas (TPAs):

⁷ Državni zavod za statistiku (DZS), *Procjena stanovništva Republike Hrvatske u 2023.* (STAN-2024-3-1): <https://podaci.dzs.hr/2024/hr/76804>

⁸ Invest Croatia / RERA S.D., *Splitsko-dalmatinska županija - County Stats*, April 2025: <https://investcroatia.gov.hr/county-stats/splitsko-dalmatinska-zupanija/>

⁹ Financije.hr, *HZZ: Krajem 2025. godine 82.625 nezaposlenih* (January 2026, citing HZZ data): <https://financije.hr/hzz-krajem-2025-godine-82-625-nezaposlenih-trenutacno-84-636/>

¹⁰ Vlada Republike Hrvatske, *Strategija pametne specijalizacije do 2029.*, adopted 13 December 2023 (MINGOR official text PDF): <https://mingo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/slike/Vijesti/2022/S3%20do%202029%20Tekst%20VRH%202023%2012%2013.pdf>



- Personalised health care
- Smart and clean energy
- Smart and green mobility
- Security and dual-use (awareness, prevention, response and remediation)
- Sustainable and circular food
- Customised and integrated wood products
- Digital products and platforms

The strategy is built around three specific objectives: (i) improving scientific excellence, (ii) bridging the gap between the research and business sectors, and (iii) increasing innovation effectiveness.

Within this framework, inclusion-related elements are present mainly through skills development and participation in entrepreneurship. The strategy emphasises upskilling and reskilling as enabling conditions for industrial transition and innovation, and it includes entrepreneurship-support actions designed to strengthen entrepreneurial capabilities and broaden participation.

Social inclusion is not defined as a standalone priority area, but the strategy contains targeted references that open space for inclusion-oriented implementation. In particular, S3 2029 explicitly acknowledges the underrepresentation of women in research and entrepreneurship – noting that women represent only 22% of PhDs in ICT and 33% in engineering, manufacturing and construction, and that the gender gap in entrepreneurial activity in Croatia is wider than the EU average. Similarly, social innovation is not positioned as a separate thematic area, but the inclusion logic is indirectly embedded through skills development, entrepreneurship-support measures and broader socio-economic outcomes linked to regional development, particularly through the industrial transition dimension.

Innovation Ecosystem¹¹

Entrepreneurship support in Split-Dalmatia County involves a combination of public institutions, EU-funded programmes and private initiatives.

Key public actors include PI RERA (Public Institution RERA S.D. for Coordination and Development of Split-Dalmatia County), which plays a central role in regional development support, policy coordination and training activities. Local entrepreneurship support is also provided by city-level development agencies and business support organisations, notably RaST - Razvojna agencija Split (City of Split Development Agency) with its entrepreneurial centre RaST+, as well as development agencies in Kaštela (KASTELARA) and Makarska (MARA). As an ISIHUB member and long-term partner, RaST plays a particularly important role in anchoring inclusive entrepreneurship support at the city level and ensuring continuity of pilot activities beyond the project lifecycle.

At the national level, several institutions contribute to the entrepreneurship support landscape. The Croatian Employment Service (HZZ) provides self-employment grants, particularly targeting unemployed individuals seeking to start a business. HAMAG-BICRO supports SMEs through financial instruments, guarantees, subsidies and mentoring programmes.

In addition, EU Structural Funds represent an important source of support, financing programmes related to green and social entrepreneurship, start-up development and SME competitiveness, often through grants, subsidised loans and project-based initiatives targeting youth, women and other vulnerable groups.

The regional ecosystem therefore includes multiple institutional entry points for entrepreneurship support, ranging from local development agencies such as PI RERA and RaST to national financial instruments (HZZ,

¹¹ Source: TASK4ISI (Interreg Central Europe), Peer Review Report - Split-Dalmatia County, v1.2, February 2025 (sections 1.2, 1.3, 3.1, 3.6 and 3.7).



HAMAG-BICRO) and EU-funded programmes. However, available evidence suggests that access to these services is uneven across the territory, with stronger availability in coastal urban centres and more limited access in rural and island areas.

ISIHUB Insights & Pilot Delivery

Pilot delivery. The Split-Dalmatia Business Skills Programme ran from 20 November 2025 to 17 January 2026 and reached 20 participants from 23 applications, with the remaining applicants withdrawing for personal or professional reasons. Delivered by CEDRA Split with PI RERA S.D. as coordinating partner, it combined a 20-hour core module delivered to the full group with a 10-hour supplementary track designed separately for women and for young people, in evening sessions that made attendance possible for participants in work or study. Sessions were held at Technology Park Split, whose managing organisation, the Split Development Agency RaST, provided premises free of charge and continues to participate in ISIHUB meetings; the programme closed with a full-day practical camp in Trilj.

The design confirmed that participants from under-represented groups require a step-by-step approach with formats adapted to each group's starting position. The women's track addressed self-doubt, imposter syndrome, fluctuating motivation, stress management and burnout prevention, and featured established female entrepreneurs as guest speakers; the youth track concentrated on decision-making, time management and converting ideas into action plans. Alongside business modelling, marketing and financial literacy, the core module covered legal forms and registration procedures and introduced participants to the regional Smart Specialisation framework as a means of identifying viable market niches – a deliberate attempt to connect first-time founders with S3 implementation rather than treating the two as separate tracks.

The Business Matchmaking Programme was delivered by CEDRA Split with PI RERA S.D. as coordinating partner, hosted and taught at the Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism of the University of Split. Its five trainers – four faculty members and the coordinator of the Faculty's Career Development Centre – contributed six hours each. The 30-hour cycle ran over four consecutive days from 25 to 28 May 2026 and closed with a networking and matchmaking event on 29 June 2026. It involved 38 participants, of whom 28 completed the full 30 hours while a further ten attended between six and 18. The programme opened with a foundational session on entrepreneurial thinking and business idea development – a response to the mixed readiness of a group combining students with entrepreneurs already trading – before shifting to partnership development, market access and Go-To-Market strategy, digital and AI-supported competitiveness including prompt engineering, and financial planning, with substantial weight on peer learning and structured networking. It responded directly to the limited networking opportunities available to entrepreneurs in smaller and peripheral parts of the county. The closing event was held jointly with the DUMP DAYS marketing and technology conference, which brought together 23 companies, 16 of them presenting at exhibition booths – an arrangement that gave participants direct access to employers and industry representatives at no additional delivery cost.

Governance and ecosystem positioning. Governance and legitimacy of the hosting arrangement have emerged as the central structural question for the Split-Dalmatia hub. The current model anchors coordination in PI RERA, while local stakeholders have signalled that the City of Split Development Agency (RaST) is well positioned to assume a more visible host-facing role going forward; the appropriate division of labour between county-level and city-level actors is currently being developed. The University of Split has moved from prospective partner to active one: its Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism hosted and taught the matchmaking programme and mobilised students through its Career Development Centre, which makes it the hub's established route to young people and to the higher-education ecosystem. Engagement with national-level actors – notably the Croatian Employment Service (HZZ) and women's organisations such as Udruga Domine – is at an early stage and represents an explicit development priority for the next phase, given their relevance to primary target groups. Communication infrastructure is similarly



identified as an area for development: dedicated digital communication channels would meaningfully extend the hub's reach beyond current media-based outreach.

Strategic learning that informs the framework. Two operational lessons feed directly into the JSA framework:

- The clearest operational need identified during the pilot is a physical one-stop-shop presence in Split – a low-threshold entry point accessible to all target groups regardless of prior familiarity with existing support structures. This directly informs Priority P3 (intermediation) and P4 (territorial reach).
- Across all good practices reviewed during the pilot phase, sustainability remains the unresolved core challenge: none of the practices examined has demonstrated structural embeddedness beyond project funding. This reinforces the precondition logic in Section 6.3: ISIHUB sustainability requires an operational budget anchored in a regional programme or institution, not dependent on project cycles.

3.1.3 Germany - Thuringia

Thuringia had 2,100,277 residents (31 December 2024) and covers around 16,202 km², with a population density of approximately 129.6 inhabitants/km², which is below the German national average. The region has experienced significant demographic decline, with the population decreasing from about 2.45 million in 2000 to just over 2.10 million at the end of 2024 – a drop of approximately 14% since 2000.¹² The decline accelerated in 2024, with the population falling by 14,593 persons (-0.7%) compared to 2023, driven by a natural deficit of 18,651 and a much-reduced net migration gain of only 4,515 (down from 14,008 in 2023, -67.8%).¹²

The demographic profile is characterised by pronounced ageing: Thuringia has the third-oldest population in Germany, with people aged 65 and over accounting for a significant share and the overall age structure continuing to rise.¹³

The regional settlement structure combines smaller urban centres with extensive rural areas, resulting in uneven access to services and labour market opportunities across the territory. Foreign residents accounted for 8.3% of the population at end-2024 (174,668 persons), up from 8.0% a year earlier, while the German population declined by 1.1%.

Thuringia's economy is SME-dominated, with strong manufacturing traditions and internationally recognised industrial clusters. Key strengths include industrial production systems, advanced manufacturing and optics/photonics capabilities centred around Jena, alongside growing activities in ICT and green technologies.

Labour market conditions have deteriorated somewhat in 2024-2025 after years of improvement, reflecting broader economic headwinds. The average unemployment rate stood at 6.2% in 2024 and rose to 6.4% in 2025 (compared to the German national rate of around 6%).¹⁴ Long-term unemployment continues to represent a notable structural challenge: in 2025 the share of persons unemployed for more than 12 months

¹² Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, *Pressemitteilung: Bevölkerungsrückgang 2024*, 22 May 2025: <https://statistik.thueringen.de/> (reported via https://www.nnz-online.de/news/news_lang.php?ArtNr=366171)

¹³ Demografieportal des Bundes und der Länder, *Bevölkerungsentwicklung in Thüringen* (based on Statistisches Bundesamt data): <https://www.demografie-portal.de/DE/Fakten/bevoelkerungszahl-thueringen.html>

¹⁴ Bundesagentur für Arbeit - Regionaldirektion Sachsen-Anhalt-Thüringen, *Arbeitsmarkt in Thüringen: Jahr 2024*, January 2025: <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/vor-ort/rd-sat/presse/2025-2-arbeitsmarkt-in-thueringen-jahr-2024-endet-mit-saisonalem-anstieg-der-arbeitslosigkeit>



fluctuated between 34% and 36% of all registered unemployed (35.9% in December 2025), broadly confirming the 35-40% range noted in the baseline narrative. The combined effects of demographic decline, ageing and labour market restructuring continue to shape entrepreneurship opportunities and regional service provision.

Smart Specialisation (S3) Priorities

Thuringia's Regional Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation (RIS Thüringen 2021-2027) – the successor to the 2014-2020 RIS3 Thüringen – is structured around four specialisation fields and one cross-cutting field (Querschnittsfeld).¹⁵ Priorities are framed primarily as technology- and industry-oriented domains linked to competitiveness and value creation; societal challenges such as demographic change are referenced mainly as contextual drivers rather than as mission-oriented priorities.

RIS Thüringen specialisation fields:

- Industrial production and systems (Industrielle Produktion und Systeme)
- Sustainable and smart mobility and logistics (Nachhaltige und intelligente Mobilität und Logistik)
- Healthy living and healthcare industry (Gesundes Leben und Gesundheitswirtschaft)
- Sustainable energy supply and resource use (Nachhaltige Energie und Ressourcenverwendung)

Cross-cutting field (Querschnittsfeld):

- ICT, innovative and production-related services (IKT, innovative und produktionsnahe Dienstleistungen)

Together, these fields account for more than 40% of Thuringian employment and over half of total regional turnover. The strategy's stated long-term objective is to generate an additional €2.9-3.4 billion in gross value added and 35,000-43,000 new jobs through focused R&D and innovation investment.

Within this framework, inclusion-related elements appear mostly indirectly. The strategy uses a broad innovation concept (*breiter Innovationsbegriff*) that explicitly includes social innovation alongside technological, process and organisational innovation, but social innovation is not elevated to a distinct priority. Societal challenges such as demographic change, public service provision (*Daseinsvorsorge*) and participation (*Teilhabe*) are referenced mainly as contextual drivers of the innovation agenda rather than as mission-oriented priorities.

The strategy's single explicit cross-cutting objective (Querschnittsziel) is greenhouse-gas neutrality – climate neutrality, not social inclusion, is the horizontal lens through which all specialisation fields are framed. This represents a shift in emphasis from the preceding RIS3 Thüringen 2014-2020, where gender equality had featured among the horizontal tasks; the 2021-2027 document does not repeat this framing at the strategy level, although horizontal EU principles on gender equality and non-discrimination continue to apply across all EFRE-funded programmes by regulation.

Innovation Ecosystem¹⁶

Entrepreneurship support in Thuringia is organised through a structured institutional ecosystem combining regional support organisations, universities and network actors.

¹⁵ Thüringer Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Wissenschaft und Digitale Gesellschaft (TMWWDG), *RIS Thüringen - Regionale Innovationsstrategie für intelligente Spezialisierung und wirtschaftlichen Wandel 2021-2027* (November 2021): https://www.leg-thueringen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/leg_portal/downloads/publikationen/thueringer_clustermanagement/tmw_wdg_ris-thueringen2021-2027_final.pdf

¹⁶ Source: TASK4ISI (Interreg Central Europe), Peer Review Report - Thuringia, Germany, v1.2, February 2025 (sections 1.2 and 3.1).



A central actor is ThEx (Thüringer Zentrum für Existenzgründungen und Unternehmertum), which coordinates entrepreneurship support services and works through a system of cooperation agreements and specialised programmes. Key initiatives include ThEx Zukunftswirtschaft and ThEx Enterprise, which provide advisory services, mentoring and support for start-ups and SMEs.

Targeted programmes addressing specific groups include ThEx Frauensache, which supports women entrepreneurs, and ThEx Young Entrepreneurs, which focuses on young people interested in starting a business.

The regional ecosystem also includes academic entrepreneurship support structures, such as the Fachhochschule Erfurt Gründungsservice, as well as network organisations such as SEND (Social Entrepreneurship Network Germany). Additional cooperation agreements with organisations such as IWM further contribute to the support landscape.

Overall, the available evidence suggests a relatively well-structured institutional support environment, combining general entrepreneurship support with several targeted initiatives aimed at specific groups.

ISIHUB Insights & Pilot Delivery

Pilot delivery. The Thuringia Business Skills Programme ran from September 2025 to April 2026 and reached 20 participants, the large majority of them migrants, alongside women and young people. It delivered 68 training hours through a two-day social hackathon, nine workshops, a networking event with the regional creative-industries association, an International Women's Day event and a closing three-day bootcamp, complemented by individual coaching. The programme was delivered in English, which lowered the access barrier for migrants in a support landscape otherwise available almost exclusively in German, and several participants subsequently registered for mentoring with mainstream support organisations whose representatives had taught or attended sessions.

Content was adjusted during delivery: a session on unique selling point and market positioning replaced the planned customer journey module in response to participant interest, prototyping was dropped in favour of additional individual mentoring given the sectoral spread of business ideas, and the module on business skills for women was merged into the International Women's Day event to give it a community-building character. The closing bootcamp was relocated to Schmalkalden University of Applied Sciences to serve students who had previously had to travel to Erfurt.

The Business Matchmaking Programme was delivered with Startup Migrants around a "first customer" logic – customer personas, competitor analysis, value proposition, minimum viable product, sales and investor outreach – combined with mentoring and a Team Matchmaking Event. It confirmed the retention pattern observed earlier: recorded attendance across participants ranged from three to twenty-nine hours, while the single networking event attracted a considerably larger audience than the regular sessions. Recruitment was also geographically skewed towards Schmalkalden, where the university start-up service actively supported dissemination, whereas comparable institutional support could not be secured in Erfurt – a concrete demonstration that reach depends on which institutions carry the outreach.

Governance and ecosystem positioning. The hub has established working relationships with local stakeholders, and conversations with the city regarding governance integration are progressing constructively. This signals that municipal buy-in – identified across regions as a critical sustainability factor – is achievable when approached incrementally rather than through formal commitments at the outset. Entrepreneurial interest among target groups exists, including within university-based communities, though realising this potential requires formats that accommodate language barriers and scheduling constraints typical of migrant participants in the region.

Strategic learning that informs the framework. The Thuringia experience contributes two lessons to the JSA framework:



- Programme length is a structural variable, not a delivery detail: extended formats carry significant retention risk for target groups with constrained time and shifting personal circumstances. This informs the calibration logic in Priority P2 and the bootcamp-style format embedded in the policy mix.
- Governance integration with municipal authorities is achievable through incremental dialogue rather than upfront commitments – a pattern that complements the precondition on institutional legitimacy in Section 6.3.

3.1.4 Poland - Małopolska Province

Małopolska Province had approximately 3.43 million residents (mid-2025, GUS estimate) and a relatively high population density of around 226 inhabitants/km² – the second-highest among Polish regions after Śląsk, and almost double the national average (~121 /km²).¹⁷ The region remains one of only two provinces in Poland (alongside Pomorze) that recorded a slight population increase in recent years, driven by relatively high fertility, lower mortality and Poland's second-highest positive migration balance after Mazowsze. Małopolska also has the country's lowest median age (41.2 years) and one of the largest shares of the working-age population.

The settlement structure is distinctive, with around half of residents (approximately 52%) living in rural areas, which contributes to marked intra-regional disparities between the Kraków metropolitan area and peripheral counties.

The regional economy is diversified and includes strong manufacturing sectors as well as a rapidly developing digital and ICT ecosystem centred around Kraków. In 2024, the REGON business register recorded approximately 499,000 economic entities in Małopolska, of which around 367,000 were natural persons running business activities, reflecting the region's role as one of Poland's major economic centres and one of the most entrepreneurial provinces in the country. The registered unemployment rate stood at 4.6% in late 2025, below the national average.¹⁸

At the same time, the regional profile highlights important territorial differences. While urban centres – particularly Kraków – benefit from strong innovation capacity, entrepreneurial networks and institutional support, more peripheral areas face more limited access to services, infrastructure and support programmes. This gap is visible in earnings data as well: Małopolska residents working in cities earn significantly more than those in rural areas, and the gap between Kraków's ICT sector (average earnings around PLN 14,500) and sectors like hospitality (around PLN 6,000) is pronounced.¹⁹

Smart Specialisation (S3) Priorities

Małopolska's Regional Innovation Strategy – officially the Regional Innovation Strategy of the Małopolska Region 2030 (RSI WM 2030), adopted by the Board of the Małopolska Region in February 2021 and serving as the region's RIS3 document – is structured around seven regional smart specialisation domains (RIS 1-RIS 7). These priorities are framed primarily as sector- and technology-oriented domains linked to industrial

¹⁷ Urząd Statystyczny w Krakowie, *Małopolska - dane bieżące* (stan na 30.06.2025): <https://krakow.stat.gov.pl/> – population 3,427.7 thousand, unemployment rate 4.6%.

¹⁸ GUS REGON register, Małopolska 2024 – 499,310 economic entities, of which 366,633 natural persons running business activities; 37,305 new registrations in 2024.

¹⁹ Radio Kraków / Urząd Statystyczny w Krakowie, *Małopolska w liczbach w 2024 roku*, December 2024: <https://www.radiokrakow.pl/aktualnosci/malopolska-w-liczbach-w-2024-roku-czym-mozemy-sie-pochwalic-co-jest-do-poprawy/>



competitiveness and innovation development, complemented by horizontal measures supporting skills, innovation diffusion and ecosystem development.²⁰

RIS3 Smart Specialisation Domains (RIS 1-RIS 7):

- RIS 1 - Life science
- RIS 2 - Sustainable energy
- RIS 3 - Information and communication technologies (ICT)
- RIS 4 - Chemistry
- RIS 5 - Production of metals, metal products and non-metallic mineral products
- RIS 6 - Electrical engineering and machine industry
- RIS 7 - Creative and leisure industries

The strategy is organised around three areas of intervention: (1) innovative background, potential and image of the region; (2) innovativeness and industrial transformation of enterprises; and (3) trust, ties and diffusion of knowledge within the innovation ecosystem (Entrepreneurial Discovery Process – PPO). These areas are broken down into 8 strategic objectives and 37 proposed actions/projects, structured around value chains (*łańcuchy wartości*) as the analytical axis.

Within this framework, inclusion-related elements appear mainly through capability-building and access mechanisms rather than as a standalone priority area. The strategy places strong emphasis on entrepreneurial competences, digital skills and lifelong learning as enabling conditions for economic transformation and innovation uptake. Implementation is supported by the project "*Zarządzanie regionalną inteligentną specjalizacją i procesem przedsiębiorczego odkrywania*" (2024-2027, budget PLN 14.37 million, co-financed under *Fundusze Europejskie dla Małopolski 2021-2027*), which is establishing four regional specialisation platforms (*małopolskie platformy specjalizacyjne*) to broaden stakeholder participation.

Social innovation is not framed as a separate specialisation domain. Social and territorial dimensions are addressed indirectly through skills development, digital inclusion policies and broader ecosystem mechanisms designed to expand access to innovation support beyond the Kraków metropolitan area, including rural communes and peripheral sub-regions.

Innovation Ecosystem²¹

Entrepreneurship support in Małopolska is delivered through a broad institutional ecosystem involving public institutions, regional development agencies, business support organisations, and civil society actors.

Key actors include the Małopolska Regional Development Agency (MARR), the Małopolska Centre for Entrepreneurship (MCP), and the Polish Entrepreneurship Foundation (PFP), which provide consulting, training, investor services, and financial support for start-ups and SMEs. The ecosystem also includes chambers of commerce (such as the Krakow Chamber of Industry and Commerce), technology parks and incubators (e.g., Krakow Technology Park, Oświęcim Business Incubators), as well as local NGOs and foundations that contribute to training, mentoring, and start-up support initiatives.

The Regional Social Policy Centre in Krakow coordinates regional social economy and social enterprise development policies focused on social reintegration and reconnection and on the incubation of social economy organisations, promoting and supporting the development of entrepreneurship among socially

²⁰ Regional Innovation Strategy of the Małopolska Region 2030 (RSI WM 2030), Marshal's Office of the Małopolska Region, February 2021 – official English version: <https://innowacyjna.malopolska.pl/uploads/pdf/Regional-Innovation-Strategy-of-the-Malopolska-Region-2030.pdf>

²¹ Source: TASK4ISI (Interreg Central Europe), Peer Review Report - Małopolska, Poland, May 2025, authored by Norbert Laurisz (KUE) (sections 1.2 and 3).



vulnerable groups. In 2023, the Małopolska Voivodeship Board adopted the Regional Programme for the Development of the Social Economy in the Małopolska Voivodeship until 2030, within which the social economy is treated as a horizontal theme. Its main goal positions the social economy sector as an important contributor to the sustainable development of the region across its social, economic, environmental, and territorial dimensions, built around four key areas: local community and socialisation of services; reintegration and social inclusion; incubation and development of social economy entities; and education and promotion of the social economy.

Available instruments include start-up grants and non-repayable support financed through the European Funds for Małopolska 2021-2027 programme, preferential development and start-up loans, vocational training and requalification programmes, career and business advisory services, and acceleration programmes such as #StartUP Małopolska. Coworking spaces and networking initiatives (business clubs, mastermind meetings, pitching sessions) further complement the offer.

Overall, the region offers a diversified set of entrepreneurship support instruments, but the availability and accessibility of services decline outside major urban centres, with uneven access to support across the region. Long-term support after business start-up and tailored pathways for specific disadvantaged groups are identified as notable gaps in the regional support landscape.

ISIHUB Insights & Pilot Delivery

Pilot delivery. Małopolska delivered its two programmes in contrasting formats and to two different populations: an autumn 2025 Business Skills Programme built around full-day bootcamps for Ukrainian migrants and seniors, and a spring 2026 Business Matchmaking Programme run as a two-part moderated hackathon for international founders based in Kraków. Both used compressed, bootcamp-style delivery, and the region's experience with that format – what it achieves and where it reaches its limit – is one of the more instructive operational findings in the partnership.

The Business Skills Programme ran from September to December 2025 and reached 38 participants. Its core consisted of two full-day bootcamps in November delivering 20 didactic hours – entrepreneurship foundations, strengths and motivation diagnostics, Business Model Canvas, personas and minimum viable product, budgeting, formal and legal requirements, and pitching – supplemented by two additional 10-hour blocks tailored to the two target groups: online training and consultations for migrants, and stationary training with individual consultations for seniors. Participants were predominantly Ukrainian migrants, with a strong prevalence of women, and business ideas concentrated in services, alongside trade, IT and small-scale manufacturing. The partner identifies language barriers and limited knowledge of the Polish legal and tax environment as the principal challenges, and initial diagnostic surveys together with deeper coverage of legal, tax and funding matters as the main design corrections for a subsequent edition.

The Business Matchmaking Programme was delivered on 18 and 25 April 2026 as two 10-hour BootCamps – 20 training hours in total – by TechnoConsulting at the Social and Economic Innovation Cluster in Kraków, with the Kraków University of Economics (UEK) as co-organisier. It reached 25 early-stage entrepreneurs and start-uppers from the city's expatriate community, all of whom completed the full 20 hours. Because most participants do not speak Polish, the entire programme – lectures, mentoring and materials – was delivered in English, which the partner identifies as the source of its transnational added value: it opened business support to a population effectively excluded from Polish-language provision.

The design is distinctive in one respect that matters for the strategy. Applicants described their business idea in an online registration form, and were then pre-assigned into groups of three to five with similar ideas or related industries before the first session. Each group's task was to develop and pitch one shared business concept by the end of day two, while continuing to consult mentors on their individual ideas. Short expert lectures of 30-40 minutes alternated with mentored group work across eight modules – business networking, business law for entrepreneurs, Business Model Canvas, budgeting, sales and client acquisition,



client communication and self-presentation, and a final pitch session – supported by five trainers drawn from the Kraków start-up ecosystem.

The outcomes were concrete. All 25 participants co-developed and stress-tested a Business Model Canvas adapted to the Polish legal and financial environment; five transnational business concepts were pitched to and assessed by active start-up consultants and investors; and participants mapped the legal requirements for establishing a sole proprietorship or a limited liability company (Sp. z o.o.) as foreign citizens – a compliance barrier specific to this group. Business ideas were concentrated in IT and deep-tech (B2B SaaS, AI, cybersecurity, robotics, mobility and EdTech applications), alongside social enterprise and community ventures, food and beverage, manufacturing, aerospace data services, and creative and retail activities. Participants named direct, real-time access to experts at their workstations as the programme's single highest value, and the pre-assignment into profile-based groups as what made networking feel organic rather than staged.

Two difficulties were reported, both of which qualify the region's own bootcamp finding. Compressing dense material – Polish business law, corporate taxation, budgeting and pitch architecture – into two intensive 10-hour days proved intellectually exhausting and produced information overload; the partner's principal recommendation for a future edition is to redistribute the same 20 hours across four or five shorter weekly evening sessions. Groups also progressed unevenly because some participants arrived with an operating MVP while others were still at ideation stage, leading the partner to propose preliminary screening into two tracks – ideation and early-stage/scale-up – and short preparatory materials (basic Polish business vocabulary, standard business models) circulated before day one.

The pilot reached migrants – primarily Ukrainians – as its most accessible target group, though accessibility is structurally time-limited by legal residence and support eligibility windows. The initial target age for seniors was adjusted downward to 55, recognising that individuals already in retirement are generally not motivated to pursue entrepreneurship – a practical calibration relevant to other regions targeting older workers.

Governance and ecosystem positioning. Two sustainability questions were raised explicitly by the coordinating organisation and inform the governance section of this strategy:

- The absence of a clear mechanism to sustain stakeholder engagement once project funding ends signals the need for a hub model that delivers ongoing value to institutional partners beyond the project cycle – a design challenge addressed in the policy mix and preconditions chapter.
- Private-sector engagement with ISIHUB structures requires a deliberate value proposition (talent pipelines, market access, procurement channels) rather than reliance on social-value framing alone.

The bootcamp format was new to several partners and required structured presentation of methodology and outcomes before broader buy-in could develop – a communication step that should be planned for, not improvised.

Strategic learning that informs the framework. Three lessons from the Małopolska pilot translate directly into the JSA framework:

- Compressed bootcamp formats are effective for retention and depth of engagement, but their intensity has a ceiling: the matchmaking pilot found that two 10-hour days produced information overload, and the partner recommends redistributing the same hours across four or five shorter weekly sessions. The design principle carried into Priority P2 and the policy mix is therefore concentration with pacing – short overall duration, but sessions calibrated to what participants can absorb.



- Target group accessibility is conditioned by legal and administrative factors beyond the hub's control (visa regimes, eligibility windows), requiring that programme design account for legally-induced volatility in participant groups.
- Both public and private partner engagement requires an explicit value proposition – a precondition rather than an emergent property of the hub model, and treated as such in Section 6.3.

3.1.5 Hungary

Hungary's population has been declining over the past decades, decreasing from over 10 million in 2000 to an estimated 9.5 million in 2025, accompanied by ageing demographic trends. The share of people aged 65 and over is projected to increase from 13.2% to 20.5%, reflecting broader demographic pressures affecting labour markets and economic participation.²²

At the same time, the country has undergone structural economic transformation, with the share of agriculture in GDP declining (from 5.8% in 2000 to 4.1% in 2020) and the service sector becoming the dominant component of the economy. The IT sector has also expanded significantly, increasing from 1.3% to approximately 4.5% of GDP over two decades.

Labour market indicators show improvement over time. Unemployment among the working-age population declined from 6.4% in 2000 to approximately 4.4% by 2025, while long-term unemployment has decreased from around 49% in the mid-2000s to approximately 36% in 2023, although it remains a structural feature of the labour market.

The project baseline focuses particularly on Central Hungary (Budapest and Pest County), which represents the country's largest and most densely populated region, with approximately 3.02 million inhabitants in 2025 and a density of around 441 inhabitants/km². Population growth in the region has been driven primarily by suburbanisation in Pest County, while the population of central Budapest has remained relatively stable.

At the same time, the country has undergone structural economic transformation, with the service sector becoming the dominant component of the economy – accounting for approximately 65.5% of GDP in 2023 and employing over 63% of the workforce. The share of agriculture in GDP has trended downward over the long term, although it remains more significant than the EU average: agriculture, forestry and fishing contributed 2.8% to gross value added in 2024²³, compared to the EU average of 1.6%, with year-to-year values fluctuating between roughly 3% and 5% depending on harvest conditions. The ICT sector has also expanded significantly, with the narrower IT segment contributing around 4.3% of GDP and the broader ICT sector (including telecommunications and IT services) accounting for approximately 6-7% of GDP, reflecting rapid digital transformation across public and private sectors.²⁴

Labour market conditions in the region are relatively favourable compared to the national average. Unemployment remained low (around 3-4% during 2020-2022), long-term unemployment levels are comparatively limited, and wages are above the national average, particularly in Budapest. At the same

²² KSH, *Censuses - 2022*: <https://www.ksh.hu/censuses> – ageing index (142 elderly per 100 children in 2022 vs. 8 per 100 in 1870).

²³ Emerging Europe, *IT Sector in Focus: Hungary* (2024); U.S. International Trade Administration, *Hungary - Information and Communication Technology* (2024): <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/hungary-information-and-communication-technology>

²⁴ Emerging Europe, *IT Sector in Focus: Hungary* (2024); U.S. International Trade Administration, *Hungary - Information and Communication Technology* (2024): <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/hungary-information-and-communication-technology>



time, the region displays internal disparities between metropolitan areas, suburban zones and more peripheral settlements.

Smart Specialisation (S3) Priorities

Hungary's National Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) 2021-2027, adopted by the Government on 2 July 2021 (Government Decision 1428/2021), is managed by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFIH) and serves as an enabling condition for accessing EU funds in the 2021-2027 programming period.²⁵ The strategy is structured around eight national economic priorities complemented by two horizontal priorities. Unlike the previous S3 (2014-2020), which was primarily sectoral, the 2021-2027 strategy is explicitly framed as inter-sectoral, aligned with major socio-economic-environmental challenges, while still anchoring innovation priorities in competitiveness and technological development.

S3 National Economic Priorities:

- Cutting-edge technologies
- Health
- Digitisation of the economy
- Energy and climate
- Services
- Resource-efficient economy
- Agriculture and food industry
- Creative industry

Horizontal Priorities:

- Skills development – designed to provide the human capital needed for smart specialisation in the priority sectors
- Modernising the business environment – focused on enabling conditions for innovation-driven SME growth²⁶

Implementation takes place through an ongoing Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) involving eight Territorial Innovation Platforms (TIPs) established around key higher education institutions, bringing together the regional "quadruple helix" (academia, industry, government, civil society).²⁷ The strategy places particular emphasis on strengthening domestic SMEs – identified as a long-standing structural weakness relative to the foreign-owned multinational sector that dominates Hungary's economic performance.

Within this framework, inclusion-related elements appear mainly through the horizontal priority on skills development, including digital skills, which is framed as a prerequisite for successful economic transformation and labour market adaptation. Social innovation is treated as a cross-cutting aspect rather than a separate priority domain, reflecting the expectation that innovation activities should contribute to

²⁵ NKFIH (Nemzeti Kutatási, Fejlesztési és Innovációs Hivatal / National Research, Development and Innovation Office), *National Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) 2021-2027*: <https://nkfi.gov.hu/english/national-smart-specialisation-strategy/s3-2021-2027> – Government Decision 1428/2021 (VII. 2.).

²⁶ NKFIH S3 information portal: <https://www.s3.nkfi.gov.hu/english> – "S3 also includes two horizontal priorities on skills development and modernising the business environment, which supports the effective delivery of the national economic priorities."

²⁷ *Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) 2021-2027* (Hungarian Government, July 2021 – English version): https://www.europeanacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Hugarian_S3_strategy_Adopted_compressed.pdf



broader societal value. However, the overall structure of the strategy remains anchored primarily in economic and technology-oriented priority areas, with no explicit standalone priority dedicated to social inclusion or underrepresented groups.

Innovation Ecosystem²⁸

Entrepreneurship support in Central Hungary is delivered through a well-developed institutional ecosystem that combines public institutions, financial organisations, business support structures and private actors, with a particular focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Key institutional actors include the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Magyar Kereskedelmi és Iparkamara, MKIK), the Hungarian Development Bank (MFB), the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFIH), the Hungarian Economic Development Agency (MGFÜ), and the Ministry of Economy, which together provide programmes related to training, mentoring, business incubation, innovation support, financial assistance and internationalisation. The ecosystem also includes KAVOSZ, Hiventures and the SEED Foundation, which offer additional services related to entrepreneurship development, mentoring and access to finance. Export-oriented support is provided through EXIM Bank and the Hungarian Export Promotion Agency (HEPA).

The region also benefits from an expanding network of industrial parks, business incubators, accelerators and co-working spaces, with notable examples including Red Stars, FastVentures and the Startup Campus Incubator, which offers incubation and investment opportunities for innovative startups across multiple Hungarian cities, including Budapest, Debrecen and Győr.

A variety of financial support programmes target aspiring entrepreneurs and disadvantaged groups. The GINOP Restart Programme promotes entrepreneurship among young people under 30, women, members of Roma communities, and individuals living in rural or underdeveloped regions, while the EFOP Plus Programme provides grants and development funds to socially or economically disadvantaged groups. Additional instruments include GINOP 5.2.2, which supports young unemployed individuals aged 18-30 with start-up capital under the Youth Guarantee Programme, GINOP 5.2.7, which provided grants of 3-5 million HUF per participant in structured stages, and Mobiltender EU, which offers up to 1 million HUF for equipment and initial setup. The START Pro mentorship and training programme, delivered under the National Talent Programme and Design Terminal, targets entrepreneurs aged 18-27 in fields such as sustainable energy.

Networking opportunities are provided through organisations such as Impact Hub and Loffice, which host workshops, pitch nights and networking events, as well as national networks including FIVOSZ (the Hungarian Association of Young Entrepreneurs) and the Hungarian Business Angel Network (HUNBAN).

Overall, the analysis highlights a relatively extensive institutional landscape for entrepreneurship support in Central Hungary, combining financial instruments, advisory services, mentoring, training programmes and targeted inclusion measures, making it easier for both mainstream and disadvantaged groups to pursue business opportunities.

SIHUB Insights & Pilot Delivery

Pilot delivery. The Hungarian pilot phase generated one of the strongest participant engagement rates across the partnership, delivered through two implementing partners running complementary pilots in parallel across the same region: Impact Hub Budapest and the Hungarian Economic Development Agency (MGFÜ). Between them, the two processes reached four distinct groups across two stages of the entrepreneurial journey – from women with no prior entrepreneurial experience to established entrepreneurs seeking internationalisation, and from women entrepreneurs to neurodivergent entrepreneurs – substantially widening the pool of Central Hungary entrepreneurs reached during the pilot phase.

²⁸ Source: TASK4ISI (Interreg Central Europe), Peer Review Report - Central Hungary, May 2025 (sections 1.2 and 3.1).



Impact Hub Budapest's Business Skills Programme was delivered in autumn 2025 as a six-week intensive course for women with no prior entrepreneurial experience and a business idea or very early-stage venture. Twelve participants were selected from 56 applications through a lightweight intake combining a simple application form with pre-selection interviews, with priority given to parents of children under eight, job-seekers and women over 50. The programme comprised eight sessions, five individual mentoring sessions and expert consultations in law, accounting and taxation. Participants rated individual mentoring and financial planning highest (both 4.8 out of 5); clarity on the viability of the business idea averaged 4.75, clarity on the business model 4.5, motivation to become an entrepreneur 4.4 and confidence in developing a viable idea 4.25. Within six weeks participants produced business model canvases, market and competitor analyses, financial plans with break-even calculations, first prototypes and landing pages, and in one case a formal sole-trader registration. The partner reports that the primary barrier for this group was self-confidence rather than absence of knowledge.

Running in parallel, MGFÜ delivered its own programme for women entrepreneurs in September 2025, with 10 participants. Prior to the pilot, participants were provided with an information package containing all relevant information. The programme covered several thematic areas, as follows:

1. Characteristics of the target group of women entrepreneurs - introductory module
2. Crisis management and managing changes in the business environment
3. Business skills development
4. Typical challenges faced by women entrepreneurs and opportunities for development
5. Good practices and role models, individual action plan
6. Conscious networking and relationship building
7. Practical networking tools
8. Relationship management and sustainable cooperation

Based on the participants' evaluations, the most useful topic was conscious business networking, which was considered particularly helpful in supporting the development of their business ideas. The topic of women's leadership roles also proved to be highly useful according to the participants' feedback.

At the second stage of the pipeline, Impact Hub Budapest's Business Matchmaking Programme, delivered in spring 2026, addressed established rather than early-stage entrepreneurs: eleven established women entrepreneurs, invited from the hub's alumni network, took part in an eight-week internationalisation programme covering market selection, financing, international customer acquisition, partnership development and leadership, each concluding with an individual internationalisation action plan. All eleven rated the programme 4 or 5 out of 5. The most instructive outcome for this strategy is how quickly peer connections converted into business activity: participants initiated cross-marketing arrangements, a joint seasonal product offering and a shared gift set within the programme period, and were connected to external financing and support channels including a bank-hosted women's community and two national innovation agency programmes.

MGFÜ's second pilot strand extended the region's reach to neurodivergent entrepreneurs, comprising more than 30 hours in total, with one session held each week during spring 2026. With the support of our mentor colleague, participants explored the challenges and key pitfalls affecting their businesses. This process helped create the safe and inclusive environment they needed, which was then followed by assessing individual opportunities and developing relevant skills, as well as networking and relationship building. Based on the entrepreneurs' feedback, they found the occasionally more informal and inclusive sessions particularly useful, and most participants gained greater confidence as a result. A major realisation for them was that they were not alone in facing challenges within their businesses, as many others were in similar situations, creating an opportunity for joint reflection and shared problem-solving during the



sessions. The overall feedback also showed that entrepreneurs would be open to such programmes and would be willing to participate in similar activities in order to acquire new knowledge and skills – an indication that financial support is not their only priority; they also value opportunities for learning, development and capacity building.

There was also openness from the policy-making side towards the TASK4ISI project and similar initiatives: the Deputy State Secretary responsible for Enterprises at the Ministry for National Economy participated in one of MGFÜ's events in March 2026, where the inclusion of the "missing entrepreneurs" target group in future entrepreneurship support and training initiatives was discussed in the context of the future development of the entrepreneurial support and training system.

Governance and ecosystem positioning. An opportunity for stronger coordination has emerged within the hub: Impact Hub Budapest and MGFÜ are currently running pilot activities in parallel, and closer integration between these two processes – spanning four complementary target groups within a single region – could unlock additional synergies that the governance model is well placed to support. The policy-level engagement secured by MGFÜ reinforces this opening: it signals that the regional ecosystem is receptive to institutionalising support for under-represented entrepreneurs, not only piloting it. The relationship to S3 governance structures – particularly the Territorial Innovation Platforms anchored around higher education institutions – represents a natural pathway through which inclusive entrepreneurship can be embedded in regional S3 implementation, rather than operated as two parallel schemes.

Strategic learning that informs the framework. Five lessons from the two parallel Hungarian pilot processes feed into the JSA framework:

- Lightweight intake processes (pre-interview plus simple application form), used across both Impact Hub Budapest and MGFÜ programmes, are more effective at matching content to readiness than detailed application procedures, and inform the design logic of Priority P2.
- Female participants across both processes tended to focus on solving problems primarily affecting women – suggesting a natural alignment between inclusive entrepreneurship and social innovation that can be deliberately leveraged in programme design and in the broader S4+ inclusion agenda.
- Long-term monitoring of participants beyond programme completion remains an identified gap across the partnership, reinforcing the case for the monitoring and feedback instruments described in Section 6.2 and the trade-off mechanism in Chapter 8.
- MGFÜ's experience with neurodivergent entrepreneurs points to a need for broader consultation when designing entrepreneurship programmes, and for dedicated programmes targeting this currently under-represented group specifically.
- Across both processes, participants valued non-financial support – learning, development and capacity building – as much as funding, indicating that programme design should not treat these as secondary to financial instruments.

Across the partner regions, the evidence consistently points to a common pattern: support systems exist, but access, tailoring, and coordination are decisive bottlenecks for disadvantaged groups.

This shared barrier structure is also where the most credible case for joint action emerges.



3.2 Cross-Regional Synthesis

Common challenges and structural barriers

Across the five partner regions, the evidence points to a consistent pattern: support systems exist, but "last-mile" accessibility, tailoring, and coordination remain the decisive bottlenecks for under-represented groups.

The recurring barrier structure clusters into five mutually reinforcing areas:

1. **Finance and risk exposure:** limited availability of low-threshold instruments (micro-finance, seed support), high eligibility thresholds, and administrative complexity, which disproportionately affect first-time and low-resource entrepreneurs.
2. **Institutional fragmentation and navigation burden:** support landscapes are often multi-actor but not integrated, producing unclear entry points, weak referral pathways, and uneven guidance for newcomers.
3. **Skills and capability gaps:** gaps in entrepreneurial literacy (business planning, compliance, pricing, market access) and digital skills/tools frequently limit readiness to start and sustain a business.
4. **Cultural and social barriers:** fear of failure, weak role-model visibility, low trust in institutions, and persistent stereotypes reduce propensity to start a business – especially for women, youth, migrants, and persons with disabilities. In the case of migrants – a target group with a natural propensity for entrepreneurship – cultural and social barriers create a risk of early business failure.
5. **Geographical and practical constraints:** urban-rural divides, peripherality (including islands/hinterland), transport limitations, childcare/care burdens, and digital exclusion shape unequal access to programmes and networks.

Territorial specificities influencing inclusive entrepreneurship

While barriers are similar in type, their intensity and expression depend on territorial conditions:

- **Metropolitan concentration vs. peripheral access:** regions with strong metropolitan cores concentrate services and networks in cities; peripheral areas face weaker service density and higher transaction costs to participate.
- **Demography as a structural constraint or advantage:** ageing and outmigration reduce labour supply and local demand in several territories, while Central Hungary's growth dynamics create different pressures and opportunities (e.g., competition, higher wages, stronger service economies).
- **Economic structure shapes "entry points":** service-led regions generate different inclusive pathways (personal services, tourism, digital services) than manufacturing-led regions (supplier integration, technical services, technology adoption).
- **Administrative and language barriers are unevenly distributed:** in some contexts, language and procedural requirements are the primary constraint for migrants and newcomers; elsewhere, the main constraint is distance, infrastructure, and fragmented delivery.

The table below summarises how the five barrier clusters identified across the partnership manifest in each region. Symbols indicate relative intensity within each region's profile, not absolute cross-regional comparison:

→ ●●● denotes a primary, binding constraint;



- ●● a significant secondary constraint;
- ● a constraint that is present but less binding.

Table 1. Five barriers

Region	Finance & risk	Institutional fragmentation	Skills & capability	Cultural & social	Geographical & practical
Emilia-Romagna	●● <i>micro-finance & non-tech sectors</i>	● <i>ART-ER provides coordination</i>	●● <i>target groups lack business/digital skills</i>	●● <i>fear of failure, stigma</i>	● <i>urban density mitigates</i>
Split-Dalmatia	●● <i>micro-instruments underused in rural areas</i>	●●● <i>multiple entry points, weak coordination</i>	●● <i>financial & digital literacy gaps</i>	●● <i>fear of failure, low confidence</i>	●●● <i>urban-rural-island divide, transport</i>
Thuringia	● <i>not flagged as primary binding constraint</i>	●● <i>administrative complexity, German-only procedures</i>	●●● <i>language, unfamiliarity with local systems</i>	●●● <i>lack of role models; women only 33.4% of new entrepreneurs</i>	●● <i>childcare, inflexible schedules</i>
Małopolska	●●● <i>scarce micro-financing, low awareness</i>	●● <i>services concentrated in urban centres</i>	●● <i>financial literacy, soft skills, digital exclusion</i>	●● <i>fear of failure; weak networks in rural areas</i>	●●● <i>transport, uneven digital infrastructure, rural periphery</i>
Hungary (Central)	●● <i>many programmes, but navigation issues constrain access</i>	●●● <i>complex procedures, fragmented support, weak personalised guidance</i>	●● <i>low financial, entrepreneurial & digital skills</i>	●● <i>fear of failure, weak mentoring networks</i>	●● <i>rural childcare gaps, transport, digital infrastructure</i>



3.3 Evidence from Pilot Implementation

Between September 2025 and June 2026 every partner region ran a Business Skills Programme for aspiring and novice entrepreneurs and a Business Matchmaking Programme for those already trading, with Central Hungary delivering two additional strands through a second implementing partner. Programmes ranged from ten to forty participants and reached a wider set of groups than the headline categories suggest: women and young people on separate tracks in Split-Dalmatia; migrants – the majority Ukrainian – seniors from the age of 55, and Kraków's expatriate founder community in Małopolska; migrants, international students, women and young people in Thuringia, taught in English; young people, women, migrants, seniors and people with disabilities in Emilia-Romagna, where several participants disclosed health conditions or learning disorders only once sessions were under way; and in Central Hungary women with no prior entrepreneurial experience – with priority given to parents of children under eight, job-seekers and women over 50 – alongside established women entrepreneurs preparing to internationalise, and neurodivergent entrepreneurs. Formats were equally varied: two-day social hackathons and weekend bootcamps, six- and eight-week intensive courses, hybrid workshop series, and individual mentoring tracks running for months. Across the six matchmaking pilots alone, partner reports document 105 regularly engaged participants and 245 programme hours – workshops, networking events, individual mentoring, peer exchange and online sessions – delivered with some 46 trainers, mentors, coaches and ecosystem actors, alongside a further 73 participants recorded by MGFÜ across activities of varying intensity and additional attendees who came only to networking events in Croatia, Germany and Hungary.

What follows are nine findings drawn from the pilot reports. They are the point at which the barrier analysis in Section 3.2 meets delivery reality – what partners encountered when they tried to reach these groups, what worked, and what did not. They inform the strategic priorities in Chapter 5 and the policy mix in Chapter 6.

Demand is strong; whether people stay depends on how the programme is built around their lives. Applications outstripped places almost everywhere – 56 for 12 in Central Hungary, 37 for 20 in Emilia-Romagna, 23 for 20 in Split-Dalmatia. Attendance, not recruitment, proved the harder problem. Participants were holding down work, study and caring responsibilities at the same time, and Emilia-Romagna's partner attributes patchy attendance to exactly that rather than to programme quality; the response was evening and Saturday slots, hybrid sessions, an assigned tutor for catch-up and continuous individual contact. Thuringia's figures make the point sharply: recorded attendance ranged from three hours to twenty-nine across the same programme, while a single networking event drew a considerably larger audience than the regular sessions. Małopolska tested the opposite end of the same variable and found its limit: two intensive 10-hour bootcamp days delivered high completion – all 25 participants attended in full – but produced information overload, and the partner recommends spreading the same hours across four or five shorter weekly sessions. Intensity aids retention up to the point at which it outruns absorption. Emilia-Romagna and Małopolska also arrived independently at the same conclusion about intake: participant groups need either homogeneous readiness from the outset or explicit segmentation, because mixed-readiness groups demand markedly more adaptive capacity from facilitators. Split-Dalmatia shows the same gap from the other side: its matchmaking programme drew 38 participants against the 20 places planned for the region, but 28 of them completed the full 30-hour cycle while ten attended between six and 18 hours. Enrolment therefore tells you little – completion rates are the meaningful measure.

Confidence is a barrier in its own right, not a by-product of skills. In Central Hungary participants named self-confidence, not missing knowledge, as their main obstacle; by the end of the programme confidence in developing a viable business idea averaged 4.25 out of 5 and motivation to pursue entrepreneurship 4.4. Split-Dalmatia built a women's track around self-doubt, imposter syndrome, fluctuating motivation, stress management and burnout prevention, with established female entrepreneurs as guest speakers. Emilia-Romagna worked on mindset alongside business model validation, through active listening and a person-centred approach. Among neurodivergent participants in Central Hungary, the decisive shift was the



realisation that they were not alone in the difficulties they faced – recognition that opened up shared problem-solving in the room. Resilience and confidence-building belong in the core of a programme, not in its margins.

Language and format decide who can walk through the door. Thuringia delivered its entire programme in English, lowering the barrier for migrants and international students in a support landscape otherwise available almost exclusively in German – and several participants went on to register for mentoring with mainstream organisations whose representatives had taught or attended sessions. Małopolska did both: it split its skills programme by group – online training and consultations for migrants, stationary sessions with individual consultations for seniors – and delivered its entire matchmaking programme in English for Kraków's expatriate founders, a population effectively outside Polish-language provision. Thuringia also moved its closing bootcamp to Schmalkalden University of Applied Sciences so that students no longer had to travel to Erfurt. These are low-cost adjustments with disproportionate effect on who participates.

One-to-one support is where the results come from. Emilia-Romagna guaranteed every participant at least 30 hours of support, of which 10 to 14 were individual tutoring, mentoring or specialist consultancy – necessary given business ideas spanning biomedical research, agri-food, wellness and the creative industries. In Central Hungary individual mentoring was rated the single best component of the programme (4.8 out of 5), and Thuringia dropped its planned prototyping module in favour of more individual mentoring once the sectoral spread of ideas became clear. Personalised support is consistently the strongest driver of outcomes, and it is also the most staff-intensive – which is why Section 6.2 treats mentoring capacity as an explicit implementation priority rather than an assumed input.

Peer connections convert into business faster than expected. Among the established women entrepreneurs in the Central Hungarian matchmaking programme, cross-marketing arrangements, a joint seasonal product offering and a shared gift set emerged during the programme itself, and one participant found a developer for an English-language website through a peer referral. Participants in the Business Skills programme identified potential future business partners among themselves. Split-Dalmatia achieved the same effect by attaching its closing matchmaking event to an existing industry conference, DUMP DAYS, putting participants in a room with 23 companies – a low-cost way to reach a density of contacts a stand-alone programme event would not have produced. In Emilia-Romagna, pairing structured learning with informal meetings and networking events proved the single most effective instrument for sustaining engagement from January 2026 onward – with face-to-face contact doing work that digital delivery could not. Małopolska engineered the effect rather than waiting for it: applicants described their business idea at registration and were pre-assigned into groups of three to five by sector affinity before the first session, each group pitching one shared concept by the end of day two. Participants credited this pre-assignment with making networking organic, and five joint business concepts reached a pitch session with external consultants and investors.

Who carries the outreach determines who shows up. Recruitment succeeded where established institutions put their weight behind it. In Thuringia the university start-up service in Schmalkalden actively supported dissemination and participation followed; comparable institutional backing could not be secured in Erfurt, and recruitment skewed geographically as a direct result. Emilia-Romagna reached its groups through employment centres, the Chamber of Commerce, the trade associations CNA and Confartigianato, university campuses and specialised organisations working on labour market inclusion and women's entrepreneurship. In Małopolska, the Kraków University of Economics acted as co-organiser, bridging the expatriate founder community and local academic and business institutions. In Split-Dalmatia the two pilots ran on two different institutional hosts: Technology Park Split, managed by the Split Development Agency RaST, which provided premises free of charge for the skills programme, and the Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism of the University of Split, which hosted and taught the matchmaking programme and recruited students through its Career Development Centre. This is the ISIHUB proposition in practice: the value lies less in delivering services than in connecting target groups to organisations they already trust.



Widening participation strengthens smart specialisation rather than diluting it. In Emilia-Romagna the business ideas developed through the matchmaking programme mapped directly onto the region's S3 production systems – cultural and creative industries (26%), digital and logistics (21%), agri-food (16%), innovation in services (16%), health and wellness (11%) and tourism (5%). Those taking part were predominantly young people under 35 and women, with 15% from a migratory background and a further 5% from other vulnerable groups including people with disabilities. Split-Dalmatia went further and introduced participants to the regional Smart Specialisation framework as a way of identifying viable market niches – a deliberate attempt to connect first-time founders to S3 implementation rather than running the two in parallel. Across the partnership, ideas clustered in services, creative industries, gastronomy, digital activities, crafts and personal services. The Kraków matchmaking group points the same way from a different starting point: ideas clustered in IT and deep-tech – B2B SaaS, AI, cybersecurity, robotics, mobility and EdTech – alongside aerospace data services and manufacturing, confirming that opening access to under-represented founders does not push a portfolio towards low-technology activity.

The hardest-to-reach groups require trust to be built before recruitment begins. Emilia-Romagna's attempt to involve neurodivergent participants, particularly individuals with autism, did not succeed – the partner attributes this to the difficulty of involving families and concludes that these groups need a more gradual and specialised approach. Central Hungary reached neurodivergent entrepreneurs, but only through more than thirty hours of weekly sessions in a deliberately informal setting built to feel safe before any business content was introduced. Emilia-Romagna also found that some participants disclosed health conditions or learning disorders only after activities had started, which means self-declaration at application does not reliably capture who needs what. Trust-based outreach, early partnership with specialist organisations and flexible design are preconditions for reaching these groups, not refinements to be added later.

Sustainability is decided by institutional embedding, not by programme design. All pilot programmes were free of charge, which partners consistently identified as important for reaching their intended groups. Partners named several continuation routes – European and national funding programmes, co-financing with corporate partners such as banks and innovation agencies, and modest participation fees for businesses already generating revenue. Confidence in continuation was highest where programmes sat inside an established organisation: a regional development agency, a technology park, or a hub with permanent premises and an active alumni network. Split-Dalmatia's review of good practices is the cautionary counterpart – not one of the practices examined had demonstrated structural embeddedness beyond project funding.

Taken together, these findings sharpen the strategic focus in one respect. The barrier analysis explains what keeps under-represented groups out of entrepreneurship.

4. Shared Vision for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation

4.1 Mission - the role of the TASK4ISI partnership

The TASK4ISI partnership works to make inclusive entrepreneurship a **structural dimension of regional innovation policy across Central Europe**. Through the ISIHUB network, shared strategic framework and regionally adapted implementation instruments, the partnership supports regions in shifting from



fragmented, high-threshold support systems towards coherent, accessible entrepreneurial pathways that enable under-represented groups to participate in, and contribute to, regional innovation ecosystems.

This mission is grounded in a consistent finding from the cross-regional analysis: the main constraint for under-represented groups is not the absence of support, but its accessibility, coherence and usability. The partnership's role is therefore not to create new instruments, but to strengthen, connect and embed existing ones within S3 and emerging S4+ frameworks.

4.2 Vision - in 2030+

By the early 2030s, partner regions are innovation ecosystems in which the participation of women, youth, migrants, long-term unemployed and persons with disabilities in entrepreneurial activity is a recognised source of adaptive capacity, diversification and territorial resilience – not a peripheral social concern.

In this vision, the roughly nine million "missing entrepreneurs" that the OECD and European Commission identify across the European Union are no longer a statistical gap. They are an entrepreneurial reserve that regional innovation systems have learned to recognise, reach and support. Smart Specialisation and S4+ strategies treat inclusion not as a horizontal disclaimer but as one of the two defining dimensions of innovation policy, alongside sustainability – reflecting the EU Green Deal principle that sustainability and inclusiveness are mutually reinforcing.

Concretely, this vision implies three interlinked transformations across partner regions:

- **Recognition.** Missing entrepreneurs are identified as part of the regional innovation base, not only as beneficiaries of social policy. Their participation in S3 priority domains is monitored, discussed in Entrepreneurial Discovery Processes, and reflected in programming decisions.
- **Accessibility.** Regional support systems have visible entry points, coherent referral pathways and low-threshold learning formats that a first-time founder – regardless of background, language or location – can realistically navigate. Hybrid delivery models bridge urban and peripheral territories without producing new forms of digital exclusion.
- **Integration.** Inclusive entrepreneurship and social innovation function as delivery mechanisms of S3/S4+ priorities. They broaden participation in green, digital and industrial transitions; they generate locally embedded market solutions to societal challenges; and they strengthen the diversity of regional innovation portfolios.

The vision is transnational in scope because the barriers are transnational in structure. Cross-regional synthesis shows that, despite very different economic profiles – from the industrial density of Emilia-Romagna to the seasonal service economy of Split-Dalmatia, from the ageing manufacturing base of Thuringia to the metropolitan dynamics of Central Hungary and the urban-rural divide of Małopolska – the core barrier pattern converges. A shared vision therefore makes cooperation meaningful rather than rhetorical.

4.3 Scope - what this vision does and does not claim

The vision explicitly addresses the intersection of inclusion, entrepreneurship and innovation policy. It does not replace labour market, education or social policy frameworks; it connects to them. It assumes that social innovation plays a complementary role, particularly in testing new forms of collaboration and in bringing user-oriented logic into support provision, but it does not treat social innovation as a synonym for inclusive entrepreneurship.

The vision also recognises a structural tension that regional implementation will need to manage. The shift towards S4+ asks regions to advance competitiveness, sustainability and inclusion simultaneously, and these



three objectives are not always aligned at the level of individual instruments. Acknowledging this tension openly – rather than presenting the vision as frictionless – is itself part of the strategic posture this agenda adopts. Mechanisms for monitoring and rebalancing trade-offs are addressed in Chapter 8.

The strategic framework set out below does not treat under-representation as a criterion for preferential allocation. The five barrier clusters identified in Section 3.2 are structural mechanisms – fragmented entry points, opaque eligibility, geographical distance, language and procedural complexity – that disproportionately filter out specific profiles without being formally selective. **The partnership's intervention logic is therefore to remove these implicit selection costs rather than to confer group-based advantage.** Demographic categories appear in this strategy as analytical proxies for where barriers accumulate, not as eligibility criteria in themselves.

5. Strategic Priorities

This chapter translates the vision into a focused operational framework. The agenda commits to one strategic goal and four priorities that advance it. Each priority is defined by the barrier cluster it primarily addresses and the priorities are the point where three streams of evidence converge:

- the regional profiles and cross-regional synthesis in Chapter 3,
- the practice-based evidence from pilot delivery in Section 3.3,
- and the shared vision and S3/S4+ positioning developed in Chapter 4.

Two complementary sources of evidence run through this translation. Desk research – regional baseline profiles, peer review reports, official statistics, and national and regional policy documents including the five Smart Specialisation Strategies – establishes what is structurally true of each region, independent of any single project activity. Pilot and ISIHUB evidence – the Business Skills and Business Matchmaking programmes, stakeholder interviews and exchanges with ISIHUB coordinators – shows how these structural conditions are actually experienced by the entrepreneurs and organisations operating within them.

All four priorities draw on both streams. This dual grounding is a deliberate methodological choice. The pilot groups were necessarily small and self-selected, and pilot design differed across regions in target group, format and duration. Relying on pilot results alone would risk generalising from a limited set of participants, could give a misleading picture of actual needs or of potential interest in a given area, and would leave regions whose pilot design differed from another's without a clear basis for their own Local Action Plan Package.

5.1 Strategic Goal

Expand the participation of under-represented groups in entrepreneurial activity across partner regions, so that missing entrepreneurs become a recognised source of innovation, diversification and territorial resilience within S3/S4+ frameworks.

The four priorities below are how the partnership pursues this goal.



5.2 The four strategic priorities

P1 Lower the financial and administrative threshold

Addresses: finance, risk and administrative complexity

Across all five partner regions, access to finance is flagged as a binding constraint: limited micro-financing, high eligibility thresholds, administrative complexity, and weak outreach in rural and peripheral territories.

The partnership cannot create new financial instruments, but it can influence the inclusiveness of existing ones. The intervention logic is therefore to redesign the entry experience: simpler procedures, accessible eligibility criteria, embedded financial guidance, and visible role models that lower the perceived risk of starting out.

From pilot delivery. All pilot programmes were offered free of charge, which partners identified as decisive for reaching their intended target groups. Lightweight intake – a simple application form combined with a pre-selection interview – proved more effective at matching content to readiness than detailed application procedures. Embedded financial guidance was among the highest-rated components: expert consultations in law, accounting and taxation accompanied delivery, and financial planning was rated 4.8 out of 5 in Central Hungary.

P2 Build skills and capabilities through low-threshold learning

Addresses: skills, business literacy and digital capability gaps

Pilot evidence and regional analyses converge on skills as the most scalable entry point into inclusive entrepreneurship. Gaps in business literacy, financial management, compliance and digital tools recur across all target groups, but their form varies – which is why skills programmes need to be modular rather than uniform.

From pilot delivery. Programme format proved to matter as much as content: long extended programmes lost participants, while short intensive formats retained them. Individualised support emerged as one of the strongest drivers of outcomes – between 10 and 14 hours of tutoring, mentoring or specialist consultancy per participant in Emilia-Romagna, and the highest-rated component of any part of the Central Hungarian programme (4.8 out of 5). The pilots also identified confidence as a barrier distinct from knowledge: Central Hungarian participants named self-confidence rather than lack of knowledge as their main obstacle, and Split-Dalmatia responded with dedicated sessions on self-doubt, imposter syndrome, stress management and burnout prevention. Peer exchange also proved to be a learning format in its own right rather than a by-product of one: Emilia-Romagna found that pairing structured sessions with informal meetings and networking events was its single most effective instrument for sustaining engagement, and in the Central Hungarian matchmaking programme participants themselves produced cross-marketing arrangements, a joint seasonal product offering and a shared gift set within the programme period, while one secured a developer for an English-language website through a peer referral. Structured peer learning therefore belongs in programme design alongside training and mentoring, rather than being left to whatever contact happens between sessions.



P3 Make support systems navigable through ISIHUB intermediaries

Addresses: institutional fragmentation and unclear entry points

Support systems in partner regions are typically dense but fragmented. Multiple actors offer overlapping services with unclear referral logic, producing a navigation burden that affects first-time founders most. The barrier is not the absence of support, but its usability.

ISIHUBs are positioned as navigation and coordination nodes – not new service providers, but visible entry points that maintain referral pathways between existing organisations and embed inclusive entrepreneurship in S3 implementation.

From pilot delivery. Who carried the outreach determined who was reached. In Thuringia the university start-up service in Schmalkalden actively supported dissemination and participation followed, while in Erfurt, where no comparable institutional backing could be secured, recruitment fell away – the same programme, a different result depending on the local intermediary. Emilia-Romagna reached its groups through a standing network of employment centres, the Chamber of Commerce, trade associations, university campuses and organisations specialising in labour market inclusion; Split-Dalmatia worked from premises provided free of charge by Technology Park Split, whose managing agency remains active in the hub. The pilots also showed the limits of intermediation without trust: Emilia-Romagna was unable to reach autistic entrepreneurs without involving families and specialist organisations, whereas Central Hungary succeeded only by building a deliberately informal, safe setting before introducing any business content. That some participants disclosed health conditions or learning disorders only once sessions had started points the same way – an intermediary's referral role rests on a relationship established before recruitment, not on the referral itself. Alongside referral, the pilots demonstrated a second hub function worth designing for: convening participants with each other. In the Central Hungarian matchmaking programme they generated cross-marketing arrangements, a joint seasonal product offering and a shared gift set within the programme period.

P4 Reach across territories through hybrid delivery

Addresses: geographical and practical barriers to access

Urban-rural divides, peripherality, care burdens and digital exclusion mean that even well-designed support reaches only those who already know how to find it. The cross-regional analysis identifies this consistently as a constraint on participation, particularly for women with care responsibilities and residents of peripheral territories.

Hybrid delivery – combining physical presence with digital tooling – works only if digital exclusion is actively mitigated. The intervention logic implies offline access points alongside digital, assisted digital support for low-literacy groups, and outreach formats designed for peripheral and rural territories.

From pilot delivery. The pilots tested responses to precisely these constraints. Thuringia delivered its programme in English, opening an otherwise German-language support ecosystem to migrants and international students, several of whom subsequently registered for mentoring with mainstream organisations they had encountered through the programme. Małopolska combined online delivery for migrants with face-to-face sessions and individual consultations for seniors. Emilia-Romagna operated across two locations with some activities held online, concluding that distributed access points outperform centralisation in territories with significant internal dispersion. Across regions, partners identified modular



sessions, catch-up opportunities, evening and weekend scheduling and hybrid delivery as what makes participation possible for people balancing work, study and caring responsibilities.

Table 2. From evidence to strategic priorities

STRATEGIC PRIORITY	STRUCTURAL GROUNDING · 3.1-3.2	WHAT PILOT DELIVERY DEMONSTRATED · 3.3
P1 Lower the financial and administrative threshold <i>Cluster: finance & risk</i>	Few low-threshold instruments, high eligibility thresholds and administrative complexity in all five regions; fear of failure and low institutional trust compound them.	All programmes free of charge – identified as decisive for reaching target groups. Lightweight intake outperformed detailed application procedures. Embedded financial guidance (law, accounting, taxation) among the highest-rated components.
P2 Build skills and capabilities through low-threshold learning <i>Cluster: skills & capability</i>	Recurring gaps in entrepreneurial literacy, financial management, compliance and digital tools – varying in form across groups, which is why delivery must be modular.	Format matters as much as content: short intensive formats retained participants where long ones lost them. Individualised support drove outcomes – 10-14 h per participant; top-rated component at 4.8/5. Confidence a barrier distinct from knowledge. Peer exchange proved a learning format in its own right: informal networking sustained engagement (Emilia-Romagna); matchmaking participants generated cross-marketing and a joint product offering (Central Hungary).
P3 Make support systems navigable through ISIHUB intermediaries <i>Cluster: institutional fragmentation</i>	Support landscapes are dense but not integrated: overlapping services, unclear referral logic and a navigation burden that falls hardest on first-time founders.	Who carried the outreach determined who was reached: the university start-up service in Schmalkalden drove participation, while recruitment fell away in Erfurt, where no comparable backing existed. Emilia-Romagna worked through employment centres, chambers and inclusion organisations; Split-Dalmatia through Technology Park Split. Trust precedes referral – autistic entrepreneurs could not be reached without families and specialist partners.
P4 Reach across territories through hybrid delivery <i>Cluster: geographical & practical</i>	Urban-rural divides, peripherality, transport limits, care burdens and digital exclusion shape unequal access to programmes and networks in every region.	Directly tested in the pilots: English-language delivery for migrants and international students (Thuringia); online plus face-to-face and individual consultations (Małopolska); two locations plus online (Emilia-Romagna). Modular and evening/weekend scheduling enabled participation.



5.3 How the priorities relate

The four priorities are not silos. P1 (thresholds) and P3 (intermediaries) work together because lower thresholds only matter if entrepreneurs can find them; P2 (skills) and P4 (hybrid delivery) work together because learning pathways need to reach the people who cannot show up in regional centres. P3 is the connective tissue: ISIHUBs are how the other three priorities reach under-represented groups in practice.

Inclusive entrepreneurship is positioned as a delivery mechanism for S3/S4+ implementation rather than a parallel social policy domain. Widening participation broadens the pool of actors contributing to priority transitions, improves the diffusion of innovation, and increases the diversity of market solutions emerging within S3 domains. This logic is operationalised through the policy mix in Chapter 6.

6. Policy Mix and Measures

This chapter specifies how the four strategic priorities are operationalised within existing S3 and emerging S4+ frameworks. It is organised along two dimensions: first, the types of instrument the mix combines; second, the preconditions for the mix to function.

The horizon of the strategy is aligned with the closing phase of the S3 2021-2027 programming cycle and the design of S3 2028+ frameworks: in the short term, the mix supports inclusive adaptation of instruments funded under current Operational Programmes; in the medium term, it informs the design of S3 2028+ priorities and calls; in the longer term, by the early 2030s, it contributes to the S4+ shift envisaged in Chapter 4.

6.1 Instrument types

The mix combines five types of instrument. Each contributes to more than one strategic priority, and the value of the mix lies in their combination. For each instrument type, this section identifies the strategic priorities it primarily serves, the typical institutional level at which it is decided, and the channel through which the partnership can exert influence within S3 and emerging S4+ frameworks.

Regulatory and administrative adjustments. Eligibility criteria, documentation requirements and procedural design of existing instruments are the hidden gatekeepers of the support landscape, shaping who can in practice access support that is formally open to all. This instrument type primarily serves P1 (financial and administrative threshold) but also unlocks P3 (ISIHUB legitimacy as first-contact point) and lowers entry costs for P2 participants. Decisions sit predominantly with managing authorities of regional operational programmes and with monitoring committees, not with implementation bodies. The partnership's influence channel is therefore at the level of programme design dialogue and S3 governance structures, where eligibility design is set rather than executed.

Financial instruments and eligibility redesign. Existing micro-finance, seed and innovation funding schemes determine the financial reach of the support landscape, but their accessibility for under-represented groups depends on parameters set well upstream of disbursement. This instrument type serves P1 directly and complements P3 through embedded financial guidance at ISIHUB level. Decisions sit with regional and national financial intermediaries (development banks, guarantee institutions, employment services) and with managing authorities of S3-linked calls. The partnership's influence channel is through technical dialogue on call design and through ISIHUB-supported pre-application guidance that does not require formal change to the instruments themselves.



Advisory, skills and mentoring services. Capability-building remains the operational heart of inclusive entrepreneurship support, and the most direct lever the partnership controls through its own pilot infrastructure. This instrument type serves P2 primarily but is essential to P4 in regions with significant peripheral populations, where delivery format determines reach. Decisions sit closest to the ground: with hub-hosting organisations, regional development agencies, training providers and ISIHUB operational partners. The partnership's influence channel here is direct – through programme design, peer exchange across partner regions, and the consolidation of pilot evidence into shared methodologies.

Infrastructural and outreach instruments. Physical presence, hybrid delivery and outreach capacity determine whether support reaches beyond populations that already know how to find it. This instrument type serves P4 primarily and is the connective tissue for P2 and P3 in territories with urban-rural or mainland-island divides. Decisions sit with regional and municipal authorities (location and infrastructure), with managing authorities for digital accessibility funding, and with ISIHUB hosts for operational delivery models. The partnership's influence channel is layered: advocacy at regional level, operational design at hub level, and demonstration through pilot delivery.

Learning, monitoring and policy feedback. Inclusive entrepreneurship policy requires continuous adaptation, and the absence of feedback mechanisms between delivery and design is one of the recurring weaknesses the cross-regional analysis identifies. This instrument type cuts across all four priorities, providing the evidence base through which the mix evolves. Decisions sit with S3 monitoring structures, with managing authorities responsible for reporting, and with the ISIHUB network itself as a peer-learning structure. The partnership's influence channel is through structured consolidation of pilot evidence and transmission of regional insights into S3/S4+ programming cycles.

6.2 Preconditions

A policy mix is only as effective as the institutional infrastructure that carries it. The cross-regional analysis and the pilot evidence identify four preconditions that need to be satisfied before the mix can deliver. Treating these as assumptions rather than explicit conditions would replicate the pattern of previous strategies in which coordination structures dissolved after project funding ended.

1. **Institutional legitimacy of the host.** The Regional ISIHUB Lead must have sufficient public visibility, stakeholder trust and convening capacity to coordinate across the ecosystem. Where the designated host lacks one of these, early renegotiation of the host role is a precondition – not an implementation detail.
2. **Operational budget beyond project cycles.** The ISIHUB function requires a dedicated operational budget embedded in a regional programme or institution, not dependent on project funding. Regions are encouraged to identify, during the lifetime of TASK4ISI, the specific funding line that will carry the ISIHUB role afterwards.
3. **Engagement of public and private actors.** The absence of municipal or regional government representation in early governance phases significantly constrains the hub's ability to embed its work in regional policy. Private-sector engagement requires a deliberate value proposition – talent pipelines, market access, procurement channels – rather than reliance on demonstrated social value alone.
4. **Capacity for individualised support.** Pilot delivery shows that mentoring, tutoring and coaching are the components through which skills and matchmaking programmes actually produce results, and equally the components that consume the most staff time. A policy mix that funds group training without securing mentoring capacity reproduces the format while losing the effect. Regions should therefore treat the mentor and tutor pool – its size, remuneration and continuity – as a budgeted element of the ISIHUB function rather than as an in-kind contribution.



7. Governance Model of the ISIHUB Network

This chapter outlines the proposed governance and coordination model for the ISIHUB network, building on the experience gained during the pilot phase of the TASK4ISI project. The model aims to support the effective functioning of ISIHUBs at regional level, ensure their sustainability beyond the project duration, and enable cooperation between regions while remaining compatible with existing institutional capacities.

7.1 Governance Structure

The governance structure of the ISIHUB network is intentionally designed to remain light, flexible and easy to maintain, building on existing institutional arrangements rather than introducing complex new structures that could create unnecessary administrative burdens.

The model is based on three core roles.

→ Network Coordinator

The Network Coordinator ensures the overall coordination of the ISIHUB network at transnational level. This function includes:

- facilitating cooperation between regional ISIHUBs
- organising network meetings and knowledge exchange activities
- coordinating the development of joint initiatives and outputs
- supporting communication within the network
- consolidating insights from regional activities into shared knowledge and policy recommendations.

→ Regional ISIHUB Lead

Each participating region designates a **Regional ISIHUB Lead organisation**, responsible for coordinating hub activities locally. Its role includes:

- coordinating ISIHUB activities within the regional ecosystem
- acting as the main contact point for entrepreneurs and target groups
- facilitating cooperation between regional support organisations
- identifying regional needs, challenges and opportunities
- sharing regional insights and experiences with the wider ISIHUB network.

→ Operational Partners

ISIHUB activities are implemented with the support of **operational partners**, which may include development agencies, incubators, training providers, business support organisations or other relevant institutions.

Their role is to:

- provide specialised support services to entrepreneurs
- participate in ISIHUB activities and initiatives



- contribute expertise and resources from within the regional ecosystem
- connect entrepreneurs to relevant programmes and opportunities.

To strengthen cooperation within the ecosystem, one operational partner should be designated each year as an associated member of the Regional ISIHUB Lead, supporting coordination activities and contributing to the development of joint initiatives.

This structure enables ISIHUBs to function as **“one-stop-shop” coordination points**, while relying on existing organisations to deliver specialised services.

Sustainability of the model. The governance model is intentionally light, but pilot experience indicates that without a clear value proposition for each participating actor, coordination structures dissolve once project funding ends. The three preconditions for the policy mix to function – institutional legitimacy of the host, operational budget beyond project cycles, and engagement of public and private actors – apply equally here. They are set out in Chapter 6.3 and should be addressed during LAPP development.

7.2 Coordination and Advisory Functions

To support coordination and strategic orientation, the coordination and advisory structures described below are proposed as added-value arrangements, complementing the core governance roles.

Coordination Board (transnational level)

The Coordination Board provides overall strategic guidance for the ISIHUB network. It is composed of the Network Coordinator, the Regional ISIHUB Leads, and the associated member designated annually by each Regional ISIHUB Lead (as set out in Chapter 7.1).

Its role is to:

- review progress of network activities
- agree on joint priorities and collaborative initiatives
- ensure coordination between regional ISIHUBs
- support alignment of network activities with broader policy objectives

The board operates through periodic meetings and does not require a permanent institutional structure.

Ecosystem Advisory Group

At regional level, ISIHUBs should engage an informal advisory group composed of operational partners and selected ecosystem actors such as public authorities, business support organisations or representatives of entrepreneurial communities.

The purpose of this group is to:

- provide feedback on the needs of entrepreneurs and support ecosystems
- facilitate alignment with regional development policies and programmes

Participation is flexible and based on existing partnerships rather than formal governance requirements.

Where possible, at least one public authority (municipal or regional) should be included in the Ecosystem Advisory Group from the outset. Pilot experience indicates that the absence of city or regional government representation in early governance phases significantly constrains the hub's ability to access mainstream funding and achieve policy integration.

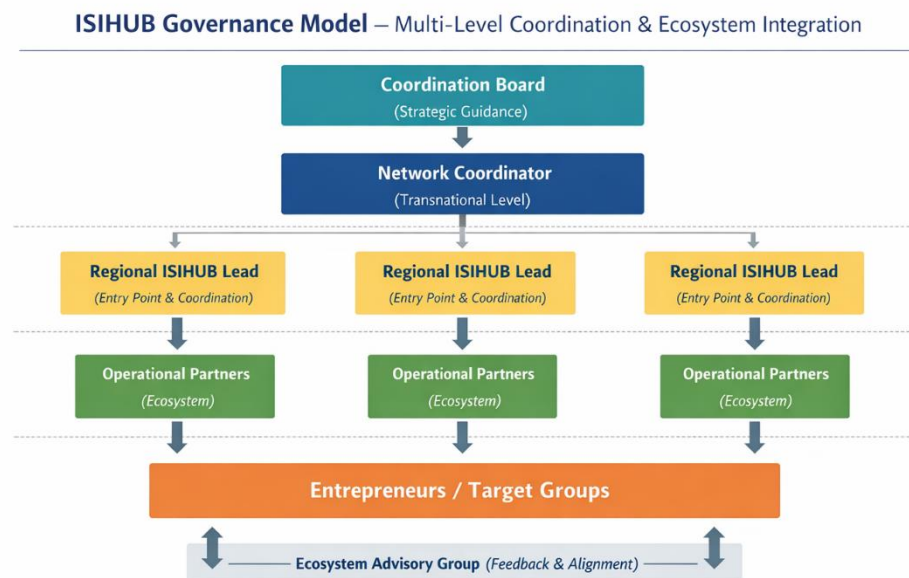


Figure 1: ISIHUB governance model - multi-level coordination and ecosystem integration

The model illustrates the light, multi-level governance structure of the ISIHUB network, linking transnational coordination with regional entry points and existing ecosystem actors.

8. From Joint Strategy to Local Action Plans

This chapter explains how the Joint Strategy Agenda (JSA) provides a strategic reference framework for the development of Local Action Plan Packages (LAPPs), which represent the operational instruments for implementing the JSA ie. inclusive entrepreneurship at regional level.

8.1 The role of LAPPs in implementation

The Joint Strategy Agenda (JSA) provides the strategic reference framework for the development of Local Action Plans (LAPPs) in each partner region. While the JSA defines shared strategic priorities and policy directions, the **LAPPs translate these orientations into concrete, implementable actions adapted to specific regional contexts.**

The plans define:

- **priority actions and measures**, derived from JSA strategic priorities and pilot results
- **implementation mechanisms**, including tools, programmes and support instruments
- **roles and responsibilities** of key actors (public authorities, ISIHUBs, business support organisations, education and research actors)
- **timeframes and sequencing of actions**, ensuring feasibility and coordination
- **resource considerations**, including potential funding sources and institutional capacities
- **monitoring and feedback mechanisms**, enabling iterative learning and policy adaptation.



A central feature of the LAPPs is their grounding in pilot evidence. The Business Skills and Matchmaking Programmes developed and tested within the project provide a validated basis for defining scalable actions at regional level.

Importantly, the relationship between the JSA and the LAPPs remains flexible rather than prescriptive. While the JSA provides a common strategic direction, each region retains the capacity to prioritise actions and define implementation pathways in line with its institutional structures, economic conditions and ecosystem maturity.

LAPP implementation generates evidence – both quantitative (participation, uptake) and qualitative (stakeholder feedback, pilot performance) – that feeds back into the JSA partnership and into future updates of regional S3/S4+ strategies. The JSA and the LAPPs together form a policy cycle linking transnational strategic coordination with regionally grounded implementation.

8.2. Trade-offs monitoring

Trade-offs between competitiveness, sustainability and inclusion will be monitored as part of the overall monitoring and learning framework. Particular attention will be given to potential imbalances in participation, accessibility and outcomes of supported activities.

In practice, this will include:

- tracking the participation of under-represented groups across different actions and programmes
- monitoring access to support instruments (e.g. uptake rates, completion rates, drop-out patterns)
- comparing outcomes across target groups and territories (e.g. urban vs rural participation)
- identifying whether certain measures disproportionately benefit more advanced or better-connected participants.

These observations will be complemented by qualitative feedback from participants and ecosystem actors, collected through surveys, interviews and ISIHUB coordination activities.

Where trade-offs are identified, corrective actions may include adjusting eligibility criteria, adapting delivery formats (e.g. hybrid or assisted access), strengthening outreach to specific groups, or rebalancing resource allocation across measures.

9. Strategic Outlook

The Joint Strategy Agenda offers partner regions a shared framework for treating inclusive entrepreneurship as a structural dimension of regional innovation policy rather than a parallel social policy concern.

What follows from here. Three operational tracks define the next phase:

- Partner regions translate the JSA into Local Action Plan Packages, anchoring the four strategic priorities in concrete regional instruments and identifying realistic continuation pathways for ISIHUB activities.
- The partnership consolidates pilot evidence and emerging practice into shared knowledge that can inform the design of S3 2028+ programming cycles – both within partner regions and beyond.
- The ISIHUB network continues to operate as a peer-learning structure, allowing regions to test, compare and adapt approaches as their ecosystems evolve.



Open risks and preconditions. The JSA is realistic about the conditions under which its logic can deliver. Sustainability of ISIHUBs beyond project funding cannot be assumed and depends on early identification of host institutions with sufficient legitimacy, dedicated operational budgets embedded within regional programmes, and a deliberate value proposition for both public and private partners. Trade-offs between competitiveness, sustainability and inclusion will not resolve themselves at instrument level – they require active monitoring and rebalancing through the mechanisms set out in Chapter 8.

A shared horizon. The transition from S3 to S4+ is currently being shaped at European, national and regional levels; the JSA is the partnership's contribution to that conversation from the perspective of regions that have tested inclusive entrepreneurship instruments in practice. What follows from this document depends on the willingness of partner regions to treat its priorities as binding orientations for Local Action Plans, on the institutional embeddedness ISIHUBs can secure in the coming programming period, and on the wider policy environment's openness to inclusion as a delivery mechanism for innovation policy rather than a separate domain.

The partnership commits to advancing the framework in each of these directions, in cooperation with regional stakeholders, European partners and the broader Central European cooperation community.