Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE

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CURIOST

Circular design and development of Sustainable products in 4 key sectors in Central Europe

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STRATEGY UPTAKE WORKSHOPS WITH LARGE NUMBER OF SME AND SMALL MIDCAPS

Deliverable 1.4.3

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1. Context

Deliverable D1.4.3 as part of approaching sustainable product development within the CURIOST project focuses on creating a joint strategy for sustainable and circular product development and ensuring its uptake by SMEs and small midcaps in four key sectors: mechanics & mechatronics, plastics, packaging, and construction & building.

Specifically, Activity A1.4 deals with the uptake of the strategy by SMEs and small midcaps, and D1.4.3 represents the implementation of strategy uptake workshops. These workshops aim to:

- **Engage at least 140 companies** (20 per partner country) to translate the strategy into concrete measures for their own businesses
- **Include sector-specific group sessions and transnational exchanges** to share best practices
- **Highlight drivers, motivators, and economic benefits of adopting sustainable product development** and circular business models

This deliverable marks the turning point where strategy becomes action, empowering SMEs and small midcaps to transform sustainability from vision into practice.

2. Implementation of on-site uptake workshops in 7 countries

An overview of the strategy uptake workshops, scheduled between September and October 2025 across all seven partner countries ensures the engagement of at least 140 SMEs and small midcaps in uptaking the CURIOST joint strategy for sustainable product development and design. In total, nine workshops have been implemented by CURIOST consortium:

Country	Project Partner(s)	Date(s) of workshop implementation	Number of participating companies on-site workshops
Austria	Biz-Up, CPU	23.10.2025	17
Slovakia	UEBA	23. & 25.10.2025	44
Hungary	PBKIK	15.10.2025	17
Poland	SPC	22.10.2025	18
Croatia	STEP RI, MJC	23.& 25.09.2025	20 (14 + 6)
Italy	MESAP, ENVI	22.10.2025	9 (far more registrations by individuals)
Germany	BI, UCB	01.10.2025	18
Participating companies on-site workshops in total			**143**

2.1. Outcomes by countries: Drivers, motivators and economic benefits by adopting sustainable product development and design on a strategic level

2.1.1. Austria (Biz-Up & CPU)

Austria is actively exploring circular strategies to maintain competitiveness in a rapidly changing market. A workshop held on 23 October 2025 by Biz-Up and CPU gathered 17 participating companies, showing strong interest in sustainable product design. Austrian project partners opened their workshop invitation to companies and research institutions, as they aimed to strengthen the perspective of SMEs and small midcaps while showcasing best practices from larger enterprises to inspire cross-sector learning.

- **Drivers & Motivators:** Curiosity for new business models; financial advantages (long-term savings); sustainability as a competitive feature; leadership-driven mindset shift
- **Economic Benefits:** Competitive edge in future-oriented markets; improved brand reputation; resource efficiency leading to cost savings
- **Challenges:** Cost and competitive pressure; regulatory hurdles; unclear roles; technical design constraints

Host of the Austrian Strategy Uptake Workshops was WFL Millturn Technologies GmbH & Co KG in Linz who acted as a best practice example for sustainable product development and design in the first two periods of CURIOST project at the same time. Moderator and trainer for Design Thinking methodology was Wolfgang Steiner, part of Biz-Ups project team.

2.1.2. Slovakia (UEBA)

Slovakia faces legislative gaps and financial barriers but sees strong potential in innovative packaging and logistics solutions. Two workshops on 23 & 25 October 2025 by UEBA engaged 44 companies plus six young researchers emphasizing the need for strategic support for SMEs and small midcaps.

- **Drivers & Motivators:** Lower material costs; logistics efficiency through digitalization; creative packaging models; customer education
- **Economic Benefits:** Reduced transport and material costs; new revenue streams via innovative packaging
- **Challenges:** Lack of clear legislative support; high transformation costs; limited financial resources; cheap imports undermining local efforts

2.1.3. Hungary (PBKIK)

Hungary's workshop on 15 October 2025 attracted 17 participating companies, reflecting strong engagement from SMEs under pressure to comply with EU regulations and client sustainability criteria. Discussions centered on survival through circular practices, reducing packaging, and aligning with funding opportunities, while addressing knowledge gaps and regulatory constraints.

- **Drivers & Motivators:** Regulatory compliance; internal motivation; packaging reduction; eligibility for funding
- **Economic Benefits:** Innovation opportunities; improved competitiveness; access to funding and new markets

- **Challenges:** Sustainability not seen as competitive advantage; strict regulations; lack of recycled materials; limited technical expertise

2.1.4. Poland (SPC)

Poland is under pressure from resource scarcity and rising costs, making circular strategies increasingly attractive. The Kraków workshop on 22 October 2025 by SPC hosted 18 participating companies, focusing on collaboration and innovation on a strategic level.

- **Drivers & Motivators:** Resource scarcity; regulatory pressure; competitive advantage; supply chain collaboration
- **Economic Benefits:** Lower material input costs; innovation-driven growth; resilience against resource volatility
- **Challenges:** Lack of CE expertise; regulatory complexity; cultural resistance; short-term focus

2.1.5. Croatia (STEP RI & MJC)

Croatia emphasizes collaboration and design thinking as tools to overcome motivational and strategic alignment challenges. Two workshops on 23 & 25 September 2025 by STEP RI and MJC involved 20 companies (14 + 6), reflecting strong engagement in circular strategies.

- **Drivers & Motivators:** Design Thinking for practical solutions; knowledge sharing; sustainability as a growth driver
- **Economic Benefits:** Tangible benefits through collaboration; stronger market positioning in sustainable sectors
- **Challenges:** Lack of innovative solutions; employee motivation; aligning strategies with circular goals

2.1.6. Italy (MESAP & ENVI)

Italy focuses on eco-design, digitalization, and partnerships to overcome cultural and regulatory barriers. The Turin workshop on 22 October 2025 by MESAP and ENVI gathered 9 participating companies (far more registrations by individuals), underlining the role of innovation in circular transformation.

- **Drivers & Motivators:** Commitment to sustainable materials; digital traceability; collaboration and research
- **Economic Benefits:** Extended product life cycles; new business models; improved reputation and compliance
- **Challenges:** Financial constraints; regulatory uncertainty; cultural resistance; technical barriers

2.1.7. Germany (BI & UCB)

Germany hosted its workshop on 1 October 2025 in Nürnberg with 18 participating companies, advocating a systemic shift from recycling to true circularity. The discussion highlighted the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and infrastructure improvements, positioning circular design as essential for future-proofing and market growth.

- **Drivers & Motivators:** Circular design and business models; knowledge exchange; sustainability as a strategic pillar

- **Economic Benefits:** Regulatory risk mitigation; growth in sustainable markets; stronger brand and investor appeal
- **Challenges:** Infrastructure gaps; need for systemic legal and design changes

2.2. Feedback from participants attending the on-site strategy uptake workshops

Across all countries, participants responded to two focus questions about learnings and motivation for follow-up prototyping. The feedback shows remarkably consistent insights: companies value practical tools and cross-country exchange, and they are ready to move from discussion to piloting in the ongoing CURIOST project.

2.2.1. Key learnings from participants

Participants broadly concluded that circular economy strategies are essential for competitiveness and sustainability and bring real economic and environmental benefits. They highlighted the importance of understanding drivers and motivators (e.g., customer expectations, policy pressure, and cost efficiency) to align company strategy.

Design Thinking was seen as an effective, actionable toolkit to tailor solutions by sector. Equally, collaboration and knowledge exchange, e.g. with peers, clusters, and research institutions enable practical innovation.

2.2.2. General motivation to participate in two stage piloting within the ongoing CURIOST project

The motivation to participate in further workshops and co-develop a first mature (digital) circular prototype was generally high across all seven countries. Reflecting companies' desire focuses on the testing of ideas, building of business cases, and validating circular designs including (cross-border) peer support.

2.2.3. Further feedback and needs of participating companies

Country	Further feedback / needs
Austria	▪ High ratings for content and trainer expertise ▪ Needs/requirements: Sector-specific case studies and clearer steps from ideation to prototype/MVP ▪ Strong interest in leadership and cultural change as enablers
Slovakia	▪ Asked for practical guidance on regulatory compliance, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), and financial instruments ▪ Emphasized structured tools and guidance for turning concepts into pilots
Hungary	▪ High ratings for interactive exercises and peer exchange ▪ Needs/ requirements: more local best-practice examples and support for translating Design Thinking outputs into testable prototypes

Poland	▪ Asked for simplified tools, templates within Design Thinking Methodology ▪ Mentoring to de-risk early pilots and measure impact credibly
Croatia	▪ Strong interest in collaboration platforms and knowledge-sharing networks ▪ Requested practical support for integrating circular strategies into daily operations and supply chains
Italy	▪ Appreciated creative ideation methods (Design Thinking, circular design canvases) ▪ Need/ requirement: embed digital tools (e.g. traceability) to accelerate decisions within circular product development
Germany	▪ Strong appreciation for Design Thinking methods and the engaging balance of theory and practice ▪ Need/ requirement: Deeper Circular Economy content and longer/multi-day workshop formats

Overall, the feedback generally shows strong engagement and readiness to move from learning to practical action, with participants interested in working together and apply circular strategies in real business contexts.

3. Implementation of virtual transnational exchange webinar across 7 countries

The transnational webinar "Thinking ahead together - Circular Strategies in international exchange" was organized to ensure a truly cross-country approach, bringing together diverse perspectives and fostering collaboration on circular strategies.

It took place on October 30th 2025, 9-11am via MSTeams. 73 persons registered, 50 persons actively participated in the transnational webinar (27 internal and Keynote). The webinar explored how manufacturing SMEs and small midcaps can embrace circular economy principles to stay competitive in a green transition. CURIOST consortium introduced the CURIOST project, challenges include regulatory complexity, financial and technical barriers, and low prioritization of circularity, while drivers include cost savings, customer demand, and innovation opportunities in the four sectors.

The Impulse Keynote by Silvia Beccari (EU Climate Pact Ambassador) stressed that sustainability is no longer optional but a survival factor. She outlined a roadmap for green business built on leadership, measurable ESG goals, and cultural change. Key pillars included:

- Vision & Leadership: Sustainability must start in the boardroom with clear goals and stakeholder engagement
- Efficiency & Circular Thinking: Move from "take-make-waste" to "reduce-reuse-regenerate," supported by tools like Life Cycle Assessment
- Innovation & Green Supply Chains: Digitalization, clean tech, and collaboration are essential for resilience
- Engaging People: Employees and customers should become co-creators of sustainable value. She emphasized that going green means future-proofing against risk and unlocking growth in tomorrow's markets

The joint moderated discussion highlighted cultural differences in sustainability approaches and how small, practical steps can shift mindsets. Participants agreed that circularity must become a core business strategy, not an add-on. Collaboration across borders and sectors was seen as critical to overcoming systemic barriers and fostering innovation.

Circular economy is not just an environmental trend but a strategic imperative for long-term competitiveness and resilience. Companies that integrate circular design, innovation, and collaboration into their core operations will unlock new business models, reduce costs, and strengthen their market position. Those who act now will lead in future-oriented markets, while laggards risk losing relevance in a rapidly changing regulatory and consumer landscape.

4. Key Results and achieved KPIs within strategy uptake

- On-site workshops:
  - 9 on-site workshops across 7 countries (Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Croatia, Italy, Germany)
  - 143 companies engaged (target: ≥140)
  - Strong interest in Design Thinking, circular strategies, and cross-border collaboration.
  - Key learnings: Circular economy seen as essential for competitiveness, cost efficiency, and compliance.
  - High motivation for follow-up piloting and prototype development
- Transnational webinar:
  - 73 registrations, 50 active participants (27 internal and keynote) from 7 countries
  - Delivered transnational exchange, keynote by EU Climate Pact Ambassador Silvia Beccari
  - Emphasized leadership, ESG goals, digitalization, and collaboration as pillars for circular transition
- Overall: 170 companies engaged (external)
- Qualitative KPIs:
  - High satisfaction with content and trainers
  - Positive feedback on Design Thinking and practical tools
  - Strong motivation for two-stage piloting and prototype development

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