EUROPEAN UNION

#HorizonEU

EUROPEAN INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

Online Info Session:
European Startup & Scaleup Hubs Call

22 October 2026

THE EU RESEARCH & INNOVATION PROGRAMME 2021 - 2027

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MODERATED BY

Daniel Gassmann

Head of Sector, EISMEA Unit I.1

European Commission

AGENDA

10:00 Welcome & Introduction

10:05 European Innovation Policy priorities

10:15 European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – policy context

10:25 European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – practical details

10:35 Q&A via Slido

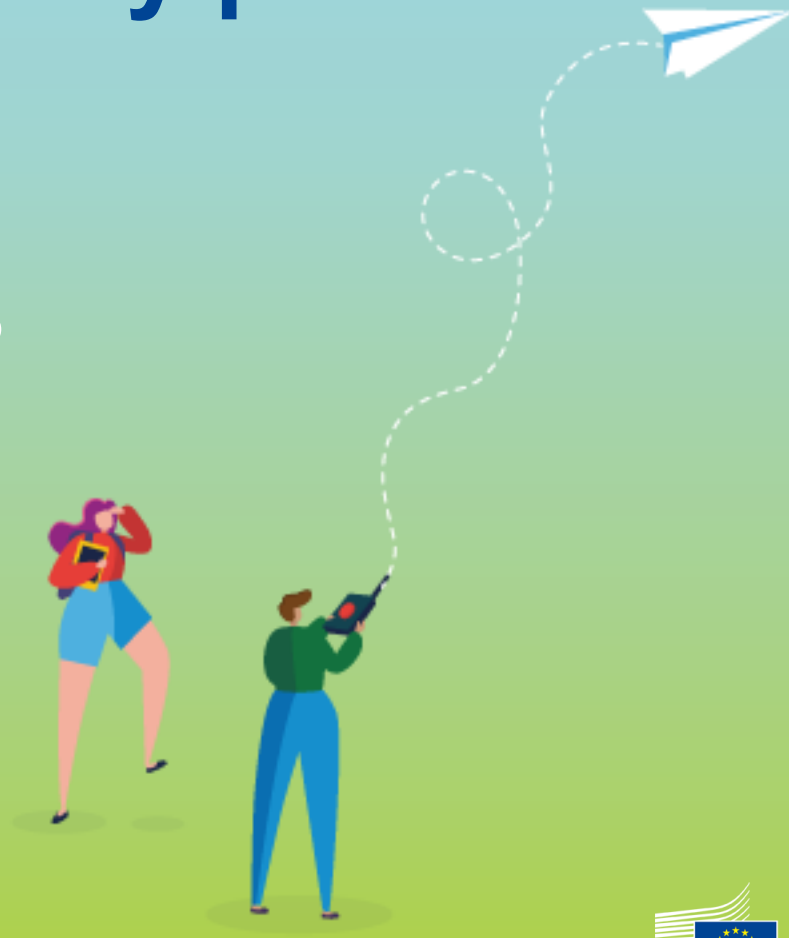
11:15 Closing remarks

European Commission

European Innovation Policy priorities

Jekaterina Novikova

Deputy Head of Unit, DG RTD.A5



European Commission

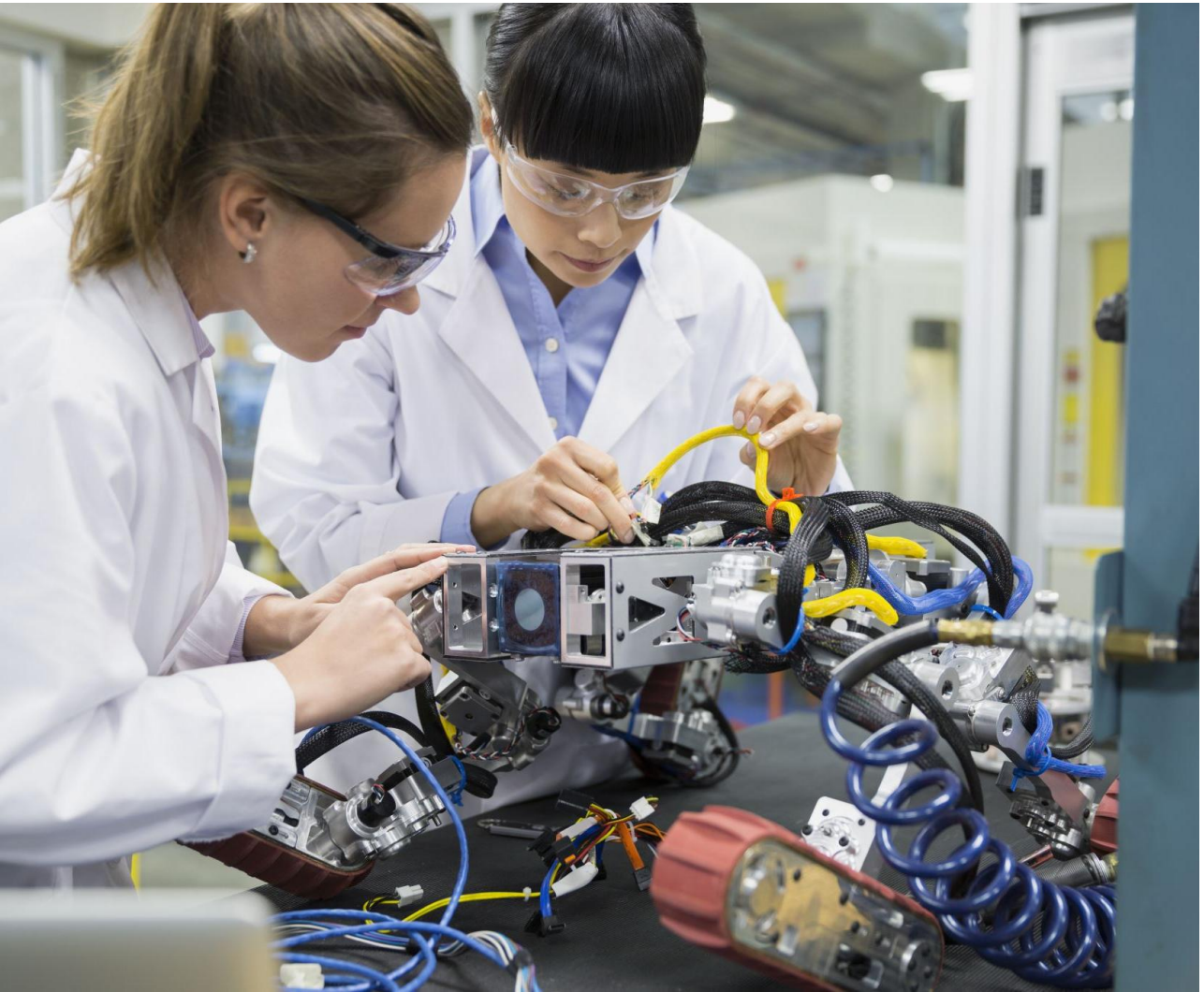
The Startup and Scaleup Strategy

Vision: **make Europe the best place in the world to launch and grow global technology-driven companies**.

- Important to capitalise on Europe's leading position in research
- A thriving startup and scaleup ecosystem can transform the EU economy by increasing productivity, creating quality jobs and attracting talent and investment

Learn more about the Strategy.

The Startup and Scaleup Strategy



Challenges: fragmented markets, limited access to finance, regulatory barriers, uneven innovation capacity across the EU, difficulties in accessing talent.

Policy levers:

- Innovation friendly regulation
- Single market simplification
- Better financing and investment flows
- Accelerated market uptake and expansion
- Attracting and retaining talent
- Facilitating access to infrastructure

The Lab to Unicorn Initiative

Initiative under the Startup and Scaleup Strategy aiming to **accelerate the commercialisation of research results**.

- Support to **European Startup and Scaleup Hubs** rooted in strong university ecosystems to network and collaborate across borders
- Develop a blueprint for **licensing, royalty- and revenue-sharing, as well as equity participation for academic institutions**
- Provide **legal and implementation guidance on state aid** to support startups

The European Innovation Ecosystems WP

- **EUR0.5B** to create connected, inclusive and efficient innovation ecosystems
- Has already invested nearly 400MEUR in 287 projects involving 870 organisations
- Supports key **ecosystem development dimensions**:
    - Access to finance
    - Experimentation practices
    - Innovation procurement
    - Gender equality
    - Access to global knowledge and value chains for SMEs

Learn more about the EIE WP.

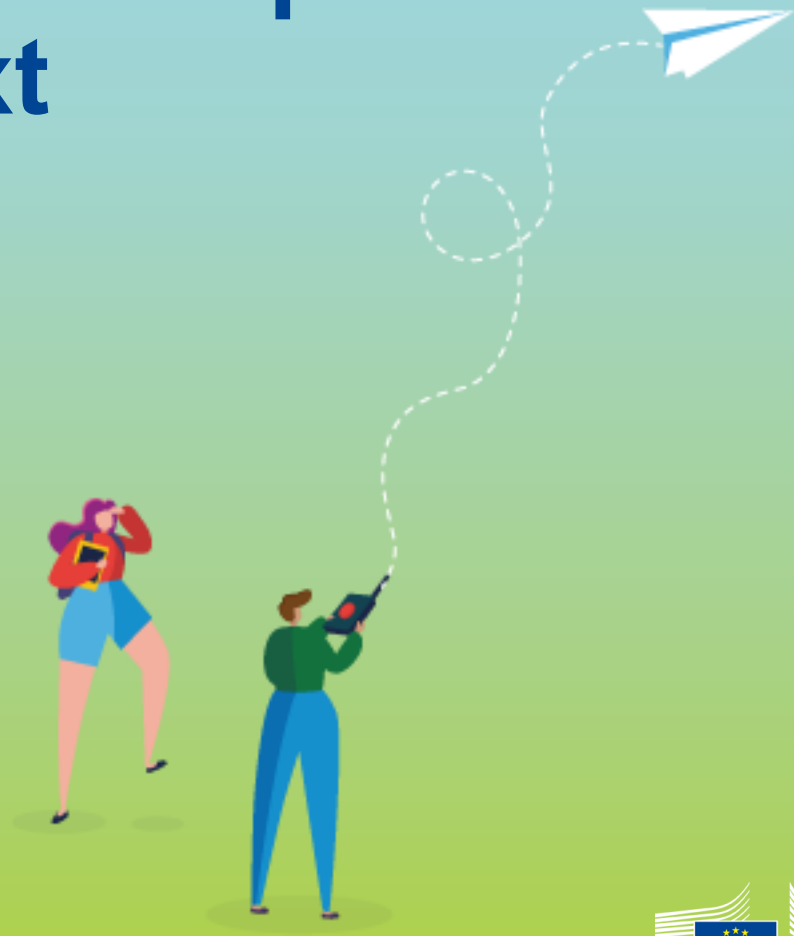
Upcoming EIE Calls

Call	Opening	Closing
HORIZON-EIE-2027-01-CONNECT-02: **Reinforcing synergies between experimentation spaces and innovation procurement**	1.06.2027	15.09.2027
HORIZON-EIE-2027-01-CONNECT-03: **Enhancing the involvement of philanthropic organisations in innovation ecosystems**	1.06.2027	15.09.2027

European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – policy context

Cédric Adam

Policy Officer, DG RTD.A5



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Main policy objectives of ESSH

Overall objectives:

- Support the emergence and growth of deep tech startups and scaleups
- Reinforce and interconnect leading and emerging innovation hubs rooted in strong research ecosystems

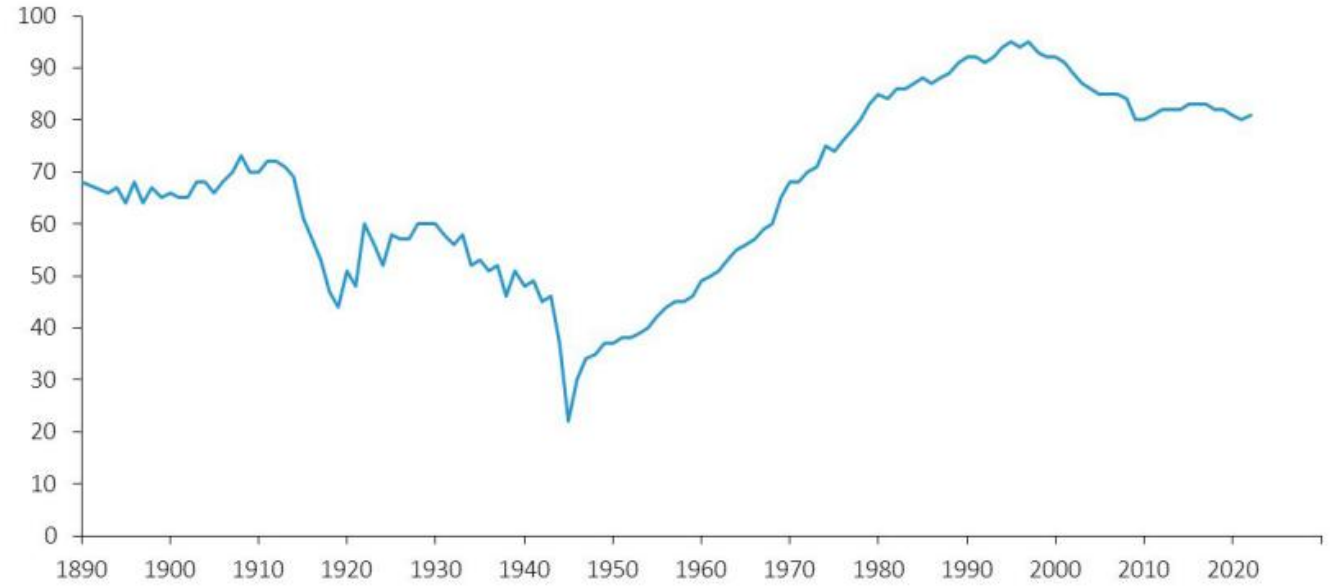
Close the innovation gap to the US

- Compared to the US, Europe has a relatively static economy leading to an important productivity gap
- Innovation is essential to be competitive and souverain in the global economy

FIGURE 1

EU versus US labour productivity 1890-2022

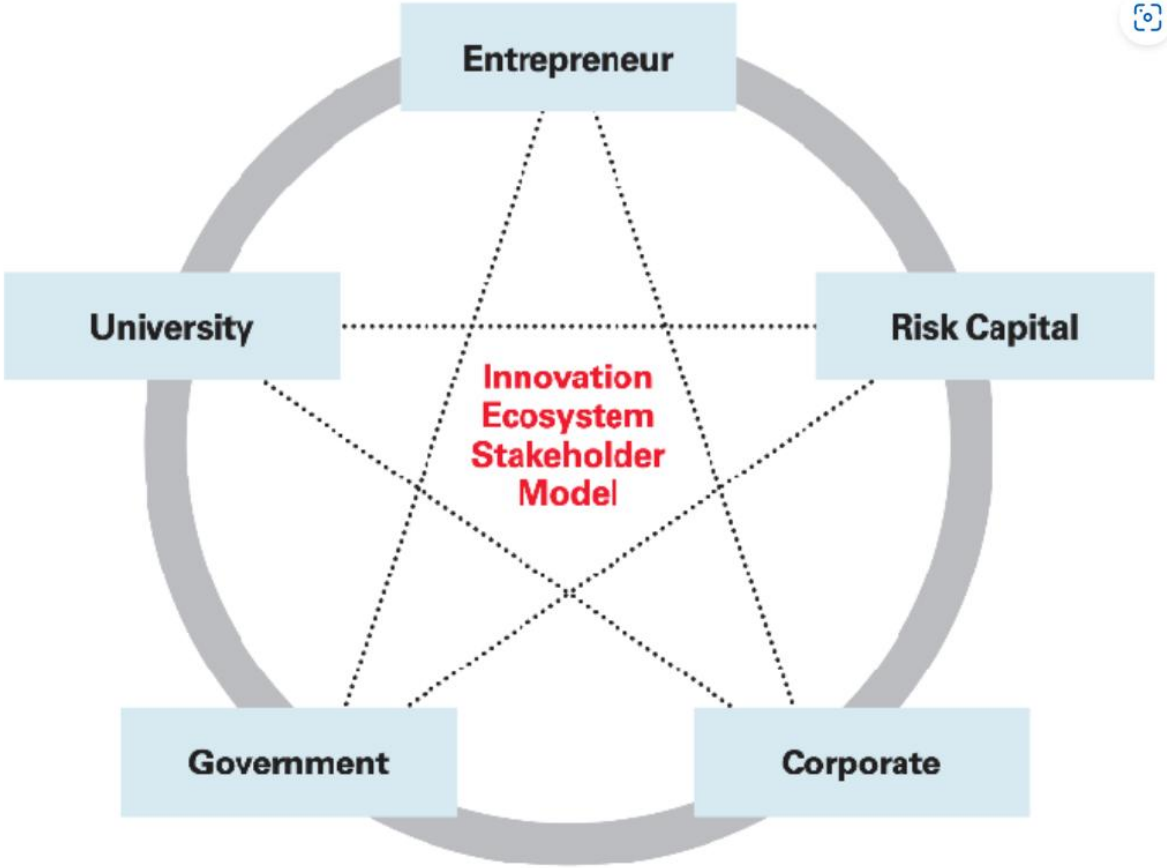
Index (US=100)



Draghi report, 2024

Leverage European innovation hubs

- Innovation hubs concentrate the specialised resources and expertise necessary to innovate
- They are the places where startups emerge and choose to set up
- The EU has numerous innovation clusters, but they are less developed and generate less value than those of the US and China (Draghi report, 2024)



Source: Budden & Murray, 2019

Reinforce European startup and scaleup ecosystems

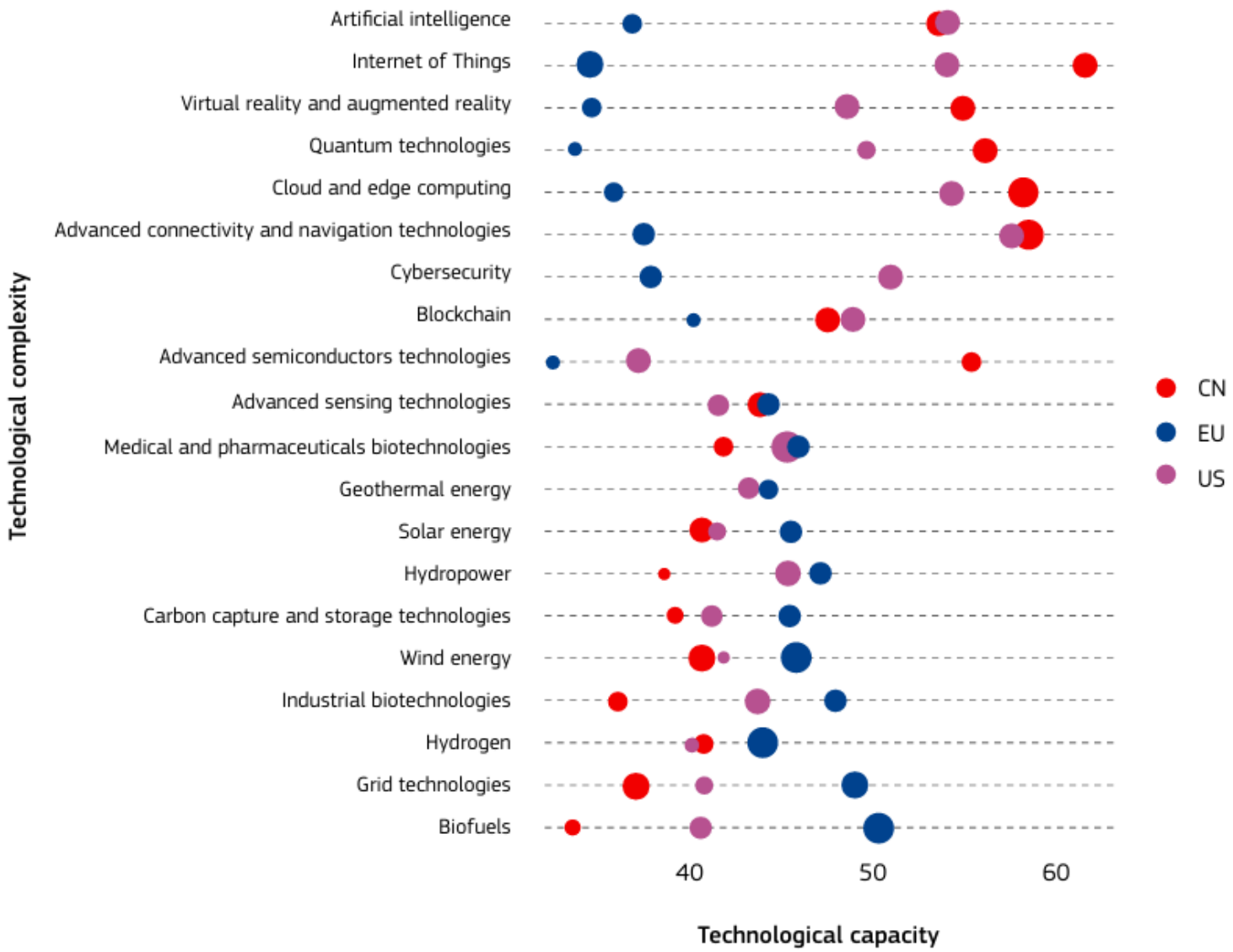
	EU 27	USA	China
Total valuation of the ecosystem (in Bn € and as a share of GDP)	748.14 3,84%	3 767.22 13,1%	1 258.66 6,72%
Number of exits	576	1237	76
Number of centaurs	506	1088	249
Number of unicorns	355	1770	436

Source: European Startup and Scaleup Scoreboard 2026

Boost European competitiveness in complex technological areas

- Collaboration is essential in complex technological areas
- European innovation hubs are less interconnected than their US counterparts (Balland and al. 2025)
- This is a disadvantage in developing complex technologies

Figure 1-7 The EU positioning in selected critical technologies vs the US and China, 2019–2023



Source: SRIP 2026

What is a startup and scaleup hub?

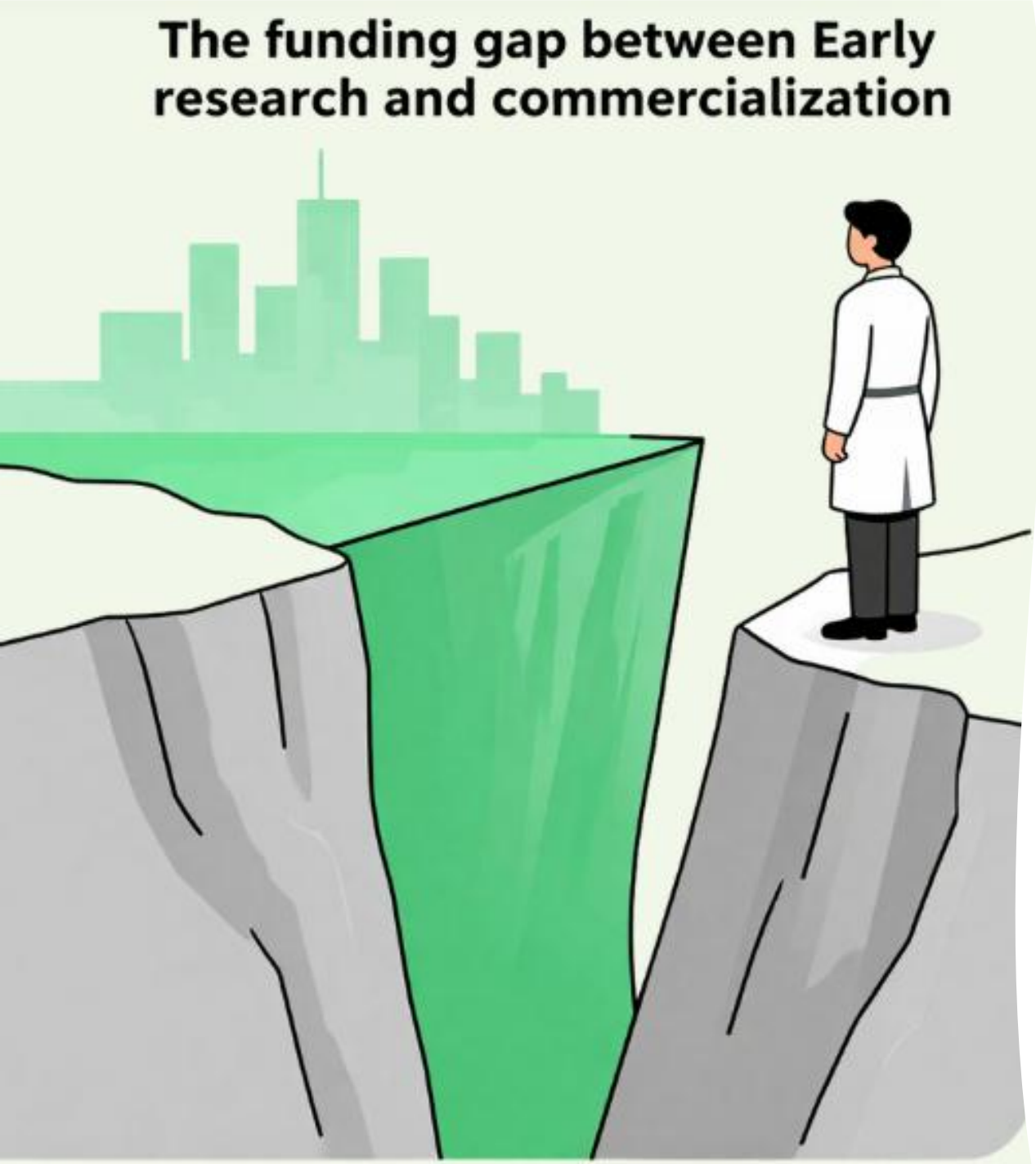
Strong research capabilities: Cutting edge infrastructures and excellent research teams

A talent pool: relevant graduate programmes, management and entrepreneurship specific trainings, etc

Dedicated startup and scaleup support: Incubator, accelerator, mentoring, etc

Network density: entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, academic and corporate researchers, etc

Professional services: legal and regulatory advice, real estate, accounting, etc



What is expected from a strong ESSH project ?

- Provide access to relevant infrastructures and facilities
- Create network opportunities such as pitch days, meet-ups, hackathons, startup week-ends, etc.
- Facilitate the access to funding opportunities and services: EIC, EEN, EIT-KICs, venture capital, local service providers
- Ensure access to relevant resources in particular research, talents, mentors, etc.

Setting up a “European Combinator”

A Highly selective EU acceleration programme

- Based on a competitive selection process
- Open to companies from non-EU countries
- Providing a structured supporting programme ending with a Demo Day

Selection criteria and KPIs

Selection criteria

- Track record in startup and scaleup support
- Research excellence and infrastructures
- Cross-border collaboration capabilities
- Deep tech innovation potential

KPIs

- New startups supported
  Min: 100
- Startups attracting cross-boarder seed or VC funding
  Min: 20%
- Startups accessing cross-boarder support
  Min: 50%

European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – practical details

Despoina Mitropoulou

Programme Coordination Manager, EISMEA I.01

European Commission

ESSH – basic info

Type of Action	Co-Fund (50% EU funding)
Call opening date	06 October 2026
Call closing date	05 January 2027
Total Indicative EU budget	EUR 40 M
Expected EU contribution	EUR 20 M
Expected grants to be signed	2

—–Estimated project duration: 2 years

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ESSH – eligibility conditions

Consortium and regional requirements:

- A hub participating as a beneficiary must be represented by a **single legal entity** or **several legal entities** representing the relevant actors of the innovation ecosystem supporting startups
- The consortium should consist of a **network of at least 10 hubs** from at least **10 different** Member States or Associated Countries.
- For Member States and Associated Countries with an overall **population not exceeding 35 million**, participation is limited to a **single hub** in the given consortium.
- For Member States and Associated Countries with an **overall population exceeding 35 million**, the participation is limited to two hubs in the given consortium.
- At least 2 participating hubs shall be established in a “**widening country**”.

ESSH – eligibility conditions

Letter of intent

- The consortium must provide a single letter of intent, at the moment of submission of the proposal, indicating the source of the required 50% of complementary funding (e.g. national and/or regional funding, EU funding, or private investments).

Communication networks

- Subject to restrictions for the protection of European communication networks.

ESSH – expected outcome

- **Accelerate market expansion** for European deep tech startups across EU regions and beyond by fostering collaboration and mutual support among European deep tech startup ecosystem actors;
- Interconnect **top-tier tech startup and scaleup hubs** embedded in research, technology and higher education ecosystems;
- Enable **cross-border access** to infrastructures, facilities, corporates, investors and talents to deep tech startups and scaleups, including those funded by the European Innovation Council (EIC);
- Enable more European deep tech startups, including women-led startups and scaleups, **to succeed scaling into globally competitive companies**;
- **Strengthen less-connected innovation hubs** by integrating them into a Europe-wide collaborative network;
- **Boost private and public investment** in deep tech ventures established within the participating innovation hubs.

How to apply?

- Applications to be submitted through the Funding & Tenders Portal.

- Applicants should submit:

    - Part A - Forms & budget
    - Part B - Technical info (main proposal – max **65** pages for COFUND)
    - Letter of intent (mandatory – eligibility condition)
    - Financial Support to Third Parties (optional)

Proposal templates – Annex: Letter of intent (LoI)

- MANDATORY - filled in and duly signed and dated by coordinator on behalf of beneficiaries

PROJECT INFORMATION	CALL: HORIZON-EIE-2027-02-CONNECT-01
Project name:	[acronym] - [project title]

As coordinator, on behalf of the consortium, I confirm:

- **our commitment to implement the project proposal in line with all relevant requirements, in particular the 50% co-funding rate, using the source of complementary funding** indicated per beneficiary below;
- **that, to the best of our knowledge, the proposal is eligible and in line with the relevant call requirements,** inter alia, that the consortium complies with the specific eligibility conditions:

participate as beneficiaries:
[single legal entities] i.e umbrella organisation representing a science and technology park, innovation cluster or district, accelerator or a venture builder embedded in an innovation ecosystem
several legal entities] representing relevant innovation ecosystem actors supporting startups (i.e. research and higher education institutions, corporated, public authorities or capital providers).
[at least 10] different Member States [indicate country codes] or Associated Countries [indicate country codes][1]
[number]
[at least 2] participating hub are established in in a "widening country" as defined by Article 2 of the Horizon Europe regulation (Regulation (EU) 2021/695)

A maximum amount of Eur 60,000 will be granted to third parties in the form of grants:
☐ financial support to third parties (FSTP)

Coordinator:	[full name] - [short name] *(in line with the proposal – Part A)*

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Proposal templates – Annex: Financial support to third parties

- Beneficiaries **may** provide financial support to third parties.
- The support to third parties can only be provided in the form of **grants**.
- The maximum amount to be granted to each third party is **EUR 60 000**.

- In the **dedicated Annex**: “Information on financial support to third parties” you are expected to provide information on how you will provide the financial support to third parties.
- The proposal must clearly detail the **objectives** and the **results** to be obtained and include at least the **following elements**:
    - the maximum amount of financial support for each third party; this amount may not exceed 60 000 EUR.
    - the criteria for calculating the exact amount of the financial support.
    - the different types of activity that qualify for financial support, on the basis of a closed list.
    - the persons or categories of persons that may receive financial support
    - the criteria for giving financial support.

Thank you!

Got questions? Contact as at

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