EUROPEAN UNION

#HorizonEU

EUROPEAN INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

Online Info Session:
European Startup & Scaleup Hubs Pilot Call

11 December 2025

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

14:00 Welcome & Introduction

14:05 European Innovation Policy priorities

14:10 European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – policy context

14:20 European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – practical details

14:30 Q&A via Slido

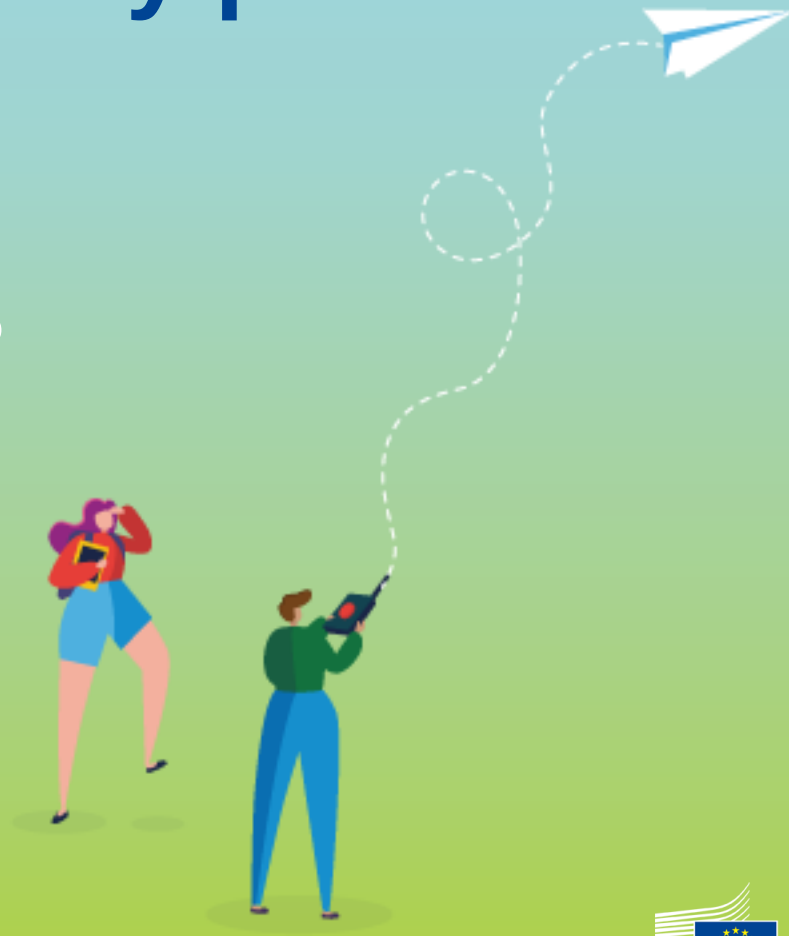
14:55 Closing remarks

European Commission

European Innovation Policy priorities

Jekaterina Novikova

Deputy Head of Unit, DG RTD.A5



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The vision: choose Europe to start and scale

- The EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy aims to make Europe the best place in the world to launch and grow global technology-driven companies
- The strategy seeks to shift the European economy towards a more entrepreneurial, innovative model
- A thriving startup and scaleup ecosystem can transform Europe’s economy – by increasing productivity, creating quality jobs and attracting talent and investments

Context: EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy

- **Challenges:** fragmented markets, limited access to finance, regulatory barriers, uneven innovation capacity across the EU, difficulties in access to talent
- **Levers:**
  - Innovation-friendly regulation and single market simplification
  - Driving better financing and investment flows
  - Accelerating market uptake and expansion
  - Attracting and retaining talent
  - Facilitating access to infrastructure, networks and services

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Context: Lab to Unicorn initiative

- An initiative under the Startup and Scaleup Strategy, which aims to **accelerate the commercialization of research results** through a number of measures:

  - support leading **European Startup & Scaleup Hubs**, rooted in strong university ecosystems, to network and collaborate across borders to provide access to startups and scaleups to each other's respective services, infrastructures and corporates

  - develop a blueprint for licensing, royalty- and revenue-sharing and equity participation for academic institutions and their inventors when commercialising IP and creating spinoffs

  - provide legal and implementation guidance on the applicable state aid rules to support startups

EIE work programme: delivering the Startup and Scaleup Strategy

- **€0.5 billion budget** under Horizon Europe to create more connected, inclusive, and efficient innovation ecosystems
- **Holistic approach to R&I** focusing on the links between resources, organisations, investors and policymakers
- **Covers diverse ecosystem-building dimensions highlighted in the SSS**, including access to finance, experimentation practises, innovation procurement, gender equality and access to global chains for SMEs
- **Bottom-up nature of the EIE calls** allows participants to be in driving seat in deciding on the specific challenges to address, in line with EU priorities
- **Highly international dimension** of the programme: In 2021-2024, EIE WP has funded projects involving 27 MS, 9 AC and 10 Third Countries

Upcoming EIE actions 2026-2027

- **HORIZON-EIE-2026-02 (12/12/2025 – 10/03/2026) TBC**
  - HORIZON-EIE-2026-02-CONNECT-01: European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot

- **HORIZON-EIE-2026-03 (09/06/2026 – 22/09/2026)**
  - HORIZON-EIE-2026-03-CONNECT-01: From lab to market: Strengthening the role of Technology Transfer Offices in bringing knowledge to the market

- **HORIZON-EIE-2027-01 (01/06/2027 – 15/09/2027)**
  - HORIZON-EIE-2027-01-CONNECT-01: Startup Europe
  - HORIZON-EIE-2027-01-CONNECT-02: Reinforcing synergies between experimentation spaces and innovation procurement
  - HORIZON-EIE-2027-01-CONNECT-03: Enhancing the involvement of philanthropic organisations in innovation ecosystems

European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – policy context

Cédric Adam

Policy Officer, DG RTD.A5

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Policy objectives of ESSH

Overall objectives:

- Reinforce and interconnect 10 to 18 leading and emerging startup and scaleup hubs rooted in strong research ecosystems
- Emulate the creation and growth of European deep tech startups through increased access to essential resources: infrastructures, venture capital, talents, mentors, collaboration opportunities, etc.
- Create bridges to supporting schemes in Europe: European Innovation Council (EIC), EIC Scaling Club, Enterprise Europe Network, etc.

Policy rational: Develop innovation capabilities

- Compared to the US, Europe had a relatively static economy over the past 25 years leading to a significant productivity gap
- Entrepreneurs didn’t seize the opportunities of the digital revolution
- To remain competitive in the global economy Europe will need to do better with upcoming innovation waves

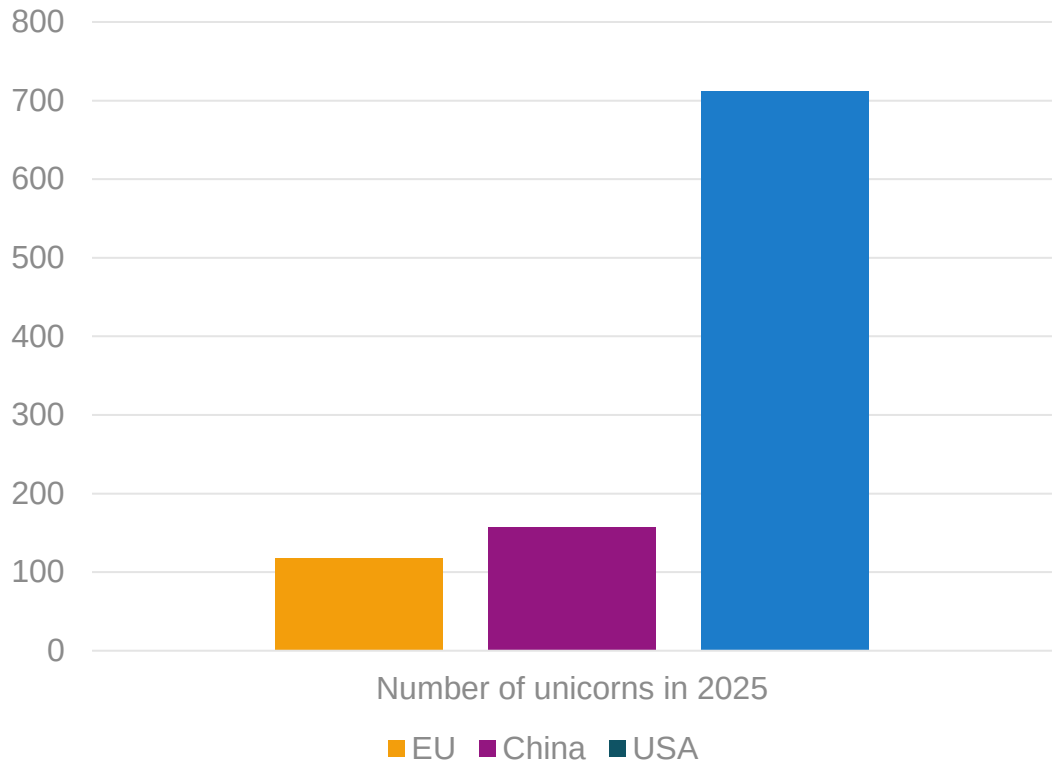
Top-3 R&D spenders and their industries compared over time

	2003	2012	2022
US	Ford (auto) Pfizer (pharma) GM (auto)	Microsoft (software) Intel (hardware) Merck (pharma)	Alphabet (software) Meta (software) Microsoft (software)
EU	Mercedes-Benz (auto) Siemens (electronics) VW (auto)	VW (auto) Mercedes-Benz (auto) Bosch (auto)	VW (auto) Mercedes-Benz (auto) Bosch (auto)
JPN	Toyota (auto) Panasonic (electronics) Sony (electronics)	Toyota (auto) Honda (auto) Panasonic (electronics)	Toyota (auto) Honda (auto) NTT (telecom)

Source: C. Fuest and al., 2024

Policy rational: Support startups and innovation

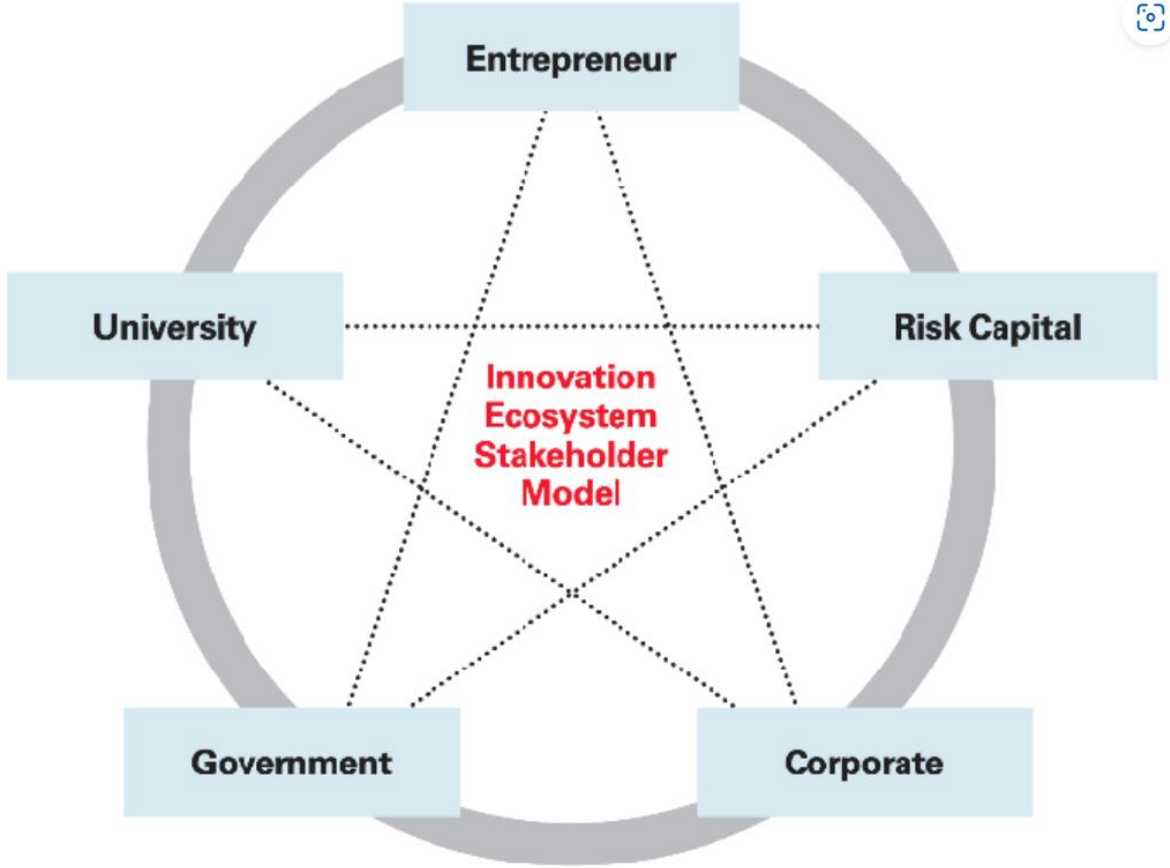
- As emphasised by the literature on innovation and economic growth new entrants especially startups play an important role in commercialising disruptive technologies
- But startups often fail to successfully growth in Europe



Made by the author
Data: World Population Review (02.12.2025)

Policy rational: Building on innovation hubs

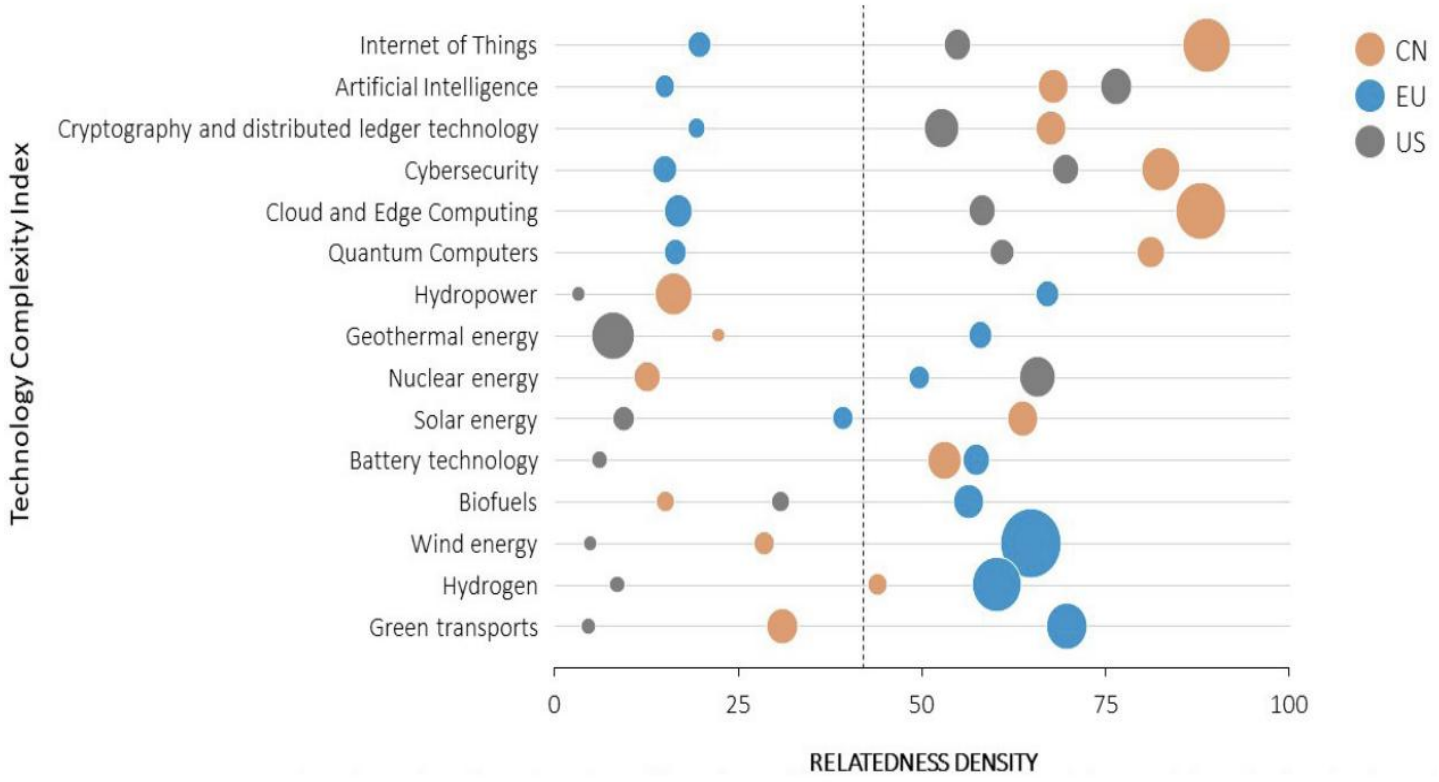
- Startup flourish mainly in hubs providing the appropriate resources to develop, while favouring similar locations for expansion
  - Research capabilities
  - Funding and finance
  - Support systems
  - Talent pools
  - Accessible markets
- The EU has numerous innovation clusters, but they are less developed and generate less value than those of the US and China



Budden & Murray, 2019

Policy rational: Improve competitiveness in complex technologies

- Publication and patenting activities show that European innovation hubs are less interconnected than their US counterparts
- Europe's lack of interconnectivity is a competitive disadvantage for developing complex technologies



Source: Draghi report, 2024

Practicalities: What is a startup 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

Practicalities: What should a successful project aim for?

- Consolidation of dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystems
- Deep tech R&I collaborations generating new spinoff ventures
- successful scaling-up of startup companies
- Capacity building in advanced technologies

Practicalities: Activities encouraged by the scope

- Provide access to relevant infrastructures and facilities
- Support connections: pitch days, meet-ups, hackathons, startup week-ends, etc
- Ensure access to funding opportunities and services: EIC, EEN, EIT-KICs, local service providers etc
- Knowledge transfer between hubs

Practicalities: 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

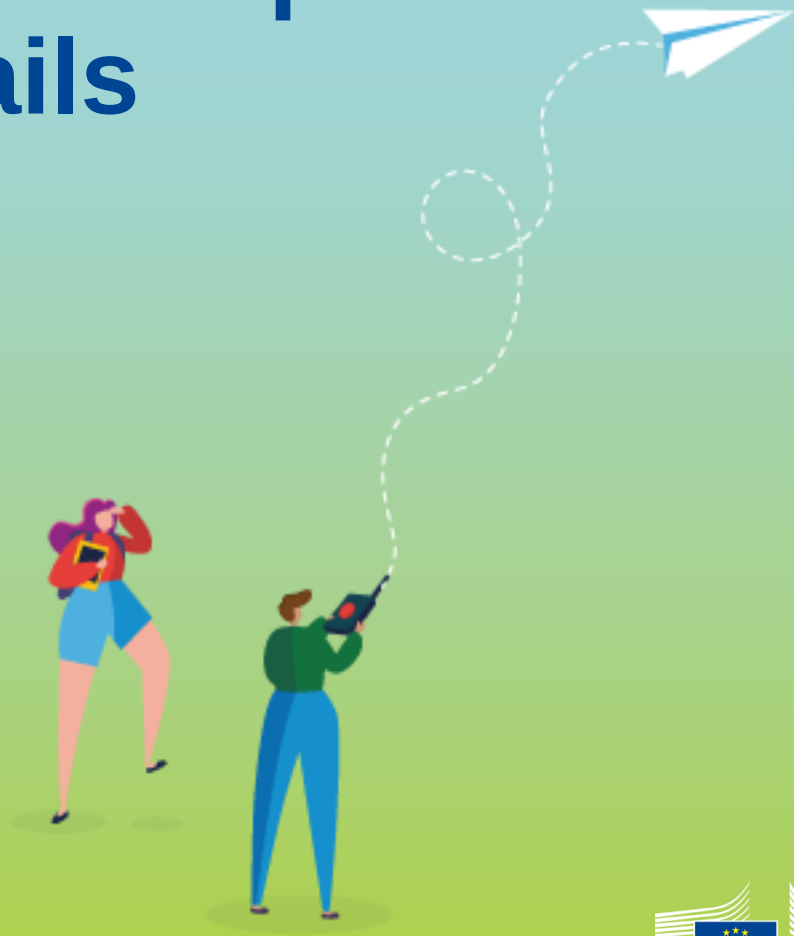
KPIs

- Startups supported
  Min: 100
- Cross-boarder support
  Min: 50
- Startups attracting VC funding
  Min: 50%

European Startup and Scaleup Hubs pilot call – practical details

Natalia Nowińska

Project Adviser, EISMEA I.01



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ESSH – basic info

Type of Action	Co-Fund (50% EU funding)
Call opening date	12 December 2025
Call closing date	10 March 2026
Total Indicative EU budget	EUR 20 M
Expected EU contribution	EUR 20 M
Expected grants to be signed	1
Expected project duration	2 years

ESSH – eligibility conditions

Consortium and regional requirements:

- A hub 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 hub 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 tech startup ecosystem actors;
- Establish robust, **pan-European alliances of 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 **to succeed scaling into globally competitive companies**;
- **Strengthen less-connected innovation hubs** by integrating them into a Europe-wide collaborative network;
- Mobilise **greater private and public capital** into deep tech ventures across participating innovation hubs.

How to apply?

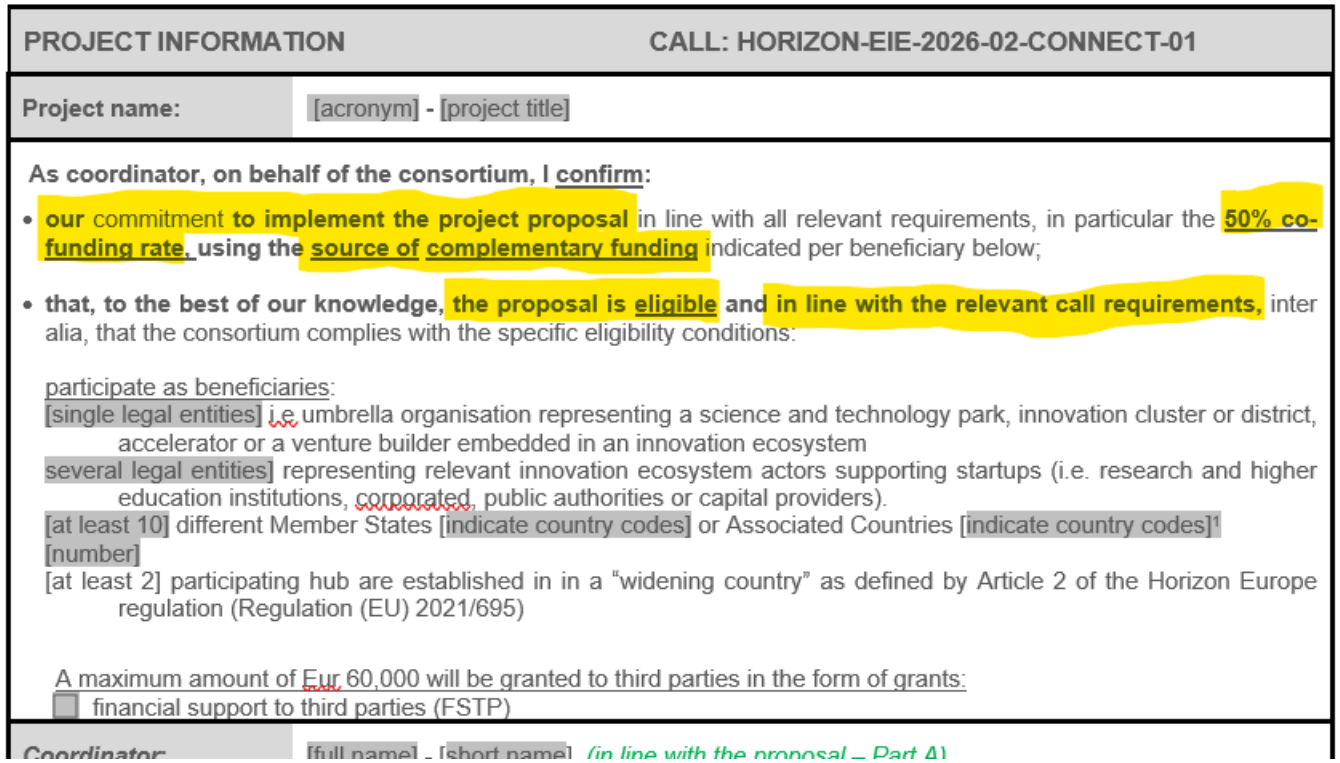
- Applications to be submitted through the Funding & Tenders Portal.

- Applicants should submit:

    - Part A - Forms & budget
    - Part B - Technical info (main proposal – max 70 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-2026-02-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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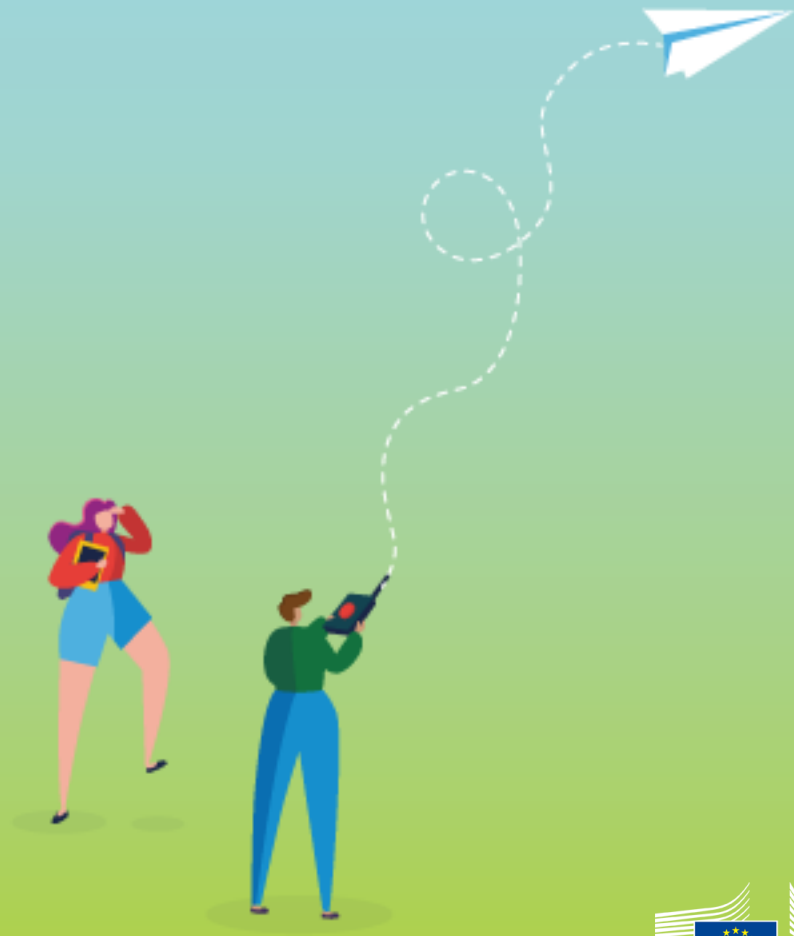
Proposal templates – Annex: Financial support to third parties

- 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.
    - describe the measures to avoid potential conflicts of interest or unequal treatment of applicants.

Closing remarks

Daniel Gassmann

Head of Sector, EISMEA Unit I.1



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Thank you!

Got questions? Contact as at

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