

EEN TG Research and Innovation: Position Paper to FP10

Contribution to FP10 to concrete actions on four main Areas:
Start-up and Scale-Ups, Innovation Act, Innovative SMEs and EIC.



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Introduction

During the Thematic Group Research and Innovation Meeting in Barcelona, from April 9th to April 11th, EEN members came up with suggestions for the next European Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10). This document aims at presenting the ideas discussed through four main chapters:



Members of the TG R&I

1.Start-ups and Scale ups: The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the future of FP10. To ensure Europe remains competitive in global innovation, we propose a set of actionable recommendations to improve access for start-ups and scale-ups to the 10th framework program. Our position builds on operational experience, direct engagement with SMEs and startups.

2.Innovation Act: Substantially boost the EU's research and innovation budget to support SMEs in developing and scaling innovative solutions. We recommend doubling the funding to €220 billion, in the form of direct funding and cascade funding for innovation, and indirect funding through confiding partnerships. Create a funding-program for new collaborations between innovation companies and commercialization companies. Create a program for new VC (public and private) and help VC to grow!

3.Innovative SMEs: Innovative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are key drivers of economic resilience, technological advancement and strategic autonomy within the European Union. Their agility, disruptive and innovation potential and proximity to market needs make them essential players in achieving the twin transitions – green and digital – and the EU's broader strategic goals. While the current EU funding landscape, particularly Horizon Europe and the EIC, has acknowledged the importance of SMEs, challenges remain in terms of access, inclusion and support mechanisms. Framework Programme 10 (FP10) presents a unique opportunity to reshape the ecosystem for SME participation, making it more impactful, inclusive, simple, effective and aligned with regional innovation dynamics. This section outlines concrete suggestions in two key areas: Improving access to FP10 for innovative SMEs; Increasing the focus on SMEs within the programme architecture and instruments.

4.EIC: The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the future of the European Innovation Council (EIC) within FP10. To ensure Europe remains competitive in global innovation, we propose a set of actionable recommendations to improve EIC instruments and foster effective collaboration between EEN and National Contact Points (NCPs). Our position builds on operational experience, direct engagement with SMEs and startups, and lessons learned through initiatives such as EEN2EIC.

1. Start-ups and Scale-Ups

Idea 1: “Fast Track” Funding Scheme – 30 Days to Grant

Proposal	Create a dedicated “ <i>Fast Track</i> ” instrument within FP10 for start-ups transitioning from TRL 6 to TRL 9, offering lump-sum grants between €200,000 and €500,000 . The application process should be streamlined and digital-first, with a decision within 30 days .
Why it matters	Start-ups in Europe often face long funding cycles, which can delay go-to-market efforts and cause them to lose out to competitors. While national schemes sometimes provide agility, EU-level instruments are rarely optimized for speed.
Key benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accelerates time-to-market for validated technologies.• De-risks the transition from prototype to commercial deployment.• Provides timely capital for IP protection, regulatory clearance, or pilot production.• Makes EU funding more responsive to market dynamics.
Implementation suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use simplified templates, AI-based eligibility screening, and milestone-triggered disbursements.• Apply a portfolio approach to manage risk and avoid administrative overload.• Draw lessons from the EIC’s Pathfinder and Transition schemes but radically reduce complexity.

Idea 2: Pre-Approved Start-Up Pool for FP10 Consortia

Proposal	Establish a pre-qualified “Start-Up Pool” consisting of vetted European start-ups with high innovation potential. Start-ups in this pool can be easily integrated into Pillar II projects during the proposal or implementation phase.
Why it matters	Consortium-building is complex and time-constrained. Many consortia avoid engaging start-ups due to perceived risks or time limits. This pool would offer ready-to-go, high-quality partners and reduce friction for both sides .
Key benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creates visibility for start-ups in the FP10 ecosystem.• Encourages early integration of disruptive tech into collaborative R&I efforts.• Lowers the entry barrier for start-ups unfamiliar with EU funding.• Fosters matchmaking between established consortia and agile innovators.

Implementation suggestions

- Use simplified templates, AI-based eligibility screening, and milestone-triggered disbursements.
- Apply a portfolio approach to manage risk and avoid administrative overload.
- Draw lessons from the EIC's Pathfinder and Transition schemes but radically reduce complexity.



Idea 3: Mandatory Start-Up Participation in Large Projects (≥ €3M)

Proposal

Introduce a rule that **all FP10 projects with a budget above €5 million** must include **at least one start-up as a core consortium partner**, contributing to one or more work packages and receiving direct funding—not just subcontracted tasks.

Why it matters

Start-ups bring agility, risk-taking, and a product focus—but are often relegated to subcontractor roles. **True integration means shared ownership, resources, and visibility.** This shift would signal a cultural change in how innovation consortia are built.

Key benefits

- Promotes cross-pollination of ideas between academia, industry, and start-ups.
- Builds consortia that are both research-excellent and market-driven.
- Creates meaningful innovation learning environments for founders.
- Ensures that FP10 accelerates not just knowledge, but economic value creation.

Implementation suggestions

- Provide dedicated guidance for coordinators on how to involve start-ups.
- Monitor compliance and collect data on impact.



Idea 4: EU as First Customer – Procurement Access for Start-Ups

Proposal


Make it mandatory for **all FP10 projects that include public procurement of R&D services** to feature **at least one start-up among their suppliers**. Extend this principle to EU-funded infrastructures, mission platforms, and challenge-based calls.

Why it matters

Start-ups need customers—not just funding. The EU, through FP10 projects, can **become a reference client** and validate early solutions, helping companies scale faster and attract further investment.

Key benefits

- Bridges the gap between innovation and public sector adoption.
- Builds trust and credibility for start-ups in sensitive or regulated markets.
- Encourages more demand-driven innovation in FP10.

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- Supports Europe's strategic autonomy by anchoring key technologies in the EU market.
 - Develop procurement toolkits for coordinators and public buyers.
 - Use minimum quota systems or procurement scoring criteria favouring start-up involvement.
 - Tie in with Innovation Procurement tools (PPI, PCP).

Implementation suggestions

Idea 5: “Plug & Play” Start-Up Vouchers

Proposal Create **flexible start-up vouchers** that enable innovative start-ups to join FP10 projects already in implementation. These vouchers would come with **pre-allocated, simplified funding** and be triggered by invitation from existing consortia.

Why it matters Start-ups evolve quickly, and many miss proposal deadlines. Current FP structures are rigid and do not accommodate dynamic partnerships. A voucher model would **bring agility to FP10** and allow projects to adapt to emerging innovation.

Key benefits

- Enables talent and technology to flow into running projects.
- Encourages projects to be more open and less siloed.
- Supports late-stage start-ups that weren't ready at the proposal phase.
- Reduces entry barriers for non-traditional FP participants.

Implementation suggestions

- Set up a simple validation process managed by EEN, EIC, or NCPs.
- Allow vouchers to cover a defined contribution (e.g. €100–300k).
- Make them time-limited and performance-tied to ensure value.

Idea 6: EU-Backed Start-Up Credits

Proposal Introduce **EU-backed, convertible, zero-equity credits** tailored for start-ups and scale-ups. Repayment would be **revenue-based**, with flexible terms that **scale with company growth**, avoiding debt traps or early dilution.

Why it matters Many start-ups—especially in deep tech—don't fit traditional VC or loan models. These credits would provide **patient capital** aligned with SME cash flow realities while supporting long-term growth. They can complement or partially replace grants in FP10.

Key benefits

- Provides sustainable, non-dilutive capital.
- Encourages responsible growth without short-term pressure.
- Strengthens EU's strategic autonomy in key technology fields.
- Builds an innovation finance architecture that fills the equity gap in Europe.

Implementation suggestions

- Repayment linked to revenue thresholds (e.g. 3% of revenue over 5 years).
- Optional conversion into grant for mission-critical projects or social impact areas.
- Delivered through EIF or EIC Fund, co-invested with regional finance institutions.

Idea 7: Expanded Cascade Funding Mechanism for Newcomers and Start-Ups

Proposal

FP10 should **expand and strengthen the use of cascade funding (financial support to third parties – FSTP)** as a dedicated tool for onboarding **newcomers, start-ups, and first-time applicants**. Sub-projects should be able to receive up to **€150,000**, with **flexible durations** proportional to the funding amount. Furthermore, the **European Commission should maintain a central, real-time repository** of all open and upcoming cascade calls, including application timelines and original project sources.

Why it matters

Cascade funding has proven to be one of the most **effective low-barrier entry points** into the EU R&I ecosystem, especially for SMEs, start-ups, and first-time applicants. It combines **smaller-scale, faster-to-access grants** with targeted support and community engagement. However, its **visibility, coherence, and scalability remain limited** under Horizon Europe.

Key benefits

- **Perfect for newcomers:** Cascade schemes typically have **simplified application and reporting rules**, lower competition intensity, and support through established innovation communities (e.g. DIHs, clusters, EDIHs, competence centers).
- **More inclusive:** Encourages **wider geographical participation**, particularly from widening countries and less-represented regions.
- **Low risk, high learning:** Helps start-ups test the waters of EU funding, build trust with EU partners, and prepare for larger FP10 opportunities like the EIC or collaborative projects.
- **Aligned with national/regional funding:** Enables **blended or complementary support** when funding rules are aligned and administrative processes harmonized across instruments.

Implementation suggestions

1. **Funding & Duration Rules**
 - Allow sub-grants of up to **€150,000**, based on the **specific objective** of the sub-project (e.g., prototyping, testing, demonstration, internationalisation).
 - The **duration** of sub-projects should be flexible and **proportionate to the funding size** (e.g., from 3 to 18 months).
2. **Administrative Alignment & Simplification**
 - Ensure that the **rules for participation, cost categories, and reporting** for FSTP follow a **harmonized template**, aligned with the overarching FP10 principles, and adaptable to other EU instruments (e.g. Interregional Innovation Investments, Digital Europe).
 - Streamline contract and payment procedures between the coordinating project and the third-party beneficiary.



3. Centralized Cascade Call Portal

- The EC should maintain a **dedicated, constantly updated platform** that:
 - Lists all active FP10 projects using cascade funding mechanisms
 - Provides **clear timelines, eligibility rules, and application procedures** for each call
 - Allows filtering by **sector, funding size, target group, and call deadline**
 - Offers **early alerts or subscription options** for upcoming opportunities

4. Outreach and Support Tools

- Ensure EEN, NCPs, and local innovation hubs are actively involved in **disseminating cascade opportunities** to their SME clients.
- Consider developing **AI-powered matchmaking and pre-eligibility check tools** to improve success rates and reduce effort for micro-enterprises.

Idea 8: Single Applicant Scheme for Market-Disruptive, Non-Deeptech Start-Ups (TRL 3-8)

Proposal	Introduce a dedicated single-beneficiary funding scheme within FP10 to support market-disruptive innovations that are not necessarily deep tech , but have strong commercial and scaling potential. The instrument would target start-ups spun out from universities and research institutions , supporting the development from TRL 3 to TRL 8 with grants of up to €1.5 million .
Why it matters	Not all impactful innovations are deeptech based. Many of Europe's most promising start-ups stem from business model innovation, platform thinking, data use, social innovation, and service transformation . These innovations often emerge from interdisciplinary research teams in universities, but they struggle to access funding through current EU instruments like the EIC, which prioritize technological breakthroughs.
Key benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fills a structural funding gap for academic spin-offs that do not fit deeptech or classic collaborative research schemes. • Supports non-linear innovation: social impact, digital platforms, service models, and systemic business innovations. • De-risks early entrepreneurial journeys and strengthens the innovation pipeline from Europe's research institutions. • Enhances diversity in innovation by welcoming social sciences, humanities, creative sectors, and female-founded ventures. • Encourages technology transfer offices and universities to pursue bold, real-world applications beyond lab-based inventions.
Target Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start-ups and SMEs spun out from universities, public research organisations or applied research institutions • Innovations with clear market disruption potential but not necessarily dependent on frontier science • Sectors: sustainability, digital services, education tech, civic tech, circular business models, public sector innovation, etc.

Implementation suggestions

1. **TRL Range & Activities Funded**
 - Covers development from **proof of concept (TRL 3)** to **first commercial deployment (TRL 8)**.
 - Eligible activities: MVP development, early user validation, regulatory testing, pilot implementation, market replication.
2. **Application Format**
 - Single applicant, simplified application format (max. 25 pages + pitch video + short financial plan).
 - Clear focus on **problem-solution fit**, **scaling pathway**, and **market disruption potential**, not just IP or tech novelty.
3. **Eligibility & Assessment**
 - Must demonstrate link to academic/research institution (e.g. through founders, licensing, or IPR).
 - Evaluation panels should include experts in **entrepreneurship, innovation design, and impact modelling**, not just tech assessors.
4. **Support Services**
 - Include access to **coaching, market access support, and IP strategy** (via EEN in cooperation with national innovation agencies).
 - Option to transition into further EIC funding or private investment pathways post-project.

Idea 9: “Widening Start-Up Booster” – A Dedicated Instrument for Innovation Readiness in unserved Regions

Proposal

FP10 should include a **dedicated funding instrument for start-ups from widening countries**, designed to bridge the gap between early-stage innovation and competitiveness in top-tier schemes like the EIC Accelerator. Projects must be **coordinated by a start-up based in a widening country**, and include **at least one partner** (research organization, university or company) from a **non-widening country**. The scheme supports development from **TRL 3 to TRL 6**, with grants of up to **€1.5 million at 100% funding rate**.

Why it matters

Start-ups in widening countries face structural barriers: weaker access to capital, fragmented ecosystems, less experience with EU funding, and limited exposure to high-level investor or market networks. As a result, they remain **significantly underrepresented** in the EIC Accelerator and other competitive instruments.

This scheme would act as a **stepping stone**, helping them develop both a **strong prototype and a viable business plan**, while also **building consortia experience** and transnational partnerships. It would be a powerful way to **mobilize entrepreneurial talent and innovation from all corners of Europe**.



Key benefits

- **Increases participation from widening countries** in mainstream EU innovation funding.
- Encourages **knowledge transfer and mentoring** from more experienced ecosystems through required cross-country partnerships.
- Fosters capacity-building in proposal writing, IPR strategy, go-to-market planning, and investor readiness.
- Supports the **maturation of promising innovations** before they compete for EIC Accelerator or private funding.
- Helps identify and scale untapped innovation potential in less connected regions.

Eligibility and Scope

- **Coordinator** must be a **start-up registered in a widening country**.
- **Consortium** must include at least **one partner from a non-widening country** (company, research institute, or university).
- **TRL 3 to TRL 6**: projects must aim to develop a **functional prototype** and a **validated business plan**.
- **Funding**: Up to **€1.5 million**, with **100% cost coverage**, including personnel, subcontracting, IP, prototyping, and coaching.

Implementation suggestions

- Expected duration: 12–24 months
- Deliverables must include:
 - Technical prototype (TRL 6)
 - Investor-ready business plan
 - Strategic roadmap for EIC Accelerator application
 - Evidence of validation activities (e.g., customer interviews, pilot testing)

Support Measures

- Projects should be offered optional access to:
 - **Innovation management coaching** (via EEN in cooperation with thematic NCPs)
 - **Pitch preparation and financial storytelling support**
 - **Fast-track evaluation pathway into the EIC Accelerator** if successful

2. Innovation Act

Idea 1: Simplify Administrative Procedures

Proposal	Streamline application and reporting processes to reduce the bureaucratic burden on SMEs to enhance accessibility to funding programs, enabling SMEs to focus more on innovation activities.
Concrete Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create an AI-program that fill in all bureaucratic information, so the SME put in the basic company information, the idea, the budget, and the goal of the AI system handles the rest. (Narrow AI to draw the right information in the right databases in the right structure – not to generate fictive content)• Create a “Seal of Innovation” Gives a fast track for SMEs to apply EU funding.

Idea 2: Enhance access to private investment

Proposal	Facilitate mechanisms that improve SMEs' access to private financing, such as venture capital and equity investments.
Concrete Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• By fostering cross-border events like SLUSH, and boost connection between BAS, EEN and SMEs.• By enforcing platforms like B2Match with focus on Privat investment and private banks.

Idea 3: Support Commercialization of Innovations

Proposal	Implement initiatives that assist SMEs in bringing research outcomes to market, addressing the existing innovation gap.
Concrete Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advisory board formed by big companies (OPEN INNOVATION) where innovators can present their ideas (Matchmaking).• Help SMEs understand what Innovation means in a commercialised sense, in common language.• Make innovation an important issue again.• EEN becomes a facilitator for matchmaking for commercialization and innovation.• Encourage collaborations between educational institutions and industries to address skill gaps in critical sectors, ensuring a workforce equipped for future challenges



Idea 4: Reduce Regulatory Barriers

Proposal	Address and minimize regulatory obstacles that hinder SME growth and innovation. Establishing a more consistent and supportive regulatory environment can enable SMEs to navigate compliance requirements effectively and compete on a global scale.
Concrete Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Translate the regulations to an easier language.• AI Machine for regulatory library. We develop (or SME develops) a SaaS providing an AI tool for regulatory library – to pull data for each situation, and to handle the big data in the regulatory library.

Idea 5: Promote collaboration and knowledge-sharing

Proposal	Encourage partnerships between SMEs, research institutions, and larger enterprises to foster an inclusive and dynamic innovation ecosystem.
Concrete Actions	Alignment of academia and industry/companies. KPI to foster real and effective collaboration (Now academia is focused more on number of papers published).

3. Innovative SMEs

Improving access to FP10 for Innovative SMEs

Idea 1: Strengthen strategic coordination between DG Research and EISMEA

Proposal 1 A stronger, institutionalized collaboration between DG Research and EISMEA is essential. This should translate into a formalized partnership framework that aligns the roles and strategies of National Contact Points (NCPs) and the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), ensuring better coverage, clearer roles and more efficient SME support throughout the project lifecycle.

Concrete Action 1 **Define and certify EEN role: the Regional Contact Points (RCPs)**

Proposal 2 To ensure quality and consistency, the role of EEN actors in FP10 should be clearly profiled and certified, with qualifications defined at the European level. Each Member State could structure this flexibly (e.g., Front Office/Back Office models), but the goal should be to nominate EEN Partners as Regional Contact Points (RCPs), qualified partners in access to EU funding, application support and partnering services for innovative SMEs at various readiness levels.

Concrete Action 2 **Focus on the EEN competence and capacity to build up partnerships**

Idea 2: Prioritize partnership facilitation

Proposal More than administrative support, SMEs need **help building strategic, transnational partnerships**. FP10 should recognize and incentivize EEN's matchmaking and partnership-building capacity as a core asset to increase SME involvement in collaborative research.

Idea 3: Increase Grant-Based Funding and Raise Funding Rates

Proposal Significant barrier for SMEs remains the **risk associated with co-financing**. To mitigate this:

- Funding rates should be raised to up to 75-80% for SME-targeted calls.
- Dedicated grant budgets should be increased and ring-fenced within FP10 to ensure long-term support for high-risk, high-potential SME projects.



Idea 4: Introduce EEN “Funding Readiness Assessments”

Proposal	EEN partners could play a key role in conducting pre-assessments of funding readiness , helping to channel SMEs to the right funding instruments at the right time, thereby improving success rates and reducing drop-out .
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Idea 5: Integrate Services more deeply into Regional Innovation Ecosystems

Proposal	<p>EEN should become a visible, first-line SME Helpdesk for FP10 at regional level. This requires:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A robust communication strategy,• Strategic integration with programmes like Interreg, EDIH or the RIVs,• Clear articulation of synergies between FP10 and other EU regional instruments.
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Increasing the Focus on SMEs within the FP10 Programme Design

Idea 1: Redesign Lump Sum funding to fit SME realities

Proposal	The lump sum mechanism should be recalibrated to better fit SME cash flow needs , e.g., by introducing advance payments or milestones that account for pre-financing constraints.
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Idea 2: Introduce guarantees for the coordinator

Proposal	To reduce risk for consortia led by or including SMEs, FP10 should implement a guarantee mechanism to cover financial losses if a partner withdraws or defaults – a critical barrier particularly for small businesses leading projects.
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Idea 3: Incentivize inclusion of newcomers

Proposal	FP10 should reward consortia that actively integrate SMEs with no prior EU project experience, helping to broaden the innovation base and reduce the dominance of established actors.
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Idea 4: Higher or Flat-Rate funding for Innovation Actions

Proposal Innovation Actions (IAs) should offer **flat-rate or elevated funding** when SMEs are involved, recognizing their higher vulnerability in late-stage R&D activities and market uptake efforts.

Idea 5: Partially Open Calls to balance Top-Down strategy with SME flexibility

Proposal FP10 should adopt "**semi-open**" calls, inspired by EIC Challenges, which offer thematic direction but still allow bottom-up innovation to surface – especially valuable for SMEs with niche or cross-sector solutions.

Idea 6: Use Cascade Funding – with limits

Proposal **Cascade funding** remains a useful tool for engaging SMEs but should be applied judiciously, ensuring transparency, fair selection, and avoiding excessive intermediation.



4. European Innovation Council (EIC)

Idea 1: Clarify and Streamline Business Acceleration Services (BAS)

Simplification and Strategic Integration	BAS offerings must become more accessible and coherent. A simplified, well-structured roadmap with clear entry points for SMEs is essential to reduce fragmentation.
Role of EEN	As a core delivery partner, EEN should be strategically positioned within the BAS ecosystem to provide direct access for SMEs and bridge national and European support schemes.

Idea 2: Improve Cooperation Across the EIC Ecosystem

Inter-Agency Clarity	Strengthen coordination between the EIC Fund, EISMEA, investment actors, EEN, and NCPs to ensure a seamless journey for beneficiaries from proposal development to scaling.
Proposal Support Continuum	Define and formalize the roles of EEN and NCPs in all proposal stages—from short proposal guidance to scaling support.

Idea 3: Ensure Budget Stability and Restore Trust

Predictable Funding	Reinstate the EIC Accelerator budget to at least €1 billion annually to restore trust and ensure a sustainable pipeline of innovation.
Manageable Success Rates	Aim for a ~10% success rate to reflect fair competition and encourage continued participation. This includes reducing the number of interview invitations to only the most competitive applicants.

Idea 4: Promote Continuity Across EIC Instruments

Support the Innovation Pathway	Ensure smoother transitions across Pathfinder → Transition → Accelerator by providing advisory support and leveraging EEN's partner search capabilities and its strong regional presence.
Systemic Connections	EEN should act as a facilitator linking EU and national instruments to support innovators at each step of the journey. To support SMEs in the Pathfinder and Transition journey further resources would be required, to pursue new initiatives (e.g. Industry Meets Academia Days at Universities, Spin-off Support etc).

Idea 5: Create a Pipeline of Investment Stages and Simplify the Application Procedure

Integrated Investment Pathway	Shift from three isolated instruments to a connected pipeline of funding stages, using milestone-based funding models (e.g., Stage-Gate).
Entry-Level Accelerator Scheme	Introduce a light-entry EIC Accelerator track (€50K–€300K) to support first-time applicants, particularly from underrepresented regions, and feed them into the main Accelerator pipeline via a milestone-driven approach.
Replace Full Proposals	Substitute the exhaustive full proposal stage with a structured business plan to reduce consultant dependency and empower applicants.
Investor Bridges	Enable EEN to act as a broker to the EIC's Trusted Investor Network or other regional/national investor pools to support scaling across all regions.
Expert Pool Reform	Enhance evaluation quality by ensuring deep-tech expertise in both remote evaluators and interview juries.

Idea 6: EEN2EIC - Learn from the past and expand targeted support

Focus Areas	EEN2EIC should prioritize women-led innovation and support for widening countries/regions (based on NUTS classification).
Regional Empowerment	Continue and scale capacity-building for moderate and low-innovation regions (instead of widening countries) to ensure balanced innovation growth across the EU.
Complementary Access Programs	Offer connections to initiatives like WomenTechEU and Pre-Accelerator programs to expand early-stage support.
Vouchers for Investment Readiness	Provide financial vouchers to promising companies (e.g., Seal of Excellence holders) to participate in investment-related events and matchmaking.

