

WHITE PAPER / REPORT**KEY EVENT INSIGHTS****SCALE SEE****BUILDING CAPACITY FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE****NOV 19, 2025**

SCALE SEE 2025 was a half-day online conference organised by ICT Cluster Bulgaria, InnovationAmp EDIH, and the MetaCities Excellence Hub. The event brought together speakers from EIC, FundingBox, F6S, Sploro, and InnovationAmp, who shared practical insights on how SMEs in Southeast Europe can access funding, strengthen their digital capacity, and integrate into the wider European innovation ecosystem.

This report summarises the event's key findings, poll data, and strategic recommendations.

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Introduction

Despite steady progress in digitalisation and innovation, significant disparities persist across Europe in access to research, innovation, and digital transformation funding. The European Commission's early analysis of participation in Horizon Europe shows that countries with mature innovation ecosystems, primarily in Western and Northern Europe, continue to secure the highest levels of funding and involvement in R&I projects.

An official review of Horizon Europe proposals from 2021–2023 shows over 68,000 eligible proposals, representing more than 63,000 distinct applicants, but participation remains heavily concentrated among a small group of countries with long-established research infrastructures and strong administrative capacity [1].

By contrast, many of the so-called “widening countries”, including those in Southeast Europe, still participate at lower rates and are underrepresented in high-budget collaborative projects. According to EC data from the WIDERA ERA Calls [2], the top participating countries were Germany (80 participations), Belgium (79), Italy (71), Spain (66), and the Netherlands (64), while widening countries such as Greece (50) and Portugal (31) appeared only marginally in the top ranks. Even though these countries appear in the statistics, their overall share of funding and number of coordinated projects remain significantly lower.

Less developed regions (defined as those with GDP per capita below 75% of the EU average [3]) face additional barriers: administrative complexity, limited staffing in SMEs, fewer experienced proposal writers, and weaker integration into European innovation networks. SMEs in Southeast Europe, in particular, often report challenges balancing day-to-day business operations with the administrative demands of EU project applications and management [1]. Many companies lack dedicated staff for innovation, EU funding, or partnership development, making it difficult to participate competitively in funding calls. Polling data and discussions from the SCALE SEE 2025 event further shows alignment with this trend - most SMEs identified finding the right call, understanding eligibility, and limited internal capacity as their main barriers to accessing funding.

¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. (2024). Country participation in the EU R&I Framework Programmes: A retrospective on the first three years of Horizon Europe (2021-2023) (Monitoring & Evaluation Report KI-05-24-564-EN-N). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
https://www.horizontevropa.cz/files_public/elfinder/6302/country%20participation%20in%20the%20eu%20r%26i%20framework%20programmes-KI0524564ENN.pdf

² ERA Factsheet No. 5. (2025, April). Results from the Horizon Europe ERA Calls (NCP WIDERA.NET).
https://www.ncpwideranet.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/ERA_Factsheet_No_5_03.pdf

³ Eurostat. (2024, August). Cohesion policy indicators. In Statistics Explained. European Commission.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Cohesion_policy_indicators

At the same time, the region holds substantial untapped potential. SMEs in Southeast Europe are demonstrating strong interest in digital transformation and emerging technologies, and platforms such as FundingBox, F6S, Sploro, and the EIC Accelerator show that SMEs from widening countries can and do succeed, with the right support structures in place. Cascade funding, in particular, has emerged as one of the most accessible pathways for early-stage or first-time applicants, offering simpler application procedures, shorter project cycles, and lower administrative burden.

SCALE SEE aimed to address the gaps in some of these underlying challenges and help bridge information gaps, demystify application processes, and foster cross-border collaboration. This report summarises the key outcomes, poll data, and expert insights shared at SCALE SEE 2025, and outlines practical recommendations to help Southeast European **SMEs integrate more fully into the European innovation ecosystem.**

Participant Profile & Poll Results

The event gathered representatives from:

- [FundingBox](#)
- [European Innovation Council \(EIC\)](#)
- [InnovationAmp \(EDIH\)](#)
- [F6S Innovation](#)
- [Sploro](#)

Alongside **27 participating organisations**, including SMEs, clusters, research institutions, and public authorities. In the first hours of the event, 91% of participants engaged in a live poll, offering a useful snapshot of the region's awareness, experience, and needs regarding EU and cascade funding.

The results show that **familiarity with cascade funding remains limited**, with 25% having never heard of it, 19% having heard the term but being unsure what it meant, and the largest group, 44%, reporting only partial familiarity. Only 13% felt quite familiar, and none felt highly knowledgeable.

Reflecting this, **cascade funding remains largely underused**: 86% of participants stated they had never applied, and only 14% planned to do so. When asked about experience with EU-funded projects more broadly, responses revealed a similarly uneven landscape: while 23% had experience with Horizon Europe and 23% with Digital Europe, 31% had never participated in any EU-funded project, and none had experience with cascade funding specifically.

Poll responses also highlighted **key challenges SMEs face in accessing funding opportunities**. The most common barriers were:

- **finding the right call (31%)**
- **understanding eligibility and requirements (23%)**
- **co-financing or administrative burden (23%).**
- **difficulty building partnerships (15%)**
- **lack of time or resources (8%)**

Despite these challenges, most organisations expressed a degree of readiness to engage with funding opportunities: 38% felt fully ready, 38% somewhat ready but in need of support, 15% unprepared, and 8% not interested.

In terms of collaboration preferences, participants showed a strong interest in forming ties with SMEs and startups (38%), followed by clusters and DIHs (23%), investors and accelerators (23%), and research organisations (15%). No respondents selected public authorities. Overall, the poll results suggest a region with growing interest and moderate readiness, but still facing significant information, capacity, and administrative barriers that hinder more active participation in European innovation programmes.

Speaker Insights

Our event brought together a diverse group of innovation and communication specialists who shared valuable insights from their work across Europe's research and innovation ecosystem.

- [Ola Sawicka Green](#), Senior Marketing Coordinator at [FundingBox](#), offered perspectives on community engagement and strategic outreach within digital innovation programmes.
- [Tsvetelina Yorgova](#), National Contact Point for the [European Innovation Council \(EIC\)](#), contributed her expertise on supporting applicants and navigating EIC funding opportunities.
- [Gerassim Y. Slavov](#) from [InnovationAmp](#) highlighted services and support available in InnovationAmp for innovation-driven organisations.
- [Ina Gencheva](#), Innovation & EU Project Manager at [F6S Innovation](#), provided practical insights from coordinating EU-funded projects and working closely with consortia across Europe.
- [Liliya Foteva](#), Innovation Consultant at [Sploro](#), shared her experience in proposal development and strategic innovation support services.

Below, we summarise some of the views on the challenges and opportunities in the EU innovation landscape shared by our speakers during the event.

FundingBox

Ola Sawicka Green from FundingBox highlighted that cascade funding has been rapidly growing and diversifying, now extending far beyond its early focus areas. Today, opportunities exist across a wide range of domains, including artificial intelligence, IoT, robotics, advanced manufacturing, and green technologies, making it easier for SMEs from different sectors to find a programme that matches their expertise. She emphasised that, despite this abundance of calls, small businesses should, instead of prioritising the number of submissions, invest their efforts in identifying those that truly align with their capabilities, strategic goals, and the impact they can realistically deliver.

Additionally, Ola reiterated a point echoed by Sploro and F6S later during the event- SMEs new to EU funding should consider beginning with smaller, low-barrier opportunities such as pilot actions, mini-grants, or innovation vouchers. These instruments help applicants build experience, credibility, and confidence, making it easier to scale up to larger and more competitive programmes over time.

European Innovation Council (EIC)

The EIC's national contact point for Bulgaria, Tsvetelina Yorgova, emphasised that for the region to benefit from European innovation opportunities fully, it must continue to strengthen cross-border collaboration and strategic partnerships. Many breakthrough projects require complementary expertise, access to diverse markets, and multidisciplinary teams, factors that are significantly enhanced when organisations work together across national boundaries. Building these networks not only improves proposal quality but also increases the long-term sustainability and scalability of funded innovations.

She also highlighted that EIC funding instruments, whether Pathfinder, Transition, or Accelerator, are designed for projects with high levels of ambition and a clearly defined Technology Readiness Level (TRL) progression. Applicants must demonstrate not only the novelty and scientific or technological excellence of their idea but also a credible pathway toward market deployment.

In addition to technical rigour, the EIC places strong emphasis on storytelling, narrative clarity, and the articulation of a compelling vision. Breakthrough innovation projects often push boundaries and target emerging or untested markets. As a result, evaluators look for proposals that can convey both the transformative potential of the idea and the passion, expertise, and ambition of the team behind it. Crafting a memorable, well-structured story helps situate the

innovation within a broader context and communicates why the project matters, not just scientifically or economically, but societally.

InnovationAmp

Gerassim Slavov from InnovationAmp highlighted a recurring challenge among many small and medium-sized enterprises in the South-East Europe region - the absence of structured digital transformation roadmaps. While most companies recognise the need to modernise, they often lack a clear, step-by-step plan outlining which technologies to adopt, how to integrate them, and what outcomes they aim to achieve. This gap frequently leads to fragmented efforts, inefficient investments, or stalled digitalisation initiatives.

To address this, InnovationAmp emphasised the value of test-before-invest services, which allow SMEs to experiment with digital tools, automation solutions, or AI-driven processes before committing to full-scale deployment. These services significantly reduce the risks associated with technology adoption by providing companies with access to expertise, demonstrators, and validation environments. For many SMEs with limited resources, this approach provides the confidence needed to make more informed, strategic decisions.

A central message from Gerassim was the importance of assessment and measurement in any digital transformation journey. As they put it, “you can’t transform what you can’t measure.” Conducting proper assessments, whether of digital maturity, operational efficiency, skills needs, or technology readiness, provides the data and insights necessary to prioritise actions and track progress. Without this foundation, it becomes difficult for companies to identify gaps, allocate resources effectively, or evaluate the true impact of new digital solutions.

F6S

Ina Gencheva from F6S Innovation underscored the scale of opportunities currently available on the platform, noting that F6S hosts more than 50 active projects at any given time. While this abundance is a major advantage for SMEs seeking funding, it also creates a challenge: discoverability. With so many programmes, it is easy for organisations, especially those new to EU funding, to feel overwhelmed or overlook calls that may be an excellent fit.

To navigate this landscape efficiently, Ina emphasised the importance of using targeted filters. SMEs should refine their search based on Technology Readiness Level (TRL), expected funding size, eligibility criteria, and the sector or domain relevant to their innovation. Doing so not only saves time but also significantly increases the likelihood of identifying calls aligned with the company’s development stage and strategic needs.

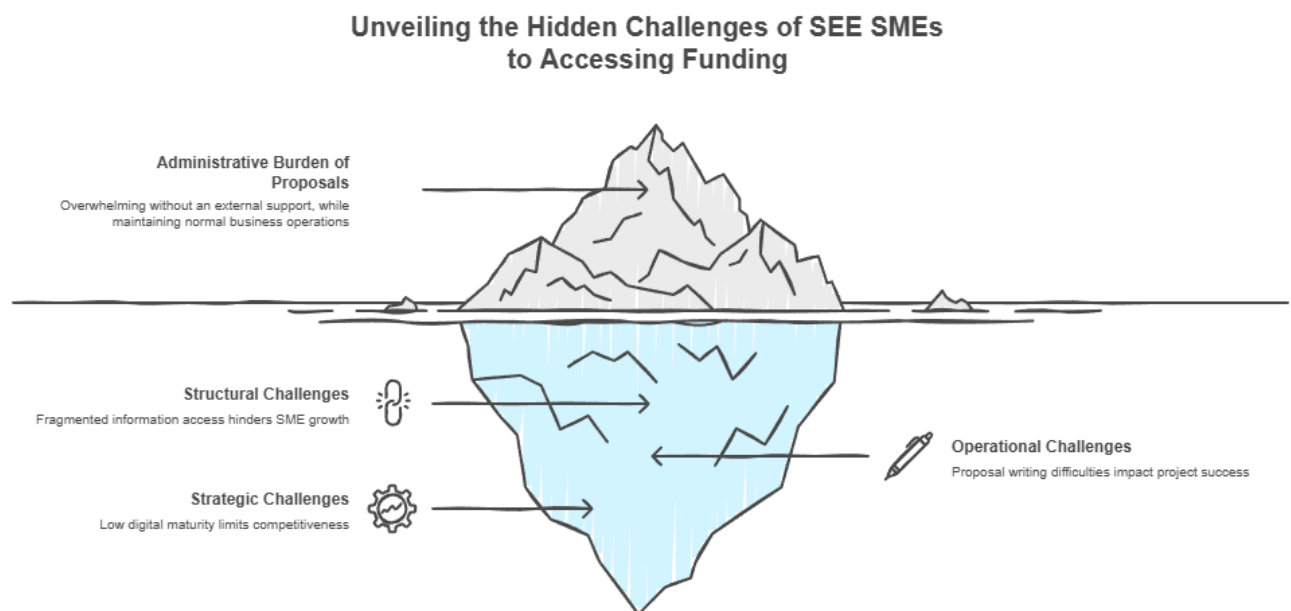
Sploro

Liliya Foteva from Sploro emphasised that SMEs entering the EU funding landscape must begin with a well-defined use case, supported by measurable KPIs and a realistic implementation timeline. Evaluators look for proposals grounded in practical needs and achievable outcomes, rather than overly ambitious visions without a clear plan. A strong use case shows exactly why the innovation matters, who benefits from it, and how success will be measured throughout the project's lifecycle.

Liliya also encouraged SMEs to view cascade funding as a strategic stepping stone toward more competitive and higher-value EU programmes. Pilot grants and micro-funding schemes help organisations gain experience, refine their solutions, build a track record, and strengthen their credentials. These early wins can significantly improve an SME's readiness for larger framework programme instruments, such as Horizon Europe collaborative projects or the EIC Accelerator.

Key Regional Challenges Identified

The discussions, speaker insights, and audience poll data collectively highlighted a set of structural, operational, and strategic challenges that continue to shape the innovation and funding landscape in the SEE region. While the region has made notable progress in recent years, these constraints still limit SMEs' ability to fully benefit from EU programmes and digital transformation opportunities.



In terms of **structural challenges**, funding opportunities, support services, and relevant guidance are often scattered across multiple platforms, making it difficult for SMEs to navigate the landscape efficiently. Joint forums and platforms to display opportunities at the regional level are one way to overcome this gap. Another one is lobbying for better representation of companies in the region in EU consortia and the evaluation process, which, in turn, leads to limited institutional support and networks. National and regional structures, such as innovation agencies, intermediary organisations, and industry associations, vary widely in capacity, which affects SMEs' ability to access guidance and build partnerships.

Another set of challenges is operational, comprising practical barriers that hinder SEE SMEs' participation in EU-funded programmes. A big challenge in this category is definitely the lack of time and staff dedicated to proposal writing, with many companies operating with lean teams, leaving little bandwidth to prepare high-quality proposals.

Furthermore, calls differ in requirements, terminology, and expectations, which adds complexity for first-time applicants. Combined with the difficulty of identifying the right technology providers, end-users, or research partners, this remains one of the most frequently cited obstacles.

Beyond day-to-day barriers, several long-term gaps affect the region's innovation performance. We have grouped this under **strategic challenges**. This could range from skills gaps to a general need for long-term digital transformation strategies. Many SMEs lack structured roadmaps to guide investment decisions or technology adoption, and certain industries still rely on traditional processes, slowing the pace of transformation. Combined with skills gaps, these shortages limit companies' ability to implement advanced solutions and scale successfully.

Besides, several cross-cutting challenges were mentioned repeatedly:

- Low awareness of funding opportunities
- Administrative and proposal-writing barriers
- Limited partnerships and access to consortia
- Market fragmentation across Southeast Europe
- Capacity constraints

Despite these, all speakers agreed that Southeast Europe is improving rapidly, with a growing number of successful applicants and well-performing SMEs.

Strategic Recommendations

The strategic recommendations emerging from the session highlight practical steps that SMEs, ecosystem organisations, and policymakers can take to strengthen innovation capacity in

Southeast Europe. For SMEs, speakers emphasised the importance of using Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs), including European DIHs such as InnovationAmp, to conduct assessments, test technologies, and better understand their digital maturity. Companies were encouraged to build partnerships early, well before calls open, and to start their EU funding journey with cascade funding schemes, which offer a lower barrier to entry and valuable experience. A recurring message was that proposals should remain simple and clear; evaluators respond far better to straightforward, well-structured ideas than to overly complex descriptions.

How to effectively engage with funding opportunities?



Ecosystem organisations were advised to step up their outreach and targeted communication to help SMEs navigate the dense funding landscape. Offering proposal-writing support, matchmaking services, and opportunities for cross-border networking can significantly improve SME competitiveness. Policymakers, meanwhile, were encouraged to reduce administrative burdens in funding schemes, increase promotion of opportunities in widening regions, and ensure sustainable support for DIHs so they can continue providing essential services.

From Sploro, FundingBox and F6S, participants learned that cascade funding opportunities now cover a broad range of technologies:

- AI & machine learning
- IoT and Industry 4.0
- Robotics
- Digital twins
- Smart cities
- Sustainability and energy
- Space data and downstream applications
- Photonics and advanced manufacturing

This means SMEs can enter funding pathways even with **highly specialised** or **niche** innovations.

Speakers emphasised several common patterns among successful applicants, listed in the figure below.



Besides these, digital transformation support emerged as a critical factor for strengthening SME competitiveness in Southeast Europe.

Insights from InnovationAmp showed that many SMEs still lack structured digital roadmaps and need guidance in assessing their current digital maturity. Companies benefit greatly from test-before-invest services, which allow them to explore and validate new technologies before making major financial commitments.

At the same time, significant skills gaps persist in key areas such as AI, data management, cybersecurity, and digital operations, limiting SMEs' ability to implement advanced solutions effectively. In this context, the services provided by European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) were highlighted as essential enablers, helping businesses build their digital capabilities and better prepare for participation in EU funding programmes.

Last, but not least, collaboration was highlighted as the strongest success driver.



Conclusion

SCALE SEE 2025 highlighted that Southeast Europe holds significant untapped innovation potential.

The region clearly possesses the talent, creativity, and entrepreneurial drive needed to compete at the European level, yet it continues to require stronger support structures, greater visibility, and simpler access to funding opportunities.

Across all speaker contributions, Southeast Europe was consistently recognised as a region rich in technical talent, innovative SMEs, a strong problem-solving mindset, and rapidly expanding digital ecosystems. At the same time, the discussions underscored the need for improved visibility within EU innovation networks, more cross-border collaboration, more proactive communication from SMEs, and more consistent engagement with open calls.