STEP: Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform

Summary

EU Clusters Talks
6 December 2023, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

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Green Transition Support: Energy and resource efficiency in EU businesses STEP: Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform organised this EU Clusters Talk on 6 December, 8:30 – 9:45 CET, to present the platform, look at the potential beneficiaries of the planned investments in critical technologies in Europe, and speak with clusters about the activities in these technology fields in Europe.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderation: Chris Burns

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
    Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. STEP: Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform
    Davide Lombardo, Acting Head of the STEP Task Force, DG BUDG, European Commission
3. Panel debate
    Ben Jorgensen, Chief Project Manager, CLEAN – The Danish Environmental Cluster
    Elvis Bajric, Business Developer, High Tech NL Robotics
    Mike Richardson, Senior Project Manager, OpTecBB
    Stamatiki Kritas, Business Development Manager, Hellenic Bio Cluster
4. Funding opportunities
    Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

*   The Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform aims at boosting investments in critical technologies – deep and digital, clean, and bio – in Europe.
*   Among the proposed initiatives is the "Sovereignty Seal", allows projects that don't receive funding in one programme due to budget limitations to have privileged access to other funding opportunities.
*   There need to be clear and transparent criteria for the "Sovereignty Seal". It also needs to be widely recognised to have value.
*   Capacity building, entrepreneurial education, scaling up projects and securing funding are the most important challenges for boosting innovation.

Strengthening the European economy through collaboration

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Chris Burns, the following news items were presented:

1. United Kingdom joins Horizon Europe programme.
2. The Green Transition Support offers the new Industrial Symbiosis Toolkit.
3. Invitation to apply for the Cluster Booster Academy.
4. Open call to host the next "Clusters meet Regions" events in 2024/2025.
5. Share feedback and topic suggestions for the EU Clusters Talks via the open survey.

2. STEP: Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform

Davide Lombardo, Acting Head of the STEP Task Force, DG BUDG, European Commission

Davide Lombardo presented the proposal for the **Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP)**. STEP is an EU response to safeguard competitiveness, international competition, and use EU budget as a catalyst for innovation. It addresses strategic relevance by focusing on technologies where the EU is overly dependent on third countries, seeking to enhance self-reliance. The three key sectors are **deep and digital technologies, clean technologies, and bio technologies**.

Regarding the operational structure, Davide Lombardo explained that STEP works through existing programmes like HORIZON, avoiding the creation of new funds. Increasing **synergies** between EU programmes should reduce administrative burdens. The initiative will realign these programmes with new specific objectives. Certain programmes, such as Invest EU, the Innovation Fund, the European Innovation Council, and the European Defence Fund, will receive reinforcement.

The STEP initiative will introduce a new **one-stop-shop**, a **"Sovereignty Portal"** consolidating information on funding opportunities both from the EU and Member States, and a **"Sovereignty Seal"**. The "Sovereignty Seal" allows projects that don't receive funding in one programme due to budget limitations to have privileged access to other funding opportunities. Projects that are funded can also receive the seal, allowing for broader coverage of their costs. Furthermore, financial incentives are offered for Member States that allocate more funding to critical projects, including higher co-financing rates from the EU budget.

He highlighted that projects aiming to get the seal must be innovative, with potential for significant economic impact and the ability to reduce EU dependencies on third countries. At the same time, STEP covers a wide range of technologies, intentionally remaining vague to allow flexibility and inclusivity.

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3. Panel debate

The speakers discussed challenges and opportunities in fostering innovation and collaboration, scaling up projects, securing funding, and the impact of new initiatives like the "Sovereignty Seal".

The speakers shared details on their work in the areas related to the **critical technologies** which should be fostered by the STEP initiative. The CLEAN cluster connects SMEs, companies, research institutions, and the public sector for projects related to water, climate adaptation, and resource materials. They are working with a heat transfer technology company to find alternatives to harmful chemicals. The Hellenic Bio Cluster is the only biotech and life sciences cluster in Greece. They are working on international collaboration within and outside Europe to foster innovation and collaboration. High Tech NL focus on sectors like semiconductors, life sciences, energy, and robotics. A notable project involved developing robots for healthcare, aiming to assist rather than replace human workers. They are also involved in training people to work effectively with robots. OpTecBB in Berlin-Brandenburg develop projects into photonics, optics, microsystem technology, and quantum technologies. Mike Richardson highlighted the region's capacity for high-scale production of photonic devices.

All speakers agreed on the importance of **fostering innovation and collaboration across European borders, the need for cross-border knowledge exchange, capacity building, and entrepreneurial education**. In critical technologies, Europe needs to prepare its graduate students for challenges in the workplace. Elvis Bajric gave the example that in healthcare, training initiatives focus on effectively integrating advanced technologies like robotics, emphasizing their role in augmenting rather than replacing human workers.

One of the major challenges of the clusters and companies is **scaling up projects and securing funding**. Mike Richardson gave the examples in biotech and photonics, where it is particularly difficult for high Technology Readiness Level (TRL) projects to scale up to the market. He also noticed a contrasting ease of obtaining regional or national funding compared to EU funding.

A significant portion of the conversation cantered around the proposed **"Sovereignty Seal" initiative**, designed to streamline access to funding for strategic projects. All panellists viewed the seal as positive, as it could give good project proposals a **competitive edge** in securing funding. European calls are highly competitive, which is why a recognition of strategically important and excellent proposals can help in the process. They also made the point that it can be potentially beneficial in making projects more attractive to investors. However, they noted that the value of the seal and its wide **recognition** need to be created over time, and that there need to be clear and **transparent criteria** to be awarded with the seal. Additionally, duplications with existing seals, like the "Seal of Excellence" need to be avoided.

Joining together **information on national and regional funding opportunities in one portal**, additionally to the European calls related to the above-mentioned critical technologies, was seen positively, as it can facilitate the work of clusters in providing this information to their members and looking for fitting calls.

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4. Funding opportunities

Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Closing the EU Clusters Talk, Nina Hoppmann shared the following examples of funding opportunities:

1. Innovation Fund 2023 Net Zero Technologies – General decarbonisation – Small-Scale Project; deadline 9 April 2024.
2. Bio-intelligent manufacturing industries (Made in Europe Partnership); deadlines 7 February 2024; 24 September 2024.
3. Industrial leadership in AI, Data and Robotics boosting competitiveness and the green transition; deadline 19 March 2024.
4. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on European Cluster Collaboration Platform

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