



EUROPEAN CLUSTER
COLLABORATION PLATFORM

Launch. Grow. Lead: The EU's Strategy for Startups and Scaleups

Summary



EU Clusters Talks
25 June 2025, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union





Launch. Grow. Lead: The EU's Strategy for Startups and Scaleups

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organises the EU Clusters Talk "**Launch. Grow. Lead: The EU's Strategy for Startups and Scaleups**" on 25 June, 8:30 – 9:45 CET to present the initiative and planned measures, discuss critical challenges for startups and scaleups, and learn about cluster support for innovation.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderator: Jennifer Baker

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Startup and Scaleup Strategy
Omar Ennaji, Legal and Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission
3. Panel debate
Catalina Luca, Management Consultant, IMAGO-MOL
Gisela Sanchez, Head of European Affairs, Finance Innovation
Jonie Oostveen, Programme Manager, AgriFood Capital
José Vilar González, Head of Service, IVACE+I, Enterprise Europe Network
Stamatiki Kritas, Cluster Manager, HBIO; Managing Director, CEBR
4. Funding opportunities
Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

- Clusters are recognised as strategic enablers for connecting startups with industry, research, and public actors across Europe
- The Startup and Scaleup Strategy addresses five core barriers: regulation, finance, market access, talent, and infrastructure.
- Sector-specific challenges must be considered—one-size-fits-all solutions risk excluding high-potential startups in fields like medtech and biotech.
- Clusters are already bridging policy and practice by supporting startups through tailored mentoring, validation infrastructure, and cross-sector collaboration.
- A pan-European mentoring network is needed to help startups scale beyond national markets, especially in fragmented regulatory environments.
- Public–private investment models are essential—early-stage public support must be complemented by private capital at scaleup stages.
- Interregional and cross-border cluster collaboration strengthens startup ecosystems and fosters international growth.
- To succeed, the EU strategy must be implemented locally—clusters require long-term funding and targeted capacity building to act effectively.



- Clusters play a critical role in de-risking innovation by providing early validation, regulatory guidance, and access to networks.
- Policy-makers must ensure that cluster initiatives are integrated into broader EU innovation frameworks to maximise their impact.

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Jennifer Baker, the following news items were presented:

1. Discover the [State of the Digital Decade 2025 report](#).
2. [Apply](#) for the AI Scientific Panel; deadline 14 September.
3. Register for the [Matchmaking in Dubai](#), UAE, 1–3 October 2025.
4. Register for the [Matchmaking in New Delhi and Greater Noida](#), India, 29 - 31 October 2025.
5. Register for the [Matchmaking in Taipei](#), Taiwan, 21–23 October 2025.
6. Register for the [Matchmaking in Bac Ninh](#), Vietnam, 4–6 November 2025.

2. Startup and Scaleup Strategy

Omar Ennaji, Legal and Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission

Omar Ennaji identified **five structural challenges** that informed the development of the strategy. First, **regulatory fragmentation and administrative burdens** continue to hamper startups, especially in areas such as taxation, labour law, and sector-specific approvals. Second, **access to infrastructure** remains a critical barrier, particularly in terms of R&D facilities and prototyping environments. Third, Europe faces a **skills shortage**, both in developing domestic talent and attracting skilled professionals from outside the EU. Fourth, **startups struggle with access to markets**, exemplified by low participation in public procurement and weak commercialisation of research. Lastly, **access to finance** remains problematic due to an underdeveloped venture capital market and inconsistent national support mechanisms.

Based on these findings, the [strategy](#) is structured around **five pillars**: innovation-friendly regulation, improved access to finance, faster market uptake, support for talent, and better access to infrastructure and networks. Each pillar includes targeted actions to address its corresponding challenge. Among the legislative initiatives, Omar Ennaji highlighted the upcoming 28th Regime—intended to harmonise company law across the EU—and the Innovation Act, which will introduce supportive rules for regulatory sandboxes.

In terms of finance, the [Scale-Up Europe Fund](#) is being developed to channel public and private investment into high-potential scale-ups, with sector-specific targeting. Additionally, the Commission aims to promote mechanisms such as IP valuation and a European corporate network to enhance investment-readiness.



To support market access, the **Lab-to-Unicorn initiative** will establish interconnected innovation hubs across the EU. The Commission is also revisiting licensing frameworks and state aid rules, while preparing a revision of public procurement directives to facilitate innovation-friendly processes.

On talent, the **Blue Carpet Initiative** will streamline visa and labour mobility systems, complementing the Blue Card scheme and a forthcoming Fair Labour Mobility Package. These measures aim to attract and retain global talent critical for startup ecosystems. The strategy also addresses the **need to better link startups with research centres**. Upcoming actions will strengthen the connectivity between innovation infrastructures and emerging companies. To monitor progress, the Commission will develop dedicated surveys and scoreboards to track ecosystem development and refine definitions of startups and scaleups.

In the end, Omar Ennaji emphasised that the **success of the Startup and Scaleup Strategy** will depend on swift and coordinated implementation by both EU institutions and Member States. The package is designed not only to remove longstanding barriers faced by innovative businesses but also to create a cohesive, attractive, and scalable environment for entrepreneurship across Europe. With **most actions set to be deployed by 2026**, the Commission's immediate focus is on operationalising the strategy, engaging stakeholders, and ensuring that Europe becomes a globally competitive home for startups and scaleups, capable of innovating, growing, and leading from within the Single Market.

3. Panel debate

The debate opened with a shared recognition of the **systemic challenges** startups and scaleups face in Europe, including fragmented regulatory frameworks, burdensome bureaucracy, and limited access to finance and market opportunities.

Catalina Luca emphasised that **regulatory barriers** affect sectors differently, citing the medtech field as especially constrained by long approval processes. In the same vein, Gisela Sanchez noted that even in mature markets like France, fintech companies struggle to attract qualified talent, while Jonie Oostveen highlighted the lack of guidance for first-time founders and the absence of interregional synergies in the EU, which undermines scale-up potential.

José Vilar González criticised the **strategy's strong focus on deep tech**, arguing that many startups with scalable business models fall outside this scope but still demonstrate significant growth potential. He called for greater inclusivity and better integration between clusters and other European support networks, citing the role of the Enterprise Europe Network. Stamatiki Kritas addressed the **disconnect between strategic and regional levels**, underlining the fact that clusters already play a crucial role in linking startups with major industry players, citing successful pharmaceutical collaborations in Greece as examples.

A core point of agreement among panellists was that **clusters are key ecosystem builders**, uniquely positioned to connect startups with research organisations, corporates, and public stakeholders. Most agreed that clusters are already playing this role effectively, although their capacity is often limited by funding constraints and variable institutional support. Stamatiki and Catalina highlighted the need for tailored mentoring, especially in highly regulated sectors like biotech and medtech. Johnny Oostveen advocated for EU-wide mentoring pools and cross-border collaboration mechanisms to help startups scale beyond national markets.



Speakers also discussed concrete **initiatives led by clusters to support startup growth**. Gisela Sanchez presented founder-to-founder support programmes and EU-funded projects like Women TechEU. Catalina Luca described her cluster’s involvement in European collaborative projects such as “Innovating You”, aimed at building inclusive ecosystems for startups. José Vilar shared insights into regional scale-up programmes supported by European networks, while Stamatiki detailed actions led by HBIO and the CEBR network, including business missions and interregional cooperation initiatives.

Funding emerged as a major topic of discussion. The lack of early-stage venture capital and limited access to larger investment rounds—particularly when compared to the US—were highlighted. During the Q&A, a key question centred on funding: **whether scaleups should be supported through hybrid public–private funds**. Johnny Oostveen suggested that public funding is essential at early stages, while private investment should be mobilised at the scaleup phase, particularly for capital-intensive sectors. Stamatiki offered examples from Greece where traditional pharma companies had successfully co-invested in startups with cluster support, showcasing the benefits of public–private collaboration. Other questions touched on implementation, mentorship, and the role of clusters in de-risking early-stage ventures.

The discussion concluded with a **strong call for increased and stable long-term funding for clusters**, not only to support startups but also to invest in their own capacity building. Panellists emphasised the need for targeted programmes to strengthen cluster teams, particularly in project management, policy alignment, and cross-sector collaboration. Ultimately, they underscored that for the Startup and Scaleup Strategy to succeed, clusters must be empowered to act as true enablers, connecting the dots between EU-level policy and grassroots entrepreneurial ecosystems.

4. Funding opportunities

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

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

1. [Women TechEU initiative](#); deadline 2 September 2025.
2. [Expanding Investment Ecosystems](#); deadline 20 January 2026.
3. [Scaling up deep tech ecosystems](#); deadline 20 January 2026.