



S3 Conference 2025

Final Report

September 2025

S3 CoP Secretariat

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Participant and viewer statistics</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Social Media Engagement.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Feedback on the post-event Satisfaction survey</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Event Minutes</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Appendix A – Agenda.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Appendix B – Post-event satisfaction survey</i>	<i>22</i>

Introduction

The S3 Conference 2025, held on 18 June in Brussels, brought together **over 300 leading practitioners, policymakers, experts, and stakeholders** from across Europe and beyond for the fourth flagship event of the Smart Specialisation Community of Practice. Organised by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), with support from the S3CoP Secretariat, the conference provided a vibrant space to explore the latest developments on Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) and their role in driving economic transformation and advancing key EU policy priorities.

Set in the welcoming surroundings of Maison du Bois, the event featured dynamic in-person exchanges complemented by a livestream, which extended the conversation to an online audience of over 250 participants across Europe and internationally. Together, participants shaped discussions on the evolution of S3 policy and its practical impact on fostering innovation and sustainable growth in Europe's regions.

The S3 Conference 2024 was presented around four pillars:

- **Reflections on relevant developments on the policy concept** and progress on S3 implementation – providing reflections on relevant developments related to smart specialisation, including links to EU strategic policy initiatives
- **S3 Community of Practice: Overview of three years of activities offered** key results and lessons learnt, and the main takeaways to guide future efforts, especially with regard to targeted support for regions
- **S3 and interregional collaboration opportunities** through dedicated instruments and support facilities. Additionally, experiences from S3 Thematic Platforms as well as Regional Innovation Valleys through a dedicated networking slot and RIV matchmaking session.
- **Outlook related to policy developments** and the S3 Community of Practice through the contribution of DG REGIO policy officials.

While the S3 Conference was a one-day event, there was a series of activities the day before (17 of June) with the Steering Committee Meeting of the S3 Thematic Platforms and the day after (19 June), through the Working Group Meetings to exchange reflections, experiences and good practices on innovation diffusion, industrial transition, and interregional cooperation.

Box 1. The objectives of the S3 Conference 2025

- **Foster collaboration and peer learning among stakeholders**, with a special focus on regional policymakers and innovation actors.
- **Explore the evolving role of Smart Specialisation (S3)** in the context of the future Cohesion Policy and broader EU strategic priorities.
- **Showcase innovative practices and solutions**, while providing space to address common challenges and insights from the S3 community.
- **Raise awareness on the tools and opportunities offered by the Smart Specialisation Community of Practice**, particularly to support interregional collaboration and joint innovation efforts.

Event Minutes

The following presents the notes that were taken as a recap of the S3 Conference 2025, by session.

Welcome and introduction

The session was moderated by Laura Galante (S3CoP Secretariat). The following presentations were given:

Welcome and introductions with a video message by Vice President Raffaele Fitto

- **Raffaele Fitto**, European Commission Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, underlined that the conference comes at a crucial time, marked by geopolitical instability, disruptions in supply chains, high energy costs and strong global competition, which threaten Europe's industrial competitiveness. He pointed out that the European Commission has responded with a strategic roadmap to strengthen industrial capacity, reduce dependencies and protect the European model. He emphasised that the main challenge today is to close the innovation gap, whereby regional policy and smart specialisation are key to empowering all regions, helping them to harness their local knowledge, strengthen their industrial ecosystems and boost innovation. He reaffirmed the value of cohesion policy in aligning R&D investments with regional capacities, stressing that this approach is more relevant today than ever.
- **Nicola de Michelis**, European Commission Director Smart and Sustainable Growth and Programme Implementation opened by underlining the current political and geopolitical context which put place-based policies in a fragile position due to their complexity and time required to design and implement them. At the same time, he emphasised that future cohesion policy will be shaped by measurable outcomes, with stronger linkages to EU priorities, demonstrating transformation of regional economies. In this context, he encouraged the community to begin thinking about the reforms needed to enhance regional innovation ecosystems and framework conditions to ensure a faster and smoother implementation of strategies. He also emphasised the need to better communicate S3 outcomes.

Laura Galante Coordinator of the S3CoP Secretariat, began by highlighting the collective achievements of the Smart Specialisation community, emphasising the role of the S3 CoP as a central knowledge and coordination platform. She noted its importance in supporting peer learning and policy development through working groups and a high-level expert group, which have addressed strategic issues such as innovation diffusion, industrial transition and interregional collaboration, leading to joint policy papers and upcoming synthesis webinars. She underlined the strong and growing engagement across regions, noting the more than 250 participants in thematic seminars, the three working groups holding regular meetings and the contribution of 12 experts to the drafting of five key policy documents. She also underlined the value of addressing real regional needs through the assignment of experts, support to thematic platforms and the creation of 43 interregional partnerships, 10 of which have been formed through the call for Expression of Interest for new partnerships under the S3 CoP Secretariat. She highlighted the role of the S3 online Observatory, which now covers nearly 190 strategies, and noted the importance of networking events, which have successfully brought together hundreds of stakeholders in several editions of the S3 Conferences.

S3 Policy from concept to Implementation

- **Dominique Foray**, Professor at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), reflected on the evolution of smart specialisation over more than a decade, highlighting the main developments and institutional learnings. He underlined how regions have contributed to reshaping the concept, moving beyond early top-down approaches, adopting more dynamic blends of vertical and horizontal priorities, and repositioning the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) to focus on action planning rather than strategy definition. By prioritising regional strengths, regions have triggered the development of innovation programmes in unexpected areas, demonstrating the inclusive potential of S3 to go beyond high-tech areas and foster broader economic transformation. Foray then highlighted that smart specialisation must also integrate natural capital into the design of strategies, promote investment in ecosystems and develop new financial tools and governance mechanisms. S3 can help regions to translate EU-wide priorities, such as competitiveness, security and ecological transition, into specific regional transformation pathways.

Taking stock of S3 implementation (2021-2027)

- **Jan-Philipp Kramer**, Head of EU-Services at Prognos AG, presented the results of a study commissioned by the EU assessing smart specialisation as a strategic framework for innovation. He stressed that S3 has become the focus of innovation policy in all EU regions, not only to meet funding requirements, but as a basic strategic tool. The survey data shows that more than 60% of regional authorities consider S3 as their main R&I strategy, with increasing maturity in the way priorities are linked to EU-wide objectives such as the green and digital transitions. According to the study, regions have made considerable progress in aligning strategies with funding instruments and implementation mechanisms (e.g. selection criteria or specific calls). Interregional collaboration is also increasingly used, though capacity and funding barriers remain. Reform agendas are increasingly embedded in S3 strategies in areas such as business environment, governance and education, although this varies by region. On monitoring and evaluation, progress was noted but key gaps persist, especially around setting clear indicators and tracing investments or inputs to impacts. Despite variability in approaches, many regions are using monitoring and evaluation findings to adapt their strategies. He concluded that S3 is now firmly established, but building operational excellence and capacity will be essential to fully realise its potential.

During the Q&A session, the following questions were asked by the audience:

- Question: **Referring to Prognos's study, what is the degree of coverage of the survey and to what extent can the results be considered representative of the S3 community?**
 - Answer: The study had 238 responses covering 160 strategies, and in total 171 strategies were analysed. While response rates vary between questions, the overall patterns remained consistent. To reinforce the validity of the findings, a combined methodological approach was applied, triangulating surveys, interviews, case studies and documentary analysis. This made it possible to cross-check the strategic ambition expressed in the strategies with their actual implementation.
- Question: **How can we improve the involvement of civil society to strengthen the legitimacy, trust and transformative impact of these strategies? Is it possible to do more to integrate these actors and bring policies closer to citizens?**
 - Answer: With the evolution of S3 towards social and sustainability challenges, civil society has become increasingly relevant. Traditional mechanisms such as the EDP may not be sufficient to effectively

incorporate these more dispersed actors, so it is necessary to rethink their design. While civil society is present in the governance of S3 strategies, there is room to strengthen its involvement, especially if truly transformative policies are to be pursued. A key challenge is to organise participatory processes more effectively, starting by clarifying what we mean by ‘civil society’ and what types of actors can play a relevant role. A major challenge for the coming period will be to create structured and effective mechanisms to meaningfully integrate civil society in the planning and implementation of S3 strategies.

- **Question: As S3 expands to include issues like natural resources and emissions, does this reflect a broader need for innovation approaches that go beyond technological innovation and toward transition-driven innovation? Should natural capital become a central element of smart specialisation strategies?**
 - Answer: Ecological transition remains a defining challenge of our time. Ignoring it could result in poorly adapted, non-resilient innovation or industrial policies. In early S3 phases, natural assets like landscapes were considered external, merely context for tourism development. Now, natural capital must be seen as an internal part of the strategy and actively managed like other regional assets. This requires new forms of governance, including trade-offs, for example, between building tourism infrastructure or preserving protected areas, and new financial instruments to support nature-based development. Regions need new tools and frameworks that bring nature into the core of strategic planning.
- **Question: Given the EU’s need for a productivity leap to remain globally competitive, how much emphasis and funding should go toward research, and how much toward innovation?**
 - Answer: Research is foundational to innovation, while at the same time the focus of S3 is on economic development and transformation. S3 is about creating the structural conditions for regional transformation, and that includes—but is not limited to—investing in research. Research and development remain integral to the innovation agenda, and it is important that strategies are tailored to each region’s unique assets and universities. A strong alignment between science and industry is essential and it is the role of regional policy to supporting in strengthening these connections, ensuring a link between local research and industry. It is also relevant to consider ways to stimulate private sector R&D, depending on the specific capacities of each region.

S3 Community of Practice: Overview of three years of activities

The session was moderated by Susana Elena Pérez and the following presentations were given:

Three years of S3 Community of Practice - Overview of main activities, challenges, and achievements

- **Fabrizio Guzzo** introduced the S3 as a unique policy experiment for its widespread adoption, capacity building efforts, institutional change and learning process. He described the S3CoP as both a learning platform and a support hub aimed at strengthening smart specialisation in practice across Europe. Core activities included expert groups, targeted assignments, S3 Thematic Platforms, and Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships, producing outputs such as webinars, policy briefs, and testimonials. Among key S3 achievements, he noted improved governance of the regional innovation policy systems, enhanced policy process through the co-design, implementation of roadmaps and action plans for priority areas and the design of policy instruments better aligned with stakeholder needs. He also highlighted that S3 has helped generate a wide range of local collective competition goods, including shared R&D infrastructures, specialised knowledge networks, the production and circulation of information on specific economic activities, markets and technologies, etc.. However, persistent challenges remain, including overall policy capacity—especially in less developed regions— as well as the need to enhance the effectiveness of the EDP in several regions to better translate strategic priorities into actionable roadmaps. In addition, although governance has seen notable improvements, it

continues to be a critical challenge in many territories. Finally, he emphasised the need for continued capacity building and for strategies to adopt a more outward-looking approach.

Supporting regions on the ground – An insight into Targeted Assignments

- **Petra Szávics**, Targeted Assignment Expert, presented the Centru region's key smart specialisation priorities alongside major challenges, including a fragmented innovation ecosystem, stakeholder engagement fatigue, weak governance structures, and limited capacity for research and innovation. A central issue was the lack of a continuous and functional EDP, disconnected from broader networks and hindered by a lack of informal cooperation structures. The assignment recommended the creation of Project Development Labs (PDLs) to support stakeholder engagement and project ideation, along with revising priority areas, developing roadmaps, and enhancing collaboration with national and EU stakeholders. Lessons learnt underlined the value of PDLs for capacity-building, the importance of informal institutions, and the need to make the EDP more inclusive, participatory, and sustained.
- **Sorin Cosmulescu**, Head of Regional Planning at Regional Development Agency (RDA) South-West Oltenia, presented South-West Oltenia, a less developed region with one of the country's lowest innovation indices. Key S3 priority areas include transport systems, industrial engineering, digitalisation, health, agri-food, and creative industries. The region requested targeted support due to low SME engagement in the EDP, weak cooperation among innovation actors, and limited involvement of universities. The expert recommendations focused on project applicant support, strengthening RDA's role in coordinating a continuous EDP, expanding stakeholder participation, addressing the talent and skills gaps via a dedicated S3 body, and promoting interregional collaboration through digital tools and events. The main takeaway was the need for an agile and inclusive EDP that considers the wider ecosystem perspective in order to overcome structural challenges.
- **Sophie Patricio**, Head of the Promotion, Innovation and Regional Competitiveness Division in Centro Region, Portugal, presented the Centro region in Portugal, highlighting persistent innovation gaps across different typologies of territories in the region, demographic decline, and the need to strengthen innovation dynamics and entrepreneurial discovery. The targeted assignment focused on both strategic and operational levels—identifying regional innovation challenges and designing specific calls and instruments for low-density areas. A key shift involved zooming in from NUTS2 to NUTS3 to better understand local constraints. This led to a new regional call enabling all intermunicipal communities to submit projects. Lessons emphasised shared responsibility, proximity-based approaches, and the importance of building capacity before deploying financial support—starting with clearly defined challenges and problem analysis.

Experts were invited to give the following reflections:

- **Antonio Ramos**, who provided support to the Centro region (PT), emphasised the need to move beyond formal Brussels-level participation toward more meaningful regional engagement. He called for stronger territorial ownership through co-created agendas and roadmaps, especially in low-density areas. Empowering regions with governance capacity and rethinking S3 strategies to reflect local realities were key recommendations. On strengthening multilevel governance, Antonio Ramos suggested a bottom-up approach built on small, co-designed steps—problem definition, needs assessment, and knowledge mobilisation. Sophie Patricio offered a contrasting view, arguing that rigid steps could conflict with the flexibility required for effective territorial policy.

- **Petra Szávics** reflected on the two targeted assignments she led. Centru followed a precise, request-driven approach focused on Project Development Labs and revising priority areas, while South West Oltenia adopted a more flexible, exploratory method linked to funding cycles. Petra Szávics noted that in both cases, not all regional challenges were fully addressed in the initial requests, and more focus is needed on aligning EDP with policy and programme cycles, as well as improving stakeholder involvement in monitoring and evaluation.
- **Sorin Cosmulescu** highlighted the value of interregional collaboration and inclusive stakeholder engagement—especially during study visits—as ways to build trust and shared responsibility in regional innovation ecosystems.

Q&A

- Question: **What practical steps can strengthen multilevel governance and align actors around shared priorities?**
 - Answer: It is important to consider co-creating solutions with regional actors, building capacity, and identifying the right knowledge to address specific needs. This process should be rooted in small, incremental steps and active field engagement. At the same time, each region requires flexibility to adapt processes to its unique context.
- Question: **What lessons can be drawn from the different approaches taken in the Centru and SW Oltenia targeted assignments?**
 - Answer: While both regions focused on improving the EDP, their approaches differed. One followed a structured, request-driven method focused on project development labs and refining smart specialisation priorities. The other explored a broader set of tools and practices, looking to improve implementation and coordination. These variations reflected differences in institutional culture, policy maturity, and specific regional needs. A common finding was the need to better connect EDP with the full policy cycle, particularly in less developed regions.
- Question: **What should regions do differently to enhance the effectiveness of smart specialisation?**
 - Answer: Regions are encouraged to move beyond formal compliance and build stronger ownership of their strategies. This includes empowering territorial governance, embedding EDP into programme design and evaluation, and adopting a participatory, bottom-up approach. Strategic planning should respond to local realities, especially in areas facing limited access to networks or expertise.
- Question: **How can an inclusive EDP be maintained while keeping stakeholder engagement focused and manageable?**
 - Answer: Inclusivity and focused engagement can coexist. Regions can involve a broader range of stakeholders—such as students, civil society, and local authorities—through smaller, well-targeted events. This helps maintain manageable group sizes while ensuring diverse perspectives are included in the process.
- Question: **How can innovation projects be made stronger, and how should evaluation be approached across the EU?**
 - Answer: A call was made for building new communities of stakeholders who can support and communicate innovation effectively. This includes rethinking monitoring and evaluation practices, potentially through shared EU-wide criteria such as development impact, growth potential, and resilience. However, evaluation frameworks should ideally remain flexible and rooted in a clear understanding of each region's goals and capacities, whereby the focus should be on defining realistic, meaningful outcomes tailored to each regional innovation system.

- Question: **What are practical ways to strengthen stakeholder commitment and regional collaboration?**
 - Answer: Examples included creating shared experiences through study visits and involving stakeholders in each stage of the process, from design to decision-making. Building trust, ensuring ownership, and sharing authority were seen as essential to fostering long-term engagement and strengthening collaboration across regions.

S3 and Interregional collaboration: S3 Thematic Platforms, I3 Support Facility and I3 Calls

The session was moderated by Daniela Kretz and the following presentations were given:

Supporting interregional collaboration as a key objective of S3 - Introduction

- **Tomislav Pinter**, European Commission, DG REGIO, introduced the session by underlining that interregional collaboration is a key enabler of smart specialisation. There have been roughly 70 projects funded with 200 regions involved so far with the I3 instrument. I3 is more than a funding tool, as it is a way to build shared value chains. Structures such as the S3 Thematic Platforms play a key role as they offer a space for regions to build long lasting partnerships, to exchange knowledge, to support implementation, and to help ensure that collaboration does not stop when the project ends. To support this further, this is where the I3 support facility is needed; this facility was launched with clear objectives to help more regions take part in I3 instrument, with a focus on less developed regions that face more barriers, by offering hands-on advice, peer learning and targeted guidance.

S3 Thematic Platforms - supporting the creation of strategic Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs)

- **Els Van De Velde**, S3 CoP Secretariat, provided an overview on the past three years of the S3 CoP secretariat's activities with the S3 Thematic Platforms, whereby there are currently 43 Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs) operating under 4 Thematic Platforms and involving 182 EU 27 NUTS2 regions. There are eight different services supporting partnerships through the S3 CoP Secretariat and a total of 108 services have been delivered, with the partnerships themselves identifying which services they wanted to receive based on their needs, interests, goals, and targets. The S3 CoP Secretariat also offers other opportunities such as the Call for expression of interest for new partnerships which has received 15 submissions and new 10 partnerships have been awarded. Guidance is related to the call for expression of interest for new partnerships as well as the Guidance on lessons learnt, both of which are available on the website. With regards to the monitoring and communication, 98 monitoring reports have been collected capturing KPIs for the partnerships' activities and updates on their activities. The partnerships' webpages are also regularly updated, and 32 testimonials have been collected and posted online, showing qualitative evidence of best practices. The benefits of interregional collaboration through the partnerships allow for peer learning and exchange of best practices, to strengthen regional ecosystems and execute regional policies, to link to S3 strategies and at the same time connect competences across regions, while providing access to market and technological intelligence along the value chain and better access to EU funding and support mechanisms.

Best practices in orchestrating continuous investments in regional innovation ecosystems

- **Wim de Kinderen**, Brainport Development, presented experiences related to engaging in a TSSP, as a part of a trusted community and well-connected community. He presented the example of

the 3D printing partnership, operating under the umbrella of the Vanguard Initiative, since 2013 with 23 member regions, and more than 400 organisations. The pilot works as a structured internationalisation collaboration channel and has developed a menu of services to connect demand and supply through an online matchmaking platform, which resulted in multiple demo cases that are promoting excellence in project-basis. The I3 projects they are running today are the core projects of the partnership. In addition, he highlighted the experiences with the interregional funding instrument VInnovate, (created by the Vanguard Initiative) which was able to fund 12 projects building on interregional collaboration (39 organisations involved, EUR 6.1 million in project costs, EUR 4 million in grants). Furthermore, he highlighted that regions could contribute to providing a funding basis to clusters/partnerships so that they can engage in international and interregional collaboration, while emphasising that S3 strategies should be built on hard data and not just ambition, i.e. based on knowledge position, patents and scientific publications in the region.

Opportunities and key takeaways on current and future I3 calls

- **Valentina Pinna**, European Commission, EISMEA, outlined the current structure of the I3 instruments
 - strand 1 (to support interregional innovation projects in shared smart specialisation areas),
 - strand 2a (development of value chains in less developed regions),
 - strand 2b (capacity building strand for less developed regions) and also part of the budget is dedicated to technical assistance in experimentation.

In I3 they are looking for innovation investments with an interregional dimension, with smart specialisation as coordination principle in interregional collaboration, and where each region can be placed in different positions of the value chain. Funding ranges up to EUR 10 million per project, with a project duration of 18-36 months maximum, with a funding rate that is 100% for cascading calls, 70% all other categories. There will be Info days on next deadlines for the strands, and deadlines for when the calls close in November, including the launch of the last capacity building 2b call in October 2025.

She also gave an overview concerning the key takeaways on the present calls and proposals received. Whereby the number of investments proposals seems to be stable, there is a significant increase of proposals under CAP 2b. Consequently, the success rate is decreasing. However, this is also due to the quality of proposals that is increasing. In terms of investments, the relationship with the value chains, and how the different territories are contributing to the different segments of those value chains are points of consideration for the improvement of future applications.

Reinforcing the objectives of the I3 Instrument through the I3 Support Facility

- **Santiago Donat**, I3 Support Facility, highlighted that the main aim of the I3 Support Facility is to target less-developed regions which remain underrepresented in the I3 Instrument. As such, it targets SMEs, clusters, R&I institutions, and public authorities, providing: the I3 Observatory, a partner search platform, discussion groups, capacity building groups, events (virtual/in-person) and publications and newsletters. He noted the importance of using S3 as a coordination principle and emphasised the value of complementarities across regions, beyond geographical proximity.

Q&A

- Question: **There may be very interesting technological opportunities for collaboration in more distant regions, however a tendency remains to collaborate is with neighbouring countries. How do you see this in the interregional collaboration context?**
 - Answer: The best way to work with complementarities in the long term is to be part of a TSSP. To make progress from an I3 perspective is about using S3 as a coordination principle for collaboration, where regions can demonstrate complementarities in their approach.
- Question: **The share of I3 projects connected to TSSPs is lower than expected, what is the plan to reinforce the connection?**
 - Answer: From project implementation, there is a lot of knowledge that is developed in the framework of I3 projects, and when that knowledge is developed under I3 projects the whole value chain and partnerships benefit from it. I3 projects connected to a TSSP generally have a better quality and outlook, as the implementation does not take place in isolation. When projects are implemented isolated to networks and I3 partnerships you have perception that fragmentation is still there. The S3 Thematic Platforms have an important role and there are already examples of I3 consortia wanting to take part in existing partnerships or form new ones.

S3 Networking: Learn about S3 Thematic Platforms, best practices and experiences

- The **S3 networking session** was organised as a **networking coffee break** to facilitate and encourage interactions between TSSPs, EU policymakers, the S3 CoP Secretariat, the I3 Support facility and all relevant S3 stakeholders taking part in the S3 Conference. Each partnership was represented by one or more members, with tables grouping 2 to 4 TSSPs by S3 Thematic Platform. Additional tables were hosted by the European Commission DG REGIO, EISMEA and DG RTD, as well as, the S3 CoP Secretariat, and the I3 Support Facility. Each table displayed signage with QR codes linking to relevant information related to table topics. Participants moved freely between tables and joined informal discussions, learning more about what the partnerships are working on, such as their activities and goals, as well as the benefits of being part of a TSSP. Participants used the opportunity to ask questions and share their views and benefitted from a more general engagement with the European Commission DG REGIO, EISMEA and DG RTD as well as the S3 CoP Secretariat and the I3 Support Facility.

Opportunities under Horizon Europe: Regional Innovation Valleys' matchmaking event

The session was moderated by Solange Mifsud and Magdalena Cymerys. The session was divided into the following parts: policy introduction, "success story" - testimony of an ongoing project, an interactive Q&A and matchmaking roundtables.

The role of European Innovation Ecosystems Regional Innovation Valleys in supporting Interregional collaboration and forthcoming opportunities

- 1) Policy introduction

Jekaterina NOVIKOVA, European Commission, DG RTD, introduced the matchmaking session by describing how Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs) support interregional collaboration. The Horizon Europe ((EIE and WIDERA Work Programmes 2025) includes call for proposals combining two-level project design: Coordination and Support Actions (CSAs) and Innovation Actions (IAs). RIV call has as condition 50% of co-funding from regional, national, European or private sources. Additionally, stakeholders were encouraged to explore calls under Cluster 4, on system experimentation for industry; as well as under Cluster 6, focusing on operationalising bioeconomy sustainability actions. RIVs aim to develop interregional innovation ecosystems to develop and scale up innovative projects. Key expected outcomes from the RIV calls are:

- Developing open, efficient, inclusive, and interconnected innovation ecosystems.
- Strengthening links between regions with differing innovation levels.
- Mobilising co-investments with Horizon Europe support.

Ms. NOVIKOVA ended her introduction by sharing additional resources including an online matchmaking tool¹, a publication on lessons learned titled “RIVs Gap Analysis”², and a recording of the info Day³.

2) Success story: Insights on EIE RIV in practice

- **Lucian Sandu**, Head of RIS3 management Office, North-East Macedonia, presented PerSonalised medicine Empowerment Connecting Innovation ecoSystems across Europe (PRECISEU) and described their process to achieve funding. The process can be summarised as such:

- Submissions of Expression of Interest
- Full proposal with synergies between Eols.
- Regional call
- Project selected for funding

The selected partners pursue co-funding at the regional level. The aim is to verify compliance with eligibility conditions and state aid regulations. PRECISEU first assess the types of applicants submitting Expressions of Interest (Eols) and proposals at the EU level. Based on this, the final eligibility criteria for regions are defined.

- 3) Interactive Q&A:

Sli.do questions as were asked revolved around eligibility criteria, co-funding requirements, aliRIV “burning” challenges, and financial rules. The following summarises the key takeaways:

- Applicants can translate five main burning challenges into more specific local needs but are clearly linked to RIV call priorities.
- If the region cannot ensure 50% of the co-funding within the regional envelope, applicants can explore co-funding from national funds, other EU programmes or from private sources.
- Eligible projects must last 3–5 years and include concrete actions (including at least one year of Annual Work Programme) at proposal stage.
- Holding an RIV label does not provide fast-track access to 2025 funding. All applicants are eligible regardless previous involvement in the 2023 calls.

¹ [Regional Innovation Valleys - European Commission](#)

² [Flagship 3: Accelerating and strengthening innovation in European Innovation Ecosystems across the EU and addressing the innovation divide - European Commission](#)

³ [Online Info session: Regional Innovation Valleys, Preparatory Action & Women TechEU - 2025 calls for proposals - European Commission](#)

- Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP) rules:
 - Minimum 3 interregional projects per consortium
 - Each entity may receive Max €600,000 in the form of grants
 - Must support innovation actions at TRL 6–8
 - Prizes are not an eligible activity.
 -

4) Match-making session

- The interactive part of the session allowed participants to network, exchange on best practices and experiences. The discussions were built around the five burning challenges as outlined in the New European Innovation Agenda, as follows:
 - Healthcare
 - Reducing reliance on fossil fuels
 - Achieving circularity
 - Mastering the digital transformation including cybersecurity and AI
 - Increasing global food security

The room was divided into the 5 burning challenges which allowed stakeholders to identify potential collaboration areas and present their unique expertise in each of the topics. Participants were invited to use matchmaking ‘RIV Business cards’. These online business cards are designed for stakeholders to express their ambitions and find potential consortia members across specific areas a:

- Healthcare: https://padlet.com/RIV_MM/Healthcare
- Reducing reliance on fossil fuels: https://padlet.com/RIV_MM/RRFF
- Achieving circularity: https://padlet.com/RIV_MM/AC
- Mastering the digital transformation including cybersecurity: https://padlet.com/RIV_MM/DT
- Increasing global food security: https://padlet.com/RIV_MM/FS

Closing and outlook

The session was moderated by Laura Galante and the following presentations were given:

Achievements and way forward for the S3 Community of Practice, Susana Elena Pérez and Nikos Maroulis, Technopolis Group

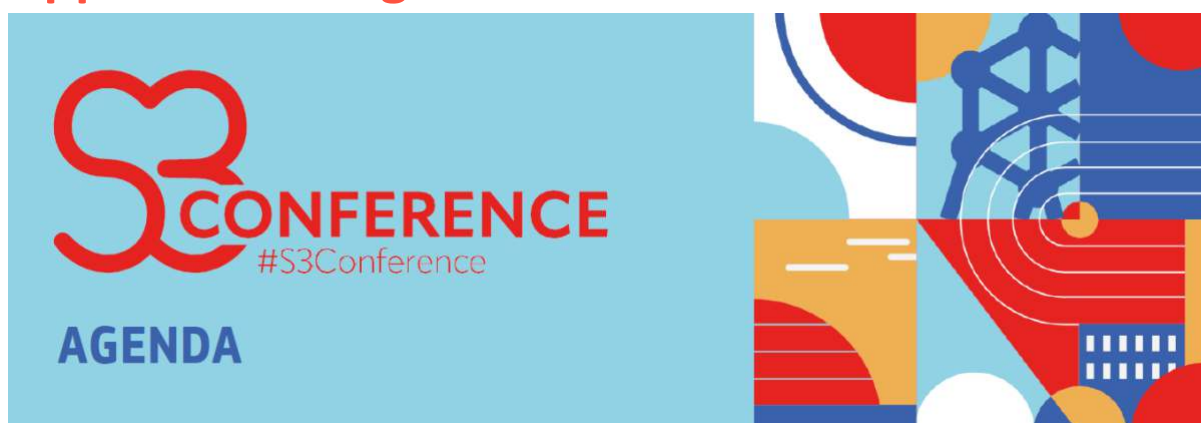
- **Susana Elena Pérez**, S3 CoP Secretariat, highlighted the achievements of the S3CoP over the past three years, highlighting its role as more than a platform, but a true analytical and collaborative hub. She emphasized how it has supported regional innovation through knowledge sharing, capacity building, expert advice, and peer learning via thematic working groups and the S3 Observatory. She pointed to the growing complexity of the political landscape and the demands of the new Cohesion Policy. These, she noted, require inclusive strategies, strengthened foresight, and more adaptive, scalable solutions to ensure no region is left behind in the innovation effort. Susana urged the community to continue evolving by developing flexible strategies, empowering tools, and deeper collaboration. She closed with a hopeful tone, emphasizing that although this chapter ends, the collective journey toward smarter, more inclusive regional development continues.
- **Nikos Maroulis**, S3 CoP Secretariat, emphasized that Smart Specialisation is evolving into a transformative policy tool, no longer just mapping regional strengths, but leveraging them

strategically to address societal challenges such as climate neutrality, technological sovereignty, and social cohesion. This marks a shift toward mission-oriented and systemic approaches to innovation. Capacity, coherence, and collaboration were highlighted as essential for success in this new phase. With higher expectations brought by policy frameworks like the recovery and resilience facility and the new Cohesion Policy, the focus must now be on strengthening administrative capacity, aligning across governance levels, and ensuring that all regions, especially the less advanced, can meaningfully participate. A renewed call to action closed the speech, urging the community to stay rooted in Smart Specialisation's foundational values (participation, place-based approaches, and inclusive engagement), while embracing new tools, deeper collaboration, and adaptive strategies. The speaker framed the moment not as an end, but as a launchpad for the next, more ambitious chapter of Smart Specialisation in Europe.

Opportunities and way forward for S3 practitioners, Eva Nussmueller, DG REGIO

- **Eva Nussmueller**, European Commission, DG REGIO, reflected on the evolving role of S3, acknowledging that S3 practitioners are well positioned, they know their regions, have built long-standing expertise, and benefit from a vibrant peer network. However, she stressed that Europe is at a critical juncture, facing severe competitiveness challenges, innovation gaps, and the pressure of decarbonisation and geopolitical instability. Regional actors must be ready to navigate this complex and evolving landscape. S3 practitioners in the future should focus on having a good strategy, by seeing how it is linked with today's challenges. They should identify where investments are still needed in the regions, determine which areas should be prioritised, assess what has worked and what has not, and examine existing bottlenecks. She underscored that for regions to move forward effectively, they should begin by understanding three fundamental elements: their own strengths, the framework they are operating in, and what they want to achieve. She also emphasized the importance of enabling reforms (not tax or pension reforms, but those that make investments more effective) and the need to define clear goals and milestones for future strategies, in line with the performance-based approaches that are likely to shape future policy frameworks.

Appendix A – Agenda



TIMING	SESSIONS	SPEAKERS
8:30 – 9:30	Registration and welcome coffee	
9:30 – 9:55	Welcome and introductions with a video message by Vice President Raffaele Fitto	Nicola de Michelis , Deputy Director General, DG REGIO, European Commission Laura Galante , Coordinator of the S3CoP Secretariat
9:55 – 10:10	S3 Policy from concept to implementation	Dominique Foray , Professor at the Swiss Federal Technology Institute of Lausanne
10:10 – 10:30	Taking stock of S3 implementation (2021-2027)	Jan-Phillipp Kramer , Head of EU Services, Prognos
10:30 – 10:50	Q&A	
10:50 – 11:20	Coffee break	
11:20 – 12:40	S3 Community of Practice Overview of three years of activities	<i>Moderation by Susana Elena, Research and Innovation Expert, S3CoP Secretariat</i>
11:20 – 11:35	Three years of S3 Community of Practice - Overview of main activities, challenges, and achievements	Fabrizio Guzzo , S3 Knowledge Manager, S3CoP Secretariat
11:35 – 12:30	Supporting regions on the ground - An insight into Targeted Assignments	Ioan Levitchi , Director of Regional Policies Department, Regional Development Agency, Centru, Romania Sorin Cosmulescu , Head of Regional Planning Unit, Regional Development Agency, South West Oltenia, Romania Sophie Patricio , Chief of Division, Commission for Regional Development, Centro, Portugal Petra Szávics , Regional Development Expert, Innostrat Consulting Antonio Ramos , Regional Innovation Expert, Technopolis Group
12:30 – 12:40	Q&A	
12:40 – 14:00	Lunch break	
14:00 – 16:00	S3 and Interregional collaboration S3 Thematic Platforms, I3 Support Facility and I3 Calls	<i>Moderation by Daniela Kretz, Support to S3 Thematic Platforms and Partnerships, S3CoP Secretariat</i>

AGENDA

14:00 – 14:05	Supporting interregional collaboration as a key objective of S3 - Introduction	Tomislav Pinter , Policy Analyst, DG REGIO, European Commission
14:05 – 14:15	S3 Thematic Platforms - supporting the creation of strategic Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs)	Els Van De Velde , Coordinator for S3 Thematic Platforms and Partnerships, S3CoP Secretariat
14:15 – 14:25	Best practices in orchestrating continuous investments in regional innovation ecosystems	Wim de Kinderen , Programme Director European Affairs, Brainport Development
14:25 – 14:35	Opportunities and key takeaways on current and future I3 calls	Valentina Pinna , Project Advisor, EISMEA
14:35 – 14:45	Reinforcing the objectives of the I3 Instrument through the I3 Support Facility	Santiago Donat , I3 Support Facility Coordinator
14:45 – 15:00	Q&A	
15:00 – 16:00	S3 Networking and coffee break Learn about S3 Thematic Platforms, best practices and experiences	S3 CoP Secretariat TSSPs leading regions
16:00 – 17:00	S3 and Interregional cooperation Opportunities under Horizon Europe: Regional Innovation Valleys' matchmaking event	<i>Moderation by Magdalena Cymerys, Policy Officer, DG RTD, and Solange Mifsud, Policy Analyst, JRC; European Commission</i>
16:00 – 16:20	The role of European Innovation Ecosystems Regional Innovation Valleys in supporting Interregional collaboration and forthcoming opportunities	Jekaterina Novikova , Deputy Head of Unit, DG RTD, European Commission
16:20 – 16:25	Insights on EIE RIV in practice	Lucian Sandu , Head of RIS3 Management Office at North East Regional Development Agency, Romania
16:25 – 16:55	Match-making session	
16:55 – 17:00	Wrap up and next steps	
17:00 – 17:30	Closing and outlook	
17:00 – 17:15	Achievements and way forward for the S3 Community of Practice	Susana Elena , Research and Innovation Expert and Nikos Maroulis , Regional Support Lead; S3CoP Secretariat
17:15 – 17:30	Opportunities and way forward for S3 practitioners	Eva Nussmueller , Deputy Head of Unit, DG REGIO, European Commission
17:30 – 19:00	Networking cocktail	