

Connecting national and regional planning to European priorities. Is Smart Specialisation still relevant in the context of the new MFF?

A joint EURADA – Friends of Smart Specialisation workshop – CDTI SOST (in the context of the European Week of Regions and Cities)

13th October 2025, 17:00 to 18:30 at CDTI SOST, rue du Trône 62, 1050 Brussels

Background

The Draghi report and subsequent new thinking on how the EU needs to respond to the challenges of competitiveness, decarbonisation and security has put better **coordination of European, national and regional industrial and innovation efforts** at the core of the debate. The strengthening of coordination is delivered in the architecture of the new Multi-Annual Financial Framework¹, with important role of national and regional plans on the one hand and a central Competitiveness Fund² on the other. A new framework for EU policies is emerging that will focus on competitiveness but will also provide an **opportunity space for place-based transformation strategies aligned with European priorities**.

To date, the role of smart specialisation strategies in this new EU strategic agenda and its future budgetary environment has not been sufficiently tackled, let alone defined. This gap raises questions both on the future of the S3 policy framework and, more generally, on place-based approaches for innovation in the post-27 EU setting. It is therefore necessary that policy-makers and stakeholders reflect upon the future directions of S3 under these shifting circumstances. Since their introduction into EU policy more than ten years ago, smart specialisation strategies have been confined mostly to cohesion policy, limiting their intrinsic **capacity of (re)directing priorities towards economic restructuring** for the competitiveness agenda of Europe at large. But more and more authors^{3 4 5} consider that smart specialisation (S3) can become the instrument for **place-based productivity**, based on the increasing role of **innovation eco-systems** to develop future-oriented solutions.

This workshop aims to discuss a potential **renewed role for smart specialisation in the European governance of investments for research, innovation and transformation**.

¹ [EU budget 2028-2034](#)

² [European Competitiveness Fund - European Commission](#)

³ A blueprint for transforming EU Industry through place-based innovation, A Renda, CEPS

⁴ Divided We Fall Behind: Why a fragmented EU cannot compete in complex technologies, R&I Working Papers, 2025

⁵ Combining regional strengths to narrow the EU innovation divide, IR Policy brief, European Commission

This will involve investigating the impact of a **new analytical framework** to firstly assess regional capacities for diversifying the economy in new competitive activities and secondly to make it more resilient to technological shocks and decoupling in line with the EU quest for more strategic autonomy. This new analytical framework could involve ‘complexity theory’⁶ which helps to identify the local activities that have the most competitive potential for advancing to more complex (productive) economies (starting from the specialisations and related activities in the region). Shifts to mission-oriented policies and regional resilience aligned with the ever-pressing goals of decarbonising the economy and building innovation and technological sovereignty are also instrumental in ensuring the upgrading and diversification of regional economies pursued through the S3. At the same time, revisiting the smart specialisation concept in light of the new EU agenda and budget for competitiveness brings again to the fore the longstanding question as to how regions with low innovation capacity can take full advantage of the S3 framework.

The workshop

The workshop starts from the premise that smart specialisation is a **decentralised European governance** mechanism that can play a strong role in the new coordination framework envisaged by the MFF, balancing **top-down** European industrial strategies with **bottom-up** opportunities and challenges. The workshop will provide an opportunity to discuss these questions within the reference framework of the **MFF proposal**. What reforms of the S3 process might be required to fulfil a new function? To which extent should the EDP (Entrepreneurial Discovery Process) and the priority setting approach be transformed into a wider and more influential planning exercise, connecting regional and national economies? How can S3 help achieve more coordination and integration in the context of multi-level and polycentric nature of R&I governance in Europe?

Following a brief introduction, a **key-note** contribution by Pierre Alexandre Balland will set the scene. This will be followed by a **panel-discussion on the policy implications** of a renewed role for smart specialisation and how S3 can identify and synchronise R&I priorities across borders. Place-based innovation extends now, as a basis to promising industrial policies and successful strategies for economic development, not necessarily at regional level only, but EU wide, connecting places with their unique innovation capacities.

The discussion will be orientated around the following set of issues:

⁶ Enhancing EU Policy Through Complexity Metrics: A new lens for research and Innovation, R&I Paper Series, 2025

1. Connecting European Industrial Policy Priorities with Bottom-Up Place-Based Discovery

Question:

How can Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) be further developed to act as a backbone for aligning European policy priorities for transformation with bottom-up, place-based discovery of opportunities? What practical steps can be taken to ensure that local strengths and innovation capacities are effectively leveraged in shaping Europe's competitiveness agenda?

2. S3's Role in Cross-Border Partnerships and Co-Investment for Resilience and Twin Transition

Question:

In what ways can S3 facilitate the creation and scaling of European and cross-border partnerships for co-investment in strategic value chains, particularly in the context of building resilience and advancing the twin transition (digital and green)? What mechanisms or incentives are needed to encourage regional innovation ecosystems to collaborate across borders and sectors?

3. Methodology for Mapping and Matching Knowledge Assets Across Innovation Ecosystems

Question:

Is there a need for a standardised European methodology for mapping knowledge assets and matching actors across innovation ecosystems to identify smart complementarities? How could such a framework enhance the formation of competitive European value chains, and what should be the key features of this methodology to ensure its effectiveness and inclusivity?

4. How is the connection between local, regional and European Stakeholders performing in practice?

Agenda:

13th of October, Rue du Trône 62 - 1050 Brussels (CDTI SOST), 17:00 to 18:30

| Time | Session | Speakers |
|---------------|------------------------------|---|
| 16:30 – 17:00 | Welcome coffee | |
| 17:00 – 17:10 | Introduction to the Workshop | Francesco Molica – EURADA |
| 17:10 – 17:30 | Keynote Speech | Pierre-Alexandre Balland – Chief Data Scientist at Centre for European Policy Studies and Visiting Professor at Harvard University |
| 17:30 – 18:20 | Panel discussions: | Panel 1: Speakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pirita Lindholm – ERRIN • Marina Martinez – SOST • Wim De Kinderen – Brainport • Wolfgang Munch – DG REGIO Chair: Friends of Smart Specialisation |
| | | Panel 2: Speakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jens Zvirgzdgrauds – Committee of the Regions • Nicola Francesco Dotti – DG RTD • Theo Föllings – |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EURADA/Oost Netherlands • Jan-Philip Kramer – Prognos <p>Chair: Francesco Molica – EURADA</p> |
| 18:20 – 18:30 | Conclusions and next steps | |
| 18:30 – 19:30 | Networking Drink | |