VANGUARD INITIATIVE

New growth through smart specialisation

Putting Interregional Innovation Collaboration into Practice

Gavin Lewis - Welsh Government

The Vanguard Initiative mission

Our origin

- Political commitment from leading European regions
- Align industrial strengths through joint smart specialization
- Achieve greater impact together

Our objective

- Connect regional industrial ecosystems
- Mobilise clusters, technology centres and innovative SMEs
- Co-develop and deploy joint innovation projects
- Accelerate market uptake, industrial scaling and competitiveness

Our approach

- Connect innovators through collaborative platforms
- Design and deliver interregional projects
- Combine regional investment with EU funding
- Strengthen EU-wide frameworks for sustained cooperation

The Vanguard Initiative today

25

regional governments

11

European countries

- **Belgium**: Flanders, Wallonia
- **Germany**: Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt
- **Italy**: Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lombardy, Trentino
- **Netherlands**: East-NL, South Holland, South-NL
- **Poland**: Malopolska
- **Portugal**: Norte
- **Romania**: Northeast Romania
- **Slovenia**: West & East Slovenia
- **Spain**: Aragon, Asturias, Basque Country, Cantabria, Galicia, Navarra
- **Sweden**: Dalarna
- **United Kingdom**: Wales

The VI interregional innovation support system

VInnovate

- Interregional collaborative funding
- Funnels high-TRL projects
- Combines regional resources for joint projects

Innovation pilots

- Based on smart specialisation strategies
- Aligned with the EU STEP approach
- Connect actors around shared industrial challenges

EU policy intelligence

- Focus on the new MFF
- Targeted instruments: ECF, Horizon Europe and NRPPs
- Links project experience to European policy design

A pathway from initial contact to project development, financing, demonstration and scale-up

How the Vanguard Initiative functions

1. Why get involved?

- Internationalisation/Europeanisation of companies and value chains

2. Where can I get active?

- Current innovation pilots
- New value chains introduced in 2026–27

3. How do I engage?

- Connect with and learn from other regions
- Implement strategic interregional value chains through demonstration cases
- Develop joint innovation projects and prepare funding

4. What support is available?

- Events and meetings to prepare joint projects
- Pilot coordination, activation and policy intelligence
- Calls through VInnovate and EU instruments, including I3 and Horizon

The evolving VI innovation domains

Energy

Hydrogen and ADMA*

Advanced manufacturing

3D printing and ESM

Smart health

Bioeconomy

Review of S3 strategies in 2026–27, including testing dual-use technologies

* Advanced Manufacturing for Energy Related Activities in harsh environments and offshore wind

VInnovate: the interregional funding tool

Funding for international innovation projects

- Grants for projects at TRLs 6–8
- Regional funding for SME internationalisation and collaboration
- Dedicated ERDF funding for interregional collaboration
- 29 Projects funded worth € 9m in grant

Information and participation in 2026

- Call launch: 1 March 2026
- Project Fit Forms accepted before the deadline
- Evaluation of the call: November 2026

VI political priorities in the new MFF

Interregional innovation collaboration in a new era

Horizon Europe

- Innovation Partnerships
- European Innovation Ecosystems
- European Technology Infrastructure

European Competitiveness Fund

- Digital and deep tech
- Decarbonisation and clean tech
- Health and biotech
- Security and defence tech

NRPPs

- National and Regional Partnership Plans
- Interregional collaboration
- Role of smart specialisation
- Positioning of I3
- Use of ERDF for VInnovate

The VI reform agenda

An integrated innovation project support system

An integrated innovation project support system

- Joint strategic priorities
- Pilot methodology
- Targeted funding

Towards a Vanguard innovation ecosystem

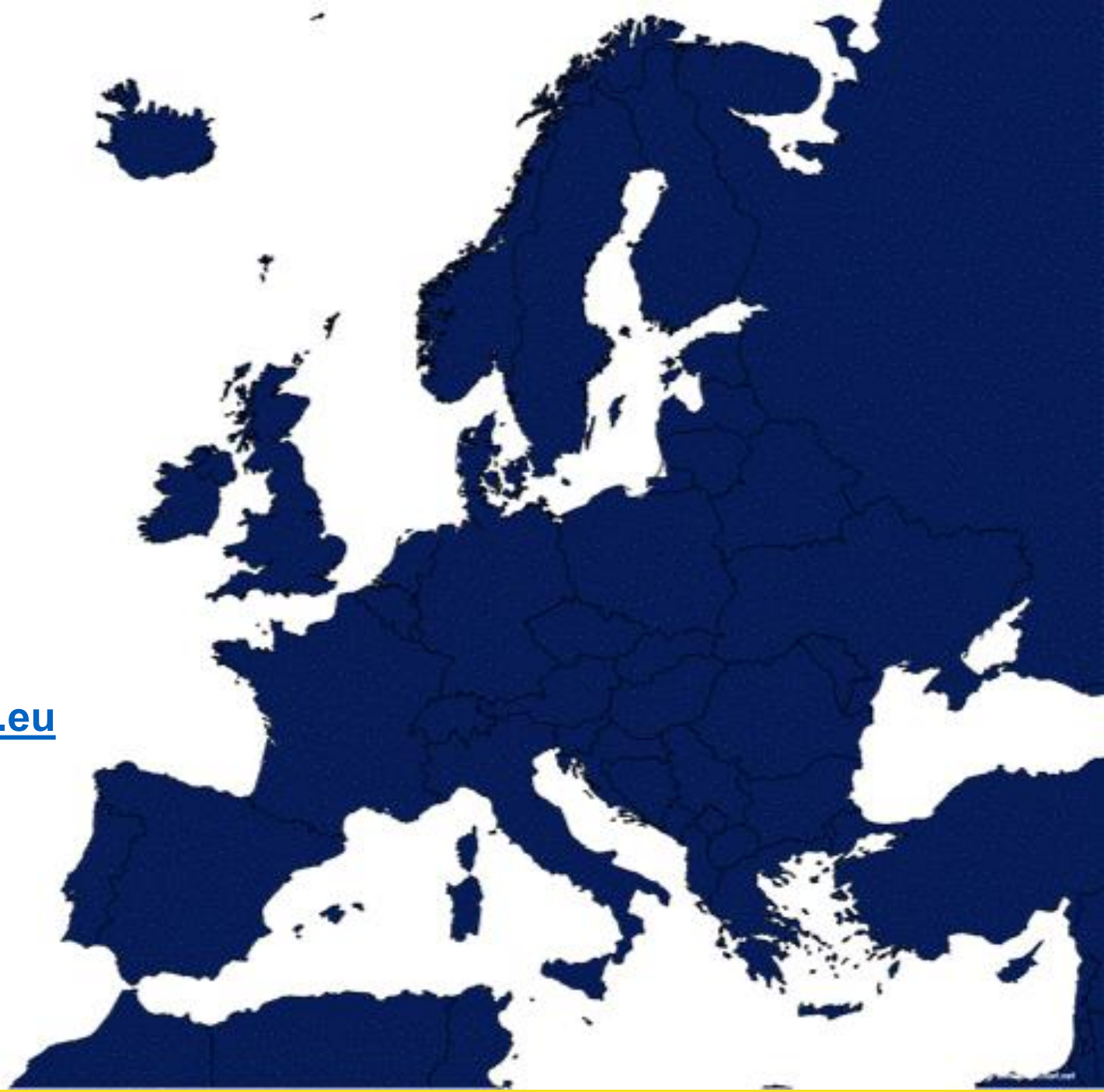
- VI Industry Group
- VI Strategy Agenda 2028–2034
- Innovative value-chain building

VI: an evolutionary system

- A broken system in turbulent times
- Disruptive and adaptive approaches
- Stronger innovation ecosystems

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Klaus.niederlander@s3vanguardinitiative.eu