

Innovation Intermediary Challenges

*Consolidated Report from Greece, Ukraine, Turkey,
and Bulgaria Workshops*

Jun 2025

Odysseas Spyroglou,
R&I Lead, International Development Ireland Ltd.

Executive Summary

The EXCELLENT project conducted four online capacity-building workshops in Greece (GR), Ukraine (UA), Turkey (TR), and Bulgaria (BG) to identify challenges faced by innovation intermediaries. Using Wooclap for audience engagement, these workshops revealed both common challenges and country-specific issues.

Key Findings:

- Access to Funding is the top challenge across all countries, especially for early-stage and scale-up ventures.
- Bureaucracy and complexity in support programs create major barriers.
- Talent gaps - difficulty finding co-founders and skilled team members.
- Fragmented support landscape - no clear roadmap for accessing help.
- Limited international networks for market access.

Priority Solutions:

- Venture capital and angel investment (especially in UA and TR).
- EU funding programs (particularly valued in GR).
- Mentorship and networking programs.

- Simplified administrative processes.

Workshop Findings by Country

Greece (GR) Workshop

Top Startup Supports:

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Access to public grants (58% of participants)
- Investor access (45%)
- Networking events (35%)

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Difficulty finding co-founders (37%)
- High administrative complexity in grants (30%)
- Lack of clear support roadmap (23%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Greek participants prioritized:

- EU funding instruments - EIC/Eureka (22%)
- Horizon Europe R&I programs (16%)
- Venture capital (12%)
- Cascading EU project funding (11%)

Key Gaps:

- "Valley of death" funding between prototype and market
- Roadmap services to navigate support programs
- Talent development initiatives
- Better university-industry technology transfer

Ukraine (UA) Workshop

Top Startup Supports:

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Public R&I grants (58%)
- Networking/community building (50%)
- Private investment access (50%)
- Mentorship (33%)

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Excessive bureaucracy (38% - highest among all countries)
- Administrative complexity in funding (38%)
- No clear roadmap of support (25%)
- Difficulty finding co-founders (25%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Ukrainian participants prioritized:

- Venture capital (31% - highest share across all countries)
- Angel investment (18%)
- Cascading EU funds (15%)
- Horizon Europe programs (6%)

Key Gaps:

- Absence of capital markets and small investment amounts
- Funding support needed for business support organizations
- Dominance of state-run science (96%) blocking tech transfer
- Insufficient post-seed funding and soft-landing programs

Turkey (TR) Workshop

Top Startup Supports

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Networking & community-building events (55% - highest among all countries)
- Public grants, private investors, mentoring (each ~36%)
- Product validation support (27%)

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Heavy regulation (30%)
- Excessive bureaucracy (20%)
- Ineffective support programs (20%)
- Lack of clear support roadmap (10%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Turkish participants prioritized:

- Venture capital (20%)
- Angel investors (18%)
- Cascading EU project funding (15%)
- EIC/Eureka programs (10%)
- Horizon Europe (10%)

Key Gaps:

- Internationalization support for startups
- Protection of entrepreneurs' rights vs. investors
- Early-stage support (pre-seed, prototyping)
- High-profile networking platforms

Bulgaria (BG) Workshop

Top Startup Supports:

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Industry engagement through open innovation (50%)
- Mentoring & coaching (33%)
- Networking events (17%)
- Tech support structures (17%)
- **Note:** Public grants scored 0% - stark contrast to other countries

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Finding co-founders (40%)
- Excessive public-sector bureaucracy (20%)
- Lack of clear support roadmap (20%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Turkish participants prioritized:

- Cascading funding (27.5% - highest among all countries)
- Venture funds (18.8%)
- SME Instruments like EIC (15%)
- Mentorship programs (12.5%)
- Horizon Europe (2.5% - very low)

Key Gaps:

- Basic resources and guidance needs
- Free legal/financial guidance for startups
- Clearer procedure guidance for funding
- More information on non-dilutive funding options

Consolidated Cross-Country Analysis

Common Challenges

1. Funding Access (Universal Priority) **All countries struggle with funding gaps, particularly:**

- Early-stage funding (seed, angel investment)
- "Valley of death" between prototype and market
- Scale-up capital (Series A and beyond)
- Complex application processes for public funding

2. Administrative Barriers

- Ukraine reports highest bureaucracy issues (38%)
- Turkey faces heavy regulation (30%)
- Greece notes grant complexity (30%)
- Need for simplified processes across all countries

3. Talent and Team Building

- Co-founder matching: major issue in Greece (37%) and Bulgaria (40%)
- Skills gaps in technical and managerial areas
- Brain drain affecting multiple countries
- Limited entrepreneurial experience

4. Fragmented Support Landscape

- No clear roadmap: Greece (23%), Bulgaria (20%), Ukraine (25%)
- Information gaps about available programs
- Poor coordination between support organizations
- Insufficient outreach beyond major cities

5. Limited International Access

- Small domestic markets (especially Bulgaria, Greece)
- Need for international market entry support
- Limited global networks and partnerships

Key Differences by Country

Funding Approach Preferences:

- **Greece:** EU programs and grants (38% combined priority)
- **Ukraine:** Private investment focus (49% combined VC + angels)
- **Turkey:** Balanced approach but emphasizing private capital (38%)
- **Bulgaria:** Alternative funding channels (cascading grants 27.5%)

Regulatory Environment:

- **Turkey:** Highest regulatory burden concerns
- **Ukraine:** Bureaucracy amplified by war conditions
- **Greece:** Process complexity over regulation per se
- **Bulgaria:** Focus on human capital over regulatory issues

Support Infrastructure:

- **Bulgaria:** Emphasizes industry partnerships and mentorship
- **Turkey:** Values networking and community building
- **Greece:** Focuses on EU integration and funding access
- **Ukraine:** Crisis-driven focus on survival and adaptation

Strategic Recommendations

1. Enhance Access to Funding

Immediate Actions:

- Create "Startup Booster Grants" for pre-seed funding
- Establish Fund-of-Funds programs with EU Investment Fund
- Support business angel networks and cross-border angel alliances
- Introduce outcome-based funding models

EU Integration:

- Leverage EIC Accelerator programs for "valley of death" funding
- Use Horizon Europe's European Innovation Ecosystems calls
- Tap European Investment Fund for venture capital development

2. Streamline Support Systems

Digital Infrastructure:

- Develop centralized "Innovation Ecosystem Portal"
- Create single, searchable interface for all support services
- Implement "Startup Helpdesk" in each country
- Maintain updated calendar of funding opportunities

Process Simplification:

- Conduct regulatory audit to eliminate unnecessary steps
- Introduce fast-track approaches for innovation projects
- Create regulatory sandboxes for fintech and emerging sectors
- Establish clear startup support roadmaps

3. Strengthen Networks and Talent

Community Building:

- Launch co-founder matching platforms and events
- Scale mentorship programs connecting experienced entrepreneurs
- Organize regular cross-border missions and exchanges
- Create sector-specific networking (fintech, AI, healthtech)

Capacity Development:

- Integrate EntreComp framework into training programs
- Focus on financial literacy and scaling capabilities
- Build resilience and crisis management skills
- Strengthen university-industry collaboration

4. Support Innovation Intermediaries

Organizational Capacity:

- Provide operational funding for incubators and accelerators
- Develop training curriculum for intermediary staff
- Create peer exchange programs between countries
- Support collaboration and resource sharing

Performance Improvement:

- Implement quality standards and certifications
- Align services with EntreComp competencies
- Foster collaboration between support organizations
- Build evidence base for effective practices

5. Leverage EU Frameworks

Policy Alignment:

- Align with EU Startup Nations Standard
- Integrate with Startup Europe initiatives

- Leverage Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programs
- Contribute to EU policy dialogues on innovation

Cross-Border Integration:

- Coordinate with Enterprise Europe Network
- Build synergies with existing EU projects
- Develop integrated European innovation pathways
- Support policy advocacy at EU level

Conclusion

The EXCELLENT workshops revealed both shared challenges and unique national contexts across Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria. While funding access and administrative complexity are universal concerns, each country requires tailored approaches within a coordinated EU framework.

Success depends on parallel action: expanding funding options, simplifying processes, strengthening networks, and building institutional capacity. The recommendations provide a roadmap for transforming these innovation ecosystems from fragmented, resource-constrained environments into vibrant, interconnected networks that can compete globally.

By addressing these challenges systematically and leveraging EU frameworks, these four countries can move from catching up to leading in specific innovation areas, contributing to Europe's overall competitiveness and resilience.

This report consolidates findings from four EXCELLENT project workshops conducted in 2025, using Wooclap audience engagement data and qualitative feedback from innovation intermediaries across Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria.