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SMERF

SMERF Strategy

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Introduction

The SMERF project aims to support low-tech and medium-tech SMEs in adopting a future-ready approach. By promoting collaboration between SMEs, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and intermediaries, SMERF intends to help SMEs prepare for future challenges.

In the dynamic landscapes of Lower Silesia (PL), Upper Austria (AT), Emilia-Romagna (IT), Baden-Württemberg (DE), Nyugat-Dunántúl (HU), Jadranska Hrvatska (HR), Liguria (IT), and Východné Slovensko (SK), the SMERF Strategy (SS) emerges as a strategic blueprint. Rooted in collective expertise and fuelled by collaborative efforts, this strategy sets forth a comprehensive framework to guide SMEs through the intricate process of evolution.

At its core, the SMERF Strategy envisions a comprehensive approach to transformation, focusing on innovation culture, digital manufacturing, open innovation 2.0 and the sharing economy, and green and circular economy and sustainability. Based on extensive research and evaluation, the strategy equips SMEs with the tools, methodologies, and support needed to modernize effectively.

The SMERF initiative is grounded in transparency and collaboration, unfolding through a well-planned series of activities aimed at preparing SMEs for the future with key reports, such as "Report on examination, evaluation and measurement of the culture of organization" (D1.1.1) and "Report on joint research of using elements of pillars 2-4 in SME" (D1.1.2), providing valuable insights. Additionally, the "Report on characteristic features and transformation tools for SMERF" (D1.1.3) offers a detailed look at tools specifically tailored for SMERF adoption.

Supporting these findings, the "Catalogue of best practices and success stories regarding SMERF" (D1.2.2) showcases effective strategies and outcomes, while the "Report on best practices, policies and strategic initiatives of more innovative partner regions" (D1.5.1) shares experiences from innovative regions. Together, these documents guide SMEs on their journey to becoming future-ready.

The SMERF journey is collaborative, highlighted by the SMERF Action Plan (SAP). Created through international cooperation and commitment, this plan outlines the steps necessary to implement SMERF across various regions and industries.

As we embark on this transformative journey, we do so with determination and unity, believing in the resilience and innovation of SMEs to shape a dynamic and equitable future. Together, we can lead the way in fostering change and ushering in a new era of prosperity, with SMERF guiding the path forward.

1. Initial Position: Fostering Central European prosperity through strategic transformation

Central Europe is home to several active economies. These economies face various challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, demographic changes, and technological advancements. These issues impact businesses and communities. As we move forward, it is important to take strategic actions to address these challenges effectively.

Challenges on the Horizon

Central Europe, and especially SMEs, is struggling with the negative socioeconomic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change-related challenges, demographic trends and migration. Common territorial challenges of SMERF partnership can be specified as:

1. SMEs face the need to effectively transition and adopt **new market and social-driven concepts and models** like Innovation Culture and Open Innovation, Digital Manufacturing, Sharing Economy, Sustainability, Green & Circular Economy (based on Territorial Agenda 2030, Smart Specialisation Strategies for Sustainability and European Commission SME strategy).

2. Many CE firms do not yet have sufficient capacities to adopt those new concepts and models as they **lack know-how, human capital, best examples as well as organisational and managerial capacity**. According to Flash Eurobarometer 486 "SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups and entrepreneurship" among EU SMEs' biggest problems are lack of skills, incl. managerial 17% (out of 12.343 SMEs); difficulties with digitalisation 13% and innovation 9%, internationalisation 8%. In such challenging circumstances, efficient and effective support is needed, which will allow SMEs to transform their organizational culture and business models, become more resilient to further challenges and to adapt changing conditions in terms of a digitalized and greener economy.

3. **Digitalisation of businesses** in central Europe, except for Austria and Germany, is below the EU average (based on Digital Economy and Society Index: AT 56.9; DE 54.1; EU 50.7; HR 46; IT 45.5; SK 43.2; HU 41.2; PL 41.0). A particular need is to support SMEs to take up digital technologies.

4. Even though **circularity** is increasing in central Europe, many territories are still lagging behind the EU average. Catching up will require major efforts, especially in Slovakia, Croatia, Poland and Hungary [level of circularity based on Index of National Economies' Circularity: medium-high: AT, IT, DE; medium-low: HU, PL, HR; low: SK].

5. SMEs **uptake of new technologies** and new business principles in Europe is still low. According to European Innovation Scoreboard 2021, 27% of EU SMEs introduced at least one new/improved product or new/improved business process. There is a need to improve this factor not only in countries with low indicator, but in whole Europe [% for each country: DE 42; IT 39; AT 38; HR 36; HU 10; SK 7; PL 4].

6. CE presents **low cooperation between mature companies and start-ups**, which could lead to the modernization of existing business processes and introduction of innovative solutions. On average, 12.3% of EU SMEs collaborate with others in their innovation activities, including domestic and foreign organisations in both the private and public sector [% for each country: AT 24; DE 23; IT 22; HR 19; HU 15; SK 12; PL 5; based on European Innovation Scoreboard 2021].

7. **Disparities and gaps persist between thriving regions and less advanced ones** also in terms of organizational culture, innovation and transformation policy learning and implementation. Governments need to create the optimal conditions for individuals to start and grow a business. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's National Entrepreneurship Context Index provides policymakers with insights on how to foster such an environment. Among European, American and Latin American entrepreneurs SMERF regions are located at: DE 16, AT 18, PL 30, SK 34, IT 35 and HR 41st place (out of 44 evaluated countries).

The Birth of SMERF: A Strategic Response

In response to the challenges and opportunities facing Central European SMEs, the SMERF project has emerged as a beacon of hope and transformation. This collaborative initiative is designed to empower SMEs by driving innovation, resilience, and sustainability, preparing them for the future.

SMERF helps SMEs to effectively transform and adopt innovative approaches. The goals of interregional cooperation (cross-border knowledge & good practice exchange) include:

- creating innovation-friendly culture (often underestimated in SMEs),
- speeding up or introducing digitalization in manufacturing,
- starting or enhancing organizations' to open up and encouraging them to Open innovation 2.0 tools & methods,
- implementing solutions & best practices in line with Green Deal and circular economy.

Unique approach the SMERF project brings

Targeted solutions for each of 4 main thematic pillars

Need to effectively transfer and adopt new market and social -driven concepts and models will be addressed by focusing on 4 Pillars oriented on:

1. Innovation culture,
2. Digital manufacturing,
3. Open innovation 2.0 & sharing economy,
4. Green & circular economy & sustainability,

Inspiration Knowledge Base – online resource hub

Online knowledge repository containing theoretical and practical approach, best practices and success stories as well as webinars developed as one of the project activities, providing targeted solutions for all 4 pillars, introducing new concepts & models with potential to solve lack of know-how, human capital and organisational & managerial capacity.

Development of comprehensive set of tools for SMEs

To support overall transformation process of SME to SMERF will develop comprehensive set of tools supporting transformation process. The process starts with an analysis of particular SMEs via SMERF Diagnosis Tool, which will provide an assessment of the current status and identification of specific needs and requirements. This information will enable us to automatically generate a transformation scenario composed of recommended trainings, expert consultations and mentoring.

Networking of SMEs enabling knowledge transfer

Improving cooperation between mature companies and SMEs & start-ups will be addressed by creating cross-regional „InnoGreen market" and study visits. Within InnoGreen Market, SMEs will be connected with big companies. Within 16 study visits SMEs will have a chance to see what will be expected in future based on mature companies' perspectives.

Support for overall regional innovation ecosystem

A dialogue with policy stakeholders and a dedicated workshop to share experiences, solutions and models of thriving regions (like DE, AT) will be implemented. Based on this outcome SMERF will support the improvement of regional innovation ecosystems, especially in less advanced regions (like PL, HR, IT, SK, HU).

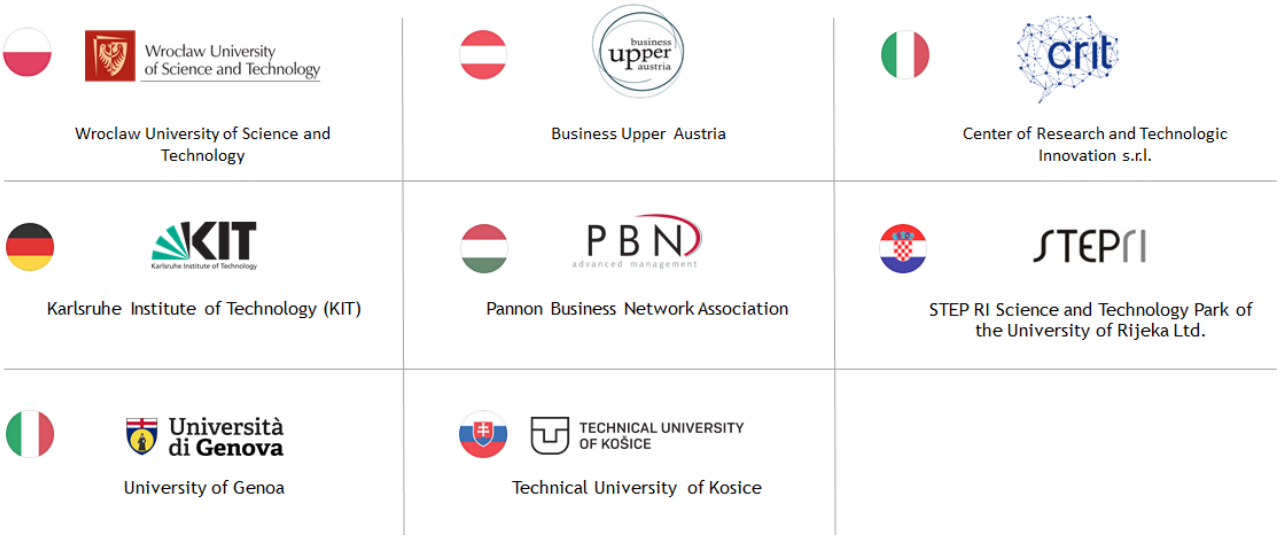
A Transnational Approach

The CE companies are still facing an insufficient number of properly-suited actions to establish opportunities for cooperation, mutual learning &knowledge transfer. "SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe" states that transition to a more economically, environmentally and socially sustainable Europe requires the full mobilisation of SMEs. EU-wide engagement is needed in order to create the appropriate business and innovation infrastructures for SMEs. EU Commission measures various types of indicators that represent EU Member States' performance. Among them, European Innovation Scoreboard and Transitions Performance Index can be counted.

The new European Innovation Scoreboard 2021 classified countries represented by SMERF PPs into: Innovation Leaders IL (DE), Strong Innovators SI (AT), Moderate Innovators MI (IT), and Emerging Innovators EI (HR, HU, SK, PL). It clearly shows that the project goals cannot be successfully reached acting only on a national level. For MI and EI, it would be hard or impossible to adopt new market and social -driven concepts and models without close collaboration with PPs characterized by high innovation performance. The transnational approach enables IL and SI to transfer best practices to MI&EI. Besides, the cooperation of IL and SI with MI&EI may generate new transformation support schemes.

The Transitions Performance Index is the basis for evaluating countries' progress towards a fair and sustainable prosperity model. TPI identifies 3 groups of countries: Transition leader (TL), Strong transition (ST) and Good transition (GT). The SMERF PPs countries represent two groups: ST (DE, AT, IT) and GT (SK, HR, PL, HU), the latter having a lower performance index than the European average. This indicates that there still persist significant gaps towards transformation and there is a need to continue efforts and capacity building among enterprises to digitize further, innovate and create new services and products. That is why SMERF plans to analyse the outcomes of experiences, solutions and models of ST countries that later will be transferred to GT countries. It is evident that joint knowledge transfer and exchange can be more and more efficient for the final beneficiaries by aggregating the elements of SME Ready for Future transition approach in one holistic innovation ecosystem and this can be reached through the transnational cooperation within the CE regions.

Due to these factors, the goals of SMERF (supporting Central European SMEs transition towards companies ready for the future in Innovation Culture, Digital Manufacturing, Open Innovation & Sharing Economy, and Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability; and providing new services to HEIs and Innomediaries that will enhance their competences and equally support SMEs beyond borders) can only be reached if the project has an international dimension. It is the only way to establish enhanced interregional cooperation to achieve cross-border knowledge and good practice exchange and is a necessary approach that could also facilitate the internationalization of SMEs from partner regions.



2. SMERF Vision: Pioneering Transformation for a Future-Ready Central Europe

The SMERF project aims to transform low-tech and medium-tech SMEs, guiding them towards a future where innovation, sustainability, and resilience are paramount. Our vision is twofold: to prepare SMEs to become "SMEs Ready for the Future" (SMERF) and to equip Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Innomediaries with the necessary tools and knowledge to support this transformation.

Strategic Objective

SMERF, following the approach based on cross-regional Quintuple Helix Innovation Model, aims at:

(1) supporting low-tech and medium-tech SMEs' transition towards companies ready for the future in 4 pillars:

1. Innovation Culture,
2. Digital Manufacturing,
3. Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy,
4. Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability,

(2) providing new services to HEIs and Innomediaries that will enhance their competences and equally support SMEs beyond borders.

How we see SME ready for the future? Vision of SMERF Project Pillars

Innovation Culture: An SME ready for the future (SMERF) with an Innovative Culture is an organization where unorthodox thinking and creative ideas are consistently generated, embraced, and integrated into daily business operations with the purpose of maintaining competitiveness in a rapidly changing business landscape. Such an enterprise values continuous improvement, welcomes change, fosters a psychologically safe working environment, and seeks new solutions while promoting collaboration, both internally and externally. Additionally, SMERF strategically allocates resources, including essential infrastructure and

funding, to energize and sustain innovative behaviours. SMERF's leadership empowers their employees to actively participate in innovation, invest in their development, and follow a structured approach to managing and measuring innovation performance, all while ensuring that the innovation strategy is well-known and clear to all employees.

List of characteristic features of SME ready for the future in Innovation Culture:

- cultivates a growth mindset that values experimentation and divergent thinking (Innovative Thinking & Creativity);
- promotes interdisciplinary teamwork with transparent, seamless information sharing, both internally and externally (Collaboration & Communication);
- assures a psychologically safe environment where ideas can be freely shared, irrespective of hierarchies, and where the leaders inspire with a clear innovation-driven vision (Leadership & Relations);
- prioritizes continuous training and establishes knowledge-sharing platforms (Knowledge & Learning)
- focuses on recruiting innovative talent and offering avenues for personal development (Human Resources Development);
- provides flexible workspaces and invests in research and development (Infrastructure & Resources) actively gathers customer feedback and remains attuned to market shifts and trends (Market Orientation).

Digital Manufacturing: An SME ready for the future in the field of Digital Manufacturing is a company that applies the principles and related technologies within the 4 identified dimensions virtual tools, automation, data management and production planning.

List of characteristic features of SME ready for the future in Digital Manufacturing:

- has embraced and integrated advanced technologies and digital solutions into its manufacturing processes;
- is proactive in adopting emerging technologies and staying up to date with industry trends to remain competitive in the rapidly evolving digital landscape;
- it has become aware internally of the potential of digitisation;
- is interconnecting its assets onto digital ecosystem, uses information to adapt, run and optimize its operations according to actual business condition, thereby generating and appropriating business value while reflecting societal requirements;
- aims to improve its competitiveness via the learning and combining the necessary digital technologies, initiate or connect to research and development activities by utilizing the own regions competences and cooperate with international partners.

Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy:

An SME ready for the future in Open Innovation is a company that uses external inputs to accelerate internal innovation and enhance the product or service development, and its market position. The SMERF has established an organizational culture and mindset that supports co-creation and collaboration with external companies, such as customers, suppliers, competitors or start-ups, and

knowledge provider, such as research centers, universities and R&D institutions. In ideal case the SME analyses the innovation process and composes an (open) innovation strategy.

List of characteristic features of SME ready for the future in Open Innovation:

- changed mindset towards opening the "internal" innovation process;
- changed company culture towards opening the "internal" innovation process;
- innovation process supports OI initiatives;
- has established cooperation & networks of partners;
- uses external ideas, and external paths to market (uses multiple external sources - customer feedback, published patents, competitors, external agencies, collaborations with universities and research centres, technology/partner scouting, corporate venture capital, the public etc.);
- uses co-creation & crowdsourcing (call for ideas/crowdsourcing, organizing hackathons & makeathones);
- established collaborations with startups or enables development of start-ups from secondary activities.

An SME ready to future in Sharing Economy is a company obtaining, giving or sharing access to resources it could not afford on its own and/or only use infrequently (e.g. machinery, human capital). The SMERF focuses on using goods instead of owning them. This is often facilitated by a community-based online platform. The SMERF has shifted its value proposition where value is co-created with an external partner and often transcends mere monetary transactions, promoting social and environmental considerations alongside profitability.

List of characteristic features of SME ready for the future in Sharing Economy:

- changes model of owing / renting resources in its business activities;
- focus on better utilization of spare resources or assets (such as infrastructure, space, skills and digital assets) ;
- share technologies and skills to reduce operational costs or cost of final product/service;exploits Sharing Economy to expand offer and differentiate from competitors

Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability: SME ready to future in Sharing economy is a company obtaining, giving or sharing access to resources it could not afford on its own and/or only use infrequently (e.g. machinery, human capital). The SMERF focuses on using goods instead of owning them. This is often facilitated by a community-based online platform. The SMERF has shifted its value proposition where value is co-created with an external partner and often transcends mere monetary transactions, promoting social and environmental considerations alongside profitability.

List of characteristic features of SME ready for the future in Sharing economy:

- changes model of owing / renting resources in its business activities;
- focus on better utilization of spare resources or assets (such as infrastructure, space, skills and digital assets) ;
- uses sharing economy to reduce operational costs or cost of final product/service;
- uses sharing economy to expand offer and differentiate from competitors.

3. Transformation Processes: from SME to SMERF

3.1. Development of the Ecosystem

The Development of the Ecosystem phase takes a comprehensive and strategic approach to support low-tech and medium-tech SMEs in their journey to become "SMEs Ready for the Future" (SMERF). This crucial initial step sets the foundation for fostering innovation, resilience, and growth in the targeted regions. By focusing on building a supportive ecosystem, the project aims to create an environment where SMEs can thrive, innovate, and adapt to the rapid technological advancements and changing market dynamics.

3.1.1. Analysis of the successful transformation process from SME to SMERF

In this phase, the project conducts an in-depth analysis of successful transformation processes undertaken by SMEs across various industries and regions. Through extensive research, case studies, and consultations with industry experts, the project identifies key factors, strategies, and best practices that have led to the successful adaptation and growth of SMEs. By understanding these drivers, the project can develop tailored support mechanisms and interventions that address the specific needs and challenges faced by SMEs participating in the SMERF project.

Determining factors and best practices influencing transformation of SME toward SMERF

Joint research foreseen to be performed will answer the question how to examine/evaluate/measure each of 4 pillars:

- Innovation Culture,
- Digital Manufacturing,
- Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy,
- Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability

As a result of cooperative desktop research, a **list of characteristic features of SMERF** will be developed and **a list of already existing and ready-to-use tools, methods and solutions that support transformation SME to SMERF**, incl. applications and way of using in order to support SME depending on their needs.

This activity will lead to development of the **catalogue of best practices and success stories** presenting the results of joint research - namely developed definition and features of 'SME ready for the future'.

Audit range, methodology and measurement system to determine SME's level of advancement in 4 pillars

An innovative audit methodology that includes determining elements of 4 pillars in audited organizations will be jointly developed by project partners. The theoretical model based on the gathered knowledge will lead to defined functionalities of an expert system that will be assessing the level of advancement of a given company in each of the 4 pillars. The activity includes **development of the method of qualifying SME for transformation and transformation procedures for selecting and involving SMEs**. Available existing **audit tools for assessing companies' level of advancement in each of 4 pillars** will be identified, as well as identification of available solutions enabling scenario/roadmap generation for companies wishing to transform under the 4 pillars.

Joint organization of webinars on factors influencing transformation of SMEs.

The objective is to raise awareness and increase knowledge of innovation ecosystem entities supporting SMEs' transformation. HEIs and Innomediaries (at least 4 per PP) will take part in 4 SMERF webinars (1 per pillar) on factors influencing transformation of SMEs. The scope of each webinar will include outcomes of *Determining factors and best practices influencing transformation of SME toward SMERF* and *Audit range, methodology and measurement system to determine SME's level of advancement in 4 pillars* and specific knowhow that will be provided by external experts to be identified and invited by PPs responsible for webinars. Impact of each of the webinars will be evaluated in a survey to be developed.

Best practices and policies of more innovative partner regions to be transferred to less innovative partner regions

Within this activity, Partners from more Innovative regions (cooperation of partners from DE and AT) in exploratory research will determine best practices and policies regarding innovation systems in their regions and determine possibilities of transferring practices and policies to local authorities of less innovative partner regions (to PL, HR, IT, SK, HU) in A3.4. With the use of an audit model, the organizational culture of DE&AT local authorities organizations will be determined (pillar 1), policies, best practices and strategic initiatives regarding support in the implementation of Digital Manufacturing (pillar 2), policies and best practices regarding Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy (pillar 3) and policies and best practices regarding Green and Circular Economy and Sustainability (pillar 4).

3.1.2. Establishing Supportive Ecosystem

The Establishing Supportive Ecosystem phase is a fundamental step in the SMERF project, aimed at transforming low-tech and medium-tech SMEs into "SMEs Ready for the Future". This phase focuses on creating a robust support framework to facilitate SMEs' transformation journeys. It involves developing essential infrastructure, capacity-building initiatives, and knowledge-sharing platforms to equip stakeholders with the necessary resources to navigate modernization and adaptation challenges.

During this phase, the SMERF project lays down the foundational elements to empower SMEs towards future readiness. Instead of concentrating solely on specific project activities, the goal is to create an environment conducive to the success of SMEs undergoing transformation.

Best Practices Repository: Inspiration Knowledge Base

As part of its strategic vision, the SMERF project has initiated the development of a comprehensive Best Practices Repository named "Inspiration Knowledge Base". This repository will be tailored to collect and disseminate best practices and success stories relevant to the SMERF initiative, serving as a centralized hub to empower SMEs in their transformative journeys.

The repository will serve as valuable resource, offering a collection of case studies, innovative methodologies, and practical insights from successful SME transformations across various industries and regions. Accessible to participating SMEs within the SMERF ecosystem, it provides tangible examples of successful strategies and outcomes, aiding informed decision-making and strengthening SMEs' capabilities to navigate transformation effectively.

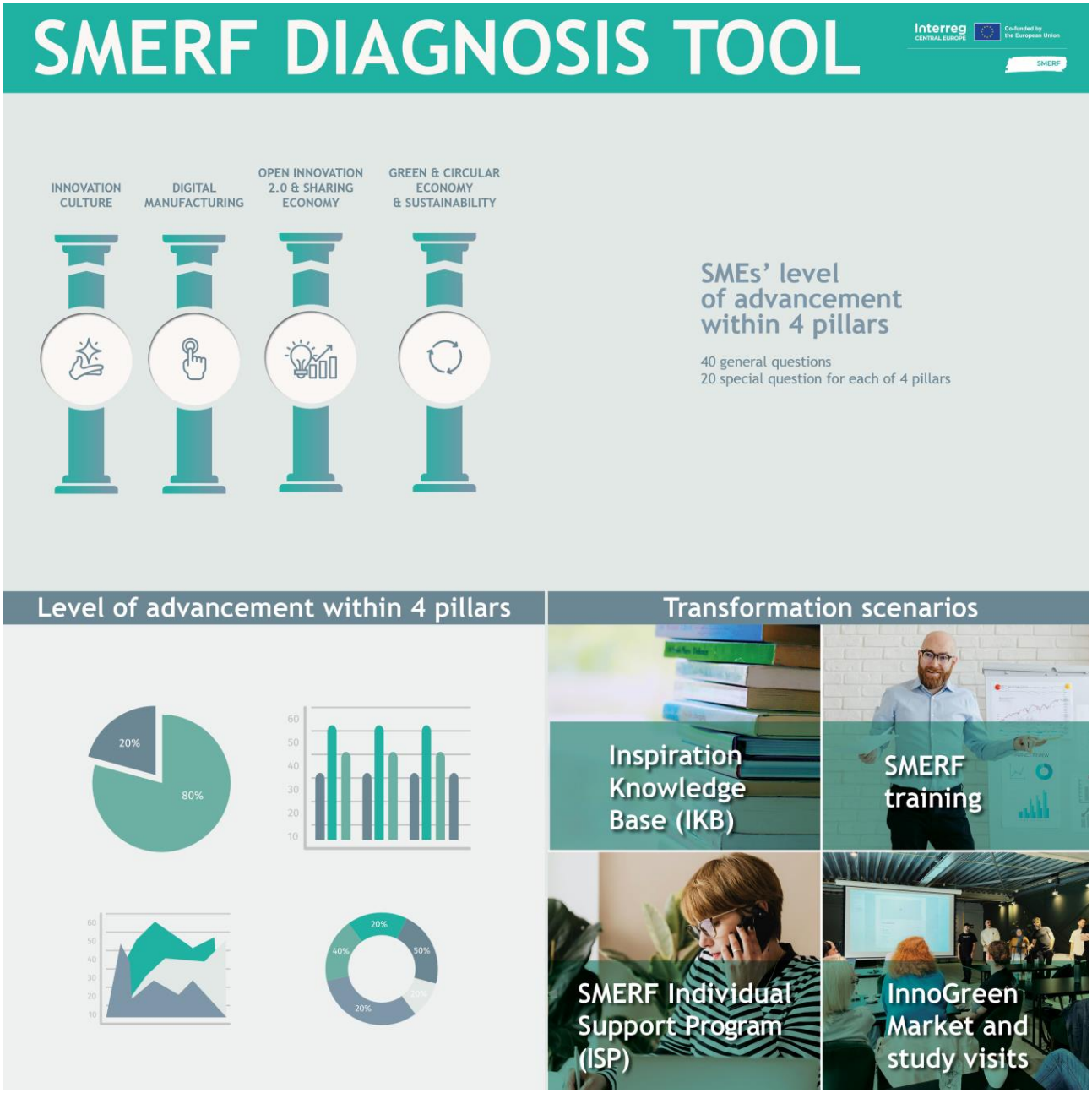
Preparation of preliminary version of SMERF Diagnosis Tool to generate transformation scenarios

The SMERF project consortium will jointly develop a preliminary version of SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT) providing features to:

- evaluate SMEs' level of advancement within 4 pillars (self-assessment functionality) and

- automatically generate transformation scenarios based on self-assessment results (expert system).

The scenarios will include recommendations covering elements of organizational culture, Digital Manufacturing, Open Innovation & Sharing Economy, Green & Circular Economy and sustainability tools, methods & solutions in audited SME. This tool will also provide a dedicated list of further training and mentoring activities that SME could follow to ensure transition to a higher level of advancement in selected pillars according to levels of advancement. Internally, SDT will allow identifying SMEs with similar transformation needs to jointly implement activities in training and mentoring activities. SDT will be available for all CE companies free of charge. Analysis of IPR and GDPR issues will be provided.



Train the SMERF mentors - preparation for mentoring towards SMERF transformation process

Participants of this training will become mentors for their regional SMEs and will be able to provide a high-standard process of developing a detailed plan of transformation implementation for SMEs interested in becoming ready for the future also thanks to the usage of SMERF Diagnosis Tool - self-assessment functionality and expert system in their cooperation with SMEs.

Mentors are expected to be representatives of external institutions, as well as by other departments/units of PPs organizations. This will cover a wider audience as well as provide SDT sustainability and transferability to other regions beyond the partnership.

The content and scope of training will be jointly developed by SMERF consortium members, while each PP organizes at least 1 training (at least 10 persons per training). Together at least 80 participants will be trained in online / hybrid / in-person mode.

SMERF TRAINING – preparation for trainings supporting transformation process for SMEs

As part of the development preparatory activities there will be conducted preparation of trainings to support SMEs in their transformation process towards SMERF. The particular scope of each training will be defined based on the knowledge gathered within previous activities leading to the organisation of at least 8 trainings related to 4 main pillars of SMERF – (1) Innovation Culture, (2) Digital Manufacturing, (3) Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy, (4) Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability.

All trainings will be held in online or hybrid form, they will be made available for SMEs from all regions of partners involved in the project and run in English (if needed, translation will be provided). The scope of trainings will cover not only outcomes developed within previous project activities but also other specific know-how & knowledge that will be provided by external experts. Each PP organises 1 training - with the support of a pillar leader to ensure joint organisation from at least 2 participating countries.

3.2. Validation and Implementation

The Validation and Implementation phase of the SMERF project implementation plan is crucial, focusing on testing and validating the developed solution. This stage carefully assesses how well these solutions work and if they meet the diverse needs and challenges faced by SMEs on their transformation journey.

Key to this phase is engaging with target groups and stakeholders to gather insights and feedback. Through targeted outreach campaigns, interactive workshops, and one-on-one consultations, the project creates a strong feedback loop, allowing for open exchanges and sharing of perspectives among stakeholders.

Additionally, this phase involves strategic efforts to attract participants for testing. Through recruitment drives, personalized invitations, and highlighting the benefits of involvement, the project aims to engage SMEs, higher education institutions (HEIs), and Innomediaries. This diverse group enriches the testing process with varied perspectives and experiences.

While the main focus is on testing solutions, this phase also includes broader communication efforts to foster understanding and engagement among stakeholders. By organizing events, sharing informative resources, and creating knowledge-sharing platforms, the project encourages dialogue and collaboration on key themes relevant to SME transformation.

Overall, this phase of the SMERF Strategy is dynamic and multifaceted, involving proactive engagement, targeted recruitment, and strategic communication. By leveraging the collective expertise and insights of stakeholders, the project refines and improves the proposed solutions, ensuring they meet the evolving needs and aspirations of SMEs. Through collaboration and shared commitment, the project aims to lay a

solid foundation for a successful transformative journey, driving meaningful impact and sustainable growth in the targeted regions.

3.2.1. Communication with target groups

During this phase, the project proactively engages with target groups such as SMEs, higher education institutions (HEIs), and Innomediaries. This is achieved through targeted outreach campaigns, workshops, and networking events. The aim is to inform stakeholders about the SMERF initiative, its goals, and the benefits of participation. By fostering open dialogue and collaboration, the project seeks to build trust and rapport, encouraging active involvement in the testing phase.

General Thematic Communication

As part of the communication strategy, the project conducts general thematic communication activities to raise awareness about key themes relevant to SME transformation. Mainly via online communication channels the project will share information and insights on innovation, digitalization, sustainability, and other important topics. By providing valuable content and facilitating knowledge sharing, the project equips stakeholders with the information and resources needed to navigate transformation challenges effectively.

Specific Thematic Communication Campaigns

In addition to general communication efforts, presenting the news about project implementation and general topic related information, we will conduct also specific communication campaign in line with implementation of especially those specific activities:

- SMERF webinars about factors influencing transformation of SMEs
- Training the SMERF mentors
- SMERF TRAINING - trainings supporting transformation process for SMEs
- SMERF Individual Support Program (ISP)
- Attracting of pilot action participants and SMERF Diagnosis Tool users
- InnoGreen market - events and study visits
- Workshop for policymakers - Innovation ecosystem development - transfer of best practices from more innovative partner regions

3.2.2. SMERF Supporting Infrastructure - implementation and pilot testing

During this crucial phase, the SMERF project focuses on thoroughly testing and validating the tools designed to aid SME transformation. This involves a comprehensive assessment of their functionality, practical applicability, and impact on SMEs' transformation journeys. The project employs rigorous testing procedures and validation protocols to ensure these tools meet the diverse needs and challenges of SMEs across various industries and regions.

SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT) - enables to evaluate SMEs' level of advancement within 4 pillars (self-assessment functionality) and automatically generates transformation scenarios based on self-assessment results (expert system). The scenarios will include recommendations covering elements of innovation culture, digital manufacturing, open innovation & sharing economy, green & circular economy and sustainability tools, methods & solutions in audited SME.

Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB) - online knowledge repository containing theoretical and practical approach and best practices and success stories regarding 4 pillars.

Training for the SMERF mentors - trainings for HEIs and Innomediaries to become mentors for their regional SMEs with the aim to provide them knowledge to provide a high-standard process of developing a detailed plan of transformation implementation for SMEs interested in becoming ready for the future.

SMERF TRAINING – (online or hybrid form) trainings supporting transformation process for SMEs related to 4 main pillars of SMERF – (1) Innovation Culture, (2) Digital Manufacturing, (3) Open Innovation 2.0 & Sharing Economy, (4) Green & Circular Economy & Sustainability.

SMERF Individual Support Program (ISP) - individual mentoring program supporting design a detailed plan of transformation implementation & provide guidance on initial steps within low and medium tech SMEs.

InnoGreen Market and study visits – international networking events enabling exchange of experiences among big companies presenting their needs and SMEs presenting their services with strategic objective – awareness raising about state-of-the-art solutions and their practical implementation supporting domestic and international competitiveness.

ALL TOOLS

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SMERF

SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT)

Assessment of SMEs within each of 4 pillars SMERF Diagnosis Tool

Based on the audit results - individual transformation scenarios

Planned to be tested by at least 160 SMEs

Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB)

Online platform presenting webinars and more than 30 good practices describing success transition stories and other thematic valuable knowledge

Training for the SMERF mentors

At least 80 participants, representatives of BSO and HEIs, will be trained to further share the knowledge and provide the support for SMEs

SMERF training

8 special trainings supporting SMEs in their transformation process towards SMERF

SMERF Individual Support Program (ISP)

Mentoring and experts consultations for more than 20 SMEs to support their transition from SME to SMERF

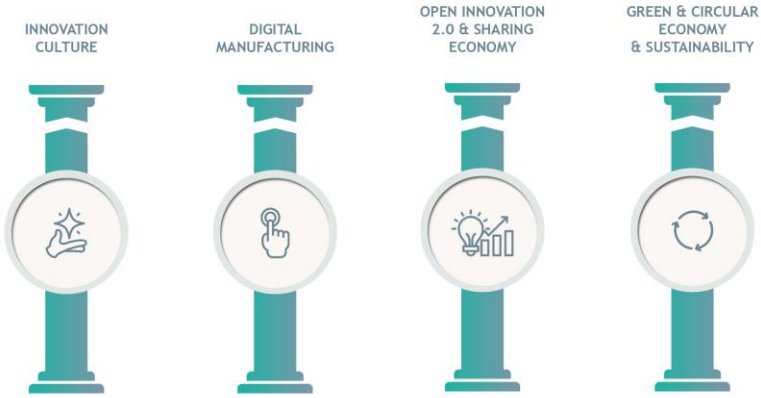
Inno-Green Market and study visits

Cross-regional event and 16 study visits where SMEs will present their products and services to big companies

Big companies will present their needs, whereas SMEs will be able to present their services and get insight into why transformation towards SMERF is beneficial for them

SMERF DIAGNOSIS TOOL

SMEs' level of advancement within 4 pillars



Automatic generation of transformation scenarios based on self-assessment results

Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB)

Online platform presenting webinars and more than 30 good practices describing success transition stories and other thematic valuable knowledge

SMERF training

8 special trainings supporting SMEs in their transformation process towards SMERF

SMERF Individual Support Program (ISP)

Mentoring and experts consultations for more than 20 SMEs to support their transition from SME to SMERF

InnoGreen Market and study visits

Cross-regional event and 16 study visits where SMEs will present their products and services to big companies

Big companies will present their needs, whereas SMEs will be able to present their services and get insight into why transformation towards SMERF is beneficial for them

Conclusion: Empowering SMEs for Future Success

In conclusion, the SMERF Strategy showcases our strong commitment to creating a new era of prosperity and resilience for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) across Central Europe. It is more than just a plan; it represents our collective vision of empowerment, innovation, and sustainable growth.

Throughout the implementation of the SMERF Strategy, we have adhered to the core principles of our mission. Every step, from analyzing successful transformation processes to building infrastructure and scaling impactful initiatives, has been aimed at making SMEs truly "Ready for the Future."

Our journey with the SMERF Strategy has been characterized by collaboration, innovation, and a relentless pursuit of excellence. By forming strategic partnerships with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Innomediaries, government entities, and industry stakeholders, we have created a strong support system to nurture SMEs at every stage of their development.

Reflecting on our achievements and the impact we've made, it is clear that our work is ongoing. The path to SMERF success involves continuous improvement, adaptation, and innovation. We are committed to maintaining this momentum, deepening partnerships, and amplifying our collective impact to ensure that SMEs continue to thrive in an ever-changing landscape.

Our vision for SMERF extends beyond mere survival; it envisions a future where SMEs lead in innovation, sustainability, and inclusive growth. By using the lessons we've learned, adopting best practices, and embracing new technologies, we aim to guide SMEs towards a future where they not only survive but flourish.

We are deeply grateful to all stakeholders who have contributed to the success of the SMERF Strategy. Together, we have embarked on a transformative journey driven by passion, collaboration, and a shared commitment to SME empowerment. As we continue this journey, let us remain dedicated to building a vibrant, inclusive, and resilient ecosystem where SMEs can thrive and shape the future of Central Europe.

The road ahead may be challenging, but with determination and collective effort, we are confident that the best is yet to come. With SMERF as our guiding light, we are ready to embrace the future with optimism, courage, and unwavering commitment.

Quality Assurance Approval

Partner	Member of the Quality Assurance Team	Result of the quality check	Date of the quality check
(QAT1)	Stefanie Neumayer (PP2 Biz-Up)	☒ accepted	07.10.2024
(QAT2)	Federico Manara (PP7 UNIGE)	☒ accepted	09.10.2024