**Acronym: BenchmarkXGaps**

**Policy Objective:** Smarter Europe (Policy Objective 1)

**Specific Objective:** S3, Industry, and Entrepreneurship

**Lead Partner:** Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency (SIEA)

**Project Idea:** One of the EU’s fundamental challenges with each wave of enlargement is the variation in regional economic and innovation performance. These differences persist not only among member states but also within regions of those countries. The Covid-19 pandemic and military conflict in Ukraine have further exacerbated these disparities. The Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2023 revealed that “regional pockets of excellence” exist in several of the least innovative EU countries, including Malopolskie in Poland and Bratislavský kraj in Slovakia. Conversely, regions such as Swietokrzyskie and Východné Slovensko significantly lag behind these high-performing areas.

While current EU initiatives, such as recovery plans and cohesion policy mechanisms, aim to address these disparities and promote convergence in terms of income, productivity, and innovation, their effectiveness depends on the level of linkages between regional ecosystem actors. Regular evaluation of existing settings and adjustments to methodological approaches for evaluating these linkages are essential. These evaluations can be inspired by helix models (such as triple, quadruple, or multiple helix models).

The fundamental unit of linkages that stimulates knowledge diffusion, leading to increased innovativeness and competitiveness of business entities, is a cluster. The EU has recognized the importance of cluster organizations for the economy over the last 20 years. The development of cluster collaboration platforms, regular cluster-oriented meetings and conferences, and dedicated structural funding schemes has fostered strong networks of entrepreneurs, research organizations, public entities, and other actors across crucial industrial sectors and regions. Additionally, active evaluation of cluster organization management quality (including excellence certification by the European Secretariat for Cluster Analysis), performance (through national cluster assessment mechanisms), and projects (via national and transnational project evaluations) has enhanced existing clusters in Europe.

However, effective knowledge diffusion and transfers within regions also depend on other forms of networking, cooperation, and the engagement of various stakeholders. To address existing regional and interregional gaps and develop evidence-based policies, comprehensive analysis of all forms of interaction is necessary, leveraging advanced technologies and methodological approaches. Data analytics plays a crucial role in evaluating business networks and improving the economic situation of regions.

**BenchmarkXGaps** aims to reduce regional imbalances in Europe by utilizing modern technologies (such as artificial intelligence and big data) and existing benchmarking policies. The project will focus on evaluating the effectiveness of networking between innovation ecosystem actors at both regional and interregional levels. Based on the results of this analysis, the project will adapt and refine policies to accelerate the impact of transnational policies aimed at reducing regional disparities.

The project’s specific goals include:

1. Developing new analytical tools or expanding existing ones to assess linkage quality based on patterns observed in more developed regions.
2. Enhancing linkages between innovation ecosystem actors across all participating regions, drawing from evidence and best practices.
3. Refining regional and national policies to maximize the effects of transnational policies targeting regional disparities.

The project aims to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Identification and sharing of **24 good practices**.
2. Organization of **40 regional and stakeholder events** and **6 interregional events and study visits**.
3. Hosting a **final conference/dissemination event**.
4. Creation of a **Joint Policy recommendation** focused on fostering regional benchmarking mechanisms.

The subsequent application of the new regional benchmarks within the project partner regions is expected to contribute to further reducing regional disparities and improving Europe’s overall economic performance