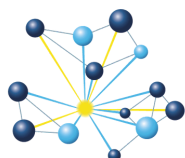
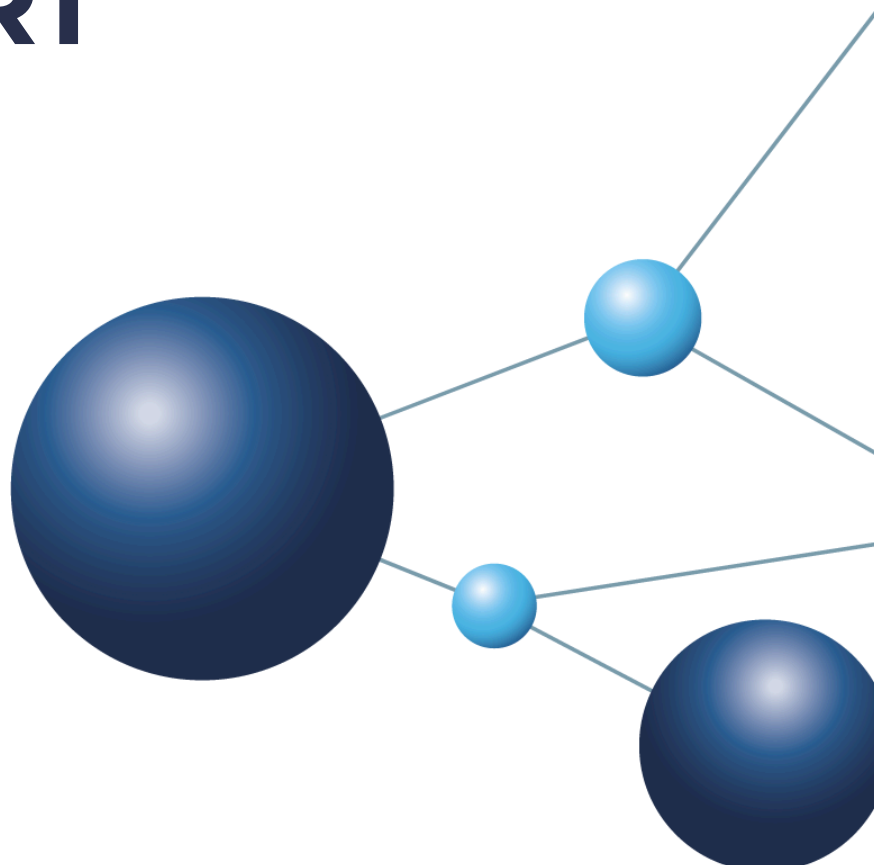


Regions Leading by Example.

The Vanguard Initiative

20 ANNUAL
25 REPORT



VANGUARD INITIATIVE
New growth through smart specialisation

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Annual Report 2025

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Introductory Word

As the new Chair of the Board, I would like to begin by extending a warm thank you to Gavin Lewis from our Welsh member region, who so ably fulfilled the dual roles of Chair and Treasurer in 2025. The past couple of years have been rather turbulent ones for the Vanguard Initiative following its tenth anniversary in 2023, during which Gavin's open and conciliatory leadership proved of immense value to the network.

Growing into maturity is never a straightforward process—especially for a European network. After the expansion and growing pains that followed our creation in 2013, VI now finds itself entering a phase of consolidation. This moment calls for new skills and actions, as we navigate a wider reflection on the role of regions and the future of smart specialisation strategies within the EU's innovation and industrial policy landscape.

Despite these challenges, VI has continued to demonstrate its innovative spirit. A major milestone was the long-awaited launch of our interregional funding tool, *VInnovate*, in 2024—a true collective achievement. Not all members are yet participating in the annual calls, but during 2025 we made solid progress in professionalising and institutionalising the tool within VI. Likewise, our pilot activities—many now a decade old—are being reformed to deliver greater impact, sharpen focus, and open new spaces for emerging areas of innovation.

The General Assembly last November entrusted the newly elected Board with a strong mandate to build upon the strategic and structural renewal launched in 2025. The original *can-do* spirit of VI is alive and well, and we intend to reinvigorate it throughout our term so that we may once again “lead interregional innovation collaboration by example.” The Board will actively reach out to members to engage them in the network's transition, and to external partners and potential new regions ready to join our collective effort. In an era defined by strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty, deeper and broader collaboration across the European innovation ecosystem is essential—not only to safeguard Europe's industrial strength but to seize the opportunities of decarbonisation and digital transformation.

On behalf of the VI Board, I look forward to working with all of you in the months and years ahead, building on the important restructuring work launched in 2025 and shaping together the next chapter of our shared journey.

Ellen Mulder
Chair of VI Board

Transition and Renewal of the Vanguard Initiative

Following its 10th anniversary in 2023, the Vanguard Initiative (VI) entered a phase of transition. A rapidly evolving European framework for innovation and industrial policy, coupled with the maturity of VI's initial mission, has made a comprehensive reform of the network both timely and necessary.

This reform process began in the second half of 2024 and accelerated throughout 2025.

It includes a two-step renewal of the VI Pilots — a first operational reform in 2024, followed by a more strategic repositioning in 2025 to be implemented over the course of 2026.

The VI Secretariat also underwent structural changes, with the appointment of a new Network Manager in February 2025 and the addition of part-time communication support in September, aligned with available resources.



After steady growth from its 10 founding members in 2013 to 40 by 2021/22, VI experienced a challenging period of contraction. In 2025, membership decreased from 33 to 25 regions, underscoring the scale of the current transformation and the need to reaffirm the network's value proposition.

While many European regions continue to embrace Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) — the foundation of VI's interregional collaboration model — the role of S3 within EU policy has weakened, as reflected in discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). VI Pilots have long showcased the potential of S3 to foster innovation partnerships, but they have also revealed its limits for achieving broader, deeper collaboration. The introduction of the *Vinnovate* interregional funding instrument in 2024 gave new impetus to pilot activities, yet these incremental reforms alone have not been sufficient to fully address the changing European landscape.

The High-Level Directors' Meeting (HLDM) in Cracow in June 2025 provided an opportunity for members to reflect on the network's current state and to set the foundations for the strategic review to be pursued by the Board in the second half of the year.

The newly elected VI Board, appointed in November 2025, is now tasked with steering the Initiative through this transition and preparing it for the upcoming MFF period (2028–2034). The November 2025 General Assembly provided a valuable forum for members to voice their expectations and reaffirm their commitment to a renewed, "Vanguard-like" future direction.

The Vanguard Initiative remains a unique and vital platform for interregional collaboration in Europe. Its continued success will depend on its capacity to adapt, innovate, and engage strategically with European stakeholders. By viewing this transition as an opportunity for renewal, VI can strengthen its leadership in driving innovation and industrial competitiveness across Europe.

Improved Internal Governance & Meeting Structure

Over the past few years, the Vanguard Initiative (VI) has undertaken a broad review of its internal governance to ensure greater efficiency, stability, and accountability. This process was motivated by increasing challenges in maintaining an effective Board structure, particularly concerning the roles of Chair and Treasurer.

In response, the Board initiated several reform measures to strengthen its mandate and improve overall continuity. The most significant change — approved by the General Assembly through a written consultation in October 2025 — extended Board mandates from one to two years and set new parameters for the number of members, establishing a minimum of four and a maximum of eight. Six new Board members with two-year terms were elected in 2025, representing East Netherlands (Chair), Slovenia (Treasurer), Małopolska, Lombardy, Lower Saxony, and Aragon. To enhance coordination and transparency, the Board now convenes online every two months, complemented by one annual in-person meeting, which in 2025 took place in September alongside the mid-term review of the VI Pilots. Meeting summaries and presentations are shared with all members through the monthly newsletter to strengthen communication across the network.

Parallel to the Board reform, VI streamlined its internal meeting structure to clarify roles and avoid duplication. The Network Representatives Meeting (NRM) is now held in conjunction with the General Assembly, ensuring an efficient balance between policy dialogue and statutory decision-making. The NRM provides an open forum for discussion on interregional collaboration and innovation policy, while the General Assembly focuses on formal Association matters such as adopting the annual and financial reports, approving the budget, and electing Board members. In 2025, two General Assemblies were held in May and November, with the first combined with the NRM. An additional NRM was organized alongside the Policy Influencing Task Group following the publication of the new MFF proposal.

To better engage the political and strategic levels of the member regions, the governance structure at this level is being simplified. The High-Level Directors' Meeting (HLDM) and the Annual Political Meeting (APM) will be merged into a single annual meeting, providing a more coherent platform for strategic dialogue. In 2025, the HLDM, hosted by the Małopolska region in Cracow, served as the starting point for the VI strategic review process.

Operational coordination has also been strengthened across the Secretariat, pilot activities, Vinnovate, and policy influencing functions. The Vanguard Pilot Monitoring (VPM), co-chaired by the VI Secretary General and pilot representatives, met every two months to review progress and ensure joint ownership between the Secretariat and pilots. The Vinnovate Secretariat was fully integrated into the VI Secretariat, with the Vinnovate Manager overseeing the delivery of annual calls. The Policy Influencing Task Group was chaired by the Secretary General in 2025 to ensure continued policy engagement despite temporary internal task member changes. A more in-depth structural review of this task force is foreseen for 2026.

Together, these measures mark important steps toward a stronger, more resilient governance framework that supports the Vanguard Initiative's mission to lead interregional innovation collaboration in Europe.

Strengthening VI's Operations

Member conversations as well as the HLDLM meeting in Cracow stressed the urgent need for reforms of VI's current operations, which had been pending for too long, as well as integrating the different parts working too much in isolation of each other in the past.

The Reform of the Pilots

A dedicated working group composed of pilot coordinators, Board members, and representatives from selected regions has been developing proposals to reform the current VI pilots since 2023. The first reform package, approved in 2023, included 13 recommendations aimed at improving the efficiency of the pilots. Implementation took place throughout 2024 and 2025, introducing measures such as biannual pilot reviews (mid-term and end-of-year), the Gateway pilot member connection tool, enhanced communication between pilots and the Secretariat, and streamlined financial procedures amongst others.

Building on this progress, a second reform package was developed between the second half of 2024 and the first half of 2025 under the leadership of South NL and Emilia Romagna, with the latter drafting the final report. This second reform focused on deeper structural improvements across four key areas:

1. Introduction of a **pilot lifecycle** with clearly defined starting and ending phase to sharpen focus on impact while reflecting evolving regional innovation priorities.
2. A **strengthened strategic framework** for pilot coordination, clarifying the respective roles of the VI Secretariat and pilot coordinators to reduce overlap and prioritize outcomes.
3. A **democase support system** to reinforce collaboration among participating partners.
4. A **review of the pilot budget and fee system** to enable regions to access all active pilots.

The final report was approved by the Board in September and subsequently by the General Assembly in November. It now serves as the framework for operationalising the four reform areas. The Vanguard Pilot Monitoring (VPM) members will translate these recommendations into concrete actions during 2026, with the new pilot membership fee structure expected to take effect in 2027.

In parallel, the 2025 mid-term reviews of all eight pilots—3DP, ESM, Nano, AI, ADMA, Hydrogen, Bioeconomy, and Smart Health— were conducted both in person and online during the September Board meeting. Based on these results, the Board decided to discontinue AI and Nano as standalone pilots due to limited member participation and output despite sustained efforts by coordinators. Their active democases will be integrated into the ESM and 3DP pilots in 2026, as these two explore closer collaboration and an eventual merger into a broader *"Manufacturing for the Future"* pilot in 2027. This new framework will address rapid technological shifts in manufacturing, particularly the convergence of industrial AI, robotics, and related innovations.

Further pilot consolidation is expected in 2026, focusing on the key manufacturing themes of the twin transition—digitalisation and decarbonisation—alongside green energy (hydrogen, offshore wind), health, and bioeconomy/biotech, aligning with the EU’s strategic priorities under the envisaged European Competitiveness Fund.

Collaboration and learning among pilots have continued to deepen through the Vanguard Pilot Monitoring (VPM). At each meeting, pilot coordinators present their recent activities and challenges, exchange experiences, and coordinate joint efforts to implement the reform agenda and the use of the Gateway platform.

Finally, the Secretariat and the Board have continued to closely monitor financial support for pilots, especially regarding the use of previously unspent budgets. The 2025 financial review showed marked improvements in spending and reporting, with further progress expected in 2026.

The second call of VInnovate

Following the successful launch of **VInnovate**, VI’s interregional funding instrument, in 2024 with 11 participating member regions, the second call was implemented in 2025. Once again, 11 regions took part—Basque Country, East NL, Emilia-Romagna, Galicia, Lombardy, Lower Austria, Lower Saxony, Norte, North-East Romania, Southern NL, and Wales—following the official launch of Call 2025 in early February.

VInnovate received **31 full proposals**, up from 28 in 2024, submitted by **94 organisations** (compared to 64 the previous year). This increase reflects the growing complexity of projects, which now extend beyond bilateral cooperations to involve multiple regions and broader value-chain partnerships.

At its evaluation meeting in December, the Board approved **17 out of 31 proposals** for funding, representing a total project volume of **€7.2 million** and involving **54 organisations**. This marks a significant rise from 2024’s 12 funded projects (€6.1 million, 39 organisations).

The approved projects of the 2024 & 2025 calls span three key thematic domains aligned with the VI pilots:

1. Digital and Advanced Technologies for Industrial Competitiveness

- *Call 2025:* AI, XR, and digital twins for construction safety (Galicia, NERO); factory digital twins for adaptive production scheduling (Lombardy, Galicia); XR-based SME lean and ergonomic optimisation (Lombardy, Lower Saxony); additive manufacturing of high-efficiency heat exchangers (Emilia-Romagna, Galicia); AI-enabled inspection of ageing infrastructure (Emilia-Romagna, East NL); digital traceability and compliance tools for forestry value chains (Norte, Galicia).
- *Call 2024:* AI-enabled optimisation of logistics and delivery routing (NERO, Emilia-Romagna); secure digital platforms for additive manufacturing data and IP management (Wales, East NL); additive manufacturing of integrated catalytic heating structures (Flanders, Noord Brabant).

2. Clean, Circular and Resource-Efficient Industrial Systems

- *Call 2025*: Biobased polymers and circular recycling for technical textiles (Lombardy, Wales); circular agro-energy systems for farm-level energy autonomy and nutrient recovery (Emilia-Romagna, Wales, Lombardy); smart offshore connection systems for marine renewable energy (Wales, Galicia); sodium-ion structural batteries reducing dependence on critical raw materials (Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Lower Austria); additively manufactured propulsion components for space applications (Galicia, Lower Austria).
- *Call 2024*: Circular bioeconomy valorisation of agricultural residues through biorefinery processes (NERO, Norte, Wales); recycling and traceability solutions integrated into industrial production (Emilia-Romagna, NERO); additive manufacturing using recycled thermoplastics and fibres (Wallonia, East NL); AI and digital twin tools to reduce waste and emissions in manufacturing (Galicia, Wales); advanced monitoring systems for tidal energy turbine blades (Galicia, Wales).

3. Digital Health and Resilient Healthcare Systems

- *Call 2025*: AI chatbots for clinical decision support (Norte, NERO); wearable and AI-based cardiac monitoring for home care (Wales, Noord Brabant); biomechanical monitoring for preventive care and rehabilitation (Norte, Noord Brabant); data-driven personalised rehabilitation solutions (Wales, Lower Saxony, East NL).
- *Call 2024*: Hybrid osteochondral scaffolds for regenerative treatment and in-vitro testing (Emilia-Romagna, Noord Brabant, Norte); bioactive aerogels and smart textiles for wound monitoring (Norte, Galicia); photonic integrated circuits for personal health monitoring (East NL, Wales); additively manufactured medical orthosis for antifungal drug delivery (Noord Brabant, Galicia).

In terms of overall **Vinnovate management**, the VI Secretary General and the Vinnovate Manager (contracted from IDEA Consult) worked closely to ensure smooth operation of the call process and to begin integrating early lessons. Looking ahead, priority will be given to involving the remaining VI members that have not yet joined Vinnovate. Individual discussions launched in 2025 will continue through 2026 to explore options for participation by 2027 or 2028, leveraging regional development funds or national and European programmes managed by regional authorities.

A changing EU policy landscape for policy influencing

Under the leadership of **Wallonia**, supported by several member regions with Brussels offices—including the Basque Country, South NL, and Wales—as well as former VI members such as Scotland and Baden-Württemberg, the Policy Influencing Task Group (PITG) entered a period of transition in 2025. Their joint efforts had resulted in several **VI positioning papers** in the past, that strengthened the network's visibility and voice at the European level.

At the same time, some leading members became less available, and the proposal for the new **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)** introduced uncertainty for regions whose strategic role appeared to be diminished. This period prompted an internal reflection within the regional networks to reassess how best

to engage in the new MFF discussions and reassert the crucial importance of regions in shaping place-based innovation strategies.

Despite these challenges, the **PITG met five times in 2025**, exchanging views on major EU policy developments and contributing to multiple consultations related to the MFF. These discussions helped identify priority areas for future engagement. Consistent with VI's mandate, the future of **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)** and **Interregional Innovation Investments (I3)** remains a key preoccupation. The emerging **European Competitiveness Fund**—with its orientation toward higher Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs)—aligns closely with VI's mission. Similarly, the innovation dimension of **Horizon Europe**, particularly the European Innovation Ecosystems initiative, resonates strongly with VI's multi-stakeholder, place-based approach, while cluster development continues to play an essential role.

The evolving EU policy context has also underscored a broader challenge for VI: the need to move beyond its past achievements in driving the rollout of S3 across Europe and to adapt to new realities shaped by recurrent energy crises and transformative technologies such as AI. In this regard, 2025 marked an inflection point. The call for a **renewed political strategy** and stronger regional commitment has become evident, and this renewal process will form a central part of VI's agenda throughout 2026 and 2027—to ensure the network's continued relevance and impact in a rapidly changing innovation landscape.

Improved communication

Following the establishment of a renewed **VI Secretariat**—with an outsourced Network Manager appointed in February and part-time Communication Manager in September—VI's communication activities gained renewed momentum throughout 2025. The **monthly newsletter** was reintroduced, providing members with regular updates on governance and operations, including Board minutes and presentations, as well as information on VI and member events, EU policy news, and project opportunities.

The **VI website**, having become outdated over recent years, entered a redesign process. Although progress was slower than planned due to budget constraints, the website revamp began in the second half of 2025 and is scheduled for completion in the first quarter of 2026. Once relaunched, it will serve as an active communication hub to share updates on pilot activities, upcoming events, and the next **Vinnovate Call**.

VI maintained an active **social media presence**, focusing primarily on its LinkedIn community to promote key events, milestones, and networking opportunities.

Looking ahead, 2026 will see continued efforts to **revitalise VI's knowledge-sharing platform** and develop **updated promotional materials** to attract new members and strengthen external engagement.

Consolidated finances

VI's financial management required consolidation, particularly regarding outstanding membership and payment issues that had accumulated due to the absence of a fully operational Secretariat in 2024. Thanks to the close cooperation between the **Treasurer** and the **Network Manager**, most of these issues were successfully resolved, with only a few remaining matters to be finalised in early 2026.

The **income situation** was stabilised with all 2025 membership payments received and most of past outstanding membership payments collected leading to total revenue of Euro 483.500. Expenses have been kept very tightly with regard to the Secretariat, while further investments have gone into financing the second call of Vinnovate and the Gateway platform for the pilots. The **pilot finances** have now been cleared of past dues, and the financial management process was simplified for 2026. All those efforts resulted in a positive result of Euro 12.838 (see financial report 2025 for details). Given the turbulent times ahead in 2026, VI is financially sound with sufficient reserves to weather the current reduction in members.

New **budgetary codes** were introduced to streamline accounting, and VI's **general and pilot accounts** were clearly separated to ensure greater transparency about available resources, including accumulated reserves that can be allocated for future investments. Looking ahead, a **multi-year annual budget** will be developed during 2026. This will be closely linked to VI's renewed political strategy and the long-term commitment of its member regions.

Outlook for 2026

2025 was a year of consolidation and stabilisation for the Vanguard Initiative. While the year was not without challenges—most notably the departure of some key members such as Scotland and Baden-Württemberg—our internal structures have emerged stronger. Streamlined governance, a transparent financial framework, renewed communication, and the strengthening of our operations through the pilot reform, the continuation of *Vinnovate*, and the launched restructuring of the Policy Influencing Task Force, have positioned the Vanguard Initiative to confidently look toward the future.

The context in which VI operates today is profoundly different from when it was founded in 2013. The challenge of achieving an *industrial renaissance*—a term once used by the European Commission—has evolved into a question of survival for many European industries. In this environment, reaffirming the role of regions within Europe’s industrial and innovation policy is crucial. The ongoing negotiations around the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) present both opportunities and challenges for European regions to remain key actors. Place-based, smart specialisation-driven innovation strategies will continue to be essential bottom-up drivers of Europe’s strategic autonomy and competitiveness agenda. Yet, they will need to be complemented by broader, more integrated innovation approaches.



Against this backdrop, the Vanguard Initiative will reach out to its long-standing partners in the European Commission—particularly within DG GROW, DG RTD, and DG REGIO—to define a new mission for the 2028–2034 period. We will also deepen collaboration with other European regional networks to strengthen the collective voice of regions and foster complementarity across different initiatives. In 2026, VI’s Board plans to engage with potential new member regions aligned with our vision of *leading by example*.

In uncertain times, collaboration and cohesion are more vital than ever. Over the past twelve years, the Vanguard Initiative has developed a diverse and dynamic network encompassing regional authorities, industry clusters, technology institutes, SMEs, and universities. Through its portfolio of interregional innovation pilots—and the project support provided by *Vinnovate*—VI has translated collaboration ideas into action while engaging with EU policymakers on instruments such as the I3 and S3 CoP. Acting as a practical incubator of the Smart Specialisation Strategy, VI has helped shape EU instruments that accelerate innovation-driven regional collaboration.

Looking ahead, achieving Europe's strategic autonomy will require deeper and broader cooperation. The Vanguard Initiative network is ready once again to lead by example—turning uncertainty into opportunity, and ensuring that by the next MFF period, VI is not only prepared but once again at the forefront of Europe's industrial transformation.



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