Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021-2027

Autumn 2024
Newsletter 1

SMEnergy Project Newsletter

Introducing the SMEnergy project

Industrial small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Danube region are currently facing numerous energy related challenges. Many of these businesses have energy intensive operations, making energy costs a significant financial burden. To remain competitive, they seek strategies to optimise their energy usage. Additionally, heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels has heightened concerns about energy security and consequently the longevity of their businesses. These challenges are being confronted at a time when the ongoing energy transition and the EU's ambitious goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 is forcing SMEs to change their energy consumption habits.

However, an SME's ability to adapt and transition to a greener economy is often limited by scarce resources—such as time, expertise, and funding. As SMEs aim for greater energy independence, numerous concerns and uncertainties arise: *How can I optimise energy use in my business? Will my investment yield a return? How do I effectively implement the necessary changes?* These are just some of the critical questions for which SMEs seek clear answers.

In February 2024, the transnational project consortium convened in Ptuj, Slovenia for the official kick-off meeting of the SMEnergy project

The recently approved **Interreg Danube SMEnergy project** hopes to provide answers to these questions and more. By developing, testing, and implementing a network of regional and countrywide service centres, SMEnergy aims to make the transition to renewable energy for SMEs easier. For the next two-and-a-half years, the transnational pilot project aims to support energy-intensive SMEs in accelerating the transition to adopting renewable energies.

Learn more in this first edition of the SMEnergy project newsletter.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

Introducing SMEnergy...1
Regional Highlights.....2-5
Project Background 6
Partnership 7
Contact 7

PROJECT DETAILS

Period: 01 January 2024 - 30 June 2026

Budget: € 2,065,115

Interreg Funds: 80%

Interreg Danube Region

Co-funded by the European Union

SMEnergy

@Interreg Danube SMEnergy Project

Interreg Danube SMEnergy Project

www.interreg-danube.eu/smenergy

REGIONAL ANALYSES

Shortly after the project launch, partners began their comprehensive regional analyses; the research methodology consisted of desk research combined with interviews with SMEs to identify specific needs to address as well as best practices to highlight within their respective regions. Selected SMEs across all partner countries were interviewed to provide a snapshot of the regional markets of green energy. In-depth interviews are suitable tools for understanding these groups' real problems, the potential gaps in services or market coordination mechanisms, and the potential distortive elements.

SMENERGY ACROSS THE DANUBE REGION

The transnational SMEnergy project consortium consists of 10 partners and 8 associated partners from across the Danube region. For the next two-and-a-half years, the transnational pilot project aims to support energy-intensive SMEs in accelerating the transition to adopting renewable energies. Read on to learn more about the diverse partnership.

A snapshot of Ptuj, Slovenia — home of Lead Partner, LEASP

LEASP (Slovenia)

The Local Energy Agency Spodnje Podravje (LEASP), based in Ptuj, Slovenia serves as the energy manager for over 20 municipalities in the Podravje region in addition to being the lead partner in the SMEnergy project. LEASP's core activities include developing local energy strategies, energy auditing, and supporting both public and private sectors in energy efficiency and renewable energy sources initiatives. With extensive experience in EU-funded projects, LEASP actively promotes sustainable energy development by facilitating investments and providing training on energy-related topics.

LEASP has joined the SMEnergy project to leverage its expertise in regional energy management and sustainability. Through this project, LEASP aims to support SMEs in adopting energy-efficient practices and renewable energy solutions, fostering a greener business environment and advancing local and national energy goals.

Energiaklub (Hungary)

Energiaklub, founded in 1990, is a leading independent nonprofit organisation based in Budapest that focuses on climate protection, energy efficiency, and renewable energy, as well as conventional energy resources. It develops climate and energy strategies for municipalities, conducts research, provides policy recommendations, and delivers training courses. As a "think & do" tank, Energiaklub actively supports decision-makers, government bodies, and the public in adopting sustainable energy practices. Its initiatives span local, national, and international levels, emphasising the importance of connecting the dots across sectors, countries and communities to drive impactful climate action.

Energiaklub joined the SMEnergy project because of their expertise in energy efficiency and renewable energy positions them as a valuable partner in developing solutions for energy-intensive SMEs. Through their impartial and scientifically rigorous research, combined with their history of collaborating with European organisations, they contribute to creating standardised frameworks, identifying best practices, and engaging key stakeholders to drive the green energy transition.

The enthusiastic team at Energiaklub

FIB (Austria)

The Wirtschaftsagentur Burgenland Forschungs- und Innovations GmbH (FIB) is responsible for the implementation of market near research, development and innovation projects. The main topics and areas of expertise are future energy supply, renewable energies, and energy storage. FIB supports companies and municipalities located in Burgenland in the development, planning and implementation of innovative projects in the fields of: energy management; digitalisation; climate & environmental management. FIB also offers know-how, gathered from in-house research and European R&D projects, as a service provider or cooperation partner in joint innovation projects.

SMENERGY ACROSS THE DANUBE REGION

Through collaboration with international partners, FIB, as project partners in the SMEnergy project, gain valuable insights to help SMEs and other institutions strategically expand their expertise in renewable energy and energy efficiency. This cross-border cooperation opens new perspectives and promotes the exchange of innovative ideas that can be implemented in internal projects or operational processes. Additionally, access to proven practices and technologies from other countries allows FIB to develop tailored solutions for specific challenges, enabling us to benefit from these shared experiences in the long term.

PC-TREND - Formáció Group - in Hungary

PC-TREND (Hungary)

PC-TREND Ltd. - Formáció Group - is a consulting company dedicated to the professional support of European SMEs in their development. For 20 years, they have been dealing with the competitiveness, team cohesion and systemic development of organisations, especially SMEs. Their colleagues, whether employees or subcontractors, work daily to help clients achieve their goals. Through PC-TREND's international projects and research, they also inspire and innovate with their partners.

In Hungary, SMEs receive very diffuse and difficult to understand information about the potential of renewable energy; they don't know who to turn to when they have questions, and they don't know exactly how much investment they would have to make to get off fossil energy sources and over what time horizon. Even if they do make an investment, they face many administrative and legal interpretation hurdles. This is why PC-TREND was one of the initiators of the SMEnergy project. As they started to discuss this issue with international partners, it became clear that companies in the Danube region are facing similar problems in many places, and there are countries that are already ahead of the curve. Partners at PC-TREND expect the project to be able to develop a complex solution that can be used by Hungarian businesses.

DEX IC (Czech Republic)

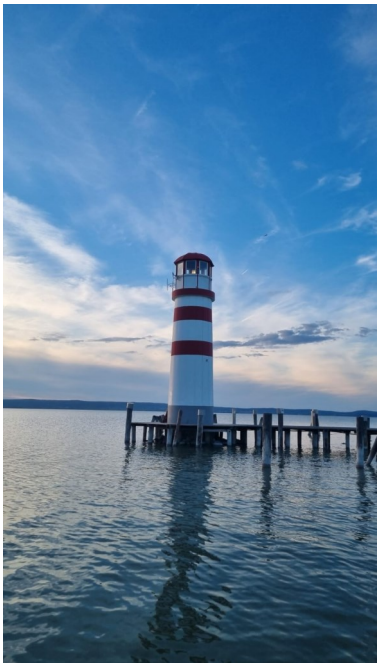
DEX Innovation Centre (DEX IC) is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to advancing innovation, supporting startups, and driving impactful research across Central Europe. With a decade of experience, DEX IC focuses on fundraising, co-creating innovations, building and scaling startups, and educating entrepreneurs to empower the next generation of innovators. As a key player in the energy and tech sectors, DEX IC works closely with partners to develop sustainable solutions for future growth.

Within SMEnergy, DEX IC aims to leverage its expertise in co-creating innovations and supporting SMEs in their green energy transitions. This aligns perfectly with DEX IC's mission to influence a greener future positively. With a proven track record in energy and innovation, DEX IC aims to apply the knowledge gained from previous successful projects like PPI2Innovate and PROMOTER to drive the success of the SMEnergy pilots.

As the project lead and responsible partner for the "Elaboration and piloting of the SMEnergy programme", DEX IC will oversee the implementation of piloting activities and ensure that all expected outcomes are successfully delivered.

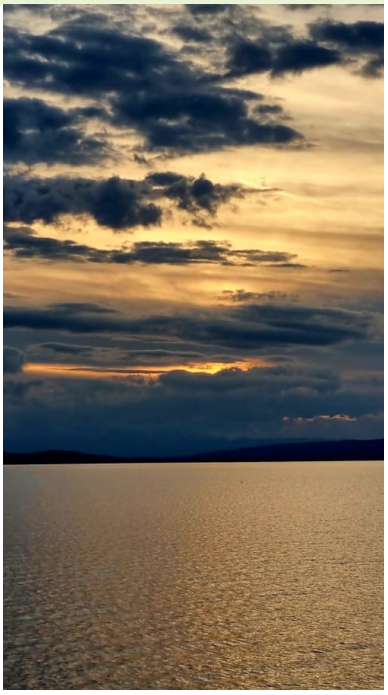
SBA (Slovakia)

Slovak Business Agency (SBA) is a cornerstone in developing and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in Slovakia. Established in 1993 through a collaborative effort between the European Union and the Slovak Government, the SBA has dedicated 30 years to fostering the growth of SMEs across Slovakia. As a unique consortium of



BEST PRACTICES

By identifying best practices for support mechanisms, methodologies, etc. for SMEs to transition to renewables in their regions, partners are working to establish a robust database of examples for SMEs to follow. Some best practices identified already in the project include the "RES Contact Point" in Borzen, Slovenia: Here, 16 advisory offices across 15 Slovenian towns work to promote the use of renewable energy sources. These offices offer free expert advice to investors interested in devices for generating or storing electrical energy from renewable sources. They also provide guidance on project implementation and assist in obtaining necessary consents and permits.



JOINT & STANDARDISED JUSTIFICATION FOR THE WIREFRAME OF FUTURE SERVICES OF THE SMENERGY MODEL

SMEnergy aims to clearly see the background and circumstances of the elements of a standardised, transformable, transferable service; this serves as a basis for the SMEnergy model — namely the good practices, obstacles, and significant differences between the individual partners (and countries), which must be adapted to. A common cross-section of opportunities will form the basis of the SMEnergy model, with common services and methodology. From the start of the project, SMEnergy has worked to engage regional/national SMEs and key players in the field of renewables and policymaking.

SMENERGY ACROSS THE DANUBE REGION

public and private sectors, SBA's members include the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, the Entrepreneurs Association of Slovakia, and the Slovak Association of Crafts. This positions the SBA as a vital bridge between SMEs and policymakers, backed by its Better Regulations Centre, which plays a pivotal role in shaping state policies and strategies.

The offices of SBA in Slovakia

SBA's involvement in SMEnergy is propelled by its extensive expertise in regional networking, policy improvement, and the practical support of SMEs through comprehensive services at their National Business Centre. By joining SMEnergy, SBA aims to leverage its longstanding experience in national and international projects, particularly in fostering sustainable business practices and circular economy initiatives. Through collaborative efforts with the Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency (SIEA), SBA is set to enrich the project with valuable insights and proven strategies that address energy sustainability challenges, a key focus of their mission. Together with SIEA, SBA will consolidate and disseminate project outcomes, ensuring lasting benefits and enhanced support for SMEs beyond the project's duration.

RARS (Republic of Srpska)

The Development Agency of the Republic of Srpska (RARS) is a public non-profit organisation devoted to supporting the establishment and growth of business entities, local and regional sustainable development, nourishing a resilient business environment, oriented to innovation, and a green economy, with adequate entrepreneurial infrastructure. RARS was established in 2004, by the Law on Encouraging the Development of SMEs. RARS is the initiator and implementer of the development policies of the Government of the Republic of Srpska in support of the private sector, attracting and supporting the realization of investment projects, as well as a place of contact and sustainable dialogue between the public and private sectors.

RARS are a reliable partner to domestic and international organisations and the business community in the implementation of development projects in the Republic of Srpska and serves as a European Association of Development Agencies (EURADA) member, with the award, *Outstanding Best Practice in 2022.* RARS is an Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) member as a coordinator of the EUNORS consortium.

From the SMEnergy team at RARS: "We joined the SMEnergy project because we believe that the green transition and improved energy efficiency can greatly improve the competitiveness of SMEs in the Republic of Srpska. Our

The SMEnergy team at RARS

entity has significant natural potential for the development of renewable energy sources, especially hydropower, solar energy, wind energy and biomass, which offers a strong advantage for sustainable development. Our goal is to support companies that adopt these energy sources and use digital tools to enable more efficient production and sustainable business, and to recognize and adopt good practices of partner countries in the future."

BSC SME (Bulgaria)

Business Support Center for SMEs – Ruse, Bulgaria is one of the oldest Bulgarian NGOs in support of SMEs (1996) outside the capital of Bulgaria. In the years of its successful operation the organization has implemented numerous projects, including in the fields of

environment protection on behalf of SMEs, biomass mobilisation and circular economy. BSC SME is a host organisation of the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) – the largest EU network in support of business and innovation. Within its EEN activities, BSC SME offers services to SMEs related to finding business opportunities abroad, transfer of technologies (e.g., energy consumption technologies, alternative energy resources solutions), and capacity building in areas such as circular & green economy, sustainability, and digitalisation.

According to data from local associations in Bulgaria, energy transformation is easier in large companies and more difficult in SMEs. Switching from traditional energy sources to alternative energy sources is often capital-intensive, which prevents companies with limited budgets, especially in the current inflationary environment, from taking decisive action in this direction. Often, decision-makers, managers and technical people in enterprises are not aware of what options they have for this transformation and how they can finance it. BSC SME has joined the project as it will contribute to solve the Bulgarian SMEs' need to have more knowledge and best practices examples at their disposal so that they are able to easily select the best RES alternatives and implement them successfully.

Ruse, Bulgaria—home of Bulgarian SMEnergy partners at BSC SME

EIfI-Tech (Germany)

The European Institute for Innovation - Technology (EIfI-Tech) an applied science organisation supporting the adaptions of regions to respond to the fast pace of development, thus making them more competitive.

EIfI-Tech develops and manages projects funded by national and/or EU programmes, working in partnership agencies and organisations across Europe, learning institutions, and the private sector. Since 2015, EIfI-Tech have successfully worked on numerous public funded EU funded, national as well as private sector projects. As the SMEnergy Communication Manage, EIfI-Tech leads in ensuring the sustainability and extensibility of the SMEnergy model.

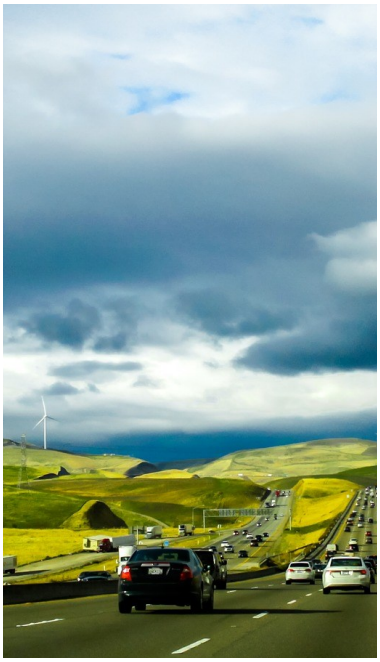
EIfI-Tech at the second SMEnergy project meeting

TZE (Germany)

The Technology Center for Energy (TZE), a research institute of the Landshut University of Applied Sciences in Germany, is at the forefront of sustainable energy innovation. From affordable, safe batteries; to groundbreaking hydrogen technologies; and smarter, more efficient energy grids, TZE's research interests focus on developing and implementing cost-effective, CO_2-friendly energy generation and storage solutions that can meet the short-, medium-, and long-term energy demands of industry and municipalities.

In Germany, countless institutions and support mechanisms are driving the energy transition forward. And despite the economic burden, 85% of businesses are behind the transformation. TZE's role in SMEnergy is twofold — firstly, share knowledge and provide technical advice on what works in Germany and how it could be transferred to partner countries. And secondly, to ensure ongoing acceptance and continued progress, identify gaps in current support for SMEs and determine how they can be addressed.

TZE is research institute of the Landshut University of Applied Sciences, located in Ruhstorf an der Rott, Germany (Credit: TZE)



ELABORATION AND PILOTING THE SMENERGY PROGRAMME

One of the goals of the SMEnergy project is to establish and pilot the "SMEnergy model" and its elements by 8 energy systems (SI, HU, AT, CZ, SK, BiH, BG, DE) across the Danube Region. This means, the unified testing of jointly elaborated: a) Energy Transition Roadmap for SMEs; b) Green Energy Database & Marketplace; c) The operation model of Green Energy Knowledge, Operation & Service Hubs (GEKOS) and their networks.

Based on the pilots, the consortium intends the elaboration on a viable integrated solution supporting green energy transition at SMEs.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Issues addressed

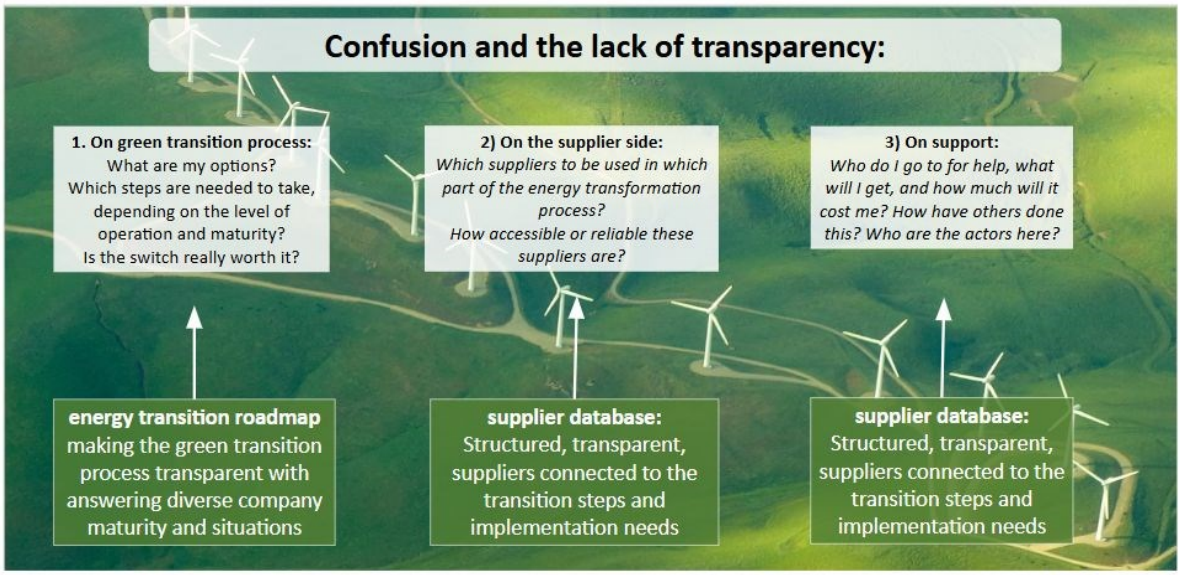
SMEs make up 99% of all businesses in Europe, accounting for around 25 million enterprises. Many of these businesses lack the resources to fully explore opportunities for improving energy efficiency and adopting renewable energy solutions. To promote economic resilience in the EU and achieve the ambitious targets set out in the EU Green Deal, it is crucial to have mechanisms in place that support SMEs. By offering tailored and transparent solutions, we can create the enabling conditions necessary to accelerate the energy transition and promote sustainable growth among SMEs.

The Interreg Danube SMEnergy Project

Over the course of 30 months, the Interreg Danube SMEnergy project aims to create a **pilot network** of regional/countrywide service centers in order to support energy-intensive SMEs in accelerating the transition to adopting renewable energies. Corresponding outputs can be achieved only through transnational collaboration: an **energy transition roadmap** providing answers to diverse company maturity & situations, as well as the model operation of ***Green Energy Knowledge, Operation and Service Hubs (GEKOS),*** assuring single-channel service, equipped with a cross-border green energy database and marketplace. Due to scalability, we must meet the needs of SMEs that are only just considering their energy transition, but also those that are already at the forefront of this. The final aim of the project is to create both national and transnational strategies/toolkits on how the diverse SME segments can be better supported in the increased use of renewables.

The SMEnergy project is aligned with the Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021-2027 priority, **"A greener, low-carbon Danube Region"**, and directly contributes to the Programme Specific Objective 2.1, **"Support greening the energy and transport sectors in the Danube Region by enhancing the integration of renewable energy sources.** For more information on how to get involved, fill out our **SMEnergy contact form.**

The main logic of the project



Source: Krisztina Horváth-Karip (PC-TREND)

SECOND PARTNER MEETNG & CONFERENCE

On 25th September 2024, the **Interreg Danube SMEnergy project** invited SMEs, energy experts, and policymakers to explore how SMEs can transition to renewable energy at the project's conference on "Service Centres and Transformation Path for Increased Renewable Energy Use in SMEs".

The conference was hosted as a hybrid event by Wirtschaftsagentur Burgenland Forschungs- und Innovations GmbH (FIB) in Podersdorf, Austria, with the opportunity for external stakeholders to join online, to provide a platform to discuss best practices, energy solutions, and challenges for SMEs – while also fostering collaboration among partners & stakeholders from across the Danube region. For more information about the fruitful event, visit our website.

Want to learn more about how to get involved? Register interest in the SMEnergy project by filling out the **SMEnergy contact form.**

PROJECT PARTNERS

Local Energy Agency Spodnje Podravje – LEASP (Slovenia)

Energiaklub (Hungary)

Business Agency Burgenland Research and Innovation Ltd. – FIB (Austria)

PC-Trend Ltd. (Hungary)

DEX Innovation Centre – DEX IC (Czech Republic)

Slovak Business Agency – SBA (Slovakia)

Development Agency of the Republic of Srpska – RARS (Republic of Srpska/Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Business Support Centre for Small and Medium Enterprises - Ruse – BSC SME Ruse (Bulgaria)

European Institute for Innovation-Technology (Germany)

Landshut University of Applied Sciences – TZE (Germany)

Contact Information

Tea Potočnik

SMEnergy Lead Partner

tea.potocnik@lea-ptuj.si

Interreg Danube Region

Co-funded by the European Union

SMEnergy