Regional Report:

North East Region of Romania Ecosystem

1. Overview of Regional Innovation Strategy

The region's focus areas within its innovation strategy

The North-Est Region is the largest development region in Romania, having two strong economic sectors, namely **services and the manufacturing** industry. The region creates, transfers, and implements innovation in a systemic manner using the **RIS3 regional strategy (The Strategy for Research and Innovation for Smart Specialisation of the North-East Region**), where innovators can transform local resources into products with high added value.

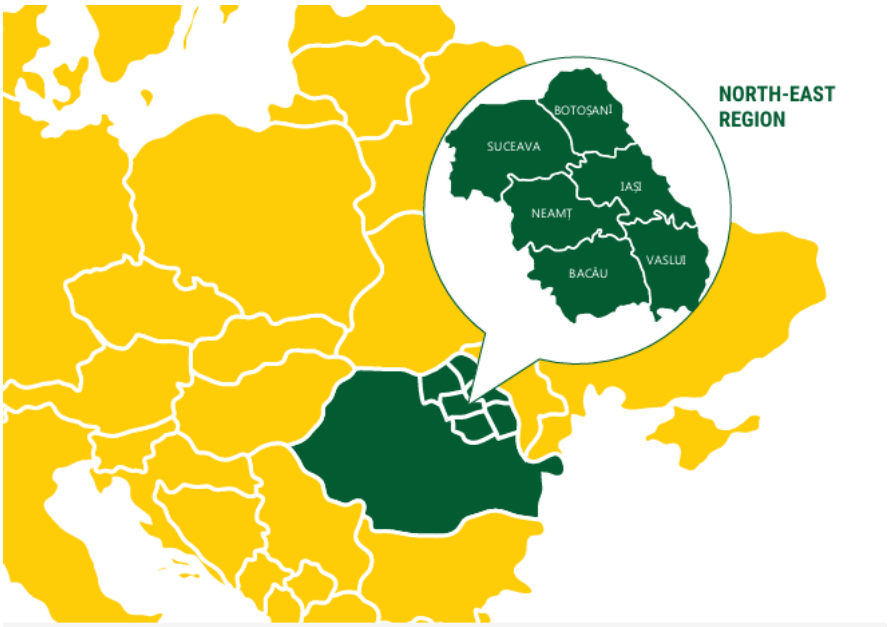

Figure 1 - Localization of the North-East Region of Romania

The North-East RIS3 is being developed by the North-East Regional Agency, within the framework of an extended regional partnership with relevant actors from academia, research institutes, business environment, local public administration and civil society, using the entrepreneurial discovery mechanism. North-East RIS3 2021-2027 (revised 3rd Edition) was developed by the North-East RDA between 2019 – 2021[1].

The development vision for 2027 is that "the North-East Region creates, transfers and implements innovation systematically, sustainably and with societal benefits, in the following key areas – *agri-food & wood industry, textiles, health, tourism, ICT, energy and the environment*".

Regional strengths to be harnessed in order to implement the vision:

[1] Source: https://www.adrnordest.ro/en/regional-innovation-consortium-approved-the-research-and-innovation-strategy-for-smart-specialisation-of-the-north-east-region-3rd-edition-1st-revision/, accessed June 2025

- Existing resources (human, material, financial);
- Regional skills in innovation, achieving and trading knowledge and technologies;
- Already available support infrastructures;
- Tradition in education and research, accumulated expertise in key economic sectors;
- The brand of traditional products of the region.

The **main societal challenges** in the region:

- **The healthy aging, demographics and well-being**
  - **Food security, sustainable agriculture and bioeconomy**
  - **Clean, effective and safe energy**
  - **Safe and secure water**

Key regional policies, programs, and initiatives supporting startups and innovation

Main regional policy is the North-East RIS3 with 5 horizontal policies depicted below[2]:

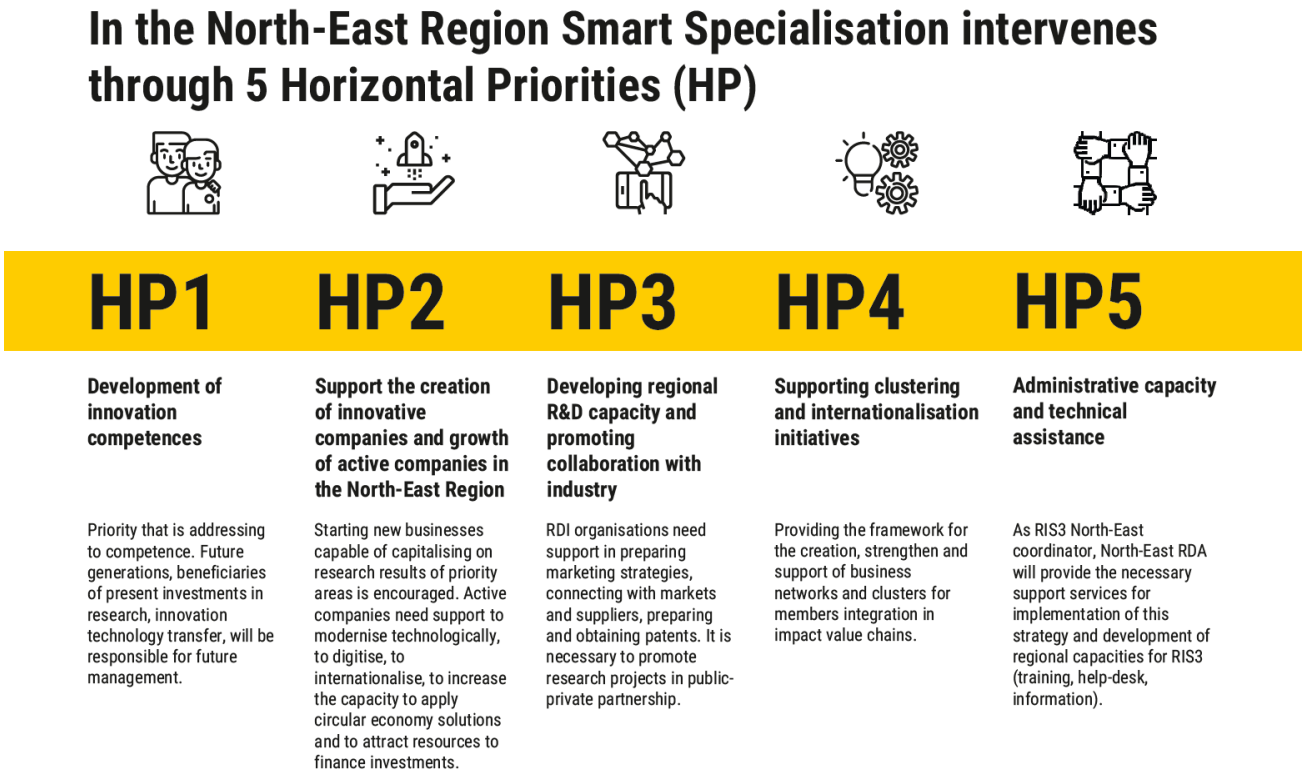

Figure 2 - RIS3 NE 2021 - 2027, Horizontal priorities

Funding programs for startups in the region

[2]Source: https://www.adrnordest.ro/en/ris3-new-brochure/

Startups in Romania and the ones originating from the North-East region have access, during the 2025–2026 period, to a wide range of funding sources suitable for all sectors of activity and all stages of development (from the idea/MVP phase to scaling).
Below are the main categories of available funding – non-reimbursable grants, private investors (business angels and venture capital funds), government programs, accelerators/incubators, and other sources (crowdfunding, competitions, etc.) – along with details about each source and official links for information and application.

Grants (European and national)

Funding source	**Institution/ Program**	**Amount**	**Domains/eligibility**
Start-Up Nation 2025	Ministry of Economy	Max. 250.000 RON (~50.000 €) per project, co-funding of 10–20%	The Start-Up Nation Program, 2025 edition, is structured around two main pillars: Pillar I – Activating the Entrepreneurial Potential of Young People, with a budget of €295,750,000 (equivalent in RON), aimed at young people under 30 years old, both in less developed regions, incl **North East region** and in Bucharest-Ilfov; Pillar II – Support for Entrepreneurship Development, with a budget of €150,435,295 (equivalent in RON), targeting individuals from less developed regions who fall into one of the following eligible categories: ● young people aged up to 30; ● job seekers; ● unemployed persons; ● long-term unemployed persons; ● inactive individuals and persons from disadvantaged groups on the labor market.
NE Regional Operational Programme 2021 - 2027	NE RDA	25.000 € – 300.000 € co-funding of min. 10%	See below

EEA & Norway Grants	SEE Mechanism	Varies between 50.000 € and few millions	Green innovation, energy efficiency, social inclusion, culture and heritage
EIC Accelerator + EIC pre-accelerator for deep tech startups	European Innovation Council	Grants up to 2,5 mil. € (TRL 6–8) + equity/co-investment 0,5 – 10 mil. €.	Deep-tech and disruptive startups
EIT calls		Trainings, bootcamps, financial support	Startups in energy, healthcare, climate, urban mobility, food, manufacturing, culture&creativity

Table 1 - Available grants for startups

Regio NORD-EST Under the Regional Operational Programme 2021 - 2027, **Priority 1 – A more competitive, more innovative region,** there are relevant funding calls which are supporting **startups**[3]**:**

Call	**What is funded**	**Eligible beneficiaries**	**Financial allocation**	**Status**
RDI projects and investments in SMEsRDI projects and investments in SMEs, necessary for the development of innovative products and processes	Economic R&D activities (TRL 4-9), investments necessary for R&D activity and the valorization of research results, management of intellectual property rights, acquisition of consulting services for the commercialization of R&D and innovation, marketing activities and services.	RDI organizations, public universities, SMEs, innovation and technological transfer entities	78.5 mil. euros	closed

[3] Source: https://regionordest.ro/en/priority-1/ , accessed June 2025

Support for the development of innovative SMEs – innovation vouchers	The financing of the services offered by RDI&TT organizations (TRL 6-8), at the request of the SME, in order to increase the capacity of the SME to develop new or significantly improved products and services	SMEs	6 mil. euros	forthcoming
SME demonstration projects (proof-of-concept)	Specific innovative activities carried out by SMEs with the aim of demonstrating the functionality and verifying a certain concept of a product, service or process that can be realized and put on the market (TRL 3-5). Investments in tangible and intangible fixed assets, the purchase of research services, innovation, consulting for business	SMEs	6 mil. euros	closed

	development are also considered.			
Seal of Excellence	Financing of projects with private promoters from the North-East Region that receive the Seal of Excellence mark in the Horizon Europe Program – Seal of Excellence – Grant support of the same eligible costs and co-financing rates from the Horizon Europe program, without resuming the technical evaluation of the project's quality .	SMEs	5,4 mil. euros	forthcoming
Modernization of micro-enterprises	Investments for the development and/or diversification of production/service provision capacity,acquisition of new technologies, automation,	Microenterprises	30 mil. euros	closed

	marketing and branding activities.			
MVP - start-up și spin-off	Start-up and spin-off projects to develop, validate and market a minimum viable product (MVP) Support for intermediary organizations (business incubators and accelerators) to develop their capacity and deliver support services (training, training, coaching and mentoring, information, etc.) to start-ups and spin-offs to identify and develop projects of MVP and will support selected start-ups and spin-offs from among the service beneficiaries to implement the MVP project. MVP projects will propose the development of a product that	Start-ups, spin-offs, SMEs	8 mil. euro	forthcoming

	includes a minimal set of key functionalities that allow the launch of the concept being worked on in the shortest possible time, with minimal effort and costs			
VInnovate	***Funding of projects with private promoters that are selected within the VInnovate funding mechanism calls, organized by the Vanguard Initiative*** Supporting SMEs by financing projects aimed at increasing the degree of innovation of the company by validating or developing a prototype/product/technology in the areas of smart specialization RIS3 North-East.			Call closed in 2024 Call open in 2025

Competencies for smart specialization	Developing skills for smart specialization, industrial transition and entrepreneurship among SME employees in the region	SMEs	600,000 euros	forthcoming

Table 2 - Available grants for startups under Regional Programme

Other governmental programs

Besides grants mentioned above, there are other forms of financial support provided by the state and institutions for startups and SMEs. These include **credit guarantee schemes**, ministry funding programs or agencies and subsidized interest - bearing loan facilities:

- **IMM Invest Plus** – is the most extensive government **loan guarantee banking program** for SMEs. The State (through FNGCIMM) guarantees up to 90% of the value loans granted by partner banks for working capital or investments, and companies receive subsidized interest. IMM Invest is structured into sub- programs sectoral (SME Prod, Agro IMM, Garant Construct, Innovation etc.) and is supporting startups (even without a financial background, only based on a provided a viable business plan)
- **The national programs for SMEs:** Ministries periodically launch state aid schemes or funding programs for SMEs, which can be accessible also by startups. For example, in the previous years, there were programs like **Woman Entrepreneur**, **Micro-industrialization**, **Trade and Services**, **Internationalization**, etc., which granted eligible companies (usually, businesses already established, with a certain seniority). For 2025–2026, these programs will depend on the allocations of the annual budget.
- **Programs included under The National Plan for Research and Innovation (PNCDI IV):** Program 5.7 - Partnership for Innovation, which include *subprogram 5.7.2 - Innovative entrepreneurship and open innovation*, with financing instruments such as: Innovative Business Matching Fund, Seed Capital Matching Fund, High Tech University Competitions, "Incubator" Grant, "Accelerator" Grant and *subprogram 5.7.3 - Innovative enterprises with financing instruments* such as: Pre-spin-off, Go to market, Stimulating high-tech exports, Patent voucher (check), 300+ Innovators and Entrepreneurs Program. None of these programs are currently active.

Private Investors (Angel Investors & Venture Capital Funds)

Private equity investments are a crucial source of capital for startups, especially during growth and scaling phases. These investments come either from **business angels** – individual investors who fund startups in exchange for equity – or from **venture capital (VC) funds** – investment

vehicles that raise capital and invest it in high-potential companies. In Romania, the private investor ecosystem has become increasingly active:

- **Business Angel Networks:** The best-known is **TechAngels Romania**, a network with over 100 active investors focusing on early-stage tech startups. In 2024 alone, TechAngels members invested approximately **€3.78 million** in startups (a 25% increase compared to 2023).
- **Venture Capital Funds:** In 2025–2026, Romanian startups can access VC funding at all stages – from **pre-seed/seed** (typically tens to hundreds of thousands of euros) to **growth rounds (Series A+)** worth several million euros. Active funds include **Early Game Ventures**, **GapMinder**, **Venture Partners**, **Catalyst Romania**, **ROCA X**, **Sparking Capital**, **Morphosis Capital**, and others. Many of these specialize in **technology and innovation** and often co-invest alongside international funds. A major boost came from the **PNRR** (National Recovery and Resilience Plan), which allocated **€400 million** through a Fund of Funds to help launch around **20 new funds**. These are expected to finance approximately **100 companies**, including startups, with investments ranging from **€50,000 (pre-seed)** to **over €5 million (scale-up).** Here below are few examples:
    - **GapMinder VC**, a seed fund launched in 2018, supports the **Techcelerator** accelerator and offers investments of up to **~€200,000** for participating startups
    - **Catalyst Romania** invests in growth-stage companies – for example, it led **€5–10 million rounds** in startups like **Leanpay** and **dotLumen**
    - **Early Game Ventures** typically invests in early-stage, innovative tech startups, while **Morphosis Capital** and **Black Sea Fund** also target scalable SMEs in more traditional sectors.
    - Regional funds such as **Launchub Ventures** and **Eleven Ventures** (Bulgaria), **Speedwell** (Poland), and others are also active in Romania, bringing foreign capital into the market.
- **Co-investment Platforms & Syndicates:** Some local funds collaborate to co-invest in startups. For example, the annual **How to Web – Spotlight** competition brings together investors in a syndicate to offer substantial investment prizes to the winning startups. At the **2024 edition**, the VC consortium (**Underline**, **GapMinder**, **Startup Wise Guys**) offered a **€350,000+ investment** prize for the most promising startup, along with access to mentorship and introductions to additional investors. These types of initiatives show the growing availability of **private capital** for high-potential Romanian startups.

Acceleration programs and incubators (funding + mentoring) at national level that can be accessed by startups from any region

Accelerators and **business incubators** offer startups a support package, including **mentoring, entrepreneurial education, access to investor networks and often, funding.** Participation in such a program can propel a startup from the idea/ prototype phase by attracting customers and investments. Here below, there are some of these programs:

- **Techcelerator –** private accelerator focused on tech startups (FinTech, SaaS B2B, eHealth, AI, cybersecurity, etc.). The program lasts ~10 weeks and includes workshops and mentoring. A major advantage is given by the fact that it is supported by the fund GapMinder, which offers **pre-seed investments up to ~€200,000** for selected startups in cohort (in exchange of an equity stake). Techcelerator already had multiple editions and contributed to the financing and scaling of some local tech companies.
- **InnovX -BCR Accelerator –** acceleration program sponsored by Commercial Bank Romanian, addressed to tech startups in **FinTech**, **cybersecurity, AI** etc. It has separate modules for **startups, scaleups** and **SMEs.** The benefits include specialized mentoring, access to customer networks and BCR partners, as well as awards and international networking opportunities.
- **Orange Fab** – corporate accelerator operated by Orange Romania, intended for startups that can integrate solutions in verticals **Smart City, IoT, HealthTech, FinTech, Cybersecurity,** etc. It does not involve a direct equity investment, but offers **access to infrastructure and Orange technology**, technical support, **product** piloting opportunities **in Orange network** and exposure to the company's customer base. Orange Fab also facilitates contacts with experts from the Orange group.
- **Impact Hub Accelerator Programs –** Impact Hub Bucharest organizes a series of acceleration programs, in partnership with organizations international or corporations. Examples include **Climathon** & **ClimAccelerator** (focused on environmental solutions and change climate), **WE/Circular** (circular economy), **Innovators for Children** (innovation in education and health children), or education programs entrepreneurial as **Capsule** and **She's Next** (supported by Visa) for women entrepreneur. These programs offer mentorship, access to the Impact Hub community and often **micro- grants or Awards** for the many good projects. Impact Hub ensures visibility and connects to networks global (e.g. network **EIT – European Institute of Innovation & Technology** for the climate, agri-food, digital, etc. verticals in which the Hub is a partner).
- **Innovation Labs –** *pre- acceleration* program dedicated to students and youth professionals, present in many center universities (Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Timișoara, etc.). Innovation Labs lasts ~3 months, a period of time in which the teams cover hackathons, mentoring and workshops in order to transform ideas into prototype and viable business models. Domains concerned include **smart city, health, cybersecurity, education digital** etc. At the end, the teams present the prototypes at Demo Day and can benefit from support and introduction to investors.
- **One Health Incubator –** first Romanian incubator destined to biotech, set-up in Timișoara**,** which is launching in 2025 the **Health Biotech Startup Bootcamp**, a mentoring and training program for biotech researchers which wants to set up startups
- **Other accelerators / incubators notable: StepFWD** (9 -week accelerator dedicated to tech startups with diverse teams, with a focus on inclusion; offers 1-on-1 mentoring and training for investors), **Spherik Accelerator (Cluj**, tech- oriented). Many corporations are also offering bootcamp/accelerator type programs (eg: **BCR InnovX** ,**Orange Fab** already mentioned, **OTP Startup Program** in fintech, **Metro Accelerator** in retail, etc.), offering

startups piloting with the respective companies and the possibility of becoming providers or partners.

Other sources relevant (crowdfunding, investment platforms, competitions)

In completion of the categories above, startups can apply and to **alternative sources of financing**, which can be extremely useful especially in early stages or for unconventional projects:

- **Investment crowdfunding (equity crowdfunding):** Online platforms allow startups to raise capital from a multitude of private investors, in exchange of percent of the company. The most known platform regional is **SeedBlink** (founded in Romania, now extended pan-European). Other equity crowdfunding platforms present: **Ronin** (RO), as well as international platforms like **OurCrowd**, **Seedrs** or **Republic,** which begin to be accessible and founders.
- **Reward crowdfunding /pre-orders:** For creative products, hardware or projects with appeal to consumers, platforms like **Kickstarter**, **Indiegogo** or local variants (e.g. **Sprijina.ro** , **CrestemIdei.ro**) can be a source of funding. The startup presents the project and offers **rewards** (pre- order product, merchandise, experiences) to those who contribute with money. This form does not imply the transfer of equity, being practically a **pre- sale**.
- **Competitions with prizes for startups:** Many organizations organize **business plan competitions** or **pitching competitions** with prizes in money, services or investments. Participation in competitions may bring both funding and increase visibility. An important example is competition Nation **"Romanians are entrepreneurs"** (organized by Startarium /ING Bank) - in 2025, they offer €50,000 **non-refundable cash** to 3 winning startups (after a selection process and live pitching). Other notable competitions: **Start-Up Spotlight** at the How-to Web conference (mentioned above, with prizes of investment of hundreds of thousands of €), **Innovation Labs Demo Day** (prizes consisting in tech products and participation in international fairs), **Hackathon4Life** (healthcare hackathon, supported by Johnson&Johson), **ClimateLaunchpad**, **European Startup Prize for Mobility**, **Central European Startup Awards (CESA)** etc. Also, the big companies organize hackathons and challenges with prizes: e.g. **The UiPath Hackathon** or **BCR InnovX Challenge** etc., where winners can receive funding for pilot or enterprise contracts.
- **Peer-to- peer lending (P2P) platforms and microfinance:** As an alternative to traditional loans banking, small startups can turn to lending from P2P or to microfinance institutions. In Romania we can mention **Mintos** (international), where companies can get loans from individual investors, usually for working capital, on interest established by the market. Also, **microfinance NFIs** (such as Patria Credit, BT Mic, etc.) offer a few credits in tens of thousands of euros for micro companies or startups without historical record, but often with higher interest. These solutions can be useful when funding from classical banking or equity investments are not accessible. **AFIN** is the first non-bank financial institution (NBFI) from Romania, offering alternative financial solutions dedicated to the field of social economy. The institution aims at facilitating access to

financing for entities with social impact from Romania who have overcome their start-up phase and need capital resources to grow.

In conclusion, **the funding ecosystem for startups in Romania** has become increasingly diversified. The key is **MATCHING** the startup 's needs to the type of financing suitable: for example, a grant may be ideal for development a prototype without giving up equity, an angel investor can bring know-how and critical connections, an accelerator can compress months of learning in a few weeks, and a crowdfunding round can validate market interest.

Relevant initiatives supporting entrepreneurship and innovation in NE region

According to the World Bank Group Romanian Startup Survey (The "Starting Up Romania: Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Diagnostic" report, published in 2021)[4], human networks (community) are a critical element of entrepreneurship ecosystems. They support the identification of entrepreneurial opportunities, access to finance, access to information, the creation of resources and spillovers, strategic alliances, and status signaling. The social networks of an entrepreneurship ecosystem connect
all other elements so entrepreneurs can access the resources needed to create startups.
The connectedness of an ecosystem refers to the interdependencies and interactions among its constituting actors (founders, universities, accelerators, and others). These interactions are key to explain why one ecosystem outperforms another because when highly connected entrepreneurial actors can access or transmit ideas and other forms of knowledge within networks of relationships, spillovers can occur.
Based on the answers of the surveyed startups, a network of relations was built and the figure below depicts the connectivity and the size of the circles reflect how connected each entity is. Rubik Hub and Innovation Labs appear to be the best-connected ones from the NE region.

[4]Source: **https://rostartup.com/2022/06/21/starting-up-romania-entrepreneurship-ecosystem-diagnostic**, accessed in June 2025

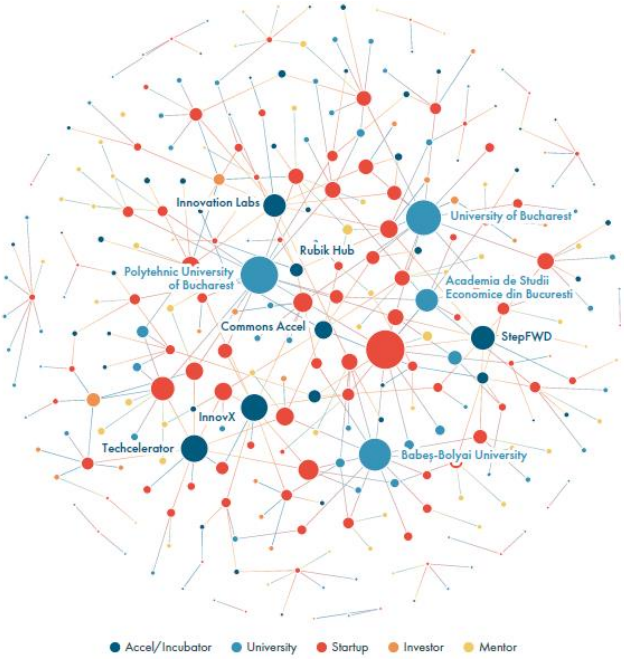

Figure 3 - The network of relations in Romanian ecosystem for startups support, Source: Starting up Romania, Entrepreneurship ecosystem diagnostic report

Rubik Hub is a startup ecosystem builder based in Piatra Neamț, Romania, and is part of the North-East Regional Development Agency (ADR Nord-Est). Since their inception in 2017, they have been committed to nurturing the startup landscape in Romania and the broader Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region.

Their involvement in the evolution of startups encompasses a comprehensive approach. They develop and build programs that inspire individuals to embark on entrepreneurial journeys and provide educational resources to equip them with the necessary skills. Through initiatives like the **Rubik Garage**, they offer equity-free accelerator programs designed to help early-stage startups validate their ideas, develop their products, and prepare for investment.

Also, their extensive network includes over 250 mentors, investors, and industry experts who provide guidance and support to startups at various stages.

Rubik Hub has been actively supporting startups since its establishment in 2017. Over the years, they've engaged with over 100 startups, 300+ founders, and 4000 students, fostering growth at local, regional, and international levels.

Their programs are designed to support **early-stage startups**, especially those with a functional MVP, aiming to reach their first customers, secure initial funding, or scale internationally.

Rubik Hub has been recognized as one of the most active entities in the Romanian startup ecosystem and was ranked 39th out of 150 in Europe's Leading Startup Hubs 2025 by the Financial Times, Statista, and Sifted.

Rubik Hub offers a comprehensive suite of services tailored to support startups at various stages:

- **Rubik Start**: A program that helps you amplify your entrepreneurial spirit, through a mix of workshops, mentoring and practical experiences. The goal here is to **ignite and nurture the entrepreneurial spirit** in aspiring founders. Through hands-on workshops and mentoring, they help participants in building the foundational mindset and skills needed to take their first steps into the startup world.
- **RubikEDU**: A pre-acceleration program that assists individuals in transforming their startup ideas into viable businesses.
- **Rubik Garage**: An equity-free accelerator for early-stage startups, providing mentorship, workshops, and networking opportunities to help them reach their first paying customers and prepare for investment.
- **Rubik Scale**: A program designed to assist startups in scaling internationally, with recent editions focusing on markets like the UK and the USA.
- **Ready to Raise**: A program which helps founders confidently navigate the emotional and complex fundraising journey. It is designed in two phases: *investment readiness and raising investment*.
- **Mentorship and Networking**: Access to a vast network of over 250 mentors, including investors, industry experts, and successful entrepreneurs.
- **Community Building**: Fostering a collaborative environment where startups can connect, share experiences, and grow together[5].

INNOVATION LABS 2.0 INNOVATION LABS - is a national pre-acceleration program designed to help early-stage tech startups turn innovative ideas into viable products. In the **North-East region of Romania**, the program has become a crucial entry point for **student teams, young entrepreneurs, and researchers** from cities like **Iași, Suceava, Bacău, and Piatra Neamț** to access entrepreneurial education, mentoring, and national visibility. Organized in partnership with **local universities** (such as UAIC and TUIASI) and **tech hubs**, the program offers: **hackathons and mentorship bootcamps, access to corporate and investor networks, guidance from tech and business mentors**. The national program also plays a role in bridging the gap between academia and entrepreneurship, fostering digital innovation in health, agriculture, and smart cities and supporting teams with limited access to national accelerators**. By cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets and validating tech ideas early, Innovation Labs contributes significantly to strengthening the startup pipeline in the North-East Romanian innovation ecosystem.**

[5]Source**:** *RegionOrdEst.ro – Clusters as drivers of regional innovation ecosystems* (Nov 2023) – Importance of thematic clusters in Iași for smart specialization**,** accessed in June 2025

HIZ is a unique pre-validation program for innovative healthcare solutions. The program aims to prepare the next generation of innovative healthcare startups and build a community of innovation in this industry. The initiative was born in 2023 proposed by the **Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ)**, in collaboration with **EIT Health**, **the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași** and **the Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy (U.M.F.)**.
The program aims to develop the entrepreneurial spirit and digital skills of participants through non-formal training activities, **support the development and testing of innovative health solutions, through a pre-validation process carried out in a controlled environment, which assesses their feasibility, efficiency and safety before large-scale implementation**, facilitate access to potential customers and support pitch sessions, as well as create a regional innovation community that actively contributes to the digitalization of medical institutions and the strengthening of the health ecosystem in the North-East.[6]

The MAVIS Innovation and Technology Transfer Center aims to become a key structure of the regional innovation ecosystem, acting both as a link between RDI sector actors, the business environment and end users, but also as an accelerator of innovative products and services developed either by exploiting research results or by covering the specific needs of companies to develop/improve/test/validate/transfer a new product or technology to the market that responds to consumer problems.
Some of the services provided by MAVIS are:

- **Customized R&D and Technology Transfer Analysis** - Conducting analyses, studies, market research, and forecasts on topics related to R&D or technology transfer upon request from the private sector;
- **Scientific research** – Research space filled with state-of-the-art equipment;
- **Product development** - The mechanical workshop is a space dedicated to technical testing, prototyping, making the mechanical elements of devices, especially through the use of 3D printers. The electronic workshop provides the optimal framework for making electronic circuits for designed devices;
- **Investigation of cardiovascular and renal pathologies** –Within X-CARE Lab, medical professionals who are part of research teams with expertise in providing medical consultations according to clinical protocols carry out their activities. The consultations

[6]Source: RegionOrdEst.ro – *Monitoring of North-East Regional Program 2021-2027* – Chronicles EU-funded innovation infrastructure development and capacity gaps. https://regionordest.ro/en/monitoring-of-north-east-regional-program, accessed in June 2025

offered to patients provide essential information, recording the dynamic state of patients' health during their participation in the study. However, these consultations do not constitute recommendations for treatment;

- **Telemedicine studies** - The telemedicine system is capable of recording a series of important physiological parameters. The system includes a tablet that collects information from the accessories and subsequently transmits them to the MAVIS Data Center;
- **Educational services** – Training sessions, workshops, simulation workstations, scientific & networking events.

MAVIS's primary goals when working with startups are to accelerate innovation in healthcare by supporting the development of medical technologies, digital health solutions, and biomedical devices that address real clinical needs and improve patient outcomes. They provide startups with access to the specialized infrastructure, including mechanical, electronic, and clinical research labs, as well as advanced equipment and interdisciplinary expertise in medicine, engineering, and informatics.

They also guide them through the complex processes of clinical validation, regulatory compliance, and technology readiness, especially in the MedTech and eHealth sectors. As part of a medical university, they facilitate academic-industry collaboration by connecting startups with researchers, clinicians, and students, enabling co-creation and research partnerships.

Their aim is to help transform innovative ideas into market-ready solutions through business development support, intellectual property guidance, and partnerships with hospitals, companies, and investors. Additionally, they promote responsible innovation by encouraging ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices to ensure meaningful and lasting impact.

iMAGO•MOL
Clusterul Regional Inovativ de Imagistică Moleculară şi Structurală Nord-Est

The North East Regional Innovative Cluster for Structural and Molecular Imaging (IMAGO-MOL) operates as a non-governmental, non-profit organization with the core objectives of enhancing the scientific competitiveness of its members and bolstering the economic competitiveness of the North East Region within the domain of medical imaging. IMAGO-MOL achieves this by fostering collaboration aimed at diversifying and optimizing services in this specialized domain. Notably, the cluster holds a gold label designation according to ESCA standards.

IMAGO-MOL is currently accommodating a number of 12 HealthTech and MedTech startups under its umbrella. Supporting medical entrepreneurship stands as a cornerstone of the cluster's strategic objectives. To this end, facilitating connections between startups and healthcare institutions to bolster the development and implementation of medical products serves as a pivotal horizontal activity.

Furthermore, dedicated efforts have been made to support startups through various events. For instance, hackathons focusing on stroke in 2020, on funding calls in 2022, and the concept of a smart healthcare city in 2023 have been organized. Additionally, pitching sessions for startups were held during the Smart Health Technologies in Medical Diagnosis and Treatment forum in

February 2023. IMAGO-MOL has also supported startups in participating in ClusterXChange under the MEDIC-NEST partnership and facilitates their involvement in relevant medical congresses, such as the European Radiology Congress.
Another targeted initiative involves offering mentorship to early-stage startups. This mentorship is extended during hackathons organized by Innovation Labs, the H3- Healthcare in Hospitals Hackathon, or through the Health Innovation Zone program. The latter has been coordinated by the Digital Innovation Zone Association and funded by the EIT Health Drive program.
Currently, is delivering mentoring and training for the InnoMedCatalyst Accelerator Programme, an interactive program designed specifically for innovators who are navigating the complexities of healthcare commercialization, under the InnoMedCatalyst project, coordinated by NE RDA in a consortium of 13 partners. The accelerator is dedicated to spinoffs, startups or early-stage SMEs innovation in MedTech or HealthTech and has two openings in 2025 and 2026.

The Center for Continuing Education and Entrepreneurship of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași addresses the needs of the labor market, focusing primarily on the economic field and information technology. The Center aims to serve as a bridge between high schools, the university, and the private sector, thus ensuring a continuous flow of up-to-date information and training aligned with the increasingly dynamic demands. The IT courses and certifications offered are of international level (Microsoft, ECDL), certifying the knowledge standards, skills, and professional level of the participants.

The iTransfer Technology Transfer Center of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi is addressing both the needs of academia for promotional services, the marketing of research results and the mediation of technology transfers, and the needs of businesses for consulting services on the implementation of innovative solutions. Its objectives are to stimulate innovation and technology transfer, the development of national / international partnerships between European organizations, units with RDI profile and SMEs in Romania, the orientation of the scientific research topics of the academic staff towards the fields / sub-domains targeted by the national and international programs and towards the concrete needs of the socio-economic environment, the formation of a generation open to the European and international scientific environment, in the spirit of innovation and technological development

Polytech has been operating since 1992 within the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași, through which research and development activities are carried out, including fundamental and applied scientific research activities, experimental development and innovation, as well as consultancy, design, service provision and technology transfer activities in fields specific to the university.

The POLYTECH Technology Transfer Center has as its mission the development of specific relations in the field of Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) of the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași with the socio-economic environment and the transfer of the results obtained from the RDI activity carried out by the research structures of TUIASI to organizations interested in taking over these results.

Technology transfer office of "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava (USV) actively contributes to the development of start-up companies by supporting innovation, offering access to research infrastructure, and facilitating technology transfer through its dedicated centers. USV regularly participates with teams of students and young researchers in idea competitions across various fields. Through these events, universities encourage the transformation of innovative ideas into viable businesses, promote the practical application of research, and strengthen the connection between academia and industry. Additionally, such participation helps develop key skills such as innovation, critical thinking, and teamwork, while also supporting the transfer of knowledge and technology into the economic environment. They are constantly focused on developing start-up companies through our students and researchers, and the fields in which the university has the most notable and patented research results are: electrical engineering, mechanical engineering and mechatronics, information and communication technology (ICT), mechanical engineering and mechatronics, food engineering, and forestry USV supports start-up companies by offering access to research infrastructure, business incubators, and technology transfer centers.

The university provides mentorship, consultancy in business planning, and guidance for securing national and European funding. It also organizes entrepreneurship training and connects start-ups with the business environment through partnerships and innovation events. These services are aimed at helping students and researchers turn innovative ideas into viable businesses.

USV supports the development of start-up companies through various funding sources, primarily aimed at students and young researchers. These include European grants such as POCU (Human Capital Operational Programme) for entrepreneurship education, POC (Competitiveness Programme) for innovation and technology transfer, and Horizon Europe for applied research and innovation. Additionally, Erasmus+ supports entrepreneurial initiatives through mobility and educational projects.

At the national level, funding is also accessed through government programs like Start-Up Nation and research and innovation grants provided by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization. USV complements these with its own institutional funds, partnerships with local authorities and private companies, as well as participation in idea competitions, hackathons, and sponsorships that provide further support for start-up growth.

Alignment with national or European innovation strategies

The RIS 3 North East is aligned with the **National Strategy for Research, Innovation and Smart Specialization 2021 – 2027**[7] in terms of specific objectives, funding resources and sectors and niches.

SECTORS AND NICHES			
Bioeconomy • Technologies for the blue economy • Breeding of seeds and breeds • Technologies for organic agriculture, agroecology, and forestry • Agriculture 4.0. • Safe and sustainable food for a healthy	**Digital economy and space** • Technologies • Microelectronic devices and systems for smart products • Networks of the future, communications, the Internet of Things • Technologies for the space economy • XR Technologies • Artificial Intelligence Systems • Cyber Security • Technologies for traceability • Robots and cognitive agents	**Energy and mobility** • Green mobility • Modern energy generation technologies with low or zero emissions • Digitalisation in energy • Energy storage	**Advanced manufacturing** • Manufacturing technologies for the aeronautical industry • Digitization and automatization of manufacturing • Advanced Manufacturing Technologies

[7] Source https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-867892-SNCISIenglish-version.pdf%20, accessed June 2025

Advanced functional materials • Optoelectronics • Smart composite materials • Recyclable materials and technologies for material recycling • Materials for electronic, electrical, photonic, magnetic and sensor applications • Biocompatible materials Materials for energy	**Environment and ecotechnologies** • Technologies for environmental management, monitoring, and de-pollution • Technologies for the circular economy	**Health - prevention, diagnosis, and advanced treatment** • Precision surgery • New generation diagnostic-therapeutic nuclear technologies • Longevity medicine • Early diagnosis • Technologies for autonomous living • eHealth • Personalized medicine and genomics • Technologies for wearable systems	

Table 3 - Sectors and niches for S3 in the National Strategy for R&I&Smart Specialization 2021 - 2027

North-East RIS3 areas are linked with thematic partnerships in European S3 platforms as follows**:**

- The thematic partnership "Smart Regional Investments in Textile Innovation" - Platform For Smart Specialisation S3 for Industrial Modernisation (S3P industry).
- The "**Bioenergy**" thematic partnership - Smart Specialisation Platform S3 for Energy (S3P Energy)
- The "**Water Smart cities**" thematic partnership - Smart Specialisation Platform S3 for Industrial Modernisation (S3P-Industry)
- The "Personalised Medicine"/ Smart health thematic partnership – Smart Specialisation Platform S3 For Industrial Modernisation (S3P industry)

Priority sectors or industries targeted by the regional innovation strategy.

Following the major societal challenges, the RIS3 has identified the **sectors**: **agri-food&wood industry, energy sector, textile sectors, tourism sector, environment sector, IT&C and health** and **niches** for each of the sectors.[8]

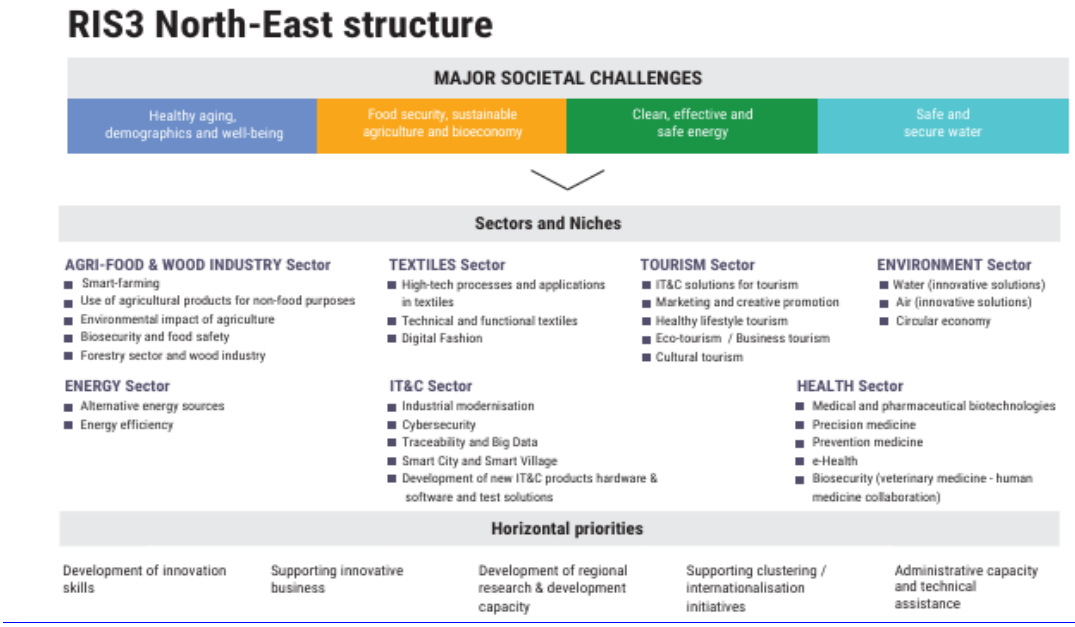

Figure 4 - RIS3 North-East structure

2. Strengths and Capacities of the Regional Ecosystem

In terms of strengths and capacities of the regional ecosystem, the RIS 3 NE strategy has emphasized the following:

- Second place at national level in terms of the number of researchers at regional level
- Second place at national level in terms of public expenditure on research and development as a percentage of regional GDP
- The existence of the university centers Iași, Bacău and Suceava in which 7 state and 3 private higher education institutions operate
- High number of doctoral schools in the region
- Existence in the region of advanced educational and research programs
- High-performance research infrastructure owned by research institutes in the region (research equipment with a high potential for scientific and / or technological operation)
- Large number of graduates aimed at specialization in some areas of smart specialization (eg ICT, Environment, Energy)

[8]Source: https://www.vestbee.com/blog/articles/romanian-startup-and-vc-ecosystem-report, accessed in June 2025

- The region with the most enterprises with innovations in organizational and / or marketing forms in the total number of enterprises, compared to the other development regions in Romania
- The emergence of hybrid medical & tech start-ups
- Expertise in developing innovative solutions for resource efficiency
- Large number of companies active in the field of ICT
- Existence of 7 accredited TTOs
- Existence of 12 clusters in fields such as medtech, textiles, tourism, new media, IT&C, agricultural machinery, construction, bioeconomy and biotechnology
- Existence of a Digital Innovation Hub

In the North-East region of Romania, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is represented by innovation hubs, incubators and accelerators, universities and research institutions. A list of these entities has been produced in task 2.1 of the INNOVAT project.

Strong industry clusters and sectors driving innovation in the region

The region benefits from the activity of 12 clusters (associative structures with legal personality activated on the quadruple helix principle – companies, education, R&D, local public administration and civil society) in areas with potential for development, and these initiatives must be further supported as they foster the creation of cross-sectoral links and knowledge outsourcing.

The main clusters operating in the region are:

- Ind-Agro-Pol agri-food technology cluster
- Innovative Regional Cluster of Molecular and Structural Imaging North-East-IMAGO-MOL (Iași)
- ASTRICO North-East Textile Cluster (Săvinești, Neamț)
- Regional Tourism Cluster - Bucovina Tourism Association (Suceava)
- ICONIC Cluster - Interactive cluster of the new media industry (Iași)
- Euronest IT&C Hub Regional Innovative Cluster (Iasi)
- BioROne Biotechnology Cluster (Iasi)
- BREASLA (Iasi) – Constructions Guild
- BioNEst Regional Organic Agriculture Cluster (Iasi)
- Carpathian Furniture Cluster (Iasi)
- Bioeconomy Innovative Cluster Suceava – Botoșani
- Danube Furniture Cluster - Bacau

In relation with the clusters presence in the North -East region, seven are members of the National Association of Clusters in Romania: ASTRICO North-East (Neamț), IMAGO-MOL (Iași), EURONEST IT&C Hub (Iași), ICONIC (Iași), BioNest (Iași), DANUBE FURNITURE CLUSTER (Bacău), Ind-Agro-Pol agri-food technology cluster (national cluster with representatives from the NE Region).

According to the information presented by the European Secretariat for Cluster Analysis (ESCA), only IMAGO-MOL (Iasi) is awarded “gold” and the Ind-Agro-Pol agri-food technology cluster is

awarded “silver”, in recognition of the efforts made to improve the management activities of the cluster.

Taking into consideration the RIS3 sectors and the evolution of the sectors in the last years, we can summarize below **the main sectors driving innovation** in the region are:

1. Agri-Food and Bioeconomy

- The region has a strong agricultural tradition and vast arable land.
- Innovation focuses on sustainable agriculture, food processing, precision farming, organic products, and circular bioeconomy.
- Research centers and universities (e.g., Life Science University of Iași) support agri-tech development and bioeconomy (such as Suceava University and Bioeconomy Innovative Cluster Suceava – Botoșani)

2. Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

- Significant growth in IT outsourcing, software development, and digital services in cities like Iași and Suceava
- Strong academic base (e.g., “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, “Gheorghe Asachi” Technical University).
- Innovation areas: AI, cybersecurity, health tech, digital government solutions.
- Digital Innovation Zone is the DIH selected by European Commission and the main catalyzer of the digital transformation in the region
- FreeYa Mind Campus, based in Iasi, is an innovative educational facility designed to bridge the gap between traditional learning and the evolving needs of the market. It offers a seamless educational journey through advanced studies, featuring specialized programs through its role as an IBM Quantum Innovation Center, which offers access to IBM’s quantum systems and resources over the cloud.

3. Health and Life Sciences

- Strong medical universities and hospitals, particularly in Iași, which acts as a regional health hub.
- A strong medical cluster supporting innovation in personalized medicine and digital health
- Growth of startups and collaborations with international health research networks, even if it is a slow pace
- Health Innovation Zone- the pre-acceleration program dedicated to health already active for 3 years
- The region is part of the Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs) initiative, for precision medicine. RIVs is described as a key element of the New European Innovation Agenda (NEIA) and aims to improve innovation and competitiveness in Europe by encouraging collaboration between different regions.

4. Environmental Technologies and Renewable Energy

- Focus on green transition, waste management, water purification, and energy efficiency.

- Renewable energy projects, especially in solar and biomass.
- R&D linked to sustainable rural development and resilience to climate change.

5. Textiles and New Materials

- Traditional textile industry is shifting toward smart textiles, eco-design, and circular production.
- Innovation involves high-performance materials and sustainability practices.

6. Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs)

- Emerging sector supported by digitalization and tourism.
- Innovations in multimedia, digital content, cultural heritage valorization, and creative urban development.

During our field research, we have asked the stakeholders how they appreciate the current development of the landscape for startups, and they indicate that it is **dynamic and rapidly evolving**. Also, there is a growing focus **on impact-driven entrepreneurship—startups that not only aim for profit but also for positive social and environmental change**. Additionally, they think that **the founders are looking for more than just funding**; they're seeking **mentorship, networks, and hands-on guidance.**

They also indicated the industries which are perceived as most promising for startup development:

- **Cybersecurity** - the increasing sophistication of cyber threats makes this sector an evergreen opportunity for deep tech solutions.
- **MedTech** because the intersection of healthcare and technology is rapidly evolving. We see particular promise in: AI-driven diagnostics, remote patient monitoring, digital therapeutics. MedTech startups that enhance healthcare accessibility, reduce costs, and improve clinical outcomes are attracting significant investment and partnerships, especially post-pandemic. Major opportunities are in medical devices, especially those that are compact, wearable, or integrated with mobile apps. Startups that focus on **early disease detection, rehabilitation technologies, and patient self-management tools** are in high demand. The development of **health data platforms and interoperable systems** that improve communication between healthcare providers and ensure continuity of care. In parallel, the fields of **personalized medicine, biotechnology, and smart aging** are opening new doors for innovation, especially when combined with advancements in biostatistics, machine learning, and bioengineering.
- **GreenTech** due to climate change mitigation and sustainable development have become global priorities. GreenTech startups focused on: carbon capture, clean energy generation, circular economy models.
- **EdTech** - the digital transformation of education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, continues to open doors for innovation. Startups in this sector are developing solutions for: AI-based personalized education, skill-based

microlearning. Particularly in B2B applications, EdTech solutions that empower educators, enterprises, and institutions are gaining traction.

- **GovTech.**
- **Deep tech innovations** with broad societal and industrial applications: advanced AI/ML applications in logistics, finance, and manufacturing, robotics and automation in industrial and healthcare settings.[9,10]

The role of universities and research centers in fostering innovation

Two directions can be evaluated when analyzing the role of universities and research centers when highlighting the role in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship: their role in **technological transfer** and their **programs towards supporting entrepreneurship.**

Regarding the **technological transfer**, at the North East region level a number of 7 TTOs are accredited according to the legislation and procedures in force, the Governmental Decision 346/2023. From the 7 TTO's, universities are hosting 4 TTO's (according to the Registry of accredited TTOs, 12.08.2024).

The TTOs are offering the following type of services: customized R&D and technology transfer analysis, product development, educational services, research services for companies, contracts' negotiation for the research results.

On the other hand, entrepreneurial education in Romanian universities is regulated by a clear legislative framework that supports the development of students' entrepreneurial skills and facilitates business initiatives:

- **The National Education Law no. 1/2011**, along with its subsequent amendments, grants universities autonomy in developing educational programs, including those in the field of entrepreneurship.
- **Order of the Ministry of Education no. 3262/2017** requires all accredited universities, both public and private, to establish Student Entrepreneurial Societies (SAS). These societies aim to support students' entrepreneurial initiatives through mentorship, networking, and financial resources.
- **The National Competitiveness Strategy 2015–2020** included measures for the development of entrepreneurial education in universities, although the implementation of these measures has been inconsistent.

According to **Order no. 3262/2017 of the Ministry of National Education**, all accredited higher education institutions, whether public or private, are required to establish **Student Entrepreneurial Societies (SAS)**. These structures are intended to support and promote

[9]Source:
Romanian Industry Outlook: IT/Software
https://www.reddit.com/r/Geosim/comments/13m51wp/econ_romanian_industry_outlook_itsoftware , accessed in June 2025

[10]Source: https://seedblink.com/2025-01-20-top-accelerators-and-startup-programs-in-romania#:~:text=transformation, accessed in June 2025

entrepreneurial culture among students, facilitating their transition to the labor market and encouraging business initiatives.[11]

Romanian universities have adopted various approaches to integrating entrepreneurial education into their curricula:

- **Mandatory/Elective Courses:** Many universities offer entrepreneurship courses as part of their bachelor's and master's programs: "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași, Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava
- **Dedicated Study Programs:**
  - Master's program in *Innovation and Entrepreneurship* ("Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași).

According to the study "Entrepreneurship Centers from Romanian universities - present challenges and good practices", the main challenges are:

- Limited access to resources and infrastructures, bureaucracy
- Professors' low level of involvement, lack of skilled professors in entrepreneurship
- Low level of students' involvement due to an overloaded academic curriculum
- Lack of collaboration with companies
- Lack of a standardized approach for entrepreneurship courses in Romania

The universities have also implemented different projects towards supporting students in setting-up startups based on business plan competitions, including offering financial subsidies, projects which have been funded by POCU (Human Capital Program). They have also entered consortia for calls supporting technological transfer under NE Regional Program.

The universities are also active members of the clusters and the Digital Innovation Hub therefore strongly supporting innovation either by engaging students in entrepreneurial competitions or offering tailor support for startups (coaching, mentoring, technical feasibility assessment or access to test-before-invest facilities).

Examples of successful startups and scale-ups from the region.

APOLLO AI Technologies Founded in 2022, in Iasi, by a team of four co-founders—Mihaela Onofrei (CEO, 37% ownership), Cezar Caluschi (37%), Vlad Trandafir (20%), and Gabriel Pavel (6%)—Apollo AI Technologies set out with an ambitious mission: use artificial intelligence to empower medical professionals in Romania and beyond.

Products & Impact

- Diabeta: A chatbot built specifically for diabetologists, approved by Romania's National Medicines Agency (ANMDM). Now it is used by 80% of Romanian diabetologists

[11]Source: **https://rostartup.com/2022/06/21/starting-up-romania-entrepreneurship-ecosystem-diagnostic**, accessed in June 2025

- PharmaChat: Launched next, it processes over 8,500 official drug documents, mapping 1.7 million drug interactions to help prescribers avoid risks. Notably, PharmaChat brought in €10–15k in monthly revenue, attracting a €500k investment
- Chat4Doc: Rolled out in 2024, this tool enables instant access to verified drug information, helping clinicians reduce prescription errors and save time.
- Their offerings have reached 7% of all medical professionals in Romania, with thousands of clinicians now benefiting from faster, more informed decision-making

Funding Roadmap

1. Self-funded beginnings
    - The founding team initially injected €750k of their own capital to build the core technology and launch the first products
2. Angel & private investment
    - Beginning in 2023, Apollo brought aboard Gabriel Pavel as a board member and angel investor. Pavel, with experience from Microsoft and Fujitsu, joined during their first capital raise
3. Seed funding round
    - In 2024, they secured €500k to expand PharmaChat and support go-to-market activities
    - Cumulatively, Apollo has attracted €870k in investment

Apollo AI is preparing to scale internationally, deepen its presence in the EU, and launch new AI-driven chatbots for additional therapeutic areas. A planned VC round will accelerate these ambitions.

Green Rent SRL is a pre-seed STARTUP based in Iasi, founded in 2019, which cultivates entrepreneurial thinking in agriculture. Their platform, **Cultiva**, empowers farmers to make better, faster, and smarter decisions by combining fully automated activity tracking, real-time farm visualization, and easy-to-understand economic insights. Unlike traditional agritech tools that require manual data input or work only with specific equipment, Cultiva turns any farm into a smart, data-driven operation — with zero friction and maximum autonomy.

Cultiva is the only solution that combines full automation, total equipment integration, ultra-high-resolution tracking, and real-time farm intelligence — to empower farmers as entrepreneurs, not just operators. Green Rent SRL has thus far grown organically. There's no public record of external investment or venture capital rounds. Instead, the company has progressed through bootstrapping 200.000-euro, reinvesting revenues into expanding its fleet and service capabilities. Now they are applying for R&D funds. Their primary focus is B2B, targeting small to medium-sized farms and agricultural businesses looking to professionalize their operations, optimize costs, and access real-time insights without needing dedicated IT teams.

AUTOSYMED Founded in 2021 in Iași by a group of Polish researchers and AI specialists—Kamil Sterna (CEO), Grzegorz Jarząb (CTO), Katarzyna Heryan (Head of R&D), and Jakub Galkowski (Head of Development), **Autosymed SRL** launched its flagship platform, initially branded CorFlow, to transform cardiology diagnostics. CadFlow is an AI-driven tool that automates coronary angiography analysis. It assesses stenoses, characterizes lesions, and computes the SyntaxScore—reducing the diagnostic time from 30–35 minutes down to just 7–8 minutes, with equal or better precision. Tailored to support less experienced cardiologists, CadFlow significantly enhances both diagnostic speed and consistency in clinical settings.

In 2023, Autosymed joined the InnovX Accelerator program, where their pitch earned a top-4 ranking at Demo Day and recognition from sector leader Medlife. They successfully secured Norway Grants funding, receiving approximately €233k in 2022 and €235k in 2023, which funded algorithm enhancements and API development

By the end of April 2024, Autosymed wrapped up its current grant-backed CorFlow Phase II project, strengthened its IP by filing a patent, and rebranded to **CadFlow** as a registered trademark in Romania

CadFlow is a robust example of grant-driven, impact-focused MedTech innovation originating from Iași. With AI-backed diagnostic precision, strong institutional validation, and a clear path to European markets, CadFlow is on track to scale globally. If you'd like, I can help draft a slide, gather financials, or explore their competitive landscape!

ALIGNSPINE Founded around 2023 in Iași by a multidisciplinary team of physiotherapists and biomedical engineers, **ALIGNSPINE** began with a vision to improve posture and mitigate back pain through innovative wearable technology. The core product—a smart active brace—utilizes advanced sensors and ergonomic materials to offer real-time posture correction, feedback, and rehabilitation support for users.

ALIGNSPINE first caught attention in May 2021, when it won the Grand Prize at Euroinvent, Romania's prestigious innovation fair. This accolade provided significant validation and media visibility, helping the team secure their first clinical partnerships. The brace began pilot testing with patients and physiotherapists, demonstrating strong results in both rehabilitation and prevention scenarios.

Initially developed as a non-medical wellness device, **ALIGNSPINE** repositioned the product after early feedback through the Innovation Lab accelerator in Iași. They repeatedly refined the design, firmware, and user interface to meet clinical standards, setting the stage for a transition into a medical device category—specifically targeting corrective orthotics and physiotherapy applications.

Using bootstrapping as the current funding structure, the amount fully bootstrapped with their own investment evaluated at 20k euro for hardware & software development, and delegations.

Today, they produce limited custom-made batches and are conducting clinical trials in partnership with two city-based rehabilitation centers in Iași and one in Bucharest. This clinical testing is a pivotal milestone toward full medical certification and broader market entry.

ALIGNSPINE has grown organically, reinvesting prototype sales and pilot program revenue into product R&D and scaling. Following grant programs and accelerator validation, the team is exploring private funding—likely via angel investors or early-stage VCs—to finance a production line setup and undertake medical device certification

ALIGNSPINE exemplifies a promising healthtech innovation emerging from Iași—rooted in scientific validation, clinical collaboration, and a strategic shift from wellness to medical orthotics. With the right funding and certification, it's poised to become a leading Romanian brand in smart postural intervention.

EZYMEM A pre-seed STARTUP based in Iasi, founded in 2023, not incorporated, with 2 founders that offers a centralized digital platform for the transparent, efficient, and compliant management of medical devices. **EZYMEM** is specifically designed for the healthcare sector, incorporating regulatory compliance with EU Regulation 2017/745, WHO guidelines, and Romanian healthcare laws. EZYMEM is the first CMMS tailored to Romania and EU medical device standards.

They validated EZYMEM through user interviews and 3 PoC iterations, ensuring alignment with users requirements. Their approach was validated by winning innovation awards and generating early demand from 29 bioengineers and 8 institutions on our waiting list.

In the next 3-5 years, EZYMEM aims to become a leader for medical device management across Romania, recognized for compliance, efficiency, and accessibility in healthcare maintenance. Key milestones: launch with paying customers, partnership with National Agency for Medicines and Medical Devices of Romania, integrate AI-powered features for predictive maintenance and data analytics, reach multi-million euro ARR.

DIGITAIL Founded in Iasi, in 2018, by Sebastian Gabor and Ruxandra Pui, **Digitail** is an all-in-one, cloud-based practice management software for veterinary clinics with a native pet parent app and an integrated AI Assistant. Over 1,000 animal hospitals in 40 countries rely on Digitail to streamline their workflows and keep their teams and clients happy.

adservio **Adservio** is an online school management platform that connects teachers with parents and students. Founded in 2008, in Iasi, is now the leader in educational management in

Romania. Adservio and Microsoft Romania launched the partnership for the digitization of schools by integrating the platform with Microsoft 365 for Education.[12,13]

3. Gaps and Weaknesses of the Regional Ecosystem

Structural weaknesses in the regional innovation system

The North-East Region of Romania (Regiunea Nord-Est), which includes counties Iași, Bacău, Suceava, Neamț, Botoșani, and Vaslui, has made progress in developing its innovation ecosystem in recent years, particularly through university-driven R&D and startup hubs like Rubik Hub. However, several structural weaknesses continue to hinder the full development of the regional innovation system.

Structural Weaknesses in the North-East Regional Innovation System are:

1. Access to Funding
   - Limited local investment capital: There is a noticeable lack of regional venture capital and angel investor networks. Most startups seek funding in Bucharest or internationally.
   - Low absorption of EU funds: Although EU and government programs exist (e.g., through ADR Nord-Est), SMEs often struggle to meet co-financing, documentation, or eligibility requirements.
   - Low private R&D investment: Business expenditure on R&D is among the lowest in Romania—most R&D is done by public institutions or universities.
2. Human Capital & Skills Mismatch
   - Brain drain: High-skilled graduates from major university centers like Iași often emigrate or relocate to Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, or abroad.
   - Skills mismatch: Employers report shortages in digital, entrepreneurial, and tech transfer-related skills. University curricula lag behind startup/industry needs.
   - Low entrepreneurial culture: Risk-averse mindsets, weak startup mentorship networks, and limited exposure to international innovation ecosystems hamper entrepreneurial development.
3. Fragmentation of Ecosystem Actors
   - Weak collaboration between academia–industry–government: Despite strong universities (e.g., UAIC and TUIASI), tech transfer offices and business cooperation are still underdeveloped.

[12]Source: https://www.adrnordest.ro/en/regional-innovation-consortium-approved-the-research-and-innovation-strategy-for-smart-specialisation-of-the-north-east-region-3rd-edition-1st-revision/, accessed in June 2025

[13]Source: https://rostartup.com/2022/06/21/starting-up-romania-entrepreneurship-ecosystem-diagnostic, accessed in June 2025

- Lack of integrated innovation hubs: Initiatives like Rubik Hub in Piatra Neamț or Digital Innovation Hub are promising but still need more traction
- Few industry clusters: Compared to Western regions, North-East Romania lacks robust clusters in sectors like biotech, IT, or clean energy that could support startup scaling.

4. Regulatory & Bureaucratic Barriers
   - Cumbersome procedures for startup registration and public funding: Delays, excessive paperwork, and changing eligibility criteria discourage participation in innovation programs.
   - Low institutional capacity: Some local authorities and regional development agencies lack the expertise or digital tools to facilitate innovation-related projects effectively.
5. Infrastructure Gaps
   - Inadequate digital infrastructure in rural and small-town areas: High-speed internet and digital service penetration are uneven.
   - Limited co-working and prototyping spaces: Outside Iași and Piatra Neamț, there are few incubators, labs, or accelerators tailored to startup needs.
6. Internationalization Deficit
   - Few startups operate globally: Most focus on local or national markets; international scaling strategies are rare due to limited market readiness and mentoring.
   - Weak international partnerships: North-East Romania's participation in cross-border R&D or startup ecosystems (like Horizon Europe or EIT programs) is still modest.

Highlight challenges in startup growth and scalability

Here are the key **challenges to startup growth and scalability** in the North-East region of Romania, reflecting both ecosystem-level and startup-level constraints:

1. Access to Capital
   - Limited local funding: Most seed and growth-stage capital is concentrated in Bucharest or international hubs. Local angel investors and VC funds are scarce.
   - Fragmented funding instruments: Public grants (e.g., Start-Up Nation, EU structural funds) are often bureaucratic, short-term, and don't support rapid scaling.
   - Low ticket sizes: When capital is available, funding rounds tend to be small—insufficient for R&D-heavy or international growth strategies.
2. Human Resource Constraints
   - Talent retention issues: Startups lose skilled staff to multinational companies or foreign opportunities (brain drain).
   - Shortage of senior talent: Difficult to attract experienced C-level executives, growth marketers, or scale-oriented product managers locally.
   - Freelancer/outsourcing over-reliance: Many startups depend on freelance developers, limiting team cohesion and IP development.
3. Limited Market Access
   - Over-reliance on the domestic market: Few startups plan for global scaling early; language barriers and lack of international partnerships delay expansion.

- Difficulty accessing corporates: Local SMEs rarely partner with startups, and there are few structured open innovation programs from big companies in the region.

4. Inadequate Mentoring & Acceleration
   - Limited scaleup-specific support: Accelerators like Rubik Hub focus on early-stage support. There are few follow-up programs for growth-phase startups.
   - Few mentors with scaleup experience: Local advisors often lack hands-on experience in taking a company from seed to Series A or internationalization.
   - Lack of structured peer learning: Few forums exist for scaleup founders to exchange insights or avoid common pitfalls.
5. Ecosystem Fragmentation
   - Siloed support structures: Incubators, universities, and municipalities often operate independently rather than as a unified growth ecosystem.
   - Lack of cluster effects: Absence of strong industrial clusters means fewer synergies, fewer customers, and limited spillover innovation.
6. Regulatory and Operational Hurdles
   - Bureaucratic legal/tax environment: Founders face slow company registration, unclear taxation for stock options, and rigid employment contracts.
   - Public procurement barriers: Complex and risk-averse procurement practices discourage municipalities and hospitals from piloting startup products. [14,15]

From the perspective of the interviewed stakeholders involved in supporting startups, when it comes to **how they assess the startups inclusion in their program** the most important aspects are: **the founding team and expertise, market size and growth potential and a validated MVP.**

When assessing the scalability potential of a startup, the main aspects taken into consideration are:

- the problem the startup is addressing—is it a widespread, clearly defined need with demand beyond a local context?
- market trends and dynamics - this includes the size of the addressable market, its growth trajectory, and the presence of unmet needs or opportunities for disruption. A scalable startup typically operates in a market that is either large or rapidly expanding, with room for new entrants to gain traction.
- investor interest serves as a valuable signal. -while not definitive on its own, the presence of reputable investors or early funding rounds indicates a level of external validation and confidence in the startup's model and potential.
- a particularly critical element is the founding team's vision and ambition, their capacity to grow

[14]Source: https://www.adrnordest.ro/en/ris3-new-brochure/, accessed in June 2025
[15]Source: https://regionordest.ro/en/priority-1/, accessed in June 2025

- The business model itself is replicable and adaptable across different markets.

Collaboration challenges between startups, corporations, universities, and policymakers.

Collaboration among startups, corporations, universities, and policymakers is essential for a functional and innovative regional ecosystem. However, in the **North-East region of Romania**, these partnerships are still evolving and face several challenges due to cultural, structural, and operational barriers.

Stakeholders Involved	Main Challenges
Startups – Universities	Weak tech transfer, poor alignment of research with market, bureaucratic delays
Startups – Corporations	No structured pilot programs, rigid procurement, low trust
Startups – Policymakers	Policy inconsistency, low representation, grant bureaucracy
Universities – Corporations	Divergent incentives, no co-creation platforms, weak demand-driven R&D
Universities/Policymakers–Startups	Misaligned funding tools, rigid program design, little agility

Table 4. The main challenges between the involved stakeholders identified into our innovation ecosystem

The structural causes include:

- Cultural gaps: Academia, business, and government operate with different goals and timeframes.
- Lack of sufficient intermediaries: Only few "innovation brokers" or platforms that facilitate matchmaking and de-risk partnerships, such as clusters or Digital Innovation Hub
- No incentives for collaboration: Professors and public employees are rarely rewarded for industry engagement or startup support.
- Insufficient clustering: The region lacks strong thematic clusters (e.g., agritech, clean tech) that could act as collaboration magnets.

Gaps in infrastructure or digital connectivity that hinder innovation

The identified gaps in Infrastructure and Digital Connectivity that hinder innovation in Romania North-East region are:

1. Digital Connectivity Deficits
   - *Urban–rural digital divide:* While cities like Iași benefit from high-speed internet, many rural areas and small towns in counties like Vaslui, Botoșani, and Suceava still lack reliable broadband or fiber-optic access.
   - *Inadequate 5G deployment:* 5G infrastructure is minimal outside Iași and Bacău, limiting the development of advanced technologies (e.g., IoT, smart mobility, telemedicine).
   - *Low digital adoption by SMEs:* Many small businesses and public institutions lack cloud computing, e-commerce integration, and cybersecurity infrastructure.
   - *Limited access to advanced computing:* Startups and researchers lack affordable access to high-performance computing, AI training infrastructure, or regional data centers.
2. Physical Infrastructure Gaps
   - *Underdeveloped transport links: Lack of speed roads* and rail connections between major towns and innovation hubs (e.g., Iași–Piatra-Neamț–Botoșani- Suceava) reduce inter-county collaboration and mobility of talent and goods.
   - *Insufficient coworking and maker spaces:* Outside Iași and Piatra Neamț (e.g., Rubik Hub), the region lacks prototyping labs, FabLabs, and coworking spaces that support startup formation and product testing.
   - *Limited science/technology parks:* The region has few fully operational technology parks with modern infrastructure and integrated business support services.
   - *Energy and utilities issues:* Some industrial zones and incubators face power fluctuations or unreliable utilities—especially in more remote counties like Neamț or Vaslui.
3. Public Sector Digitalization
   - *Slow e-government adoption:* Regional public authorities still rely heavily on paper-based processes, hindering startups applying for permits, grants, or public contracts.
   - *Lack of open data platforms:* Absence of regional or local open data initiatives limits the ability of startups to build civic tech, mobility, or analytics solutions.
   - *Weak interoperability:* Systems between municipalities, universities, and state agencies often don't talk to each other, delaying innovation collaboration.

Gap Category	Innovation Impact
Broadband & Mobile Access	Limits digital business models, remote work, and rural tech hubs
Prototyping & Lab Spaces - insufficient	Restricts hardware, medtech, or agritech startups

Transport & Mobility	Reduces collaboration, regional integration, and investor visits
Digital Public Services	Slows startup–government partnerships, grant applications
Cloud/AI Infrastructure	Limits data-driven innovation, AI adoption, and competitive edge

Table 5. The identified gaps and the impact on innovation in Romania North-East region

4. Specific Needs for Local Startups

The key challenges faced by startups in accessing resources and support

The **key challenges** faced by interviewed startups in accessing resources and support, ranked in order, taking into consideration the most pressing ones, are the following:

1. Access to the markets
2. Qualified staff
3. Business financing
4. Regulation
5. Taxes

The main types of support startups seek:
The main type of support startups seek, according to their responses, depends on the sector that they are into.

Startups in Health tech seek for:

- **Bridge funding and milestone-based grants** that can support product refinement and regulatory validation without requiring immediate high MRR.
- **More flexible public funding platforms**, with intuitive interfaces, less bureaucracy, and centralized digital profiles, so companies don't waste time uploading the same documents repeatedly.
- Early growth capital for validated but non-scaled products, especially for companies that already work with pharma or public institutions but need time to mature KPIs.
- **Strategic matchmaking** between startups and institutional clients would accelerate go-to-market and help unlock revenue faster in a sector where traction takes time, but impact is long-lasting.
- **Equity investment to accelerate hiring** (especially in product, sales, and regulatory), expand geographically, and strengthen our enterprise infrastructure.

- **Bridge or blended funding** to support pilot phases with institutional clients and pharma, where revenue comes after 6–12 months of engagement.

HealthTech startups often fall between funding categories. What's missing mostly are dedicated financial instruments tailored to long sales cycles, regulatory hurdles, and multi-stakeholder validation processes.

Startups in Agritech faces several key challenges in securing funding:

- Investor Awareness of AgriTech Complexity - Many investors, especially in early-stage ecosystems, are more familiar with urban-centric B2C or pure SaaS models. Communicating the real impact and scalability potential of agri-digitalization — especially in rural contexts — often requires education and reframing traditional ROI expectations.
- Limited Local Investor Appetite for DeepTech in Agriculture - The Eastern European investment landscape still offers few specialized funds focused on agri-innovation. Startups with a mix of hardware-agnostic integration, automation, and real-time analytics sometimes falls outside the comfort zone of generalist investors.
- Public Sector Adoption Is Slow but Critical - One of strategic customer segments — cooperatives and rural development agencies — operates under rigid procurement cycles and regulatory constraints, making revenue realization slower. This deters investors focused on fast growth.
- Need for Demonstration at Scale - While an MVP has been validated in diverse environments, investors often request additional large-scale pilots to demonstrate interoperability with all machinery types and across various geographies. This creates a funding-validation chicken-and-egg problem.
- Lack of Precedents in the Region - Being few startups that builds an automated, data-centric agri management platform in the region, we didn't identify local success stories to point to, which is riskier in the eyes of traditional funders.

Startups in **AgriTech** are looking for:

- **Practical Support for Accessing Funding**
  While funding programs (national or EU-level) do exist, many startups — especially early-stage or deep-tech ones — **struggle to navigate the complexity of the application process**. There is a clear need for **hands-on guidance and operational support** in identifying, applying for, and managing innovation grants.
- **Support for International Market Access**
  Startups in agriculture often focus on local impact, but scalable solutions like ours need help **accessing new markets across Europe and beyond**. This includes **legal, regulatory, and commercial support** to enter ecosystems where agricultural practices, equipment standards, and procurement processes vary widely.

When asked about **the factors that can make European connections more valuable**, the interviewed **Health Tech startups** identified the following:

- **Access to decision-makers in healthcare systems**
  Introductions to public health institutions, hospital networks, or digital health policy stakeholders can dramatically shorten entry timelines into new markets.
- **Pan-European pilot opportunities or consortiums**
  Joint validation programs that span multiple EU countries would help healthtech startups test, improve, and deploy their solutions across borders, with shared credibility.
- **Cross-country investor matchmaking**
  Connecting startups with sector-specific funds or angel syndicates active in other EU countries, especially those with experience in healthtech, public procurement, or AI compliance, would add strategic value beyond capital.
- **Simplified access to EU-level funding**
  Support in navigating EU grant opportunities (e.g., Horizon, EU4Health), including legal/administrative guidance or standardized digital profiles to reduce repetitive paperwork.
- **Knowledge-sharing with regulatory and clinical experts**
  Being part of communities where startups can learn from others who've scaled in regulated markets, how they handled data governance, clinical partnerships, or multilingual deployment, adds enormous practical value.
- **Streamlined Regulatory Harmonization**: Making regulatory pathways like the MDR more predictable and consistent across member states would reduce complexity and accelerate market access.
- **Cross-Border Funding Initiatives**: Increased availability of pan-European grants, co-investment funds, or venture programs targeting medtech startups would provide critical capital and reduce fragmentation.
- **Stronger Industry-Academia-Startup Networks**: Facilitating partnerships between startups, research institutions, and established medical device companies can drive innovation and speed up clinical validation.
- **Improved Access to Clinical Trials**: Harmonized processes for conducting multi-country clinical studies would make it easier and more cost-effective to generate robust evidence.
- **Standardized Reimbursement Frameworks**: Greater alignment on reimbursement policies across Europe would help startups scale and attract investor confidence by reducing market risk.

Other responses from startups are:

- **targeted peer-to-peer learning & visibility**
- **tailored mentorship & investment readiness programs**
- **founder-centric mentoring**, addressing challenges like: how to negotiate equity and retain control, how to scale without overexposure to risk
- preferential access to pilot opportunities and partnerships
- enhanced visibility in policy and innovation platforms

Skills and talent gaps that limit startup growth

Skills and Talent Gaps That Limit Startup Growth – North-East Romania

1. Shortage of Senior & Specialized Talent
   - *Lack of experienced scale-up professionals:* Founders often struggle to recruit senior-level talent such as product managers, growth hackers, CFOs, or experienced CTOs with international exposure.
   - *Talent drain to Western Europe & Bucharest:* Many skilled graduates, especially in IT, engineering, and finance, leave for higher-paying jobs abroad or in Romania's capital.
   - *Limited availability of startup-minded professionals:* Traditional career paths dominate; risk-averse mindsets make it hard for startups to hire entrepreneurial team members.
2. Mismatch Between University Output and Startup Needs
   - *Outdated curricula:* Although universities like UAIC (Alexandru Ioan Cuza University) and TUIASI ("Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University) produce high numbers of graduates, their training often lacks practical, market-ready skills—especially in areas like UI/UX design, agile development, and digital marketing.
   - *Low exposure to entrepreneurship:* Very few students experience startup internships, early-stage product development, or lean startup principles during their studies.
   - *Soft skills gap:* Communication, critical thinking, project management, and teamwork are often underdeveloped in entry-level candidates.
3. Tech & Digital Skill Gaps
   - *AI, data science & cybersecurity:* Demand for AI engineers, data analysts, and cybersecurity experts outpaces local supply, slowing the growth of tech startups in these verticals.
   - *UI/UX design and product thinking:* Founders frequently report a lack of product designers and professionals who understand user research, interface design, and user journey mapping.
   - *Cloud and DevOps expertise:* Startups adopting scalable SaaS or platform models face shortages in cloud engineers and DevOps professionals.
4. Business & Commercial Skill Gaps
   - *Sales & B2B marketing:* Startups struggle to hire people skilled in outbound sales, CRM management, lead generation, or go-to-market strategy.
   - *Legal & regulatory know-how:* Legal advisors with startup-specific experience (IP, stock options, venture law) are scarce in the region.
   - *International scaling skills:* Many startup teams lack experience in market entry strategy, cross-border legal issues, or managing distributed teams.
5. Gender & Inclusion Gaps
   - *Low representation of women in tech startups:* While some progress is visible (e.g., through Rubik Hub's women in tech programs), female participation in founding teams and technical roles remains limited.

- *Underutilization of rural talent:* Digital upskilling initiatives haven't reached rural areas or smaller towns where latent talent may exist but remains untapped.

In the North-East Romania region, we have identified also some educational system limitations, as:

- Limited number of dual education programs (university–industry cooperation), with few initiatives at Life Science University of Iasi, "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași and Suceava University.
- *Few practical training tracks focused on startups* (hackathons, MVP labs).
- *Insufficient incentive for academic entrepreneurship*—professors rarely spin off startups.

From the perspective of the stakeholders, the common mistakes that startups are making when they try to access their programs are:

- focusing too much on the product and not enough on the problem they are trying to solve
- founders fall in love with the product and forget to validate it with the market
- underestimating the complexity of the market they are targeting (for example, healthcare and medical technology environment, which is highly regulated)
- lack the interdisciplinary collaboration required for success
- incomplete or unclear applications, vague descriptions of the innovation, or lack of engagement during the evaluation process
- too vague in the presentation – relevant details are treated lightly, without clarity on major topics like competitive advantage, financial projections (and the basis thereof), relevant growth limitations etc.
- unrealistic financial projections & poor timeline estimations (mismatches between expected revenue start date and piling early expenses => significant cash flow issues)
- failure to consider potential limitations / barriers in achieving the expected results
- failure to consider multiple scenarios for achieving the goal (e.g. bootstrapping vs. continuous fundraising)

All these shortcomings reflect the need for upskilling when it comes to startups founders.

Insights from local startups on their biggest roadblocks to success

The general challenges for regional startups are related **to access for national and EU funding calls, which is very difficult**. Another key challenge is the **intense competition with larger companies** that have bigger budgets and specialized teams for navigating these processes.
In addition, **bureaucracy** remains a major hurdle, from repetitive paperwork to slow response times, and many of the existing platforms are outdated, unintuitive, and not built with startups in mind. Ideally, there would be a validated digital company profile that eliminates the need to re-upload the same documents across multiple programs and platforms. The current process is often time-consuming and inefficient, especially for early-stage teams with limited administrative capacity.

The main challenges depend on the sector that they are into.

For **HealthTech startups**, they are related to the nature of the healthcare market and the mismatch between sales cycle and VC expectations, like:

- **Long enterprise sales cycles -** Working with pharma companies, public institutions, and medical associations involves complex procurement processes, legal reviews, and regulatory approvals. While this results in high-value contracts and strong retention, it slows down short-term revenue growth and makes it harder to show rapid MRR acceleration.
- **VC expectations for fast, recurring SaaS revenue -** Many investors prioritize high monthly recurring revenue (MRR) and short sales loops, which do not align with the B2B/B2G HealthTech reality, where long-term contracts, pilot phases, and relationship-building are the norm.
- **Limited appetite for regulated, clinical-grade AI -** Investors often find it harder to evaluate the value and scalability of AI products that operate in highly regulated, clinically validated environments, compared to more generalist or B2C AI plays.

But despite these challenges, there are startups that have built strong traction through public sector partnerships, validated deployments, and commercial pharma projects, positioning them for sustainable growth and de-risked scale.

Another challenge for Healthtech startups is the **regulatory compliance:**

- **Extended validation timelines**
  Clinical-grade AI tools require rigorous validation, approvals, and collaboration with medical authorities. While this increases trust and credibility, it delays the kind of rapid scaling that some investors expect.
- **Increased legal and compliance costs**
  Ensuring GDPR compliance, traceability, and auditability adds complexity to both development and deployment—especially when working with public institutions or integrating with EHRs. EU regulatory acts on personal data and the need for repetitive procedures in hospitals for obtaining permits are limiting the product's capabilities. Such limitations do not exist in China and the US, which is one of the reasons for spectacular advancements of their AI technologies over EU-made ones.
- **Perceived investor risks**
  Some VC firms are hesitant to fund startups operating in regulated environments due to concerns about approval delays, liability, or lack of technical understanding of compliance frameworks

Startups in Agri tech faces several key challenges:

- **Investor Awareness of AgriTech Complexity** - Many investors, especially in early-stage ecosystems, are more familiar with urban-centric B2C or pure SaaS models. Communicating the real impact and scalability potential of agri-digitalization —

especially in rural contexts — often requires education and reframing traditional ROI expectations.

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- Lack of Precedents in the Region - Being few startups that builds an automated, data-centric agri management platform in the region, we didn't identify local success stories to point to, which is riskier in the eyes of traditional funders.

From the regulatory point of view the challenges for AgriTech companies are:

- **Complexity in Public Procurement for B2G Clients**
  One of our strategic customer segments includes **agricultural cooperatives and rural institutions**, which are often funded through public mechanisms. However, engaging with these entities means navigating **complex procurement regulations and long approval cycles**, which can delay revenue and deter private investors looking for short-term returns.
- **Uncertainty Around Data Usage Regulations**
  Although Cultiva is GDPR-compliant and transparent in its data practices, **investors often raise questions about long-term compliance** — especially when discussing integration with public programs or potential data monetization models. The evolving regulatory landscape in the EU (e.g. AI Act, Data Act) introduces uncertainty for innovation-based startups.
- **Limited National Incentives for Private AgriTech Investment**
  In some regions, regulatory frameworks **do not yet incentivize private capital to support agri-digital transformation**, unlike sectors such as energy or IT. This creates a funding gap for mission-driven, tech-enabled solutions that serve rural ecosystems.

5. Barriers for Women and Minorities in Accessing Innovation Support Services

Challenges women and minority entrepreneurs face in accessing funding and resources.

Gender-specific challenges do exist, especially in male-dominated sectors like AI, healthcare technology, and institutional procurement.

As female founders, our interviewed entrepreneurs encountered moments where technical or strategic credibility was questioned more quickly, or where assumptions were made about the scale or seriousness of the company they lead. In meetings with institutional or corporate stakeholders, they have noticed that sometimes they have to over-explain or justify decisions that male counterparts might not be questioned on.
Access to funding can also be affected. While they have engaged with many supportive investors, there is still a **visible underrepresentation of women in investment committees**, which sometimes limits shared perspective, especially when pitching HealthTech solutions built through empathy, trust, and long-term impact, not just velocity.
That said, these challenges have pushed female founders to build even stronger networks, to lead with clarity and data, and to support other women in tech and health who are navigating similar paths. They strongly believe that representation at the founder level is part of what drives innovation where it's most needed.

While the ecosystem is more open than ever and female founders had access to valuable programs and investor conversations, they also experienced the structural gaps that persist, especially as a female founder from Eastern Europe in a regulated, deep-tech sector.
Access isn't just about being allowed into the room, it's about being understood, fairly evaluated, and trusted to build at scale. B2B startups led by women often don't match the stereotypical profile that VCs are used to funding. As a result, they sometimes face **higher barriers of proof**, especially when short-term MRR doesn't reflect long-term strategic value.

That said, we believe things are shifting, and they actively seek out partners who value substance, credibility, and long-term impact over rapid, headline-driven growth.

As a female founder coming from Eastern Europe, they have often had to work harder to be taken seriously in early-stage funding conversations, especially when speaking to generalist investors unfamiliar with regulated sectors or slower B2B/B2G growth models.

There's a persistent gap in how opportunities are distributed and how credibility is perceived. We have encountered situations where female founders' expertise or ambition was underestimated, or where similar ideas received more enthusiasm when pitched by male counterparts.
Still, these experiences have also strengthened female founders' focus and helped them refine how to communicate value and vision. They have learned to seek out investors who understand the context, not just the numbers, and who believe in building long-term impact alongside underrepresented founders.

Specific barriers in networking, mentorship, or business development.

There are times when, in international or Western-European contexts, female founders sensed a subtle bias or underestimation of both the maturity of their solutions and the strategic potential of startups emerging from Central and Eastern Europe. The perception gap around where "serious innovation" happens can create an additional hurdle, not in technology, but in credibility and perceived readiness.
Also, navigating highly regulated sectors like healthcare as a *non-traditional voice-female, technical, and from a smaller market* means often having to push harder to access decision-makers or funding networks that remain relatively closed or centralized.
That said, these experiences have also shaped female founders' resilience and sharpened their focus, proving that great innovation doesn't require the "right" zip code, but the right execution and vision.

Regional policies or programs aimed at improving inclusion and diversity in the innovative ecosystem.

Things are changing in regional policies and programs in North-East Romania that are aimed at improving inclusion and diversity within the innovation ecosystem — particularly regarding gender equality, rural inclusion, and youth participation in startups and technology. Here are some good practice examples:
1. Rubik Hub – Inclusion-Centered Programs
- *RubikEDU & Rubik Garage (Piatra Neamț):* These pre-acceleration and acceleration programs place special emphasis on supporting first-time founders, female entrepreneurs, and those from non-tech backgrounds. They run targeted workshops on leadership, confidence building, and team diversity.
- *Women in Tech initiatives:* Rubik Hub has supported panels, networking events, and mentorship sessions specifically aimed at women in STEM and entrepreneurship. These activities promote visibility and provide role models for underrepresented groups.

2. ADR Nord-Est (North-East Regional Development Agency)
- *RIS3 Strategy (Smart Specialization Strategy 2021–2027):* Identifies inclusive innovation as a cross-cutting priority, with objectives to promote access to digital skills for rural populations, women, and young people. Also supports inclusive digital transformation in public services, with the aim to ensure all citizens benefit from regional innovation.
- *TechTalent Growth programs (co-funded by EU):* Promote tech training for youth in underserved areas, especially through partnerships with universities and NGOs.

3. Startup Nation & Other National Programs (with Regional Implementation)
- *Startup Nation Romania:* Offers bonus scoring for applications led by women entrepreneurs, young founders (under 35), and founders from rural areas. Although national, it's implemented regionally through local agencies like AIPPIMM and PFA consultants.
- *Diaspora Start-Up Program:* Supports returning Romanian immigrants in launching businesses, including in North-East Romania, with a focus on integrating diverse perspectives and reversing brain drain.

4. NGO-Led Inclusion Projects (Regional Level)

- *Digital People Romania (Iași):* Runs workshops and online academies to train rural youth and women in digital tools, freelancing, and entrepreneurship.
- *Code4Romania (partially active in NE Romania):* Promotes civic tech projects that increase access to public services for disabled, elderly, and digitally excluded populations.
- *Fundația Alături de Voi (ADV Romania):* Based in Iași, ADV runs social enterprises and innovation labs to support young people with disabilities, Roma communities, and marginalized youth in entering the labor market or starting ventures.
- *Global Women TechLeaders (National Level):* **Global Women TechLeaders (GWTL)** is a non-profit organization, founded in 2017 under OUG Nr. 26⁄2000, that promotes continuous learning and growth and facilitates international knowledge sharing through global partnerships with organizations, companies and universities meant to bring in innovative programs aimed at enhancing the educational and professional development of women in the tech ecosystem worldwide. They are 'global' as we facilitate the international business exchange between Romania and other countries through the programs, networking and business opportunities we bring in.

5. University-Level Programs Supporting Inclusion

- *UAIC (Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Iasi):* Offers inclusion scholarships and supports women in science through EU programs like Horizon Europe and EIT HEI Initiatives.
- *TUIASI (Gheorghe Asachi Technical University Iasi):* Hosts events and bootcamps in partnership with NGOs to support young women in tech and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Regarding the presented policies and local actions, we observed gaps and challenges on applying level like:

- Lack of long-term monitoring & evaluation for diversity impact.
- Inclusion is often limited to project-based funding rather than being embedded systemically in regional strategies.
- Low representation of Roma entrepreneurs or ethnic minorities in startup ecosystems. Digital inclusion efforts are still underfunded in the poorest rural communes.

Recommendations for making innovation support services more inclusive

Because we succeed to identify the gaps and problems in the region, here are some targeted recommendations for making innovation support services more inclusive in the North-East region of Romania, aligned with the regional context and EU best practices:

1. Design Tailored Programs for Underrepresented Groups

- *Women Entrepreneurs:* Establish dedicated mentoring circles, leadership workshops, and founder networks. Offer targeted pre-seed grants or pitch days specifically for women-led startups.

- *Rural Innovators:* Deploy mobile innovation labs or digital buses that deliver workshops and maker tools directly to rural towns and communes. Subsidize co-working spaces and satellite incubators in second-tier cities like Vaslui, Roman, or Dorohoi.

2. *Embed Diversity Criteria into Funding & Evaluation:* Include diversity and inclusion scores in the selection criteria for public grants, accelerators, and tech park access. The programs can offer bonus points or earmarked quotas for: Women-led ventures; Youth-led startups; Social enterprises; Founders from disadvantaged backgrounds or rural areas.

3. Improve Digital Accessibility and Infrastructure
   - *Expand broadband and mobile connectivity in innovation deserts* (e.g., rural Suceava, Botoșani).
   - *Build inclusive digital platforms* (mobile-first, low-bandwidth compatible) for grant applications, mentoring, and matchmaking services.
   - *Ensure innovation services and training are available in Romanian and minority languages* (e.g., Romani, Hungarian) where applicable.
4. Foster Inclusive Talent Pipelines
   - *Integrate entrepreneurship education and startup internships into high school and vocational curricula.*
   - *Partner with NGOs to deliver digital upskilling for: Women re-entering the workforce; NEET youth (not in education, employment, or training); People with disabilities.*
   - *Promote diverse role models through speaker events and media campaigns.*
5. Encourage Inclusive Public–Private Partnerships
   - Co-create programs with grassroots organizations and community leaders to reach marginalized populations.
   - Incentivize universities, corporations, and municipalities to run co-branded innovation challenges focused on inclusive solutions (e.g., assistive tech, rural mobility, social housing innovation).
6. Build Inclusive Infrastructure
   - Design incubators, tech hubs, and labs to be physically accessible and equipped for people with disabilities.
   - Ensure child-friendly spaces or childcare services in co-working environments to support parent entrepreneurs, especially mothers.
7. Monitor, Measure & Publicly Report Inclusion Outcomes
   - Set KPIs for gender, age, geographic and socioeconomic diversity in program applicants and grantees, leadership roles in supported startups and participation in innovation events.
   - Publish annual inclusion dashboards to promote transparency and accountability.

All the above proposed recommendations are aligned with EU Programs for Startups and innovation fostering programs like: Horizon Europe's Mission on Inclusive Innovation, EIT RIS strategies, European Innovation Council's inclusivity goals, Digital Europe Programme (DEP) and European Pillar of Social Rights.

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