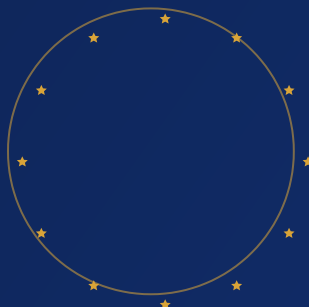


A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR ALBANIAN SMES
ON THE PATH TO EUROPEAN UNION ACCESSION

Innovation Knowledge Hub

A roadmap for adopting innovation, meeting European standards,
and unlocking EU funding — built for owners, founders and
innovation managers of small and medium enterprises in Albania.



About this guide

The **Innovation Knowledge Hub** is a practical reference for Albanian small and medium enterprises navigating innovation adoption, digital and green transition, and the technical alignment required on the path to European Union membership. It is designed to sit alongside, not replace, the official guidance of the European Commission, the Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA), and the Enterprise Europe Network.

This edition draws on publicly available European Commission enlargement reporting, Horizon Europe and Single Market Programme documentation, and the services delivered through Enterprise Europe Network Albania, current as of mid-2026. EU funding rules, calls, deadlines and thresholds change frequently — always verify current terms at the official sources listed in the References chapter before applying.

Published for dissemination by business support organisations, chambers of commerce, incubators and accelerators, and public institutions supporting SME competitiveness in Albania.

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FORMAT

Practical guide · 12 chapters

AUDIENCE

SMEs, innovation managers,
BSOs, policymakers

LANGUAGE

English edition

CONTENTS

What’s inside

PART I · FOUNDATIONS

01	Why Innovation Matters for EU Accession	p.05
02	The EU Innovation Ecosystem, Explained	p.08
03	Innovation Readiness for SMEs	p.11

PART II · BUILDING BLOCKS

04	Digital Transformation	p.14
05	Green Transition & Sustainability	p.17
06	Research, Development & Technology Transfer	p.20
07	Intellectual Property Rights	p.23
08	Standards, Quality Infrastructure & CE Marking	p.26

PART III · THE TOOLKIT

09	Funding Opportunities	p.29
10	Enterprise Europe Network & Support in Albania	p.34
11	AI & Emerging Technologies for SMEs	p.37

PART IV · METHOD

12	Innovation Management Frameworks	p.40
13	The Step-by-Step Innovation Journey	p.43

PART V · IN PRACTICE

14	Sector-Specific Innovation Examples	p.46
15	Albanian Success Stories & EU Best Practice	p.53

PART VI · TOOLS

16	Practical Checklists	p.56
17	Self-Assessment & Innovation Maturity Model	p.58

FOREWORD

A guide for a decisive decade

Albania is negotiating EU membership faster than at any point in its history. All 33 negotiating chapters are open, the country has passed its interim rule-of-law benchmarks, and the first chapters — science and research, education and culture, and external relations — have already been provisionally closed. The government's stated ambition is to conclude negotiations by 2027.

None of that is abstract for the owner of a manufacturing workshop in Shkodra, a software team in Tirana, or an agrifood exporter in Korça. Every negotiating chapter that closes brings Albanian SMEs closer to competing, trading and innovating on equal terms inside the EU Single Market — and closer to needing the same standards, certifications and innovation capacity that European competitors already have.

This guide exists to close that gap early. It translates EU policy — standards, funding programmes, intellectual property rules, quality infrastructure — into decisions an SME owner can act on this quarter, not just once accession is complete.

“Innovation is not a reward for accession — it is the preparation for it. The SMEs that start now will not be catching up in 2030. They will already be competing.”

INNOVATION KNOWLEDGE HUB EDITORIAL BOARD

© WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

SME owners and managers, innovation and export leads, incubator and accelerator staff, chamber of commerce advisors, and public officials designing SME support programmes.

INTRODUCTION

How to use this guide

The guide is organised as a journey: understand why innovation and EU accession are linked, learn the EU innovation ecosystem, assess your own readiness, then work chapter by chapter through the technical building blocks — digital, green, IP, standards and funding — before turning to sector examples, tools and a step-by-step action plan.

**Read**

Concise chapters, no jargon, EU concepts explained in plain terms.

**Assess**

Self-assessment tools and a maturity model to benchmark your SME.

**Plan**

Checklists and a roadmap template to turn insight into action.

**Connect**

Contacts for AIDA, EEN Albania and EU programme desks.

 HOW TO READ THE ICONS

Look out for “**Did You Know?**” highlights (gold), practical **action checklists**, EU-standard **comparison tables**, and real **case studies** throughout. Each chapter opens with a one-page brief you can read in under three minutes, and closes with a practical checklist.



CHAPTER 01

Why Innovation Matters for EU Accession

Albania's EU accession is no longer a distant milestone. It is an active negotiation with real deadlines — and innovation capacity is one of the clearest ways an SME can get ahead of it.

33/33

CHAPTERS OPENED

2027

TARGET TO CLOSE NEGOTIATIONS

2030

EARLIEST REALISTIC ACCESSION

01.1 WHERE ACCESSION STANDS TODAY

A negotiation that is now moving fast

Albania opened its first negotiating cluster in October 2024 and, remarkably, had opened all six clusters covering all 33 negotiating chapters by December 2025 — one of the fastest openings of any EU candidate country. In May 2026, Albania became only the second candidate country, after Montenegro, to pass its Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) for Cluster 1 “Fundamentals,” the cluster that must lead every opening and close every process.

Passing that benchmark unlocked the “closing” phase of negotiations. In July 2026, Albania and the EU provisionally closed their first three chapters: science and research, education and culture, and external relations. The government’s stated ambition is to complete all negotiations by the end of 2027, with EU entry realistically possible from 2030 if the pace and reform momentum are sustained.

For an SME, the practical reading is this: the technical alignment of Albanian law, standards and institutions with the EU acquis is happening chapter by chapter, right now — and much of it, especially Chapter 20 (Enterprise and Industrial Policy), Chapter 25 (Science and Research) and Chapter 29 (Customs Union), lands directly on how businesses operate.

THE SIX NEGOTIATING CLUSTERS

- 1. Fundamentals** — rule of law, judiciary, public administration, economic criteria.
- 2. Internal market** — free movement, company law, competition, consumer protection.
- 3. Competitiveness & inclusive growth** — enterprise policy, research, education, employment.
- 4. Green agenda & sustainable connectivity** — environment, energy, transport.
- 5. Resources, agriculture & cohesion** — agriculture, fisheries, regional policy.
- 6. External relations** — foreign, security and defence policy.

DID YOU KNOW?

Clusters 2 and 3 — internal market, and competitiveness & inclusive growth — are the ones that set the rules SMEs will eventually operate under: company law, standards, state aid, research and enterprise policy.

01.2 THE INNOVATION LINK

Why innovation, specifically

EU accession is fundamentally a convergence process: Albanian institutions, standards and markets aligning with European ones. Innovation capacity is one of the few areas where an individual SME can converge ahead of the state — and benefit immediately, inside or outside the EU.



MARKET ACCESS, EARLY

Horizon Europe, the Single Market Programme and other EU funds are already open to Albanian entities — years before formal membership. Waiting for accession means leaving funding on the table now.



STANDARDS AS A PASSPORT

CE marking, harmonised standards and quality infrastructure are technical, not political. An SME that meets them can sell into the EU Single Market well before Albania formally joins it.



COMPETITIVENESS PRESSURE

Accession opens the domestic market to EU competitors under the same rules. Innovation — not just cost — will be what keeps Albanian SMEs winning at home.

What “innovation” means in this guide

Not only invention. In an EU policy sense, innovation covers product, process, organisational and marketing innovation — a new product line, a digitised workflow, a new export market entered with a new business model, or a certified quality system are all innovation.

This guide treats innovation as a **management discipline**: a repeatable way of finding, testing and scaling improvements, supported by the right funding, partnerships and standards — not a one-off project.

THREE REASONS TO START BEFORE ACCESSION, NOT AFTER

- ☐ EU funding programmes (Horizon Europe, SMP, Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs) are already open to Albanian entities.
- ☐ Standards and certification take months to years to implement — starting early avoids a bottleneck at accession.
- ☐ Early movers capture export relationships and supplier contracts before EU competitors arrive at scale.

01.3 WHERE ALBANIA STANDS

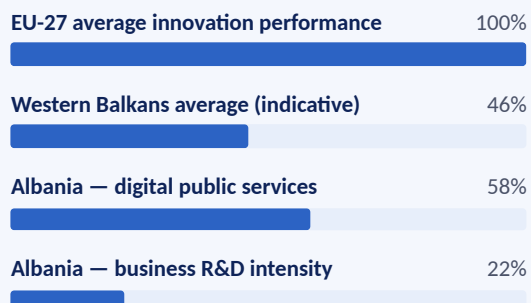
Albania's innovation starting point

Albania is consistently classified as an **emerging innovator** in regional innovation benchmarking, alongside most of the Western Balkans. The gap with the EU average is largest in business R&D expenditure, patent applications and innovation-active firms as a share of all SMEs — and narrowest in digital public services and entrepreneurial intentions, where Albania performs comparatively well.

That gap is an opportunity as much as a challenge. Because so few Albanian SMEs currently engage systematically with innovation support, the SMEs that do adopt structured innovation practices, apply for EU co-funding, or pursue certification tend to stand out quickly — both to EU partners and to domestic customers.

The remainder of this guide is built around closing that gap: readiness, digital and green transition, R&D and IP, standards, and — critically — the funding and support instruments that make closing it affordable for a small business.

INDICATIVE INNOVATION SNAPSHOT



Indicative positioning based on regional innovation benchmarking trends; consult the European Innovation Scoreboard and national statistics (INSTAT) for current figures.

DID YOU KNOW?

Albania has been fully associated to Horizon Europe since February 2022 — the same terms as EU member states — giving Albanian researchers and SMEs access to a programme worth €95.5 billion.



CHAPTER 02

The EU Innovation Ecosystem, Explained

A map of the institutions, programmes and standards bodies that shape how innovation is funded, protected and recognised across Europe — and where Albania already has a seat at the table.

02.1 THE ARCHITECTURE

Four layers of the EU innovation system

The EU innovation ecosystem is not one programme — it is a stack of policy, funding, standards and support layers that work together. Understanding the stack helps an SME work out which door to knock on first.

1 · POLICY & LAW

The European Commission (notably DG GROW for internal market/SMEs, and DG RTD for research) sets the rules: the Single Market, product legislation, state aid rules and the SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe. This layer defines *what is required*.

2 · FUNDING PROGRAMMES

Horizon Europe, the Single Market Programme, InvestEU, Digital Europe Programme and others turn policy into money SMEs can apply for — grants, blended finance, guarantees and vouchers. Covered in full in Chapter 09.

3 · STANDARDS & IP INFRASTRUCTURE

CEN, CENELEC and ETSI (harmonised standards), the European Patent Office (EPO) and EUIPO (trademarks, designs) give innovation a recognised, protectable, tradeable form across all 27 member states.

4 · DELIVERY NETWORKS

Enterprise Europe Network, national contact points, EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities, and clusters put a person in front of an SME — the layer that actually reaches Albanian businesses. Covered in Chapter 10.

02.2 KEY INSTITUTIONS AT A GLANCE

Who does what

INSTITUTION	ROLE	RELEVANT TO SMES FOR
European Commission — DG GROW	Single Market, SME & industrial policy, standards legislation	CE marking rules, SME Strategy, COSME/SMP funding
European Commission — DG RTD	Research & innovation policy	Horizon Europe strategy and work programmes
European Innovation Council (EIC)	Deep-tech and breakthrough innovation funding	Accelerator grants and equity for high-growth innovators
European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT)	Innovation ecosystems by sector (Knowledge & Innovation Communities)	Training, acceleration, sector-specific innovation networks
European Patent Office (EPO)	Patent examination & grant across Europe	Protecting technical inventions in EU markets
EU Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO)	EU trademarks & registered designs	Protecting brands and product design EU-wide
CEN / CENELEC / ETSI	Development of harmonised European standards	Technical requirements behind CE marking
Enterprise Europe Network (EEN)	SME advisory, partnering, technology transfer	Local, free-of-charge business support — present in Albania

02.3 HOW ALBANIA IS ALREADY PLUGGED IN

Association, not just aspiration

Membership is still ahead, but Albania is not waiting on the sidelines of the EU innovation system. Since February 2022, Albania has been **fully associated to Horizon Europe**, giving Albanian universities, research institutes and companies the same participation rights as entities from EU member states in the €95.5 billion programme. Under the preceding Horizon 2020 programme, Western Balkan participants received roughly €170 million in direct EU contributions across around 1,000 organisations.

Albania is also part of the **Enterprise Europe Network** through AIDA and partner organisations, giving SMEs access to the world’s largest SME support network — 600 member organisations in over 60 countries — funded through the EU’s Single Market Programme.

Chapter 25 of the accession negotiations (Science and Research) was among the first three chapters provisionally closed in July 2026, formally recognising that Albania’s research and innovation framework already meets EU standards in this area.

 DID YOU KNOW?

Association to Horizon Europe means an Albanian SME can lead or join a Horizon Europe consortium on exactly the same funding terms as a company in Germany or France — no accession required.

ALBANIA’S CURRENT EU INNOVATION TOUCHPOINTS

- ☐ Full association to Horizon Europe (since February 2022)
- ☐ Enterprise Europe Network Albania, led by AIDA with regional partners
- ☐ Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans (received October 2025)
- ☐ Chapter 25 (Science & Research) provisionally closed in accession talks (July 2026)



CHAPTER 03

Innovation Readiness for SMEs

Before choosing a funding programme or a certification, an SME needs an honest picture of its own capacity to innovate. This chapter gives you the lens.

03.1 THE FIVE READINESS DIMENSIONS

What “innovation ready” actually means

Innovation readiness is not about having a research lab. It is about whether an SME has the basic conditions for change to stick: leadership commitment, people, process, finance and market connection. Score honestly — this is a diagnostic, not an exam.



STRATEGIC INTENT

Does leadership treat innovation as a deliberate priority with allocated time and budget — or only as a reaction to a lost customer or a competitor’s move?



PEOPLE & SKILLS

Do employees have the digital, technical and language skills to adopt new tools, apply for EU funding, or work with foreign partners?



PROCESS DISCIPLINE

Is there any repeatable way ideas get captured, tested and reviewed — or does every improvement depend on one person remembering to do it?



FINANCIAL CAPACITY

Can the business co-finance a grant (most EU funding requires matching contribution), or absorb the cash-flow gap between spending and reimbursement?



MARKET & PARTNER CONNECTION

Does the business have any relationship — supplier, customer, university, network — that reaches outside Albania?



QUALITY & COMPLIANCE BASE

Is there already a baseline of quality management, record-keeping and regulatory compliance to build certification on top of?

03.2 COMMON BARRIERS — AND WHAT ACTUALLY REMOVES THEM

The real obstacles, named honestly

BARRIER AS SMES DESCRIBE IT	WHAT IS USUALLY REALLY HAPPENING	WHERE THIS GUIDE HELPS
"We don't have time for this"	Innovation has no owner or protected hours — it competes with daily operations by default	Ch.12 Innovation management frameworks
"EU funding is too complicated"	The application process is unfamiliar, not impossible — and free advisory support exists locally	Ch.09 Funding · Ch.10 EEN support
"We can't afford certification"	Co-financing schemes and vouchers exist specifically to lower this barrier	Ch.08 Standards & CE marking · Ch.09 Funding
"We don't know where to start"	No structured self-assessment has been done — readiness is assumed, not measured	Ch.17 Self-assessment & maturity model
"Our sector doesn't really innovate"	Innovation examples seen are rarely sector-specific, so they don't feel relevant	Ch.14 Sector-specific examples

03.3 A FIRST, HONEST SELF-CHECK

Rate yourself before you read on

ANSWER YES / NO HONESTLY

- ☐ Someone in the business is formally responsible for innovation or improvement, even part-time.

- ☐ We have applied for, or seriously investigated, any EU or national grant in the past two years.

- ☐ We track at least one quality or performance metric consistently over time.

- ☐ We have a relationship with a university, research institute, or foreign business partner.

- ☐ We could find 10–30% matching funding if a grant required it.

- ☐ We know which EU or international standards apply to our product or service.

5–6 yes: you are ready to pursue funding and certification directly — skip to Chapter 09. 2–4 yes: build foundations first with Chapters 04–08. 0–1 yes: start with Chapter 12 (innovation management) before anything else.

💡 DID YOU KNOW?

Enterprise Europe Network advisors in Albania can run a free innovation and export readiness diagnostic for any registered SME — it does not have to be self-assessed alone. See Chapter 10.

“We didn’t need a bigger company to start exporting to the EU. We needed one person spending four hours a week on it, consistently, for a year.”

OWNER, ALBANIAN FOOD-PROCESSING SME
(ILLUSTRATIVE COMPOSITE BASED ON COMMON
ENTERPRISE EUROPE NETWORK CASE PATTERNS)



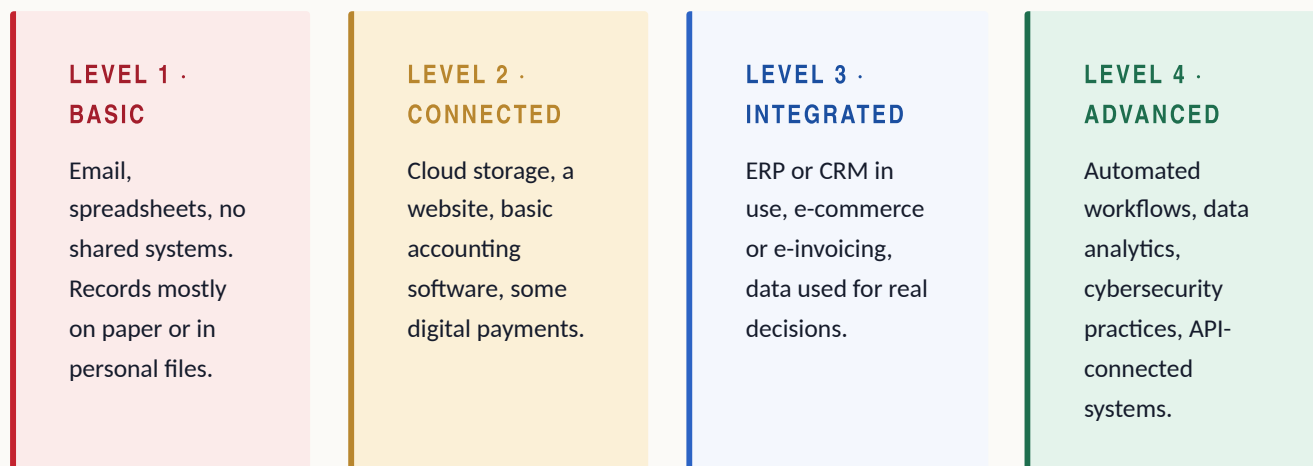
CHAPTER 04

Digital Transformation

Digital maturity is now a baseline expectation for EU trading partners and funding bodies alike — not an optional upgrade. Here is where to start and what to skip.

04.1 FOUR LEVELS OF DIGITAL MATURITY

Where is your business today?



Most Albanian SMEs sit between Level 1 and Level 2. That is not a weakness unique to Albania — it mirrors most of the EU's own SME base outside a handful of digital leaders. The EU's own Digital Decade targets aim for 90% of EU SMEs to reach at least a basic level of digital intensity; moving from Level 1 to Level 2 is therefore not falling behind, it is catching up to the EU's own majority.

💡 DID YOU KNOW?

You do not need Level 4 to benefit from EU programmes. Most Digital Europe Programme and Enterprise Europe Network digital support is specifically designed to move SMEs from Level 1–2 to Level 3.

04.2 WHERE TO INVEST FIRST

A practical sequence, not a wish list

1

Get your records digital and centralised

Move invoicing, inventory and customer records off paper and personal devices into one shared, backed-up system — even a well-structured cloud spreadsheet is a valid first step.

2

Establish a real digital presence

A functioning website and at least one verified business profile (marketplace, social, B2B directory) so EU partners and Enterprise Europe Network matchmaking can find you.

3

Adopt e-invoicing and digital payments

Increasingly a legal and practical requirement for cross-border EU trade, and a prerequisite for many funding applications.

4

Introduce basic cybersecurity hygiene

Password management, backups, and staff awareness — low-cost, high-impact, and a growing requirement in EU partner due diligence.

5

Move toward an ERP/CRM system

Only once steps 1–4 are stable. Integration failures are the most common reason digitalisation projects stall.

☁ WHERE FUNDING CAN HELP

The Digital Europe Programme, national digitalisation vouchers, and Enterprise Europe Network digital assessments (see Chapter 09 and 10) can co-finance software, hardware and advisory costs for exactly these steps — most are designed for SMEs starting from Level 1–2, not digital leaders.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION — QUICK CHECKLIST

- ☐ All financial records are digital and backed up off-site or in the cloud
- ☐ The business has a live, mobile-friendly website
- ☐ At least one digital payment method is accepted
- ☐ Staff have completed basic cybersecurity awareness training
- ☐ A named person owns IT and data decisions, even part-time

04.3 DIGITAL AND THE EU MARKET

Digital rules that follow you into the EU market

As Albania aligns with the EU acquis, several digital-economy rules become directly relevant to any SME trading with or inside the EU, well before formal accession:

EU DIGITAL RULE AREA	WHAT IT REQUIRES IN PRACTICE	WHO IT AFFECTS MOST
GDPR-equivalent data protection	Lawful basis for collecting personal data, breach notification, user rights requests	Any business handling EU customer or partner data
E-commerce & consumer rights rules	Clear pricing, returns, contract terms for online sales	SMEs selling online to EU consumers
Cybersecurity baseline (NIS2-aligned direction)	Risk management and incident reporting for essential/important entities	Digital service providers, critical-sector suppliers
E-invoicing standards	Structured, machine-readable invoice formats for cross-border and public trade	Exporters, public procurement suppliers

DID YOU KNOW?

The EU's Digital Europe Programme funds a network of European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) across member and candidate regions offering free digital maturity assessments — ask Enterprise Europe Network Albania whether a partner EDIH currently serves Albanian SMEs.



CHAPTER 05

Green Transition & Sustainability

The European Green Deal is reshaping what “competitive” means across the Single Market. For Albanian SMEs, sustainability is becoming a market entry condition, not a marketing choice.

05.1 WHY THIS IS NOW COMMERCIAL, NOT JUST ENVIRONMENTAL

The Green Deal reaches supply chains

The European Green Deal set the EU's target of climate neutrality by 2050, and it increasingly shapes what large EU buyers require from every supplier in their chain — including small ones outside the EU. Two mechanisms matter most for Albanian exporters:

The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) applies a carbon cost to imports of certain goods (initially cement, iron and steel, aluminium, fertilisers, electricity and hydrogen) based on their embedded emissions. Exporters in these sectors need to measure and report emissions data to EU importers.

Corporate sustainability reporting expectations, cascading down from large EU companies to their suppliers, mean even a small Albanian supplier may be asked for basic environmental and social data as a condition of a contract.

WHAT THIS IS NOT

This is not primarily about compliance paperwork for its own sake. Energy efficiency, waste reduction and circular material use typically **cut costs** in the same motion that they satisfy EU sustainability expectations — the business case and the compliance case usually point the same direction.

DID YOU KNOW?

The EU Green Deal is one of the six accession negotiation clusters (Cluster 4: Green agenda and sustainable connectivity) — Albania is negotiating alignment with these exact rules right now.

05.2 PRACTICAL STARTING POINTS BY COST

Sustainability actions, ranked by effort

ACTION	TYPICAL COST/EFFORT	TYPICAL PAYBACK
Energy audit and basic efficiency fixes (lighting, insulation, scheduling)	Low	Months
Waste segregation and material reuse or resale programme	Low-medium	Months to 1 year
Switch to renewable electricity supply or on-site solar	Medium	2-5 years
Environmental Management System (e.g. ISO 14001)	Medium	Market access & efficiency, ongoing
Product redesign for circularity (materials, packaging, repairability)	Medium-high	Varies by sector
Carbon footprint measurement & reporting capability	Low-medium (mostly staff time)	Required for CBAM-affected exporters

GREEN TRANSITION — WHERE TO START THIS QUARTER

- ☐ Complete a basic energy and waste audit, even informally
- ☐ Identify whether your products fall under CBAM sectors (cement, steel, aluminium, fertiliser, electricity, hydrogen)
- ☐ Ask your largest EU-linked customer whether they require sustainability data from suppliers
- ☐ Explore green financing lines through InvestEU-backed local banks (see Chapter 09)

05.3 CIRCULAR ECONOMY AS AN INNOVATION SOURCE

Circularity is an innovation strategy, not a constraint

Circular economy thinking — designing out waste, keeping materials in use, regenerating natural systems — is one of the most accessible forms of innovation for resource-constrained SMEs, because it often reduces input costs while opening new revenue lines: by-product sales, repair and refurbishment services, or take-back schemes.

Albania's manufacturing, agrifood and tourism sectors each have clear circular opportunities: textile and footwear off-cuts, agricultural by-products, and single-use materials in hospitality are common, addressable starting points covered further in Chapter 14.

“The waste we used to pay to remove became the raw material for a second product line. The environmental case and the profit case were the same spreadsheet.”

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE, MANUFACTURING SECTOR
PATTERN



CHAPTER 06

Research, Development & Technology Transfer

You do not need an in-house laboratory to benefit from research.

Technology transfer is how SMEs borrow innovation instead of building it from zero.

06.1 WHAT TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

Borrowing R&D instead of building it

Technology transfer means acquiring the right to use knowledge, technology or a process developed elsewhere — typically by a university, research institute or another company — rather than developing it from scratch. For a resource-constrained SME, this is usually the fastest and cheapest route to real innovation.



UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

Joint projects, student placements, or contracted applied research with Albanian or EU universities and research institutes.



LICENSING

Paying to use a patented process or technology already developed and proven by another organisation.



CONSORTIUM PROJECTS

Joining a Horizon Europe or Interreg consortium as an industry partner, gaining access to research results as part of the project.

06.2 WHERE TO FIND A RESEARCH PARTNER IN PRACTICE

Finding the right partner

PRACTICAL CHANNELS TO IDENTIFY A PARTNER

- ☐ Enterprise Europe Network technology and partner search database (see Chapter 10)
- ☐ Albanian public universities' technology transfer or industry-liaison offices
- ☐ Horizon Europe partner search tools and national contact points (NCPs)
- ☐ Sector clusters and chambers of commerce hosting matchmaking events
- ☐ EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities relevant to your sector (see Chapter 02)

© WHAT TO BRING TO THE FIRST MEETING

A one-page description of the problem you want solved — not the solution you assume you need. Research partners can often identify a better or cheaper technical route than the one an SME has already assumed. Come with the problem, the current cost of not solving it, and any data you already have.

💡 DID YOU KNOW?

Since 2022, Albania has been fully associated to Horizon Europe. That means an Albanian company can be the lead applicant, not just a subcontractor, on a Horizon Europe R&D consortium, with EU project partners under identical rules to an EU member state company.

06.3 FROM IDEA TO PROTECTED, MARKETABLE RESULT

The technology transfer sequence

- 1 Define the problem, not the solution**
Write a one-page technical brief: what is failing, what it costs, what “solved” looks like.
- 2 Search for existing solutions first**
Check whether a licensable technology or published research result already solves this, via EEN's technology database or a university liaison office.
- 3 Formalise the collaboration**
Use a simple non-disclosure and collaboration agreement before sharing proprietary information or data.
- 4 Agree IP terms before starting, not after**
Decide upfront who owns results, and on what licensing terms — see Chapter 07.
- 5 Pilot at small scale before full rollout**
Validate technical and commercial fit with a limited pilot before committing capital to scale.



CHAPTER 07

Intellectual Property Rights

An innovation that is not protected is an innovation any competitor can copy for free. IP rights turn ideas into assets a bank, investor or buyer can recognise.

07.1 THE FOUR IP TOOLS EVERY SME SHOULD KNOW

Protecting what makes you different

IP RIGHT	PROTECTS	TYPICAL ROUTE FOR ALBANIAN SMES
Patent	A new technical invention or process	Albanian General Directorate of Patents and Trademarks (GDPT/DPPM); European Patent Office (EPO) for EU-wide protection
Trademark	Brand names, logos, slogans	National registration in Albania; EU trademark via EUIPO for Single Market protection
Registered design	The visual appearance of a product	National registration; registered Community design via EUIPO for EU-wide coverage
Trade secret / know-how	Confidential business or technical information with commercial value	No registration — protected through confidentiality agreements and internal controls
Copyright	Original creative, written or software works	Automatic on creation; formal registration not required but documentation of authorship helps

07.2 WHY THIS MATTERS MORE AS ACCESSION ADVANCES

IP alignment is part of the acquis

Intellectual property law is part of Cluster 2 (Internal Market) in the accession negotiations. Albania is progressively aligning its IP framework — enforcement standards, registration systems and international treaty membership — with the EU acquis as part of the process.

For an SME, this has two practical effects. First, an Albanian trademark or patent registered today under a system converging toward EU standards is a more durable, more valuable asset over time. Second, EU buyers and partners increasingly expect suppliers to show they can protect know-how — especially in technology transfer or co-development relationships (Chapter 06).

Unprotected innovation is also a funding risk: many EU grant evaluators specifically assess whether a project's results can be protected and exploited commercially.

DID YOU KNOW?

A single EU trademark filed through EUIPO covers all 27 EU member states with one application and one fee — far simpler than registering separately in each country.

IP BASICS — BEFORE YOU TALK TO ANYONE OUTSIDE THE BUSINESS

- ☐ Search existing trademarks and patents before naming a product or filing anything
- ☐ Use a non-disclosure agreement before sharing technical details with a partner or investor
- ☐ Document the invention date and inventors internally, even before filing
- ☐ Register your core brand name and logo as a trademark, at minimum nationally

07.3 A PRACTICAL IP DECISION PATH

Which right do you actually need?

1

Is it a technical invention that works in a new way?

If yes, consider a patent. If it is more of a process improvement without novelty, a trade secret may fit better.

2

Is it a name, logo or design customers recognise you by?

Register it as a trademark or design, nationally first, then at EU level via EUIPO when you begin exporting.

3

Is it confidential know-how you don't want to disclose publicly?

Protect it as a trade secret: limit access, use NDAs, and document control measures — patents require public disclosure, trade secrets do not.

4

Are you unsure?

Enterprise Europe Network advisors and the Albanian patent and trademark office can provide an initial, low-cost assessment before you commit to a filing route.

** A COMMON AND COSTLY MISTAKE**

Publicly demonstrating or publishing a technical innovation (at a trade fair, in a pitch deck, on social media) before filing a patent application can permanently forfeit the right to patent it in most jurisdictions. Sequence disclosure and filing carefully.



CHAPTER 08

Standards, Quality Infrastructure & CE Marking

Standards are the technical language of the EU Single Market.

Understanding them is the single most direct way an SME can prepare for accession.

08.1 THE QUALITY INFRASTRUCTURE SYSTEM

Four pillars that make products trustworthy across borders

“Quality infrastructure” is the system of institutions and rules that let a buyer in Germany trust a product made in Albania without inspecting it personally. It rests on four pillars, all of which Albania is aligning with EU practice as part of accession:

Standardisation — technical specifications (often via CEN, CENELEC, ETSI at EU level; DPS/General Directorate of Standardization in Albania) that define what “good” means.

Metrology — accurate, traceable measurement, so a kilogram or a volt means the same thing everywhere.

Accreditation — independent confirmation that a testing or certification body is competent to do its job.

Conformity assessment — the actual testing, inspection or certification that a specific product meets the requirements.



WHERE ALBANIA STANDS

Albania’s national quality infrastructure bodies (standardisation, accreditation and metrology institutions) are progressively aligning their frameworks with EU requirements as part of Cluster 2 (Internal Market) of the accession negotiations. SMEs should expect continued convergence toward EU-recognised testing and certification capacity over the coming years.



DID YOU KNOW?

A product tested and certified only against Albanian national requirements today may still need EU conformity assessment to be sold in the EU market — check both, and plan for convergence over time.

08.2 CE MARKING, EXPLAINED SIMPLY

What CE marking is — and is not

CE marking is a manufacturer's **declaration** that a product meets all applicable EU health, safety and environmental requirements — not a quality label or an award. It is a legal requirement to sell certain product categories (electrical equipment, machinery, toys, construction products, medical devices, and more) in the EU Single Market.

Not every product needs CE marking — it applies only to product categories covered by specific EU legislation ("New Legislative Framework" directives and regulations). Many services, food products (which follow separate food safety rules) and some consumer goods fall outside its scope.

The manufacturer is legally responsible for the declaration, whether they self-certify (for lower-risk products) or use a notified body (for higher-risk products, such as certain machinery or medical devices).

1

Identify applicable legislation

Determine which EU directive(s)/regulation(s) cover your product category.

2

Assess conformity

Test against the relevant harmonised standards — self-assessment or notified-body assessment, depending on risk category.

3

Compile technical documentation

Assemble evidence: test reports, risk assessments, design files.

4

Issue a Declaration of Conformity

A signed legal document, and affix the CE mark to the product.

08.3 CERTIFICATION AS A COMPETITIVE TOOL

Beyond CE: certifications worth considering

STANDARD / CERTIFICATION	WHAT IT DEMONSTRATES	MOST RELEVANT SECTORS
ISO 9001	Quality management system	All sectors, especially manufacturing and services
ISO 14001	Environmental management system	Manufacturing, agrifood, tourism
ISO/IEC 27001	Information security management	ICT, financial and data-handling services
HACCP / ISO 22000	Food safety management	Agrifood, hospitality
GlobalG.A.P.	Good agricultural practice	Primary agriculture, fresh produce exporters
BRCGS / IFS	Retailer-driven food and product safety standards	Food manufacturers supplying EU retail chains

DID YOU KNOW?

Many EU retail buyers will not open a supplier relationship without at least one recognised certification on this list, regardless of product quality — certification is often a market-access gate, not an optional extra.



CHAPTER 09

Funding Opportunities

From pre-accession grants to Horizon Europe consortia, this chapter maps every major funding door open to Albanian SMEs today — and how to tell which one fits.

95.5_{B€}

HORIZON EUROPE PROGRAMME SIZE

170_{M€}

WESTERN BALKANS RECEIVED UNDER HORIZON 2020

09.1 A MAP, NOT A MAZE

Three questions to find your programme



1. WHAT DO YOU NEED?

Grant funding, equity/investment, a loan guarantee, free advisory support, or a partner network — each maps to a different instrument family.



2. HOW READY ARE YOU?

Early-stage ideas fit innovation vouchers and accelerators; proven products fit scale-up and export instruments; research-heavy projects fit Horizon Europe.



3. ALONE OR WITH PARTNERS?

Some funding is open to a single SME; most Horizon Europe and Interreg funding requires a multi-country consortium.

Two funding “families” matter for Albanian SMEs: **pre-accession instruments** designed specifically for EU candidate countries (money to prepare for membership), and **direct EU programmes** that Albania already participates in on equal terms with member states. Both are covered below.

DID YOU KNOW?

EU funding rules, calls and deadlines change often. Treat every figure and deadline in this chapter as a starting point for your own verification with AIDA, Enterprise Europe Network Albania, or the official programme portal — not a final answer.

09.2 PRE-ACCESSION INSTRUMENTS — FUNDING BUILT FOR ALBANIA’S PATH TO THE EU

Money that exists *because* Albania is a candidate

INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT FUNDS	ROUTE FOR SMES
Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III)	The EU’s main channel for funding reform and capacity-building in candidate countries, including private-sector competitiveness	Usually via national calls, grant schemes and technical assistance projects managed with Albanian institutions
Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans	Performance-based EU financing tied to reform milestones, including business environment and competitiveness reforms (Albania received its first disbursement in October 2025)	Indirect — shapes the national reform and support environment SMEs operate in
Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF)	Blends grants and loans for infrastructure and private-sector development projects across the region	Mainly larger infrastructure and financial-sector projects; relevant to SMEs via improved access to finance
Enterprise Europe Network Albania (Single Market Programme)	Free advisory, partnering and innovation support delivered locally	Direct — AIDA and partner organisations; see Chapter 10

 WHY THIS MATTERS FOR TIMING

Pre-accession funding is explicitly designed to prepare Albanian institutions and businesses for membership — meaning eligibility and relevance to SMEs typically *increases*, not decreases, as accession negotiations progress through 2026–2027.

09.3 HORIZON EUROPE & THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL

The EU's flagship research & innovation programme

Horizon Europe (2021–2027, €95.5 billion) is structured around three pillars: **Excellent Science** (research grants, mobility), **Global Challenges & European Industrial Competitiveness** (thematic clusters — health, digital, climate, food, and more), and **Innovative Europe**, home to the **European Innovation Council (EIC)**.

The EIC is the part most directly relevant to innovative SMEs: the **EIC Accelerator** funds high-risk, high-potential deep-tech and breakthrough innovations with a blend of grant and equity investment, while **EIC Pathfinder** and **Transition** support earlier-stage research-to-market journeys.

A dedicated **Widening** sub-programme exists specifically to strengthen participation from countries — including Albania — with less-developed research and innovation systems, funding networking, twinning with stronger institutions, and capacity-building.

💡 DID YOU KNOW?

Albania has been fully associated to Horizon Europe since February 2022. An Albanian SME can coordinate a project, not just participate in one, on identical terms to an applicant from an EU member state.

SIGNS HORIZON EUROPE IS THE RIGHT FIT

- ☐ Your innovation involves genuine technical or scientific risk, not just commercialisation
- ☐ You can identify at least 2–3 potential partners in other associated or member countries
- ☐ You have the internal capacity (or a partner) to manage EU project reporting
- ☐ Your project timeline is 2–4 years, not a quick market test

09.4 THE REST OF THE TOOLKIT

Programme-by-programme reference

PROGRAMME	BEST FOR	HOW IT WORKS
Single Market Programme (incl. former COSME strand)	SME competitiveness, business support networks	Funds SME support infrastructure such as Enterprise Europe Network; some direct SME calls
InvestEU	Access to finance for growth and investment	EU budget guarantee backing loans and equity from partner banks/funds — access via participating financial institutions
Digital Europe Programme	Digital capacity building, AI, cybersecurity, high-performance computing access	Grants and support via European Digital Innovation Hubs; some SME-facing digital adoption support
European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT)	Sector-specific innovation and entrepreneurship (e.g. EIT Food, EIT Digital, EIT Climate-KIC)	Training, acceleration and innovation projects through Knowledge and Innovation Communities
Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs	New entrepreneurs learning from experienced business owners abroad	Funded exchange placements (1–6 months) with an experienced host entrepreneur in another participating country
Creative Europe	Creative and cultural sector innovation and cooperation	Grants for cross-border creative industry projects and cultural cooperation
Interreg IPA cross-border programmes	Cross-border cooperation projects (e.g. Italy-Albania-Montenegro)	Project calls for joint initiatives with neighbouring EU regions

09.5 APPLYING WELL

What separates funded applications from rejected ones

BEFORE YOU WRITE A WORD OF THE APPLICATION

- ☐ Read the call text's evaluation criteria first — write to the criteria, not around them
- ☐ Confirm your organisation meets all eligibility rules, including any co-financing requirement
- ☐ Identify partners early — most EU calls score partnership quality explicitly
- ☐ Get free pre-screening from Enterprise Europe Network Albania or AIDA before submitting
- ☐ Budget realistically — overstated budgets are a common reason for rejection or clawback

THE MOST COMMON AVOIDABLE MISTAKES

Applying to the wrong instrument for your project's maturity level; writing a generic narrative instead of answering the specific evaluation questions; underestimating the reporting burden after a grant is awarded; and submitting without any external review of the draft.

PLAN FOR THE CALENDAR, NOT JUST THE DEADLINE

Most EU calls take 4–9 months from submission to funding decision, and co-financed projects require cash flow to cover costs before reimbursement. Apply with your bank, not just your idea, in mind.



CHAPTER 10

Enterprise Europe Network & Support in Albania

None of the previous chapters need to be navigated alone. This chapter maps the organisations already working in Albania to help SMEs innovate, certify and export.

10.1 ENTERPRISE EUROPE NETWORK ALBANIA

The world’s largest SME support network, with a local team

The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) is the EU’s flagship business support network — around 600 member organisations across more than 60 countries — funded through the Single Market Programme. In Albania, the current EEN-Albania project (2025–2028) is delivered by a consortium led by the **Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA)**, together with the Centre for the Promotion of Competitiveness, the Tirana Regional Development Agency, the Durrës Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Women’s Economic Chamber as an affiliated partner.

Services are free or low-cost and cover the full innovation journey this guide walks through — from a first readiness conversation to a Horizon Europe partner search.

WHAT ENTERPRISE EUROPE NETWORK ALBANIA OFFERS

- ☐ Business and innovation advisory tailored to SMEs
- ☐ International partner search and B2B matchmaking (trade fairs, missions, online databases)
- ☐ Support accessing EU funding, including Horizon Europe and Single Market Programme calls
- ☐ Guidance on standards, certification and intellectual property basics
- ☐ Innovation and digital readiness assessments
- ☐ Internationalisation and export-readiness support

10.2 AIDA — THE ALBANIAN INVESTMENT DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

A one-stop shop for investment and SME growth

AIDA is Albania's official investment promotion, SME development and export promotion agency, established to attract investment and increase the competitiveness of Albanian SMEs through technological progress, innovation and information exchange. It acts as a one-stop shop, coordinating with government authorities on behalf of investors and businesses.

AIDA runs its own national grant and support schemes for innovation, start-ups, and sector-specific SME competitiveness — alongside coordinating the EEN-Albania project. Three business incubators currently operate in the country, including a dedicated IT incubator in Tirana and a social business incubator supporting Roma entrepreneurs.

© WHEN TO CONTACT AIDA DIRECTLY

For national grant schemes, investment facilitation, export promotion support, and as the coordinating body for EEN-Albania services. AIDA is typically the first stop for any Albanian SME beginning to engage with EU-linked support.

10.3 THE WIDER ALBANIAN SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

Who else to know

ORGANISATION TYPE	ROLE	EXAMPLES
Chambers of commerce and industry	Business advocacy, networking, some EEN partner services	Tirana Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Durrës Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Regional development agencies	Local economic development, project implementation	Tirana Regional Development Agency (RDA)
Business incubators & accelerators	Early-stage venture support, mentoring, co-working	IT-focused and sector incubators operating in Tirana and other cities
Universities & research institutes	Applied research, technology transfer, talent pipeline	Public universities with industry-liaison or technology transfer offices
Sector associations	Sector-specific advocacy and standards guidance	Manufacturing, agrifood, tourism and ICT associations

DID YOU KNOW?

Full contact details for the organisations named in this chapter are collected in Chapter 19 (Contacts & Support Organisations) — keep this chapter for context, that one for action.



CHAPTER 11

AI & Emerging Technologies for SMEs

Artificial intelligence is no longer a large-company technology. This chapter separates realistic, low-risk AI adoption from hype — and flags the EU rules that already apply.

11.1 WHERE AI CREATES VALUE FOR AN SME TODAY

Practical, not speculative, use cases

LOW-RISK STARTING POINTS, MOST SECTORS

- ☐ Customer service: chat assistants for common queries, multilingual support
- ☐ Administration: automated invoicing, scheduling, document drafting
- ☐ Marketing: content drafting, translation, image editing for product listings
- ☐ Forecasting: demand and inventory prediction from sales history
- ☐ Quality control: image-based defect detection in manufacturing

A USEFUL TEST BEFORE ADOPTING ANY AI TOOL

Ask: does this tool save time on a task we already do often, using data we are comfortable sharing, with a human still checking the output? If yes to all three, it is usually a safe starting point. If no to any, slow down and get advice first.

11.2 THE EU AI ACT — WHAT SMES ACTUALLY NEED TO KNOW

Risk-based, not blanket, regulation

The EU AI Act regulates AI systems by **risk level**, not by the technology itself. Most everyday SME use cases — a chatbot, a forecasting tool, an image editor — fall into minimal or limited-risk categories with light-touch obligations, mainly transparency (telling users they are interacting with AI).

Higher-risk uses — for example, AI used in recruitment decisions, credit scoring, or safety-critical equipment — carry stricter obligations around documentation, human oversight and risk management. As Albania aligns with the EU digital acquis, this framework becomes directly relevant to any SME trading with or inside the EU.

UNACCEPTABLE RISK

Banned outright (e.g. social scoring, manipulative systems)

HIGH RISK

Strict obligations (e.g. HR, credit, safety systems)

LIMITED / MINIMAL RISK

Transparency duties or no specific obligations (most SME tools)

💡 DID YOU KNOW?

If you build your own AI feature into a product rather than only using off-the-shelf tools, your obligations under the AI Act increase — get specific advice before launch.

11.3 BEYOND AI: OTHER EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES WORTH WATCHING

A short watchlist, sized for SMEs

TECHNOLOGY	REALISTIC SME RELEVANCE	TIME HORIZON
Internet of Things (IoT) sensors	Equipment monitoring, cold-chain tracking for agrifood exports	Available now, low cost of entry
E-commerce & marketplace automation	Cross-border sales without a physical EU presence	Available now
Advanced robotics / automation	Selective automation of repetitive manufacturing tasks	Medium term, capital-intensive
Blockchain-based traceability	Supply chain and origin verification, increasingly requested in agrifood exports	Emerging, sector-specific
Generative AI for design and prototyping	Faster product and packaging iteration	Available now, low cost of entry

💡 DID YOU KNOW?

The Digital Europe Programme funds European Digital Innovation Hubs offering SMEs free or subsidised AI testing and advisory services before any investment decision — ask Enterprise Europe Network Albania what is currently accessible.



CHAPTER 12

Innovation Management Frameworks

Innovation stops being a lucky accident once it has a process. This chapter introduces three frameworks sized for a small business, not a corporate R&D department.

12.1 ISO 56002 — THE INTERNATIONAL INNOVATION MANAGEMENT STANDARD

A structure, scaled down for SMEs

ISO 56002 provides guidance — not certification requirements — for building an innovation management system. Its core idea, adapted for a small business: innovation needs the same basic management attention as finance or sales, with a clear owner, a simple process and a way of learning from what fails.



DIRECTION

Leadership names innovation priorities linked to real business goals.



IDEA INTAKE

A simple, known way for staff and customers to surface ideas.



EVALUATION

A consistent way to decide which ideas get tested, resourced or dropped.



LEARNING

Results — including failures — are reviewed and feed back into the next cycle.

12.2 DESIGN THINKING AND LEAN STARTUP — FOR TESTING IDEAS CHEAPLY

Two lightweight methods worth knowing

DESIGN THINKING

A five-step approach — **empathise, define, ideate, prototype, test** — that starts from real customer problems rather than assumed solutions. Useful whenever a business is unsure what customers actually need.

LEAN STARTUP

Build a minimum viable version, measure real customer response, and decide to persevere or change course — before investing heavily. Particularly useful before applying for capital-intensive funding.

THE BUILD-MEASURE-LEARN LOOP

Build the smallest version that tests your riskiest assumption → **Measure** real customer behaviour, not opinions → **Learn** whether to continue, adjust, or stop — then repeat. Each loop should take weeks, not months.

12.3 CHOOSING A FRAMEWORK THAT FITS YOUR SIZE

Match the method to the moment

SITUATION	BEST-FIT APPROACH	WHY
Unsure what customers actually want	Design Thinking	Grounds ideas in real observed problems before building anything
Have an idea, unsure if it will sell	Lean Startup	Tests demand cheaply before committing capital
Have several ideas competing for limited budget	ISO 56002-style evaluation process	Gives a consistent, defensible way to prioritise
Applying for EU R&D funding	Structured innovation management system	Evaluators look for evidence of process, not just a good idea

DID YOU KNOW?

You do not need to certify to ISO 56002 to benefit from it — most SMEs get 80% of the value simply by naming an innovation owner and running one structured idea-review meeting per month.



CHAPTER 13

The Step-by-Step Innovation Journey

Everything in this guide, sequenced. A realistic 12-month path from first idea to a funded, certified, EU-market-ready innovation.

13.1 THE EIGHT-STAGE JOURNEY

From readiness to EU market

- 1 Self-assess**
Complete the readiness check (Ch.03) and maturity model (Ch.17). Know your honest starting point.
- 2 Set direction**
Leadership names 1–3 innovation priorities tied to real business goals — not everything at once.
- 3 Build foundations**
Close the biggest gaps in digital (Ch.04) and quality/compliance basics (Ch.08) before applying for anything.
- 4 Find your support partner**
Register with Enterprise Europe Network Albania / AIDA (Ch.10) for a free diagnostic and advisory relationship.
- 5 Choose your funding route**
Match your project to the right instrument using the funding map (Ch.09).
- 6 Protect what you build**
Put basic IP protection in place before disclosing or scaling the innovation (Ch.07).
- 7 Pilot, measure, certify**
Test at small scale, then pursue the certification your target market actually requires (Ch.08).
- 8 Scale into the EU market**
Use export-readiness and matchmaking support to convert a certified, funded innovation into EU sales.

13.2 A REALISTIC 12-MONTH TIMELINE

What this actually looks like month by month



13.3 WHAT CAN RUN IN PARALLEL

You do not have to do this in strict sequence

CAN RUN SIMULTANEOUSLY

Digital foundation-building, EEN registration, and initial IP awareness (steps 3, 4 and 6) can all start in month one — they do not depend on each other and each reduces risk in later stages.

SHOULD NOT BE RUSHED

Funding applications (step 5) and certification (step 7) both reward preparation. Rushing either to hit an arbitrary deadline is the most common reason SMEs lose a funding round or fail a first certification audit.

BEFORE MOVING FROM ONE STAGE TO THE NEXT, CONFIRM

- ☐ The previous stage's output is documented, not just “done in someone's head”
- ☐ At least one other person in the business understands the current status
- ☐ You know what the next stage will cost, in time and money, before starting it



CHAPTER 14

Sector-Specific Innovation Examples

Innovation looks different in a textile workshop than in a software studio.
This chapter grounds every earlier chapter in seven Albanian sectors.

14.1 SECTOR FOCUS



Manufacturing

Albania’s manufacturing base — footwear, textiles, garments and light industry — is deeply integrated into EU value chains through outward-processing trade, giving these firms a head start on EU quality expectations.



REGULATORY WATCH LIST

CE marking scope (for machinery/equipment producers), REACH-aligned chemical restrictions for textile finishing

PRIORITY MOVES FOR THIS SECTOR

- ☐ Automate the highest-defect production step first, not the most visible one
- ☐ Pursue ISO 9001 as a baseline before pursuing customer-specific certifications
- ☐ Explore CBAM exposure if working with metals, cement or related inputs
- ☐ Investigate by-product and off-cut resale as a circular-economy revenue line

14.2 SECTOR FOCUS



Export-oriented Albanian agrifood producers already sell into EU markets under trade preferences; the ceiling on growth is increasingly food safety certification and traceability, not production capacity.

**REGULATORY WATCH LIST**

EU food safety and traceability requirements, phytosanitary/veterinary export conditions

PRIORITY MOVES FOR THIS SECTOR

- ☐ Prioritise HACCP or ISO 22000 before investing further in production capacity
- ☐ Adopt basic cold-chain and traceability tracking for high-value exports
- ☐ Investigate GlobalG.A.P. certification for primary producers targeting EU retail
- ☐ Turn agricultural by-products into secondary revenue (feed, compost, biomaterials)

14.3 SECTOR FOCUS

 Tourism

Albania's fast-growing tourism sector is highly exposed to EU traveller expectations on sustainability, digital booking, and accessibility — innovation here is largely about matching those expectations.

**REGULATORY WATCH LIST**

EU package travel and consumer protection rules, accessibility requirements for public-facing services

PRIORITY MOVES FOR THIS SECTOR

- ☐ Adopt a digital booking and channel-management system to reach EU travel platforms directly
- ☐ Reduce single-use materials as both a cost and a sustainability differentiator
- ☐ Pursue a recognised sustainable tourism certification (e.g. Travelife, EU Ecolabel for accommodation)
- ☐ Use data from bookings to inform seasonal pricing and service innovation

14.4 SECTOR FOCUS

 ICT & software

Albania's ICT sector is its most digitally mature and most naturally positioned for direct participation in Horizon Europe and Digital Europe Programme funding.

**REGULATORY WATCH LIST**

EU AI Act obligations for embedded AI features, cybersecurity requirements for critical-sector clients

PRIORITY MOVES FOR THIS SECTOR

- ☐ Pursue ISO/IEC 27001 early — it is increasingly a contractual requirement for EU clients
- ☐ Build GDPR-compliant data handling into products from the design stage, not retrofitted later
- ☐ Target Horizon Europe Digital, Industry and Space cluster calls for R&D-heavy products
- ☐ Use Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs placements to build direct EU client relationships

14.5 SECTOR FOCUS



Creative industries

Design, media, gaming and craft-based creative businesses are a fast-growing but underfunded segment, well matched to Creative Europe and EU cultural cooperation funding.



REGULATORY WATCH LIST

Copyright and licensing terms for digital distribution platforms, EU consumer protection for online sales

PRIORITY MOVES FOR THIS SECTOR

- ☐ Register trademarks and copyright documentation before international distribution
- ☐ Explore Creative Europe cooperation projects with EU cultural partners
- ☐ Use digital platforms to reach EU consumers directly, bypassing traditional distribution costs
- ☐ Combine traditional Albanian craft techniques with contemporary design for EU niche markets

14.6 SECTOR FOCUS



Circular economy

Circularity is less a single sector than a lens every sector can apply — and one of the most immediately fundable innovation categories under EU green transition support.



REGULATORY WATCH LIST

EU circular economy and extended producer responsibility rules, evolving packaging regulations

PRIORITY MOVES FOR THIS SECTOR

- ☐ Map material and energy flows to find the highest-cost waste stream first
- ☐ Explore repair, refurbishment or take-back services as new revenue lines
- ☐ Investigate green financing lines backed by InvestEU through participating local banks
- ☐ Document circular practices — they strengthen both funding and certification applications

14.7 SECTOR FOCUS



Business & professional services

Consulting, logistics, financial and professional services firms often overlook their own eligibility for innovation support, assuming programmes are only for manufacturers.



REGULATORY WATCH LIST

Cross-border service provision rules within the EU Single Market, professional qualification recognition

PRIORITY MOVES FOR THIS SECTOR

- ☐ Digitise service delivery (client portals, e-signatures, automated reporting) as a first innovation step
- ☐ Pursue quality certifications relevant to professional trust (ISO 9001, sector-specific accreditation)
- ☐ Use Enterprise Europe Network partner search to find EU service-sector partners and subcontracting opportunities
- ☐ Package internal process innovations as sellable services to other Albanian SMEs



CHAPTER 15

Albanian Success Stories & EU Best Practice

Proof that this works, at every scale — from national research participation to individual SME journeys.

15.1 ALBANIA IN EU RESEARCH & INNOVATION PROGRAMMES

Documented national participation

Since Horizon 2020, Albanian research organisations have participated in EU-funded consortium projects addressing shared European challenges — demonstrating that Albanian institutions can compete for and deliver on EU research funding on equal terms.

PROJECT THEME	WHAT IT ADDRESSED	RELEVANCE TO ALBANIA
Child vision and hearing screening comparison	Comparing national screening programmes for children across Europe to improve early detection	Albanian public health research participation in an EU-wide comparative study
Climate adaptation and disaster resilience innovation	A cross-European hub connecting innovators working on flood and climate-risk solutions	Relevant to Albania’s exposure to flooding and climate adaptation needs
Biomaterials for medical implants	Developing improved methods for finding suitable biomaterials for medical implants	Albanian research capacity engaged in advanced medical technology research

 DID YOU KNOW?

Western Balkan participants received approximately €170 million in direct EU contributions across roughly 1,000 organisations under Horizon 2020 alone — before Albania’s full Horizon Europe association in 2022 made participation even more accessible.

15.2 ILLUSTRATIVE SME JOURNEYS

What the journey looks like in practice

The following composite examples illustrate common, realistic patterns seen across Enterprise Europe Network case reporting and SME support practice in the region. They are illustrative archetypes, not profiles of specific named companies.

Footwear manufacturer, Shkodra region MANUFACTURING

CHALLENGE	Competing on price alone against lower-cost producers, with no formal quality certification limiting access to EU brand contracts.
ACTION	Pursued ISO 9001 certification with EEN advisory support; digitised production records to support both certification and a Single Market Programme co-financed efficiency upgrade.
RESULT	Secured a multi-year supply contract with an EU footwear brand that required certified quality management as a condition of the relationship.

Agrifood processor, Korça region AGRIFOOD

CHALLENGE	Strong product quality but no traceability system, blocking entry to EU retail chains that require batch-level tracking.
ACTION	Implemented HACCP-aligned processes and a basic digital traceability system; joined a cross-border Interreg project connecting agrifood producers across Italy, Albania and Montenegro.
RESULT	Traceability system opened conversations with two EU retail buyers previously inaccessible without certification.

15.3 WHAT THESE PATTERNS HAVE IN COMMON

Five recurring lessons

PATTERNS ACROSS SUCCESSFUL ALBANIAN AND REGIONAL SME INNOVATION JOURNEYS

- ☐ The trigger was usually a specific lost or blocked opportunity (a contract, a market), not abstract ambition
- ☐ Free advisory support (EEN, AIDA, chambers) was used before, not after, major spending decisions
- ☐ Certification and digitalisation were pursued together, since digital records make certification audits faster and cheaper
- ☐ Partnerships — university, cross-border, or EU consortium — accelerated progress more than working alone
- ☐ Progress was incremental: one certification, one market, one funding round at a time — not a single transformation



CHAPTER 16

Practical Checklists

Every checklist in this guide, gathered in one place for fast reference on your desk or your phone.

16.1 FOUNDATIONS

Readiness & digital checklist

INNOVATION READINESS

- ☐ A named person is responsible for innovation, even part-time
- ☐ We have investigated an EU or national grant in the past two years
- ☐ We track at least one quality or performance metric over time
- ☐ We have a relationship reaching outside Albania (partner, customer, university)
- ☐ We could find 10–30% matching funding if a grant required it
- ☐ We know which EU or international standards apply to us

DIGITAL FOUNDATIONS

- ☐ All financial records are digital and backed up
- ☐ The business has a live, mobile-friendly website
- ☐ At least one digital payment method is accepted
- ☐ Staff have completed basic cybersecurity awareness training
- ☐ A named person owns IT and data decisions

16.2 PROTECTION, STANDARDS & FUNDING

Before you file, certify, or apply

IP BASICS

- ☐ Searched existing trademarks/patents before naming or filing anything
- ☐ Used an NDA before sharing technical details with a partner or investor
- ☐ Documented invention date and inventors internally
- ☐ Registered core brand name and logo as a trademark, at minimum nationally

BEFORE SUBMITTING AN EU FUNDING APPLICATION

- ☐ Read the call's evaluation criteria before writing anything
- ☐ Confirmed eligibility, including any co-financing requirement
- ☐ Identified partners early where the call requires a consortium
- ☐ Had the draft pre-screened by EEN Albania or AIDA
- ☐ Budgeted realistically, not optimistically

USING THESE CHECKLISTS WELL

Treat a “no” answer as a to-do item with an owner and a date — not a reason to delay starting elsewhere. Revisit each checklist quarterly as your business changes.



CHAPTER 17

Self-Assessment & Innovation Maturity Model

A five-level model to benchmark where your SME stands today, and what the next level actually requires.

17.1 THE FIVE LEVELS

The Innovation Knowledge Hub maturity model

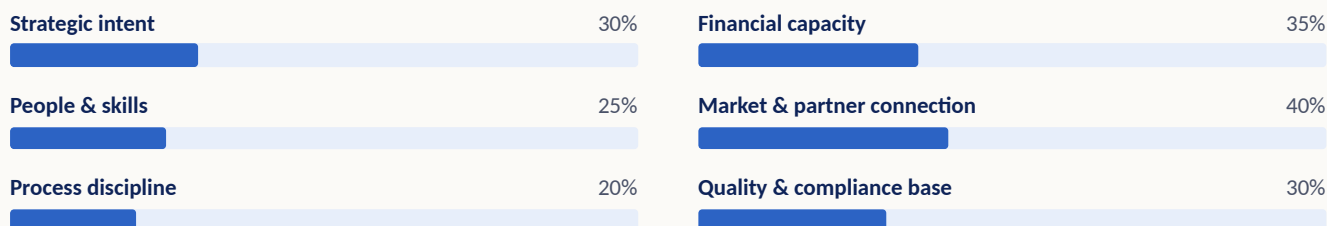
LEVEL	NAME	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
1	Reactive	Innovation happens only in response to a crisis or a lost customer; no budget or owner
2	Aware	Leadership recognises the need; occasional ad hoc initiatives; no consistent process
3	Structured	A named owner, a simple process for evaluating ideas, some external support engaged (e.g. EEN)
4	Systematic	Regular innovation reviews, active funding applications, at least one certification in progress or held
5	Integrated	Innovation is embedded in strategy; multiple funding sources, partnerships and IP assets active simultaneously

DID YOU KNOW?

Most Albanian SMEs sit at Level 1 or 2 today — reaching Level 3 is realistically achievable within 6–12 months of consistent effort using this guide.

17.2 SCORE YOURSELF ACROSS SIX DIMENSIONS

Rate each 0–100%, honestly



Illustrative scoring shown above — replace each bar with your own honest estimate. Average below 30% across dimensions typically indicates Level 1–2; 30–60% indicates Level 3; above 60% indicates Level 4–5.

© USING YOUR SCORE

Do not try to raise every dimension at once. Identify your single lowest-scoring dimension and address it first — low financial capacity and low process discipline are the two most common bottlenecks for Albanian SMEs, and both are addressed directly in Chapters 09 and 12.

17.3 WHAT EACH LEVEL UNLOCKS

Matching your level to your next move

YOUR LEVEL	RECOMMENDED NEXT MOVE	RELEVANT CHAPTERS
1 — Reactive	Complete the readiness self-check and name an innovation owner	Ch.03, Ch.12
2 — Aware	Register with Enterprise Europe Network Albania for a free diagnostic	Ch.10
3 — Structured	Select a first funding instrument and begin certification planning	Ch.08, Ch.09
4 — Systematic	Pursue Horizon Europe or sector-specific EU consortium participation	Ch.06, Ch.09
5 — Integrated	Mentor other SMEs; consider joining a cluster or Enterprise Europe Network events as a case study	Ch.15



CHAPTER 18

Action Plans & Implementation Roadmap

A blank template to turn everything you have read into three committed actions with owners and dates.

18.1 YOUR 90-DAY ACTION PLAN

Three actions, committed on paper

Choose exactly three actions from this guide that you will complete in the next 90 days. Fewer than three risks losing momentum; more than three usually means none get finished. Fill this in by hand, with your team, before moving on.

ACTION	OWNER	TARGET DATE	CHAPTER REFERENCE
_____	_____	_____	_____

ACTION	OWNER	TARGET DATE	CHAPTER REFERENCE
_____	_____	_____	_____

ACTION	OWNER	TARGET DATE	CHAPTER REFERENCE
_____	_____	_____	_____

A TIP ON CHOOSING

Pick at least one action that costs nothing but time (e.g. registering with EEN Albania, completing a self-assessment) so progress starts immediately, even while a funded action is still in preparation.

18.2 THE 12-MONTH ROADMAP TEMPLATE

Quarter by quarter

QUARTER	FOCUS	YOUR NOTES
Q1	Self-assessment, foundations, EEN/AIDA registration	
Q2	Funding application preparation and submission	
Q3	Certification process and pilot testing	
Q4	Market entry, review results, set next year's priorities	

QUARTERLY REVIEW QUESTIONS

- ☐ What did we commit to this quarter, and did we finish it?
- ☐ What is blocking progress — time, money, skills, or information?
- ☐ Which external support (EEN, AIDA, a partner) should we bring in next quarter?
- ☐ Has our innovation maturity score (Ch.17) moved since last quarter?



CHAPTER 19

Contacts & Support Organisations

Every organisation named in this guide, gathered for quick reference. Verify current contact details before relying on them — organisations update websites and staff regularly.

19.1 ALBANIA — FIRST POINTS OF CONTACT

Where to start, in Albania

ORGANISATION	WHAT THEY HELP WITH	HOW TO REACH THEM
AIDA — Albanian Investment Development Agency	National grant schemes, investment facilitation, coordinates EEN Albania	aida.gov.al
Enterprise Europe Network Albania	Free innovation, funding, partnering and export advisory	een-albania.al
Tirana Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Business advocacy, EEN partner services, networking	cci.al
Durrës Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Regional business support, EEN partner services	local chamber website / AIDA referral
Tirana Regional Development Agency (RDA)	Regional economic development, EEN partner services	rdatirana.al
Women's Economic Chamber	Support for women entrepreneurs, training, networking	EEN Albania referral
Albanian General Directorate of Patents and Trademarks	National patent and trademark registration	national government directory

Contact details listed are indicative starting points current as of this edition — always confirm via an official search before relying on a specific email or phone number.

19.2 EU-LEVEL PROGRAMME CONTACTS

Where to go for programme-specific detail

NEED	OFFICIAL SOURCE
Horizon Europe calls, rules and partner search	EU Funding & Tenders Portal (ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders)
Horizon Europe national support and guidance	Albania's Horizon Europe National Contact Points (NCPs), via the Ministry of Education and Sports / research institutions
EU trademark and design registration	European Union Intellectual Property Office (euipo.europa.eu)
European patent applications	European Patent Office (epo.org)
EU accession negotiation status and reporting	European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (enlargement.ec.europa.eu)
Enterprise Europe Network, EU-wide directory	Enterprise Europe Network portal (een.ec.europa.eu)
CE marking and harmonised standards	European Commission Single Market for products (single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu)

 A NOTE ON USING OFFICIAL SOURCES

This guide summarises programme structures accurately as of mid-2026, but calls, budgets, deadlines and eligibility rules change. Treat every official portal above as the authoritative, current source — and this guide as your map to find them.



CHAPTER 20

Glossary of Innovation Terminology

The acronyms and terms used throughout this guide, defined plainly.

20.1 A–Z REFERENCE

Key terms used in this guide

AIDA

Albanian Investment Development Agency — Albania's national investment and SME support agency.

CBAM

Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism — an EU carbon cost applied to certain imports based on embedded emissions.

CE marking

A manufacturer's declaration that a product meets applicable EU health, safety and environmental requirements.

CEN / CENELEC / ETSI

The three European standardisation organisations that develop harmonised European standards.

Cluster (accession)

A grouping of related negotiating chapters in the EU accession process; there are six clusters in total.

Conformity assessment

The process of testing, inspecting or certifying that a product meets required standards.

EEN

Enterprise Europe Network — the EU's SME support and partnering network, active in Albania.

EIC

European Innovation Council — funds high-risk, high-potential deep-tech and breakthrough innovation.

EIT

European Institute of Innovation & Technology — runs sector-specific innovation communities.

EPO

European Patent Office — examines and grants European patents.

EUIPO

European Union Intellectual Property Office — registers EU trademarks and designs.

Horizon Europe

The EU's €95.5 billion research and innovation funding programme (2021–2027).

IBAR

Interim Benchmark Assessment Report — the EU assessment confirming a candidate country has met interim reform benchmarks.

Innovation management system

A structured, repeatable organisational process for generating, evaluating and scaling innovation.

InvestEU

An EU programme providing budget guarantees to mobilise investment finance across the EU and partner countries.

IPA III

Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance — the EU's main funding channel for candidate countries.

IPR

Intellectual Property Rights — legal protections including patents, trademarks, designs, copyright and trade secrets.

New Legislative Framework

The EU legal framework underpinning CE marking and product conformity rules.

Notified body

An independent organisation authorised to assess conformity for higher-risk product categories.

Quality infrastructure

The combined system of standardisation, metrology, accreditation and conformity assessment.

Single Market Programme (SMP)

The EU programme funding SME competitiveness support, including Enterprise Europe Network.

Widening (Horizon Europe)

A Horizon Europe sub-programme supporting countries with less-developed research and innovation systems, including Albania.



CHAPTER 21

References

Primary sources behind this edition. EU policy and funding information changes; always check the current version at the official source.

21.1 PRIMARY SOURCES

Sources consulted for this edition

- 01 European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations — Albania country page (enlargement.ec.europa.eu).
- 02 Council of the European Union (Consilium) — press releases on Albania accession conferences and IBAR assessment, 2026 (consilium.europa.eu).
- 03 European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation — Albania and Horizon Europe association announcement (research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu).
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- 05 Western Balkans Info Hub — Horizon Europe and Widening programme resources (westernbalkans-infohub.eu).
- 06 Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA) — institutional information and project pages (aida.gov.al).
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- 15 European Commission — Digital Europe Programme information (digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu).
- 16 European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) — Knowledge and Innovation Communities overview (eit.europa.eu).
- 17 European Commission — EU AI Act overview and risk-based framework (digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu).
- 18 International Organization for Standardization — ISO 56002 Innovation Management guidance overview (iso.org).

INNOVATION KNOWLEDGE HUB

Innovation is the fastest way an
Albanian SME can act on EU
accession — starting today, not in
2030.

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CONTACT

een-albania.al · aida.gov.al