

Connecting the European Competitiveness Fund to Europe's Trade Promotion Capacity

Five proposals for a stronger market access and internationalisation dimension in the EU for Business Network

Key messages

The future EU for Business Network, proposed within the new European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), is an opportunity to simplify European business support and better connect EU competitiveness policies with concrete opportunities for SMEs seeking to grow across the Single Market and beyond.

The starting point should be the company. SMEs seeking to grow internationally should not need to understand the institutional architecture of European business support to find the expertise they need. The future EU for Business Network (referred to here as EU4Business) should give them a simpler route to the expertise, finance, partners and market opportunities they need to grow internationally.

This means building on the strengths of the current system while connecting complementary capabilities more effectively. The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) has demonstrated considerable reach and impact, including in innovation, finance, digitalisation and internationalisation. At the same time, substantial specialised trade promotion and international market capacity already exists at national and regional level. EU4Business should connect these complementary capabilities and link them effectively to the wider opportunities of the ECF, rather than duplicate them.

Trade Promotion Organisations (TPOs) also perform a distinctive horizontal role across EU instruments and initiatives relevant to internationalisation. When these instruments become relevant to companies, TPOs translate them into practical business terms, explain the opportunities they offer and advise companies on how they can support their international growth. Yet this operational role is not currently matched by a structured dialogue between the European Commission and other relevant EU institutions and the trade promotion community on how these instruments work for companies in practice.

Considering all of this, Trade Promotion Europe, the European association of trade promotion organisations, proposes five priorities for the future design and implementation of EU4Business:

1. **Make internationalisation a core function of EU4Business.** EU4Business should support SMEs seeking to grow internationally from readiness for cross-border growth and Single Market expansion to third-country market access.

Internationalisation, market intelligence, international public procurement and participation in European and international value chains should be embedded in its service offer.

2. **Give Trade Promotion Organisations a defined place in the EU4Business design and delivery model.** EU4Business should connect systematically with existing national, regional and sectoral trade promotion capacities. Competent TPOs should be able to participate as access points and specialist delivery partners according to their mandate and capacity. At European level, TPE should serve as a structured and continuous coordination and consultation interface between the European Commission and the trade promotion community, contributing to the design, implementation, periodic review and future development of the Network, while operational delivery remains with competent national, regional and sectoral TPOs.
3. **Make no-wrong-door operational through reciprocal referral.** SMEs seeking to grow internationally should be able to enter through any competent EU4Business partner and be connected to the provider best placed to help them. Referrals between TPOs, EEN partners and other specialist providers should work in both directions, supported by interoperable principles for assessment, handover, follow-up and feedback. TPOs should be recognised as access points and specialist internationalisation providers where appropriate.
4. **Move from programme information to business opportunities and results.** EU4Business should not stop at informing companies about EU initiatives. It should connect SMEs seeking to grow internationally with concrete business opportunities, including projects, partners, consortia, lead contractors, buyers, public procurement and international markets. TPOs can provide specialised market intelligence, partner identification, in-market support and commercial follow-through to help translate these opportunities into tangible business results. Performance measurement should complement activity indicators with measurable business outcomes.
5. **Ensure a clear and smooth transition to EU4Business.** The move from the current EEN system to EU4Business should be transparent and predictable. Existing services to companies should continue without disruption, while national and regional authorities and delivery organisations need early clarity on the future service framework, participation arrangements, roles, funding and implementation timetable.

The underlying principle is simple: make the system easier and more effective for SMEs seeking to grow internationally by connecting complementary European, national and regional capacity rather than creating parallel structures.

Start from the needs of SMEs seeking to grow internationally

Increasing the ability of European SMEs to access international markets is important for Europe's competitiveness, growth and innovation. Yet SMEs seeking to grow internationally face a complex support landscape comprising EU instruments, national and regional programmes, business support networks, financial institutions and specialised organisations.

The European Commission's 2025 Study of the European Union SMEs Internationalisation Strategy confirms the breadth of the support landscape available to European SMEs. It maps a wide range of instruments at EU, national and regional level and identifies recurring challenges for SMEs, including access to market intelligence, finding business partners and customers, developing internationalisation strategies and accessing appropriate financial and non-financial support. Its recommendations point towards stronger coordination and more efficient use of existing resources at EU and national level.

This is the problem EU4Business should help solve. The benefits for SMEs should be clear: less time navigating programmes and organisations and faster access to the expertise, partners, buyers and market opportunities relevant to their international growth. Companies should not need to understand the institutional architecture behind the support they receive.

Build on the strengths of the current system

The transition to EU4Business starts from a strong base. The Enterprise Europe Network has demonstrated substantial reach and impact. Its 2022–2025 Impact Report shows strong results across different areas of business support. On **internationalisation**, **84%** of SMEs receiving internationalisation support successfully launched products or services in new markets. EEN already provides internationalisation support both within and beyond the Single Market. Among SMEs successfully entering new markets following EEN support, **79%** targeted another EU country, illustrating the importance of cross-border growth within the Single Market.

At the same time, Member States and regions have developed substantial specialised capacity for export promotion and international market development. Trade Promotion Organisations combine proximity to SMEs seeking to grow internationally and regional business ecosystems with specialised market and sector intelligence, partner and buyer networks, international public procurement expertise and extensive in-market networks through offices, representations and partnerships abroad.

TPOs also perform a distinctive horizontal role across EU instruments and initiatives relevant to internationalisation. When a new instrument, programme or initiative becomes relevant to companies, TPOs need to understand it, translate it into practical business terms and advise companies on whether and how it can support their international growth. This role spans different areas of EU policy and support, from trade and market access to innovation, intellectual property, finance, partnerships, procurement and major initiatives such as Global Gateway.

Yet this operational role is not currently matched by a structured dialogue between the European Commission and the trade promotion community. There is no systematic channel through which TPOs can discuss how these instruments are understood and used by internationally active companies, share practical implementation experience or provide feedback relevant to their further development. EU4Business provides an opportunity to establish this missing connection.

EU4Business should bring these complementary capabilities together. The objective should not be for every organisation to provide every service, but to ensure that companies can move effectively between organisations with the appropriate mandate and expertise. For internationalisation, this means connecting EEN's existing capabilities with the specialised market knowledge, overseas networks and practical commercial follow-through available through TPOs. **The principle is simple: connect expertise rather than duplicate it** and organise support around the needs of the company rather than the boundaries between organisations.

A TPE study, conducted with the University of Geneva, highlights the economic benefits of export promotion and its impact on employment and GDP growth across TPE member countries:



Source: New Impact Study: The Returns of Export Promotion for TPE members - Trade Promotion Europe (TPE)

Five proposals for the future EU4Business Network

1. Make internationalisation a core function of EU4Business

Internationalisation should be embedded explicitly across the EU4Business service offer rather than treated as a separate or final stage of business support.

For SMEs seeking to grow internationally, EU4Business should support the pathway from **readiness for cross-border growth and Single Market expansion to third-country market access**. Depending on business needs, this should include export readiness support, market intelligence, partner and buyer identification, guidance on relevant EU instruments and opportunities, use of EU trade agreements, participation in European and international value chains and international public procurement. The Council partial general approach already provides a basis for this broader approach. Article 28 of the proposed regulation on the European Competitiveness Fund covers access to markets through SME internationalisation and market intelligence, alongside partnering opportunities, market uptake, public procurement and business feedback. The future EU4Business service framework and work programmes should translate these functions into concrete services, responsibilities and delivery arrangements, including the involvement of organisations with the relevant internationalisation and market access capacity.

Proposal: ensure that the market access and internationalisation functions foreseen in Article 28 are translated into operational commitments in the EU4Business service framework, work programmes and performance indicators, with appropriate specialist delivery capacity.

2. Give Trade Promotion Organisations a defined place in the design and delivery model

EU4Business should connect systematically with the public trade promotion capacity that already exists across Member States and regions.

This should operate at two levels. At European level, TPE can provide a structured and continuous coordination and consultation interface between the European Commission, including the relevant Directorates-General involved in the ECF and other policies and instruments supporting SME internationalisation, and the trade promotion community. This should work in both directions: enabling TPOs to understand and translate relevant EU instruments and initiatives for internationally active companies, while allowing their practical experience with companies to feed back into discussions on implementation, emerging business needs and, where relevant, the further development of these instruments. The Commission's 2025 SME internationalisation study recommends structured exchanges involving Member States and Trade Promotion Organisations on third markets and explicitly identifies TPE as a possible coordinator. It also identifies TPE as a representative organisation through which internationalisation-related activities can be coordinated.

At national and regional level, competent TPOs should be able to contribute to service design and participate in delivery according to their mandate and demonstrated capacity.

This includes helping to shape internationalisation diagnostics, specialist service specifications and referral arrangements, as well as providing market intelligence, partner and buyer searches, international public procurement and in-market support.

Participation should not depend solely on legacy membership of a particular EU network. Member States should retain sufficient flexibility to build on their existing business support systems and involve organisations with the relevant mandate and delivery capacity.

Where delivery arrangements are selected through calls or comparable procedures, the arrangement as a whole should demonstrate verifiable internationalisation and market access capacity, with clearly identified responsible partners. Neither existing EEN nor TPE membership should in itself guarantee or exclude participation.

Proposal: recognise competent TPOs as partners in the design and delivery of EU4Business internationalisation services and use TPE as a structured and continuous European coordination and consultation interface for dialogue between the European Commission and the trade promotion community, including on the practical implementation and business relevance of EU instruments and initiatives supporting internationalisation.

3. Make no-wrong-door operational through reciprocal referral

The no-wrong-door principle should become an operational feature of EU4Business rather than simply an access principle.

An SME should be able to enter through any competent, recognised access point, whether an EEN partner, TPO or another relevant business support organisation, without needing to understand which organisation or programme is responsible for its particular need. Existing assessments should be reused where appropriate and, subject to the necessary consent, the company should be connected to the provider best placed to deliver the required support.

Crucially, **referral should work in both directions**. TPOs should be able to refer companies to innovation, digitalisation, finance or programme specialists. Other EU4Business partners should in turn be able to refer SMEs requiring specialised internationalisation support to the competent TPO or another specialist provider.

A limited set of interoperable principles for assessment, consent, handover, response times, follow-up and feedback could make this possible without imposing identical institutional arrangements across Member States.

The objective is straightforward: **the company should experience one connected support system even when several organisations are involved behind the scenes**.

This approach also allows national and regional differences to be respected. EU4Business does not need to impose one institutional model across Europe. It needs to ensure that different models can work together effectively.

Proposal: establish reciprocal referral arrangements within EU4Business so that companies can enter through any competent access point and be connected seamlessly to the appropriate specialist provider, with competent TPOs recognised as access points and specialist internationalisation providers where appropriate.

4. Move from programme information to business opportunities and results

EU4Business should not stop at helping companies navigate EU programmes and instruments. It should help turn relevant European initiatives into concrete business opportunities.

Depending on the opportunity, effective support can require identifying suitable companies, finding partners and consortium members, connecting SMEs with lead contractors, identifying subcontracting and public procurement opportunities, finding buyers and investors, accessing relevant financing and providing in-market support and follow-up.

TPO offices in third countries can play an important role in this commercial follow-through. Once a project or opportunity has been identified, they can facilitate contacts between European companies and relevant EU Delegations, donors, lead contractors and local partners, and provide practical support as companies seek to position themselves for related business opportunities.

EU4Business should also connect companies, where relevant, to the proposed ECF single portal, project and advisory support, Access2Markets, InvestEU advisory services, programme-specific contact points and other specialist support. Its role should be to help companies navigate from an identified European opportunity to the expertise and support they need, while leaving programme-specific advice and proposal preparation to the competent specialist providers. From there, EU4Business and its internationalisation partners can help connect companies to the partners, consortia, procurement opportunities and markets needed to translate the opportunity into a business result.

This is particularly relevant for initiatives such as **Global Gateway, Ukraine reconstruction and recovery, EU trade agreements, strategic value chains and European industrial priorities**.

The ambition should therefore be to establish a clearer chain:

EU priorities → business opportunities → suitable SMEs seeking to grow internationally → partners and markets → measurable business results

Performance measurement should reflect this ambition. EU4Business should therefore complement activity indicators with business-result indicators where these can reasonably be measured. Relevant outcomes can include new market entries, consortium and lead-contractor matches, participation in consortia and subcontracting chains, tenders pursued, contracts secured, buyer and distributor agreements and export or contract value.

EU4Business should also use aggregated feedback from TPOs and other partners to identify recurring market access, procurement, financing and regulatory barriers and feed these insights back into future services and work programmes.

Proposal: include opportunity identification and business mobilisation in the EU4Business service model, connect the Network systematically with organisations capable of providing international market intelligence and in-market delivery support, and complement activity indicators with measurable business outcomes.

FROM EU PRIORITY TO SME OPPORTUNITY: GLOBAL GATEWAY

Global Gateway provides a concrete example of how EU4Business could help translate a major European initiative into business opportunities for SMEs. Effective SME participation requires more than information about projects and financing. Companies may need earlier visibility of project pipelines, support in identifying consortium partners and lead contractors, access to procurement and subcontracting opportunities, relevant financing and practical support in partner markets.

TPE's position paper *Enhancing SME Participation in the EU's Global Gateway Initiative* sets out nine practical recommendations to strengthen SME participation, drawing on the operational experience and international networks of European TPOs.

EU4Business could provide the business support bridge between Global Gateway opportunities and European SMEs: helping identify suitable companies, connect them with partners and consortia, navigate procurement and financing opportunities, and mobilise TPO networks for follow-up in partner markets.

→ **Read TPE's nine recommendations to open Global Gateway to SMEs**

5. Ensure a clear and smooth transition to EU4Business

The transition from the current system to EU4Business should be **clear, gradual and predictable**.

Simplification at European level should not create temporary complexity for companies.

Existing SME services and client relationships should not be interrupted while the new arrangements are introduced. Existing EEN partnerships and established national and regional delivery arrangements should provide a stable basis during the transition. At the same time, national and regional authorities, TPOs and other relevant organisations need sufficient advance clarity to prepare for the future model.

The European Commission should therefore communicate the future **service scope, participation and eligibility criteria, consortium and governance arrangements, roles and responsibilities, funding arrangements and implementation timetable** sufficiently early.

The wider EU4Business mandate should be matched by predictable and identifiable resources commensurate with the functions assigned to the EU4Business network. This includes the core coordination needed to operate the system, reciprocal referral arrangements and specialist internationalisation and market access delivery. At implementation level, work programmes should provide sufficient and predictable funding visibility so that participating organisations can plan and so that new functions do not weaken existing SME support capacity. Core coordination, referral and delivery functions should not depend solely on short-term pilots or ad hoc project funding.

New referral and cooperation arrangements should be introduced progressively. Where new interfaces need to be tested, this can be done through targeted testing and phased implementation before wider application. The first implementation cycle should also include a structured review of referral performance, service coverage and remaining gaps, drawing on feedback from SMEs and delivery organisations so that the model can be adjusted based on evidence.

The transition should also respect Member State and regional arrangements. Different countries organise business support and trade promotion differently. EU4Business should establish common objectives and interoperable principles without unnecessarily replacing institutional arrangements that already work.

The guiding principle should be: **preserve what works, connect complementary capabilities and introduce change without disrupting services to companies**.

Proposal: provide an early and transparent transition roadmap for EU4Business, ensure continuity of services during implementation and give Member States, regions and delivery organisations sufficient clarity and time to adapt to the future framework.

What Trade Promotion Europe can bring

Trade Promotion Europe brings together **34 trade promotion organisations from 23 European countries, including 19 EU Member States.**

Together, TPE members supported more than 150,000 businesses in 2025 and bring together more than 8,000 trade promotion professionals across 672 offices worldwide, 241 in the EU and 431 abroad.

TPE members operate within different national and regional institutional systems but share a public or publicly mandated role in supporting companies in their international development. Their contribution to EU4Business can operate at two distinct levels.

At national and regional level, individual TPOs provide operational capacity. They combine proximity to SMEs with market and sector intelligence, partner and buyer networks, international public procurement expertise and in-market networks abroad.

At European level, TPE can provide a structured and continuous coordination and consultation interface between the European Commission and the trade promotion community. This can create a two-way channel through which relevant EU instruments and initiatives are discussed with TPOs responsible for translating them into practical opportunities for internationally active companies, while implementation experience, recurring business needs and market feedback from TPOs can be aggregated and fed back to the relevant Commission services. The interface can also support structured consultation on EU4Business service design and work programmes, service gaps and future internationalisation priorities, alongside peer learning between TPOs.

TPE should not select or accredit organisations for participation in EU4Business. Participation should remain subject to the relevant EU and Member State arrangements and be based on mandate and capacity.

This is a strategic coordination role, not a new gateway or parallel delivery structure. The proposition is simple:

Proposal: use TPE as a structured and continuous European coordination and consultation interface with the trade promotion community and competent TPOs as operational partners connecting EU4Business with existing national, regional and international market delivery capacity.

Conclusion

EU4Business provides an opportunity to make European business support simpler and more effective by **connecting existing capabilities rather than duplicating them**.

Internationalisation and market access should be an integral part of this approach, enabling companies to move easily between specialised providers and from European initiatives to concrete business opportunities.

The objective is not for every organisation to do everything, but for the system as a whole to provide what the company needs. TPE stands ready to work with the European Commission, Member States, EEN and other partners to put this connected approach into practice.

Trade Promotion Europe members



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