Fellowship Report

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Location of the fellowship: Germany
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Table of content

1. Introduction **2**
2. Fellowship Objectives **2**
3. Overview of Fellowship Activities **2**
4. Best Practices and Key Takeaways from Study Visits **3**
Day 1 – 1 September 2025 (Bonn and Cologne) 3
DLR-PT Offices (Bonn) 3
Meeting with Widera NCP, DLR 3
DLR-PT Offices (Bonn) 4
Meeting with NCP for Pathfinder/Transition and NCP for Acceleration, DLR 4
DLR Space Center (Cologne) 4
Meeting with Senior Investment Manager, DLR Space Center / Startup Factory 4
Day 2 – 2 September 2025 (Sankt Augustin and Bonn) 6
Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg (H-BRS) / University of Applied Sciences (Sankt Augustin, Bonn) 6
Meeting with representatives of the Centre for Entrepreneurship, Innovation and SME Management (CENTIM) and the Centre for Science and Technology Transfer (ZWT) 6
University of Bonn (Bonn) 7
Meeting with representatives of Transfer Center enaCom 7
Day 3 – 3 September 2025 (Bonn) 8
Meeting with a representative of the DLR Innovation Strategies Unit (Joseph-Beuys-Allee, Bonn) 8
DLR-PT Offices (Bonn) 10
Meeting with DLR representatives in POLICY ANSWERS 10
Day 4 – 5 September 2025 (Berlin) 11
Projektträger Jülich (Berlin) 11
Meeting with Research Associate, Spokesperson for International Affairs 11
EUREKA/Eurostars, DLR (Berlin) 13
Meeting with representative for European and International Cooperation 13
5. From Insights to Action: Roadmap for STP Montenegro **14**

1. Introduction

The fellowship at **DLR Projektträger (DLR-PT)** in Germany was conducted within the framework of the **POLICY ANSWERS project**, which aims to strengthen research and innovation policies and practices across the Western Balkans by fostering structured cooperation with European Union institutions and best-performing innovation ecosystems.

For the **Associate on development and donor-funded projects and National Contact Point (NCP) for the New European Bauhaus (NEB)** at the **Science and Technology Park of Montenegro (STP MNE)**, the participation in this fellowship had a dual aim:

Learn and adapt best practices from DLR, the University of Bonn, the University of Applied Sciences/Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, and their innovation and business–academia support centers, applying them to STP MNE and the NCP role.

Build and expand cooperation opportunities through EU-funded projects, workshops, webinars, and Memorandums of Cooperation, while strengthening links with DLR's NCP network for sustainable collaboration.

The fellowship directly contributes to the delivery of **Deliverable 5.2 (D5.2)** of the POLICY ANSWERS Project, which emphasises the **transfer of best practices in supporting the innovation ecosystems** and the establishment of **sustainable models of innovation support** in the Western Balkans.

2. Fellowship Objectives

The objective of this fellowship report is to provide a comprehensive overview of the experience gained at the German Aerospace Center (DLR), with a particular focus on knowledge and expertise in the fields of start-ups, knowledge and technology transfer, digitalisation and research infrastructure. The fellowship further aimed to gather insights into funding opportunities and guidance related to Horizon Europe and other EU programmes, while fostering connections with Horizon Europe National Contact Points and enhancing understanding of programmatic and organisational structures.

Another key objective was to develop a roadmap for strengthening the capacities of the Science and Technology Park of Montenegro (STP MNE), informed by the fellow's experience and best practices observed at DLR and the University of Bonn, the University of Applied Sciences, and their innovation and business–academia support centres. Additionally, the fellowship report provides an overview of DLR's primary functions as a research funding agency.

3. Overview of Fellowship Activities

The fellowship combined policy discussions, institutional visits and practical exchanges with German counterparts. The programme provided insights into Germany's innovation system, focusing on how research results are transferred into practice and how academic entrepreneurship is supported.

Day 1 (Bonn/Cologne): Meetings at DLR-PT on managing national and EU programmes; visit to DLR Startup Factory to explore incubation, acceleration and start-up support models.

Day 2 (Sankt Augustin/Bonn): Exchange with Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg on university-industry cooperation; visit to University of Bonn's innovation office *enaCom* to learn about proof-of-concept funding and IP services.

Day 3 (Bonn): Discussions at DLR-PT on innovation transfer strategies; meeting with the Innovation Strategies Unit on policy co-creation and evidence-based innovation design.

Day 4 (Berlin): Visit to Projektträger Jülich on the EXIST program for academic entrepreneurship; meetings at DLR-PT Berlin on EUREKA/Eurostars, international cooperation, and future collaboration opportunities.

The programme offered valuable insights into integrated approach to fostering innovation, start-up support, and linking research to industry, with concrete lessons applicable to Montenegro.

4. Best Practices and Key Takeaways from Study Visits

Day 1 – 1 September 2025 (Bonn and Cologne)

DLR-PT Offices (Bonn)

Meeting with Widera NCP, DLR

During the discussion, the NCP recommended establishing contact with the Potsdam Science Park in Berlin (potsdam-sciencepark.de) as a valuable example for Montenegro to explore, given its size and practices. He explained that the Park is financed through a combination of structural funds (government) and Horizon Europe.

Regarding NCP structures, he noted that in Germany NCPs receive between 15% and 40% of their salary for this role, while JRC NCPs function as full-time NCPs. He also highlighted the opportunity for Montenegro to join NCPwideranet.eu, which would allow access to funding for NCPs through project support.

He also drew attention to the upcoming Widening call on Research Infrastructure outlined in the draft Research Infrastructure Work Programme 2026-2027, specifically Call: HORIZON-INFRA-2027-DEV-01-04 – Promoting the integration of Widening and Candidate countries in the European research infrastructure ecosystem.

The call is expected to lead to enhanced integration of Widening and candidate countries into the European research infrastructure ecosystem, strengthened capacities to address research challenges and EU policy priorities, as well as increased convergence of research capabilities and improved European competitiveness.

The scope of the call is defined by efforts to promote further integration through access to research infrastructures and related activities. Opportunities linked to Open Access to Research Infrastructure—such as the RCCs Open Access Research Infrastructure in the Western Balkans Support Programme—were also mentioned. Additionally, the importance of training programmes (TTO STP) and the capacity building of research managers through Twinning projects was underlined.

DLR-PT Offices (Bonn)

Meeting with NCP for Pathfinder/Transition and NCP for Acceleration, DLR

During the meeting, it was highlighted that EIC calls are particularly suitable for STP MNE tenants, as they provide opportunities for pre-acceleration at TRL4. The Pathfinder programme is primarily research-oriented and not designed for startups directly; instead, it targets research institutions that can collaborate with companies or startups. The outcome of such collaboration is typically a proof of concept, which can later serve as the basis for entering the EIC Transition phase, where the concept is tested on the market. The discussion also underlined the cooperation opportunities within EIC Transition schemes. In addition, it was noted that the program provides access to an IPR help desk to support participants with intellectual property rights. It was recommended that we consider exploring the call HORIZON-EIE-2026-02-CONNECT-01: "From Lab to Market: Strengthening the Role of Technology Transfer Offices in Bringing Knowledge to the Market" (Deadline: September 2026). Detailed information about this call is available in the prepublication of the EIE Work Programme 2026-2027 on the Comitology Register.

DLR Space Center (Cologne)

Meeting with Senior Investment Manager, DLR Space Center / Startup Factory

During the meeting with the investment manager, we were introduced to the concept and functioning of the DLR Startup Factory, which invests around €400,000 annually in startups based on DLR technologies. Startups must originate from DLR research, and intellectual property (IP) remains the property of DLR. Approximately 20% of patent profits are returned to universities or research institutions, while licensing revenues are reinvested into infrastructure and equipment for researchers. Patents are rarely sold, except in exceptional cases when they are older than 10 years and lack further potential.

A key element of their system is the internal patent review conducted by a physicist who is also a certified EU patent lawyer. Their guiding principle is to patent ideas first and publish later, ensuring the protection of research results and future innovation opportunities.

DLR also actively promotes an entrepreneurial mindset among researchers. Through workshops and training, they emphasise parallels between research and startups—both start with assumptions and evolve toward results—encouraging researchers to translate their work into ventures. Their Innovation and Transfer Strategy ensures that ideas reaching TRL3 (Proof of Concept) are assessed for patenting and market potential, while licensing revenues can also supplement researchers' income.

In terms of innovation management, DLR uses TRL self-assessment tools, market comparisons with local and international partners, and continuous progress-tracking mechanisms. They stress that not every startup needs investment; in many cases, securing customers and business partners is more important, with partnerships often evolving into investment opportunities.

Funding for DLR's activities comes primarily from the government (about 50%), with additional support from EU projects (20%) and industry contributions (30%). On average, the journey from idea to spin-off takes around 3.5 years. Networking is fostered through cooperation agreements, student–founder exchanges, and broader ecosystem-building activities that connect researchers, founders, and partners.

For further information, the Startup Factory can be reached at: **startups@dlr.de**

Day 2 – 2 September 2025 (Sankt Augustin and Bonn)

Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg (H-BRS) / University of Applied Sciences (Sankt Augustin, Bonn)

Meeting with representatives of the Centre for Entrepreneurship, Innovation and SME Management (CENTIM) and the Centre for Science and Technology Transfer (ZWT)

The second day in Bonn included meetings with representatives of CENTIM and ZWT, highlighting best practices in university-led entrepreneurship. CENTIM serves as a central hub for entrepreneurship at H-BRS, supporting students, staff, and alumni through advisory services, mentoring, competitions and training programmes. Entrepreneurship is embedded across curricula, including the Start-up Development MBA, joint theses with SMEs, and workshops for international partners. The Start-up-Manufaktur acts as a one-stop centre for founding support, combining practical guidance with networking opportunities. Partnerships with regional and international institutions, incubators, accelerators and chambers of commerce strengthen the ecosystem, while tailored consulting and applied research projects connect academia with SMEs.

ZWT complements this ecosystem by facilitating applied research and university-industry collaboration. It helps researchers access funding, connect with suitable companies and manage intellectual property. The use of vouchers for expert consultations, structured IP management and support for entrepreneurial faculty ensures that research outputs are effectively translated into

market-ready solutions. Both CENTIM and ZWT demonstrate the importance of early identification of entrepreneurial talent and the integration of practical projects and mentorship to maximise startup success.

Overall, the study visit highlighted several best practices: the need for structured IP protection, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset among researchers, integration of entrepreneurship into academic programmes and the value of strong regional and international partnerships. Practical engagement with SMEs, competitions, mentoring and tailored consulting all contribute to a cohesive ecosystem where innovation can thrive from concept to market.

University of Bonn (Bonn)

Meeting with representatives of Transfer Center enaCom

The meeting with representatives of enaCom provided valuable insights into the University of Bonn's approach to intellectual property (IP) management and fostering entrepreneurial thinking among researchers. Their work focuses on bridging the gap between research and impact by promoting awareness of IP rights, offering innovation scouting workshops, and supporting researchers from the early PhD level through to professorship. The aim is to stimulate ideation processes and explore how research outcomes can be developed into practical applications.

EnaCom provides legal and administrative support for IP management, including patent evaluation, filing, and licensing. They work closely with Provendis, which handles IP and commercialisation. Researchers retain the rights to their inventions, but due to the high costs of patenting, universities often take over this responsibility. The benefit-sharing model allocates 30% of net revenues to inventors (paid as part of their salary), while 20% goes back to the institute to support research needs such as equipment. Patents are rarely sold but are licensed to external users, often forming the basis for startups. While many patents remain uncommercialised, those with potential are supported through structured evaluation processes.

Beyond IP management, enaCom also supports entrepreneurial education and mindset development. Two professors offer accredited business courses open to all students of the University of Bonn, while dedicated programmes encourage PhD candidates and postdocs to explore the business potential of their research. Startups benefit from university-provided space, mentoring, and limited financial support under de minimis rules (up to €300,000 over three years). Currently, most university spin-offs are software-based, with around four to five active startups.

EnaCom also strengthens the innovation ecosystem by organising workshops, building networks and raising awareness among researchers of the resources available to them. Their structured approach combines training, legal and administrative support and targeted funding to gradually build an entrepreneurial culture within a traditionally research-focused institution.

As follow up to the visit, representatives of enaCom from the University of Bonn shared resources on intellectual property management, including the "IP Driving Licence" programme, designed to educate researchers and students on IP processes and best practices. Participants were provided with links to the online modules (IP Führerschein) and the invention information and questionnaire (Inventions, Patents, and Property Rights). This initiative supports early-stage innovators in understanding patent procedures, IP ownership and commercialisation pathways.

Day 3 – 3 September 2025 (Bonn)

Meeting with a representative of the DLR Innovation Strategies Unit (Joseph-Beuys-Allee, Bonn)

The meeting with DLR's innovation strategies unit focused on socially innovative projects and government-supported initiatives for research and SMEs. One of the largest programmes involves around 320 participants and is funded by both the German government and the EU. DLR plays a central role in designing calls for technology projects, deciding which proposals will receive funding, and supporting startups and SMEs in areas such as digitalisation, mobility and infrastructure. Projects typically start with modest funding and can scale up as the results develop, providing a low-risk pathway for experimentation.

A link was also provided to a resource mapping the main research and research funding actors within the German R&D&I system, which could be explored for potential project partnerships or collaboration needs

A key element of DLR's approach is the integration of practical incentives, including streamlined tax support for companies conducting research that is new to their business. This mechanism allows firms to reduce taxes automatically based on a simple three-page application linked directly with tax offices, minimizing administrative burdens while encouraging applied research. Digital platforms, including open data tools and digital twins, are used to support municipal planning and infrastructure projects, such as identifying optimal locations for waste disposal.

Several initiatives exemplify DLR's approach to knowledge transfer and SME support. Programmes like KI4KMU-RLP enable SMEs to explore AI applications, providing potential analyses and demonstrator projects funded by government consortia.

The KI4KMU-RLP project is a government-funded initiative designed to help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Rhineland-Palatinate explore and implement artificial intelligence (AI) in their operations. Recognising that many SMEs lack the internal resources or expertise to assess the potential of AI, the state government has allocated €1.6 million to support their digital transformation journey.

At the heart of the initiative is a collaboration between a consortium of four major companies and a university. With this funding, SMEs are invited to undergo a free AI potential analysis, carried out by the university. This analysis helps identify where AI can add value in the company's processes, products, or services. A total of 24 SMEs will benefit from this initial phase, each receiving a tailored report and recommendations based on their specific needs. The cost of these analyses accounts for around 10% of the total budget.

The majority of the funding—around €1.3 million—is dedicated to the second phase of the project: the development of AI demonstrators. From the 24 companies that receive the initial analysis, 12 will be selected to move forward with the creation of a working demonstrator—a functional prototype that shows how AI can be applied in their business context. These demonstrators will also be delivered at no cost to the SMEs, thanks to public funding. The demonstrator development is expected to be completed by the end of 2026, while the initial analyses will be finalised by the end of 2025.

In addition to the technical work, the project sets aside €300,000 for conferences, knowledge exchange and other organisational activities that support networking and visibility for the program. These efforts aim to share experiences and outcomes with a wider audience and encourage other SMEs to consider AI adoption in the future.

An important aspect of the project is how it handles intellectual property (IP). The university is responsible for conducting the research and developing the AI solutions, but if a company decides to move forward with patenting an outcome, the responsibility lies with the SME. The university does not retain the IP or initiate the patenting process; instead, the goal is to support applied innovation while keeping commercial rights with the companies. Contracts between the university and each SME clearly define these IP terms, ensuring transparency and clarity from the outset.

This initiative offers significant mutual benefits. SMEs gain access to high-quality AI assessments and prototypes without upfront investment, while the university strengthens its applied research profile and develops insight into the real-world challenges companies face. This knowledge, in turn, can feed into new academic programs, training modules and long-term research directions.

To track impact, a monitoring mechanism will be put in place to evaluate whether and how the demonstrators are used after the project concludes. Moreover, the initiative sets the stage for future use of tax instruments or incentive models to encourage sustained digital innovation among SMEs beyond the lifespan of KI4KMU-RLP.

In summary, KI4KMU-RLP is a forward-thinking public investment that bridges the gap between research and application, aiming to make AI more accessible to SMEs across Rhineland-Palatinate. By reducing financial and technical barriers and focusing on real-world use cases, it enables

businesses to take confident steps into the future of intelligent technologies, while building lasting collaboration between academia and industry.

DLR emphasises clear allocation of intellectual property, placing responsibility for patents with SMEs while the university focuses on research activities. Continuous monitoring ensures that research outputs are effectively applied, fostering measurable knowledge transfer and societal impact. Overall, the visit showcased DLR's well-organised and practical strategy for promoting innovation—one that combines gradually increasing seed funding, the use of digital tools and targeted administrative incentives to support startups, SMEs and research projects with strong societal impact.

DLR-PT Offices (Bonn)

Meeting with DLR representatives in POLICY ANSWERS

During the meeting with the head of unit, potential avenues for collaboration were explored, particularly regarding the organisation of joint workshops and the utilisation of DLR expertise. Information was shared about meetings already held, including discussions with NCPs, regarding potential cooperation on the WIDERA Call 2026, the EnaCom joint entrepreneurship course across faculties under a Memorandum of Cooperation and other possible collaborative projects. It was noted that some funding programmes are restricted to German citizens, while participation by international partners is allowed using their own resources.

The structure of the Project Management Agency at DLR was explained, where project proposals are submitted and reviewed, and it was emphasised that DLR researchers have the discretion to be included as partners. Opportunities for workshops, such as IP awareness sessions, were discussed, which could be organised jointly or delivered by DLR experts sharing their experience. It was indicated that DLR contributes to national projects for widening participation and will inform partners when relevant calls are announced. Participation in international consortia was discussed, although funding mechanisms for partners abroad are limited.

The three main pillars of DLR activities were outlined: project management; strategic research, including policy advice and programme evaluation; and innovation and foresight, which supports the development of offices abroad, such as in Congo. It was explained that DLR follows a client-oriented approach in developing international strategies and in responding to tenders from the German Research Ministry. DLR is also engaged as a service partner for initiatives such as GIZ calls and contacts with potential project partners, technology transfer offices (TTOs) and science and technology parks (STPs) across Germany were provided. It was noted that Berlin's Adlershof Science and Technology Park (STP) is among the largest, whereas STPs are generally less common in Germany.

Potential mechanisms for collaboration were identified, including the adaptation of DLR's activities as models, sharing best practices, and the identification of activities suitable for joint workshops or future project proposals.

Day 4 – 5 September 2025 (Berlin)

Projektträger Jülich (Berlin)

Meeting with Research Associate, Spokesperson for International Affairs

The meeting with the representative focused on the support provided by **Projektträger Jülich (PTJ)** for fostering entrepreneurial thinking and the implementation of funding programmes across German universities. PTJ, one of the largest project management organizations in Germany with approximately 4,600 employees, has been overseeing funding initiatives for more than 25 years. Notably, PTJ initiated the **EXIST project** in 1998, which has since become a seal of quality for promoting entrepreneurship within universities.

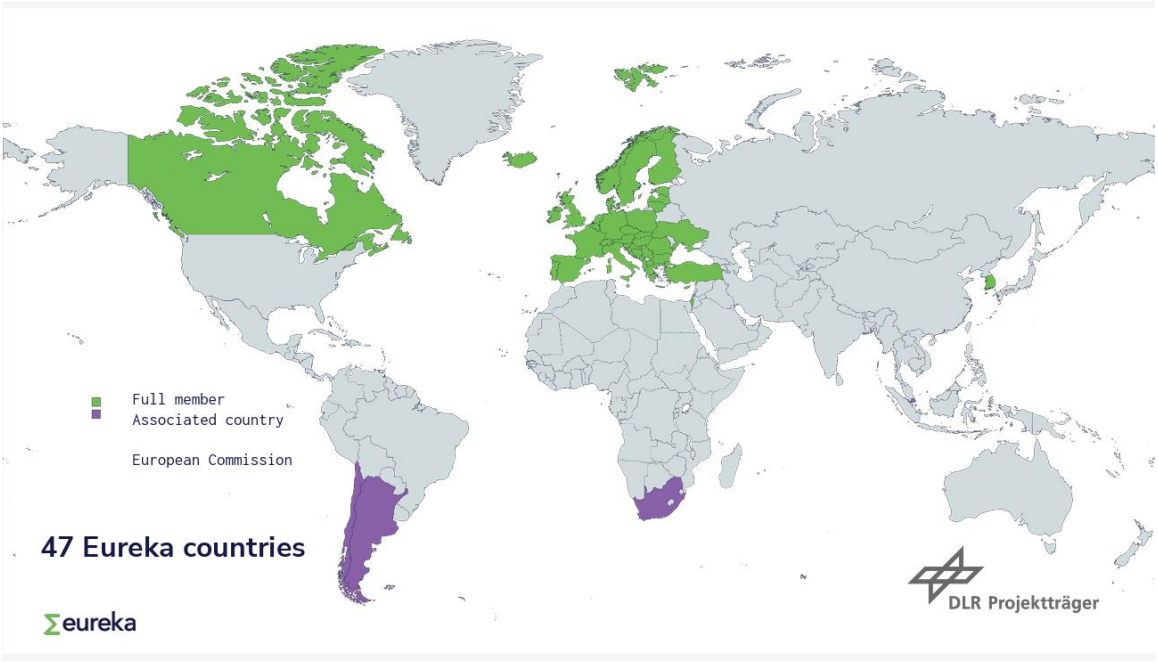
The EXIST programme and related initiatives aim to cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets among researchers and students, providing access to infrastructure, consulting services, and networking events. PTJ develops new funding programs and advises the European Commission, ensuring alignment with national and EU innovation strategies, including the **Hightech Strategy 2025**. Specific funding initiatives highlighted include **AI Startup Hubs** and the **DLR Startup Factory**, which receives €10 million in funding, complemented by an additional €10 million to support researchers. Funding is also extended through the **Invest program**, which engages angel investors, with the government reinvesting part of the capital.

Support under these programs is primarily delivered through German universities, which manage applications and provide the necessary infrastructure. PTJ also facilitates networking through events and consultancy services, including the **Global Certification and Consultancy Center (GCCC)**, which consolidates entrepreneurial networks across EXIST universities. While PTJ does not directly fund foreign universities, international students and researchers can participate in startup events and exchange experiences with EXIST-supported programs.

Overall, the visit highlighted PTJ's role as a central hub for funding, consulting and networking, providing comprehensive support to universities and researchers to foster entrepreneurship and translate innovative ideas into startup ventures.

EUREKA/Eurostars, DLR (Berlin)

Meeting with representative for European and International Cooperation



The meeting with the representative focused on EUREKA and Eurostars, two major initiatives supporting international collaboration in research and development. EUREKA, established in 1985, operates as a framework program for R&D and involves collaboration between 47 member countries, including EU states, Chile, Canada, South Africa, Singapore, Argentina and Brazil (in process). Eureka projects are civilian in purpose and built on international collaboration between organisations from at least two member countries. They focus on the research and development of new products, processes, or services, with a strong market orientation, while the participating organisations themselves determine the direction of research. Following a bottom-up approach, these projects operate as flexible network initiatives. Each participating country is responsible for allocating funds to its national participants, with funding typically covering around 50% of SME project costs, though the exact amounts are determined individually by each country.

Eureka programmes offer a range of instruments to support international cooperation and innovation. Network projects provide flexibility for collaboration among international partners, while the Globalstars initiative extends this flexibility to include partners from non-Eureka countries. The EU Partnership on Innovative SMEs includes Eurostars, considered the third generation of Eureka instruments, which focuses on SMEs with specific funding allocations. Eurostars projects typically target TRL 4-6 and are expected to achieve commercialization within two years of completion. Funding is directed primarily to SMEs rather than universities, and project progress is monitored through biannual reporting; if a project fails to demonstrate solutions to the defined problem within the reporting period, funding may be paused until the issue is resolved. Innowwide provides fixed funding of around €60,000 to support market feasibility studies, covering

70% of project costs with SMEs contributing the remaining 30%. Clusters foster large-scale, industry-led international cooperation across thematic areas, with five clusters currently active. Finally, the investment readiness component helps participating companies prepare for and attract private investment.

Overall, the meeting highlighted EUREKA and Eurostars as structured, internationally collaborative programmes designed to support SMEs in research and innovation. Both initiatives emphasise practical outcomes, rapid commercialisation and flexible collaboration mechanisms while providing substantial financial support for cross-border R&D projects.

5. From Insights to Action: Roadmap for STP Montenegro

The study visit to Cologne, Bonn and Berlin provided critical insights into fostering entrepreneurship, innovation, and technology transfer through centralised support, structured funding, IP management, mentorship and academia-industry collaboration. Programmes such as **DLR Startup Factory, CENTIM, ZWT, EXIST, PTJ-managed initiatives, and EUREKA/Eurostars** demonstrated effective strategies for transforming research ideas into market-ready innovations and promoting sustainable innovation ecosystems.

For the **Science and Technology Park Montenegro (STP MNE)**, these lessons offer a clear framework to strengthen capacities, enhance collaboration, and increase the number of patents and licenses reaching the market.

Proposed Roadmap for STP MNE:

Centralised Support Hub for Startups

- Establish a “one-stop” centre consolidating advisory services, mentoring, legal support and funding guidance.
- Provide tailored consulting for students, researchers and SMEs, inspired by DLR’s Startup Factory and CENTIM.

Entrepreneurial Education and Skills Development

- Organise workshops, bootcamps, and training sessions on IP management, business models and startup development.
- Embed entrepreneurship modules into academic programmes and encourage collaboration with faculty, students and alumni.

IP Management and Commercialisation

- Implement structured IP procedures, including patenting strategies, licensing frameworks and awareness initiatives (e.g., IP Driving Licence).
- Monitor the commercialisation of patents to ensure research outputs reach the market.

Demonstrator Projects and Applied Research

- Launch small-scale pilot projects with local SMEs, scaling successful prototypes into full solutions, following the DLR model.
- Use government and EU funding to cover project analysis and demonstrator development costs.

Networking and Ecosystem Building

- Foster partnerships with universities, TTOs, incubators, accelerators and international research organisations.
- Organise networking events, mentorship programmes and student-industry exchanges to stimulate collaboration and knowledge transfer.

Strategic Partnerships and EU-Funded Projects

- Establish **Memorandums of Cooperation** with German universities, DLR, and other research centres to enable knowledge sharing and joint initiatives.
- Actively pursue participation in **EU-funded programmes** to secure resources, expand international collaboration and integrate STP MNE into wider innovation networks.

Monitoring and Impact Assessment

- Implement mechanisms to track startup success, IP commercialisation and SME engagement.
- Collect and evaluate data to inform continuous improvement and policy alignment.

By following this roadmap, STP Montenegro can build its capacities, foster stronger collaboration between academia and industry and create a sustainable ecosystem where research and innovation are translated into commercially viable solutions, ultimately increasing the number of patents, licenses and successful startups in the region.