

BLUEPRINT

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# Building market and supply chain opportunities

*for micro-SMEs within the Baltic Sea Region*

**Interreg**  
Baltic Sea Region



Co-funded by  
the European Union



RESILIENT ECONOMIES AND COMMUNITIES

**BSR Go-abroad**

BSR Go-abroad is co-funded by the EU through the Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme.



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Baltic Sea Region



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**BSR Go-abroad**

BSR Go-abroad / Blueprint

Jimmy F. Andersen (ed.) & Eva Holmberg (ed.)

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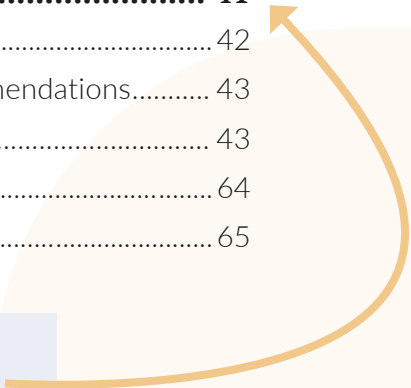
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# Introduction to BSR Go-abroad

In an inter-connected world market tremors and trade disruptions travel faster than ever. Smaller companies can succumb more easily to global crises or unexpected external disturbances, however those operating in international markets are more likely to recover quickly from or even withstand such disruptions. Expanding beyond domestic markets can therefore make micro-SMEs (companies with fewer than 10 employees) more resilient. By diversifying their market base and building local value chains, these companies can better shield themselves from global supply chain disruptions caused by exogenous shocks such as pandemics, wars, energy or financial crises.

Studies show that micro-SMEs engaged in international activities tend to outperform those operating solely in domestic markets. They benefit from higher turnover and employment growth and are better positioned to seize new opportunities. Moreover, there is a strong correlation between internationalisation and innovation, further underlining the strategic importance of cross-border engagement (Steinerowska-Streb et al, 2022, Dabić et al, 2020; Galkina et al., 2022).

Despite these advantages, only a small proportion of micro-SMEs currently engage in export activities. In 2022, just 6.3% of micro-SMEs in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) with fewer than 10 employees were involved in exports. This compares to 22.6% of

SMEs with 10–49 employees and 49.5% of SMEs with 50–250 employees, highlighting a significant gap in international engagement among the smallest businesses (Eurostat, 2025).

In response to these challenges, the objective of the BSR Go-abroad project was to test a solution aimed at supporting micro-SMEs across the BSR and give them greater confidence in taking their first steps towards internationalisation.

To achieve this, an internationalisation programme was implemented between May 2024 and March 2026 providing 258 companies across the BSR with the knowledge, tools, and networks needed to design and execute effective internationalisation strategies.

A key output of the project was this blueprint, which offers practical toolkits and recommendations for supporting cross-border trade among micro-SMEs in the BSR. It is intended for public and private Business Development Organisations (BDOs), policy decision-makers, and other relevant stakeholders, as well as micro-SMEs seeking to initiate or expand their international activities.

The BSR Go-abroad partnership, responsible for designing and implementing the project, consisted of eight partners from seven countries across the BSR.

All project partners, except for one, were public or private BDOs that support smaller companies with scaling as part of their core activities and have experience in internationalisation.

## Project partners

Eight partners from seven countries in the Baltic Sea region are involved in the project



**This blueprint consists of three parts. Part 1 and 2 should be read as one and Part 3 can be read as a stand-alone report and is targeted policy decision-makers:**

- 1. The BSR Go-abroad Internationalisation Programme**  
*- Overview of programme methodology and tools*
- 2. Programme Recommendations**  
*- Lessons learned and recommendations for organisations looking to support micro-SMEs with internationalisation*
- 3. Policy Recommendations**  
*- Recommendations for local policy decision-makers*

[Go directly to Part 3](#)

A person wearing a green sweater is sitting at a wooden desk. They are holding a silver pen in their right hand and a clipboard with a white sheet of paper in their left hand. The desk is cluttered with various items, including a laptop, a keyboard, and some papers. The background is slightly blurred, showing a window with a view of the outdoors.

# 01

## The BSR Go-abroad Internationalisation Programme

*– Overview of programme methodology and tools*

# The Internationalisation Programme

The BSR Go-abroad programme was structured as an acceleration programme and had four levels, which companies progressed through step by step.

Unlike many other internationalisation initiatives, the BSR Go-abroad programme was delivered entirely online, with all activities taking place virtually. This made the programme more accessible for companies by reducing both time and travel costs, as there was no need for physical attendance. Participation was also free of charge, making the programme particularly attractive to smaller companies with limited financial resources.

In order to create a strong sense of belonging to an international network, all participating companies were brought together across the BSR. Meaning that all joint activities took place in an international setting, highlighting the value of cross-border collaboration.

The internationalisation programme targeted micro-SMEs located in the BSR and in total, 258 companies participated in BSR Go-abroad. These companies originated from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Poland, Estonia, and Germany—the same countries represented in the project partnership.

Most companies were small in size, almost 50 percent had only 1–2 employees and in total more than 75 percent had fewer than 4 employees. The average annual turnover of participating companies with fewer than 4 employees was €217,000.

The companies participating in the programme represented a wide range of industries. However, special focus was placed on recruiting micro-SMEs from the following sectors: transport and logistics,

**All joint activities took place in an international setting**

manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, and media and culture.

To participate in the programme, companies had to demonstrate a clear motivation to expand into new markets or begin internationalising parts of their business within the BSR. Most participating companies had little or no prior experience with internationalisation, while a smaller number had already engaged

in limited international activities before joining the programme.

Among the participating companies, most micro-SMEs were interested in exporting and finding new customers (both B2C and B2B). However, some also aimed to explore opportunities for new partnerships, identify new suppliers, and connect with foreign investors.

## Breakdown of the four levels and tools

The following is a breakdown of content and activities of the programme's four levels.



Figure 1. Brief overview of the programme's four levels.

## LEVEL 1: International Readiness Assessment

The first activity at level 1 was a screening session with a local Business Coach from one of the project partners. Meaning if a Polish company joined the programme they would be assigned a Business Coach from Poland.

Each screening session lasted approximately two hours and was mandatory for all participating companies. All micro-SMEs were required to fill in the “BSR Go-abroad Internationalisation Readiness Assessment Screening Tool”- a screening tool developed by the project partners to assess the companies readiness for internationalisation. Based on this assessment, a short-term ‘Next Step Plan’ was created to outline concrete priorities for the company throughout the programme.

Most companies continued to level 2 after the screening assessment, in order to build a fundamental understanding of internationalisation while a few companies progressed directly to level 3.

During each screening session, the local Business Coach gained valuable insights into the company’s needs, ambitions, and challenges. These insights were later used to provide tailored guidance and support throughout the programme.

In total 258 companies went through this level and had a screening assessment of their internationalisation readiness.

### The “BSR Go-abroad Internationalisation Readiness Assessment Screening Tool” explained

The purpose of a screening was to assess the internal capacity of the company and to identify its initial internal strengths/weaknesses and challenges related to internationalisation.

The screening tool had 10 assessment areas. These were:

1. Mindset, Competencies, and Training
2. Market Research and Needs Assessment
3. Market Entry Strategy
4. Technology Adoption
5. Networking and Collaboration
6. Financial Support and Funding
7. Risk Management
8. Regulatory Compliance and Quality Control
9. Logistics and Supply Chain Management
10. Sustainability Framework

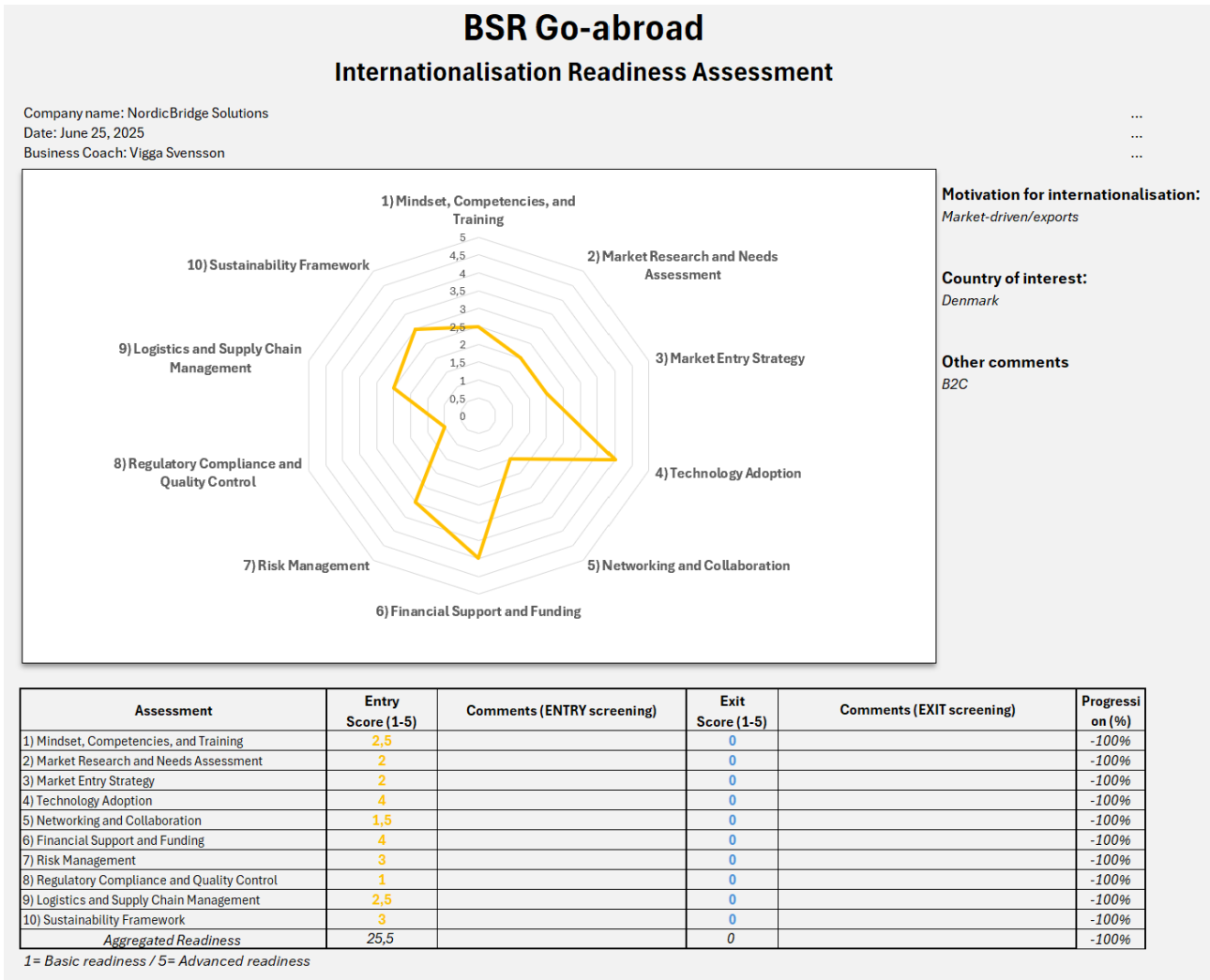


Figure 2. Shows an example of filled in screening tool at 'point of entry'.

**A minimum of  
20 points**  
*was required to continue in the  
BSR Go-abroad programme*

The screening tool scored each assessment area on a scale from 1–5, with 5 being the highest score and 1 being the lowest. After each area was scored, a ‘spider web’ (in yellow) was generated providing an overview of the company’s strengths and weaknesses. A company could achieve a maximum total score of 50 points.

A minimum of 20 points was required to continue in the BSR Go-abroad programme.

A guideline for how to use the screening tool, including definitions of the 1–5 scale, was provided as part of the screening tool. For each assessment area, a set of guiding questions was developed to support the Business Coaches conducting the screening assessments.

Based on the screening session and the score, a local Business Coach would fill in a ‘Next Step Plan’ with short term concrete action points for what the

company had to focus on, as part of their participation in the programme.

In order to assess how much each company had progressed, the local Business Coach would apply the screening tool again, when a company exited the programme. The same 10 assessment areas would be scored, and a new ‘spider web’ (in dotted blue) was formed to show the progression and highlight the difference between the company’s entrance and exit scores in the programme.

The tool is very user-friendly and easy to apply, and it can be used either by a representative from BDOs or by companies themselves who wish to assess their internal capacity and internationalisation readiness.

Interested in the “BSR Go-abroad Internationalisation Readiness Assessment Screening Tool”?

[To the Toolkit!](#)

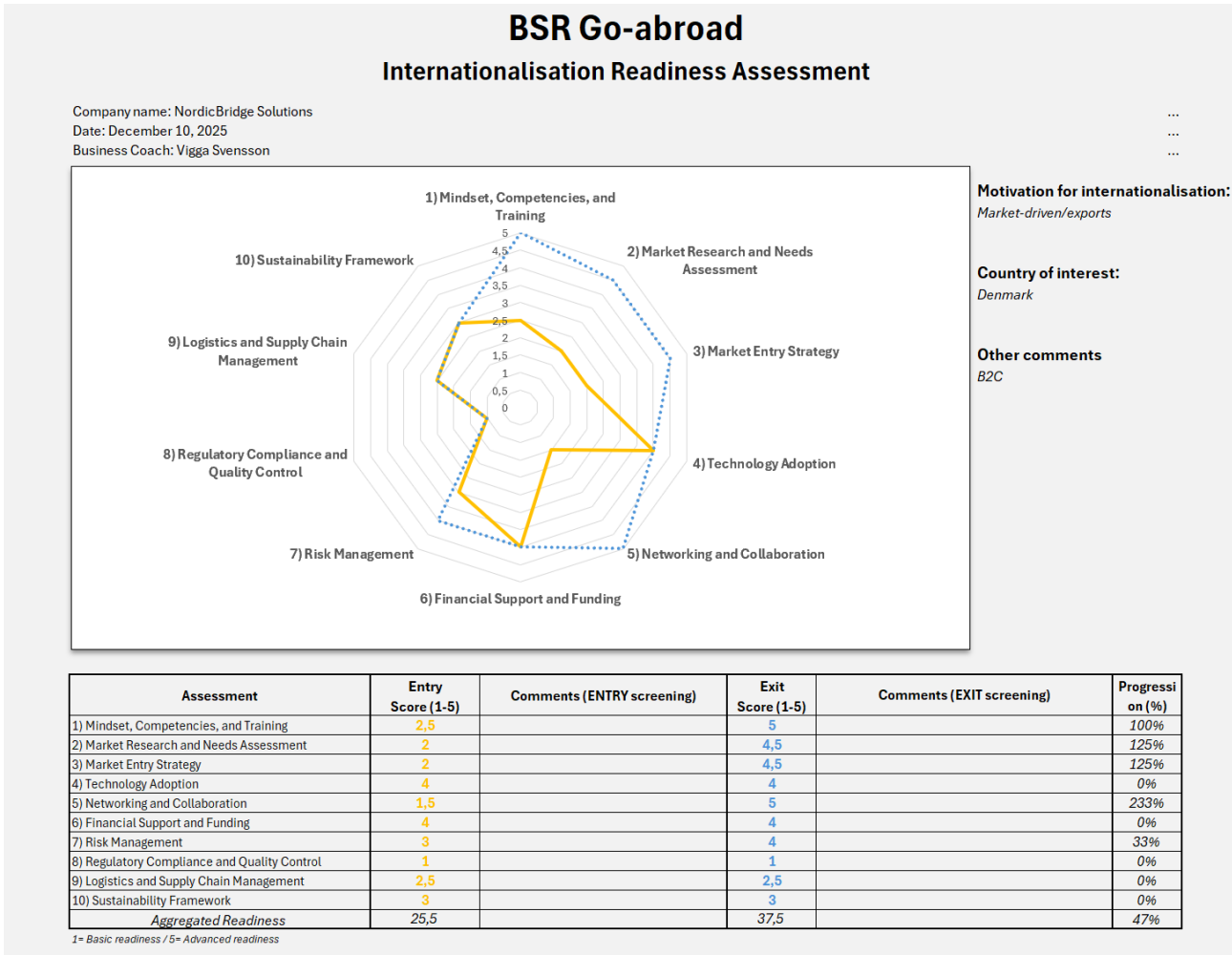


Figure 3. Shows example of filled in screening at 'point of exit'.

## LEVEL 2: Competency Building Workshops

At level 2, companies were grouped into cross-border cohorts of 25–30 founders from across the BSR and took part in four ‘competency building workshops’ delivered by external experts, who were experienced internationalisation coaches.

The programme at level 2, consisted of four thematic sessions:

1. The International Mindset  
– *Prerequisites for success*
2. International Market Fit  
– *Building on data insights*
3. Organise Your Team  
– *Gearing for growth*
4. Digitising International Activities  
– *Scaling through systems*

Each workshop lasted four hours and was held once a week over a four-week period, amounting to a total of 16 hours of teaching. Participation in all four workshops was mandatory in order to progress to the next level.

In total, 9 cohorts were conducted, with 249 companies completing level 2. The training equipped participants with essential knowledge and tools to support various aspects of internationalisation readiness.

The intention was that each workshop would provide new knowledge and practical tools that participants could easily apply after each session. The workshops were coherent and structured sequentially, meaning participants had to complete Workshop 1 before progressing to the subsequent workshops.

All workshops were carried out online and recorded, allowing participants to catch up if they were unable to attend a session. As part of level 2, participants were also provided with a ‘go-to-market plan’ based on the content of the four workshops. This ‘go-to-market plan’, called the ‘BSR Go-abroad PlayBook’, was a working document that participants were expected to fill in and complete throughout their progression of the programme.

## Content of the four workshops

### **Workshop 1: The International Mindset** – Prerequisites for success

This workshop marked the starting point for the competency building workshops, recognising that successful internationalisation begins with mindset and ambitions. Its purpose was to establish a clear understanding of why an international outlook is essential, while also providing participants with a realistic perspective on what it takes to expand abroad.

The experts facilitating workshop 1, would present real business cases from micro-SMEs they had previously supported, providing participants with concrete examples and reference points.

The topics presented at the workshop were:

- Why is internationalisation important?
- Why and how should you go international?
- Ambition and Motivation: What type of company do you want to be?
- How to develop strategic growth goals?

### **Workshop 2: International Market Fit** – Building on data insights

Workshop 2 focused on helping companies adapt their products or services to new markets. This required a clear understanding of their value proposition, as well as their 'Ideal Customer Profile' (ICP). Building on this foundation, participants were introduced to tools and methods for identifying and reaching new customers in international markets.

The aim of the workshop was also to support companies in identifying the most suitable target markets

within the BSR, based on data rather than intuition. To facilitate this, a range of tools and checklists were introduced, which participants had to apply during and after the workshop.

The experts facilitating workshop 2, would also present real business cases from micro-SMEs they had previously supported.

The topics presented at the workshop were:

- How to choose/evaluate market potential – based on data rather than (just) gut feeling? Which data/metrics to evaluate on?
- Identify your 'Ideal Customer Profile' - ICP
- Product market fit in new markets: Is your current value proposition strong enough/adapted to international needs?

### **Workshop 3: Organise Your Team** – Gearing for growth

This workshop focused on highlighting the importance of organising a team for internationalisation and identifying the types of human resources typically required related to international expansion. It also emphasised the significance of understanding different business cultures, which is essential for successfully navigating international markets.

The aim was to provide practical guidance on how to build a 'lean organisation' without incurring high costs, such as hiring specialised country sales managers, etc. Throughout the workshop, participants were introduced to tools and checklists that they could apply both during the session and immediately afterwards.

The experts facilitating workshop 3, would present real business cases from micro-SMEs they had previously helped scale international.

The topics presented at the workshop were:

- Organisational market fit? Resource allocation – what do you need to go international?
- What team composition and commitment do you need (building knowledge and culture)?
- How to map and build int'l networks? Incl. role of corporations and int'l partnerships
- Legal aspects; The essentials of going international

#### **Workshop 4: Digitising International Activities – Scaling through systems**

This workshop focused on introducing digital tools, AI models and other tech solutions, to support internationalisation. Participants explored how digital tools can ease cross-border business operations and how AI can enhance international sales, communication, and logistics in a smart way. Companies were also introduced to platforms for lead generation and partner search, as well as how digital tools can support them with pricing, sales, and compliance.

By applying insights gained from previous workshops—particularly related to the companies value proposition and ICP—participants were better positioned to identify their most relevant target markets and customers in new international contexts by using AI.

The topics presented at the workshop were:

- Rise of digital tools eases cross-border activity. Implications and opportunities for micro-SMEs in the early stages of int'l? Implications for pricing, sales and communication channels
- AI tools for customer management/ cross-border communication/ market/int'l web-shops.
- Sales and partner leads through digital tools - cheaper than trade shows but as effective?
- AI/Digital tools and models to ease operations across borders

#### **Completion of level 2**

Upon completing level 2— 16 hours of training over one month—micro-SMEs received a certificate if they had participated in at least three out of the four workshops.

Following the training, each company met with their local Business Coach, who assessed their readiness and motivation to progress to level 3.

#### **The BSR Go-abroad PlayBook**

Interested in the BSR Go-abroad PlayBook? Go to:

**BSR Go-abroad Toolkit**



Figure 4. Shows a full overview of content covered in each thematic workshop.

In total,  
**222** companies  
advanced  
to level 3

### Level 3: Customized Journey

At level 3, the primary focus was for companies to apply knowledge gained at the competency building workshops (at level 2) by developing their own go-to-market plan ('BSR Go-abroad Playbook'), supported by their local Business Coach. The key objective was to identify and validate the most suitable target market and most actionable ICP, partner, investor, etc. in that market.

In addition to regular 1:1 coaching with a local Business Coach, participants also had the opportunity to consult other Business Coaches from the partnership to gain a better understanding of specific BSR markets.

Alongside coaching, participants took part in 'peer-to-peer' group sessions based on which sector they belonged to, where they exchanged experiences and insights across the BSR. Each peer-to-peer group consisted of 10–13 participants and was facilitated by a Business Coach and internationalisation experts from previous workshops at level 2.

Further activities included workshops such as 'Doing Business in (BSR country)', which provided deeper

insights into market conditions, business culture, tax regulations, and legal frameworks, and more.

Level 3 lasted three months, during which companies refined their 'BSR Go-abroad PlayBook' and clarified their most ideal target market/s. At the end of level 3, the most advanced companies presented their 'BSR Go-abroad PlayBook' to a panel of Business Coaches in sessions known as 'Springboard Sessions'. Companies with a solid and viable go-to-market plan progressed to level 4, where the project partners supported them with cross-border matchmaking within the BSR.

In total, 222 companies advanced to level 3.

Activities at level 3:

- 1:1 coaching with local Business Coach and target market Business Coaches
- 'Peer-to-peer' group sessions
- Workshops on 'Doing Business in (BSR country)'
- Springboard Sessions

## The 'peer-to-peer' groups sessions

Before each new level 3 began, all participating micro-SMEs were divided into smaller 'peer-to-peer' groups based on sector.

Each 'peer-to-peer' group met for four sessions, each lasting two hours held once a week over the course of a month. Similar to the workshops in level 2, the sessions followed the same thematic structure starting with the *The International Mindset - Prerequisites for succes*. The format encouraged participants to share their challenges related to each theme and was designed to place participants at the centre of the process, allowing them to exchange experiences with like-minded peers who could provide feedback and practical advice. The sessions also gave the participants the chance to ask the experts they had previously encountered during level 2 with more in-depth questions on content or specific tools they had been working with.

Participants worked actively with their 'BSR Go-abroad PlayBook', focusing on the relevant sections tied to each session, which enabled them to receive targeted input and support on areas they found challenging.

Participation in the 'peer-to-peer' sessions was optional, and sessions were not recorded due to the sensitive nature of the discussions. The closed-group format also aimed to foster stronger cross-border networks among participants.

In total 18 'peer-to-peer' groups were put together and conducted between May 2024 and March 2026.

## 1:1 coaching with local Business Coaches

Throughout the programme, each micro-SME was assigned a local Business Coach, whom they first met during the screening session at level 1. During level 2, companies checked in with their local Business Coach in between the four workshops and met again at the end of level 2, where their Business Coach assessed whether they were ready to progress to level 3 or not.

At level 3, the companies had bi-weekly meetings with their Business Coaches, with the main objective of ensuring steady advancement. The primary focus of these meetings was the 'BSR Go-abroad PlayBook', as completing this document was a key requirement for moving on to level 4 - the matchmaking level.

In addition to 1:1 sessions with their Business Coach, companies also had the opportunity to consult Business Coaches from other project partner countries. This allowed them to gather valuable insights and better determine the most suitable target market/s.

Overall, the local Business Coaches were a central element of level 3, and companies that actively engaged in regular coaching sessions and leveraged access to other Business Coaches tended to progress more effectively.

## Workshops on “Doing Business in (BSR country)”

As an additional activity to support micro-SMEs in narrowing down their most suitable target market, a series of seven ‘Doing Business in (BSR country)’ workshops were offered, covering Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Poland, Estonia, and Germany. Companies were free to participate in as many of these workshops as they wished in order to gather relevant market insights.

Each workshop lasted 2 hours and was delivered by external experts. All sessions were recorded, and the recordings were made available to all companies with an interest in the respective markets.

Want access to the ‘Doing Business In’ presentation material? Press here:

[To the website!](#)

## ‘Springboard Sessions’

At the end of the three-month level 3 programme, companies were expected to have gained sufficient knowledge and support to finalise their ‘BSR Go-abroad PlayBook’ and develop a clear understanding of which target market/s were most ideal for them.

By filling out a short application outlining a specific matchmaking request in the most ideal target/s, the company’s application was reviewed by the Business Coaches. If the Business Coach from the target market agreed to support the request, a ‘Springboard Session’ was arranged involving the company, their local Business Coach, and the target market Business Coach. During this session, the target market Business Coach would ask follow-up questions to better understand the company’s market choice and the type of connections they were looking for.

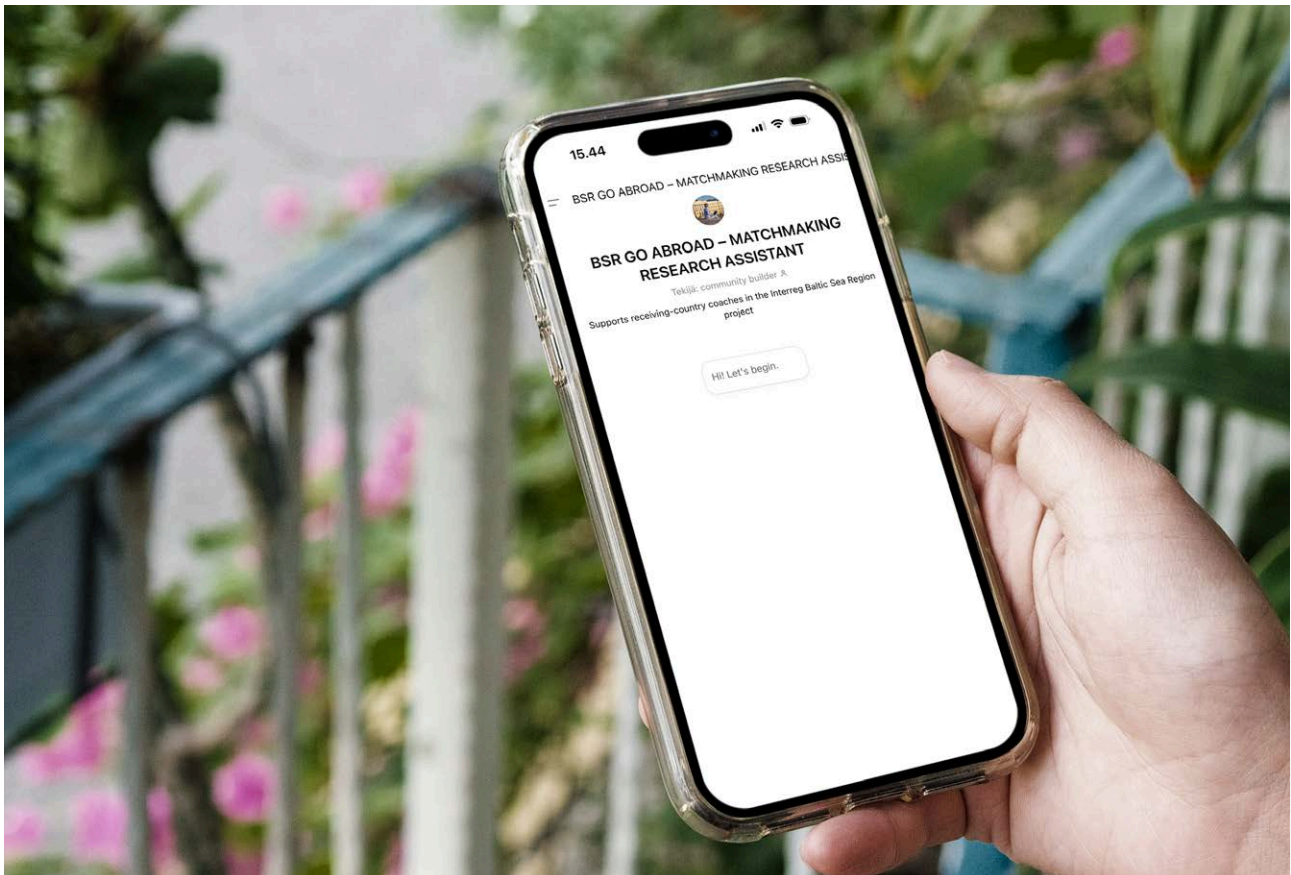
Following the ‘Springboard Session’, it was up to the target market Business Coach to decide whether they could support the company’s matchmaking request. If approved, the matchmaking process was initiated.

In total, 113 companies applied for a ‘Springboard Session’.

As part of Level 3, the project partners also developed a supportive AI tool called the ‘BSR Go-abroad Matchmaking Research Assistant’. The purpose of the tool was to help the Business Coaches map the potential customers, partners, sub-suppliers, investors, and other potential business connections based on the specific requests and needs of the participating companies.

Want to try the AI match-making assistant?

Try the AI match-making assistant here!



## Level 4: Cross-border matchmaking

At Level 4, project partners delivered tailored matchmaking support, with Business Coaches helping companies connect with potential customers, partners, investors, sub-suppliers, and more.

Companies could also access in-depth guidance to navigate international challenges through external expert support—such as legal advice and other useful consultation—funded via a voucher scheme.

In total, 62 companies participated in matchmaking meetings across the BSR, with several resulting in concrete business opportunities.

Activities at level 4:

- Matchmaking
- Local Market Expert Voucher

### Matchmaking

Once a company was accepted into Level 4, the matchmaking process was initiated. On average, the target market Business Coach had 3–4 weeks to identify a suitable match for the company and arrange an online meeting with the BSR micro-SME and the counterpart that was found. Companies could participate in more than one matchmaking meeting within the same target market and some also had matchmaking meetings in more than one

target market. The matchmaking meetings were typically conducted online and included both the local Business Coach, the target market Business Coach, the requesting BSR micro-SME and the identified counterpart.

Identifying the right match depended on the Business Coaches local networks. When relevant contacts were not readily available, Business Coaches would reach out through alternative channels to try to establish connections. If no suitable match could be found, the target market Business Coach would inform the requesting company.

### Local market expert voucher

As part of Level 4, participating companies could apply for additional market support through a voucher scheme funded by the project. Following a matchmaking meeting with e.g. a potential customer, micro-SMEs might require legal advice on specific matters before proceeding with further discussions. As project partners were not able to provide legal guidance directly, external experts—such as attorneys—could be engaged to address these needs.

Each company was eligible to receive the voucher once, with a maximum value of €1,000.

**62** companies participated in matchmaking meetings

several resulting in  
**CONCRETE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES**

## Exiting the programme

Micro-SMEs were free to exit the programme at any time. Most companies completed the first three levels, and a significant number also progressed to the 'Springboard Sessions' and the matchmaking level.

Whenever a company chose to exit, an exit meeting was held between the local Business Coach and the company, during which an 'exit screening' was carried out.

## Evaluation of the programme

As part of 'testing' the BSR Go-abroad internationalisation programme, feedback and evaluation from participating micro-SMEs was essential for the project partners. After each activity participants went through, questionnaires were sent out and companies provided input that was used to continuously adapt and improve the programme. To support this process, the project partners developed an 'Evaluation Design' to ensure a structured and consistent approach to assessing and refining the programme throughout the implementation period.

The 'exit screening' provided the project partners with insights into the company's progress from entry to exit. This data was essential for evaluating the programme's impact on participating companies.

In addition, the 'Next Step Plan' filled in during the 'entry screening' was updated, enabling companies to continue working with concrete actions beyond the programme in support of their internationalisation journey.

Overall, the feedback from participating companies was positive. Many highlighted the gained knowledge as valuable, providing practical insights and tools that could be applied immediately. Below are selected examples of feedback from participants:

*“Really inspiring to be a part of this programme. Lots of valuable insights (... and a lot of work to be done).”*

*“So happy to be a part of BSR Go-abroad! It’s a huge boost of energy and knowledge for our team! Sky is no longer the limit.”*

*“Thank you! It was an incredible experience being part of this programme. Truly inspiring and highly recommended for any startup looking to grow globally.”*

*“It has been a good experience to participate in the program”. I am very much looking forward to the upcoming opportunities I received through the program!”*

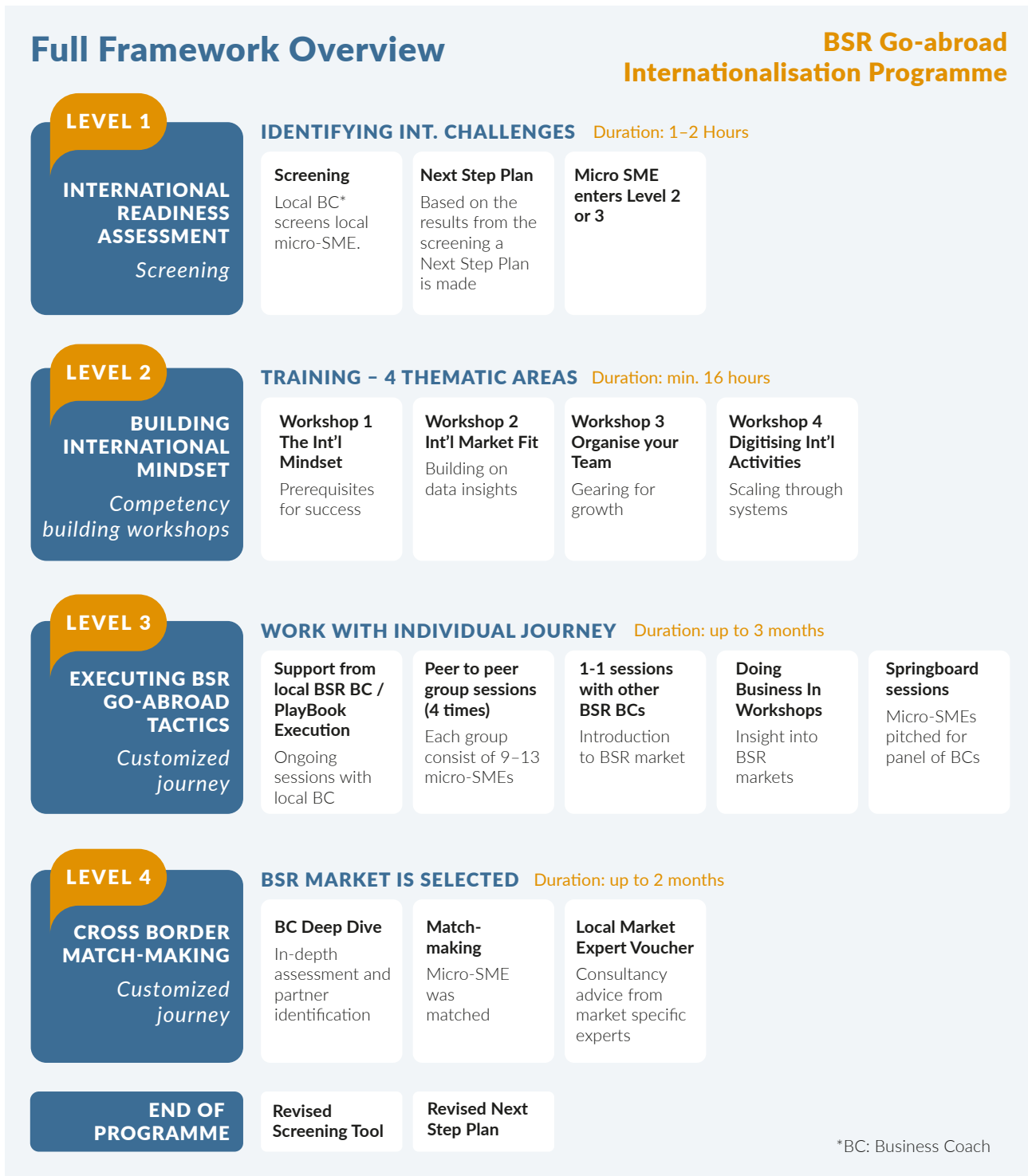


Figure 5. Shows in-depth overview of the programme's activities at all four levels.

## Community Platform

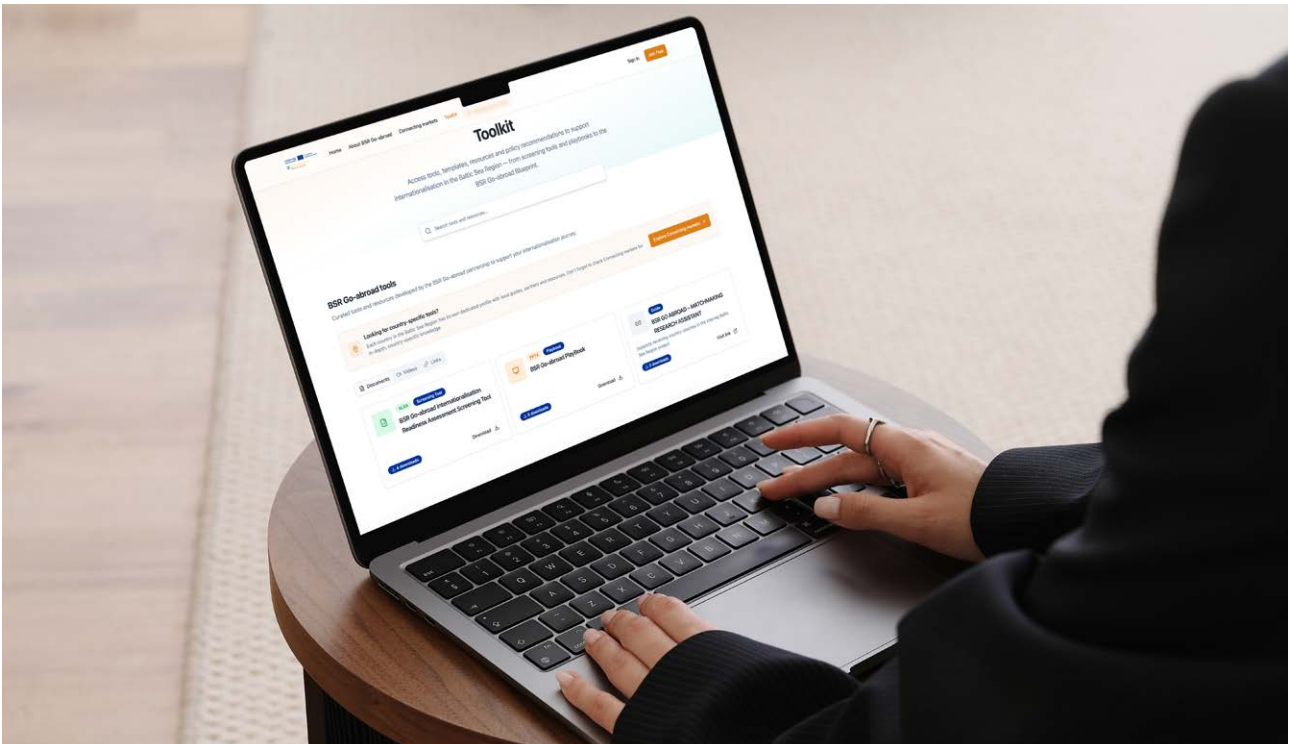
To ensure long-term impact and knowledge sharing, the BSR Go-abroad project has established a digital 'Community Platform', where other business support organisations, can connect, exchange experiences and join the BSR Go-abroad Community.

On the platform all developed BSR Go-abroad tools (and other toolkits), checklists and other useful material related to internationalisation can be downloaded and used free of charge. It is also possible to book 1:1 meetings with the BSR project partners if you have a company that needs insight into a specific BSR market.

BSR Go-abroad is looking to expand its current partnership with new community partners. If you are interested in using the BSR Go-abroad solution, strengthening your knowledge of internationalisation, expanding your network, and engaging with experienced internationalisation peers across the BSR, we invite you to join our 'Community Platform'.

Access the platform here:

[Community Platform](#)





# 02

## Programme Recommendations

*– Lessons learned and recommendations  
for organisations looking to support micro-  
SMEs with internationalisation*

# Introduction to key lessons learned

In the following section the key lessons learned from the implementation of the BSR Go-abroad internationalisation programme are presented. These insights are based on practical experiences from working directly with micro-SMEs (companies with fewer than 10 employees), Business Development Organisations (BDOs), and Public Authorities across the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).

These learnings are intended to support business support organisations and other ecosystem actors in better understanding how micro-SMEs approach internationalisation in practice: the barriers they encounter, and which types of support are most effective in enabling their international growth. The lessons will also provide concrete, experience-based guidance on how to design and deliver support structures that are more closely aligned with the needs and realities of smaller companies.

In addition, the section provides insights into the collaboration among project partners within the BSR Go-abroad project and highlights key considerations

for organisations wanting to engage in cross-border programmes. This includes lessons related to coordination, communication, and partnership building across different countries and ecosystems.

By combining insights into both company-level experiences and partnership dynamics, this section offers practical guidance on how to strengthen internationalisation efforts through more targeted, structured, and collaborative support approaches.

## **Key Lessons from supporting micro-SMEs in their internationalisation journey**

- 1. Ensure basic business capacities  
before internationalisation**
- 2. Strong commitment and motivation  
for internationalisation**
- 3. From knowledge to action:  
The need for execution support**

# 1)

## Ensure basic business capacities before internationalisation

Before engaging micro-SMEs in internationalisation activities, it is essential that they have a solid understanding of their core business fundamentals. Experiences from the BSR Go-abroad project showed that many companies are eager to expand internationally but often lack clarity around key elements of their business. Without this foundation, internationalisation efforts risk becoming unfocused, inefficient, and ultimately unsuccessful.

Companies need to have a clear understanding of who their customers are, what value they offer, and how they differentiate themselves from competitors. This includes having a well-defined value proposition, insight into their target segments, and a realistic understanding of their competitors. In addition, a basic sales strategy—how they reach customers, convert leads, and generate revenue—is crucial before attempting to replicate or adapt this approach in a foreign market.

At the same time, internal resources must be considered. Micro-SMEs need to be aware of their own capacity, including time, financial resources, and team competencies. Entering new markets places additional demands on the organisation, and without

a clear overview of available resources, companies risk overextending themselves.

The BSR Go-abroad programme highlighted that companies who had a stronger grasp of these fundamentals were significantly better equipped to benefit from internationalisation support. They were able to make clearer decisions, prioritise the right markets, and adapt their strategies more effectively. In contrast, companies lacking this basic business understanding often struggled to move from learning to action.

A key takeaway is therefore that internationalisation should not be the starting point, but rather a next step built on a solid business foundation. Business support efforts should first ensure that micro-SMEs have clarity around their core business model and strategic direction. From there, tools and programmes—such as those developed in BSR Go-abroad—can support companies in identifying relevant target markets and taking structured steps towards international expansion.

By ensuring that these basic business capabilities are in place, micro-SMEs are far more likely to succeed in international markets, reduce risks, and create sustainable growth beyond borders.

## Concrete actions we recommend to BDOs :

- **Conduct structured readiness assessments**  
Implement simple screening tools to evaluate whether companies have clarity on their value proposition, target customers, competitive positioning, and internal resources before entering internationalisation programmes.
- **Provide targeted support to increase core business skills**  
Offer workshops or one-to-one mentoring focused on strengthening key areas such as business model, sales strategy, pricing, and customer segmentation to ensure companies have a solid foundation.
- **Prioritise companies with sufficient capacity**  
Assess whether micro-SMEs have the necessary time, motivation, and team capabilities to engage in internationalisation, and guide those who are not yet ready towards preparatory support.
- **Integrate step-by-step pathways before internationalisation**  
Design support programmes that first help companies build and validate their core business locally, and only then transition them into internationalisation activities in a structured and gradual way.

# 2)

## **Strong commitment and motivation for internationalisation**

Another key lesson from the BSR Go-abroad programme is that commitment and motivation are critical factors for successful internationalisation. While access to tools, knowledge, and support structures is important, these alone are not sufficient if companies do not have a clear internal drive to pursue international growth.

The programme showed that micro-SMEs with strong motivation to expand internationally were far more likely to engage actively, complete programme activities, and take concrete steps towards entering new markets. In contrast, companies with lower levels of commitment often struggled to maintain momentum, prioritise internationalisation alongside daily operations, or translate learning into action.

Internationalisation requires time, focus, and persistence. It involves navigating uncertainty, adapting to new environments, and often working with longer time horizons before results materialise. For micro-SMEs, where resources are limited and teams are small, this means that internationalisation must be a deliberate and prioritised effort within the company. Without internal commitment from management and key decision-makers, even well-designed support programmes are unlikely to have a lasting impact.

The BSR Go-abroad experience also highlighted that motivation is closely linked to mindset. Companies that viewed internationalisation as a gradual and achievable process—rather than a high-risk leap—were more willing to experiment, learn, and adapt along the way. Structured support, such as early-stage workshops focusing on ambition, goals, and expectations, proved valuable in helping companies reflect on their readiness and strengthen their motivation.

A key takeaway is therefore that business support initiatives should not only focus on providing knowledge and tools but also on strengthening companies' commitment to internationalisation. This can be achieved by encouraging clear goal setting, aligning international ambitions with overall business strategy, and ensuring that companies understand the level of effort required.

By ensuring that micro-SMEs are both motivated and committed from the outset, the likelihood of sustained engagement and successful internationalisation increases significantly. This creates a stronger foundation for companies to move from intention to action and to continue developing their international activities beyond initial support programmes.

## Concrete actions BDOs could take:

- **Assess motivation and commitment early**  
Include a simple screening step to evaluate companies' ambition, readiness, and willingness to prioritise internationalisation before enrolling them in programmes.
- **Facilitate goal-setting and strategic alignment**  
Support companies in defining clear internationalisation goals and ensure these are aligned with their overall business strategy and growth ambitions.
- **Integrate mindset and motivation-building activities**  
Incorporate workshops or sessions that focus on developing an international mindset, helping companies see internationalisation as a gradual and achievable process.
- **Ensure ongoing engagement and accountability**  
Maintain regular follow-ups and structured milestones to keep companies committed, support progress, and prevent loss of momentum throughout the interaction.

# 3)

## **From knowledge to action: The need for execution support**

If micro-SMEs are to be effectively supported in their internationalisation journey, it is not often enough to provide knowledge, tools, and inspiration alone—they also need strong execution support.

Experiences from the BSR Go-abroad programme clearly showed that companies struggle to translate learning into concrete actions without ongoing guidance and hands-on support.

The role of Business Coaches in the BSR Go-abroad proved to be a key element within the programme. Each micro-SME was assigned a dedicated Business Coach, and it became evident during implementation that training modules alone were not sufficient to move companies meaningfully forward in their internationalisation journey. While the training modules were effective in inspiring participants, providing knowledge, and introducing relevant tools, many micro-SMEs struggled to apply these insights once they returned to their daily operations. With limited time, resources, and internal capacity, participants required continuous support to prioritise, adapt, and implement what they had learned.

The inclusion of local Business Coaches as dedicated ‘go-to’ sparring partners throughout the programme therefore emerged as a key success factor. Because the coaches had a solid understanding of the programme’s content, tools, terminology, and expectations, they were able to provide targeted, coherent, and context-specific support at the subsequent levels—particularly during the go-to-market phase at level 3 at level 4.

This support structure significantly increased the likelihood that participating micro-SMEs moved from inspiration to action, and from intention to actual cross-border engagement. In cases where a local Business Coach was not available, this often had an immediate negative effect on the engagement and progression of participating companies.

A clear takeaway is therefore the importance of ensuring dedicated execution support. Without this type of hands-on guidance, many micro-SMEs struggle to move forward in their internationalisation journey and realise their full potential.

## Concrete actions BDOs could take:

- **Assign dedicated execution support to each company**  
Ensure that each micro-SME is matched with a dedicated advisor or Business Coach who can support them continuously throughout the internationalisation process whether that by through a dedicated programme or other initiatives related to international expansion.
- **Integrate coaching alongside training programmes**  
Complement training modules with ongoing one-to-one guidance to help companies translate knowledge and tools into concrete actions in their own business context.
- **Focus on implementation and prioritisation**  
Support companies in breaking down their internationalisation efforts into manageable steps, helping them prioritise actions and stay focused despite limited time and resources.
- **Ensure continuous follow-up and engagement**  
Establish regular check-ins and progress tracking to maintain momentum, address challenges early, and keep companies actively engaged throughout the programme.

### **Key lessons learned among the project partners in BSR Go-abroad**

1. Interpersonal relations among project partners are crucial
2. Clear communication in a complex cross-border partnerships is important
3. Valuable knowledge and exposure from being part of BSR Go-abroad

# 1)

## Interpersonal relations among project partners are crucial

Prior to the BSR Go-abroad programme, most of the project partners did not know each other and had no history of working together. During the first six months of the development phase, the partners met in-person several times to co-create the programme methodology and all its activities.

This joint development process was essential in building a common understanding of objectives, structure, and expected outcomes.

Recognising and investing in the importance of interpersonal relationships early on in a cross-border project proved to be a critical factor for success when implementing the cross-border programme. Establishing trust, mutual understanding, and open communication among partners require more than formal coordination meetings. While online communication was practical and efficient for daily collaboration, it became evident that face-to-face interaction played a decisive role in strengthening the partnership.

Meeting in-person, visiting each other's organisations, and gaining insight into local ecosystems and working environments created a stronger foundation for collaboration.

These physical meetings not only improved cultural understanding and enabled more effective problem-solving, but they also contributed to a shared sense of ownership and commitment to the programme's success.

BSR Go-abroad therefore highlights the significant value of in-person interaction between project partners, particularly in transnational initiatives. For future cross-border programmes, it is strongly recommended that funding for travel to visit all project partners is prioritised in project budgets, especially during the development phase but also throughout the implementation phase of a programme.

Investing in relationship-building early on can substantially enhance coordination, alignment, and overall project impact.

# 2)

## Clear communication in a complex cross-border partnerships is important

Effective communication and coordination are fundamental to the success of complex cross-border partnerships. Experiences from the BSR Go-abroad project demonstrated that when working across different countries, cultures, and ecosystems, alignment cannot be taken for granted—it must be actively built and continuously maintained. Differences in organisational structures, working cultures, priorities, and expectations can easily lead to misunderstandings or fragmentation if not addressed through clear and consistent communication practices.

To ensure coherence across partners, it is essential to establish clear roles, responsibilities, and governance structures from the outset. Partners need a shared understanding of objectives, deliverables, and timelines, as well as clarity on how decisions are made and how information is shared. Structured collaboration formats—such as regular coordination meetings, clear reporting frameworks, and shared digital systems for documentation—help create transparency and ensure that all partners remain aligned throughout the project lifecycle.

The BSR Go-abroad project also highlighted the importance of maintaining frequent and open communication. Regular check-ins not only support progress tracking but also create space to address challenges early, share learnings, and adjust approaches where needed. In cross-border settings,

over-communication is often more effective than under-communication, as it reduces the risk of misalignment and ensures that all partners remain engaged and informed.

A key success factor in this context is the presence of a dedicated lead project manager with overall responsibility for coordination. In BSR Go-abroad, a lead project manager played a central role in ensuring that all partners worked towards common goals and that tasks were carried out effectively. This central coordination function helped maintain momentum, facilitated decision-making, and ensured that responsibilities were clearly distributed across the partnership.

At the same time, strong communication supports the development of shared ownership among partners. When all actors feel informed, involved, and aligned, they are more likely to contribute actively and take responsibility for the project's success. This sense of collective ownership is particularly important in transnational projects, where partners operate in different contexts but must function as a cohesive unit.

Ultimately, the experience from BSR Go-abroad shows that strong communication and coordination are not just operational necessities, but strategic enablers. They allow diverse partners to work together effectively, minimise friction, and deliver more coherent, impactful programmes across borders.

# 3)

## Valuable knowledge and exposure from being part of BSR Go-abroad

All eight project partners gained valuable knowledge and hands-on experience through their participation in the BSR Go-abroad project. Working together across borders provided a unique opportunity to exchange methods, approaches, and perspectives on how to support the internationalisation of micro-SMEs.

For some partners, this meant adopting entirely new ways of working with their local companies, including more structured, step-by-step internationalisation support. For others, it provided a deeper understanding of how cultural, institutional, and market differences influence business development across countries.

Over the course of three years, continuous collaboration and mutual visits played a key role in strengthening these insights. By visiting each other's organisations and local ecosystems, partners gained a more nuanced understanding of how business support eco-systems operate in different contexts. This not only enhanced learning but also built a strong foundation for trust and long-term cooperation. These relationships extended beyond the project itself, with several partners continuing to collaborate on new initiatives and jointly applying for new projects through various EU programmes.

Participation in BSR Go-abroad also significantly increased the visibility and positioning of the partner organisations within their own local ecosystems. Many partners experienced growing interest from local authorities, other BDOs, and additional ecosystem actors. At the same time, their involvement in

an international project strengthened their credibility among local companies, making it easier to attract and engage businesses in new initiatives. This created new opportunities for partnerships, projects, and expanded services at the local level.

For the projects smaller and locally anchored business support organisations in particular, being part of a cross-border project proved highly valuable. It not only enabled access to international knowledge and networks but also strengthened their role as key facilitators of business development within their regions. By bringing new approaches to international expansion into their local ecosystems, partners were able to offer more relevant and impactful support to the companies they serve.

The overall experience clearly demonstrates that participating in international programmes creates significant added value—not only for the business support organisations involved, but also for the local businesses they support. It enables knowledge transfer, strengthens networks, and opens new pathways for collaboration and growth.

Other BDOs and business support organisations are therefore strongly encouraged to engage in cross border international programmes and partnerships. The benefits extend far beyond the duration of a single project and can have a lasting impact on both organisational development and the ability to support local companies in accessing international opportunities.

## Want to join the BSR Go-abroad partnership?

If you are interested in becoming part of the BSR Go-abroad partnership, we welcome you to get in touch. The project brings together BDOs, public authorities, and ecosystem actors across the Baltic Sea Region to strengthen support for micro-SMEs entering international markets.

By joining, you gain access to a strong international network, shared knowledge, and opportunities to collaborate on future initiatives and projects.



03

Policy

Recommendations

*- recommendations for local policy decision-makers*

# Context and Introduction to the Policy Recommendations

In the following section, the reader is presented with policy recommendations that can help local policymakers understand why supporting smaller companies in their international growth is important. The recommendations offer practical input on how to integrate support for the internationalisation of micro-SMEs (companies with fewer than 10 employees) into business support strategies at regional and municipal level.

Across the EU, micro-SMEs represent more than 90% of all businesses and account for around 70% of total employment (Statista, 2024). This underlines their importance to both the European and local economies. Especially in smaller municipalities and rural areas, micro-SMEs are key drivers of employment, contributors to regional value chains, and essential for economic resilience, often forming the backbone of local economic activity.

Despite their importance, many micro-SMEs still operate primarily in their home markets, with only 6.3% engaged in exports, compared to 22.6% of SMEs with 10–49 employees and 49.5% of SMEs with 50–250 employees (Eurostat, 2025).

Expanding into international markets remains limited among many smaller companies, even though

research shows that internationalisation can increase profitability, reduce market dependency, stimulate innovation, and strengthen resilience to global crises and value chain disruptions (Steinerowska-Streb et al., 2022; Dabić et al., 2020; Galkina et al., 2022).

Supporting the growth of micro-SMEs, including their international expansion, should therefore be a strategic priority for policymakers at all levels, as it contributes to job creation and strengthens local economies. However, at national, regional, and municipal levels across the EU, internationalisation is often not treated as a standalone policy area but rather as one of several instruments within broader economic development strategies. As a result, many policymakers do not clearly recognise internationalisation as a key driver of job creation, business growth, competitiveness, resilience, and overall local economic development.

By linking internationalisation to existing policy priorities at regional, and local levels, authorities can strengthen both its relevance and overall impact. This approach also makes it easier for decision-makers to justify investments in internationalisation initiatives and ensures that support for smaller companies expanding internationally is seen as a key instrument in achieving broader economic development objectives.

## Methodology of data collection for the Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations in this blueprint are based on insights gathered from interviews with Business Development Organisations (BDOs), both public and private, and micro-SMEs across the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) that participated in the BSR Go-abroad project.

In addition, the recommendations draw on interviews with the project's 'associated partners', consisting of public authorities from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Poland, Estonia, and Germany, all operating at municipal or regional level and supporting startup and SME growth.

Some recommendations are inspired by existing policies that have already been implemented successfully, while others are based on needs and insights identified through the project's data and the project partnership. The partnership recognises that regional and local policies are closely interconnected with national frameworks and EU-level directives, and that implementation differs across the BSR. Therefore, the recommendations should be viewed as adaptable rather than universally applicable.

### The five Policy Recommendations

- 1. Prioritise Internationalisation within Development Strategies**
- 2. Integrate Internationalisation into Local Business Support Services**
- 3. Funding Support for Early-Stage Internationalisation**
- 4. Set up City-to-City Partnerships across Borders**
- 5. Establish Regional Support Hub as an Entry Point for Business Development**

# #1

## **Policy Recommendation #1: Prioritise Internationalisation within Development Strategies**

### ***Challenge***

Internationalisation is often not considered a political priority at local level, despite its strong potential to contribute to job creation, business growth, innovation, and local economic resilience. In many municipalities, it is not systematically embedded within local development strategies but rather treated as a secondary or supporting activity.

As a result, internationalisation is frequently overlooked in local decision-making processes and not clearly positioned as a driver of growth. This limits both political attention and the allocation of resources needed to support companies in expanding beyond national borders. Consequently, many

micro-SMEs lack clear and accessible pathways to engage in international activities.

In addition, when internationalisation is not approached strategically at local level, efforts tend to remain fragmented, short-term, or project based. This reduces continuity and makes it difficult to build long-term capabilities within both companies and local business support eco-systems. As a result, the full potential of internationalisation as a tool for local economic development is not realised.

### **Recommendation to Policymakers**

Local policy decision makers should ensure that internationalisation is positioned as a core and integrated component of local business development strategies. Rather than being treated as a separate topic, internationalisation should be recognised as a key instrument for achieving broader local economic objectives.

This requires clearly linking internationalisation to municipal priorities such as job creation, local business growth, increased tax revenues, innovation, and competitiveness. By making these connections explicit, municipalities can strengthen the political relevance of internationalisation and ensure that it becomes a prioritised area within local policy agendas.

At the same time, municipalities should translate strategic ambitions into clear operational frameworks with defined goals and measurable outcomes. This includes

developing relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that reflect the realities of micro-SMEs and SMEs and allow for systematic tracking of progress.

Internationalisation strategies should also be supported by structured monitoring and evaluation systems at the municipal level. This ensures that progress is continuously assessed and that policies can be adjusted based on evidence and observed outcomes.

Close collaboration with local BDOs is essential to ensure effective implementation. These organisations play a key role in translating municipal priorities into concrete support for companies and ensuring that internationalisation becomes part of everyday business development activities.

## Concrete and actionable steps policymakers can take to implement this are:

- **Integrate internationalisation into municipal strategies**  
Ensure that internationalisation is clearly defined as a priority within local business development strategies and linked to broader goals such as job creation, growth, innovation and competitiveness.
- **Define and apply measurable KPIs**  
Develop concrete indicators to track international engagement among micro-SMEs and SMEs, such as participation in cross-border activities, new partnerships, and involvement in internationalisation support programmes, etc.
- **Establish monitoring and reporting systems**  
Implement regular tracking of progress using both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate impact and support evidence-based adjustments to policies.
- **Strengthen collaboration with local BDOs**  
Work closely with local BDOs to translate strategies into practice, ensuring that internationalisation is integrated into advisory services and support initiatives.
- **Ensure stable funding for implementation**  
Allocate sufficient and long-term funding to enable BDOs to deliver consistent and effective internationalisation support.

### **Expected Impact**

Prioritising internationalisation within municipal development strategies will strengthen its political relevance and ensure more consistent attention and resource allocation over time. By embedding internationalisation into local policy frameworks, municipalities can create stronger conditions for business growth and competitiveness.

This approach will also improve transparency and accountability through the use of measurable indicators and structured monitoring systems. Municipal policymakers will be better equipped to assess what works and adjust strategies accordingly.

At the local level, this can lead to increased participation of micro-SMEs in international activities, stronger cross-border partnerships, and improved integration into international markets. Over time, this contributes to higher levels of innovation, increased economic resilience and more dynamic local economies.

By making internationalisation a strategic priority, municipalities can help more companies access and benefit from cross-border opportunities, fostering long-term and inclusive economic growth while strengthening resilience to global crises and supply chain disruptions.

*This recommendation is inspired by one of the project's 'associated partners', which has chosen to place internationalisation at the top of its local development strategy. In doing so, the municipality has made a clear political commitment to support the international growth of local businesses, with a particular focus on enabling smaller companies and SMEs to engage in internationalisation early on in their growth journey.*

# #2

## Policy Recommendation #2: Integrate Internationalisation into Local Business Support Services

### *Challenge*

While prioritising internationalisation within development strategies is an important first step, there is often a gap between strategic ambition and practical implementation. In many municipalities, business support services remain primarily focused on general business development, such as start-up support, local growth, digitalisation, etc., and internationalisation is treated as a specialised topic, rather than being integrated into everyday advisory services.

As a result, micro-SMEs are not consistently exposed to international opportunities early in their development process. Many companies therefore do not consider internationalisation as a natural part of their growth journey. Instead, engagement with international markets is often delayed or does not occur

at all, even in cases where companies may have the potential to benefit from it.

In addition, local BDOs may not always have the tools, knowledge, or mandate to systematically include internationalisation in their dialogue with companies. This limits their ability to identify companies with international potential and guide them in a structured and gradual way.

Consequently, opportunities to support early-stage internationalisation are often missed at the point where it could have a great impact.

### **Recommendation to Policymakers**

To address this challenge, policymakers should ensure that internationalisation is embedded as a standard and systematic component of local business support services. Rather than being treated as a separate or specialised activity, internationalisation should form part of everyday advisory interactions between business development organisations and micro-SMEs.

This requires strengthening the capacity of local BDOs to incorporate international perspectives into their advisory work. Advisors should be equipped to assess whether international opportunities are relevant for each company and to introduce these opportunities as part of broader discussions on growth, innovation, and strategy.

Municipalities should support the development of advisory frameworks where internationalisation is integrated into existing services. This can include the use of simple screening tools, structured dialogue guides, and practical methods that help advisors

identify companies with international potential and guide them towards relevant opportunities.

At the same time, internationalisation support should be clearly inter-connected to existing programmes and other business development initiatives. This ensures that companies are not only made aware of international opportunities but are also supported by taking concrete steps towards engaging in cross-border activities.

To ensure effective and consistent delivery, policymakers should provide targeted financial support to BDOs to strengthen their competencies in internationalisation. This could include financial support for hiring an internationalisation coach, enabling internationalisation training, developing workshops or support programmes related to internationalisation and adapting practical tools that support advisors in delivering relevant and high-quality guidance.

## Concrete and actionable steps policymakers can take to implement this is:

- **Embed internationalisation into standard advisory processes**  
Provide financial support to ensure that internationalisation is systematically included in business development dialogues with companies. This can be supported by developing or using existing simple tools and frameworks that help advisors identify companies with international potential at an early stage. BSR Go-abroad has developed a tool called the [BSR Internationalisation Readiness Assessment Screening Tool](#) that assesses the readiness of micro-SMEs in a easy way.
- **Strengthen competencies within BDOs**  
Make sure that BDOs are provided with targeted training and capacity-building initiatives for local advisors. This could also be financial support to hire an experienced internationalisation coach. This ensures they have the knowledge and confidence to introduce international perspectives and guide companies effectively.
- **Align advisory services with international opportunities**  
Ensure strong coordination between local advisory services and relevant internationalisation programmes, networks, and initiatives at regional, national and EU level. This allows companies to be guided efficiently from initial awareness to concrete action. A concrete suggestion is to use [Enterprise Europe Network](#), which is the world's largest support network for SMEs with international ambitions.
- **Promote proactive outreach to companies**  
Encourage BDOs to actively engage with companies and introduce international opportunities, rather than relying solely on companies to seek support themselves. This increases awareness and lowers the threshold for engagement.
- **Ensure accessible and step-by-step support for micro-SMEs**  
Support BDOs in designing support in a way that is practical and manageable for smaller companies. Focus on gradual, low-risk approaches that allow micro-SMEs to explore international markets step by step, such as use of digital and AI tools.

### ***Expected Impact***

Integrating internationalisation into everyday business support services will increase the number of micro-SMEs that consider and engage in international activities. By introducing international perspectives early in the development process, companies can build the necessary knowledge, networks, and capabilities over time.

This approach will also improve the effectiveness of existing support measures, as more companies are guided towards relevant opportunities and are better prepared to take advantage of them.

At the local level, this can lead to a broader base of internationally active companies, increased business growth, and stronger integration into international value chains. Over time, this contributes to higher levels of innovation, improved competitiveness, and more resilient local economies.

By making internationalisation a natural and integrated part of business development, local policy makers can ensure that more micro-SMEs are able to participate in and benefit from cross-border opportunities, supporting long-term and inclusive economic growth.

# #3

## Policy Recommendation #3: Funding Support for Early-Stage Internationalisation

### Challenge

While integrating internationalisation into development strategies and local business support services is essential, many micro-SMEs still face a significant barrier when attempting to take the first concrete steps towards international markets.

In particular limited access to targeted financial support in the early stages of internationalisation continues to restrict their ability to act on these opportunities.

Compared to larger SMEs, smaller companies often operate with limited financial resources, smaller teams, and less strategic capacity. As a result, international expansion is perceived as a high-risk and resource-intensive process.

At the same time, existing public and private funding programmes are typically designed for more mature, export-ready companies. This means that access to funding often requires demonstrated growth, strong execution capacity, co-financing or prior international experience.

Consequently, many early-stage micro-SMEs are excluded from financial support before they even begin exploring international opportunities. This creates a systemic bottleneck, where companies with potential are often unable to take the first concrete actions towards internationalisation. Without targeted support in the exploration phase, fewer companies take initial steps, reducing the overall impact of internationalisation policies.

Insights from participating BSR Go-abroad companies across the BSR show that funding for early-stage internationalisation activities is essential. Companies highlighted the need for support to cover costs related to market visits, participation in trade fairs, legal advice, in-depth market research, pilot projects with international partners, and cost related to testing phases to validate demand and refine go-to-market strategies. These activities would help companies better understand foreign markets, establish initial contacts, and assess business opportunities.

### **Recommendation to Policymakers**

To address this challenge, policymakers should shift the focus of funding schemes from primarily supporting export performance to supporting the full internationalisation journey, including its earliest phases. Financial instruments should be designed to reflect the realities of smaller companies and enable them to explore international opportunities in a gradual and low-risk way.

Municipalities should introduce more accessible and targeted funding instruments tailored to micro-SMEs. This includes establishing small-scale grants that support early-stage activities such as market research, participation in international events, and initial market exploration. These small grants should be simple to access and embedded within existing structured programmes that provide advisory services for small companies.

Eligibility criteria should also be adjusted to include companies without prior export experience. Instead of focusing on past performance, funding schemes should consider the ambition and potential of micro-SMEs to internationalise. This allows more companies to access support at a stage where it can have a great impact.

At the same time, funding schemes should support experimentation by enabling pilot projects and testing activities in foreign markets. This allows companies to validate their products, gain market insights, and refine their strategies without taking on excessive financial risk.

To ensure accessibility, administrative requirements should be simplified, and co-financing demands should be reduced or removed completely to reflect the limited capacity of micro-SMEs. Funding instruments should also be closely aligned with other local business support services to ensure that financial support is complemented by guidance, networks, and capacity-building initiatives.

## Concrete and actionable steps policymakers can take to implement this is:

- **Introduce small-scale grants for early-stage internationalisation**  
Establish dedicated small-scale funding schemes tailored to micro-SMEs, covering essential early activities such as market visits, participation in trade fairs, initial legal advice, and targeted market research. These grants should be flexible and aligned with the scale and needs of micro-SMEs and be delivered as part of existing structured programmes.
- **Simplify application procedures**  
Design application and reporting processes that reflect the limited administrative capacity of micro-SMEs. This includes short and clearly structured applications, faster evaluation and approval timelines, and reduced documentation requirements, making it easier for smaller companies to access support.
- **Adjust eligibility criteria**  
Revise funding criteria to include micro-SMEs with limited or no prior export experience but with clear ambition and potential to internationalise. This ensures that support reaches companies at the earliest and most critical stage of their international journey.
- **Fund pilot and testing activities**  
Provide financial support for pilot projects, product testing, and short-term validation activities in foreign markets. This allows micro-SMEs to explore opportunities, gather real market feedback, and refine their offerings with limited financial risk.
- **Integrate funding with local business support services**  
Deliver funding in close cooperation with local BDOs, ensuring that financial support is complemented by advisory services, mentoring, and access to relevant networks. Embedding grants within programme-based support increases the likelihood of successful market entry and long-term impact.

### ***Expected Impact***

Improving access to funding for early-stage internationalisation will enable more micro-SMEs to take their first steps into international markets. By lowering financial and administrative barriers, the eco-system can support a broader group of companies in exploring and engaging in cross-border activities.

This approach will also increase the effectiveness of existing internationalisation efforts by ensuring that more smaller companies are able to act on the opportunities identified through advisory services and development strategies. As a result, more micro-SMEs will enter the internationalisation pipeline and build the capabilities needed for long-term growth.

At the local level, this can lead to increased business activity, stronger integration into international markets, and improved competitiveness. Over time, a more accessible and targeted funding system will contribute to higher levels of innovation, job creation, and economic resilience, supporting more inclusive and sustainable growth across municipalities.

# #4

## Policy Recommendation #4: Establish City-to-City Partnerships across Borders

### Challenge

Across the BSR many cities do not fully utilise the opportunities to collaborate across borders with other cities to support local companies in entering new markets. Despite geographical proximity and shared economic interests, cross-border cooperation at city-to-city level often remains underdeveloped and is not systematically integrated into local business development strategies. As a result, collaboration between cities to facilitate cross-border market entry remains limited, fragmented, and inconsistent across the BSR.

While some initiatives do exist, they are typically not focused on supporting companies' internationalisation in a structured and formalised way. Activities are often isolated and lack continuity, meaning that cities do not fully benefit from shared knowledge, joint learning processes, or coordinated support mechanisms. As a consequence, opportunities for knowledge sharing, resource pooling, and the development of joint services are not fully realised.

This leads to missed opportunities to create more efficient and scalable support models that could benefit both companies and local economies across cities in the BSR.

In addition, the lack of structured collaboration makes it more difficult for micro-SMEs to identify reliable entry points and trusted partners in new markets. Without consistent frameworks, companies often have to navigate unfamiliar environments on their own, increasing both the perceived and actual risks of internationalisation. Strengthening cooperation between cities could therefore play a key role in lowering these barriers and enabling more companies to take their first steps into international markets.

### Recommendation to Policymakers

Local decision-makers should establish city-to-city partnerships, where municipalities collaborate with one another in nearby or comparable markets within the BSR.

A practical starting point is to prioritise partnerships with neighbouring markets, as cultural, regulatory, and geographic proximity can significantly reduce entry barriers and increase the likelihood of success for businesses.

Once such collaborations are in place, municipalities should work together with local BDOs on both sides of the border to develop exchange programmes that enable companies to test and validate their products and services in real market conditions across partner cities. Rather than focusing solely on long-term relocation or export readiness, these initiatives should provide flexible, short-term opportunities for market exploration and pilot activities.

To support the development of these partnerships, local policymakers should provide financial backing for the initiative. It is also recommended to actively seek other sorts of funding, for example through EU programmes or relevant national funding schemes.

By combining local co-financing with external funding, municipalities and business support organisations can establish and run structured city-to-city pilot projects over several years. Such pilot projects allow stakeholders to test and refine the city-to-city

collaboration model, experiment with different formats, build strong partnerships, and generate evidence on what works before scaling the approach more permanently. In this model, municipalities act as co-financing partners while working closely with one or more local BDOs responsible for designing and delivering the exchange programmes. In addition small-scale grants for micro-SMEs should be integrated into these programmes.

*This recommendation draws on experiences from initiatives such as the soft-landing programme called [Lean Landing](#), where 26 business support organisations and municipalities collaborated to provide soft-landing support for startups exploring new markets as part of their internationalisation journey. It is also inspired by the [Test in Tallinn](#) initiative, in which the City of Tallinn acts as a 'testbed' by granting access to relevant public data and offering structured support to companies that want to test pilot projects and enter the Estonian market.*

## Concrete and actionable steps policymakers can take to implement this is:

- **Exchange programmes**

Establish programmes that allow companies to temporarily operate in a partner city to explore new market opportunities. Through these exchanges, businesses gain first-hand experience of foreign markets and a better understanding of local consumer behaviour, preferences, and market dynamics. This approach significantly reduces risk, as companies can assess market viability before committing to larger investments.

- **Access to temporary workspaces abroad**

Provide workspaces such as co-working offices or introductions to local incubators, enabling companies to establish a local presence without incurring high upfront costs. This flexibility lowers entry barriers and allows businesses to test their market potential in a supportive environment. Small-scale grants should be provided to support these efforts.

- **Access to local networks**

Provide access to networks by connecting companies with clusters, industry organisations, potential customers, and partners. These connections support faster integration into the local business ecosystem and strengthen collaboration opportunities.

- **Mentorship and local guidance**

Offer mentorship and guidance by matching companies with local experts abroad who have in-depth knowledge of the domestic business environment. This helps companies navigate regulations, cultural differences, and market conditions.

- **Opportunities to test products and services**

Create opportunities to test products and services in real market environments, allowing companies to validate demand, adapt their offerings, and refine go-to-market strategies before scaling. Small-scale grants should be provided to support these efforts.

### ***Expected Impact***

Establishing city-to-city partnerships and structured exchange programmes can significantly reduce the barriers to internationalisation for micro-SMEs within those cities. By providing access to nearby markets, real-life testing environments, and local support structures, smaller companies can gain first-hand insights, build relationships, and validate business opportunities without taking on excessive financial risk.

By forming long-term partnerships, cities can continuously test and refine their collaboration models over time, creating scalable and evidence-based approaches to internationalisation support. This allows stakeholders to learn what works in practice and gradually improve the effectiveness of their initiatives.

This approach can encourage more micro-SMEs to engage in international activities at an earlier stage, particularly when such opportunities are actively supported at the local level. As a result, more companies may enter the internationalisation pipeline. At the same time, it strengthens cross-border collabora-

tion between municipalities and contributes to more integrated regional ecosystems.

In the longer term, these partnerships can lead to stronger and more sustainable international growth for micro-SMEs, increased regional competitiveness, and deeper economic ties between cities within the BSR. By enabling companies to test, learn, and scale across borders while remaining anchored in their local ecosystems, city-to-city soft-landing initiatives support a more inclusive and resilient approach to internationalisation.

# #5

## **Policy Recommendation #5: Establish a Regional 'Support Hub' as an Entry Point for Business Development Support**

### **Challenge**

While a wide range of support mechanisms and business development support programmes exist, these are often fragmented across multiple business support organisations operating at local, regional, and national levels.

For many micro-SMEs, navigating this dispersed support landscape can be overwhelming and confusing. Information may be inconsistent and difficult to compare. As a result smaller companies often struggle to understand what kind of support is available, what they are eligible for, and where to start.

This fragmentation can in itself become a barrier. Instead of acting as an enabler, the business support ecosystem can unintentionally become a source of friction and micro-SMEs may miss opportunities to engage in business support related to international-

isation not because they lack potential, but because they lack clarity and appropriate guidance.

Furthermore, the lack of coordination of business support initiatives among municipalities in a region can lead to duplication of effort, gaps in support, and inefficient use of public resources. Without a clear entry point and an overview of available support services, companies risk missing out on relevant programmes when looking for support.

Based on insights from participating micro-SMEs in the BSR Go-abroad project, this challenge is not limited to one country but is observed across several BSR countries.

### **Recommendation to Policymakers**

Policymakers at regional level should strengthen the accessibility and effectiveness of the support ecosystem in their own region by establishing a ‘Support Hub’ that acts as a central coordination and access point for companies (both small and medium sized SMEs) seeking an overview of business development support and assistance with international expansion.

This ‘Support Hub’ should not replace existing BDOs or other support organisations. Rather, it should connect and coordinate with these actors and services already in place, creating a more seamless and user-oriented experience for companies seeking support.

By establishing a regional ‘Support Hub’, policymakers can increase the likelihood that companies are guided more effectively towards relevant business development offers, as well as internationalisation support initiatives, at an early stage.

An example of such an initiative is the ‘Business Hubs’ in Denmark. Each region in Denmark has a ‘Business Hub’, whose role is to support companies in navigating the complex Danish landscape of business development services, funding programmes, projects, cluster support, and much more. They act as intermediaries, matching companies with the most relevant support offers at local, regional, national, and EU levels based on each company’s specific needs.

The ‘Business Hubs’ are supported through a combination of public funding, with the largest share coming from the municipalities within each region. All municipalities contribute financially, typically based on a distribution key such as population size or the number of businesses in the municipality. This model ensures strong local anchoring and ownership of the ‘Business Hubs’.

By establishing similar structures, regional policymakers can create a more coherent and accessible support ecosystem that not only improves general business development services but also strengthens support for the internationalisation potential of companies in their region. A well-coordinated ‘Support Hub’ can ensure that smaller companies are not overlooked and that internationalisation becomes a more integrated and attainable part of their growth journey.

*The BSR Go-abroad partnership recognised that it can be difficult to implement such an initiative, as political systems vary across countries.*

*However, the Danish ‘Business Hubs’ may serve as a source of inspiration for other regions by demonstrating how coordinated, regionally anchored political initiatives can effectively facilitate support for companies across different cities and municipalities within a region.*

## Concrete and actionable steps policymakers can take to implement this include:

- **Establish a regional support hub as an entry point**  
Establish a regional 'Support Hub' with a clear mandate to act as an entry point and connector between existing support organisations, projects, programmes, and related services, ensuring that companies can easily access relevant support across local, regional, and national providers.
- **Ensure joint funding and political commitment**  
Secure joint funding and political commitment from municipalities and regional authorities to ensure long-term stability and local ownership. This can be done through a co-financing model with clear contribution principles and by anchoring the initiative within existing regional governance and development strategies.
- **Develop a user-friendly support hub**  
Develop a simple, user-friendly 'Support Hub' that combines a digital platform with in-person advisory services. This should help companies navigate and access relevant support by assessing company needs and directing them efficiently to the most appropriate services and programmes.
- **Coordinate and map existing support services**  
Map and actively coordinate existing support services among business development actors (both public and privately funded) to reduce duplication and close gaps in the ecosystem. This requires creating a comprehensive and regularly updated overview of available programmes and establishing structured collaboration and information sharing among stakeholders across the region.
- **Implement targeted outreach and guidance**  
Implement targeted outreach and guidance to engage companies early and connect them to the most relevant internationalisation programmes and related initiatives by working closely with local networks, business support organisations, and municipalities.

### **Expected Impact**

Establishing a 'Support Hub' as a clear entry point can significantly reduce the complexity and uncertainty that companies face when engaging with the business support system. By providing an accessible starting point, companies are better equipped to understand their options, identify relevant opportunities, and take the first steps towards, for example, internationalisation.

Improved access to coordinated support will lead to earlier engagement by companies that might otherwise remain outside the system. By acting as a facilitator, the 'Support Hub' can guide companies towards the most relevant internationalisation support available at local, regional, national, and even EU level.

At the same time, a more coordinated ecosystem increases the efficiency and impact of existing services and programmes. Resources can be used more effectively, duplication can be reduced, and support can be better tailored to company needs. By connecting companies with the right initiatives at the right time, the 'Support Hub' can help ensure that

companies can access the most suitable international opportunities and support mechanisms without having to navigate the system alone.

In the longer term, this approach can contribute to a higher number of internationally active micro-SMEs, stronger regional competitiveness, and more balanced economic development across smaller cities and municipalities. By improving coordination and strengthening connections across support levels in a region, an entry-point 'Support Hub' can play a key role in unlocking the untapped potential of smaller companies and supporting more inclusive and sustainable growth.

**We welcome  
collaborations!**

## Closing Remarks

The policy recommendations presented in this blueprint highlight that supporting the internationalisation of micro-SMEs is not only about isolated initiatives, but about creating a more coherent, accessible, and well-coordinated support ecosystem. By prioritising internationalisation, strengthening local support services, improving access to early-stage funding, fostering cross-border collaboration, and simplifying access through coordinated support structures, municipalities and regions can unlock the full potential of their local business communities.

The BSR Go-abroad project demonstrates that when these elements are combined, smaller companies are better equipped to explore international opportunities, build partnerships, and grow beyond their

home markets. At the same time, this contributes to stronger, more resilient, and more competitive local economies across the BSR.

If you are interested in learning more or becoming part of the BSR Go-abroad partnership, we encourage you to reach out. We welcome collaboration with all sorts of business development support organisations, municipalities, regions within the BSR, that share the ambition of supporting micro-SMEs in their international growth journey.

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