Project Title	**Boosting Smart Specialization and Encouraging Spin-offs in IT across Danube Region**
Call	**Danube Region Programme**
Project number	**DRP0200277**
Coordinator	**ZEDA**
Project duration	**30 months 0 days**
Project website	***https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/spinit***
Specific objective	**Setting up, implementing, and validating pilot measures in IT sector and smart technologies in DR**
Activity	**Next-gen Pilot Projects for Smart Specialization and IT**

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D.2.2.2: Selection of Pilot Projects

Deliverable D.1.2.1 Development of the Framework for knowledge exchange and benchmarking			
Due date of deliverable:	30.06.2025	Actual submission date:	18.03.2025
Organization:	**INOVAcija**	Author:	Alenka Bopsić Larisa Maruna Sanja Jerak
Status: Final (F) Draft (D) Revised draft (RV)	D	Dissemination level: Public (PU) Confidential, only for members of the consortium (CO)	CO

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1 Approach and Methodology

The methodology for pilot project selection and implementation within the SpinIT initiative is designed to ensure alignment with the project's overarching objectives, focusing on skills development, digital innovation, and smart specialization. While the Local Action Plans (LAPs) provided valuable insights into regional priorities, it became evident that some proposed pilot actions required further refinement to meet the strategic goals of the project.

To address this, a set of standardized requirements has been established, ensuring that all pilot projects align with the regional S3 strategies, EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), and SpinIT's focus areas. Rather than directly linking LAPs to pilot actions, each partner is encouraged to adapt and refine their pilot projects to meet these criteria. This approach is particularly necessary where pilot actions were not clearly defined or where engagement levels varied among territorial partners.

By implementing this structured methodology, we aim to maximize the impact, scalability, and transferability of pilot projects across the Danube Region, ensuring that they contribute meaningfully to digital transformation and innovation in the participating territories.

The selection of pilot projects for SpinIT is not just about meeting predefined criteria; it is about finding initiatives that inspire, innovate, and align with the project's broader goals of fostering smart specialization and bridging territorial disparities. Building on the knowledge from the **D.1.2.2 Best Practice Report**, this deliverable provides partners with a roadmap to identify projects that address local challenges while capitalizing on transnational synergies. The process involves asking key questions, drawing lessons from successful examples, and building a coherent strategy tailored to each region.

2 Framing the Selection: Where to Start?

When beginning the selection process, partners should consider: ***What are the pressing challenges in your region?*** Local Action Plans (LAPs) serve as the foundation, highlighting specific needs and opportunities. For instance, does your region lack digital infrastructure in agriculture? Or are SMEs in your area struggling with adopting Industry 4.0 technologies? By grounding the selection process in the realities of each region, partners ensure relevance and impact.

From there, partners should evaluate how the **defined Requirements** (D.2.2.1) shape their focus. For example, if the requirements emphasize the integration of AI in small businesses,

how can this translate into actionable pilot ideas? What industries could benefit the most from such interventions? This step ensures alignment with SpinIT's objectives while maintaining flexibility to adapt to local contexts.

3 Drawing Inspiration from Best Practices

A powerful way to develop pilot ideas is to learn from projects that have already proven successful. For example, **PRAGMATIC**, a precision agriculture initiative, provides a compelling case study. This project integrated IoT, big data, and satellite imaging to help farmers optimize resource use and improve yields. Beyond its technical achievements, PRAGMATIC demonstrated the importance of creating accessible, user-friendly tools that directly address end-users' pain points. As a partner, ask yourself: *Could a similar approach work in our local industry?* If agriculture isn't relevant, what about other sectors where data-driven decision-making could drive efficiency, such as manufacturing or logistics?

Similarly, **LandSense** highlights the value of engaging communities in innovation. Its CropSupport app not only provided farmers with real-time crop monitoring tools but also involved them in contributing data to broader scientific research. This dual benefit of empowering users and advancing knowledge is a model for projects that seek to combine local impact with broader relevance. Partners should ask: *How can we engage end-users as active participants in our pilot projects?* What tools or platforms can facilitate this engagement?

4 Thinking Big: Where Could Innovation Lead?

When reviewing potential pilot ideas, it's essential to think beyond immediate goals. The **AI4SI initiative in Slovenia**, for example, shows how fostering collaboration between academia, policymakers, and businesses can create long-term change. By transferring AI research into practical applications, the project strengthened national competitiveness and paved the way for a cohesive AI strategy. This raises an important question: *Is there a technology or methodology that your region has yet to fully embrace?* Could your pilot project serve as the starting point for broader adoption?

Projects like **Ladies in AI**, an example from Croatia, which focused on equipping women with AI and entrepreneurial skills, also demonstrate the potential for addressing social inequalities through innovation. Partners might consider: *Are there underrepresented groups in your region that could benefit from targeted skills development?* How can technology act as an enabler for social inclusion and economic growth?

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5 Building a Strategy for Selection

The selection process is about balancing inspiration with practicality. Partners should approach this by asking:

1. *Does the pilot idea align with the strategic goals of SpinIT and S3 priorities?*
2. *Is it feasible within the resources and timelines available?*
3. *Does it offer clear and measurable outcomes, such as improved digital adoption or increased competitiveness?*

Partners should also think about scalability and adaptability. For instance, the **Danube Energy+ initiative**, which targeted young innovators to pioneer energy efficiency solutions, created a replicable model for engaging youth in sustainability. Could your pilot idea be scaled to other regions or industries? What structures would need to be in place for this to happen?

Finally, promotion and visibility are crucial. Ask: *How can the results of your pilot project be shared effectively?* Developing a communication plan that includes workshops, reports, and digital outreach ensures that the project's impact extends beyond its immediate participants.

5. 1 Encouraging Collaborative Creativity

Partners are encouraged to think collaboratively, sharing insights and brainstorming ideas that combine regional expertise with transnational perspectives. For example, combining lessons from **PRAGMATIC** and **LandSense** (both from Serbia) could result in a pilot project that applies IoT not just in agriculture but in water resource management, an equally critical area for many regions in the Danube.

Similarly, cross-sectoral collaboration, as seen in projects like **DanubePeerChains** (from Bosnia and Herzegovina), can inspire partners to look for synergies between industries. Could ICT solutions for manufacturing also address challenges in healthcare or education? Asking these types of questions encourages out-of-the-box thinking and maximizes the potential for innovation.

5. 2 Guiding Questions for Partners

To make the selection process more engaging, here's a set of guiding questions:

- *What specific regional challenges does your pilot project address?*
- *What tools or methodologies will you use, and are they accessible to all stakeholders?*
- *What outcomes do you expect, and how will you measure success?*

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- *How can your project be adapted for other regions or scaled for broader impact?*

By combining structured analysis with inspiration from proven initiatives, partners can select pilot projects that not only meet the requirements of D.2.2.2 but also embody the transformative spirit of the SpinIT project.

5. 3 Requirements of the selection based on the D.2.2.1

Pilot projects within the SpinIT initiative must focus on **skills development** in **ICT, AI, AR/VR, Industry 4.0, Edtech, and cross-sectoral collaboration**, ensuring alignment with **regional Smart Specialization Strategies (S3)** and the **EU-Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**. They must deliver measurable benefits, such as increased IT sector employment, and contribute to the long-term objectives of SpinIT.

All pilot projects must be **feasible, well-defined, and completed by June 2025**. They must engage **10 participants (including 3 SMEs)**, develop a **transferable curriculum/methodology**, and be **properly documented and promoted**. Pure application or platform development is not eligible—projects must emphasize education, innovation, and new methodologies.

Projects should integrate **emerging technologies** (AI, IoT, blockchain, big data) and **innovative approaches** (gamification, virtual hackathons) to enhance engagement and effectiveness. Additionally, they must ensure **scalability and transferability**, allowing successful initiatives to be replicated across different regions and sectors.

Practical part - Selection of Pilot projects

A) Based on the Local Action Plans (via D.2.1.4.)

SpinIT_LAP template_FINAL.docx

B) Based on the Best Practice reports

D.1.2.2. Best practice report_FINAL.pdf

C) Based on the Defined Requirements (via D.2.2.1)

D2.2.1 Definition of requirements for pilot projects in smart specialization and IT sector

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Annex 1: Drafting the Pilot Project

Pilot Project Template

1. Project Title

AI user skills and responsible AI use in business

2. General Information

Region/Location: Zadar County, Croatia
Lead Organization: INOVAcija
Key Stakeholders: Stakeholders in this Pilot project are Public institutions, SMEs, Professional associations, Academia, Universities and NGOs which are included in LDG.

Public Authorities: Zadarska County, City of Zadar, City of Benkovac, City of Biograd na Moru, City of Nin, City of Pag, City of Obrovac, and the municipalities of Poličnik, Preko, and Ražanac.
SMEs: Galo Industries, Spring Media, Evolutio, Bruncin, WHILE 1, Sintelly, Alba Digital, Helmholz Systems.
Professional Associations: Zadar County Chamber of Commerce, Zadar Crafts Chamber, Zadar County Development Agency ZADRA NOVA, Center for Development and Education Poličnik, Zadar County Rural Development Agency Agrra.
NGOs: Zadar County Technical Culture Community, Ravni Kotari Rural Development Association, Donat Association, Croatian Economic Association, IT Society.
Academia: Mencl Adult Education Institution.
Universities: University of Zadar.

3. Impact of the Local Discovery Group workshops

NOVAcija hosted a series of workshops aimed at addressing the region's digital transformation and fostering innovation in Zadar County. These workshops brought together a diverse group of participants, including local businesses, public sector representatives, academic institutions, and civil society members, all engaged in collaborative discussions about the future of the county's IT and digital ecosystem.

KEY INSIGHTS
-Enhancing human capital and digital skills: Participants emphasized the need to improve digital literacy across all sectors, from personal development to business growth.

-Integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI): There was a focus on equipping individuals with skills to incorporate AI tools into daily workflows.

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-Social media proficiency: Attendees highlighted the importance of creating and managing social media for business growth and branding

4. Project Details

Objective:
The primary objective is to enhance participants' ability to use AI tools and to build critical thinking and evaluation skills for AI-generated outputs, to equip public sector employees, entrepreneurs, and startups with practical skills to effectively integrate digital tools and responsibly adopt AI in their daily operations.

Relevance to RIS3 (Smart Specialization Strategies):
This project contributes to building a digitally skilled workforce capable of driving competitiveness and sustainable growth in the digital economy by advancing digital transformation and innovation, with a bottom-up approach, following the Croatian S3 strategy. The pilot project also aligns with The Development Plan for Zadar County 2021–2027, which outlines technological advancement, digital transformation, and innovation as one of the strategic priorities.

5.Technical Information

Digital and Innovation Tools Used:
A Curriculum will be developed to meet specific training goals, ensuring that participants acquire the skills necessary to implement digital solutions effectively. Workshops will be designed to be accessible to beginners, providing step-by-step guidance and real-world applications of theory.

Methodology:
After Curriculum development, the digital skills training will be implemented in the computer classroom, over two days, with each day consisting of three workshops. The approach is designed for beginners, focusing on interactive exercises such as setting up accounts, hands-on practice with AI tools, and challenges. Feedback will be collected through a review form and follow-up survey to measure impact and inform future initiatives.

Innovative Aspects:
The pilot project combines hands-on, practical training with real-life examples and gamified exercises that encourage immediate application. It minimizes theoretical content in favor of interactive activities that empower participants to try and apply digital solutions right away.

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6. Scope and Impact

Scope:

The project focuses on Zadar County, targeting key sectors including public institutions, SMEs, startups, and business support organizations. The thematic focus is on responsible AI adoption in everyday operations.

Expected Results:

The anticipated outcomes are enhanced digital literacy with AI user skills for at least 15 participants and the responsible implementation of AI practices in at least 3 local businesses.

Who Will Benefit?

Improved digital skills will empower individuals to participate more effectively in the digital economy. SMEs will become more competitive and better equipped for daily work. Public sector employees will be more efficient, and better meet people's needs.

7. Timeline

March: *Development of Curriculum and stakeholder engagement.*
The curriculum will be finalized, and stakeholder engagement will be accomplished through an email campaign.
April: *AI user skills training, Pilot project implementation*.
Training days: April 4th and 11th
May: *Evaluation and reporting*.
Training participants survey after May 8th.
June: *Reporting*.

8. Promotion Strategies

Communication Channels:

- INOVAcija social media channels and website
- Email campaign
- Business support organization network
- Local portals news

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Engagement Activities:
-Email campaign to LDG and others
-Social media campaign
-PR article; send to local portals

9. Scalability and Transferability

Potential for Expansion:
The training that we have developed is designed for beginners and focuses on practical, immediately applicable skills for everyday operations. The same training could be used to support digital transformation across different sectors and territories.

Replication Opportunities:
This Pilot project can be easily replicated in other regions, with the same curriculum. Organizations in different areas can implement the program effectively, fostering widespread digital transformation by enhancing AI user skills and responsible use of AI in business.

10. Budget (Optional)

Budget estimate: 2500,00 EUR
Budget includes:

- *Curriculum development*
- *AI expert trainer*
- *Computer classroom*
- *Engagement activities*

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Instructions for Submission

Each Partner will prepare the presentation for the consortium to present the pilot idea, proposal, and implementation plan. This plan will be presented in the middle of March (via DOODLE voting results) and later it will be decided if all is planned well, eligible, and possible to do.

Sample of PPTX: Pilot Presentation Template

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