



In Ostrava, 24. února 2026

Affordable Saffron to Everyone? The CEE Startup Voucher 2024 Competition Was Dominated by Spicy Cells With Their Revolutionary Idea of the Rare Spice Production

Czech startups made a splash on the international stage in Poland! In a competition of more than 120 projects from 19 countries, they claimed first and third place in the prestigious CEE Startup Voucher 2024 competition. The victory went to a groundbreaking idea for saffron production.

The fact that saffron is a rare commodity might soon be a thing of the past. The Brno-based startup **Spicy Cells**, composed of Matej Zámečník, Šarlota Kaňuková, and Eliška Ulmanová, is determined to make the world's most expensive spice affordable to everyone. Through a unique biotechnological process that cultivates only specific plant cells that produce the spice, they aim to speed up saffron production, eliminate the need for vast growing areas and labor-intensive harvesting. This method will preserve the high quality of the crop but significantly lower its cost. **The plant biotechnologists' idea earned them first place and a prize of €20,000.**

"When we first came across the CEE Startup Voucher competition, we didn't even consider entering. But we decided to give it a shot. Thanks to our innovative approach to make culinary experiences and the health benefits of 'red gold' accessible to all, we won! Huge thanks to the CEE Startup Network team, the jury, and the organizers of Made in Wrocław for this incredible opportunity and the trust they placed in us. This will help us on our journey to make saffron the new vanilla – just wait and see," summarized the winner Matej Zámečník.

Second place and €10,000 prize **went to Dino, a digital tool by the Italian company Paperbox Health**, which focuses on early detection of learning disorders in children from the age of five. This interactive video game helps to identify possible issues and recommends steps for parents and specialists.

Third place went to the Prague-based startup YoungLink, which aims to make schools a safer place for children. Their app collects and analyzes data by using sociometric methods, allowing schools and parents to monitor the dynamics between students and detect risky behavior such as bullying. The project received €5,000 for further development.

The finals of the competition and the announcement of the top innovative projects were held by the members of the CEE Startup Networks at the end of October during the unique **Made in Wrocław** event, focused on innovation, inspiration, and breakthrough technologies. This year's competition, with strong representation from Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia, attracted the attention of experts, media, and other conference attendees, with an audience of around 2,000 people.

Opportunities for Aspiring Entrepreneurs

Financial rewards are not the only a form of support provided to the winning projects. Participation in the initiative also offers the opportunity to present your startup to international investors and experts, gain valuable contacts, feedback, and access to tailored services.

Adéla Píchová, Head of the Startup Acceleration Team at the Moravian-Silesian Innovation Centre shared:

"CEE Startup Voucher is a symbol of collaboration and support for initiatives arising from the needs of entrepreneurs themselves. The program connects organizations from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia with a clear mission: to support the innovation and



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growth of emerging startups. The competition is not just about financial support; it reflects our commitment to contribute to the sustainable development of the region,”

The CEE Startup Voucher competition was initiated by MSIC in collaboration with the INOVIA center in Žilina three years ago. This platform connects the third cities from Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia with the goal of creating a well-functioning startup ecosystem outside the main innovation hubs in the CEE region, strengthening the position of smaller regional startups on the European stage.

About the CEE Startup Network

CEE Startup Network is a platform that connects innovation centers, startups, and other key players across Central and Eastern Europe, aiming to enhance their visibility, competitiveness, and growth in the European market. It was established to support the development of innovative projects and to help startups gain resources, expertise, and investor access they need. The CEE Startup Voucher competition is one of its flagship programs.

Prizes:

1st Place Startup Voucher: Spicy Cells

2nd Place Startup Voucher: Dino by Paperbox

3rd Place Startup Voucher: YoungLink

Startup Voucher 2024 Finalists:

[Dino by Paperbox](#) (IT) – This digital tool helps detect the risk of specific learning disorders in children and facilitates early intervention. It is a form of a video game that combines fun activities and gamification elements.

[Dreamer Yachts](#) (PL) – A startup focused on innovative and sustainable technologies in the yachting industry. Their specialty is developing boats by using a technology that combines natural materials with high performance, reducing the ecological footprint.

[Exoheal](#) (DE) – An innovative project aimed at rehabilitation of patients with hand paralysis i.e. after a stroke. It utilizes a robotic exoskeleton combined with neuroscience principles, accelerating recovery through concepts of neuroplasticity and mirror learning.

[IoMobility Solutions](#) (SK) – Developing modern data-driven solutions for urban mobility. It combines IoT technologies, smart infrastructure, and a digital integration platform, helping cities manage and optimize traffic flows effectively.

[LOKI s.r.l. - Laboratory Of Key Innovations](#) (IT) – Enhances road safety and efficiency using AI and advanced technologies. Their flagship project Asfalto Sicuro detects road defects and provides data to make the road maintenance more efficient.

[SPARKLD](#) (CZ) – Their technology is used in the B2B segment. It leverages publicly available data to help companies identify ideal business opportunities and expand into new markets by identifying suitable partners and clients.

[Spicy Cells](#) (CZ) – Offers a sustainable alternative to traditional saffron cultivation. By using biotechnological methods, one of the world's most expensive spices could become affordable to the wider public.

[YoungLink](#) (CZ) – Has developed a way to improve relationships between classmates and classroom climate. Their app allows schools and parents to monitor the dynamics between students and detect potential risky behavior in time.

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