

Session 2.2: «Business Ecosystems Institutions and Infrastructures»

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*SMEs in the Balkan countries face several problems to attract funding (demand side) while the local ecosystems have started to mature and provide such services (offer side). The main stakeholders of the local ecosystems are public bodies (universities, research centers, municipalities, BSOs, etc) who are the main beneficiaries of the INTERREG programs. Therefore, in this **evolutionary phase of Balkan ecosystems**, the role INTERREG programs is structural and strategic.*

As in the entire Europe, a synergetic model that seems to attract the interest of many innovation stakeholders in the Balkan countries is the **cluster** or cluster like structures that can effectively support the synergetic innovation in the local ecosystems. Balkan Peninsula includes many countries in different phase of growth and maturity of ecosystems while it has the potential to support several national or cross border value chains. These factors create a platform where clusters can blossom. **INTERREG framework** and other regional and national programs aimed to support business ecosystems should update their strategies adopting the cluster tool in a more explicit way (specific aims, tools and project support criteria for clusters).

EU member states and some Balkan countries are more experienced in cluster funding and in clusters management. **Cluster excellence** evaluation frameworks such as the European Clusters Excellence Initiative (ECEI) along with the European Cluster Observatory can transfer know-how to Balkan countries for their future clusters support policies.

Clusters seem to be an excellent tool for the proper and effective implementation of the well-established framework of RIS3 (**Smart Specialization Strategies**) that all E.U regions have drafted since 2017. The reason is that mature clusters can address local problems and challenges in a more holistic and cooperative way that simply support one or two business sectors. The early identification of such local challenges remains a priority for the Balkan countries that have recently started their journey in clusters era.

Balkans are behind in E.U average regarding adequate **infrastructures** while due to relative small geographical size of the Balkan countries many infrastructure projects (transport, energy, telecommunications) concern more than one country. Therefore Balkan governments should increase cross-border cooperation building on complementarities and crating synergies and promote physical infrastructure projects that have long lasting effects.

Cross borders projects seem to be an effective solution fully aligned with the INTERREG philosophy (Joint problems requiring joint solutions through territorial cooperation). Due to limited domestic financial resources, better **regional coordination** of investment projects in the Balkans is essential while external

financing from international banking institutions can play important role in the area particularly for mature projects exhibiting sustainability.

Concerning future steps for the Balkan Forum it seems that Thessaloniki city has many advantages to host future Balkan Forums and strengthen its political agenda and cross border cooperation in the Balkans. The **Ministry of Interior (Macedonia-Thrace sector)** is located in Thessaloniki and many bilateral synergies among Greece and neighboring countries belong to its portfolio. In addition, Thessaloniki hosts the INTERREG Managing Authority, responsible for the managing and monitoring of the following **four cross-border and transnational INTERREG Programs related to Balkans:**

- Cooperation Programme INTERREG V-A "Greece – Bulgaria 2014-2020"
- Cross-border Cooperation Programme IPA INTERREG "Greece –Albania 2014-2020"
- Cross-border Cooperation Programme IPA INTERREG "Greece –The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2014-2020"
- Cooperation Programme INTERREG V-B "Balkan – Mediterranean 2014-2020"

Based on the above facts, it is highly suggested the creation of a **decentralized unit (task force)** within the Ministry of Interior (Macedonia and Thrace sector) to undertake a coordinating role, continue and update the Balkan Forum agenda during the new programming period (2021-2027).

It is also suggested the set up of a **Balkan based European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs)** to facilitate cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation between Balkan countries or their regional and local authorities. Such an EGTC would enable Balkan countries to implement joint projects, share expertise and improve coordination of spatial planning more effectively. This set up of a Balkan EGTC could be supported by INTERREG programs and or other E.U funding frameworks.

During the Thessaloniki Balkan Forum, it has been clear that cooperation among public, private sector is important for the Balkans along with the involvement of research and academic community. More important, **green technologies, circular economy** seem to be suitable thematic axes to enforce sustainable growth in Balkan Peninsula. In the **new programming period (2021-2027)** the respective programs and funding schemes should foresee and strengthen these dimensions.

Synergetic innovation models like technology & science parks, incubators as well as clusters and other SMEs networks are considered important and suitable tools for the Balkan countries. These tools are highly suggested for support by the INTERREG frameworks for the new programming period (2021-2027).

Finally, the next Thessaloniki Balkan Forum is suggested to adopt the thematic axe of Sustainable Environment since it is a major and horizontal axe addressing many other sectors. In addition, the next **Thessaloniki Balkan**

Forum is suggested to be combined with a **B2B session** where executives from all Balkan countries and ecosystems could meet up, discuss and jointly promote common projects. By adopting a B2B session the Balkan Forum wouldn't remain a political forum but a place with **networking and creative synergies**.