

Session 4.2 “Boosting innovative technology infrastructure in the Balkan region: Current situation and future possibilities”

Moderator: Kyriakos Loufakis, President of Alexander Innovation Zone S.A.

We should act in two levels in order to enhance the development of innovation in the region and create highly qualified jobs in order to reduce the brain drain phenomenon and then reverse it. On the one hand, we can encourage startups and young entrepreneurship and on the other hand there is the need for infrastructure to attract R&D investments and help young entrepreneurs to innovate.

Prof. Polenakovikj elaborated the good practices to encourage entrepreneurship in the Republic of North Macedonia. Courses of entrepreneurship have been offered in higher education since the 1990s. Moreover, since 2012 a compulsory course on innovation and entrepreneurship has been introduced in high school and in 2013 a fund for innovation was established. In the framework of strategic plan 2014-2020 more than 2,000 teachers have been educated in entrepreneurship. This effort is being supported by the World Bank as well as diaspora scholarships and mentorship in order to reverse the brain drain to brain gain.

Dr. Paris Kokorotsikos referred to the 4th generation science and technology parks. The first technology parks have been active after World War II but their importance appeared much later. The 4th generation STPs that have been developed from 2010 and later on, incorporated the experience of previous years. IASP is a worldwide network of STPs with 350 parks as members in 77 countries and 115,000 established companies. IASP is a worldwide organization with 7 regional divisions. STPs are not anymore a “technogeto” but open to society, focused not on the science but on companies in order to facilitate the creation of new businesses. STPs are places where companies transfer their R&D departments and universities part of their applied research, creating synergies with a multiplier effect.

There are several successful examples in SE Europe. The technology park in Bucharest has developed technologies in Nuclear Physics and has Laser infrastructure with a 350m investment. Recently, a new fund has been created investing in the first stages to certify the proof of concept. The results are impressive as the number of startups has been significantly increased including highly successful new businesses.

Mr. Mladenov presented Sofia Tech Park, where companies, research institutes, universities, financial institutions and the State work together. In the last five years, 25 companies have been established in 40,000 m², 11 laboratories from 3 universities and 700 jobs have been created. A digital innovation hub has been developed with supercomputing infrastructures with emphasis on ICT (Smart Cities, Blockchain), Life Science and Clean Energy technologies. Companies such as Bosch, Microsoft, Samsung and smaller

ones collaborate while there is also a coworking space for startups. Financial institutions as well as the World Bank are also present.

Dr. Aifantopoulou finally referred to the 4th generation technology park ThessINTEC that is going to be established in Thessaloniki, offering state of art physical infrastructure and focus areas according to the RIS framework of the Region of Central Macedonia, being also open to the public.

During the Thessaloniki Balkan Forum, it has been clear that cooperation between innovation ecosystems of the Balkan counties is very important as it's a significant tool for the attraction of investments and creation of the necessary culture. These initiatives can be also funded under the INTERREG framework.