

Session 5.2: “Supporting green growth, entrepreneurship and circular economy through cooperation in the Balkans”

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In section 5.2, notable speakers from Greece and Bulgaria approached innovative actions and funding tools to:

- The transition and consolidation of a greener economy, since environmental protection is an essential condition for sustainable development.
- The promotion of sustainable development programmes, partnerships and networks in the Balkans during the programmatic period 2021 – 2027 of the EU funds.

All Balkan countries are committed to the principles of green economy. Over the previous years they have made substantial effort in establishing the institutional, legislative and strategic framework for green growth. From the viewpoint of green growth, they include several types of strategies, often entitled as Sustainable development strategies (there are sector-specific strategies, among which energy, agriculture and forestry strategies are of particular significance).

Concerning the new CE package for the EU the circular economy is about reducing waste and protecting the environment, but it is also about a profound transformation of the way our entire economy works. New types of economies have emerged, aiming at transforming the paradigm from linear models to circular ones. A circular economy (CE) aims at restoring material flows through closed-loop processes and thus requires a special product design. Although numerous approaches of circular product design have been developed, the mostly disruptive nature of their implementation has posed many challenges to companies, e.g. of economic or organizational nature. Research has already been carried out on the challenges that arise during implementation.

Circular economy is fast growing topic nowadays as there is found a desperate need of business and society transformation. According to the business economics' development, the business model not just shifts from Industry 4.0 to Industry 5.0 but the shift is so fast as it has never been before.

A circular economy describes an economic system that is based on business models which replace the 'end-of-life' concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling and recovering materials in production/distribution and consumption processes, thus operating at the micro level (products, companies, consumers), meso level (eco-industrial parks) and macro level (city, region, nation and beyond), with the aim to accomplish sustainable development, which implies creating environmental quality, economic prosperity and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations.

In particular, according to Mr. Emmanouil Vlachogiannis, Vice President of the Thessaloniki Chamber of Commerce and Industry:

"Dissemination of information on opportunities presented for the exploitation of technological innovations and the realization of business collaborations is a necessary action of public policy to prevent climate change and promote the circular economy. It is crucial to adopt digital tools by creating appropriate platforms for counseling and training, so that knowledge can be utilized. These platforms must be open to businesses in South East Europe. The training should not stop at the border, but should be constantly expanded with the cooperation of the institutions and the osmosis of the trainees. We are still in the process of a sustainable approach and the possibility of making the wrong choices is always present. By no means should this risk be an alibi for abandoning this path."

Professor Petar Petrov Phd from the Bulgarian University of Forestry, who is involved in relevant research and programs, then referred to the factors that support the development of the circular economy model, as well as the expected benefits. The EU priority areas for the circular economy are:

- food products and household food waste;
- fast-moving goods and wastes from industrial beverage production;
- packaging and packaging waste;
- electrical and electronic waste;
- textile products and textile waste;
- furniture and waste from furniture production;
- construction waste;
- Vehicle.

He then analyzed industrial symbiosis as an innovation in the circular economy that allows the use of waste or by-products from one industry to another and presented examples of such applications in Bulgaria. Summarizing his presentation Mr. Petrov mentioned that: Industrial symbiosis as a novel part of circular economy have great potential for green growth and environmental friendly entrepreneurship. The reuse and utilization of by-products in net of collaborating companies is a precondition for practical implementation of industrial symbiosis. The overall participation of business, science and government will boost industrial symbiosis. Key element in promoting the cross-border industrial symbiosis in the Balkans is adequate and consistent regulatory base.

This was followed by a discussion and proposals on the strengthening of green entrepreneurship and circular economy programs through European cooperation programs of public bodies, private bodies and companies, as well as research centers and universities for the period 2021-27.

Finally, it was suggested to create a hub unit at **the Ministry of Interior Sector Macedonia – Thrace**, based in Thessaloniki for coordination and cooperation in the Balkans, in order to lead companies, governments, research institutions

and Universities, as well as the citizens of the Balkan countries for effective funding through European programs and their rapid adaptation to modern technologies and processes, as mentioned at this conference.