

PROCEEDINGS REPORT

“A click away from entrepreneurship”

20 October 2021

The high-level conference on Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation “A click away from entrepreneurship” was organized online by Partners Albania for Change and Development on October 20th 2021. The event brought together around 70 different stakeholders of start-up ecosystem representing donor community and public authorities, venture capital firms, business angels, entrepreneurship hubs, acceleration programs, supporting organizations, networks, startups and civil society organizations from the Western Balkan 6 countries and the EU.

This event marked the official launch of the Dua Partner Invest platform, the latest initiative of Partners Albania in the field of entrepreneurship and innovation, a virtual hub that serves the WB6 start-up community, boosts connections, outreaches, and facilitates access to finance.

Distinguished speakers in the event from European Commission, regional cooperation mechanisms, country decision and policy makers, intermediary institutions and other important actors tightly connected to the sector, highlighted the progress, challenges and opportunities in the field of entrepreneurship and start-ups.

The event was greeted by a welcoming speech from the Director of Partners Albania for Change and Development, Ms. Juliana Hoxha. She gave an overview of the social entrepreneurship developments in the WB region and emphasized the progress in the field the last 10 years despite the challenges in legal, financial, and capacity building aspects. “The social Economy summit in Manheim” organized by the European Commission with the support of the German Federal Government provided an important space for all stakeholders to discuss the future of social economy in Europe, and it provided an important space for the WB actors in the social economy, to promote developments, discuss challenges and potentials and build support and awareness” said Ms. Hoxha. She concluded her speech introducing the latest initiative of Partners Albania, Dua Partner Invest platform which captures more than a decade the experience and lessons learned in support of entrepreneurship and bringing together startups from the Western Balkans, consultants and investors from EU and beyond.

Head of Sector, Social Economy and Social Enterprise, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) of European Commission, Mr. Patrick Klein, explained briefly the concept of social entrepreneurship and the number of barriers which impede their growth. He emphasized that governments have much to gain from bringing down these barriers and creating an ecosystem within which social enterprises can flourish. Mr. Klein concluded his speech speaking about the 5 pillars of EU action in building a thriving ecosystem among which highlighted:

- **Legal and regulatory frameworks:** which brings clarity, visibility and recognition and consists in mapping, policy review, better entrepreneurship tool.
- **Access to finance:** which should be of a range of types and sources available for SE. Regional funds (ESF+/ERDF), financial instruments (InvestEU).
- **Access to markets:** key is particularly through public procurement. Training, guides and best practices;
- **Business support structures:** both generic and specialist, and catering for both start-up and growth. EEN, supporting business incubators development (eg: impact Hub).
- **Skills, training and education:** Skills and capacities need to be built, among policy-makers as much as among social enterprises. This is best done in partnership.

Ms. Maja Handjiska-Trendafilova, Head of Program Department, Regional Cooperation Council, coming from a Regional perspective of the Balkans as a whole unit, said that it is the small enterprises that develop innovative practices that come in help of driving the necessary structural changes. She concluded that RCC facilitates the establishment of regional networks of green startups, women entrepreneurs, young graduates with excellent business ideas, while in the same time collaborating with different clusters and programs. In this regard Ms. Handjiska-Trendafilova introduced RCC programs with financial support in digital economy among which, with high interest for the startups in the area and the audience, the second competition called Balkathon, an online, regional competition that invites interested young people, start-ups, entrepreneurs, students, digital innovation hubs, scientific parks, universities, SMEs, etc. from all Western Balkan economies to propose and develop innovative digital solutions as a response to the challenges of our day-to-day life. Balkathon competition seeks to support innovative ideas in Smart Cities, E-Health, Green Cities and E-entrepreneur which will smarten up Western Balkan region and encourage regional collaboration, co-creation and real-life change, with the idea to help the region, businesses and citizens to strengthen their resilience to global challenges.

[Video registration of panel I discussion](#)

The second panel of the event was organized in two parallel discussion sessions stimulating sharing and exchange among government representatives and intermediary organizations operating in the field of entrepreneurship in the region on public policies and mechanisms in support of entrepreneurship. Development of appropriate legal, regulatory and fiscal frameworks for the operation of social economy enterprises and organizations, it is also one of the main recommendations of the European Social Economy Summit, Mannheim 2021.

The first discussion session was composed of five key speakers from government institutions and supporting organizations in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, as follows: Ms. Edona Bilali, Minister of State for the Protection of Entrepreneurship, Albania, Ms. Klotilda Kosta, Director of Programs, Partners Albania for Change and Development, Albania, Mr. Uranik Begu, Executive Director, Innovation Center, Kosovo, Mr. Jumni Ademi, State Counselor for Entrepreneurship, Ministry of Economy, North Macedonia and Mr. Igor Madzov, Founder and President, StartupMacedonia, North Macedonia. The panel was moderated by Mr. Shkëlzen Marku, Co-founder and Managing Director of Yunus Social Business Balkans.

The second discussion session focused on the public policies and mechanisms in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. The speakers included: Mr. Nevzet Sefo, Expert Advisor, Federal Ministry of Development, Entrepreneurship and Crafts, Bosnia & Hercegovina, Ms. Marijeta Barjaktarovic Lanzardi,

Acting Director General, Directorate of Digital Economy and Technological Development, Ministry of Economic Development, Montenegro, Ms. Milena Kostadinovic, Operations Manager, Innovation Fund, Serbia, Ms. Sejdefa Basic, Collective Impact Director, Mozaik Foundation, Bosnia & Hercegovina, Mr. Igor Milosevic, Program Developer, ADP-Zid, Montenegro, Ms. Dina Rakin, Director, Coalition for Solidarity Economy Development, Serbia. This panel was moderated by Ms. Nikica Kusinikova, Director of Association Konekt from North Macedonia.

The first part of the session discussions focused on the most important achievements, in terms of policy, legal/regulatory framework and/or supporting mechanisms (state and non-state actors) for development of startups, entrepreneurship and social economy in respective countries. The session concluded that the last decade some positive developments have occurred in national and regional level in the Western Balkan 6 to improve the competitiveness and effectiveness of the entrepreneurship ecosystem and social economy sector in the Western Balkan countries. As key results of this session, the following came into view:

- ✚ All countries in the region are committed to create enabling environment for entrepreneurs and start-ups. More increasingly, the state actors' shift is towards innovation and digital technologies to improve competitiveness of the WB markets and their integration in the global economies;
- ✚ Among the most important achievements is the increased awareness on the importance of development of innovative, green and social startup initiatives and the increased engagement of stakeholders to support these initiatives;
- ✚ Particular focus of the public and private sector initiatives in this area are youth i.e. creating possibilities for young people to engage in entrepreneurship (including social entrepreneurship);
- ✚ There is need for government commitment to further strengthen the collaboration with international programs and ecosystem actors in order to improve efficiency of the startup support measures and instruments in the countries;
- ✚ The importance of cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders to create enabling legal and operations startups and new enterprises. There are existing new initiatives in the region, but they are not well known by the startups/entrepreneurs, but only through collaboration among them these initiatives of support will be more effective;
- ✚ The pressing need for a more enabling environment and more favorable conditions for startups and social enterprises in the whole Western Balkan region, including access to financing and favorable tax treatment for startups, also legal framework that enables Business angels and venture capital firms to be established;
- ✚ The support programs need to be carefully designed, have sound selection process in place and later on proper monitoring system and report on the impact of the supportive mechanisms.

[Video registration of panel II, group 1 discussion](#)

[Video registration of panel II, group 2 discussion](#)

The 3rd panel shed light onto the perspectives of different actors from the start-up' ecosystem. This panel was moderated by Mr. Patrick Bosteels, Now Sprint Accelerator.

Ms. Alina Moldovan, Project Coordinator, Impact Vienna Hub, in regard of strengths and treats for the startup scene in the Western Balkans, said that the WB have a huge potential, which is still untapped. As Impact Hub they are not yet physically present in all WB countries, but they support any initiative coming from the region.

Mr. Stevica Kuharski, Principal, FilRouge Capital, from the Venture Capital perspective highlighted that are still a lot of improvements needed to be able to talk about a well-functioning investment ecosystem in the Western Balkans. On the other hand, it is also clear that the quality of the startups needs to be improved especially as the Western Balkans are rather small countries so they need to look abroad for a wider market, where there is present a higher competitiveness.

Ms. Ardiola Hristic, Principal, Regional Coordinator Local Consultancy in the Western Balkans, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), introduced to the audience the support that EBRD offers to small business in regard of the knowhow, and for the startup community the regional Startup Venture, a grant scheme in support of the startups.

Ms. Marta Bruschi, Senior Expert, Network & Community Engagement at Diesis Network, Co-Director, Networks & Convenings at IAVE, explained the importance of networking and also DIESIS Network supporting the federations and consortiums of social enterprises in different regions of EU and beyond. Also they stay connected and support their members in their mission so they can support their beneficiaries.

Following the finalization of the conference, reflections upon the future of the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (EU agenda 2030), were focused in supporting the ecosystem that enables entrepreneurship.

While pledging the continued support of all stakeholders to the Western Balkan's startups, Ms. Hoxha encouraged for a whole-of-society approach towards entrepreneurship, and continuation of this discussion with other regional events.

[Video registration of panel III discussion](#)