



ACCELERATOR - Developing accelerators to provide better access to innovation finance for SMEs

Kick-off event – Towards improved business support for SMEs in the Danube Region

20-21 February 2017

Sfantu Gheorghe, Covasna, Romania

MINUTES

The Kick-off event, titled "Towards improved business support for SMEs in the Danube Region" of Developing accelerators to provide better access to innovation finance for SMEs (Accelerator) project took place on 20-21 February 2017 in Sfantu Gheorghe, Romania. On February 19 the partners were welcomed with dinner by ASIMCOV, the local organizers, where all the participant partners had the opportunity to introduce themselves and to outline their expectations regarding the kick-off event.

Partners present at the kick-off: Széchenyi Tőkealap-kezelő Zrt. - Hungary, Central-Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency Nonprofit Ltd. – Hungary, Technology Park Ljubljana Ltd., Institute for Entrepreneurship - Slovenia, Technology Center Sofia Ltd. – Bulgaria, DEX Innovation Centre - Czech Republic, Development Agency of Serbia, Serbia Republic Agency for the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry for National Economy Deputy State Secretariat Responsible for Implementing Economic Development Programs – Hungary, Slovene Enterprise Fund - Slovenia, Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding - Romania and Association of Small- and Medium Size Enterprises of Covasna County ASIMCOV from Romania – host of the event.

The event was the first open discussion following ACCELERATOR'S main objective. Namely to enhance access to innovation finance through improving the institutional framework conditions and related policy instruments by developing the practical solution of acceleration services and influencing the concerned strategic framework at partner's regions and programme level.

On Monday, 20th February the public kick-off event started with more than 60 participants including local, regional and national actors of the economic ecosystem, with a great view of the actual Romanian situation and initiatives in accelerators as complex tools to support SMEs to innovate, along with facilitators of transnational connections.



Mr. Lajos Vajda, director of ASIMCOV in his welcome speech emphasized the importance of synergy between all the approved projects, as these projects together can contribute to a balanced growth and, at the same time, the complementarity of the projects can result in an enhanced impact on an innovative and socially responsible Danube Region. Mr. Vajda mentioned the role of clusters in the project implementation as drivers of sustainable regional development, especially in the excellent domains identified by the Smart Specialization Strategy. As a message from the host partner - ASIMCOV, Mr. Vajda ended his speech with the following idea: if clusters mean collaboration and smart specialization means excellence, then the ACCELERATOR project has to be **excellence in collaboration**.

Mr. Miklós Levente Bagoly, president of ASIMCOV welcomed the guests and expressed his gratitude to the project team, who developed the concept of the project, and also to the Danube programme framework which targets the introduction of innovation and supports SMEs in this mission. The president of ASIMCOV Association conducted a short retrospective of their activity over the last 20 years.

Mr. József Török from the Széchenyi Venture Capital Fund Management Zrt. as the Lead partner welcomed all the partners and Romanian stakeholders, wishing good luck with the implementation and consolidation of the partnership which can result in a competitive Danube Region.

Covasna County Council was represented by the vice president, **Mr. Róbert Gruman**, who enumerated all the ongoing relevant initiatives of the Council which fits into the framework of ACCELERATOR.

Sfântu Gheoghe is the capital of Covasna County, being one of the 6 counties which compose the Centru Development Region. On behalf of the Romanian Development Agency - Centru Region, **Mr. Laurențiu David** explained how the agency can support similar initiatives and enumerated relevant financing programs for SMEs. The agency considers a priority to connect the financing opportunities to the potential stakeholders, but the question arises as to how this linkage can be created and how the national and regional policies can facilitate these connections.



Mr. József Török



Mr. Laurențiu David



Mr. Daniel Coșniță

After the welcome speeches, national experts shared valuable information concerning national development directions in some cases inspired by best practices abroad, moderated by the president of Romanian Cluster Association CLUSTERO, **Mr. Daniel Coșniță**.

Firstly, **Ms. Gabriela Pârvu**, senior counsellor of the Romanian Ministry of Economy discussed the priorities of national strategies for competitiveness detailing the development of institutional capacity of the Ministry.



Ms. Gabriela Pârvu



Mr. Adrian Curaj

Mr. Adrian Curaj, on behalf of the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding - Romania (UEFISCDI, AS partner) presented the importance and link of Smart Specialization Strategy, highlighting the Romanian framework, initiatives and already existing tools to strengthen the regional innovation ecosystem.

The Project Officer, **Mr. Marius Valentin Niculae**, responsible for coordinating the implementation of Priority 1 of the Programme, assisted the Kick-off event in the first place by giving advice and explanations about reporting. On the other hand, Mr. Niculae presented at the public kick-off event the essence of the 1. Priority - *Innovative and socially responsible Danube region*, especially the first specific objective – *Improve framework conditions for innovation*.



Ms. Gyöngyi Király



Mr. Marius Valentin Niculae

Ms. Gyöngyi Király, business development manager at Széchenyi Venture Capital Fund Management Zrt., presented to the participants the main objective of the ACCELERATOR project and the expected outcomes of the intense co-working of partners and external stakeholders. She emphasized that the project will contribute to stronger links among actors in regional innovation ecosystem and to strengthened innovation capacities of the involved partner regions.

After every presentation, the speakers answered several questions from the audience.

The conference continued with a panel discussion about the Challenges of involving equity financing in SMEs in the Danube Region moderated by **Ms. Jelena Uzelac** from the Development Agency of Serbia.

The Panelists were:

- **Mr. József Török**, Head of Business Development and Startup, Széchenyi Venture Capital Fund Management Zrt.
- **Mr. Matej Rus**, Representative of the Institute for Entrepreneurship Research, Slovenia, Director of Venture Factory – Business Incubator of University of Maribor, Head of Initiative Startup Slovenia
- **Mr. Gergely Kardos**, International Relations Officer, Ministry for National Economy, Hungary
- **Ms. Christina Leucuța**, Associate researcher, Institute for Economic Forecasting, Romanian Academy, Senior Advisor - Romanian Cluster Association

Every panelist presented the current state of the financing support structure in their countries, including personal initiatives and relevant achievements. The group discussed the differences between the countries, which mainly comes from the approach of the subjects. They also deliberated about best internationalization methods, mentoring and incubation. The audience raised the problem of gaps between different strategies on local, regional, national and European level, the lack of mentoring culture and the discontinuous character of the supporting programmes. The group agreed that although the problems are similar in the partner countries, the solution should be comprehensive but also personalized to the socio-economic specificity of the area. Several examples of good practices were presented, so we can mention as results the knowledge transfer, a stronger consortium and interconnections between partners of different projects following the 1. Priority of the Danube Programme, between actors of the Romanian ecosystem from different sectors SMEs, universities, public administration, financing institutions, mass media, etc.



Guest representatives on behalf of the projects: FORESDA, CAMARO-D, RARE, YOUMIG, INSIGHTS have also attended the conference.

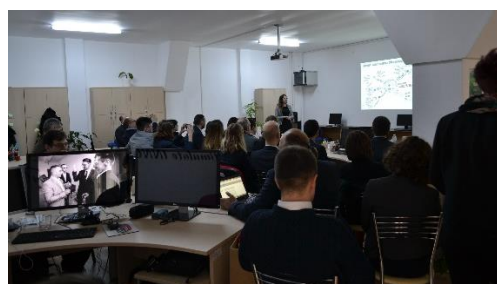
The following Romanian organizations were represented at the kick-off conference:

Enterprise Europe Network, Transylvania Textile & Fashion Cluster, Prowood Cluster, Transylvania Mechanical Engineering Cluster, Packaging-Printing-Design Cluster, Agrofood Cluster, Young Entrepreneurs Association from Transylvania, Junior Business Club, Romanian Cluster Association CLUSTERO, Hungarian Trade House and other representatives.

After lunch, where the participants continued the discussions, the partners visited the Business Incubator of Sfantu Gheorghe to learn more about the structure developed throughout its 10 years of existence.



Ms. Mátyus Enikő, communication manager of ASIMCOV and coordinator of the innoHUB coworking space explained how the association created within the incubator a sustainable structure of regional economic development, which includes the incubated companies, representatives of different national and international organizations, professional groups, cluster management entities and startups of the coworking space. If in the first years we focused mostly on supporting the development of early-phase firms and helping them to reach stability and autonomy before leaving the Incubator, with the vision that after graduating from the business incubation programme, firms should have increased competitive power and higher chances of long-term market survival, now every entity, representative with workpoint in the incubator is integrated in a development structure with the common goal to gain social and economic competitiveness to the region by protecting the environment. In order to meet the EU requirements and for the enterprises to become more competitive in the European internal market, ASIMCOV has initiated to reorganize the association. To be able to realize an analysis of different business sectors and for the transfer of information and contact keeping to become more efficient, we intend to form professional groupings in different fields in which members are activating. Professional groupings formed the basis for the CLUSTERS in many important areas, which are also priorities in the Regional Development Strategy.



Based on the potential of the region, the clusters formed naturally. Clusters are a free form of association and represent a framework for business development, collaboration between companies, universities, research institutions, suppliers, customers and competitors located in the same geographical area.



On the last day of the kick-off event, every participant partner presented briefly their professional activity, the reason why the organization joined ACCELERATOR and also the expected results. After that, **Mr. Zoltán Bendó**, manager of the project presented his talk regarding the project implementation in which he explained several details concerning the structure of work packages, meeting schedule, capitalization, tasks of different roles in the project. He also explained the expectations regarding reporting and the monitoring procedure and other issues.



The meeting was connected with the first Steering Committee Meeting with two subjects to discuss:

1. Appointment of Steering Committee Meeting
2. Operation and Organization of the Steering Committee

The partners had the opportunity to request answers for any unclear aspects regarding the implementation, thus discussions evolved between the project leaders and partners about different activities but also technical issues.



As a key element of the project, **Mr. Ákos Szépvölgyi** talked about the communication in the project, presenting the most important requirements and responsibilities.

The kick-off meeting ended with the presentation of a draft version of the methodology of implementation of the Work Package 3 by **Ms. Mojca Cvirn** from Technology Park Ljubljana Ltd. including a short intro to innovation driven SMEs & Start:up Slovenia Initiative experience by **Mr. Matei Rus** from Institute for Entrepreneurship Research Slovenia.

The project partners agreed that sharing the experience and knowledge between them will bring an added value to the project and will also contribute to the sustainability of the project concept. The different approaches and experiences of the partners regarding start-up development will enable the project consortium to develop a complex and comprehensive joint strategy. This strategy will serve as a great tool not just for the project partners, but for many stakeholders of the European ecosystem.