

Joint Declaration

on Reinforcing
the Tech Entrepreneurship
Ecosystems in the Central
and Eastern European
and Western Balkan
Regions

15 November 2018
Sofia, Bulgaria

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The digital revolution offers major opportunities for growth and innovation in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) and Western Balkan (WB) Regions. These Regions dispose of significant assets in terms of a large pool of talented people with strong ICT skills and a dynamic startup community. Additionally, they are actively addressing infrastructural deficiencies as well as improving connectivity and proximity to large markets. The digital transformation is real and crucial for the development of these two Regions. As already demonstrated on many occasions, startups can transform local economies and societies, and grow in a sustainable manner while creating high-quality jobs.

At the same time, however, our startups continue facing challenges that hamper their further scale up and growth, such as fragmentation of effort, red tape, lack of information and complex procedures in accessing sources of finance. Joint efforts are needed to support innovation-friendly environments of our Regions to unleash their potential and enable digital startups and SMEs to scale up in the EU Digital Single Market and beyond. As a result, our resourceful entrepreneurs will achieve world-class breakthroughs.

To this end, we, the startup ecosystem leaders in the Central and Eastern European and Western Balkan Regions [consisting of founders, investors, executives and startup entrepreneurs], recognize the need to forge stronger links between different startup hubs in our respective countries, promote greater cooperation and specialization and, collectively, connect the Central and Eastern European and Western Balkan's startup ecosystems to well-established European hubs to help them accessing the expertise and resources they need.

By signing this voluntary agreement, we join the call for action to all Central and Eastern European and Western Balkan startup ecosystem leaders and undertake to improve startup ecosystems of the respective Regions. In so doing, we contribute to accelerating the growth of local startups. We, the signatories, commit ourselves to:

1. Establishing and sustaining the Startup Europe Central and Eastern Europe Network and the Startup Europe Western Balkan Network

The Networks, which will be underpinned by a light administrative structure, will promote active collaborations between startup ecosystem players across the Regions. Connecting people and their ideas, creating links with mature startup ecosystems, exchanging good practices, promoting enduring cross-border projects that provide access to finance, facilitating the participation of women in ICT entrepreneurship, as well as talent and public procurement services will be the main outputs of our common endeavour. The Networks will actively liaise with the startup scene in the rest of Europe and beyond to learn from their experience and promote these regions as prime locations for startups. The networks will be open to any relevant stakeholder with interest in startups ecosystems in these two regions.

2. Strengthening and sustaining the collaboration between Startup Europe Central and Eastern Europe Network and the Startup Europe Western Balkan Network

The Startup Europe Central and Eastern Europe Network and the Startup Europe Western Balkan Network and their founding members are confident that enhanced and continuous cooperation is needed for achieving critical mass.

To this aim, the Network will identify cooperation opportunities aimed at reducing existing gaps between the entrepreneurial systems of the member countries. By sharing best practices and connecting the ecosystems, we will promote synergies and consistent collaborations among them. A common branding and a sound communication strategy will be developed to provide greater visibility to both the results of the collaboration and our ambitions for the future. This approach, inter alia, should help CEE and WB startups to improve their smooth access to capital.

3. Contributing to release policy recommendations, advice on tools and opportunities to maximize the growth potential of the Regions

Whilst important progress has been made, there are still obstacles to starting up and growing new digital companies. Our ambition is to make the CEE and WB Regions promising local ecosystems for entrepreneurs to initiate and develop their digital businesses. Accordingly, we want to offer constructive advices to policy-makers in the Regions and to the European Commission on how best to improve the framework conditions. The Networks will also provide counsel on tools and opportunities (e.g. funding, research, collaboration) to maximize the growth potential of the Regions and their entrepreneurs. Therefore, we will issue, on a regular basis and starting in early 2019, a set of concrete policy recommendations tailored to CEE and WB startups' needs, and actively engage with public authorities and policy-makers.

4. Devising an Action Plan to raise the Regions' positions as attractive startup locations

Studies show that a thriving startup ecosystem is what attracts new startups the most. Building on the branding strategy and the policy recommendations, the Networks will go a step further and elaborate an Action Plan aimed at promoting the image of these Regions as attractive startup locations. The Action Plan will consist of both a stocktaking of the main barriers that entrepreneurs encounter and a range of concrete actions they need to undertake. To adequately address the defined barriers, an External Advisory Board consisting of prominent ecosystem builders will be established.

We, the founding members of the Networks, will focus our efforts in the following areas:

- Strengthening the participating startup ecosystems;
- Facilitating connection within and between the Regions;
- Increasing the availability of financing;
- Fostering entrepreneurship education;
- Creating synergies on both the Regional and pan-European level;
- Creating synergies on regional and pan-European level.

15 November 2018, Sofia

Signatories

Central and Eastern European Startup Organizations:

Bulgaria

Dimitar Vasilev Ivanov,
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Croatia

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By signing this declaration, each signatory organisation will become part of the Startup Europe Central and Eastern Europe Network.

Western Balkans Startup Organizations:

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By signing this declaration, each signatory organisation will become part of the Startup Europe Western Balkan Network.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.