

THE VOICE OF ENTREPRENEURS AND INNOVATORS

BEST PRACTICES - LESSONS LEARNED - ROLE MODELS
ENTREPRENEURSHIP - INNOVATION



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Our deepest gratitude to all the participants in this study, for their time and efforts, without them this would not have been possible. They present the future of entrepreneurship and innovation in North Macedonia and Kosovo, but also are representatives and advocates of the entrepreneurial and innovators' mindset.

We would also like to thank Marie Löwegren for writing the preface of this publication.

Preface

I am very pleased to hold in my hand one of the outputs from the Swedish Institute Summer Academy for Young Professionals, held in Lund, Sweden in 2019. At the Summer Academy a number of talented people from the Western Balkans gathered to learn about how to encourage, support and develop entrepreneurship through policies and through the innovation ecosystem. Another purpose of the Summer Academy was to build transnational networks in order to enable the participants to collaborate entrepreneurially for mutual benefit in the future – all in line with the European Commission's report: *Supporting an Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans* from 2018. After the Summer Academy a couple of follow-up projects were selected for additional funding – this research of entrepreneurs in North Macedonia and Kosovo being one of them.

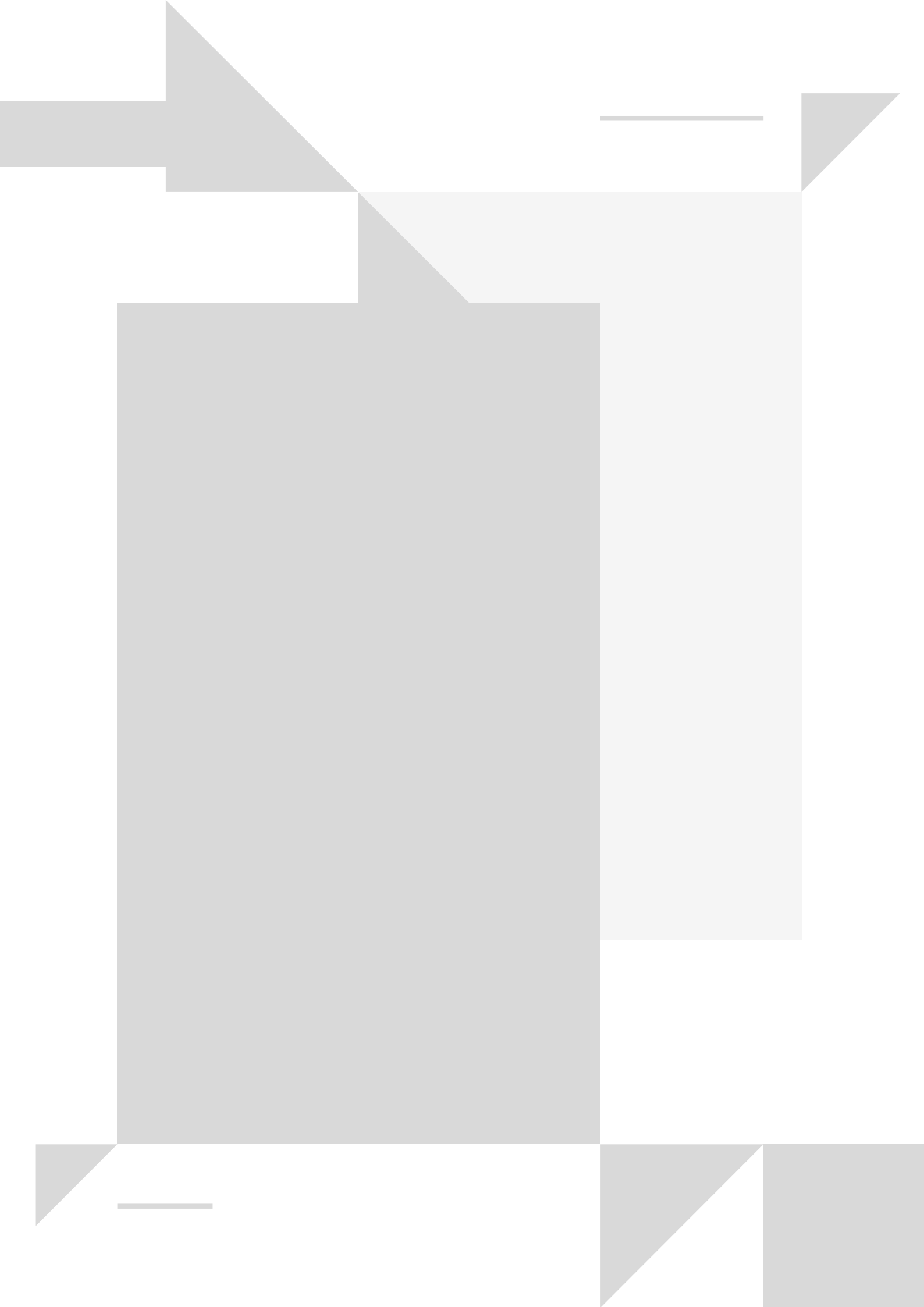
Reading this report makes me very hopeful for the future! It is indeed very encouraging to find so many interesting and successful entrepreneurs in the two countries covered. As we know that becoming an entrepreneur is probably not on most people's agenda (yet), it is very important that the stories of these great role models are spread in order to create awareness of entrepreneurship as a possible career path, and to initiate discussions on policy level on how to support entrepreneurs more actively. Attitudes need to change, and barriers need to be reduced, to build an entrepreneurial spirit in society. Only then can individual action be taken, challenges be solved, and solutions to the difficult problems all over the world be found.

Reading this report about these inspirational and passionate entrepreneurs gives me hope for a better world to come. They have taken the lead and shown that it is possible. More people will certainly follow in their footsteps – maybe even you?

Marie Löwegren

Senior Lecturer

Sten K. Johnson Centre for Entrepreneurship at Lund University



Introduction

Entrepreneurship and innovation are drivers of quality of life. They have the ability to change the way we live and work. They may also improve standards of living, create jobs, increase efficiency and efficacy and contribute to a growing economy.

Entrepreneurship and innovation spur economic growth, add to national income, create social change and contribute to community development (Sergi et al., 2019). For instance, the creation of better, high-paying jobs can result in some other business sectors to capitalize on this growth as the migration of workers to cities where employment was growing would increase. Another example is businesses offering unique goods and services, which results in improved quality of life. Imagine an innovation that can double the food and/or water production in Africa or a unique syringe for injecting medicines and useful for medical purposes that would protect healthcare professionals from any contamination while providing treatment.

Entrepreneurial and innovation stories have the power to motivate current and new entrepreneurs and innovators by sharing best practices, learning from the experience of others and provide role model influence, which increases the positive effect of entrepreneurial stories. Liu, Ma and Li (2019) contribute to this claim that entrepreneurial and innovation stories, both successful and failure, positively influence entrepreneurial intentions. They also add that successful role model stories have a greater impact than failure stories.

Governments have made great efforts to support promising entrepreneurs by establishing accelerators, incubators, entrepreneurship programs, hackathons, contests and many other forms for facilitating and increasing the entrepreneurial activity. Although these forms have provided great support for entrepreneurs and innovators, still the entrepreneurial and innovator's stories have had a huge impact on increasing early entrepreneurial intentions. The possibility to recognize yourself in a story, through narrative and storytelling, has been highlighted as a potential way to influence people's entrepreneurial decisions (Fellnhofer, 2017).

In the Western Balkans, entrepreneurship is a way for self-employment, decent work and salary. It does not go much further than that. Lack of belief is one of the

greatest issues in the region, given that the entrepreneurs do not believe their products could go global (British Council, 2018). One of the interviewees in their research described entrepreneurship as “for “big fish” who have at least one of money, business connections, political influence and links to the informal economy. It is risky, demands capital and can result in failure. Many people see that safer options may be more attractive, although potentially far less rewarding financially” (British Council, 2018, p.13).

For that purpose, this paper is focused on sharing positive case studies or stories and different experiences to motivate and inspire current and new entrepreneurs and innovators, and to show them examples of people who faced and still face similar struggles, obstacles and challenges and how they overcome them.

Methodology

For the purpose of conducting this research we used qualitative method. The qualitative methodology also tolerates a more adaptable sampling by applying open-ended and less structured protocols, but also use of a tool such as interactive interviews, to gather valuable data. Also, the participants required to have the liberty to express themselves and the information to be gathered in their natural setting. The use of qualitative methodology and its tools involved the researcher in every step of this research, being responsive, receptive, flexible, adaptive and a good listener.

The research was conducted by obtaining and analyzing primary data. The primary source of data was gathered through in-depth interviews as a tool. Using in-depth interviews has allowed us authentic access to the experiences of the interviewees in the research. It also provided us with the prospect to use the already collected data connected to preceding interviews to be applied and presented in the future interviews (Bryman, 2012).

In terms of sample size, it is generally known that qualitative analyses typically require a smaller sample size than quantitative analyses. However, we had in mind that these are case studies presented in a Compendium of best practices, lessons learned and role models, which does not require generalization. In fact, the whole point of presenting these case studies is to provide diversity in experience and to show current and new entrepreneurs and innovators how others in the field have handled and dealt with existing challenges in the entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem.

For the sampling in this research, purposive sampling was applied. We mapped 50 cases from both North Macedonia and Kosovo, and hand-picked from 10 to 15 cases to be interviewed in each country based on their personal story and experience. Then, for the Compendium we selected five cases representatives from each country that were most suitable for the research and our objective. The interviewees in Kosovo were from Gjilan and Prishtina, and in North Macedonia from Skopje, Radovish, Bitola, and Kochani.

THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA



Meet Mihail Stevchev – Founder of Treebanks

“Let’s fight CO2 together, let’s plant millions of trees!”

Mihail Stevchev is the founder of Treebanks. A company, a social enterprise that works towards protecting the environment by planting trees. Their mission is to produce treebanks of a million of trees around the world. It is a simple, yet powerful concept.

“With each booking you make through our partners we plant a tree for free. It does not cost a dime and yet you help fight the pollution and CO2 on the long run”.



It works by booking trips through their page (www.treebanks.com). They are connected with booking.com, kiwi.com, agoda.com and others travel (booking)

websites and with every redirection from treebanks.com you plant a tree.

“With each booking you make, starting from our website, we receive commission from our partners. The commission is used to plant trees and to produce tree seeds”.

The founder of Treebanks has chosen to plant trees because they contribute to water filtration, forests promote beneficial water quality and reduce storm water management costs, climate change, trees absorb carbon (CO2), reducing the overall concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and conserve energy, given that the trees are a natural air conditioner. The evaporation from a single tree can produce the cooling effect of ten room-size, residential air conditioners operating 20 hours a day.

The idea for Treebanks was a combination of several factors. First, it was Mihail’s experience and his connections to the travel industry as a software developer, and second, his father’s profession as an agricultural engineer and his ecological products.

“I have been working as a software developer for the past 6 years, various projects have gone through my hands. In the last few years, I touched base with the travel industry and had the chance to know how it works. On the other hand, my father Mitko is an agricultural engineer and has been in ecology for his whole life. He has been producing vermicompost for more than 20 years”.



(Mihail at Belgrade Venture forum)

The combination of his start-up knowledge and his father’s ecology background has contributed to development of the Treebanks idea, but also to setting a goal to plant a million trees, with the ultimate goal being to create something that will contribute to reducing the world pollution.

In 2019, they planted approximately 1,700 trees on various locations. In the first location, a place where the forest was destroyed by a fire that took place a few years back (village Podaresh, near the city Radovish) they planted 400 trees. They have also planted trees in Ohrid, Veles and Skopje. On every planting action they have from 5 to 15 volunteers who signed up to help them. The youngest planter is 9 years old, and the oldest is their team member Mitko. While planting trees, they educate the volunteers on tree planting.

“Our idea behind the planting actions is to educate the volunteers on tree planting, the proper method on how to plant trees, what the trees mean on local and global scale. For this reason, we contact local NGOs, scout and sport organizations to participate in the planting actions. For the first planting action we had volunteers from Ploca climbing club – Radovish, some U.S. citizens working for Peace Corps Macedonia and some locals which were interested and willing to help. Even before the start we felt the positive energy between all of us, despite the cloudy weather and the possibility for rain”.



(The Treebanks team planting trees in the village Podarësh, near the city Radoviš)

The biggest batch was 1020 trees planted at Lake Mladost, Veles. In the summer of 2019, there was big fire around the Lake Mladost which burned 200 hectares of pine forest. The Treebanks team wanted to help in the reforestation process of the area and gather funds for trees to be planted. That is how “September is for Veles” campaign was created, with the idea all trees that will be gathered in September to be planted in Veles. The campaign was extended until they did the planting. Up to 28.12.2019 they have gathered 720 trees to be planted. Since they had more space available, they have asked and received 300 more trees to plant, donated by the municipality of Veles. Mihail further describes the process:

“Right after the campaign, we started working on the bureaucracy for the planting action. The Mayor of Veles, Ace Kocevski welcomed us for a meeting. Our initiative to plant trees at the burned areas was well received. He informed us that there was crisis team formed for reforestation and they will inform us when they will organize planting so we can plant with them. We filled a request for permit for planting in Municipality of Veles and contacted with the chief of environment protection sector in Municipality of Veles. And... we waited, waited and waited. The temperatures were too high for planting. And we waited, waited and waited. On 19.12.2019 we received a call from Biljana from the Municipality of Veles that there will be planting action on Saturday. I started calling people for transportation, helpers and everything else...”

Treebanks started as an initiative in December 2018, and in March 2019, Mihail officially established and registered the company Bank of Trees.

The first challenge that Mihail and his team faced was the bureaucracy for receiving a planting license to be able to plant trees. The process is time-consuming and affects the planting procedure.

Currently, they have been approved a license to plant trees in the municipalities Ohrid, Veles and the city of Skopje.

“The bureaucracy has made the tree planting process a little more difficult. The process is time-consuming. It has also affected the species of trees that we are going to plant. We are adding multiple species of trees. Most of the trees in the first action will be black locust in accordance with the Public Enterprise Macedonian Forests planting plan”.

Treebanks is a Social Impact Award winner for 2019. For this idea, Treebanks is not financially supported by anyone. They have tried applying for a grant, but did not enter in the finalists from North Macedonia. That is the only application they have sent for financial support.

In order to gather funds, he has thought of selling T-shirts and blouses with the Treebanks logo on them to people want to support the cause. They have also made a decoration for the winter holidays as a promotional product.



(Treebanks blouse and ornament)

The next step is to reach financial sustainability, to build better infrastructure and increase their tree planting capacity for planting trees. So far, they planted 1,700 trees and in 2020, they hope that they can reach the number of 3,000 planted trees.

“What a year we had! Lots of new things learned, more ups, a little bit of downs, lots of positive feedback, openness, acceptance, simply said, 2019 was great for Treebanks. 1,700 trees planted with your help, without you, you who booked your trip, you who bought Treebanks t-shirt, you who bought Treebanks ornaments, you who helped with the design, you who helped with the strategy, you who spread the word about Treebanks, you who cheered to continue stronger, you who helped planting the trees. THANK YOU!”

We are the saviours of planet Earth

Personal advice

“In my opinion, it would be best to test the idea, to be dedicated and to be persistent. Do not quit after the first closed door. I tell this to everybody, learn from everything and educate yourself in a general sense. Business is not only one thing to learn, it is a combination of experiences and knowledge. You will never know what information or interest can open the door. When you are at a networking event and you meet Bill Gates, and he is interested in some pastry, and you know some information about that pastry, you have an entrance to talk to Bill Gates. I am suggesting this from personal experience. You can never know who you will meet and where”

Meet Natalija Burgieva - Founder of Mama Organa

“We promote circular economy”

Mama Organa is a social enterprise that promotes circular economy, gender equality and work integration of vulnerable groups of people. It is a company formed to collect food waste and by adding value to it, to produce organic fertilizers and innovative soil substrates. Mama Organa also provides jobs for socially excluded single parents.



The idea for Mama Organa was created when Natalija, as a single parent, was faced with financial and health challenges after she became unemployed. She is an economist, but the environment is her passion. She started to self-educate on the subject “organic food” and in 2017 she founded Mama Organa, a company that collects food waste, produces organic fertilizers and employs predominantly single mothers at social risk.

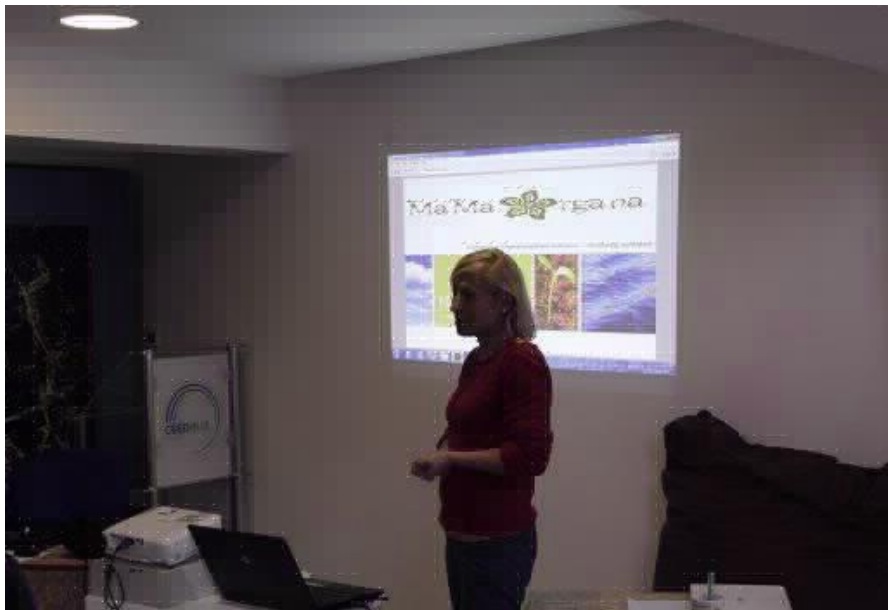
“A few years ago, due to personal health problems, I started researching the foods we eat. The conclusions I drew point out that in addition to nutritional values, the food also has other toxic ingredients that directly damage our health and body”.

Natalija changed her diet and nutrition plan, but there were new challenges ahead. The scarce organic food and its high price made her think about what she could do to improve her and other people’s health and to make organic food more accessible and affordable.

She has also contributed to the work of some civil society organizations, where she learned that 30% of the food is thrown away and there is an increasing amount of people that could not afford any kind of food. She could not accept that there is such a modern paradox, given that she was really close to be one of those people. Natalija made it her mission to improve the situation. She further explained that the whole concept and business plan of Mama Organa was a set of her own personal challenges.

Then, she realized that such a solution could contribute to the global challenges, not only local.

“I did some experiments that gave surprisingly good results and then came up with the idea that my knowledge and solutions to personal challenges could be implemented at a higher level and serve as a positive example for the whole of society. I decided to start a company that would have strong ethical principles and at the same time would work to empower women economically”.



(Founder of Mama Organa, presentation at CEED Hub)

That is how the idea for Mama Organa was born. However, instead of making profit for her own wellbeing, she wanted to contribute to society and to her fellow single mothers.

“We live in a world where the linear economy is practiced and where businesses are generally profit-oriented, so being a pioneer, and especially a woman who wants to impose different rules of work, is more than a challenge. For this reason, it was extremely difficult to develop and adopt a business model whose primary goals are the product and the social impact that product exerts”.

At the beginning, Natalija asked for support from the local municipalities, but there was no interest to help her. Her idea was the leftover food from schools and kindergartens to be processed into compost and substrate, whereby municipalities

would not need to provide financial support for the idea, but rather only logistical. However, there is still no interest from the local authorities to support Mama Organa.

Given that she did not have any support, she applied in an accelerators program of CEED Hub Skopje. Natalija further explains that:

“There they understood our purpose and mission and with their help, we developed an innovative business model that encompasses as much as 8 of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Points, and we also received financial support”.

Mama Organa also received financial support as seed capital in order to buy raw materials and to pay wages. During the acceleration program, Mama Organa participated in few start up competitions with great success.

“We won several startup competitions and participated in the Impact Hub investment program in Vienna, where we further adapted the business model to circular economy, gender equality and social impact”.

In 2017, they won the national competition for Best Green Business Idea “Philanthropy through Green Ideas”. They won at “Get in the Ring” startup competition 2017, and competed for the Startup Europe prize in Brussels in 2018.

In 2019, they won "Startup Europe Award 2019", in the category of "Best Job Growth Startup", as special winner. It was a special edition that recognized 5 startups focused on social impact.



(Startup Europe Award 2019 Winners)

Currently, Mama Organa is entering the scaling phase and looking for investment. They have expanded their palette of products with a second green product: ECO cat litter, an antibacterial and biodegradable solution which is already attracting a lot of attention in EU countries. Their next step would be expanding at the EU market and these funds will be used to expand the production capacity and obtain all the needed licenses.

Their mission remains the same, to care for planet Earth and for natural resources, to fight hunger and poverty, to create jobs and to support the economic development of women as individuals. In the future, they plan to enter in education sector and organize workshops to educate on the importance of circular economics, thereby raising public awareness about this type of business model.

“For me personally, taking care of the planet and the holistic approach to living is extremely important. I think we all need to take great care of the planet and love it as a child, and from that point of view, I am developing the company. Companies that make a social impact, as Mama Organa does, replace the word “ego” with “eco”. Profit is important, but not a priority. People’s priority is the well-being and care for the planet. The resources we have as humanity are not infinite, and therefore practicing a circular economy, i.e. using the same resource multiple times (in this case waste) is of paramount importance to everyone. At Mama Organa, all work respects these principles. As a resource we use waste, we pack our products in biodegradable packaging, and with the proceeds we provide material security for mothers and work on their own development”.

Personal advice

“Never be afraid and risk as much as you can. Always try to realize your idea. You never know what can come up from that idea. Even if it fails, there is always something to learn. The next attempt can be more successful. Just be brave and persistent. There is no loss for us. Either you learn and try again or you succeed”.

Meet Ognjen and Elena Fidanoski - Cofounders of Macedonian Honey

“Creating strong bees, resistant to climate change.”

The story of Macedonian Honey has a historical background involving the Fidanoski family tradition up on the mountain ranges of Stogovo and Bistra, Southwest region of North Macedonia, near the cities of Debar and Kichevo, in a place called Ehloec. It is



a village with rich history, but currently it is almost completely depopulated. The Fidanoski family kept bees at Ehloec for 70 years until 1968 when their old family house has been burned down.

When they returned to that place 40 years later, old memories and future plans united and the idea of Macedonian Honey was born. They “installed” 10 beehives on the old place where their family kept bees. Their mission is to create a better future for honeybees.

“At this time, with Colony Collapse Disorder and a host of illnesses, mites and beetles undermining the bees’ health and endangering their survival, instead of focusing on how much honey we can get from the bees, we must ask what can be done to protect, strengthen and heal them... that’s how it all started”.

For Ognjen and Elena, today we are faced with a double crisis – environmental and economic, and sustained economic growth is imperative for environmental protection. They continue:

“The environment and the economy are inseparable. ‘Environment’ is where we live and ‘development’ is what we do to sustain our living. With our work we are creating new possibilities on a forgotten land, once very wealthy. We are making this land love again, because we believe that this is the only way to make sustainable economy and make sustainable living for us and future generations”.

Since their start in 2015, they have revolutionized beekeeping with their invention ‘Elle Hive’. They have designed a beehive for which they believe that “Conforms to the natural habits of the bees and make the work of the beekeeper easier”.

They wanted to create a system of activities together with the beekeeping equipment which will allow bees to efficiently use their coded defensive mechanism in fighting their predators and dealing with diseases.

“Bees are responsible for 1/3 of all our food, because they pollinate 70 percent of the crops that provide most of the world’s food including the alfalfa eaten by dairy cows. So, milk, butter, cheese, whipped cream and ice cream could all be missing from future tables, if bees are missing from this world”.

With their innovative idea and process, they have been winners of several national, regional and continental awards, as well as participants on various conferences and expos. Macedonian Honey presented their first innovative product at the first ‘Health, Wellness and Fitness Expo’ held in Skopje. In 2016 they have been



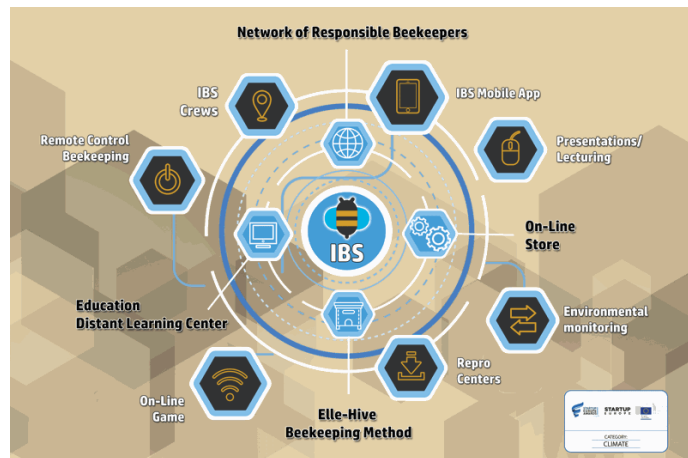
participants in HUB Skopje acceleration program in the country. They also participated at the ‘Global CEED Conference’ in Sofia, Bulgaria, meeting all important global stakeholders in business in one place. Later that year, they were winners of a competition for participating in the Investment Ready program organized by IMPACT HUB Vienna, creating scalable solutions to societal problems, which helped them build a successful business plan. In 2017, they were the selected social enterprise from the country to take the active role in the ‘Central and Eastern Europe IMPACT DAY’ held in Vienna. They also were the finalist of ‘Get in the Ring’ competition, selected as a company aiming to make positive impact in this world. In November that year, they were the national winners chosen to participate in the ‘Startup Europe Awards’ in the category ‘Climate’ which they won the following year.



(Elena Fidanoska receiving the award 'Startup Europe Awards')

Ognjen and Elena have also established International Bee Station that serves as a station where international supporters and fans from over the world can contribute for the joint mission to fight bee decline.

“We are introducing new approach and new light on the problems of the bees and environment in general. Creating a movement in which the most important role will be saving the bees and helping the biodiversity. Spreading the movement to the European continent by creating the first ‘International Bee Station’ of its kind”.



Personal advice

“You have to be adaptable and to learn along the way. Persistence, dedication and hard work. I would quote Churchill – no success is final, no failure is fatal, it is the courage to continue that counts. You have to contemplate and reflect everything you do and learn to do it better. Everything is a lesson. Also, be prepared. Sometimes there are unplanned situations that can provide an opportunity if you are well prepared”.

Meet Dragana Neshovska – Cofounder and CEO of Solveo

“We deliver breakthrough solutions and help your business grow.”

The sprouts of the idea for establishment of Solveo have begun several years ago when Dragana and Ivan (co-founder of Solveo) returned to Skopje, from their master studies in business and marketing in London. While they were studying, they realized that the opportunities students have in North Macedonia were scarce. The internships were just a formality without learning opportunities and incentives. In London, they saw that students can go and talk to and learn from companies such as Coca-Cola, VISA, Heathrow Airport and other great corporations and businesses.

“Although the curriculum was great, we worked with many companies on their projects, which somehow were related to the university. Students get practical experience while the company gets creative and innovative ideas from students”.



That is how the initial idea for Solveo was developed. They wanted to help the companies, but at the same time to help the students (youth). However, the first impression for Solveo was that it is an NGO (non-governmental organization).

“We are still being asked: why do you want to work with youth? Our initial idea was not to build a million-dollar company. We wanted to have an impact. However, we are a business and our goal is to be sustainable and scalable and to grow beyond the national borders”.

However, they realized that the companies in the country were not open for such a collaboration with youth. It was hard to sign a contract with a company and work in combination with youth. So, they started to go to events.

Dragana continues *“We were going to every event possible and meeting people that were ever present on these events. After a while, we met with a CEO of a company that saw our idea as visionary idea. He helped us a lot because we were in a situation where we did not know what we will do, he brought us a client from Sweden”.*

They have since adopted a new model which provides an improved product development and market placement for their clients. Dragana explains the model as *“a team of 9-12 people divided in four groups tasked to find different innovative solutions for their client”*.

Despite the change of the work model, they did not leave the old model entirely. They organize one event per year, traditionally held in April or May, where students find solutions for companies.

“We find three sponsors for which we organize a dedicated challenge. Three teams work for every company. It all leads to the final event where nine to ten teams work for three companies and we run the whole process. When students work on projects that last couple or several months, our team provides a daily or weekly feedback to steer them in the right direction”.



(Rethink Creative Marathon event)

They mostly work with small and medium-sized companies, since they are more open to new approaches, they are more adaptable and easy-going. Working with big corporations such as VIP (A1), T-Mobile and others is a challenge, given that they are always planning 3-5 years ahead of time, they are not adaptable nor open to change.

In terms of seeking financial support, they have applied for a grant from the Fund for Innovation and Technology Development, but their application was not successful.

Dragana says *“we ascribe the outcome of the application to ourselves because we did not have the funds to dedicate a team, given that our resources were scarce and already engaged in a project”*.

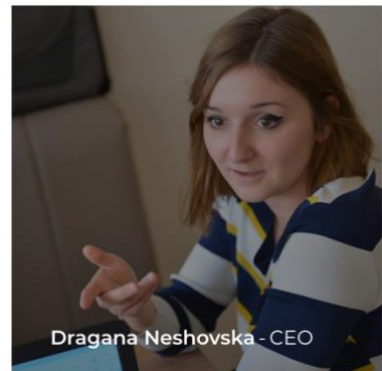
However, they had support from families, friends, collaborators and partners that helped them during the first projects and events. They were there as part of the team to help, especially with logistical support.

“We started probably as every start-up does. We did not have employees and offices, we worked from home, co-working spaces, from everywhere”.

Their biggest challenge is to explain to their potential clients what Solveo does. Companies have more trust in already established marketing agencies rather than picking someone new.

“We are not a marketing agency, we are presenting ourselves as innovation consultants, something that does not exist in the country. Our model is an adapted version of what we saw in England”.

Another challenge is the perception of her and her team when she walks into a meeting.



“People see me as a young female person and their perception is you are young; you still have time to succeed. Sometimes they do not perceive me seriously. There was one time that made me furious, when a big company called us on a meeting and the business manager started to insult a member of our team, not personally, but... anyways it was a weird and tricky situation”.

The third challenge is to get the first meeting.

“Solveo is not a company that sends an offer before the meeting. We have a process in which we make tailor-made innovation and solution for our clients and companies. It is a bit difficult to get the first meeting without sending an offer to the managers of the company”.

However, practice showed that after a meeting or two, the client is hooked on their model and starts to change their perception of Solveo and its team, given that they are bringing something new and fresh to the market. They are still working based on word-of-mouth. Their successful clients recommend Solveo to their partners, collaborators and others.

Currently, they are a sustainable and profitable company with over 10 employees. Dragana describes their road and company development as a difficult one, with many ups and downs. She says that having clients from their early days made them think that they are already placed on the market and that the client list will grow. They had a 6 months stalemate after the first three clients.

“It was a depressing period. We were already in the work and our processes were cut off. We started doing different things such as writing research papers or reaching to international companies for research. We needed to do something. We talked to managers from KPMG, Vodafone, IKEA and other top innovation companies. At the end, it was not bad at all, because we made contacts that we nurture to this day. Workwise, it was a letdown. We even thought about closing the company”.

Personal advice

“First, share your idea with people. Get your feedback. Do your research. Don’t be afraid of criticism and negative feedback. Second, you need to adapt. I learned that the hard way. If you don’t adopt, you will fail. Third, you have to try your product or service on the market. You have to see in practice and feel



what your product and/or service need. Then, research the market and do a lot of piloting. Test, test, test. The last thing is to be dedicated and to realize that success can’t happen overnight. You have to do the work. It’s all in or nothing”.

Meet Sanja Mitrovska – Cofounder and CEO of Networker

“We make startups, startup!”

Sanja’s story is a bit different from the others. She always wanted to have an impact and it all started when she was an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Economics in Skopje. Although she had a platform and a pleiad of students to teach, she wanted something more - to help people learn how to work with finance, but to also help businesses grow and teach them how to work on the market and talk to investors.

Her background in management of financial portfolios helped in taking the initial step, she registered an NGO – Academy for Financial Literacy that conducted trainings and consultancy. However, the business aspect was missing.



In 2019, she established the company Networker. They help entrepreneurs make their idea investible. The first idea was to connect startups with investors and to mediate the process. When Networker launched, something interesting happened:

“When Networker launched, I thought that there will be many ideas and a lot of quality businesses, and a small number of business angels. What happened is it was the other way around. We have more business investors that are ready to invest, but the ideas of the startups are not ready for investment. They need to take a step back, their ideas to be validated on the market”.

To answer to this tricky situation, Networker worked four months to find a way to address this mismatch on the market. They found Google Sprint methodologies that are created by Google Venture Investment Fund that aims to make the startups ready for investment.

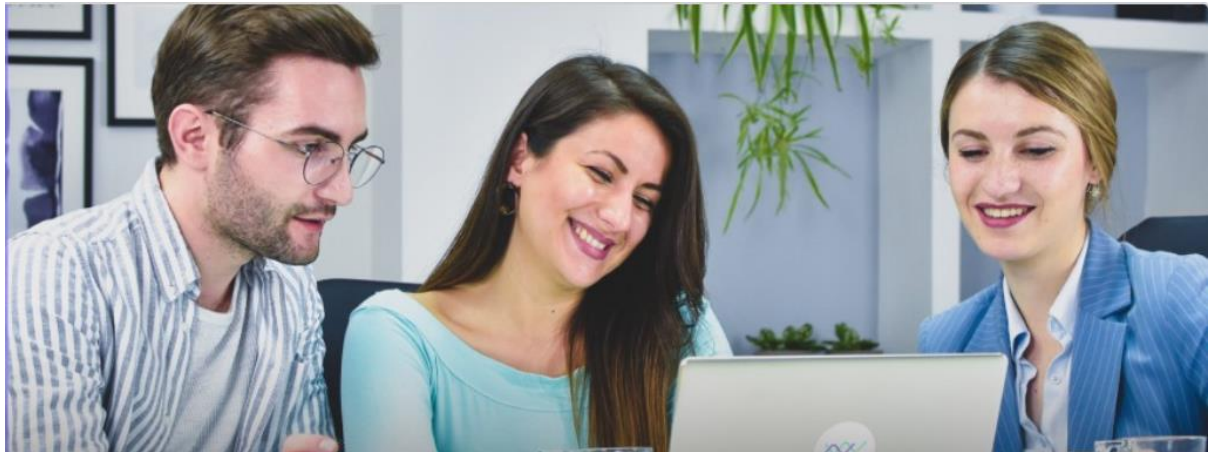
“We use Google Sprint methodologies to make businesses investible in a short amount of time. The design sprints last for five days. In that time period we try to kill the idea by involving the key stakeholders, we try to protect the idea from those factors, we create a prototype and then we give the prototype to real customers - the ideal

buyer persona of the startup. The last day we record the ideal buyer persona moves, feelings, perception, more qualitative research and, if the client is interested, that is used as letter of interest. The founders see a live stream of the process and if they confirm that the process meets their needs or solves their problems, they are interested and ready to pay for development of the product, we already have confirmed pricing and marketing strategy etc., and you can look for funding from investors”.

Their experience has showed that research is key for innovation. Innovators and entrepreneurs need to share their idea and ask potential customers, friends, family how they perceive what they do and how to make it better. Networker has mediated approximately 150,000 EUR from business angels, plus the grants from the Fund for Innovation and Technology Development. Networker view as investor anyone who is ready and willing to invest 10,000 EUR.

It also depends a lot from the founder of the company. Their dedication, mission, objective and what they are prepared to do and give for his idea to become investible and for someone to invest in it. Sanja explains the process further: *“When a founder comes with an idea, we diagnose the idea, calculate how much funding is needed, and communicate the founder openness to give, in terms of shares, royalty etc. We are always assuming that the idea will become investable with our work. It is a mutual dedication from both Networker and the founder. We are trying to set a target, which is the founder’s objective”.*

Despite the work that they have done so far, at a certain point, Networker was on a brink of closure. Sanja says *“the road so far has been hard and full of uncertainties. I was always led by the impact that I make. When I was an Assistant Lecturer, I realized that I can do something with even bigger impact and established an NGO. Then, I learned that people do not appreciate what is given to them for free and it is not a long-term solution for me to continue that work. One of my clients from my previous workplace became an investor and together we founded Networker”.*



(Networker's Team)

In the beginnings, Networker offered mentorship and trainings for financial planning, product development and other, but all these activities took a huge effort and time for both startups and the Networker employees, which led to a situation in which the company did not have any reserves or funds to cover the employees' salaries.

"I was in such trouble. I was thinking that I would have to close the company. Then, I was invited to be a guest speaker at an event and a young person in the audience started to ask questions and one of them was 'Have you ever thought about implementing design sprint methodology, because it will fasten the mentorship period?'. He said indirectly 'I think that your model is wrong'. Afterwards, we talked and I asked him why does he think that, because I felt that my approach is



wrong. He offered the idea to several other companies, but no one took him seriously. After that conversation, I started to research and learn about the methodology, visited classes and after several months I invited him to the first sprint that we did. Essentially, I got involved with this method to save my company. By the way, I hired the person who told me about the methodology, now he is my Art Director".

Personal advice

“The founders must be able to admit when they are wrong and when the model is wrong. They have to know that for the first three to five months they will do everything wrong. There is no luck in business. You have to learn and adapt, and be open to ideas. The founders have to detach from their idea, and see what the market needs. They have to talk with people that have rejected them, accepted them, paid them and so on. They have to put all their energy in one place. You need to have a sales person. For the most part, in startups the CEO is the sales person. If the company does not have a sales person, it is a must to employ a good one”.

THE CASE OF KOSOVO



Meet Valmira Xani - CEO of Ozone Hair Clinic

“Your happiness is our success”

Her story started at a very young age. She started working at 14 years of age, and she has been working for almost 17 years. Her family’s mentality is that someone cannot be fulfilled as a person if the person is not independent. That mentality was adopted by the Ozone Hair Clinic owner who has developed a working and earning habit for her. When she started working, she gave some of the earnings to her parents, to help with the living costs. Valmira describes herself as a hard worker, as a person that does not know any better way to succeed than to work hard for what you want to achieve.

“I started working at a very young age, soon will be my 17th anniversary since I started to work, and I am 31 years old. I was raised and taught that I cannot be fulfilled as a person in any other way, if I am not independent. When at a very young age, with my first salary, I started to give money and help my family, that was the best feeling. In fact, I was still in high school”.

Her friends and sometimes her family criticize her for working long hours, saying that in some cases it is beyond normal. To that, she responds by saying that when you enter the game with that attitude, you cannot go back and reduce the workload. It does not matter what challenges a person would face; it is just not possible to reduce the time that you are already investing.



Valmira has been working for different employers for 15 years, but she had a goal set that by her 30th year she would have her own business. Her company was established two years ago, one month before she turned 30.

The decision to open her own company was very difficult because she had to quit her job in order to make her dream a reality. When she started her company, she did not have any money or revenue to pay for the office rent, so she had to borrow money from her boyfriend and friends. She did not want to see the barriers and/or obstacles,

she just wanted to start her own business. In her mind, there was no option and possibility of failure. Her belief at the time was that if somebody else can do it, she can do it.

“I worked 15 years for others, and my goal was that when I’ll turn 30, I must have something mine. I opened my business 2 years ago, 1 month before turning 30. It was hard because I quit a job, and when I started, I paid the first rent with the money that a friend of mine borrowed”.

Then, everything started to get better than expected. The demand, and with that the revenues, started to get higher; however, she still has the same passion for her work as when she started. From the moment of starting her business until the current interview, she had more than 500 clients.

Her idea for the hair clinic came from her experience working for a hair clinic in Tirana, Albania for four years. She learned how the business operates and, since it is not obligatory to have to a medical doctor to open a hair clinic, she saw it as an opportunity for her own company in the future. Her background consists of pharmaceutical experience and some medical background, given that she started medical school but did not finish it. However, her working experience and knowledge were used to open the clinic, but the work she has done in Tirana also played a huge role. Currently, the clinic has 10 employees. Five full-time staff and the medical team from Istanbul, Turkey.

“For 4 years, I worked in Tirana with such a clinic and there I learned to do this job. But even apart from this, I have a degree in Economy, and some Faculty of Medicine, and even experience in pharmacy, so I have background that makes me capable for this. But the main source of knowledge was that clinic, where I worked a lot and everything”.

The biggest challenge for Valmira was that at the time the hair transplantation services was a novelty in Kosovo. Since it was an innovative service, people thought it would not be properly done and they would not get the service like from clinics abroad. They did not believe that such service could be done professionally in Kosovo.

“The hardest thing was to convince others that we also can do that here. We are also taking a medical team from Istanbul, which can also be seen as a challenge. You have clients who are waiting, but the medical team says that it is busy in that period and then you have to make your potential clients wait. The clinic has a contract with them, but there is still the possibility of the medical team being busy”.

Another challenge was the personal fear. Whether she will succeed or not, whether her investment would bear fruit. It is a constant fear of not succeeding. That is something that never lets her relax.

They also have to work a lot with clients, and in reality, they also do the job of psychologists. Some of the clients are not informed, but there are others who are feeling depressed due to their situation. There are cases where after the preliminary check-up, they found that there is no possibility to plant hair and achieve good results, and they have to tell their clients, which is not accepted well. Other clinics could take such cases, but not her clinic. Valmira wants her clinic to take cases where the quality of the service is guaranteed.

According to her, that is the hardest part, although she does not believe that there is an obstacle she cannot overcome. During these times, her husband is her biggest support. Also, her family and friends provided her with moral support, which she sees it as crucial when starting your own business.

“Mostly it was the fear how people will accept the clinic, how I will suit with the team and actually this fear is always present, because one day they can just say ‘we are too busy and cannot come’. We have contract with them, but I can never stay calm for this, because they can leave. Another part is that I have to talk a lot with the clients... actually I also play the role of therapist sometimes. Since it’s a new thing here, there is a lack of information, so I have to face and talk and explain to everyone. I will also tell that there are some cases when I don’t accept some people, if I say that their donor zone is not ok and there will not be good results. This, because people who will see the client after the procedure, they will not know that the problem was his/her donor zone, they will think that I didn’t do a good job. Maybe there are people or clinics that don’t refuse anyone as client, but I do”.



(Owners of the Ozone Hair Clinic, middle of the picture)

In terms of other kinds of support, for instance financially, she has not received any grants, funds or support from the state, local government, nor grants and donations. She applied once for state support, but the application was not successful. However, she expected that and did not plan for such support, since the business does not require big investments on materials. What it requires is time and patience.

When she was starting, she had very limited budget and she went to Istanbul by herself to buy the necessary equipment. What made it even more difficult was that her knowledge of the English language was very poor. Every day when she got back at the hotel, she was telling her husband that it is very hard for her, because she could not understand nor communicate with the suppliers.

Being constantly tired is also a challenge, because sometimes she had to work for 22 hours per day. There were many days when she slept on the couch in her office. This mostly happens when the medical team arrives, because she wants to be in the office if they need her help with anything. In the first year of the company, there were many such situations.

In terms of obstacles from the state, for instance legal, institutional etc., they did not face any. The work of the clinic runs smoothly. In general, she did not face many administrative challenges. Currently, her clinic is the only one in Kosovo that is licensed to provide such service.

Personal advice

“My advice to other entrepreneurs and innovators is to act upon their idea. Work hard and learn from your previous experiences. That knowledge will provide you with the courage you need to start something new. You need to have passion and love for what you do and have a clear vision where you are headed. Another thing that should be engraved in our minds is that building a brand is hard, but keeping the brand reputation is harder. If you want to do a proper job you have to feel that it is right. If you are working only for profit you will lose your way. The motive and the inspiration can fade. My passion for my job grows with every new successful result. It is a pleasure when people send me messages telling me I have changed their lives”.



Meet Taulant Hoxha – Communications Officer at Bear Sanctuary Four Paws

“A world where humans treat animals with respect, empathy and understanding”

The idea to establish a sanctuary for brown bears in Kosovo was born in autumn 2010 after it became illegal to keep bears privately. At the time, thirteen so-called “restaurant bears” were held in tiny, dilapidated cages next to restaurants for the purpose of attracting customers. Due to the rising number of protests and inquiries from people concerned about these conditions, the Austrian Embassy in Kosovo became active and established a contact between FOUR PAWS and the Kosovan government. FOUR PAWS offered to support the government in finding a solution for these illegally kept animals and agreed to establish a sanctuary for the bears. In September 2012, a land use contract was signed with the City of Prishtina and construction began immediately. In March 2013, Kassandra, the first restaurant bear, was confiscated by Kosovan authorities in the presence of FOUR PAWS and was transferred to BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina. Over the next two months, 12 more restaurant bears were rescued and transferred to the sanctuary. By housing all Kosovan restaurant bears, FOUR PAWS ended this sad chapter of animal cruelty in Kosovo. In the meantime, BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina is also home to bears from Albania saved from life in conditions contrary to animal welfare.

The BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina is located 20 kilometers from the capital of Kosovo near the village of Mramor. The land allocated for the sanctuary by the Municipality of Prishtina covers an area of 16 hectares. Currently, approximately 10 hectares have been developed and provide a near-natural habitat and lifelong home to brown bears formerly kept as restaurant bears in Kosovo and Albania. Three of the bears, now living here, were bought when they were only a few weeks old and kept illegally as pets by Kosovan families. They were discovered and confiscated by the Kosovan police and transferred to BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina in spring 2014. Here, the bears have the chance to live under professional supervision and in an environment suited to their species.



(Picture was taken near the entrance of the BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina)

However, there is a lot more to this story. It gets a lot more personal for the owners. These “restaurant bears” were mostly famous in Kosovo and Albania.

“In one of the restaurants in Tirana, the guy was kind of interested to give them away, he realized that that this is not the right treatment. But then he has said there was a condition, that being “I want to send these just in Kosovo, nowhere else”.

We had some bears that were taken to Switzerland from Albania. Some of them in Germany. The bears are young, 19 to 20 years. In these conditions, they make it 35 maybe 40 years. All of them are in good health. We do health checks annually.



(The bear tableau at the BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina)

The reaction of the people against restaurant bears had a great impact. It raised awareness of animal welfare and right now, the reaction of people when they see what the sanctuary is doing is motivating. Now, when the visitors see how the bears are kept, their reaction is “they are ok, this is different”. The BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina started with two people and now there are 32 employees. Just 4 or five of them are from other places. The others are from the local villages in close proximity to the BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina.

“It started with two people and now we are 32 employees. And just 4 or five of us are from other places. And all others are from the villages nearby. That is another economic impact in the local economy”.

The BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina works as a social enterprise. They reinvest their profits in development of the facilities, activities for raising awareness and education.

“Currently, there is no short-term plan to work on other species. Bears are the focus. However, education is becoming our second most important goal. The education is focused for general animal welfare and environmental protection, not only bears”.



(Education center at the BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina)

There are 45 thousand visitors every year on average. The BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina also features a shop selling t-shirts, blouses, accessories, memorabilia, souvenirs, toys and other items. It has become the main income generating part. All of the products are either from 2 or 3 organizations, small family businesses and civil society organizations. They also have two conference rooms and a vegetarian restaurant, which also contributes to the revenues, as well as the entrance tickets (there are different tickets: 2 euro for adults, 1 euro for children, family passes, groups, students and there are some categories for which the entrance is free). However, it is still not sustainable.

“No, not yet, it's too early. It will take a lot for a whole new concept like social enterprise to develop, like a new thing generally, but we are there. Legally we are a foundation, but because of the income we generate we have to pay back taxes. But we still have long-term goals, and in few years, we hope to be completely sustainable. And the idea is to make the bears project sustainable. There is a huge cost to maintain the whole project. The entire area is 60 hectares, with electricity across the entire area, 24h per day electrical fence. Also, the food for 20 bears, three meals a day, or salaries for the workers”.

The biggest challenge is explaining the concept to others, for instance media or the general population.

“One of the biggest challenges is probably the reaction that we get from media and general population. They state “there are people starving” or “Like we don’t have other issues”. It happens when we push for a reaction to a problem”.

Despite these issues, the BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina is doing well.

“So, in all kind of mess that is happening around, we are doing it right. Usually we get stressed sometimes, we are like ‘this is not going well’. Then we step back and it’s not all black and white. And of course, the feedback that we receive from the people. They can see and make the difference and they are like wow”.

At the end of the visit, we asked the communications officer what is his personal motivation to get involved in the BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina.

“It’s personal, because in my hometown, two bears here are from my hometown. Sometimes I just stop and think ten years after. How far it takes you. But you had no clue that this was horribly wrong. Now they are on the other side of the hill, healthy. That becomes kind of everyday world. Also, people approach you and having this level of trust in you. They see a wolf and they are like ‘you can do something as an organization’ and that is people having trust in you”.



Personal advice

“You have to get involved with what you love, what makes you happy. I wanted to help with marketing and public relations for the sanctuary and I fell in love with this place. Sometimes you have to take risks to find yourself. For some is making profits and personal wealth, while for others, it can be social impact. There are no rules, but be prepared to take risks to find yourself”.



(Expansion of the BEAR SANCTUARY Prishtina)

Meet Florentin Emini – Founder of Florentin’s Cheese

“Try our artizan cheese, from pastures of Gollak!”

It all started at his early age, when as a kid he watched his grandmother make cheese. In the last several years, he was thinking about restoring the family recipes and started producing his own cheese. The idea was to make cheese for his own consumption and share it with family and friends. However, the interest in the several types of cheese was increasing and he thought that it is possible to try and make more quantity without losing any of the cheese’s quality.

A couple of years ago, he started investing and scaling his idea. He built a cheese cave to process and make the cheese. Then, he promoted the product and placed it on the market, but the demand was so high that he did not have the capacity to provide the suitable supply. However, he had a plan for that as well.



“The idea was there because I, as a kid, watched my grandmother make cheese, so it was basically always there, so I made cheese at home for family, friends and for my own consumption. So, I was making cheese for my own consumption as I started, but people were asking for it, and it started like that. Two years ago, I went in on a larger scale, started to get on the market, then I had an interview, I had several local tv stations, they even came in here to see the process, to see the building because I built a cheese cave”.

Up until the making of this interview, he had not received any support from the national or local government. He did everything on his own. The investment was quite high, since the cheese cave and equipment are up in the mountains and the road conditions are not good. He even bought used equipment to make the cheese, because it was cheaper.

“The investments that I had last year, like building a cave and stuff, because it’s up in the mountains and road conditions are very bad, it cost me quite a lot, so, in general my plan is to have return on the investment within 5 to 7 years, but with this rhythm I’ll be there in about 3 and a half years, if things go properly in business”.

The biggest obstacle that he faced were the road blocks from the local government, from the municipality. They did not recognize what he was doing, did not want to help him, and they still do not take any action to improve the road in the village. They have been promising him road improvements for the last 10 years, but still nothing happened. He has sent multiple official requests as a citizen and as a company, explaining that the road is for other citizens from the village, since they need to sell their products.

“The biggest obstacle was the local government, the municipality, I had road blocks from them. Literally they didn’t want to hear that I had this need to, like, to fix the road, I made an official request because I couldn’t afford to pay for the road pavement. They didn’t want to hear it, and they still didn’t take any action on it. Oh, I have so many promises; it’s been like 10 years”.

Another challenge for him is procuring the HACCP certification and the late payments from the markets.

“The food agency cannot issue it so you need to get it from Austria, the producers of Kosovo cannot export to Serbia. Serbia is the main road block for Kosovar production, so I need to get the certificate from Austria in order to export in other states, also in Europe. Now through Albania you can export to Germany, through Italy”.

In terms of late payments from the markets he adds:

“The main obstacle in our market, I’m talking about big chain markets, every one of them wanted to have my cheese, but I needed to wait for the payment for 60 days and I didn’t accept that, because what they do is they get your cheese and they sell it, even if they sell it fast they don’t do the payment. I just didn’t want it because for me as a small producer it’s like financially impossible, I would have to close my businesses within a year, so that’s why I had to find smart solutions to sell it in 2-3 places and that’s it”.

In the village, the majority of the people are shepherds and cowherds producing milk. They provide him with the milk for the cheese. It is a circular economy example where everyone benefits (businesses, society, and the environment).

“I don’t have any farm, but I have a lot of farmers when I’m around and I get the milk from them. Usually these are pastures that are clean, no air pollution, it’s beautiful, and I pay them cash I get the milk and I give the money, because they need this money to survive, because every weekend to get like 200-300 euros cash is very beneficial”.



(Florentin’s Cheese with the Labels)

We also asked him whether it is an option to have his own farm in the future.

“It’s more like, if you have a farm it reduces the development of other farmers, and I’m not interested, the only thing I would like to achieve is to get money to finance the farmers to get more sheep so I can get the milk from them. I have my ways paid; in the market I have everything, so the only thing I’d like is to extend the development of that area because it’s the poorest area of Kosovo basically. I mean doing that it really supports them, so I buy sheep for them and they pay me back with milk. This is my long-term goal”.



(Florentin's Cheese)

However, what saved him a lot of headaches in terms of finances, knowledge and experience was the collaboration with other cheese aficionados. He explains that learning from other experienced people can save time, energy and finances if the person can swallow their pride and talk to people and gather information about the business.

"In my case it was the Macedonian guy, I would say he saved me probably around 20,000 euros with what I had in my mind and what I was planning. With one visit to his farm, he came with the solutions that he did, and we're talking about smart solutions, cheap solutions, he really saved me. I was able to build and have it ready in three months because of these solutions".

His next step is the production of beef prosciutto, an air-dried, salted beef that has been aged two or three months until it becomes hard and turns a dark red, almost purple color.

"This is a type like bresaola, like a beef prosciutto, it's getting really expensive in the market, you lose about 80% of the weight of the meat, but it's really something, with quality, air dried, not smoked, mainly with cheeses, perfect for wine".



(Florentin's Bresaola Curing)

Personal advice

"Please whatever you want to do, just have a good initial plan, start working on market research, pick something that is unique, do not try to copy anybody else and consult with people in that field in general, mostly with professionals, they don't hesitate to give you a proper advice. I myself am having so many people trying to get into artisanal cheese consumption, to learn the stuff so I'm planning to organize cheese making lessons for these kinds of people. Each of them is like 'You know what? I just like to learn from my own consumption. I'm not trying to get into your market and stuff' and I respond 'Dude I don't care as long as you like it and you like making it'. There is a place and a piece there, if you're interested, you'll get there".

Meet Viona Stavileci – Cofounder of Kiku 3D Toys

“We turn kids’ imagination into 3D toys”

Kiku 3D Toys is an UPSHIFT-winning youth-led social enterprise whose goal is to express and improve the creativity of children by turning their 2D drawings into real toys.

Their story began approximately 18 months ago when they were invited by a colleague to enter a competition organized by UNICEF and Innovations Lab Kosovo. They were a group of three who had a completely different idea for competing. The first idea was more of a campaign, but the instructions for the competition were “If you want to compete for a prize then it has to be a product and not a campaign”.



(Kiku 3D Toys on UPSHIFT contest)

Then they started the thinking process for a product that will compete on the contest. One member of the group explained how the process up to developing the idea was running.

“We were working during those three days that we were there and we had to come up with another idea and it was like ‘Ok so what’s the cool thing now’ and it was the 3D printing. It was me and my two friends, all three of us have all been

studying economics so we are like not fond of any technologies, and it was like ‘Ok 3d printing, sure, but what can we do with it‘.

They knew that it had to be something with children and connected to the process of developing their creativity, capacities and use of their imagination. They also knew that there is a gap on the market in Kosovo and in the region in general, given that not much work was being done with small children. She continued explaining the process in steps.

“We came up with the idea to let them draw something and then we can make the toy the way that they drew it. At first, we thought that it was going to be, like, super easy because we thought that there was a software that turns 2D drawings into 3D models, and we were wrong. So, we had to find somebody to do it, and basically that’s it, the first part of the process”.



(Interview with the cofounder of Kiku 3D Toys)

The second part of the process was branding the product and they had to name the product. They thought of the name ‘Kiku’, which means ‘You have where’.

“We just said that we were gonna use this because it means kind of talking to the parent or to the child, so you have a word to create your toy, you have a word to

express your imagination, you have a word to express your level of creativity and even practice it and more, which opens doors to innovation later in life and is also a cool name for a toy“.

They thought that the word would provide a brand and it would be easy to remember. They were inspired by LEGO and their project name/campaign ‘kronkiwongi’.

“When LEGO were asked ‘Why did you use this name?’, they said that it was because, back then, if you would Google search the name ‘kronkiwongi’ there was no search result. It was one of the few words that Google didn’t find anything about, and they used it because of this, because they didn’t want to kind of limit the imagination of kids”.

They started working as a business that uses the profits to cover the costs for toys that they also give for free. The process is simple - one child pays for his/her toys and they are getting a toy for themselves, but they are also paying the cost for another child’s toy, not knowing who the child is.

“We take, like, 1% of the kids whose parents are willing to pay for our services and then with that money, excluding the cost to make it, we use it to make toys and to go to hospitals for example, and we just ask kids from the hospitals, like, just draw something and we’re gonna make it for you for free”.

However, there are many challenges they have faced during their work. Starting from the time-consuming process, because of the 3D printing, huge logistical issues, to support from the family, friends and other.

Regarding the time-consuming process, they had to monitor the whole printing process which takes from 15 to 20 hours. Most of the time the process has to be monitored, since something can get stuck or the 3D model itself or the software is not good enough and then it just crashes. They have to be very careful given that, unless someone is there to push the right button, it can burn the whole thing. It is also a great risk.

In terms of support, it was hard for them to explain why they are involved in social entrepreneurship and what they get from it.

“Our families at first, it was kind of really hard to understand the idea of social enterprises, it was like ‘What do you get from this, why are you working for free, you can do something else with all your time’, but as soon as they saw the first few toys and when we showed some pictures of kids receiving



these toys, especially the ones that we send for free, it was like ‘Ok, now we understand that you’re doing the right thing, it feels right and it looks right’”.

In the beginning, they had consulting support from the professors about the price of the product, how they should market it, how to pitch the idea to potential investors and other advice they could give to make their idea a success.

But then, another challenge arose. Everyone who said that will support them financially by buying a toy from them and sharing it, just disappeared when the products started to sell.

“It was like the first 2 months, and it’s really interesting when you are just discussing the idea with them, people say ‘I’m gonna be the first one to purchase something from you’ and when you start you’re like ‘Come on guys we started, come and buy from us. Oh yeah sure next week I’m gonna do this’ so it’s basically talk, talk, talk, nothing else”.

Their toys were selling mostly because the parents wanted their children to have something different, to have a different toy from their peers, or because they do not want to buy a toy from other toy stores because they do not trust the product, so they buy from Kiku 3D Toys. Viona further explains:

“Unfortunately, at the moment here in Kosovo it’s mostly because ‘I want my kid to have something different, I don’t want my kid to have the same toys that everybody uses’ and we had just a small number of cases where parents actually purchase our services because of not wanting to buy from Jumbo, because they don’t trust the product that they buy there, it’s really cheap plastic, it’s not good for the kid, and then it’s the other part; it was like ‘Because my kid is gonna show off in the classroom with the toy to say I have this on my own’. That’s basically the level of consciousness at the moment that we experienced, and we tried to push forward the idea because it’s good for the environment, you teach your kid this and that, it’s biodegradable, it’s reusable. And also about the imagination and creativity part it was mainly the parents helping the kids to draw ‘Let me just help you with the wing here because it’s gonna look really good on the toy’ and not them wanting their kid to express their creativity and draw it the way they imagined it in their heads”.

The biggest challenge for them remains the moral support from their environment, given that the awareness level for social enterprises is low. Also, 3D printing is new in the country and not many people understand the technology and offer advice, repairs and other services. We asked Viona ‘What’s the biggest challenge that you faced during the implementation phase and during the idea implementation phase?’.

“I’d have to say the moral support, because it’s really hard to explain to people all the time that this is what we choose to do and we really want to commit to this even if it’s not for profit because we’d get the looks of ‘Ok you’re crazy’ or ‘You’re not smart enough and you’re not using it for profit, you don’t know how to use your talent for profit, you just use your talent to make something that you are trying to sell it as something big’. So it’s basically the moral support and even the people that work with 3d printers , we’d reach out to get help, like ‘Can you help us on how to do this and how to do that’ and it was like “ Oh you wanted to go through this business so you can do this by yourself ‘. The competition is terrible in 3d printers and that’s basically what we experienced here and the really insufficient people understanding the technology and somebody providing services”.

Personal advice

“Do not give up because, basically, what we kept thinking was that, if we would have stayed, like, fully committed at the moment that we just kind of went a few steps back, we believe that it would have been better, but it was, like, we’d got really tired and it was like ‘You know what? Let’s just give it some time’ and once you give it some time, then it’s really hard to go back as committed and as motivated as you were back then. And, of course, not everyone’s gonna help you as they say in the beginning, but there will be also other people that will help you even if you didn’t expect them”.

Meet Jeton Haliti and Ditika Zymberi – Cofounders of Cool n'Creative

“We go through steel for your happiness”

Cool n'Creative manufactures and designs decorations of various shapes and sizes, made from steel. The decorations can also be made according to the customer's requirements, such as logos and décor for companies, restaurants, offices, homes etc. It is a family business. It is still just an entrepreneurial innovative initiative that has started around 18 months ago with the first order being placed in August 2018.

The idea for manufacturing and creating design decorations from steel came when they saw machines for cutting steel for industrial jobs such as construction. They thought that they can do something more with the machines, something that can be used as a décor.



“I have a friend who ordered this machine for industrial use, as I said, mainly for making doors, balconies, and he was telling me that he can do something great, and he mainly explained me for industrial use, and then I thought, and then the idea came to me to use it for decoration and not only just industrial

orders. Then, I started to explore the internet and I found very little products like that. I saw that there are not a lot of these kinds of things in the world”.

However, they spent eight months on research before starting to sell their designs. Their process started by trial and error and it went so slowly because they started with small investment.

“We started in January with the idea, and from that we started searching the Internet, what we can do, and it took a lot of time, maybe 8 months, but we went step by step, not fast. We had many ideas, this can do, this other one can do, and after that we did some samples and maybe 30-40 decor samples and, after that, we took pictures of those and started from there. Then we checked all the costs, all profits.

Whether it is ok to start with or not, because we didn't start with a lot of money, maybe 500 EUR in the beginning, and it wasn't too much cost".

They do not own such a machine, they rent it. The machine is expensive and they cannot afford it yet. For that reason, they started to look for grants, for financial support, but so far, they have not tried to apply.

"The machine is expensive. The range is from 3,000-70,000 Euro. It depends on the thickness of steel that you want to cut. That's the reason we're looking for grants, to buy it, because we can't do such a big buy at the beginning of the business, because we didn't know how the business will go. At the moment it's going very well and we have good indications that we can expand".



(Together with co-owners of Cool n'Creative)

Cool n'Creative is still just an initiative, they are not a registered company, since they did not know whether there will be an interest for products such as theirs. However, now they need to register in order to start working as a company, to export and to be eligible for grants.

"The reason we have not yet applied for grant is because we didn't know how this company will grow up. So, now we know that, if we have the resources, the machine,

our offices, designers, maybe we can support all of Europe. We know that we need a machine, CNC Machine, computers”.

They accumulate orders up until the moment it is affordable to rent the machine. For orders, people have to wait for 7 to 10 days, depending on the order. When Cool n’Creative receive an order, they have to make it and work on it on a specific software to make the picture, logo etc. and then make it from steel. The next step is to cut it, paint it and deliver it.

The minimum amount of an order is 20 euros. It is not affordable for them to go below that price. If the order costs less, customers have to order more pieces. They have sold over 1,000 pieces thus far, since August 2018. They have had customers from Kosovo, Switzerland, Germany, France, Albania, North Macedonia, England and other places.

“One year and a half. First order, first cut was in August 2018. It’s a year and a half that we’re on at this point. We had a lot of orders from abroad, like Switzerland, ‘cause we have a lot of Albanians that live in Switzerland, Germany, France, Albania, North Macedonia, London (England)”.

Currently, they are collaborating with painters, designers, companies that rent them the machines, transport and other things. At the beginning, all of that was done by the pair alone.

The biggest challenge for them is that some of the collaborators started copying their work. Given that they rent the machines and provide the designs, it is a great challenge because it represents an opportunity for their collaborators to do the same. They have contracts with them for the service, but they do not have a patent on the designs or on the making process.



(Cool n'Creative products)

“We have a lot of problems, because time after time people see it's a good idea, we make good job and even from our collaborators we saw that they are copying our work. They stole our files, then we finished our collaboration with them and started with a new one. We didn't have any other choice because we had to continue after we did the design, we had to send them”.

One of their collaborators went even further and started a new company with the designs and products made by Cool n'Creative.

“After that we saw that they started a new company with our own designs, our own products, our own photos. They used our photos that we made for marketing. They're coping us. We're doing a good job. They can copy what we have done till now, but they don't know what we will do in the future. They know we're the first, our work is good, people like our products, buy our products... Can you imagine, their store is full with our own designs and products”.

This case has made them careful in the use of marketing for their products. Currently, they use social media marketing and word of mouth. They state that several TV stations have been contacting them to film their story, but also the making and production process, which is not acceptable for them because they had such an unpleasant experience with their collaborators.

“We had many televisions that asked to record the process in a video. In one hand it's good and in another, it's not, because you will have good marketing if you are on television, but then everybody will know how we do it, so we didn't accept [this offer]. We had more than 4 televisions that asked us ‘How are you doing this’, and we didn't accept [to be filmed]”.

Personal advice

“You need to start it; you don't need just to say it. Do something to start it. I sit everyday with people that say ‘I will do this; I will do this if I have this...’ No, no, you can't just say, you just have to start to do something. You can't just wait, and think if ‘I have 10 euros, I can do this, or 100 euros’... no, no, everybody can find these days 200 euros to start something new. I think we started with 500 euros, but maybe we could have started with only 200 euros. You need to know what are you doing. You need to believe in your idea and start doing it”.



Conclusions

As a field of study, entrepreneurship is an increasingly popular field. It has a growing community of scholars researching entrepreneurship through different methodological perspectives and from a wide spectrum of disciplines. Nowadays, entrepreneurship covers a view wider than family businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises. However, the importance of individualism in the entrepreneurial activities is frequently underrated.

The evidence from our research have shown that individualism and the characteristics of entrepreneurs and innovators are key for the success of their companies. The mindset of those in charge makes the difference between failure and success. Several mutual traits were found among the (social) entrepreneurs and innovators that were a part of this research.

Consequently, we can characterize these types of people as hard-working, passionate, dedicated, risk-takers, people that trust and believe in their capabilities and in those of their team, surround themselves with people that believe in them and believe in collaboration and competition.

These were the traits and characteristics that we found while they shared their story with us in both North Macedonia and Kosovo. It appears that the geographical location does not matter when we are describing an entrepreneurial or innovators' mind.

From the stories it can also be concluded that research is key for success. Most of these entrepreneurs and innovators have spent a lot of time in investigation of the market, possibilities, costs and other details that are essential for launching a business, a product or a service.

Also, the need for the same and similar type of research where the entrepreneurs' and innovators' personal stories are in the foreground was highlighted as key for providing role models and comradery for new and upcoming entrepreneurs and innovators.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. To research entrepreneurs' and innovators' stories on a regular level, to share various experiences and practices;
2. To keep researching in the already researched countries, but to also widen the area on a regional level (Western Balkans);
3. To organize a series of meet-ups on a national and regional level (it can even be online), for entrepreneurs and innovators to share their stories in front of an audience, but also to network on both levels;
4. To make follow-ups of the already researched stories to track their development;
5. To research how Covid-19 has affected entrepreneurs and innovators and their businesses;
6. To make vlogs with entrepreneurs and innovators that can be disseminated online.

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Appendix 1 - Information List for Participants

Information List for Participants

Research project title:

INNOVENT – Building Bridges for Greater Impact

Researcher:

Stefan Chichevaliev, e-mail: stefan@seobservatory.org; telephone number: +38978305868

Dear participant,

Thank you for accepting to read this informative list.

You are invited to take part in this research closely related to your work and everyday life. It is of utmost importance to us that you understand why this research is conducted and what it will include, before you decide if you are going to participate. Please take time to read this information list carefully and to ask any questions you might have in terms of clarification or further information.

Receipt of the information list does not imply that you are obliged to participate. Should you decide to participate, you shall be required to sign the Declaration of Consent enclosed below, which you would also need to read carefully prior to signing.

Brief information about the research

The aim of this research is to collect and share useful and relevant information to determine best practices, lessons learned and role models that foster entrepreneurship and innovation in North Macedonia and Kosovo and to promote personal stories of entrepreneurs and innovators. The research includes qualitative data gathering and analysis – through semi-structured interviews conducted with entrepreneurs and innovators.

Why are you chosen for this research?

You are invited to participate as entrepreneur and/or innovator.

What should you do? Procedure

After you sign the Declaration of Consent, the researcher will ask you a certain number of questions enabling you to discuss this topic and to express your viewpoints and opinions. Please take note that there are no correct or incorrect answers and that your knowledge and experience in the field are of utmost significance for the research.

The interview will take no more than 60 minutes of your time.

Furthermore, each interview will be analysed and the analysis will be used for the purposes of the research indicated above.

Making a decision – should you participate?

Accepting to read this informative list does not oblige you to participate in this research – the decision of whether you will participate or not is completely yours. Should you decide to participate, you will be required to sign the Declaration of Consent enclosed in this information list.

Moreover, even if you decide to participate, you have complete freedom to withdraw from the research, without specifying the reasons thereto.

Confidentiality and privacy

All information received about you and from you during this research will be stored in protected database and will be fully confidential. Should you make explicit request, any information enclosing your identity will be anonymized, and all other personal information will be adequately removed and replaced by pseudonyms or by other form of non-personal identification.

Information obtained during this interview will be used solely for analysis purposes. No other use will take place without your written consent.

Research results – what will they be used for?

Research results will be primarily used to provide insight of best practices, lessons learned and role models that foster entrepreneurship and innovation in Kosovo. You are welcome to read the research and analysis upon publication.

Contacts for additional information

Should you require clarification or additional information, or should you wish to discuss any aspect of the research, please contact researcher

Stefan Chichevaliev, e-mail: stefan@seobservatory.org; telephone number: +38978305868.

I express my sincere gratitude for your cooperation.

Appendix 2 – Declaration of Consent

Declaration of Consent

Research project title:
INNOVENT – Building Bridges for Greater Impact

Name of researcher: _____

Participant identification number: __ Please use initials to sign

1. I hereby confirm that I have read and understood the project Information List dated _____ that provides explanation regarding the research, and that I was provided with opportunity to ask questions about the project.
2. I hereby confirm I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw at any given time, without specifying reasons thereto, and that such decision will not result in any negative consequences.
3. Furthermore, should I not feel comfortable in providing answer to any of the asked questions, I have the right to refuse to answer.
4. I hereby confirm I understand that my answers shall be strictly confidential, should I make such request. Simultaneously, I grant permission for access to my anonymized answers.
5. I hereby consent to the use of data provided by me for future research cases.
6. I hereby consent to take part in this research.
7. I hereby consent to the publication of my name in list of participants in this survey, without linking it to specific results thereof.

Name of participant
(or legal representative)

Date

Signature

Main researcher
To be signed in the presence of participant

Date

Signature

Number of samples: 2

Once the Declaration has been signed by all parties, each party shall receive one sample in addition to the Research Information and other information provided in hardcopy. One sample of the Declaration shall be kept in the research file, stored at safe location accessible only to the researcher.

Appendix 3 – Guide for interviews with Entrepreneurs and Innovators

Guide for Interviews with Entrepreneurs and Innovators

Project Title:

INNOVENT – Building Bridges for Greater Impact

General questions about the respondent

Q1. Name and Surname (voluntary)

Q2. Company's name

Q3. Job position

Q4. Age

a) 18 – 29;

b) 30 – 39;

c) 40 – 49;

d) 50 – 59;

e) 60 – 64;

f) Over 60.

General information about the enterprise

Q5. In what year was the enterprise established? (Year of establishment)

Q6. What is the enterprise's activity sector? (Education, IT, Services...)

Q7. What is the size of the enterprise? (Micro, small, medium-sized, big...)

Human Resources

Q8. Could you tell me how many employees does your organization have?

Q9. Could you tell me how many volunteers does your organization have?

Personal story

Q10. Could you please tell me how did you start your company?

Q11. Could you please tell me how did you get the idea for the company (product, service, software)?

Personal motivation

Q12. In your opinion, what is the (personal) motivation for involving in entrepreneurship and/or innovation (Why are you involved in entrepreneurship)?

Innovation

Q13. In your opinion, has your enterprise introduced any innovations?

Institutional Determinants

Q14. Have you ever collaborated with local authorities?

If yes, what was the collaboration about?

If no, why not?

Q15. Have you ever collaborated with state authorities?

If yes, what was the collaboration about?

If no, why not?

Q16. Could you please tell us what are your best practices in collaboration with various actors, stakeholders?

Q17. Could you please tell us what have you learned from the communication and the collaboration with various actors, stakeholders?

Q18. Have you ever received any kind of support from local or national authorities?

If yes, what kind of support?

If no, why not?

Q19. Have you ever received any kind of support – donation, grant, technical support...?

Infrastructure

Q20. In your opinion, do start-ups and innovators have supporting infrastructure?
(Grant funds, institutional and technical support, counsellors, national or regional networks for entrepreneurship and innovation, coalitions, umbrella organizations...)

Q21. Can you share your own personal view and experience of the road taken thus far?

Q22. In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for entrepreneurs and innovators?

- a) Small market (Business determinants);
- b) Competition (Business determinants);
- c) Difficulties in finding and affording a physical space to work (Financial determinants);
- d) Difficulties in communicating to customers (Business determinants);
- e) Limited public awareness of the company (Business determinants);
- f) Lack of support organizations (Institutional determinants);
- g) Lack of favourable tax treatment (Legal determinants);
- h) Bureaucracy (Institutional determinants);
- i) Difficulties in getting financial support from various sources (Financial determinants);
- j) Low pay for employees/low-paid employees (Financial determinants);
- k) Low motivation of employees (Institutional determinants);
- l) Difficulties recruiting employees and volunteers (Business determinants);
- m) Lack of institutional support (Institutional determinants);
- n) Lack of legal framework – laws and bylaws (Legal determinants).

Personal message

Q23. What is your (personal) message to other and future entrepreneurs and innovators?

Q24. Is there anything you would like to add to this interview, related to your personal experience and practice, that we did not ask, but is important?

Appendix 4 – List of Participants

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Organization</i>
Mihail Stevchev	Founder and CEO	Treebanks
Natalija Burgieva	Founder and CEO	Mama Organa
Elena and Ognjen Fidanoski	Cofounders	Macedonian Honey
Dragana Neshovska	Cofounder and CEO	Solveo
Sanja Mitrovska	Cofounder and CEO	Networker
Valmira Xani	Founder and CEO	Ozone Hair
Taulant Hoxha	Communications Officer	Bear Sanctuary Four Paws
Florentin Emini	Founder and CEO	Florentin's Cheese
Viona Stavileci	Cofounder	Kiku 3D Toys
Jeton Haliti and Ditika Zymberi	Cofounders	Cool n'Creative

Appendix 5 – Project INNOVENT

INNOVENT

TRENDS THAT ARE RESHAPING THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP & INNOVATION IN WB6

CONTRIBUTING TO THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF ENTREPRENEURS AND INNOVATORS AS KEY ACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION

SAMPLE SIZE

ENTREPRENEURS AND INNOVATORS



IN 6 ENTREPRENEURS & 4 INNOVATORS WERE INTERVIEWED.



IN 6 ENTREPRENEURS & 4 INNOVATORS WERE INTERVIEWED.

INNOVENT

STAKEHOLDERS



Entrepreneurs



Civil Society



Innovators



Partners



Swedish Institute



Lund University

COMPENDIUM

BEST PRACTICES-LESSONS LEARNED-ROLE MODELS



TOP 10 TRAITS OF THE ENTREPRENEURS & INNOVATORS

- 👉 WORK HARD!
- 👉 NEVER GIVE UP!
- 👉 BELIEVE IN YOUR IDEA, EVEN IF NO ONE BELIEVES IN IT AT THE BEGINNING!
- 👉 BE PASSIONATE!
- 👉 LOVE YOUR JOB/WORK!
- 👉 COLLABORATION GOES A LONG WAY!
- 👉 COMPETITION MAKES YOU STRONGER!
- 👉 THERE IS NO ENEMY!
- 👉 SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PEOPLE THAT BELIEVE IN YOU!
- 👉 TRUST AND BELIEVE IN YOURSELF!

INNOVENT IS A PILOT PROJECT SINCE IT REPRESENTS THE FIRST STEP IN CONTINUING THE COLLABORATION, STRENGTHENING RESULTS AND PROVIDING SUSTAINABILITY BY INCLUDING OTHER WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES AND ALUMNI.