

Young people from the region on the European stage: what does it actually take to turn an idea into a business?

At the 11th EUSAIR Annual Forum in Skopje, one panel stood out for the directness of its opening question: what does a young person in the Adriatic-Ionian Region actually need to turn an idea into a viable business? And who bears responsibility for making that possible?

Shared challenges, named plainly

Answering that question required, above all, an honest account of the obstacles. Young people across the region face the same structural barriers: brain drain that hollows out local communities, a persistent mismatch between what education systems offer and what labour markets demand, and unequal access to opportunities depending on where someone happens to live. In smaller, rural and island communities, these barriers run deeper and are harder to overcome.

The panel was moderated by Diana Hećimović, Pillar 5 Coordinator at the Croatian Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, and brought together stakeholders who approach the topic from different angles — from EU-level policy to direct entrepreneurial experience.

From a statistic to a startup: what no university teaches

Niko Bucalo, founder of the Croatian startup Textiloop, opened with a concrete figure: every European generates 16 kilograms of textile waste per year. Textiloop treats that volume as raw material — using AI technology, they collect industrial textile remnants and turn them into new value.

Behind that idea, however, lay a challenge that no curriculum addresses: how to reach the right people, networks and support structures at the moment they are most needed. Bucalo's story is not an exception — it is precisely the kind of experience that young entrepreneurs across the Adriatic-Ionian Region recognise as decisive. The shortage is rarely one of ideas. It is one of access.

What the evidence shows, and what the region needs

Maja Mimica, lead expert on the study *Skills for a Competitive and Resilient EUSAIR Region*, provided the analytical foundation for those concrete experiences. The study identifies the competencies most critical to the region's long-term competitiveness: technical, digital, green and entrepreneurial skills — all of them in short supply or unevenly distributed, both across and within countries.

Julien De Beys from the European Commission (DG Employment) brought the EU-level perspective: which policy instruments are available, how funding can be deployed, and

where a macro-regional framework such as EUSAIR can bridge the gap between European ambition and local reality.

Tanja Kožuh, Director of the Primorska Technology Park, spoke from practice: what it takes to build a functioning support ecosystem for young entrepreneurs, what infrastructure is indispensable, and why funding schemes without mentoring and networking rarely produce lasting results.

Two flagships with the potential to change the picture

The discussion gave precise form to what is missing: connected, inclusive support structures that are accessible to all young people, regardless of whether they live in a regional centre or on a remote island. Two Pillar 5 flagships were highlighted as having real structural potential:

EUSAIR Skills Alliance for the Future — for systematically aligning education, labour markets and entrepreneurial ecosystems across the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

Youth Entrepreneurship Alliance — for connecting young entrepreneurs with mentors, investors and public institutions, with the explicit aim of making access to opportunity independent of geography.

What the panel concluded

Investing in youth skills and entrepreneurship is not a social policy measure — it is a prerequisite for the long-term competitiveness and resilience of the entire region. The panel substantiated that argument at multiple levels, from EU policy frameworks to the personal account of a startup founder.

The 11th EUSAIR Annual Forum in Skopje demonstrated that the framework for cooperation is in place. The question that remains is not whether action is possible, but whether joint initiatives will translate into concrete, measurable steps that reach the young people they are designed to serve.