

SOCIAL INNOVATION – AN EMERGING CONCEPT IN EASTERN EUROPE

WILL THESE COUNTRIES MANAGE TO OVERCOME THE BARRIERS THAT HINDER THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL INNOVATION AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE ENABLING FACTORS OR WILL THE CONSTRAINING FACTORS PREVAIL?

The term social innovation is relatively new in the countries in Eastern Europe. However, there have been many initiatives in the region that could be classified as such and that occur in a variety of fields such as education, energy, environment, transport, etc. Although the innovation policies in the region are not specifically focused on the development of social innovations, there are also drivers and successful practices that demonstrate the potential of this type of innovations to achieve positive impacts. [1]

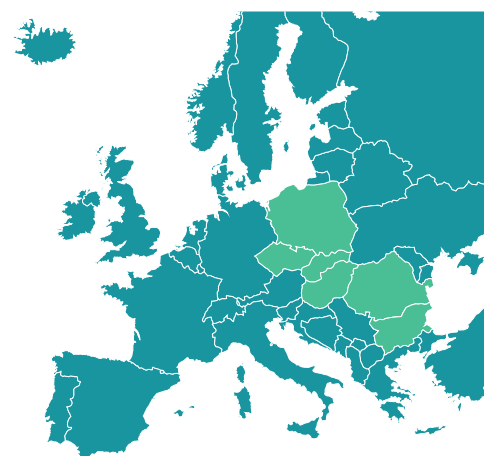
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INNOVATION PERFORMANCE IN EASTERN EUROPE

The Eastern European countries covered in this article are: Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic. According to the European Innovation Scoreboard, the innovation performance of these countries stayed below that of the EU average during the last decade. [2] However, the future perspectives for the innovation potential of the Eastern European region seem optimistic. Eastern Europe has the opportunity and capacity to contribute to a better

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future by developing innovations that would address certain challenges, such as reducing poverty, reaching social cohesion, and coping with environmental issues. In this regard, Mr. Martin Kern, the Interim Director of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, states that *“There is great untapped potential for innovation in the Central and Eastern European Member States! We should use it to further enhance Europe’s competitiveness and our position in the global innovation performance”* [3]. In addition, social innovations could play a key role in boosting innovation performance of the Eastern European region.



Map of Europe, the countries highlighted in the map are addressed in the article.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

Social innovation is a relatively new concept in the Eastern part of Europe, which only recently started gaining popularity. There are initiatives in the region that comply with the definition of social innovation but these have neither been recognized as such, nor have they been researched or analyzed. Sometimes, even innovators themselves are not aware that what they are doing could be considered social innovation. Desk research results show that instead of social innovation, social enterprise is the term that is more commonly used in the countries under scrutiny. Both terms are linked to

activities of the third sector and the alternative provision of social services by civil society. In Hungary, for instance, social enterprise is much more used than social innovation, while in Poland, Bulgaria and Romania the term is applied in the context of social economy and social entrepreneurship. In Slovakia, social innovation is usually used as a synonym for social affairs [1].

Although social innovation still is not a widely spread concept in Eastern Europe, there are some projects funded by the European Commission that aim at popularizing the concept not only in Eastern Europe but in Europe as a whole, by mapping and analyzing social innovation practices. Examples of such projects are SI-Drive [4] and CASI [5], both funded under the FP7.

EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL INNOVATION INITIATIVES IN EASTERN EUROPE

What social innovations in Eastern European countries have in common is that they are mainly related to activities of civil society organizations, introduced either in response to social needs or in order to address certain challenges. These innovations mainly occur in the field of education, environment, transport, and energy. Examples are:

- **Education – “Jumpido”** in Bulgaria is an educational software for primary school students that offers a new methodology of learning mathematics through a set of educational games and at the same time encourages children to engage in sportive activities.
- **Environment – “Farmama”** in Slovakia is a project concerned with urban farming. It publishes manuals and tips for growing, storing and using herbs, fruits and vegetables and aims at encouraging people in urban areas to farm on their balconies.
- **Energy – the “Unit for Social Innovation and Research”** in Poland is an initiative that aims at facilitating the creation of meaningful social innovations that solve real-life social problems and challenges, one of which is the reduction of energy use.
- **Transport – a project** in South Moravia (the Czech Republic) equips buses with trailers and trains with additional compartments for transporting bicycles, thus making rail and bus services compatible with using a bicycle [1].

More examples of social innovation initiatives are listed in the infographic. All these examples prove that countries in Eastern Europe seem to be fertile ground for social innovation and social entrepreneurship to take root to meet existing social needs. Detailed information on social innovation initiatives in the countries under scrutiny can be found in the case study reports developed as part of the SI-Drive project [4] and in CASIPEDIA which is an online platform with social and sustainable innovation practices that have been mapped within the framework of the CASI project [5].

Social Innovation initiatives:

Examples from Eastern Europe



Environment

- 1) "Let's clean Bulgaria in one day" (BG)
- 2) "Green Sofia" (BG)
- 3) "Urban Community Gardens" (RO)
- 4) "Let's do it, Romania!" (RO)
- 5) "Farmama" (SK)



Education

- 1) "Jumpido" (BG)
- 2) "Digital School" (PL)
- 3) Dynamic Entrepreneurship (PL)
- 4) "Colabs" (HU)



Energy

- 1) "Warmth for the children" (BG)
- 2) "Recycling Map" (RO)
- 3) "Unit For Social Innovation and Research" (PL)



Transport

- 1) "Aha! Car Platform" (BG)
- 2) "Helping cyclists travel on public transport in South Moravia" (CZ)

Overview of social innovation initiatives in environment, education, energy and transport in Eastern Europe (note: The “Canva” online tool was used for creating the infographic).

ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SOCIAL INNOVATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

Research in the domain of Social Innovation reveals that several factors exist that foster the development of social innovation in Eastern Europe. Among them are the existing financial programs and instruments, the positive reforms in the regulatory environment for social enterprises and the strong individual leadership of innovators, who often are the ones initiating social innovation. However, what is still needed in Eastern European countries, with regard to fostering social innovation, is awareness raising about successful social innovation initiatives and the mobilization of more volunteers. The lack of a volunteering culture, in turn, is among the factors that hinder the development of social innovations in the Eastern part of Europe. Together with the lack of funding on national level, a lack of social and policy support for social innovation initiatives and an underdeveloped entrepreneurial culture, an unfavorable environment for the development and scaling of social innovations is created.

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Even though these obstacles are expected to continue hindering the development of the social economy in Eastern Europe in the coming years, social innovations seem to be the best solution to meeting social needs and tackling societal challenges.

CONCLUSION: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

As already mentioned, the term social innovation is still not widely spread in Eastern Europe and remains relatively unknown. It could be claimed that social innovation in this part of the continent nowadays is primarily a result of the efforts of the third sector and social entrepreneurs, mainly occurring as response to pressing societal challenges not addressed by public policies. For that reason, social innovation initiatives in the region are very successful in the field of providing social services (mainly to vulnerable groups and Roma minorities), education and employment opportunities.

Yet, the spread of such initiatives is hampered by the unpopular view on voluntarism in the countries under scrutiny and the conservative attitude of policy-makers and institutions towards social innovations. What brings hope that social innovation in the region could boost are the active, open-minded and amenable to innovations young people [1].

REFERENCES

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