

EuropaBio sat down with new National Association Member from Bulgaria, to find out their plans for their national activities within an international framework

Interview with Kristina Eskenazi, Chair of Health & Life Sciences Cluster Bulgaria



About Kristina Eskenazi

Kristina Eskenazi is a founder and member of the managing boards of Health & Life Sciences Cluster Bulgaria (Chair), Bulgarian Bio-scientific Society, Artificial Intelligence Cluster Bulgaria and Bulgarian Employers' Association for Innovation and Technology.

She is a national contact point (for Bulgaria) for cluster Health next to Horizon Europe.

Her background includes a broad range of communications, marketing, and public affairs issues for public and private sector clients in many fields in the past 20 years. She is Community Manager at Trending Topics SEE, CEO and founder of MassMedia Foundation.

1) Could you describe your members and what they expect from you as an association?

Health & Life Science Cluster Bulgaria (www.biocluster.bg) is a non-profit organization that united businesses and organizations with Key Activities focused on practical application of life sciences & health. In our network we have huge range of organisations' field, starting with companies in the field of drug discovery, genetic research, 3D human tissue printing, software solutions for medical and outpatient care, drug manufacturing, nutrition supplements, green technologies, bio-based technology, foodtech and agritech.

The cluster's strategy envisages the establishment of representative offices in different regions in Bulgaria, guaranteeing cross-cluster, cross-industrial and cross-regional cooperation for SME development. One of the objectives of the cluster, that united our members is to stimulate, validate and promote technological progress in the sector of health & life sciences, as well as to connect scientists with business leaders, academia and media. For sure our members can take advantages of the services and main projects, such as building a **sustainable regional innovation ecosystem**, searching and establishment of collaboration opportunities in EU and International Projects with focus over the **Green Deal**, **Horizon Europe**, and creation and participation in a first of its kind in **Bulgaria BioCenter**

(positioning in Sofia). The Center is in a result of successful collaboration with Health & Life Sciences Cluster Bulgaria, Sofia Tech Park and Sofia Municipality, through Sofia Development Association. The establishment of the Center is expected to strengthen the ties and create new partnerships between the academic, research, industrial and regional community as a condition for the development of specific regional and local innovation ecosystems in Bulgaria.

2) Where do you see the future of the biotechnology industry in Bulgaria?

Bulgaria has a large number of qualified researchers, low-cost operations, strategic geographical positioning, and a strong ecosystem.

Bulgaria can be position itself not only as a producer and distributor, but also as a creator of modern therapeutic solutions.

Our country has everything necessary for the establishment and development of major projects, such as positioning "Bulgaria, as innovative drug discovery and development destination". Its potential is determined by the well-developed biotechnology sector - in Bulgaria there are 11 000 students in the fields of healthcare, medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry, 145 000 employed by the sector (4.6% of the labour force), 200 clinical trials are registered annually. We have 128 medical centres engaged in clinical research, the biotechnology industry is responsible for € 10 billion of annual turnover in health and life sciences. 15 % of all Bulgarian Healthtech solutions apply AI, and 5.7 % work with Big Data and Predictive Analytics.

By being a small country, allow us to know each other and build a strong ecosystem. Some of the Members of the cluster are also cofounder of AI Cluster Bulgaria (www.aicluster.bg), who has a strong international partnership. Being a Member of the European AI Forum (together with AI4SI, AI Austria, CroAI, Hub France IA and KI-Bundesverband), Health & Life Sciences Cluster Bulgaria can contribute with creation of a strong collaboration with European AI Community. We look forward to engaging with the European Commission and all stakeholders in the process of implementation of the EU IP Action Plan for securing and broadening the criticality of IP for a successful life sciences and biotechnology ecosystem in the EU. The current fragmentation of European data repositories and data protection rules are making it hard for industrial players to use sensitive health data. The implementation of the European Health Data Space aims to address the challenges regarding the collection, use, re-use, interoperability and cross-border movement of high-quality health data in a secure environment.

3) What are your aims for working with EuropaBio members?

Sharing the resources, processes, international expertise, vision and culture is very important particularly for the biotech space, because the risk is pretty high, and the timelines are very long.

We have 3 major pillars when it comes to our Membership. The first one is that unique connection that we can bring with the European AI community.

We can contribute to EuropaBio by bringing more AI solution and meet both experts' group in searching for better innovative solutions. We can organize meetings, webinars dedicated on AI and its implementation in Biotech Industry. Our second pillar is connected to connection and further collaboration with countries that are not member of EU, but still, they are position in Europa, such as Western Balkans (Serbia, Macedonia, Monte Negro, etc.). Our third pillar is aimed to bring a strong innovative ecosystem by implement Venture

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Build Models and creation of a Venture Capital fund, dedicated to a deep-tech to support more innovation from our region.

The cluster ecosystem works over stronger presence in Horizon Europe, therefore, proactively search for match organisation for future strong collaborations. Our aim is to increase the visibility of Bulgarian scientific and innovative achievements, to create more opportunities for consortium participations and increase the country's participation in Horizon Europe (2021-2027).

4) What is your biggest activity planned for 2021?

Bulgaria has clearly stated its ambition for economic growth based on innovation and science, promising help to synchronize all key local projects in this area, as well as to identify instruments for their financing. But the road is long and experienced advisory is required.

If you make a research over the region of SEE and Western Balkans, it is obvious missing and need of VC funds dedicated to deep-tech companies. That pushes the companies to emigrate abroad and take the innovation, IP, entity, with them by leaving the local ecosystem without best stories to reveal. Creation of such VC Fund is our key project for 2021.

Investment, nurturing the best ideas, spinning out and venture building from academia and centres of excellence, faster ecosystem development, and economic resilience, those are the priorities and key activities for us.

When it comes for creation of a strong deep-tech pipeline, connected with the success of the new VC fund, we have reviewed different models worldwide and found a solution and a best practice coming from the UK. The huge economic crisis in 2009 pushed UK government and life sciences ecosystem to think of a new model called venture build studios. So, we decided to start series of meetings with key stakeholders from the local ecosystem and international experts with a great know-how. So far, we have met and start collaboration with Oxentia (the innovative company of Oxford), Alper Celen (specializing in online vertical marketplaces in the Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan, and Turkey) and met them with Director of the Bulgaria's State Agency for Research and Innovation, CEO of Find of the Funds. By adopting Venture Build model in Bulgaria, also the start-ups coming out of studios have a unique composition. These companies solve the world's biggest problems with the world's best entrepreneurs.

