

Ladies and Gentlemen.

First of all, I want to welcome you all in Thessaloniki, the capital of the Region of Central Macedonia

It is a great honor for the Region of Central Macedonia that the European Cluster Matchmaking event, organized by the European Cluster Collaboration Platform, takes place in our Region and we would like to thank the organizers for their choice.

We also want to thank you all for your presence and we are sure that in these two days we will all have the opportunity not only to present our policies for boosting economic development but also

to discuss and exchange ideas as to how these policies can be improved and adapted based on good practices and other successful cases all over Europe.

For this reason, this event – we believe – will be extremely beneficial for all the participants and of course our Region.

From the discussions that will follow,
we will be able to extract many useful conclusions in key
issues such as:

- 1) The framework for economic recovery and how clusters can assist this recovery process.
- 2) The key trends and challenges for evolving our economies.
- 3) The support of transition towards higher value added activities.
- 4) And the role of clusters in enhancing territorial cooperation

Ladies and Gentlemen.

The most significant **challenges** we need to address in the Balkans and especially in Greece are short – termed and long – termed.

The main short term challenges are:

- 1) The behind the EU average growth rate and income per capita.
- 2) The relatively low technological level of SME's
- 3) The high unemployment rates, especially in countries like Greece and especially in youth.
- 4) The "brain - drain" of educated and skilled young people.
- 5) The pending reforms that are state led such as red tape, tender rules, regulatory context and support of innovation and entrepreneurship.

On the other hand the core long term challenges derive from specific tendencies and facts:

- 1) The concentration of wealth is increasing.
- 2) Future technologies can and will replace much of the human labor.

3) Moreover, the return on investment in capital and technology is usually higher than in labor.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

In order to evolve and not be left behind, by the rapid changes that are taking place globally, our region has

- a vision,
- a strategy
- and most significantly the will to implement it.

This is the triptych, in which the administration of the Region of Central Macedonia is committed to.

Throughout our term, we are implementing radical and moving – forward reforms and initiatives , some of which are:

1. The “One Stop Shop” for supporting entrepreneurship and bringing together research and innovation, and the business community. The benefits from bringing together these two ecosystems are enormous.

New opportunities for businesses arise especially for SMEs which find it difficult to commit resources to pursue such co-operations themselves.

One example of this is the establishment (with the assistance of Technopolis –Thessaloniki’s ICT business park) , of a co-operation with CERN through which the scientific and business community can exploit the know-how and technologies developed by CERN and create innovative products and services. And we will continue this effort with other similar co-operations in the future.

2. The second reform we are implementing is the restructuring of the Region’s Organization Chart which now has a separate directorate of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Support which will be responsible to put into action the Regional policies for supporting businesses and innovation.

The restructuring of our organization Chart is complemented by the restructuring and standardization of the Region's internal procedures with the goal to reduce bureaucracy and red tape in the services offered to the SMEs and to the public by 40% by 2020.

3. In times of financial crisis as we are in the last years in Greece, the Regions can always offer direct support to start-ups, research entities and Micro enterprises through funding but they can do so indirectly. The Region of Central Macedonia is offering to entrepreneurs the real-world context where the Region can become an implementation laboratory, a living lab, where they can test their innovations at an initial stage, sharing the experience and the Region in return offering valuable feedback to them before hitting the markets.

4. A very important initiative of the Region is the co-creation and co-leading, together with the Region of Noord-Brabant from Holland, of a S3 sub-platform in

the agri food sector following an open call by JRC. The main goal of this sub- platform is to collaborate with other regions in perspective of starting a partnership for co-investments in developing new products and services that will be competing in the Global Value Chains.

We have submitted the proposal in a specific thematic area which relates to “agrifood for Rural diversification and Smart Agri-Food destinations” and also we took part in two other approved proposals

- High-tech farming from Tuscany Italy and
- Traceability and big data from Andalusia Spain

The participation in these platforms aims to boost technological use and create new investment pipe lines for global markets. We are confident that our proposal will be approved.

No matter what the final outcome of this proposal will be the Region is planning to lead the creation of digital innovation hub in the agrofood area and the preparation work that has been done in the proposal for the thematic

S3 platform in the agrofood will be the basis for this Digital Innovation Hub.

5. We also are committed to developing a new strategy for the future, in co-operation with our stakeholders using digital means, such as the "Online RIS3 initiative", in order to record and process long term trends in society, geopolitics, technology, and governance.

6. We are planning an accelerator for supporting SME's especially in the agrifood sector, and other stakeholders for integrating digital and other advanced tech tools in their business.

So, ladies and gentlemen,
through this extremely tough times, our primary twofold goal, has to be to ease financial problems and social challenges, and at the same time plan, vision and execute in long term.

We want the Region of Central Macedonia to be one of the leading innovative regions, based on Research and Innovation, by empowering the ecosystem, and strengthening the links of the 4 helixes: industry, knowledge, government and society, and ultimately boosting the development of new, or the improvement of existing products and services , that will be able to compete in the global markets sustainably.

Thus, our principal goal is to create value that will eventually increase income and decrease brain drain.

In simple words, we are trying to move from the Passive and Reactive model,

to a more Pre-active model where you try to predict the future , and mainly to a more Proactive model where you want to create the future .

This is our vision.

That is reflected also in our RIS3 Strategy which will be presented to you later on by Mr George Kostaras from the managing authority of the Regional Operational programme Central Macedonia 2014-2020

We have a solid and clear strategy for the future to support innovation and entrepreneurship.

This strategy is the reason behind the nomination by the European Union and the Committee of the Regions of the Region of Central Macedonia as the European Entrepreneurship Region for 2018, together with the regions of Ile-de-France (FR) and Northern and Western Region of Republic of Ireland (IE)

Ladies and Gentlemen.

As a final remark, we want to reassure all participants, that whatever will be discussed today and the conclusions that will be drawn, are valuable to us, and will be incorporated in our strategic plan.

The Region of Central Macedonia has in the recent past made efforts to foster the idea of cluster formation.

We have been the lead partners of the AGROLESS project, a strategic project funded by the Greece Bulgaria 2007-2013 programme about Precision farming through which the formation of clusters in the agricultural sector was encouraged.

Through the **Clusterpolisee** project which was funded by South East Europe programme a complete road map as to how to form and operate a cluster was prepared, a road map which was presented to many local communities in rural areas of the Region.

And we continue our efforts to promote clusters through another project called AGROLABS funded by Balcan Med Programme which gives emphasis to cluster formation around biofunctional food products.

Finally, the Regional Operational Programme of the Region of Central Macedonia for 2014-2020 also has set a target to assist the formation of clusters in our region (more about the policies of the ROP about clusters will be presented to you later on by Mr Kostaras)

The fact that **despite the high potentials**, there are only a few clusters in our region and the impact that they have on our economy is not as high as it could be, means that we need to improve our policies for promoting the establishment of clusters but also to assist the long term success of those that already exist.

In the Region of Central Macedonia we are devoted to change and reforms. We are committed to moving forward. And we are keen on working together with all the stakeholders and all the mechanisms that share our goals and expectations.

With this last words we would like to thank again the European Cluster Collaboration Platform for the initiative to organize this event in our region.

We wish you every success to the event and a nice stay in Thessaloniki. We are here to listen to your views and suggestions and to work together for the benefits of our regions, our countries and Europe.

Welcome and thank you all.

Mr Apostolos Tzitzikostas
Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia