

WE CREATE A NARRATIVE FOR OUR CITIES

What we think and what we say about a place we live in goes a long way. If a substantial group of people says the same thing, it becomes a narrative – a story people say about a city, region or a country. Israel is now globally seen as a startup nation, a center of gravity for entrepreneurs and innovators. This is a major shift from Israel's narrative as a country dominated by conflicts with its neighbors just two or three decades ago. Similarly, Tartu used to be a low-key municipality in the Baltics and is now known for a vibrant tech scene, great universities and a big startup festival and has been dubbed a sTARTUp city.

What does it take for Košice and Eastern Slovakia to become a gravitational force for talent from across Slovakia and abroad? Can Košice become Central Europe's creative hub? These were some of the topics discussed in AmCham Košice's May roundtables involving key stakeholders from the region.

Košice has witnessed two important shifts in the last 15 years. First, Košice has seen a massive growth of the IT industry, now employing more people than any other industry in the region. Driven by Košice IT Valley – likely the most impactful cluster in Slovakia – the IT industry dominated by large multinationals breeds IT

students by working closely with high schools and universities and attracts IT talent from around Eastern Slovakia.

Second, the city has built a strong creative industry cluster catalysed by the European Capital of Culture title in 2013, a related massive infrastructure development and forward-looking activities of Creative Industry Košice, one of the key organizations driving Košice's creative transformation.

Now Košice is on the brink of a third transformation and three factors will define whether the city and the region of Eastern Slovakia will succeed:

First, municipalities, schools and universities need to focus on **entrepreneurship** as a horizontal topic to be present across curricula and educational programs. Entrepreneurship defined as a set of skills enabling people to “turn ideas into action” is a critical precondition for jobs of the future and a key element in the transformation of Košice's economy. It will help young people start their own projects or companies, initiate change in their communities, cities, companies or in the public sector. We need more home-grown and product-oriented companies to create opportunities for the most talented and most creative professionals in the region. This will not

come as a result of ‘brick and mortar’ investments into infrastructure alone – no new highway or research park will change what we teach and how we teach it. The focus should be on methods and content, not appearance.

Second, we need a **positive and ambitious narrative** to come from the leadership of the city and region. Mayors and governors bear the biggest responsibility in creating a bold vision for their territories that will motivate young talent to participate on turning that vision into reality and attract the brightest people back to their homeland. Over the past three years, I was fortunate to participate in the design and implementation of a landmark Košice 2.0 project financed by a very competitive Urban Innovative Actions scheme. This project increased civic participation and use of data in the decision-making of the city. It helped support young entrepreneurs and leveraged the existing creative infrastructure, all to increase the focus of the municipality on the citizen and well-being in the city. We need to leverage the momentum created by projects like these to change the mood in our cities.

And third, **collaboration** – none of that will be possible without breaking down silos. For a small



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country like Slovakia, there is no justification for people and institutions not communicating and collaborating together. The crisis of trust – Slovakia is one of the lowest ranking countries in OECD in terms of trust among people and trust in public institutions – has translated into lack of collaboration among and within public institutions, universities and businesses. We need to showcase success stories, impactful programs and empower individuals, who are making a positive change in their work and their communities. There are professors, social innovators, entrepreneurs and public officials, who – despite the circumstances – are building a better Košice every day. We need to support those individuals and organizations in helping them scale their activities.

Collaboration will also be at the core of Košice's economic transformation – the interplay between different sectors in the region can be a true game changer. Creative industry, for example, can increase added value and generate unique sparks of innovation in more traditional sectors of Košice's economy such as manufacturing or IT. As a boost to these collaborations, Košice will now host Slovakia's first co-location center of the European Institute of Innovation & Technology focused on culture & creativity.

We all create a narrative for our cities. But a visionary, collaborative and committed leadership that realizes the urgency to act can serve as a catalyst for a positive story that spreads fast.