



# In what ways can the innovation ecosystem of Košice draw on the international dialogue about its future?

Conclusions from the Policy Lab 2 - Label4Future event

Marko Popović<sup>a,c</sup>

Oto Hudec<sup>b</sup>

Lucia Koukolová<sup>a</sup>

Slavomír Ondoš<sup>a</sup>

Apolónia Pecka Sejková<sup>a</sup>

Miriam Šebová<sup>b</sup>

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<sup>a</sup>Creative Industry Košice; Kukučínova 2, 040 01 Košice

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<sup>b</sup>Technical University of Košice, Faculty of Economics, Department of  
Regional Sciences and Management; Boženy Němcovej 32, 040 01 Košice

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<sup>c</sup>Contact person: [marko.popovic@cike.sk](mailto:marko.popovic@cike.sk)



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## Abstracts

In this study, we examine the content gathered from the Policy Lab 2 event held on 24 June 2025 at Creative Industry Košice. The aim of this event was to link expert theoretical perspectives with practical experience in order to strengthen the Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation in the Košice region and, indirectly, in the broader context of Eastern Slovakia. To this end, we conducted a content analysis of the panel discussion transcribed from the audio recording. We based the analysis of the interactive workshop on the facilitators' notes. The study identifies and synthesizes findings in five main thematic areas: the need for a clear, long-term and inclusive vision for the region; the dynamic nature of smart specialization as a process of discovery, not static selection; the importance of effective multi-level coordination and sharing of competencies; the role of building trust and ownership among actors; and finally, the need to ensure continuity across policy cycles and address demographic challenges that affect talent retention. The findings highlight existing barriers, such as institutional fragmentation and lack of trust, while pointing to the potential of participatory approaches and the role of the broker in aligning innovation activities. The event confirmed the validity of regional development theories in the specific context of Central and Eastern Europe. Practically, it serves as a basis for the formulation of concrete recommendations for the continued development of the innovation ecosystem.

Keywords: trust, smart specialization, innovation ecosystem, Košice region, policy lab, regional development, vision.

## 1. Introduction

In this study, we present a detailed analysis of the Policy Lab 2 event held on 24 June 2025 at Creative Industry Košice. The event was the second in a series of meetings aimed at continuing the local dialogue on updating the Regional Innovation Strategy (RIS3<sup>1</sup>) within the Label4Future project, in which Creative Industry Košice is involved. The first event diagnostically mapped the status of the regional ecosystem, with the results forming the basis for formatting and designing the content of the following Policy Lab. The motivation for this study is the need to deepen understanding and identify applicable strategies for regional development and strengthening of the innovation ecosystem in the Košice region, as well as more broadly in Eastern Slovakia, taking into account the dominant position of Košice as its urban core. The event has been designed as a milestone in the ongoing initiative to strengthen the Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation, with a particular focus here on transferring knowledge and experience from international settings to the local context.

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<sup>1</sup> S3 stands for Smart Specialisation Strategy. It is a broader policy concept introduced by the European Commission to promote regional innovation and economic growth. RIS3 stands for Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation. This term is used to emphasise that it is a specific strategic document (plan) at national or regional level that results from the implementation of the S3 concept. It is actually a concrete application of S3.



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The central idea of the event was to combine theoretical knowledge and practical experience in a targeted way, leading to concrete and applicable recommendations for the final Policy Lab 3. Underpinning this approach was the assumption that external perspectives and best practices from other, often more mature innovation ecosystems, can provide guidance for the development of the region. Theoretical expectations focused on the potential for transfer of explicit (e.g., methodologies, governance models) and tacit (e.g., approaches to building trust, culture of collaboration) knowledge from the panelists and concurrent experts involved in the workshop. The aim was to extract relevant examples, identify conditions for successful transfer, consider potential risks and propose actions that would be adapted to the specificities of the Košice region. To achieve the objectives, the event was divided into two interrelated sessions.

The morning started with a panel discussion led by Oto Hudec from the Technical University of Košice. The panel was composed of international experts - David Uhlíř (JIC Brno), Coen de Graaf (IDEA Consult) and Lubomír Šottník (Research and Innovation Authority - VAIA). Their diverse experience in the field of regional development, innovation systems, EU policy and the interconnection of the academic, public and business spheres provided a comprehensive perspective on the topics discussed. We then organised a workshop that allowed participants to actively engage in facilitated discussions at three thematic tables, with each round lasting 30 minutes. These discussions were moderated by the three experts listed above, supplemented by moderators: Apolónia Pecka Sejková (Creative Industry Košice), Miriam Šebová (Technical University of Košice) and Slavomír Ondoš (Creative Industry Košice). This format maximized the collective generation of ideas and solutions. As a result, the study proved to answer the following research questions.

- What insights and knowledge have international and local experts brought to the field of regional development and smart specialisation?
- What are the most significant challenges and opportunities for the implementation of RIS3 in the Košice region and Eastern Slovakia based on the experts' experiences?
- What specific examples and recommendations from other regions are relevant and applicable to improve coordination, build ownership and ensure continuity of innovation strategies in the local context?

The study is divided into chapters that lead the reader from methodology to detailed analytical results and final discussions. It starts with a chapter on the event methodology and content analysis, which describes the event approach and the evaluation of the data collected. This is followed by detailed analytical chapters focusing on the panel discussion. They address topics such as smart specialisation and conditionality; national, regional or inter-regional systems and their effectiveness; how to build real ownership; ensuring continuity and progress; and finally the future of RIS3 in the Košice region and Eastern Slovakia. These are followed by analytical chapters from the workshop covering effective coordination and competence sharing; national and regional innovation systems and the



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interconnection of actors; and vision, trust and the role of the arts in the innovation ecosystem. A synthesis of the findings is made in the Discussion chapter and the study concludes with a Conclusion chapter that summarises the main findings and suggests future actions.

### 2. Event format

The Policy Lab 2 event took place over one morning in two sessions: a panel discussion followed by a workshop in a World Café format. Below is a description of the methods that were used on-site and subsequently in the qualitative analysis of the content of these sessions to ensure transparency of the results presented. The applied approach was chosen to maximize the collection of in-depth data and to support the generation of not only academic discussion, but also practically applicable recommendations for the regional innovation ecosystem.

#### 2.1. Panel discussion method

The panel discussion was held from 9:00 to 10:30. It represents the introductory and content-bearing part of the event. It aimed to delve into the topics of regional development and smart specialisation through a moderated dialogue between international and local experts. The structure of the discussion was framed by the moderator, Otto Hudec, into thematic headings, which allowed for a systematic coverage of a wide range of issues. This format offers the advantage of a high concentration of information gathered from experienced professionals, which is valuable from a scientific point of view for obtaining expert views and best practices from different relevant contexts. From an applied perspective, the panel discussion effectively summarizes complex topics and provides participants with a comprehensive overview of the current state and challenges in the field of innovation. However, a drawback may be the limited opportunity for deeper interaction between panellists with each other and with the audience.

For the purpose of writing the study, the panel discussion was recorded in English. This recording was then automatically converted to a text transcript using the notta.ai tool and subjected to manual correction. The corrected and analytically accessible textual transcript served as a source for qualitative content analysis. The content analysis of the panel discussion was conducted in accordance with predefined thematic sections defined by the moderator. Each section was subjected to qualitative analysis, which allowed for a systematic segmentation of the extensive material and a detailed interpretation of the ideas, attitudes and proposals discussed. Particular attention was paid to the identification of added value. The sequencing of themes was adapted within the analytical process to achieve the best possible clarity for the reader. This approach ensured that the chapters are an interpretation of the panel content rather than a chronological summary of the transcript.

#### 2.2 Workshop method



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Following the panel discussion and break, an interactive workshop was held from 11:00 to 12:30. Its format was chosen to encourage collective reflection and the generation of concrete proposals by rotating participants between thematic tables. The workshop was divided into three thematic tables, each led by an international expert (1 - David Uhlíř, 2 - Ľubomír Šottník, 3 - Coen de Graaf) and moderators: Apolónia Pecka Sejková (Creative Industry Košice), Miriam Šebová (Technical University of Košice) and Slavomir Ondoš (Creative Industry Košice). Participants rotated between the three 30-minute rounds, while the experts stayed at their tables with the moderators. A template was prepared for each table, which included the following points: examples → conditions → risks → first steps. This framework ensured a structured output and comparability of the findings from each table. From a scientific perspective, the chosen format promoted qualitative data collection through broader participant involvement and the inclusion of diverse perspectives. From a practical perspective, it is ideal for building consensus, sharing know-how and formulating action plans in real time, while promoting participation and a sense of ownership of solutions. The main drawback remains that the quality of the outputs depends on the motivation of the participants, and recording the discussions is challenging.

Unlike the panel discussion, we do not have recordings for the workshop. Therefore, the data sources for the analysis were the workshop outputs: notes recorded on flip charts from the discussions at each table. This method of data collection also required a different analytical approach, focusing on the interpretation of brief fragments. The qualitative analysis of the content of the tables was based on a synthesis of the recorded ideas, examples, conditions, risks and recommended actions from each table. Despite the absence of transcripts, sufficient detail in the notes allowed us to reconstruct the main areas of discussion and identify conclusions. The analytical process involved a thematic analysis of the collected notes to identify recurring themes, arguments and specific suggestions. In addition, the analysis sought to link the findings to the content of the panel discussion, integrating details into the chapters that, while thematically related to the topics of the tables, were not explicitly mentioned in the notes. This approach allowed for a coherent picture to emerge and provided a context for interpreting the workshop results, highlighting the interconnectedness of the two sections of the event.

### 3. Results from the panel discussion

The panel discussion at the event served as a platform for discussing regional development and innovation strategies, with a focus on the Košice region. The discussion, which lasted approximately 90 minutes, aimed to link theory to practice in the field of regional strategies. Participants were encouraged to listen carefully and identify parallels and ideas that can be used in future group discussions and implementation phases. The aim of the discussion was to analyse and evaluate approaches to regional innovation strategies and smart specialisation that are widely applied in the European Union and to explore their interpretation and effectiveness, including success stories and challenges.



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The discussion was moderated by Oto Hudec from the Technical University of Košice, an expert on regional and urban development, innovation systems, smart specialisation and sustainable regional development. Professor Hudec, whose portfolio includes scientific publications on regional disparities and the role of universities in innovation ecosystems, focuses his work on bridging theory and practice in development strategies adapted to the conditions of Central and Eastern Europe. His role was to lead the panel discussion through defined thematic blocks and ensure a structured and fruitful dialogue.

The panel members included international and local experts who brought diverse perspectives and a wealth of experience. David Uhlíř, Innovation Ecosystem Architect and Strategy Director at JIC Brno, contributed his more than 20 years of experience in regional and innovation policy at both national and European level. As a co-founder of JIC in 2003, he was responsible for developing the first regional innovation strategy in South Moravia back in 2002, designing strategic innovation initiatives that bring together the public, academic and private sectors. His contributions to OECD and European Commission innovation policy making in many countries underline his deep knowledge in this field.

The second panelist was Coen de Graaf, Senior Consultant at IDEA Consult, who joined the Innovation, Competitiveness and Sustainability team in 2024. With more than 30 years of experience, including positions as International Business Director and Project Manager for cross-regional innovation initiatives (Vanguard Initiative in Noord-Brabant, NL), he brought extensive knowledge of high-tech and energy innovation, as well as regional economic strategy, to the discussion. His involvement in several EU instruments (E.E.R., PRI, Manunet, I-3, Interreg, Horizon) demonstrates his deep know-how of European innovation support mechanisms.

The panel was complemented by the third guest, Lubomír Šottník from the Research and Innovation Authority (VAIA), which is involved in the support of R&D in the framework of the Smart Specialisation Strategy. His work at the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic and his focus on supporting the mental health of university students, as well as his contribution to the development of regional health and social care centres, underlined the importance of the social aspect of innovation. Mr Šottník also lectures on sociological research methods at the University of Trnava, which enriched the discussion with an academic perspective on the social aspects of innovation processes.

### 3.1 Smart specialisation and conditionality

The panel discussion started by focusing on one of the most important topics of the European Union's current regional policy: smart specialisation (S3) and related issues of conditionality. This segment of the discussion provided an overview of the understanding and application of this concept. The panellists sought to define the essence of smart specialisation, distinguish it from older approaches and reflect on its practical implications and challenges. One of the main points that emerged was a critical reflection on the term "specialisation" itself. Although the concept of S3 is based on the idea



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of identifying and promoting sectors or projects that exploit assets and human capital, some reservations were also expressed. Too strict an understanding of specialisation may lead to selection of priorities, while other, potentially important factors will be neglected. It was argued that the way to success is not just to select the 'best' sectors, but to create a supportive ecosystem and a smart public administration that facilitates, not hinders, the process. This indicates a shift from a narrowly defined focus on specific sectors to a broader understanding of the environmental conditions that enable innovation.

The discussion highlighted the continuing challenges in implementing S3, particularly in securing funding for specialised projects. One panellist mentioned that their region does not apply vertical specialisation programmes due to limited funding. This reveals a disconnect between the ambitions of the strategy document and the reality of implementation options, especially in regions with less robust budgets. The difficulty of securing funding suggests that while S3 offers a theoretical framework for promoting research, development and competitiveness, practical implementation requires effective mechanisms for linking actors and providing seed capital to launch projects. Without this impetus, even the best defined strategies may remain on paper. The appeal for originality and authenticity of regional innovation strategies was critical. It was repeatedly stressed that it is essential for regions to avoid simply copying trends or approaches from other, often more advanced, regions. Instead, smart specialisation should build on the region's unique existing assets and strengths. This approach is in line with the original S3 philosophy, which emphasises a bottom-up entrepreneurial discovery process (entrepreneurial discovery process, or EDP), where the region's real competitive advantages and innovation potential are identified in consultation with relevant actors.<sup>2</sup>

Concerns about the role of public administration have been raised about formalistic approaches that are based on statistical analysis alone. Panelists raised the risk that S3 implementation could turn into a bureaucratic exercise that overlooks the dynamics of the innovation ecosystem. Instead, the need to foster strengths and develop collaboration was emphasized. Reference was also made to marketing platforms that can facilitate partnerships between industries and international partners, creating room for more effective coordination and synergies. The discussion concluded by reiterating the importance of aligning and coordinating regional and national strategies. The role of the state as a facilitator, not as a dictator, was highlighted, which should provide a platform for discussion and feedback. This approach reinforces the importance of entrepreneurial discovery and underlines the need to consider potential future technologies and their impact on regional development.

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<sup>2</sup> The EDP process is a continuous and iterative mechanism to identify and activate the unique innovation potential of a region. At its core is a bottom-up participatory approach that systematically engages diverse actors in open dialogues and informal interactions. The aim is not only to discover existing strengths, but also to uncover latent opportunities and co-create shared visions that are tailored to local specificities and avoid mechanistic copying of external strategies. The role of an impartial broker who facilitates discussions, synthesises knowledge and translates it into concrete policy measures and strategic priorities is essential.



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### 3.2 National, regional or inter-regional - Which works best?

The subsequent discussion focused on the question of whether a national, regional or inter-regional approach to innovation is more effective. It brought important nuances and experiences. The discussion was not limited to theoretical models, but presented insights from practice that can be essential for building effective innovation ecosystems. While the need for multi-level governance is widely acknowledged, the panel sought to strike a balance and identify success factors. The first salient point was the emphasis on geographical aspects of policy implementation. The view was expressed that by actively interacting with regions, the effective radius of engagement for intensive collaboration was estimated to be around 100 kilometres. As distance increases, the intensity of interaction naturally decreases. This perspective implies the necessity of regional agencies with a presence in multiple locations to ensure sufficient proximity to local actors. This observation directly influences the design of support structures and networks.

In the context of Slovakia and the Košice region, fragmentation of the innovation environment was identified. However, this situation is considered to be rather a transitory phenomenon. The panellists highlighted the growth of innovation institutions at local level also in cities such as Košice, Žilina and Trnava, which suggests a promising basis for future implementation of the strategies. Coupled with the growth is the expectation that the state level will provide the necessary support and coordination to integrate these local initiatives into a more comprehensive system. This idea underscores the importance of collaboration between different levels of government. The discussion delved deeper into the issue of innovation systems, mentioning theories of national, regional and sectoral systems. A key idea was that it is essential not only to create new networks, but above all to maintain and strengthen existing ones, across institutions in all regions. This is reflected in the need to build a genuine regional innovation system organisation and process, involving diverse institutions and firms in a common cause. It is not just about formal cooperation, but about active involvement that leads to shared responsibility and common goals.

The focus was on building trust and cooperation. It was suggested that trust is built gradually, in small steps and through public-private partnerships. The panellist shared the experience of moving towards a more inclusive innovation strategy after ten years of public partnership, when entrepreneurs were also invited to participate. This illustrates that establishing a solid foundation of trust is a prerequisite for more ambitious initiatives and for the full involvement of all relevant actors. Trust is fragile and therefore requires systematic effort and transparency. The panel also discussed the importance of creating shared visions and opportunities, highlighting the role of face-to-face interactions - such as informal meetings or dinners - in building trust. Instead of focusing on problems, discussions should focus on opportunities and shared visions. A shift from the traditional "triple helix" model



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(universities, companies, government) to broader "quadruple helix" and "quintuple helix" models that involve multiple parties, including civil society, was presented.<sup>3</sup>

This broader view aims to foster trust and encourage participation. The concept of inspirational visits to other regions has been proposed as an effective method for aligning objectives and sharing successful initiatives. Such visits allow stakeholders to see in practice how other regions organise and coordinate innovation efforts and to take inspiration for their own environment. Finally, the role of open communication and the willingness of the state level to understand regional developments was highlighted. The way to effective regional cooperation is to find common goals and develop a shared vision, rather than focusing on satisfying individual interests. There was also the provocative idea of finding a level of coordination where each role is equally dissatisfied, suggesting the need for a balanced approach to the distribution of resources and responsibilities, where no one party feels superior or inferior.

### 3.3 How to build real ownership?

The next part of the panel discussion addressed the issue of building real ownership of innovation strategies. It revealed deeper layers of challenges and possible solutions that go beyond the formal endorsement of documents. Linking strategic planning to the active involvement of all relevant actors and establishing mechanisms to ensure continuity and resilience to policy changes is essential for sustained success. The first point of discussion was the value of foresight in developing strategies, especially in regions that suffer from a lack of a clear vision. It was noted that tools such as foresight are essential for building achievable visions with tangible results<sup>4</sup>. The basic idea was that strategic focus should not exclude diverse perspectives, but rather focus efforts on important areas in order to

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<sup>3</sup> The Triple, Quadruple and Quintuple Helix models are developmental frameworks that describe and analyse the relationships and interactions between different actors in the innovation ecosystem to promote growth, development and sustainability, with each model extending the previous one by adding another key domain. The Triple Helix model, originally by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, focuses on the interactions between the three main pillars of innovation: universities (knowledge creation and research), firms (knowledge application and economic value), and government (policy setting, financing and regulatory framework creation), with the main focus of enhancing economic development and competitiveness through knowledge transfer. The Quadruple Helix model extends this concept with a fourth dimension, that of civil society, public and media, involving the active participation of citizens, NGOs, media and cultural institutions, thus seeing innovation not only as a technocratic but also as a socially legitimate issue, aimed at building knowledge societies and democracy and addressing broader societal needs. Finally, the Quintuple Helix model is the most comprehensive, as it adds a fifth sphere, which is the natural environment and ecological dimension, emphasising the need to integrate environmental challenges and sustainability principles in the design and implementation of innovations, with the aim of socio-ecological transformation of society and the economy. Although each model has its own specific focus - the Triple Helix on economic and technological progress, the Quadruple Helix on social and cultural inclusion, and the Quintuple Helix on environmental sustainability - they are not mutually exclusive, but rather offer progressively broader perspectives on the dynamics of innovation systems that allow for the increasingly complex challenges of the contemporary world to be taken into account.

<sup>4</sup> Foresight is a systematic, participatory process of exploring multiple possible future scenarios that helps organizations anticipate challenges and opportunities, and proactively shape desirable developments. It is carried out through continuous horizon scanning (detection of weak signals), scenarios, Delphi methods (expert consensus) and backcasting, often using digital tools, big data analytics and artificial intelligence. The inclusion of different actors (government, business, academia, civil society, environment) and the integration of foresight into strategic planning and policy making to ensure flexibility, resilience to uncertainty is key.



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build a better future. Ownership of the vision must be inclusive, certainly not elitist. One of the most prominent concerns was how to maintain continuity and progress on strategic initiatives despite frequent personnel changes due to elections at the regional, local, and institutional levels (e.g., academia).

The panellists reflected on the question of who should be driving these changes - public administrations, universities or companies? It is important to understand why these initiatives are important to ensure they are supported regardless of political cycles. True ownership requires a deeper understanding of the intent, the benefits. The discussion then focused on the process of entrepreneurial discovery as a means to create continuity and sustainability. It was suggested that defining stakeholder engagement at different levels is key. It was suggested that government should orchestrate the process rather than own it. In doing so, it should involve all parties - academia, business, and civil society. It seems useful for the process to be managed by an independent body, ideally at the regional level, which would involve all partners and ensure its impartiality and inclusiveness. In this context, the need for a broker to coordinate innovation initiatives was highlighted<sup>5</sup>. Such a broker should be well connected, able to bring people together and not have a specific agenda. Universities and companies were identified as unsuitable to coordinate these initiatives - because of their inherent interests. It was stressed how important it is to have someone who acts on behalf of common interests, understands different concerns and leads collective action. This is an important aspect of building trust and shared ownership.

Another aspect was the communication of innovation agendas across the corporate spectrum in order to build consensus and sustain innovation processes. This requires the formation of a coalition to promote a given position, again recognising that government structures can change too frequently. It was stressed that training new officials and ensuring continuity through clear role definitions and handover processes are essential. Ownership is thus closely linked to transparency and effective change management.

The discussion also provided practical examples. An innovation council in one region showed how government representatives responsible for innovation can maintain institutional memory by involving their predecessors in meetings. Innovation coalitions that address specific challenges such as energy competition were presented as a model for multi-stakeholder collaboration. These coalitions involve public administrations and aim to develop solutions within defined timeframes, often with cross-regional partnerships. This shows that real ownership is manifested in concrete actions and structures. Finally, the panel also touched on the potential for corporate failure and the

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<sup>5</sup> A broker of innovation initiatives in a region is an independent entity or individual who acts as a trusted facilitator and coordinator between the various actors in the innovation ecosystem - including public administration, academia, the business sector and civil society. Its role is to coordinate collaboration without its own particularistic agenda, to overcome fragmentation and unclear competences, to build trust through personal interactions, and to lead collective action towards a shared vision and concrete results. It must be able to bring together people with diverse interests, understand their concerns and align their efforts for the long-term and sustainable development of the region, especially in an environment influenced by political cycles and change.



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need for autonomy in such situations. The importance of cross-regional partnerships to leverage knowledge and resources from other regions and countries was highlighted, suggesting that ownership need not be regional in isolation but can be strengthened by broader collaboration.

### 3.4 How to ensure continuity and progress?

The question of ensuring continuity and progress in innovation strategies was the subject of the next part of the panel discussion. It emerged as one of the most pressing. In an environment subject to political cycles with personnel changes, it is essential to find mechanisms that allow strategic initiatives to survive and ideally thrive. Panelists focused on approaches that are able to bridge the short-term political horizon and create long-term, sustainable foundations for development. The discussion began by acknowledging that changing the institutional environment is a long-term process and there is a need to prepare for potential setbacks. In this context, the importance of developing a long-term vision that transcends political cycles and lasts 10 to 15 years was stressed. Such a vision should be able to reach and engage high-level actors, including politicians, to work on it across electoral periods. It is a strategic anchor that reduces the impact of short-term changes and provides direction even in more turbulent periods. A vision that can appeal to a broader spectrum of society and political currents is more likely to survive.

The task of ensuring continuity was assigned to academia. The view was expressed that academic institutions often have a broader sense of responsibility for the region compared to companies. They can think in the long term, provide a stable basis for research, analytics, strategic planning. The need for proactive and willing leaders with links to both regional government and independent institutions was highlighted. It is also important to distinguish between the strategic and operational roles of academia, with its strength lying mainly in cultural and strategic development and experimental research. Independence and expertise can serve as an anchor for long-term goals. The panel then focused on the situation in the Košice region, highlighting persistent challenges such as low R&D spending and the decline in human capital and population. The Košice Regional Innovation Strategy seeks to address these challenges by creating an innovation sector, promoting entrepreneurship and developing innovation skills in secondary schools. These initiatives are important for building the future talent base and for mitigating negative demographic trends, which is a prerequisite for any continuity.

Ensuring continuity requires building a regional innovation system that leverages the strengths and synergies of different elements in the region. The disparity between Košice and the rest of the region was highlighted, as was the call to extend the benefits of innovation and development to the peripheral areas of eastern Slovakia. The issue of continuing and expanding the international strategy to promote commitment to innovation in the region is crucial for overall sustainability. Continuity should not be limited to the regional centre, but should permeate the whole territory. Establishing a clear and compelling vision for the future of the region has been identified as essential to retaining talent and attracting new talent. There is a need to move from a problem-focused mindset to a focus on



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opportunities for growth and innovation. This vision should be based on the region's competencies and strengths and address the basic needs of the population - such as housing, safety, health and prosperity. Continuity is only possible if people see their future in the region.

Another important aspect is the identification and support of 'missionaries' in the business sector - companies with international growth potential. These firms can serve as anchors for regional development, attracting skilled workers and driving economic growth. It was also mentioned that regional development is a long-term process that requires patience and a focus on building strengths. The region's ability to learn from success stories such as Taiwan, Israel and Finland was also identified as an important factor in overcoming challenges and ensuring progress. Finally, a factor for keeping people in the region is the creation of quality jobs that provide prosperity and stable prospects.

### 3.5 The process of entrepreneurial discovery and leadership

The discussion on the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) and the issue of leadership in the regional ecosystem was one of the most important parts of the panel. EDP is the foundation of Smart Specialisation (S3) and its successful implementation is important for true innovative development. Panelists sought to determine how to effectively initiate and sustain this process and who should take the lead in a complex set of regional actors. The finding was that EDP should be a continuous process in the sense of foresight. Rather than a one-off exercise, it should continuously generate new ideas and solutions. It was felt that the process must be able to generate visions and support the development of strategies, especially in regions that suffer from a lack of a clear vision. It is important that foresight leads to tangible results and is not just academic. The vision must be open enough not to be exclusive, but at the same time specific enough to focus efforts on building a better future. One of the main challenges with EDP is to ensure sustainability despite changes in the political and institutional environment.

Personnel changes caused by elections at regional, local and academic levels can disrupt the dynamics of the process. The debate therefore raised the question of who should be the main driver of the universities' return to the process - the public administration, the universities themselves or the companies. The importance of a deep understanding of the EDP was stressed to ensure that it is supported regardless of political influences. In this context, the role of the entrepreneurial discovery process as a means to create continuity was affirmed. It was suggested that the key is to define stakeholder engagement at different levels. Government should moderate rather than own the EDP, involving all parties in multi-stakeholder activities that include academia, business, government and civil society. To ensure impartiality and effectiveness, the idea of an independent body, ideally at the regional level, to coordinate the EDP and involve all partners has been proposed. In this context, the need for an innovation broker was also highlighted. This actor should be strongly connected, able to bring people together and operate without a specific agenda. Universities and companies were considered unsuitable to coordinate these initiatives - because of their own inherent interests.



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An actor who acts in the interest of common goals, understands different concerns and is able to lead collective action. EDP leaders should be experts, but also persons with a high level of trust and the ability to build consensus. Communication of innovation agendas between all stakeholders is another aspect. To build consensus and sustain innovation, it is essential to engage a coalition to advocate for a given position, which is particularly important given the changes in government structures. Therefore, there is a need to effectively train new officials and ensure continuity through clear role definitions and handover processes. Leaders need to be able to bridge political divides and maintain strategic direction. Practical examples were also given to illustrate how continuity of leadership and EDP can be ensured. Innovation councils in regions where predecessors of those in charge are involved in meetings are an example of maintaining institutional memory. Innovation coalitions that address specific challenges, such as energy competition, serve as a model for multi-stakeholder collaboration and show how leadership can be extended to a network of partners.

### 3.6 The future of RIS3 in the Košice region

The final part of the panel discussion focused on the concrete future of the Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation in the Košice Region, integrating previous discussions on vision, ownership and continuity. The aim was to move from general principles to pragmatic recommendations and actions that can shape the innovation ecosystem in this specific area. One of the main conclusions was that the future of the region and its RIS3 is inextricably linked to its attractiveness to young generations, especially Generation Z<sup>6</sup>. The discussion highlighted that cities need to be attractive not only in terms of job opportunities, but also in terms of quality of life, culture and access to services. It was said that a regional strategy should not only focus on innovation in the high-tech sector, but should also include the arts and creative industries, thus leveraging the region's existing strengths. This requirement means that RIS3 must be broader than just an economic document and must also take into account social and cultural aspects.

It is essential to harmonise the various instruments and policies in order to create a supportive environment for young people that will give them a reason to stay in the region. If the aim is to attract Generation Z, efforts must be directed towards creating a supportive environment that responds to their specific needs and values. The balance between cultural investment and job creation was also an important point of discussion. Although cultural investment can revitalise cities and make them

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<sup>6</sup> The Silent Generation (born c. 1928-1945) survived the war and post-war reconstruction, and is characterised by hard work and respect for authority. This is followed by the Baby Boomers (c. 1946-1964), who were characterised by a period of economic growth and social change, in Slovakia overlapping in part with the "Husák children", characterised by loyalty and the formation of post-war society. Generation X (c. 1965-1980) is the generation that experienced the fall of communism and the advent of the Internet, which made them independent, sceptical and adaptable, valuing a balance between work and life. Generation Y or Millennials (approximately 1981-1996) have grown up with digital technology and social media, are globally oriented, seek meaning in work, and are flexible. The youngest Generation Z (c. 1997-2012) are "digital natives" for whom technology is an integral part of life; they are visually oriented, very active on social media, emphasize authenticity, self-development, flexibility, mental health, and social issues, and their attractiveness for regional development in Slovakia depends on the creation of quality job opportunities and an attractive urban environment with cultural and social amenities.



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more attractive - as shown by the example of Brno, which has been transformed from a 'dead' place into a vibrant centre through investment in culture and infrastructure - cultural investment alone is not enough. Well-paid jobs are essential to sustain a vibrant community. The gaming sector was cited as an example of an industry that can create a significant number of jobs and contribute to tax revenues. This means that the future of RIS3 must find synergy between the "soft" and "hard" factors of development. The discussion also touched on the interdependence between amenities and job creation. Firms are more likely to set up in cities with a high level of amenities, but amenities themselves require a strong economic base. A successful strategy for the future of RIS3 must therefore take both aspects into account and look for ways to create a favourable environment in which to live and work.

The panel also stressed the importance of recognising generational differences and addressing housing and amenity needs. It is essential to know the opinion of the younger generations and to offer options to meet their specific requirements. The future of RIS3 in the Košice region and eastern Slovakia therefore requires addressing basic living conditions in order to prevent emigration and preserve human capital. In conclusion, it was stressed that strategic efforts to create an environment that encourages people to stay and work in their communities is essential. This includes developing and aligning tools to create an enabling environment for Generation Z, actively working on visions that appeal to them, and continually seeking a balance between amenities and job creation. The future depends on the region's ability to adapt, innovate and create an environment that is attractive to all, not only economically but also socially and culturally.

### 4. Results from the workshop

#### 4.1 Effective coordination and sharing of competences

The workshop was designed as an interactive platform to generate concrete inspirational cases and guidelines for the next stages of the Policy Lab event series. Each table, led by an expert, aimed to move from theoretical discussions to applicable suggestions. The table, moderated by David Uhlíř and Apolónia Pecka Sejková, focused on effective coordination and sharing of competences in the regional innovation ecosystem. The main theme that resonated at this table was the issue of sustainable funding and governance structures for innovation hubs. The Innovation Centre of the Košice Region (ICKK) and the region's commitment to 2030 was mentioned as an example, indicating the need for a long-term vision and stable resources. This idea builds on previous panel discussions on the necessity of overcoming short-term policy cycles in building an innovation system. Sustainable funding is essential for any effective coordination, as without it institutions are forced to operate on a project-by-project basis, which hinders the building of both enduring structures and trust.

The issue of incentives, especially the voluntary contribution of human resources ('pro bono provision of people'), highlights the mismatch between the time available to academics and the need to involve them in the various planning processes where their expertise is indispensable. The solution is to set



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up a collaborative system that avoids the frustration of providing too much energy, while at the same time making it clear that current work will yield results (including financial ones) in the future. A culture of voluntary collaboration and sharing of expertise must be created sensitively and must explicitly take into account the motivations and capabilities of the invited actors. This call is in line with the panel discussion on building real ownership that goes beyond financial incentives.

The discussion did not avoid the sensitive topic of political inter-party and intra-party frictions that the table participants have experienced when working with elected representatives of citizens. Politicians understandably have complicated relationships with each other, and these can also weigh in when planning innovations. This point directly reflects the problems identified in previous discussions about the need for open communication and trust-building. Political instability and internal divisions can significantly undermine coordination efforts. The example of the JIC (South Moravian Innovation Centre) and their five-year "struggle" for the trust of politicians illustrates that building a functional ecosystem requires enormous patience and systematic work with documents, RIS meetings and communication of success stories. Here it is demonstrated that leadership in the innovation ecosystem, as discussed in the previous chapter, needs to be able to navigate even in a politically sensitive environment.

The outcome of this table is to highlight the need for a clear division of roles and responsibilities between the city and the region. This is because there is often an overlap of activities or, conversely, 'grey areas' without clear responsibilities, leading to duplication and inefficiency. In the case of the JIC, an action plan with a clear division of projects between the region and the city has proved to be a viable way of setting up effective cooperation. The Innovation Council, where the majority is made up of companies and the chair is a politician, was cited as an example of a structure that can bring more stability than the political sphere alone. This model supports the idea of a broker and the involvement of strong 'captains of industry' who have a vested interest in the development of the region regardless of short-term political changes. It was noted that large companies want to be involved in RIS3 through platforms and thematic discussions, which requires both an analytical approach and targeted intervention. At the same time, there is a need to moderate expectations about the speed of results, as innovation processes are inherently long term.

### 4.2 National and regional innovation systems and linking actors

The second table of the workshop, led by Lubomir Šottník and Miriam Šebová, focused on the topic of national and regional innovation systems and the interconnection of actors, which is crucial for the effective implementation of RIS3. The discussion at this table dealt with specific challenges and opportunities in the Slovak context. It was based on concrete examples and challenges that were identified in the previous panel. Participants were invited to reflect on what works, what does not and what steps are needed to improve coordination and trust. The participatory design of the Košice Economic and Social Development Programme was cited as an example of good practice. This nine-month process was characterised by an ambitious but realistic approach that contributed to achieving



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the set objectives. Regular meetings with stakeholders and the testing of the process, which has subsequently been applied to sectoral strategies, are evidence of a systematic approach. The importance of a cooperation matrix and clear rules of communication was stressed in the meetings, which directly follows on from the panel's earlier discussions on building trust and transparency.

The discussion also revealed problems in the region, in particular tensions between the city of Košice and the Košice Self-Governing Region. This problem of competency "grey zones" where politics spills over into professional activities and hinders collaboration on strategies, leads to duplication and inefficiency. It was stressed that cooperation is essential, underlining the need for effective multi-level governance and the division of competences already discussed in the previous analysis. A positive aspect was the mention of strong NGOs in the city, which can also act as valuable actors in the innovation ecosystem.

Another important point was the mapping of actors' competences and transparency of spending, as VAIA does when reviewing R&D spending in Slovakia. The publication "Overview of expenditure, competences and staff capacities in research, development and innovation" contributes to a clearer definition of roles and competences. However, systemic problems in Slovakia have also been identified, such as cancelled calls for the private sector, the centrism of the Bratislava metropolitan region and the inefficient use of EU funds. These factors hinder the growth of SMEs and lead to a formal decentralisation of EU funds without real impact, confirming the need for stronger strategic management and reduction of bureaucratic barriers.

The debate did not avoid the problems of linking actors and building trust. It was said that "people don't really connect but act in isolation", leading to mistrust and fear of speaking out. Formal documents and strategies are often written but not implemented, leading to continued frustration. This 'isolating' mindset is a serious barrier to any progress in innovation and needs to be overcome through community and trust building activities, as discussed in the previous chapters on leadership. The example of the VAIA Innovation Festival and the use of design thinking in the participatory design of RIS3 was given to identify priorities and link resources in the region. The strong slogan "A Slovakia that believes in itself" suggests a general need for a change of mindset. Another example of a participatory approach was the creation of a stakeholder map at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and the establishment of an advisory committee composed of practitioners. These initiatives lead to the creation of working groups with good results and learning from feedback from practice, which is the basis for the process of entrepreneurial discovery here as well.

Finally, the discussion also touched on the issue of monitoring and evaluation of RIS3 implementation, highlighting the absence of data transformed into RIS3. The regional offices of the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatization and the ICKK platform were mentioned as efforts to bring actors closer to each other and to facilitate management level meetings. However, there were also criticisms about the purpose of these meetings and maintaining regular



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contact with entrepreneurs. It was noted that too many actors are doing the same thing (e.g. AmCham, SOPK), leading to fragmented activities that exhaust rather than create synergies. The main challenge is to involve the business sector and identify a respected broker who can manage the processes.

### 4.3 Vision, trust and the role of art in the innovation ecosystem

The third table of the workshop, led by Coen de Graaf and Slavomir Ondoš, addressed aspects of regional development that go beyond economic dimensions. The discussion focused on visions, building trust and the role of art and artists in the innovation ecosystem. These themes reflected a broader view of smart specialisation and regional competitiveness, building on previous discussions on the need for a comprehensive vision for regional development. The introductory part of the discussion focused on the concept of vision. It was felt that it was essential to define what the region wants to achieve and for whom. The discussion also touched on the question of the validity of the current RIS3. One of the ideas was that education, for example, should also be a tool, not an end in itself. It was stressed that it is important to create a shared vision that defines the region in something other than the existence of large industrial companies. Instead of focusing on problems, the discussion should focus on opportunities.

Questions were raised about competitiveness in attracting investors, mentioning the availability of skilled workers, wages and basic infrastructure (health, education). The discussion further delved into the differences between the city and the region, stressing that they should not compete with each other, but rather complement each other, creating an interesting and diverse environment. The example of Eindhoven, which has transformed itself from an industrial legacy of Philips into a hi-tech hub with a complete residential area and startup ecosystem, served as inspiration for building a similar realistic vision for Košice<sup>7</sup>. It was also noted that a long-term vision - although often perceived as "impossible" and too far away - is essential and needs respected "captains" or "guardians of the idea" to maintain it across political cycles.

The second theme was trust. The discussion stressed that trust is essential for any effective cooperation. The solution lies in open communication, shared goals and purpose. The idea of compromise - which will only lead to a loss for both parties - was challenged, with the suggestion that it is better to combine individual strengths and look for solutions where everyone wins. The

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<sup>7</sup> Eindhoven has undergone a remarkable transformation from an industrial centre, once heavily dependent on Philips, to a globally recognised hi-tech hub. Founded in 1891, Philips dominated the city's economy for decades, employing tens of thousands of people and building an entire infrastructure for its employees, including housing, schools and cultural facilities. But when Philips began to restructure its operations and relocate production in the 1980s and 1990s, the city was threatened with economic collapse. The response was a strategic vision to move towards open innovation. In 1999, Philips initiated the creation of the High Tech Campus Eindhoven (HTCE), where it began to share its research facilities and knowledge with other companies and start-ups instead of closing off research. Together with the Technical University of Eindhoven and the active support of the regional government, the city focused on building a strong ecosystem based on collaboration, research and development, especially in areas such as semiconductors, photonics and artificial intelligence. This approach has attracted international talent and led to the emergence of a complete startup ecosystem and the development of modern residential areas, establishing Eindhoven as a dynamic hub of innovation and design that has successfully overcome its dependence on one large enterprise.



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priority is to change mindsets - to focus on mutual exchange and a human approach instead of defending one's own positions. The example of regions where agreements have been reached in informal settings underlines the importance of personal relationships and 'humanity' in the process of building trust. This corresponds with earlier findings from the panel on the importance of informal meetings. Trust is essential for real problems to be solved and not just formal document fulfillment. The vision needs to have a leader who can inspire and deliver on shared goals, and the 'guardians' of the vision can be ex-politicians or 'captains of industry' with a passion for the region, working with dedicated officials.

The role of art and artists in the innovation process was also an element of the discussion. It was noted that artists can bring 'truth' to discussions and influence thinking about the region from within. Nevertheless, caution was also expressed as to whether artists are really a representative group on which the whole vision of the region should rely, given their relatively small numbers compared to the general population. Notwithstanding these concerns, the importance of combining diverse actors - artists, politicians, scientists - in the visioning dialogue was stressed. The idea of the 'quadruple helix' was thus extended here to the creative sector. The aim is to find the right path together before the vision is turned into a marketing slogan. The vision must address people's real problems and take into account the long-term future.

### 5. Discussion

The event, designed as a platform for the exchange of experiences between international experts and local actors, provided insights into the challenges and opportunities in the field of regional development and smart specialisation, with a focus on the Košice region and Eastern Slovakia. The combination of a panel discussion and an interactive workshop allowed to present expert views and to encourage collective thinking and the generation of practical proposals. In this chapter we will summarise the findings from both formats in order to encompass the maximum added value for understanding how experiences and best practices can be applied in the local context. A central idea running through the event was the necessity of a clear, long-term and inclusive vision. Panelists repeatedly emphasized that successful innovation ecosystems are not an accidental outcome. They are the result of deliberate strategic planning that transcends political cycles. The vision should be articulated in a way that appeals to a wide range of actors and shifts from a problem-focused mindset to an opportunity-focused mindset.

Examples such as the transformation of Eindhoven show that ambitious visions, even though they may seem unrealistic at first sight, can be achieved through systematic efforts. In order to secure the vision, the involvement of 'guardians of the idea' - respected figures from business, academia or even former politicians - is essential. Actors with a genuine interest in the development of the region are able to defend the vision against the turbulence of political change, and their commitment and ability to communicate the seriousness of the strategic direction are as crucial as the content itself. In the context of the vision, the discussion focused on Smart Specialisation (S3) and its proper



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understanding and implementation. The discussion confirmed that S3 is not so much about selecting a few sectors, but rather a process of identifying and building on a region's unique strengths, with an emphasis on existing assets and human capital. At the same time, there was a warning against mechanically copying strategies from other regions, which would only lead to "on paper" strategies with no real impact.

Instead, we should focus on creating a supportive ecosystem and a "smart" public administration that supports, not constrains, this process. This lies in the ability of the public administration to act as a facilitator, not a dictator, and to provide a platform for dialogue and feedback, thereby deepening the sense of ownership and contributing to effective entrepreneurial discovery. The future of RIS3 in the region should therefore be anchored in specific regional circumstances, integrating economic, social and cultural aspects to achieve multifaceted development. A critical aspect that emerged repeatedly in both the discussion and the workshop is governance, coordination and multi-levelness. Institutional fragmentation and unclear competences between the city and the region represent a significant obstacle. The discussion highlighted that the solution lies in finding an optimal balance between national, regional and inter-regional approaches, with geographical proximity (100 km radius for intensive interaction) playing a role.

Successful examples such as the JIC in Brno have shown that building trust between political and innovation actors is a long-term process that requires systematic work and clear communication. The role of the broker is important - an independent entity or individual who has the trust of all parties and can manage innovation initiatives without self-interest. Such roles are important to overcome political frictions and ensure continuity, especially in an environment where political leadership changes frequently. Building genuine ownership and trust is inextricably linked to the entrepreneurial discovery process (EDP) and effective leadership. EDP has been identified as a continuous process in the sense of foresight, which should continuously generate new ideas and solutions. For EDP to be effective, a deep understanding of its importance and the involvement of all relevant actors within the 'quadruple helix' model (government, academia, business, civil society) is essential.

Trust is built through personal interactions and informal meetings that go beyond formal protocols. Findings from the workshop underlined that an isolating mindset and low willingness to share information are serious barriers. On the contrary, the examples demonstrated that inclusive approaches lead to more effective identification of priorities and engagement of actors. The challenge remains to motivate the business sector to actively participate and to find a respected leader who can bring together disparate initiatives into a coherent whole.

Addressing the demographic challenges and the outflow of talent from the Košice region is essential for maintaining the dynamism of the innovation ecosystem. Creating not only well-paid jobs, but also an overall vac attractive living environment that takes into account the needs of younger generations, including quality housing, cultural activities and services, contributes to this. The problem of interdependence between amenities and job creation highlights that a successful strategy must strike

a balance between these elements of the environment. Identifying and supporting 'missionaries' - companies with international growth potential - appears to be a step for creating new jobs and attracting talent. It is essential to recognise that regional development is a long-term process that requires patience and a focus on building on existing strengths.

**Table 1. An overview that brings together the identified challenges, their causes and consequences. This structure is useful for designing effective interventions in the upcoming Policy Lab 3.**

Problem	Identified impacts	Root causes
A. Lack of a clear, long-term and inclusive vision for the innovative development of the region.	Lack of common direction and goals among actors.	Formal understanding of strategic documents (e.g. S3) without real ownership.
	Short-term focus that does not go beyond political cycles.	Lack of space for participatory visioning processes.
	Failure to inspire and engage a wide range of stakeholders.	Problem orientation instead of opportunity orientation.
	Lower attractiveness of the region for young generations and talent.	Insufficient use of foresight tools.
B. Low level of consensus among actors on multi-level coordination of the innovation ecosystem	Isolated activities instead of synergistic projects.	
	Risk of duplication of activities and inefficient use of resources.	Lack of communication on existing roles and responsibilities.
	Perception of "grey areas" of responsibility among actors.	Poor awareness of the work of coordinating actors in parts of the ecosystem.
	Limited linkages between national, regional and local initiatives.	Short-term political cycles and frequent staff changes.
	Reduced level of trust between actors (public administration, academia, companies, NGOs).	Persistent tensions and diverging institutional priorities.
Complicated implementation of RIS3 and limited synergies.	Limited capacity to facilitate and build common understanding.	

C. Low engagement and ownership of innovation processes by actors.	Strategies remain "on paper" without real implementation.	Lack of trust between actors (fear of speaking out).
	Lack of motivation for "pro bono" engagement.	Isolated action by actors.
	Passivity of the business sector.	Lack of respected leaders/"brokers".
	Frustration and disappointment with repeated failed initiatives.	Poor communication of innovation agendas across the spectrum.
D. Talent drain and lack of attractiveness of the region for young generations.	Low resilience of innovative initiatives to policy changes.	Ineffective monitoring and evaluation of RIS3 implementation.
	Declining human capital and population decline.	Insufficient creation of quality and well-paid jobs.
	Shortage of skilled labour.	Low quality of life (housing, culture, health, education).
	Limited development of innovative and high-tech sectors.	Neglect of soft attractiveness factors (arts, creative industries).
	Low investment in R&D (lowest in the EU).	Disparity between urban and rural areas of the region.

## 6. Conclusion

The event fulfilled the objective of providing a platform for the exchange of expertise and the collective creation of proposals to strengthen the innovation ecosystem in the region. Analysis of the panel discussion and workshops revealed a complex web of challenges and opportunities, while providing new information for strategic decision-making. The main added value of this study is the synthesis of scientific knowledge with the practical experience of experts, which will lead to the formulation of more concrete and better argued recommendations, serving as a basis for the upcoming Policy Lab 3 focused on the design of regional actions and policies. The findings from the event can be summarised in five areas.

- We need a clear, long-term and inclusive vision. Without a compelling vision that transcends short-term policy cycles and reaches out to a wide range of actors, building a sustainable innovation ecosystem is challenging. The vision needs to be dynamic, capable of integrating diverse perspectives and shifting thinking from problems to opportunities.



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- Smart specialisation should be seen as a dynamic process, not a static selection. RIS3 is not just about sectoral selection, but a continuous process of entrepreneurial discovery that adapts to changing conditions and builds on unique regional assets. The role of 'smart' public administration as a facilitator is key.
- It is important to have effective multi-level coordination and division of competences. Fragmentation of institutions and unclear lines of responsibility between city, regional and national levels are critical obstacles. A clear division of tasks and the search for a broker who can manage cooperation are essential.
- Trust and ownership play an essential role. Trust, built through personal and informal interactions, is the cornerstone for real stakeholder engagement and shared ownership of innovation initiatives. Without trust, even the best strategies remain only on paper.
- Continuity across policy cycles and addressing demographic challenges are essential. To ensure long-term progress, mechanisms need to be put in place to protect the strategic direction from political instability. This includes addressing the talent drain and creating an attractive environment for younger generations that takes into account quality of life, culture and career opportunities.

The study confirms and extends standard theoretical concepts of regional development and smart specialisation, such as the 'quadruple helix' theory and the importance of entrepreneurial discovery, by testing them in the specific context of the post-transition CEE region. It provides a detailed insight into the dynamics of interactions between different actors and identifies practical barriers and facilitators of knowledge transfer and best practices. In practical terms, the study serves as another diagnostic tool for the Košice region, summarising the challenges while offering inspiration and concrete suggestions for overcoming them, drawn directly from international experience. Based on the findings and discussions, we formulate the following recommendations for the Košice region and the upcoming Policy Lab 3.

### (1) Creating an inclusive and accepted long-term vision

The absence of a clear and shared vision has been identified as one of the main obstacles to coherent development. The vision should be the result of a participatory process involving all relevant groups - public administration, academia, business, civil society and, most importantly, the young generations. Only then can it be resilient to political change and inspire long-term commitment. The example of Eindhoven has shown that even heavily industrial cities can undergo a comprehensive transformation if they have a strong and shared vision. Policy Lab 3 should start with a 'design thinking' phase that focuses on co-creating the elements of this long-term vision, identifying its attributes and values that will resonate across the region.



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### (2) Strengthening trust and creating a platform for transparent communication and coordination

Ongoing tensions and divisions between the city and the region, as well as a lack of trust between stakeholders, hinder effective collaboration. The establishment of an independent coordination platform (with a broker role) with clearly defined competences and a mandate to coordinate innovation initiatives is recommended. This platform should actively promote informal meetings and dialogue, which are the basis for building trust and overcoming personal animosities. Policy Lab 3 should focus on the design of concrete mechanisms and structures to ensure effective multi-level coordination. This may include a model of innovation coalitions involving entrepreneurs and politicians, or defining roles and responsibilities for different levels of governance, including the establishment of effective communication channels.

### (3) Focusing on both 'soft' and 'hard' drivers of regional attractiveness and talent development

To attract and retain talent, especially young people, it is not enough to create jobs. We need to invest in quality of life - in cultural institutions, education, healthcare and sustainable housing. The demographic decline in the region requires a comprehensive response. Identifying and supporting 'missionaries' (dynamic companies with international potential), combined with the development of creative industries and cultural initiatives, can create synergies that will strengthen the region's overall attractiveness. Policy Lab 3 should propose concrete measures and programmes that integrate support for talent development, environmental improvement and the development of economic sectors, including creative industries and specific high-tech areas identified in RIS3. This may include pilot projects aimed at wooing Generation Z.

### (4) Implementing the entrepreneurial discovery process as a continuous, participatory cycle

EDP is not a one-off activity, but a long-term process that requires the systematic involvement of all relevant actors. Given previous implementation challenges and the lack of data, it is essential to set up robust mechanisms to collect feedback and adapt the strategy. The Academy can play an essential role as a stable partner and source of knowledge in this process. Policy Lab 3 should design in detail the methodology and phases of a continuous EDP for the Košice region, including tools for data collection, mechanisms for discussion with stakeholders, and processes for periodic review and updating of the RIS3. The question of how to effectively measure the impact of innovation initiatives and how to ensure their transparent evaluation should be asked.