

# Creating a new generation of entrepreneurship in the region

BY NIKI KITSANTONIS  
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Next month, on May 25 and 26, the city of Serres in northern Greece, is to shift up a gear for the inaugural Balkans & Black Sea Cooperation Forum, bringing together more than 500 participants from 17 countries of the Balkans and Black Sea area, the first step towards fulfilling the untapped potential for business and trade in the region.

"It aims to be the Davos of this region," said Siwarde Sap, member of the steering committee of the Forum, referring to the annual economic forum in Switzerland. A joint concept of Mrs. Sap, senior adviser on economic affairs to the Embassy of the Netherlands in Greece, and Giannis Balakakis, chair of the Forum's organizing committee and president of the Geo Routes Cultural Institute, the Forum aims to boost cross-border cooperation and sustainable development in the broader region, encouraging countries to trade best practice techniques.

In an interview, Mrs Sap said the initiative is a new approach focusing on different business sectors and countries, working together.

The Forum, on the cross-section of public and business sectors, offers "explore and experience" networking opportunities through a Business Hub, cultural exhibitions and a Social Excursion Program, and aims to create a new generation of entrepreneurship in the region.

**How does the Balkans & Black Sea Cooperation Forum differ from other events in the region?**

The structure has more of a think-tank approach than other conferences. It is not just people making presentations of their organizations. We expect speakers to contribute by considering why regional economic cooperation is difficult and what they can do to help to overcome. Therefore, panels will equally represent speakers from the public, business and research sectors. It should be a discussion pushing things forward.

Balkan and Black Sea countries could gain valuable experience from the Netherlands, much of which is below sea level. It's in the Dutch DNA



Siwarde Sap (left, with Giannis Balakakis at right) is on the Steering Committee of the Balkans and Black Sea Cooperation Forum.



that rich, poor, whatever religion or political views, the public, private and research sectors have always worked together to fight the sea – you need a dyke to keep the water out, you need to join forces. This way of working, this concept, is what I would like for other countries to adopt – that there is a dialogue followed by tangible results.

**How did the idea for the Forum arise and what are its key practical goals?**

Giannis Balakakis, chair of the forum's Organizing Committee, approached the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), exchanging views about launching a regional forum for the Black Sea countries on Cultural and Sustainable Tourism. After the BSEC's suggestion to focus on all means of cooperation, the Forum went live. The Forum comes a month before BSEC's 25th anniversary and aligns with a United Nations resolution designating 2017 as International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, which is our forum "headline" next month.

I traveled in the Balkans and Black Sea countries and, with my interest in economic diplomacy, I had many ideas for how this region could re-identify itself. I would like to see how the countries in this region can create a new footprint by doing more business together.

When Giannis and I sat down to

gether early 2016, he with his ideas, I with my ideas, the concept was born. From there on we developed it under the auspices of Official Partner BSEC. **Why was Greece chosen as the host country for this inaugural international forum? And why Serres specifically?**

The Greek economy plays as much of a role as the economies of the other participating countries, unlike other economic summits which are about just Greece. As for the choice of Serres, that was Giannis's idea. He had been to Serres to design Geo Routes cultural heritage routes. Mr. Moisiadis, the vice regional governor of Serres, took up the challenge of becoming a co-organizer at this May forum. The Forum is supported by about 100 volunteers, all citizens of Serres. The Forum also brings people closer through the "experience and explore" concept of its social excursion programs [Amphipolis, Lake Kerkini, Prodromos Monastery, Nigrita Mountain trekking]. On the map, Serres is now a new international conference and tourist destination in the region – a remarkable achievement.

**How will subsequent host cities be chosen and how often will the Forum be held? Do we know already where the follow-up Forum will be held?**

We aim for the Forum event to be rotating, in a different country and city

every year. This is not a forum belonging to Greece. In our vision it belongs to the region. The Forum is not about the economy of the host country, it is about getting united through regional diversity – I strongly believe that diversity can lead to creativity and to seek new ways of working together, doing business.

At the end of April, a call for Expressions of Interest for becoming the 2018 Host Country and City, will be released to all Balkans and Black Sea countries. Upon further assessment and after location surveys, the Forum's Scientific and Steering committees will decide where the next forum event will take place.

"Be the change you wish for this region" is the slogan, so the forum has to travel.

**Authorities in Greece always underline its prospects as a regional hub for energy and stability. Can Greece develop a key role in the region and why is a Dutch diplomat supporting this Forum?**

Firstly, Greece, from government to opposition, wants to contribute to becoming a regional energy hub and to strengthen stability in the wider region. Greece sees itself as a net exporter of security and stability. This is in line with the Forum aiming at stability, growth and cooperation in the region and in line with the Netherlands

government policies, as an active founding member of EU and NATO.

Secondly, Greece aims to recover its economy. Working with the IMF and Eurogroup is just a part of this huge effort. Greece should also seek new opportunities to improve its competitiveness. The Netherlands has an open and strong economy; it took us lots of years to reach that stage and it takes even more effort to maintain. Such processes of continuous reforming need innovation and creativity from the inside. Our Embassy's initiative to establish the start-up incubator "Orange Grove" in Greece is an example of how we support the creation of a new generation of entrepreneurs.

**Do you think Greece has economic growth potential?**

I believe Greece is a country with huge potential. Each sector has diamonds of companies and people, excellent minds, good strategic thinkers and good in tactics, but collectively people have not connected enough (yet) to come out stronger, especially in tourism, agribusiness, energy, logistics and transport. Let's take an example. Although Greece has such productive soil, is not able yet to produce enough tomatoes for the domestic market. That's why we see e.g. Dutch imported tomatoes in summer. There are some quite successful examples of high-tech greenhouses in Northern Greece and with the right policy shaping at the government level and efficient cooperation between public, private and research sectors, Greece could cover the domestic demand of tomatoes. It could perhaps even start exporting and improving its trade balance.

We always think we have to go far away for better welfare but with the digital economy, there is so much potential for cooperation.

If we realize how diverse we are but how much we have in common whilst exploring, so much creativity can be born and make the region stronger. Stability, Growth and Cooperation. That's the slogan of the Forum.

**Are you concerned about destabilizing factors in the region – Turkish aggression, the Cyprus problem? How do you see those issues obstructing regional cooperation?**

Geopolitical challenges always play a role. Forum participants will definitely discuss the challenges and limitations. The key difference is that participants will be triggered on how to seek business opportunities. The Forum contributes to a better dialogue because of its think-tank approach. It will focus on regional economic cooperation and is not political in nature.

So far, all partners and participants have shown themselves to be very committed to making this Forum a success. I have good vibes that the Forum will strengthen regional cooperation. **Although the "headline" topic of the Forum is "Cultural Tourism," the event covers a series of issues ranging from energy routes to women in leadership. Where is the focus?**

When we first started the forum, the idea was very much anchored on cultural exchange. We broadened the scope to include a much wider range of topics when BSEC, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation organization, became involved as a partner. So topics such as energy, digital economy, women in leadership, agriculture, maritime affairs, transport and infrastructure are now part of the Forum agenda. All of these topics have significant importance in the region, with great development potential.

As a result, we have attracted various international speakers from abroad, including the Netherlands: Dr. Frans-Paul van der Putten, senior research fellow at the Clingendael Institute, who is half Dutch-half Chinese, is renowned for his research on China's approach to global trade. He will contribute to the panel on the 'One Belt, One Road' strategy and its effect on the container trade in the Black Sea. Wim Mijs, CEO of the European Banking Federation, will moderate the panel on 'Digital Economy & Innovation.' He also asked to join the 'Women in Leadership' panel.

Learning from others, exchanging bottlenecks and good practices, inspiring and opening eyes. The Forum is about connecting people who are striving for creating a new generation of entrepreneurship in the region.

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25 - 26 May 2017  
Serres - Greece

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**TOPICS**

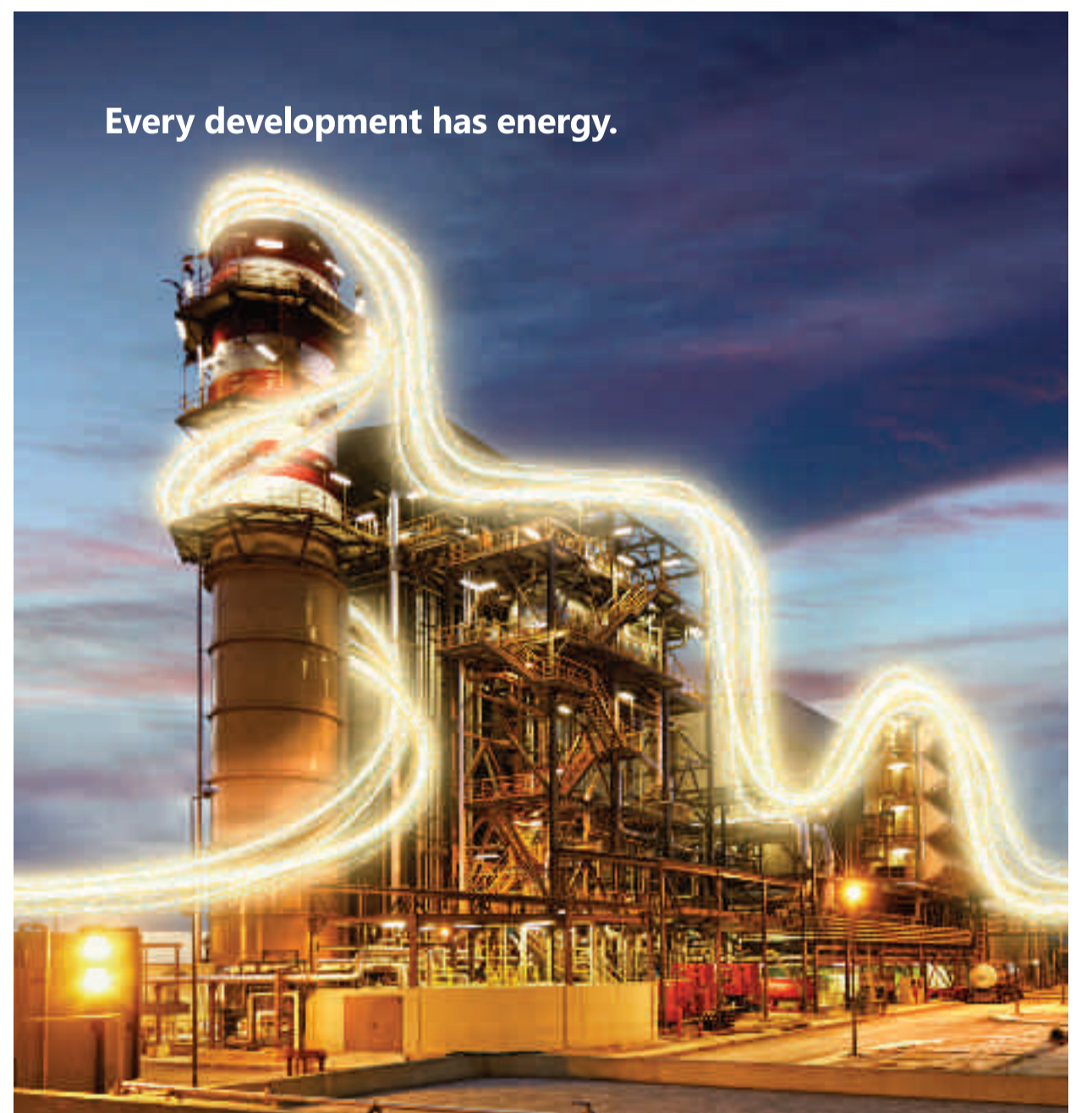
- EU Balkans & Black Sea Perspectives and SDGs towards 2030
- Roads of Energy "Electricity & Gas Interconnectivity"
- Digital Economy & Innovation
- Women in leadership
- Agriculture, Environment & Use of Sources
- Maritime, Transportation, Infrastructures, Hubs
- Cultural & Sustainable Tourism

**17** Participant Countries  
**02** Honorary States  
**07** Multi-level Sessions  
**42** International Panelists  
**500** Delegates

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