

CULTURE, CREATIVITY AND BUSINESS

LESSONS FROM THE
KRENI STARTUP PROJECT



CONTENT

1. Executive Summary and Introduction

- 1.1. Introduction and overview of the KreNI Startup project
- 1.2. Background of the project: KreNI Conference and Starup Weekend Ohrid
- 1.3. Connection to wider strategic goals

2. Objectives and Project Planning

- 2.1. Main objectives
- 2.2. Planning methodology
- 2.3. Identified risks and mitigation measures

3. Project Activities and Implementation

- 3.1. Study visits to Portugal
- 3.2. The concept and format of festivals in Serbia and North Macedonia
- 3.3. Festivals - Setting the stage for innovation
- 3.4. Festivals – program synergy
- 3.5. Community-Driven Ideas
- 3.6. Testimonials





4. Participants and Community Engagement

- 4.1. Participants overview
- 4.2. Speakers, mentors, and partners
- 4.3. Interactive sessions and tools
- 4.4. Evaluation

5. Partnerships and Communication

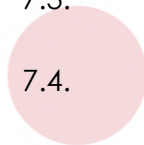
- 5.1. Long lasting partnerships
- 5.2. Communication Synergy

6. Challenges and Opportunities

- 6.1. Challenges identified
- 6.2. Implemented solutions and tactics
- 6.3. Key lessons and findings

7. Conclusions, Recommendations, and Broader Impact

- 7.1. Final thoughts on synergy creation
- 7.2. Tips and tricks: Key recommendations
- 7.3. Potential of creative entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans region
- 7.4. Long-term value of KreNI Startup





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE KRENI STARTUP PROJECT

The **KreNI Startup** project was developed with the aim of co-producing the KreNI Conference in Nis and Startup Weekend Ohrid as innovative platforms to address several pressing challenges in the Western Balkans. The initiative specifically focuses on enhancing **regional networking, cultural cooperation**, and the development of **creative industries and startup ecosystems**.

This project responds to a clear and growing need: empowering young people, supporting the development of innovative business ideas, and promoting cross-border cultural exchange. These elements are essential for driving sustainable socio-economic progress in the region.

The KreNI Startup was grounded in insights gathered through stakeholder consultations and needs analysis. One of the most critical gaps identified was the **lack of mentorship and networking opportunities** for young creatives and aspiring entrepreneurs in the cultural and innovation sectors. Through joint planning, benchmarking workshops, and ideation studies, the KreNI Startup initiative has shared valuable European best practices and created a collaborative learning environment where youth can thrive.

Moreover, this initiative directly contributes to addressing structural issues such as **high youth unemployment, underdeveloped creative industries**, and the **limited institutional support for innovation**. It aligns with our broader mission to promote





inclusive cultural and economic development through creativity, innovation, and international cooperation.

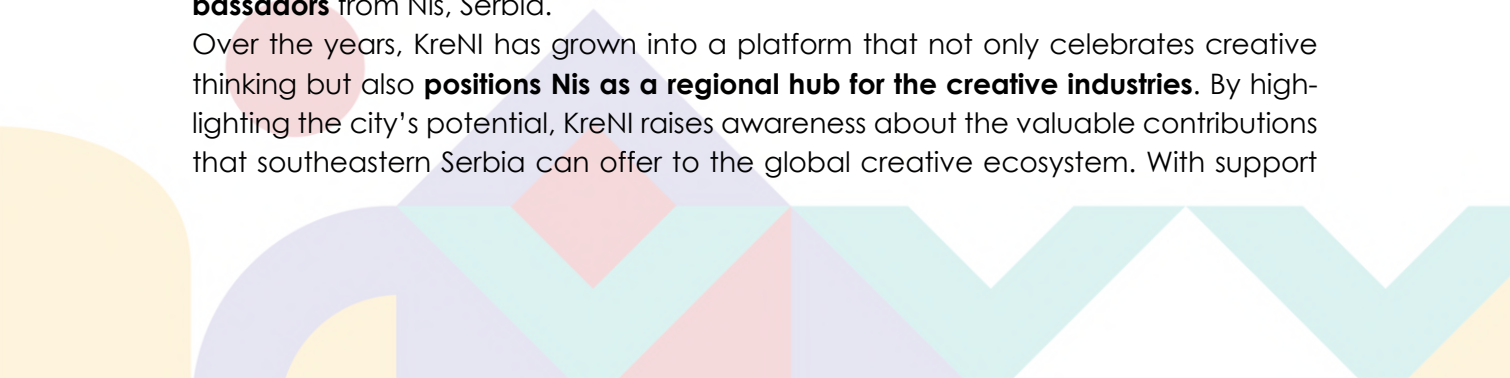
By fostering regional collaboration and supporting underrepresented groups, the KreNI Startup project is laying the foundation for long-term, sustainable growth, helping ensure that the **youth of the Western Balkans are equipped, connected, and inspired to shape a better future.**

The **KreNI Startup project** is supported by the **British Council** and funded by the **European Union** through the **Culture and Creativity for the Western Balkans (CC4WBs)** project. The CC4WBs project aims to foster dialogue in the Western Balkans by enhancing the cultural and creative sectors for increased socio-economic impact.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT: KRENI CONFERENCE AND STARTUP WEEKEND OHRID

The KreNI Conference of creative industries is the first and most influential creativity conference in southeastern Serbia, held annually in the city of Nis. It gathers young creatives, professionals, and international experts to explore the power of creativity in addressing societal challenges. The conference is dedicated to **empowering youth**, encouraging them to identify problems in their communities and co-create innovative solutions. The KreNI is created and organised by association **Young Ambassadors** from Nis, Serbia.

Over the years, KreNI has grown into a platform that not only celebrates creative thinking but also **positions Nis as a regional hub for the creative industries.** By highlighting the city's potential, KreNI raises awareness about the valuable contributions that southeastern Serbia can offer to the global creative ecosystem. With support





from renowned international mentors, the conference fosters a space where knowledge exchange and collaborative problem-solving lead to concrete, locally relevant solutions.

As a **flagship festival of creativity and innovation**, KreNI plays a critical role in strengthening the visibility of local talent and bridging it with global trends and best practices.

Startup Weekend Ohrid 2025 was envisioned as a complementary regional initiative designed to nurture entrepreneurial thinking, hands-on innovation, and **cross-border collaboration** among youth, creatives, and aspiring entrepreneurs. The event is organised by organisation **Startup Macedonia** from Skopje, North Macedonia. Based on the globally recognized **Techstars Startup Weekend** model, the event provided a high-energy, inclusive environment for participants to form teams, develop startup ideas, test business models, and pitch in front of mentors and peers.

The significance of this event lies in its capacity to tackle persistent gaps in the regional innovation ecosystem - namely, the **lack of access to experiential learning, insufficient early-stage support for startups, and limited connections between academia, industry, and the startup community**. Startup Weekend Ohrid helped bridge these gaps by offering practical tools, direct mentorship, and a collaborative framework that supports long-term engagement across sectors and borders.

1.3 CONNECTION TO WIDER STRATEGIC GOALS

The “**KreNI Startup**” project directly contributes to broader strategic goals related to **youth empowerment, social inclusion, cultural cooperation, and economic resilience** in the Western Balkans region. By co-producing two complementary initiatives, **KreNI Conference** and **Startup Weekend Ohrid**, the project amplifies the role of creative and entrepreneurial platforms in fostering **resilient, future-ready communities**.





Both KreNI and Startup Weekend Ohrid respond to **identified systemic challenges**, such as limited access to employment, education, and cultural participation. The KreNI Conference empowers young people to engage in creative problem-solving and to contribute to urban and social transformation in their local environments. In parallel, Startup Weekend Ohrid provides a rare opportunity for aspiring entrepreneurs to explore business ideas with hands-on mentorship, tools, and exposure resources often unavailable to vulnerable populations.

By equipping participants with relevant **skills, networks, and opportunities**, the project strengthens the capacity of creative industries and the startup ecosystem to play a meaningful role in **inclusive, sustainable growth** across the Western Balkans. Its co-production model also reinforces cross-border collaboration and promotes long-term regional partnerships in line with European integration and development strategies.





OBJECTIVES AND PROJECT PLANNING

2.1 MAIN OBJECTIVES

The "KreNI Startup" project aims to facilitate the **co-production of KreNI and Startup Weekend Ohrid**, and to enhance regional networking and cooperation in the fields of creative industries and startup businesses. This collaborative initiative will create an environment that fosters cultural exchange and creative business, enhances skills and promotes regional cooperation through innovative festival co-production, drawing on the strengths of both KreNI and Startup Weekend Ohrid.

One of the project's **most innovative aspects is its focus on integrating business skills with cultural and creative industries**. The project will bridge the gap between the startup and creative industry sectors by involving experienced startup mentors and creative industry experts. This will create new opportunities for collaboration and growth.

2.2 PLANNING METHODOLOGY

The planning of the "KreNI Startup" project was built around close cooperation between two teams, those behind the Young Ambassadors and Startup Macedonia. From the very beginning, **the idea was to combine different types of knowledge and experience**, from creative industries and entrepreneurship to youth engagement and event organization. Instead of working separately, both teams developed and shaped the project together through joint discussions and shared decision-making.





Each team brought its own strengths to the planning process: the KreNI team focused on creativity, local engagement, and working with young people, while the Startup Weekend Ohrid team contributed strong methods for startup development and mentoring. Programs were co-created, and speakers, mentors, and topics were carefully selected to strike a balance between creative expression and entrepreneurial thinking.

A dedicated study visit was organized to observe and analyse innovative methodologies, audience engagement strategies, and sustainability practices. This phase ensured that the project remained informed by **current trends and standards in the European creative and startup ecosystem**.

One of the main takeaways from this process is that **good planning does not have to be overly complex**, but it does need to be collaborative, clearly communicated, and open to change. Flexibility, regular dialogue, and a willingness to adapt were essential to the success of this project's preparation.

2.3 IDENTIFIED RISKS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Like any cross-border, multi-partner initiative, the *KreNI Startup* project came with its own set of risks. Some were anticipated early in the planning phase, while others emerged during implementation. Below are the most relevant risks identified, along with the strategies we used (or recommend) to reduce their impact:

Different experience levels among participants

Risk: A diverse group of young people joined the project, some were familiar with creative workshops or startup events, while others were attending something like





this for the first time. This could have led to an imbalance in group dynamics or limited participation.

Mitigation: We provided tailored guidance from mentors, adjusted workshop formats to include more hands-on support, and ensured team roles were clear. In the future, a short onboarding session could help equalize knowledge levels at the start.

Tight scheduling and time pressure

Risk: The ambitious number of activities, joint workshops, planning meetings, study visits, and festivals, had to be delivered in a relatively short timeframe. This posed a challenge in terms of preparation, coordination, and participant readiness.

Mitigation: In response, we adjusted the sequence of activities to reduce pressure before the main conference events and introduced several follow-up activities after the conferences. These post-event activities are helping us promote project results more effectively and build new partnerships with organizations working on similar initiatives across Europe. This approach ensured continuity, expanded impact, and allowed the project to remain agile and responsive.





PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 STUDY VISIT TO PORTUGAL

In November 2024, a six-person delegation from the KreNI and Startup Weekend Ohrid teams participated in an organized study visit to Lisbon, Portugal. The aim was to explore successful European models of events in the fields of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The visit centred around two major international events in Lisbon, Portugal: Portugal Tech Week and Web Summit. These events offered the team first-hand experience of advanced event formats, audience engagement strategies and innovative cross-sectoral content.

- **Portugal Tech Week** is a week-long, decentralized festival that connects the Portuguese tech ecosystem through independently organized events. These include hackathons, panels, startup showcases, creative meetups, and tech-driven cultural programming. The 2024 edition featured over 200 events across Lisbon, Porto, Braga and other cities, organized by accelerators, co-working spaces, universities and start-ups.
- **Web Summit** is one of the world's largest tech conferences, attracting over 70,000 attendees and 1,000 speakers from around the globe. It brings together leaders in technology, start-ups, the media, the arts, sustainability and policy. The 2024 programme included major themes such as "Planet: Tech for Sustainability", "Content Makers" and "Creative Futures", which align with the project's themes.





The insights gathered during the study visit directly impacted on:

- the format of the workshops and talks at KreNI10, particularly those related to business innovation and sustainability;
- the mentor structure and team-building techniques used during KreNi conference and Startup Weekend Ohrid;
- the integration of green skills and activities across both events.

The visit also initiated contact with potential European partners for future collaborations.

3.2 THE CONCEPT AND FORMAT OF FESTIVALS IN SERBIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA

KreNI is a two-day event filled with lectures, panel discussions, workshops, and idea-pitching sessions. It is very practical in nature, whereby participants, through creativity, technology, and innovation, develop concrete solutions for urban and social challenges. The event gathers around 100 creatives, students, entrepreneurs, and professionals each year. It is primarily aimed at youth aged 18-30, but open to professionals and experts across disciplines. KreNI is always held in Nis, reinforcing the city's position as a hub for creative industries. It also has international influence because it features renowned global speakers and experts, providing mentorship and collaboration opportunities.

Since its creation in 2015, KreNI has successfully enabled:

- More than 40 creative projects by participants with innovative perspective;
- International mentors boost cooperations while enriching Serbia's ecosystem regarding the creative industry;





- Practical empowerment of youngsters: workshops/master class events on community development.

With these events, KreNI further inspires, educates, and connects young people through these activities, using the power of creativity as the driving force of positive changes in Nis and beyond.


Startup Weekend Ohrid is a part of a global event/hackathon that aims to gather young professionals, freelancers, and startup enthusiasts in one location to form a team to develop a business idea from concept to prototype within 54 hours or a weekend. The participants form a team where they implement and test the idea and the project they will work on. The teams develop their ideas with the support of over 40 mentors (startup founders and experts) and present their concepts to a jury of distinguished IT professionals, businessmen, and investors.

Startup Weekend Ohrid is an event intended for all young enthusiasts who have a business idea or project, but need a team, resources, or mentoring support to realize it.

3.3 FESTIVALS - SETTING THE STAGE FOR INNOVATION

The 10th KreNI Conference took place on December 6th and 7th 2024 at Hotel Ambasador in Nis, marking a decade of inspiring creativity and innovation. This anniversary event put the spotlight on Sweden as the host country, while highly respected international guests, city representatives, and participants from various fields joined the conference. The Conference dealt with the theme of Proximity and its impact on urban living, confirming KreNI's role of an active driver for positive change within the creative industries and beyond.





Startup Weekend Ohrid 2025 was hosted at the University of Information Science and Technology “St. Apostle Paul” in Ohrid, a venue that perfectly complemented the spirit of innovation. Nestled just above the historic city, the campus offers modern classrooms, spacious lecture halls, co-working areas, and well-equipped breakout rooms. This setup provided teams with flexible working environments to brainstorm, prototype, and rehearse their pitches throughout the 54-hour event.

3.4 FESTIVALS – PROGRAM SYNERGY

Through aligned themes, shared methodologies, and complementary formats, the two festivals created a seamless flow of learning, from ideation and inspiration at KreNI10 to prototyping and validation at Startup Weekend.

KreNI10: Exploring Proximity through creativity and collaboration

KreNI10 offered a rich and immersive program that explored the theme of **Proximity** - a concept tied to the “15-minute city” model and sustainable urban development. The conference was carefully structured to set the stage for the entrepreneurial journey that continued in Ohrid. Program elements were curated to encourage creative thinking, interdisciplinary dialogue, and idea incubation.

Key program components:

- **KreNI Talks:** International experts from 10 countries shared best practices on sustainable urban solutions, mobility, and inclusive city design.
 - **Working Groups and Thematic Labs:** Participants, guided by mentors, co-developed ideas centred on urban proximity, mobility, ecology, and cultural participation.
 - **Masterclasses and Case Studies:** Practical insights were shared on how cities like Vienna, Lund, and Stockholm have embraced proximity principles.
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- **Panel Discussions:** These focused on how proximity influences social inclusion, urban planning, and environmental sustainability.
- **Workshops:** Hands-on sessions where participants began shaping business ideas rooted in proximity values, many of which were later developed further at Startup Weekend Ohrid.

The collaborative and participatory nature of KreNI10 provided the foundation for real-world project development, setting participants on the path toward startup ideation.


Startup Weekend Ohrid 2025: Transforming ideas into startups

Startup Weekend Ohrid picked up the momentum from KreNI10 and transitioned the conversation from *inspiration to implementation*. Building on the thematic focus and early-stage ideas developed in Nis, the Ohrid event empowered participants to translate their creative concepts into startup models through a structured and intensive 54-hour format based on the global Techstars methodology.

Core Program Elements:

- **Business Model Canvas Workshop:** Helped teams map out their ideas using structured tools, often expanding on projects initiated at KreNI10.
- **Market Research and Validation:** Supported participants in testing the real-world relevance of their proximity-themed ideas through user research and analysis.
- **Pitching Workshop:** Built upon the storytelling and communication skills introduced during KreNI, helping participants refine and confidently present their ideas.
- **Mentoring Sessions:** Involved over 20 experts providing targeted feedback on business models, product design, and impact potential.



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- **Corporate and Startup Innovation Roundtable:** This session mirrored the strategic panels at KreNI, reinforcing the importance of cross-sector collaboration and open innovation.


Each session at Startup Weekend was carefully designed to expand the work started in Nis, fostering a sense of continuity and progression between the two events.

Program alignment: A unified journey

The two festivals were intentionally **programmed in synergy**, with clear bridges built between themes, participants, and learning outcomes:

- **Thematic continuity:** “Proximity” as the unifying theme offered a coherent framework for exploration at both events, creatively at KreNI and entrepreneurially at Startup Weekend.
- **Participant flow:** Several ideas sparked at KreNI were further developed and prototyped in Ohrid, enabling a fluid participant journey across events.
- **Mentorship and methodology:** The mentoring culture and workshop formats used in Nis were adapted and deepened in Ohrid, ensuring a consistent learning environment.
- **Shared objectives:** Both events promoted youth engagement, local innovation, and regional cooperation, goals achieved through co-design, co-production, and mutual reinforcement.

As part of the festival synergy and exchange, a group of youth participants from North Macedonia took part in the 10th edition of the KreNI Conference. They were not only engaged as attendees but also contributed to program design and logistics, working alongside the host team and receiving mentorship throughout the process. Likewise, a delegation of young participants from Serbia attended Startup





Weekend Ohrid, further reinforcing cross-border collaboration and mutual learning between the two initiatives.

By aligning their program structures and content focus, KreNI10 and Startup Weekend Ohrid formed a comprehensive pipeline, from idea inspiration to real-world application, demonstrating the value of cross-event synergy in building creative and entrepreneurial capacity across the Western Balkans.

3.5 COMMUNITY-DRIVEN IDEAS

All ideas developed during the KreNI10 Conference and Startup Weekend Ohrid 2025 shared a common goal: to address real challenges faced by local communities through creative, sustainable, and tech-enabled solutions. Participants, working in diverse teams, blended innovation with empathy, designing tools that improve everyday life, support public services, and promote environmental, social, and economic well-being. Developed ideas:

- **CleaNIing** – A public health campaign and digital platform designed to raise awareness of the harmful effects of air pollution and promote clean air initiatives in Nis.
- **E-Ride** (*Winner of KreNI10 Best Idea Award*) – A smart mobility app that integrates multiple modes of public and private transport into one seamless, user-friendly system.
- **Green Print** – An ecological action app that encourages sustainable behaviour by rewarding users with redeemable points usable at local businesses.
- **RešiNI** – A hyperlocal app focused on the Pantelejš neighbourhood, allowing residents to report infrastructure and civic issues directly to local authorities.





- **Take It Back** (*Winner of the Special City of Nis Award*) – A revitalization initiative for Stara Železnička Kolonija, promoting intergenerational participation by involving students and senior citizens in community development.
- **Movement Archipelago** – A participatory platform that motivates citizens to actively engage in shaping urban policies and solving everyday problems in their communities.
- **Food Loop** – An app connecting restaurants with surplus food to customers at discounted prices, also offering the option to donate to humanitarian organizations.
- **Ride & Revive** – A platform that links cycling routes with cultural content, creating immersive and eco-friendly city tours.
- **PCParts** – A platform that simplifies the process of selecting, comparing, and purchasing computer components, tailored for gaming and DIY PC users.
- **Smart Clothes Dryer** – A sensor-equipped indoor drying solution that reduces energy use and drying time, ideal for urban households with limited outdoor space.
- **Smart Career Switch** – A digital career transition tool that helps users identify transferable skills, explore new paths, and plan reskilling through guided steps.
- **Smart Pill** – A health-tech solution for elderly users, combining medication reminders, dosage tracking, and emergency alerts for safer and more consistent treatment adherence.





3.6 TESTIMONIALS

The impact of both festivals is best reflected in the testimonials shared by participants and key partners.

The importance of KreNI10 was pointed out by key diplomatic representatives:

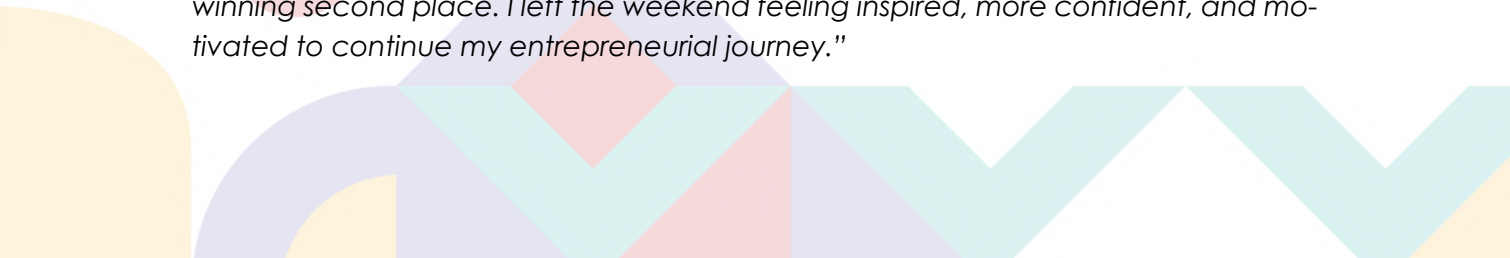
H.E. Charlotte Sammelin (Ambassador of Sweden): *"KreNI put Nis on the map of creative industries in the world. A decade of such a journey is really remarkable."*

H.E. Pierre Cochard (Ambassador of France): *"With 57% of the population of Serbia living in cities, proximity is very important subject. KreNI fosters solutions for making urban living more effective and sustainable."*

Mr Roberto Cincotta (Director of Italian Institute of Culture): *"The future is in the hands of young people, and KreNI is proof of how creativity can shape better cities."*

One of the participants at Startup Weekend Ohrid, **Marija Poposka**, shared her impressions:

"Participating in Startup Weekend Ohrid was an unforgettable experience and a true privilege. The event provided a unique opportunity to learn from incredible mentors who generously shared their knowledge and guidance across all aspects of starting a business, from shaping an idea to building a viable product and pitching it. What made the experience even more special was the chance to meet so many inspiring people like-minded individuals. It helped me expand my horizons and gain new perspectives on innovation, collaboration, and problem-solving. I'm especially proud that this event provided me with the platform to challenge myself, grow, and showcase my skills in the best light, which ultimately contributed to our team winning second place. I left the weekend feeling inspired, more confident, and motivated to continue my entrepreneurial journey."





PARTICIPANTS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

4.1 PARTICIPANTS OVERVIEW

The young creative participants of KreNI10 and Startup Weekend Ohrid were ambitious, driven individuals from diverse backgrounds: students, artists, designers, tech innovators, and aspiring entrepreneurs, united by their passion for solving real-world challenges. They brought fresh perspectives, strong motivation, and a collaborative spirit, contributing ideas that reflected both local needs and global trends.

4.2 SPEAKERS, MENTORS, AND PARTNERS


The 10th KreNI Conference brought together an impressive roster of international speakers who shared their expertise and innovative approaches to proximity. Each speaker's work and insights contributed significantly to the conference's success, inspiring participants to rethink urban development and sustainability. Some of the most notable speakers:

1. **Lara Seixo Rodrigues (Portugal)**

Profession: Architect and Urban Artist

Notable Work: Founder of the "Mistaker Maker" and "WOOL" projects, Lara merges art and architecture in transforming public spaces into colourful, sustainable ones. Her work has underlined the role of creative expression in fostering community engagement and the revitalization of urban areas.

Conference Contribution: Lara presented case studies on the impact of her projects in developing inclusive, aesthetically engaging urban space.





2. Damien Plant (Austria)

Profession: Urban Sustainability Expert

Notable Work: Specialist in urban security and sustainability, Damien has extensively studied Vienna's development over the past two centuries. He advocates for proximity models to create safer, greener, and more accessible cities.

Conference Contribution: Using Vienna as an example, Damien explained how proximity principles have been successfully implemented to enhance urban living.

3. Ilhami Alkan Olsson (Sweden)

Profession: Climate Adaptation and Urban Planning Specialist

Notable Work: Ilhami's work focuses on integrating human rights with sustainable urban planning. He has contributed significantly to the development of Lund's Norra Fälåden neighborhood, a model for combining environmental and social priorities.

Conference Contribution: He shared strategies for addressing climate adaptation challenges while fostering inclusive communities.

4. Giovanni Lanza (Italy)

Profession: Professor at Politecnico di Milano

Notable Work: Giovanni specializes in analysing mobility inequalities and enhancing urban accessibility. His research emphasizes the need to adapt historical proximity models to modern urban challenges.

Conference Contribution: Giovanni discussed the transformation of European cities from proximity-based designs to car-centric urban planning and suggested ways to reverse this trend.

5. Mathieu Voisin (France)

Profession: Urban Transport Consultant

Notable Work: Currently working in Belgrade, Mathieu focuses on reducing car dependency and implementing sustainable transport solutions. His initiatives are supported by French programs promoting green mobility.





Conference Contribution: Mathieu outlined practical steps and challenges in adopting sustainable city models in Serbia.

6. **Johanna Alkan Olsson (Sweden)**

Profession: Teacher and Researcher at Lund University, Sweden

Notable Work: Social environmental scientist and currently assistant director at the Centre for Environmental and Climate Science, Lund University. She has a PhD from Theme Environment (previously Theme Water) at Linköping University.

Conference Contribution: Highlighted ecological and social benefits of proximity while addressing global economic challenges.

The diverse backgrounds and experiences of these speakers enriched the conference's discussions, workshops, and idea presentations. By sharing best practices and innovative solutions, they:

- Highlighted global examples of successful proximity implementations;
- Encouraged interdisciplinary approaches to urban challenges;
- Provided actionable insights for adapting proximity principles to local contexts in Nis and beyond.

These speakers provided insight into ways that participants could envision and create sustainable, inclusive, and connected communities through their expertise.

Strengthening the KreNI Network

The success of KreNI 10 is enabled by the invaluable support and collaboration of our partners:

- **City of Nis** provides a continual support for creativity and innovation.
- **Embassy of Sweden in Belgrade:** Our host country for this year's conference, Sweden brings in its wealth of knowledge and experience in sustainable urban development.




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- **Embassy of France in Serbia:** France adds a contribution of cultural and intellectual exchange, further enhancing the international dimension of the conference.
 - **British Council:** The UK's organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities internationally promotes creative expression and exchange.
 - **Embassy of the United States in Serbia:** Supports projects of enhancing the level of bilateral relations and promoting cultural and educational exchange.
 - **Italian Institute of Culture in Belgrade:** Gives an artistic value to the conference by promoting cultural exchange and cooperation between Italy and Serbia.
 - **Embassy of Portugal in Serbia:** Promotes Portuguese culture and supports bilateral cooperation in all sectors of activity, including creative industries.

Startup Weekend Ohrid 2025 was powered by an exceptional network of mentors, an inspiring speaker, and strong strategic partnerships that were crucial to the success of the event.

Notable mentors included **Gogo Rafajlovski**, **Petar Lazarov**, and **Vasko Karangelevski**, who brought deep knowledge of business development, startup strategy, and market insight. Their contribution created a dynamic and collaborative learning environment, and their guidance had a lasting impact on the participants.

A special highlight of the weekend was the presence of our facilitator, **Simone Demelas**, an experienced Startup Weekend leader from Italy. As a **Techstars-certified facilitator**, Simone was responsible for the overall flow of the event, opening the weekend, guiding participants through the 54-hour experience, supporting the formation of teams, running key sessions, and preparing everyone for the final pitch. His energy, empathy, and structure gave the event its rhythm, and his role was critical in ensuring that every participant stayed motivated and on track from start to finish.





Equally important were partners, organizations that supported this initiative not only with funding, but with vision, trust, and long-term commitment to building the startup ecosystem in Ohrid and beyond. **British Council, Qinshift, Casys, HalkBank, KB Prvo Penzinsko**, and **MK Host** stood out as core supporters of the event.

Their collaboration reflects a growing awareness in the private sector of the importance of investing in innovation and youth entrepreneurship. Together with our mentors and speaker, these partners created an ecosystem where ideas could flourish, teams could grow, and a new generation of entrepreneurs could emerge.

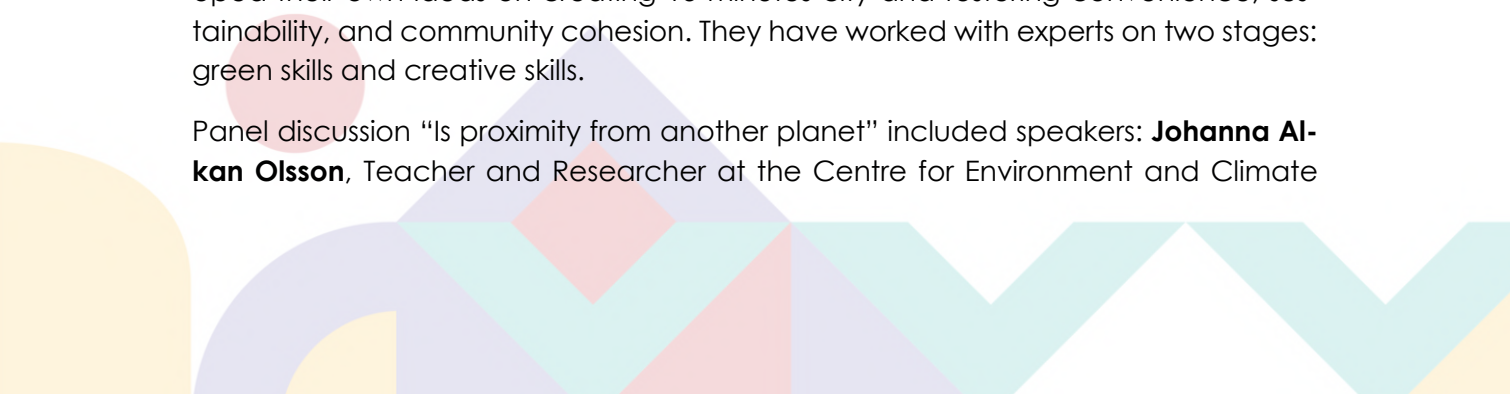
4.3 INTERACTIVE SESSIONS AND TOOLS

The 10th KreNI Conference, held in Nis, brought together participants and experts to explore innovative solutions for urban living and sustainability.

Working sessions were the core of the KreNI10 program, which allowed participants to develop ideas and practical solutions for urban challenges. Guided by international mentors, these sessions encouraged collaboration and creative problem-solving, focusing on themes such as sustainability, mobility, and community engagement. Participants learned how to refine their concepts into actionable projects, with a strong emphasis on proximity principles.

KreNI10 participants worked with experts from Italy, Sweden, Austria, France, Portugal and North Macedonia, gained new knowledge and experience and developed their own ideas on creating 15 minutes city and fostering convenience, sustainability, and community cohesion. They have worked with experts on two stages: green skills and creative skills.

Panel discussion “Is proximity from another planet?” included speakers: **Johanna Alkan Olsson**, Teacher and Researcher at the Centre for Environment and Climate





Science at Lund University, Sweden, **Marko Todorović**, Director of business development at Semrén & Månsson International **Ivana Bogdanović Protić**, Associate Professor, Chair of Town and Spatial Planning, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture Nis. Panel was moderated by **Ivana Marjanović**, Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Economics Nis.

“KreNI talks” was composed of master classes on the topic of “Proximity” by experts from 6 countries.

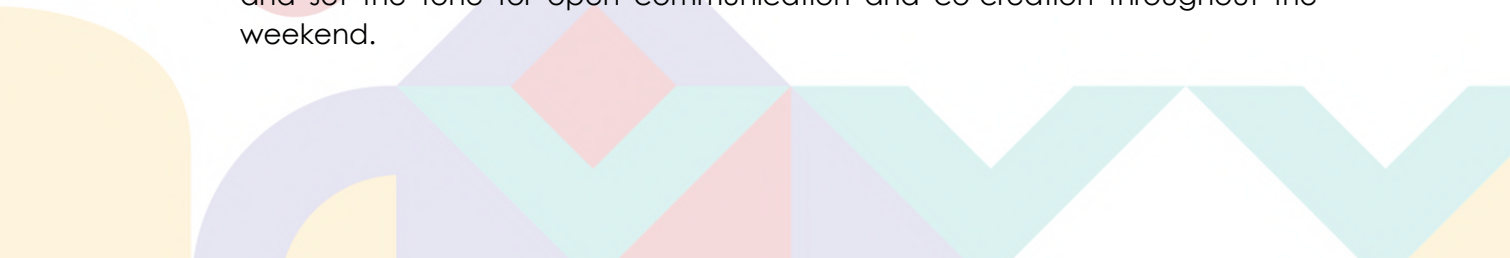
It was followed by workshops with speakers where participants had the opportunity to work on their ideas. After the workshops, they received a task to present their idea on creating 15 minutes city.


During the pitching part, 8 teams presented their ideas and jury members were: **Andreas Bryngelson**, Business Developer at Lund University, **Lidija Stefanović Nikolić**, Chief Urban Planner for the City of Nis, **Tijana Jugović**, Public Diplomacy Officer at the US Embassy in Serbia, **Vladimir Jovanović**, representative of the Tourism Office Nis, **Sandra Dejanović**, Director of Alta bank Nis.

Startup Weekend Ohrid 2025 was designed to be hands-on, engaging, and highly interactive, placing participants at the centre of the learning and building process. The event combined structured workshops, guided mentorship, and open collaboration spaces to foster creativity, rapid problem-solving, and real-time feedback.

The core interactive sessions included:


- **Icebreaker and Team Formation Activities:** Participants pitched raw ideas on the first evening, followed by a networking and voting process that led to the formation of 10 teams based on shared interests. This session was highly dynamic and set the tone for open communication and co-creation throughout the weekend.



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- **Business Model Canvas Workshop:** Using printed templates and guided instruction, teams worked through their business models, mapping out customer segments, value propositions, revenue streams, and key resources. This session helped teams structure their ideas and identify early gaps.
 - **Market Research and Validation Session:** Participants were encouraged to interact with potential users on-site and online. They were supported in preparing short surveys and interview questions to gather real feedback and adjust their assumptions.
 - **Mentoring Blocks:** Two separate mentoring sessions were organized in a rotating format, allowing each team to interact with multiple mentors. These one-on-one or small-group sessions helped teams gain technical and strategic input tailored to their ideas.
 - **Pitching Workshop:** An interactive session where teams practiced their pitches and received live feedback from the facilitator and mentors. This helped improve clarity, structure, and confidence before the final presentations.

4.4 EVALUATION

The KreNI10 Conference and Startup Weekend Ohrid 2025 proved essential in equipping young participants with practical tools, skills, and knowledge to tackle real-world urban and entrepreneurial challenges. Through structured sessions and expert guidance, participants explored the concept of proximity, sustainability, and innovation in city planning, gaining insights from professionals across Europe. Interactive workshops, mentoring blocks, and collaborative formats fostered creativity, teamwork, and hands-on learning. Participants were encouraged to ideate, test, and refine their concepts into viable projects that address community needs. The diversity of methods, from business model canvases to market validation and pitching, allowed for both strategic thinking and immediate application. By engaging with





mentors, panellists, and international experts, participants not only built technical skills but also strengthened their confidence, adaptability, and leadership capacity. These activities directly contributed to the project's broader goals of promoting youth empowerment, regional cooperation, and the growth of creative and startup ecosystems.





PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION

5.1 LONG LASTING PARTNERSHIPS

About Young Ambassadors: Empowering youth through innovation

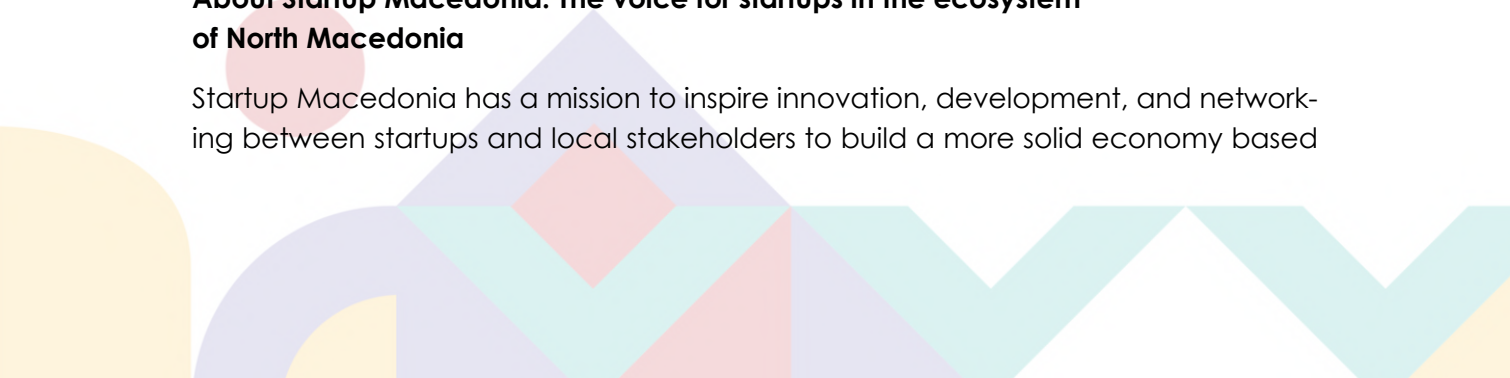
Young Ambassadors is a youth organization that was established in January 2014, and its mission is to contribute to increasing the capacities of young people through actions of multisectoral collaboration and personal development, while having a vision to contribute to the growth of local communities. Until today, there were ten KreNi conferences and some of the most interesting subjects were: Reinventing skills, Proximity, Slow culture vs. Metaverse, Digital disruption, Smart tourism, etc.

The organization dedicates its activities to:

- Youth Involvement: To involve youth in active participation in their own local community by initiating different activities and programs.
- Social Economy: To provide a supportive environment to social enterprises and workers by offering support, networking, education, and promoting business methods that have a social impact.
- Effective innovation: Developing and using digital technologies and creative industries in the development of new business model and innovative solutions.

About Startup Macedonia: The voice for startups in the ecosystem of North Macedonia

Startup Macedonia has a mission to inspire innovation, development, and networking between startups and local stakeholders to build a more solid economy based





on added-value products. Since its inception in 2016, organisation has directly collaborated with over 200 startups and 50+ service providers available on our Ecosystem Platform. Additionally, engaged with more than 100 international mentors through Mentoring Platform, providing valuable guidance and expertise.

Startup Macedonia platform is a comprehensive resource for startups, offering access to various service providers, including legal, financial, marketing, and technological services. By facilitating connections and collaboration, we ensure startups receive the support they need to thrive. The Mentoring Platform connects startups with experienced international mentors who offer strategic advice, industry insights, and networking opportunities.

In joint commitment these two organisations have created the KreNI startup, platform designed to establish a collaborative partnership between KreNI and Startup Weekend Ohrid. By leveraging the unique strengths of both organizations, the project aims to foster innovation and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. **This initiative was supported by the British Council, through the Culture and Creativity for the Western Balkans program.**

UNESCO, the British Council, and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) have joined forces in managing **Culture and Creativity for the Western Balkans (CC4WBs)**, a programme funded by the European Union, aimed at fostering intercultural dialogue and enhancing the socio-economic impact of the cultural and creative sector in the Western Balkans.

5.2 COMMUNICATION SYNERGY

A key strength of the KreNI Startup project was the strong and coordinated communication approach that amplified both visibility and impact. The festivals received widespread media attention, highlighting its focus on proximity, innovation, and





youth-driven urban development. National and regional media featured interviews with speakers and organizers, reported on award-winning ideas, and emphasized the event's role in empowering young creatives to shape the future of Nis and contribute to broader community change.

From the outset, communication and visibility efforts were strategically planned to ensure the project's message reached targeted audiences. This included clearly defined branding, key messages, visual identity, and promotional guidelines. The partners involved in the project played a vital role in reinforcing visibility through their websites, newsletters, and social media platforms, as well as by promoting the project at other relevant events.

To support long-term visibility and accessibility of the project outcomes, a dedicated web platform was developed to showcase all project results. In addition, study visits to festivals across the region were organized to promote the project's achievements and foster new partnerships.



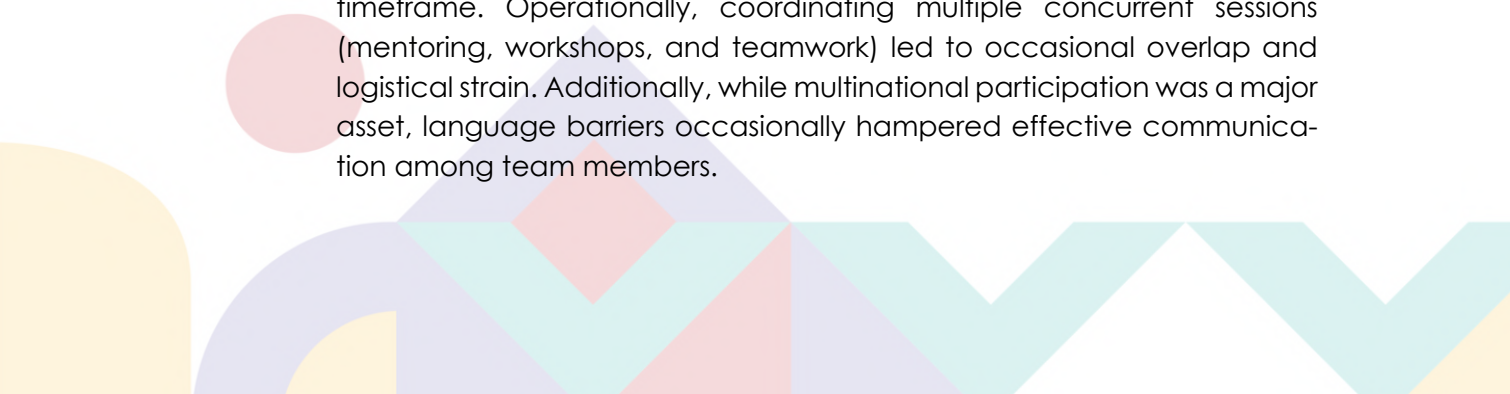


CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

6.1 CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

The project faced several key challenges during the planning and implementation.

- **Sustainability and long-term visibility** of the KreNI Startup initiative beyond the event itself. While both festivals successfully generated interest and participation, maintaining momentum and continuing engagement with participants, partners, and the wider public required strategic planning and resource allocation. Additionally, there was a need to clearly position the initiative as a platform that could grow, evolve, and remain relevant to the regional creative and entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- **Diverse levels of experience among participants.** While some attendees were familiar with startup or design-thinking methodologies, many were engaging with these concepts for the first time. This created imbalances in team dynamics and placed additional pressure on mentors and facilitators.
- **Time management** also emerged as a challenge. Many teams struggled to move from idea generation to final presentation within the limited timeframe. Operationally, coordinating multiple concurrent sessions (mentoring, workshops, and teamwork) led to occasional overlap and logistical strain. Additionally, while multinational participation was a major asset, language barriers occasionally hampered effective communication among team members.





6.2 IMPLEMENTED SOLUTIONS AND TACTICS

Prepared team need to have answer to everything:

- To enhance **sustainability and visibility**, the project team developed a dedicated **web platform** to showcase all results, stories, and future activities related to the KreNI Startup initiative. This digital presence serves as a resource hub and promotional tool, allowing continued access to project outcomes and opportunities for engagement. Furthermore, the team organized **regional festival visits** to promote the initiative, share experiences, and establish new partnerships. These actions not only extended the project's visibility but also created fertile ground for future collaboration and expansion of the platform's reach across Europe.
- In addressing varying **levels of participant experience**, mentors were briefed to tailor their support according to team maturity. Less experienced teams were offered simplified frameworks and closer guidance, while more advanced groups received strategic input and freedom to explore more complex ideas. The facilitation team also integrated checkpoints during workshops to maintain a shared pace and understanding.
- **Operational challenges** were resolved in real time through adaptive coordination by volunteers and team leads. When session overlaps or room shortages occurred, schedules were adjusted and space usage optimized. For the language-related barriers, teams relied on peer translation and English facilitation, with future editions planning to introduce onboarding materials and language support tools.





6.3 KEY LESSONS AND FINDINGS

The project highlighted several important lessons for future festival and startup event implementers. First, pre-event onboarding can significantly reduce experience gaps and foster more effective teamwork. Second, real-time support and flexible planning are critical in high-pressure formats. Providing clear milestones and time checkpoints can ease workflow and reduce participant stress.

Cross-border collaboration

The value of regional and **cross-border collaboration** also emerged as a key takeaway. The synergy between the Serbian and North Macedonian youth participants, who took part in both festivals—demonstrated the potential for shared cultural learning, mentorship, and partnership development. Furthermore, KreNI10's alignment with the theme of proximity and its adaptation of global models into local urban planning highlighted the benefits of localized innovation inspired by global trends.

Networking

An essential insight from the project was the transformative power of **networking and international collaboration**. Building partnerships with organizations across Europe not only enriched the program content but also enabled participants and organizers to **exchange experiences, learn from diverse contexts, and adopt best practices**. Through activities such as joint planning, mentoring, study visits, and post-event collaborations, the project fostered a dynamic environment where knowledge flows freely across borders. This networking aspect strengthened the impact of the project and laid the foundation for **sustainable cooperation**, ensuring that the ideas, tools, and skills developed during the events continue to evolve through ongoing dialogue with like-minded European initiatives.





Innovation

Finally, both festivals proved that when diverse participants are supported through structured yet adaptive programs, they can **co-create meaningful, innovative ideas that address real societal needs**, ranging from urban mobility and sustainability to community revitalization and digital entrepreneurship.





CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND BROADER IMPACT

7.1 FINAL THOUGHTS ON SYNERGY CREATION

Snezana Andric, President of Young Ambassadors: *"In this edition, KreNI was not only a celebration of a decade of creativity but also a testament to the power of youth, innovation, and interdisciplinary collaboration in shaping the future of our region. We had a chance to spread our vision beyond Serbia, merge the inspiration with likeminded organisation and start working on the joint platform in the Western Balkan. With all the takeouts from the KreNI Startup project, we will continue creating better environment for youth creativity."*

Hristijan Volkanovski, Program Coordinator at Startup Macedonia: *"For me, the collaboration between Startup Weekend Ohrid and the KreNI Startup project is crucial because it helps build a stronger regional startup community. It allows us to exchange ideas, connect creative minds from North Macedonia and Serbia, and inspire young people to think globally while acting locally. I believe this kind of synergy is key to long-term growth and innovation in our region."*





7.2 TIPS AND TRICKS: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the planning and implementation flow of the project, several recommendations need to be pointed out:

- **Design with synergy in mind**

When organizing connected festivals or regional initiatives, co-create the program structure to ensure shared goals, complementary topics, and participant exchange. KreNI10 and Startup Weekend Ohrid successfully aligned their themes, focusing on proximity, sustainability, and entrepreneurship, while exchanging participants and ideas between Serbia and North Macedonia.

- **Use local context as a starting point**

Ideas developed at both events—like *E-Ride*, *Take It Back*, and *Smart Pill*—were rooted in real community needs. Encourage participants to identify and tackle problems from their local environments, and then frame them with a global, scalable mindset.

- **Create a clear learning path**

Both events built momentum by designing programs that flowed logically—ice-breakers, idea pitching, team formation, mentoring blocks, workshops, and final presentations. This structure helped participants stay focused, track their progress, and build stronger outcomes.

- **Celebrate outcomes and recognize talent**

Offering awards like “Best Idea” and “Special Recognition by the City of Nis” gave visibility to standout teams and created motivation.





- **Build for the long-term, not just the weekend**
The strength of KreNI Startup lies in its sustainability—using festivals to catalyse new partnerships, support local ecosystems, and inspire youth engagement. Whether through follow-up visits, alumni engagement, or new collaborations, think of your event as the starting point, not the finish line.
- **Do not stop at your own event - GO TO SEE HOW OTHERS DO!**
Organizing or participating in study visits to other festivals across Europe provides fresh perspectives, exposes your team to innovative formats, and builds lasting partnerships.

7.3 POTENTIAL OF CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION

Creative entrepreneurship holds significant potential in the Western Balkans, where youth-driven innovation can contribute to solving local challenges and revitalizing urban and cultural spaces. The KreNI and Startup Weekend Ohrid projects demonstrated how cross-sectoral collaboration, mentorship, and idea incubation can empower young people to become changemakers in their communities. With limited early-stage support in the region, such initiatives bridge the gap between creativity and practical business development. By nurturing new skills, creating networks, and encouraging collaboration between cities and countries, the region can build a more resilient and competitive creative economy. The ideas developed—ranging from sustainability-focused urban solutions to tech-driven cultural apps, reflect the region's readiness to lead in creativity and entrepreneurship. With continued support, these initiatives can be scaled and replicated, strengthening the regional startup and cultural ecosystem.





7.4 LONG-TERM VALUE OF KRENI STARTUP

The long-term value of the KreNI Startup initiative lies in its collaborative model, which successfully combined cultural, creative, and entrepreneurial education into one dynamic program. Joint planning, mentoring, and follow-up activities helped establish a strong foundation for future cooperation between festivals and institutions across the Western Balkans.

Youth participants not only developed project ideas but also gained leadership skills and networks that will fuel their future community work. The benchmarking and ideation methods used during the project can serve as a replicable framework for other regions seeking to empower young creatives.

Furthermore, the synergy between KreNI and Startup Weekend Ohrid fostered a sustainable approach to knowledge exchange, strengthening regional ties and partnerships.

As a result, KreNI Startup acts as a model for cultural innovation with long-term impact on policy, practice, and youth engagement.





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