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## Digital and sustainable innovation policies in Europe: comparative lessons

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## EDITORIAL

### **Digital and sustainable innovation policies in Europe: comparative lessons**

Old Europe does not lead the world in digital innovations. The United States do.

The list of the 10 richest US citizens underlines and displays the American superiority: seven of them are start-up entrepreneurs of digital economies: Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Larry Ellison (Oracle), Larry Page (Google), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Sergey Brin (Google) and Steve Ballmer (Microsoft). No digital entrepreneur appears in the list of the 20 richest Europeans.

What is the problem with Europe? And, more important, is there a problem? In fact, if we look at social and sustainable innovation, Europe is not lagging behind.

Articles in this issue of the *European Journal of Social Science Research* focus on innovation policies and the diverse set of measures adopted to support innovation at the European and national level. They emphasize the need for international networking, and, at the same time, they underline both the persistence of differences among and within member states in the reception of EU policy initiatives.

Innovation is an elusive concept, but authors agree that businesses do not innovate alone, and that promoting innovation requires a holistic and systemic approach (Bria and Baeck 2014, Edquist 2014).

The concepts of cross-border innovation and innovation ecosystem is at the core of Mu Tian, Ping Deng and Bing Wu's systematic literature review which stresses the influence of cultural factors on innovation (Della Porta 2009, Frenkel and Maital 2014).

If culture is one explanatory component, in order to remove barriers to business growth and to promote innovative entrepreneurship is necessary to address the interrelation among the cultural, political, academic, environmental, and business elements and, possibly, targeting networks of actors more than individual ones.

The attempt at integrating higher education, research and business activities, involving a large international network, is at the basis of two successful policy experiments aimed at stimulating innovative entrepreneurship – the European Institute of Technology and its partnership operations (Knowledge and Innovation Communities – KIC), the EIT-Digital. José Manuel Leceta and Totti Könnölä in their articles analyze the two initiatives and develop the concept of Pan-European 'entrepreneurial innovation ecosystems', stressing the importance of governance and intention in non-biological ecosystems.

A coherent European innovation policy might, however, trigger diverse reactions. International, Eu level, cooperation is important to foster present and future European competitiveness, but, as demonstrated in Steven McMillan's article, small countries, as Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus, might need to follow specific and idiosyncratic paths to fully benefit from European research initiatives. The need for compromising and the search for the right balance is at the basis of Pedro Silva, Sara Moreno Pires and Filipe

Teres' article on explanatory models of regional innovation performance in Europe. The analysis of the impact of various initiatives resulting from the European agenda 'Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialization (RIS3)' which aimed at promoting innovation-driven economic transformation at national and regional level allows the authors to shed light on the 'double edge' role of certain variables on regional innovation, the importance (again) of cultural factors and to suggest a more adaptive, flexible and regional innovation policy.

The persistence of the importance of the regional dimension when dealing with innovation policies is at the center of Blümel's article on German federal science, technology and innovation (STI) policies (Fritsch 2005). The author reminds us that we have a little knowledge about the involvement of the epistemic communities, the innovation narratives and the decision-making processes which lead to the development of policy instruments. Yet 'narratives and intellectual heritage' are important and contribute to legitimate the implementation of policy instruments.

The differences among European members and the persistence of national dimension emerge also in Franz Seifert's article on 'National Specificities and Convergence in the European Anti-GM-Movement' where the author compares five European countries, showing that, despite policies on agri-food technologies are now of concern of the EU, there is no convergence among anti GM movements which remain strongly affected by national traditions and historical experience.

When dealing with measures supporting innovative entrepreneurship, the European governance is torn between the need for a coherent innovation policy on the one side, and the necessity to harmonize it with the many pressures coming from regions and states on the other. This might in part explain the European weakness in digital innovation compared to the US leadership.

However, if we look at the European performance in social and sustainable innovation the outlook on the near future is brighter. Not only governance problems are increasingly the object of studies and research, as the articles in this issue clearly demonstrate, but the objectives of the EU and of the member states seem aligned when dealing with social entrepreneurship and sustainability. Social innovation concept became recently part of the European policy agenda and the Innovation Union Flagship Initiative resulted in the launch of a series of research projects and in the development of new policy instruments. The articles from Moroñ and Certomà point at the future of European innovation policies.

Dorota Moroñ, in her article, for example, shows that the implementation of socially responsible public procurement has been crucial to support the Polish underdeveloped social economy. Chiara Certomà and Francesco Corsini instead provide a genealogical analysis of the emergence, conceptualization and clusterization of knowledge about digitally enabled social innovation. Although they underline that digitally enabled social innovation is a new social technology, still nebulously defined and conceptualized, they argue that this substantial amount of knowledge generated thanks to the support of the European commission, provides us with essential indications on the future evolution of public services and other critical aspects of social organization.

As far as innovation policies are concerned, Europe seems thus on the verge of change and two recent events, a scandal and an exogenous shock, might have worked as catalyst to make transformations faster and more radical.

On the one side, the Diesel scandal had a strong push effect on sustainable innovations in the European automotive sector. The velocity and dynamics of the turnaround towards electric mobility would not have been possible without it. We could sarcastically argue that Volkswagen benefited from the scandal by being forced to a more consequent strategy

shift than most other car producers. On the other, the Corona crisis worked as a game changer in the fields of education, government and administration pushing strongly toward innovation. A radical shift in some sedate educational, government, and administrative landscapes would not have been possible without the epidemics, which served as an unintended input towards the introduction of radical digital innovations in many European economies.

This issue makes the point on both strengths and weaknesses of innovation policies in Europe and looks at both their past and future. It comes at the right moment, when the European Commission discusses how to bring to life the Green Deal and how to combine it with more digital innovations in Europe. We wish you an inspiring and pleasant read.

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