

Speech: The Start-Up Games: backing the Western Balkans' Entrepreneurs

Welcome all of you to the Start-Up Games, here in London.

I wanted to thank those of you who have come across from the Western Balkans for coming here and I hope today, you will find, has been an incredibly useful time for you.

I understand you had a launch last night and are raring to go for today.

The innovation we see in the Western Balkans

You should know that everybody here is part of a very special and carefully selected group of people that we have asked to come to take part in today.

What we are looking for around the world are some of the most innovative entrepreneurs, and you have actually been singled out as people that we think fit that bill.

We think that every single one of your businesses has an idea.

We think you have an idea and you have the start of a business acumen that can really transform what is happening in the world, and that's why we're excited that you're here today.

We have for example a company from Serbia that has solar-powered drones.

These drones are expected to stay airborne for months, so another major improvement.

Or a Kosovan company building desktop 3D printers.

A Bosnian company developing smart beehives.

Or one of my personal favourites having come from the education world, earlier in my business career, an EdTech business with the wonderful name "Whoopedu".

And that's just a tip of the iceberg.

Now today really is about hearing from people who've done it before, hearing from investors about what it is that they are looking for in terms of businesses in which to invest – people and ideas in which to invest.

It's about helping you build your networks, because networks in any business line are fundamentally important.

And it's about what we can do to give you some ideas, thoughts, links to bring your ideas and make them a reality.

But before I start and launch the event I just wanted to say a few words, and step back, about why this event is taking place at all.

Building links with Balkan governments and businesses

As you know it's part of a major bigger diplomatic activity: the [Western Balkans Summit](#).

This itself is part of an even bigger project called the Berlin Process. And that was a process that was developed to strengthen the multilateral ties between the 6 Western Balkans nations and the European Union.

In fact, this is the 5th Berlin Summit event.

It was an initiative that was launched by Chancellor Merkel, and which our Prime Minister, Theresa May, is proud to host here today in the UK.

And I think you will see this very much and it represents a sign of our ongoing commitment, to your countries, which I can promise you, will not stop when we leave the EU.

So next time somebody says, "what were you doing here?", you can say you were attending an event which was all part of a diplomatic mission.

But I don't think anyone will think that you'd come to an event quite like this.

But that's actually what makes it so important, because having come from business myself, and I've been in government for just over 9 months, I'm very clear the government's role is to do what we can do to help businesses, but the people who trade, the people with the ideas that take them forward are almost always businesses – businessmen and women.

So for me, it's incredibly important that we don't just have government-to-government links but we have business-to-business links.

And that's especially true in the world of start-ups.

So we have seasoned investors here, as I've said.

We in the UK have one of the largest investor bases, with £1.2 trillion worth of money invested from the UK, abroad.

So we think for you there's a big opportunity to be had.

The UK's commitment to the Western Balkans

And let's make no mistake, the UK is committed to the Western Balkans.

We may be leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe.

We support the prosperity, the stability and the security of Europe, and we always will.

So my government, and the department I represent – the Department of International Trade – are determined that we will take a leading role in the Western Balkans.

And we are here, as I said earlier, to help you achieve your full potential.

The Global Entrepreneur Programme

We believe we have one of the world's best business environments.

The World Bank will independently measure the UK as the Number 7 in terms of ease of doing business.

So what we're doing now to build on that is to develop a fellowship programme to give entrepreneurs and investors or future investors direct exposure to our innovative environment in the UK.

And to set up a link – a network – between Britain and Western Balkans, entrepreneurs and the tech incubators.

And this today is the first time you will have heard it officially from a government minister: we are extending the Global Entrepreneur Programme, which helps tech entrepreneurs scale and flourish, from a UK base – we're [extending the Global Entrepreneur Programme, or the GEP, to the Western Balkans.](#)

I was lucky enough last week to meet one of the founders, Eric van der Kleij.

In fact, I met him in Seoul, in Korea, where he was there doing what he, obviously he and his colleagues had done, scouring the world for the best ideas to bring them to the UK for events such as this.

We hope that this day will help you.

It will help you build your business plans.

It will provide you with assistance for any relocation you might need, including access to the Entrepreneur Visa.

We hope it will be the start of helping secure new investment, to begin some mentoring options and mentoring opportunities and to give you advice about how to grow.

Conclusion

I really hope that some of you here today, while enjoying today, I hope it will be helpful and I hope you will look back and think this was a fundamental change in the way you took on your business.

And I hope you will take advantage of this programme to help both the Western Balkans and the UK – and Europe as a whole – to reach that high-tech, high-growth future that we all want to see.

And I'm very clear it will be you and people like you that will do it.

Let's make a start today.

I officially open the Western Balkans Games.

Let the games begin.