Clusters Meet Regions in Ajdovščina: A Local Story with European Impact

What does a small Slovenian town have to teach us about the future of Europe's industrial transition?

Plenty, as the latest edition of Clusters Meet Regions in **Ajdovščina** (10–11 September 2025) clearly showed.

Organised by the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP) on behalf of the European Commission, the event was held in partnership with ROD Ajdovščina and EURADA – the European Association of Development Agencies, as part of EURADA's annual AGORADA forum. Over two days, more than 70 participants, including cluster managers, regional development agencies, SMEs, EU officials, and research institutions, came together to explore how Europe's green, digital, and industrial strategies are being translated into tangible action at the regional level.

Day One: Aligning Local Vision with European Strategy

Ajdovščina is a small town with a big vision. Mayor Tadej Beočanin set the tone by introducing the Knowledge Park, an 18-hectare site dedicated to biotech, aviation, and applied research. Expected to create 100 jobs in its first phase, the park reflects the town's strategy of anchoring innovation in quality of life and long-term resilience.

"This is about investing in quality of life, competitiveness, and a future-proof local economy," Mr. Beočanin said.

Dr. Jan-Philipp Kramer (ECCP Team) presented key findings from the ECCP Input Paper, positioning the North Adriatic, especially Western Slovenia, as prime examples of innovation potential.

Notably, Western Slovenia has been ranked as a "Strong Innovator" in the 2025 Regional Innovation Scoreboard, outperforming EU averages in collaboration between universities and industry, public-private research efforts, and R&D infrastructure. This recognition confirms that the region is not only catching up but can lead in translating EU-level ambition into local impact.

From Brussels, Christophe Guichard (DG GROW, European Commission) connected this local ambition to broader European industrial policy. He underlined the role of clusters in implementing EU initiatives such

as the Competitiveness Compass and the Clean Industrial Deal, not just on paper, but in factories, laboratories, and communities across Europe.

Panel discussions further explored the human and structural factors at the heart of innovation ecosystems. Speakers such as Tine Tomažič (Pipistrel Aircraft) highlighted the human side of innovation, reminding the audience that talent can't be chased, but it must be attracted through purpose and stability. Dr. Matjaž Valant (University of Nova Gorica) echoed this, noting that while Slovenia's research is strong, the bridge to industry still needs work.

Day one also featured strong cross-border examples of innovation in practice. Maria Valentina Vanceo (Venetian Cluster) shared insights from BioTech2Agri, an Interreg project helping SMEs map and apply biotechnologies in agri-food supply chains. Andoni Hidalgo Simón (Climate-KIC) illustrated how systemic portfolio approaches can be used to make circular economy strategies more actionable at regional level, with Slovenia serving as a case study.

Day Two: From Ideas to Implementation

The second day shifted the focus from policy to practice, diving into how regional development agencies and clusters implement change on the ground. Co-organised with EURADA, the morning's sessions brought regional development agencies into the spotlight. The discussions were honest and grounded, not only in successes, but also in the practical hurdles of scaling the twin transition.

Dr. Amna Potočnik (RRA Podravje-Maribor) reminded participants that transformation isn't just about technology. *"Technology can be installed, but change must be embraced,"* she said, highlighting the need to design greener habits, not just greener infrastructure.

Kornelija Mlinarević ([Development Agency Zagreb](#)) described the Croatian capital's efforts to pair EU and local funds in a way that benefits citizens directly, through climate-neutral urban regeneration, energy efficiency, and nature-based solutions. Her message was clear: policy must be relatable in order to be effective.

Vedran Kružić ([RDA Primorje-Gorski Kotar County](#)) presented a regional matchmaking platform [(RIMAP)](#) that connects over 300 stakeholders, from academia to SMEs, helping them find funding, partners, and shared solutions. It's a model of strategic ecosystem building in action.

Throughout the session, one theme kept surfacing: the need for a territorial lens. Francesco Molica ([EURADA](#)) warned that *"without regional perspectives, EU efforts toward strategic autonomy risk deepening disparities rather than closing them"*. He called for stronger coordination and more inclusive industrial policies that recognise the specific needs and strengths of Europe's diverse regions.

In the afternoon, the discussions moved offstage and into the field. Participants visited the [Ajdovščina Business Incubator](#), where biotech startups are developing circular economy innovations. They also explored [Pipistrel](#)'s clean aviation facilities and saw firsthand how the [University of Nova Gorica](#) is linking academic research with regional economic needs.

These visits brought the core message to life: strategic autonomy isn't abstract. It's happening, step by step, through clusters, campuses, startups, and regional agencies.

A Blueprint for Other Regions

What made Ajdovščina stand out wasn't just its ambition. It was the alignment between local action and European priorities. By bridging EU policy and regional practice, this Clusters Meet Regions event demonstrated that even small towns can become strategic actors in Europe's green and digital future.

Closing the conference, Christophe Guichard (DG GROW) underscored that *"The North Adriatic is a strategic corridor of ideas, cooperation and sustainable transformation."*

What's Next?

The Clusters Meet Regions journey continues in Vaasa, Finland, where the spotlight will turn to sustainable industrial growth in the Nordics. With each stop, the series adds another piece to the puzzle, showing how Europe's transformation will be built not from the top down, but from the regions up.

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