

The evolution of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the context of the entrepreneurship support infrastructure in Belarus

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Abstract

The article examines the evolution of the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the Republic of Belarus in the context of the entrepreneurship support infrastructure. The article provides a literary review of the definition of «entrepreneurship support infrastructure» and determines the relationship with the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The author's definition of «entrepreneurship support infrastructure» is proposed. The evolution of development of entrepreneurship support centers and business incubators in Belarus is analyzed, various legislative acts of the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the President of the Republic of Belarus in this area are considered. The presented study of the Republic of Belarus is based on author's long-term analysis of the entrepreneurship support infrastructure in the country, as well as the experience of assessing the effectiveness of individual organizations. It is noted that the entrepreneurship support infrastructure has several stages of development, which reflect global trends in its development.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial ecosystem, small and medium entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship support infrastructure

JEL Code: 010, 038

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1. Introduction

Small and medium entrepreneurship (SME) play a significant role in the economic development of Belarus. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, SMEs today have a significant share in the country's macro indicators. Thus, SMEs account for 30% of gross value added, 47.8% of exports, and 39% of investment in fixed assets. In the context of institutional transformations, the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) is one of the most important areas for improving efficiency and enhancing entrepreneurship. Some of the main elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem are SME support organizations - business incubators (BI), entrepreneurship support centers (ESC), etc.

Despite a number of positive results achieved in this area in Belarus, the problem of structural discrepancy between the demand for the services of the main organizations of the specified infrastructure and the supply, as well as issues related to the formation and functioning of these organizations themselves, remains relevant. The centralized policy of the state regarding their creation, based on a standard package of measures, has exhausted itself. Its improvement requires revision, selection and adjustment of currently implemented measures based on a comprehensive analysis of the domestic entrepreneurship support infrastructure (ESI). This will improve the development and targeting of public policy measures in the field of SME development, and enhance their impact on the ESI.

In this regard, the most urgent is the need for research and a deeper study of new approaches to the process of developing the ESI at the macro level in the context of the formation of the EEs in Belarus, capable of linking theoretical knowledge with the practical experience of main subjects. Effective and efficient government policy is impossible without understanding the evolution of ESI development.

The aim of the work is to reveal the evolutionary processes of the EE in Belarus in the context of the ESI. The author's hypothesis is that the ESI is an important part of many domains of the EE.

The structure of the article is as follows: first, an introduction to the topic under discussion with an overview of the relevance of the study is represented. The second part contains links to recent literature on the

development of EEs and ESI. The third part analyzes the development of the ESI in a historical retrospective in Belarus. In conclusion, results are drawn and new directions for research into the development of business incubators and entrepreneurship support centers are proposed.

2. Literature review

One of the important directions of SME development is the formation and development of EEs. The founder of the theory of business ecosystems is D. Moore, who suggested that there are parallels with business and natural ecosystems, since they are partly deliberately formed and partly the result of accidental occurrence (Moore, 1993). Subsequently, at the present stage, the use of phrases such as «entrepreneurial ecosystem» or «ecosystem of entrepreneurship» is becoming more common in public policy in the field of SMEs and the business community. Our research is based on D. Isenberg's theory of EEs, and also the roles of SME support organizations in EEs. Typically, several domains of the EEs are distinguished, including such an element as organizations supporting entrepreneurship (Isenberg, 2010).

BI and ESC play a special role. When considering the elements of the EEs, several domains can be distinguished in which the development of high-quality and efficient BI and ESC is important. Among the six distinct areas of the ecosystem identified by D. Isenberg: politics, finance, culture, support, human capital, and markets (Isenberg, 2010). Undoubtedly, BI and ESC belong to the area of support. At the same time, the following pillars of the EEs are also distinguished: human capital, finance and services; the participants involved (talents, investors, mentors/advisors, fellow entrepreneurs); formal («government and regulatory framework») and informal institutions («cultural support») that foster entrepreneurship; access to customers in the domestic and foreign markets (World Economic Forum, 2013). The role of the ESI in the formation of an entrepreneurial culture cannot be ignored. Based on this, the ESI can be related to both formal institutions and indirectly related to informal institutions.

Certain definitions of the infrastructure for supporting entrepreneurship show general ideas about this direction of SME development. The term

«business support infrastructure» includes a network of institutions and organizations providing services to potential entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs or small- and medium-sized enterprises for the development of their business capacity (human, organizational, marketing, etc.) or providing physical facilities for business operations (D. Mijačić, 2011). In accordance with the Federal Law of the Russian Federation dated July 24, 2007 No. 209-FZ «On the Development of Small and medium entrepreneurship», the Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Infrastructure is a system of commercial and non-commercial organizations that are created and carry out their activities to ensure the implementation of state programs that ensure conditions for the creation of small and medium entrepreneurship, and for providing them with support.

The ESI is the totality of state, non-state, public, educational, commercial organizations, directly providing normal living conditions for small and medium-sized businesses as a whole (Kuznetsova, 2007). The ESI is a combination of state, private and public institutions (organizations, institutions and associations) that serve the interests of SMEs and ensure their economic activities and contribute to their efficiency (Plotnikova, 2011).

In our opinion, the ESI is a combination of state, public and private organizations that stimulate the formation and functioning of SME. However, in this article we will follow the legislation of the Republic of Belarus in this area. The author's vision is more general in nature and reflects all the elements of the ESI and their role in the development of SMEs at various stages of its development. However, in this article, the author will follow the legislation of the Republic of Belarus in this area, since the author considers the evolution of the development of the EE in the context of the ESI in accordance with the legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus, which regulate the activities of all elements of the ESE, which, according to the legislation, only Support Centers Entrepreneurship, Business Incubators, Science and Technology Parks and Technology Transfer Centers.

BI can be considered as part of the ESI. It is worth noting that scientists have not yet come to a unified definition of the ideal typical incubator (Albort-Morant and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2016), which undoubtedly makes it difficult to identify the role of BI in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Khalil and Olafsen (2010) defined BI as the «process aimed at supporting the development and scaling of growth-oriented, early-staged enterprises». The Association of British Business Incubators defined incubation as «a unique and flexible combination of business development, infrastructure and people, designed to start and grow new and small businesses by supporting them in the early stages of development and change» (UKBI, 2013). BI are usually physical spaces that are available on a relatively flexible basis and provide additional incubation services (Aerts K., Matthyssens, P., & Vandenbempt, K. 2007).

Shouvik Sanyal (2018) points to the role of BI in the EE, as many small businesses fail in the early stages as owners cannot negotiate and find solutions to these varied problems. In this context, BIs are a very necessary solution to enable SMEs to sustain and grow in the long term. The role of BIs in the entrepreneurial process is quite large (L. Peters, 2004), and thus it can be concluded that BI play a significant role not only in the EE, but also in the business ecosystem of the company.

At the same time, some researchers are of the opinion that the support received by entrepreneurs from incubators is not essential for young firms (Pena, 2004). In this article, we can find the opinion that the organizations and institutions of today's EEs (Spigel, 2015) are very heterogeneous. In this regard, the development of BI and ESC in historical retrospect will help to understand the path of development of the EE in Belarus.

3. Data and Methodology

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods to improve readers' understanding of issues related to the development of BIs and ESCs in historical perspective. In particular, it analyzes legislative acts in the field of ESI, and the study is based on personal experience in assessing the development of these organizations.

Qualitative analysis is used to identify and assess the impact of the ESI on the development of the EE and SMEs in Belarus. Accordingly, this is the theoretical basis on which further research is built. The analysis of the ESI development is based on statistics from the Department of Entrepreneurship of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus. The Department of

Entrepreneurship has its own methodology for assessing the activities of ESI, since it is the Department that assigns the status «Small Business Incubator» and «Business Support Center» to various companies. This status allows receiving government support for companies. The internet portal of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus served the informational resource for the study.

4. Results

One of the main directions of state programs to support SMEs in the Republic of Belarus is the formation of an ESI. The study of the processes of origin, formation and subsequent development of the domestic ESI on the example of its individual subjects allows us to single out a number of stages, as well as the characteristic features of each of them. Since the criteria for referring to small and medium entrepreneurship were determined only in 2010, until that time, only small entrepreneurship (SE) was mentioned in the article.

The first stage (1992-1995) is characterized by the emergence of ESI elements. In 1992 the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus on the establishment of the Belarusian Fund for Financial Support to Entrepreneurs (BFFSE) was adopted (Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 1992), and the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 1993 regulated the creation and operation of ESCs in the country (Resolution of the Council of Ministers Republic of Belarus, 1993). Table 1 shows the characteristics of these ESI elements.

Second stage (1996-2000). To develop a state strategy and tactics in the field of supporting entrepreneurship, developing investment activities in the non-state sector of the economy and implementing competition policy, the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Investment of the Republic of Belarus (MEI) was created in 1996. One of the main directions of state support for small entrepreneurship, according to the Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus «On State Support of Small Entrepreneurship» (Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 1996) is the formation of the ESI.

Table 1. Entrepreneurship Support Infrastructure elements in the Republic of Belarus in the period 1992-1995

Name	Description
Fund for financial support of entrepreneurs	a legal entity that owns separate property on the basis of operational management rights, has an independent balance sheet, settlement, currency and other bank accounts, a seal depicting the state emblem of the Republic of Belarus and with its name, emblem, trademark and other details
Entrepreneurship Support Center	a legal entity, a business entity providing, on a contractual basis, economic and organizational support to small businesses

Source: elaborated by the author mostly on the base of legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus and other sources referred to in the text.

The Law «On State Support of Small entrepreneurship in the Republic of Belarus» (Law of the Republic of Belarus, 1996) defines the main instruments for pursuing a policy of state support for small entrepreneurship, which, in particular, are: the Belarusian Fund for Financial Support to Entrepreneurs (BFFSE), Entrepreneurship Support Centers (ESC), Incubators of Small Entrepreneurship, mutual credit societies (MCS) (table 2).

For the development of the ESI, the following resolutions of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus were adopted: «On business support centers in the Republic of Belarus» (Resolutions of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, August 25, 1997), «On incubators of small businesses in the Republic of Belarus» (Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 4 June 1997), «On Approval of the Regulation on the Science and Technology Park» (Resolutions of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, July 31, 1997), «On the Council for the Development of Entrepreneurship under the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Investments of the Republic of Belarus». In 1997, the State Committee for Science and Technology of the Republic of Belarus (SCST) and the MEI approved The Procedure for classifying legal entities as BI, The Procedure for acquiring the status of a ESC by legal entities, and The Procedure for classifying business entities as science and technology parks.

Table 2. Entrepreneurship Support Infrastructure elements in the Republic of Belarus in the period 1996 – 2009

Name	Description
Fund for financial support of entrepreneurs	a non-profit organization created to finance programs, projects and activities aimed at supporting and developing small entrepreneurship by using funds in the form of budget allocations, credit resources, voluntary contributions and donations from legal entities and individuals, income from the issue and placement of securities
Entrepreneurship Support Center	an organization created on the basis of any form of ownership in order to provide economic and organizational support for small entrepreneurship
Incubator of Small Entrepreneurship	an organization that is created on the basis of any form of ownership and provides, on certain conditions and for a certain time, premises specially equipped for offices and production for small businesses starting their activities, in order to assist them in the gradual establishment and development of their business and their acquisition of financial independence
Mutual Lending Societies	These companies are legal entities and they are created to accumulate temporarily free funds of participants in order to provide them with temporary financial assistance.

Source: elaborated by the author mostly on the base of legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus and other sources referred to in the text.

At the second stage MEI took an active part in the implementation of the joint project of UNDP and the Government of the Republic of Belarus «Formation of Infrastructure for Support and Development of Small Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Belarus», part of which was the project «Assistance to the Creation of the Institute of Credit Unions in the Republic of Belarus». In June 2000, the Belarusian Union of Business Incubators, Entrepreneurship Support Centers, Innovation Centers and Techno parks (BSBI) was established, whose mission was to promote the creation and development of ESI entities (including combining the efforts of national and international organizations) in Belarus. Unfortunately, the activity of this Union did not receive its development and was completed in a few years.

The second stage is characterized by the streamlining and development of the process of forming a network of central heating centers and the beginning of the formation of a network of ESC, BI, tech parks.

Third stage (2001-2009). In November 2001, the MEI was liquidated and the Department for Entrepreneurship was organized within the structure of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus. At this stage, a set of measures to stimulate the development of entrepreneurship and the additional creation of infrastructure facilities for supporting and developing small entrepreneurship has been adopted, approved by the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 1685 of December 24, 2003 «On measures to stimulate the development of entrepreneurship».

Also, the procedure for providing financial assistance to the ESC and BI at the expense of the republican budget, the procedure for the creation and operation of guarantee funds on the territory of the republic through the formation of non-profit organizations for the development and support of SEs has been legislatively formalized.

It should be noted that at this stage, the innovative infrastructure of entrepreneurship support received a new impetus for development, which was facilitated by the adoption of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus «On the approval of the Regulation on the procedure for creating elements of innovation infrastructure» (Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 2007). This Decree established the attribution of organizations to the elements of innovation infrastructure and the main areas of their activities (Table 3).

This stage is characterized by the beginning of the formation of a network of institutions for financial support of entrepreneurship, a rather ramified network of ESC, BI, TTC, tech-parks. The main characteristic feature of the third stage, in our opinion, are: imperfect legislative base, which determines the functioning of the ESC, the BI and tech-parks; the absence of a legislative framework regulating the functioning of the TTC, a targeted State Program for the Formation and Development of ESI elements, as well as the Program of State Support for Small Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Belarus for 2003.

Table 3. Elements of the innovation infrastructure of the Republic of Belarus

Name	Description
Science and Technology Park	an organization with an average number of employees of up to 100 people, the purpose of which is to promote the development of entrepreneurship in the scientific, scientific and technical, innovative fields and create conditions for legal entities and individual entrepreneurs who are residents of the tech-park to carry out innovative activities from the search (development) of an innovation to its implementation
Technology Transfer Center (TTC)	an organization with an average headcount of up to 100 people, the purpose of which is to ensure the transfer of innovations from the sphere of their development to the sphere of practical use. A technology transfer center can also be a scientific organization that has a separate subdivision with at least 7 employees, the purpose of which is to ensure the transfer of innovations from the sphere of their development to the sphere of practical use. In this case, a scientific organization that has acquired the status of a technology transfer center enjoys the privileges and advantages provided to it in terms of the activities of the corresponding separate subdivision
Venture Organization	a commercial organization created to carry out investment activities in the field of creating and implementing innovations, as well as financing venture projects

Source: elaborated by the author mostly on the base of legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus and other sources referred to in the text.

In addition, it becomes quite obvious that the role of the state in regulating the activities of individual ESI elements is increasing, which is expressed in the cumbersomeness and frequency of reporting by the ESC and BI to the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus, which will (and led) to the outflow of business entities from among them.

The fourth stage (2010 - present time). The Law «On Support of Small and Medium Entrepreneurship» was adopted, which defines the elements of the ESI and other organizations that support SME (Law of the Republic of Belarus, 2010). The Law stipulates that the elements of the ESI are ESC and BI. Other organizations providing support to SMEs, in accordance with this

Law and other acts of legislation, include the BFFSE, institutions for financial support of entrepreneurs (Table 4). Thus, it can be stated that there have been no changes in the composition of the infrastructure for supporting small and medium-sized businesses in comparison with the 1996 Law.

Table 4. Entrepreneurship Support Infrastructure elements in the Republic of Belarus in the period (2010 r. – present time)

Name	Description
Fund for financial support of entrepreneurs	is a legal entity, owns separate property on the basis of operational management rights, has an independent balance sheet, settlement, currency and other bank accounts, a seal depicting the State Emblem of the Republic of Belarus and with its name, an emblem, a trademark and other details
Entrepreneurship Support Center	a legal entity carrying out activities to provide economic and organizational support for small and medium-sized businesses
Incubator of Small Entrepreneurship	a legal entity that has, on the right of ownership, economic management, operational management or on another legal basis specially equipped for offices and production of goods (performance of work, provision of services) premises and the property located in them and provides them in accordance with the legislation for use by those who are starting their activities small business entities in order to help them develop and acquire financial independence.
Financial support institution for entrepreneurs	a non-profit organization created by the decision of the regional (Minsk city) executive committee or other legal entity in order to facilitate the implementation of state policy in the field of supporting small businesses by attracting and effectively using financial resources for the implementation of relevant target programs, projects and activities.
Mutual Lending Societies	a non-profit organization created by SMEs in the form of a consumer cooperative to accumulate temporarily free funds of members of this society in order to provide them with temporary financial assistance.

Source: elaborated by the author mostly on the base of legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus and other sources referred to in the text.

As of January 1, 2020, according to the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus, 109 ESC operated in the republic and 26 BI (in the Brest region - 13 ESC, 3 BI; Vitebsk - 8 ESC, 2 BI; Gomel - 11 ESC, 2 BI; Grodno - 22 ESC, 2 BI; Minsk region - 17 ESC, 7 BI; Mogilev - 13 ESC, 5 BI; city Minsk - 26 ESC, 5 BI). In general, in the republic 60 elements of the ESI (47 ESC and 13 BI) or about 44.5% of the total number of elements of the ESI are concentrated in cities of regional significance; 44 elements of the ESI (38 ESC and 6 BI), or 32.6% of the total, operate in small and medium-sized urban settlements and rural areas. Of the elements of the ESI operating in the republic, 79.3% of their total number are private organizations, 20.7% - state (16.3% - communal, 4.4% - republican). 32 organizations (or 23.7% of the total number of elements of the ESI) have been operating as ESC or BI for over 10 years, 38 organizations (28.1%) from 5 to 10 years, 15 organizations from 3 to 5 years (11.1%), from 1 to 3 years - 33 organizations (24.4%), less than 1 year - 17 organizations (12.6%).

Elements of the ESI arose either spontaneously (at the initiative of organizers or groups of entrepreneurs), or in accordance with international programs. At the same time, the real needs of regional entrepreneurs were not taken into account, which is confirmed by the correlation analysis of the relationship between the number of small and medium-sized enterprises in the regions and the rating of the region by the level of development of the ESI, carried out using the system (criteria) assessment of the ESI. The resulting Spearman correlation coefficient is 0.4, which indicates a low relationship. This correlation analysis is an independent research of the author for several decades to observe the relationship between the number of SMEs in the regions and the regional ranking by the level of development of the ESI based on a survey of leaders and specialists of district executive committees.

The average scores of the quality of development of the ESI in the regions of Belarus used in calculating the Spearman coefficient were determined on the basis of expert interviews of leading specialists in the Republic of Belarus in the area under consideration, among which: heads of ESI subjects - 35.8%; government representatives - 21.4; employees of scientific organizations - 7.1; members of unions of entrepreneurs - 28.6; employees of the Council for the Development of Entrepreneurship under the

President of the Republic of Belarus - 7.1%. The qualitative approach to the assessment of the ESI is interesting in that the subjects of the ESI are considered as organizations whose activities are characterized by the following specific features: assistance to the development of SMEs at the initial stage; the need to provide preferential and free services, constant adaptability to changes, etc.

5. Conclusions

As can be seen from the analysis of the historical development of the ESI, it is developing at a fairly rapid pace. Today, one of the main tasks of the state is to contribute to the effective development of ESI. For this, it is necessary to develop a Special ESI development Program, taking into account new trends in it. Thus, accelerators, co working spaces and other new elements of ESI are expected to be actively introduced in Belarus. The government is developing a Concept for Improving the System of State Support for Small and Medium Entrepreneurship, which provides for the improvement of non-financial support measures based on the modernization of the support infrastructure. Voluntary certification is assumed for the provision of services by infrastructure entities at a cost below market value or free of charge. The following types of services are distinguished - information, consulting, educational, organizational, rental services. Certain requirements will be set for obtaining certificates. In the presence of valid certificates, the ESI element will receive a special status, examples of which are the status of an incubator, accelerator, startup hub, organizer of a cluster project. It seems that all the planned changes will help to intensify the development of the ESI at the present stage. The ways of further research can be directed to the analysis of new organizations supporting SMEs, as well as identifying new relationships between the development of SMEs and the activities of these organizations.

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