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Session 1 - Generative AI keynotes

- [Bianca Muntean](#), Coordinator of EDIH TDIH
- Kirke Maar, Coordinator of EDIH AIRE
- Representative of an innovative AI company

Introduction:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to share the journey of The European Digital Innovation Hub in Transilvania, or TEDIHT, as we call it, within the community that is shaping the future of digital transformation in Europe: the European Digital Innovation Hubs network.

You know I come from Romania, a country that ranks last in the EU's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). Imagine starting a digitalization journey there, in a country where many believe that owning a computer is enough to be "digitalized". This is where our story begins.

Everything we've done has been about building from the ground up. We've built partnerships, capacities, capabilities, and, most importantly, contacts & trust. We're transforming not only organizations but also mindsets. We share knowledge, offer expertise and lay the foundation for digital success, step by step.

We've seen the impact of our work — real success that we can measure in stories, testimonials, and results. Some might say an EDIH is just a project. It is far more than that. To many, we are an anchor, a vital resource, sometimes their chance for a fresh start or a completely new direction. And getting here wasn't easy; we all know that.

Challenges and Turning Points:

We actually started planning TEDIHT before the launch of the Digital Europe program. At that time, there was a roadmap, but no clear path or understanding of what a Digital Innovation Hub could really achieve. Yet, our goal was ambitious: to address the specific needs of our region while aligning them with Europe's digital transformation priorities.

From the beginning, we encountered challenges — understanding what businesses truly needed, proving our credibility, and delivering real results quickly. We addressed these obstacles through early partnerships, a shared vision, and flexibility. This collaborative approach became one of our greatest strengths.

A major challenge was also aligning what businesses believed they needed with the true potential of digital transformation. This required us to serve as both educators and enablers, creating clarity and building trust.

Progress and Success Stories:

Where do we stand today? We can point to tangible achievements: healthcare companies that have digitalized their operations and now feel more connected to their patients; a unicorn-potential startup in the energy sector testing an innovative app through TEDIHT's infrastructure, designed to optimize energy consumption and reduce bills; businesses thriving thanks to the right digital solutions; and individuals who have become ambassadors of digital transformation.

A key realization has been the importance of putting people at the center of digital transformation. Our human-centric focus ensures that every employee, CEO, partner, and client is integral to our work. This approach reinforces the foundation of Industry 5.0, making technology serve people, not the other way around.

This journey has also allowed us to demonstrate the value of digital innovation hubs to public authorities. We've influenced policy, helping to shape Romania's legislative framework for digital innovation hubs. Together with policymakers, we contributed to the official definition of DIHs in a Government Decision, establishing their essential role in the country's digital transformation.

Our work has also gained global recognition. TEDIHT was featured in the 2024 UNIDO Industrial Development Report, highlighting our role in driving digitalization and innovation in Romania's North-West region, as a good practice example.

Ongoing Challenges and the Bigger Picture:

However, our journey hasn't been without challenges. Bureaucracy remains a significant hurdle, as does the pressure to drive widespread national changes while operating at a grassroots level.

We're often expected not only to promote digitalization but also to generate innovation and new products. This is challenging, especially when administrative tasks consume much of our time. We need additional support, to focus on strategic goals and to reduce these operational burdens.

Based on our recent digital maturity assessments of the SMEs in our region, we see both potential and barriers. Small businesses are eager to adopt digital solutions, but they often face financial constraints. National funding calls for SME digitalization have been delayed for over a year in our region, and the lack of synergy among various financing programs further complicates access to resources. Securing funding for digitalization shouldn't be this complex.

Key Insights and Lessons Learned:

The journey so far has taught us many lessons. One of the most important is the need for a common language in digitalization. Bridging the digital divide isn't just about technology; it's about understanding and communication. By aligning our messages and building trust, we make digital transformation more accessible and less intimidating for businesses and public sector organizations from all over Europe.

Equally important is the role of authorities in creating frameworks that enable EDIHs to succeed. Governments must evolve to become facilitators rather than gatekeepers, with greater responsiveness to the needs of regional hubs.

Finally, we've learned the importance of commitment and accountability within EDIHs. Once funded, it's imperative that those funded fulfill their commitments and remain focused on their mission. Consistent monitoring ensures that these organizations deliver on their promises.

Future Vision and Closing Thoughts:

Looking forward, EDIHs are not just structures; they are catalysts for Europe's transformation. With testing facilities and expertise in advanced technologies like AI, we empower businesses, public institutions, and individuals to thrive in an increasingly digitalized world.



We can be used as deployment engines for technology, or sandboxes for experimentation — roles that no other structures fulfill in the same way.

I'll leave you with this question: What is the superpower of the EDIHs? Every time I think about it, I imagine an electricity pole with hundreds of tangled cables. Nobody has any idea what each cable does, what advantages it has, or what its function is. Then the EDIHs and their experts appear, like skilled professionals, untangling these cables and connecting them to a vast network — the EDIH Network. It seems simple, but it requires effort and coordination.

To policymakers, partners, and stakeholders: Your support is not just appreciated—it is vital. We are here. USE us.

EDIHs are proven ecosystems, uniquely positioned to create a wide-reaching impact.

There's no need to start anything new, from scratch. The infrastructure is in place. The expertise is established. Over time, EDIHs have created a robust network that fosters knowledge, drives innovation, and supports growth. It is important to have continuity with no gaps in financing it.

These hubs should be seen as public utility instruments, with the potential to multiply impact, becoming a catalyst for systemic change and a key player in implementing policies at European and national levels.

I could speak to you in numbers and KPIs, but today I choose to deliver a different message: Every beneficiary counts. Every systemic change starts with one individual, one organization, one region.

This journey isn't one we can walk alone. What we've built so far has required extraordinary effort and resilience — extraordinary because they extend far beyond traditional expectations. It would be a loss to see this progress decline now.

We need ongoing support — financial, strategic, and political. To every partner in this room, I say: We have come a long way, but the road ahead is equally significant. Let's ensure we don't lose the momentum. People, businesses, regions, need us. Countries like Romania need us.

We are proud to be a part of this grand mechanism — the EDIH network. Together, we are more than the sum of our parts. Together, we can turn Europe's digital and green ambitions into a living, breathing reality.

So, let's keep moving forward—together. Thank you for being part of this journey!
