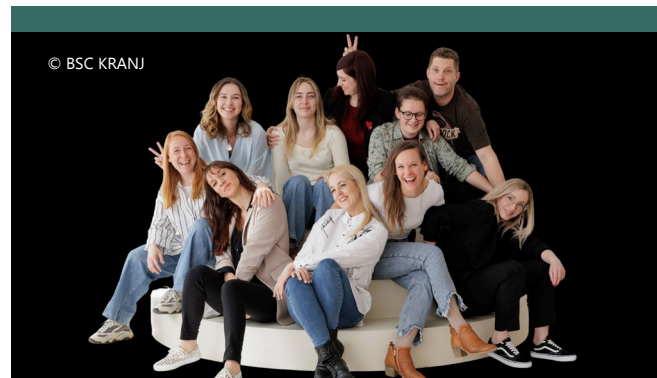




PONI programme: support for entrepreneurs in Slovenia's Gorenjska region

SUMMARY

PONI (short for Podjetno nad izzive, or 'An entrepreneurial approach to challenges') is a national programme aimed at fostering entrepreneurship. In Gorenjska region, participants are employed full-time by the programme for four months, receiving a salary, paid annual leave, holiday allowance, proportional severance pay and full employment benefits while they develop and launch their own business. Cohorts of 10-12 entrepreneurs are supported per cycle (with two cycles a year), receiving two to three workshops per week and support from mentors.



Themes: Entrepreneurship

Country: Slovenia

Organisations:

> BSC Kranj – Regional Development Agency of Gorenjska, public authority

Start & end date: 12/2019 - ongoing

Budget: EUR 1 538 272 for implementation period 1 November 2023 to 31 December 2029

Funding sources:

> European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

> National funds of the Republic of Slovenia

Website: <https://www.bsc-kranj.si/poni-gorenjska-podjetno-nad-izzive/>

Contact: Maruša Bonča, Project Assistant, marusa.bonca@bsc-kranj.si



CONTEXT

Gorenjska in the north of Slovenia, predominantly rural in character – a significant share of residents live in villages and smaller communities – while also hosting the regional centre of Kranj. Gorenjska's proximity to the country's capital Ljubljana shapes its economic and demographic dynamics: the region benefits from access to wider business networks and the metropolitan labour market, but also faces outmigration of young people and businesses towards the capital. PONI Gorenjska was designed, as part of Slovenia's national decentralised entrepreneurship support programme, to give potential entrepreneurs access to high-quality training, mentoring, coworking and the financial security of a four-month employment contract to develop and launch their business.



OBJECTIVES

- > Give aspiring entrepreneurs four months of economic and social security through a paid employment contract, allowing them to focus fully on developing and launching their business idea;
- > Deliver a comprehensive four-month training programme equipping participants with the entrepreneurial skills they need;
- > Provide mentoring and all-round support for development of business ideas and preparation of business plans;
- > Achieve a rate of at least 30% of successful transitions into entrepreneurship;
- > Reduce unemployment by encouraging self-employment and creation of new jobs in the region.



ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

The key actors involved are BSC Kranj (the Regional Development Agency of Gorenjska), Kovačnica (provides the coworking and entrepreneurship hub), local mentors and established entrepreneurs from across Gorenjska, while national policy coordination is carried out through the Slovenian government's cohesion policy framework. The initiative is structured around four components:

- > Regional outreach and selection: working together, BSC Kranj and Kovačnica run public calls inviting Gorenjska residents with a business idea to apply, regardless of age, education or employment status. The only conditions are residence (permanent or temporary) in the region and an intention to establish a business.
- > Paid four-month employment pathway: selected participants sign a four-month employment contract with the regional implementing organisation, receiving a full salary, paid annual leave, holiday allowance, proportional severance pay and full employment benefits. Their full-time job for the four months is to develop and launch their own business.
- > Structured training, mentoring and a coworking space: 10-12 entrepreneurs (per programme round) work from a co-working space, with two to three workshops held per week covering business model development, business planning, marketing, finance, sales and market validation. They also receive continuous support from both an internal and external mentor, drawn from Gorenjska's entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- > Launch and ongoing engagement: by the end of the four months, participants present a business plan and a minimum viable product, and many register a business entity. Beyond the formal pathway, a substantial number of participants continue to use the coworking infrastructure and informal peer networks.



RESULTS

- > Around 70% of PONI Gorenjska participants go on to establish their own business – the highest start-up rate in Slovenia.
- > 106 participants are supported per cycle.
- > Gorenjska's entrepreneurial ecosystem is reinforced long term through ongoing use of Kovačnica's coworking infrastructure beyond the formal pathway.
- > Anchoring business creation in the region contributes strongly to talent retention in Gorenjska.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > Mature regional partners with deep entrepreneurial experience: BSC Kranj and Kovačnica are established players in Slovenia's entrepreneurial ecosystem, with long experience in supporting start-ups and an active network of local mentors and entrepreneurs.
- > Paid four-month employment removes the financial risk barrier: this is the most distinctive design feature of the national PONI model and the lever that brings participants into formal entrepreneurship support.
- > Strategic use of rural-urban linkages: Gorenjska's proximity to Ljubljana, while a source of demographic pressure, also provides access to wider business networks, capital markets and clients. PONI Gorenjska channels this proximity for the benefit of rural entrepreneurs rather than allowing it to drain talent towards the capital.
- > Working in cohorts of 10-12 entrepreneurs creates a built-in peer-support network that often outlasts the four-month formal pathway. The ongoing presence of past participants at the co-working space reinforces the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- > Continuity across EU programming periods: successive PONI cycles, building on the earlier part of the programme, have allowed the methodology to mature, the regional partnership to consolidate and an evidence base to accumulate.
- > The PONI programme is implemented in all 12 Slovenian regions, with regular exchange among the regional implementing organisations built into the model. This peer support to programme implementers, through sharing methodologies, lessons learned and practical solutions, is crucial to maintaining consistency and quality across the country and enables each region to build on what works elsewhere.



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info@rural-pact.eu



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