

Opening Speech: National Innovation Forum 2024 – Sofia, Bulgaria

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Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, and partners,

It is a profound honour to address you today at the National Innovation Forum 2024, a pivotal event organized by the Applied Research and Communication Fund (ARC Fund).

Congratulations on your 20 years anniversary! This Forum stands as a testament to our collective commitment to fostering innovation, facilitating technology transfer, and exploring the transformative potential of digital connectivity and artificial intelligence (AI) in Bulgaria and across Europe. For Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, it is great pleasure to be your partner in this project. It became a long-lasting tradition.

I would like to congratulate all awarded companies on their innovation projects – you are the real face of success in Bulgaria.

The National Innovation Forum, under the stewardship of the ARC Fund, has consistently provided a dynamic platform for dialogue among policymakers, researchers, and industry leaders. The ARC Fund's dedication to nurturing an environment conducive to innovation is instrumental in positioning Bulgaria as a competitive player in the global digital economy.

At the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, we are deeply committed to promoting democracy, the rule of law, and sustainable development in Bulgaria and Europe. Our initiatives aim to bridge the gap between technological innovation and societal progress. By facilitating dialogue among government entities, businesses, and civil society, we strive to ensure that technological advancements align with democratic values and contribute to the common good.

Thinking about the role of digital connectivity and artificial intelligence, we may say that they are the backbone of modern economies. Both lay the groundwork for innovations that can enhance productivity, foster inclusivity, and drive economic resilience. Moreover, Artificial intelligence has transformative power that holds the potential to revolutionize various sectors, including healthcare, education, and public administration. Its applications can lead to more efficient processes, personalized services, and data-driven decision-making. However, the deployment of AI must be approached with a focus on ethical considerations, data privacy, and the mitigation of biases to ensure it serves society equitably.

Bulgaria's rich history of innovation provides a solid foundation for its digital future. I would like to share with you some notable milestones of Bulgaria's innovation history:

- **Telegraph Lines:** In 1855, the first telegraph lines were established on Bulgarian territory during the Crimean War.
- **Wireless Telegraphy:** In 1912, the first experimental wireless telegraphy transmissions took place in Sofia.
- **First Electronic Digital Computer:** John Atanasoff, the son of Bulgarian immigrants, developed the first electronic digital computer in the 1930s.
- **First Gramophone Record Production:** In 1934, Simeon Petrov organized Bulgaria's first gramophone record production and founded the "Simonavia" factory.

- **First Female Professor:** Elisaveta Karamihaylova became Bulgaria's first female professor in 1937, making significant contributions to radioactivity research.
- **Television Production:** In the 1960s, Bulgaria began producing televisions at the "Elektronika" plant in Sofia.
- **First Bulgarian Automobile:** The "Balkan 1200" was developed in 1960 at the "Balkan" factory in Lovech, though it did not reach mass production.
- **First Digital Watch:** 1971 Bulgarian engineer Peter Petroff invented the world's first digital watch.
- **Computer Production:** During the 1980s, Bulgaria produced computers under the COMECON agreement, including the IZOT and ES EVM series.

Last but not least, Bulgarian rose oil industry is a key national industry and a source of national pride.

- **Rose Oil Production:** Bulgarian rose oil has been renowned since 1720 for its exceptional quality, earning numerous international accolades. The techniques have been passed down through generations, blending traditional methods with modern distillation and innovation to preserve the oil's purity and potency.

These achievements underscore Bulgaria's longstanding tradition of innovation and its capacity to contribute meaningfully to global technological progress.

The National Innovation Forum serves as a catalyst for collaborative efforts aimed at advancing Bulgaria's digital transformation. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, it fosters an environment where ideas can flourish, partnerships can be forged, and strategies can be developed to harness the potential of digital technologies for societal benefit.

As we reflect on Bulgaria's rich history of innovation, we are reminded of the nation's resilience and ingenuity. Looking ahead, it is imperative that we build upon this legacy by embracing digital connectivity and artificial intelligence in ways that are ethical, inclusive, and aligned with democratic principles. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting Bulgaria's journey toward a digitally empowered future that honours its past achievements while striving for sustainable progress.