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CzechBio's Serhiy Forostyak, MD, Ph.D, shares the importance of a strong platform where all actors of the biotech landscape can develop their ideas and establish valuable partnerships on a national and international level. Moreover, he delves into the Czech history of medical innovation and the country's potential to strive among Europe's top players.

Since its foundation in 2008, CzechBio's aim has been to support the biotechnology industry by creating a favorable ecosystem through a global industry network. How does the association achieve this goal?

CzechBio was created as a biotech consortium that acts as a platform for partnerships, for the development of new ideas and technologies, and for the practical implementation and commercialization of these. Similar platforms are quite usual in countries such as the US and the UK, and it was time for the concept to be brought to the Czech Republic as well.

Since its foundation in 2008 the model of the biotech cluster has shifted towards a more focused and specialized approach. CzechBio is currently the oldest active biotech cluster in the country, offering solutions to those in need of national and international partnerships with added value.

What have been the key milestones of the association in recent years?

We have been able to attract the key players in the region: institutes of The Czech Academy of Sciences, universities, biotechs and pharma firms, as well as smaller companies that have joined because they wanted to be part of our vision. We see great potential in the communication between all these different partners. The cluster also acts as a platform for communication with the authorities, which in turn enables its partners to shape the country's strategy in the field of biotechnologies. It is much easier to communicate with the government via the association than as an individual entity. It has therefore been a priority to develop this feature.

How would you assess the ever-evolving biotech landscape in the Czech Republic?

The biotech sector in the Czech Republic isn't fully shaped, and some rules aren't well-defined yet, which makes it hard for scientists and universities to spin off ideas and establish new companies. This, nonetheless, is already changing in a positive way. The last couple of years have been very dynamic for the Czech biotech ecosystem and new start-up companies have appeared. Some of these new start-ups are based on technological solutions and solid Intellectual Property, which from my perspective is the best way to build up a biotech.

Where does the Czech Republic's ambition in medical innovation come from?

To provide some historical insight into the country's biotech scene, here are two great success stories. The biggest Czech project in biotech was led by Professor Antonín Holáček, father of several multimillion dollar drugs that are now registered in the US. He developed several fantastic medicines and vaccines currently used for treatment and prevention of HIV and Hepatitis B. His work, until now, is bringing one of the biggest investments into the Institute of Organic Chemistry and Biochemistry in Prague. This institute is the biggest taxpayer in Prague 6, the area that holds the Václav Havel Airport. Imagine the value of discoveries generated by this renown professor.

There is also Otto Wichterle, the chemist who invented the modern soft contact lens. During socialist times, his patent was transferred to the US and until now people worldwide are using his invention on a daily basis.

These examples reflect the potential of the country. In order to really strive, it is crucial to have not just governmental support in promoting the investments, but also development of a proper infrastructure including clusters that will attract and motivate talented researchers as well as form a ground for investors. The role of CzechBio in this is to provide a very solid platform for the above discussion. The members of the consortium have already established lots of projects together. Nonetheless, there is still room for more efficiency and to develop the mission of the association into something greater. There is huge potential and not all of it has yet been explored.

CzechBio is not only supported by the European Union but also arranges international meetings and congresses to promote its members outside of the Czech Republic. How important is internationalization for your member companies?

CzechBio is actively connected with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade and Industry and Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic, which all promote the popularization and better representation of the Czech Republic in the international arena. These partnerships allow CzechBio members to present their companies outside of the Czech Republic and to take home new international collaborations from European, Asian and American markets.

The country has a strong reputation for quality manufacturing. How does the Czech Republic compare to its CEE neighbors as a production hub of innovative pharmaceuticals and medical technologies?

The Czech Republic, although not the largest in terms of size and population, has established itself as one of the regional leaders in the biotech segment, being heavily involved in clinical trials and translational research and offering the highest standards for biotech and pharma businesses. Being part of the European Union and complying to regulations and legislation of the European Medicines Agency (EMA), it follows the same rules as other EU markets of the likes of France or Germany.

What does the "Innovation Strategy of the Czech Republic 2019-2030" mean for the biotech industry?

It is well known that if you don't invest in innovation and research and development, there is no future for the country. The majority of CzechBio's members, if not all, welcome the "Innovation Strategy of the Czech Republic 2019-2030". It facilitates the implementation of know-how into practice. There have been many instances in which collaborations between CzechBio partners have been granted by the government - we are glad that the funding opportunity exists.

Do you think the country could have a significant role in closing the gap between Eastern and Western Europe? What would this mean for the biotech scene in terms of partnerships and collaborations?

On one hand, we are in the heart of Europe, which makes the Czech Republic a crossroads for collaborations and partnerships. On the other, modern technologies diminished the relevance of distance or geography on partnerships. What is truly closing the gap between East and West is the similarity of infrastructure and legislature. I think that the Czech Republic is on the right track to play amongst the most developed, high-income countries.

What does the talent landscape look like in the Czech Republic?

Migration for better levels of higher education is a typical tendency worldwide and talented young people are moving out of the Czech Republic too, whether to study or for better-paid jobs. The issue is that only few come back.

Whereas big cities such as Prague and Brno have good soil for talent, this is a problem almost everywhere else. In recent years, several governmental programs have been implemented to attract prospective researchers to the Czech Republic and state-of-art research centers have been built with this aim in mind. While this helped to certain extent, those who come back usually do it for

patriotic reasons, and I believe that a better ground needs to be created to really keep young talent from Czech universities in the country.

What is the future direction of CzechBio and what does the association hope to achieve in the next three to five years?

We are taking small but firm steps. Our main task is to spread the word about the potential of biotechnology and of the benefits of being part of our platform. Secondly, we strive to improve communication with the government.

The Czech biotech sector is very dynamic, and we aim to promote partners of the cluster to be listed at least among the main European players in the near future.

On a more personal note, what makes you so passionate about being part of the biotechnology scene?

My decision to move into the biotech field was influenced by my background. I'm a medical doctor and worked as a neuroscientist for over ten years. I wanted to use my experience to bring basic research closer to patients. I believe that current biotechnologies have almost unlimited potential and are able to improve many people's lives. Translation towards the patient is my motivation.

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