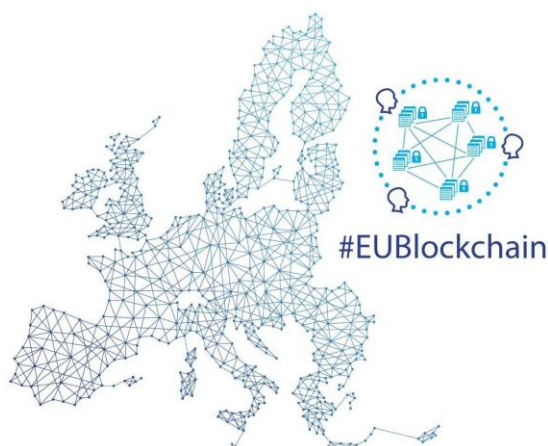# EU BLOCKCHAIN OBSERVATORY & FORUM

Workshop Report – Blockchain Start-Ups, Innovation Hubs and SMMEs in European Countries

–

Online Video Conference, 28 July 2022

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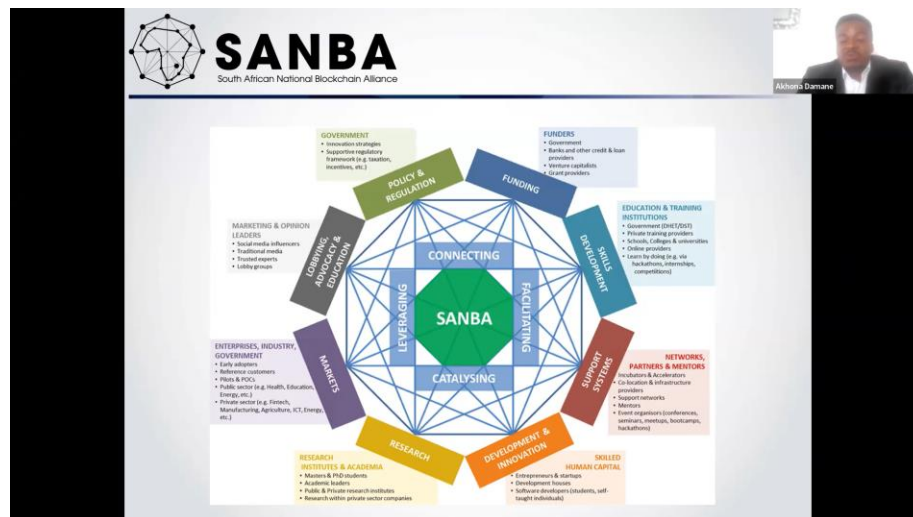Europe

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WELCOME

Bara Greplova, INATBA, commenced the workshop with a brief explanation of the housekeeping rules to be followed during the workshop. The workshop was a joint event between INATBA and European Blockchain Observatory and Forum about blockchain startups, innovation hubs and SMMEs.

INTRODUCTION

Akhona Damane, SANBA, presented the collaborations established by SANBA for promoting blockchain; Mr Damane explained that the European experience is very significant in terms of helping SANBA better integrate blockchain; special reference was made to the Switzerland Embassy that invited SANBA to join their blockchain hackathon, allowing South Africa representatives to better understand the potential of their country as well.

Following the brief introduction and welcome, Mr Damane gave a bit of background on the history of SANBA and explained the mission and objectives of the Alliance.

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He presented relevant partnerships and project and their significance and especially highlighted the IamZA digital identity project.

He then moved on to present an overview of the Blockchain startup ecosystem in South Africa, explaining which thematic areas have been developed and look prominent for further development as well as the challenges faced, including regulatory uncertainty, limited support from government as well as limited access to funding.

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As part of his concluding remarks, Mr Damane explained that SANBA is part of the INATBA's Governmental Advisory Body working on blockchain policies promoting the innovation ecosystem, that their focus is on establishing a pan-African blockchain network in partnership with European stakeholders, aiming to support the broader blockchain ecosystem, public sector blockchain programs, Digital Innovation hubs and digital entrepreneurs in the Africa region, while regulatory reform is underway.

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STARTUPS IN THE EU BLOCKCHAIN ECOSYSTEM

The workshop continued with a presentation by **Mr Iordanis Papoutsoglou,** EUBOF, about the latest findings from EUBOF's research on the European blockchain ecosystem.

Iordanis started by providing the role and objectives of the EU Blockchain Observatory and Forum, as well as an overview of its work, explaining the research themes addressed in their research and the respective publications they have produced, as well as the events and workshops they have organized up to date.

He then moved on to explain the structure of the latest report produced on EU Blockchain Ecosystem developments, highlighting that 31 European countries are covered, and that the report is structured on 3 levels:

1. A country level overview, examining key data and indicators, policy and regulatory framework, education and research initiatives, active user communities, national entrepreneurial environment and also includes interviews with experts and policy makers.

2. A cross-country level analysis and comparisons, based on their entrepreneurial ecosystem, academia and regulatory framework

3. The evolution of the ecosystem since the last publication, taking on board developments on ecosystem maturity and regulatory curve maturity.

It was discussed that not all countries are at the same maturity level, but currently, there is a growing momentum. The main factors influencing growth include 1) the first and quick mover advantage, 2) the existence of regulatory certainty, 3) the level of state support, 4) the innovation friendly environment and cross sectoral synergies. Last but not least, the regulation at EU level helps eliminate discrepancies and geo-arbitrage.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS

Nena Dokuzov, Head of Project Group for New Economy and Blockchain Technologies (Government of Slovenia) discussed the role of governments in the development of blockchain ecosystems.

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Ms Dokuzov explained how things started in Slovenia…there was a lot of interest for blockchain and project in crypto-sphere, and it was the point of the building of the ecosystem in the country. There were a lot of startup companies working on blockchain, so we decided to support them at the government level. The government was very active throughout the process of building and strengthening the ecosystem. The decision that was undertaken by the government to support blockchain and the development of blockchain, was a strong sign for the new businesses that started at that time. Following this, there was a declaration that advocated for the development of innovative technologies and many areas were addressed also in those technologies.

Apart from this, the European Commission also adopted the declaration in 2018 and the European Blockchain Partnership was established.

More specifically, Slovenia, in early 2018, was one of the first countries that adopted a blockchain strategy (action plan). Through this strategy, all stakeholders were identified; apart from companies there were academic institutes, researchers, supporting initiatives, and the government played the role of connecting them all together.

Furthermore, the government launched a call for projects, intending to avoid being stuck only in cryptos; so, they tried to diversify the use of blockchain on certain pillars of the industry; for example, other industries addressed included: smart cities, health, tourism, circular economy, medical treatment, smart homes, and so on. The solutions that were brought forth, weren't only blockchain based, but blockchain was put in the front of supporting traditional sectors and industries. This proved to be a good approach in transforming the economy. At the same time, it gave blockchain companies a backup, on how to develop without becoming dependent on the market and ICO investors, but also from the companies that determine themselves to go underway of a transformation on their own.

It is very important that the governments take some steps, into not only the policy and strategic points, but also financing points, so that the companies can be supported by having a stable source of financing. This needs to be built along with a supportive environment. For example, in Slovenia the supporting environment includes incubators that have started to perceive the knowledge of how to use blockchain technology and shared this knowledge with other companies that were not familiar with that technology. On the other hand, the support included building innovation within the blockchain. For example, Slovenia was the first country to ever have a national blockchain infrastructure; it was called SI-Chain which was a very useful learning tool (learning by doing). This process is very much applicable for the blockchain technology. The government also realized that for example, AI is also an advanced digital technology but on the other hand, it is more on the academic level, and blockchain has a more bottom-up approach. So, when all these technologies are put together, and have a convergence, we can definitely have a good mix that can help transform traditional industries and make European and other economies stronger.

The European Blockchain Partnership (EBP) was established in 2018 and there is a very strong policy group represented by the Member States and the European Commission; they also have the initiative to create another strong ecosystem, apart from EUBOF, and that was INATBA which was established 3 years ago. INATBA's role is very crucial because as the industrial association, concentrates a lot of knowledge in many different areas and fields, and the right mix of these can help Europe to upgrade also the results that were presented previously by EUBOF. Europe is constantly developing technologies through all the instruments available. Three use cases were developed in the beginning by the EBP. The first one was on SSI, there was another one on Diplomas, and the third one was Traceability on notarization use case. In 2019 a governance structure was developed for EBP – the policy group, the EBSI technical group, responsible for developing the European Blockchain Services Infrastructure that is cross-border functioning interoperable infrastructure. Three use cases are currently being tested and a fourth one on social security pass. Two more use cases will be adopted on SME financing and Asylum.

Based on the discussion about the African model, EBP has adopted an observer status; the aim is to develop

EBP further, to work on an international level and invite other like-minded countries to join the EBP policy group.

Jan Klesla (co-chair of the EBP, as part of the Czech Presidency of the EU), intervened to mention that there are more use case in place, and anyone interested could reach out to him directly or via INATBA. He also clarified that for now, only EU countries can join the current use cases.

Ms Dokuzov, continued her presentation to discuss the post Covid era and the activities undertaken by the Slovenian government. They adopted the strategy for the digital transformation of the economy in Slovenia and blockchain was found to be one of the most advanced digital technologies within the European strategy or Digital Europe programme. Another source of financing was secured by the recovery and resilience plan allowing focus on advanced digital technologies and combinations of them, enabling startups to start developing and cooperating with other consortia and projects and to further develop technology as such.

Slovenia is trying to bilaterally or multilaterally help other countries that want to develop projects on blockchain peer-to-peer, or in cooperation, for example, with the Western Balkans, on how to raise the level of knowledge on the technologies and help them strengthen their economies.

EU DIGITAL IDENTITY EUROPEAN ECOSYSTEM REGULATION AND BLOCKCHAIN

The event proceeded with the discussion on the EU digital identity regulation, and how this affects the EU Blockchain ecosystem, by **Kristina Lillieneke (Blackbird Law and EU Blockchain Observatory Expert Panel).**

eIDAS was formulated in 2019 as part of the Digital Agenda for Europe 2030. The aim of the first version of eIDAS was 1) to provide cross-border recognition of national electronic identification (eIDs) to allow EU citizens to access public services, 2) to establish a Union market for trust services and 3) to enable convenient and secure electronic transactions across EU borders for citizens, businesses and public sector institutions.

Through the regulation, 3 types of electronic signatures have been developed: 1) simple electronic signature (SES), including a broad category of all electronic signatures (even scanned signature images, click of an "I accept" button, DocuSign, etc.); 2) Advanced Electronic Signature (AES), which must meet specific requirements

providing a higher level of signer ID verification, security, and tamper-sealing; are uniquely linked to the signer; are capable of identifying the signer; are developed using signature creation data that the signer can use under their sole control; they are linked to the signed data in a way that any subsequent change in the data is not possible; 3) Qualified electronic signature (QES) that have a special legal status and are considered equivalent to hand-written signatures. QES must meet advanced electronic signature requirements and be backed by a qualified certificate, issued by a Trust service   provider listed in the EU Trusted List (ETL) and certified by an EU Member State. The role of the trust service provider is to verify the identity of the signer and vouch for it (Liability).

Furthermore, the first version of eIDAs introduced

- electronic seals, which are digital IDs but for businesses or corporations. Electronic seals (eSeal) ensure the origin and integrity of data and are used to verify invoices or sign contracts with a physical person.

- Electronic timestamps – eTimestamps, used for certifications, agreements, etc.

- Electronic registered delivery services - eDelivery, which allows public organisations, businesses and the public to transfer data to and from other parties, complete with proof of sending and receipt.

- Qualified Web Authentication Certificate, which provides proof of ownership of a website, serving as tool to help avoid phishing sites and online scams.

Since February 2020, the EC is working on the revision of the eIDAs regulation, which should be enacted by all EU MS by September 2023. The reason for this is because the technology landscape has significantly evolved since then but also, because there was very little adoption of the regulation by the EU Member States.

There are no standards, so the individual countries set up the requirements for the highest level of verification. Apart from this, once the new eIDAs regulation has passed, it will need to be streamlined, such as the EU Cybersecurity Act (EU 2019/881), the EU NIS II Directive (EU 2016/1148), the EU Digital Gateway regulation (EU 2018/1724), as well as the MiCA Regulation and GDPR related regulation.

The biggest change with this will be the mandatory nature of the EU Digital Identity wallets. In this case, there is high demand both from businesses and individuals (mainly businesses though), and it is also framed as the "right" of every citizen to receive digital identity wallet, and the aim is to have – through this legislation already – electronic driving license, electronic passport, electronic national ID-card, medical data, as well as other attributes; other attributes could include everything with regards to personal data (age, gender, address, civil status, family composition, nationality, educational and professional qualifications & titles, licenses, permits and other payment details. It is also supposed to be technology neutral, meaning that you can have this on a laptop, a mobile phone or a smartcard, or any other type of hardware.

Some key features of the ID wallets include:

- They can be issued by a Member State, under a Mandate from a Member State, independently but recognized by a Member State;

- All certified European Digital Identity Wallets are listed in a central database for the European Union.

- All identify wallets are expected to enable the user to request and receive a digital ID wallet; store, select, combine and share its own identification data, store attributes and get them electronically attestated/ authenticated and finally, sign with QES.

Every wallet owner must have a unique and persistent identification (e.g. social security number or personal ID number). This makes it hard to anonymise and avoid track and tracing, so this is considered to be controversial.

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The purpose of the legislation is that the user is going to be in control. More specifically,

- The issuer is not allowed to collect information about the use of the wallet which is not necessary for the provision of the wallet services.

- The issuer can't combine person identification data and any other personal data stored or relating to the use of the Identity Wallet with personal data from any other services offered by this issuer or from third-party services which are not necessary for the provision of the wallet services, unless the user has expressly requested it.

- Personal data should be kept physically and logically separate from any other data stored.

In case there are security breaches, or partial security compromises,

- The wallet issuance should be suspended and the validity of the European Identity Wallet should be revoked;

- Other MS and the Commission should be informed;

- In case the breach can't be fixed within a period of three months, the digital wallet concerned should be withdrawn.

This legislation is a bit unclear in terms of the actual effects such breach may have on the user. For example, if there is a breach, and someone retrieves a person's information through the wallet, and then this wallet is revoked, then what would this mean for the person owning the wallet? Would they be without a wallet for three months? And if this is not solved, the users run the risk of not being able to use their identity for this period, especially since each identity needs to have a unique identifier – if this gets blocked, then how are the users going to be able to function in a society? Also, if you have this unique identifier utilized in several online places, how are you going to make sure that it is not used there again or that it is revoked from there so that no one else can still claim to be this person.

Oversight of the providers will be done by National Supervisory Authorities, and it is expected that Member States will cooperate with one another; It is expected that many issuers, will be providing digital IDs to more than one country or even the entire EU. It is required that every 24 months each issuer will have to be audited at their own expense and if they are in breach of some regulation, they will be given up to 3 months to rectify that. During these oversights, if they find that the GDPR legislation has been broken, the GDPR authorities should be notified.

This is also a bit unclear, as it is not defined who is responsible for what, and it would be more efficient if citizens had one place to go in order to make complaints, regardless if they concern GDPR or some other legislation; so this regulation should be aligned with GDPR as it concerns personal data being protected. This way, citizens can claim damages and have them rectified.

There are three other services under version 2.0 of the eIDAs regulation:

1) Electronic attestation of attributes (e.g. college or university degree); to verify you would need intermediaries (e.g. the University or the college); that needs to be set up, but the rules for that are not written yet. There is an upcoming implementation act and is supposed to be issued 6 months after Eidas2.0 has been passed.

2) Qualified Electronic Archiving Services (e.g. signed business agreements that you want stored), i.e. electronic documents

3) Electronic Ledgers, but only if you are a qualified provider.

To help with the implementation of the legislation the EC has given out a recommendation, for a common toolbox for a coordinated approach towards a European Digital Identity Framework.

The EC vision is to create a beautiful digital society built on trust, integrity and freedom of choice.

Still, the risks to consider are quite a few:

The user potential is in real decentralization and in peer-to-peer transactions. This solution we are looking into right now, runs the risk of being run by centralized systems, which is bad from a control perspective where it can work like the COVID certificates did – from a human rights perspective and legal perspective there is criticism of how this was used and all the rights that were breached.

Generally, the centralization aspect runs the risk of limiting freedoms and rights for European citizens.

With centralization there is also a single point of failure. It is much easier to hack once you have a centralized register and if it is stored with each individual on their own; this is a risk as there is no joint or collective institution that is responsible for all types of complaints. Furthermore, although currently it is seen as a right, it will soon become an obligation, as people soon will not be able to function without one and decline its use.

There is no limitation on what we should not use the digital passport data; this could lead to exclusion – financial exclusion as well - in case someone decides not to use CBDCs or crypto wallets as well.

Furthermore, there is no specific regulation on the use of biometric data, behavioural or neuro data; these are very valuable assets and people might not want big tech companies to own those. There is also no differentiation of consent, so that citizens can say yes or no to small parts of it; there is no focus on zero-knowledge-proof and when this should be used or not (e.g. for banking). Finally, there is no discussion at all on human rights and there is no alternative system.

So, despite the many positive parts, there are several risks that need to be considered.

MODERATED Q&A SESSION

Moderated by: Bara Greplova, Membership Manager, Academic & Governmental Relations INATBA

Question to Kristina Lillieneke: what is your expectation for the regulatory process? Where do you see the benefit in this ambitious timeline? Is it farfetched?

KL: I consider the timeline for the regulation to be rushed, and I am not even sure why this is. I am guessing it is because of CBDCs and intending to catch up to the COVID-19 Passports. These have been prolonged till the time the digital IDs are supposed to be enacted. So, maybe this is one reason. Blockchain is a very dynamic industry but legislation is not – it is actually quite a slow process. So, I would say it is harder to do good legislation that release good blockchain applications.

Question to all panelists: So how do we ensure that progress is fast enough when the regulation is the main "roadblock" to innovation?

KL: It is important to weight the pros and cons of course, but I consider that the rights of the citizens should weigh more in this and they should be ensured in a more secure way, and should be thought a little bit more before rushing into a regulatory or legislative framework. This is because it would be much harder and more expensive to change it afterwards.

IP: Digital Identities are in the core of every service and every application, so it is really integral to set the floor, step by step; indeed eIDAs seems to be rushed, but we should also consider on whether want new developments, such as the Metaverse or Smart Contracts to be more than code and have impact in our daily lives; we should start thinking about having identities, for instance, Smart Contracts are only code…they are not real contracts in the real world. The first step would be to set identities. The same goes for Web3.0 and the Metaverse where we will start interacting with identities.

KL: I agree, for sure. And in DAOs it will be important to have that, but I also think it is equally important to be able to live your life without being required to have one or having your rights infringed. If you ask me what is more important, human rights or the Metaverse? I am going to vote for human rights!

Question to Iordanis Papoutsoglou: in the EU Blockchain Observatory and Forum presentation, there was an observation on the number of countries with blockchain startups (with Estonia having the highest number), and then another one about the number of blockchain related activities (academic, research, legislation, etc.); how do these correlate?

IP: the headquarters of a company differ from where the product development may be taking place. There is a case of entrepreneurs who select a country with a favorable environment (e.g. tax incentives, favorable regulatory environment, etc.) to establish a company, but they can have their development team in another in more other countries. Smaller countries are disadvantaged when it comes to the sheer number (due to size, which is natural), but when you look at the funds per capita, or businesses per capita, you distribute the number of business or funds raised, and then the disadvantage may lie with the largest countries. With regards to blockchain initiatives specifically, Spain had 8 post-graduate programs (i.e. programs specifically focused on blockchain and cryptocurrencies). There are IT Master's programs or even undergraduate programs that teach blockchain but the degrees are not specifically dedicated to blockchain (there are a few relevant courses only). We expect that in the future, when there will be more experience and foundation, there might be accelerator systems in these countries. This is why we examine education as one of the basic pillars for blockchain development.

Bara Greplova – more questions from the audience

Q1: Where do you see future opportunities in the EU blockchain ecosystem?

ND: From our experience, in each sector – energy efficiency (e.g. circular economy), NFTs for every industry – the characteristics of the technology supporting the processes for traceability, product materials, where the European legislation on consumer rights is very strong and is currently being renewed. So blockchain for traceability, from the source, e.g., credit coupons were mentioned; we can create energy efficient communities that are dealing with the credit coupon system and this can help achieve the green objectives of Europe and beyond. Then, smart factories, metaverse – not only identities – I agree that identities are relevant, and human rights can't be violated through metaverse; in any case, metaverse is very useful for supporting industrial processes, for digital twins, so there are a lot of opportunities for blockchain to be used but in combination with other technologies, their effect can be even stronger and better. For digital identity, we can put as much data as we want to show on the blockchain – even GDPR does not stop us from doing this, and we can look at this from the bright side of the technology that enables us to do this.

AD: I reflect on that many of these are not applicable in the EU context. However, in Africa we have seen the application of blockchain in remittance and cross border remittance, where we have transactions across countries with a fee. Now they are able to send money through cryptocurrency. This has been working quite well. Across the globe, the issue of digital identity that Kristina touched upon is very crucial; the biggest layer that is also out for discussion is the component of biometrics. It needs to be defined if this will be an integral part of the technology, given that theft, fraud is possible across the world, and one may think that biometric technology can be that key. A third point, maybe also applicable in Europe, is the aspect of social grants' distribution for indigent families, to

get them something to go by. The big challenge is that there is so much abuse; in some instances there is abuse of alcohol, etc., so that money that was meant for buying groceries for the families is misplaced. So, something that we are looking into, are blockchain based coupons or a system of tokens, that will be linked to vendors that are able to ensure that there is traceability and accountability in terms of what is being purchased with that grant allocated for food. Also, the climate technology and energy efficient aspects are also key.

KL: with regards to digital IDs for Africa, I think that here in Europe we have a big system for handing out government IDs for the onboarding (for getting your digital ID) for use as our passport or driver license and all that; but in the vast majorities of the countries across the world this is not readily accessible. This means we need other solutions, and these may include biometric data, and we need to decide how are these going to be protected when used. Also, NFTs and digital wallets could be important for money transfer, but also for earning carbon credit for doing environmental work, and earning an income through that way.

IP: I am happy with what was mentioned, and especially by Akhona's mention to cross border collaboration and the exploitation of relevant initiatives to improve this collaboration. It is also essential to start thinking and treating blockchain technology as "not something special", meaning that having tools embedded and having decentralized applications – things beyond storage – this could be something to see in the future.

Q2: are cryptos harming the reputation of blockchain technology?

ND: It depends on the technology itself probably. What we decided when the hype of ICOs was on the top in 2017, was to differentiate and to treat crypto different from blockchain technologies. So, if you concentrate on blockchain as technology and all the positive characteristics that it has, and the education programs that are available (knowledge based programs) and are shared among the people more intensively, we can probably enable them to come closer to the technology as such. We don't need to speak about the crypto as an inevitable connection with blockchain technology. This would be the right way to avoid any misconceptions about blockchain technology.

KL: I would also like to add that the biggest scams and frauds are not in crypto, but in the fiat world. Then we say it is not the banking system's fault; but blockchain is just a technology and it is immature and it is like a market that is going to mature, so I wouldn't agree with the premise of the question.

Bara Greplova: Thank you to all the speakers and presenters and I am giving the floor to Balela Mchunu, Researcher with Department of Communications & Digital Technologies, for the Government of South Africa. The Government of South Africa is the leader of the Government Advisory Body for Blockchain Policies and Innovation ecosystem workstream. Balela will give us the plan for the upcoming webinars.

Balela Mchunu: I understand we are running out of time, so I will be very brief. Thank you very much to everyone that has attended this discussion; I believe it was very informative; there is so much we have learnt and I think we will continue to learn from each other as we move forward.

So, this is the beginning of three more webinars that we are planning. We believe this is a platform that both Africa and EU are exchanging knowledge and is a policy and innovation ecosystem space.

The next webinar will be in September, so it will be communicated later on; the focus will be similar to this one, looking into innovation, hubs and SMMEs in Africa. The third webinar will be in November, focusing on EU policies. The fourth and final one will be in February 2023, where the focus will be on African level policies.

This doesn't have to end here; we can continue the discussion. Anyone interested in joining the next webinars, please contact us.

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End of Webinar

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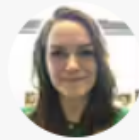| Time	Activity
14.00	**Welcome - ** Bara Greplova, INATBA
14:05	**Introduction** - Akhona Damane, South African Blockchain Alliance (SANBA)
14:20	**European blockchain start-up ecosystem overview - ** Iordanis Papoutsoglou, EUBOF
14:35	**European government role in the blockchain ecosystem:** Nena Dokuzov (Government of Slovenia)
15:00	**EU Digital Identity European Ecosystem regulation and blockchain:** Kristina Lilllieneke (Blackbird Law)
15.15	**Discussion:** Questions & Answers from the floor Moderator: Bara Greplova
15.30	**Conclusion and next steps:** Balela Mchunu, Department of Communications & Digital Technologies, South Africa

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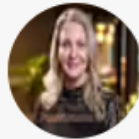
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