

Growing the family business in North Macedonia: an innovative farming case study

Tanja Kotevska calls herself first and foremost a philosopher. She studied philosophy at university in Greece and believes that the right outlook is the key to business success: “first comes the vision and only afterwards comes how to make money. That’s the important part of being an entrepreneur, otherwise you’re just a trader.”

After graduation, Kotevska worked for Unilever, first as a marketing manager in Macedonia, then as a regional marketing director in Bulgaria. In 2008, however, she joined the family firm, Greenagro, founded by her father in 2001.

“My father”, she says, “had started out trading animal feeds, but in 2008 we decided to begin our own production. We built a small facility to make premixes – a product of 50 components for all types of animals containing vitamins, minerals, amino acids and so on. It was very innovative.”

They had to become experts in many fields: genetics, biosecurity, raw materials. “We would go to the farms”, says Kotevska, “and take samples from the animals, we would then create a formula for that particular herd or flock. Foreign firms couldn’t offer such a service, so that gave us an advantage.”

A decade later, Greenagro pivoted slightly, deciding to create a range of probiotics for animal feeds with support from Macedonia’s Fund of Innovation. “Probiotics help with animals’ digestion”, she explains, “they increase the feed-conversion ratio and also boost immunity.”

The process was long: “we took a micro-organism, a yeast, from a bank and did some in vitro research and then did more research on live animals with control groups. We did all this with the help of a local veterinary school, with Attaturk University in Türkiye and a college in Spain. It lasted several years.”

The company now enjoys a turnover of around €800,000 derived 90% from premixes and around 10% from probiotics. There are ten employees, mainly scientific experts.

One of the biggest challenges for Kotevska is a labour shortage. “We just don’t have

enough research institutes here, we don’t have experimental farms. There are not enough experienced people, people who understand technology and microbiology and veterinary medicine, and so a lack of workforce is one of our most serious problems.”

Her company, she says, has effectively become a de facto training facility. “We’re running an educational centre already: when we take on a new technical person, we need to train them for two years, paying consultants as educators, because you cannot find anyone with a major in animal feed!”

Her dream is to open a vocational training centre for vets and farm students in Skopje. “It’s going to be called the ‘Educational Centre for Livestock Farming’. So many universities here have only theoretical lessons and the numbers of students is always diminishing. We want to teach them practical skills – not only technology and science, but also soft skills like marketing and so on.”

Kotevska says that dealing with farmers requires a specific skill set. “They’re very conservative, mainly because they’re stuck on the farm and don’t have time to travel. Big industrial farms have educated managers, but then they often don’t have technical knowledge. And there are lots of egotistical managers who think they know everything...”

It’s a hard world in which to be a woman. “When I used to go and visit a client with my father they would think I was his mistress! And at trade fairs they didn’t address me because they would think I was his secretary.”

But Kotevska – tall, eloquent and determined – isn’t easy to ignore. “Business success takes perseverance”, she says. “In the early years, no-one answered my emails so I said to myself ‘I will write more times than they’re able to say no’. Every time I didn’t get a reply, I would ask again!”

Another important lesson was learning to deal with setbacks. “Every fail is your next step to success”, she says. “Don’t give up on yourself: only if you don’t try something out will you have no failures.

Many times our trials didn't turn out as expected: animals got sick or farmers weren't prepared to go through with it."

The next challenge for Greenagro is to break into new markets overseas, but it's not easy. "There are regulations: companies are looking for documentation certified by government, but how does someone in Jordan know it's true? The procedure is very slow and you need to go through several institutions."

Export to the European Union is even harder. "I won't export there at all", she says bluntly. "To approve our product, EFSA [the European Food Safety Agency] requires us to do research which could cost up to a million euros. Because we're dealing with living organisms it's common sense, but to test two types of animals on three farms, then all the special testing in labs... it's unfeasible."

She also has a negligible budget for marketing: an advert on LinkedIn can cost €2,000 and just visiting a client overseas might cost €3,000. "It's an amount of money I cannot easily invest", she says.

But with North Macedonia on the brink of joining the EU, she is expecting the situation to change. "I hope it means we will have less people moving out. And I hope people will be more psychologically positive. The best thing that could happen is a change of mindset: at the moment there's too much negativity: 'we don't have money... we don't have a state'. Of course we have obstacles, but we are the country, not the government, and we can work together."

Her father has already seen the effect of EU accession on Bulgaria. "He was in Bulgaria when they received the date to enter the EU, and he said that suddenly everyone was working in synergy. When they knew where they were going it gave them hope, they were motivated."

"That's why I'm here", she enthuses, "so that we have changes in our society and in our business."