

## THE DANUBE REGION AT THE TURN OF TIMES –

**Shaping the Digital Future along the Danube.  
Unlocking Opportunities for SMEs and Industry through Cooperation.**

### SPEAKERS

**Dr. Balázs Barta, Managing Director Pannon Business Network (PBN), HU  
(Panelist) Digitalisation and AI for companies**



Balázs Barta is the Managing Director of Pannon Business Network (PBN), Hungary's frontrunner innovation agency focused on applied research, **digitalisation**, and ecosystem development. He has an MBA from Budapest, executive educations at Wharton and Insead, while PhD at engineering doctoral school. He is Supervisory Board Member at EIT Manufacturing Paris, senior lead expert at Institute of Advanced Studies, author and co-author of multiple articles and publications. He is a **key advocate for the practical implementation of AI** and frequently speaks on topics such as digital transformation in manufacturing, AI ecosystem development, and cross-sectoral innovation partnerships. He is **coordinating the PA 8 Working Group Artificial Intelligence**.

Pannon Business Network (PBN) is one of Hungary's leading centers for applied research and business-oriented innovation, **driving digital transformation** across regional and international ecosystems. With over 50 digitalisation applications and more than 1,000 SMEs and citizens trained annually, PBN is a **regional leader in digital upskilling**. The organisation manages a 500m<sup>2</sup> laboratory, known as am-LAB, with advanced technologies as part of its core innovation activities. PBN also pioneers **AI-driven smart care solutions**, supporting **digital health and elderly care**, and is at the forefront globally on **social humanoid research**, with a large multidisciplinary team. PBN also has daughter companies in Baden-Württemberg, to facilitate integration into the European leading innovation ecosystem.

**Prof. Dr. Michel Börner, Endowed Professorship for AI in Production, THU-Ulm  
University of Applied Sciences, BW  
(Key note speaker) AI in production**



Prof. Dr. Michel Börner is an endowed professor of computer science with a focus on **artificial intelligence in production** at the Technische Hochschule Ulm (THU). Prior to this role, he worked **for eight years as a data scientist** and team leader in the automotive, electrical, pharmaceutical, and metal industries. Through his studies in business physics and mathematics, as well as his **PhD in computational mathematics**, he has developed a broad interdisciplinary background and a particular interest in processes and methods in manufacturing. His main areas of expertise include the optimization of production processes, **data-driven decision-making**, root



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cause analysis, networks in small and medium-sized enterprises, and knowledge transfer. In addition, he serves as a juror for *Jugend forscht* and is active in the continuing education academy of Ulm's universities (SAPS).

THU is a university of applied sciences known for its **strong emphasis on engineering, digital technologies**, and close collaboration with industry.

## **Tobias Gotthardt, Vice Minister, Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs, Regional Development and Energy, BY** (Speaker) Insights: Regional AI-strategies and use cases



Tobias Gotthardt has been serving as Vice Minister in the Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs, Regional Development and Energy since November 8, 2023, and is a member of the Bavarian State Government. He began his career as a parliamentary assistant and head of office in the European Parliament and the German Bundestag, gaining extensive experience in European and federal policymaking. Elected to the Bavarian State Parliament in 2018, he chaired the Committee for Federal and European Affairs and later served as Deputy and Acting Chairman of the Committee on Education and

Cultural Affairs. He was also spokesperson for federal, European, education and youth policy of the FREIE WÄHLER parliamentary group.

Tobias Gotthardt is responsible for key areas of economic policy, regional development and energy, with a **strong emphasis on innovation and digital transformation**. He supports strategic initiatives to strengthen Bavaria's position in future technologies, including **artificial intelligence, advanced digital infrastructure** and **research-driven innovation**. His work focuses on fostering technology transfer, promoting start-ups and enabling established industries to **adopt AI-based solutions**, thereby enhancing competitiveness, technological sovereignty and sustainable growth in a rapidly evolving economic landscape.

## **Dr. Claus Hoffmann, CEO, Center for Digitalisation Region Stuttgart, BW** (Panelist) Digitalisation and AI for companies



Dr. Claus Hoffmann has been Managing Director of ZD.BB GmbH since 2018, heading the Working Group Digital Danube (Priority Area 8) within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. He studied economics and holds a PhD in Communication Sciences from the University of Hohenheim. Before taking up his current position, he led the Creative Industries business unit at Medien- und Filmgesellschaft Baden-Württemberg and worked as a consultant for several Baden-Württemberg state ministries. He has been closely involved in numerous strategy development processes, as well as **digitalisation and AI projects**, for companies and public institutions.

ZD.BB (Zentrum Digitalisierung Region Stuttgart) is a **leading Digital Innovation Hub** that supports small and medium-sized enterprises in driving **digital innovation, artificial intelligence and sustainable transformation**.

Acting as a central interface between businesses, research organisations, start-ups and public administrations, ZD.BB helps companies to **translate emerging technologies into concrete business value**. The organisation runs the 'KI Lab Region Stuttgart' (AI Lab Stuttgart Region) and coordinates the Interreg Danube Region flagship project DECIDE, which focuses on circular economy solutions. ZD.BB stands for the twin transition – **digital and green** – and supports companies in strengthening their competitiveness in a rapidly changing economic environment.

**Dr. Gerd Meier zu Köcker, CEO, RegioClusterAgency, BW  
(Panelist) Corporate Cybersecurity**



Dr. Gerd Meier zu Köcker is an experienced cluster and innovation policy expert, currently serving as Head of the RegioClusterAgentur Baden-Württemberg. In this leadership role, he drives strategic initiatives to strengthen regional innovation ecosystems, enhance value-chain linkages, and promote collaborative industrial development across sectors. With a background in economic policy, regional development, and strategic innovation management, Dr. Meier zu Köcker has spent more than two decades working at the intersection of industry, government, and business support organisations.

At the RegioClusterAgentur, he leads various programs that help cluster organisations and SMEs improve competitiveness by fostering shared value creation, knowledge exchange, and **coordinated investment in priority technologies**. The close cooperation with SMEs in this regard has provided him with **first-hand insights into the cybersecurity challenges** businesses face. Dr. Meier zu Köcker's work in Baden-Württemberg has included support in cluster development, developing regional economic strategies, and facilitating cross-border cooperation. Internationally, he acted as founder of the European Secretary for Cluster Analysis and led the European Cluster Observatory. Dr. Meier zu Köcker holds a doctorate in production technologies and frequently speaks at European forums on competitiveness, cluster excellence, and collaborative innovation ecosystems. He is coordinating the PA 8 Working Group Cluster and Regional Development.

**Anja Lange, BW  
Moderator**



Anja Lange is a certified moderator from the SWR Institute for Moderation with over ten years of experience hosting international business events across Europe. She moderates conferences, trade fairs and digital formats such as webinars and live streams. Her professional focus is on economics, **digitalisation and IT topics**, including **cybersecurity and AI**.

Anja holds degrees in Media Management and Corporate Communications, has several years of marketing experience, and is also a trained media coach, supporting speakers and executives in delivering clear, confident and impactful messages.

## Dr. Iuliana Nichersu, EDIH-AICS, FZI Forschungszentrum Informatik, BW (Panelist) Corporate Cybersecurity



Dr. Eng. Iuliana Nichersu is Senior Project Manager at the FZI Research Center for Information Technology in Karlsruhe with over 15 years of experience in European research and innovation projects. She builds and coordinates transnational cooperation frameworks, particularly in the Danube Region, at the intersection of **digitalisation, sustainability and regional development**. With a background in civil and environmental engineering and a PhD in spatial planning, she combines technical expertise with strategic project leadership. She has coordinated and contributed to numerous **Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe and INTERREG projects**, with strong expertise in proposal development, stakeholder engagement, foresight and innovation ecosystem building across research, policy and industry.

Currently, she coordinates the **European Digital Innovation Hub Applied Artificial Intelligence and Cybersecurity (EDIH-AICS)**, positioning the hub as a **key driver of digital transformation** at regional and European level. EDIH-AICS supports SMEs and public authorities in adopting **trustworthy AI and cybersecurity solutions** through maturity assessments, test-before-invest services, training and matchmaking. The hub connects research, industry and public stakeholders to **accelerate the uptake of advanced digital technologies**. At European level, Iuliana Nichersu co-coordinates the Thematic Working Group (TWG) CYBER, bringing together EDIHs across Europe to exchange on cybersecurity challenges, regulatory developments and market needs.

## Daniel Riss, Managing Director IT Solutions, Axians Germany, BW (Panelist) Digitalisation and AI for companies



Daniel Riss is Managing Director for the **management area IT Solutions** of Axians in Germany. It includes the responsibility as Managing Director of Axians Infoma, headquartered in Ulm, Germany. After working as a consultant, project manager and team leader, he was officially appointed as general manager of Axians Infoma in 2014, taking full responsibility for one of Germany's **leading providers of software solutions and digital services** for public administration. His expertise includes **software innovation and AI, digital transformation of municipalities**, and data-driven administrative processes in the DACH region. He was involved in the founding and development of successful nearshoring companies for **software development** in Romania and in Kosovo.

Axians, the ICT brand of VINCI Energies, supports its customers — private-sector companies, public-sector entities, operators and service providers — in their **infrastructures and digital solutions development**.

To this end, Axians offers a comprehensive range of ICT solutions and services spanning business applications and data analytics, enterprise networks and digital workspaces, datacenters and cloud services, telecommunications infrastructure and **cybersecurity**.



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## Svitlana Skrypka, Head of International Cooperation, Lviv IT Cluster, UA (Panelist) Digitalisation and AI for companies



Svitlana Skrypka is the Head of International Cooperation at the Lviv IT Cluster, where she leads international cooperation and develops strategic partnerships. Svitlana has over **20 years of experience in finance, business development, and digitalisation**, including senior roles as CFO for SMEs and **co-founding the cybersecurity startup Xsight**. Since 2023, she has worked at Lviv IT Cluster, leading fundraising, consortium building, and the design and implementation of donor-funded programs and projects. In 2025, she additionally took on responsibility for international partnerships and the implementation of the EU-funded LEAP EDIH programme, **supporting the digital transformation of SME's and the public sector**.

The Lviv IT Cluster is Ukraine's **largest and most influential technology association**, bringing together over 320 companies and more than 100,000 professionals, and delivering over 50 education, research, business, and humanitarian projects. It organizes the **flagship IT Arena conference**, modernises vocational and higher education with new degree programmes and training centres, supporting startups through the IT Arena Startup Competition, and runs humanitarian initiatives for internally displaced people, veterans, the army, and war-affected communities.

## Silviu Sofronie, Director of Investigations, BitDefender, RO (Panelist) Corporate Cybersecurity



Silviu Sofronie is a **cybersecurity expert** at Bitdefender, a European cybersecurity leader founded and headquartered in Bucharest, Romania, protecting millions of users and organisations around the world. He works at the **intersection of offensive security and large-scale defense** with hands-on experience in incident response and threat hunting. His focus is on understanding real-world attackers and applying that insight to strengthen defenses for enterprises and critical infrastructure.

BitDefender is a **global cybersecurity leader**, safeguarding millions of consumers, businesses, and government environments in more than 170 countries with threat prevention, detection, and response solutions. Founded in 2001, it combines deep **security research, AI-driven innovation**, and over **580 patents** to block threats and prevent massive ransomware losses. The company delivers a comprehensive portfolio spanning consumer security suites, identity, and privacy protection. The GravityZone platform for endpoint, XDR, and managed detection and response services empowers organisations of all sizes to **build resilient digital infrastructure**.



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## Rolf Strehle, CEO, ditis Systeme, BW (Key note speaker and panelist) Corporate Cybersecurity



Cyber Competence Center Ulm and advises prominent companies in Germany on all aspects of cybersecurity.

Rolf Strehle has been working in the field of **information security for over 30 years** and is one of Germany's leading **cybersecurity experts**. After studying computer science in Ulm, he founded and managed several IT security startups. Today, he is the **managing director of the cybersecurity company ditis Systeme**, a subsidiary of the technology group Voith in Heidenheim. As an ISO 27001 auditor and co-founder of the VDMA IT Security Working Group, he has **firsthand knowledge of current technologies and security issues**. He is also the initiator of the

ditis Systeme is a **cybersecurity service provider** headquartered in Ulm and Heidenheim and serves as the competence center for IT and OT security for the industrial, mechanical engineering, and energy sectors. With over 130 experts, ditis has been a strategic partner for global SMEs in the field of cybersecurity for 25 years. With a specialized team of security experts, lawyers and IT professionals, practical solutions are developed to **increase the cyber resilience of IT and OT environments**.

## Prof. Dr. Christian Stummeyer, Entrepreneur and Keynote Speaker on AI and Digital Commerce, Munich, BY (Keynote speaker) Future trends on Digitalisation and AI



Professor Christian Stummeyer is one of **Germany's leading AI and digital experts**. He holds a chair in **Business Informatics and Digital Commerce** at the Technical University of Ingolstadt. Besides his role as a professor, he supports large enterprises and medium sized companies in **developing digital strategies and AI activities**. In his keynotes, he inspires and thrills his audience with his **strategic vision and digital and forward-looking ideas**. He started his career at the The Boston Consulting Group, was member of the international leadership circle of Siemens AG in Munich and has been supporting global corporations and SMEs with their **digital transformation** for more than 20 years. As an e-commerce entrepreneur, he was instrumental in shaping the growth strategy of a leading online retailer of premium designer furniture. For several years, the experienced management consultant was responsible for the management consulting business of the UDG United Digital Group, **Germany's largest digital agency**.

Prof. Stummeyer is also the scientific director of the Bavarian Research Center for **Artificial Intelligence AININ** in Ingolstadt. His work focuses also on trend-setting approaches to use artificial intelligence and machine learning with a strategic perspective in companies.

His work is also highly recognized internationally, with Christian Stummeyer being a visiting professor at the South China University of Technology (SCUT) in Guangzhou and the Universitas Bunda Mulia in Jakarta, Indonesia, among others.



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## Tomislav Vazdar, AI & Cybersecurity Strategist and CEO, Riskoria, HR (Panelist) Digitalisation and AI for companies



Tomislav Vazdar is an **AI and cybersecurity strategist** and the founder and CEO of Riskoria Advising & Professional Services. With more than 25 years of experience, he helps organisations navigate the intersection of **artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and regulation**, with a focus on **AI governance, cyber risk** and compliance with frameworks such as NIS2, GDPR and the EU AI Act. Alongside his advisory work, he leads the **MSc programme in Enterprise Cybersecurity** at the Open Institute of Technology (OPIT) and regularly advises governments, NGOs and industry on the societal and economic impact of emerging technologies.

Riskoria is a boutique advisory and professional services firm helping organisations navigate today's most complex intersection: **artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and regulatory compliance**. Riskoria works with leaders who need clarity and control in fast-changing environments, turning high-stakes uncertainty into structured decisions, practical roadmaps and measurable outcomes. The firm combines strategic thinking with hands-on delivery across **AI governance, security and resilience**, and risk and compliance – supporting clients from early planning through implementation, audits, training and long-term capability building.

