



Conclusions

Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation Belgrade (Serbia), September 27-28, 2017

The 19th *Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation*¹ took place in Belgrade on September 27, 2017 within the framework of the European Commission's Support for the Steering Platform (SP) on Research and Innovation for the Western Balkan countries (WBC). The meeting was co-chaired by the Estonian EU Council Presidency (represented by the trio-partner Austria), the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development which hosted the event, and the European Commission (DG Research and Innovation, Directorate for International Cooperation).

This year, the Steering Platform on Research and Innovation was held together with the meeting of the 6th *Ministerial Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training*. The Ministers met in the mornings of September 28 and 29 to discuss the education and training part of the agenda, and in the afternoon of 28 September to discuss research and innovation topics. The Serbian Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development Mladen Sarcevic, the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sports Tibor Navracsics, and the Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia Sem Fabrizi opened the Ministerial meeting, which also celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Erasmus+ programme.

On September 27, the European Commission and the EU Council Presidency informed the Steering Platform members about the topics that will be high on the European agenda next year, such as setting the corner stones for post 2020 activities (Multiannual Framework, Brexit negotiations, review of ERA, first draft of FP9, etc.). The priorities of the Estonian EU Council Presidency in this context related to research and innovation are focused on impact and value of research as well as on increased coherence and openness of the EU R&I partnerships.

The European Commission further informed the SP members about the ongoing work related to the assessment of the impact of Horizon 2020 and to the preparations for the successor programme of Horizon 2020 and stressed that synergies between the European Framework Programme and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) as well as Structural Funds need to be taken more into account to strengthen R&I capacities in the region.

Western Balkan stakeholders welcomed the opportunity to discuss the Horizon 2020 performance assessment with the European Commission as well as the forthcoming Economic Reform Programme process, in particular the part related to research and innovation. A letter was sent by Director-General Robert-Jan Smits from DG R&I to the Western Balkans Science Ministers on August 8, 2017 providing the EC's assessment of the WBC participation in Horizon 2020 and inviting the ministries to comment on it until the end

¹ The Steering Platform meeting was held for the first time including also officially "Innovation" in its title.

of September 2017. The objective is to strengthen the participation of the Western Balkans in Horizon 2020 and in future Framework Programmes.

The Steering Platform took note of recent R&I cooperation developments in/with the Western Balkans² and of diverse actions taken by the EU Member States towards the Western Balkans notably through cooperation in research projects, exchange programmes and conclusion of bilateral agreements. The Steering Platform welcomed initiatives taken by regional and international stakeholders related to technology transfer, smart specialisation, Open Science and other.

The Steering Platform monitored carefully the in-depth discussion on a number of recent actions that will have a broad impact on the research and innovation landscape in the Western Balkans in the upcoming period: The planned *Western Balkans' Research Foundation*³ to support young researchers; a study assessing *research capacities within Higher Education institutions in WB* (commissioned by the EC under the SPHERE contract); the *Western Balkans Research and Innovation Centre WISE* (a regional initiative that is expected to start operations as of October 2017 while ratification in some countries is still pending); collaboration through *COST*; the activities of the *Regional Cooperation Council* (e.g. working groups on mobility and on Open Science); the initiative for the creation of the *South-East European International Institute for Sustainable Technologies SEEIIST* (initiated by the Ministry of Science, Montenegro); the *Verrocchio centre* (initiated by the Institute of Physics in Belgrade), actions for technology transfer support and the opening up of research infrastructures from the EC's Joint Research Centre and other research infrastructures with a regional outreach in the area such as CERIC-ERIC.

The Steering Platform agreed on the following topics to be presented and discussed at the Ministerial Meeting on September 28, 2017:

Capacity building and exchange of information: The suggested measures include: "Brain-map" for the region (catalogue of research capacities); improving Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for researchers and a new reward system; providing more funding to unlock research and innovation capacity; making the fiscal environment more favourable for research activities; establishing a joint platform for evaluating smart specialisation strategies (S3) efforts; sharing best practices and lessons learned (e.g. ANTARES, CERIC-ERIC); linking stakeholders and sharing information regionally (e.g. via the wbc-rti.info Information Platform, the upcoming Multiannual Action Plan, the Current Research Information System/CRIS, Research infrastructure investments).

² Progress reports were prepared by Steering Platform members and are available at <https://wbc-rti.info/steeringzone/object/document/16541>. The list of participants, the agenda and all presentations from the meeting are available for the Steering Platform members at <https://wbc-rti.info/steeringzone/object/news/16521>. An event review incl. the conclusions of the meeting, progress reports, the agenda and all presentations will also be made available for the public at <https://wbc-rti.info/object/news/16546>.

³ Following the proposal of the 3rd Joint Science Conference held in June 2017 in Paris, the Heads of States and Governments decided at the Western Balkans Summit on 12 July in Trieste to start the process of establishing a "Western Balkans Research Foundation" in order to support junior scientists at scientific institutions in the Western Balkans. The declaration by the Italian chair is available at http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/trieste-western-balkan-summit-declaration.html

Stronger collaboration between academia and industry: Cooperation at national/regional level in support of innovation was identified as one of the key necessities to be worked on. Developing Regional Centres of Excellence and research infrastructures (also attracting and supporting the setting-up of new European ERIC consortia) will contribute to promoting collaboration between science and industry; the usage of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) to prioritize R&I efforts and associated funding was suggested for the region.

Policy support: The Policy Support Facility of the European Commission offers support to the Western Balkans (Policy Mix Peer Review, Mutual Learning Exercises, Specific support to countries); the EC's Joint Research Centre operates the S3 platform, which assists EU countries and regions to develop, implement and review their Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3). The Platform is open to all Horizon 2020 Associated Countries as well. Several Regions from the Western Balkans are already registered.

Specific measures for the Western Balkans: Considering particular WBC measures in the discussions on the upcoming Framework Programme; a synergy between funds (e.g. ESIF/IPA and EU Framework Programme for Research, Development and Innovation) is strongly encouraged.

During the **Ministerial Meeting on September 28, 2017**, the European Commission, the Western Balkans Ministers, eminent experts and guests, and Steering Platform members concluded the following:

The development of smart specialisation strategies underpins national research and innovation strategies and policies. The forthcoming smart-specialisation strategies will help to prioritise national research efforts and allocate the resources needed. It will also help to identify regional centres of excellence and research infrastructures.

To support increased Horizon 2020 participation an awareness raising and training campaign in the Western Balkans 6 will be launched following the adoption of the new Horizon 2020 Work programme which covers the period 2018-20. The Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility is available to assist the national strategy and the policy-making processes.

The Ministers highlighted the importance of cross regional initiatives to promote science and innovation. Good practices, such as the ANTARES Centre of Excellence, should be promoted.

In summary, the Steering Platform meeting was beneficial as it provided an overview of ongoing and planned actions and contributed to the successful continuation of regional cooperation in the areas of research and innovation.

Upcoming meetings:

In 2018, a Western Balkans Research and Innovation meeting as well as the next meeting of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation are planned. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia looks forward to organising the Western Balkans Research and Innovation meeting in Skopje, and the dates of both meetings and the venue of the SP meeting will be communicated in due time.