

Strengthening the WB Steering Platform on R&I: new activities funded in 2019-2021

The Steering Platform on Research and Innovation for the Western Balkans (SP) is a stable and reliable format for political cooperation and exchange up to the highest level that since 2006 builds up on the progress achieved under the EU-Balkan Countries Action Plan on Science and Technology. Its main objective is to support the enhanced integration of the region in the European Research Area and it is therefore a key strategic body to deal with European, multilateral and regional issues of Science, Technology and Innovation policies in and with the Western Balkans. In 2017 a new scheme for the support of the SP meetings was introduced and funded by the European Commission. Within this facility, several SP meetings (both at technical and ministerial level) could be organised.

In 2018 the European Commission presented the strategy 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans', and through six flagship initiatives currently supports the transformation efforts of the Western Balkans in areas of mutual interest. From the very beginning, cooperation on research and innovation has been stimulated as a tool to facilitate European integration, to harmonise approaches and to tackle common societal challenges.

Against this background, **new impetus is now given to the Steering Platform and new activities are being funded** to support the socio-economic development of the Western Balkans, through the same service facility scheme funded by the European Commission, while also fostering regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations.

WBC-RTI.INFO platform and its connected newsletter service can directly benefit from this new stimulus. Both were indeed acknowledged as a stable reference point for dissemination of high-quality information on R&I relevant to WB economies, and were therefore included in the package. WBC-RTI.INFO services are thus guaranteed until August 2021. The portal will be updated on daily base with new news items, events, calls, etc. while periodical supplementary and in-depth articles as well as interviews will further enrich it. Newsletters gathering the information online will be finally sent on monthly with few special editions dedicated to the works of the Steering Platform.

New impetus shall generally help creating synergies between the many existing actions and instruments in formulating joint initiatives and action plans. At the operational level the support by the European Commission includes a range of different actions, such as:

- Implementation of **2 Ministerial meetings of the Western Balkan Steering Platform on R&I** (one in 2019 and one in 2020). The annual Steering Platform meeting will include a Minister-level session that might be organised back-to-back with the Steering Platform on Education supported by DG EAC.
- Organisation of **4 Research and Innovation (R&I) meetings or regional events** (one in 2019, two in 2020 and one in 2021). These events will continue to support the preparation or advancement of the work of the Steering Platform. They will also act as regional R&I training and support events aimed at improving the regions' participation in Horizon 2020 and its successor programme (incl. Open Science, and flagship research initiatives). Events will therefore target key stakeholders in a given R&I policy area (e.g. open science, innovation, technology transfer, mobility, etc.) in order to progress the understanding, insight and competence of the various national/regional actors in a given field, to prepare agenda points for upcoming meetings of the Platform, to prepare new joint initiatives/actions, to disseminate the achievements of the WBCs R&I communities to EU stakeholders and to raise awareness, or to train researchers in view of submitting proposals to Horizon 2020 and its successor.
- **Support to the development and implementation of national S3 strategies and cluster by transferring EU expertise.** This includes a series of on-demand interventions (i.e. support activities such as coaching, trainings, small workshops, counseling) providing expertise based on the needs formulated by the WBC stakeholders and including support to and facilitation of the organisation of regional R&I training and support events; the interventions will also target towards improving the regions participation on Horizon 2020 and its successor (incl. Open Science, and flagship research initiatives). Each intervention should be triggered by a concrete and justified request from a Western Balkan country, in particular by the national or regional S3 teams or clusters, addressed to the service provider forwarding the request to the European Commission (DG RTD). After a

positive assessment by the EC, a concrete plan of intervention will be developed within this service delivery and agreed upon with the EC. The interventions will then be carried out aiming at improving the quality of the implementation of the national and regional Smart Specialisation strategies in the Western Balkans as well as the establishment and development of clusters in the region.

- **Development of a study on the status of Smart Specialisation Strategies and R&I cluster activities in the region.** The study's overarching objective is to take stock of the state-of-play in developing and implementing research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation (RIS3) in Western Balkans economies. The results will inspire possible interventions, and 7 to build synergies with the ERA progress monitoring. The results of the Study on the status of S3 and R&I cluster activities will be presented at a one-day event in January or February 2021 targeting an audience of 150 stakeholders. The event will serve for presenting the analytical work done as well as the obtained results but it will be also an opportunity for discussing on S3 as a tool for transnational cooperation in the Western Balkans, strategic innovation policies, priorities of common interest and conclusions and recommendations on S3 implementation across the Western Balkans;
- Participation of WBC researchers in the EU Framework Programmes such as Horizon 2020 and the upcoming Horizon Europe is and will be increasingly dependent on networking and staying connected with partners across Europe. Therefore, strong emphasis has to be put on fostering the mobility of researchers and providing tailor made schemes and instruments for their support. This should help develop research capacity in the WBC in a systemic and sustainable manner, monitored and supported by EU expertise and in line with the region's and the EU's strategic objectives. To this end, an **analysis of the provision of a researcher's mobility system** will be performed and will be based on existing material and programmes, leading to the formulation of 3 to 5 options for mobility schemes and a set recommendations for their operation;
- Transformation in the WBCs is closely linked with the ability to ambitiously develop the local research and innovation systems with regard to the European Research Area (ERA) while the R&I landscape in the region is still very heterogeneous. An **analysis on the ERA progress monitoring** will be carried out and will concentrate on monitoring the WBC's progress in their efforts towards ERA integration; the results will be laid down in half-yearly reports. One country profile for each Western Balkan Country will be developed consisting of no more than 10 to 15 pages each assessing the impact of ongoing R&I reforms and the progress made with regard to ERA integration.
- The strengthening of visibility of the WBC's potential of the regional science communities and dissemination of their achievements. The presentation of research excellence from the WBC has actually so far contributed to raise the number of participation in FP/H2020 projects but as yet in many cases with marginal roles. The objective is now to help integrate the R&I communities from the region into 3 major European R&I events (e.g. ESOF 2020, Week of Innovative Regions, European R&I Days, etc.) to generally showcase excellences and allow for a better networking and exchange of best practices

The final overall aim of this service delivery is the integration of the WBCs into the European Research Area by integrating them into existing EU knowledge networks and by supporting R&I capacity building for an effective participation in the EU's Framework Programmes. It shall therefore contribute to the EU-Western Balkans Strategy, and especially to the Action Plan in Support of the transformation of the Western Balkans under Supporting socio-economic development. The delivery will also support the flagship 'Initiative to Support Reconciliation and good Neighbourly Relations'.

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