

Conclusions of the Western Balkans Steering Platform R&I and Ministerial Meetings (Brussels, 23-24 September 2019)

The Western Balkans (WB) Steering Platform on Research and Innovation (SP) was organised in Brussels on September 23-24, 2019. The meeting was co-chaired by the European Commission (DG Research and Innovation), the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and Bosnia and Herzegovina represented by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The meeting was organised back to back with the Research and Innovation Days (24-26 September 2019).

The Ministerial part of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation took place in the morning of September 24th and, in the morning of 23rd September, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) organised a preparatory meeting on Horizon Europe to finalise the related Western Balkans Statement. At the RCC meeting, the Western Balkans reported on progress and developments related to R&I. Their reporting slides can be found [here](#).

Steering Platform on Research and Innovation

At the meeting of the SP on September 23th, 2019, the European Commission and the Finnish EU Council Presidency highlighted in their welcoming words the continued work on a credible enlargement perspective for the WB and illustrated priorities such as to strengthen common values and the rule of law, to make the EU more competitive and socially inclusive, to strengthen the EU's position as a global leader in climate action and to protect the security of citizens.

The European Commission further informed the SP members about the developments as to the Commission's proposal for Horizon Europe which will continue along the lines of Horizon 2020 and build on its achievements. The programme builds on three pillars (Excellent Science; Global Challenges and Industrial Competitiveness; Innovation) and shall encourage international cooperation.

WB stakeholders welcomed the opportunity to discuss their advances in reforming the WBs' policy framework for research and innovation including notably the ongoing process of designing Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (S3) and measures to support mobility, brain circulation and participation in EU funded programmes (in particular in Horizon 2020). The SP took note of the recent R&I cooperation developments in/with the WB. WB representatives took the opportunity to discuss the needs for improving participation, implement S3 strategies and to put forward a joint statement on the upcoming Horizon Europe.

The SP agreed on the following topics to be presented and discussed at the Ministerial Meeting on September 24th, 2019 in the morning:

- **The Western Balkans welcome the joined efforts to further strengthen and gain momentum for the successful integration of the Western Balkan research Community into the European Research Area** and are committed to continuing the work of the Steering Platform for aligning policies and exchanging best practices at regional level.
- As a result the Western Balkans agreed upon a **Joint Statement on the Horizon Europe proposal**. It will be an essential instrument in building research collaborations and creating research networks between the EU and the Region. By enhancing research capacities and strengthening excellence in research and innovation, the region wants to contribute more effectively to the closing of the gap between the Western Balkans and the EU, in preparation of accession.
- **The Steering Platform welcomes the increased budget proposed for Horizon Europe**, as this financial commitment clearly shows strong determination to achieve these goals. While the budget itself may not resolve all the challenges in case of the Western Balkans, it makes a striking difference.
- The scientific community in the region has considerably increased its overall performance and participation in Horizon 2020, as compared to FP7. The Steering Platform works hard towards maintaining this trend in the next Framework Programme Horizon Europe. **The Steering Platform wants to ensure an observer role for the Western Balkans representatives in the Governing and Mission Boards in Horizon Europe.**

- One of the biggest challenges that the Region faces today is not to stop the brain drain, as it is practically an impossible task, but to **provide open new channels for multi directional brain circulation**. That is why access to mobility of researchers is high on the agenda of the Steering Platform. All stakeholders need to be engaged in order to improve the participation figures in researchers' mobility schemes.
- The Steering Platform believes that a **regional mobility instrument would support capacity building and increase and attract human resources**. The proposal for Horizon Europe foresees a substantially strengthened budget, including for the COST Programme, in order to support the creation of research and innovation networks.
- Data shows that the networks created through COST have achieved significant success and opened up boundaries of knowledge and innovation without people actually migrating. The circulation and interaction within regions, but also at interregional and continental level, is one of the most efficient mechanisms in transforming the entire paradigm of brain loss. Interaction and networking is not a loss for some but a gain for all, and in that regard the Steering Platform has **high expectations from Horizon Europe in recognizing the values and achievements of COST, especially in successful promotion of Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITCs), gender balance and inclusion of young researchers into COST actions**.
- **The Steering Platform considers very important the participation in the Research Infrastructures on the ESFRI Roadmap, and the mapping of national research infrastructure as a priority**. Therefore, the Steering Platform is looking forward to increase the access of the researchers from the region and to benefit from international opening of research infrastructures. The support from the region to the South-East European International Institute for Sustainable Technologies (SEIIIST) given at the Poznan Western Balkans Summit, clearly shows that the region is collaborating to advance this flagship research infrastructure initiative. **The Western Balkans are also on their way to integrate Open Access and Open Science into national policies**, for capacity building and for generating incentives for scientists.
- **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3s) are well under preparation in all Balkan economies**, and Montenegro is the first non-EU Member State that adopted its national S3. Nation-wide, large-scale transformations require an active involvement of multiple segments of state and society in achieving that goal in a meaningful way. These strategies should become efficient tools for successful modernisation. It is encouraging to see that even in the countries that face tremendous economic challenges there is a genuine understanding of its importance for their future developments. The most important role in this process is reserved for research and innovation in order to maximise the impact of an S3 to the society as a whole. The commitment across the Region is encouraging and the expectations are high.
- The positive trends of the Region in the field of Research and Innovation have been strongly supported and recognised by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The RCC highlighted the importance and the good opportunity for placing Research and Innovation high on the agenda of the next Leader's summit in the context of the Multi-Annual Plan on the Regional Economic Area.
- The Steering Platform has proven being important forum for the exchange of information and ideas, a source of inspiration and even a tool that facilitates joint efforts, better coordination and pooling together resources.

Ministerial Meeting

During the Ministerial Meeting, Carlos Moedas, European Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, expressed his farewell as a new Commissioner was recently designated and recalled the work and commitment towards the 2014 vision "Open Science, Open Innovation and Open to the World". He underlined how this vision for science, education and innovation was then translated into a real political statement. Further, Commissioner Moedas called for cooperation in research and innovation both within the WB and between the WB and the rest of Europe while outlining the progress made so far. The Commissioner further acknowledged the abilities of the WB to focus and obtain results also with difficult background situations and emphasised that the WB are part of the EU family, as both share the same history, challenges and future.

All the WB science ministers gave updates on their policy efforts to promote research and innovation and also provided data regarding the participation in Horizon 2020, highlighting their expectations from Horizon Europe. The WB science ministers expressed an interest in a joint WB – EU Member States meeting on Horizon Europe. Further

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discussions and updates followed with focus on the implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies, on their impact on the national economy, as well as the role of research and innovation to support this process.

Jean-Eric Paquet, Director-General for Research and Innovation at the European Commission, expressed his delight to hear from WB representatives about the policy efforts being pursued in the region. The European Commission can support WB reform efforts by combining instruments and encouraging synergies with national programmes. After pointing at the progress made by the WB during Horizon 2020 in terms of increased financing received, participation and success rates, Mr. Paquet focused on Horizon Europe and assured the WB that all of them will be associated to the new programme after negotiations. For this reason, Mr. Paquet further invited the WB to be prepared and to continue improving the necessary framework conditions. Horizon Europe is based on a co-creation process with the goal to make it impactful and policy driven. With reference to the envisaged five mission areas, the WB should engage and contribute to the identification of these missions' objectives. Mr. Paquet underlined that the final purpose is to deploy science and obtaining concrete outcomes for the society.

More information and news on the Steering Platform can be found on our [website](#)

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