

## **A spotlight on MCAA's Western Balkans Chapter - Increasing research capacity in the Western Balkans**

*Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) are providing opportunities for researchers in the Western Balkans region. Radenka Krsmanović Whiffen, Chair of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Alumni (MCAA) Western Balkans Chapter, tells us about how they are promoting these actions, the MCAA, and Responsible Research and Innovation in the region.*

Researchers have the opportunity to gain new knowledge and expertise for a successful career thanks to funding grants under MSCA. They also enable research-focused organisations to host talented researchers and to create strategic partnerships with leading institutions worldwide. To date, researchers from the [Western Balkans](#) region have received millions of euros in funding under MSCA.

### **A spotlight on MCAA's Western Balkans Chapter**

The [Western Balkans Chapter](#) aims to connect and represent MSCA fellows and alumni from the Western Balkan region, with many of them residing abroad and being part of the so-called “scientific diaspora”. A large part of this involves promoting MSCA actions, the MCAA, and Responsible Research and Innovation both to researchers and to relevant stakeholders in the Balkans, including both government and academic institutions.

Introducing her role as Chair of the Western Balkans Chapter, Whiffen, a native of Montenegro and current Maria Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellow at the ENEA Research Centre in Rome says: “I try to help direct the Chapter so that we can address some of the challenges facing researchers in the Balkan region, notably in terms of developing a responsible research culture and driving engagement with EU-funded programmes.”

She adds: “It is our intention to expand our Chapter’s mission further by explaining the importance of science in and for society, including through public outreach activities.”

The overall goal of the Chapter is to reflect and represent the interests of their members by focusing on issues of relevance to researchers in the Western Balkans, developing career pathways, arguing for academic integrity and supporting the development of a meritocratic approach to science and research.

“We hope that by doing that we can contribute to improving the position of science and researchers in the region,” adds Whiffen.

### **A glance at their activities**

“A lot of our activities are on hold at the moment due to the COVID-19 outbreak,” notes Whiffen. This includes their planned sessions for the 2020 MCAA Annual Conference in Zagreb on research integrity in the Balkans and expanding engagement with MSCA and increasing participation.

She adds: “We will all have to think about how to adjust to the post-COVID reality. In terms of Covid-19 responses, several of our members are looking at creating a Balkan specific task force, involving data visualisation on the pandemic to map infection rates, and highlight trustworthy news and accurate information. Plans are still in the initial stages, and the Chapter will of course support them.”

Whiffen reports that their normal activities include regular Chapter meet-up events for members who are residents in the region, as well as alumni who are visiting and other members of the scientific diaspora. “These meetings are always a good chance to share experiences, discuss ideas for future events, and engage with issues that really matter to our members.”

The Chapter is also active in promoting MCAA and MSCA opportunities across the region through presentations by individual members, engagement with the research community, collaboration with various science policy stakeholders,

for example the Ministry of Science of Montenegro, and through working with the network of National Contact Points (NCPs) for MSCA activities across the region.

“We are lucky that we have the very active support of local NCPs, notably the NCP for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dalibor Drljača, who uses every opportunity to promote both the Chapter and our message.”

The Chapter also uses their social media feeds, especially their [Twitter account](#), to communicate the latest news from their members, and to highlight events and opportunities from across Europe that are relevant to our membership.

“We also use every opportunity to have local Western Balkans media outreach. I would like to highlight our involvement in an episode of the science magazine programme "[Istraživač](#)" in which the MCAA Vice-Chair, myself and two members of our Chapter were interviewed.” It aired on Montenegrin TV in September 2019. The programme explored the MSCA IF programme and the work of the MCAA and the Chapter.

## Joining the Chapter

“Anyone who is a beneficiary of any kind of MSCA can join the MCAA. Our Chapter is open to beneficiaries who are originally from the Western Balkan region, or who are currently resident in one of the territories of our region,” explains Whiffen. While, the majority of the Chapter’s members work outside the region, it has a significant number of resident members as well. MCAA membership is free and those who are interested can apply online at <https://www.mariecuriealumni.eu/register-in-mcaa>.

Whiffen notes: “Once you are a member of the MCAA, you can apply to join our Chapter by sending a request via the portal, explaining your connection to the region, and then you will be added to the Chapter. We have 90 members at the moment, and we hope to continue to increase that number in the future.”

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