



[FOCUS ARTICLE] Interview with Elke Dall, POLICY ANSWERS Coordinator

POLICY ANSWERS is a new coordination and support action funded by the European Commission under the Horizon Europe Programme (HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ACCESS-06-01) to generally support R&I policy making in the Western Balkans to and thus their better integration into the European Research Area.

Led by the Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI) in Vienna and involving 13 additional partner institutions, the project builds on the solid ground created by successful past experiences. In the following interview, the project coordinator, Elke Dall, explains about the project's positioning within the EU - WB relations, the key features and planned activities.

Could you position POLICY ANSWERS in the more general history of the support to R&I cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans, providing us with some background information on the project and its precursors?

Elke: Let me answer the question with some references to my professional history, as I was very privileged to be involved, after my graduation and first work experiences with EU programmes, in the application for funding under the European Commissions 6th Framework Programme, which succeeded in bringing together bilateral science funding programmes in South East Europe under the leadership of the organisation I have been working for, the Centre for Social Innovation in Austria. This was in 2004 and it built on the Thessaloniki Action Plan from 2003. The broader cooperation with the Western Balkans has always been supported in view of EU enlargement and their European perspective. In the cooperation we analysed the possibilities to develop and coordinate funding on a regional level, acknowledging that there are challenges that should be addressed together as well as the fact that scientific cooperation can build bridges and create mutual understanding. In 2006 the Steering Platform on Research and Innovation for the Western Balkans was launched, a forum that has been meeting regularly until now and which brings together policy makers and programme owners from the region and the EU. The most formative project in my professional career was the subsequent WBC-INCO.NET, it was an ambitious consortium of 29 partners running from 2008 to 2014. Different services for the Steering Platform and the community, such as a newsletter informing about cooperation opportunities and important topics in research and innovation, could be continued with support of different donors and projects. Other colleagues at ZSI also continued in these activities. In the transition between Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, the European Commission launched the call on the support for R&I policies and beyond and building on our experience, we pulled together a consortium of 14 partners and submitted the winning application. Very ambitiously, we were able to

launch the first project activities already in March, after a record speed from the submission in September and evaluation results in January.

Why is POLICY ANSWERS a project that is timely and relevant for the Western Balkans right now?

Elke: The project serves many strategic goals of the cooperation. It certainly has an aspect of science diplomacy in its core, bringing the Western Balkans closer together, preparing the ground and identifying good examples of regional cooperation. We have to make sure that there is a credible European perspective and we need to work on the integration into the European Research Area and all the relevant fora. We need to continuously monitor how the cooperation is progressing, co-design and co-develop the processes, create platforms and opportunities for dialogue, mobilise critical mass and ensure that there are relevant and targeted pilot activities with potentials to be scaled up. Still we observe that funding for R&I in the region in absolute terms is rather low and the stakeholder cooperation not as smooth as it should be.

Does your project have all the policy answers? What are the main challenges the project aims to address? And How?

Elke: To the contrary, indeed I believe our project has and will have mainly a lot of questions! The expectations towards this project are very high whilst reaching the objectives might be challenging in this difficult period. We hope to provide a good example of cooperation and to inspire each other and the stakeholders in the region to create this critical mass and a positive agenda. We will see how the geopolitical context will develop but the project will for sure bring some institutional change and be one piece in the puzzle for a transition. We aim to increase the profile of research and innovation, improve the ecosystem, support coordination in relation to key priorities such as digitalisation, the green agenda and healthy societies. We employ a variety of tools from policy dialogue to the development and implementation of regional pilot funding schemes. A core component of the methodology is also represented by an information platform with newsletter service. A complex system needs to self-organise in a way, so we will just openly circulate information via our newsletter or our social media and in dynamic processes with the help of the wider community, a small piece of information at the right place at the right time can make a huge difference. Such impacts are almost impossible to measure but we hope that overall the project will indeed be felt on the ground as making a difference.

What are the characteristic of the project consortium? Why is it a winning team?

Elke: Well, it's definitively a winning team, we won the grant and while we still have to get to know each other and form the team, we had excellent cooperation during the proposal phase and know each other from the preparation of the proposal and our first activities. On March 3, for example, we met with the Project Advisory Board which is a unique configuration of senior officials at different Directorate Generals of the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council. The support of such a board to bring together the EC, in combination with the Steering Platforms, which involve also the Member States, brings significant policy knowledge and credibility to support and guide our activities. When we consider the project consortium itself, the strength is certainly the fact that the Western Balkans are all represented with highly respected partners who have important functions in the respective research and innovation ecosystems, which is chosen as the centre of gravity, while also addressing stakeholders in the fields of education, culture, youth and sports with some of our activities.

Last but not least, what are the immediate next steps and the possibilities to contribute to POLICY ANSWERS from the side of the different stakeholders?

Elke: The start-up phase of a project is always quite hectic, finding ourselves as a team, developing our processes e.g. for cooperation, exchange and quality assurance. As we can build on previous activities, we already have a working Western Balkans Information Hub based on the previous service WBC-RTI.INFO. This is one of the key aspects where all stakeholders are invited: via the email address info@westernbalkans-infohub.eu they can submit their news, calls, event announcements and documents that they would like to share with us and the community. We will also implement a mapping of stakeholders, we will be looking for lots of inputs from experts, but we will also dedicate significant efforts to hear the ones that are usually not heard. If this article and the project newsletters speak to you, let's schedule a call and explore what we can do together. We are open for inspiration, coordination, and support as it's all about the regional innovation ecosystem's flourishing. Drop a mail and let's schedule a talk - dall@zsi.at and policy-answers@westernbalkans-infohub.eu ... let's make use of the opportunities that POLICY ANSWERS will open up in the next four years.

POLICY ANSWERS (R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS) is a Coordination and Support Action funded by the European Union through the Horizon Europe programme. It is led by the Centre for Social Innovation in Vienna (Austria), and involves 13 other partners: German Aerospace Center (Germany), Institute Mihajlo Pupin (Serbia), GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research (Germany), the Agency for Research, Technology and Innovation (Albania), Riinvest - Institute for Development Research (Kosovo), Fund for Innovations and Technology Development (North Macedonia), Foundation for Management and Industrial Research (North Macedonia), University of Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Formicablu (Italy), Science and Technology Park Montenegro (Montenegro), Austrian Research Promotion Agency (Austria), University of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Institute of Economics Zagreb (Croatia).*

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