

## **“EU – Balkan countries Cooperation in Science and Technology”**

### **SHARED VISION**

#### **Context**

Europe is a continent that historically suffered from intense conflicts among Empires and national states during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Nowadays, Europe is integrating at an accelerated pace. The Council decision for the accession of 10 additional countries, mainly on the eastern border of the Member States of the Union came only one year after the adoption of the unique currency in 12 of the Member States (MS).

The traditionally very diversified Balkan region was until recently divided into areas of strong competing external political influence. The integration of the more prosperous countries of Europe has generated for the people of the Balkan region the hope for a shared future in peace and sustainable growth. The European Union should not leave this region isolated in a struggle to overcome internal contradictions and to survive in the increasingly competitive international context.

In Europe, the transition from the industrial era to the knowledge economy coincided with the transition of the planned economies of Eastern Europe to market economies. This conjecture finds the countries of the Balkan region in very dissimilar situations. For example, Greece has been a full member of the Union for more than 20 years, with increasing rates of growth. Bulgaria and Romania are working to achieve the accession requirements and Turkey the pre-conditions requirements. The five States of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro and F.Y.R. of Macedonia are in the process of coming out of the political and economic instability experienced because of previous crisis situations.

Europe has a strong interest in contributing to the welfare of the people and the economies of the region to overcome these difficulties. This is in order to increase the living standards, to extend the capabilities of the internal market and to enhance the competitiveness of Europe in the international scene, compared to its main competitors. Such interest needs to be transformed into actions and measures approved by all involved parties. The resulting cooperation should be based on mutual understanding and in the perspective of full participation of the Balkan region in the European Research Area (ERA) and therefore the European RTD activities and networks, as soon as possible.

In their effort to adapt to the pervasive knowledge economy and to global competition, the citizens of the Balkan countries have to exploit their high level of motivation for social mobility and their relatively good educational background, but

also to combine scientific and technological knowledge with entrepreneurship. This is in order to create higher added value and competitive advantages for the region.

In this respect, science, research and technological development are seen to be an essential tool for future economic stabilisation and growth in the region. The European Commission is promoting EU S&T co-operation with the five countries of the western Balkans as well as with the candidate countries, with the key objective to contribute to their political and economic stabilisation. To this end, in October 2001, the European Commission organised the first formal consultation with high-level representatives from Ministries of Science and Technology of all Western Balkan countries in order to identify the key thematic areas of regional importance to be commonly promoted. In parallel, initiatives were taken to organise conferences and workshops, often at Ministerial level, dedicated to the promotion of the collaboration in S&T between the countries of the region and the EU or within the region (Vienna - December 2000, UNESCO, Paris - October 2001, Bonn - March 2002, Bucharest - April 2002, Sofia - September 2002, Dubrovnik - November 2002, Thessaloniki - February 2003)<sup>1</sup>.

The process launched by the Zagreb summit in 2000 was given a strong new momentum at the Thessaloniki European Council (19-20/6/03), which endorsed "*The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: moving towards European integration*" aiming at further strengthening the privileged relations between the EU and the Western Balkans, also drawing from the enlargement experience. The Union's thus enriched Stabilization and Association Process will remain the framework for the European course of the Western Balkan countries all the way to their future accession. Moreover, the EU-Western Balkan Summit (Thessaloniki, 21/6/03) stressed once again that the future of the Balkans is within the European Union and highlighted the need for regional cooperation in Research, Technology and Development. The overall perspective as laid down by the Zagreb Summit remains valid: The status as 'potential candidate' is offered to the Western Balkan countries on the basis of the criteria defined at the Copenhagen European Council and the progress made in implementing the Stabilization and Association Agreements (S.A.A.).

### **Main goals**

The recent political and economic crises of the countries of the region affected dramatically their RTD capacities. The main reasons for this effect included: the sudden change from almost exclusively state directed economies and research capacities to market economies; the exceptional reduction in national expenditures on RTD; the loss of critical mass due to the formation of new states; and the simultaneously important brain drain.

It is now necessary to undertake coherent actions for the reinforcement of the RTD capacity in each country and in the region as a whole.

To this end, the importance of RTD for the economic growth and the resolution of problems in each country should be put forward at the highest political level of all countries in order to facilitate the necessary initiatives and the mobilisation of funds.

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<sup>1</sup> The conclusions from these events are reported in Annex B

The necessary initiatives should address issues related to:

- research infrastructure;
  - the improvement of the Human Potential;
  - institution building;
  - the promotion of joint RTD activities of mutual benefit and regional impact;
- in a coherent and balanced way to maximise the expected goals.

In terms of **Infrastructure**, the need for renewal and improvement is a major issue for all the countries of the region. A failure to address this issue could destabilise efforts in other domains.

The improvement of the **Human Potential** in RTD should include distinct actions for policy makers and for the research personnel.

The aim of the **Institution building** activities should be the enhancement of the research potential of each country and, at the same time, the establishment of structures compatible with the existing structures in the EU countries. This is in order to facilitate the integration of the countries of the region into ERA.

The promotion of **joint RTD activities** should concentrate on topics of mutual benefit and regional added value. Some MS and candidate countries could play a catalytic role in setting up RTD projects with the Western Balkan countries, to share their experience and, at the same time, to address common scientific problems.

Since the RTD effort should be seen as a tool to solve problems and to promote the economic growth of the countries, it is necessary to foresee specific actions to improve **Innovation**. Adequate structures need to be established to provide assistance for the exploitation of RTD results.

## **Roadmap**

To achieve the common goals agreed by the EU Member States, candidate countries and the countries of the region, an Action Plan is elaborated. The Action Plan further details the relevant actions to undertake and the adequate instruments for their implementation.

In addition, responsibilities need to be attributed for the implementation of the Action Plan.