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The 7th Framework Programme: Opportunities for Albania and the European Union

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Opening session of the EU Research Information event

Tirana (Albania), 6 May 2008

Minister Pollo, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

4 months ago Minister Pollo visited me in Brussels. That was a great day because together we signed the Memorandum of Understanding that associated the Republic of Albania to the 7th Framework Programme for Research.

I was absolutely delighted to be able to accept the Minister's invitation to visit Tirana; to experience for the first time [as Commissioner] its delights and hospitality. But most of all I am pleased to be here today to welcome - personally - the Albanian community of researchers into the European Research Area.

Since I became the Commissioner for Science and Research in 2004, I have made it my mission to open European research programmes to the countries of the Western Balkan region. Now, with the association of Albania, every Western Balkan Country – with a single exception (Bosnia & Herzegovina) – is now associated to the 7th Framework Programme.

So to all of you - scientists, technologists, industrialists and policymakers - here today,...Welcome to the European Research Area!

- Welcome to the community of research partners that cooperate and compete on an equal footing, on the basis of scientific excellence;
- Welcome to the network of scientists, industrialists and policy-makers that are changing the face of European research and innovation.
- Welcome to the grouping of EU Member States and neighbouring national partners that is working together to transform the competitiveness of Europe.

So what is the European Research Area and why is it so important for the future of Europe?

The European Research Area is a space where we are working hard:

- So that researchers, technology and knowledge can circulate freely;
- So that national research programmes will be coordinated and open to each other; and
- So that universities will modernise.

We are creating incentives and removing barriers:

- So that networks of scientists will have access to world-class infrastructure and facilities, and to which foreign researchers are drawn and retained;
- So that structured partnerships are formed between academia and industry, to meet the needs for new products, processes and services, as well as for skilled employees; and
- So that qualifications, experience, and social security rights of knowledge workers... such as you... will be portable across borders;

In other words, we are creating a knowledge society.

The European Union and its single market are built on four fundamental freedoms - freedom of movement for people, goods, services and capital. We are creating a new fifth freedom in Europe – the freedom of movement of knowledge.

Why is Europe's aim to be a leading knowledge-based economy so vital?

The answer is simple:

- We want to improve our quality of life and remain globally competitive.
- We want to produce goods, and services that the rest of the world wants to buy.
- We want - indeed we need - to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change, while meeting our needs for energy.
- And we want to be a positive force for good in the world, while maintaining high social standards at home.

We cannot deliver these wishes in the face of globalisation if we try to compete on the basis of low wages. That means that we have to create and apply new knowledge. I firmly believe that Europe must build on its leadership in three crucially interlinked ways - in the way knowledge is:

- Produced through research;
- Diffused through education; and
- Applied through innovation.

The main tool at our disposal to achieve this at European level is the 7th Framework Programme for Research. Since you will have a detailed explanation of the programme during the course of today, I will provide only the broadest of outlines.

This programme, to which Albania has been associated since 1 January, is funded to a total of €54 billion during its lifetime from 2007 to 2013. It consists of four major programmes:

- The **Cooperation** programme funds collaborative projects between research teams. During its first year of operations nearly 27,000 proposals were submitted to over 50 calls for proposals.
- The **Ideas** programme funds competition between individual researchers in cutting-edge fundamental science. The new independent European Research Council is supporting the best investigator-driven research that Europe and the world has to offer. The results of its first call for proposals are already known.
- The **Capacities** programme supports the development of major European research infrastructures and the research potential of European small and medium-sized companies. 30 or more new pan-European research infrastructures are planned.
- Finally, the **People** programme funds training, mobility and career development of researchers.

The 7th Framework Programme is open to international cooperation on a scale that has never been seen in previous programmes. European and national research programmes will increasingly coordinate their international activities.

So what does it all mean for Albania?

Your association is an exciting development,... both for Albania and for the European Union. As an associated country...

- You will maximise your possibilities to be part of European research projects and networks;
- You will share in the transfer of knowledge and the creation of new market opportunities; and...

- You will increase the opportunities for the education and training of Albanian researchers.

For the European Union, it is an opportunity to continue to build and strengthen the European Research Area. You will contribute to Europe's critical mass and to Europe's target to become the most competitive region in the world.

As we strive to further raise the level of excellence of our scientists, ...as we encourage the mobility of our researchers, ...as we develop our infrastructure, ... we will make with you a common cause.

As we encourage the linkage of national and European research programmes,... as we promote partnerships between academia and industry, ... as we stimulate the private sector to conduct research, ... we will join our efforts to your own.

We should also not forget that for Albania and other Western Balkan countries, integration into the European Research Area is an important early step to greater things. Research cooperation brings benefits in its own right; but is also an important learning experience and an economic development tool in the long road to possible accession to the EU.

I believe that research cooperation has an important part to play in preparing the ground for accession. Research cooperation breaks down frontiers, both physical and cultural. That is because researchers from all backgrounds, from all nationalities, understand and share the same objective: improving society through curiosity, creativity and excellence.

Let's take the theme of excellence and go back to the 7th Framework Programme, because the key to research success in the programme is excellence.

As an associated country you have the same opportunities (and obligations) as the EU Member States. This also means you compete on an equal footing to obtain research projects and grants. And the competition is tough.

To participate on the basis of excellence requires the building of the national capacity of Albania in education, research and innovation. There is no magic solution. No "silver bullet". It requires the development of priorities and the definition of strategies. It requires reforms and investment. It requires daily and collective efforts.

Implementing an integrated national research strategy will help to put research and innovation higher on the political agenda:

- Establishing plans to stimulate investment in research;
- Encouraging your enterprises to conduct research;
- Boosting the capacity of universities and the level of education and expertise of your scientists;
- Developing your research infrastructure; and
- Stimulating partnerships between universities, research institutes and the private sector.

These actions depend on you. But we are your partners in this endeavour.

European Funding under the Pre-Accession Instrument (IPA) can be used for the purpose of strengthening your research capacity and human resources.

You can take advantage of regional research networks such as the ERA-NET for South East Europe (SEE-ERA-NET), and the international cooperation network for the Western Balkan Countries (WBC INCO-NET). And training can be provided on the submission of project proposals with EU partners, in the priority fields of the 7th Framework Programme.

Putting your national research strategy into action will be a difficult challenge. But the rewards will be great:

- You'll take up more research funding under the 7th Framework Programme, deepening the research cooperation between EU and Albania;
- You'll benefit from a greater transfer of ideas, people and technologies that will act to further boost your research capacity in a virtuous circle;
- You'll improve your ability to translate your research capacity into the innovative products and services that will increase Albania's competitiveness, growth and prosperity in a sustainable manner; and thus -
- You'll move ever closer to the European Union in technology capacity, in skills, and in wealth.

The great inventor, Thomas Edison is supposed to have said that "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."

You'll achieve the most success if you meet this opportunity with the right level of preparation. Therefore I call on every individual here to assume your role and responsibility in this effort;

- Making your voices heard in the setting of priorities and providing ideas for a national strategy;
- Developing your potential and capacities with the resources at your disposal; and
- Finding partners with whom to create proposals and exchange best practice.

If you will do this, then I am confident that Albania will not miss its opportunity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Albania, working with us in the 7th Framework Programme for Research, will continue building its place within the greater European family.

I wish you all a successful event and a fruitful day.

Thank you.