

## Conclusions of meeting of Steering Platform on Research for Western Balkan Countries Zagreb, 29 October 2009

The Steering Platform on Research for the Western Balkan Countries met in Zagreb on 29 October 2009. The meeting was co-chaired by the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Republic of Croatia on behalf of the Western Balkan Countries – who hosted the event – and the European Commission.

The presentations of the progress reports allowed for a stock-taking of activities recently undertaken with respect to S&T policy and research cooperation in and with the Western Balkan Region. Many actions relate to the participation in the Seventh Research Framework Programme, but also other targeted actions have been organised by Member States and other stakeholders, and notably the Regional Cooperation Council, aiming at strengthening research capacities in the Region.

The Platform welcomed the fact that a number of Western Balkan Countries had made progress towards strengthening their national research capacities and designing or implementing their national research policies.

The Platform recognised, in particular, the important role of the WBC-INCO.NET project in supporting and carrying forward the work of the Platform and in helping consolidate research capabilities and cooperation opportunities in the Balkan Region. This was well illustrated by the presentation of Work package 2 of the project on regional priority setting. The Steering Platform also

welcomed the conclusions of the regional dialogue meeting on the Regional Strategy on Research and Development for Innovation.

The Platform agreed to continue relying on the analytical outcomes of Workpackage 2 of the INCO-NET with respect to research priority setting and particularly with the priority areas identified and will consider both through all possibilities offered by the EU Framework Programme and through other means as appropriate, how this work can foster the research cooperation. The Steering Platform took note of the wish of the Western Balkan countries to explore further opportunities to support enlargement countries.

The Platform also supported the initiative to enhance and prolong the WBC-INCO.NET project in response to the FP7 INCO-2010-1 call under the the International Cooperation programme in the Specific Programme Capacities.

The Platform further acknowledged the positive role played by the SEE-ERA.NET project and welcomed the fact that its activities continue with SEE-ERA.NET PLUS, which offers additional research cooperation opportunities of interest to the region. In this regard, the updated Joint Action Plan is also a useful source of guidance for future work.

The presentation of the ERA Vision 2020 by the Swedish Presidency and the ensuing discussion showed both the magnitude of the challenge and the potential of the endeavour of building a broad, cohesive, open and effective ERA. With respect to the engagement of the Western Balkan Countries with the European Research Area, it was noted that the WBCs should take advantage of the ERA opportunities and the possibilities already existing to participate in various ERA governance structures. The WBCs were encouraged to designate their representatives and participate actively in the relevant bodies of ERA initiatives.

As demonstrated by the presentation from Croatia on their experience with preparing for the accession to the EU, participation in the ERA activities can help in pursuing the compliance with the EU *acquis* on Science and Research (chapter 25).

The large participation of Western Balkan research institutes in the recent FP7 targeted call on Research Potential shows that there is a strong need for support to research capacity building in the Region.

The study on opportunities to access S&T Infrastructures demonstrates that many opportunities already exist to access research infrastructures in the Balkan Region. The report was welcomed and seen as a useful source of information on the existing infrastructures in the Region. Regular dissemination of information and creating awareness of existing facilities would be instrumental to the optimisation of their use. Further efforts to share facilities and equipment and facilitate access to infrastructure in the Region should be considered, including the possibility of virtual Infrastructures. The work in the ESFRI Regional Work Group could contribute to pursue these objectives.

The Steering Platform agreed to have a discussion on its priorities for the coming years in the light of the work so far at its next meeting (in Belgrade, Serbia on June 24, 2010).