

## WBC-RTI presents at ESOF 2020

*Under the overarching motto of ‘Science for freedom, freedom for science’, thousands of the world’s leading researchers, innovators and policymakers participated in the largest science conference in Europe, ESOF 2020, which took place from 2 to 6 September in Trieste, Italy. The WBC-RTI showed a strong presence in this year’s conference, organising two interactive events with prominent speakers and specialists from the region.*

The Western Balkan Countries Information Platform on Research Technology and Innovation (WBC-RTI) held two virtual sessions at the ESOF 2020. Organised on behalf of the European Commission’s DG Research and Innovation, the aim of both sessions was to promote the strong potential of the Western Balkans’ research and innovation (R&I) capacities.

### **R&I for a knowledge- and innovation-based economy**

The [first](#) event was a round table focused on advancing R&I ecosystems in the region. R&I is a valuable tool in the context of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU. However, the current scientific landscape in the region is fragmented and suffers from differing capacities and structural deficiencies in critical R&I sectors. A transformation process of the Balkans towards a knowledge-based and innovation dominated economy is therefore deemed necessary.

**Stefan Weiers**, from the European Commission’s DG Research and Innovation, opened the session with a speech on the potential of the Western Balkans to contribute to Horizon Europe, the research and innovation programme that will build on the achievements and success of Horizon 2020. *“Widening participation and spreading excellence will be, again, an important priority and part of the Future programme Horizon Europe,”* he said.

The next speaker, **Vedran Šimunović**, Executive Director of INTERA Technology Park in Bosnia and Herzegovina, addressed the entrepreneurial potential of the region, and the importance of securing adequate knowledge, skills, resources and mentorship, as well as support from domestic and foreign donors, for it to blossom. He stressed the importance of technology incubators and technology parks during a crisis.

*“They are places where companies and start-ups and spinoffs will be created,”* he explained. *“All around the world, business incubators, science and technology parks are the foundation of early business stage development and innovation. With control and the right kind of finance they can kickstart or become the backbone of early stage economic development.”*

**Branka Zizic**, General Director for Innovation and Technology Development at the Ministry of Science of Montenegro, focused her intervention on the current R&I system in Montenegro and the steps taken in the Montenegrin Innovation System to establish collaborations and synergies between organisations and institutions to open new lines of communication and cooperation.

*“The Innovation Fund of Montenegro, now under establishment, and the new Council for Innovation and Smart Specialisation, are connecting different organisations and institutions that before did not have straight connections and lines of collaboration,”* she said.

**Ognjen Prnjat**, Director of National Infrastructures for Research and Technology at GRNET, discussed the merits of building national initiatives for Open Science and stressed the importance of regional research and innovation initiatives.

*“The regional dimension is really important for the Western Balkan and the wider South East European area,”* he explained. *“To be on par with EU efforts and bringing together the capacities of these countries, gives us a stronger voice in Europe and paves the way towards EU accession and preventing brain drain in the region.”*

The session’s final speaker, **Ales Gnamus**, Scientific Policy Officer at the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, addressed the issue of Smart Specialisation and the value of developing expertise based on regional concentration of knowledge, competence, and market potentials. Focusing on the Western Balkan region, he said that *“there are promising fields for very successful cooperation between countries in the region and the rest of the EU.”*

### **Collaboration crucial for success**

The [second](#) WBC-RTI event at ESOF 2020 was a virtual networking session, focused on showcasing research excellence from the region and fostering collaborations between research organisations and disciplines. While the Western Balkan

countries have contributed to several of the EU's funding programmes, including Horizon 2020, it has often been in a marginal role. For contemporary research to have an impact, it requires a strong interactive and interdisciplinary dimension and relies on networking and collaboration within the research community as well as with industry, governance actors and international organisations.

**Klaus Schuch**, Executive Director at the Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI) in Austria, opened and moderated the session with a note on the contribution of the Western Balkans to European research and innovation: *"It is important to know that for 20 years, the Western Balkan countries have been participating in the previous European framework programmes for research and technological development,"* he said. *"They know the rules and regulations, they know how to play the game."*

The session's first speaker, **Marjana Brkic**, Advisor at the Centre for the Promotion of Science in Serbia, introduced the audience to the TeRRIFICA Horizon 2020 project, which aims to develop and foster innovative climate actions. *"What makes the TeRRIFICA project different is its co-creation and bottom-up approach with the goal of creating a community of all relevant stakeholders, especially citizens, around the questions of climate change adaptation and mitigation, producing innovative climate actions for better resilience of our cities,"* she explained. Dr Brkic emphasised the cross-border nature of climate questions and the importance of regional collaboration, as results from the Belgrade-based project are relevant for neighbouring regions as well.

The next speaker, **Nena Nikolovska**, Associate at the Economic Chamber of Macedonia in North Macedonia, presented results from the TRAINEE project implemented within the H2020 programme. The project is focused on developing market-based skills for sustainable energy-efficient construction.

*"The construction sector in our country is facing a problem with a deficit in qualified workforce with competencies in the field of energy efficiency and renewable resources,"* she explained. *"In that sense, the project brings a long-term impact and benefits for this sector as it enables the individuals to continue their education and broadens their options for career advancement in this field."*

**Vladimir Atanasovski**, Managing Director of INNOFEIT in North Macedonia, discussed the issue of improving academia-industry cooperation. *"We are dealing with a very big problem in the country: brain drain. It really hurts our R&D efforts,"* he said. *"What we have found out is that people would like to have a more attractive work environment and work on innovative R&D projects (...) We want to increase the contract research services for local and regional industry and, in a way, provide a bridge between the academic staff on our side and the industry on the other side."*

**Jana Kolar**, Executive Director of CERIC-ERIC, concluded the session. She stressed the importance of giving researchers from the Western Balkans open access to research facilities in Europe, to foster excellent science and enable the delivery of innovative solutions to societal challenges.

*"Through exchanges of information, also at the management level, you can see these kind of consortia as teaming-projects, where you have more advanced and some less advanced countries working together and also exchanging approaches - and we all learn from this,"* she explained. She also emphasised the importance of establishing self-standing research infrastructures in the Western Balkans, that can be used by international users who will bring new knowledge to the region.

Find all presentations at the respective sessions' page:

- [Advancing R&I ecosystems in the Western Balkans with regard to their ERA integration](#)
- [Networking Western Balkans R&I community towards success](#)

September 2020