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European Commissioner for Science and Research

Towards full integration of Serbia into the European Research Area

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

EU Research Information Event

Belgrade, 29 June 2009

Dear Deputy Prime Minister,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today with all of you in Belgrade for this Information Event on EU research policy.

As you know this is not my first time in Belgrade and thus I know what a dynamic research community you are. But let me say that I am really impressed with the high attendance and the full programme that has been set up.

As we have just heard, the enthusiasm of your Minister is evident. This also confirms that the decision your government took last year to combine the responsibilities for European Integration and Science and Technology was a strategic one.

Which is why today I would like to put research cooperation with your country and the European Union in a broader context, that of the European Research Area and in turn, your integration into the European Union.

Of course, I hope that today's event will also offer further possibilities within the Seventh Research Framework Programme because research cooperation under FP7 requires continued efforts in creating awareness, disseminating information and networking.

The results of these efforts are long term but again Serbia seems to be an exception: after less than three years of association to FP7, you are already well embedded in the European scientific community. You have been particularly successful in food and agriculture, information technologies and energy. However there is room for improvement and I believe that this can only be achieved if Serbia commits fuller to the objectives of the European Research Area.

From Association of FP7 to Integration into European Research Area

Discussions on association to FP7 started exactly three years ago during my first official visit to Belgrade. On that occasion I emphasised that association to FP7 by itself would not be enough. Actions at national level would be required to strengthen your research capacity, which in turn would increase the absorption capacity under FP7. In taking actions to support the human capital building and modernise the research infrastructure you would also contribute to the overall objectives of the European Research Area. This is expected from every country with a European integration perspective.

Therefore the first message that I would like to pass on today is that we believe that Serbia's future lies in the European Union and that we hope that the Serbian people share this objective. I know that scientists by experience believe that borders and different historical backgrounds do not constitute an obstacle to research cooperation, but integration into the European Union requires efforts to achieve the necessary changes and reforms.

At the same time many changes have to be done irrespective of Europe. Reforms are necessary to become more competitive in a sustainable way and to offer good quality of life to your citizens with access to good health services, clean environment, new products and services and access to the new technologies to facilitate and speed up communications.

As we have realised in the European Union of 27 Member States: all these objectives cannot be achieved without increased efforts in research and innovation.

To this end, Member States adopted in 2000 the Lisbon Strategy with the aim of becoming the most competitive and knowledge based economy, amongst others things, through the implementation of the European Research Area.

What is the European Research Area?

The European Research Area aims to create one area in which researchers, technology and knowledge can freely move: the so-called fifth freedom, freedom of knowledge.

Achieving the ERA objectives requires quantitative and qualitative measures and actions taken at all levels: European, national, regional and local. It also requires coordination with other policies and instruments such as education, industrial policy and innovation.

Cooperation at Regional level

Cooperation at regional level is very much favoured because often the same challenges and problems are shared which need to be addressed with increased research efforts. In the case of the Western Balkans I am thinking of the need for improvements to the public health systems, improvements in air and water quality, and the need to tackle soil erosion and increase energy efficiency.

This is why I very much encourage cooperation among all research entities and researchers of the region, which should be easier now that all Balkan Countries are associated to FP7.

The Steering Platform for Research Co-operation which I launched in June 2006 was a first step in fostering the regional dialogue. The Platform which the Commission supports with an FP7 Inco.Net project for the Western Balkan countries is doing excellent work, only because it is the only forum in which representatives from the Ministries of Science from every Western Balkan country sit together.

I am also very pleased that under the auspices of the Regional Cooperation Council the regional dialogue on research will be pursued in a broader context including education and innovation.

Actions at national level: ownership and Lisbon Strategy

On the other hand actions at national level are also important. This is what I called upon when launching the Steering Platform for Research: "Ownership". We have recommended that you design an integrated research policy. This is nothing more than taking actions that will contribute to the overall European Research Area objectives.

The presentation that your Minister has just made on a national strategy for research cooperation is really going in that direction: infrastructure being addressed, actions to turn brain drain into brain circulation and of course a plan to increase progressively public spending on research.

But as established at European level: the private sector, big industry, Small and Medium Sized enterprises alike, should also be more involved in research.

Member States are asked to set out in their national reform programmes, the so-called Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs, how they will contribute to achieving the European Research Area objectives. The role of the Commission is mainly to facilitate and monitor this process.

There is no "one-size fits all" solution. What matters is that we see progress in terms of more investment in research and improving the organisation of research.

You are expected to contribute to this progress and improvement of Europe's scientific excellence. Your good participation in FP7 indicates that you have the potential to do so. But efforts on research capacity building are necessary to allow the scientists to work in attractive and competitive conditions.

ERA is work in progress: ERA vision 2020 and Ljubljana process

Recently Member States have agreed to develop further actions to strengthen and deepen the European Research Area, which was launched in 2000. It all re-started with the Ljubljana Process in April 2008 under the Slovenian Presidency and the ERA vision 2020 was adopted by the Competitiveness Council in December 2008.

Several initiatives have been taken to further encourage research cooperation, avoid fragmentation and increase Europe's scientific excellence. This in turn requires good governance, including political steering at Ministerial level.

The five ERA building blocks are:

Single labour market for researchers;

World-class research infrastructures;

Well coordinated research programmes and priorities or joint programming;

Effective knowledge sharing; and

Opening of the ERA to the world.

The European Commission actively supports and facilitates the implementation of concrete initiatives in partnership with all interested Member States and Associated Countries.

In other words, Serbia, as an associated country to FP7, is expected to fully contribute to the realisation of these objectives and is therefore also part of the governance structure.

Single labour market for researchers

The European researchers' labour market is structurally fragmented. This prevents the transnational mobility of researchers within the EU. It is partly due to a lack of open recruitment and cultural factors and problems which can be encountered by highly mobile workers in such fields as social security, taxation and transferability of pension rights.

In Europe, and I believe this is also the case in your country, we are faced with the upcoming retirement of a generation of researchers, with no prospect of their full replacement. This is why it is so important to attract young people to the sciences.

In May 2008 the Commission proposed the European Partnership for Researchers with the aim of increasing the number, quality and mobility of researchers and to enhance Europe's attractiveness to researchers. It focuses action on four key areas to substantially improve the mobility and careers of researchers:

Open recruitment and portability of grants;

Meeting the social security and supplementary pensions needs of mobile researchers;

Attractive employment and working conditions and

Enhancing the training, skills and experience of European researchers.

The end goal is establishing a single market for researchers.

We're looking forward to Serbia's support and commitment to this initiative and the work in the dedicated ERA Steering Group on Human Resources and Mobility in which you have been invited to nominate your delegate.

Joint programming

We are facing challenges today that no single state or region can address alone. That is why we need to work together and that is why we developed the idea of Joint programming.

Joint Programming is based on Member States getting together to discuss common visions and Strategic Research Agendas on major societal challenges. It is about setting up partnerships between Member States and about making the best use of resources, money and brains.

Research Infrastructure

Research infrastructures are becoming increasingly complex and expensive, often placing them beyond the reach of a single research group, region, nation or even continent.

The sheer size of such projects, generally hundreds of millions of Euros for construction and several tens of millions of Euros for operation, requires a joint effort by several European countries.

Until now, the absence of an adequate legal framework allowing the creation of appropriate partnership with partners from different countries has been a major difficulty for Member States.

The new European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC), the legal framework, which was adopted by the Council this month, should provide a legal personality recognised in all Member States and will provide some of the advantages of international organisations, such as VAT exemptions. It will also offer the opportunity to cut down significantly the time necessary for setting up such European Research Infrastructures, allowing them to become operational as soon as possible, which is important in the quickly evolving world of science.

We expect Serbia to be actively involved in the Regional Working Group established under ESFRI. This will give you information on the infrastructure in Europe and how to manage and ensure open access to large scale infrastructure.

Transfer of Knowledge

To improve the exploitation of the results of public research, the Commission has adopted a Recommendation on the management of intellectual property in knowledge transfer activities. The Recommendation consists of two parts: policy guidelines for Member States and a Code of Practice for public research organisations and universities.

As a member of ERA, we expect Serbia to implement this recommendation.

Opening ERA to the world

There is also fragmentation and duplication on research cooperation with third countries. This is why the Commission presented a strategy on research cooperation with third countries aiming at a more coordinated approach through partnerships between the Member States and the European Community.

We hope that Serbia will contribute, through the Strategic Forum on International Cooperation, to an open ERA by streamlining its bilateral programmes with those of the EU on thematic and geographic targets to be determined together.

So, in summary, by being associated you are already part of all ERA activities.

A new science strategy

The high costs of advanced facilities and the intense competition for the best brains, forces us to think even further on how we can achieve most with what we have. We need to set a new strategy for science. We need to act on three fronts:

Large-scale collaboration between Member States, including the associated countries with an EU perspective;

Better methods for distributing EU funding, and

Combining our technology and industrial policies.

This might sound futuristic in a country like Serbia that has an economy which is in mid-transition. And it might even sound more unrealistic in times of global financial crisis. But it is my firm conviction that the need for scientific investment remains a priority, even an opportunity in times of crisis. Money is (always) scarce, but the right investments in research and technological development are smart investments.

This is even truer when considering that leaders in other parts of the World are also keeping up their investments in science. In America, Barack Obama has very publicly reaffirmed the central place of science to the US economy and committed his country to a target of spending at least 3% of GDP on research. China and other emerging economies are doing similar things.

I know the economic and financial crisis is now hitting this region very hard, possibly harder than other regions because your economy is still feeling the consequences of the recent war. But the crisis will not last forever and we have to prepare ourselves for the time after it. We have to come out stronger; ready for increased global competition and for the global challenges, like climate change and energy issues. None of these challenges we dealt with before this crisis, disappeared or is different and they are still waiting for our actions. Crisis is too good an opportunity to miss it and therefore, yes, Serbia, like the rest of Europe needs to keep up its science activities.

From European Research Area to European Integration

Finally, increasing regional competitiveness is part of your partnership with Europe. Doing research together will allow you to share knowledge and ideas, develop better and more innovative products, create new opportunities for accessing markets and, above all, help to improve the quality of life of your citizens. In doing research together, Serbia and its neighbours will become more competitive and build sustainable prosperity. Sustainable Economic development will help you on the road to EU membership.

I know that you still have a lot of work to do to build up your research capacity, build or rebuild infrastructures and grow useful networks of co-operation. In times of economic crisis, you also need double your efforts to catch up compared to other regions also affected by the economic crisis. Therefore I am very pleased to announce that under the FP7 Work Programme on Research Potential another call specifically for the Western Balkan Countries aiming at strengthening your research capacity will be launched this summer.

Another challenge you all face is the increased research effort and knowledge necessary to meet the numerous EU standards and technical requirements in complicated areas such as public health, environmental standards or energy targets. I know that you have already been making use of the Joint Research Centre's special programme for enlargement countries – even more so than any of your neighbours. I strongly encourage you to continue doing so - the specialised workshops and conferences, temporary job positions for national experts and grant holders as well as the possibility to participate in competitive projects and EU-wide networks together with the JRC.

Cooperation and support for research doesn't and shouldn't only come from the Seventh Research Framework Programme. The Pre-Accession Instrument (IPA) also has an important role to play. We can use it in synergy with other instruments and stakeholders who are committed to the same objective - to strengthen the capacity of the region by considering the knowledge triangle.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I could go on outlining why research is important but ultimately it is up to you and I have every faith in your potential. And please do not forget that the Commission is here to assist you whenever we can.

I hope you find this event enjoyable and benefit from the information and new opportunities it provides.