Promoting ICT cooperation opportunities and
policy dialogue with the Western Balkan countries

ICT-WEB-PROMS

FINAL PUBLISHABLE SUMMARY REPORT

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Project duration: 2 years

Partners:

- EBA - European Business Associates SRL (Project coordinator)
- URSIT Ltd.
- South East European Research Centre
- Ss Cyril and Methodius University
- Universiteti Politeknik i Tiranes
- Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci ETF
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What did ICT-WEB-PROMS aim at?

Objectives

ICT-WEB-PROMS aimed at increasing capacity of stakeholders in the Western Balkan countries (WBC) to fully participate in European ICT research and in the European Research Area by creating and supporting strategic partnership between stakeholders in the EU and the WBC while providing access to relevant knowledge.

The four key objectives were:

- Networking of WB and EU countries in the area of ICT
- Increasing the capacity of organizations from WBC to create ICT technology and participate in the FP7 ICT programme
- Creating a supporting project environment and tools that are sustainable
- Contributing to the implementation of ICT and information society strategies in the WBC and supporting EU policy for co-operation with the WBC
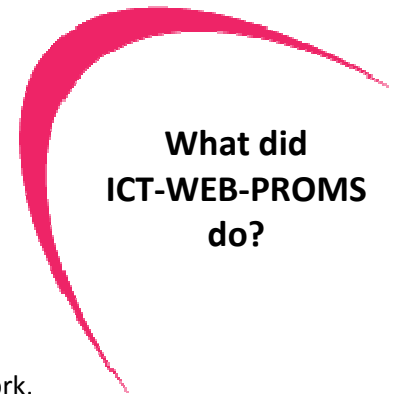
Work performed

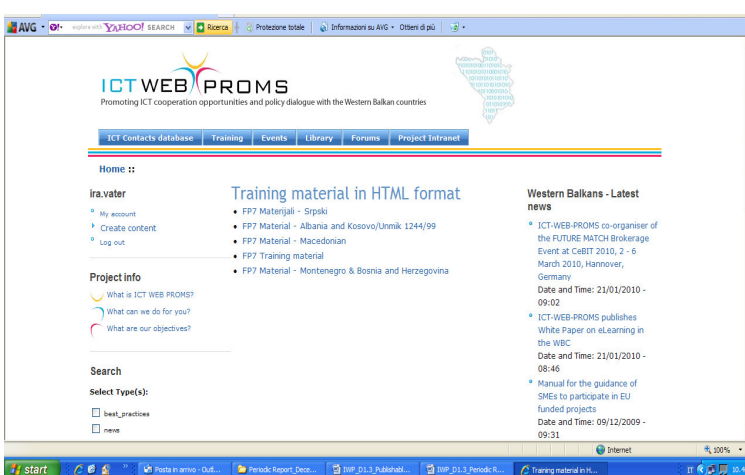ICT-WEB-PROMS started in January 2009. After two years, at the end of December 2010, the balance sheet of the project was more than positive. The first six month set-up phase of the project was successfully completed at the end of June 2009. This phase aimed at setting up the project activities, focalising the project and sharing experiences in order to bring all partners from the WBC to the same level of knowledge and to enable them to support and train stakeholders. In this first phase the consortium summarised information about relevant policy and projects in the WBC, established the areas of mutual interest as a basis for project work, designed the web site and implementated its first version including the database, held a workshop to train the trainers - resulting in the first version of the training material, identified and established contacts with the target stakeholders and carried out dissemination activities to build up the network.

What did ICT-WEB-PROMS do?

After the first six months the project entered its pro-active phase of support, networking and policy dialogue – and numerous activities were performed in the period between July 2009 and December 2010. The full version of the website was implemented in October 2009 including more advanced features such as the project idea and matchmaking facilities, allowing to connect with other databases or partner search tools such as Idealist and Cordis. This phase of the project saw continued registration in the database by organizations and researchers from both the WBC and other countries, resulting in around 500 database registrations - 250 more than target.

The training material developed for the Train the Trainers Workshop was converted into hmtl and uploaded on the project website as online self training modules. This online FP7 training material was also translated into the local languages of the WBC, allowing the stakeholders from the WBC to read the documents in their own languages. It was subsequently updated to include information about the ICT Calls 6 and 7 that were both published in 2010.

Training events were organized throughout the period – 14 horizontal workshops, 13 roadshows and 4 vertical workshops. The 14 horizontal workshops were organised between September and November 2009 and March and June 2010 in FYR of Macedonia (2 in Skopje), Montenegro (2 in Podgorica), Albania (2 in Tirana), Serbia (2 in Belgrade), Bosnia & Herzegovina (2 in Banja Luca, 1 each in Doboj and Mostar) and Kovoso (2 in Pristina). These workshops concentrated on FP7 and recorded a total of close to 500 participants.

The roadshows were shorter versions of the horizontal workshops and were held in smaller cities. 13 roadshows were held between February and June 2010 in FYR of Macedonia (Tetova and Shtip), Montenegro (Zabljak and Kotor), Albania (Shkodra and Vlora), Serbia (Cacak and Zrenjanin), Bosnia & Herzegovina (Doboj, Travnik and Siroki Brijeg) and Kovoso (Gjakova and Prizren). The roadshows attracted just over 300 participants.

135 stakeholders participated in the four vertical workshops that concentrated on specific topics of interest to the WBC. The first workshop was organized in the framework of the 4th Balkan Conference in Informatics, held in September 2009 in Thessaloniki, with the topic of eLearning. Three further vertical workshops were organised during 2010: the first was held in April in Skopje, parallel to the RCI IT B2B Matchmaking Event and covered the topic of eGovernment. The second and third vertical workshops on eHealth and Network and Service Infrastructures were organised together as a stand alone event in May in Skopje too. Major attention was dedicated to enhancing and stimulating the four Focus Groups on eLearning, eGovernment, eHealth and Network and Service Infrastructures that were set up following the vertical workshops with interested experts from the WB region and animated via a forum for discussion on the website.

Award Ceremony at the ICT 2010 Event

In April 2010 a formal ICT idea competition was launched among WB stakeholders. The competition was open to all researchers from Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, F.Y.R. of Macedonia, Kosovo (UNMIK 1244/99), Montenegro and Serbia carrying out research or development in the ICT area with forward looking research ideas.   30 applications were received and in June 2010 two winners each were announced from Serbia and Kosovo (UNMIK 1244/99) and one winner each from Montenegro and F.Y.R. of Macedonia. The prize for each winner was a trip to the ICT 2010 Event in Brussels in September 2010 where the award ceremony took place.

During the second project year major effort was undertaken to mobilise the WB Diaspora involved in European ICT research in order to network and promote regional stakeholders. A list of 133 Diaspora members was established. After initial contacts explaining the objectives of ICT-WEB-PROMS to the Diaspora and inviting them to become involved in the project, regular contact was maintained via email and via LinkedIn. Diaspora members were invited to give presentations at both a vertical workshop and a networking event and several Diaspora members attended project events.

The project also offered stakeholders intense support for networking activities via brokerage and networking events. To this end four brokerage and networking events were held.

The first brokerage event and information stand was held in October 2009 in the frame of the international event "eChallenges e-2009 Conference" (Istanbul, Turkey from 21 – 23 October 2009). This "EU-Western Balkan countries Brokerage & Networking Session" gave 49 interested stakeholders from the Western

Balkan countries and other European countries the opportunity to present their organizations as well as to receive information about the ICT Programme and possible WB participation.

The second brokerage event "CeBIT Future Match Brokerage Event" was held in March 2010 at the occasion of CeBIT in Hannover, Germany. It was organised by the Enterprise Europe Network, co-organised by the project and attracted a total of 449 participants, of which 53 from the WBC. At the ICT 2010 Event in Brussels in September 2010, a networking session "Thinking across borders - (Re) discover ICT cooperation potential with East Europe & Central Asia and Western Balkan countries" was organized jointly by seven support actions.

Future Match Brokerage Event at CeBIT 2010 in Hannover

126 participants attended this session of which 26 were from the WB countries. Participants had the possibility to meet other in face-to-face meetings and the session also saw the award ceremony of the "Western Balkan Countries' ICT Idea Competition". Finally, in October 2010, the project participated in the eChallenges e2010 Conference in Warsaw, Poland with both a networking event with 36 participants and a brokerage event with 42 participants and 37 bilateral meetings.

In the last project months the consortium concentrated its effort in directly supporting stakeholders. At least 328 contacts were recorded with advice ranging from how to participate in FP7, to evaluating project ideas or improving previously unsuccessful proposals. The support given led to WB participation in 40 proposals, of which 17 were successful.

With regards to policy recommendations and dialogue, a first report on the "First version of policy recommendations" was submitted in June 2009. This document formed the basis for further research that led to a set of policy recommendations. During the second half of 2009 and first months of 2010, an analysis of National Strategies and Procedures in the WBCs was performed, whereby all available, up to date strategy documents were reviewed and preliminary conclusions drawn. To this end a focused questionnaire was drafted, targeted at documenting WBC stakeholders' opinions regarding national and EU

Networking Event at the eChallenges e2010 Conference in Warsaw

Report on policy recommendations" was submitted, a document that gathered reviews of the S&T backgrounds in WBC, priorities of technical areas and barriers, an in-depth analysis of the funding and implementation frameworks and national ICT policies as well as a series of recommendations for the WBC integration into ERA and FP7. A final version of the document was produced in December 2010, taking into account latest developments.

Numerous dissemination activities were carried out throughout the project duration, through

presentations at national and local events, articles about the project activities and e-dissemination activities.

Results achieved

What did ICT-WEB-PROMS achieve?

ICT-WEB-PROMS has identified over 800 stakeholders, creating a large network of organizations interested in European research in ICT involving the WBC. The project activities such as the competition, the workshops, the brokerage events, the web portal, the training material, the policy recommendations, and the support and dissemination activities have led to an increase of knowledge and capacity within the WBC, enabling stakeholders from the region to participate in ICT/FP7 and other programmes. They have furthermore been given the possibility to network with their counterparts from EU countries, thus enhancing their changes of finding partners and being included in project consortia for FP7 proposals.

Concrete quantitative results achieved by ICT-WEB-PROMS in the course of the project are:

- The project has reached a considerable number of stakeholders and has worked with them.
- Increased awareness of WBC stakeholders of FP7 and related ICT research.
- Creation of training and information material (including the web site) in all languages of the WBC that can be refined and re-used.
- Creation of a number of well trained individuals mainly within universities in the WBC that can act as multipliers at two levels: the first level will be their own institution (university etc) and the second level their research communities.
- Enhanced visibility of WBC stakeholders as well as increased chances for the participation in project proposals.
- Higher awareness in the EU of WBC – the project connected interested stakeholders from the WBC and the EU.
- Better understanding of the problems and obstacles that WBC researchers face.

Problems encountered and needs identified in the WBC

After two years of working with stakeholders in the WBC, the project has reached a considerable number of stakeholders who have shown great interest in funding by the FP7 programme. However, several problem areas were identified and the overall impression was gained that participation in ICT/FP7 projects still constitutes a challenge for potential partners in the WBC.

Many stakeholders perceive the rules and mechanisms of FP7 to be a barrier. First of all, due to the fact that a only a very small percentage of submitted proposals is successful, many stakeholders from the WBC are unwilling to go through the difficult and cumbersome process of proposal writing. Then, even if they were to be successful in proposal writing, they see the heavy bureaucracy and difficult administration of

FP7 projects to be a further obstacle. Most stakeholders in the WBC are not used to the precise working and project management rules as required by FP7 and furthermore the 75% funding in FP7 is a barrier for many small companies and universities. They are often unable to match the remaining 25% co-funding required. A further obstacle is that many researchers do not have a sufficient level of English language proficiency in order to be able to participate in EU funded projects. WBC participation in ICT/FP7 depends very strongly on personal initiative and is only to some extent institutionalized in the sense that there is a lack of clear institutional strategies that foster research

Networking Event at the ICT 2010 Event in Brussels

and innovation. Strategies at the WBC level do not identify specific priorities and do not try to create or to sustain centres of excellence. By identifying priorities too broadly, whatever resources are available become scarce and thus insufficient budget is dedicated to research, notably to ICT research.

A lack of knowledge and experience in the ICT sector has been documented. Experience is concentrated in some research centres and the IT industry has a weak research orientation within the WBC, with a lack of cooperation between industry and academia.

Institutional structures in the WBC are not prepared for the type of research funding offered by ICT/FP7. They tend to have a short term orientation and a need for short term income and it takes time to change this.

A problem inherent to the WB researchers themselves is their unwillingness and lack of trust to publish and communicate ideas, for fear of their project ideas being stolen by others. There is also an unwillingness in many cases of those who already participate successfully in ICT/FP7 to spread the information about their success and to involve others.

Brokerage Event at the eChallenges e2009 Conference in Istanbul

On the other hand problems have also been identified with regards to the EU's acceptance of WB involvement in ICT/FP7 which constitute a further barrier to their participation. EU researchers are often unwilling to accept WBC institutions as potential partners; they prefer to collaborate with researchers they know and regard as their peers, i.e. the people they meet in conferences and whose names appear in academic journals. WB reseachers are still lagging behind in this respect, lacking the necessary funds to travel to conferences and to publish papers. It has also proven very difficult to mobilise the WB Diaspora to network with WB stakeholders.

Keeping in mind the identified problem areas, what are thus the concrete needs of WB stakeholders? The Western Balkan countries are still on the learning curve and much more time is needed to fully

integrate these countries into the ERA. In fact, WB history in FP7 participation is still very young. Notwithstanding the many workshops that have been carried out in the region, there is still a need for better understanding and awareness of ICT/FP7 and a need to involve more stakeholders.

The existing research institutions in the WBC need more funds in order to be able to employ new research staff and to acquire new equipment, and networking with the EU needs to be further enhanced.

There is also a need for greater mobility of WBC ICT researchers as well as a clear strategy for WBC academics to increase networking by increasing their contributions to conferences and journals at both the institutional and the national level.

FP7/ICT has to be considered in the larger context of the situation in the WB region, with regards to infrastructure as well as the political and social situation. There is a need for support at regional level and cooperation between countries must be stimulated.

On the basis of the problems encountered and the needs identified in the WBC, the project has issued several recommendations for the stakeholders involved, that would help facilitate WB participation in European research in the future.

Recommendations for the European Commission

- Give FP7 proposals with WBC participation a higher ranking. This would stimulate EU organisations to invite WB stakeholders to join project consortia.
- Encourage WBC researcher mobility any way possible. If a "preferential treatment" policy was to be adopted towards the WBC it would make more sense to adopt it for the People rather than the Cooperation part of the Framework Programme.
- Help to streamline all available resources (including IPA funds) towards the goal of building capacities for research and innovation in the WBC. i.e. IPA could fund mobility schemes, proposal preparation schemes, awards for project ideas etc., thus preparing researchers to participate in FP research.
- Ensure more cohesion and collaboration between individual programmes in order to achieve higher impact.
- Publish more ICT/FP7 calls targeted to the WB region in specific fields recognized to be the priority areas of WB countries.
- Promote WBC research via the Internet, for example as part of Cordis.

Recommendations for national governments

- (Re)define and implement Strategic Research Agendas for ICT by defining specific priorities and allocating dedicated funds.
- Enforce the NCP system in WBC by providing adequate resources to NCPs and by avoiding frequent replacement of NCPs.
- Participate regularly to ICT Program Committee meetings.
- Provide support mechanisms, for example via the NCPs, for the administration work necessary in ICT/FP7 projects.
- Encourage stakeholders to participate in FP7 by giving them for example a reward for each submitted quality proposal.

- Ease regulation of grant spending allowing use of resources more flexibly and effectively.
- Focus not only on research excellence but also on the inclusion of users of technology so that the research carried out corresponds to practical needs and is applied.
- Encourage universities and research centers to adopt strategies for building excellence from within by having clear strategies on research assessment of their staff; putting emphasis on academic publishing in high impact journals and though high impact conferences; having clear IPR strategies; putting emphasis on performing research that is relevant to the IT industry, their communities and the society; and creating mechanisms that link industry and research.

Recommendations for stakeholders

- Make use of a number of programmes, other than ICT/FP7, that could be used to increase research excellence; capacity still has to be developed in several areas, which cannot be done through the Cooperation programme only, but are part of other areas of FP7 such as the Capacities or People Programmes.
- Stimulate cooperation between academia and industry – stakeholders from key research centres should cooperate with industry, in particular SMEs, and other users.
- Stimulate the ICT industry to invest in research.
- Wider use of Internet tools - researchers from the WBC seem to be less conversant in using the Internet than those from Western Europe, thus providers of such tools need to carefully think about the specific audience, user interfaces and how to convey the message of the benefit of using such tools to the envisaged users.

Lessons learnt for future activities in the region

After two years of working with stakeholders in the WBC, the project has achieved a significant number of results, but two years of experience in the region has also been a lesson on the utility of activities that were carried out.

Project Stand at the eChallenges e2009 Conference in Istanbul

The ICT-WEB-PROMS workshops and road shows, brokerage and networking events, ICT idea competition, mobilization of the Diaspora and the web site and database were useful and effective tools and should be included in any future project. Matchmaking and partner search is necessary, but should not be offered as a standalone matchmaking facility in future projects' own web-sites. There are established facilities like CORDIS and IDEAL-IST that offer this service more efficiently and on a broader scale.

Future projects should instead offer assistance to researchers in order to be able to use CORDIS and IDEAL-IST successfully. Projects should also provide parallel registration of stakeholders in the projects' databases, and in CORDIS and/or IDEAL-IST.

Training remains a need, also in future projects, but should be differently organized and focused. To date stakeholders are brought together in workshops and receive the same kind of general training. It is

necessary to offer separate training for researchers, managers and policy-makers.

Researchers should receive training on:

- The principle behind the Framework Programme - researchers often think of projects of national interest, which is not possible as the Framework Programme targets research projects of pan-European interest.
- The state of the art in the EU - projects should be presented as case studies, notably projects that are opening new areas of work. Instead of going to EU conferences to hear what is going on, research trends of FP projects could be presented in workshops in the WBC.
- Communication tools such as CORDIS, IDEAL-IST etc. should be presented, demonstrated and discussed.
- The main administrative/financial rules should be presented as shortly as possible, but with case studies on how technical management is done in the best projects.

Managers should receive dedicated training on administrative, legal and financial details of FP7 as well as on case studies on how management is done in selected projects, in order to guide them and help them find solutions for their own cases.

With regards to policy-makers, rather than to invite them to general workshops, it would have a greater impact to organise dedicated round tables where the Framework Programme and recommendations for policy could be presented and discussed.

The translation of material into local languages offers visibility to the project and FP7 but no real added value as it is important to communicate the reality to the WB stakeholders: if you are not able to communicate in English there is no way you can participate in the Framework Programme.

Running blogs and forums on the project website is useful, depending on the results one expects. Use of the Internet in the WBC is still limited, in comparison to the EU Member States. Stakeholders still prefer to communicate via the telephone or email rather than via discussion forums and blogs. However, forums are accepted and used as a vehicle for information provision and can thus be useful if used for dissemination of information on specific topics.

There are also activities that ICT-WEB-PROMS did not do, but that would be useful in future support projects in the region. For example it would be useful to organize a small mobility scheme for WBC researchers to be able to visit established EU research institutes of their choice on short term missions. This activity, carried out in the framework on one support project, could act as a pilot mobility scheme, providing multiplying effects in the long run and demonstrating the usefulness of a broader WBC mobility scheme.

Future projects should also foresee funds to support participation of stakeholders from the WBC in EU level networking and brokerage events. Their participation in such events is important, but the cost of travel and registration is too high for many WB stakeholders, thus limiting their possibility of networking with their EU counterparts.

Experience in ICT-WEB-PROMS has shown that promoting and enabling WBC participation in European ICT research is a slow process and more time and follow-up is needed to integrate stakeholders into the ERA. The project would have had an even greater impact if its duration had been longer than only two years.