

Contribution of the Information Office of the Steering Platform on Research for the Western Balkan countries to the Green Paper on “The ERA: New Perspectives”

General Comments on the Green Paper

The Green Paper prominently highlights the accelerating globalisation of research and the appearance of new partners for European researchers. In fact, the different approach to international cooperation as demonstrated in the Seventh Framework Programme has a significant impact also on the potential candidate countries located in the Western Balkan countries and this has not been sufficiently tackled in the Green Paper as it is presented.

Their status in the integration to the European Research Area is currently changing at different speed according to their capacities and capabilities. Their perspective towards the ERA is therefore a complex one. It should definitely not be neglected in the light of their current and future contributions to the European knowledge society where research, education, training and innovation are fully mobilised to fulfil the economic, social and environmental ambitions of the EU and the expectations of its citizens.

The signing of Memoranda of Understanding to the Seventh Framework Programme by Croatia, FYR of Macedonia and Serbia on June 13, 2007 has been a milestone for this group of the Western Balkan countries. Montenegro is expected to join FP7 soon. Currently, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina (and UNMIK/Kosovo which is not covered through the MoU with Serbia) remain International Cooperation Partner Countries (ICPC).

A difficult situation arises as, on the one hand, Specific International Cooperation Actions are hardly specifically targeting the remaining ICPC group in the Western Balkan countries and specific calls for associated countries are not foreseen as they are participating on equal grounds as the Member States. On the other hand, as it has been shown in FP6 and e.g. the recent call REGPOT-3, specific calls for the Western Balkans are of great importance to the researchers in the region.

We therefore call for the implementation of SICAs also for the Western Balkan countries which will allow for increased promotion of the Framework Programme in these target countries familiarising the potential beneficiaries with the programme, its logic and procedures.

The deficits of ERA mentioned in the Green Paper are to an even larger extent valid for the research systems of the Western Balkan countries:

- fragmentation of the public research base
- hampered mobility
- lack of business funding for R&D
- lack of science-industry relationships
- uncoordinated national research programmes and research funding
- lack of European perspective and transnational coherence

In order to reach the following aspects highlighted in the Green Paper, the Information Office calls for action.

– An adequate flow of competent researchers with high levels of mobility between institutions, disciplines, sectors and countries

Researchers in the Western Balkan countries are far from the European labour market and a balanced brain circulation. Transnational mobility is not allowed and visa regulations sometimes severely hamper scientific collaboration. Especially the young researchers need exchange and integration in the European research activities – also in order to make it more attractive to them to stay in their countries. Brain waste and brain drain are severe problems in the region and need to be tackled in cooperation with the European Union Member States.

Actions called for:

- > Inclusion of WBC researchers and students in mobility measures of the EU
- > Ease of visa regulation for researchers and students from all Western Balkan countries

– World-class research infrastructures, integrated, networked and accessible to research teams from across Europe and the world, notably thanks to new generations of electronic communication infrastructures;

The Western Balkan researchers lack access to adequate scientific infrastructure, sometimes on a very basic level (e.g. due to the destruction through the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina). The support to infrastructure also in the field of research (addressed through IPA, the Instrument for Pre-Accession) is of great importance for the sector. Furthermore, the opening up of world-class research infrastructure in Europe to the researchers from the Western Balkan countries is an important aspect.

Actions called for:

- > Support for research infrastructure through IPA
- > Opening up of research infrastructure in EU Member States to researchers from the Western Balkan countries
- > Promotion of Centers of Excellence in the Western Balkan countries and encouragement of visiting researchers from EU Member States to the Western Balkan countries
- > Integration of WBC into the existing networks of research infrastructure and infrastructure development on EU level (ESFRI, etc.)

– Excellent research institutions engaged in effective public-private cooperation and partnerships, forming the core of research and innovation 'clusters' including 'virtual research communities', mostly specialised in interdisciplinary areas and attracting a critical mass of human and financial resources;

The private sector in the Western Balkan countries is not yet investing adequately (not even on a low level) in research. It is important to assist the countries continuously in the development of innovation infrastructures such as technology and science parks, clusters, etc. and to provide good practice examples to link the private and public stakeholders.

Furthermore, existing structures in the Western Balkan countries should be included in the efforts to structure and network the European Research Area.

Actions called for:

- > Integration of WBC research institutions into virtual research communities
- > Promotion of Centers of Excellence in the WBC
- > Promotion of public-private and science-industry links
- > Exchange of good practice with stakeholders of the region

– Effective knowledge-sharing notably between public research and industry, as well as with the public at large;

The system of IPR and patenting needs improvement in the Western Balkan countries, which is in the interest of the European Union. The implementation of common standards and the exchange between the national patent organisations of the Western Balkan countries and EPO / WIPO needs further improvement. Communication channels implemented in the region are not yet sufficient and further improvement is expected e.g. through the upcoming WBC-INCO.NET. The Research Information Systems of the region, the implementation of standards (CERIF, etc.) needs to be further supported from the local governments as well as international stakeholders.

Actions called for:

- > Inclusion of academia, industry and the general public in the Western Balkan countries into knowledge-sharing initiatives
- > Joint implementation of standards and interoperable systems
- > Implementation of innovative communication channels at all levels of research policy and science

– Well-coordinated research programmes and priorities, including a significant volume of jointly-programmed public research investment at European level involving common priorities, coordinated implementation and joint evaluation; and

SEE-ERA.NET is an excellent example of joint programming, implementation and evaluation of public research investments. The inclusion of further EU Member States and Regions should be fostered and the implementation of the ERA-NET plus scheme promoted. Apart from this good practice case, the inclusion of the

Western Balkan countries into efforts of joint programming, implementation and evaluation are meagre.

The identification of common priorities will also be furthered through the upcoming INCO-NET, the uptake of the identified priorities of mutual interest needs strong support from all stakeholders.

SEE-ERA.NET also proved the importance of the exchange of good practice on research funding systems.

Actions called for:

- > Coordinate research programmes with the Western Balkan countries (see South East European ERA-NET)
- > Include programmes funded by Western Balkan countries into thematic ERA-NETs
- > Develop common priorities and programmes with the Western Balkan countries
- > Promote further exchange of good practice on transparent research funding

– A wide opening of the European Research Area to the world with special emphasis on neighbouring countries and a strong commitment to addressing global challenges with Europe's partners.

This part of the Green Paper should be of particular interest for the Western Balkan countries, but in fact they are completely neglected as it is only mentioned to put special emphasis on neighbouring countries (covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy). The potential candidate countries or enlargement countries need to have a very specific role in the opening of the European Research Area – especially those which are not foreseen to associate with the Framework Programme soon.

Furthermore, the European Research Area is not the Framework Programme alone, the progress of integration into the ERA has still not reached several other programmes which are important for the Western Balkan countries: the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme (CIP), LIFE+, the Research Fund for Coal and Steel, the Lifelong Learning Programme or many others.

An even stronger commitment towards the Western Balkan countries needs therefore be called for!

Actions called for:

- > Provide for a special position of the Western Balkan countries as candidate countries and potential candidate countries which are not covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy
- > Full inclusion of the Western Balkan countries in the European Research Area, not only in the Framework Programmes for RTD

What is the *Information Office of the Steering Platform on Research*?

The Information Office acts as a source of high quality targeted information on research in the Western Balkan countries (WBCs) by supporting the Steering Platform through a regular eJournal, analytical studies and reports and directories. The Information Office contributes to a dialogue on S&T issues between the EU and the Western Balkan countries and the integration of the research and innovation systems of the WBCs into the European Research Area (ERA).

Contact:

Elke Dall

dall@zsi.at

+43-1-4950442-62