

Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK

European Commissioner for Science and Research

**"Developing regional research strategy
for the Western Balkans"**

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

Ministerial conference in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sarajevo, 24 April 2009

Dear Ministers,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be together with all of you here in Sarajevo for this important initiative.

Firstly, my sincere thanks and support go to the Czech Presidency and the Regional Cooperation Council for organising this Ministerial conference.

I really hope that the discussions today and the Joint Statement, which will be adopted, will lead to concrete progress in research cooperation in this region, with all the benefits that can bring.

As you probably already know, from the very beginning of my mandate as the Commissioner for Science and Research I have made it one of my missions to bring the Western Balkan countries – your countries – into the European Research Area and enable them to fully participate in the Framework Programme.

In less than three years since the launch of the Western Balkan Steering Platform in Vienna all your countries have become fully associated to FP7 and have started the integration into the European Area. This mission has clearly been a success.

This is an important personal mission for me as well as a professional one. Besides being the European Commissioner for science and research, I am also the first European Commissioner to have grown up in the former Yugoslavia. Slovenia, my home country, has in many ways been very fortunate – in EU terms at least, although clearly not in the current World cup qualifiers!

Slovenia has seen first hand the benefits that EU membership can bring. How countries working together can achieve more than the sum of their individual efforts. And this applies in science and research especially – the high costs of advanced facilities and the intense competition for the best brains have forced us to rethink how we can achieve the most with what we have.

Both the European Commission and the European Council believe that the future of the Western Balkan countries lies in the European Union. And I see participation in European Research as an important ticket into our common European Union future.

I say this because I know, like you do, that science and research are essential to the creation of a prosperous modern economy. Increasing regional competitiveness is part of your partnership with Europe. Sustainable economic development will help you on the road to EU membership.

The cooperation that drives the European Research Area can be of particular benefit here in this region. I know how difficult the divisions in the Balkans have been and still can be.

Just as the European Communities were originally conceived to help heal the wounds of the Second World War and prevent further conflict, I believe that working together in science and research and solving common regional problems, can help the countries and communities of the Western Balkans to overcome the pain and divisions from recent wars.

The initiative to develop the regional research strategy that you started today can bring you to a new level of cooperation, helping you all to achieve more in research and to achieve it quicker.

I understand that you all have a lot of work to do to build up your research capacity, build or rebuild infrastructures and grow useful networks of cooperation. Essentially to create an "eco-system" in which science, research and innovation can thrive.

And if you can do things together you can avoid wasteful duplication. If you were, for example, to create a shared regional research centre open to all, this could be so much more successful than if the same resources and funding were spread across a set of similar smaller centres one per country. Better in terms of facilities and more effective in terms of the researchers it can attract.

Human resources – "trained brains" – the most important resource of all need to be used as effectively as possible. You need to attract and train more new researchers and build up your universities teaching capacity as well as their research facilities. Selective, smart specialisation is the best and the quickest way to do that.

Your countries are relatively small, which means you cannot be good at everything. And as you know, in science, being good – being excellent is what really matters. Therefore you should use this opportunity to identify the areas, or specific issues where committing to working together at regional level will make a difference. By working together you can create better opportunities for your scientists and more attractive conditions for business.

I am not suggesting that regional cooperation is the answer to everything! But because researchers from all backgrounds, from all nationalities, understand and share the same hunger for knowledge and the same desire to improve society through science, this is often the most natural level to start cooperation.

And here in the Region I firmly believe that it can be especially useful.

By the way, do not think that regional cooperation is not something natural, something we do not support, also in our research cooperation inside the European Union. For example, just two days ago, I was replying to an oral question in European Parliament on the so called Article 169 initiative called BONUS. We are supposed to present it still in this year. It is about joint research programme uniting the eight Baltic Sea States of the EU and the Russian Federation aiming to improve the effectiveness of environmental and sustainable development policies for the entire Baltic Region. All the involved countries already expressed their will to financially participate in the programme.

Regional cooperation among different countries is a favoured principle common to all aspects of the European Research Area because it is effective – whether it is here in the Western Balkans, in the Union itself, or in international co-operation with regions in Asia or Latin America.

Cooperation in research can and will enable you to overcome common challenges. And I know this Region well enough to say that in many instances you share the same challenges and problems, like improving public health systems, air and water quality, tackling soil erosion and increasing energy efficiency.

Another challenge that you all face is the increased research effort and knowledge necessary to meet the numerous EU standards and technical requirements in complicated areas as public health, environmental standards or energy targets.

In this context the Joint Research Centre, or JRC, for which I am also responsible can help and support cooperation at regional level. The JRC can play an important role in assisting your countries' preparation for adoption of the EU *acquis communautaire*.

The JRC encourages regional networking through regular scientific and technical workshops and conferences in which experts from all your countries participate. It also promotes regional cooperation by inviting partners from Western Balkan countries to take part in its competitive projects and EU-wide institutional networks.

But cooperation and support for the regional dimension should not only come from research programmes.

The Pre-Accession Instrument (IPA) also has an important role to play and is already considering the regional dimension. We should 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.

I hear you thinking: "This all sounds great, but how do we do this amid the economic and financial crisis that is hitting us?" I know the crisis is hitting this region very hard. It is hitting Europe, it is hitting entire world. But keeping research efforts high, and strengthening our cooperation, is a smart way ahead. Economic and financial crisis will not stay with us for ever, thus we have to prepare ourselves also for the times after the crisis. We have to come out of it stronger - ready for increased global competition and ready for the global challenges, like climate change and energy supply. None of those challenges we had consistently and patiently dealt with before the crises emerged, disappeared or is different. They are here with us, waiting for our answers. Thus, crisis is too good an opportunity to miss it.

Knowledge - education, research, innovation – is at the heart of the answer and greater dialogue and cooperation at regional level can also be a way to make limited resources go further. You have the opportunity to work together in building and rebuilding your scientific capacities. And EU funding is there as an incentive and as a support, because it is also in the European Union's interest to see your countries, your researchers and your companies integrated in the big knowledge economy we have set out to create.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have made a good start with the Steering Platform for Research Cooperation. By beginning a wider dialogue including research, education and innovation – the 3 facets of the knowledge triangle that are driving modern economic development - the Regional Cooperation Council is making valuable contribution and at the right time.

You can certainly count on my support, our support to cooperate with the Regional Cooperation Council to strengthen the regional dimension of research cooperation.

But enough from me – these are your discussions and this will be your regional strategy; strategy of cooperation in research which is first and foremost in your interest, but also strategy, which is bringing each one of you closer to the European Union. It is the same spirit of competition and cooperation you can find behind our joint efforts in Europe. Good luck!