



Conclusions of the 1st Western Balkans Research and Innovation meeting held in Podgorica on June 12-13, 2017

The first Western Balkans Research and Innovation (WB R&I) meeting was organised in Podgorica on June 12-13, 2017 within the framework of the European Commission's Support for the Steering Platform (SP) on Research and Innovation for the Western Balkan countries (WBC). The meeting was co-chaired by the Ministry of Science, Montenegro who hosted the event and the European Commission (DG Research and Innovation, Directorate for International Cooperation).

In the opening session, the Minister of Science of Montenegro, Sanja Damjanovic welcomed all participants in Podgorica underlining the important role of SP meetings which have proven to be a very useful tool to launch specific initiatives and increase networking on specific issues. Furthermore, the meetings are at the same time an excellent forum for the development of strong partnerships in the field of Science and Technology and also an information exchange node for needs, suggestions and proposals of the Western Balkan countries.

Minister Damjanovic further stated: "The countries of the Western Balkans who see themselves as future Member States adjusted their policies in the field of research. We definitely could not make it on our own and the coordination instrument like the Steering Platform was crucial for our faster learning in the development of research policies."

Mr. Kostas Glinos from the European Commission welcomed the opportunity to meet again with the representatives of the Western Balkan countries and other invited stakeholders and briefly introduced the new scheme for the support of the Steering Platform meetings implemented by the International Cooperation Support Facility of the European Commission. Within this facility it is planned to organise two Steering Platform meetings in 2017 and in 2018, as well as three thematic meetings including the preparatory meetings for the SP.

The participants welcomed the continuation of the SP meetings and confirmed their interest for actions towards strengthening the R&I capacity in the Region.

The European Commission informed the participants about the upcoming Steering Platform meeting to take place in Belgrade on September 27-28, 2017 which will be held in close cooperation with the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training. For the first time after its establishment in 2006, the Steering Platform on Research and Innovation will be also organised at ministerial level, Mr. Kostas underlined.

The European Commission emphasised the relevance of the topic "Researchers Mobility" for the region and expressed its willingness to support dedicated actions. The Commission invited Western Balkan countries and stakeholders dealing with this topic to share the results of studies and their experiences and to provide recommendations on how to best prepare future actions. In this context, preliminary results of studies conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and SPHERE (Support and Promotion for Higher Education

Reform Experts, supported by Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC)) were presented. The Steering Platform working group on mobility, established during the last Steering Platform meeting in Sarajevo in 2016, presented its concept note, while CEEPUS and DAAD introduced their activities in the region and shared experiences relevant for the implementation of a possible future mobility scheme for the Western Balkans.

Actions for Research and Innovation in the Western Balkan countries

Given the increasing "excellence gap" with other parts of Europe and the brain-drain which the region is experiencing – with the consequence that scientists leave their country for better opportunities in the EU and elsewhere – it is important to establish a research and innovation environment across the whole region that supports socioeconomic development and embraces scientists and their needs. In order to reinforce the creation of such an environment, this year's Ministerial Platforms on 'Education and Training' and on 'Research and Innovation' will discuss means to increase research capacity in the region. This should provide the necessary political commitment for the following measures, to be implemented by 2019:

- Launch a pilot scheme to support incoming excellent research teams to the Western Balkans with the aim to strengthen research capacity in chosen areas;
- Reduce barriers for the mobility of researchers and establish an open, merit-based, competitive, international recruitment system;
- Develop regional Centres of Excellence to promote collaboration between science, technology and industry and to provide platforms for the education of young scientists and engineers, based on a mapping of what already exists and the gaps that need to be closed.

These measures will be crucial for the integration of the Western Balkan research environments into the European Research Area.

The representatives from the Western Balkan region elaborated on the activities related to research and innovation reforms as part of the Economic Reform Programmes and updated on their participation in Horizon 2020. On this basis, participants discussed the areas which need to be improved and what measures are planned to achieve these improvements.

Concerns were expressed i.a. that researchers find it difficult to participate in Horizon 2020. A suggestion was made by the European Commission that countries could establish incentives for applicants in Horizon 2020 (e.g. travelling to preparatory meetings). Turkey was mentioned in this regard as a good example. Montenegro has incentives for researchers (positively evaluated proposals), Bosnia and Herzegovina also (to applicants and to approved project participants), Serbia used to have incentives, some changes are expected in the near future in this regard.

The Western Balkan country representatives welcomed the introduction to the Pre-Commercial Procurement (PCP) and Public Procurement of Innovative solutions (PPI). Further awareness rising in the countries in this regard is needed as procurement in general is still considered a difficult and time consuming exercise. There is a need for further information on possible synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) by using the Innovation Procurement instruments PCP and PPI.

In conclusion, the Western Balkan countries considered the meeting being very useful and timely to take stock of the actions, to exchange best practice, and to steer the work further on concrete actions. Serbia is looking forward to welcoming the Steering Platform in Belgrade in September 2017.