



Conclusions of the 2nd Western Balkans Research and Innovation meeting held in Skopje on March 21-22, 2018

The second Western Balkans Research and Innovation meeting was organised in Skopje on March 21-22, 2018 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 Education and Science of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia who hosted the event, the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union, and the European Commission (DG Research and Innovation).

In the opening session, Special Adviser of the Minister at the Ministry of Education and Science, Ms. Ljubica Karamandi Popchevski welcomed all participants to Skopje, thanked the European Commission for its support and wished all participants a successful Research and Innovation meeting. On behalf of the European Commission (DG Research and Innovation, Directorate for International Cooperation), Mr. Bernhard Fabianek called the present Research and Innovation meeting historic in view of the European Commission's new enlargement strategy. According to Mr. Fabianek, this new strategy has the character of a "game changer" because it offers the Western Balkan countries a perspective of EU membership. Effectively, this means that reinforced actions have to be taken to achieve significant progress in research and innovation.

As representative of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), Mr. Miroslav Veskovc emphasised that the JRC takes a cross-sectoral perspective when it comes to research and innovation. Science is not regarded as a means by itself but as a basis for policies. Thus, it is important for the Western Balkan countries to align their research priorities with their economic priorities and policies, notably through the formulation of research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation. For instance, applied science in fields such as energy efficiency, renewable energies or environmental technologies can be used by other sectors across the economy. JRC can assist the Western Balkan countries when implementing such a cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary approach.

Smart specialisation in the context of R&I capacity building

Formulating research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation is important not just for innovation but strategically because smart specialisation touches wider aspects of economic development, governance, or transparency. Thus, smart specialisation affects all six flagship initiatives of the new EU enlargement strategy. Western Balkan countries should thus consider smart specialisation as an important activity with built-in effects on other political priorities even beyond research and innovation. JRC concluded an agreement with DG NEAR to support the smart specialisation process in accession countries, building on

JRC's five-year experience on smart specialisation within the EU. Due to this experience, there is a conceptual framework that facilitates the development of such strategies in the Western Balkan countries.

The smart specialisation roadmap is on track in the Western Balkans. In Albania, fields of interest to be considered in the draft smart specialisation strategy include information and communication technology services, tourism, and energy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the upcoming preparation of a draft smart specialisation strategy will follow the four broad priorities of information and communication technology, food production, energy, and creative industries, while the Republic of Srpska is already in the process of adopting a smart specialisation strategy. In Kosovo^{*}, several relevant strategies exist that can be integrated in the future process of smart specialisation which should integrate the pre-existing sectoral strategies into an overarching strategic document. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will draft a smart specialisation strategy in 2019. Montenegro is currently embarking upon the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process while in Serbia, the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process has started. Western Balkan countries' smart specialisation teams will participate in an upcoming JRC training in Ljubljana on April 11-12, 2018 which will assist Montenegro and Serbia in pursuing their Entrepreneurial Discovery Processes and help the other countries prepare further steps.

Moreover, participants agreed that it is important that Western Balkan countries align their research priorities for their participation in Horizon 2020 with their priorities in using IPA funds.

Development of regional research infrastructures based on smart specialisation and industry cooperation

Regarding the ongoing efforts to implement the South-East European International Institute for Sustainable Technologies (SEEIIST), various options for the purpose and operation of the institute's facilities were discussed. The decision on which option to pursue further will be taken shortly. Further discussions will have to deal with a range of scientific, political, and economic questions. The next steps will be to seek agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency on training and with the European Commission on the detailed design of the project in terms of technical details, scientific aspects, and the institute's business plan. An important step will be the discussion of funding scenarios to be decided on in the SEEIIST Steering Committee.

The Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union supports the setup of SEEIIST which will be expressed in a memorandum of cooperation to be signed by the countries' prime ministers. Thereafter, a political decision on support by the European Commission will be thought. The European Commission could facilitate the process between stakeholders and potentially support preparatory work.

^{*} This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Conclusions and summary of the preparatory tasks for the Steering Platform meeting / Ministerial Meeting, Brussels, June 25-26, 2018

Participants agreed on the following issues to be forwarded to discussion at the upcoming Western Balkans Steering Platform meeting and Ministerial Meeting:

- Western Balkan countries' active participation in the Programme Committees of Horizon 2020 is important, given the perspective of EU membership highlighted by the European Commission's new enlargement strategy. Western Balkan ministers might wish to consider writing a joint letter to the European Commission proposing full voting rights in the Programme Committees to contribute to the discussions undertaken in the committees.
- There is a need for cooperation on training and capacity building efforts such as specific trainings for proposal writing, notably for the participation of Western Balkan researchers and entities in Horizon 2020. Western Balkan countries can ask the European Commission for support measures but will have to define their needs precisely.
- A need for identifying thematic research priorities including social sciences and humanities is acknowledged. These research priorities should be aligned with the Western Balkan countries' economic policies and priorities. The formulation of research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation provides a strategic and systemic opportunity to align priorities.
- COST actions provide an important opportunity for networking between researchers from the Western Balkan countries and EU Member States and have a positive impact not just by facilitating the establishment of networks and relationships between researchers, but also by enabling them to be invited to joint proposals with researchers from EU Member States for Horizon 2020 calls.

Upcoming meetings:

The European Commission looks forward to organising the Western Balkans Steering Platform in Brussels in June 25, 2018. This meeting will be held back to back with the Ministerial Meeting and the Steering Platform on Education and Training (June 25-26, 2018). The next Western Balkans Research and Innovation meeting is envisaged to take place spring 2019. The venue will be communicated in due time.

Important logistic note for draft conclusions:

Minutes and conclusions are sent for feedback to all participants by April 13, 2018. Deadline for feedback by the participants is **April 19, 2018**. After that, minutes and conclusions are considered final.

The minutes of the R&I meeting (after approval by the EC and all participants) will be made available only to SP members in a restricted website area by May 2018 at <https://wbc-rti.info>. The conclusions of the R&I meeting will be published separately and made available for public at <https://wbc-rti.info>.