



### Summary of the Panel

## “The prospects of mobility driven Research and Innovation: How to strengthen Western Balkans integration into European Research Area?”

### Tirana Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF) 2023

15 October 2023 Tirana, Rogner Hotel, 13:00 – 14:30

On October 15, 2023, Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV) hosted the panel “The prospects of mobility driven Research and Innovation: How to strengthen Western Balkans integration into European Research Area?” part of the 2023 Civil Society and Think Tank Forum of Berlin Process, bringing together representatives from civil society organizations, universities, research centers and other stakeholders in Western Balkans and European Union. The panel was directed towards reflecting on how to strengthen the integration of the region into the European Research Area, ensuring the Western Balkan countries not only align with but also actively collaborate with their European peers in pioneering progressive initiatives.

Mr Elvin Gjevori, Director General, Parliamentary Institute of the Assembly of Albania moderated the panel discussion, which started with a keynote by Mrs. Albana Tole, the Deputy Minister of Education and Sports in Albania on behalf of the Minister of Science and Sports, Mrs. Ogerta Manastirliu.

In her remarks, Ms. Tole emphasized the importance of education, scientific research, and innovation in promoting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans (WB6). She added that Albania is focusing on building an ecosystem and enhancing its legal frameworks for higher education and strategic research, including participation in EU framework programs. Furthermore, the country aims to strengthen the connection between national priorities, increase funding for education and innovation, and is also working on finalizing smart specialization strategies, supporting new programs through the National Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation, and internationalizing scientific and technological cooperation among higher education institutions. Ms. Tole mentioned the pledge of the Albanian Government to increase investment in research and innovation up to 1% of GDP by 2023 envisaged in the recently approved Strategy for Science and Research.

Ms. Blerjana Bino, SCiDEV’s Executive Director underlined core messages and recommendations on strengthening mobility driven research and innovation in the region, resulting from the Thematic Working Group on Mobility. While sharing key recommendations, Ms Bino brought to the fore the core message for political leaders and stakeholders to “finance and support the ecosystem of research and innovation in WB6 cooperation within the WB and with the EU for sustained economic growth and resilient societies and accelerating integration of the region in the European Research Area”. The New Growth Plan of the European Commission for #WB6 to be unveiled at the Leaders’ Summit, the revision of the Common Regional Market, the upcoming preparation for the next phase of Horizon Europe, the IPA funds planning and the new political momentum of renewed interest in enlargement are key moments to capitalize and advocate for increased focus and investment on R&I. She ended by underlining that to strengthen the regions integration in European Research Area, clear political will, commitment, and policy actions on the side of the governments are needed as well as increased role of the parliament in holding governments accountable to maintaining their commitments with the Berlin Process and most importantly to their citizens. More



financial support from EU and BP participating countries it must be linked to more accountability on the use of funds and good governance. CSOs must continue their shared advocacy agenda, pressing stakeholders and initiating follow up actions following the results of the CSF2023.

Ms. Lisa Cowey, Knowledge Transfer Senior Expert, Member of TWG on Mobility, while commenting on the relevance of the recommendations, underscored the importance of access to research infrastructures throughout the #WB6 and the need for increased visibility and accessibility within the region, as well as the importance of sharing experiences and best practices through maximizing human capital and resources. Ms. Cowey also focused on how to make mobility within the region and in the EU more attractive for young researchers particularly considering the hidden barriers within universities. She noted that research shows that young researchers often feel undervalued and disconnected from professors and senior researchers and face difficulties in getting approvals from high level management within universities. In hosting institutions while they encounter challenges related to mobility and infrastructure within the region. Thus, it is imperative to address and dismantle these hidden barriers for young researchers and create a more enabling environment within universities for mobility.

Further on, the panel continued with a dedicated discussion on how to strengthen Western Balkans integration into the European Research Area.

Mr. Bernhard Fabianek, Senior Expert for the Western Balkans at the Horizon Europe Association Unit in DG Research and Innovation, appreciated the work done by civil society organisations and the valuable contribution in informing EC work in the region. He underscored the need to demonstrate the tangible impact of research and innovation initiatives to local communities. Rather than pursuing science solely for its own sake, the focus should be on promoting and proving the possibilities and benefits that can be achieved through collaborative efforts in the field of research and innovation. He added that evidence-based policy making is essential to ensure that decisions are grounded in undeniable evidence and thorough research, while the involvement of various stakeholders, including businesses, should be considered significantly in this process.

Speaking of mobility driven research and innovation as the key tool to move forward and meet new demands of technological developments, Ms. Sanja Damjanovic, Scientists, GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research, Darmstadt, underlined the need to deal with brain drain, make evidence-based policies and ensure a wide-open dialogue with the business sector and the civil society. She added that investing in research infrastructures and making it a national priority is key to also attracting young researchers and professionals that will support the research and innovation ecosystem to thrive.

In continuation, Mr. Lucian Brujan, Berlin Process Coordinator for Education, Science and Innovation, German Academy of Science Leopoldina, raised attention on the strategic aspects of the Berlin Process, particularly on the importance of fully associating the WB6 with the EU programs and frameworks in research and innovation. He emphasized the need for a cooperative approach, prioritizing regional common interests over personal agendas. Mr. Brujan also added that empowering the diaspora and involving them in initiatives is seen as an investment in people, fostering brain circulation, ensuring continuity, and finding solutions to some of the key challenges that stakeholders working in the field of research and innovation in the WB are facing. He called for more political will and commitment from the leaders to increase funding and dedicate certain budgets from the instruments of pre-accession (IPA) towards science, research and innovation.

To provide an overview on the smart specialization strategies (S3) in Albania, Ms. Linda Pustina, Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister of Albania and Head of Albanian S3 Team, highlighted the progress made and how S3



interrelates with mobility driven R&I. She mentioned that the S3 journey is nearly complete and underscored the need to plan for the upcoming years while aiming to engage all stakeholders and institutions to maximize the impact of the strategy. Ms. Pustina also emphasized the importance of implementing the quadruple helix model, which involves collaboration between academia, research industry, government, and civil society. She underscored the importance of involving actors from various ministries and working to establish open research and innovation centers and shared lab spaces in Albania and the region as key components of the S3 strategy in the country.

In conclusion of the event, the final remarks were delivered by Mr. Anastas Mishev, Professor of Computer Science and Engineering, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University. He focused on the importance of accessibility, openness, and open science, emphasizing connectivity and regional cooperation, while calling for continued support for regional collaboration and the allocation of regional funds in the field of research and innovation. Mr. Mishev pointed out that open science receives significant investment from the EU, and it's crucial for the EU to persist in supporting such areas of intervention and include the WB6 in these initiatives. The WB6 needs access to these infrastructures and should be fully integrated and have ownership over these initiatives.

As reflected by the work of the TWG on Mobility, and this panel discussion organized within CSF 2023, research and innovation and knowledge transfer in the WB have the transformative potential of accelerating sustainable growth and convergence of the economies of the region with the EU. This potential can be attained only if the pressing challenges of R&I and mobility-driven innovation in the Western Balkans are addressed timely, to catalyze regional cooperation and facilitate integration into the EU, including the European Research Area.

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