

Conclusions of meeting of Steering Platform on Research for Western Balkan Countries Liblice, 28 May 2009

The Steering Platform for Research for the Western Balkan Countries met in Liblice on 28 May 2009. The Platform was co-chaired by the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union – which hosted it – the Republic of Albania on behalf of the Western Balkan Countries, and the European Commission.

The presentations of the recent developments regarding cooperation on research and technological development in and with the Western Balkan Countries acknowledged the trend of growing cooperation with the European Commission, the European Union Member States, the FP7 Associated States, as well as with other stakeholders, and in particular with COST, EUREKA, the Regional Cooperation Council and UNESCO. Actions have been taken in the last six months on two levels: encouraging and increasing common research cooperation as well as support and effort to strengthen the research capacity in the region. As we are now facing the economic crisis impacts, the risk of decreasing investments in research and development and innovation should be avoided, also because these investments are largely aimed at overcoming the present economic crisis and steering stabilization process and growth.

The Platform welcomed, in particular, the willingness to strengthen the cooperation at regional level under the auspices of the Regional Cooperation Council.

The Platform is very supportive of the newly established Strategic Forum for International S&T Cooperation (SFIC) and encourages the Western Balkan Countries to nominate their delegates and participate actively in the work of the Forum.

The Commission presented the statistics on participation of Western Balkan Countries in the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration activities (FP7) followed by a presentation of the study on barriers to research cooperation by the WBC-INCO.NET project. The presentations and discussion demonstrated a number of important aspects of research cooperation with and in the Balkan Region. The results of the WBCs participation are mixed: strong participation in Cooperation – in particular in ICT, Food, Agriculture, Fisheries and Biotechnology (FAB) and Transport themes, but generally very weak in the SP People. With respect to the SP Ideas, it was acknowledged that the participation in the latter needs to be considered separately and on its own merits. The share of SME's participation is also too low. The data also demonstrated the preference of WBCs for coordination and support actions over collaborative research projects. The findings of the study on barriers in WBCs and Turkey disclosed that the major barrier to cooperation and the EC Framework Programmes related to the management and administrative conditions and hence the importance of further simplification. The lack of critical mass and infrastructures, including research equipment, is also seen as a barrier to compete on the basis of scientific excellence. In this context, the WBCs reiterated the importance of progressive research potential building and repeated

the request to include special calls for WBCs into the Capacities – Specific Research Potential Programme. The Platform discussed the study and the statistics and acknowledged that the results should be carefully considered and could certainly contribute to improving the research capacity in the Balkan region. The Platform also takes note of the conclusions of the EUFORDIA Conference aiming at making research cooperation under the Framework Programme more effective.

Following the discussion on mobility of researchers, the Platform asked to actively consider how to improve the participation of WBCs in the FP7 Specific Programme on People. Visa and stay permits are still important obstacles to mobility of researchers. The need to build further upon human capital and balanced “brain circulation” was also emphasized. The Platform welcomed the recent work of the Task Force on Fostering and Building Human Capital under the Regional Cooperation Council and will follow up the improvement on interface between research and building human capital. The programme presented by Albania on brain gain was seen as a good practice on how to reintegrate the scientists in their countries.

With respect to research infrastructure the Platform expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the conference on “*Research infrastructures and the Regional dimension of ERA*” (24-25 March 2009) held in Prague under the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union which, amongst others, highlighted the regional aspects of the development of large EU infrastructures in new, small and associated countries. The Platform is looking forward to the work to be undertaken in the 2008 Regional Issues Working Group. The Platform is committed to cooperate wherever it can, to ensure that regional partner facilities, distributed infrastructures and e-infrastructures will be duly considered in addition to large pan-European research infrastructures, in order to

reduce the imbalanced distribution in Europe and increase the possibility of brain circulation leading to reduction of unemployment.

The Platform takes due note of the Joint Statement on Developing a Regional Strategy on Research and Development for the Western Balkans adopted at the Ministerial meeting held in Sarajevo on 24 April 2009. Considering the identification of regional research priorities, through a high standard methodology, in the frame of the WBC-INCO-NET project, the Platform supports the idea that emphasis should be given to the ICT, Agro-food, Health, Transport and Environment themes when setting priorities in the FP7 Management Committees and their future work programmes. The Platform confirmed its willingness to contribute to the elaboration of the regional dimension of the research policy with the Regional Cooperation Council and encouraged the idea that this initiative would also be supported by an IPA project. In general, the Platform encourages the Western Balkan Countries to use IPA in synergy with FP7.