

## Conclusions

Meeting of Steering Platform on Research for

Western Balkan Countries

Zagreb, 11-12 December 2013

**The Steering Platform on Research for the Western Balkan Countries met in Zagreb on 11-12 December 2013. The meeting was co-chaired by the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Croatia - who hosted the event and co-chaired on behalf of the Western Balkan Countries and the European Commission.**

Croatia opened the meeting welcoming all participants to their country and underlining the importance of the Steering Platform also for the implementation of the Regional Strategy on Research and Innovation adopted in Zagreb on 25 October 2013. Croatia stressed that as Member State it remained committed to continuing the cooperation with the Balkan countries and supporting them in their path to the European Union. The Lithuanian Presidency welcomed very much the opportunity to participate in the Steering Platform which they considered as a very good tool to prepare for EU membership, one which was unfortunately not available when Lithuania was a candidate country. They welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the work by informing the members of the Platform on the latest developments in research and innovation, in particular, the adoption of the Horizon 2020 package and the outcomes of the Conferences held during their Presidency. The EC welcomed the opportunity to meet with all the Balkan countries together with other stakeholders which was a valuable occasion to take stock of actions taken or to be taken. With the adoption of Horizon 2020 and the launch of the first calls in the 2014/2015 work programmes, it is clear that efforts should be concentrated on the preparation for participation in the new Union programme for research and innovation. In view of the end of the WBC- INCO.NET project, this meeting was an occasion to reflect openly and jointly on the future needs of the Steering Platform.

The Platform members thanked the EC for the preparatory work on the procedure for association to Horizon 2020 and were pleased to learn that by now all enlargement countries had expressed interest in becoming associated to Horizon 2020. Several enlargement countries, however, expressed concern about the level of the estimated financial contributions, given the limited possibilities under the Pre-Accession Instrument (IPA II) for reimbursement of part of the contribution. All enlargement countries confirmed they were in close contact with their National IPA coordinator to ensure that research and innovation was retained as a priority sector in the Country Strategy Papers. With

the support of the WBC.INCO.NET, preparations on the design and use of a Smart Specialization Strategy were also progressing. The Balkan countries were encouraged to use the strategy as guidance for participation in Horizon 2020 and use of IPA II.

The Steering Platform took note of the many and diverse actions taken by the Member States towards the Balkans and notably through cooperation in research projects, exchange programmes and concluding bilateral agreements. Several Balkan countries informed on actions and strategies focusing on innovation. The actions taken by the JRC confirmed its commitment towards the implementation of the EU Danube Strategy. UNESCO informed on the work it had conducted on S&T statistics in the Region and its willingness to support, with other stakeholders, the need to improve the statistics. The Platform took note of the outcomes of the SEE.ERA.NET Plus project and was invited to suggest a final action with the remaining funding. The Platform also welcomed the cooperation opportunities offered under the M-ERA.NET project on material sciences. The Platform was informed about the latest developments on COST and expressed the hope that membership for all the Balkans would soon become a reality. The Platform was informed about the final activities within WBC-INCO.NET project, in particular the announcement of the WBC-INCO.NET final publication “Western Balkan Region – R&D and Innovation Systems in Focus” and preparations for the Final conference (March 27/28, 2014) and brokerage event (March 28, 2014) in Vienna.

The Platform took note of the Western Balkan Strategy on R&D for Innovation and welcomed the useful analysis and vision to improve the R&I capacity both at national and regional level. The Platform inquired on the funding necessary for the implementation and, in particular, for the governance structure, including the technical assistance facility called WISE (Western Balkan Innovation Structure Exercise). In this context the Platform underlined the overarching importance and role of the Regional Cooperation Council. The Platform welcomed the suggestion from the RCC to propose further synergy between the role of the RCC on R&I and the newly established WISE facility and the future status and role of the Steering Platform. The Steering Platform took note of the commitment of the Central Europe Initiative (CEI) to support the strengthening of the research infrastructure in the Balkan region with Horizon 2020 actions.

The Platform welcomed a number of new studies presented during the meeting and particularly the WBC INNO project on strengthening transfer of technology capacities at universities. This was a good demonstration of how other programmes (i.e. Tempus) contribute to the key ERA priorities. The Platform noted that preparations for the kick-off meeting of the Danube.Inco.Net were on track and that preparations on the Danube Regional Research and Innovation

Fund (DRRIF) were progressing in the right direction. The Steering Platform appreciated the presentation on the newly adopted Eastern European Partnership and its endeavor to strengthen cooperation also through research and innovation. It also welcomed the information given by the Lithuanian Presidency on the Vilnius Declaration, which was another useful source and tool in preparing Horizon 2020 projects. The Platform welcomed the presentation of the activities undertaken by the Centre for advanced studies in South East Europe (CAS-SEE), a new organisation established at the University in Rijeka (Croatia) which conducts research on democracy challenges in the region. The organisation was encouraged to consider, in cooperation with entities from the Balkan Region, research opportunities under Horizon 2020, as social sciences and humanities (SSH) is an important cross-cutting challenge. The Steering Platform welcomed the presentation of the study on evaluation culture on government procurement in S.E.E conducted within EVAL-INNO project and advised that the recommendations be carefully studied and applied at national level.

In conclusion, this Steering Platform, in principle the last one, once more demonstrated its usefulness in sharing information and best practices and offering networking opportunities on research and innovation. In the light of this, all members of the Steering Platform were asked to consider options for continuing the Platform's work, in the same constructive spirit and with the same commitment, in time for the final WBC.INCO.NET conference in Vienna on 27-28 March 2014.