

Operational Conclusions

WBC Steering Platform – Belgrade, 6 December 2012

The Steering Platform on Research for the Western Balkan Countries met in Belgrade on 6 December 2012. The meeting was co-chaired by the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Serbia - who hosted the event on behalf of the Western Balkan Countries and the European Commission.

Serbia welcomed all participants and expressed its gratitude at hosting the Platform meeting for the second time. It also took advantage of the occasion to inform the members of the Platform about its national research policy which focused on actions to strengthen the links between science and industry as a way to boost the economy. Serbia was also grateful for the supporting role of the Platform in achieving its objectives. The Cyprus Presidency welcomed the opportunity to learn more about work in the Balkan Region and underlined the importance of research and innovation, in particular in times of economic crises. The European Commission thanked the co-chairs for the organization of the meeting which is always a good opportunity to inform and learn about latest developments on research and innovation, both at EU level and in the Region. At EU level, the priority was the discussions on the next research programme Horizon 2020 while work on the realization of the European Research Area and the Innovation Union also actively continued. On international cooperation a new strategy was adopted aiming at more strategic cooperation with the international partners. The EC recommended all enlargement countries to take this strategy into consideration in the development and implementation of their international cooperation strategies.

The Steering Platform welcomed the variety of actions taken by all Platform members since the last meeting in Tirana in June 2012. It took note that several countries (Member States and Balkans) had organized bilateral and/or regional research cooperation opportunities (including under the [SEE.ERA.NET](#) plus project) and concluded bilateral S&T agreements. The Platform took note that most policy actions taken by the Balkan countries related to stimulating innovation. The Platform welcomed the continued commitment from the Joint Research Centre for the enlargement countries and the visits organized to the Region, as well as the continued commitment from Central European Initiative (CEI), Cost, Eureka and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The Platform welcomed, in particular, the presentation by the RCC of the South East Europe 2020 Strategy which will certainly offer more opportunities for strengthening cooperation at Regional level. The Platform also welcomed the latest information on the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region by the Coordinator for the priority area on “Knowledge Society”. In this context, the Platform welcomed the fact that the FP7 Work programme 2013 included a call for a Danube INCO.NET.

The Platform appreciated very much the presentation by the Cyprus Presidency on the latest developments on Horizon 2020. The WBC members of the Platform expressed interest in obtaining more information on the outcome of the General Partial Agreement (GPA) adopted at the Competitiveness Council on 10 October 2012. The presentation by Poland on the outcome of the discussions on widening participation in Horizon 2020 was also much appreciated and informative for the enlargement countries. From the exchange of views it became clear that besides specific measures to encourage participation in Horizon 2020, there is also a strong correlation between successful uptake of EU research projects and measures taken at national level to strengthen the research and innovation capacity, and in particular efforts with respect to increasing the level of investment in research. In this context, the importance of

good synergy between Horizon 2020 and the Structural Funds and the Pre-Accession Instrument (IPA) was mentioned as well as becoming familiar with the Smart Specialization Strategy (S3). The Platform welcomed the organization by the WBC-INCO.NET of a training session on S3 in Belgrade in Spring 2013. The Platform was also informed that the WBC-INCO.NET, represented in this case by TURBO (Turkish liaison office) had been successful in convincing the European Parliament to introduce an amendment to the draft IPA II regulation, explicitly adding the funding possibilities for S&T capacity building. It was now important that all Platform members call upon the support of their authorities in the ongoing discussions both in the EP and the Council to secure the adoption of the amendment.

The Platform very much welcomed the data presented on the successful participation of all WBCs and Turkey in FP7 so far (based on E-Corda statistics until 30 November 2012) and the more qualitative assessment provided by the WBC-Inco.Net. The current levels of participation in FP7 underlined the importance to start preparations for Horizon 2020 as soon as possible, in particular on participation in effective collaboration projects, on research on societal challenges and on Marie Skłodowska Curie actions. In this context, the Platform took note of the importance of preparing for the (re) structuring of the National Contact Points in line with Horizon 2020 and the EU standards on support services. The EC reminded participants how important it was also to attend the preparatory meetings organized for all NCPs from the Member States and the Associated Countries.

The Platform took note of the outline presented on the procedure and timing for association to Horizon 2020. All Balkan countries asked for an Ad Hoc meeting at regional level to be more informed about the terms and conditions of association, in particular on the financial contribution given the current absorption capacity and budget increase for Horizon 2020.

The Platform took note of the importance to take actions to boost the Bio-Economy at EU level and welcomed the support from the CEI which informed the Platform on its actions on advanced bio-fuels. The CEI also offered support to participate in the proposed bio-based public-private partnership which will offer additional cooperation opportunities for the Region in this important field. The Platform welcomed the presentation of the COST action on Green Engineering Camp which illustrated very well the need for international and interdisciplinary networking to secure sustainable development of natural resources.

Commented [JG1]: Did the CEI offer the support or the Platform?

The Platform welcomed the comprehensive debriefing on the state of implementation of the IPA project (implemented by the RCC and the World Bank) aiming at developing a regional strategy on research and innovation in the Western Balkans. The draft nature of the strategy and proposed actions was underlined. Some questions related to the estimated funding for the proposed regional actions. The Platform asked to be kept informed on a regular basis in particular on the possible future actions that will be proposed to avoid duplication and ensure coherent governance.

The Platform took note of the Joint Declaration adopted at the South East European Ministerial Round Table in Sarajevo on 23 November 2012, co-organized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Unesco Regional Bureau in Venice. The Platform asked for good coordination on the implementation of the recommendations to avoid overlap and duplication of work. With respect to work to be undertaken on Infrastructures, the importance of attending the meetings of the European Strategic Forum on Research Institutes (ESFRI) was stressed as well as the need to improve the quality of the statistics on S&T. The Platform expressed interest in work aiming at improving science communications.

The Platform welcomed the presentation of the EVAL-INNO project which emphasised the importance of ensuring open, transparent and fair evaluation of research programmes and projects as a way to increase scientific excellence. The EC encouraged the Balkan countries to take full advantage of the training offered under this project which was fully in line with the ERA objectives.

In conclusion, all members very much appreciated the work of the Steering Platform, which had really become a reference for boosting and enhancing cooperation on R&I in the Balkan Region and preparing for accession to the EU. The Platform called upon the EC to carry on and build upon the work achieved by the WBC-INCO.NET even after the end of the project (in principle end of 2013). This was particularly relevant for the Newsletter and the WBC-INCO.NET website which contained very useful up-to-date information. The EC fully agreed on the useful role the Platform meetings played, but considered that it should also be used to further steer future work, since information can also be obtained directly in the relevant ERA governance bodies (hence the importance of attending those meetings). In response to several interventions during the meeting to continue the work of the Steering Platform beyond the duration of the WBC-INCO.NET project, the EC promised to look at the possibilities.

Montenegro expressed an interest in co-chairing the next meeting in the first half of 2013, together with the upcoming EU Irish Presidency and the European Commission. Information on this will be announced in due time.