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New approaches for
RTD co-operation in the
European Research Area:

**Regional and European wide
co-operation with Southeast
Europe**

The SEE-ERA.NET-Consortium
Conference, Zagreb, December 15th and 16th, 2005

Conclusions

The integration of the Southeast European Countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, FYRo Macedonia and Serbia and Montenegro into the growing European Research Area (ERA) is of utmost political and economic importance both for the Southeast European region and for the European Union. At the 2003 EU-summit in Thessaloniki, the region was confirmed the accession perspective by giving these countries (often referred to as West Balkan countries) the status of Potential Candidate countries. In the meantime Croatia is acknowledged as Candidate country.

In order to support the integration of the West Balkan countries, in 2004 a consortium representing organisations from 14 European countries including all West Balkan countries was formed to launch the Southeast European ERA-NET (SEE-ERA.NET). This initiative is funded within the 6th European R&D Framework Programme. Its primary aim is to develop and to implement scenarios for a co-ordination of nationally funded co-operation programmes between EU-Member States, Accession Countries and the Potential Candidate Countries.

In order to share and to discuss the preliminary analytic results of the work of the SEE-ERA.NET consortium, to raise the awareness for the opportunities of a much closer co-operation with the West Balkan countries in R&D and to discuss scenarios for accelerating the integration of the region into the European Research Area, experts from all over Europe representing national, European and international organisations were invited by the Croatian Ministry for Science, Education and Sports to participate in and contribute to this conference.

The main conclusions of the conference are:

Perspectives and expectations

1. There is unanimous agreement of all participants on the high priority of the economic, social and political integration of the West Balkan countries in the European Union. However, it was stated, that the accession process requires tremendous, coherent and complementary national, regional and European efforts.
2. Supporting the West Balkan countries on their way to knowledge based economies, R&D is considered an important prerequisite and a facilitator of national growth and stability as well as transnational cohesion. The respective political awareness of this has to be strengthened in most of the West Balkan countries and set into concrete action based on a clear and sustainable political strategy. The ongoing reform of the academic sector and the achievements were greatly acknowledged.

Opportunities and Chances

3. The significant R&D potential of the region in terms of excellent scientists and internationally acknowledged institutions is considered a main pillar of co-operation. There are a number of opportunities, both for the countries of the region, the region as a whole and the EU-Member States and Accession countries to be exploited by a closer co-operation.

Co-operation as an asset

4. The regional dimension of the integration process was highlighted. There is a need for coherent strategies among the West Balkan countries in order to achieve synergies by setting up a concept for a research area incorporating specialisation, networking and joint institutions.
5. Highlighting the opportunities of the integration of the West Balkan countries into the ERA, the political and scientific awareness of the challenges related to this process should be raised in EU Member States and the EU Commission. Building on previous close contacts and making the best use of bilateral and EU programmes, coherent activities of the Members States and the EU Commission should be devoted
 - to inform the scientific communities in the EU Member States on the new chances for (re)establishing a close co-operation,
 - to facilitate contacts building on bilateral project oriented mobility and to set up European research networks with the institutions of the West Balkan countries,
 - to provide (preferential) access to R&D infrastructure and to support infrastructure development in the West Balkan countries in specific areas,

- to contribute to the development of innovative small and medium enterprises as a main pillar of national innovation systems by integrating them into collaborative research. To establish Innovation Relay Centres and to link them to the existing European network, and
 - to foster the active participation of the West Balkan countries in the European Community R&D programmes.
6. Joint multilateral activities of the EU-Member States, Accession Countries and West Balkan countries based on their close bilateral relations shall contribute to a co-ordinated and coherent integration of the region. These should include joint calls that support targeted R&D projects as well as accompanying measures, for instance joint use of databases for evaluation purposes, brokerage events, information and dissemination activities, training on institutional level. Existing legal and administrative barriers should be removed.

Requirements and Challenges

7. It was pointed out that the West Balkan countries, the EU-Members States and Accession Countries are faced with a number of challenges for a successful implementation of integrating the “Region” into the European Research Area. Of utmost importance is the establishment of an attractive R&D infrastructure. This will contribute to a closer networking and improved co-operation with leading European institutions and at the same time help to (re)attract leading scientists to the West Balkan countries. It was stressed that infrastructure development is an important element of R&D policy that has to be based on national priority settings and requires first of all national investments, including appropriate budgets.
8. The participants welcome the Austrian initiative to introduce the strategic importance of infrastructure development in the West Balkan countries on one hand and of access to the European infrastructures on the other hand within the frame of ESFRI – the European Strategic Forum on Research Infrastructure. By planning the perspectives of the European development of R&D infrastructure, the West Balkan countries should be taken into consideration.
9. It is recommended, that the EU and the West Balkan countries agree on including R&D into the CARDS programme of the EU and its successor IPA, aimed at assisting the West Balkan countries in the EU-integration process. Activities to be funded might cover infrastructure development as well as institution and capacity building including training elements in accordance with the European Structural, Cohesion and Social Funds. Additional contributions of EU-member states and European and international organisations in-line with the national strategies are most welcome.
10. A central element for the re-integration of most of the West Balkan countries is to overcome the still existing digital divides, requiring high speed internet access to the R&D institutions in the “Region” and access to electronic libraries. This includes the basic technical infrastructure, campus networks, a suitable regional organisational model to assure the connectivity to GÉANT – the European Electronic Scientific Network - and a model for accessing existing scientific eLibraries under preferential conditions. This could be realised in a Regional CARDS-

Programme. It is recommended that the West Balkan countries approach the European Delegations or the European Agency for Reconstruction in the respective countries with this issues.

11. The participants recommended that the European institutions acknowledge the West Balkan countries as Potential Candidates and Croatia as Candidate in the European RTD Framework Programme. Based on the experiences in the ongoing 6th Framework Programme, appropriate instruments should be developed to strengthen the participation in the framework programme. This might include integration in ongoing projects, enabling networking, supporting capacity building, introducing specific training activities or launching specific calls in the thematic priorities according to the strengths of the West Balkan countries.
12. Furthermore, the West Balkan countries should continue building-up an efficient consultancy system based on National Contact Points, the promotion of their academic strengths in the EU and the setting-up of own instruments that support European networking and the participation in EU-programmes.
13. Particular attention should be given to the development of human potential in R&D in the West Balkan countries and its re-integration into ERA. In this respect, the introduction of “building of human capital” as new core objective of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe was recommended. Respective joint activities of EU-Member States, Accession Countries and the West Balkan countries should be foreseen.
14. Most of the researchers and scientists are employed at universities in the WBCs. Therefore, the reform of Higher Education systems and universities in the region has to be closely linked to future joint activities of the SEE-ERA.NET as well as activities of other multilateral R&D actors in the regions. The support of the implementation of the Bologna Process should be continued.
15. Of highest priority would be to introduce a smart visa regime for scientists of the West Balkan countries.
16. Existing “people oriented programmes” of the EU such as Marie Curie should pay more attention to the needs of the region. One option is to introduce sur-place fellowships. In addition, there is a strong need for including special training elements in particular on science management on institutional level. The development of the National Contact Points in the West Balkan countries should be strengthened by building on the experience of the successful ERA-WEST BALKAN project. Twinning models of established NCPs in the EU with the new ones in the West Balkan.

What comes next?

17. During the conference, the problem of an adequate data base for R&D and related S&T activities in the West Balkan countries was highlighted. With regard to the ongoing statistical work of EU member countries, representatives of the European commission were invited to examine the possibility of giving the West Balkan countries an observer status in the appropriate Eurostat committee.

18. The activities of SEE-ERA.NET are acknowledged as playing a key role for coordinating bilateral activities, and even going beyond by taking relevant activities of European and international organisations into consideration and developing scenarios for a co-ordinated approach. The ongoing exploratory talks between the consortium and the relevant organisations will be continued. According to preliminary results, the interest of the EU-Joint Research Centre in joint activities with the SEE-ERA.NET consortium is highly welcome. It was also reported that UNESCO-ROSTE was open for discussions on complementary strategies, and might be an interesting partner for joint activities in the near future. The integrative role of SEE-ERA.NET for establishing a sustainable network of institutions from EU Member States, Accession Countries and West Balkan countries was highlighted. It was recommended to consider the ERA-NET plus – mechanism, which is under discussion for the 7th European Framework Programme, as a tool for increasing the efficiency of the joint activities of the SEE-ERA.NET consortium.
19. Based on a Greek proposal it was agreed to set-up a *Task Force* for developing and implementing a scenario for introducing R&D to the CARDS-Programme and its successor IPA. The *Task Force* will come up with a proposal for respective short-term activities. Contributions of the participants are mostly welcome and should be submitted to George Bonas (bonas@gsrt.gr). Other urgent issues might also be dealt with by this *Task Force*.
20. In view of the conclusions of this conference the forthcoming Incoming Austrian EU-Presidency was cordially thanked for their initiative to give the integration of the West Balkan countries into the European Research Area a priority. Of particular importance is the EU-Commission's proposal to setting-up a "Steering Platform" on high political level in order to follow-up this process and develop scenarios for its improvement.

Zagreb, December 16, 2005

Project Partners

Albania	Albanian Ministry of Education and Science
Austria	Ministry for Education, Science and Culture in Austria Centre for Social Innovation in Austria, SEE-ERA.NET Co-ordinator
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina
Bulgaria	Bulgarian Ministry for Education and Science
Croatia	Ministry of Science, Education and Sports in Croatia
France	Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France
Germany	Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany International Bureau of the Ministry of Education and Research, Germany
Greece	Greek Ministry of Development: General Secretariat for Research & Technology
Hungary	Hungarian National Office of Research and Technology
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Macedonian Ministry of Education and Science
Montenegro	Ministry of Education and Science in Montenegro
Romania	Romanian Ministry of Education and Research
Serbia	Serbian Ministry for Science and Environmental Protection
Slovenia	Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology

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