

INITIAL STATEMENT ON THE HORIZON EUROPE PROPOSAL BY WESTERN BALKAN SIX

Preamble

The Initial Statement on the Horizon Europe Proposal represents the initial joint position of Ministries responsible for Science of the Western Balkan Six on the European Commission proposal for Horizon Europe.

The preparation of the Statement has been facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council which was tasked to communicate the Statement to the relevant European Institutions.

Introduction

The European Commissions' Communication of 6th February 2018 and The Sofia Declaration of 17th May 2018 reaffirm the EU unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans and a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans.

Furthermore, both documents emphasise the need to close the socio-economic gap between the EU and the Western Balkan Six through socio-economic reforms which include further boost of innovation and ensure research and innovation capacity building; and advance integration of the Western Balkans into the existing EU knowledge networks and full integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area.

The research and innovation (R&I) gap between the European Union and the Western Balkans continues to grow. Closing it is essential to ensuring development of excellence in science and high-quality, research-led education. Furthermore, excellence in science and research is essential to changing the growth model of the Western Balkans to an innovation led, value-added, knowledge economy which would contribute to closing the economic divide between Western Balkan and the European Union and ensure that the Western Balkans are ready to withstand the competitiveness pressures within the European Union.

The Framework Programme has been an essential instrument for the Western Balkans in building meaningful research collaborations and creating research networks between the European Union and the Western Balkans, integrating the region into the European Research Area and building its research capacities and strengthening excellence in research across the region. However, there is space for the next generation of the Framework Programme, namely the Horizon Europe, to contribute more effectively to the closing of the gap between the Western Balkans and the European Union and the preparation of the Western Balkans for accession to the European Union.

To this end, the Western Balkan Six propose the following recommendations for consideration ahead of the adoption of the Horizon Europe programme:

- a. We welcome the European Commission's proposal for establishing Horizon Europe with a substantially increased budget. We welcome Horizon Europe objective to stimulate excellence – based competition of research across borders and to bring together the best researchers to collaborate on cutting edge research. Sustaining and further developing excellence in research in the Western Balkans is at the heart of our national research and innovation strategies. In the context of limited financial resources, Horizon Europe is an essential instrument to award existing and stimulate the development of excellent research institutions and best researchers in our region.
- b. We further welcome the broad aims of Horizon Europe to contribute to Europe's ability to face global challenges and address most pressing societal needs which are shared by both the European Unions and the Western Balkans. In particular we see ample opportunities to jointly define missions that would focus research collaboration in the region and with the EU partners towards joint challenges which are particularly accentuated in the Western Balkans.
- c. We emphasise the importance of investing into research infrastructure as a prerequisite to building long-term, sustainable excellence in research. It is in the research infrastructure where the largest divide between the European Union and the Western Balkans exists. Therefore, we underscore the importance of ensuring balanced geographical spread of investment into the research infrastructure across Europe, including to the prospective European Union members, with an aim of addressing the need to developing large scale research infrastructures as a pre-condition for high-level science and creation of a functional research and innovation ecosystems that could attract and retain talent.
- d. Investing into the human resources is as important as investing into the research infrastructure for the development of scientific excellence in the Western Balkans and closing the existing gaps with the European Union. Therefore, we strongly recommend and call upon the EU Member States and EU Institutions to consider introducing portable "Widening European Research Council Grants". Following the success of the MSCA Widening Fellowships we believe introducing a similar widening scheme to European Research Council Grants would contribute significantly to the closing of research and innovation gaps in Europe and between Europe and the Western Balkans.
- e. Bearing in mind the importance of investing into human capital and research infrastructure for the Western Balkans as outlined above, we draw attention to the two existing initiatives in the region which could be funded through the Horizon Europe:
 - e1. In line with the conclusions of the 3rd Joint Science Conference of the Berlin Process convened at the French Académie des sciences – Institut de France in Paris we call for establishment of the Western Balkans Research Foundation as an instrument under Sharing Excellence of Horizon Europe which would award ad personam grants to junior scientists from the Western Balkans to build up excellent research labs and teams in the Western Balkans within a period of five years, while enjoying grant portability¹.
 - e2. The regional initiative to establish a South East European International Institute for Sustainable Technologies (SEEIST), endorsed by Declaration of Intent to establish SEEIST on 25 October 2017 at CERN by Ministers of Science from all Western Balkan Six, as well as Bulgaria and Slovenia. The SEEIST, presently a regional project with its own governance, aims to build a regional research nucleus with the newest technology which would offer a first-class research and have long-term effects on economic growth. The joint facilities of the International Institute for Sustainable Technologies would promote collaboration between science, technology and industry, stimulate the education of young scientists and engineers based on knowledge and technology transfer from European laboratories such as CERN², and by scientific diplomacy promote reconciliation. Ensuring funding through Horizon Europe for SEEIST throughout the process of establishment is essential and could be modelled on the experience of SESAME project³.

f. We welcome the emphasis placed in the new programme on innovation. We encourage innovation to be understood in its broad concept which includes both evolutionary types of innovation, as well as revolutionary types of innovation to ensure that businesses and research institutions across Europe can use the envisaged innovation instruments for strategic growth and job creation. We also emphasise the need for close collaboration between the national innovation funding bodies and programmes and the European Innovation Council. We further emphasise the need for geographically balanced spread of innovation hubs in the scope of the European Institute for Innovation and Technology across Europe, including to the accession region of the Western Balkans, as a pre-condition for development of innovation ecosystem and transition to knowledge-based economy.

g. Without undermining the excellence criteria in the selection of all Horizon Europe projects we call for consideration of additional selection points being awarded to those excellent consortia which bring in "first time" partners into their research projects. To this end a better definition of the term "European Added Value" should be developed. The term "European Added Value" of the Horizon Europe projects could be understood to refer to inclusion of partners which ensure wide geographical coverage, including the coverage of the "widening participants" and the accession region of the Western Balkans.

On "Sharing Excellence"

h. We underline the importance of Sharing Excellence instrument to creating new and strengthening collaborations across the Research and Innovation divide, but emphasise the need to increase their impact and effectiveness to building research excellence and research capacity in the targeted economies, in particular by taking into account more prominently the recommendations of the Advisory Group on Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation⁴ which we fully endorse.

i. We welcome, in particular, the increased budget foreseen with the "Sharing Excellence". To help deliver on the promise of the "Sharing Excellence" instrument, we call for allocating 3% of FP9 resources to this instrument.

j. We in particular recommend careful consideration of means aimed at strengthening the research dimension of *Twinning actions*. We recommend opening the Twinning actions for participation of PhD and Master students in **research roles** and ensuring eligibility of **research costs** of PhD and Master students in Twinning as essential to investing into development of excellence of the young generation of researchers.

k. To increase impact and sustainability of *Twinning actions*, we call for introduction of concrete indicators to measure the expected impact of the Twinning exercise on the target institution. The proposed indicators should address national and regional specificities (societal, cultural, historical, economic, legal) in order to stimulate applicants to carefully address the Twinning's objectives, i.e. strengthening of a defined field of research and taking into consideration the expected impact at national and regional level.

l. With regards to ERA Chairs, we emphasise the need for these actions to make a real, noticeable difference to research institutions and systems. We advocate that successful institutions have greater flexibility in appointment (for instance of younger research leaders), while adhering to the principle of excellence. Additional attention in development of Human Resource strategies for researchers under the European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, from both the European Commission and national authorities' side, should be placed on ensuring the right institutional setting for ERA Chair team.

m. Enhance linkages of ERA Chair projects with higher education systems in the countries, while not requiring a mandatory teaching load for ERA Chairs. We recommend that the Widening institution specifies how the linkages between research and education will be enhanced, how the ERA Chair's contribution to education will be strengthened, and how the ERA Chair will enhance education-related activities. Subject to the institutional and local needs and context, the business plan could also include actions about links with Phd, master and life-long learning programmes in order to ensure integration in the education and training activities of institutions and the development of human capital for the region.

n. As the ERA Chairs and Teaming actions are based on mobility, they cannot succeed if collaboration is hindered by a structural inability of lower-performing economies to attract international researchers. To ensure the international attractiveness of positions created by the ERA Chairs and Teaming actions, we suggest that the method of calculation adopted for MSCA, i.e. optional unit cost with a country coefficient depending on the cost of living, be also used to determine salary levels for these actions.

On Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

Investing in young, early-career researchers is crucial for boosting the quality and capacity of European and Western Balkan research excellence, as it builds on their particular openness to new ideas, mobility and cultural aptitude.

Therefore, we call for:

o. Within the enlarged budget, we propose the introduction of 'returning grants' from "third countries" for MSCA scholars to encourage outward and returning mobility, and to stimulate the internationalisation of our research cultures.

p. An assessment of the MSCA Widening Fellowships, introduced as a Horizon 2020 pilot in 2017, has indicated a successful scheme, thus its subsequent (and significant) expansion is welcome. We propose that the "Widening Fellowships" be marked as "MSCA Widening Fellowships" in order to show the direct connection with this prestigious mobility scheme.

¹ The concept of the Western Balkans Research Foundation is available at: https://www.leopoldina.org/fileadmin/redaktion/inter-nationaler/overview_wbrf.pdf

² The SEEIST is inspired by the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN) model of 'Science for Peace'. More information on SEEIST is available at <http://www.mma.gov.me/en/initiatives>.

³ SESAME project: 'Synchrotron Light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East' (http://www.sesame.org.jo/sesame_2011/).

⁴ European Commission report, Final Report of the H2020 Advisory Group on Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation, 1 June 2016, <https://ec.europa.eu/research/leg/Wyn>.

