

DRAFT CONCEPT PAPER

I Introduction

Global structures of research, development, and innovation are in transition as global competition is mounting. The roles of Europe as a competitive and leading information and knowledge society depend, to a significant extent, on the developments in the field of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Such developments are underpinned by strong research capabilities. A European Research Area (ERA) where all available resources are integrated and utilised efficiently and intelligently is paramount for Europe to remain competitive on a global scale.

The Western Balkan (WB) region has a history of inclusive research, scientific excellence and export of ICT and human capital. Recent historical developments have disturbed and fragmented these assets which have also led to a significant 'brain drain'. Strong regional cooperation in the field of scientific endeavour in general and ICT in particular will facilitate the regeneration of scientific excellence and reverse this trend. This will lead not only to a stronger innovation capacity but will also strengthen the overall synergy and capabilities of the ERA. Moreover, it will enable the creation of a critical mass in the WB, essential for the region's competitiveness.

Specific ICT research priorities as well as common challenges and barriers to research cooperation in the WB region have recently been identified by an extensive technological audit carried out by the European Commission. The technological audit studies conclude that the WB have the potential for propelling the regional development process through cooperation. In order to release this hidden potential, WB states should invest their best efforts in addressing open regional relations. As such, science is both a means to find answers to critical questions and a way of connecting nations.

In this context, the Forum on Research for Innovation in ICT for the Western Balkan Countries (the Forum) is meant to improve EU-Western Balkan research cooperation, through the inclusion of all countries currently associated to the FP7. The Forum aims to identify the areas of cooperation and agree on a regional strategy based on knowledge and innovation, while taking into account the specific characteristics of each country. Neighbouring countries and EU Member States Slovenia and Bulgaria may act as a bridge in pursuing the above.

II Reasons for conducting a Western Balkans Forum

The aim of the Forum is to establish a permanent dialogue and cooperation between (a) political leaders and (b) high-level officials in charge for ICT and Research and Technological Development (RTD) within the WB region and between the WB region countries and their European counterparts.



III Objectives to be achieved at the Forum

The Forum aims to find the means to achieve a number of objectives including;

1. Coordination of regional policies in RTD in general and ICT in particular;
2. Discussion and exchange of good practices and experiences stemming from the implementation of national ICT policies;
3. Facilitation of the exchange of scientific knowledge and researchers;
4. Facilitation of networking between researchers and policy makers;
5. Consolidation of scientific potential, and;
6. Sharing of research assets and infrastructure.

IV Implementation of objectives

It is essential that Governments continue to take action in order to support an enabling and competitive environment for the necessary investment in ICT RTD. In order to provide a timeframe for the achievement of the Forum objectives, a Roadmap for the implementation of common policies agreed between the officials in charge of ICT RTD in Western Balkan States is established.

Some suggestions of the means which will contribute to the objectives are:

1. An agreement to make this Forum permanent and to coordinate ICT activities in the Western Balkan Countries, including neighboring countries, to implement the Roadmap;
2. Definition of the objectives and operational modalities of the permanent Forum;
3. Strengthening of cooperation between the relevant Western Balkan Ministers and their services by agreeing to meet regularly to assess the progress of the implementation of the Roadmap;
4. Perseverance of delegates in charge of ICT and RTD from the WB region to insist on strong initiatives to implement measures needed for further progress of innovation in ICT and encourage cooperation between RTD and business sector;
5. Adoption of the Roadmap.

V Conclusion

Within the ERA all available resources should be integrated and utilised efficiently in order to remain a leading information and knowledge society. The WB region has the potential to enhance European ICT RTD by investing in regional and international cooperation. Increased cooperation would also lead to a more prosperous and inclusive society in the region.

This Forum aims to define an open relationship between Governments of the WB region based on mutual interest and openness and should provide a platform to capture this opportunity, and hence to reinforce ICT growth in Western Balkan region.

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