

# **Steering Platform on Research: A Step Forward for the Western Balkans towards the European Research Area**

Address by Janez Potočnik  
European Commissioner for Research and Science

at the launch event of the  
Steering Platform on Research for Western Balkan Countries

Vienna, 26 June 2006.

**Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort**

Dear Minister,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Ladies & Gentlemen,

It is for me a real honour and pleasure to celebrate with you the launch of the Steering Platform on Research for the Western Balkans.

Vienna is the right place for this event. This part of Europe shares with the Balkan a lot of common history, culture and knowledge. And it is therefore no coincidence that Mrs. Gehrler has used the Austrian Presidency to the full and made it possible that the idea of a platform can be put into practice so quickly.

The actions we want to launch today are based on a very clear European policy, just confirmed by the European Council: *The future of the Western Balkan Countries lies in the European Union*".

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What is our starting point for the steering platform ?

As you will recall a three year Action Plan on Science and Technology was adopted in Thessaloniki in 2003. —

Its purpose was to identify needs and means to develop and integrate research capacities of the Western Balkan Countries into the European Research Area.

This initiative has been, overall, a success: it allowed to give visibility to the Western Balkans and to stress the importance of research. This is important because indeed, let me say very clearly, research is a key tool to facilitate integration. It is a policy field that opens the doors and allows advancing in other domains.

Among the concrete results of the Action Plan were the dedicated calls organised under the International Cooperation Programme of FP6 on capacities. Given the number of applications, these calls certainly responded to a clear need. They have allowed to finance some important capacity building in the region which otherwise would not be possible.

The SEE.ERA.NET is another good result of the Thessaloniki Action Plan. I can not stress enough how important is the coordination of national policies that help creating synergies. I count on SEE.ERA.NET to continue to play this leading role and help the Steering Platform in its work.

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But we have to do more. And this is where the Western Balkans Steering Platform comes in.

To say it in research terms: it is a spin-off from the overall political commitment the EU took towards the Western Balkan countries.

The Platform has a double function: to bring together all stakeholders within one Platform and to steer the process.

Since Thessaloniki it has become clear that many actors are willing to contribute to the overall objective of facilitating integration of the Western Balkan Countries and to support economic development in a sustainable way.

The Steering Platform should therefore be used as a forum to bring all ideas and means together and share information and experience.

It is also clear that the Platform goes beyond the Seventh Framework Programme. Important stakeholders such as the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and COST as well as outside financing instruments such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development should all contribute to the scientific capacity building in the Balkans. Only through a joint effort can we achieve this ambitious goal.

The Platform has also an important regional economic development dimension. It can bring important value-added in terms of S&T cooperation to the whole region and not just separately to each of the countries.

As regards the “steering” part of the platform, I think a number of valuable priorities have already been identified:

- general awareness actions regarding research policy and its links with other policies such as the Lisbon strategy;
- attracting the best researchers and facilitate the movement of researchers;
- upgrading of the research infrastructure in laboratories and institutes.

I also see a role of the Steering Platform in the preparation for the *acquis communautaire*. Harmonising national rules and practices with the EU laws in areas such as environment, energy, agriculture, health, to name just a few, will require intensive work and know-how. The Steering Platform could be very instrumental in developing policy responses in these fields.

Finally and I say this at the end so as to underline the importance of it: this platform should also serve as a forum to create synergies between the Seventh Framework Programme and the Pre-accession funds, called IPA.

It is essential that the Steering Platform is used to prepare the ground in your national administrations to plan the science and technology dimension of capacity building under IPA and to indicate which research actions can contribute to the objectives of the pre-accession funds. This is really of crucial importance.

I would like to close with two more political messages.

For me it is clear that the ownership of the Steering Platform has to lie with the Western Balkan countries. It is in your own interest to increase knowledge potential. Only with the right policies on education, research and innovation will it be possible to achieve the objectives of stability and prosperity in a sustainable way. This is the best way to join the European Union efforts. Do not wait for suggestions from Brussels, be active, have high ambitions and fill this platform with life.

In turn, and this is my second message, I would like to make the door to the European Research Area wide open. I would like to see your countries being part of the Seventh Framework Programme as soon as possible. I therefore intend to make the association to the Seventh Framework Programme attractive with an aim to help you and gradually prepare you for the membership in Union. The world is changing and new challenges are ahead of us. Education, research and innovation are

keys to our success. I am convinced that we share that vision.

There are conditions attached to this approach. This is because it will only work if it is combined with ambitious policies at national level: if you are able to steer the national policies so that the framework conditions for research are right; so that researchers are increasingly prepared to participate at the European-wide competition; so that the pre-accession instruments are used to the best and directed towards investments into the future; if you manage to achieve this, the Western Balkans Steering Platform will do a lot for you, a lot for the European Research Area, for the benefit of all of us.

Science and technology is a great tool to achieve integration. Europe as a whole will be a better place to live if we join our forces and cooperate.

Dear Minister,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish you very fruitful discussion this afternoon so that the priorities of the Platform can be identified and the means to achieve them clearly set. I am looking forward to concrete and tangible results.

You can count on my personal commitment and that of my services to fully contribute to the successful work of this Steering Platform.

Thank you.