

## Baltic Science Network transnational seminar

### New Tools for Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation in Research and Innovation Programmes

#### Conclusions

On November 16, 2017 Estonia organised a transnational seminar “New Tools for Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation in Research and Innovation Programmes” as part of the Baltic Science Network (BSN) project that took place in the Art museum of Estonia, Kumu. The aim of the seminar was to gather input for policy measures, which would help to increase participation of moderate innovators in research and innovation initiatives in the European Research Area (including the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), the EU Framework Programme (FP), and joint activities such as EU joint initiatives, NordForsk and bilateral research cooperation programmes.

The BSR has proven itself a test-bed to develop and implement innovative measures aimed at tackling the participation gap in collaborative research and innovation programmes (at EU and macro-regional level), as well as exploiting the macro-region’s full innovation and scientific potential. The event and its forthcoming analysis in the context of the BSN project, a network of transnational, national and regional policy actors from the BSR countries, will help to formulate national action plans, and make recommendations for a relevant macro-regional strategy.

Key take-away messages from the event:

- **The EU FP widening measures continue to be relevant**, because the innovation gap between EU13 and EU15 is still significant. This issue will need to be addressed in the preparation of the next EU FP.
- It is important to **encourage business and R&D institutions to participate in the EU’s Research and Innovation** by better targeting funding priorities and actions. Cooperation between universities and enterprises should be advanced.
- The EU funding programmes should address the gap between research and commercialisation. Supporting both bottom-up and top-down approaches is vital.
- **The piloting of innovative measures, such as blind evaluation should be considered**, where possible, as a means to promote openness.
- **There is a need to support cross-border cooperation on a macro-regional level** in addition to the well-working BONUS programme, Baltic TRAM and the Baltic Science Network. The implementation of transnational instruments, such as INTERREG should be used more extensively to improve joint regional R&I efforts – e.g. INTERREG could provide research funding for regional collaboration in the next programming period. EU and regional R&I cooperation platforms and partnerships should be exploited wherever possible. The approach towards engaging existing instruments has to become more structured for maximal effect and call for more cooperation at the political level.
- **More efforts are needed to better showcase or brand the uniqueness of the macro-region** or its research institutions to increase its attractiveness as a partner.
- **International and cross-sectorial mobility and networking should be continued**. Supporting application writing by joint support platforms and communication of good practices also facilitates cooperation.
- To capture excellence, **more attention should be paid to functional proximity**. The orientation towards similar focuses e.g. processes and end-products is more important than historical and geographical connections.

*All major changes take time; good planning is indispensable and the commitment of all stakeholders needed. To use the full potential of European Research Area, all excellent players should be included and catching-up has to be facilitated.*





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The event was opened by **Mailis Reps**, the Minister of Education and Research of Estonia, who stressed the importance of research cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region, especially in tackling common societal challenges. She pointed out the need to expand research cooperation and the importance of committing at the highest level to develop innovative tools for overcoming innovation gap in the region. Among successful cooperation examples she mentioned BONUS, Baltic TRAM (Transnational Access in Macro-region) and Baltic Science Network (BSN), and urged for more efforts on the regional level to create additional similar partnerships.

**Indrek Reimand**, Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry of Education and Research representing BSN pointed out that national or regional answers are not sufficient for large societal challenges. In order to enhance closer transnational cooperation and joint presentation of interests in higher education, science and research domains at the macro-regional scale, BSN gathers policy-makers and involves them in the whole process of building a common platform. Widening participation as one of the key topics of the BSN is in need for new approaches, as the participation gap between the new and old EU Member States is still not decreasing.

### *Session 1 European and macro-regional experience on widening participation*

**Dimitri Corpakis** (former EU official), **Gunnel Gustafsson** (Director of NordForsk), **Anders Bergström** (EUSBSR, Policy Area Education, Research and Employability Coordinator) and **Mike Cherrett** (Director of External Partnerships at Climate-KIC) argue that the problem of catching-up economies cannot be left to be decided by the market, when our aim is competitiveness and sustainability of the EU as a whole. To do so, it is important to keep the existing widening instruments, but work on harmonisation of rules and conditions for research funding between the EU FP, the European Structural and Investment Funds and across the Member States. Synergies happen when different processes are at play but they all contribute to the same result. INTERREG provides additional opportunities for interregional cooperation between innovation ecosystems. One good example of such cooperation is the BSN. However, first and foremost, countries have to concentrate on building their own competence.

It is important to set long-term goals and to be ambitious, but success is not to be expected very fast. Constant exchange of experiences would decrease the necessity for self-invention. Networking and cooperation would have to be facilitated, more opportunities given to young scientists to cooperate. Researchers' mobility within BSR should be increased and complemented by a cross-sectoral approach. Also, attracting more researchers from outside BSR to research institutions should be a priority, as capacity building for excellence, science productivity, efficiency and innovation favour international cooperation that goes beyond traditional forms. Networking and mobility can be used as bases for larger initiatives. In addition, building trust, especially within the Business-Research-Public Sector partnerships is vital.

### *Session 2 Barriers for widening excellence and collaboration*

**Žilvinas Martinaitis** (Research Manager from Visionary Analytics), **Agrita Kiopa** (Deputy State Secretary, Director of the Higher Education, Science and Innovation Department, Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia) **Katarzyna Kaczowska** (Deputy Director for Innovation and Development Support Programmes, Ministry for Economic Development of Poland), **Johanna Leino** (Development Director of the Baltic Institute of Finland), **Bettina Eichler-Löbermann** (Vice-Rector for Internationalisation, Gender and Diversity Management, University of Rostock) reflected on barriers for widening excellence and collaboration. They admitted that there are strong concentration effects, while EU-13 countries are catching up quite slowly. Participation of EU13 in the EU FPs has a strong correlation with national funding – underfunded research and innovation systems lack capacities and necessary critical mass to participate. The discrepancy is further increased by EE, LT, LV and PL being mostly partners, not coordinators, thus receiving fewer funds in total. In addition, there are notable differences in salary levels between EU-13 and EU-15 researchers, which also influences the total share of EU FP funding of these countries and decreases the attractiveness of EU FP projects for potential EU-13 participants. For newcomers it is difficult to join networks or to create their own network that would be able to win larger amounts of financing from EU FPs. However, both excellence and





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state-of-the-art infrastructure can potentially be found everywhere, therefore it is important to enlarge participation and to use the full potential of research and development of the region and EU as a whole.

One of the barriers for successful cooperation in the BSR highlighted in the remarks of several speakers is the heterogeneity and differences in economic and innovation structures between various sub-regions. Additional identified problems are the perceived lack of research and innovation excellence (influencing the decision of institutions not to participate), lack of preconditions (partners), low success rates that reduce incentives to invest in the capacities required for project management, predominant focus on teaching rather than research in most universities.

It is mentioned that the overall funding of EU FPs should increase, to ensure further support for widening initiatives and emphasise research and innovation rather than networking and coordination activities in INTERREG programmes. However, it is acknowledged that alternative funding is very important as well. For example, additional funding allocated to enterprises and research and innovation institutions was welcomed to encourage their participation in the EU FP as well as funding for excellent projects that have not received EU FP financing (e.g. Seal of Excellence certificate). Likewise, funding for joint PhD training, research and innovation projects, joint infrastructures would also be welcome.

Common topics should be used as a motivator for cooperation. More institutions should be engaged in solving macro-regional problems. Cooperation should focus on areas of joint excellence and mutual benefits. In addition, it is important to select some strong and focused thematic areas and put priorities in financing. A pilot project approach could be used to test this suggestion. Facilitating a two-way flow of people, ideas, good practices and structuring the existing cooperation into sustainable partnerships and networks should also be followed. Instead of creating new systems and platforms it is wise to explore as a region the possibilities to enter existing cooperation platforms, such as NordForsk and BONUS.

### *Session 3 Perspectives of overcoming widening barriers*

**Kadri Ukrainski** (professor at the University of Tartu), **Kaisa Kononen** (executive director of the BONUS programme), **Ülle Jaakma** (vice-rector for research at Estonian University of Life Sciences), **Lotte Strøbech** (CEO of EmbryoTrans Biotech and Affiliate Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen), **Christoph Quitmann** (Director of MAX IV Laboratory) presented some of the best examples of effective cooperation in the BSR and gave recommendations for the future.

Speakers emphasised that for a successful project, the long-term nature of the cooperation network has to be considered, and much time and effort invested into building trust between partners. Some of the speakers found it very important that universities become more open to collaboration with companies to the point where university researchers are allowed to own companies. Also, it was highlighted that building a network is a bottom-up initiative. A network based on common infrastructure use can prove very beneficial. The mobility of researchers to large-scale infrastructures ESS and MAX IV to cooperate in research projects is the key to building up innovative networks. Including young researchers ensures the sustainability of cooperation networks. Mobility thus proves a great collaboration accelerator.

Successful projects have a long history, which leads to synergies, new initiatives or applications and possible new networking. Thus, it is important to arrange more networking activities.

The importance of all current Horizon 2020 widening instruments and the need for their continuation in the next FP was highlighted, as it would ensure the sustainability of current partnerships and future endurance of the networks. Sustainability is vital for future cooperation within the network that was built up and put into motion with considerable efforts and resources.

It is agreed that in order to advance cooperation in the BSR, bottom-up and top-down approaches are both important, depending on the issue at stake. Societal issues need more top-down coordination and financing. In both cases, more attention should be paid to functional proximity instead of mere location in the same macro-region. Functional proximity reflects the orientation towards similar focuses e.g. processes and end-products. The cooperation has to involve private and public sector in addition to research and development institutions. Another idea was that institutions in less developed regions of the BSR should define their specialities of areas of uniqueness to become attractive as partners for more established researchers. Uniqueness can also be a special geographical location (proximity to the sea for maritime research), collection (data bases or libraries), expertise.





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Some of the suggestions for speeding up the bottom-up cooperation are increasing the ease of access to existing data and knowledge on available funding, improving drafting skills related to the preparation of project applications and sharing best practices, training, common use of infrastructure (creating virtual service centres, shared service centres), and facilitating cooperation between the institutions in the BSR. The interests of the macro-region should be promoted and the creation of the image of the BSR should be considered. The creation of BSR 2<sup>nd</sup> best funding facility would help to implement project proposals that received very good evaluations, but failed to receive the funding from the two-phase programmes of Horizon 2020. Such a funding facility would bear relevance for the research advancement in the macro-region as a whole. Additional top-down initiatives proposed for further consideration were mentioned. For example, the BSR societal challenges' initiatives (joint grants or coordinated policy initiatives); BSR breakthrough accelerator grants for cooperative high-risk and high-return projects.

#### *Session 4 The way forward*

**Wolfgang Burtcher** (Deputy Director-General Directorate-General for Research & Innovation (DG RTD), European Commission), **Rudolf Niessler** (Director of Smart and Sustainable Growth and Programme Implementation, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), European Commission), Ambassador **Maira Mora** (Director General of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) Secretariat), **Indrek Reimand** (Deputy Secretary General, Estonian Ministry of Education and Research), **Klaus von Lepel** (Director of Research Policy, Innovation, European and International Affairs; BSN Project Director, Ministry of Science, Research and Equalities, Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, Germany) shared their ideas on how to move forward and increase participation of moderate innovators in research and innovation initiatives in the European Research Area.

It was judged to be too early to fully measure the impact of widening measures, as they have been around only for 3 years. The representative of DG RTD pointed out that the Horizon 2020 mid-term evaluation shows the widening measures as still relevant, because the innovation gap between EU13 and EU15 is still significant. However, he also indicated that the two groups are not homogeneous and that there were first signs of improvement, for example as regards to the budgets spent on research and innovation. Consequently, this issue will need to be addressed in the preparation of the next EU FP. The importance to continue implementing the widening measures and opening up networks was also stressed by the representative of Estonia.

The importance of ensuring better synergies between the Horizon 2020 (top-down and bottom-up initiatives) and cohesion policy bottom-up initiatives to ensure the competitiveness of EU is highlighted by DG REGIO. Smart specialisation was seen as an opportunity to introduce tailor-made systems for each country. The gap between research and commercialisation and in offering a full spectrum of and support to the companies until they can fully commercialize their product was also mentioned, and the necessity to address the gap on regional level by either DG REGIO or DG RTD noted. The requirement to support joint investments to benefit a series of regions or countries could be addressed in the upcoming financial framework of INTERREG, possible sources for a better structured approach should be considered.

Once discussing widening, it has to be kept in mind that Structural Funds (ESIF) are beneficial for enhancing the excellence of the macro-region, but are not meant for cross-border cooperation. There is a need to have common platforms on regional level supporting cross-border cooperation in addition to the well-working BONUS programme. Participation in networks should be encouraged nationally. There are challenges of a broader scope which should be addressed on the on macro-regional level (environment, Baltic Sea, natural resources, security, transport infrastructure). A more extensive use of transnational instruments like INTERREG should be stressed to improve such joint efforts. In addition, research funding should be more in focus of INTERREG. BSN was highlighted as one of the best examples of programmes where all actors of the region work together for a macro-regional alignment of resources. The CBSS Science, Research and Innovation Agenda provides an additional platform for further capacity building and advancement of expertise among research institutions.

When discussing the introduction of a new instrument, such suggestion must be based on a thorough reasoning. There are many existing schemes and instruments that work very well and these should be used, if possible. The existing successful cooperation initiatives should not necessarily be a subject to change. The sustainability and prosperity of the macro-region as well as a safe





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and secure environment should be top priorities. It was pointed out that more effort needs to be put in developing synergies among various funding sources. Synergies would have to involve more than Horizon 2020 and the Structural Funds, for example they could include agriculture (Common Agricultural Policy). Increasing participation of the new EU Member States in the multilateral European research cooperation initiatives is also important for innovation leaders, since it would improve the position of Europe as an innovation leader on a global scale. As international cooperation is driven by common benefit and interest, the Baltic Sea Region countries should step-up joint initiatives. This would add greatly to their global visibility and influence as a world player in the field of research and innovation.

To sum up, widening is an important topic for the European Commission and the EU Member States. It is highly relevant for the acceptance of the EU research policy and thus has immediate impact for the financing of the upcoming EU FP 9.

