

Joint Press Release

Austrian Academy of Sciences
German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina

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Science: An Opportunity for the Western Balkans

How can the science systems of the Western Balkans countries be prepared for the European Research Area? This question was in the focus of an international conference by the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna. One of the results: future prospects for junior and excellent scientists in the region must be strengthened.

Scientists and representatives of national academies of sciences (and arts), rectors' conferences and other institutions from 13 countries of the EU and the Western Balkans participated in the conference from 22-24 May 2016. They discussed strategies and perspectives for further improvement of the science systems in South East Europe. The "Joint Science Conference" is part of the "Western Balkans Process / Berlin Process", initiated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW), in cooperation with the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, hosted this conference in Vienna.

Further development of South East European science systems is important not only for the Western Balkans, but also for Europe as a whole, stresses OeAW president Anton Zeilinger: "Science is central for societal development and economic growth. High-quality research in Western Balkans countries creates opportunities for all of Europe because new scientific insights and innovative ideas know no national borders".

The conference is an important step in bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU, says Jörg Hacker, president of Leopoldina: "The advancement of science, education and research in the Western Balkans Countries, which we support with this conference, brings the region closer to the EU and accelerates the integration of these countries into the European Research Area."

The participants of the meeting came from Austria and Germany, Bulgaria, France and Italy, the Western Balkans Countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, as well as from the new EU-member states Croatia and Slovenia. The discussions focused particularly on recommendations on how to competitively support excellent researchers and how to sustainably ensure international quality standards in research and higher education in the Western Balkans. In the long run, this can raise the attractiveness of the region as a location for science and research in the global competition for the brightest minds and diminish "brain drain", the emigration of highly qualified scientists.

Potential measures for this were debated at the OeAW and during a meeting with policy-makers and representatives of embassies at the Austrian Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs. Additional topics of the conference were the improvement of framework conditions, quality assurance in research funding and recruitment as well as the creation of stable prospects for talented junior scientists.

The results of the conference will be summarised in a Joint Statement in the upcoming weeks, which will provide unbiased science-based advice for policy-makers in the EU and the Western Balkans countries. The recommendations will be fed into the consultations of the next Western Balkans Leaders' Summit on 4 July 2016 in Paris. The next meeting of the Joint Science Conference will be hosted in 2017 by the French Académie des sciences; the conference series will continue thereafter.

The EU member states Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia and the six Western Balkans Countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – as well as the European Commission are part of the Western Balkans Process, also known as Berlin Process. The initiative intends to bring the Western Balkans countries closer to the EU, to intensify the EU-enlargement process and to strengthen the regional cooperation in the areas of policy, economy, science and society. The Leopoldina has assumed leadership in the pillar of the Process concerning science and society, following a request of the German Federal Government.

The science conference in Vienna was organised by the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Leopoldina in cooperation with the Austrian Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, the German Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Swiss development agency Helvetas.

For more information visit the Web page of the Joint Science Conference of the Western Balkans Process:
www.leopoldina.org/en/jsc.

The Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW) is Austria's central non-university research and science institution. Its statutory mission is to "promote science in every way". Founded in 1847 as a learned society, today the OeAW has over 770 members

and 1,450 employees dedicated to innovative basic research, interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge and the dissemination of new insights with the aim of contributing to progress in science and society as a whole.

The German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina brings together the expertise of some 1,500 distinguished scientists to bear on questions of social and political relevance, publishing unbiased and timely scientific opinions. The Leopoldina represents the German scientific community in international committees and pursues the advancement of science for the benefit of humankind and for a better future.

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