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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Council

Subject: Policy Forum on Advancing Research and Innovation in Central and
Eastern Europe (Brussels, 04 July 2024): conclusions
- Information from the Presidency

Delegations will find in the Annex a note from the Presidency on the above-mentioned subject which will be dealt with under "Any other business" at the Council meeting ("Agriculture and Fisheries") on 15 July 2024.

Policy Forum on Advancing Research and Innovation in Central and Eastern Europe within the Framework of Sustainable Natural Resource Management, Food Systems Security, and Biomanufacturing Policy Development

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Introduction

On 4 July 2024, the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, in collaboration with the BIOEAST Initiative, organized a high-level policy debate focusing on the potential role of Central and Eastern Europe within the overarching framework of European Strategic Autonomy, European Food System Security, and European Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing initiatives.

The primary aim was to engage all European Union member states in a comprehensive dialogue concerning research, innovation, and development priorities specifically tailored to Eastern Europe, encompassing the Western Balkan countries, Ukraine and Moldova, with the overarching goal of fostering continent-wide benefits.

The conference is part of a series of events linked to the Presidency priority on supporting knowledge-based and innovative agriculture. The target audience was Brussels-based envoys and EU institutions. The policy forum aimed to start to discuss priority areas for the macro-region. Namely, four thematic areas – healthy soils, freshwater resilience, food systems security, and locally based biomanufacturing – and to support the adoption of council conclusions in the Competitiveness Council later this year.

Background

The discussions took place in three panels: member states' priorities about the role Central and Eastern Europe could play in the future of European Strategic Autonomy, the Commission's priorities on a sustainable future from DG AGRI, RTD, and GROW, and a third science-policy discussion with experts about the four thematic areas.

In the first panel, the Belgian EU Presidency presented its achievements concerning agriculture, food systems, and bioeconomy-related files. Poland, holding the Visegrad 4 Group Presidency on behalf of the 10 BIOEAST countries, presented a Joint Declaration of the 10 Ministers of Agriculture and 10 Ministers of Research about their commitment to strengthening cooperation in research, innovation, and development by establishing a new joint research and innovation-driven partnership involving also other countries such as the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. Representatives from Estonia and Ukraine emphasized the abundance of biological resources and their potential role in the future of Europe, highlighting the need and importance to facilitate the integration of agricultural sectors and other bioeconomy sectors by adding value locally to the available biomass.

The Commission representatives focused on ongoing initiatives, mainly the Mission on Healthy Soils and the Mission on Restoring our Ocean and Waters. They also set the scene in explaining why the bioeconomy stands out as a key success for Europe and specifically for Widening and accession countries and how new initiatives like the EU Biotechnologies and Biomanufacturing initiative could play a key role in the future of the macro-region by creating opportunity for the rural areas. On the possible future partnership the directors emphasized the good example of PRIMA and the importance of having indebt discussion between member states about the content and form.

The third panel focused on the discussion around a bottom-up, stakeholder-led Manifesto. The Manifesto, available on the BIOEAST website (www.bioeast.eu), was already signed by more than 150 stakeholders, and the number is growing. The Stakeholder Manifesto on “Sustainable Supply Chains and Strengthened Local Processing of Bioresources in Central and Eastern Europe” was unveiled, spearheaded by dedicated BIOEAST thematic working group members committed to catalyzing change. Recognizing the macro-region’s valuable natural assets, such as fertile soils, freshwater resources, and renewable biomass, the Manifesto stresses the need for enhancing local knowledge on environmentally friendly technologies. It emphasizes the importance of involving stakeholders from the CEE macro-region in the deployment of research, innovation, and sustainable solutions to achieve Europe’s transition towards a circular and sustainable future. Therefore, it calls for increased public investment in joint research and innovation partnership to unlock the region’s potential, aiming to produce renewable biological resources and convert them sustainably into competitive value-added products. The Manifesto urges decision-makers to prioritize the nexus of soil, freshwater, food systems, and biomanufacturing to shape a sustainable future for the macro-region.

The Berlin Process offers an opportunity to elevate the importance of food, agriculture and forestry for the Western Balkans and increase visibility of the efforts to address the policies related to food security, climate action and generation renewal of rural areas at the highest political level. In line with the Process the Jahorina Agenda 2024 for Agriculture and Rural Development in South Eastern Europe supports the establishment of European research and innovation partnership.

Conclusions

The Presidency thanks the Member States providing speakers and for the European Commission high-level participation and valuable inputs.

The Presidency takes note of the joint declaration and manifesto presented during the forum. The conclusions of the conference ask the Commission to start reflecting on the priorities and a potential partnership based on what was presented and discussed.

The Presidency plans to further discuss the thematic areas during the next big Presidency conference from 4-6 December in Budapest. The Presidency looks forward to constructive discussions during the upcoming two years with the next Trio Presidency, specifically with Poland, but also with the BIOEAST Initiative, which could help to materialize an institutionalized research and innovation partnership.

The Presidency asks the member states' representatives to consider stepping into the future partnership, which could be an enormous push for the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. The Presidency emphasizes the role Central and Eastern Europe could play in future European food system security and strategic autonomy. The establishment of sustainable and circular bioeconomies within the macro-region holds promise in addressing prevalent European challenges pertaining to energy, climate, water, and food security.

Given the impending Multiannual Financial Framework discussions, the imperative lies in setting pertinent priorities, implementing effective measures, and fostering consensus on the continent's future trajectory. Hence, it is imperative to engage in discussions and co-invest in a partnership that promises significant benefits both for Member States and future accession countries. The pivotal role of the European Commission in delineating the policy framework for bioeconomy policy and related research, innovation, development, and education cannot be overstated.

