

## **EMPOWERING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE BALKAN REGION**

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Earth observation (EO) activities in the Balkan region and particularly the contribution of individual Balkan countries to the Group on Earth Observation (GEO) and Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) are under the strong influence of recent historic events and economic circumstances in the region. Activities within the FP7 project EOPower aim at empowering economic development to fully unlock the potential of the EO in the Balkans and other regions of Europe. The activities performed within the first project year by three local partners – University of Novi Sad, Serbia; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece and University of Split, Croatia – cover promotion of EO, regional thematic workshops and further development of the Permanent Networking Facility (PNF).

Novi Sad GEO Workshop held in September 2013 in Novi Sad, Serbia gathered over 150 experts from 6 on-going and 3 past FP7 projects, renowned representatives the European Commission, the GEO and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, as well as the representatives of the governments from the region. The workshop was a unique opportunity to get acquainted with the latest achievements in coordination of the Earth observation (EO) activities and to address questions of interest for its future in the wider Balkan area. The participants also addressed potential contribution of current and future projects to the Danube Reference Data and Service Infrastructure, the creation of recommendations for the EO components articulation and the creation of short and mid-term synergies. Future regional workshops to be held in November 2014 in Pristina and in February 2015 in Novi Sad will build on this experience and they will attempt to firmly link scientists and industry in a cooperation around economic and societal issues that need to be urgently addressed, revealing the needs and opportunities, which lay in the region's Earth observation capacity. Furthermore, these future workshops will serve as an opportunity to investigate gaps and needs of the Earth observation industry and research and to derive a roadmap for decision makers regarding future capacity building in the region.

The key infrastructure for networking of relevant EO stakeholders and projects in the region will be the PNF, developed within the BalkanGEONet project. Initially envisaged as a regional directory for expertise and partnership search, it has received a significant attention and within the EOPower project it was upgraded into a Euro-African repository, not only for the discovery of expertise and existing GEOSS components, but also for investigating capacity building infrastructure of relevant organizations and their initiatives and programmes. In the course of the project the PNF became a generic word for similar structures to be established in other regions – IASON PNF for Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, ENCOSIO-LA PNF for South American region etc.) Through its new Open Search capabilities, the PNF will now efficiently connect to other GEO infrastructures, such as GEOSS, GEONetCab and other regionals networking facilities proving further more visibility and integration within the Earth observation community.