

Raising the bar

Bulgaria's six-month presidency of the European Council has come to a close. The experience has been transformative for the country, **Antoaneta Roussi** reports.

When Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, many of the country's citizens were filled with hope. After years of uncertainty and economic strife following the end of communism, the nation would finally be what its people always felt it was: European.

But EU membership came with downsides, such as being the poorest country in the bloc and remaining largely on the sidelines of EU decision-making. Bulgaria's modest research and innovation capability also meant that many of its talented researchers left to work in the west.

The country had much to prove when it took over the six-month rotating presidency of the European Council in January. Owing to the UK's forfeiture of its presidency, Bulgaria unexpectedly had to show that it was capable of leading the EU into deliberations on two major work streams: the 2021-27 budget and the next R&D funding programme Horizon Europe.

In the presidency spotlight, Bulgaria became more visible to the EU but it also had to compare itself more with other member states. In some cases this was a sobering experience. Much of the Balkan territory is still analogue, with poor digital links between regions hindering research and other endeavours. Digitisation has long been a priority for Bulgaria, but lawmakers have said this has intensified with its presidency.

The science ministry began working towards a national open-data cloud, with the aim of providing researchers, companies and policymakers with data that are accessible, interoperable and reusable.

With the help of the EU digital commissioner Mariya Gabriel—who is Bulgarian—the country joined EuroHPC, a collaboration of 20 countries set up to design, procure and build world-class supercomputers. An event jointly organised by the presidency and the European Commission in April brought representatives of EU institutions and national and regional leaders together in Sofia to learn about how high-performance computing could help transform Europe's future.

"The conferences that were held were at a very high level and it gave us a chance to show the good results of Bulgarian scientists," the country's deputy science minister Ivan Dimov told Research Europe.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria was able to get EU research ministers to endorse its presidency proposal for extending the Euratom nuclear research programme. This was a particular achievement "given that Euratom has so

many sceptics", said Kostadin Kostadinov, an adviser to Bulgaria's science minister Krasimir Valchev.

There was also an "incredible growth" of industry participation in national research programmes during the presidency, Dimov claimed. This is vital for increasing Bulgaria's R&D performance, and was one of five R&D priorities in a Commission report for the country.

But there is still a long way to go, particularly in fashioning legislation that encourages universities to innovate. Under Bulgarian law, public universities are not permitted to become part of public-private partnerships or create their own spin-off companies.

The country must also increase its R&D spending to meet a target of 1.5 per cent of GDP by 2020. At present, government and industry investment in R&D adds up to 0.96 per cent of GDP, according to Eurostat. In May, lawmakers topped up this year's science budget with €34 million, giving a total of €177.4m of public spending.

For the first time, the Bulgarian government adopted a national roadmap for research infrastructures, designating €5.5m for facilities within the European Strategy Forum for Research Infrastructures. Dimov said he thought the presidency crystallised these plans, pushing the government to deliver.

Bulgaria also wants to increase its international research collaboration and participation in Horizon 2020. To do this, the ministry of science decided not to try to be competitive in all disciplines. Instead, its 2017-30 R&D strategy focuses on six areas of strength: materials science, electrical engineering, astrophysics, mathematics, biotechnology and environmental sciences.

It remains to be seen whether Bulgaria will meet its ambitious goals to become an attractive hub for the development of new technologies, increase its scientific prestige on the world stage and use R&D to contribute to economic growth. But when the baton of the EU presidency was handed to Austria on 1 July, the Bulgarian leadership was confident that it is much closer to the agenda-setting countries in the Council and European Parliament than before.

Even though Bulgaria's time at the helm lasted just six months, the presidency had a profound significance for it, Kostadinov said. "You can see the difference."

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