

PARTNERING FOR THE FUTURE

‘BIOEAST and Beyond’ high-level conference on Central and Eastern European research and innovation priorities in the context of sustainable soil and freshwater resilience, food systems security and bioeconomy related policies

4-6 December 2024, Budapest, Hungary

Zsolt Feldman Opening Speech

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear State Secretaries, Directors and Speakers!

It is my great honor to welcome you to Budapest on behalf of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union to this high-level conference, “BIOEAST and Beyond: Partnering for the Future”. This event is a cornerstone of our Presidency's agricultural priorities, which focus on fostering a competitive, crisis-resilient, sustainable, farmer-friendly, and knowledge-based agricultural sector.

We are in the last month of our Presidency, and we can confirm that in terms of our objectives and priorities, specifically linked to knowledge-based agricultural sector we are in a very good track. A series of conferences and workshops were organized, a political declaration was signed by 22 ministers from 10 EU + 1 neighboring country, a Council Conclusion was agreed among the 27-member states and we are here today to earmark the research needs of our macro region.

I am pleased to extend a warm welcome to the esteemed representatives of the European Commission, including Mr. Marc Lemaitre, Director-General of DG RTD, Ms. Kristin Schreiber, Director in DG GROW, Mr. Diego Canga Fano, Acting Deputy Director-General of DG AGRI, and Mr. John Bell, Director in DG RTD. Your presence underscores the importance of our collaborative efforts in advancing research and innovation within the agricultural sector and in the BIOEAST macro-region.

I am pleased to have representative from the upcoming Polish Presidency, and high-level representatives from North Macedonia and Slovakia, distinguished speakers from Ukraine, Georgia and EU countries.

I am happy to see the Circular Bio-based Europe and Bio-based Industries Consortium high-level representatives among the speakers, and to thank for the national report on Hungary which is going to be published today.

This conference builds upon the legacy of the SCAR Budapest Declaration, adopted during Hungary's 2011 EU Presidency. That declaration highlighted the pivotal role of agricultural research and innovation in addressing Europe's food security, scarcities and sustainability challenges. It warned us about a transition period ahead of us. Undoubtedly, we are in that transition period with enormous challenges, droughts, inundations, heat waves and geopolitical crises. Since then, the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research has been instrumental in guiding European research priorities, in fostering collaboration, in aligning the long-term joint programming of Member States and European Commission agendas by addressing complex global challenges. We have to acknowledge the efforts of the SCAR in supporting the transition towards sustainable agriculture, forestry, and food systems by steering new research-oriented initiatives, including the nine new Partnerships and the expanding agendas of the Missions on soils and water including living labs and demonstration activities.

We also celebrate the achievements of the BIOEAST Initiative, which unites Central and Eastern European countries in regional research cooperation and advancing sustainable solutions in bioeconomy. The initiative's manifesto, endorsed by over 200 stakeholders, reflects a bottom-up commitment to innovation and knowledge sharing. This collective effort has led to a joint declaration by 22 agriculture and research ministers, paving the way for stronger partnerships and a clearer vision for sustainable development in our macro-region. I am pleased to announce that, in addition to the 10 BIOEAST countries, Serbia joined the common political declaration last month, and we anticipate signatures from four additional Western Balkan countries.

The Hungarian Presidency prioritizes developing a farmer-friendly and knowledge-based agriculture, avoiding new administrative and budgetary burdens on producers and national authorities, while supporting innovative solutions and knowledge transfer. These priorities align with broader European goals.

Recent agricultural and research policy discussions have highlighted fundamental differences among EU countries, and even among BIOEAST countries, regarding future policy developments. However, they have also revealed several aspects that can unite us for the benefit of European society. After five months of our Presidency, we continue to believe that, considering the natural resources and biomass potential of Central and Eastern Europe—including the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova—this region should be a strategic priority for Europe, alongside the Mediterranean. Sectoral policies should serve this strategic priority. To unlock this potential, the region needs more collaboration, cooperation, and focused research and innovation initiative that can bring innovative solutions closer to farmers, foresters, and industry players. Agriculture is not the alpha and omega of bioeconomy deployment; we must develop decentralized, resilient, and diversified bioeconomies across Europe by better engaging industry and energy sectors. Concentrating capacities and technological advancements can lead to vulnerability. The Central and Eastern European region needs development; we must boost research investments in the bioeconomy, demonstration plants and living labs need to be showcased to society.

In the upcoming year, under the Polish and Danish Presidencies, we will begin work on the new programming period for 2028-2034. Discussions regarding the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the 10th

Framework Programme for Research (FP10), and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) should reflect this strategic priority.

Thus, this conference today is a milestone in these discussions. Setting thematic priorities. Over the next two days, this conference will focus on two thematic nexuses:

- The Carbon-Water Cycle Nexus: Emphasizing the interconnections between healthy soils and freshwater resilience, essential for climate adaptation and environmental sustainability.
- The Nutrition-Biomanufacturing Cycle Nexus: Addressing food systems security and the transformative potential of biomass utilization within the bioeconomy.

These themes are particularly relevant to Central and Eastern Europe, a region rich in natural resources but requiring targeted support to unlock its full potential for sustainability and innovation. The SCAR 6th Foresight Exercise, which we will discuss here, provides a valuable framework for addressing these interconnected challenges, offering actionable insights for research and policy development.

I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers, particularly the SCAR and BIOEAST teams, for their dedication to making this conference happen. I also extend my thanks to the European Commission for its continuous support and partnership, enabling us to align regional efforts with European strategies.

As we convene under the motto “Partnership for the Future,” let us reaffirm our shared commitment to collaboration. Today's discussions are not just about identifying challenges but about co-creating solutions that bridge gaps, strengthen connections, and foster innovation across borders. Together, we have the opportunity to shape a future where sustainability and resilience are not just goals but lived realities.

I invite all of you—policy makers, researchers, industry representatives, and stakeholders from across Europe—to engage actively in the sessions ahead. Your insights and expertise are essential to ensuring the success of this conference and the realization of its outcomes.

Thank you for your attention, and I wish you a productive and inspiring event. Together, let us pave the way for a more sustainable and resilient Europe.