

# CONNECT SYMPOSIUM: FROM PARTICIPANT IN 2017 TO ORGANIZER IN 2025

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**Abstract:** In this reflection, I share my journey from being a participant in the first Connect Symposium in 2017 to returning as a junior organizer and lecturer in 2025. What began as a formative experience during my undergraduate studies became a turning point in my academic path, guiding me through a PhD and deeper engagement with the European research landscape. The symposium offered far more than lectures – it introduced me to the importance of science communication, regional cooperation, and networking, all of which shaped my career. Eight years later, I return to Neum alongside one of the colleagues I met during that first Connect, now ready to pass on what we once received. As we focus this year on “Towards the EU Research Area,” I hope our stories and experiences will inspire a new generation to see science not just as a profession, but as a shared, cross-border endeavor

**Keywords:** Western Balkans Scientific network, EU research area, science communication, open science, AI in science

## 1. Connect 2017

In August 2017, as a bachelor student, I participated in the very first *Connect Symposium*, funded by DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and held at the Grand Hotel Neum. It turned out to be one of the most formative experiences of my early scientific life. Now, in 2025, as a PhD student in the final phase of my studies, I return as a junior organizer and it feels like closing a beautiful circle.

Back then, the symposium ran from August 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> and was divided into two parts. The mornings were reserved for lectures covering themes such as *Science and Society*, *Politics and Society*, *Cooperation in Small Scale Projects*, *Regional Cooperation*, and *International Cooperation*. In the afternoons, we worked in international groups through “world café” discussions, responding to specific questions on four central topics: the creation of a young researchers’ association (ZBAMI - YRA), the potential for a regional research center, the promotion of natural sciences, and ways to improve science education in the Western Balkans.

These sessions, which lasted from 4 PM to 7 PM, were intense, inspiring, and full of insight. We quickly realized that the idea of cooperation among young scientists across the

Western Balkans was not only desirable but necessary and most importantly, achievable. I vividly remember how even during breaks, many of us continued discussing ideas, often blending brainstorming and relaxation in a uniquely productive way.



Figure 1. Connect 2017, Neum

## 2. After Connect 2017

The impact of Connect went far beyond the five days in Neum. Shortly afterward, some of the Tuzla and Novi Sad students again met in Novi Sad for the event “Noć istraživača” (Researchers’ Night) on 28 September 2017, continuing the collaboration that had begun during the symposium (Figure 2).

After Neum, Goran Stanić, student from Novi Sad, and I continued our paths in Germany. We both pursued master's and PhD studies in Germany. Now, in 2025, we return as lecturers—ready to give back what we once received.

One of the most powerful elements of Connect was learning about things that traditional university courses often miss—how science relates to society, how to communicate it effectively, and how to identify and access funding opportunities. The knowledge we gained was not abstract; it was immediately applicable, helping us both secure future positions and shape our careers.



Figure 2. Researchers' Night 2017, Novi Sad

The relationships formed during that week, both professional and personal, are still part of my life eight years later.

### 3. Connect 2025: Towards the EU Research Area

This year's Connect, still funded by DAAD and held once again at the Grand Hotel Neum from August 25<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> (Figure 3), mirrors the original format, lectures in the morning and early afternoon, followed by world café discussions. The topic this year is "Towards the EU Research Area", and it feels like the perfect continuation of what began back in 2017.

Goran and I will talk about our path from the Balkans to the EU, and how Connect helped us take those first steps by equipping us with tools to communicate our science, build networks, and navigate the landscape of European research.



Figure 3. Connect 2025 Official Poster

This year's topics, from EU-WB collaboration to science funding, science in industry, science communication, open science, and AI in research, are more relevant than ever. As organizers and lecturers, our goal is to give today's students the same spark we once received.

Together with 13 other senior participants, we are excited to pass on our experience, and we hope this year's Connect becomes a new turning point in someone else's story, just like it was in ours.

## Acknowledgment

The author expresses her deepest gratitude to the organizers and founders of CONNECT 1.0 - 7.0 events that took place in Tuzla and Neum, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 2017 to 2025. CONNECT events aimed to improve academic collaboration between the students and young researchers of the Western Balkans and were funded by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD, eng. German Academic Exchange Service).