

When Science Becomes Both the Impetus to Depart and the Rationale to Return

Nikolina Nikolić

University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Sciences, Department of Mathematics and Informatics, Novi Sad, Serbia

Correspondence: nikolinanikolic14816@gmail.com

Abstract: The CONNECT 2025 conference, held in Neum between August 24 and August 30, was conceived as a scientific platform to enhance cooperation among Western Balkan countries. Its overarching aim was to strengthen regional integration through science and to align researchers and policymakers with the European Research Area (ERA). The conference facilitated interdisciplinary dialogue, professional networking, and thematic sessions on Open Science. Presentations emphasized transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity in scientific inquiry, while participants engaged in discussions with distinguished European scholars. The discourse on Open Science emerged as the most impactful theme, highlighting its role in democratizing access to data, publications, and educational resources. This model was recognized as a catalyst for accelerating research processes and fostering collaboration. The Ubuntu philosophy: “I am what I am because of who we all are” underscored the collective progress, linking dimension of scientific individual achievement to societal advancement. CONNECT 2025 demonstrated that science functions both as a vehicle for mobility and as a rationale for return, bridging nations through shared knowledge. For young researchers from the Western Balkans, the conference provided critical opportunities to establish networks, broaden perspectives, and cultivate collaborations essential for sustainable development.

Keywords: open science; European Research Area; Western Balkans; scientific collaboration; knowledge society; interconnectedness; integration

1. Introduction

CONNECT 2025 was a scientific conference held in Neum from August 24 to August 30, with the primary aim of strengthening connections among Western Balkan countries in the fields of science, research, and broader academic cooperation. The conference was designed to promote the development of a knowledge-based society as a foundation for democratization and sustainable progress. Its core objectives included fostering new professional networks, introducing participants to opportunities for scientific collaboration, and familiarizing researchers with mechanisms for international cooperation. In this context, the central theme of CONNECT 2025 addressed how researchers and policymakers

from the Western Balkans can align more closely with the European Research Area (ERA) and how they can benefit from increased integration within it.

Science is a discipline that provides us with diverse experiences, including the opportunity to represent, in the country of our birth, the nation in which we have acquired knowledge. Yet such an occasion is of particular significance. This opportunity was made possible through the CONNECT 2025 conference, whose primary aim was to foster regional integration through science, using scientific collaboration as a key link connecting researchers across the Western Balkans.

2. Open Science

The theme that left the most profound impression on me, owing to the depth of its underlying context, was Open Science (Figure 1). The magnitude, importance, and necessity of Open Science constitute an imperative for every scholar and researcher in contemporary times. The resources made available through this manifestation greatly facilitate research across all domains and, above all, significantly reduce the time required for adequate preparation in scientific inquiry.



Figure 1. Core pillars of open science.

A quotation from the presenter that encapsulated the essence of the topic was: *"I am what I am because of who we all are."* Reflecting upon the profundity of the statement *"Ubuntu – Humanity to others"*, we recognize how, despite originating in a distant part of the world, it remains global and powerfully descriptive of the society in which we reside. Why does this particular quotation remain etched in memory after five days of lectures enriched by the experiences of some of the most esteemed European scholars, who shared with us a multitude of usable perceptions and stimulated our engagement with themes previously unexplored? Perhaps the reason lies in the scientific understanding that mutual influence and society as a collective can only function effectively when individuals themselves succeed in functioning. The success of the individual constitutes success for society, just as the success of society as a collective represents success for each of its members. The difficulty of achieving success through solitary effort in any domain, including the scientific, is well known to all who originate from this region. Open Science, in this regard, opens numerous doors within the domain of scientific research.

Commencing with the sample of Open Science, it contributes to the creation of new domains that ought to be transparent, accessible, and made available to each scholar and researcher. Why did this particular theme capture my attention? As a student who, driven by a profound commitment to mathematics as a scientific discipline, pursued knowledge in a neighboring country to approach the very core of science, I consider the discourse on Open Science, its modes of application, and the presentation of its advantages to be a fundamental step toward genuine interconnectedness among scientists. Access to research papers, scientific data, and resources should be equally available to all. There ought not to be obstacles to advancement merely because, as a society, we remain insufficiently acquainted with progress that is already widely recognized in the global scientific community. Hence, this conference represents an ideal mechanism for elevating science to a higher level, or, more precisely, for raising awareness of science and its possibilities. It enables us to broaden our perspectives, discern new opportunities, and cultivate professional relationships that may, in the future, precede collaborations whose outcomes could prove essential for the development of our society.

The nexus between Open Science and us, the young scientists of the Balkans, lies in mutual understanding, not only in terms of language, but also in the shared scientific contributions we are prepared to invest in for the advancement of science and its improved interpretation for future generations. One of the most significant challenges we encountered was the execution of a collaborative project within a smaller group, which was subsequently presented to the instructor. Figure 1 shows that, despite the demanding task, the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed.



Figure 2. Formal presentation of the inaugural collaborative research project with ensuing academic discussion.

I believe that the conference left most of us with a strong sense of connection, fully reflecting its name and purpose. As I have already emphasized, science is what personally led me to another country, but it is also what brought me back home, with the task of serving as the bridge that unites these two nations. Science, entrusted to us who are witnesses to societal and communicational deficiencies, yet willing to take incremental steps, has the potential to guide the Western Balkans into a new era.

3. Conclusion

The imprint left upon me by the CONNECT 2025 conference is not easily articulated. While it is accurate to describe it as a scientific conference, it is, in reality, much more. It represents the source of new acquaintances, new knowledge, new opportunities, and new experiences. The knowledge acquired during the course of the conference, both through formal presentations and through direct dialogue with lecturers, will undoubtedly be applied by each participant in their professional work, serving as guiding principles for the advancement of scientific careers. The experiences gained throughout the conference are of considerable significance, as each of us was afforded the opportunity to engage in discussions with lecturers and thereby become part of a community of scholars with distinguished careers and expertise, whose contributions were an honor to witness.

My overall impression from this first conference I attended is that collaboration with experienced and highly educated researchers can significantly deepen our knowledge and serve as a strong motivation for continued learning and work. For this reason, I sincerely hope that this event marks the beginning of a fruitful and long-lasting collaboration.

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