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Pushing the boundaries of astronomy is only possible if you have the latest technology at hand. An EU-funded project aims to ensure that the Astronomical Observatory of Belgrade is equipped to become one of Europe's most dynamic and competitive centres of discovery.



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The Astronomical Observatory of Belgrade (AOB) is one of the oldest and most distinguished scientific institutes in Serbia, which celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2013. While the observatory continues to be a regional centre of excellence, participating in nine national research projects, with 20 principal scientists, it was recently acknowledged that an upgrade was needed to ensure that it was visible to other European researchers, and that it could participate fully in international research initiatives.

This is why the *Belissima* project, funded through the FP7 Research Potential programme, was established, to enhance existing research capacities and to forge links with other institutions across Europe. The ultimate objective is to establish the AOB as the Balkan region's most dynamic and competitive centre for astronomical and space sciences, with a truly European reach.

Reaching for the stars

"EU support will benefit AOB in two important aspects," says Belissima project coordinator Srdjan Samurovic. "The purchase of a new instrument, the robotic telescope known as 'Milanković', and the reinforcement of AOB staff through the recruitment of two experienced overseas researchers."

Samurovic explains that the telescope, with a main mirror diameter of 1.5 metres, is named after the famous Serbian astronomer Milutin Milanković, who was known for his contribution to both celestial mechanics and global climate theory. Milanković headed the AOB between 1948 and 1951. Once the new robotic telescope is completed, it will be the most advanced instrument in the Western Balkans

region, and will form part of a global network of robotic telescopes.

“The recruitment of two researchers, Dr Milan Bogosavljević from Caltech in the US and Dr Miroslav Mićić from the University of Sydney in Australia, will certainly significantly improve human resources at the AOB,” continues Samurovic. *“Permanent positions and the opportunity to lead scientific projects will be offered beyond the Belissima project’s life cycle.”*

The project was to re-establish the AOB as an important observation centre in Europe. *“The mounting of the new robotic telescope Milanković will mark a new era in Serbian astronomy, which will enable AOB staff to participate in modern research activities such as extragalactic astronomy, observations of multiple stars and observations of extra-solar planets,”* Samurovic explains. *“I have no doubt that research groups in Serbia – and from the region as a whole – will use it to advance their research.”*

A constellation of European excellence

Another important goal of the project is to reinforce the observatory’s network of partners. *“On this, I can say that we have already succeeded,”* claims Samurovic. *“For example, we have continued our partnership with researchers from the Baja Observatory in Hungary, and they have helped us to train AOB staff using instruments similar to those which will be installed at the AOB’s Vidojevica Astronomical Station. Dr Zach Ioannou and his colleagues from the Orliakas Astronomical Station in Greece also helped us in numerous technical details regarding the construction and purchase of our telescope.”*

Co-operation with the reputable NEON (Network of European Observatories in the North) observing school has also been continued, and contacts with researchers from observatories in Tenerife and La Palma in Spain have been forged. *“I can say that the Belissima project has attracted attention whenever its activities and plans for a new telescope have been presented,”* says Samurovic.

It is hoped that the refurbished observatory will inspire Serbia’s astronomers of the future, and lead to greater public understanding of the science. *“The degree of scientific illiteracy in Serbia is alarmingly high,”* says Samurovic. *“Therefore, we expect that through the popularisation of our work, we may significantly improve the present situation. A series of TV programmes dedicated to Belissima and to astronomy will also hopefully have a direct impact.”*

The effective implementation of the Belissima project is crucial to the successful integration of Serbia into Europe’s space and astronomy research community. Establishing sustainable research partnerships between the AOB and other centres of astronomical and space science excellence will raise the observatory’s profile, and the already strong scientific output of the AOB will be strengthened significantly following completion of the Milanković telescope.

“I am most proud of being a part of the team that managed to initiate the process of reinstalling Serbia as a country with competitive astronomical observations, using cutting-edge technology,” concludes Samurovic. *“Only time will tell whether we will have succeeded, but I am sure that all participants of the Belissima project are doing their best to accomplish this demanding task.”*

See also:

[Info-centre](#) [2]

Project:

Belgrade initiative for space science, instrumentation and modelling in astrophysics

Project Acronym:

BELLISIMA

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