



Exploiting the multifunctional properties of polyphenols: from wastes to high value products

NEWSLETTER

Mid-term meeting and Winter School

A large representative of the Phenocycles project consortium moved to Romania in mid-November 2025 to participate in the project mid-term meeting attended by REA Project Officer Sotirios Kokias, and in the winter school in Environmental Psychology organized by Corina Alin, Patricia Albulescu, and Anca Lazar (ICAM-WUT).

This was the first time several members of the consortium met outside the realm of a PC monitor, and, for many, it was their first time traveling to Romania. Certainly, for almost everyone, it was their first time exploring the world of Environmental Psychology!

This issue of the newsletter is entirely dedicated to these events. How did it go? What were the feelings of the travellers and meeting participants? Below some travel stories, both personal and professional.



The project

PHENOCYCLES aims at exploring innovative use of polyphenols (PP) and at validating methods for their extraction with a green chemistry approach. PP extracted from agro-industrial wastes and herbs with therapeutic value will be purified/fractionated with pilot-scale nano/ultrafiltration membranes to recover different PP fractions, to be employed in four distinct sectors: health, plant production, environment protection, material science.

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Secondment's stories

Giuliana Magnacca (UNITO)

It was truly wonderful to travel to a country never seen before with colleagues who felt so much like friends! The trip was planned to spend the weekend exploring the city and food of Bucharest with some relatives: Carola, Paolo, and Eleonora, aged 14, 17, and 18, were excellent travel companions, curious to discover the customs of a new place and open to spending time with people at least twice their age!

The Parliament Palace (or Palatul Parlamentului in Romanian) was one of the first destinations, then a visit to the oldest Orthodox churches, but also to the recently consecrated Catedrala Națională, also known as the People's Salvation Cathedral, the tallest and most imposing in Europe, with dazzling mosaics and a magnet for tourists and worshippers.

And the food?

Well... The mici (or mititei) at the Obor market, along with the ciorba de fasole (a special bean soup served in a loaf of bread) at one of the most characteristic places in the city center (a former brewery founded in 1879), and even the American-Romanian fusion breakfast at the place displaying hundreds of reproductions of Van Gogh works, were all noteworthy experiences.

Two days passed in a while....

After a warm farewell to Bucharest, Timișoara awaits us! The city is the fifth most popular in the country, many buildings have been renovated, others are under renovation, the squares are welcoming and bustling with people, the shops offer local products and many types of Palinka, the Romanian most famous liqueur, with an alcohol content of over 50%, made from plums but also other fruit varieties.

November 10th is the day of the welcome dinner, when we meet with our Romanian guests at a restaurant on the riverbank. The weather is not ideal for enjoying the riverside setting, but the atmosphere is perfect for a traditional dinner! And we also celebrate my birthday with a delicious cherry cake and choirs in all languages!!!!

The winter school is a surprise for me! I had never heard of Environmental Psychology, and following a team at work is an experience! Terms like "focus group" suddenly becomes something that conceals a wealth of knowledge, and after the school, we are ready to support the team of psychologists in their work in our own countries!



PHENOCYCLES Consortium

Coordinator:

(CREA) - Consiglio per la ricerca in agricoltura e l'analisi dell'economia agraria, ITA

Participants:

(UNITO) - Università degli Studi Di Torino, ITA
 (WUT) - Universitatea de Vest Din Timișoara, ROM
 (CNR) - Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, ITA
 (UPV) - Universitat Politecnica de Valencia, ESP
 (InHort) - Instytut Ogrodnictwa - Panstwowy Instytut Badawczy, POL

Partners:

(UdeA) - Universidad de Antioquia, COL
 (UNLP) - Universidad Nacional de La Plata, ARG
 (UNCo) - Universidad Nacional del Comahue, ARG
 (UPPSRI) - Plant Protection Scientific Research Institute, UZB

Luciana Baggi (UNITO)

Two a.m., a packed Flixbus, last row. What can I say: there's barely any space. The situation isn't exactly comfortable, but as my Neapolitan colleague would say, "Ma a noi che ce ne futt?" or, more politely, "who cares?". Honestly, despite being tired, the excitement from the past three days is keeping me awake. My supervisor Giuliana and I are turning back from Timișoara, where the Phenocycles Winter School has just taken place at the ICAM center. Since Phenocycles is a deeply interdisciplinary project, this experience was the perfect opportunity to start building a real bridge between different worlds that are equally important, even if they speak different languages. And it's exactly this mix of perspectives that makes everything more interesting, especially for someone like me who's just entering the second year of her PhD.

The first day was dedicated to a detailed presentation of the project and some gaming activities to break the ice and get to know each other in a relaxed way. But it was on the second day that we really got into the core of the school: the organizers, who are environmental psychologists, explained clearly and practically what a focus group is, what kinds of questions are useful to explore people's perceptions, and how to build an effective questionnaire. After a guided simulation, we worked together on drafting the questions that, on the third day, were submitted back to us as if we were actual participants.



What surprised me most was seeing how each of us contributed to a different piece of the puzzle: priorities, sensitivities, technical perspectives, social perspectives, everything came together to create a more complete picture. The mediators kept the exchange balanced and constructive, while the warm welcome from the ICAM team created a genuinely pleasant environment where everyone felt comfortable sharing.

Now, as I sit on this crowded Flixbus, I keep thinking that the best part was realizing how circular economy and interdisciplinarity aren't just abstract concepts, in fact they can become something real when different people come together, try to understand one another, and collaborate. It's a

Marina Gallarate e Simona Sapino (UNITO)

It is truly difficult for us to add anything to Giuliana's words, as she has already given a wonderful description of the artistic heritage and beauty of Bucharest and Timisoara and has described so well both the tourist and social aspects as well as the scientific aspects of this MTM.

Neither I, nor Simona, nor her children had ever been to Romania before. In our imagination, we thought we would find smoky cities, rich in old Soviet architecture. Instead, we were hugely surprised: Bucharest is an incredibly lively city, with a center full of trendy bars crowded with young people and all kinds of shops. Carola and Paolo, Simona's children, know all about this, having spent many hours walking around and shopping. And what can we say about the karaoke bar, where Eligio gave a performance of the highest standard? But he'll tell us all about that himself.

Timisoara is a University town belonging to "UNITA-Universitas Montium", one of 64 European alliances funded by the European Commission as part of the Erasmus+ European Universities initiative, a project coordinated by the University of Torino.



It is a very people-friendly city, with squares surrounded by pastel-colored houses, which are very charming even when shrouded in mist. The first Christmas lights helped to enhance the charm of the place... or perhaps it was the Palinka we drank to the health of Giuliana and Giovanna, who were celebrating their birthdays during the MTM days?

As far as the scientific aspects are concerned, it was certainly very important to be able to meet in person the colleagues from WUT whom we had gotten to know through online meetings.

Their welcome, confirming what many people have already said in this newsletter, was truly warm. Personally, we found the visit to the research laboratories, equipped with advanced, high-performance analytical instruments, very interesting: we must confess that we felt a little friendly envy.

During the presentation session of the project's Work Packages, in the presence of Project Officer Sotiris Kiokias, we were able to discuss our results and exchange ideas with colleagues who have carried out their research in different fields, with the common goal of exploiting the potential of polyphenols. On this occasion, we further understood the great value of this multitasking collaboration and how interdisciplinarity is a useful tool for fully harnessing, in this case, the resources from the processing waste of plant products.

Last but not least, we would like to mention the Project Officer, who proved to be attentive, curious, competent, and provided us with useful advice for continuing our research. From a human point of view, he was a very pleasant person to talk to about any subject, as I (Marina) can confirm, having traveled from Timisoara to Munich sitting next to him on the plane.

In short, everything went well: when is the next meeting?

Giovanna Gautier di Confiengo (CNR-STEMS)

I visited Romania and in particular Bucharest many years ago. I was surprised to see how touristy and lively it was. It was really fun to explore the city with the Piedmont/Argentina group. We walked for kilometres, ate at the market and sang in Italian at karaoke.

As far as Timisoara, was a wonderful surprise. It is a very beautiful city.

We were warmly welcomed by the ICAM/WUT team, with whom we immediately found great chemistry. They organized a delicious dinner at a restaurant along the river, which immediately helped break the ice. The focus groups were really interesting and useful. We also visited the laboratories, with which we will definitely start collaborating.

We will be back in Timisoara soon, as the whole city knows us now. We are even in the local newspaper.



Next event

Seminar, November 24th, 17.00 AulaMagna Guido Tappi. (Prof. D. Martire, UNLP)

Engineering Nanomaterials for Enhanced Photothermal and Photodynamic Therapies

Maria Giulia Faga (CNR-STEMS)

“What about a weekend in Bucharest before the midterm in Timisoara?”

Hmm... why not? I've never been to Romania, so it seems right to visit the capital first.

There are eleven of us? Oh... that could be tricky... With three teenagers... Well, they can be any worse than I was at their age.

So began the journey in my head: curiosity with limited expectations. And what a wonderful surprise: a lively and nice capital city, welcoming people, the Phenocycles group moving smoothly: it seems like the result of long planning. The beauty of serendipity.

In Timisoara, the amazement continues. Other two-dimensional faces, seen only on the computer, prove their real existence. “We'll get a minibus with the Phenocycles logo on it to travel around the world,” says Silvia from CREA, meeting with everyone's approval.

Including the kids, who should be included in the secondments on merit.

And then... the welcome from WUT's colleagues is difficult to describe without sounding corny. What can I say about the school, masterfully organized by the Social Scientists of the Project? Interesting, fun, stimulating, and I could go on and on.

Of course, there was one downside: the food was so good that I gained a kilo and a half!



Marco Russo (CNR-STEMS)

If I had to describe my time in Timisoara in two words, the ones that come to mind are discovery and surprise. Yes, I was really surprised because I was captivated by the beauty of Timisoara, the kindness of its inhabitants and the goodness... and abundance of its food.

But I was also surprised to discover a lively social and academic environment. At WUT University, and in particular at the ICAM department, I found people with great human and scientific qualities in both the fields of chemistry and psychology. In the latter case, the surprise was twofold because... despite some initial scepticism, I admit... I discovered that environmental psychologists can really act as a bridge between chemists, who are trying to find technical solutions for a sustainable development, and society, which needs to understand and absorb these changes. Participating in the Winter School focus groups was enlightening for me!

Returning to chemistry... or rather green chemistry... during my secondment, even if only for a few days, I tried my hand at new (or different) experimental activities that took me back to the past, when during my PhD I didn't count the hours spent in the laboratory... but only the beauty of discovering something new or unexpected. This pleasant journey into the past also involved living like a student... which meant living in a dormitory (although it was more like a 5-star residence) and sharing my days away from home with colleagues.

In fact, with Antonella, Massimo and Silvia in particular, we shared moments inside and outside the dormitory, took endless walks to discover Timisoara, its culture, its history (it was exciting to visit the Museum of the Romanian Revolution) and its wonderful food... two things in particular stole my heart... Palinka and Papanasi! But someone else also made an impression on me... my new friend Alexandru Pahomi... one of the kindest people I have ever met, who helped to make this period unforgettable.

Finally, this experience allowed me to finally meet some of my colleagues involved in the project in person, in particular my colleagues from the “Piedmont Group”... Well, once again, I was surprised to discover a group of colleagues who were not only highly professional, but also close-knit and friendly, so much so that I felt like I had known them forever. All this contributes to giving value and meaning, both scientific and human, to what is now more than just a project for me... so

Thank you PHENOCYCLES and thank you to all my colleagues at WUT/ICAM for their warm hospitality!



Massimo Guaita, Phenocycles coordinator (CREA)

My personal involvement in this Rumanian adventure was double, actually. On one side, as the Coordinator of PHENOCYCLES, my main concern was the MTM meeting, a very important step for the prosecution of the project itself, and for the first time we had to report personally to our PO the advances of the project. It was challenging, but everything worked out perfectly, thanks to the perfect organization of the event (thanks again to all WUT's team! 😊) and to the relaxed atmosphere that soon was established among all participants to MTM.

On the other side, I was also a secondee at WUT, and I had the chance to live this experience as a “young” secondee: actually, we had lessons (the Winter School!) during the day, and nice beers during the evening.

Moreover, our stay was at WUT's dormitory, a perfect place! Brand new, full of young people, a really nice atmosphere. Then, we spent the rest of our free time just wandering around this beautiful town, full of things to see, full of trees and parks, and bycycles around, with our friends Marco, Alex and Ovidio (Hugs to them! 😊)

Silvia Motta and Antonella Bosso (CREA)

We spent ten days in Timisoara with a pretty full schedule: the project's midterm meeting, the winter school, and the first part of our secondment. It was a great experience from both a professional and a personal point of view!

As for the MTM, it was a pleasure to finally meet in person many colleagues we had only seen online. Communication is always easier face to face, and we really appreciate seeing how many results the consortium has achieved so far.

The winter school, whose topic was environmental psychology, was something completely new for us and, to be honest, we had no idea what to expect. In reality, thanks especially to the professional and at the same time friendly way in which we were introduced to a completely new world of knowledge by Corina, Patricia and Anca, it turned out to be a great experience. It was truly an opportunity for us to grow.

As for the scientific part, which we will develop further in the next phase of the secondment, we had the opportunity to appreciate the well-equipped laboratory and to meet the highly qualified team: Titus, Gabriela, Adina, Alexandru, Micaela, and Raul. Together, we discussed what could become the most interesting research directions for our grape extracts.

Finally, a few words about free time, friendship, and visiting the city: we spent our free time walking and walking non-stop with our wonderful new friends Alex, Ovidio, and Marco, exploring Timisoara, visiting museums, getting to know its history and culture, and not least... its food, beer and wine traditions!

Alex and Ovidio were two invaluable guides and taught us so many things! They left us with the desire to come back soon to explore the surroundings of Timisoara as well! One last thing: it was fun to discover how many words Italians and Romanians have in common! One evening at dinner we tried sitting Italians on one side and Romanians on the other, and the rule was that everyone had to speak their own language... the result was that we actually understood each other quite well!

Daniel Cacciari (UNLP)

The four days I spent in Romania were truly special from many angles. It was my first time visiting an Eastern European country, so I arrived with a head full of questions: What would the culture be like? How would people be—warm, distant, friendly? And the food? Luckily, every one of those questions ended up getting the best possible answer. The culture felt very different from mine or from the places I've visited before; the people turned out to be surprisingly warm and welcoming; and the food was delicious—especially the soups..

During my first two days, I had the chance to explore the capital, Bucharest. At first it felt strange to me, mostly because it's so different from the cities I'm used to. But as I walked around, I discovered a place full of history, mixed architecture, and something interesting to look at on every block. Despite the cold and humid weather, the trip was incredibly enjoyable thanks to the company of my colleagues from UNITO who were traveling with me.

After that, it was time to visit Timișoara and get ready for my secondment presentation at the project's mid-term meeting—a completely new experience for me. I got to meet the rest of the Italian team and our Romanian hosts, who welcomed us warmly. Timișoara is a small city, but rich in history, with beautiful architecture and amazingly photogenic squares.

The mid-term meeting was a truly enriching experience. It allowed me to connect directly with the other project participants and learn more about their areas of expertise. Unfortunately, I couldn't stay for the Winter School because my secondment was ending and I had to return to Argentina. Still, those four days in Romania will stay with me for a long time.

Daniel Osvaldo Martire (UNLP)

My trip to Timișoara for the Phenocycles mid-term meeting was both scientifically stimulating and personally enriching. The gathering was a crucial opportunity to connect face-to-face with a wide array of colleagues—the Phenocycles family—representing the Italian, Polish, Argentinian, and Romanian partners. Beyond the technical discussions, these interactions were key in fostering deeper understanding and commitment across our different international teams. The exemplary hospitality of our host colleagues in Romania made the entire experience seamless and welcoming for all the foreign participants.

As someone coming from Argentina, the atmosphere and setting in Romania were particularly memorable. Timișoara is a truly beautiful and historic place. Its architectural heritage is captivating; the central district is defined by magnificent examples of Austro-Hungarian Baroque style, giving the city a palpable sense of old-world European sophistication and grandeur. Experiencing this rich local culture while advancing our important EU project truly underscored the cross-cultural nature of modern scientific collaboration.

Elvio Malusà (InHORT)

I was impressed by WUT up-to-date facilities within the Chemistry Department and overwhelming capacity to conduct research. As a representative of a Polish institution, I have to say that, to break the common stereotype I have met several times in scientific and not scientific institutions of more advanced EU countries about the new-comers capacity in terms of expertise and facilities. Same appreciation goes to the Social Science Department, which has very well organized the Winter School and provided useful elements to prompt life-science researchers considering people perception when delivering technical innovations.

Heart and emotions are the most powerful drivers of innovation adoption. I was even given the opportunity to demonstrate this by carrying out the “Breath of Soil – Memory Nexus” exercise devised within the Horizon Europe SPIN-FERT project: all Phenocycles members provided their emotions in writing when smelling a soil substrate which will be transformed into a RNA molecule representing the connection of the life in the soil to our life experience (<https://spinfert.eu/art-science/>). We experienced the same emotion when looking at the Wine Rainbow installation at the art museum of Timisoara (in the picture).



But at the same time, to confirm the stereotypes about Eastern EU countries, we enjoyed a lot the hospitality, the good food and, I would say, above all, the good wine and wine industry derivatives (I think nice terminology to define the “palinka”!!). Timisoara is an amazing city, worthy to be visited!! Secondments there would result in a perfect mix of knowledge exchange and cultural sharing. Let's Phenocycles at WUT!!

In conclusion,

a heartfelt thank you to our Romanian colleagues for taking care of us!

In the picture, from the top to the bottom, some of the colleagues met in Timisoara: Patricia Albulescu, Corina Ilin, Anca Lazar, Gabriela Vlase, Adina Segneanu, Stefana Dima, Alin Semenescu, Titus Vlase and Alexandru Pahomi.

