

Ministerial Declaration
for the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Meeting of the Steering Platform on
Research and Innovation

We, the Western Balkans Ministers responsible for research and innovation and the European Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation, met in Brussels on 22 October 2026 at the Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation.

Achievements over the 20 years of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation

1. We acknowledge the **full association** of all Western Balkans economies to **EU Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation**, alongside **growing participation rates** in Horizon Europe.
2. We recognise the gradual **integration** of Western Balkans economies **in the European Research Area (ERA)** by aligning their policies with ERA values and principles and by taking part in its governance and implementation modalities.
3. We welcome the **increasing public expenditure** on research and innovation in line with national Reform Agendas, reflecting strengthened national commitments.
4. We reaffirm the importance of a **regular dialogue** on research and innovation **at Ministerial level** addressing relevant topics for Western Balkans partners.
5. We recognise the advancements in the **Western Balkans Growth Plan and Reform Agendas**, enhancing structural reforms.
6. We welcome the **substantial progress** in the development and implementation of the Western Balkans innovation strategies (**Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)**), fostering regional economic transformation with Western Balkans economies focusing on priority domains defined in their Smart Specialisation Strategies.
7. We acknowledge the **strengthened innovation ecosystems**, including the establishment of **innovation agencies, science and technology parks, technology transfer offices, and EIT Community Hubs**, fostering **academia-business collaboration**.
8. We welcome an accelerated **digital transition and AI adoption** through public digitalisation efforts, the co-funding of **Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs)**, the participation in the **EuroHPC Joint Undertaking's activities**, the adoption of **national AI Strategies**, and the establishment of **AI Factories Antennas**.
9. We welcome the award of **EU Mission Labels** to the cities of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Elbasan (Albania), and Podgorica (Montenegro), recognising their leadership in climate-neutral and smart urban development.

10. We highlight the importance of an **active engagement** in networking opportunities under **COST** (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) **Eureka and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)**, enhancing cross-border collaboration.

Priorities for further deepened regional integration of research and innovation ecosystems

We have jointly decided on the following priorities and commitments to deepen regional integration and innovation-driven growth:

11. We **reaffirm the Western Balkans' dedication** and commitment to their **EU accession path**, with a focus on **harmonisation with key EU-level initiatives and legislation**, including:

- The **European Research Area Act**,
- The **Startup and Scaleup Strategy**,
- The **European Innovation Act**, and
- Relevant **EU acquis** in research and innovation.

12. We intend to **advance the reform of the research and innovation policy framework and ensure sustainable systemic change** by fostering strategic, **evidence-informed decision-making, efficient implementation** and by establishing a stable, **predictable funding environment** aligned with regional capabilities and priorities, thereby aiming to:

- Enhance the **effective utilisation of financial investments** to maximise their impact;
- Gradually introduce **performance-based research funding** accompanied by **capacity building** measures for **evaluation** and **monitoring**;
- Deliver tangible **benefits for both economic growth societal transformation and well-being**;
- Develop and progressively pursue **research security as an important component** of the policy framework, following the 2024 Council recommendation on enhancing research security, through a risk-based approach in balance with preserving open scientific cooperation and academic freedom.

13. We envisage that **Western Balkans further boost domestic funding** for research and innovation, while creating **enabling framework conditions** to:

- **Stimulate private-sector investment** in R&D through instruments like fiscal incentives, public-private funds, or innovation support schemes,
- **Support a progressive and merit-based integration** into the European Research Area and the European Innovation Ecosystems,

- **Strengthen academia-business linkages, long-term partnerships and innovation ecosystems, and**
- **Leverage EU funding instruments**, including the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (**Horizon Europe**) and **future EU programmes relevant for Research and Innovation.**

14. We intend to **enhance skills development and institutional capacities** in **research and innovation** to support:

- The **green and clean transition**, including circular economy, renewable energy, critical raw materials and climate adaptation as well as the integration of candidate countries into **European industrial strategies**;
- The **digital transformation**, with a focus on **AI, cybersecurity, and advanced digital skills** sharing research outputs and data in line with FAIR principles;
- **Gender equality and inclusivity** in R&I, including in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics).

15. We envisage that Western Balkans **support the establishment and upgrading of**:

- **Regional research and technology infrastructures** and **centres of excellence** emphasising cross-border collaboration in line with reform agendas and further integration into European research infrastructures,
- **Mobility programmes** for researchers and innovators,
- **Measures to retain, attract and circulate talent**, including through **competitive funding, research assessment, career development by removing existent, unjustified barriers, and promoting international collaboration. Balanced brain circulation** promotes two-way mobility, long-term cooperation networks and reintegration opportunities for researchers and innovators.

16. We reaffirm to **maximise engagement** across **European Union policy and innovation support mechanisms**, such as:

- The Horizon Europe **Policy Enlarge project**, supporting **policy dialogue**, mutual learning, joint actions and **capacity building** in enlargement countries;
- A scheme, providing **strategic foresight** for Western Balkans both on **individual and regional** level.
- **Train-the-trainers and mentoring initiatives** to enhance capacities of **innovation hubs and innovation advisors** in Western Balkans economies **to train and support local small and medium-sized enterprises and startups**
- **Funding for proposals** from Western Balkan companies that receive a **Seal of Excellence under the EIC Accelerator and EIC Pre-Accelerator calls of the current Horizon Europe programme** to support innovative SMEs and start-ups and strengthen the pipeline for future scale-up and equity investment.

- The **EIT Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS)**, boosting innovation capacity building, and the **EIT Community Hubs**, acting as one-stop shops on the ground and providing local actors broader **access to innovation opportunities**.
 - Strengthened cooperation through **EU-Macro-Regional strategies** as important territorial cooperation frameworks to develop joint initiatives across the region.
17. We envisage to **strengthen the role** of the **Steering Platform on Research and Innovation** by:
- **Further deepening cooperation** between Western Balkans economies **EU Member States and other Associated Countries**,
 - Promoting **science diplomacy** as a mean of strengthening policy dialogue, fostering mutual trust, and expanding research and innovation cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans.
 - Mandating the Steering Platform to **revise the Western Balkans Agenda** on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport, with a special **focus on research and innovation**, by the **next Ministerial Meeting in 2027**;
 - **Developing an ambitious Action Plan** aligned with the **structure and strategic goals of the next 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework** ensuring **coherence with EU funding programmes and regional development strategies**, reinforcing European competitiveness, and delivering tangible mutual benefits for research and innovation communities. The Action Plan will include **clear objectives**, indicative timelines, **monitoring** arrangements and measurable **indicators**, while remaining flexible enough to reflect the **specific needs and capacities of each Western Balkans economy**.
18. We **pledge to work collaboratively** to implement this Joint Declaration, ensuring that **research and innovation** remain **central drivers** of the Western Balkans' **socio-economic development and further European integration**.

Endorsed by the European Commissioner for Startups, Research, and Innovation on behalf of the EU, and by the Western Balkans Ministers responsible for research and innovation. Brussels, on 22 October 2026