



**WESTERN  
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Newsletter

## [FOCUS ARTICLE] The Western Balkans on the Pathway towards Digital Transition

### Europe ´s Digital Decade

Digital technology is revolutionising the way people live, particularly in the era of artificial intelligence (AI). The EU's digital strategy seeks to harness this transformation for the benefit of individuals and businesses, striving to establish the upcoming decade as Europe's "[Digital Decade](#)". Concurrently, it aims to contribute to the objective of achieving a climate-neutral Europe by 2050.

The European Commission aims to empower businesses and people in a human-centred, sustainable, and more prosperous digital future. The [Digital Decade policy programme](#), with concrete targets and objectives for 2030, guides Europe's digital transformation, while the [Digital Education Action Plan \(2021-2027\)](#) sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe. Join the [Digital Education Action Plan in Review](#) event in Brussels or online and listen to the achievements accomplished so far during the implementation of the Plan.

### Spotlight on Artificial Intelligence

On 24 January 2024, the [Commission launched a package of measures to support European startups and SMEs](#) in the development of trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (AI) that respects EU values and rules. As part of this package, the [European AI Office](#) has been established at the Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology to support the [European approach to AI](#) and with an aim to ensure the development and coordination of AI policy at European level and to supervise the implementation and enforcement of the forthcoming [AI Act](#). To support the use of AI in research, the [European Research Area Forum](#) has [recently developed](#) the [Living guidelines on the responsible use of generative AI in research](#).

Another key aspect is that the EC will provide financial support through [Horizon Europe](#) and the [Digital Europe programme](#) dedicated to generative AI. In this regard, the [European Commission has opened a new set of calls for proposals in Digital Europe](#).



Source of image: EC

Currently, four Call for Proposals related to AI are open until 29 May 2024. For more precise information, please check out the calls here:

- [DIGITAL-2024-AI-ACT-06-INNOV - EU AI Innovation Accelerator preparatory action](#)
- [DIGITAL-2024-AI-ACT-06-SANDBOX - AI regulatory sandboxes: EU-level coordination and support](#)
- [DIGITAL-2024-AI-ACT-06-TESTAI - Pilot action for the establishment of future Union Testing Facilities in AI](#)
- [DIGITAL-2024-CLOUD-DATA-06 - Cloud, data and artificial intelligence](#)

*Please note that to date, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia participate in the Digital Europe Programme from the Western Balkans retroactively from 1 January 2023. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\* have started negotiations to join the Programme. You can check the latest update on their eligibility status [here](#).*

March marked the Commission's flagship [Research and Innovation Days](#). On 20 March 2024, the Commission has adopted the [second strategic plan for Horizon Europe](#), which sets out three key strategic orientations for the EU's research and innovation funding for 2025-2027 (see also this [Factsheet](#)), besides green transition and a more resilient, competitive, inclusive and democratic Europe, digital transition is one of the pillars of this strategic plan, showing its significance.

## **POLICY ANSWERS in support of Digital Transition in the WB**

In the Western Balkans, digital transition is guided by the Digital Agenda, [launched](#) by the EC in 2018. The Commission together with Ministers from the six Western Balkans economies committed to investing in broadband connectivity, increasing cybersecurity, trust, and digitalisation of industry, strengthening the digital economy and society and boosting research and innovation with an aim to support the transition of the region into a digital economy and bring the benefits of the digital transformation, such as faster economic growth, more jobs, and better services.



Source of image: EC

On 22 February 2024, as part of its Monthly Webinar series, POLICY ANSWERS organised a webinar which reflected on the challenges, highlights and best practices while providing recommendations in relation to the digital transition in the Western Balkans. The recording of the event is available [here](#). For more information on the upcoming webinars follow [this link](#).

To provide a comprehensive overview of on the state-of-play of digital transition in the Western Balkans Region, POLICY ANSWERS has recently published a [Policy Report on Digital Transformation in the Western Balkans](#), which presents a comprehensive analysis of the digitalisation landscape in the region by addressing various dimensions like ICT infrastructure, skills, governance models, legal frameworks, eGovernment initiatives, and user experience. An accompanying Policy Brief is also available via the mentioned link.

### **New Growth Plan - the Western Balkans towards a Digital Single Market**

On 8 November 2023, the [European Commission adopted a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#), with the aim of bringing the Western Balkan partners closer to the EU through offering some of the benefits of EU membership to the region already before accession, boosting economic growth and accelerating socio-economic convergence. The [first event dedicated to the Growth Plan](#) has recently been organised in Tirana, Albania, where stakeholders from across the EU, regional bodies, and national governments discussed the implications of the Growth Plan on the Common Regional Market.

The new Growth Plan places a significant emphasis on the digital transition as a cornerstone for regional economic growth and integration with the EU. By prioritising the Digital Single Market, the Plan not only aims at enhancing the region's digital infrastructure but also at

aligning its digital standards with those of the EU, fostering a more competitive and cohesive economic landscape.



Source of image: EC

### Digital Innovation Hubs (DiH)

According to the [EU4DigitalSME](https://eu4digitalsme.ba/en/dihs/) project, a DiH is “An organisation or a coordinated group with complementary expertise and goals focusing on social responsibility and offering a set of services and activities that support small and medium-sized enterprises in their digital transformation and innovation as a key contact point/point of expertise.” (Source: <https://eu4digitalsme.ba/en/dihs/>)



Source of image: JRC



The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has designed a [Support programme for development of Digital Innovation Hubs in the Western Balkans](#). In the frame of this programme, the RCC has [mapped Digital Innovation Hubs in the Region](#), identifying also needs and prospective regional cooperation actions. To support DIHs in collaborating for joint project proposals and to facilitate networking among regional DIHs, the RCC organised a [Regional Digital Innovation Hubs Workshop in Podgorica](#).

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To delve deeper into activities going on in the Western Balkans, read further in our Newsletter or visit the WB Info Hub and its page [dedicated to the Digital Transition theme](#). If you have news, events, publications, projects etc. to share in this topic, please do not hesitate to reach out to [info@westernbalkans-infohub.eu](mailto:info@westernbalkans-infohub.eu). We will be happy to share your input.