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Newsletter

## [FOCUS ARTICLE] Progresses in the implementation of the Western Balkans Agenda

### POLICY ANSWERS review of the Steering Platforms meeting in Skopje, 15-16 February 2023

The Western Balkans Steering Platforms on Research and Innovation and Education and Training have recently met in North Macedonia. Their meeting took place on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2023 in Skopje, and was co-chaired by the European Commission's DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and DG Research and Innovation, the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and North Macedonia on behalf of the Western Balkans.

The morning of the first day was dedicated to the Meeting of the Steering Platform on Education and Training, which discussed the [main policy developments and cooperation](#) in implementing the Western Balkans Agenda with a focus on Education, Training and Youth. The different stakeholders presented the progress made in participation of the region in a variety of European funded programmes as well as new opportunities emerging within the [European Education Area](#). It was outlined that the [Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success](#) can be a source of inspiration and guiding document also for the Western Balkans while trying to obtain better learning outcomes and inclusiveness. The recently published [guidelines on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy](#), as well as [guidelines on the use of artificial intelligence and data](#), have been recommended as useful references for education reforms in the region. When it comes to skills development, besides the digital and other competencies, the training of professional translators and interpreters on university level is also of high importance in relation to EU integration. A [European Master's in Translation](#) was launched by [DG Translation](#) to improve translator training, with [DG Interpretation](#) further setting up [MA and post-graduate courses to support conference-interpreter training](#) in the Western Balkans and with it train top-level professionals to assist in the negotiations on the EU enlargement path. All Western Balkans reported progresses such as the revision of key legal documents or strategies, and various projects and programmes in relation to the education and training of youth and children. Highlighted examples included cooperation between UNESCO, UNICEF and different local ministries focusing on digitalization, media and information literacy, etc. The [European Training Foundation \(ETF\)](#) provided an in-depth overview on how to enable a stronger participation in the Copenhagen Process for Vocational Education and foster research, innovation, education and vocational training capacity building Training (VET) by linking the Western Balkan education and innovation activities and bringing them closer to the EU ones. UNICEF informed on its activities to accelerate the [digital transformation of the education systems in the Western Balkans](#), and underlined how thousands of teachers and educators upgraded their teaching skills by using digital tools in education and methods



of inclusive pedagogy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro and North Macedonia due to extensive capacity building activities.

At the same time, the [Western Balkans Alumni Association \(WBAA\)](#) updated on its offer in terms of capacity building activities, events, as well as research, internationalisation and modernisation projects for higher education on the ground. The WBAA recently published the so-called “[Tracer Study](#)” to identify effective approaches for improvement in the higher education system in the WB as well as a [report](#) on how the organisation creates supportive environment for young people of the region.

The Steering Platform meeting on Research and Innovation started on the second half of the day to continue also on the second day. Here the participants debated the priorities and objectives in Research and Innovation with the Western Balkans, which provided [comprehensive reports on their most recent R&I developments](#). All Western Balkans economies are now associated to the [Horizon Europe programme](#). The region is also participating in the [Enterprise Europe Network \(EEN\)](#), EUREKA established a dedicated WB Working Group, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) launched a [Regional Innovation Scheme \(RIS\)](#), thematic RIS Hubs were launched and planned to be further developed into a network of Community Hubs, and concrete synergies have been created between R&I and regional development programmes, e.g. the participation of universities from the Western Balkans in the [ADRION](#) programme. North Macedonia and Serbia participated in the 10th round of the [European Social Survey](#) and Kosovo\* connected to [GEANT](#), just to mention a few examples of the recent deliverables in achieving the Western Balkans Agenda.

The Other opportunities include the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions ([MSCA](#)), [ERA fellowship calls](#), while the EC will seek for more synergies with existing initiatives in the region: [ERASMUS+](#), [COST](#), [MCAA WB chapter](#), [Euraxess](#), [New European Bauhaus](#) etc.

The Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC) presented a variety of institutional capacity building activities are taking place on [Smart Specialisation](#) as well as in support of the Green Deal in the Western Balkans. The JRC is undertaking trainings and surveys on status of the environment (air, climate, water and soil), and published a range of reports and studies on [air-pollution and health](#), [soil health](#) and [environment](#) in the Western Balkans. [A list of calls is currently open](#) to access the JRC’s nuclear and non-nuclear research infrastructures.

In summary the [EU is focusing on four flagship activities](#) as regards the Western Balkans:

- A Stronger Involvement of the Western Balkans in EU Policy Work
- Association of the Western Balkans to EU Programmes and Initiatives
- Supporting the Quality of Youth Engagement and Youth Policy Reforms by Increasing Opportunities for Young People
- Supporting The Western Balkans Fit for The Green and Digital Age

The Steering Platform meeting on R&I proceeded with [updates on R&I Cooperation and strengthening of capacities in the region](#) from the side of the EU member states and other organisations.

Both, [Austria and Germany](#) presented bilateral cooperation schemes for multilateral cooperation, such as the [Western Balkans R&D cooperation programme](#) (WBC2019) of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) of Germany or the BMBF call on “Integration of the Central and South Eastern European Region into the European Research Area” ([Bridge2ERA2021](#)) that is still open until May 31, 2024. Also France strongly supports



the association to Horizon Europe programme and is strengthening ties with stakeholders in the region. INALCO plans to expand to all 6 WB as part of European Capacity Building programme in Erasmus+. Among other initiatives of scholarships and support, a [Balkans Institute for Science and Innovation](#) was established at the Université Côte d'Azur (UCA). Listing a list of synergies and programmes, [COST](#) especially drew attention to its [Open Call 2023](#), to submit COST action proposals. The [Enterprise Europe Network](#) introduced the organisation's achievements, activities and areas of expertise and introduced EEN coordinators in the Western Balkans. The [European Innovation Council \(EIC\)](#) observed the low participation among the Western Balkans in the [EIC Accelerator](#) and pointed out that SMEs are eligible and can reply to all EIC calls, presenting funding options, eligibility criteria, selection processes as well as open calls. The European Institute of Innovation and Technology ([EIT](#)) will continue giving priority to its engagement with the Western Balkans, especially through: the enhanced [EIT RIS](#); the [EIT HEI Action](#); the Cross-KIC action supporting Strategic Regional Innovations, including a dedicated Western Balkans Work Package. The main goal of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is to support regional initiatives in cooperation and working groups (on research, digital, financial investment) and to deliver technical assistance to individual WBs and the region. The RCC is currently seeking [nominations for Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the year 2022](#). [Elettra - Sincrotrone Trieste](#) presented its initiatives to involve scientists from Western Balkans in synchrotron radiation research through PhD scholarship and Postdoctoral fellowship opportunities, while the European Business and Innovation Centre Network ([EBN](#)) provides a series of opportunities, ranging from technical assistance, certification or strategic partnerships.

Last but not least, the participants in the Steering Platforms meeting could also learn about the preparation of the 2023 Ministerial Meeting, to take place on 5-6 June in Skopje, and could discuss on a first draft agenda.

On various occasions, [POLICY ANSWERS presented progress made](#) in different areas of the project. Desiree Pecarz (ZSI) gave a first overview about the organisation of the upcoming Ministerial Meeting in June 2023 that will be organised in cooperation with the Republic of North Macedonia. Elke Dall (ZSI) provided an update from the project overall and in particular the [ongoing capacity building measures](#), which were launched in the region in the second half of 2022. These Capacity Building Programmes were co-created with stakeholders in the Western Balkans and centre around five broad topics, including technical assistance in policy design and implementation, monitoring and evaluation, support to universities, business sector, and for participation in EU programmes, as well as general training sessions on circular economy, blue growth and healthy societies. The measures also support Foresight and Anticipatory Science and Aligning Priorities around Partnerships and Missions for Digital, Green and Health. Pilot Activities will include a Regional Innovation Academy presenting educational resources related to innovation management, innovation funding and related experiences. Other pilot activities will impact skills and competences of particular target groups: regional innovation vouchers, researcher mobility, youth campaigns, promoting research infrastructures. Ulrike Kunze (DLR) presented an overview of the [current monitoring activity done by the project](#) in relation to the integration of the region into the European Research Area, including key findings. Together with the European Commission, the POLICY ANSWERS project also organised an [Info session on the Western Balkans Agenda](#) in follow up of the Steering Platform Meetings on 17 February 2023.

A separate workshop was finally held on the [New European Research Area](#), followed by a Seminar on the [New European Innovation Agenda](#).

Participation in the [ERA Forum](#) of associated countries is extremely important as instrument of integration of pre-accession partners, as it is gathering stakeholders to implement



measures on national levels. The [New European Research Area](#) includes a list of novelties. The first novelty is the [Pact for R&I in Europe](#) - a long-term policy framework for the EU for setting values and principles of collaboration and priority areas of action: ethics, integrity, freedom of science and scientific research, gender equality, shared opportunities etc. The second novelty is the ERA Policy Agenda which includes 20 actions along four priority areas and puts into practices the steps for implementation of ERA Actions. The third novelty is the establishment of a new governance body: the ERA Governance Forum, with a new ERA Monitoring Mechanism as fourth novelty. All achievements will feed into the New Policy Agenda of 2025-27. All Western Balkans economies are highly encouraged to participate in the ERA Governance Forum and commit to ERA Actions. The [EC DG for Regional and Urban Policy](#) gave a detailed overview about the 2021-2027 Interreg IPA cooperation, as well as the IPA ADRIAN & EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region - Macro-Regional Strategy (EUSAIR MRS) facilitation of the enlargement process of the Western Balkans. A list of calls is currently open on sustainable blue economy.

The second day concluded with a seminar on the [New European Innovation Agenda](#) that mainly focuses on deep tech innovation. The Agenda will help Europe develop new technologies and bring them to the market. It has five flagships and actions around them to create innovation ecosystems and breach the innovation gap. Many funding opportunities will be upcoming for the Western Balkans, including internships, funding for scale-ups, calls and matchmaking among others, incl. the [Deep Tech Talent Initiative](#), the [WomenTechEU](#) or the [GirlsGoCircular](#) project. Finally, all Western Balkans economies are highly encouraged to join the EIC forum and check the EU talent pool for matchmaking and funding opportunities.

The Meeting of the Steering Platforms in Skopje was the first one to take place physically after the Covid-19 pandemic. The meeting was a successful opportunity to network between the stakeholders and discuss the achievements made and future outlook. The next Steering Platform meetings will be again virtual, continuing cooperation in view of the ahead in view of the Ministerial Meeting of the Steering Platforms to take place from 5 - 6 June 2023 in Skopje.

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For more information on news around the Steering Platforms, visit the Western Balkans Info Hub portal within the [Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training](#) & [Steering Platform on Research and Innovation for Western Balkans](#) sections!