



**Joint Science  
Conference**  
BERLIN PROCESS

GERMAN PRESIDENCY AND 10<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE BERLIN PROCESS

## JOINT STATEMENT

COURAGE FOR FUTURE

BERLIN PROCESS JOINT SCIENCE CONFERENCE

8<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF STAKEHOLDERS OF THE SCIENCE, EDUCATION, RESEARCH  
AND INNOVATION PILLAR OF THE BERLIN PROCESS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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The 8<sup>th</sup> Berlin Process Joint Science Conference convened to explore pathways for deeper integration of the Western Balkans' education, research, and innovation sectors into the European Union, and to strengthen democracy in the region through reinvigorated intellectual engagement on national and European issues.

### KEY MESSAGES FOR THE HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT, AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- I. Preceding full membership, the Western Balkans are advancing their integration into the European Union through higher education, research, and innovation. We call for the acceleration and deepening of this integration by *establishing a dedicated Western Balkans Facility for Skills, Research, and Innovation* that will pool funding from all relevant European Union programmes to make the region fit for the future. The association of the Western Balkan countries with the European Union Framework Programme for Research and Innovation *should unite the principles of excellence and solidarity*, reflecting the unique challenges the region faces and addressing its needs more sharply.
- II. Investment in innovation, skills, and knowledge is critical for competitiveness, strategic autonomy, and dual transitions. It is essential that the *Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans* invests in students, scientists, universities, and research and innovation institutions. It is equally essential that *Western Balkan national governments increase their low gross domestic product investment rate in education, research, and innovation*. The European Commission must ensure that Western Balkan scientific institutions can engage effectively in the European Research Area and European policy areas, existing and future.
- III. Democracy in the Western Balkans is under pressure from nationalism, populism, and disinformation, often driven by foreign influence. To counter these threats, *it is crucial to guarantee and support public safe spaces where intellectuals and cultural figures can foster free and open societal discourse*. Although these spaces are shrinking, they remain critical to reviving democratic values and advocating for the European ideal, promoting mutual respect and creating positive narratives for all Southeast Europe.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE FOR PRIORITY ACTIONS

#### 1. Update EU policies for the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans face longstanding structural challenges, slow economic growth, and complex geopolitical realities that necessitate a *reset of EU policies*. Current policies must be evaluated to continue successful approaches while discontinuing less effective ones. New approaches should be principle-based and problem-focused, extending not just to the Western Balkans but also to Ukraine and Moldova. EU enlargement must maintain *solidarity as its core principle*.

## **2. Unite the principles of excellence and solidarity in EU funding for the Western Balkans**

The EU must *unite excellence and solidarity* in its education, research, and innovation policies for the Western Balkans. Both principles are not mutually exclusive and lie at the heart of the EU, with excellence being the guiding principle for the EU Framework Programme and solidarity being central to the EU's cohesion and enlargement policy. *Solidarity also requires commitment from Western Balkan* political and non-political actors to advance reforms. This dual approach ensures that the region is better equipped for integration while addressing its practical needs.

## **3. Introduce a Western Balkans component in all EU funding programmes and policy frameworks**

To increase the effectiveness of EU support for the Western Balkans in education, research, and innovation, a dedicated *Western Balkans Facility for Skills, Research, and Innovation* should be established. This facility would pool funding and instruments from various EU programmes, such as the Framework Programme and Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. This intersectoral approach would not only accelerate the region's integration into the EU but also reflect its strategic importance for the EU.

## **4. Deepen and accelerate EU integration of Western Balkans' education, research, and innovation preceding full membership**

Even ahead of full membership, the *Western Balkans need a stronger and more diversified connection with European peer networks/communities*. This can be achieved by maximising the association of the Western Balkans with the European Framework Programme, mainly in two ways: through special *Western Balkan Calls* in different areas of the Framework Programme, and through expanded *hop-on instruments* allowing researchers/scientific institutions to join already ongoing actions<sup>1</sup> – both under the umbrella of the Western Balkans Facility for Skills, Research and Innovation. Networking events, new *interdisciplinary conferences*, and increased researcher mobility particularly from the EU towards the Western Balkans and vice versa, are essential to this deeper integration. European researchers should seek connections to peers in the Western Balkans more actively.

## **5. Address structural gaps in Western Balkans' education, research and innovation with realism<sup>2</sup>**

As the OECD's data-based insights and conclusions show<sup>3</sup>, the Western Balkans significantly lag behind the EU average in education, research and innovation indicators. This gap is reflected in low public and private investment, brain drain and limited talent retention, and low productivity and innovation capacity. Before overstraining the capabilities of the scientific systems in the Western Balkans, which would create even more strain, *EU and national policies must focus on closing these structural gaps*, especially through higher and more efficient investment in research, development and innovation capacity.

## **6. Align national and European priorities in education, research and innovation**

Western Balkan national governments should *develop and/or update their national strategies in education, research and innovation together with their scientific communities to enable programmatic synergies* with the European Research Area and other relevant European policy frameworks, such as the announced European Competitiveness Fund. Such national agendas must underpin national budget investments in education, research and development. Complementing EU and national funding will increase the competitiveness of grants and projects, such as in the case of projects having obtained the European Seal of Excellence.

## **7. Support strategic capacity building for fertilising excellence in the Western Balkans**

Existing proven pockets of excellence in the Western Balkans need to be linked to peers in Europe and supported through strategic capacity building. Two ways for achieving this are recommended: (i) Western Balkans national governments should enhance support for existing research laboratories with proven excellence, which form the backbone of existing research infrastructure in the region. To scale up these labs –

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<sup>1</sup> This includes basic research grants of the European Research Council, innovation and applied research grants of the European Innovation Council, R&I partnerships of the European Innovation Institute, European research infrastructure consortia, European Universities Alliances and others.

<sup>2</sup> Also consult the 2023 Joint Statement of the seventh Berlin Process Joint Science Conference held in Tirana, [https://doi.org/10.26164/leopoldina\\_04\\_00995](https://doi.org/10.26164/leopoldina_04_00995).

<sup>3</sup> For comprehensive analysis see: OECD (2024), *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024: Regional Profile*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/170b0e53-en>.

which is one of the prime steps to better integrate such infrastructures nationally and regionally, – *National Research Laboratories should be established*, with open access across scientific institutions and disciplines. Furthermore, these labs should connect to European and global research infrastructures for gradual scalability. (ii) Strategic capacity building also requires *science management training, including grant management, project execution skills* and due diligence and compliance management, and targeted support to help researchers prepare and submit successful EU-grants through seed funding for competitive ideas. Universities should engage in consortia focused on research and innovation priorities, if meaningful, complementing already existing university alliances. General administrative simplification remains vital.

## **8. Implement European standards in Western Balkan education, research and innovation systems**

Achieving European standards is a challenging and lengthy process, but it is necessary. This requires good governance, consistency, and planning reliability. *National governments must make robust investments in the sector while also addressing systemic flaws* such as clientelism, weak governance and political interference, next to *developing corruption prevention measures* and integrity codices. EU support through flexible instruments can help address these issues, fostering a more competitive and integrity-ensuring scientific system.

## **9. Help universities update curricula**

Western Balkan universities need to adapt to new technological challenges, such as artificial intelligence, and to the structural challenge of low talent retention rates by *updating curricula and modernising study programs*. EU funding instruments should support this modernisation, particularly by promoting university-industry collaborations that address skills mismatches and encourage joint research efforts as well as social innovations, and digital, scientific and democratic literacy. National governments and EU institutions should provide *tax incentives and other legislative support to foster academia-industry cooperation*, in addition to ensuring *financial predictability for universities*.

## **10. Establish the Western Balkans Research Fund**

We reiterate the call for the creation of a *Western Balkans Research Fund*, a critical initiative to foster research excellence and mitigate the brain drain that continues to seriously and structurally affect the region. The establishment of this fund would be transformative for the Western Balkans, comparable to the impact of the European Research Council on European science.

## **11. Promote intellectual discourse to protect democracy and strengthen the European ideal**

Rising nationalism, populism, and disinformation are *undermining democracy in both the Western Balkans and the EU*. These challenges contribute to heightened tensions, as well as anti-European and illiberal thinking. *Intellectuals, cultural figures, and their institutions need to play a respected role in promoting democratic values and affirming European ideals*. Intellectual spaces should encourage mutual respect and foster positive dialogue and critical thinking, which are essential for upholding democratic principles and reconciliation in Southeast Europe. Intellectuals from both the EU and the Western Balkans should collaborate on this shared cause, given the common nature of these challenges.

## **12. Protect public safe spaces for free and open intellectual discourse and evidence-based decisions**

Safeguarding free intellectual discourse is critical for the health of democracy in the Western Balkans. If fundamental freedoms are under pressure, democracy is under threat. *Intellectuals have a responsibility to initiate debates on fundamental issues, and political actors and state institutions must safeguard free and open discourse*. Universities and research institutions need to be empowered to take a leading role in shaping evidence-based decision-making while resisting instrumentalization for partisan purposes—this is their *«third mission» alongside the traditional ones of educating and conducting research*. Political leaders must respect the autonomy of academic institutions and guarantee public safe spaces where open, rigorous debate can thrive.

## **13. Reset EU-Western Balkans intellectual exchange**

There is a growing need to *reset intellectual dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans* based on mutual appreciation. Intellectuals need to create new formats for open, honest discussions, especially on shared challenges such as the *«Europeanisation of the Balkans»* and the *«Balkanisation of Europe»*. By addressing common misconceptions, this discourse can reinvigorate Europe's intellectual foundation, ensuring that the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans remains productive and forward-looking. After all, Europe is an intellectual idea that requires constant conceptual underpinning, both in the EU and countries aspiring to become EU-members.

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