

Conclusions of the 2024 Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms on Education and Training, Research and Innovation, and Culture

The Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport continues to set the Western Balkans on a solid path towards closer cooperation in those policy areas, thus contributing to the enlargement agenda.

The Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms on Education and Training, Research and Innovation, and Culture was organised in Skopje on 29 September – 1 October 2024, with participation of the respective Ministers of the Western Balkans. It provided an excellent opportunity to continue joint efforts to maintain the political momentum generated by the Agenda, discuss the progress on its implementation and next steps, as well as communicate broadly on its main initiatives and their concrete impact.

The European Commission was represented by the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Iliana Ivanova. The Ministerial Meeting was co-chaired by the European Commission, the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, represented by Balázs Hankó, Minister of Culture and Innovation, and by North Macedonia represented by Vesna Janevska, Minister of Education and Science, and by Zoran Ljutkov, Minister of Culture and Tourism.

The Western Balkan economies continue to enhance and strengthen their policies in the fields of education, research and innovation, and culture. Numerous cooperation activities between EU Member States and Western Balkan partners have reinforced key areas supporting the modernisation of higher education systems, enhancing academia-industry cooperation, promoting smart manufacturing, strengthening of innovation eco-systems, digitalisation, and supporting exchanges in the field of culture. The Green and Digital transitions are in full swing - supported by EU programmes and initiatives in the field of education, research and innovation, and culture, and they are underpinned by substantial funds provided via the Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

Ministerial Meeting on Education and Training

Commissioner Ivanova highlighted the key importance of building a strong link between education and innovation. Several key policy initiatives contribute to strengthening the synergy between the two: the European Education Area, in particular the European strategy for universities, the New European Innovation Agenda and the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027. She noted the great potential and opportunities for the Western Balkans to be tapped through a number of key initiatives in particular the European Universities, the work towards a European degree and the Deep-Tech Talent initiative.

The Commissioner emphasised the importance of the review of the Digital Education Action Plan, which was launched in April this year, and highlighted the importance of the two Council Recommendations on key enabling factors for successful digital education and training, and on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training.

The discussion addressed critical issues such as the need for enhancing digital literacy, critical thinking and fighting disinformation, stressed the need for education and training systems to build capacity and leverage the opportunities provided by the use of Artificial Intelligence, while taking into account associated challenges and risks.

Taking stock of achievements:

The Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training took note of the following advancements, which shall support the development of high-quality education systems in the region:

- Stressing the benefits of mutual learning and sharing of best practices in the field of education, the involvement of the Western Balkan partners in the working groups under the European Education Area (EEA) strategic framework for cooperation in education and training, was acknowledged. The opportunity offered by the EEA working groups under their current mandate needs to be fully exploited by the Western Balkans partners. Policy learning and the experience acquired in these fora should be effectively converted into practical solutions to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of education and training systems in the region.
- The contribution of the newly opened College of Europe campus in Tirana which will help prepare the next generation of Western Balkans' leaders, supporting enlargement and the integration of the Western Balkans within the EU.
- The opening of the European Universities initiative to higher education institutions in the Western Balkans demonstrated their great potential to bring the EU and Western Balkans cooperation even closer. The 14 higher education institutions from the Western Balkans taking part as full partners in 13 European Universities alliances actively contribute to delivering on the strategic objectives of Western Balkans Agenda to build more competitive, attractive, resilient and inclusive education and training systems in the region.

- The continuous participation by many Western Balkan partners in large international tests was welcomed. Efforts made by partners to find the necessary financial and human resources to be actively involved in such tests were acknowledged. Recent results of international tests such as PISA and PIRLS were noted. The need of pursuing reforms to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of education, as clearly indicated by the results of such tests, was recognised as vital for the cohesion and competitiveness of the Western Balkans, and in an EU enlargement perspective.
- Enhancing and sustaining cooperation and outreach in the Western Balkans is crucial for the successful implementation of key initiatives under the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027). Expanding initiatives such as the Girls Go Circular more broadly across the region and actively promoting Digital Education Hackathons (DigiEduHack) by expanding the network of DigiEduHack Ambassadors, will play a pivotal role in advancing digital education. Moreover, participation in initiatives such as SELFIE for schools and SELFIE for Teachers is increasing and reaching even more users in the Western Balkans economies.
- Effective dissemination across the region of the Ethical guidelines on the use of AI and data in teaching and learning for educators as well as the Guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training.
- The successful participation of the Western Balkans in the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) Higher Education Institution (HEI) initiative that supports the innovation and entrepreneurial capacity of HEIs.
- Involvement of Western Balkan stakeholders –authorities, businesses, education providers – in the Deep-Tech Talent initiative, a flagship of the New European Innovation Agenda led by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT).

Next steps:

The Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training identified the following next steps, to further strengthen the education systems in the region in their path towards EU accession:

- Encourage active participation and continued engagement in regional projects and initiatives in a spirit of openness.
- Ensure that all Western Balkan partners are full and active members of the EEA Working Groups under their renewed mandate. Exploit the opportunities offered by EEA enabling framework to ensure the involvement of all Western Balkan partners in EU mutual learning and cooperation arrangements in the field of education and training.
- Support the participation of all Western Balkans partners into the next cycle of key international tests such as the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS 2028) and the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2027). Make full use of policy dialogues in the context of enlargement to keep track and follow up on how Western Balkan partners are addressing the shortcomings in education and training highlighted by the results of international tests.
- Exploit synergies with measures carried out in the context of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans to boost the quality and inclusiveness of education, training, and life-long learning.

- Enhance cooperation on key issues related to the digital transformation of education and training systems including through the continued dissemination and outreach as concerns the Ethical guidelines on the use of AI and data in teaching and learning for educators as well as the Guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training.
- Further promote participation from the Western Balkans in initiatives of the Digital Education Action Plan such as Girls Go Circular and the Digital Education Hackathons, as well as in SELFIE for schools and SELFIE for Teachers.
- Organise an Erasmus+ week of events in the region – including a study fair, a contact-building seminar, and a policy-focused event on topics relevant to the region - to foster mobility and cooperation in education and make best use of the opportunities offered by Erasmus+ to the Western Balkans.

Ministerial Meeting on Culture

Commissioner Ivanova emphasised the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage, both intangible and tangible, especially under the threat of climate change and natural disasters. She noted the need to strengthen capacity building and professional skills necessary for the protection and preservation of cultural heritage. She stressed that the use of digital tools and new technologies should be a priority, as they can make cultural heritage more interconnected and digitally accessible. She highlighted the need to invest in research and innovation, mentioning two flagship initiatives: the Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage, aimed at enhancing digital and interoperable access to Europe's cultural heritage, and the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage, aimed at establishing a digital infrastructure that connects cultural heritage institutions and professionals across the EU. She also referred to the work of EU Member State experts on strengthening cultural heritage resilience to climate change.

Commissioner Ivanova emphasised the crucial role of cooperation and mobility for artists and cultural professionals within the Western Balkans and with the EU. This collaboration fosters mutual understanding, strengthens social cohesion, and promotes peace. Artistic and cultural cooperation is further supported by the Creative Europe program.

It was also acknowledged that the economic, social, and public aspects of the cultural and creative sectors have been strengthened through support from various EU programmes, including Creative Europe and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance.

Taking stock of achievements:

The Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Culture took note of the following advancements which have created a positive impact on the cultural and creative sectors in the region:

- Welcome the opportunity for Western Balkans partners to actively take part in the European Commission Cultural Heritage Expert Group. This opportunity needs further encouragement.

- Acknowledge the opportunity for Western Balkans partners to share good practices through the EU TAIEX/TWINNING mechanisms. Increased use of these mechanisms for effective collaboration within the cultural sectors can however be encouraged.
- Organise a dedicated meeting of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Culture to share good practices collected during the Open-Method-of-Coordination working groups established under the EU Work Plans for Culture and the Commission expert group on cultural heritage. Welcome the participation of the Western Balkan culture and creative sector in dedicated EU programmes, notably the participation of professionals of these sectors from the Western Balkans in the relevant actions of the Creative Europe Programme, including the Culture Moves Europe mobility scheme.
- These opportunities need to be further promoted and Western Balkan cultural and creative organisations need in particular to be encouraged to work together and develop joint projects under the relevant actions of the Creative Europe Programme. Further training of the Creative Europe desks of the Western Balkans partners is needed for the region to fully benefit from the programme.
- Welcome the extension of the European Heritage Hub to the Western Balkans, and the success of its first Small Grants Scheme for heritage-related projects led by civil society in the European neighbourhood.
- Welcome the opportunity for Western Balkans partners to participate in the trainings in disaster risk management for cultural heritage professionals funded by the European Commission and to be implemented by the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). This opportunity needs further promotion.
- Welcome the inclusion of all Western Balkan partners in the Day of European Authors. The participation of schools and actors from the book sector in the Western Balkans needs to be further encouraged.

Next steps:

The Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Culture identified the following next steps, to further strengthen the cultural and creative sectors in the region:

- Encourage active participation and continued engagement in regional projects and initiatives in a spirit of openness.
- Encourage discussions in the Open-Method-of-Coordination working groups established under the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 with the Western Balkans partners on topical issues in cultural policy and promote their involvement in exchanges on cultural policy and good practices at European level. Organise a dedicated meeting of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Culture to share good practices collected during the Open-Method-of-Coordination working groups and the Commission expert group on cultural heritage.
- Organise a dedicated session for the Creative Europe desks of Western Balkans partners to enable the cultural and creative sectors in the region to fully benefit from the opportunities offered by Creative Europe.

- Encourage cities in the Western Balkans to participate in the call for the designation of a 2030 European Capital of Culture title to connect further the cities selected and their cultural communities with the European Union.

Ministerial Meetings on Research and Innovation and on Smart Specialisation Strategies

During the Ministerial Meetings, Commissioner Ivanova emphasised the important role of the European Research Area and the European Innovation Agenda to foster, attract, and retain talents through scaling up the skills required for innovation.

The Commissioner acknowledged the great efforts of the Western Balkan partners in increasing resources for research and innovation, particularly for research infrastructures, science and technology parks, academia-business cooperation facilitating technology transfer, and broad sets of innovation support measures. She stressed the excellent impact these measures are already having on the success of stakeholders from the region in Horizon Europe¹.

The Commissioner placed particular attention to the youth, to skills development and to upskilling the workforce, especially in the Deep-Tech areas. She underlined the important impact of the European Innovation Agenda and its Flagship on ‘Fostering, attracting, and retaining talents’. Recognising the local, regional, and EU efforts in strengthening and boosting innovation ecosystems, she highlighted the opportunities provided by the European Innovation Council (EIC) actions as well as those of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and initiatives in the context of the New European Innovation Agenda’s Flagship on ‘Accelerating and strengthening innovation in Innovation Ecosystems and addressing the innovation divide’.

Commissioner Ivanova acknowledged the significant efforts made by Western Balkans partners to develop and implement Smart Specialisation Strategies. She expressed optimism that common priorities stemming from Smart Specialisation Strategies – developed by most Western Balkan partners - generate inter-regional synergies and critical mass for talent development and retention. In the context of the European Innovation Agenda, Smart Specialisation Strategies enable regions with aligned areas of specialisation and complementary capabilities, as well as different levels of innovation performance, to collaborate and take forward joint innovation projects.

Highlighting the impact of the Horizon Europe Cities Mission in fostering a new city governance model able to push a systemic transformation to climate neutrality, the Commissioner acknowledged the efforts made by the three Mission Cities in the region - Elbasan, Podgorica, and Sarajevo.

The study on the health impact of air quality and related economic burden in the Western Balkans, provided additional evidence about the benefits that may derive from making further progress in the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Taking advantage of the support from the Energy Community, and resources available from the Western Balkans Investment Framework, in the areas of energy production, buildings’ energy performance and promotion of renewable energy sources was emphasised.

The activity report on the Western Balkan partners in COST offered an overview of the individual research activities in the COST Actions. The report focused on the first three years of Horizon Europe, contributing to the region’s engagement to the European Research Area.

¹ 400 projects supported with a total funding of EUR 140 million (2021-23)

Taking stock of achievements:

The Ministerial Meetings of the Western Balkans Platform on Research and Innovation and on Smart Specialisation Strategies noted the following advancements, which shall foster the build-up of the skills needed for boosting innovation as well as markets' uptake of skilled innovators:

- Welcome the full participation of the Western Balkans in the European Innovation Agenda, including the EU's invitation to participate in the European Innovation Council Forum to discuss and coordinate innovation policy. Western Balkan organisations need to be encouraged to actively participate in the Coalition of the Willing sharing details about concrete innovation initiatives they are working on or plan to develop.
- Acknowledge the synergies developed with other Union programmes supporting research and innovation in the Western Balkans especially with ERDF INTERREG programmes – building up from the DANUBE REGION and ADRIAN programme and links with the Horizon Europe Missions 'Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities' and in 'Restore our Ocean and Waters'. These synergies provide lighthouse initiatives, inspiring actors in the whole region.
- Highlight the positive impact stemming from opening the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) Community Regional Innovation Scheme Hubs in North Macedonia (Skopje) and in Montenegro (Podgorica). The Hubs should serve as a one-stop shop for stakeholders in the region to access the activities offered by all EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs).
- Emphasise the successful launch of the EIT Raw Materials regional innovation centre in Albania addressing the supply of critical raw materials.
- Recognise the strong track record of COST in integrating researchers in the Western Balkans into Europe-wide research networks. A substantial number of leadership positions in the COST Actions are filled by researchers from the Western Balkans.
- Underline the benefits of the cooperation between COST and EUREKA on a specific Western Balkan EUREKA measure, fostering a vibrant innovation ecosystem, nurturing, and retaining a talent pool and access to finance notably for innovative SMEs in the region, as well as strengthen regional cooperation on innovation. Such cooperation actions should be repeated for the region.
- Acknowledge the inclusion of the Western Balkans in Deep-Tech Innovation Valleys: Western Balkan partners can be recognised as regional innovation valleys, based on a clear and public commitment to enhance the coordination and steering of their research and innovation investments and policies towards key EU priorities. This opportunity needs further strengthening and encouragement. The participation of Western Balkans' start-ups in the EIT Jumpstarter, a business accelerator programme, has steadily grown providing support to talented and promising entrepreneurs from the region.
- Welcome the cooperation between various EU actors for improved access for the Western Balkans to finance innovation, by building on different EU programmes enabling International Financial Institutions and partners to act in synergy. This new possibility needs now to be actively used by the Western Balkans partners and their institutions.
- Acknowledge the opportunities emerging from innovation procurement actions, particularly in the Green and Digital areas as well as from Common Regional Market

policies, and from the work of the Regional Cooperation Council. However, further training on innovation procurement mechanisms is needed to fully benefit from these.

- Highlight that the Western Balkan partners are successful in the New European Bauhaus Prize: Sarajevo being a winner in 2024. The standardisation efforts, integrating the New European Bauhaus principles, will contribute to the acceleration of the green transition in the region. These efforts need further promotion and strengthening in the coming year.
- Acknowledge the successful take up by Western Balkans partners of the EIT Infrabooster, a training programme for scientific organisations that own research infrastructures to support them in designing infrastructure-based services that could be offered to companies.
- Welcome the efforts of the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU to strengthen the research and innovation cooperation with Western Balkans partners in agriculture and other bioeconomy sectors in the framework of the BIOEAST initiative.
- Welcome the Western Balkans' significant progress in developing and implementing their Smart Specialisation Strategies, focusing and prioritising measures to boost innovation ecosystems and competitiveness.

Next steps:

The Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Research and Innovation and on Smart Specialisation Strategies identified the following next steps, to further strengthen research and innovation ecosystems, and competitiveness across the region:

- Encourage active participation and continued engagement in regional projects and initiatives in a spirit of openness.
- Further promote closer regional cooperation on the fight against air pollution and enhancement of the Western Balkan economies' science for policy interface in this area.
- Piloting and evaluating an Innovation Voucher scheme across the whole region and an action on intra-regional research and innovation mobility.
- Support the Green and Digital Transitions via innovation support measures in line with EIC and EIT schemes and building on the Reform Agendas of the new Growth Plan with a focus on increasing the necessary skills base.
- Further increase research and innovation spending (in terms of % of GDP) with the aim to reach the EU 3% target as soon as possible.
- Promote a stronger adherence of Western Balkan's research performing and research funding organisations to the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers, which will generate an improved attractiveness for foreign and domestic research talent. Utilise COST as a platform to connect and to enhance scientific linkages.
- Exploit synergies with measures carried out in the context of the new Growth Plan particularly to support innovation, competitiveness, and growth.
- Further promote the integration of Smart Specialisation into Western Balkans economies' programming and the establishment of consistent mechanisms for coordination, while leveraging lessons in the region and from EU Member States.