



# Fellowship Brief: Rethinking Kosovo's Path in European Research: Learning from Germany's Model

POLICY ANSWERS Fellowship | DLR-PT, Bonn & Berlin | 17 February – 1 March 2025

By: Alma Bajramaj

April 2025



## 1. Introduction: Why Kosovo<sup>\*1</sup> must act now

This report was developed in the context of the POLICY ANSWERS project and reflects the insights gathered during a two-week fellowship at the DLR Project Management Agency (DLR-PT) in Bonn and Berlin. The purpose of the fellowship was to better understand how EU research funding ecosystems function—particularly in Germany—and to explore how good practices from established systems can be adapted to strengthen Kosovo’s research and innovation landscape.

In the face of growing geopolitical uncertainty and shifting foreign aid priorities, Kosovo must take decisive steps to strengthen its research and innovation ecosystem. The recent freeze of some internationally funded programmes—such as certain US-funded initiatives—raises concerns about the long-term reliability of external donor support. At the same time, broader geopolitical developments may also impact the EU’s strategic focus and the continuity of its investments in the Western Balkans. Adding to these challenges, Kosovo has been under EU sanctions in certain programmes for nearly two years, further limiting access to crucial funding and collaboration opportunities. At a time when securing external funding is becoming increasingly uncertain, Kosovo cannot afford to miss opportunities offered by European funding in this area, as it remains one of the few viable sources of financial and institutional support for research and innovation advancement.

Although Kosovo has access to a wide range of European research and innovation programmes, participation remains significantly low due to structural, administrative, and institutional barriers. During my two-week fellowship at DLR-PT in Bonn and Berlin, I had the opportunity to engage with representatives from various European research support programmes, including Horizon Europe, COST, Eurostars, Eureka, and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). Additionally, I met with representatives from the European Research Area (ERA), European Research Council (ERC), the Head of National Contact Points (NCPs), the NCP for Women in Research, and experts on bilateral Western Balkans cooperation. I also had the chance to discuss with representatives from EU-funded projects such as MSCAdvocacy and the Luke Project, which focus on strengthening research participation and policy engagement. Although these programmes provide researchers with significant financing and networking opportunities, Kosovo is still substantially underrepresented, which hinders its capacity to take advantage of these resources and more successfully integrate into European research frameworks.

---

<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

## 2. Research & Innovation System in Germany: A Structured Approach

Germany is widely regarded as one of the world's leading research nations, with R&D expenditures reaching 3.14 percent of GDP in 2021 and a national target of 3.5 percent by 2025. This substantial investment is strategically allocated across a highly structured and internationally connected research ecosystem that includes universities, non-university research institutions, and private sector companies. Due to its strong dedication to innovation, scientific advancement, and knowledge-based economic growth, Germany is one of the top countries in the world for research and development spending.

At the core of this system are Germany's four large and internationally renowned non-university research organisations, each managing research budgets in the billions and funded primarily by the federal and state governments. These organizations include the Max Planck Society, Helmholtz Association, Fraunhofer Society, and Leibniz Association, which together oversee hundreds of individual research institutions conducting cutting-edge research across multiple disciplines.

Beyond these four non-university research institutes, Germany has a widespread network of publicly funded research organisations, including more than 70 public and state-funded academic libraries, archives, and specialist information centres, as well as over 100 academic museums. Moreover, federal and state research institutions, along with the academies of sciences and humanities, hold particular importance in shaping public policy through evidence-based research. These institutions provide scientific expertise for political decision-making, address pressing research issues relevant to government priorities, and prepare forecasts for tackling societal challenges.

A significant aspect of Germany's research and innovation strategy is the National Roadmap Process, introduced in 2015. This roadmap serves as a policy tool to prioritise major long-term research investments, guiding decision-makers on which research facilities should receive funding in the future. The main goal of this process is to guarantee that German researchers have access to top-notch scientific resources and facilities, setting Germany as a world leader in research excellence.

Beyond direct national funding, Germany has also strategically positioned itself as a leading beneficiary of European research and innovation funding. To facilitate this, the country has developed a thorough research support system that helps researchers navigate European funding mechanisms, build international partnerships, and successfully manage large-scale projects. This structured approach is coordinated through the Ministry of Education and Research - BMBF's EU Office and the National Contact Point (NCP) Network, which provide targeted services that increase participation in EU-funded research and innovation programmes. These support systems guarantee that German institutions maximise their success rates and strategically apply for EU funds. By combining strong national funding with a proactive approach to securing EU funding, Germany has

created a highly competitive and internationally integrated research system which allows its institutions to remain at the forefront of global scientific advancement.

### 3. Addressing Kosovo's Challenges in Research Funding & EU Participation

The global market is evolving rapidly, and research is essential for achieving competitiveness, sustainable economic growth, and social development. Kosovo's research and innovation system remains underdeveloped, facing structural, financial, and institutional challenges that hinder its ability to integrate effectively into the ERA. At both the national and institutional levels, the current system fails to support a scientific culture that encourages knowledge production, innovation, and dissemination for the advancement of society.

One of the primary barriers to research development in Kosovo is the lack of systematic planning and sustained investment in research infrastructure, compounded by chronic underfinancing and the still low absorptive capacity of institutions to effectively utilise and manage available resources. Scientific research remains at an early stage of development, with an ad-hoc approach to planning research means and non-systematic management of research policies. There is little consideration for the collective infrastructure needs of the economy, nor for long-term strategic planning that would ensure Kosovo's research ecosystem aligns with global and European trends. There is a significant barrier: underfunding of research and innovation (R&I). Public spending on R&I in Kosovo is at 0.01 percent of GDP, as opposed to the legal obligation established by the government to reach up to 0.7 percent. Moreover, Kosovo does not have a specialised national agency or fund for research and innovation fully dedicated to such activities, as the state budget lacks a centralised source for financing R&I efforts. Instead, the research is highly dependent on donor support, especially from international sources and donor-funded projects, which are fragmented, lack continuity and remain uncertain, especially in the current geopolitical climate.

On the legal and policy level, Kosovo has established the National Research Council (NRC) to oversee research policy and internationalisation within the R&I system. However, after years of inactivity, the NRC was only re-established in early 2022. The Law on Scientific Research Activity outlines the government's responsibilities in funding and managing research institutions, but its implementation remains weak. Furthermore, while the law includes provisions for a National Research Fund (NRF) with an annual budget allocation of 0.7 percent, this fund has yet to be operationalised, preventing essential funding from reaching research institutions. This is further reinforced by the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan (2022–2026), which focuses little emphasis on R&I. Although the reconvening of the NRC led to the drafting of a new National Research Programme (NRP) for 2023–2028, it is unclear how its ambitious goals will be carried out. The NRP aims to develop a strong research system, enhance researcher training, improve research infrastructure, promote internationalisation, and foster interdisciplinary collaboration. However, without dedicated funding mechanisms, full implementation of these objectives will remain a challenge.

Kosovo's current institutional capacity within the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI) is also a major limiting factor. The ministry's small team overseeing EU-funded research programmes struggles to coordinate national research projects, strategically guide institutions, and advocate for Kosovo's increased inclusion in European research financing mechanisms. In the absence of a robust research support infrastructure, institutions are left to navigate the complex EU funding process alone, resulting in low application and success rates in Horizon Europe and other EU programmes. Even within universities, research support structures are insufficient. For instance, the University of Prishtina, with over 1,000 academic staff, has only two people working in its Research Support Office, which is far from adequate to administer all externally funded projects.

While structural reforms will take time, Kosovo must act now to leverage existing opportunities. If policy priorities and strategic planning do not change, Kosovo runs the risk of being even more cut off from European research projects and losing out on important chances to boost innovation, promote scientific research, and become an active player in the European research ecosystem.

#### 4. Bringing Germany's Good Practices to Kosovo: Establishing Research Support Structures for EU Funding

Understanding how Germany has established research support systems to make it easier to obtain EU funding was one of the biggest takeaways during my fellowship at DLR-PT in Germany. The BMBF's EU Bureau and NCP Network serve as a centralised system that ensures researchers receive the necessary guidance to successfully apply for and manage EU-funded projects. Through the establishment of an intermediary support system, Germany provides researchers with specialised advisory services, proposal development assistance, matchmaking with European partners, and administrative support throughout the entire research lifecycle.

The EU Bureau of the BMBF, established in 1994 at the German Aerospace Centre's Project Management Agency (DLR-PT), initially focused on EU mobility measures (now known as Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions) and socio-economic research. Over the years, its scope expanded significantly, and it now provides expertise in preparing and implementing European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation, as well as advising on EU research policy and educational cooperation. In this regard, DLR-PT functions as a contracted research management agency for the BMBF, responsible for delivering research administration services for a fixed period (typically three years), after which it must reapply. Germany has around 140 NCPs, of which DLR-PT supports approximately 19 for different programmes. This coordinated, dynamic, and results-driven model allows Germany to continuously refine its research priorities and align them with evolving European funding opportunities.

Kosovo, by contrast, lacks a coordinated support structure that assists universities, research institutions, independent researchers, and even private sector actors in securing European research funding. While Kosovo does have NCPs, these positions are typically part-time roles, often held by university professors or professionals with other commitments. This significantly limits their ability to actively engage with researchers, provide hands-on support, or guide institutions through the complex EU application process.

Given that MESTI has limited staff and administrative capacity to manage EU research programmes directly, Kosovo should closely study Germany's approach and consider outsourcing research support services to a specialised institution or think tank. Establishing a dedicated EU Research Support Unit could help Kosovo's institutions identify relevant calls, build strong research consortia, and develop high-quality proposals, ensuring a higher success rate in European funding applications.

This unit could function as an independent research advisory centre, either within MESTI or as an outsourced function housed within a research institute or think tank. Its key functions would include:

- Providing targeted assistance in identifying relevant EU funding calls
- Supporting researchers and institutions in proposal writing and consortium building
- Facilitating matchmaking between Kosovar institutions and European research partners
- Offering administrative and financial guidance to ensure compliance with EU project rules

Given that Kosovo is still underrepresented in European research programmes and that other Western Balkan countries have already established more sophisticated research support systems, it is especially imperative that this model be put into practice. Creating such a unit does not require substantial financial investment, but it would yield high returns by increasing research participation, strengthening Kosovo's integration into the European research community, and improving the quality of research proposals.

Germany's model demonstrates that having a strong research ecosystem is not just about funding—it is about having the right structures in place to help researchers access that funding successfully. Kosovo must take immediate steps to develop its own specialised research advisory structures.

## 5. Recommendations for Enhancing Kosovo's Participation in EU-Funded Research

To strengthen Kosovo's research ecosystem and increase its participation in European-funded programmes, it is essential to implement strategic actions that address both short-term opportunities and long-term structural reforms. Based on discussions held during my fellowship at

DLR-PT, the following recommendations should be prioritised to improve Kosovo's success in securing EU research funding:

- A critical first step is for Kosovo to register and actively participate in Eureka/ Eurostars, as it remains the only Western Balkan country not yet part of this major European R&D funding network. Eureka plays a vital role in market-driven innovation and industry-academia collaboration, providing funding and partnership opportunities that Kosovo's institutions are currently missing.
- Additionally, Kosovo should register in the EURAXESS portal, an EU-wide platform that connects researchers with job opportunities, funding programmes, and international collaborations. This portal facilitates mobility and knowledge exchange, making it an essential tool for increasing Kosovo's visibility in the European research community.
- Given the highly competitive nature of Horizon Europe, it is advisable that Kosovo-based institutions start small by joining projects as partners rather than applying as lead institutions. Establishing a track record of participation will build credibility, experience, and international partnerships, making it easier for institutions to eventually coordinate their own research projects in the future. An essential step in this process is to use the CORDIS portal, which provides access to past and ongoing EU-funded research projects. By searching for completed projects in relevant fields, Kosovo-based institutions can identify previous project coordinators, build connections, and explore opportunities to collaborate on upcoming open calls.
- Another key recommendation is to leverage the Kosovar diaspora, using them as ambassadors for Kosovo's research and innovation sector. This approach, referred to as Science Diplomacy, emphasises the role of researchers abroad in strengthening international partnerships, facilitating knowledge transfer, and advocating for Kosovo's inclusion in European research initiatives. Many Kosovar researchers hold positions in leading institutions across Europe, and their expertise and connections could be instrumental in helping local institutions build international partnerships and participate in EU-funded projects.
- It is also crucial to emphasise Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area, as it remains a prominent Horizon Europe programme where Kosovo-based institutions can apply as lead coordinators. While the current Widening work programme (2023–2025) still offers active calls in 2025, orientation is already shifting toward the upcoming 2026–2027 programme, which is currently under development. Although details are still being finalised, it is expected that the new work programme will remain similar in structure and priorities to previous cycles. This makes it important for Kosovo to engage early—both to make use of existing calls and to prepare strategically for the next programme cycle—ensuring that institutions are ready to submit competitive proposals when calls open.



- Under this umbrella, the Hop On Facility presents another promising pathway for Kosovo to increase its research participation. This continuous funding scheme allows institutions from Widening countries to join existing Horizon Europe projects as additional partners. Given that the success rate for Hop On projects is significantly higher than many other Horizon Europe calls, Kosovo’s institutions should actively seek out projects looking for new partners and position themselves as valuable contributors.
- For Riinvest Institute specifically, it is recommended to invest in the formalisation of an internal EU research support unit or focal point responsible for tracking open calls, coordinating proposal development, and fostering partnerships with EU-based institutions. Riinvest could also lead or co-lead applications under the Widening programme, particularly in policy-related calls where it already possesses thematic expertise. In the short term, Riinvest should explore collaboration opportunities through Hop On calls, and in parallel, build a network of academic diaspora contacts who can serve as mentors or project allies.

By implementing these strategic actions, Kosovo can gradually overcome the structural barriers limiting its participation in European research programmes. While long-term reforms remain essential, these practical and immediate steps can provide Kosovo with entry points into EU-funded projects, helping researchers and institutions build credibility, strengthen networks, and increase funding success rates in the European Research Area.

## 6. Conclusion

Kosovo’s scientific research and innovation system remains in its early stages of development, lacking a structured funding framework, dedicated institutional support, and a coordinated national strategy to effectively engage with the ERA. Kosovo cannot afford to wait for systemic reforms before taking advantage of available European research funding opportunities.

One of the most important takeaways from my fellowship at DLR-PT is that even in countries with well-established research ecosystems like Germany, institutions do not succeed in securing EU funding without strong advisory and support mechanisms. The existence of structured research support units, such as the BMBF’s EU Bureau and Germany’s NCP Network, plays a decisive role in ensuring high participation rates in European research programmes.

Kosovo should focus on establishing a structured research support system that actively assists researchers, institutions, and independent innovators in accessing EU funding. Establishing a dedicated EU Research Support Unit—either within MESTI or through an independent research institute—would provide essential services such as proposal writing assistance, matchmaking with European partners, financial and legal guidance, and administrative support.





Personally, this fellowship experience offered a rare and valuable opportunity to observe how a mature research support system operates—from strategy to execution—and it left me convinced that Kosovo’s institutions can achieve much more with the right structures and partnerships in place.

## 7. Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Birgit Ditgens, Malte Schrage-Veltins (DLR Bonn), and Ulrike Kunze (DLR Berlin) for their invaluable insights and support during this fellowship.

This report was prepared as part of the POLICY ANSWERS Fellowship.