



**POLICY
ANSWERS**

Opinions and Suggestions regarding the Draft of the National Science Programme (NSP) 2023-2028

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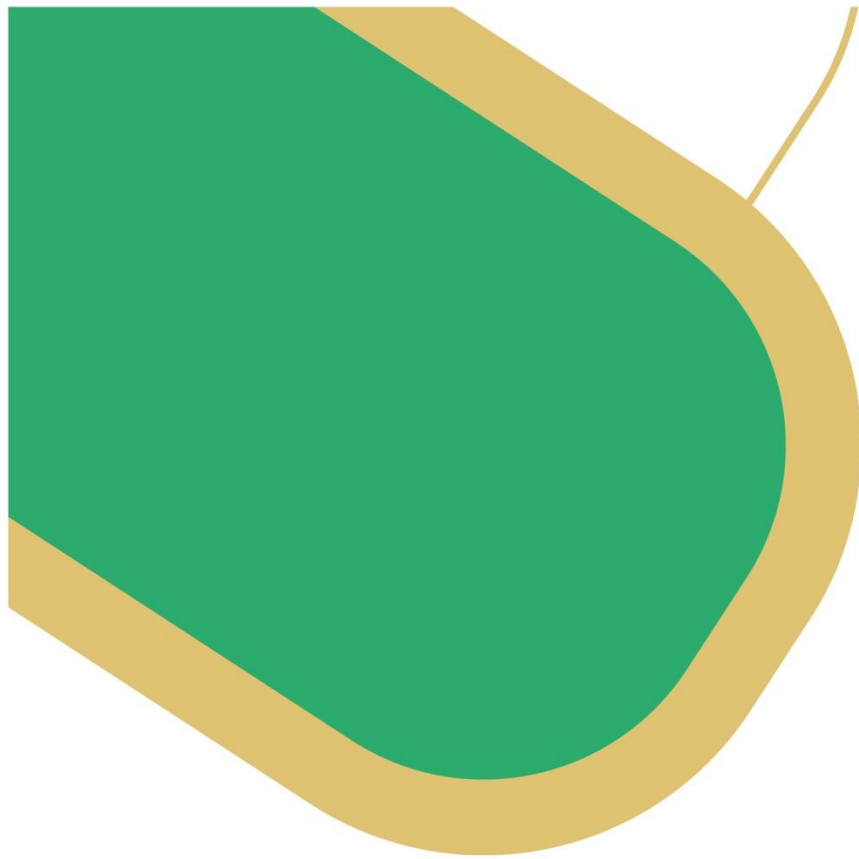
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List of abbreviations

ERA	European Research Area
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Horizon Europe
NSC	National Science Council
NSP	National Science Programme
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategy

1 Introduction

This brief presents an overview of an extensive discussion organised by the Riinvest Institute on 18 April 2023, as part of the public debate on the ‘National Science Programme 2023-2028 (NSP)’ prepared by the National Science Council (NSC). The participants included researchers and stakeholders of the Horizon Europe (HE) funded project POLICY ANSWERS of which Riinvest is a partner, as well as Riinvest associates from Kosovo* and the diaspora.

The 2023-2028 NSP draft holds particular significance as it comes at a time when Kosovo needs to make pivotal strides in supporting the field of Research and Innovation (R&I) to foster sustainable economic development and increase its to-day modest participation in the European Research Area (ERA). The Riinvest Institute is actively engaged in a series of research and advocacy activities within the POLICY ANSWERS project to create a supportive environment for research and evidence-based innovation activities, promoting policies grounded in evidence. After introductory remarks by Isuf Berisha (a member of the POLICY ANSWERS project team) and initial comments from Gersa Latifi (Technical University Munich, TUM) and Pellumb Çollaku (Riinvest Associate), a lively discussion ensued among both in-person and virtual participants. The entire debate was broadcasted through social networks (Riinvest Institute’s Facebook page and the "Ekonomia Online" portal).

It was acknowledged and appreciated that the NSC, in its new composition, managed to draft this document within a reasonable timeframe, prioritising this crucial work and making it available for consultation with relevant stakeholders. Positive recognition was also given to the fact that the NSP is an inclusive document that supports the Council’s objectives, with a particular focus on enhancing the capacity of higher education and research institutions to strengthen their absorptive capacities for advancing R&I in support of development policies in Kosovo and thereby increasing Kosovo’s participation in the ERA. In its efforts to improve its position in this field, Kosovo is a net contributor, contributing more than it currently gains financially under the most important programme, Horizon Europe. Participants in the discussion noted as a positive aspect that the programme is focused on improving the environment for meaningful engagement of the research community and research institutions. As such, it is expected to contribute to both the quantitative and qualitative growth of research and innovation outcomes in Kosovo.

During the engaged discussion, participants also emphasised the need to refine certain parts of the Programme further, especially in defining the expected results of research activities in the fields and programmes to be intervened. Greater selectivity regarding intervention fields was suggested to create a critical mass of funds for achieving objectives. Among other things, it was suggested that, instead of creating new administrative bodies, there should be a preference for building capacities in universities by establishing new research units where they do not exist within faculties and departments while simultaneously consolidating and enhancing the research profile of existing research institutes and centres. In this way, the implementation of this Programme should not only reduce administrative burdens but also elevate the field of R&I into a qualitatively new sphere, transitioning from a primarily individual effort-based field that results in publications in journals to a system that consolidates these efforts and creates the necessary synergy and interconnection with university education processes, contributing to the needs of societal development and greater integration into the European Research Area. Furthermore, it was suggested to strengthen and better articulate support of research projects related to sources and factors for economic growth within the country, as well as economic convergence with the European Union (EU) and regional cooperation.

The anticipated volume of public funds allocated for implementing this Programme, while seemingly improved compared to previous periods, in relative terms of its weight in projections for Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Kosovo’s budget participation, does not represent the necessary breakthrough, not only compared to EU Member States but also compared to countries in the region.

2 Findings and recommendations

(1) As for setting strategic objectives and priority areas for interventions to be supported with public funds, there is a noticeable similarity between the NSP 2010-2015 and the draft of NSP 2023-2028. This is not necessarily a deficiency. Strategic consistency and the continuation of efforts initiated with the NSP (2010) could be seen as positive. However, to assess the significance of the mentioned similarities, the question of how they were achieved must be raised. Therefore, we need to examine the process of drafting the NSP (2023) that has resulted in strategic objectives and priority areas similar to those of the NSP (2010). If the strategic objectives and priority areas of R&I in the NSP (2023) have emerged as a result of a genuine assessment of the state of the R&I sector, supported by thorough research and analysis as well as extensive consultations with the research community and other interested parties, then the mentioned similarities would demonstrate the sustainability of assessments, priorities and strategic objectives of the NSP (2010). However, the 2023 draft of the NSP fails to present a clear analysis of the implementation barriers of the 2010-2015 Programme, and the assessment of the current state of the R&I sector is primarily based on secondary data. Therefore, a more detailed analysis is needed to understand why its implementation has stalled in order to create a foundation that ensures objectivity regarding projections in the current Programme.

(2) There is a lack of a clear approach to improving institutional communication and coordination, including with stakeholders in the scientific and innovation community. This is a critical point for the successful implementation of the programme. This problem is not insignificant and is emphasised in many areas of Kosovo's institutions, including higher education. A coordinating plan and continuous communication, accompanied by the necessary metrics and statistical information system, help in accurate assessments and necessary monitoring for the more successful implementation of this Programme. The lack of communication and coordination is also reflected by important documents produced by the institutions. In this regard, the NSP does not align with the identified priority sectors, such as those in the Industrial Development and Business Support Strategy. Consequently, in the NSP there is inadequate inclusion of industry and the private sector, which does not correspond with the draft of the Industry Strategy (2023-2030) in the field of scientific research and innovation, giving the impression that the two documents do not communicate with each other as would be normal practice. There is a policy and programmatic orientation and focus on the need to support research on Kosovo's economic development challenges. It is an essential feature of modern economies to promote and systematically support the cooperation and linkages between academia and industry, as well as other sectors of economic activities. The Programme is missing the opportunity to give a boost to the priority sectors identified by the Ministry of Industry, Entrepreneurship, and Trade in its new Strategy. In this aspect, the NSP must be closely connected to the fourth scientific and technological revolution known as Industry 4.0, powered by, among other things, the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3), which is in the development phase.

(3) In this aspect, there must be a clear connection between research and innovation and the private sector, as practices in other countries show. The Programme overlooks a crucial element: the participation of industry in financing projects envisaged in the Programme, and in research programmes of interest to specific industries.

(4) Comparative analysis of the geographical region where Kosovo is located is lacking because Serbia has been omitted from the analysis. This could obscure and distort the interpretation of the situation in the field of research and innovation in Kosovo. This is because all scientific publication platforms (Scopus, Web of Science, etc.) have included the publications of Kosovar researchers under the name of Serbia over the years. A Programme like this is expected to conduct a more serious analysis of the data and to provide a clearer picture of the situation, enabling a deeper analysis of the data between Kosovo and Serbia.

(5) The assessment of the current situation, conducted through the presentation of key performance indicators based on national and international reports, has identified several challenges regarding the formulation and implementation of science development policies in Kosovo, such as ineffective mechanisms for implementing development policies, low budget allocations for scientific research and innovation, low productivity of scientific institutions in Kosovo, as well as inadequate legal frameworks and undefined policies for Research and Innovation (R&I) in Kosovo. However, this analysis, presented on page seven and beyond, needs to be deepened and structured in such a way that it provides a clear picture of the barriers, including: (a) insufficient commitment, as reflected in insufficient financing from public funds and others; (b) neglect of the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) with regard to institutional research activity and the lack of connections between research and the activities of faculties, departments and academic staff, including the necessary incentives for stimulating this; (c) low absorptive capacity to cope with regional and European competition; (d) insufficient connection to evidence-based economic and social policies; (e) transparency, accountability and systematic evaluation related to research results concerning the use of public funds and grants from these funds for various purposes.

(6) The defined vision appears to be somewhat passive, more like a call for an operational action that is overly generalised, rather than a state we aim to achieve in five years time. Therefore, it should be more specified. In our opinion, it should guide policymakers and the scientific community to effectively engage for research and innovations (R&I) to become an integral part of addressing the most vital issues of economic, social and cultural development, and to significantly influence evidence-based economic and social policies, also resulting in a significant increase of Kosovo's participation in the European Research Area (ERA).

(7) The Programme is loaded with many tasks and activities and does not clearly define priorities and targets within budget constraints and resource limitations. The budget is not allocated according to areas of action or priorities; there are disparities in the treatment of priority areas, and the structuring seems inadequate. Perhaps in structuring, it should follow what has already been standardised in ERA. Thus, Priority 2 does not seem well-structured, it is very broad and lacks logical connections between its elements, and natural and technical sciences are not visible. Economics is only treated with a quarter of a page, while agriculture covers a large space (about seven pages), including Priority 3 on Environmental Protection, which is also elaborated separately. It appears to be more reasonable to define seven to ten priority programme areas linked to the country's sustainable development needs and then place projects in those areas where specific sciences can be connected within an interdisciplinary approach. If this is considered impossible at this stage of the NSP discussion and approval process, we suggest that priority programmes be prepared within the framework of preparations for the call for applications by research institutions and organisations for specific two-year periods (2023-2024, 2025-2026, and 2027-2028). The calls for applications should define the expected outcomes (which are now unclear and mostly absent) and other details with a documentation, methodology and their assessment in accordance with the standardised methodology in Horizon Europe (HE). This would accelerate capacity building in research institutions and in the research community in general to increase their participation in the European Commission's framework programmes and in Horizon Europe more effectively.

(8) As highlighted, the section on the economy is inadequate in both content and coverage. Programmatic directions for intervention in this area are almost entirely absent. The needs of the private sector, including industry and tourism and their cooperation with research institutions, is not well addressed. Based on developmental documents, reports of research organisations, and on reports from international organisations (EU Country Reports, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, institutes such as wiiw), programmes and research agendas in the field of economic development should encompass issues such as:

- macroeconomic governance and the mobilisation of sources of economic growth
- the competitive capacity of Kosovo's economy and its sectors in the EU and region

- achieving economic convergence with the EU
- challenges of regional cooperation
- economic complementarity with Albania (joint projects) in the context of intergovernmental cooperation
- challenges of implementing the Industry 4.0 revolution and its importance for competitive positioning, including issues related to the value chain in industry, cross-sectoral linkages, and the development of high-value-added products and services
- tourism
- water as a limiting factor in development
- balance of payments
- labour market, migration, employment, and unemployment.

(9) Objective 6 defines the establishment of an interdisciplinary research institute as a state institution with a significant budget within the framework of the NSP, without conducting a feasibility study. Without denying the great need for interdisciplinary studies, the feasibility study should provide a clear answer on how this can be achieved more effectively: through a state institute or alternatively through programmes, projects and funding allocations that will support the cooperation of research institutions and other entities in projects that necessarily require multidisciplinary approaches, and the collaboration among research organisations only. Ensuring interdisciplinarity within one state institute does not seem to be an effective solution.

(10) On page 16 of the Programme, there is a reasonable approach for review of the legislative framework. Consideration should be given to how current obstacles to amending the Higher Education Law can be overcome. Given this, we suggest that, as soon as possible, improvements should be made to the law and secondary legislation within the existing framework. Priority should also be given, and this need should be clearly added to NSP, to the revision of policies and procedures related to the announcement and public calls, with a clear orientation of programmes and expected outputs. This should attract more qualitative responses through the application of institutions and research organisations for specific projects. In addition to this, the evaluation procedures and monitoring of implementation and reporting should be upgraded according to existing international standards, specifically ERA.

(11) Regarding Objective 2, the importance of training in research methodology, preparation of research proposals, as well as their assessment and administration management is rightly emphasised. However, it seems that the allocated amount of funds for the first three years (EUR 2 million) needs to be reconsidered as it appears to be excessive. According to our experience within the POLICY ANSWERS Project, systematic training of a participant in a ten day programme, in groups of 25 people, including international experts, costs around EUR 280 per individual. Judging by this, it would require training for more than 2,000 people within a year (!).

(12) Similarly, the rationale for establishing the Centre for Horizon Europe training should be examined, or this should be achieved within projects for which research organisations, universities, and faculties apply. We recommend a review and redefinition of support for doctoral studies and mobility related to doctoral studies in the context of scientific research, which should focus more on research projects that also include capacity building, student involvement in these projects, as well as engagement of international experts in projects implemented by Kosovo research organisations. It gives the impression that this capacity building part focuses extensively on doctoral students and mobility, considering that this can be addressed with other budgetary lines of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MESTI) and other programmes such as Erasmus, among others. Additionally, the funds provided for the mobility of scientific workers, around EUR 1.7 million from the individual strand of researchers, should also be included as mobility within the projects of research organisations as part of the designated research project. Furthermore, it is recommended that the focus should be on engaging external academic staff (from EU-27 and other countries) in supervising doctoral topics in order to promote the development of the quality of these studies in Kosovo. These studies should be linked to specific research projects in Kosovo.

One of the most important activities of the NSP (2023) is the establishment of a series of new entities or bodies that should undertake the implementation of this R&I development strategy. A significant portion of the NSP budget is planned to be spent on the establishment and operation of these new entities. Some of these activities include: The establishment of the State Interdisciplinary Institute for Science and Technology, the establishment of the National Research Infrastructure Fund, the establishment of the Training and Preparation Centre for international-level scientific and innovative project proposals, the creation of a support fund for the development of local expertise for applications in international projects, the creation of a supportive financial scheme for joint projects between universities and industry for scientific projects, the establishment of a cross-sectoral body for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the NSP. Considering the need for a restructuring of the institutional network within MESTI, Kosovo Scientific/Research Council) we recommend all of these proposals to be revisited based on the definition of their scope of operation, economic and financial rationality, avoidance of excessive administration, and avoidance of difficulties in coordination and conflicts regarding competencies and the rational use of public funds. It seems that all this should revolve mainly around the Research and Innovation Fund and the Agency for Scientific Research within MESTI and with systematic monitoring by the NSC and the Kosovo Assembly. The creation of several state organisations will be harmful as they will absorb a good part of the budget; their boundaries and competencies will be unclear; there will be competition between them, etc. One state body to allocate funds and to monitor their implementation should be enough.

(13) On page eleven, the necessary need for a gradual increase in financial support for R&I is not achieved, compared to the existing obligation by law to achieve 0.7 % of the total national budget. In fact, with the projections in the NSP presented in the table below, it is not expected that even this will be achieved and that the situation will change as it is outmost necessary. There is a need for an institutional and general societal consensus to overcome the current situation in order for R&I investments for a three-to-five-year period to reach the regional average. It is important to avoid comparisons with the EU and the region in documents like the NSPs regarding R&I funding based solely on budget numbers. Instead, these comparisons should also include a standard indicator, illustrating the percentage of investments in R&I relative to GDP. The general budgetary allocations for planned activities in the NSP 2023-2028 are estimated to be around EUR 87 million. On average, over these six years, the anticipated amount is about EUR 14.5 million per year.

As part of the budget, in the next three years (as the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework envisages), the general budgetary requirements for activities planned with the NSP are very modest. In 2023, this share in the budget is: 0.32 %; in 2024 it is 0.49 %; while in 2025, it is 0.56 %. As a share of GDP, the budgetary requirements for activities planned with the NSP in 2023 are 0.11 %, in 2024 they are 0.15 %, while in 2025 they are 0.16 % (Table 1). This is inadequate to support participation in the ERA and especially to respond to Kosovo's social and economic development needs.

Table 1: Budgetary requirements (EUR) for NSP relative to the budget and GDP

	2023	2024	2025
(A) Budgetary requests by year for NSP activities	10,272,500	15,326,750	17,918,925
(B) Planned Budget in Medium-Term Expenditure Framework	3,212,000,000	3,113,000,000	3,203,000,000
(C) GDP	9,621,300,000	10,407,800,000	11,156,400,000



(A)/(B)	Proportion relative to the budget	0.32 %	0.49 %	0.56 %
(A)/(C)	Proportion relative to GDP	0.11 %	0.15 %	0.16 %

Note: The data in line A are taken from NSP; the data in lines B and C are taken from the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, except for the value marked with an asterisk (*) which is taken from the budget law for the year 2023.

The NSP 2023-2028 highlights that the main challenges for the implementation of this programme are (p. 82): "(i) The institutional capacity of MESTI (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology and Innovations) for processing proposed schemes and activities, as well as managing and monitoring the allocated budget for potential beneficiaries and implementers of activities; and, (ii) The absorptive capacity of potential beneficiaries to use schemes and funds with complete accountability and transparency."

Considering that these issues are evident, it is recommended that budgetary requirements aimed at addressing these challenges be concentrated in the early years of programme implementation. This would enable better results to be obtained from the continued implementation of the programme.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft of the NSP 2023. Riinvest Institute remains committed to constructively contributing to this topic.



ABOUT POLICY ANSWERS

POLICY ANSWERS (R&I POLICY making, implementation AND Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS) supports policy coordination in the Western Balkans and with the EC and the EU. 14 partner organisations, representing network nodes in the region and EU expert organisations, support policy dialogue through formal meetings (such as ministerial and steering platform and ad-hoc policy meetings), monitoring and agenda setting, capacity building and implementation of the EU's Western Balkan Agenda, as well as the alignment of thematic priorities. The project implements regional pilot activities and offers an information hub based on the westernbalkans-fohub.eu online information platform. The partners provide analytical evidence via monitoring and mapping activities of the stakeholder ecosystem, of the implementation of the Western Balkans Agenda and of the Western Balkans' integration into the European Research Area as well as via strategic foresight. POLICY ANSWERS also allows for tailored and targeted capacity building activities in the Western Balkans as well as regional alignment of priorities in relation to the digital transformation, the green agenda and towards healthy societies. Pilot activities provide learning opportunities on policy and programme level and reach out to final beneficiaries related to improved academia-industry cooperation, researcher mobility, inclusion of youth in policy processes, promotion of research infrastructures and increased innovation skills in all areas.