



Policy Brief

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Western Balkans monitoring and reporting: challenges and key takeaways



The EU-funded project POLICY ANSWERS delivers analytical input to the EU-Western Balkans (WB) policy dialogue, specifically to the EU-WB Steering Platform on Research and Innovation (R&I) and the WB Ministerial Meetings. This contribution derives mainly from monitoring the implementation of the EU-WB Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (WB Agenda)¹ and from reporting the progress made by the WB in their integration into the European Research Area (ERA). Challenges are encountered in terms of statistics regarding data availability and reliability. The main message of this Policy Brief is that there is a need for improved statistical systems in the WB to guide informed and evidence-based policy making. Ultimately, sustained policy commitment in terms of using various datasets in combination with capacity building and regional cooperation are essential for long-term alignment of the WB with EU standards.

This Policy Brief highlights the challenges associated with the collection, analysis and interpretation of data for indicators that describe the R&I landscapes and systems in the WB as a basis for policy analysis. It also identifies challenges and gaps in data availability and quality, and provides recommendations for improving the statistical systems, especially in terms of data availability for contextual and other indicators, in view of future monitoring and reporting activities in the WB.



¹ European Commission. (2021). A Western Balkans agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth & sport. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/831554>. Accessed 24 July 2025.

Characteristics	Description
 Data Availability	Difficult to obtain timely data
 Surveying and Sampling	Business register updates and functioning CRIS are prerequisites
 Data Harmonisation	Methodological changes affect data comparability
 Data Owners	Lack of designated data owners, contact and focal points
 Data Use	Results often not used for decision and evidence based policy-making
 Data Reliability	Proxy indicators and unresolved questions related to data reliability
 Problem Awareness	Policy makers are often unaware of challenges
 Resources	General lack of resources available in the R&I ecosystem and in particular at statistical offices

Figure 1: Challenges regarding R&I data collection and use for policy making

Providing analytical input to policy dialogue and capacity building

Measuring R&I activities is important to assess the knowledge generation as well as its valorisation impact on national priorities and global challenges. Reliable indicators are needed to strategically inform decision makers in areas such as education, industry, health and environment to make the Digital Transformation and the Green Transition a success.

POLICY ANSWERS supports regular Ministerial Meetings and meetings of the WB Steering Platform on R&I, as well as wider and topic-related discussions amongst stakeholders. In these frameworks, progress in relation to the measurements and implementation of statistics, monitoring and evaluation is often cited. Reliable statistics are needed for the Growth Plan and the associated Reform Agenda to demonstrate that a step has been achieved by the WB.

The use of the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS)² and publications like the OECD Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook³ or She Figures⁴ are often featured in POLICY ANSWERS' communications through the project website WB Info Hub as they provide a comprehensive stock taking on several relevant indicators on R&I.

Monitoring and reporting of the WB R&I landscapes provided by the POLICY ANSWERS activities is a valuable source of information to policy makers in the WB and the European Commission (EC). Furthermore, the monitoring and reporting results and their subsequent analysis contribute to capacity building as they allow for a better assessment of the policy needs of the region and a better definition of priorities.

However, the continuous policy dialogue in the project and with external stakeholders makes apparent the need for the use of solid statistics as well as monitoring and evaluation challenges and prospects.

Policy makers in the WB are aware of these challenges which not at last became apparent during the POLICY ANSWERS "Workshop on Western Balkans ERA Reporting" in Skopje in June 2024⁵. Participants noted that the unavailability of comprehensive data can hinder policy makers from evaluating policy impact, from comparing WB performance with EU benchmarks and from making evidence-based decisions.

The enlargement process requires candidate countries to demonstrate full implementation capacity such as the ability to participate in the EU Framework Programme on R&I, contribute to the WB integration in the ERA and support evidence-based policy making through robust R&I statistics. This is necessary to comply with legal requirements for data collection at European level.



POLICY ANSWERS contributes analytical insights by...

a) Monitoring

The monitoring of the implementation of the WB Agenda is centred on indicators describing its implementation by various stakeholders and their activities in the context of six dimensions (see Table 1). The general purpose of monitoring is to provide relevant information that can be used by policy makers for decision-making and designing adequate measures and activities. Favourable developments can be made apparent as well as needs and challenges where improvements in policy making are needed. POLICY ANSWERS uses different types of indicators for the monitoring to demonstrate whether the

² European Commission. (2025). European innovation scoreboard. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/european-innovation-scoreboard_en. Accessed 24 July 2025.

³ OECD. (2024). Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024: Regional Profile, Competitiveness and Private Sector Development, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/170b0e53-en>. Accessed 24 July 2025.

⁴ European Commission. (2025). She figures 2024 – Gender in research and innovation – Statistics and indicators. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/592260>. Accessed 24 July 2025.

⁵ <https://westernbalkans-fohub.eu/news/event-review-workshop-on-western-balkans-european-research-area-era-reporting-5-june-2024-skopje/>

outcomes of actions align with the established goals of the WB Agenda and its key components. Among those, the contextual indicators provide quantifiable evidence, reflect general changes in the socio-economic environment and can help define or adjust the scope of any public intervention.

Research & Innovation	Summary Innovation Index
Digital Competitiveness	Individuals frequently using the internet
Education & Skills	Academic Freedom Index
Youth, Culture & Sport	Youth with above basic overall digital skills
Common Regional Market	Exports of goods in other WB economies as percentage of total exports
Environment	Regulatory Indicators for Sustainable Energy

Table 1: Context indicators used for the POLICY ANSWERS monitoring

The WB Agenda refers to the six WB economies Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The monitoring thus provides comparable evidence on the current and prior socio-economic status in each WB economy as well as its progress over time. This helps parallel and benchmark the findings against a contextual baseline. Understanding the wider context, the impact of measures taken and the progress of each WB economy is essential for stakeholders to make sound and timely decisions.

b) Reporting

POLICY ANSWERS prepared reports on ERA integration for all six WB economies for the reporting year 2022 in accordance with the methodology provided by the EC (ERA Monitoring Handbook 2018) for the EU Member States. According to the new methodology introduced for the reporting year 2023, ERA Country Reports were prepared for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia (see Figure 2) based on the ERA Monitoring Mechanism (EMM).

These WB ERA Country Reports give a detailed overview of the R&I systems in the WB. They describe the ERA integration of the WB R&I communities and landscapes as well as at the level of policy making. The reports serve as a basis for recognising the challenges and needs and thus enable policy makers to make informed decisions. The reporting thus can foster the WB involvement in the ERA and improve the WB R&I capacity through international collaboration. The ERA reporting offers the WB economies the opportunity to tackle challenges raised in the reports and work on the strengths and weaknesses of their R&I systems.



Figure 2: WB ERA Country Reports 2023, prepared by POLICY ANSWERS (except Montenegro and Serbia)

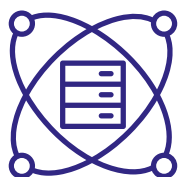
* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Challenges



Data availability

This is the major challenge in contextual and other monitoring. Although selecting indicators considering data availability for each WB economy, it was difficult to obtain them over the entire monitoring period for some WB economies. An example is the “Summary Innovation Index” as a composite indicator. There are tight deadlines for data delivery, new indicators are continuously developed and improving the performance in comparative approaches by the data providers.



Data harmonisation and comparability

As the monitoring relies also on secondary data provided by other entities, methodological changes in data collection and processing by external sources affected the availability and comparability of data. Datasets that rely on standardised methodologies facilitate the comparison of the WB economies, but it could not be ensured that all datasets would be available for the entire period, nor that they could be aggregated at the most suitable level.



Data owners

At policy level, the main challenge is the fact that there is no designated “owner” of the WB Agenda responsible for its implementation and for feeding the indicators with data in the government bodies. Ideally, it would simplify the work if each (group of) indicator(s) fall(s) in the responsibility of one Ministry or agency in every WB economy.



Data use

It is also challenging to ensure that the results of the contextual monitoring are also used for forward looking decision-making and tailoring future measures rather than being used “only” for reporting purposes.



Data reliability and the use of proxy indicators

For the reporting activities, obstacles were encountered when collecting data for the WB economies related to the ERA Performance Indicators, which were primarily used for the ERA Country Reports 2023 for the EU Member States. Only Montenegro and Serbia provided (some) data for (some) of the ERA Performance Indicators for the reporting year 2023. A certain level of comparability with EU Member States and Associated Countries can thus be achieved. Therefore, in some cases proxy indicators and qualitative information were mostly used for the reporting instead and some gaps were filled with other data from, e.g., the EIS.

Recommendations

Ministries – in relation to data collection and provision

- Promote capacity-building programmes for experts in the fields of monitoring, assessment, data usage, evaluation and governance of innovation programmes (e.g., Smart Specialisation Strategies) in the Ministries and agencies related to the implementation of the WB Agenda.
- Establish functional Current Research and Innovation Systems (CRIS), systematically track R&I activities, output and impacts at national and institutional levels.
- Align data collection with international standards and strive for data harmonisation by using an R&I statistics framework aligned with EUROSTAT/OECD/UNESCO standards to enhance data availability.
- Focus on the collection of data aligned to the EIS⁶ and the EC ERA Performance Indicators⁷ by national statistical offices and Ministries.
- Increase digitalisation initiatives and e-government solutions, upgrade digital platforms for data sharing.
- Emphasise and foster “open data” and better and comprehensive data availability, enable public access and facilitate policy analysis.
- Link monitoring and evaluation findings with strategic planning and budgeting, ensure evidence-based policy making and combine it with regular public reporting about statistical data and achievements fostering transparency.
- Strategically use EU funds and opportunities to address bottlenecks, e.g., the Policy Support Facility⁸.
- Empower national statistical offices and make R&I data collection and provision compulsory.
- Ensure these offices have the legal mandates and resources to collect, process and disseminate high-quality data.
- Promote capacity-building programmes for national statistical offices to enhance R&I data collection and reporting.

National statistical offices

- Nominate dedicated liaison persons or focal points in each statistical office to coordinate data provision, e.g., for the EIS or the EU survey on information and communication technology usage and e-commerce in enterprises.
- Invest in continuous professional education, participate in trainings, use opportunities offered to actively engage with international experts, ask questions and proactively ask for technical assistance and training to improve data quality and analytical skills. Invest also in the necessary information technology (IT) systems.
- Put in place all necessary procedures for data validation and for submitting data such as to Eurostat in the required formats and within specified deadlines, including metadata and quality reports, documenting sources, methodologies, and any deviations from standards.
- Enhance cooperation in the national ecosystem as well as internationally, establish regular exchange formats with Ministries, ensuring data feeds reliably in the policy processes.
- Monitor new and emerging indicators and explore possibilities to measure them, expand towards new topics, develop adequate proxy indicators and contribute to the scientific dialogue on indicator development.

⁶ <https://westernbalkans-infohub.eu/news/european-innovation-scoreboard-2025-released/>

⁷ European Commission. (2024). ERA Performance Indicators. https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu/scoreboard-reports?countries%5B0%5D=24&field_related_sb_indicator_target_id=115&token=dnr8HolVCW. Accessed 23 June 2025.

⁸ <https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/statistics/policy-support-facility>

Regional networking, international bodies and cooperation

- Establish Regional Innovation Networks in the WB and establish regional coordination (building on examples such as the Croatian Network for Innovation Policy as a community of practice initiative, and as implemented by OECD/UNESCO as a top-down approach) to ensure dissemination of innovation policy practices, assessment of monitoring practices, implementation of ERA monitoring mechanisms and introduction of new topics (e.g., implementation of artificial intelligence in current policy frameworks). Such networks should include representatives from academia, policy making institutions and the business sector, bringing forward the success of innovation policy in the WB economies.
- Promote peer learning and participate actively in international and regional coordination among statistical institutes, possibly facilitating staff exchanges, joint trainings, etc. promoting also data harmonisation.
- Ensure early and clear communication and exchange in international groups related to indicator definitions, breakdowns, metadata requirements and deadlines.
- Foster the data exchange data for monitoring and reporting of statistical offices and Ministries responsible for international cooperation in R&I.
- Put increased emphasis on accountability and coordination among policy making institutions in the WB in charge of the implementation of the WB Agenda and ERA integration.
- Involve experts with deep knowledge of various specific indicators in close cooperation with the WB Ministries.
- Focus on long-term cooperation rather than on short-term trainings or information events when providing international support.

Research and Innovation Performing Organisations

- Participate in data collections and actively contribute data to CRIS, provide data on investments, etc.
- Provide feedback on relevance and data quality, co-develop solutions and engage with the statistical offices and policy makers.
- Adopt Open Access and open data policies.
- Participate in scientific conferences and seminars dedicated to data collection, innovation policy and Smart Specialisation Strategies, promoting the usage of the indicators.
- Participation in EU programmes (e.g., Horizon Europe).

This Policy Brief is
available here:



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Strengthening Research and Innovation in the Western Balkans: The POLICY ANSWERS project

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