

2025

ENHANCING WESTERN BALKANS' PARTICIPATION IN HORIZON EUROPE AND FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME 10

DISCLAIMER

This working document is written by Mrika Hoxha and Venera Gudachi for the [Center Science and Innovation for Development \(SCiDEV\)](#), representing a continuation of the organization's strategic efforts to enhance mobility-driven research and innovation in the Western Balkans (WB6) as a pathway to sustained economic growth and convergence with the European Union (EU).

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Tirana, June 2025

This working document is developed within the framework of the Open Society Foundations | Western Balkans initiative #IGNITA, a regional collaboration among civil society organizations aimed at fostering cooperation and advancing EU integration across the Western Balkans. Within the IGNITA initiative, SCiDEV implemented the [“Enhancing Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation in the Western Balkans for Sustained Economic Growth and Convergence with the European Union” Project](#).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

<u>List of Abbreviations</u>	4
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02

Executive Summary	5
1.1 Brief Context and Key Challenges	5
1.2 Main Findings	5
1.3 Key Recommendations	6

03

Introduction	8
2.1 Brief Context and Key Challenges	8
2.2 Main Findings	10
2.3 Key Recommendations	10

04

Methodology	11
3.1 Analytical Approach and Sources	11
3.2 Data Collection Methods and Instruments	11
3.3 Contextual Background	12
3.4 Key Objectives for WB Participation	12

05

Analysis and Findings	14
4.1 Comparative Regional Analysis	14
4.2 Country-Specific Cases and Relevant Examples	18

06

Recommendations	20
5.1 Strategic Measures	20
5.2 Recommendations for the European Commission	22
5.3 Recommendations for National Governments	23
5.4 Recommendations for Academic and Scientific Communities	25
5.5 Recommendations for Other Relevant Stakeholders	26
Conclusions	27
Annexes	29
List of Interviewees	29
Consent Form for Interviews and Use of Participant Data	29

ABBREVIATIONS

DIH	Digital Innovation Hub
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
EIC	European Innovation Council
EIT	European Institute of Innovation and Technology
ERA	European Research Area
ERC	European Research Council
ESFRI	European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures
EU	European Union
FP10	Framework Programme 10
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HE	Horizon Europe
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
MSCA	Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
NCP.....	National Contact Point
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
R&I	Research and Innovation
RIAs	Research and Innovation Actions
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategy
SCiDEV	Center Science and Innovation for Development
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
S&I	Science and Innovation
WB	Western Balkans
WB6	Western Balkans Six
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework
WIDERA	Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The participation of the Western Balkans (WB) in Horizon Europe from 2021 to 2023 reflects steady and meaningful progress, underscoring the region's potential for deeper integration into the European Research Area (ERA). While notable strides have been made, particularly in researcher mobility and strategic alignment with EU frameworks, significant disparities remain in research capacity, institutional strength, and the ability to effectively absorb and utilize funding across the region.

1.1 Brief Context and Key Challenges

Between 2021 and 2023, the Western Balkans secured over €111 million in Horizon Europe funding, marking a strong upward trajectory compared to the Horizon 2020 period, where the funding for the whole 7-years period was €170 million (DGR&I, 2021¹). Participation in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) increased by 49%, underscoring the role mobility as a key driver of knowledge transfer and ethical research practices.

Serbia and Montenegro show higher return on investment (RoI) as compared to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. While the top performing countries show institutional strength, the latter continue to face systemic barriers, including weak infrastructures, fragmented support mechanisms, restrictive labour regulations, and slow national co-financing systems. Moreover, research indicates that RoI analysis remains underutilized at the national level across the region, hampering strategic optimization and advocacy for tailored support under Framework Programme 10 (FP10).

1.2 Main Findings

The Western Balkans have improved their participation in Horizon Europe, with Serbia and Montenegro emerging as top performers.

Participation momentum aligns well with the objectives of the New Growth Plan and the Berlin Process, linking research and innovation (R&I) to broader economic development and EU integration goals.

MSCA programmes have advanced researcher mobility, promoted ethical standards, and enhanced international cooperation. However, their long-term impact is constrained by limited institutional capacity to sustain participation.

Administrative burdens and fragmented support mechanism structures continue to impede full integration of the region into the European Research Area (ERA).

These structural challenges are particularly detrimental to early-career researchers, who face limited mobility opportunities, inadequate mentorship frameworks, and scarce regional collaboration pathways.

Innovation infrastructures across the region remains nascent and predominantly donor-dependent, with minimal contributions and/or co-financing from domestic stakeholders.

The €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for the WB presents a strategic opportunity to directly link policy reforms to investments in R&I infrastructure, research capacity-building, researcher mobility, and the development of regional innovation ecosystems.

1.3 Key Recommendations



Strengthen National Contact Points (NCPs) and institutional support systems to offer full-cycle assistance throughout the project lifecycle – from project ideation to management and reporting.



Simplify administrative and legal procedures that affect researcher participation and mobility, with a particular focus on university-employed researchers and early-career academics. Reforms should address institutional-level barriers that often delay or restrict access to international research opportunities.



Integrate Horizon Europe priorities into national Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) to reinforce strategic coherence.



Enhance researcher mobility by establishing complementary national mobility schemes, promoting joint PhD programmes, and building partnerships with EU research institutions.



Expand strategic alignment by synchronizing national research agendas with EU priorities, not only through the New Growth Plan and IPA funding frameworks, but also through broader instruments.



Implement systematic RoI tracking mechanisms to inform participation strategies and maximise both financial and strategic benefits.



Incentivise SME participation by developing national SME support schemes aligned with Horizon Europe, including technical assistance, grant-writing coaching, and co-financing facilities, in line with European Innovation Council (EIC) practice.



Promote core European values and principles, including academic freedom, inclusiveness, social and environmental responsibility, across all research and innovation activities.

By tackling these persistent challenges and fully capitalizing on the strategic momentum of the New Growth Plan, the Berlin Process, and the upcoming FP10, the Western Balkans can achieve transformative integration into the ERA, fostering sustainable growth, more robust innovation ecosystems, and deeper regional collaboration.

2. INTRODUCTION

Horizon Europe, the European Union's flagship research and innovation programme, seeks to strengthen the EU's scientific and technological foundations while boosting competitiveness, innovation capacity, and societal resilience. A key strategic priority within this framework is the integration of the Western Balkans (WB), aimed at fostering socio-economic growth, stability, and innovation across the region.

This paper reviews the participation of WB countries in Horizon Europe during 2021–2023 with a particular focus on researcher mobility. It examines participation trends, financial performance, researcher mobility dynamics, structural challenges, and strategic pathways for deeper integration. Drawing on available data, evaluation reports, and stakeholder consultations, the analysis offers evidence-based insights and targeted policy recommendations to enhance the WB's role within the European Research Area (ERA).

2.1 Brief Context and Key Challenges

The Western Balkan region –comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia– has made notable progress in integrating into the EU research and innovation ecosystem. A key milestone was reached in 2021–2022, when all six economies signed association agreements with Horizon Europe, granting them full participation to the EU's €95.5 billion programme. This achievement forms part of the broader Western Balkan Agenda on Research, Innovation, Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport, supported by initiatives such as the Berlin Process and the 2023 New Growth Plan for the WB. Between 2021 and 2023, the WB secured over €111 million across 582 projects under Horizon Europe, approaching the €171 million total obtained during the entire Horizon 2020 period. Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro lead in participation and funding returns, while Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to face structural barriers, including fragmented research infrastructures, restrictive labour frameworks, and limited institutional capacities.

Mobility programmes, particularly the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and Erasmus+, have played a pivotal role in advancing researcher development and fostering international collaboration. However, persistent challenges, including administrative complexity, underinvestment in research and development, and weak institutional support, continue to constrain broader participation, especially among early-career researchers. Serbia's strong performance also distorts regional averages, masking disparities among less advanced research ecosystems.

MSCA programmes have advanced researcher mobility, promoted ethical standards, and enhanced international cooperation. However, their long-term impact is constrained by limited institutional capacity to sustain participation.

Participation in Horizon Europe represents not only a financial opportunity but a strategic imperative for the Western Balkans countries in their path toward EU integration. Regional alignment with EU priorities, such as the Green Deal, digital transition, and sustainable economic development, is crucial for fostering convergence and strengthening Europe's overall resilience.

However, despite their association with Horizon Europe, the region's private sector, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), still remain underrepresented in research and innovation activities. Existing gaps mostly in SME innovation capacity, digital skills, and public-private collaboration continue to limit effective engagement with the EU R&I schemes. While Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have adopted their S3 to align with the EU priorities, the remaining WB6 economies need to accelerate S3 adoption and implementation to improve their success in the Horizon Europe and Digital Europe funding opportunities. Upcoming opportunities under Horizon Europe's successor, FP10, offer an optimal window to advance deeper integration.

While substantial progress has been made, challenges persist. Administrative burdens, the complexity of diverse funding instruments, the absence of a dedicated WB Research Foundation, and uneven support mechanisms for mobility continue to constrain the region's full participation potential. Moreover, political instability, unresolved bilateral disputes, and enlargement fatigue further complicate the broader EU accession process, despite recent geopolitical shifts that have renewed attention to the region's strategic importance.

Efforts to strengthen R&I ecosystems in the Western Balkans are supported by financial instruments, such as the WB Investment Framework (WBIF), the EFSD+ Guarantee Facility, and innovation initiatives under the European Innovation Council and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology. Nevertheless, notable gaps remain, particularly in the availability of dedicated financial products and in funding and training for professional research management.

Policy recommendations for FP10 highlight the need to simplify the association processes, strengthen NCPs training and professionalization, and enhance administrative support throughout the research cycle. They also underscore the importance of promoting gender equality and inclusiveness, while fostering early stakeholder involvement, with a special focus on early career researchers and academics.

Enhancing research management through stronger grant-writing and project implementation skills, coupled with greater investment in cross-border cooperation, is essential to unlocking the Western Balkans' full potential in research and innovation. Overall, the WB represent a dynamic and evolving partner for the European Union. Tangible progress in research capacity, regional cooperation, and strategic alignment underscore the region's potential for deeper integration into ERA. Addressing systemic barriers through coordinated, inclusive, and future-oriented reforms remains essential to capitalize on the opportunities ahead under Horizon Europe and the forthcoming FP10.

2.2 Purpose and Objectives

This working document examines the participation of WB6 countries in Horizon Europe (2021–2023), with a focus on mobility-driven research, and offers strategic recommendations to enhance their engagement in upcoming European research programmes, notably Horizon Europe Work Programme 2025–2027 and its successor, FP10.

It analyses participation trends, financial performance, mobility initiatives, particularly MSCA and WIDERA, as well as alignment with regional and EU priorities, including the New Growth Plan and the Berlin Process. Drawing on data from the Innovation Union Scoreboard, ERA Monitoring Reports, and other European Commission and OECD studies, alongside insights from stakeholder consultations and semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders, the paper identifies current challenges and outlines opportunities for the future.

The identified objectives include improving access to funding, strengthening institutional capacities, boosting regional and EU-wide collaboration, and promoting inclusive participation. Guided by the principles of scientific excellence, ethical standards, and inclusiveness, the paper presents evidence-based policy recommendations to strengthen WB integration into the ERA and future EU research frameworks.

2.3 Scope and Limitations

This analysis examines the WB6 participation in Horizon Europe, with a particular focus on mobility-driven research under MSCA and WIDERA, and outlines strategies for future engagement. It draws on available data (up to early 2024) from European Commission reports, OECD studies, and stakeholder consultations.

Limitations of the analysis include the lack of a broad quantitative survey across diverse stakeholder groups, inconsistencies in national data quality and reporting, which may affect the accuracy of return-on-investment assessments. While based on the best available evidence, as of early 2024, including [European Commission reports](#) and [MSC Advocacy findings](#), new programme updates may influence future interpretations.

Despite these constraints, the paper provides an evidence-based contribution to strategic planning aimed at enhancing the Western Balkans' integration into Horizon Europe and upcoming EU research programmes, underscoring the importance of a participatory and adaptive approach.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Analytical Approach and Sources

The analytical approach combined documentary review and primary data collection to assess the participation of WB countries in mobility-driven research, particularly within the MSCA and WIDERA programmes under Horizon Europe. Key sources included the [Innovation Union Scoreboard](#), [European Research Area \(ERA\) Monitoring Reports](#), [Qlik Sense dashboard](#), national research and innovation strategies, and relevant evaluation studies. These sources were analysed to identify strengths, gaps, and emerging trends in the region's research performance, forming the evidence base for recommendations aimed at enhancing participation in the Horizon Europe 2025–2027 Work Programme and shaping future contributions to FP10.

3.2 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data collection employed a mixed-methods approach, combining desk research, stakeholder mapping, and semi-structured interviews. Key documents reviewed included European Commission reports, national R&I strategies, the Innovation Union Scoreboard, ERA Monitoring Reports, and Qlik Sense data.

Stakeholders were grouped into national policymakers, research-performing institutions, and EU-level actors (e.g., National Contact Points, European Commission experts). Tailored questionnaires were developed and refined following three online stakeholder events. Five semi-structured interviews –4 with WB stakeholders and 1 with EU counterparts– generated insights into research mobility challenges and opportunities.

Qualitative feedback was integrated and quantitative data to build a comparative analysis of participation trends across the WB6. Where data gaps existed, secondary sources and qualitative interpretations were also employed.






All interviews were conducted in compliance with data protection standards and participant consent requirements.

3.3 Contextual Background

Horizon Europe is the EU flagship research and innovation programme, with a €95.5 billion budget aimed at fostering scientific excellence, addressing global challenges, and enhancing industrial competitiveness. The Western Balkans' participation in Horizon Europe supports the region's integration into the European Research Area, offering access to EU funding and collaboration opportunities.

Between 2021 and 2023, the region engaged in 63 projects under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, securing €10.68 million in funding. However, participation levels vary across countries: Serbia and Montenegro have shown stronger performance in Horizon Europe, both in participation rates and funding secured, while Albania and Kosovo continue to lag in project involvement and success rates.

3.4 Key Objectives for WB Participation

-  Strengthening local research infrastructure and developing human capital, including fostering student and post-doc training.
-  Ensuring inclusive access to EU funding and networks for all WB institutions, including SMEs and civil society.
-  Enhancing research networks within the region and with EU counterparts through mechanisms such as MSCA exchanges and digital innovation hubs.
-  Addressing key challenges, such as climate change, health, and digitalization, by harnessing regional expertise.
-  Aligning with EU principles and values, including ethics, academic freedom, gender equality, and open science.

The WB countries have made significant progress in Horizon Europe participation, achieving full association with the programme by late 2021. This status has allowed WB researchers to participate in EU-funded projects under the same rules as EU Member States, contributing to the enhancement of research and innovation capacity across the region.

Despite this progress, disparities persist in participation, with Serbia and Montenegro leading in project involvement and funding, while Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia remain underrepresented. The region's participation in MSCA has grown substantially: WB organizations increased their participation by 49% compared to Horizon 2020, with 10 new projects contracted in the most recent year. These disparities are largely attributed to weaker national research infrastructures, complex administrative procedures, and insufficient support systems, particularly for newcomers to EU programmes.

Key challenges include the need for tailored capacity-building initiatives, leadership training, and simplified application procedures. Additionally, despite progress, many Western Balkan countries continue to encounter significant barriers in fully leveraging the financial and strategic benefits of EU association, highlighting the need for targeted policy reforms and stronger alignment with EU R&I priorities.

While the region's R&I systems have made advances, particularly in engaging with MSCA and WIDERA, additional investments are required in research infrastructure, mobility schemes, and cross-sector collaboration to fully unlock the region's potential and achieve greater integration into the ERA.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Comparative Regional Analysis

During Horizon 2020 (2014–2020), the first Framework Programme in which the Western Balkans were associated, researchers from the region secured modest but steadily increasing involvement. In total, [WB partners received about €170 million in EU grants](#) and roughly 1,000 participations. [Participation rates varied significantly by country. Serbia led with 598 participations \(resulting in €134.8 million\)](#), reflecting its relatively larger R&I base. [North Macedonia followed with 122 participations \(€14.8 million\)](#), followed by [Bosnia and Herzegovina with 118 \(€8.72 million\)](#). [Albania recorded 53 participations \(€5.79 million\)](#), [Montenegro 65 \(€4.62 million\)](#), and [Kosovo \(having joined later in 2021\) 21 participations \(€2.56 million\)](#). Overall, the proposal success rates in Horizon 2020 for the region were close to the EU average (around 12%). For example, [Albania's retained-proposal success was 8.2% versus the EU's 12.0%](#), and [North Macedonia's was 10.8%](#). (Notably, [Kosovo –as a new associate– achieved a higher-than-average 17.4% success rate.](#))

Under Horizon Europe (2021–2027) the Western Balkans are building on these trends, with early indications of active involvement in mission-oriented projects. In the EU Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission, [three WB cities –Elbasan \(Albania\), Sarajevo \(Bosnia and Herzegovina\) and Podgorica \(Montenegro\)– were selected among the 100 cities participating in the “Cities Mission”](#). Each city will each develop a “Climate City Contract” encompassing sectors such as energy, buildings, waste, transport, etc.) with the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2030. Likewise, [WB entities are taking part in other Missions](#). For example, Albania, Montenegro and Serbia have projects in the “Restore our Ocean and Waters” Mission; North Macedonia and Serbia are active in the “Soil Deal” Mission. According to [recent analyses](#), the performance of WB teams in these missions is encouraging, with reported success rates at or even above the EU average. Participation is also expanding in EU–WB International Cooperation projects and partnerships, which bodes well for deeper integration.

In the financial return for association, the Western Balkans are benefitting both Horizon funding and complementary EU instruments. [Under Horizon 2020, the EU invested €170 million in WB research](#). Complementing this, pre-accession EU funds (IPA II and national budgets) channel substantial resources into regional R&I. Between 2014–2020, IPA II allocations amounted roughly to [€1.54 billion for Serbia](#), [€608.7 million for North Macedonia](#), [€552.1 million for Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [€639.5 million for Albania](#), [€602.1 million for Kosovo](#), and [€279.1 million for Montenegro](#), targeting R&I-related components.

These funds, supplemented by modest national budgets, have supported infrastructure, competitive grants, innovation vouchers and institutional modernization. Under the WB Agenda, the [EU has signalled another new commitment of ~€150 million for R&I support in 2022-26](#). Taken together, EU financial “returns” to the region’s R&I ecosystem represent a substantial –though still modest by EU benchmarks– contribution and aim to boost capacity, networks and readiness to absorb more ambitious Horizon Europe funding.

With regard to mobility programs, WB researchers and students are increasingly mobile thanks to EU-funded exchange schemes. In the field of education and training, Erasmus+ has seen progressive expansion. In 2022, the [EU launched an “Enhanced Partnership” with WB countries](#). As of 2023, higher education institutions in the non-associated WB countries are eligible to participate in strategic Erasmus+ actions, such as the [new European Universities alliances](#), on equal footing with EU members. This development enables students, academics and youth from the region to access a broader range of mobility opportunities and joint degree programmes alongside their EU peers.

In the field of research, Western Balkan researchers are eligible for MSCA fellowships, doctoral networks and exchanges under Horizon Europe. In practice, however, uptake has been uneven. A recent [policy analysis](#) observed that although participation in EU programmes is “rising,” it “remains modest and selective” – with particularly low engagement in the MSCA and only a handful of ERC grants awarded to researchers from the region. In contrast, involvement in networking schemes such as COST Actions and the European Innovation Council (EIC) is increasing. Many WB institutions are active in COST research networks, while initiatives like the EIC’s outreach and the launch of WB R&I Youth Awards in 2025 are contributing to greater visibility for the region. Overall, mobility programs represent both a challenge –due to underutilization– and an opportunity for learning and EU integration for the WB R&I community.

In terms of European Research Council (ERC) grants, the Western Balkans have experienced limited success. For instance, nearly 300 applications were submitted under a regional ERC Grant Scheme, with approximately half successfully completed. However, the number of awarded grants remains low. This highlights the significant challenges confronting the WB researchers in securing such competitive funding.

By contrast, participation in networking schemes like COST Actions has been notably stronger. Between 2021 and 2023, researchers from the Western Balkans were involved in 161 COST Actions, demonstrating growing integration into European research networks. According to COST, flexible participation model and individual representation makes it accessible and attractive for researchers from the region to engage in these initiatives.

The European Innovation Council (EIC) has also expanded its engagement in the region. Initiatives such as the EIC’s outreach programs and the introduction of the Western Balkans Research and Innovation (R&I) Youth Awards in 2025 have contributed to boosting the region’s visibility in the European innovation ecosystem. In regards to the WIDERA participation, the WB are explicitly targeted by [Horizon Europe’s WIDERA measures](#). This dedicated strand [supports countries with lower R&I performance through instruments](#) like ERA Chairs, Twinning, Teaming, Pathways to Synergies, and Excellence Hubs.

All six Western Balkan economies are considered as [widening countries, making them eligible for such calls](#). These instruments aim to build institutional capacity, for example by establishing centers of excellence, fostering partnerships between local universities and top EU partners, and attracting world-class researchers from more research-intensive countries to the widening countries. To date, while a few WB teams have won ERA Chairs and Twinning projects (often in collaboration with EU institutions), the overall number of

WIDERA grants awarded in the region remains relatively low. Greater WB involvement in these programs is encouraged, as these programmes provide structured pathways to strengthen research leadership and competitiveness.

As of early 2025, the European Commission's Research Executive Agency (REA) selected [63 new projects](#) for funding under the Teaming, Excellence Hubs, and ERA Chair actions of the WIDERA programme. These projects, launched in 2023, are scheduled to commence between late 2024 and early 2025, with a total funding allocation of €315 million. Regarding ERA Chairs, the call for proposals closed in March 2024, receiving [158 applications, of which 38 were selected for funding](#). For the Teaming Excellence call, the second stage deadline was on 7 March 2024, with 34 proposals submitted. Thirteen projects were selected for funding and are expected to begin between November 2024 and January 2025. Meanwhile, Excellence Hubs call received 205 project proposals in March 2024 from which 12 were selected to receive EU funding.

Despite progress, significant obstacles remain. Most WB countries continue to invest significantly below EU norms in R&I. National R&D expenditure is typically under 1% of GDP. For example, in 2024, [Albania allocated 0.08%](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina 0.2%](#), [Montenegro 0.31%](#), [North Macedonia 0.38%](#), [Kosovo 0.1%](#) and [Serbia up to 0.9%](#). [An expert from the region notes that](#) "Budgetary allocations for R&D are startlingly low, oscillating between 0.25% in Albania and 0.9% in Serbia," severely limiting research capacity. The research workforce is also small and ageing with most [WB countries employing only a few hundred to two thousand researchers per million inhabitants, well below the EU average \(4,450\), and brain drain of young scientists remains a major worry](#).

Additionally, SME participation across the Western Balkans remains critically low in Horizon Europe, particularly under innovation-driven schemes such as the EIC Accelerator and Eurostars. Key barriers include limited R&D investment, low digital capacity, and weak university-business collaboration, which significantly constrain SME-driven innovation. Strengthening SME engagement through targeted incentives, such as national innovation voucher schemes, Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs), and dedicated Horizon Europe SME support desks, will be essential to boost regional competitiveness and make better use of the program. As noted by regional experts, the underutilized potential by the private sector stems not from lack of capacity; rather, it is triggered by the lack of awareness and access. Companies, especially in IT, PR, and consulting, are unaware they can serve as project managers or technical implementers in Horizon Europe calls. Participation numbers confirm this gap. As of 2024, only two companies from North Macedonia were actively involved. Addressing this information gap could unlock a significant new channel of participation.

Institutional and systemic hurdles further compound these issues. Legal and administrative frameworks for R&I are often weak or inconsistently applied. Beyond national R&I frameworks, internal dynamics within higher education institutions present additional obstacles. As highlighted during interviews, the academic system in some WB6 countries is characterized by a closed structure, weak intra-university cooperation, and minimal international networking. Faculties frequently operate in isolation and even in competition with one another, while centralized financial and staffing decisions hampers responsiveness to EU programme requirements. Science and Innovation (SPI) offices, intended to facilitate engagement with Horizon Europe, are often symbolic rather than functional, lacking budgetary support or dedicated personnel.

In some cases, staff assigned to support research functions receive neither compensation nor travel funding, further weakening institutional capacity to effectively assist researchers. In addition, centralized decision-making within institutions hampers timely participation in Horizon Europe, while private universities remain under-engaged due to the programme's

strong focus on research excellence. This fragmented governance weakens the full activation of national research potential.

While ERA Fellowships under MSCA have proven effective in promoting brain circulation and EU-wide research integration, overall participation remains low. Institutional engagement is often fragmented, and many high-quality proposals remain unfunded due to intense competition and the lack of national follow-up mechanisms, such as support for Seal of Excellence awardees. Persistent major challenges include limited national R&I funding, weak internal support systems, precarious researcher career pathways, and insufficient integration into established EU consortia.

A [civil-society analysis](#) highlight “complex legislation, insufficient communication, and inconsistency in implementing measures” as key barriers to research mobility and collaboration.

[Funding mechanisms remain fragmented](#), with significant variation in R&I grants across countries, while links between [academia-industry are underdeveloped](#). According to [the OECD Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024](#), there has been limited strategic effort to leverage regional partnerships. For example, only six WB projects are listed in the ESFRI research infrastructure roadmap, and just half involve more than one country. [Intra-regional cooperation remains limited](#): there is “little focus on enhancing the intra-regional exchange and mobility of researchers” in the Balkans. As a result, participation in Horizon Europe is currently uneven and requires targeted strengthening to fully tap the program’s potentials for the Western Balkans.

At the same time, the Western Balkans are actively seizing new opportunities. The EU has increasingly integrated the region into major research and innovation initiatives. In addition to Horizon Europe, WB scientists can join COST Actions and EIT communities, and infrastructure roadmaps. Notably, recent missions and partnerships have been leveraged as entry points. [The selection of Elbasan, Sarajevo and Podgorica in the Cities Mission](#) provides those urban areas with targeted support and investment plans for the green transition.

Similarly, WB entities are increasingly embedded in [Europe-wide Mission consortia focused on oceans and soil](#). Such concrete involvement accelerates knowledge transfer and showcases local innovation. Meanwhile, accession-driven reforms are gradually fostering a more enabling environment. All six economies have [initiated the development or revision of national R&I strategies and S3 roadmaps](#) to better align with EU objectives. For example, [Serbia and Montenegro adopted their S3 strategies in 2019/2020 followed by North Macedonia in 2023](#), signalling a structural shift towards research-driven growth.

Advancing [the implementation of S3 has become essential for accessing Horizon Europe’s widening initiatives, participating in mission activities, and leveraging funding opportunities under the Digital Europe Programme](#). While Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have made notable progress in adopting S3 frameworks, the remaining Western Balkan economies must expedite the development of their national strategies. Aligning these efforts with key EU research and innovation priorities, such as health, digital transformation, the green economy, and sustainable food systems, will be crucial. Enhanced deployment of S3 strategies will also facilitate the creation of more cross-border research and innovation networks within the region, a growing priority within EU funding mechanisms.

Regional best practices increasingly highlight the effective use of networking and information tools. Civil society and EU-funded projects, such as the WB Info Hub, have played a key role in generating evidence-based policy briefs and country-specific reports,

which help identify gaps and set reform targets. For instance, [Policy Answers outputs](#) like the 2023 ERA Country Reports give each economy tailored analyses of strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the 2024 Monitoring Cards track progress on digital and green priorities. These tools guide governments in targeting reforms.

Cross-border collaborations are gaining traction, ranging from joint PhD programs to shared innovation centres, often facilitated through EU-funded twinning projects. In parallel, cultural momentum is building: high-level events, such as [the Skopje Ministerial Platform in 2024](#) and civil-society forums like [the Berlin Process Civil Society Forum](#), have consistently advocated for concrete steps, including raising R&I budgets to 2% of GDP by 2030 and creating dedicated Balkan mobility schemes. If acted upon, such recommendations could significantly bolster the region's research integration. Enhanced cooperation among WB6 countries would also position the region more strongly for participation in FP10, where collaborative excellence will play an even more pivotal role.

Policy alignment between the Western Balkans and the EU is a cornerstone of deeper cooperation. WB countries are progressively reorienting their national R&I agendas toward to align with EU frameworks. Recent EU-WB meetings have underscored this commitment. For example, an [October 2024 ministerial in Skopje](#) brought together WB ministers and EU officials to discuss strategies for fostering regional innovation, research capacity and cross-border cooperation. In practical terms, this alignment involves coordinating national priorities with EU Missions and Partnerships, strengthening R&I governance, and improving the integration of national systems with EU funding mechanisms.

Recommendations from policy experts reinforce these strategic directions. Key proposals include a commitment by regional governments to [raise public R&I funding to at least 2% of GDP by 2030](#) alongside the establishment of a comprehensive [intra-Balkans mobility framework](#) to facilitate researcher exchanges. Alignment also involves making smarter use of EU funds. Experts recommend leveraging synergies between Horizon Europe and pre-accession programs (IPA) through co-financed projects and joint R&I clusters. On the implementation front, this has translated into new initiatives like an enhanced Balkan Europe Research Area and joint EU-WB “horizon scanning” exercises to better align research agendas.

To ensure accountability and track progress, robust monitoring is put in place. The European Commission and WB partners are rolling out indicators [to assess the region's R&I integration](#). Tools such as the [ERA country reports](#) and [monitoring cards](#) provide a data-driven baseline for 2023–2024. Going forward, these will inform both national reforms and EU policy support. Meanwhile, the Western Balkans are beginning to prepare for the next FP10, [with EU-backed policy tools outlining concrete steps to upgrade research infrastructures and foster collaboration for the 2030](#).

4.2 Country-Specific Cases and Relevant Examples

Serbia stands out as the leading Western Balkan participant in Horizon Europe with approximately 290 projects and EUR 55 million in secured funding. The country benefits from strong institutions such as the University of Belgrade and the BioSense Institute, which have played a pivotal role in securing EU research funding. These institutions, alongside governmental and political support for research and development (R&D),

have enabled Serbia to maintain a robust track record, particularly in priority areas such as ICT, green technologies, and health-related research. This strategic investment has positioned Serbia as a key player in European research collaboration, showcasing the positive impact of sustained strategic investment in R&D infrastructure.

Though trailing Serbia in overall participation, North Macedonia and Montenegro have demonstrated notable performance in specific sectors, such as green transition, information and communication technology (ICT), and marine biology. By capitalizing on their regional strengths, both countries have positioned themselves as contributors to EU climate goals and marine research initiatives. While their overall participation levels remain modest, these targeted strengths provide opportunities for further growth, especially with the expansion of specialized calls and mobility programs under Horizon Europe.

In contrast, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo face greater challenges in their Horizon Europe participation, primarily due to weak research infrastructures and limited national support mechanisms that have hindered broader involvement in EU-funded projects. Nevertheless, these countries have identified niche strengths in areas such as ICT, governance, biotechnology, and agriculture, which have allowed them to gain recognition within specific research domains.

To support these emerging areas, targeted capacity-building initiatives, such as proposal-writing workshops and the appointment of national MSCA focal points, have played a critical role in strengthening the ability of researchers from these countries to engage more effectively with Horizon Europe. These interventions not only help improve immediate participation but also help build a foundation for longer-term growth in research competitiveness.

Identification of key gaps and challenges:

Many WB countries, particularly Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, lack modern research facilities and technological infrastructure. Although Serbia has made significant progress, the region's infrastructure remains uneven, limiting its ability to conduct high-quality research.

Bureaucratic barriers, such as delayed co-financing mechanisms, inefficient application processes, and a lack of national contact points, constrain full participation. These obstacles are especially prevalent in countries like Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where support systems remain fragmented.

Administrative support structures to assist researchers with administrative, financial, and project management tasks remain limited. Most Western Balkan institutions still participate as partners rather than project coordinators, limiting their influence in Horizon Europe. While some capacity-building efforts have produced some success, further initiatives are needed to strengthen project management and leadership skills.

Despite strengths in fields such as ICT, biotechnology, and green transition, WB countries remain underrepresented in key areas such as digitalization, health, and climate change. This limits their contribution to broader Horizon Europe initiatives. In addition, there is a lack of multi-disciplinarity in their proposals.

Brain drain continues to be a major challenge, with many skilled researchers relocating to Western Europe. While mobility programs like MSCA provide opportunities, more long-term retention strategies, such as career development support, are essential to keep talent in the region.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Strategic Measures

Strengthen institutional support (NCPs, Horizon Offices) by upgrading NCPs into full-cycle/priority or providing additional staffing for the so-called “Horizon Offices”, offering direct coaching services to universities and early-stage researchers, as well as specialized advice for SME applicants, and hands-on support with writing successful proposals, doing networking and promotion in the European arena to identify and link with suitable partners and project leaders, among other tasks. This recommendation should be integrated in the country specific Horizon Europe promotion strategies.

Expand targeted support for early-career researchers by strengthening mentoring schemes, providing structured training in grant writing, research ethics, and project management, and enhancing access to international mobility and collaborative research opportunities.

Maximize uptake of MSCA and WIDERA opportunities across WB economies. These flagship opportunities support researcher mobility, institutional strengthening, and network integration. Targeted awareness-raising, training, and application support should be embedded in institutional structures for both schemes.

Simplify application, evaluation, contracting, and reporting processes of European programmes.

Consolidate international networks and promote strategic internationalization across all levels of research and innovation activity.

Align national research funding with EU strategic priorities and capitalize on IPA and New Growth Plan funds.

Adopt country-level WIDERA action plans, complemented by national co-financing schemes for Seal of Excellence projects and ERA-linked investments.

Incentivize national support for ERA Fellowships and Seal of Excellence schemes to retain and scale up mobility-driven research capacity.

Launch national strategies for researcher career development, focusing on modern career pathways and sustainable research management roles within institutions.

Provide customized technical assistance to WB research-performing institutions and SMEs to improve project design, grant writing, management capacities, and innovation commercialization.

Formalize and adequately fund SPI roles within universities. SPI units should be institutionalized with dedicated and compensated staff who spend at least 20% of their workload on Horizon-related support, including partner matchmaking, proposal review, and institutional networking.

Ensure political and societal commitment to research and innovation. Cultivating a strong R&I culture in the Western Balkans demands sustained political commitment to science, education, and innovation as development pillars, alongside public communication efforts to build broader societal support for R&I investments.

Integrate inclusiveness, gender equality, and societal impact as core eligibility criteria in national competitive calls for R&I funding, to align with Horizon Europe standards and strengthen ERA integration.

Accelerate the adoption and implementation of S3 in all WB economies to better align national priorities with EU strategic research and innovation goals and the HE objectives.

Promote targeted funding under FP10 to address participation gaps through dedicated capacity-building initiatives.

Celebrate and showcase success stories of WB participation in Horizon Europe.

5.2 Recommendations for the European Commission



Simplify Horizon Europe funding application procedures and enhance transparency of eligibility criteria to improve accessibility for Western Balkan applicants. Complement these efforts with tailored support mechanisms for the region, such as establishing dedicated WB technical help-desks within the Horizon Europe National Contact Point (NCP) network, and providing targeted webinars, proposal clinics, and matchmaking events, especially focused on Missions, WIDERA, and EIC Accelerator calls.



Maintain quick pre-financing and flexible payment mechanisms.



Expand the use of two-stage application procedures across more Horizon Europe components, focusing on those with low success rates and high proposal volumes, in order to reduce applicant fatigue and enhance accessibility. Under the WIDERA strand, introduce additional Research and Innovation Actions (RIAs) to boost institutional leadership in lower-capacity R&I countries and support broader cross-border cooperation.



Simplify application and participation procedures in EU research and innovation programmes to reduce administrative burdens and improve accessibility for WB institutions.



Simultaneously, increase the systematic inclusion of Western Balkan experts in proposal evaluation panels, advisory groups, and programme committees to build regional evaluation capacity, strengthen ownership, and ensure that regional perspectives are better represented in EU-level decision-making.



Boost visibility by leveraging dynamic communication platforms, like the WB Info Hub, including multilingual project calls, and success stories featuring WB participants.



Establish Horizon Europe representation or liaison offices for WB6 in Brussels to facilitate real-time networking and access to consortium-building processes. A regional presence near EU decision-makers would improve visibility and enable access to early calls and networking events.



Proactively manage the association processes of Western Balkan countries to Horizon Europe and future framework programmes by ensuring timely negotiation, signature, and ratification of association agreements. This requires stronger coordination between national governments, the European Commission, and research stakeholders to prevent delays that could lead to participation gaps at the start of new programme cycles.



Strengthen FP10's horizontal pillar as a driver for R&I policy reform across the Western Balkans by aligning it with the evolving ERA Policy Agenda and supporting reforms in funding, governance, and research career pathways.

5.3 Recommendations for National Governments

01

Strengthen national co-financing frameworks to augment local funding for research and innovation.

02

Develop the multi-disciplinary approach (e.g., combining various areas, such as social science, medicine, ICT etc).

03

Implement policies that promote and facilitate researcher mobility.

05

Reform public procurement and financing rules for Horizon projects to allow universities and research institutions greater flexibility in financial management, including independent hiring and subcontracting, beyond rigid state mechanisms.

07

Disseminate success stories and encourage stakeholder inclusivity by establishing national Horizon Europe success platforms that showcase WB project leaders and foster cross-country learning through workshops and case studies. Implement robust monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability frameworks.

09

Launch competitive grants to co-finance EU project participation.

04

Align national R&I strategies with Horizon Europe objectives and goals.

06

Strengthen NCPs, Horizon Offices, and research infrastructure by increasing technical staff, offering specialized training, and deploying modern digital platforms to better support researchers and SME applicants. Simplify legal and contractual frameworks or establish centralized structures of NCPs to improve coordination.

08

Establish dedicated administrative support structures within research institutions to assist with project preparation, proposal submission, grant management, and reporting obligations, thereby easing researchers' administrative burden and increasing participation in competitive EU programmes. Promote regional cooperation by financing joint research initiatives, shared research infrastructures, and mobility networks through frameworks such as the Berlin Process and enhanced regional Horizon Europe consortia.

10

Progressively increase national R&D investments to meet the ERA benchmark of at least 1% of GDP by 2030.

11

Leverage pre-accession instruments (IPA, Digital Europe Programme, ESF+) to strengthen research infrastructure and improve digital skills and institutional readiness for Horizon participation.

12

Streamline administrative and financial procedures to reduce bureaucratic burdens on applicants.

13

Fully integrate S3 into national R&I planning, ensuring that funding allocations directly support Horizon Europe thematic clusters and regional innovation ecosystems.

5.4 Recommendations for Academic and Scientific Communities

Advocate for closer collaboration with EU partners and utilize existing frameworks for joint research initiatives.

Invest in capacity-building programmes to improve proposal writing skills.

Boost proactive participation in regional and EU-wide consortia to generate experience and enhance visibility.

Showcase successful participation examples to inspire stronger institutional engagement and generate public support.

Actively engage in Pillar II cluster calls to position WB institutions within major EU research networks and enhance eligibility for follow-up EU funding streams.

Establish mechanisms intended for brain circulation and for the return of researchers through targeted institutional support schemes.

5.5 Recommendations for Other Relevant Stakeholders

- ✓ Foster synergies among research institutions, governmental bodies, and the private sector to maximize resource utilization and impact by establishing formal innovation clusters, public-private research partnerships, and regional industry-led consortia aligned with Horizon Europe themes to enhance resources use and impact.
- ✓ Leverage diaspora communities to broaden networks and foster research collaborations.
- ✓ Prioritize systematic investment in regional innovation hubs and digital research infrastructures, focusing on areas where the WB6 have competitive potential such as ICT, Green Technologies, Health, and Smart Manufacturing, aligned with S3.
- ✓ Expand delivery of training programs focused on grant writing, project implementation, open science, and scientific communication, incorporating peer-mentoring schemes, cross-institutional capacity-building programs, and regional summer schools.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, WB participation in Horizon Europe is advancing; yet, further efforts are required to ensure more balanced and sustained engagement across the region. [The region's full association with Horizon Europe](#) has enabled access to a broad range of calls and mobility schemes, which are critical for advancing research excellence, developing innovation ecosystems, and deepening Western Balkans' integration into the European Research Area. While initial performance in Horizon 2020 was modest, it showed promising signs for future participation. Success in forthcoming Horizon calls will largely depend on continued institutional strengthening and increased investments.

This entails transforming National Contact Points (NCPs) into full-cycle, priority-driven Horizon Offices equipped with adequate staffing, dedicated coaching services for universities and early-stage researchers, and tailored advisory services for SMEs. These offices should play an active role in partner matchmaking, proposal development, and strategic networking within the European R&I ecosystem. At the same time, it is essential to simplify application, evaluation, contracting, and reporting procedures, expanding capacity-building for early-career researchers, and align national funding with EU priorities, such as MSCA, WIDERA, and ERA Fellowships. Achieving success also depends on strengthening researcher career pathways, promoting inclusiveness and gender equality, providing technical assistance to improve proposal quality, and integrating S3 to ensure coherence with Horizon Europe's thematic goals. These measures should be systematically embedded in country-specific Horizon Europe promotion strategies to close the participation gap and build long-term competitiveness.

In addition, practices such as participation in EU Missions, engagement with COST/EIT networks, and alignment of national R&I strategies with EU priorities are already demonstrating growing integration. However, persistent challenges, such as low R&D funding, brain drain, and regulatory obstacles including rigid public procurement rules, lack of national co-funding mechanisms, lack of administrative support, limited autonomy of universities and research institutions still need to be addressed. With concerted efforts by regional governments, EU institutions, and key stakeholders, these barriers can be effectively overcome.

The findings underscore the importance of sustained investment in institutional capacity-building, increased funding, reduced administrative burdens, and enhanced cross-countries and cross-sectors collaboration. These measures will strengthen the region's participation in Horizon Europe and foster a more research-intensive growth. Continued integration of WB countries into European R&I structures and alignment of their national strategies with

EU standards will contribute to long-term European integration and societal resilience. If [WB countries reach the recommended target of 2% of GDP for R&D investment](#) and deepen EU-WB cooperation, their role in Horizon Europe could become a powerful driver of innovation and convergence.

Looking ahead, the Western Balkans' involvement in Horizon Europe and preparatory efforts for FP10 will be critical for the region's continued integration into the ERA. Shared objectives, such as strengthening WB research capacity, promoting inclusive participation, deepening collaborative networks, and upholding ethical, values-driven research are clearly articulated in both EU and regional policy documents. Achieving these objectives will require addressing existing gaps through targeted strategic capacity-building, streamlined administrative procedures, and stronger leadership at both the EU and national levels.

ANNEXES

List of Interviewees

Elke Dall	Senior Expert, Centre for Social Innovation, POLICY ANSWERS Project Coordinator
Katarina Kreceva	Part of the team negotiating North Macedonia's accession to Horizon Europe
Kamila Kozirog	Research and Innovation Policy Analyst at European University Association
Gentrit Berisha	Assistant Professor of Management, University of Prishtina, NCP (ERC and MSCA)
Qamile Sinanaj	Head of the Division for International Cooperation Program Development in Higher Education and Science (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation; NCP (Horizon Europe and COST)

Consent Form for Interviews and Use of Participant Data

The interview forms part of the activities related to the development of the working document "Participation of WB6 in the Horizon Europe 2025-2027 Programme and Planning for the EU's Framework Programme" under the "Enhancing Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation in Western Balkans for Sustained Economic Growth and Convergence with the European Union" Project implemented by the Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV). It was conducted by Mrika Hoxha and Venera Gudachi, ITM Consulting, Skopje.

Tick the appropriate box that you agree with:

1. I confirm that I understand the purpose of the interview and that I was given the opportunity to ask questions regarding its purpose.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without indicating the reason. Furthermore, if I do not wish to answer a particular question or questions, I have the right to do so.	
3. I understand that my answers will all be treated with the strictest confidence and will be anonymized in the reports. I allow the project evaluation team to have access to my answers.	
4. I agree that short anonymized quotes from the interview can be published in the evaluation report and other publications under this project.	

5. I agree that my profession and place of living, without my name or any other identifiable data, is listed in the annex to the evaluation report.	
6. I agree to participate in the interview on my free will.	
7. I acknowledge that the information will be shared solely with the evaluation team and handled as strictly confidential in accordance with national data protection laws and internationally accepted standards.	
8. Other:	

Participant:

(name, surname and signature)

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for National Stakeholders (e.g., Ministries of Education/Science, Innovation Funds, Research Agencies) and Research Funding Organizations

Objective: *To understand the policy, financial, and institutional setting affecting WB countries' participation in mobility-driven research and future readiness for FP10.*

1. Provide a brief introduction about the institution.
 - Ways of its engagement in mobility-driven research
 - Its capacities and resources
2. Co-Financing and research funding ecosystem
 - Does your institution support the participation for HE generally and MSCA and Widera specifically?
 - How so?
 - Do you co-fund at all?
 - Tell us about your instruments, please?
 - How do you organize your support?
 - What do you think your institution can do better to support HE participation, with particular focus on MSCA and WIDERA one?
 - Better in terms of organization? Administration?
 - Or funding?
3. Institutional involvement and active participation
 - How do you assess your capacities to manage EU-funded research projects?
 - What systemic reforms are needed to enhance institutional ability so as to increase your institution's participation and implement complex mobility programmes?

4. Strategic outlook for FP10

- What do you think your institution will be required to do to ensure a stronger participation in FP10 with particular focus on MSCA and WIDERA programmes?
 - What about at other levels?
 - Do you feel involved in the way the national priorities are being designed and transmitted to Brussels?

Regarding FP10, I was told several years ago that many administrative institutions faced significant challenges, such as delays in initiating payments, difficulties in managing funds, and demand for additional money. Staff often do not speak English, which places an additional burden on researchers, who are left to navigate funding processes on their own.

5. National policies on researcher mobility

- Does your institution have any instruments that support research mobility?
 - What are they?
 - Do they target returnees?

6. Any other important information you would like to share?

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Objective: To build understanding of HEIs' engagement in mobility-driven research, participation in Horizon Europe (especially MSCA), institutional challenges, and priorities for FP10.

1. Institutional engagement in mobility-driven research

- How would you value your institution's experience with MSCA and other mobility-focused EU programmes?
- What types of mobility (incoming/outgoing researchers, doctoral/postdoc exchanges) are most common in your institution?
- What has worked well? What are the main challenges?

2. Institutional capacities and support structures

- What institutional structures are in place to support researchers in applying for MSCA and WIDERA or similar schemes?
- What kinds of support (training, proposal writing, project management) would you say are missing or underdeveloped?

3. Researcher retention and brain circulation

- What incentives does your institution provide to retain talented researchers, including those returning from abroad?
- What are the biggest challenges in attracting/retaining mobile researchers?

4. Vision for participation in FP10

- What changes or support mechanisms would help your institution to engage more effectively in FP10?
- How can Western Balkan HEIs increase their visibility and role in shaping FP10 priorities?

5. Any other important information you would like to share?

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for EU Representatives (e.g., EU Delegations, Horizon Europe NCPs, EC experts)

Objective: To capture EU perspectives on the participation of WB countries in MSCA and Horizon Europe, identify systemic barriers, and co-develop recommendations for FP10.

1. Regional performance & key trends

- How would you assess the overall participation of Western Balkan countries in mobility-driven research (MSCA and related instruments)?
- From your perspective, what is the main limitation/challenge of their engagement?

2. Supporting WB6 institutional capacities

- What would you consider to be the most effective measure to date that resulted in mobility-focused research of WB6 stakeholders?
- Is there any measure that might be introduced under FP10 to improve WB participation?

3. Strategic alignment with EU priorities

- How do you think national WB strategies would better align with broader ERA and Horizon Europe objectives?
- Are there any other EU programmes that might contribute towards WB's increased participation in FP10?
- What role do EU Delegations or NCPs play in facilitating alignment or fostering dialogue?

4. Exploring needs, interest, and instruments

- Does your institution have an interest in strengthening WB participation in FP10?
 - Why is that?
 - According to you, how can that be achieved?
- If there is an area or instrument to be chosen to improve WB's participation in FP10, what would that be?
 - Why?
 - What's your opinion on the mobility instruments?

5. Any other important information you would like to share?



WORKING DOCUMENT

Enhancing Western Balkans' Participation in Horizon Europe and Framework Programme 10