

Welcome

Edit Herczog, the chair of the Science|Business Widening Initiative opened the conference by welcoming participants and highlighting the importance of connecting policy discussions with the research community. She reflected on the creation of the S|B Widening initiative to ensure that countries eligible for the EU Widening Programme are represented in the European research and innovation dialogue

Milivoje Radović, President of the Governing Board of the University of Montenegro, opened the conference by welcoming Montenegro's membership in the Science|Business Widening Group. He emphasised the university's commitment to **excellence, openness, and collaboration**, describing research as transformative forces that drive social progress and strengthen regional cooperation.



Executive summary

On **21 October 2025**, Science|Business held its **second Southeast Europe Conference**, following the successful inaugural edition in Skopje, North Macedonia in 2024. This year's meeting, hosted by the **University of Montenegro in Podgorica**, the newest member of the Science|Business Widening Group, symbolised the region's growing importance and engagement in European research and innovation landscape.

The event took place in parallel with the **Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation**, creating a unique bridge between political dialogue and expert exchange. Together, both meetings underlined a shared ambition: to **deepen partnerships, strengthen collaboration, and align regional policies with European strategies** for research, innovation, and higher education.

At a time when European enlargement is **regaining strong political momentum**—recognised as a geostrategic **investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity**—the conference acted as both a strategic platform and a practical forum to explore how the Western Balkans can be more fully integrated into the European Research Area (ERA). Discussions were grounded in real-life examples of successful regional initiatives, showing how collaboration, perseverance, and shared purpose can translate into tangible results and measurable impact.

The event brought together leaders and decision-makers from across Europe: spanning government, academia, industry, and research institutes to debate policy priorities, share good practices, and explore how to maximise the regional impact of EU instruments such as **Horizon Europe, COST Actions, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), POLICY ANSWERS Widening project** and more.

Through these exchanges, the conference highlighted that the **Widening agenda** remains essential, not only as a funding mechanism, but as a **driver of excellence, collaboration, and capacity-building** across the region, supporting candidate countries in advancing their enlargement goals through stronger innovation ecosystems. For Science|Business, bringing this community together on the ground is essential: to connect local innovators with European partners, strengthen regional ecosystems, and ensure that voices from Southeast Europe are fully part of Europe's scientific and innovation future.

FROM KNOWLEDGE TO IMPACT: NURTURING RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Science | Business Widening conference, in partnership with University of Montenegro, POLICY ANSWERS project, EIT Community, COST Association and SciDEV, 21 October 14:00 – 18:30 CET, Podgorica, Montenegro

Keynote

Sabine Henzler, Director for Strategy and Impact at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), highlighted the importance of close EU-Western Balkans cooperation in advancing research, innovation, and European integration.

She described **smart specialisation** as both a **strategic tool for economic growth** and a **cornerstone of EU accession**, enabling regions to identify their comparative advantages and build innovation ecosystems around them.

According to the **European Innovation Scoreboard 2025**, the Western Balkans remain “emerging innovators,” performing below 70% of the EU average. Sabine noted that **low private-sector R&D investment** and **skills gaps** continue to constrain progress. To overcome these challenges, she called for **strong political commitment and long-term vision**, adding that smart specialisation can help Western Balkan countries move from participation to partnership within the European Research Area.



Key Outcomes

- **Commitment and results are already visible.** Numerous success stories across the region demonstrate that strong foundations for growth and innovation are in place. Regional actors are increasingly capable of delivering impact and value through EU-supported initiatives.
- **The challenge is not talent but confidence and capacity.** Excellence exists in the region, but many potential applicants remain hesitant to engage with EU programmes. Beyond overcoming self-doubt, researchers and innovators need greater training and awareness of EU funding opportunities, including administrative know-how and understanding of programme rules, to compete more effectively. Universities have a crucial role to play in turning talent into excellence, fostering entrepreneurial mindsets, and equipping researchers with the skills needed to translate ideas into innovation.
- **Smart Specialisation is a key pillar of integration and growth.** As a proven framework for aligning science, research, and business, Smart Specialisation helps countries identify their strengths, channel investment into priority areas, and foster innovation-led, place-based growth. It is also a crucial tool for aligning national priorities with European strategies and deepening participation in EU research and innovation programmes.
- **Networks and collaboration are key.** Local and regional cooperation remains the cornerstone of progress. Strengthening partnerships across borders, institutions, and disciplines is essential to build robust innovation ecosystems and build long-term impact.
- **Research Infrastructures and access to data and talent matter.** Building and maintaining modern research infrastructures is vital to retain talent, attract investment, and connect regional capacities to European and global networks. Greater access and investment are needed to ensure that researchers can operate at the frontiers of science and innovation.
- **Integration into the ERA is essential for long-term resilience.** A fully connected and inclusive ERA, linking universities, research institutions, and businesses across Europe, is key to building competitiveness, trust, and shared prosperity. The forthcoming ERA Act, which will make participation in core ERA priorities legally binding, could help anchor these efforts and accelerate the region's alignment with EU standards.

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Announcement

Enis Kočan, Professor at the University of Montenegro, announced a major development for the region's digital future. Following the EU–Western Balkans Investment Forum in Tirana, the European Commission, GÉANT, and 4iG Group signed a declaration to develop a regional terrestrial digital backbone and invest in the EAGLE submarine data cable connecting Albania and Egypt. Together, these initiatives will create a new digital corridor linking the Western Balkans with EU data hubs—enhancing connectivity, competitiveness, and opportunities for startups and IT companies across the region.



Science | Business Widening Talks

These short S|B Widening Talks highlighted how perseverance, partnerships, and EU instruments are turning ideas into impactful innovations across the region.

Rana Sanyal, RS Research; EIC European Prize for Women Innovators Winner shared how her team transformed a research idea into Türkiye first cancer nanomedicine to reach clinical trials. Her story showed how belief, persistence, and teamwork can overcome structural barriers and inspire new generations, especially women scientists, to lead transformative research. Her pioneering work has already inspired 13 new clinical trials launched by other researchers, demonstrating the powerful ripple effect of excellence and role models in widening countries.

Uroš Đorđević, Western Balkans Innovation Voucher “Sustainable Lipid-Rich Wastewater Management”, Agrounik presented the evolution of a family-run academic spin-out into the region's first biostimulant and biopesticide producer demonstrating how research-based entrepreneurship can thrive in the region. Agrounik stands as one of the region's most successful companies in securing EU-funded projects, proving that scientific knowledge, when connected with entrepreneurship and EU support, can transform local industries and strengthen the regional innovation ecosystem.

Erida Çepelë, Western Balkan Innovation Voucher "Organic food supplements impact on mental health"; PharmaBest presented a first large-scale study on natural supplements for mental health, exemplifying cross-border cooperation between academia and industry in the Western Balkans and showing how EU instruments like innovation vouchers can catalyse research-driven business development and evidence-based healthcare innovation. She also shared how she initially faced scepticism about applying for the Innovation Voucher but determination and belief in one's ideas paid off, encouraging other entrepreneurs to take initiative and apply for EU-funded opportunities.

Mirela Alhasani, Member, Management Committee Multi-task, Multilingual, Multi-modal Language Generation (Multi3Generation), COST Action highlighted COST Action as a unique basket of opportunities enabling researchers from Widening countries to participate as equal members in European cross-border and interdisciplinary scientific collaboration. As a Chair of a working group in COST, she shared that COST Actions serves as a catalyst and empowers researchers in the Western Balkans to translate collaboration into tangible systemic change.

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Science | Business Widening Talks



Vladimir Mrkajić, Science Communication Coordinator & Management Committee Member, FruitCREWS, COST Action; Head of Research and Development, InoSens shared how participation in the COST Action helped his transition from academia to entrepreneurship by capacity-building opportunities that strengthened his company's ability to join Horizon Europe projects. Vladimir stressed that while the region has strong scientific expertise, it often lacks administrative and management support, calling for greater institutional backing to help researchers fully leverage European programmes.

Panel Session I – Branching and ripening of deep-rooted SEE collaboration

The first panel, moderated by Katarina Haluskova, focused on the success stories and future growth prospects of Southeast Europe's research and innovation ecosystem.

Andrijana Tasevska, Work Package Leader of the POLICY ANSWERS project, INOVA, identified persistent barriers: fragmentation, weak institutional capacity and limited private-sector engagement. She showcased the **Western Balkans Innovation Voucher**, which has already produced 15 success stories, and called for a permanent cross-border voucher fund to build sustainable bridges between academia and business.

Cağrı Yıldırım, Head of EU Framework Programmes Department at TÜBİTAK presented Türkiye's two decades of participation in the EU Framework Programmes—**723 projects worth €358 million and over 1,000 project implementers**. He called for clarity in FP10 regarding associated countries and for mechanisms that allow them access to complementary funding sources such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or European Investment Fund (EIF).

Branka Žižić, EIT Community Officer for the EIT Montenegro Community Hub, presented the EIT as a connector between universities, research centres, and businesses. She noted that Western Balkan participation in Horizon Europe remains low—**14% success rate vs 20% EU average**, accounting for **only 0.3% of the total Horizon budget** despite making up **3.5% of the population**—showing the region could do **ten times better**. Many applications fail on eligibility grounds (around 40%), showing a need for training and know-how. She emphasised that macro-regional collaboration among neighbouring widening countries should be supported more explicitly in EU programmes.

The panel concluded that while fragmentation cannot disappear overnight, **strong networks, local initiative, and gradual integration** can deliver tangible regional impact. When envisioning success for the Southeast Europe research and innovation **ecosystem** over the next five years, panelists emphasized: improving the **institutional position and strategic support** for those involved in EU projects; expanding the network of **R&I ambassadors** to raise awareness and engagement; and achieving **stronger integration with the European research ecosystem**, reflected in a **higher participation rate** from the region.



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Keynote

Ase Gornitzka, President of the COST Association, reflected on COST's 50-year legacy of fostering **open, cross-border collaboration**. She spoke about the evolution from the **knowledge economy** and **knowledge society** to a **"knowledge democracy"**, in which science is more participatory and inclusive. COST's **250 networks and 60,000 participants** exemplify this approach, with members achieving a **39% Horizon Europe success rate**. COST's model of equal participation of Western Balkan researchers continues to strengthen both **capacity and European cohesion**.

Martin Kern, Director of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), outlined EIT's mission to translate knowledge into impact. Through **10 Knowledge and Innovation Communities** and **60 hubs**, EIT fosters entrepreneurship, skills, and start-ups across Europe. Once focused on innovation leaders (Germany, France, UK), EIT now sees **most of its results coming from widening countries**.

In the Western Balkans, EIT has invested **€10 million**, supporting **200+ start-ups**, **74 higher education institutions**, and trained **18,000 people**. Its programmes such as **InfraBooster**, **Jumpstarter**, and the **Higher Education Initiative**, help innovators stay and build companies locally. Looking ahead, EIT aims to **close the skills and innovation gaps**, focusing on emerging fields like **AI, robotics, bioeconomy, and rural innovation**.



Session: from knowledge to impact – data insights to support the journey in Southeast Europe

Anne-Catherine Rota and **Marat Fatkhullin** from **Elsevier** presented a first-of-its-kind data analysis focused on research and innovation performance in Southeast Europe. Their message emphasized how **data can guide strategic decisions**, helping funders, ministries, policymakers and institutions understand where they stand, **identify strengths, and address gaps**—particularly in applied research, commercialization, and collaboration with industry. They showed that while the **region's research quality is strong** and often exceeds EU averages, it **relies heavily on international collaborations** rather than domestic capacity. Elsevier also highlighted the importance of **tracking interdisciplinarity, mentorship, and researcher mobility** to combat brain drain and strengthen local ecosystems, offering data-driven tools and dashboards as models for monitoring progress and shaping research strategies. For more information, please find Elsevier presentation slides [here](#).



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Panel Session II – Nurturing research and innovation in the ERA

The second panel examined how to strengthen the European Research Area (ERA) as the backbone of European competitiveness.

The moderator **Āgota David, Policy officer at DG RTD** reminded that while **Horizon Europe (€100 billion)** is a major tool, it represents only **10% of total European research investment**—the rest depends on coordination and alignment. Looking ahead, she announced **ERA Act**, which will make participation in certain core priorities **compulsory for EU members**, particularly regarding **investment, reforms, and free knowledge circulation**. Please find more information about the ERA attached [here](#).

Robert Blatnik, Head of Office for Substantive Project Support from the **Jožef Stefan Institute** described how his institute built a 15-year system of capacity building, technology transfer and entrepreneurial support. By identifying “potential entrepreneurs” among scientists and combining funding with mentoring (“smart money” instruments), they have created a culture of innovation from the ground up. Researchers are guided to understand value creation, engage with industrial partners, and co-develop solutions that often start as small projects and grow into long-term collaborations.

Sanja Damjanović, Senior Researcher, GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research emphasized the crucial role of research infrastructures in driving socioeconomic impact, reducing brain drain, and strengthening innovation in the Western Balkans. She highlighted the urgent need for new research infrastructures in the Western Balkans as none have been built in over 70 years. Despite having a strong scientific tradition and being a founding member of CERN (former Yugoslavia), the region's number of researchers has remained stagnant for more than a decade. ERA Monitoring shows that the number of researchers in the Western Balkans has remained unchanged for over a decade—unlike in the EU27, where it has grown by around 50%—revealing a major structural policy challenge linked to the absence of new and large-scale research infrastructures. Sanja then presented **SEEIIST**, a **€250 million Accelerator-based research infrastructure for cancer therapy and biomedical research with ion beams** recognized by the European Commission as a flagship project for enlargement. She also mentioned regional success stories such as **BioSense** (smart agriculture) and **ElevenEs** (battery gigafactory) as proof of potential.

Sorin Costreie, President for the **Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA)**, stressed that universities must stand at the centre of innovation ecosystems. He called the **European University Initiative** the “third major wave” of European transformation, following Erasmus and the Bologna Process. With **65 alliances**, it advances co-innovation, democratic values, and European identity. He stressed the importance of continuation of the Horizon Europe WIDERA and concluded that science must stand at the forefront of Europe's integrative power, serving as a model for democracy, inclusion, and cooperation.



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Ivana Janković-Mijanović, Acting Director at the General Directorate for Innovation and Smart Specialisation for Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation, Government of Montenegro, highlighted **smart specialisation** as a key tool for aligning science, business, and policy to drive national innovation. She explained that Montenegro is updating its **Smart Specialisation Strategy** through the **Entrepreneurial Discovery Process**, which connects researchers, companies, and policymakers to set clear priorities, while also strengthening research infrastructures and European networks—including an application for **ELIXIR observer status** and a new **€1 million call** to engage the scientific diaspora. To help companies better use research in their innovation processes, Montenegro has introduced innovation vouchers and proof-of-concept grants, alongside efforts to retain young researchers by improving conditions and enabling international collaboration at home.

In closing, panellists shared their “dreams” for the European Research Area five years from now:

- **A better integration between the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**, ideally under one commissioner and one unified vision for research, education, and skills.
- Stronger funding and success of **moonshot missions** under FP10
- **Ethical, science-led development of AI.**
- Instruments that help researchers think **entrepreneurially and globally**, linking science to market needs.

The conference once again demonstrated the vitality, ambition, and growing influence of Southeast Europe's research and innovation community. It gathered speakers from **13 nationalities**, including **10 women and 8 men**, alongside the Science|Business team of four women from four different countries—a fitting reflection of the diversity, inclusion, and dynamism driving this fast-growing network. Together, they showed that the region's strength lies not only in its ideas and talent, but in its shared commitment to building a more connected, competitive, and innovative Europe.

In partnership with



List of speakers



- Mirela Alhasani – Member, Management Committee, Multi-task, Multilingual, Multi-modal Language Generation (Multi3Generation), COST Action
- Robert Blatnik – Head, Office for Substantive Project Support, Technology Transfer and Innovation, Jožef Stefan Institute
- Erida Çepelë – Western Balkan Innovation Voucher “Organic food supplements impact on mental health”; Marketing Manager, PharmaBest
- Sorin Costreie – President, Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA)
- Ágota Dávid – Policy Officer, International Cooperation – Europe and Americas, DG RTD, European Commission (Moderator)
- Sanja Damjanović – Senior Researcher, GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research
- Uroš Đorđević – Western Balkans Innovation Voucher “Sustainable Lipid-Rich Wastewater Management”; CEO, Agrounik
- Marat Fatkhullin – Vice President, Global Strategic Networks, Elsevier
- Āse Gornitzka – President, COST Association
- Katarína Halušková – Policy Officer, Science | Business (Moderator)
- Sabine Henzler – Director, Strategy and Impact, Joint Research Centre (European Commission)
- Edit Herczog – Chair, Science | Business Widening Initiative (Moderator)
- Ivana Janković Mijanović – Acting Director, General Directorate for Innovation and Smart Specialisation, Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation, Government of Montenegro
- Martin Kern – Director, European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)
- Vladimir Mrkajić – Science Communication Coordinator & Management Committee Member, FruitCREWS COST Action; Head of R&D, InoSens
- Milivoje Radović – President, Governing Board, University of Montenegro
- Anne-Catherine Rota – Strategic Engagement Manager, Europe, Middle East and Africa, Elsevier
- Rana Sanyal – Co-Founder & CSO, RS Research; EIC European Prize for Women Innovators Winner
- Andrijana Tasevska – POLICY ANSWERS Work Package Leader, INOVA
- Branka Zizic – EIT Community Officer, EIT Montenegro Community
- Çağrı Yıldırım – Head, EU Framework Programmes Department, TÜBİTAK (Türkiye)