# Policy Brief

February 2026

POLICY ANSWERS

# Preparing for FP10: Strengthening Western Balkans participation in the 2028-2034 programme landscape

This Policy Brief updates our Policy Brief on the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10)[1] of September 2024, reflecting on the progress in the FP10 development process and their implications for stakeholders in the Western Balkans (WB)[2]. It places particular emphasis on the perspective of the EU enlargement countries[3] and how EU accession interacts with the proposed FP10 structure.

1 POLICY ANSWERS. (2024). Policy Brief The Western Balkans on the Road to FP10. https://westernbalkans-infohub.eu/documents/policy-answers-policy-brief-the-western-balkans-on-the-road-to-framework-programme-10/. Accessed 22 December 2025.

2 The Western Balkans comprise Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia 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.

3 The enlargement countries comprise the Western Balkans and Georgia, Moldova, Türkiye and Ukraine.

## FP10 timeline and state of play


The development of the next FP10 is advancing rapidly, with preparations accelerating across European institutions and EU Member States (MS). Since mid-2024, MS have been outlining their priorities in the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) opinion on FP10[4]. Meanwhile, the independent High-Level Expert Group report "Align, Act, Accelerate"[5], published in October 2024, alongside with the Draghi[6] and Letta[7] reports, has supported shaping the debate on objectives.

In 2025, the focus shifted further toward evidence and options for a future FP10 design. This includes the European Parliament's resolution on the assessment of the implementation of Horizon Europe[8] from March 2025 and the European Commission's (EC) Horizon Europe Interim Evaluation[9] from April 2025 which was followed by the EC's legislative proposal[10] (Figure 1), published in July 2025.

From autumn 2025 onwards, the process entered negotiations with the MS discussing the proposed legal basis, in particular, the Danish EU Council presidency handed these over to the Cypriot EU Council presidency[11]. An agreement in the trilogue also with the European Parliament is expected by the end of 2026 to allow for programme preparation and budget finalisation ahead of FP10's anticipated start in 2028.

4 Council of the European Union: General Secretariat of the Council. (2024). ERAC Opinion on Guidance for the next Framework Programme for Research & Innovation. Council document 11678/24. https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11678-2024-INIT/en/pdf. Accessed 22 December 2025.

5 European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. (2024). Align, act, accelerate – Research, technology and innovation to boost European competitiveness. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/9106236. Accessed 22 December 2025.

6 European Commission. (2024). The Future of European Competitiveness – A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe. https://commission.europa.eu/document/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en. Accessed 22 December 2025.

7 Letta, Enrico. (2024). Much more than a market: Speed, security, solidarity. European Council. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf. Accessed 22 December 2025.

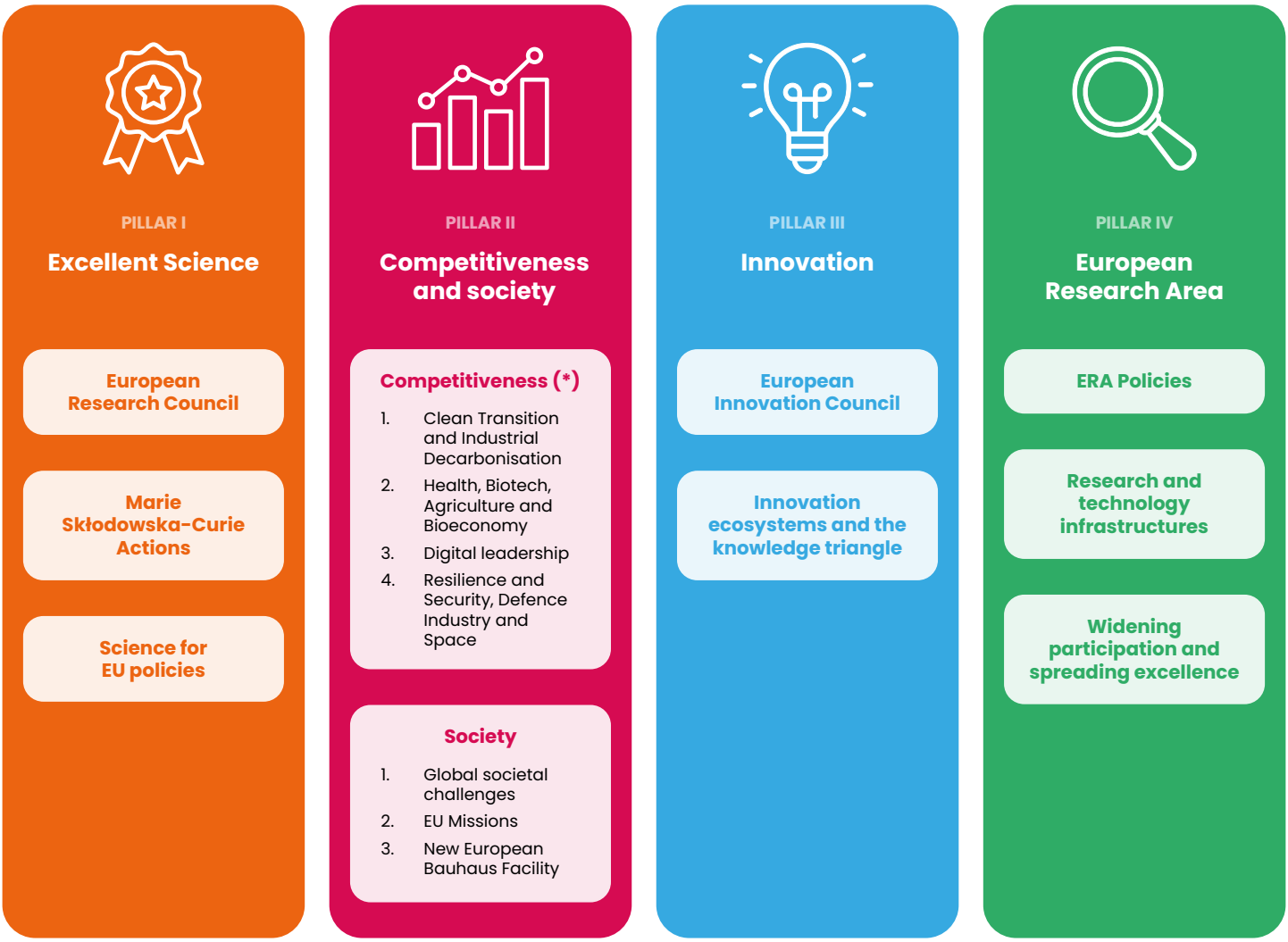
8 European Parliament. (2025). Assessment of the implementation of Horizon Europe in view of its interim evaluation and recommendations for the 10th Research Framework Programme – European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2025 (2024/2109(INI)). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025IP0028. Accessed 22 December 2025.

9 European Commission. (2025). Commission Staff Working Document – Evaluation: Interim Evaluation of the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021–2024). SWD (2025) 110 final. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a3aa9b90-15c0-4ea7-b25e-9f4e29cfa740_en. Accessed 22 December 2025.

10 Horizon Europe 2028 - 2034: twice bigger, simpler, faster and more impactful. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/horizon-europe-2028-2034-twice-bigger-simpler-faster-and-more-impactful-2025-07-16_en. Accessed 22 December 2025.

11 Progress Report. Horizon Europe Package: Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2028-2034. https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15959-2025-INIT/en/pdf. Accessed 22 December 2025.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.




* Consistent with activities of the European Competitiveness Fund

*Figure 1: Outline of FP10 pillars*

A major additional proposal in the debate and an important new policy initiative is the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) which is a proposed EUR 409 billion umbrella instrument in the 2028–2034 EU Multiannual Financial Framework that would merge several funding programmes to support strategic technologies and sectors (Digital Europe, EU4Health, LIFE, etc.). In the proposal, the ECF is structured around a small number of policy "windows" and closely linked to Horizon Europe, which would remain an autonomous framework programme (Figure 2). This architecture has proved to be somewhat challenging in negotiations, as Horizon Europe is discussed in the Research Working Party of the Council, while responsibility for the ECF lies at the Ad Hoc Working Party on the Multiannual Financial Framework. To avoid complexity, strong alignment and coherence between FP10 and ECF needs to be ensured.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

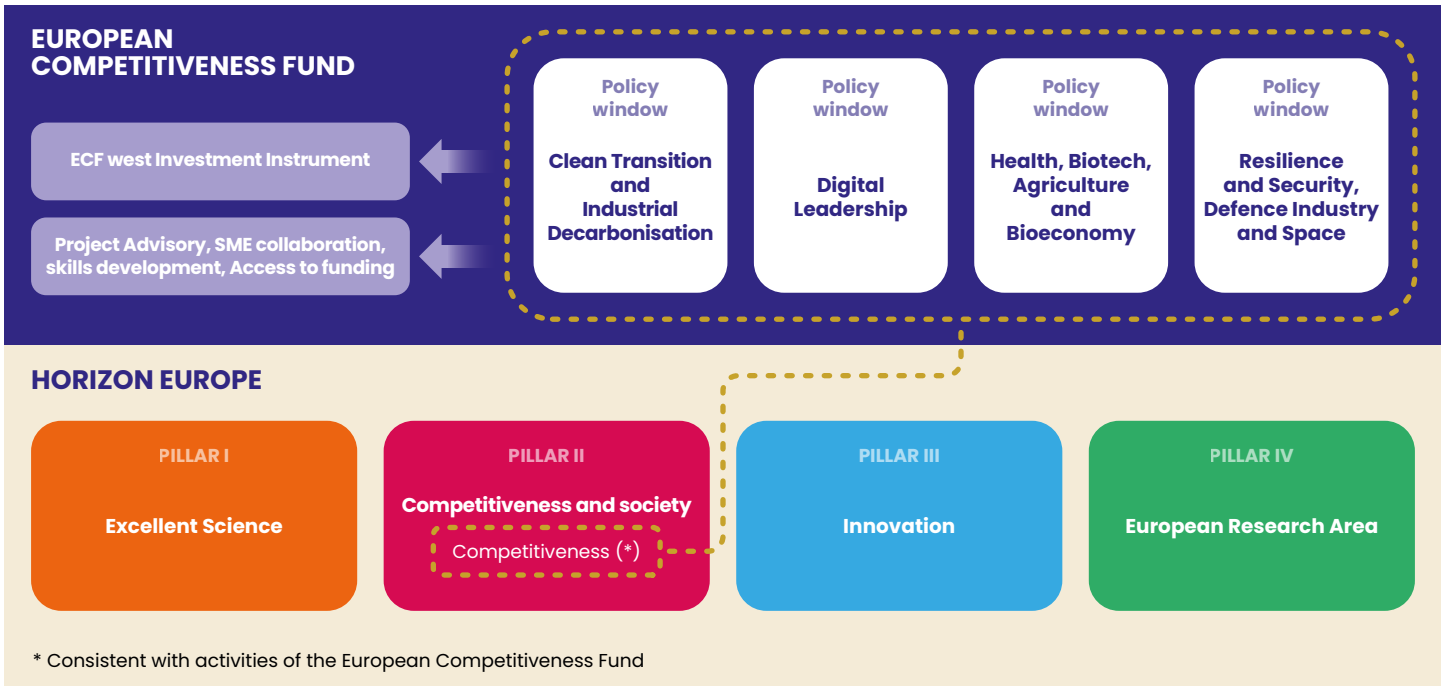



*Figure 2: Links between FP10 and ECF.*

The debates continue in 2026, in particular related to the balance between excellence-based allocation and territorial cohesion (including whether to earmark funding for less research-intensive or lower-income MS), questions of governance and transparency as well as concerns that the instrument's design is still too vague to guarantee clear traceability and effective oversight of spending.

Based on a small-scale consultation process of the POLICY ANSWERS project, we would like to highlight a few points and provide recommendations from the perspective of the enlargement countries.

## Association process

The association process for the enlargement countries should be prioritised and speedy and should enter into force with the start of the programme. However, as rules for association are negotiated not only for Horizon Europe, but also for the ECF, the rules of participation will depend on wider negotiations, where additional considerations, e.g., related to security or strategic autonomy might come into play. Based on clear mutual interest to cooperate, robust diplomatic and technical engagement is needed to avoid any difficulties in the association process to the Horizon Europe and/or the ECF for the special group of enlargement countries. In order to foster the spirit of 'win-win' cooperation, the participation in European programmes need to remain financially attractive for associated enlargement countries.

## Enabling participation: Operational set-up, European Partnerships and other novelties

In the context of the EU accession process, the WB economies have a strong interest in aligning more closely with the European Research Area (ERA) and in helping shape FP10 to support their integration into European research and innovation (R&I) networks. Supporting innovation ecosystems as a key to increasing competitiveness of Europe needs to include the different groups of actors in the enlargement countries as well. Despite an already existing solid base of experts and a certain maturity in the system,

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

strict selection, systemic support as well as monitoring and evaluation, e.g., of National Contact Point structures, remains important.

Furthermore, clear and more flexible conditions for participation in various structures such as ERA working groups, European Partnerships and other fora are important. In any case, effective operational structures need to be put in place and supported adequately in each WB economy. Strategic participation of the WB economies in Partnerships should be increased, reflecting the region's growing orientation towards key thematic areas. For example, good practices should be promoted such as the establishment of funding instruments that can support the participation in Partnership projects even if there is no formal membership of the economy. An orientation towards priorities (e.g., Digital Transformation, Green/Clean Transition and issues related to health) is of high relevance to the region. This is in line with the upcoming planned priorities for Horizon Europe, including the European Partnerships (Figure 3). However, while European Partnerships should be anchored to relevant policy windows, there is also a need for flexibility, for example to cover societal and systemic challenges which require integrated approaches that span multiple policy domains. The portfolio should allow for horizontal partnerships focusing on challenges cutting across policy areas.

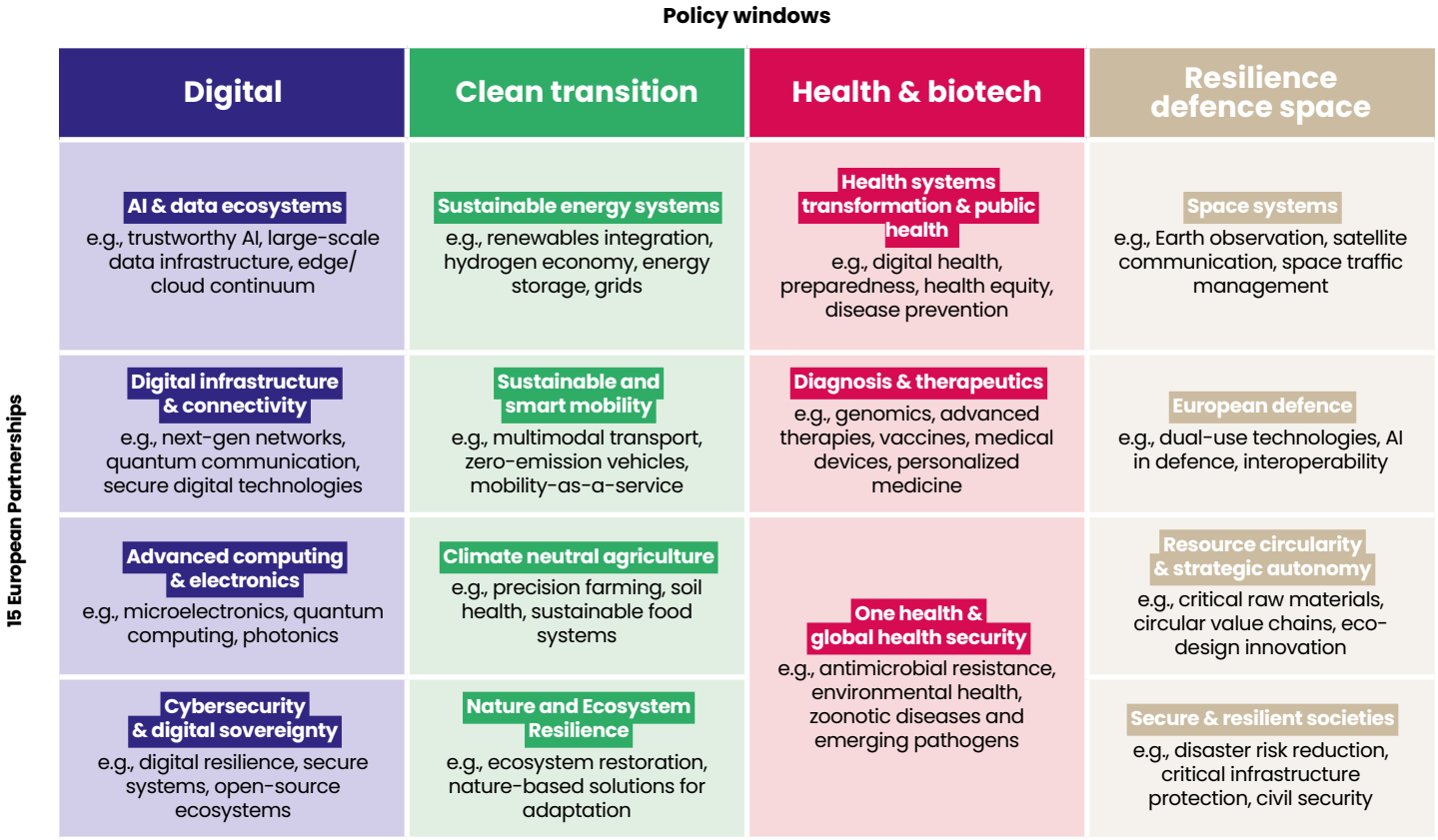



*Figure 3: Partnerships planned for the MFF 2028-2034.*

The EC has also proposed mission-oriented initiatives, such as Moonshots (Figure 4), to which the enlargement countries could contribute, e.g., in focus areas such as regenerative therapies or zero water pollution.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

## Moonshots

| Future Circular Collider | Clean Aviation | Quantum Computing | Next Generation AI | Data Sovereignty |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **What** Sustain Europe's leadership in particle physics by investing in CERN's next-generation collider. | **What** Lead the world in developing the next generation of $CO_2$-free aircraft. | **What** Make Europe the first continent with fully integrated quantum computing in daily life. | **What** Model the new AI on the laws of nature and grounded in physics and biology. | **What** Make Europe the global leader and safest hub for critical research data. |

| Automated Transport and Mobility | Regenerative Therapies | Fusion Energy | Space Economy | Zero Water Pollution | Ocean Observation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **What** Advance safe, inclusive, and emission-reducing automated transport and mobility in Europe. | **What** Deliver breakthrough therapies to improve people's health and lives. | **What** The first commercial nuclear fusion power plant, generating safe, consistent, and reliable electricity. | **What** Make Europe the leader in the space economy. | **What** Move towards zero pollution of water in the EU. | **What** Achieving strategic autonomy in ocean observation infrastructure, data and information services. |

*Figure 4: Moonshots planned for the MFF 2028-2034.*

Additionally, FP10 stronger reflects technology infrastructures which accelerate innovation and industrial uptake by enabling testing, experimentation and validation of technologies. Investment in technology infrastructure and connection to these infrastructures can strengthen institutional capacity and reputation over time, including through skills development and more integrated governance and access arrangements areas, where the WB often face structural gaps and uneven availability. For technology infrastructures, this could include public–private partnerships[12] that pool investment, expertise and operational capacity to develop and run facilities, while ensuring open and transparent access for R&I users.

Allowing dual-use projects across the different programmes, although generally perceived as necessary, remains contested as the concept of dual use is broad and not clearly defined in practice. This can create uncertainty for applicants and evaluators and may have implications for Open Science ambitions, as additional security requirements and access restrictions could limit transparency, data sharing and international collaboration, especially in the EU enlargement context.

12 European Commission. (2025). Strategy on Research and Technology Infrastructures. COM/2025/497 final/2. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2025:497:REV1. Accessed 30 January 2026.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

## FP10 programme structure[13]

As shown in Figure 1 above, the proposal for FP10 is structured in four pillars, which represents an evolution of the current Horizon Europe framework that runs from 2021 to 2027.


- **Pillar I 'Excellent Science'** aims at strengthening the EU's scientific base, attract top talent and promote excellent research in Europe. It covers the European Research Council (ERC), Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and science for EU policies through the Joint Research Centre. The ERC will be expanded to increase its ability to support frontier research with a focus on funding excellent researchers and their teams following a 'Choose Europe' approach. This is in line with interests of the WB; however additional support to improve the competitiveness of its researchers in particular in the ERC's instruments is needed such as separate calls for ERC grants with Principal Investigators from widening countries.

- **Pillar II 'Competitiveness and Society'** aims at supporting collaborative R&I in areas of high societal impact. It targets EU competitiveness in areas like the Clean Transition, digital leadership, defence, industry and space in close cooperation with the ECF. It will also address global societal challenges, and feature EU missions as well as the New European Bauhaus Facility. For WB this pillar is likely most consequential in terms of participation volume, visibility and long-term impacts. However, without targeted measures such as grants to build capacity for managing complex consortia, there is a risk that actors remain at peripheral roles such as testing environments.
  A clear focus on social innovation and the participation of social sciences and humanities is appreciated. Enlargement countries offer rich empirical contexts for studying institutional reform and impactful examples for leapfrogging and systems building under constrained conditions.

- **Pillar III 'Innovation'** aims at supporting innovation in Europe with a focus on promoting the development of new products, services and business models. The European Innovation Council (EIC) will be expanded to fund high-risk disruptive projects and will introduce a focus for defence and dual-use startups. In a region where access to finance is difficult, a strong focus on SMEs and scale-up orientation could be a possibility for structural upgrades, technology adoption and the establishment of cross-border value chains. The programmes should strive for inclusiveness also towards companies with lower beginning values but high potential. The plug-in mechanism needs to be further strengthened, as it allows national funding bodies to align with the EIC instruments, enabling complementary, faster and more flexible support. It is important to increase the visibility of the opportunities in the private sector with dedicated activities – especially having in mind also

13 European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Europe's budget – Horizon Europe (2028-2034). (2025). https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/8979807. Accessed 22 December 2025.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

the synergies with the ECF. FP10 should support WB startups and SME scale-up by offering lean, agile support with reduced administrative burden and clear, simple pathways across complementary programmes. The support to innovation ecosystems should be rolled out with significant budgets, avoiding calls with low success rates. Supporting the cooperation along the knowledge triangle is very important for the WB. The model of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) is seen as transferable and functional and its Regional Innovation Scheme has been very successful. Moreover, Eureka can play an important role in FP10 by offering fast and flexible funding. The WB can benefit by strengthening their engagement in Eureka instruments and ensuring a reliable national operational set-up (stable co-funding, clear procedures and active outreach to potential stakeholders).

- **Pillar IV 'European Research Area'** aims at supporting the development of a unified ERA, with a focus on promoting excellence and impact, including a reformed widening component. As a novelty, it is also proposed to support the development and operation of research and technology infrastructures. In this context, specific actions for the WB or the enlargement countries are of outmost importance: better infrastructure and new equipment are highly needed. Equally important is the continuation of instruments such as the COST Actions, which enable networking and drive future success. It is essential that FP10 explicitly supports the implementation of the future ERA Policy Agenda[14], ensuring that its objectives translate into tangible reforms and sustainable capacity-building. This is particularly important for the WB, where national R&I resources remain still limited. EU-level programmes are therefore critical to strengthening institutions and deepening integration into the ERA. As mentioned above, a dedicated focus to seed more industrial R&I projects could be beneficial. 'Widening' measures should also continue to concretely focus on strengthening the position of research organisations in the WB within European knowledge networks. The network analysis indicates that widening countries host relatively few influential 'hub' organisations and that connectivity depends on 'bridges' and short collaboration pathways[15]. Therefore, FP10 could place greater emphasis on longer-term institutional partnerships and incentives to take coordinating roles, alongside targeted actions that systematically expand network links. Widening actions could fund more R&I activities and continue targeted incentives for ecosystem building and science–business collaboration. In all parts of the Framework Programme, translation of increased participation into societal, educational, policy and economic impacts as well as re-use, scale-up and sustainable embedding of results needs to be in focus. The system should be moving from the project-by-project approach towards a portfolio-based approach and instead of counting numbers of successful proposals rather focus on the combined strategic value of implemented projects. Groups of projects should be strategically aligned, mutually reinforcing and oriented towards shared long-term objectives, which will require flexibility in the implementation. The approach of "implement as proposed" should be changed towards the aggregation of critical mass and allowing for strategic modifications, also avoiding duplication. Moreover, FP10 should foster a strong collaborative environment between grant offices and knowledge/technology transfer offices at research-performing organisations, enabling the faster development of innovative solutions and their uptake in the market.

14 European Commission. (2025). ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027. European Research Area website. https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu/era-policy-agenda-2025-2027. Accessed 30 January 2026.

15 European Commission. (2025). To what extent are widening countries part of knowledge networks formed by the framework programmes? https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/2418909. Accessed 30 January 2026.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

## Competing in FP10: reputation, visibility and recognition of excellence – the need for 'Widening'

As tools and services for preparing project proposals develop rapidly and become widely accessible, the competitive advantage is likely to shift increasingly towards factors that cannot be 'automated', for example, the institutional track record, scientific credibility and the visibility of research-performing organisations. In this context, the WB economies may require better tailored support to ensure that their research excellence is recognised and more visible within the ERA. This could include targeted measures to strengthen institutional reputation, showcase validated results and build strong partnerships with leading EU R&I actors. Such efforts can help make competition fairer in competitive calls, where evaluators often look closely at proven capacity and past project involvement. This should not be exacerbated by considering linear pipelines in the transition from Horizon Europe to FP10/the ECF.
Definitively, financial support from the private sector to research activities needs to be increased. Dedicated mobilisation efforts, facilitating of science–business collaboration and the creation of a pipeline of industrial R&I projects are needed.
A broad and inclusive definition of competitiveness including societal and technological innovation, cohesion and long-term strategic benefits is important.

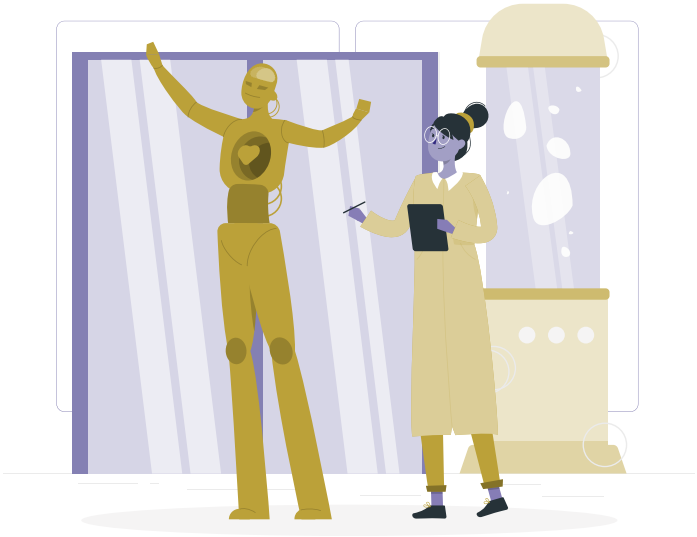
FP10 has a role to play in reducing disparities in R&I at both the global level and within the MS and Associated Countries. This means that support to the continuation and enhancement of (widening) measures is important that help widening partners increase their participation, including specific support measures to attract newcomers. However, the division of partners into "leaders" and "followers" is seen as counterproductive. Participants from widening countries should establish themselves as leaders which could be supported by providing additional funding for excellently ranked proposals from first-time coordinators or participants which would otherwise only end up on the reserve list. The approach of allocating the eligibility for widening measures should be carefully considered avoiding any disincentives of further improving the position in the European Innovation Scoreboard.

## Implementation

The continuation of the standard instruments of 'Research and Innovation Actions' and 'Coordination and Support Actions' enable the stakeholders to apply knowledge and experiences from the previous Framework Programmes. The funding rate of 100% actual costs plus 25% overheads work well. It should be avoided to embed the disadvantages of underpaid researchers through the use of standardised unit costs per country or per organisation. The use of the lump-sum approach is positively assessed, however, a good preparation with solid institutional processes is also needed to avoid misuse. Simpler, faster processes and easily accessible chatbots supporting compliance can increase participation as administrative barriers are often a challenge. Well-developed templates, e.g., for consortium agreements and other financial and administrative matters, are very helpful for newcomers and participants which lack strong R&I support offices.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

## Emerging technologies and AI: implications for proposal preparation and evaluation



Rapidly evolving technologies, such as AI, present a timely opportunity to accelerate capability-building and increase involvement in excellence-driven and challenge-oriented research. However, they also pose risks, and "business as usual" will not work for the upcoming decade, e.g., due to the already experienced surge in application numbers. If FP10 is designed and implemented embracing complexity and exploiting new technologies based on accessibility and ethical standards combined with targeted support, Europe can profit of the regional alignment with the ERA improving its geopolitical position, while advancing reforms and investments that contribute to broader EU competitiveness goals.

Discussions are already underway regarding the role of AI tools in the submission and evaluation processes[16] under FP10, including their potential to:

- Clarify the content of calls for applicants;
- Improve the allocation of proposals to appropriate experts (including checks for expertise and potential conflicts of interest);
- Assist evaluators using EC AI tools (e.g., for summarisation and quality checks);
- Enable pre-screening of proposals (e.g., for eligibility and completeness checks);
- Support multilingualism, including the possibility of evaluating proposals in applicants' native languages.

As the EC advances discussions on the use of its own AI tools in proposal submission and evaluation as well as monitoring and review, this also creates a timely opportunity for WB actors to catch up in developing high-quality proposals by integrating and, where appropriate, supporting capability- and capacity-building on project application's preparation and developing in-house AI solutions to support researchers in drafting and improving project applications. Keeping up with AI use will be important for all European actors to avoid a widening gap towards other continents and meet the challenges posed to the whole R&I system. Any such AI use needs to follow the principles set by the living EU guidelines on responsible generative AI[17], for example, by maintaining human oversight and accountability, verifying outputs, ensuring appropriate transparency about meaningful AI use and protecting confidentiality, privacy and intellectual property.

16 European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. (2025). AI in proposals submission and evaluation of Horizon Europe. https://www.ffg.at/sites/default/files/2025-12/Ruiz_EC_AIProposalwritingEvaluation.pdf. Accessed 22 December 2025.

17 European Commission. (2024). Living Guidelines on the Responsible Use of Generative AI in Research. Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. https://doi.org/10.2777/AI-guidelines-research-2024. Accessed 22 December 2025.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

## Synergies with other programmes

It is important to better align links between national science, research and innovation programmes with ERA in terms of contents, policies and procedures as well as partnerships for implementation and reciprocity.

EU funding has already supported the transformation of research, higher education and innovation processes, but sometimes there are barriers within the programmes to support cross-cutting activities. These should be avoided. Specific support to build capacities, improve linkages and exchange good practices should be provided and used, e.g., through requests to the Policy Support Facility of the EC.

As national funds are still often scarce or inflexible in the enlargement countries, strict requirements on co-financing by national agencies puts researchers from the WB in a disadvantaged position and their potential might stay under-used. Unfortunately, this also applies to the "Seal of Excellence" approach as often the alternative funding is missing.

Nevertheless, several WB R&I stakeholders also are in favour to apply conditionalities for associated enlargements countries in terms of their public support for R&I as percentage of GDP and to safeguard academic freedom.

A well-designed architecture of synergies between various programmes and interoperability with the pre-accession funds is important. Additional to funding supporting the cooperation with innovation leaders, it is important to also support increasing regional cooperation, sharing of investment in infrastructure with neighbouring countries. Ideally, Smart Specialisation at macro-regional level could allow for synergies in certain thematic areas, e.g., of unique biodiversity, and solving specific regional challenges.

Moreover, strategic and coordinated planning of pre-accession funds and Teaming calls within the Widening participation programme would be crucial for developing more EU Centres of Excellence and narrowing the research excellence gap between the EU and the WB.

For example, the institutions in the WB are active participants in Erasmus+ initiatives that support capacity-building in higher education institutions. Ensuring that the next Erasmus+ programme (2028–2034) strengthens linkages with R&I instruments would further boost skills and excellent research development across the region, reinforcing education, research and innovation as a coherent and connected integrated approach.

## Upcoming ERA and Innovation Acts

The forthcoming ERA Act and Innovation Act are expected to shape a new EU policy and regulatory acquis for R&I. For the WB, this evolving framework will become increasingly relevant for alignment in the accession process and may also influence future conditions for association to FP10 and/or ECF. Early monitoring and structured dialogue with EC can help anticipate requirements and reduce risks of misalignment.

**Authors**: Dall, E., Gavarane, I.

**Responsible organisation**: Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI)
With kind inputs from project partners and stakeholders through interviews and comments to draft version.

Figures 1-4 are adapted from EC sources.

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N°101058873.

Partners

Get in touch at
www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu

and follow us on LinkedIn and YouTube
WBInfoHub
westernbalkansinfohub1309

WESTERN BALKANS Info Hub
POWERED BY POLICY ANSWERS

POLICY ANSWERS, "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", is a Horizon Europe project funded by the European Commission, Grant Agreement N° 101058873.