



Policy Brief

Western Balkans Mobility Scheme

March 2026



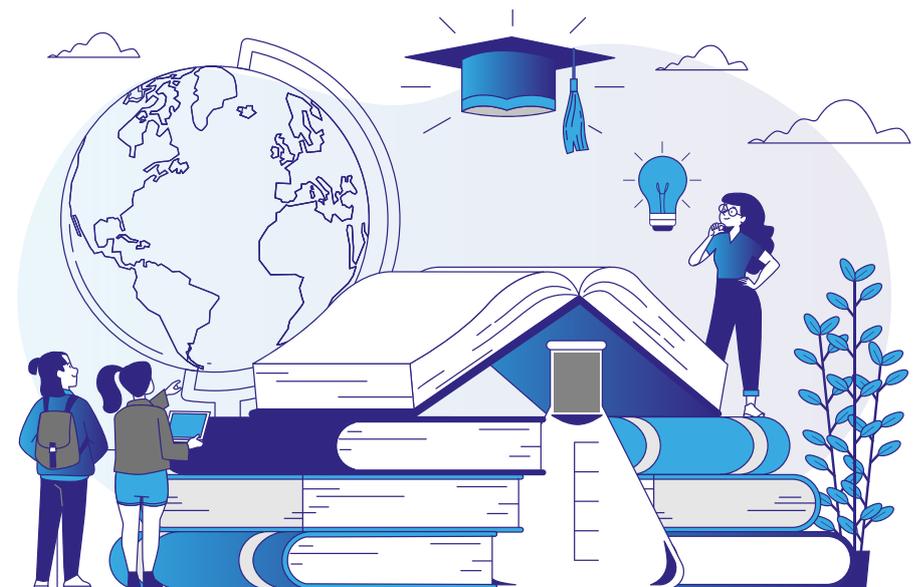
Supporting young researcher mobility in the Western Balkans

Researcher mobility is recognised as a strategic priority within the Berlin Process and as a key instrument for addressing shared regional challenges in the Western Balkans (WB)¹, including green transition and digital transformation, while nurturing a new generation of innovators.

The pilot initiative of the **Western Balkans Mobility Scheme (WBMS)** was launched to address these challenges, with the potential for scaling up through co-funding from additional actors. This Policy Brief shares insights and lessons learnt from the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the programme and dialogue activities of the POLICY ANSWERS project to further the discussion about researcher mobility grant schemes in the WB.

One of five pilot activities of the Horizon Europe-funded POLICY ANSWERS project, allowed us to test a scheme to enhance regional cooperation and sustained support for mobility-driven Research and Innovation (R&I).

The overall aims were to contribute to sustainable economic growth, the development of a common regional market, increased societal resilience and the convergence of the WB with the European Union.



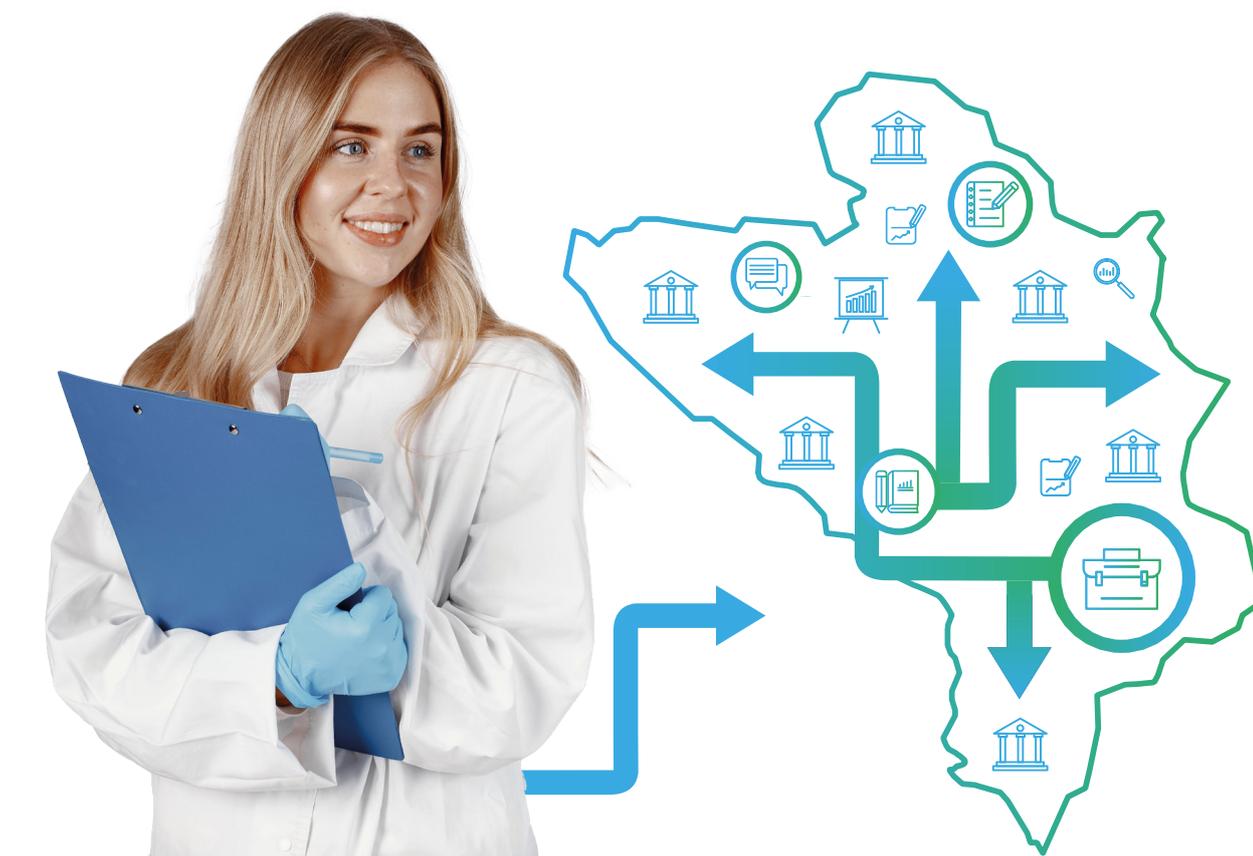
¹ The WB comprise Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

* 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.

The WBMS is one of the possible responses to persistent structural challenges affecting the WB, particularly shortages in STEM skills and the long-standing phenomenon of brain drain. High levels of net emigration, predominantly among educated young people in fields such as IT, engineering and medicine, have weakened local innovation capacity and placed pressure on critical sectors. At the same time, the region faces a significant digital skills gap compared to the EU average.

Therefore, we believe that **schemes such as our WBMS offer solutions**: promoting a brain circulation approach, leveraging structured academic and professional mobility to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, expertise and international best practices back into the region. By aligning mobility opportunities with regional needs, it seeks to **strengthen local innovation ecosystems, improve researchers' career prospects and transform migration-related challenges into drivers of sustainable regional development**.

Based on our experiences as well as a workshop, expert interviews and exchanges with partners, grantees and their mentors, **two Policy Reports have been released**, complementing this brief: **"Report on Western Balkans Regional Mobility Scheme"**² and **"Circulating Excellence: Rethinking Research Mobility in the Western Balkans"**³.



Research in Motion

Empowering Innovation in the Western
Balkans through the POLICY ANSWERS
Western Balkans Mobility Scheme
for Early-Career Researchers

² Hanatschek, Ralf (2026). Report on Western Balkans Regional Mobility Scheme.

³ Mertadiwangsa, Destine Prayogi and Ghosh, Pradeep (2026). Circulating Excellence: Rethinking Research Mobility in the Western Balkans.



Perspectives for career support of early-career researchers in the Western Balkans

The analysis of expert interviews and stakeholder inputs demonstrates that the successful establishment of a STEM capacity and mobility programme for the WB depends on an integrated, regionally coordinated, and credibility-driven institutional model.

There has been a broad consensus about specific issues: the priority of legal clarity, transparency and strong governance mechanisms; the need for a centralised regional hub combined with decentralised local outreach; the importance of a blended, multi-source funding model; the programmatic focus which must be sharply aligned with industry-relevant skill acquisition and mobility.

Taken together, these findings confirm that the impact will depend not on a single legal form or funding source, but on a coherent system that integrates governance credibility, regional coordination, diversified financing and industry-aligned programme design into a sustainable STEM capacity-building framework for the WB.

In this context, **establishing a foundation is identified as the most robust and future-proof institutional solution**. Based on the experiences of our partners, **Germany could be an ideal location, due to its proximity to world-class research infrastructures, a predictable regulatory environment and high international credibility**. A German-based foundation would serve as a neutral and trusted anchor, while regional accessibility would be ensured through decentralised contact points across all six WB economies.



Programmatically, a future initiative should prioritise targeted, mobility schemes focused on research infrastructures, such as short research stays, internships and fellowships for students and early career researchers. Covering practical barriers, particularly housing and living costs, is essential, alongside capacity building in professional and grant-related skills. **The overarching objective is talent retention** through brain circulation. Incentive-based models and clear post-programme career pathways are critical to ensuring that international exposure translates into lasting benefits for the WB's research ecosystems, innovation capacity and economic competitiveness.

While our POLICY ANSWERS Pilot Scheme did not include a focus on industry, future schemes could also focus on early industry involvement and industry-relevant activities.

The next level of mobility schemes in the Western Balkans

The WBMS turned out to be effective in supporting young researchers in the WB within their career development but also in improving excellence in the WB and in enhancing the intraregional mobility, especially with regard to a more efficient usage of the Research Infrastructures in the WB. With these aspects **the WBMS provides a unique funding opportunity to young researchers in the WB**. The current WBMS regulations proved also to be strong in the field of efficiency – both with regard to the slim administrative procedures and the high output regarding the invested low budget of EUR 100,000 for the whole measure. The good response of PhD students and young post-docs in the WB make the WBMS a small but efficient tool in order to turn a brain drain into a brain circulation in the WB.

Therefore, **a follow-up of the WBMS is highly recommended**. It is encouraged to spread widely the success story of the WBMS in order to successfully find a donor or a funding mechanism – no matter if on global, regional or economy level – for a follow-up measure.

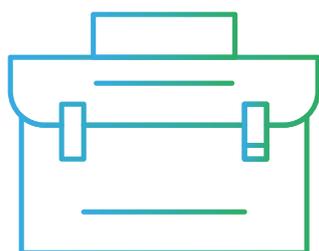
The current WBMS design can be used as it is, apart from two lessons learned: the first one addresses the design of the WBMS, with an extended maximum project duration of up to 12 months and an increase in the maximum project sum exceeding the current EUR 5,000 being highly recommended; the second one refers to the importance of a comprehensive dissemination and promotion strategy in order to reach the target group. This would include especially the use of social media, but also the need for regional networks and – most important – personal contacts of multipliers in the region.

	Total budget	EUR 100,000
	Suggested expanded duration	12 months
	Current maximum project sum (increase recommended)	EUR 5,000

Scientific excellence and richness of research in the Western Balkans

The concept and the scope of this mobility scheme were based on the one hand on the analytical findings of the 2021 report “Researchers’ Mobility in the Western Balkans”⁴ of the International Service Facility (ISF), as well as on an intensive analysis of already existing mobility programmes by desk research; on the other hand, the constant and intensive involvement of experts and stakeholders from all six WB economies made it possible to integrate advice from regional, economy-level and international experts in the design of the WBMS and to ensure the niche for the WBMS (e.g., with the workshop “Designing a regional mobility scheme for better access to Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans” at the premises of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in Sarajevo on 14-15 September 2023).

As a result of these consultation processes, **intraregional mobility, young researchers, the use of Research Infrastructures (RI) and doing research were identified as the cornerstones of the WBMS.** In order to maximise the impact already in the pilot phase, the maximum grant per project was limited to EUR 5,000 in order to support as much young researchers as possible from the available total budget of EUR 100,000. Only so-called Early Career Researchers (ECR), i.e. PhD students and post-docs whose doctorate was awarded no longer than seven years before the deadline of the call, were eligible as grantees. All thematic research areas were eligible. Projects had to fulfil three criteria: short term mobility within the WB (physical presence of the grantee for a duration of between two weeks and two months); specialised equipment or facilities (research infrastructures) in another WB economy; doing research. The overall project duration was set to between two weeks and six months in order to give the grantees enough time for the exploitation of the project results.



⁴ Melin, Göran, Schuch, Klaus, Stewering, Elke (2021). Researchers’ Mobility in the Western Balkans. International Service Facility.

As a result, the WBMS received a good response from the target group of young researchers, with 31 applications submitted until 26 June 2024. However, a prolongation of the initial deadline of 31 May 2024 for about one month and intensive promotion activities with a focus on social media had to be carried out in order to ensure this result. Finally, 23 WBMS projects could be funded, exhausting the funding budget and covering all six WB economies as home as well as host institution and all thematic areas. The grantees comprised to an almost equal share women and men (10 to 13), PhD students and Postdocs (13 to 10) and supported young researchers with little to no experience in international research mobility. The WBMS projects comprise scientific endeavours with project titles like “Harnessing Fruit Juice Industry Waste for the Development of Cellulose Fabrics intended for Diabetic Wound Dressing” or “Artistic Acoustic Textiles: Fusion of Art and Urban Soundscapes in the Western Balkans” and “Memories of a stressful past: Phenolic compounds in transgenerational plant stress memory”.

Table 1: Distribution of projects according to economy of home institutions, economy of host institutions, classification of R&I, Status of ECRs, Gender of ECRs, Experience of ECRs in international research mobility

Distribution of projects according to economy of home institutions					
Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
1	5	2	3	6	6
Distribution of projects according to economy of host institutions					
Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
2	3	2	3	2	11
Distribution of projects according to classification of R&I					
Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences	Engineering and Technology	Humanities	Medical and Health	Natural Sciences	Social Sciences
0	5	2	4	4	8
Status of ECRs					
PhD student			Postdoc		
13			10		
Gender of ECRs					
Female			Male		
10			13		
Experience in international research mobility (number of stays abroad)					
0 stays			Up to 5 stays		
9			14		

All 23 projects – which were implemented between 1 October 2024 and 30 June 2025 – were completed successfully. The exploitation of the project results is rather impressive – especially if we take into account the limited budget invested and the early stage in the scientific career of the grantees – and covers a multitude of results demonstrating the scientific excellence of young researchers and the richness of research in the WB: from articles for conference proceedings and peer reviewed scientific journals to policy briefs and applications in Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) programmes and with European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Actions, as well as project proposals in national programmes like the Serbian Fund for Science. In one project the results were presented at a workshop of a Horizon Europe project, in another a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the host and the home institution as a consequence of the cooperation in the WBMS and in a third one the grantee successfully participated in the research category of the Global Chemical Leasing award 2025 (by the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation & Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate- and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management) and promoted the results at a company in Austria. The exploitation of the project results is not yet terminated. Further papers to be submitted, conferences to be participated in, podcasts to be recorded are in planning for the time after the end of the WBMS projects.



This Policy Brief is an executive summary of two Policy Reports: “Report on Western Balkans Regional Mobility Scheme” and “Circulating Excellence: Rethinking Research Mobility in the Western Balkans”. The Policy Reports are available here:

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

POLICY ANSWERS is a strategic initiative funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEStErN BalkanS". The project focuses on enhancing research and innovation (R&I) policymaking and governance systems in the Western Balkans, while also addressing aspects of education, culture, youth, and sports. By providing essential support to the region's development, POLICY ANSWERS plays a crucial role in strengthening the Western Balkans' potential for successful participation in regional and multilateral research and innovation activities.

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