

Conclusions of the 2025 Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation

The Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Research and Innovation was organised in Podgorica on 20-21 October 2025 with participation of Ministers from the Western Balkans responsible for research and innovation. The meeting provided an excellent opportunity to discuss recent achievements and possible next steps in scientific cooperation and in innovation, as well as to take stock of the progress on the enlargement process.

The European Commission was represented by the Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation, Ekaterina Zaharieva. The Ministerial Meeting was co-chaired by the European Commission, the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union - represented by the Embassy of Poland in Montenegro, and by Montenegro represented by Anđela Jakšić-Stojanović, Minister of Education, Science and Innovation.

The Western Balkan economies are committed to strengthen their scientific cooperation and innovation within the region and with European Union Member States, to align with European research and innovation priorities, to improve their research policy structures and their innovation ecosystems. Participation of Western Balkan partners in Horizon Europe, the European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation is ever increasing, strengthening scientific excellence, the knowledge base, the growth potential of the region, and facilitating the internationalisation of economies. There are more and more initiatives supporting academia-industry cooperation, digitalisation and greening of the economy, and artificial intelligence. Smart Specialisation Strategies have been or are being developed, creating a strong basis for prioritisation and focused research and innovation (R&I) investments. Priorities of economies are also financed by the Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. EU Member States support bilateral research and innovation efforts across the region. Synergies between these various funding sources increase efficiency and impact.

Ministerial Meetings on Research and Innovation and on Smart Specialisation Strategies

During the Ministerial Meetings, Commissioner Zaharieva emphasised the important role of the European Research Area in general and research and innovation infrastructures in particular in creating pockets of excellence, attracting, and retaining talents. Research and innovation infrastructures foster innovation, support the creation and growth of spin-offs and SMEs. The role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in science was also highlighted. It acts as a catalyst for scientific breakthroughs, and it is a key instrument in the scientific process, while scientific integrity and methodological rigour need to be ensured when using it.

The Commissioner acknowledged the efforts of the Western Balkan economies in increasing funding provided for research and innovation, particularly for research and innovation infrastructures, science and technology parks, digital innovation hubs, academia-business cooperation facilitating technology transfer, and broad sets of innovation support measures. Such investments lead to improved results from the region in Horizon Europe. Nevertheless, the Commissioner stressed that expenditure on research and innovation is still low compared to the EU – even compared to declared objectives, and that the innovation divide still persists.

Commissioner Zaharieva acknowledged the significant efforts made by Western Balkans partners to develop and implement Smart Specialisation Strategies. All economies consider Smart Specialisation Strategies as an effective tool for strategic planning and prioritisation of R&I funding. In addition to local specificities, there are common priorities, such as digitalisation, green economy and a skilled workforce, which allow for inter-regional synergies and cooperation.

Bilateral sessions with each Western Balkans partner provided excellent opportunities for tailor-made discussions about most pressing issues in the economies in terms of innovation and scientific cooperation with the EU, science policy developments and EU enlargement negotiations – particularly on Chapter 25 Science and Research. This novelty on the agenda showed that Ministerial Steering Platform Meetings not only allow for more general, regional discussions but also for tailor-made, focused debates.

Back-to-back with the official programmes three side-events were organised:

- The report on the “Startup ecosystem developments/needs analysis in the Western Balkans” was presented by the Regional Cooperation Council;
- The Joint Research Centre presented the programme of open access to its Research Infrastructures and the opportunities offered to the region’s academia, industry, small and medium enterprises, as well as to start-ups;
- COST presented how its actions contribute to building up scientific networks between the region and the EU.

At the start of the Ministerial Meeting six innovators from the region were awarded for their inspiring efforts.

Taking stock of achievements:

The Ministerial Meetings of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation and on Smart Specialisation Strategies noted the following achievements, which all facilitate better integration of Western Balkans economies into the European Research Area. The members of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation:

- acknowledge the strengthened public investment in research and innovation. Notable increases in R&I funding across the region reflect enhanced political commitment and alignment with European research priorities. The objective of working towards 3% of GDP expenditures on R&I was acknowledged, while actual figures are in the range of 0,2 to 1% of GDP. Higher R&I investments will contribute to increased competitiveness, and to reducing the innovation divide between emerging innovators and innovation leaders.
- welcome the enhanced participation of Western Balkans economies in Horizon Europe. Western Balkans partners have significantly increased their engagement in the Horizon Europe programme (from EUR 45 million funding received in 2021, to EUR 62 million in 2023), effectively contributing to scientific excellence and networking. If the current trend continues, Western Balkans economies will double the funding received from the programme (EUR 180 million so far - halfway through the programme), compared to the previous Framework Programme, Horizon 2020 (EUR 172 million - for the total Programme).
- recognise the increased support for fostering academia–industry cooperation and research and technology infrastructures. The region has seen an expansion of academia–industry collaboration, supported by the establishment of a range of new technology parks and Digital Innovation Hubs that facilitate knowledge and technology transfer. Continued investment in research and technology infrastructures as well as in dedicated innovation support measures has strengthened the regional innovation ecosystem and increased research capacities.
- acknowledge the continuous engagement in European Partnerships and Missions. Western Balkan partners have actively participated in EU Missions, Partnerships, and Joint Undertakings, further deepening their integration into the European R&I framework. Advancements have taken place under the ‘Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities’ mission: all the three mission cities in the region – Elbasan, Podgorica, and Sarajevo – have submitted their Climate City Contracts. Upon positive review of the contracts, the cities receive a Mission Label that facilitates access to funding.
- recognise the successful participation in and implementation of key EU-supported programmes such as COST Actions, and EUREKA and its SME-focused scheme Innowide. The latter has been particularly successful, fostering innovation networks and research excellence throughout the region. COST has a strong track record in integrating researchers in the Western Balkans into Europe-wide research networks. A substantial number of leadership positions in the COST Actions are filled by researchers from the Western Balkans. Dedicated EUREKA calls for the Western Balkans have been greatly appreciated and have engaged highly innovative enterprises.

- highlight the positive impact stemming from opening the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) Community Regional Innovation Scheme Hub in Albania (Tirana), after the successful openings in North Macedonia (Skopje) and in Montenegro (Podgorica). The ambition of the EIT is to expand its reach through new EIT Community Hubs in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina which are planned to be launched in 2026. The Hubs serve as a one-stop shop for stakeholders in the region to access the activities offered by all EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs).
- welcome the Western Balkans' significant progress in developing and implementing their Smart Specialisation Strategies, with a focus on addressing emerging challenges linked to the twin green and digital transition and unlocking new pathways towards economic competitiveness.
- highlight the hurdles concerning the twin transition in the region. Addressing challenges of skills shortage, enhancing digital infrastructure and ensuring access to finance the twin green and digital transition will be paramount. Specific Reform Agenda steps under the Western Balkans Growth Plan support innovation efforts and financially underpin these transitions.
- recognise the potential of Smart Specialisation Strategies as a framework to simultaneously address the twin digital and green transition while bolstering regional economic competitiveness. By focusing on innovation in sectors that inherently bridge digital and green technologies such as smart agriculture, sustainable tourism, or circular economy solutions, the region fosters new value chains, attracts investment and creates high-skilled jobs. This acts as a catalyst for more resilient, sustainable and digitally advanced economies, ensuring that the twin transition is not a merely regulatory burden, but a powerful driver of technological sovereignty and growth.
- acknowledge concrete measures by EU Member States facilitating scientific and innovation cooperation and the twin transition with Western Balkans partners. R&I cooperation initiatives are financially supported by EU Member States – e.g. preferential access to research infrastructures, researchers' mobility schemes, joint research activities in the fields of renewable energy, agri- and biotech, greening the industry, SME and start-up support, etc., – demonstrating strong and sustained support for the continued integration of Western Balkans partners.
- welcome the development and implementation of regional policy instruments facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council. Regional support schemes, such as those under the POLICY ANSWERS initiative, including innovation vouchers and programmes for young researchers, have been instrumental in supporting early-career scientists and SMEs.

All these achievements demonstrate the region's growing commitment to a knowledge-based economy and underscore the importance of sustained collaboration and strategic investment in research and innovation.

Next steps:

The Ministerial Meetings of the Western Balkans Platform on Research and Innovation and on Smart Specialisation Strategies identified the following priorities and focus areas to further strengthen research and innovation ecosystems, and competitiveness across the region.

Looking ahead, the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation should continue its efforts on fully aligning the region with key European research and innovation policy frameworks. In this context the Platform should intensify its strategic focus on harmonisation with major EU-level initiatives and regulations, specifically:

- The Start-up and Scale-up Strategy that sets out legislative, policy and financial support measures, at both EU and Member States level, to address the needs of innovative companies throughout their development;
- The European Research Area Act that asks for reforms strengthening research systems and investments, that foster talent circulation, and that support the freedom of scientific research, open science, and knowledge valorisation;
- The European Innovation Act, with a view to supporting regional innovation networks, facilitating the emergence of deep tech innovation, and scaling up regional start-ups through enhanced access to finance and skills development.

These alignment efforts are essential for ensuring that the Western Balkans research and innovation systems are integrated into the broader European Research and Innovation landscape and that the region contributes to Europe's collective competitiveness and resilience. Harmonisation and support efforts will facilitate the enlargement process, the preparation of potential new member states to align with new regulatory efforts on the European level.

At the same time enhanced regional efforts are encouraged across a number of critical dimensions:

- Private sector engagement in R&I funding: Greater emphasis is needed on the provision and effective monitoring of private investment in research and innovation. Strengthening public-private partnerships and incentivising private R&I funding will be essential to achieve balanced and sustainable innovation ecosystems. The objective is to reduce the innovation gap with the EU in each of the Western Balkan economies as monitored by the European Innovation Scoreboard. GERD figures (including private sector data) are timely provided by Statistical Offices to EUROSTAT.
- Capacity building and skills development for the Green and Digital Transitions: Targeted actions must be taken to develop human capital and institutional capacities required for the twin transition. This includes upskilling the workforce in digital technologies, sustainable industry practices, and fostering innovation capabilities across all sectors. The Western Balkans Growth Plan and the relevant steps in its Reform Agenda are particularly strengthening these transition efforts and provide regular monitoring.

- Continued implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3): The progress achieved so far in S3 development and implementation should be maintained and deepened. It is essential to ensure robust governance structures, alignment with economic policies, and monitoring mechanisms that can track outcomes and adjust priorities. Common S3 priorities across the region are linked to Twin Transition in traditional sectors – e.g. smart agriculture, sustainable tourism, or circular economy providing opportunities for regional cooperation. Stakeholder coordination mechanisms, along with strategic financial instruments aligned to common S3 priorities, are key to facilitate outwards looking opportunities and stimulate and attract innovative ventures.
- Strengthening Academia–Industry cooperation: encouraging steps have been already taken, while still further efforts are required to fully operationalise existing technology parks and innovation hubs. These infrastructures must be positioned as central nodes for knowledge transfer, collaborative research, and entrepreneurial development.
- Continued cooperation through bilateral research and innovation schemes and mobility programmes with EU Member States, particularly for carrying out joint research, sharing best practices on innovation support schemes, optimal use of research infrastructures and the circulation and retaining of talent – with COBISS.net being a shining example of such long standing regional cooperation. The extension of the BIOEAST initiative towards Western Balkans partners could strengthen cooperation in the field of bioeconomy.
- Western Balkans Growth Plan and Reform Agenda implementation: Continuous monitoring and reporting of innovation-related measures within the framework of the Growth Plan’s Reform Agendas should be prioritised. This includes tracking progress against defined milestones and aligning priorities with S3 objectives.
- Enhanced participation in European programmes: Continued strong engagement in COST Actions and their leadership positions. Expanding regional participation in EUREKA and its SME-focused scheme Innowwide remains a key priority. In this context, we welcome the continued rendering of dedicated EUREKA Calls specifically targeting the Western Balkans, which represent an important opportunity to strengthen cross-border collaboration, support high-potential enterprises, and reinforce regional innovation capacity.
- AI in Science: Continue to explore future cooperation to promote the responsible, transparent and ethical use of AI in science aligned with EU standards and encourage participation of Western Balkans economies in the ERA Action “Facilitating and accelerating the use of AI in science and research in the EU”.
- Acknowledging the discussions and announcements made at the recent EU-Western Balkans Investment events: Continue advancing broadband and AI infrastructures for R&I, in support of the region’s digital transition, enhanced connectivity and competitiveness, and its closer integration into the European Union.

These priorities reflect a continued commitment to fostering the integration of the region into European R&I schemes, and to an innovation-driven Western Balkans in general. Achieving these objectives will require continued and coordinated actions from authorities, regional stakeholders, EU institutions, EU Member States, and local partners. Ministers called upon the Steering Platform to continue serving as a forum for dialogue, cooperation, and policy alignment in support of a forward-looking, resilient, and competitive research and innovation environment across the region.