

WESTERN BALKANS AGENDA ON INNOVATION, RESEARCH, EDUCATION, CULTURE, YOUTH & SPORT

An overview

The Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (the Innovation Agenda) outlines a comprehensive, long-term strategy for cooperation with the Western Balkans. It contributes to social and economic development and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans building on the overall EU support for a rapid restart of the region's economy and the on-going accession process.

The Innovation Agenda is a key element in delivering the Innovation component of the Economic and Investment Plan. The Western Balkans Ministers of Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport endorsed its content in a Ministerial meeting in December 2020. The Council of the European Union gave its support in May 2021.

This agenda outlines a comprehensive, long-term strategy and framework for cooperation with the Western Balkans and aims to contribute to the economic development and regional cooperation in the region. It provides a positive and forward-looking vision for all, youth in particular.

For the Western Balkans, association and especially integration in the new European Research Area for Research and Innovation (ERA) and European Education Area (EEA) represents a driver for national reforms and policy transitions towards a more performant R&I system and better and more inclusive education systems, helping the region to increase its capacities and potential in infrastructures as well as its continued alignment with the acquis.

This Innovation Agenda is also a tool for evidence-based policy making; it highlights the effectiveness and impact of Science Diplomacy, as was concretely experienced through the rapid mobilisation of scientists and entrepreneurs across the region in addressing COVID and Green Deal challenges, and coming up with innovative solutions.

This Agenda and its proposed implementation actions, which will be continuously monitored by all partners, will contribute to a number of priorities and missions in the region among which:

- Boosting the region's innovation capacities by bringing research and innovation eco-systems closer to EU standards;
- Reducing the gap in economic performance of the regional economies;
- Counteracting climate change and environmental degradation by exploring new opportunities;
- Supporting the digital transformation;
- Promoting the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and its five pillars;
- Progressing towards a circular economy;
- Enhancing the quality, inclusiveness and equity of education and training systems, starting with the early childhood education years and including also the lifelong learning context; Supporting the development of a digital education ecosystem and the development of digital skills and competences Offering young people the possibility of civic participation;
- Establishing high quality standards of European vocational education and training as a reference for skills development, including micro credentials; nurture knowledge-based societies; Boosting human capital development in priority economic and investment sectors;
- Promoting and supporting brain circulation in particular with the Western Balkans diaspora;
- Reducing the gender and digital divide as well as promoting and implementing new technologies in line with priority fields in education;
- Improving sustainable mobility and connectivity;
- Fostering cultural, academic and youth cooperation within the region and the EU;
- Strengthening regional cooperation and the Common Regional Market.

An Agenda based on Three Pillars

The focus of the actions of this Agenda is accomplished through three main axes: **political, regional and thematic**, which set the framework for cooperation with the Western Balkans while remaining flexible with a view to adapting the actions to new developments or emerging priorities. Foresight, technology transfer, capacity building activities and evidence-based policymaking will guide this Agenda.

1. A Political Agenda

The EU and the Western Balkans are tackling the common challenges together, as was clearly demonstrated by the unprecedented solidarity between the EU and the Western Balkans in addressing the immediate impact of COVID-19.

The EU is committed to further intensify its engagement with the region, reconfirming its European perspective, and supporting the implementation of systemic transformations via reforms, as reflected in the Enlargement Package 2020, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, and through the Economic and Reform Programme process.

However, the region's economies are struggling to raise their competitiveness levels. There is a good momentum for the Western Balkans economies to build a more sustainable, resilient and decarbonised future. The main objectives under the political axis of the Agenda are:

- Support the reforms in the region in the fields of Science and Research and in Education, Culture and Youth by implementing the *acquis communautaire*. Support the work on accession negotiations for Chapters 25 and 26 for Albania and North Macedonia under the "Competitiveness and inclusive growth" cluster.
- Full Association to Horizon Europe for the Western Balkans
- Support in the long-term the full association to Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps for the Western Balkans
- Association to the SME pillar of the Single Market Programme
- Full Association to Creative Europe for the Western Balkans
- Establishment of a Western Balkans Ministerial Platform on Culture
- Integration in the new European Research and Innovation Area (ERA)
- Enable a stronger participation in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Education Area (EEA) and the *Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)* Enable a stronger participation in the Copenhagen Process for Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the Osnabrück Declaration on Vocational Education and Training
- Finalise the Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3s) and support their implementation for all Western Balkan partners

2. A Regional Agenda

The Western Balkan economies are showing a volatile and slow growth, with high unemployment rates, with particularly high youth unemployment. They are also affected by emigration (temporary or long-term), especially from young people.

Despite efforts by some economies in the region to invest in new R&D&I infrastructures, there is overall an insufficient level of support for innovation ecosystem development in the region. Main causes include a limited access to potential funding sources, lack of proper know-how and skills, low capacities for technology and knowledge transfer, as well as dispersed, fragmented and inconsistent innovation support measures and infrastructures for enterprises.

The ongoing process of reforming education, training and research systems in the region should be reinforced and accelerated, by providing more opportunities for upskilling and reskilling to young people and adults, through capacity building and business orientation, and increasing the innovation potential. They should be closely linked with the actions and commitments of the Industry and Innovation Area of the Common Regional Market. Where relevant, the EUSAIR and the EUSDR can enable a balanced recovery and an even playing field reducing regional disparities and increasing cohesion and convergence. The main objectives under the regional axis of the Agenda are:

- Increase investment in SMEs and their capacity to innovate, scale-up and grow
- Foster research, innovation, education and vocational training capacity building
- Deepen Economic Union by linking the Western Balkan education and innovation activities and by bringing them closer to the EU ones
- Fostering cultural cooperation
- Regional cooperation and people-to-people exchanges in the academic, youth, cultural and sport fields

3. A Thematic Agenda

In line with the new Commission priorities and the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the Green Deal and its external dimension, the Digital transformation and an Economy that works for and connects people are essential for the relaunch and modernisation of the Western Balkan economies. Innovation measures in these thematic areas will continue to be supported by the Horizon Europe implementation and specifically its Missions, together with MSCA, EIT and its KICs, Interreg IPA, and the implementation of the Smart Specialisation Strategies. The main objectives under the thematic axis are:

- A Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
- A Europe fit for the digital age - adapting the region to the rapid transformative technological development in order to remain prosperous and competitive
- An economy that works for people building constructive partnerships and tackling common challenges through coordinated efforts to improve competitiveness, innovation and technology aiming to provide region-wide opportunities for inclusive growth and alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights.