

MINISTERIAL MEETING OF THE WESTERN BALKANS PLATFORMS

ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING & RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
02 DECEMBER 2020



Press Release

Brussels, 3 December 2020

The Western Balkans and the EU pledge for more education, training, research, innovation and culture at Ministerial meeting

The Western Balkan Six - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia - pledged to increase their support for research, innovation, education, training and culture at the Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms on Education and Training & Research and Innovation with Commissioner Mariya Gabriel and top European Commission officials on Wednesday 2 December. They expressed their firm backing for the proposed 'Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport', a positive and forward-looking vision for all.

Ministers of research, innovation, education and culture from the Western Balkans took part in the meeting where they exchanged views and experiences. All of them committed to increasing their support for these sectors, and backed the various EU programmes aimed at improving cross-border cooperation in these fields.

Mariya Gabriel, EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, said the "Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport" should provide opportunities to students, researchers, innovators and cultural operators so that they access new markets, become more competitive and build sustainable prosperity."

"A deep innovation agenda will be essential for enhancing human capital development as well as the development of a sustainable innovation ecosystem," she said. "Our ambition is to promote inclusive and high-quality education and training systems, with a view to offering new opportunities for young people in the regions."

Commissioner Gabriel emphasized that investments in education, innovation and research would unlock talents in the region, which would be invaluable for the green and digital transitions across the whole of Europe. "This innovation agenda aims to bring the Western Balkans closer to the European Union, and the young generation will be the focus of our work. We really need to provide them support and tell them we can work together to realize their ideas, their projects and their potential," she further added. "All the tools are at our disposal to make our common innovation a success story. Let's join forces and work on it."

* 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.

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Thomas Rachel, Germany's Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister of Education and Research - representing the EU Council Presidency - said the coronavirus crisis had shown how important investments in research, innovation and technology are.

"No economy can solve the major challenges of our time on its own. We need European and international cooperation on science and research in order to combat the coronavirus pandemic and man-made climate change," he said. He stressed that researchers from the Western Balkans are already well integrated into the European research community, and he said that next year the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research will provide funding for 14 projects with all six Western Balkans partners.

The Ministerial meeting is a forum of exchange between Western Balkans ministers, the European Commission and EU Member States. It gathers ministers responsible for Innovation, Research, Education and Culture from the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkan partners have increased their participation in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ in recent years, and are currently aiming at associating with Horizon Europe. They also all have strong cooperation potential in research and innovation systems. This is crucial, as the integration of the Western Balkans research and innovation frameworks into the European Research Area is important step forward on their European path.

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Horizon 2020: Open to the World

Horizon 2020 is the largest multinational programme dedicated to research and innovation and it is 'Open to the World.' All Western Balkans (except Kosovo*) are fully associated to the European Union's Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. Kosovo* is participating in the programme as a non-associated third country. Researchers, universities, research organisations, and companies from across the globe, have been able to apply and participate in the activities of the Horizon 2020 Work Programme. Partners associated to Horizon Europe have the same rights and obligations as their partners coming from the EU.

Horizon Europe

Investing in research and innovation is investing in Europe's future. It helps us to compete globally and preserve our unique social model. It improves the daily lives of millions of people here in Europe and around the world, helping to solve some of our biggest societal challenges. Building on the achievements and success of the EU's past flagship research and innovation programmes, the European Commission proposes a budget of €100 billion for 2021-2027 for Horizon Europe. Horizon Europe is the most ambitious research and innovation funding programme ever. It will continue to drive Europe's scientific excellence through the

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European Research Council and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowships and exchanges and draw on the scientific advice, technical support and dedicated research of the Joint Research Centre. And it will add a new level of ambition and boost the scientific, economic and societal impact of EU funding.

Erasmus+

Six non-EU countries fully participate in the programme. North Macedonia is a fully-fledged programme country since 2014 and Serbia since 2019. Under the programme, opportunities in higher education for students, learners and staff have multiplied in recent years. Between 2015 and 2020, thanks to Erasmus+ around 49 000 students and staff have been exchanged between the EU and the Western Balkans. More and more higher education institutions in the region are engaged in the development of joint master's degrees together with partners in Europe, participating in capacity building projects and preparing the ground for higher education reform. Under the 'Youth Component' of the Erasmus Programme, around 16 000 young people from the region have taken part in non-formal exchanges and volunteering.

New Erasmus+

The programme will provide new opportunities to support higher education institutions to have a successful transition into the digital age, to equip their students and staff with the digital skills necessary for them to thrive in the future and contribute to the recovery from the COVID-19. It will also be more international, simpler and more inclusive. New opportunities will thus become available also to the Western Balkans, including the Erasmus Virtual Exchanges and new actions in the field of VET (mobility and capacity building).

More information:

- [Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport](#)
- [Background information](#)
- [Speakers' Bios](#)
- [Resources \(Success Stories, Infographic, Videos, Fact sheets, etc.\)](#)

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