

## **Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport**

Building on the Joint Declaration “A Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport” this document presents the specific objectives, priorities and a tentative roadmap of key actions of this Agenda.

**Fostering the stability and prosperity** of the region remains a key priority for the EU, taking into account the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic which is hitting hard the Western Balkan societies and economies. As outlined in the European Commission priorities, **green transition, digital transformation and an economy that works for people** are crucial for relaunching and modernising the economies of the Western Balkans, helping to create jobs and growth, addressing the long-standing challenges faced by young people in the region such as limited job prospects, and inequality. Research, innovation, education and culture are essential drivers in this process - underpinned by evidence-based policymaking. Culture and inter-cultural dialogue processes also have an outstanding role in creating an enabling environment for strengthening and reconciling communities.

The Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport outlines a comprehensive, long-term strategy for cooperation with the Western Balkans. It will contribute to the economic development and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans alongside the overall EU support for a rapid restart of the region’s economy. The Commission has launched an ambitious **Economic and Investment Plan for the region** proposing to mobilise up to EUR 9 billion of IPA III funding for the period 2021-2027, including a new Western Balkans Guarantee facility, with the ambition to potentially raise investments of up to EUR 20 billion<sup>1</sup>. This is complemented by the European Commission’s proposal on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience<sup>2</sup> as well as the New European Skills Agenda<sup>3</sup> as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>4</sup>.

The challenges posed by climate change call for an urgent effort to decarbonise the energy supply, systematically improve air quality and the implementation of smart mobility solutions<sup>5</sup>, as well as for investments in enhancing resilience to climate change impacts and disasters. In addition, the circular economy is the key to reduce the increasing consumption of natural resources and harmful waste disposal<sup>6</sup>. Also depollution of air, water and soil, is a political priority with a view to protect citizen health and biodiversity in the long term<sup>7</sup>.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Commission Communication Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery, COM(2020) 315 final

<sup>2</sup> Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience COM(2020)275 final

<sup>3</sup> European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, 1 July 2020

<sup>4</sup> European Pillar of Social Rights. Building a more inclusive and fairer European Union.

<sup>5</sup> COM(2019) 640 final Commission Communication on The European Green Deal and SWD (2020) 223 final on Guidelines for the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans

<sup>6</sup> COM(2020) 98 final A new Circular Economy Action Plan for a cleaner and more competitive Europe

<sup>7</sup> Factsheet Eliminating pollution ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs\\_19\\_6729](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_19_6729))

This Agenda and proposed implementation actions will contribute to a number of priorities and missions in the region:

- Stimulating a sustainable economy (post COVID-19) and help to create jobs;
- Transforming research and innovation eco-systems towards EU standards;
- Enhancing research and innovation eco-systems to boost the region's innovation capacities
- Counteracting climate change and supporting the digital transformation;
- Promoting the implementation of the external dimension of the EU Green Deal and a sustainable agriculture in the Western Balkans;
- Providing vocational education and continuing training for upskilling and reskilling of young and adults;
- Establishing European vocational education and training as a global reference for skills development;
- Nurture knowledge-based societies;
- Enhancing the quality of education and training including also the lifelong learning context;
- Boosting human capital development in priority economic and investment sectors;
- 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 cooperation within the region and the EU;
- Strengthening regional cooperation and the Common Regional Market.

The continued assessment of this Agenda is based on the completion of precise actions underpinned by a set of indicators with base lines and targets well identified. Given its inter-disciplinary and cross-sectoral nature, the successful implementation of this Agenda will require a broad, comprehensive and synergetic implementation process at various levels, including European, regional, and local.

The involvement of various actors, including EU institutions, Western Balkans authorities, various stakeholders such as SMEs, higher education institutions (HEIs), research organisations and research infrastructures, vocational training providers, schools, cultural and creative sector and youth and sport organisations will be key elements for the achievement of the priorities and missions of this Agenda.

## 1. A Political Agenda

The EU is committed to further intensify its engagement with the region, shaping its European perspective, and supporting the implementation of systemic changes and reforms.

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<sup>8</sup>.

However, many of the region's economies are struggling to raise their competitiveness levels. There is a good momentum presently for the Western Balkans economies to build a more sustainable future.

The main priorities and accompanying actions for this Political Agenda are as follows:

- Engage in the **Accession Negotiations for Chapters 25 and 26** for Albania and North Macedonia and at the same time support the reforms in the region addressed by both Chapters in Science and Research and in Higher Education and Culture by implementing the *acquis*.
- **Full Association to Horizon Europe for the Western Balkans** - Association to the EU's Framework Programme on Research and Innovation is the closest form of cooperation in science and technology. It has proven instrumental for smooth cooperation and funding of joint innovation projects enabling mutual access to excellence, innovation and research resources. It has provided invaluable opportunities for human development, amplifying a chance of success in finding jointly solutions to global challenges.
  - Strengthen the regional cooperation among universities, research organisations and SMEs linking them into European STI cooperation and exchange mechanisms (e.g. through integration into pan-European Research Infrastructures, Missions, European Partnerships, COST, MSCA as well as the EIT and its KICs);
  - Contribute to the dedicated programmes and planned foresight exercises involving governments, the business sector, universities and research centres, as well as civil societies;
  - In line with the Horizon Europe "Innovation Ecosystems" work programme, enable sustainable cross-border innovation partnerships, networking, joint programme actions, actions for scaling up innovative solutions, innovation intelligence gathering, and excellence clusters in the region (e.g. via Enterprise Europe Network, linking of Science and Technology Parks and Digital Innovation Hubs);
  - Encourage increased participation in the MSCA programme by providing in particular more opportunities for the MSCA Doctoral networks and MSCA Staff Exchanges as well as Postdoctoral Fellowships. Promote applications to the MSCA COFUND for stimulating local and regional doctoral and fellowships programmes.
  - Strengthen the role of the EIT in the region by boosting the EIT Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) and cross- Knowledge Innovation Communities (KICs) activities targeting the WBs.

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<sup>8</sup> 2020/0065 (COD) Proposal for a DECISION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on providing Macro-Financial Assistance to enlargement and neighbourhood partners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. 22 April 2020.

Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19 (JOIN(2020)11 final) of 8.4.2020

COM(2020) 315 final European Commission Communication on Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery --Commission contribution ahead of the EU-Western Balkans leaders meeting on 6 May 2020

- **Full Association as Programme Countries of all the Western Balkans to the new Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programmes**
  - Assist the full association of all Western Balkan partners to Erasmus<sup>9</sup> and the European Solidarity Corps<sup>10</sup> by supporting the implementation of preparatory measures.
  - Ensure the firm commitment and investment from the partners, to set up the required management structures and compliance measures, which is a pre-condition for this process<sup>11</sup>.
  
- **Association over time of the Western Balkans region to the new Creative Europe (CE)**
  - Increase the participation and success rate of the region in the various actions of the CE programme.
  - Improve the capacity of cultural operators for the benefit of the whole cultural sector.
  - Encourage Kosovo\* to apply for full membership of the CE programme by advancing preparations for full alignment to the EU audio-visual media service directives.
  - Increase and enable a stronger cooperation on cultural heritage by extending an invitation to the Western Balkans partners to participate in the Commission Expert Group on Cultural Heritage and explore the possibilities of inviting Western Balkan partners to the European Heritage Label programme;
  - Encourage and support Western Balkan partners in the EU action European Capitals of Culture.
  
- **Integration in the new European Research and Innovation Area (ERA) through linking to the Key Actions of the ERA Roadmap process - enabling a smooth transition towards a performant R&I system.** The new vision for the ERA<sup>12</sup> is one of a transformative R&I policy that shapes technological and societal change to deliver a sustainable European society. It calls for an attractive and excellent R&I system spanning across Member States and Associated Countries. It accelerates the transition towards climate neutrality, strengthened resilience and preparedness, digital leadership, and gender equality. Being part of the ERA represents a driver for reforms and policy transitions towards a more performant R&I system, helping the region to increase its capacities and potential in infrastructures and their networking.
  - Fully implement the four strategic ERA objectives through 14 key actions; include the Western Balkans in the ERA Committee, the European Innovation Scoreboard, regular ERA monitoring and reporting, and other actions as indicated in the new ERA for Research and Innovation Roadmap.
  - Fully exploit the integration into ERA as a driver as for reforms and policy transitions towards a more performant R&I system, for instance through participations into Horizon Policy Support Facility activities;
  - Establish foresight activities to guide the post COVID-19 recovery efforts through innovation and by ensuring synergies and, where relevant, synchronisation with European actions and instruments<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The preparatory process for a partner normally lasts at least four years but it can be further extended if the level of preparedness of the newly set up National Agency does not meet the strict criteria of the Erasmus+ programme.

<sup>10</sup> North Macedonia joined the ESC as non-EU Participating Country in 2019, while Serbia abstained waiting for the next MFF. As set in the present legal basis, Traineeship and Jobs actions under the ESC are only available to EU Member States.

<sup>11</sup> This is a long-term objective requiring extensive resources for the Western Balkans Ministries of Education and Youth, as it will imply in each case the creation of a fully operational National Agency. During this preparatory period, the future National Agency has to set up an appropriate organisational structure by ensuring the necessary preparedness in terms of staff training, recruitment, management supervision, level of assurance, managing call for proposals, providing assistance to applicants and beneficiaries. The process has high costs both in terms of human resources and finances. It requires a strong administrative investment from the new programme country.

<sup>12</sup> Communication on 'A new ERA for Research and Innovation', COM(2020) 628; 30/09/2020

<sup>13</sup> CBRN CoE Initiative through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), RIA Research and Innovation action, R&I Policy Support Facility, JRC Foresight and Value Chain Analysis, etc.

- Promote the coordination and synergies of local, regional and EU funds to stimulate excellence in education, research and innovation (e.g. via the Steering Platforms on Education and Training & Research and Innovation).
  - Develop, implement, and sustain inclusive gender equality plans in order to be eligible to apply for Horizon Europe funding, in line with the ERA communication action to promote gender equality in Research and Innovation<sup>14</sup>.
- **Enable a stronger participation in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the newly adopted European Education Area (EEA) and the Education and Training Cooperation Framework (ET 2030)**
- Support the rightful implementation of the Bologna process commitments to complete the reform of the higher education sector in the framework of the EHEA, and prepare the region to benefit in the long-term from the EEA.
    - Support the region to develop joint standards and procedures for recognition of quality assured academic qualifications<sup>15</sup> and study periods abroad, in line with the Multiannual Action Plan on the Regional Economic Area endorsed in the framework of the Berlin Process as well as other regional initiatives in the framework of the Danube Macroregion, the Adriatic-Ionian Macroregion, or ENIC centres<sup>16</sup>.
  - Promote EHEA projects aimed at improving automatic recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance, and enhance opportunities for cooperation and capacity building in these areas through Erasmus+. The aim is to boost structural projects for capacity building in higher education with direct participation of Western Balkans Authorities.
  - Promote knowledge sharing and cooperation, including through the Western Balkan Ministerial Platform for Education and Training, with regard to the development of the EEA and related initiatives.
  - Take advantage of the European Universities Initiative to inspire transformation of the higher education sector in the Western Balkan region<sup>17</sup>.
  - Strengthen the mutual learning support to the Western Balkan partners to actively participate in the 2030 Education and Training Cooperation Framework.
- **Enable a stronger participation in the Copenhagen Process for Vocational Education and Training, the newly adopted Osnabrück Declaration for Vocational Education and Training and the Education and Training Cooperation Framework (ET 2030)**
- Strengthen monitoring of the Copenhagen process commitments to report on progress towards the goals agreed with the support of the European Training Foundation.
  - Support the implementation of reforms of VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience in cooperation and prepare the region to respond to the dual green and digital economy.
  - Support the region to develop joint standards and procedures for recognition of quality assured academic and professional qualifications and study periods abroad, in line with the Multiannual Action Plan on the Regional Economic Area in the framework of the Berlin Process.

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<sup>14</sup> The concerned legal entities for the eligibility criterion are public bodies, research organisations and higher education institutions in Member States and Associated Countries

<sup>15</sup> In line with the Poznan Declaration and its key principles

<sup>16</sup> A National information centre (ENIC or ENIC-NARIC) is an entity established by each Party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). The National information centre reports to their respective national competent authority (ministry of education or another body). Upon request, the National information centre may provide information to UNESCO and the Council of Europe, in their role as Co-Secretariat of the LRC, but also to the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC).

<sup>17</sup> Serbia and North Macedonia as Erasmus+ programme countries can already now be involved in the European Universities initiative

- Promote projects aimed at improving automatic recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance, and enhance opportunities for cooperation and capacity building in these areas through EU tools and programmes and initiative. The aim is to boost structural projects for capacity building including vocational education and training with direct participation of Western Balkans Authorities.
- Promote the inclusion of Western Balkans in EU wide networks and actions, in particular in quality assurance, mobility schemes, apprentices' network with the support of the European Training Foundation, the EU agency active exclusively in HCD in the external dimension.
- Promote knowledge sharing and cooperation, including through the Western Balkan Ministerial Platform for Education and Training and in cooperation with the European Training Foundation.

➤ **Finalise the Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3s) and support their implementation for all the Western Balkans**

Smart Specialisation Strategies guide socio-economic transformation processes by aligning resources and strategies between private and public actors from different governance levels. The Smart Specialisation approach focuses on promoting sustainable economic development and growth through innovation in a cross-sectoral manner, by identifying specialisation areas, which are defined by mapping of economic, innovation and scientific potentials followed by a comprehensive dialogue coined as the "entrepreneurial discovery process" that includes policymakers from various government ministries and agencies, private-sector stakeholders, academia, and civil society. In the case of Western Balkans, Smart Specialisation Strategies can mobilise the entrepreneurial discovery process of local opportunities in digital and green transformation, and in particular the deployment of European strategies that define common objectives. Once established, RIS3s would set the basis to lead to a stronger, sustainable and more focused cooperation with EU regions that have similar priorities in the field of technology, science, creative industries and innovation.

- Support the development and implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies through expertise and best practice under the guidance of the Joint Research Centre<sup>18</sup> and mobilise technology transfer networks and actors throughout the region;
- Develop the implementation perspective for Western Balkan Smart Specialisation Strategies based on the combination of local and regional policy measures and existing EU programmes and funds while linking economic priorities with skills and competence development in cooperation with the European Training Foundation;
- Encourage partners to establish and maintain regular dialogue of the knowledge triangle throughout the implementation of sustainable S3s (representing public, private and education sectors, including vocational education and training) with the cooperation of the EIT and its KICs as well as with the macro-regional strategic framework in the Danube and Adriatic-Ionian macro-regions and the strengthening of international (transnational) value chains;
- Encourage EU Member States and sector actors to share best practices and facilitate the implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies in a synergetic way with partners in the region;
- Increase the role of the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation in identifying key regional initiatives to spread innovative technologies and business models as well as direct industrial and innovation ecosystems towards more inclusive and sustainable pathways to growth while engaging with European governmental actors on their implementation;
- Support the Western Balkan partners in developing scientific advice mechanisms for an informed and evidence-based policy-making and societal scientific literacy, helping also to build trust in science and acceptance of new technologies.

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<sup>18</sup> Montenegro and Serbia have both adopted the Smart Specialisation Strategy (Serbia is yet to adopt an action plan to the strategy), while the other economies are in the process of developing them



## 2. A Regional Agenda

The Western Balkan economies are presently showing a volatile and slow growth, with high unemployment rates, and 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 are: limited access to potential funding sources, lack of proper know-how and skills, low capacities for technology and knowledge transfer, lack of export orientation, as well as dispersed, fragmented and inconsistent business support measures and infrastructures.

New investments and economic policy measures directed towards game-changing innovations are needed, as well as measures that create sustainable and human capital development and a digital future. 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, by capacity building and business orientation, and by increasing the innovation potential.

The main priorities and accompanying actions for this Regional Agenda are:

- **Increase investment in SMEs and their capacity to innovate, scale-up and grow** - One of the main root causes for the low investments in sustainable economic growth is an insufficient pipeline of bankable projects. At the same time, capital and financial markets in the region are characterised by the inexistent and/or insufficient use of alternative financial sources. The EU in close cooperation with the International Financial Institutions has mobilised a package of over EUR 3.3 billion for the Western Balkans<sup>19</sup>.
  - Guide and stimulate the region's ability to effectively use resources in support of innovation, especially through the establishment of mechanisms to create, support and promote start-ups oriented towards green transition/green economy, digital economy, circular and sustainable economy (e.g. through local Innovation Funds, Science and Technology Parks, Technology Transfer centres, Digital Innovation Hubs, clusters);
  - Through the EIC<sup>20</sup> and in synergy with the EIT and COSME as well as through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), including its private sector platform Western Balkans Enterprise Development and Innovation Facility (WB EDIF) facilitate the access to financial markets - specifically for SMEs<sup>21</sup> and start-ups;
  - Through EIC measures addressing innovation eco-systems, support the establishment of a Regional Innovation Fund for Western Balkan economies to create and implement new models of support to start-ups and MSMEs with innovative ideas, which will combine efforts and resources from authorities in the region, in partnership with international organizations/IFIs. The model will allow for mobilising private capital from businesses in the region and beyond, offering returns for funds invested. The Fund will operate in synergy with EU and other international funded programmes in the region. In particular, it can build and further extend a pipeline of ready-to-invest projects for the instruments under the Western Balkans EDIF programme, by providing financing in earlier phases, on grant and other-than-equity basis.
  - Alignment with the InvestEU Programme (Fund and Advisory Hub) and European Fund for Sustainable Development+ (EFSD+) (up to EUR 20 billion in public and private investments) to access guarantees which cover a variety of sectors from sustainable and climate-resilient infrastructures to various forms of support to SMEs;
  - Facilitate the access of the cultural and creative industries to the European financial market instruments.

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<sup>19</sup> This includes a dedicated EUR 389 million of Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) funding and a further EUR 455 million economic reactivation package to support the social and economic recovery and growth

<sup>20</sup> And the forthcoming SME Strategy offering a simplified landscape to access financial resources

<sup>21</sup> Commission Priorities 2019-24: Priority 2 An economy that works for people – Supporting SMEs investment and financing

- **Foster research, innovation, education and vocational training capacity building** - Stimulating the process of reforming education, training (including vocational education and training - VET) and research systems in the region to transform them into the driving forces of creativity, innovation and economic development<sup>22</sup>.
- Support Western Balkan economies to increase their research and innovation investments by 50% in the next 5 years, and allocate at least 4% of GDP for education through investments both in human capital and in infrastructures; continuously connect these allocations and measures to the priorities defined by the Smart Specialisation Strategy/Process;
  - Encourage investments in capacity building and facilitate cooperation and coherent policy making via the Ministerial Steering Platforms on Education and Training and on Research and Innovation;
  - Promote Widening Initiatives under Horizon Europe and launch swiftly a specific Twinning Call for the Western Balkans to increase the attractiveness of the region for young and female talents, unlock the regional potential, promote brain circulation and facilitate mentoring networks between Western Balkans and leading European research institutions, inspired by the EU-Western Balkans Research Excellence Compact encouraged by the Berlin Process;
  - Increase the Western Balkans involvement in the activities of the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) (including in the creation of the new KIC on cultural and creative industries planned to be launched in 2022<sup>23</sup>), in particular (but not exclusively) through the participation in the activities supported by EIT Regional Innovation Scheme in synergy with Smart Specialisation Strategy activities;
  - Encourage and promote active participation from the Western Balkans in initiatives like COST, and EUREKA fostering the further linkage with European partners and increasing international cooperation;
  - Support the establishment of a National Contact Point (NCP) network in the forthcoming Horizon Europe programme, to facilitate the flow of information about opportunities, including in MSCAs, EIT and KICs activities;
  - Enhance Open Science regional partnerships between academic and business community through practical collaborations in fields of open data sharing, and open access to research infrastructures. Enable rapid open access publishing and open software. Work towards a scientific eco-system for research data and skills development of researchers to achieve minimum standards for OS and OA regarding to the FAIR principles; foster a regional OA/OS platform for training, data sharing and scientific advice;
  - Support the participation of the Western Balkan partners in international tests such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, as well as the inclusion of the WBs in ICILS 2023 (International Computer and Information Literacy Study) and TALIS 2024 (Teaching and Learning International Survey);
  - Encourage universities to develop study programmes that match graduates' skills better to the real needs of labour markets, including through cooperation with businesses, and encourage universities to develop research infrastructures together with the private sector;
  - Encourage the development of Regional Vocational Education and Training (VET) Centers of Excellence to respond to the needs of the labour market in regionally defined S3 priorities with potential for regional specialisation (through improving and adapting skills, knowledge and competences of the youth and adults);
  - Support the international mobility of VET staff and learners as well as capacity building for VET schools based on the results of two pilot calls<sup>24</sup> for VET mobility for the WB region in preparation of Erasmus and its component for VET. Foster links to overall system reforms in a lifelong learning perspective and in cooperation with the European Training Foundation.

<sup>22</sup> e.g. following the example of the Higher education in Smart Specialisation (HESS) project ([s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/hess](https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/hess))

<sup>23</sup> 2019/331 (COD) Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, 11 July 2019

<sup>24</sup> First pilot call currently being implemented successfully with partners from all 6 WBs. Second pilot call launched in April 2020 with activities expected to start in January 2021

- **Deepen Economic Union by linking the Western Balkan economies and bringing them closer to the European ones** - Greater access to financial services for enterprises and their integration into value chains and markets will increase economic productivity in specialised, higher value-added and labour-intensive sectors and foster diversification, technological upgrading, skills development and innovation.
  - In cooperation with regional Western Balkans and individual recovery plans and synchronised with the European Union neighbours, assist in defining ‘post COVID-19 economic scenarios’ for the region including health, economic, security, environmental and social aspects;
  - Facilitate and promote foresight exercises (local and regional) as an integrator of international knowledge programming, structuring the engagement of stakeholders in the region and guiding recovery roadmaps for a green transition;
  - Through participation in the EU programmes (Horizon Europe, COSME, Digital Europe, etc.) analyse and identify Western Balkans value chains within the broader South-East European region;
  - Foster innovation activities in Western Balkans by encouraging technology transfer activities, by supporting the safeguarding of intellectual property rights and increasing the capacities of innovators to absorb efficiently technology transfer financing. Link these processes to smart specialization strategies.
  
- **Foster the Western Balkans transition to sustainability.** A paradigm shift in the economic development model towards one based on low-carbon, climate resilient and a circular economy, where recycling and reuse are the rule while the use of natural resources is significantly reduced, is needed<sup>25</sup>. The main challenges in terms of boosting competitiveness and long-term and inclusive growth are (i) Improving skills of the population in relation to labour market needs and new technologies, (ii) Renewable energy, (iv) Smart mobility, (v) Sustainable agriculture and industry and (vi) Improving the business and investment environment.
  - In cooperation with the Steering Platforms on Education and Training and on Research and Innovation, guide large-scale investments and facilitate coherent policy making, specifically through Ministerial meetings of the Steering Platforms on Education and Training and Research and Innovation;
  - Facilitate and promote foresight exercises (local and regional) as integrators of international knowledge programming, structuring the engagement of stakeholders in the region and guiding recovery roadmaps;
  - Promote collaboration on Smart Specialisation Strategies priorities and the strengthening of the integration in international (transnational) industrial eco-systems and value chains and by building on the macro-regional strategic framework in the Danube and Adriatic-Ionian macro-regions.
  - Continue to promote regional cooperation on technology transfer and entrepreneurship activities, supporting skills creation for local entrepreneurs and enhancing opportunities for start-ups and scale-ups, regionally and internationally, notably in line with Smart Specialisation Strategies priorities.
  
- **Fostering cultural cooperation** contributes to the development of the cultural and creative industries, which represents an untapped potential for socio-economic development, and can help restore trust and bring tangible benefits to their citizens. The Western Balkans is a region with abundant cultural and creative talent and potential. Culture and inter-cultural dialogue can build common narratives between inclusive communities and link people to people.
  - Promote the regional programme<sup>26</sup> on culture and creativity in the Western Balkans to build capacities and support the culture and creative sector leading to a more successful participation in the future Creative Europe programme;

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<sup>25</sup> A new Circular Economy Action Plan For a cleaner and more competitive Europe (COM/2020/98 final)

<sup>26</sup> EUR 8 million from the IPA-II Multi-Country Programme 2020 budget

- Foster the cultural co-operation both within the Western Balkans and between the region and the EU, with an accent on the co-creation and audience development;
- Support the implementation of people-to-people cooperation projects with and within the Western Balkans - satisfying the high demand. Increase the number of cooperation projects to foster capacity for international cooperation;
- Support the development of inclusive cultural policy development from local to regional level, and promote cultural heritage involving the local communities following the principles of the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage<sup>27</sup>.

➤ **Regional cooperation and people-to-people exchanges** are essential for progress on the region's European path. People-to-people exchanges, including academic, youth, cultural and sport mobility measures have a unique potential to contribute to political stabilisation and create economic opportunities fostering greater tolerance, promoting European values and strengthening the cohesion of society. Better learning of each other's languages and cultures will additionally lead to rapprochement between neighbours and is an instrumental tool in overcoming the challenges of the past.

Through Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, the EU has been promoting non-formal learning opportunities for young people and youth workers in the region. In this context, the EU contributes more widely to developing the quality of youth engagement and supports youth policy reforms.

- Strengthen the capacity building activities in the field of Youth under the Erasmus+ Programme, funding projects between organisations active in youth, education, training and other socio-economic sectors in the region;
- Develop together with the Western Balkan partners the quality of youth engagement through initiatives such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the School Exchange Scheme, the EU Scheme for Young Professionals in the Western Balkans or the Youth Policy Labs;
- Reinforce the role of the different alumni associations, e.g. Western Balkans Alumni Association<sup>28</sup>, EIT Alumni<sup>29</sup>, DG JRC Alumni or Marie Curie Alumni Association<sup>30</sup> by enhancing opportunities for networking and facilitating their cooperation with regional policy-makers;
- Support innovative people-to-people formats that allow cross-cultural learning in the region and beyond and the affirmation of European core values;
- Expand the Western Balkan dimension of the European Week of Sport Beyond Borders and promote active participation in the #BeActive campaign, to enhance the number of young women and men practicing sport;
- Build on the results of the Preparatory Action on Exchanges and mobility<sup>31</sup> in sport to expand the international dimension of the Erasmus Programme through better inclusion of Western Balkan sport organisations;
- Promote joint regional sport activities and events (e.g. sport events and mobilities in the context of sport and educational events, as well as promotion of physical activity and common values);
- Follow-up to the Tartu Call for a Healthy Lifestyle, strengthen the policy dialogue and exchange of best practices in the field of sport.

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<sup>27</sup> Serbia and Albania have responded positively

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://eitalumni.eu/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.mariecuriealumni.eu/>

<sup>31</sup> PA Mobility – 3 years specific call (2018, 2019, 2020) aiming at promoting learning mobility of sport staff and coaches. Mobilities have to include participants from at least one of the following regions: Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans

### 3. A Thematic Agenda

In line with the new Commission priorities, the Green transition, the Digital transformation and an Economy that works for and connects people are essential for the relaunch and modernisation of the Western Balkan economies. This has been underlined by a number of stakeholders, i.e Policy Support Facility<sup>32</sup>, the Berlin Process<sup>33</sup>, the Western Balkan Platforms on Research and Innovation and Education and Training, and the Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3s).

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, IPA-III, and the implementation of the S3s.

The main priorities and accompanying actions for this Thematic Agenda are as follows:

- **A European Green Deal:** Climate change and environmental degradation are key challenges to Europe and the world. The Western Balkans are projected to be severely hit by climate change: without enhanced ambition, an increased frequency and intensity of droughts, floods and other extreme weather phenomena are expected, resulting in the need for climate-neutral buildings and infrastructures, decarbonisation of energy and mobility, and a sustainable management of natural resources, particularly of forests and waters. Environmental pollution, in particular air pollution and water pollution, is a key problem in the main cities, which affects the health of citizen and the economies of both Western Balkans and EU member states. In this regard, the climate-neutrality, resilient zero-pollution ambition of the EU Green Deal is to be implemented in the Western Balkans through a dedicated Green Agenda<sup>34</sup>.
  - Through increased participation in Horizon Europe programmes, partnerships and macro-regional strategies, promoting cross-sectoral nexus innovative approaches and knowledge sharing, encourage, support and guide the transition to clean, sustainable, competitive, secure, safe and smart energy;
  - Work together with Western Balkans to establish a virtual Environmental Observatory, covering the entire Balkan Peninsula, as an information system that supports real-time collection and analysis of data relevant to climate and the environment, thus providing the basis for scientific advice, evidence-based policy measures and foresight;<sup>35</sup>
  - Engage centres across the region on Disaster Risk Management, also drawing upon the Copernicus Emergency Management Service with its early warning systems, such as the European Flood Awareness System (EFAS)<sup>36</sup>, the European Drought Observatory (EDO)<sup>37</sup> and the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS)<sup>38</sup>, as well as the Copernicus Climate Change Services and to use climate simulations carried out by EuroHPC<sup>39</sup>;
  - Reinforce cooperation with the EIT KICs engaged in the Green Deal with the aim of nurturing and further developing the thematic innovation ecosystems in the region, and supporting the involvement of WB partners in European strategic value chains.
  - Support the implementation of the EU acquis and international treaties to pursue zero-pollution ambition in all the environmental compartments, with particular reference to air quality.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://rio.jrc.ec.europa.eu/policy-support-facility/specific-support-montenegro-towards-entrepreneurial-innovation-ecosystems>

<sup>33</sup> [wbc-rti.info/object/document/16406/attach/1\\_overview\\_wbrf\\_en.pdf](https://wbc-rti.info/object/document/16406/attach/1_overview_wbrf_en.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1596443911913&uri=CELEX:52019DC0640#document2>

<sup>35</sup> The Observatory shall bring together knowledge resources from existing institutions and collaborative formats from the EU and the Western Balkans, particularly those of the DG Joint Research Centre and the European Environmental Agency in an integrated virtual framework.

<sup>36</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/assessment-capacity-flood-monitoring-and-early-warning-enlargement-and-eastern-southern>

<sup>37</sup> <https://edo.jrc.ec.europa.eu/edov2/php/index.php?id=1000>

<sup>38</sup> <https://effis.jrc.ec.europa.eu>

<sup>39</sup> <https://eurohpc-ju.europa.eu>

- **A Europe fit for the digital age** - adapting the region to the rapid transformative technological development in order to remain prosperous and competitive. The EU will promote cooperation in digital education globally through the new Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP) for the period 2021-2027 and develop cooperation with priority partner regions such as the Western Balkans. Synergies with digitalisation-related activities in the Berlin Process, particularly with the Connectivity Agenda and the MAP REA will be pursued.
- Boost innovative digital transformation through encouraging the deployment of platforms and policies such as e.g. eGov, eHealth, e-commerce, digital access to culture and cultural heritage, digital skills in education, Open Access to research data and results, Investments into broadband, and the inclusion of all economies into EuroHPC.
  - Foster the development of regional Digital Innovation Hubs and their linking to the Science and Technology Parks, and the EIT KICs as one-stop-shops supporting companies boost their competitiveness using digital technologies especially in the take up of artificial intelligence in the business sector (notably for SMEs) in line with EU efforts and guidelines; In the framework of the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans<sup>40</sup> and the new DEAP, promote the digital skills development and virtual learning in the region. The strong international dimension of the new DEAP will contribute to improving digital skills and literacy, transforming digital competences, increasing availability of online education learning and content initiatives, sharing good practice and building communities of practice through collaboration and EU projects;
  - Enhance participation in platforms and initiatives such as SELFIE<sup>41</sup> in cooperation with ETF and JRC, HEInnovate<sup>42</sup>, the Digital Education Hackathon<sup>43</sup> and EU Code Week;
  - Encourage the development and implementation of Digital Education Strategies in the region<sup>44</sup>; support teacher training and online education learning and content initiatives<sup>45</sup>;
  - Foster the implementation of the Multi-stakeholders Regional Working Group on Digital Skills under the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) while ensuring complementarity with developments at partner level;
  - Expand the current Erasmus Virtual Exchanges pilot action to the Western Balkans under the new Erasmus+ Programme;
  - Promote the 3D laser scanning of cultural heritage sites to help their preservation<sup>46</sup> and provide opportunities for additional scientific and cultural projects.

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<sup>40</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_18\\_4242](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_4242)

<sup>41</sup> Self-reflection tool for digital readiness of schools - SELFIE

<sup>42</sup> Tool measuring innovativeness and entrepreneurship in universities where digital transformation is one of the eight areas

<sup>43</sup> <https://digieduhack.com/en/>

<sup>44</sup> Presently only Serbia has approved one in February 2020

<sup>45</sup> i.e. Digital Opportunity Traineeships for students, teaching staff and the Schools Go Digital initiative

<sup>46</sup> DG JRC researchers have developed a 3D laser scanning technology that can be transported to the specific zone in a backpack. It uses a mobile laser scanner that continuously takes distance measurements while the scanner moves through the environment.

- **An economy that connects and 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 growth.
  - Following the examples of BioEAST<sup>47</sup>, ANTARES and the regional centres of excellence (i.e. Biosense<sup>48</sup> and BioICT institutes), support the region in a paradigm shift in its economic development model towards a climate-neutral, resilient, sustainable and circular economy - leapfrogging to innovative green technologies. The Central and Eastern European countries under the BioEAST Initiative set the vision for 2030 to develop knowledge and cooperation based circular bioeconomies aiming to enhance their inclusive growth and to create new value-added jobs especially in rural areas, while maintaining or even strengthening environmental sustainability.
  - Strengthen the cooperation between the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD<sup>49</sup>) and the ‘soil health and food’ Mission in Horizon Europe to facilitate regional Farm-to-Fork efforts, the establishment of food quality laboratories in close cooperation with Universities and Technology Parks;
  - Encourage the continuous involvement of the regions’ stakeholders in all European COVID-19 mitigation, research and innovation actions to overcome the crisis and rebuild the economy;
  - Support further development of a novel pan-European Research Infrastructure, the South East European International Institute for Sustainable Technologies (SEEIIST<sup>50</sup>) and its key regional role in the Mission Cancer;
  - Apply the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor methodology and capacity building tools to the Western Balkans to help city administrations harness culture and creativity to support social and economic development.<sup>51</sup>
  - Support the implementation of European standards for construction in Western Balkans to strengthen the competitiveness of their construction sectors.

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<sup>47</sup> <https://bioeast.eu/>

<sup>48</sup> [https://biosens.rs/?page\\_id=10010&lang=en](https://biosens.rs/?page_id=10010&lang=en)

<sup>49</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/international-cooperation/enlargement/pre-accession-assistance/overview>

<sup>50</sup> <https://seeiist.eu/>

<sup>51</sup> DG JRC launched a Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor in 2017, covering the EU-27 Member States plus UK, Norway and Switzerland. In 2019, based on its methodology, DG JRC carried out a preliminary assessment of the performance of capital cities in Western Balkans.