



## [FOCUS ARTICLE] The ERA Integration of the Western Balkans

The European Research Area (ERA) represents the ambition to create a single, borderless market for research, innovation and technology across the EU - as designed by DG Research & Innovation. The ERA plays a pivotal role in promoting scientific excellence and cooperation across Europe - with the Western Balkans being an integral part. Initiatives such as the POLICY ANSWERS project and its Western Balkans Information Hub are instrumental in monitoring and supporting the ERA integration efforts.

The [Staff Working Document](#) accompanying the [Communication “A new ERA for Research and Innovation”](#) acknowledges the Western Balkans as part of the geopolitical dimension of a new ERA.

[POLICY ANSWERS](#), acting as the Secretariat of the Western Balkans Steering Platforms, monitors and supports policy coordination within the EU-WB relations and help the Western Balkans strengthen their potential for successful participation in regional and multilateral research and innovation activities, to promote regional cooperation in R&I and networking and to advance access to information and excellence. The project addresses these objectives through targeted project activities, and one of these activities is monitoring the progress made in the Western Balkans related to ERA integration.

With this newsletter, we are introducing the visual summaries of the ERA reports prepared by POLICY ANSWERS for each Western Balkans economy. These reports follow the six priorities defined during the establishment of the ERA in 2000, the following areas have been monitored accordingly:

- National research systems
- Transnational cooperation and competition, including ‘jointly addressing grand challenges’ and ‘research infrastructures’
- Open labour market for researchers
- Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research
- Optimal circulation, access and transfer of scientific knowledge
- International cooperation

Economy-specific summaries of the ERA reports can be accessed via the following links:

- [Albania’s ERA Integration](#)
- [Bosnia and Herzegovina’s ERA Integration](#)

Kosovo\* (This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.)



- [Kosovo\\*'s ERA Integration](#)
- [Montenegro's ERA Integration](#)
- [North Macedonia's ERA Integration](#)
- [Serbia's ERA Integration](#)

Further to the summaries, Malte Schrage-Veltins, who is coordinating the team responsible for activities on ERA monitoring in the frame of the project, provides some insights into the process of developing the reports and their results as part of an [interview](#). Malte Schrage-Veltins has been working as a scientific officer at the DLR Projektträger (Project Management Agency of the German Aerospace Center) since 2020. He holds a PhD from the University of Bonn in political science with a focus on innovation policy.



**POLICY ANSWERS:** In the POLICY ANSWERS project you coordinate activities on ERA monitoring. Could you outline briefly what are the main activities and challenges in this task?

Malte: Sure. In this task, our project team monitors and analyses the progress made by the Western Balkan economies in their integration into the new ERA. We also observe the achievement of goals related to long-term cooperation with the Western Balkans. These are increased investments in the areas of innovation, research and education, as well as the promotion of the Green Deal or the quality enhancement in education and training. All of these goals are addressed in the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth & Sport published in 2021. The results of these monitoring and analysing activities are summarised in reports whose structure and content are based on the priority areas set out by the European Commission in their ERA Monitoring Handbook.

Regarding the challenges, I would say that the coordination between the high number of stakeholders engaged in the production of the reports is sometimes a bit challenging. Besides many of our project partners acting at different levels of coordination. We also involve external experts from the Western Balkan economies and their local expertise. But I personally enjoy to cope with this challenge because it gives me the opportunity to get in touch with so many different persons with a lot of knowledge and experience.

**POLICY ANSWERS:** What is the state of ERA integration of the Western Balkans in general, according to your experience?

Malte: First of all, it is important to say that the integration of the Western Balkans into the ERA is of central importance for the research policy of both the region and the European Union. And it is great to see that all Western Balkan economies are associated to the EU Framework Programme Horizon Europe, running from 2021 to 2027.

It should also be highlighted that all the Western Balkans economies make a lot of efforts to improve their research and innovation system and to participate in the ERA. In general, they are progressing well regarding the integration into the ERA. Albeit there are differences in their research and innovation systems and the level of development, an overall improvement can be observed when considering different ERA priorities laid out by the European Commission to achieve ERA integration.

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It is not only that the Western Balkan economies are associated to Horizon Europe and show good proposal success rates and participation and contribution numbers; they have also improved participation figures in other European programmes and initiatives, such as COST, EURAXESS or the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures.

**POLICY ANSWERS: What are the main differences and what are the common elements between the Western Balkans economies in this process? What would you recommend for improvement?**

Malte: Well, the research and innovation systems of the six Western Balkan economies are heterogeneous. As I have already mentioned before, the differences are mostly due to the development stage of the respective research and innovation system of the economy.

However, when taking a look at common elements we see that the number of participations in the past and ongoing European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation has increased for all of the Western Balkan economies. They also have in common their ambition in trying to align to European Union standards with regard to, for example, gender equality initiatives.

From a research and innovation-centred perspective, there are three major common challenges for all the Western Balkans economies where improvements could be made: firstly, they could aim at increasing their funding for research and development to come closer to the average of the funding figures of the European Union Member States. Secondly, they all should further support cooperation between the public and the private sector. And thirdly, further developing a comprehensive approach regarding their research and innovation systems would be beneficial with regard to improving their overall competitiveness.

**POLICY ANSWERS: Could you mention highlights from the six Western Balkans economies that they have made while further integrating into ERA?**

Malte: In my view, Montenegro did very well for the development and implementation of its Smart Specialisation Strategy and aligned it to the European Union's policy framework. Another example is Serbia being the only Western Balkans economy with a Teaming for Excellence Project in Horizon Europe, called ANTARES. Serbia has also made significant progress in establishing a system for the further deep-tech development. Then, Bosnia and Herzegovina has made a lot of efforts in relation to gender equality, especially in the higher education sector. Furthermore, North Macedonia is advanced among the Western Balkan economies when it comes to the support of public-private sector cooperation. Another best practice worth mentioning is the recently conducted structural reforms in the research sector in Kosovo, which is important considering the size of this Western Balkan economy. Finally, Albania has established new strategies and regulations to promote innovation, particularly for SMEs.

**POLICY ANSWERS: Many thanks for your insights.**

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For more information on ERA, [visit the dedicated session of the Western Balkans Info Hub](#). POLICY ANSWERS will continue to monitor also the [New European Research Area](#) with its 20 Actions in the future. If you have input for this theme or any of our [themes](#), please feel free to get in touch with us via [policy-answers@westernbalkans-infohub.eu](mailto:policy-answers@westernbalkans-infohub.eu)