MONTENEGRIN PRESIDENCY OF THE BERLIN PROCESS

JOINT STATEMENT

WESTERN BALKANS IN EUROPE: PEOPLE – INNOVATION – TRANSFORMATION

BERLIN PROCESS JOINT SCIENCE CONFERENCE

10TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF STAKEHOLDERS OF THE SCIENCE, EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND INNOVATION PILLAR OF THE BERLIN PROCESS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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The 10th Berlin Process Joint Science Conference convened in Podgorica to address the transformation of higher education, the strengthening of innovation ecosystems, and the role of scientific advice in state modernisation and EU pre-accession investment. Participants underlined that the **knowledge sector is central to the Western Balkans' European integration** and is already one of the most advanced areas of gradual integration before EU accession. Yet substantial challenges remain in narrowing the gap with EU standards. The modernisation of the region, especially the transition towards sustainable growth, must be people-centred and supported by an **adequately funded** knowledge sector (higher education, research and innovation), capable of improving the absorption and monitoring of EU funds. Young people, scientists and entrepreneurs are decisive for the region's future in Europe.

KEY MESSAGES FOR THE HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT, AND POLITICAL LEADERS

I. Universities, research organisations and innovation institutions across the Western Balkans continue to **adopt European standards and drive modernisation**. Yet weak political will, fragmented reforms, chronic underfunding and administrative inertia still constrain them. Governments should substantially increase public investment in the knowledge sector and ensure merit-based recruitment, promotion and research funding. The **knowledge sector must be empowered to modernise** continuously, operate efficiently and transparently, and demonstrate accountability.

II. **Transformation must be centred on people, especially young people**. Demographic decline, emigration and youth mobilisation are warning signals of institutional stress, accumulated discontent, educational shortcomings and weak job prospects. Governments must create real opportunities through competitive universities, future-oriented study programmes, stronger links with the labour market, cross-border and inter-sectoral mobility, critical thinking and real participation in public life. To retain talent, special youth employment programmes, including early-career positions in research and development, should be established. **Artificial intelligence** is a powerful tool and should be used responsibly in knowledge-intensive activities.

III. Innovation policy should shift from dispersed funding to investment in **place-based and regionally connected ecosystems**. The Western Balkans already have talent, pockets of scientific excellence and entrepreneurial dynamism, but lack critical mass, exposure to investors and markets, scale-up capacity and international connectivity. Public and European funding should target decisive bottlenecks in knowledge transfer and market entry, including proof-of-concept grants, technology transfer, university–industry partnerships, early-stage financing and scale-up support. This is essential to accelerate the **transition to knowledge economies** that generate sustainable growth.

IV. **The public interest requires independent scientific advice** grounded in reliable, interoperable data. Energy transition, climate change adaptation, water resources, public health, bioeconomy and territorial planning exceed electoral cycles and national silos. Governments should establish independent scientific advisory mechanisms to inform, assess and support the monitoring of major public policies, investments and EU-funded projects. **EU pre-accession funds and Horizon Europe** funding must also strengthen research infrastructures, scientific capacity and participation in European education, research and innovation frameworks as a strategic investment in the European future of the Western Balkans.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE FOR PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Enable the knowledge sector to lead modernisation

Universities, national academies, research organisations and innovation institutions should have the **autonomy, funding and governance conditions** needed to lead modernisation. Governments should reduce administrative burdens, provide adequate and predictable public funding, recognise and facilitate private investment and ensure that EU pre-accession funding also supports the knowledge sector. Multiannual research funding commitments, competitive grant schemes and transparent, merit-based recruitment and promotion procedures are critical. In return, institutions should demonstrate integrity, **performance orientation**, efficient management, accountability and openness. Research performance should be assessed independently in line with European standards, while respecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

2. Make higher education transformation continuous and structurally coherent

Higher education modernisation must **respond continuously** to demographic decline, emigration, changing labour markets and disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence. Universities should regularly renew study programmes, pedagogical methods, assessment, student support and career planning, using labour-market data and student feedback. They should strengthen soft and entrepreneurial skills, prepare young people for the jobs of the future, and develop critical thinking, responsible citizenship and democratic resilience. Fragmented study programmes and rigid faculty structures require a strategic **review of university organisation, while respecting institutional autonomy**. The region needs stronger internal university integration, closer cooperation between faculties, and national and regional university networks and alliances. Each university should define its niche, strengths and strategic ambitions, including research specialisation based on scientific capacity, as well as third-mission objectives. **Labour-market and business links** should be strengthened, for instance, through academia–industry study programmes, doctoral and postdoctoral training, professors of practice, paid internships and inter-sectoral mobility. The aim is a coherent, visible and high-quality higher education system, with fair and productive competition, not duplication or rivalry for shrinking student numbers. Students and scientists should be treated as partners in reform, not merely as beneficiaries.

3. Strengthen quality assurance and strategic internationalisation

Internationalisation should be used to raise academic standards, research output and international connectivity. It should support talent circulation, diaspora engagement and meaningful international recruitment. Governments and European partners should support **quality assurance and accreditation** for public and private higher education institutions on equal terms, and in line with European standards and procedures. Participation in **European University Alliances** should be further supported as an instrument for modernisation, internationalisation, exchange of good practice and research collaboration. Targeted funding should support participation in such alliances, joint research projects and international researcher mobility where these bring institutional benefits.

4. Enable the knowledge sector to use artificial intelligence responsibly

Artificial intelligence is changing teaching, learning, research, administration and assessment. Universities should adopt living AI guidelines and institutional **AI governance** frameworks that cover transparency (disclosure), data protection, academic integrity and human oversight. Staff and students must be empowered to use AI responsibly through training in AI literacy, while assessment methods should be redesigned to protect scientific excellence and critical thinking. AI should be used **reasonably as a powerful tool**, not as a substitute for judgement, responsibility or the teacher-student relationship. Regional cooperation on trustworthy AI should be strengthened with European peers and industry, building on existing regional potential. Where appropriate, governments should also support shared infrastructure and university–industry AI projects.

5. Use European funding instruments and policy frameworks more strategically

The knowledge sector is one of the most advanced areas of gradual EU integration before accession, although disparities within the region and with the EU remain. Western Balkan institutions should deepen participation in joint and double degrees, international accreditation, the European Diploma initiative and European research and technology infrastructures. **Horizon Europe** and its successor from 2028 onwards must remain excellence-based, but their design should **better recognise the specific needs and structural constraints of the Western Balkans** knowledge sector. One-size-fits-all approaches risk reinforcing existing disparities. Funding calls should enable stronger participation and integration without lowering standards. Supporting partnerships with leading European scientific institutions remains as important as enabling Western Balkan entities to lead Horizon Europe projects. Preparatory grants, support for building consortia and thematic research networks can help achieve this. The **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans** (and any successor instrument) should include a **dedicated share for the knowledge sector**, especially research and teaching infrastructures, research grants and innovation capacity building. This is not sectoral spending, but investment that generates growth and creates quality jobs and prospects.

6. Build place-based and regionally connected innovation ecosystems

Innovation develops in places where researchers, entrepreneurs, companies, investors and public authorities interact with trust, ambition and exposure to risk. **Strategic innovation funding**, both national and European, should support science and technology parks, innovation hubs and regional platforms that connect local strengths with European and global innovation systems. These structures should strengthen technology transfer, start-up incubation, cross-border innovation projects and links with investors and markets. Smart Specialisation strategies should provide the strategic framework, but they must be realistic, institutionally owned and adapted through regular impact evaluation.

7. Target funding at bottlenecks in knowledge transfer and market entry

Funding for innovation and knowledge-based entrepreneurship should not be spread too thinly; it should be selective, strategic and focused on stages where **targeted investment can unlock substantial progress**. Priority instruments include proof-of-concept funding, prototype testing, intellectual-property support, market validation, professional technology transfer, investor readiness, pre-seed and seed financing, and venture capital for scale-up. Universities should be supported in establishing a **portfolio of innovation-support services**, including counselling, mentoring and support for spin-offs. Innovation funding should also support social innovation, a field that can address societal challenges of transformation and modernisation and in which the region has remarkable potential.

8. Institutionalise scientific advice and make investment evidence-based, absorbable and transparent

Long-term challenges cannot be solved within one electoral mandate or within national borders alone. Issues such as energy transition and energy security, climate change adaptation, water management, environmental protection, public health and prevention, digitalisation and state modernisation, sustainable bioeconomy, infrastructure development and cohesive territorial planning **require scientific evidence**. Governments should institutionalise independent scientific advisory mechanisms, drawing on European and international practice and linked to national academies, universities and research organisations. **Major public projects and EU-funded investments** must be informed by independent scientific assessment, awarded through competitive, transparent procedures, and implemented consistently without arbitrary interference. Regular reports should track the absorption, implementation and impact of national and EU funds. The knowledge sector can support project preparation, impact assessment, monitoring and evaluation, so that funds are used wisely and in the public interest.

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