

BRITISH PRESIDENCY OF THE BERLIN PROCESS

JOINT STATEMENT

SCIENCE UNDER PRESSURE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

BERLIN PROCESS JOINT SCIENCE CONFERENCE

9TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF STAKEHOLDERS OF THE SCIENCE, EDUCATION, RESEARCH
AND INNOVATION PILLAR OF THE BERLIN PROCESS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

LJUBLJANA · 14 – 16 OCTOBER 2025

The **9th Berlin Process Joint Science Conference** convened to explore how the challenges facing the Western Balkans' education, research, and innovation sectors also hold opportunities for renewal and progress in times of growing pressure and rising expectations. The conference focused on protecting academic freedom and the autonomy of scientific organisations; advancing science as driver of growth and competitiveness; reinforcing security and societal resilience through science; and enabling universities to reclaim their space in the public sphere to strengthen democracy and open societies. The young generations carry a key responsibility in this.

KEY MESSAGES FOR THE HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT, THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, AND LEADERS

- I. Universities and research organisations play an essential role as guardians of democracy, rule of law, and equity. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not privileges, but responsibilities that sustain open societies. Governments, academic bodies, and international partners must act together to protect academic institutions from political interference, ensure secure and transparent governance, and nurture universities as safe spaces for dialogue and critical inquiry. This must also be inclusive of the broad communities in academic life, with a strong voice for the young generations.
- II. The Western Balkans' scientific community holds great potential and is ready to drive competitiveness and economic growth. To be successful, it needs guarantees: sustainable investment, premises for continuous skills development, and ever-closer integration with European and global research networks. Support from the European Union and international partners remains indispensable, though it must be matched by commitments from national governments. Priorities must be realistic; measures must be efficient and consider persistent disparities.
- III. The security landscape is evolving rapidly, with threats becoming broader and more sophisticated. Challenges are both of external and internal nature, including authoritarianism and the vitiation of democratic checks and balances, disinformation and polarisation. Security needs a broader approach with science being part of the response. Science can strengthen societal and institutional resilience, advance cyber and information security, and give citizens the critical and digital literacy they need to counter hybrid threats and manipulation. Lasting security also depends on prosperity, social cohesion and opportunities for the young generation.
- IV. Reforms must accelerate to align the Western Balkans' higher education, research and innovation systems with European standards, while respecting national capacities. Transparent and effective governance, performance-based funding, and the empowerment of young researchers and students are essential. Brain drain cannot be alleviated by return programmes alone; it also requires the creation of adequate working environments in the countries of origin. International scientific cooperation must remain a cornerstone of the region's European path.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE FOR PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Protect academic freedom and autonomy of scientific organisations

Universities and scientific organisations across the Western Balkans face **pressures affecting their autonomy**. **Externally**, political interference, often leading to self-censorship, along with low public investment, and administrative restrictions limit research activities. **Internally**, they are burdened by increasing expectations without having sufficient human resources, thus jeopardising their missions of educating and conducting both blue sky and applied research. Student protests often combine grievances about the state of higher education with those about broader political, economic, and social problems. Governments and European partners must **act decisively to safeguard academic freedom** by embedding organisational, human resource, and financial autonomy within legal frameworks reflecting science-friendly values and principles. **Constitutional guarantees** must protect scientific organisations from political interference and respect the trust they enjoy as credible and impartial institutions.

2. Enhance institutional capacity and the resilience of scientific organisations

Universities and research institutions function as **fundamental pillars of knowledge creation** and public **agorae for open discourse**. To ensure excellence and performance, scientific organisations are committed to lead by example – upholding transparency, integrity, and participatory governance through open appointment and election procedures and inclusive decision-making. Sustainable, predictable, multi-year, performance-based funding is essential for their agility. In addition of public funding, the diversification of revenues through private funding gives them **more independency in setting priorities**, thereby making them more attractive. Regional and international scientific cooperation, external monitoring mechanisms, and alignment with European standards, along with integration into international science networks, strengthen long-term institutional success.

3. Empower the next generation and diaspora to engage in science and technology

The young generations are vital for sustaining excellence; active participation cultivates a culture of openness, creativity, and engagement. **Cutting-edge science** – such as quantum technology, nanotechnology, AI, and biotechnology – driven by research infrastructures and conducted in centres of excellence leads to a cycle of discoveries and innovations with better commercialisation prospects. Focusing funding on this cycle is therefore recommended, including complementary measures for new soft skills, mentorship, and networking with potential investors. **Continuous emigration of the highly skilled** systematically weakens Western Balkans' scientific systems. EU funding programmes, especially

the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and pre-accession funds, should address these realities. **We reiterate** our previous requests to the European Commission and to Western Balkan Governments for funding to attract diaspora to engage in the countries of origin – especially the Western Balkans dedicated facility that pools R&I oriented funding from Horizon Europe and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

4. Enable science systems to be drivers of competitiveness, laying the foundation for knowledge economies

For long-term prosperity, the Western Balkans must transition from cost-dependent competitiveness to a **knowledge-based economy**. Knowledge economies in the Western Balkans remain underdeveloped but hold significant potential. Realising this potential demands a shift from viewing science primarily as a domain of public expenditure and academic training to recognising it as **critical for competitiveness and growth**. Beyond convergence with the European Union Single Market, key foundations require strengthening: digital infrastructure, advanced skills, including in disruptive technologies, and supportive legal and institutional environments. Governments and European funds must support research management systems capable of ensuring that universities and research organisations can fully contribute to prosperity, and that innovation is not detached from its scientific base.

5. Strengthen knowledge and technology transfer

A closer relationship between science, innovation, and industry is essential for competitiveness. In the Western Balkans, knowledge transfer is currently more feasible than full technology transfer, but both require structural support. Internationally tested approaches – such as innovation ecosystems, university-industry partnerships, and pipeline models linearly linking research, application, and commercialisation – offer good options. The full professionalisation of technology transfer services, alongside regional initiatives such as Regional Innovation for Start-up Excellence (RISE), can accelerate progress. Universities and businesses must overcome mutual reluctance to collaborate, including staff mobility between the two. The EU-funded Growth Plan for the Western Balkans should prioritise these measures while supporting reforms, EU – Western Balkans trade as well as broad infrastructure development.

6. Support promising innovators and entrepreneurs through targeted and flexible funding

Persistent gaps between EU research priorities and regional capabilities require flexible approaches **focusing on pioneering**

innovators and emerging entrepreneurs. Excellent individuals and teams struggle to connect their research to local industry needs, contributing to brain drain. Start-ups at critical technology readiness levels often relocate abroad for better conditions, limiting upscaling. Governments and European funds should focus on **targeted funding to support high-potential** innovators and strengthen links within the regional start-up ecosystem. **Brain circulation** should be promoted through diaspora engagement, cross-border regional mobility, and opportunities for skilled innovators and entrepreneurs to contribute locally. Universities require resources to invest in entrepreneurial education, equipping students with critical business and innovation skills and fostering a culture of creative discovery.

7. Strengthen security and societal resilience with science

Security in the 21st century goes beyond defence and borders: it encompasses information integrity, data protection, resilience to disinformation, and societal preparedness for shocks. Scientific organisations are essential to this **broader understanding**, providing evidence, literacy, and ethical guidance amid hybrid threats. **Vulnerabilities** are also internal, stemming from societal polarisation, weak institutions, opaque public safety measures, and lack of inclusive growth. **Science must be mobilised as a tool for resilience**, equipping citizens and institutions with critical assets, especially in cyberspace. Governments, universities, and European partners should integrate cybersecurity, AI, and data analytics into research and education, and in risk management. In the Western Balkans, the conversation on science and security is beginning and should expand through regional and European cooperation.

8. Balance openness and protection through responsible international scientific cooperation

Scientific progress and security are interdependent: **openness and collaboration are vital** for innovation but require safeguards to protect integrity. Western Balkan institutions need support to develop secure, transparent systems for science security, balancing academic freedom and international engagement with protection against malicious interference. Regional collaboration – including between NATO and non-NATO members – should establish **shared security standards, training, and joint risk management**, supported by EU initiatives. Reinforcing the interface between science, governance, and security will strengthen resilience and contribute to a secure and trustworthy **European Research Area**.

9. Uphold democracy and the rule of law through science and education in public life

Universities and scientific organisations are more than knowledge centres: they are **pillars of democratic culture and social trust**. As unbiased public spaces, they must uphold transparency, inclusion, and freedom of expression while nurturing critical thinking, different opinions and civic responsibility. Academic integrity and evidence-based policymaking are essential to counter disinformation and polarisation, which undermine democracy, and to prevent poor governance. Governments and European partners should formally **embed scientific expertise in policymaking and reform processes**. We reiterate our previous recommendation for national mechanisms of scientific advice and foresight, as well as for participatory policymaking. Progress in this area remains modest in the Western Balkans, with some countries even experiencing regression.

10. Safeguard universities as stakeholders of democracy

Universities are determined to hold their space in public life, seizing opportunities even amid crises. They are committed to pluralism and reasoned debate that is protected from populist and authoritarian pressures. Every academic actor has a responsibility to model democratic governance, integrity, and respect for evidence-based thought. Strengthening civic education, participatory learning, and collaborative pedagogies **empowers students and citizens** as critical thinkers and agents of progress. Regional cooperation between universities, national academies, and science-related think tanks should be deepened to promote good governance and uphold European values. By safeguarding civic spaces through the **democratic ethos of education and science**, the Western Balkans can reinforce integrity and resilience on its European path.

SIGNATORIES

SCIENTIFIC ORGANISATIONS

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