EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

10TH BERLIN PROCESS JOINT SCIENCE CONFERENCE

WESTERN BALKANS IN EUROPE: PEOPLE – INNOVATION – TRANSFORMATION

PODGORICA, 21 OCTOBER 2026

The Conference is a self-standing science diplomacy format within the Berlin Process. Its Joint Statements are addressed to the political leaders meeting at the yearly Western Balkans Summits.

Held from 12–14 October 2026 in Podgorica under the Montenegrin Presidency of the Berlin Process, the Conference brought together 60 participants from the 16 Berlin Process countries, including national academies of sciences and arts, universities, research organisations, innovation institutions, regional partners and experts ad personam.

Ahead of the 12th Western Balkans Summit of Heads of State and Government, the Berlin Process Joint Science Conference issued a Joint Statement calling on political leaders to place people, science, higher education and innovation at the centre of the Western Balkans' European future.

The Joint Statement calls for EU pre-accession funds, Horizon Europe funding and future European instruments to strengthen research infrastructures, scientific capacity and participation in European education, research and innovation frameworks.

Participants stressed that universities, research organisations and innovation institutions across the Western Balkans continue to adopt European standards, but remain constrained by weak political will, fragmented reforms, chronic underfunding and administrative inertia. Governments are called upon to substantially increase public investment in the knowledge sector, ensure merit-based recruitment, promotion and research funding, and strengthen institutional autonomy, accountability and openness.

A central message is that the transformation of the region must be centred on people, especially young people. Demographic decline, emigration and weak job prospects are warning signals. Governments should create real opportunities through competitive universities, future-oriented study programmes, stronger labour-market links, mobility, critical thinking and real participation in public life. Special youth employment programmes, including in academia, are proposed as a measure to retain talent.

The Joint Statement also calls for innovation policy to shift from dispersed funding to place-based and regionally connected ecosystems. Funding should target bottlenecks in knowledge transfer and market entry, including proof-of-concept grants, university–industry partnerships, early-stage financing and scale-up support. These measures are essential to accelerate the transition to knowledge economies that generate sustainable growth.

Participants further highlighted the need for independent scientific advice on long-term challenges such as energy transition, climate change adaptation, water management, public health, sustainable bioeconomy, digitalisation and territorial planning, which exceed electoral cycles and national borders. Governments are encouraged to institutionalise independent scientific advisory mechanisms and ensure that major public projects and EU-funded investments are informed by scientific assessment subject to monitoring and evaluation.

The Joint Statement sets out eight priorities:

1. Enable the knowledge sector to lead modernisation through adequate public and additional private funding;
2. Use a dedicated share of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans for investment in the region's knowledge sector;
3. Make higher education transformation continuous and structurally coherent, with renewed study programmes, stronger skills and closer links to businesses;
4. Strengthen quality assurance and strategic internationalisation, including participation in European University Alliances;
5. Enable the responsible use of artificial intelligence in teaching, learning, research, administration and assessment;
6. Target funding at bottlenecks in knowledge transfer and market entry, rather than dispersing funding too thinly;
7. Build place-based and regionally connected innovation ecosystems linked to European and global markets;
8. Institutionalise scientific advice and make public and EU investment evidence-based, absorbable and transparent.