

Western Balkans Mobility Scheme

A POLICY ANSWERS Pilot Programme

Call text

1. Aim and objectives

Funded under Horizon Europe, the project entitled POLICY ANSWERS - R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS (<https://www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu/about/>) was launched on 1 March 2022. Positioned well in line with the EU Western Balkans¹ (WB) Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (WB Agenda), POLICY ANSWERS monitors and supports policy coordination within the EU-WB cooperation, but also provides capacity building and pilot actions in the WB to contribute to the region's EU integration process and to strengthen their innovation ecosystems.

This pilot regional mobility scheme launched by POLICY ANSWERS has a call budget of EUR 100,000. It should build the foundation for a follow-up measure to be funded by regional, economy-level or international stakeholders. The aim of this scheme is to enhance regional cooperation and sustained support in mobility-driven R&I and - by fostering the interconnectedness of the WB - to support sustainable economic growth, a common regional market, societal resilience and convergence of the WB with the EU. Enhanced cooperation and sustained support in mobility-driven R&I are also pivotal for equipping the WB with the requisite tools and knowledge to address shared challenges, such as climate change and digital transformation, while fostering a generation of innovators who can reshape the region's future.

These aims should be achieved by fostering brain circulation and encourage brain retention within the WB at an early stage of the researchers' careers. The young researchers will initiate new contacts and networks to strengthen the links between the regions' economies and build new bridges between them. Additionally, this scheme will support excellence in research in the WB. Furthermore, it will promote and support the Open Access use of the huge amount of underused research infrastructure (facilities, resources and services) across the WB.

¹ The Western Balkans comprise Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

This mobility scheme is supported by the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC, <https://www.drc-danube.org>) and the Rectors' Forum of Southeast Europe and Western Balkans (RF SEEWB, <https://www.uni-lj.si/study/rectors-forum-SEE-WB>).

2. Type of projects

A project within this scheme must fulfil each of these three criteria: It must use (1) short-term mobility within the WB and (2) specialised equipment or facilities (research infrastructures) in another WB economy in order to (3) do research. Only mobility projects in the field of research will be funded.

Mobility must comprise the physical presence of an early-career researcher - as the recipient of the financial support - for a duration of between two weeks and two months at a location in a different WB economy, that allows access to a research infrastructure. The overall duration of the project must be between two weeks and six months, which allows enough time for the exploitation of the results of the mobility. During the project several visits to the same RI are eligible, but not to a different RI in the same or in another WB economy.

This scheme addresses early-career researchers (ECR) only, which means that only PhD students and Postdocs, whose doctorate was awarded no longer than seven years before the deadline of this call, are eligible as applicants. The ECR must be affiliated to a home institution, which must be located in the WB. The home institution must be a research performing organisation (RPO) or higher education institutions (HEI) (public or private) that has to be registered and accredited in the WB. Companies are not eligible as home institution. In order to initiate a sustainable and long-term cooperation between the home and the host institution, it is encouraged that the ECR be involved in accompanying activities at the host institution like training, capacity building, soft skill development etc.

By definition, a research infrastructure is a set of facilities, resources and services that are used by the research communities to conduct research and foster innovation in their respective fields. It includes: major scientific equipment (or sets of instruments), knowledge-based resources such as collections, archives and scientific data, e-infrastructures, such as data and computing systems and communication networks and any other tools that are essential to achieve excellence in research and innovation^{2,3}.

All public or private RPOs or HEI in the WB that are registered in one WB economy under the respective law and provide research infrastructures (as defined above) are eligible as host institution for the recipient; this includes virtual research infrastructures, if an added value of the mobility is evident. The hosting institution is obliged to provide a counsellor (which could be a mentor or a peer) as central contact person for the ECR.

² According to Article 2 (6) of the Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013 of 11 December 2013-“Establishing Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2014-2020”.

³ The recent RCC report “Western Balkans Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap” gives a first overview on research infrastructures in the WB at <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/149/western-balkans-research-and-innovation-infrastructure-roadmap> and <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/144/a-framework-for-research-infrastructure-roadmaps>.

In order to boost the regional cooperation, all thematic research areas are eligible (including Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) and arts-based research). Applications that address the twin transition (green and digital) of the WB and priorities mentioned in research strategies of the WB economies (respective Smart Specialisation Strategies/S3) are particularly welcome. The project must have a civilian purpose.

The financial support for the recipients is given according to the Horizon Europe regulations for Financial Support to Third Parties. This means that the following regulations in the POLICY ANSWERS grant agreement (GA) also apply to the recipient, who has to:

- (1) prevent that the implementation of the project is compromised for reasons involving family, emotional life, political or ethnic affinity etc. ('conflict of interests', article 12 GA),
- (2) keep confidential any data, documents or other material that is identified as sensitive in writing ('sensitive information') ('confidentiality and security', article 13 GA),
- (3) carry out the action in line with the highest ethical standards and to commit to and ensure the respect of basic EU values (such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy etc.) ('ethics and values', article 14 GA),
- (4) acknowledge the EU support and display the European flag (emblem) and funding statement in all communication activities related to the action like media relations, conferences, seminars etc ('communication, dissemination and visibility', article 17.2 GA),
- (5) provide any information requested in order to verify eligibility of the costs or contributions declared, proper implementation of the action etc. ('general information obligations', article 19 GA),
- (6) keep records and other supporting documents to prove the proper implementation of the action ('record-keeping', article 20 GA),
- (7) accept that the granting authority - the European Commission - and other European bodies as the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) etc. may also carry out checks, project reviews, audits and investigations during the action or afterwards ('checks, reviews, audits and investigations – extension of findings', article 25 GA).

Further information is available in the draft of the “financial support contract” of this scheme as part of the “guide for applicants”.

The recipients and the counsellors are obliged to participate in evaluative measures and to provide information for the evaluation of the success of the funding measure.

3. Type, scope and amount of funding

The financial support will be given as a grant with a maximum sum of EUR 5,000 per project. The funding will be given as non-refundable grant in two instalments, with a first share as pre-financing (75%), and a second share after approval of the final report (25%).

Eligible costs are supported by:

- (1) an "allowance unit cost" of EUR 75 per day of the stay - resulting in EUR 2,250 per month (30 days) - to compensate for all travel costs and living allowances of the recipient (including cost for visa etc.);
- (2) any cost that occurs at the host institution like accession fees, consumables etc.;
- (3) costs for exploitation of project results (visibility, publication of scientific article, etc.);

Costs of category (2) and (3) are accounted for as direct costs only (with VAT) that have to be actual, economic and necessary.

Health, accident and personal liability insurances for the time of mobility have to be taken out by the recipients at their own expense.

The financial support may not be used to cover costs that are already covered by other sources. The financial support is not renewable.

4. Application

Applications have to be submitted by the ECR via the web-based Call Management System PT-Outline only (<https://ptoutline.eu/app/wbms>) and will be following a one-stage procedure. Applications must be in English and signed by the ECR and the counsellor of the hosting institution.

Main elements of applications are information on the (a) project basics, (b) home institution and the ECR, (c) host institution and counsellor, (d) objectives of the project and its workplan and (e) requested funds. In addition, CVs of the ECR and the counsellor (in EUROPASS format) have to be uploaded. Applications must be in English and signed by the ECR and the counsellor. A scan of the pages with the signatures will be sufficient. Further information is provided in the "guide for applicants".

All team members of the POLICY ANSWERS project are not eligible to apply.

The deadline for submission of applications is 31 May 2024, 17:00 CEST.

5. Assessment and selection of applications

The applications will be assessed through a one-stage process with independent experts. External reviewers with a high level of professional experience in the public or private R&D sector will assess the applications in a remote assessment according to the assessment criteria which are specified below. A minimum of two reviewers will be assigned to each application. In case of major deviations, a third peer reviewer will be engaged and the review that differs the most from the mean of the three reviews will be discarded.

Assessment criteria will be based on the three weighted criteria excellence (40%), impact (40%) and quality and efficiency of the implementation (20%):

(1) Excellence (threshold 3/5):

- Clarity and pertinence of the project's research and innovation approach and objectives as well as the soundness of the proposed methodology;
- Quality of the home institution, and of the host institution and its research infrastructure;
- Extent and quality of the accompanying activities at the host institution like training, capacity building, soft skill development;

(2) Impact (threshold 3/5):

- Quality of expected research outputs and relevance to regional, economy-level or local policy context;
- Quality of the measures to enhance the career perspectives and employability of the ECR and contribution to his/her skills development;
- Suitability and quality of the measures to maximise the exploitation of the research results and its visibility;
- Contribution to the establishment of joint follow-up measures and long-term co-operations;

(3) Quality and efficiency of the implementation (threshold 3/5):

- Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, hosting arrangements and allocation of resources;
- Complementarity of the role and the benefits of all three stakeholders (ECR, home and host institution).

Based on the assessment results, a ranking list of the applications will be drawn up and given to the POLICY ANSWERS Steering Group as a funding recommendation. The Steering Group consists of nine participants, with one representative from the ministry responsible for research within each WB economy and three representatives from regional organisations. The Steering Group will decide about applications to be funded (and those to put on the reserve list).

Adjustments of the ranking list are allowed only if a) applications are located at the same rank or very close together and b) based on geographical balance between the WB economies and within the WB economies and/or based on inclusivity. While the geographical balance between the WB economies should ensure an evenly regional distribution of the selected applicants and a regional success of the scheme, the balance within the economies should ensure that not only home institutions in the capitals are supported, but also those in more remote areas of the respective WB economy. The aspect of inclusivity should ensure gender balance (at least a 30:70 ratio should be realised between women/men and vice versa) and benefits for those ECR with little or no experience in international mobility.

All applicants will be informed about the selection result in writing.

6. Contracting and reporting

The basis for the financial support will be a bilateral contract between the DLR Projektträger (DLR-PT) functioning as call secretariat and the recipient (the ECR of a project selected for funding) with Letters of Intent (LoI) of the home and the host institution - signed and stamped by the respective legal representative of these institutions - as integral part of the agreement. The financial support will go directly to the recipient.

The recipient must provide one technical and financial report at the end of the project, which has to include a standardised confirmation letter by the counsellor at the end of the project, validating the stay of the recipient and its length.

7. Timeline

Publication of the call: 28 March 2024

Deadline for submission of applications: 31 May 2024, 17:00 CEST

Envisaged funding decision: August 2024

Envisaged start of the projects: 1 October to 1 November 2024

8. Jurisdiction

The place of jurisdiction is Bonn, Germany. In the event of dispute, German Law shall be applicable.

9. Further information and counselling

The call secretariat will be located at DLR Projektträger (DLR-PT), Heinrich-Konen-Strasse 1, 53227 Bonn, Germany.

Further information is available at <https://www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu/calls/western-balkans-mobility-scheme/> and from the DLR-PT via email to calls-europe@dlr.de and via phone call to +49 228 3821 1482 or 1358.