

# The Role of the Rectors' Forum in Fostering Cooperation Between Universities in EU Member States and Non-EU Western Balkan Countries

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Brussels, 12 June 2025  
Permanent Representation of the Republic of Slovenia in the European Union

# The Voice of Academic Institutions in the Region

- The Rectors' Forum for Southeast Europe and Western Balkans is committed to addressing crucial issues and promoting European policy in higher education and research within the Region:
  - Raising the quality standards of research and higher education
  - Strengthening regional and international connections
  - Sharing good practices, preparing joint projects, unifying legislation, encouraging staff and students exchange, etc.

# List of Members

Founded in 2018, the Rectors' Forum for Southeast Europe and Western Balkans comprises 34 universities from Slovenia, over Albania, to Greece



# Main Achievements

- **Promotion of the European University Initiative** - 15 universities are members of European university alliances
- **RECAS - Regional Centers for Advanced Studies:** eight centers for advanced studies integrated in the regional network are developing postdoctoral education and research (University of Rijeka CAS-SEE)
  - Calls for postdoctoral fellowships “Change in the Balkans – Strategic interventions for a democratic Europe”
- **Joint projects (brain gain)**
  - **The URGE PROJECT's** main objective is to establish *a joint scientific diaspora network* that will mitigate the effects of brain drain within the academic community (University of Belgrade)
  - MSCA Staff Exchange scheme and MSCA Doctoral Network project proposal (under preparation)
- **Regular workshops for capacity building** - internationalization, project application design, innovation and technology transfers, research funding, etc. (EUTOPIA, University of Ljubljana)
- **Matchmaking events focused on a sustainable future** - green technologies, energy, digitalization, blue growth and biodiversity, cultural heritage, food, bioeconomy, agriculture and natural resources, healthy life, climate and mobility, an inclusive, innovative and reflective society

# Capacity-Building Activities

- **Matchmaking platform RIMAP:** A regional digital innovation platform for knowledge transfers between the academic community and the economy, focused on developing **the regional innovation ecosystem**
- **The Western Balkans Mobility Scheme enhances student mobility**
- **Established cooperation with The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)** is an all-inclusive, regionally-owned and led cooperative framework that connects universities with the international community and potential donors
- **Connecting through academia:** The European Parliament's Translation Service initiative strives to strengthen a mutually beneficial relationship with academia while accessing the European Union
- **Heightened visibility** of the Rectors' Forum <https://rectorsforum.eu>
- **A newsletter** disseminating open calls and other opportunities for cooperation

# Integration of Universities from Southeast Europe and Western Balkans in ERA and EHEA

- The Rectors' Forum emerged from several prior initiatives that responded to common challenges in efficiently integrating Western Balkan and Southeast European universities into EHEA and ERA
- We highly value and pledge to participate in the Berlin Process - a joint initiative of 16 European Countries and the European Commission focused on facilitating the integration of WB countries into the European Union



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**Berlin Process 2025**  
hosted in the UK





# The Goals of the Berlin Process

RECTORS' FORUM  
OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE  
AND WESTERN BALKANS



The Berlin Process aims at improving regional cooperation as well as cooperation with the EU in a number of policy areas to support countries in the region in achieving EU standards and to bring concrete benefits to the citizens in the region. The Berlin Process has the advantage of broad international support and involvement, including EU Member states and institutions. It offers a more structured framework and a unique inclusive WB6 approach for dialogue and collaboration, which leads to more effective and sustainable outcomes compared to other initiatives. It helps increase the countries' competitiveness and ultimately prepares the WB 6 for EU Membership:

# Joint Science Conference: The Standing Conference of National Stakeholders in the Science, Education, Research and Innovation

RECTORS' FORUM  
OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE  
AND WESTERN BALKANS



**Leopoldina**  
Nationale Akademie  
der Wissenschaften



**Joint Science  
Conference**  
BERLIN PROCESS



**Berlin  
Process  
Summit**  
2024  
10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

GERMAN PRESIDENCY AND 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE BERLIN PROCESS

## JOINT STATEMENT

COURAGE FOR FUTURE

BERLIN PROCESS JOINT SCIENCE CONFERENCE

8<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF STAKEHOLDERS OF THE SCIENCE, EDUCATION, RESEARCH  
AND INNOVATION PILLAR OF THE BERLIN PROCESS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

*BERLIN • 30 SEPTEMBER – 1 OCTOBER 2024*



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

- I. Preceding full membership, the Western Balkans are advancing their integration into the European Union through higher education, research, and innovation. We call for the acceleration and deepening of this integration by *establishing a dedicated Western Balkans Facility for Skills, Research, and Innovation* that will pool funding from all relevant European Union programmes to make the region fit for the future. The association of the Western Balkan countries with the European Union Framework Programme for Research and Innovation *should unite the principles of excellence and solidarity*, reflecting the unique challenges the region faces and addressing its needs more sharply.
- II. Investment in innovation, skills, and knowledge is critical for competitiveness, strategic autonomy, and dual transitions. It is essential that the *Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans* invests in students, scientists, universities, and research and innovation institutions. It is equally essential that *Western Balkan national governments increase their low gross domestic product investment rate in education, research, and innovation*. The European Commission must ensure that Western Balkan scientific institutions can engage effectively in the European Research Area and European policy areas, existing and future.
- III. Democracy in the Western Balkans is under pressure from nationalism, populism, and disinformation, often driven by foreign influence. To counter these threats, *it is crucial to guarantee and support public safe spaces where intellectuals and cultural figures can foster free and open societal discourse*. Although these spaces are shrinking, they remain critical to reviving democratic values and advocating for the European ideal, promoting mutual respect and creating positive narratives for all Southeast Europe.

- 1. Update EU policies for the Western Balkans**
- 2. Unite the principles of excellence and solidarity in EU funding for the Western Balkans**
- 3. Introduce a Western Balkans component in all EU funding programmes and policy frameworks**
- 4. Deepen and accelerate EU integration of Western Balkans' education, research, and innovation preceding full membership**
- 5. Address structural gaps in Western Balkans' education, research and innovation with realism<sup>2</sup>**
- 6. Align national and European priorities in education, research and innovation**
- 7. Support strategic capacity building for fertilising excellence in the Western Balkans**
- 8. Implement European standards in Western Balkan education, research and innovation systems**
- 9. Help universities update curricula**
- 10. Establish the *Western Balkans Research Fund***
- 11. Promote intellectual discourse to protect democracy and strengthen the European ideal**
- 12. Protect public safe spaces for free and open intellectual discourse and evidence-based decisions**
- 13. Reset EU-Western Balkans intellectual exchange**

# The Innovation Imperative

- Europe is stepping up its ambition to cement its position of a global leader in research. President **von der Leyen** underscored Europe's ambition to “*remain a continent where scientific freedom is protected, where research talent is nurtured, and where innovation can flourish*”.
- One of the **three transformational imperatives** around which the Compass is structured is **closing the innovation gap**



Figure 30: Innovation performance of the EU and its global competitors

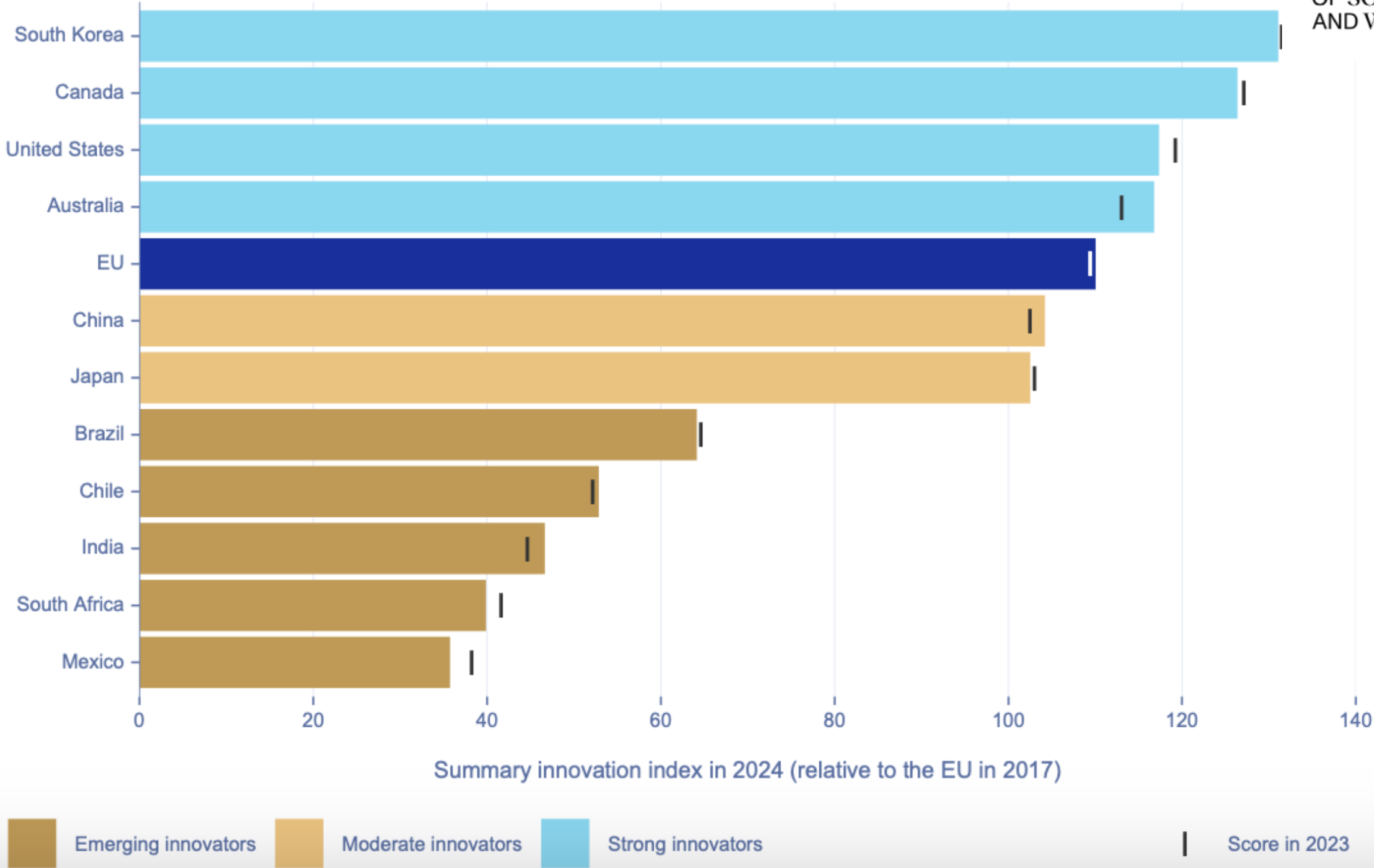
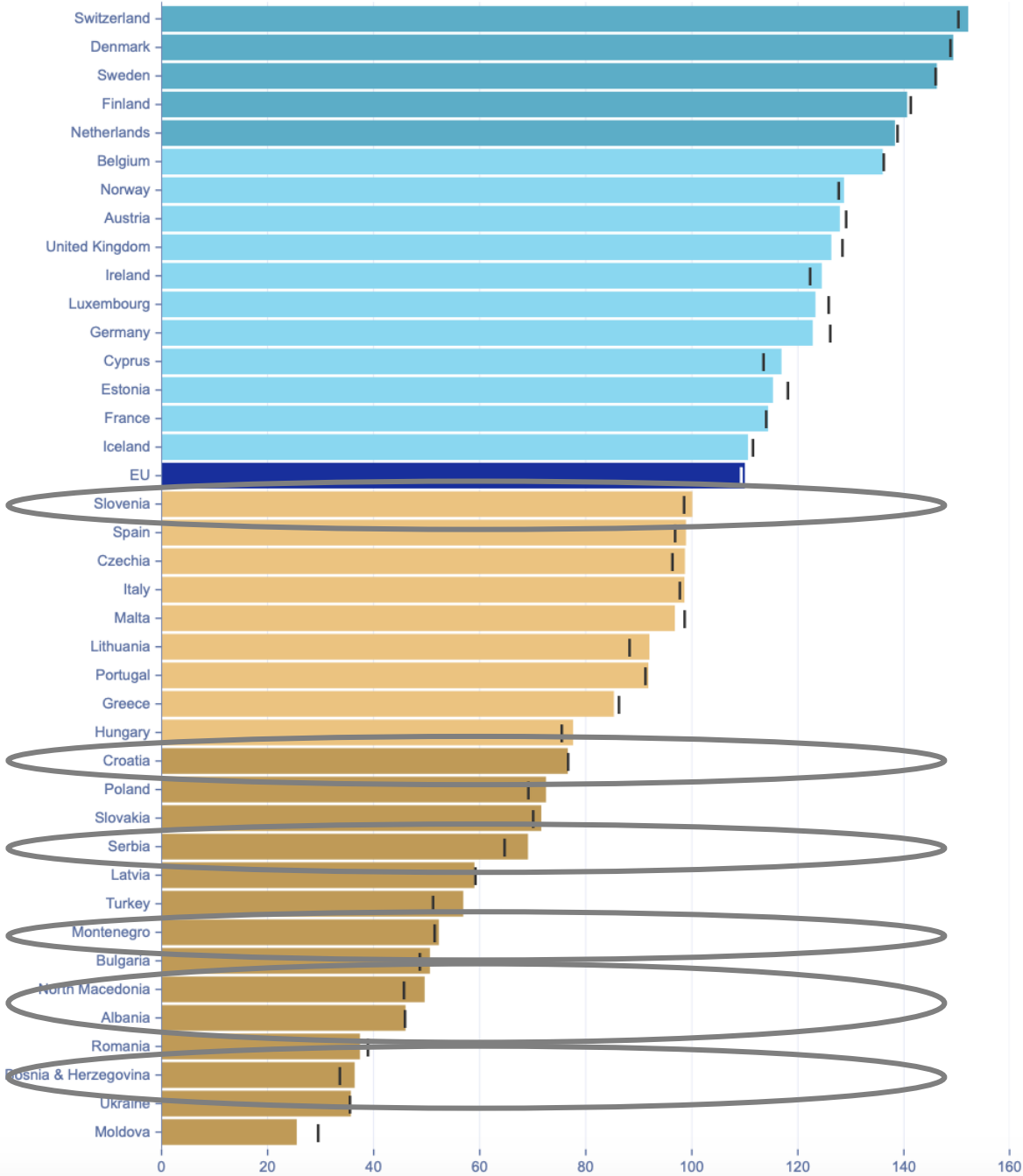


Figure 26: Innovation performance of the EU Member States and neighbouring countries (bar chart) (2024 vs 2023)



# How to Bridge the Innovation Gap?

- Our Region underperforms regarding most indicators in the European Innovation Scoreboard, such as human resources, digitalization, intellectual assets, firm investment and linkages, employment impacts, and like
- Higher education resources and funding for research and innovation have remained low in Western Balkans despite declarative commitments to attain EU levels
- Such circumstances significantly affect Europe's global competitiveness





“ Science has no passport, gender, ethnicity or political party. We want Europe to be the best and most attractive place in the world for science and researchers. We want Europe to continue to be at the forefront of fundamental research. To be a leader in priority technologies that will shape the world of tomorrow. ”

**Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation**

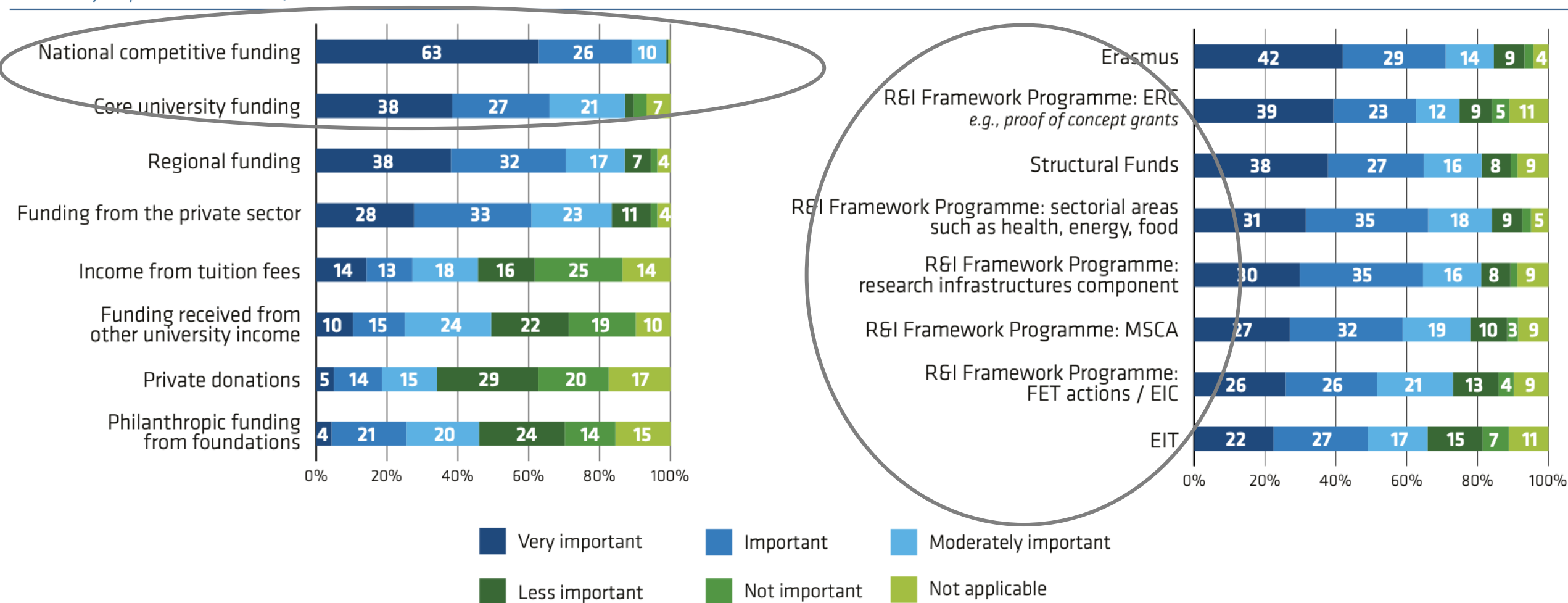
# We are Welcoming

- **The European Research Area Act** guarantees a “fifth freedom” – free movement of researchers, scientific knowledge, and technology – to reduce the fragmentation of research, increase R&D investments to 3% of GDP, and enhance talent circulation across Europe
- A long-term strategy to boost European Research Infrastructure to create a **pan-European ecosystem of research infrastructure and services**.
- **The strengthening of University Alliances** that ensure cooperation between European universities and communities
- **The European Innovation Act** streamlines our regulatory frameworks and facilitates access to venture capital for European innovative startups and scaleups
- **A European start-up and scale-up strategy** that fosters collaboration between universities and business
- **A network of Trusted Investors** that promotes co-investments with the EIC Fund
- **The next Framework Program (FP10)** and the allocation of funding from EU research and innovation programs, such as Horizon Europe

**Figure 16:** Funding sources for innovation activities at universities

Q12. Please specify how important the following different funding sources used by your institution are for innovation activities.

Number of respondents: 158-164/166.

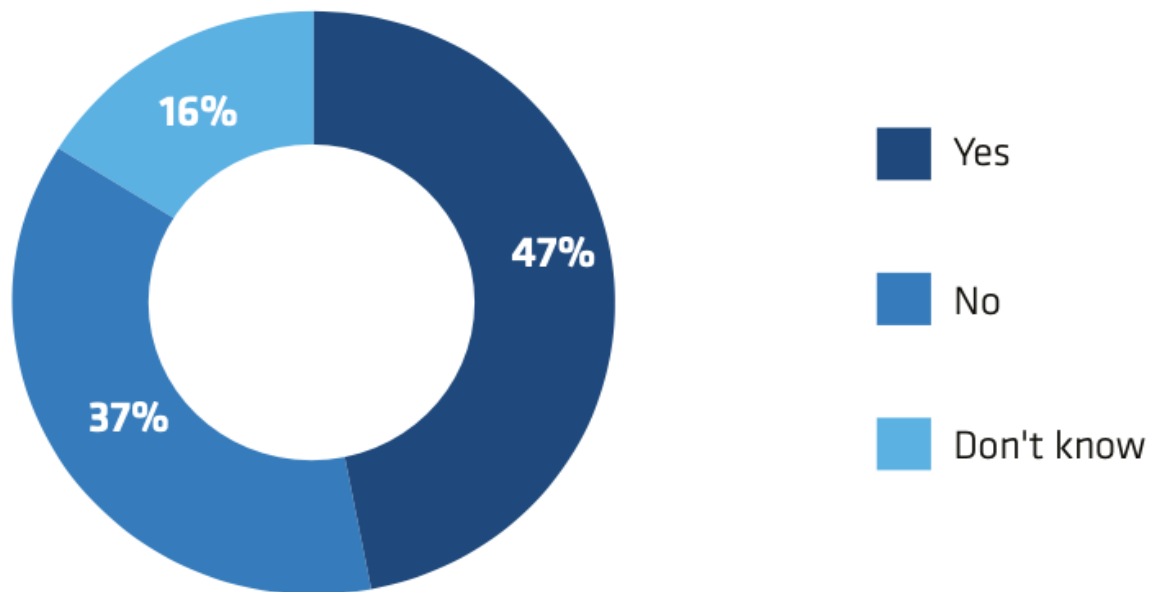


**Figure 8:** Existence of national/regional university innovation capacity assessment systems

*Q4. Does your country or region have an official university innovation capacity assessment system?*

*Number of respondents: 166/166.*

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# Priorities

- Supporting WB/SEE national governments in increasing their official GDP investment rate in research and innovation, and initiating national or regional innovation policies and assessments
- Ensuring that FP10 unite the principles of excellence and solidarity, reflecting the unique challenges characteristic for the SEE/WB region
- Promoting regional competitiveness by investing in innovation, skills, and knowledge – The SEE/Western Balkans Research and Innovation Fund
- Supporting the engagement of SEE/WB universities in the ERA and European policy areas
- Safeguarding public spaces where intellectuals can foster free, open, and democratic discourse that promotes European values and the European way of life

## Conclusion

- We call upon all relevant international stakeholders to prioritize 'multi-country' initiatives, including a broad range of financing programs that would enable students, academics, and researchers from the region to contribute to Europe's global competitiveness and ambitions. **(RF 2023 Declaration)**
- We strongly believe that there can be no social and economic development, nor indeed sustainable peace in Europe, without making education, research, and innovation a collaborative endeavor of the highest priority in Southeast Europe and Western Balkans, as well as in other parts of the European Union



# Fostering Research and Educational Synergies Across Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans

## Thank You!