A common European future must be shaped now and the Western Balkans (WB) are an inseparable part of it – maintaining the status quo is not a viable option. We therefore resolutely support efforts for cooperation, reconciliation and integration in the WB. A particular focus should be on young people as the driving force for positive change. Sciences and humanities should be considered as a continuous investment into the future.

To address the identified challenges and implement sustainable solutions, we recommend the following:

1. **Sustainable Funding and Unified Quality Standards**
   - In the WB, there is a chronic shortage of public and private funding for science and research. Therefore, we strongly advocate the goal of allocating 3% of national GDP for higher education and science.
   - Planning reliability and sustainable financing are conditions for strategic development of the science system, which are currently hampered by short term focus and distributive approaches towards financing. Therefore, middle and long term approaches have to be implemented and finances allocated through competitive procedures.
   - To ensure a reliable evaluation of performance, unified quality standards – within the WB and following the EU-standards – must be established.

2. **Institutional Change, Brain Drain and Brain Gain**
   - Young scientists are a key element of science. Currently, mass emigration (especially brain drain) is one of the greatest risks for future development of the WB.
   - To make it attractive for young scientists to stay in their home country and to get involved in the science systems, they need a reliable perspective starting immediately after graduation. The WB academic diaspora should be encouraged to return through brain gain initiatives, creating a welcome culture for returning scientists.
   - Such measures must be part of a wider institutional change with the principal aim of modernising the WB science systems for integration into the European Research Area.

3. **South-Eastern European Research Council / Foundation**
   - The WB science systems lack strategic approaches to foster academic excellence and competitiveness, according to internationally acknowledged standards. Excellent individual scientists can act as agents of change. Thus, the support of their research by targeted funding is of highest priority.
   - We strongly recommend the creation of a South-Eastern European Research Council (SEERC) – in a joint consortium with the European Research Council and the research funding institutions from the WB countries – or a South-Eastern European Research Foundation (SEERF), both emphasising merit-based individual funding.
   - Transparent selection criteria guided only by academic excellence and evaluation procedures according to international standards, with the participation of international evaluators, are needed.

These recommendations are intended as sustainable solutions for the following key issues, which need urgent attention and reforms.

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* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSC 1244 resolution and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.
4. Centres of Excellence; Connectivity and Mobility

- Existing resources, infrastructures, projects and people in the WB science systems are insufficiently linked. This leads to a high degree of isolation / inward orientation of the national science systems. Therefore, WB science needs to be interconnected, within the region and with the rest of Europe.

- Networks of regional, supranational Centres of Excellence with an interdisciplinary focus (up to five) should be established. This will enhance the chances for accessing EU-funding. These centres should have three major tasks:
  1. state of the art basic and applied research,
  2. internationally competitive doctoral and postdoctoral training, and
  3. transfer of research results.

- Additionally, resources and infrastructures (educational, research, core facilities etc.) should be used jointly. Already existing cooperative formats should be strengthened and extended.

- Mobility schemes, which interconnect scientists within the WB and with the EU, should be developed. This includes facilitating international travel for scientists and students from the WB region, and creating a regional exchange programme following the Erasmus model.


- Science and its results are rarely included in decision-making and opinion-building. The knowledge gained by researchers is thus lost for the beneficial use of politics and society.

- This calls for a new approach by implementing institutionalised mechanisms for the science-politics-society dialogue in the WB. The participating parties of the conference are willing to share knowledge and provide technical support for capacity building.

- A scientific advisory mechanism analogue to the one used at the G7 summits should be realised for the Intergovernmental Initiative Western Balkans (Western Balkans Process).