

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS AT THE ROUNDTABLE DIALOGUE

Diaspora for Convergence: Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation for EU Integration

Part of the SCiDEV in Brussels Advocacy Actions, supported by the #IGNITA Initiative

Full Circle, Brussels, 30 October 2025

The roundtable [“Diaspora for Convergence: Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation for EU Integration”](#), organised by [SCiDEV](#) under the [#IGNITA Initiative](#) supported by the [Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans](#) (OSF-WB), marked SCiDEV’s first advocacy dialogue in Brussels. Bringing together representatives from EU institutions, regional cooperation mechanisms, academia, civil society, think tanks, and the Western Balkans diaspora, the event explored how mobility-driven research and innovation can accelerate the region’s convergence with the European Union. The discussion took place against a backdrop of renewed commitment to science and innovation within the [EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#) and the outcomes of the [Berlin Process Summit in London](#). Both highlighted research and education not merely as economic drivers, but as pillars of democratic resilience and social cohesion.

Setting the Scene: From Mobility to Convergence

Opening the event, **Abi Dodbiba**, IGNITA’s external expert, framed the discussion within the broader EU enlargement and research and innovation policy agenda. She noted that the Western Balkans have achieved [substantial progress](#) in research and innovation, but cooperation remains fragmented. Mobility, she stressed, is not only a movement of people but of ideas, knowledge, and institutional learning, and should be embedded as a systemic element of EU convergence policies.

In her opening address, **Blerjana Bino**, Executive Director of SCiDEV, framed mobility-driven research and innovation as both a democratic and European imperative. She traced SCiDEV’s evolution from a network connecting researchers in Albania to a regional think tank operating at the intersection of science, democracy, and EU integration. *“Science strengthens democracy,”* she noted, emphasizing that evidence-based research builds trust, empowers citizens, and anchors governance in accountability.

Dr. Bino placed the discussion within the context of the [EU–Western Balkans Ministerial Meeting on Research and Innovation](#) and the [Berlin Process Summit in London](#), both of which reaffirmed the

region's role in Europe's knowledge ecosystem. She presented findings from SCiDEV's [IGNITA research](#) showing that while progress is tangible, structural weaknesses persist. Public R&D investment remains below 1% of GDP, university autonomy and performance are fragile, and mobility often results in brain drain rather than brain circulation due to weak reintegration pathways.

She called for a shift from alignment on paper to participation in practice. "*Research and innovation mirror our democratic fundamentals,*" she said — reforms must be systemic, not cosmetic. Dr. Bino urged reciprocity with the diaspora: their expertise and networks must be met with institutional openness, co-creation, and sustained collaboration. SCiDEV advocates for this reciprocity via fellowships, mentoring networks, and co-led projects that turn mobility into long-term engagement. In conclusion, Dr. Bino issued a call to action to policymakers and donors: "*Without structural investment and institutional leadership, the Western Balkans will remain aligned on paper but peripheral in practice.*"

From Hope to Opportunity for Diaspora Engagement

Ambassador Ferit Hoxha, [Ambassador of the Mission of the Republic of Albania to the European Union](#), reflected on the strategic timing of the event, coming amid preparations for the next one in January 2026. He juxtaposed "hopes versus reality," noting that while expectations around the role of the diaspora are high, they must be matched with clear frameworks and measurable opportunities. Referring to EU accession Chapters 25 on Science and Research, he emphasized that integration is a political process rooted in *values and fundamentals*, not simply a technical one of meeting deadlines or closing chapters.

Ambassador Hoxha described the path of integration of Albania over the past decades as both "bumpy and frustrating," but underlined that Albania's ambition to complete negotiations by 2027, though extremely ambitious, is achievable. He stressed that education and innovation must be treated as the backbone of development, and that universities need to be empowered to generate ideas and connect with the EU's research and innovation ecosystem. The diaspora, he said, is not just a symbolic community but a strategic asset — a "brain power" that can be matched with local realities through effective *matchmaking*. He encouraged turning "brain drain" into "brain gain" and ultimately "brain circulation," emphasizing the importance of co-creation and mobility of ideas. He concluded by framing enlargement as "a possibility to connect with ideas," calling on all actors to invest in this intellectual convergence.

Mobilising the Diaspora and Regional Cooperation for Research, Innovation, and EU Convergence

Igor Šoltes, Head of the [Regional Cooperation Council \(RCC\)](#) Liaison Office in Brussels, emphasized that political will remains the crucial ingredient to move from frameworks to tangible results. He presented RCC's work on innovation hubs and regional digital initiatives, highlighting synergies

between [Horizon Europe](#), [Digital Europe](#), and regional instruments such as RISE. He pointed to persistent gaps between academia and business that hinder the competitiveness of the region, arguing that research capacity must translate into innovation output. The [Smart Specialisation Strategies \(S3\) process](#), he noted, is complex and requires coherence across institutions to form a functional ecosystem. Šoltes stressed the importance of developing technology transfer offices and strengthening “islands of excellence” that can connect across the region and with the European value chain. He also referred to the potential of deep-tech and green-tech sectors to create new labour markets and opportunities for upskilling. Science and research, he concluded, should be seen as the foundation of sustainable innovation.

Aurelia Ieseanu, from the [CEFTA Secretariat](#), elaborated on the importance of regional economic integration as a driver of innovation. She underscored that the [Common Regional Market](#) should serve as a bridge between the Western Balkans and the [EU Single Market](#), enabling “gradual integration before accession.” Removing barriers, harmonising legal frameworks, and ensuring cross-border recognition of qualifications are key steps toward this goal. She mentioned the development of a regional e-commerce framework aligned with EU directives, as well as ongoing work on intellectual property rights and licensing standards. Digitalisation, she argued, is a cross-cutting process that enables economic and scientific collaboration. Ultimately, she stressed that CEFTA’s efforts aim to make mobility of goods, services, and knowledge seamless across the region.

Katalin Alföldi, Policy Advisor at the [COST Association](#), focused on how COST networks can strengthen regional participation in European research cooperation. She noted that nearly 300 researchers from the Western Balkans are actively involved in COST actions, benefiting from over 240,000 professional connections built through these networks. She highlighted the *two-way mobility* that COST enables — allowing researchers from the Western Balkans to engage in European networks while also integrating European experts into regional initiatives. COST, she explained, does not fund research directly but provides the connective tissue that facilitates excellence, impact, and implementation. Collaboration with the diaspora is increasingly shaping COST actions, amplifying the region’s visibility within the [European Research Area](#).

Enrik Keco, Project Manager at the [Albanian-American Development Fund \(AADF\)](#) showcased [READ](#) and [Bridge by READ](#) as practical models for engaging Albania’s academic diaspora. Through structured mentoring and matchmaking, hundreds of diaspora scholars have supported Albanian universities with curricula development, co-teaching, co-supervision of thesis, collaborative research and more recently in proposal design, consortia building, and project writing, resulting in Horizon Europe submissions and stronger institutional capacity. Mr Keco argued that instruments that connect diaspora expertise to university needs and industry demand can translate mobility into measurable research outputs and social impact.

Charalampos Papaioannou, Policy Officer for Youth Policy and Programmes at the [Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture \(DG EAC\)](#), underlined the role of young people and

early-career researchers in shaping the future of European research. He mentioned recent collaboration between the [European Commission](#) and the [Council of Europe](#) to create space for youth dialogue, particularly through [Erasmus+](#) and [Horizon Europe](#). He highlighted that the University of Tirana and Polis University in Albania are now part of the [European Universities Initiative](#), opening new opportunities for funding and cooperation. The Commission's new [Intergenerational Fairness Strategy](#) which is expected in spring 2026 was also referenced as a framework for supporting equitable participation in education, research, and innovation across age groups.

Nikelina Naska, from [ESMEA](#), highlighted the potential of macro-regional cooperation programmes—such as [Interreg VI](#), and related cross-border mechanisms—as valuable instruments for strengthening research and innovation in the Western Balkans. She argued that these programmes already embed strong R&I components and can be strategically leveraged to complement participation in Horizon Europe, which, while crucial, remains highly competitive and often less accessible to emerging institutions. Naska stressed the importance of linking national [Smart Specialisation Strategies](#) (S3) with macro-regional economic frameworks, and of deepening cooperation with neighbouring EU member states such as Italy and Greece to foster joint innovation ecosystems and enhance regional competitiveness.

Ilijana Gjoni, [Carnegie Europe](#), emphasized that research excellence is inseparable from governance quality. She [argued](#) that critical thinking cannot flourish in environments constrained by corruption or entrenched patriarchy. To achieve genuine excellence, she said, societies must provide the “right garden” — one that nurtures academic freedom, accountability, and good governance. This involves tackling structural issues rather than merely celebrating outputs, and fostering a holistic approach to education that prepares students as critical and responsible citizens.

Lendina Smaja, from [Directorate General for Mobility and Transport](#) (DG MOVE), emphasized the role of applied research in advancing the transport sector, particularly in air traffic management. She highlighted the persistent gap between research and industry, noting that many European research projects in this field currently lack participation from Albanian researchers or institutions. This absence, she argued, underlines the urgent need to strengthen education and research capacities in transport and mobility and to build stronger links between academia and industry.

Jeta Bejtullahu, consultant for the [Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans \(OSF-WB\)](#), spoke about the power of strategic narratives in shaping how the Western Balkans is perceived in Brussels and across Europe. She urged a reframing of regional discourse — moving away from narratives of dependency and deficit toward one of agency, competence, and contribution. For Bejtullahu, connecting “the right knowledge dots” means mapping and amplifying the expertise, experience, and innovation already present in the region. Generating true *brain gain*, she argued, requires not only individual success stories but a collective voice and coordinated engagement with EU

institutions to position the Western Balkans as an active contributor to Europe's research, policy, and innovation agendas.

Erjon Curraj, Senior Digital Transformation Expert at [SCiDEV](#), underscored the need for a sextuple helix model that integrates academia, industry, government, civil society, media, and the environment. He pointed out that the quality of research in the region remains uneven and that trust in research and innovation is undermined by weak institutional linkages between universities and policymaking bodies. Curraj argued that research actors must take a proactive role in addressing government and societal challenges, rather than waiting to be invited into the policy process. At the same time, governments must invest in evidence-based policymaking and view research as a public good rather than a formal requirement. For him, the credibility of research excellence in the Western Balkans depends on collaboration, transparency, and the ability to connect research outputs with tangible social and economic impact.

Concluding Session: Policy Takeaways

In closing, **Orkidea Xhaferaj**, [SCiDEV](#) Digital and Innovation Policy Lead, distilled the discussion into key policy takeaways. She reaffirmed that research and innovation are democratic infrastructures that strengthen the rule of law and public trust. While willingness is an important first step, she said, institutions must also create pathways, incentives, and mechanisms to make mobility circular and impactful. She underscored that the responsibility to advance these goals is shared across all sectors — government, private sector, academia, media, and civil society.

Xhaferaj emphasised that quality education is the foundation of quality research and that regional cooperation must be leveraged to exchange best practices and improve standards. The role of the private sector, she added, remains underdeveloped and should be strengthened through joint initiatives and technology transfer partnerships. STEM fields, green technologies, and AI require targeted investment and accessible digital infrastructure. Finally, she reiterated the central theme of the dialogue — that diaspora inclusion must be strategic, not symbolic. It must be built on structured engagement, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

Next Steps

In closing, SCiDEV expressed its sincere appreciation to all speakers, partners, and participants — from EU institutions and regional organisations to academia, civil society, and the diaspora — for their insightful contributions and constructive engagement throughout the dialogue. The diversity of perspectives reflected a shared commitment to strengthening research and innovation as a cornerstone of democratic resilience and European convergence. Participants agreed to sustained collaboration, openness, and knowledge sharing and networking.

Building on the momentum of this discussion, SCiDEV announced three concrete follow-up actions:

1. Preparation of a summary document synthesising the findings and recommendations emerging from the dialogue.
2. Organisation of a second Brussels roundtable in early 2026, focusing on research governance and alignment with the forthcoming FP10 framework.
3. Continued cooperation with EU institutions, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), CEFTA, and diaspora networks to translate these commitments into actionable policies and sustained regional impact.

Background information

SCiDEV policy memo, [“On the Edge of Convergence: Research, Innovation, and Mobility in the Western Balkans,”](#) as part of the [Forum “Ignita 2025: On the Edge”](#).

Policy Paper [“Unlocking the Potential of Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation to Enable Brain Circulation in the Western Balkans”](#).

Working Paper [“Policy Measures Related to Mobility-Driven Research & Innovation in the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans”](#).

Working Document [“Enhancing Western Balkans’ Participation in Horizon Europe and Framework Programme 10”](#).

SCiDEV’s contribution to the Joint Science Conference of the Berlin Process can be accessed [here](#).

Learn more about our contribution to the Joint Science Conference and Civil Society and Think Tank Forum of the Berlin Process [here](#) and [here](#).

SCiDEV’s [Roundtable](#) Calls for Increased Investment and Strategic Action in Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation.

About the project

The *“Enhancing Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation in Western Balkans For Sustained Economic Growth and Convergence with the European Union”* project aims to influence European and regional decision-makers to increase investments and create more opportunities for mobility-driven research and innovation (R&I), while strengthening the results of its predecessor, and contributing to a stronger research and innovation ecosystem across the Western Balkans. This project is part of the [Open Society Foundations | Western Balkans](#) initiative #IGNITA, a collaboration among regional civil society organisations to create a hub for stakeholders focused on regional cooperation and EU integration. Discover more about IGNITA here: <https://osfwb.org/project/ignita/>