

Women in Science Diplomacy in the Western Balkans





INSTITUTE FOR SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN BALKANS

The first Think Tank established beyond the Western Balkans, exclusively dedicated to sustainable development in the region. Comprising experts in Pluralist Economics, we promote policies and practices that support economic stability, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. Through rigorous research, strategic partnerships, and advocacy, we aim to influence both regional and international decision-making processes, ensuring that the Western Balkans can thrive in a global context. Our commitment to evidence-based policies, innovation, and collaboration drives our efforts to create a prosperous and sustainable future for all communities in the region.



Science Diplomacy: The use of scientific knowledge, scientific cooperation, and diplomatic tools to support foreign policy, international cooperation, and responses to cross-border challenges. It commonly includes science in diplomacy, diplomacy for science, and science for diplomacy.

Science in Diplomacy: The use of scientific evidence and expertise to inform foreign-policy decisions and international negotiations.

Diplomacy for Science: The use of diplomatic relations, agreements, and institutions to facilitate international scientific cooperation, research partnerships, access to infrastructure, and mobility of researchers.

Science for Diplomacy: The use of scientific cooperation as a means of building dialogue, trust, and relationships between countries, including in politically sensitive contexts.

Science-Diplomacy Interface: The institutional and professional space where science, research policy, foreign policy, and international relations intersect. It can include science advisers, science attachés, researchers, diplomats, international organisations, and government officials responsible for science and innovation.

Gender-disaggregated Data: Data collected and presented separately by gender. Such data are important for identifying differences in participation, career progression, leadership, representation, and access to opportunities.

Gender Equality Plan (GEP): A set of institutional commitments and measures designed to identify and address gender inequalities within an organisation. Under Horizon Europe, Gender Equality Plans are required for certain categories of participating organisations.

Western Balkans: A regional term commonly referring to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. All six participate in the European integration process and are associated with the EU's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme.

*ISED-WB organisation does not take any political stands, but for the purpose of research works with data from all countries and territories in the region.



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Key messages

The Western Balkans possess a scientific asset that remains insufficiently connected to foreign policy, women researchers and experts. In several economies of the region, women represent around half or more of the research workforce, yet almost no systematic information exists on their representation among science advisers, science attachés, international scientific delegations, research-policy negotiators or other roles at the science–diplomacy interface.

At the same time, science diplomacy is becoming increasingly relevant to the region. Climate adaptation, energy security, artificial intelligence, public health, environmental protection and research security are simultaneously scientific and foreign-policy questions. European integration further increases the importance of connecting scientific expertise with diplomacy.

The Western Balkans should therefore move beyond policies concerned only with women entering STEM and begin asking a second question: are women scientists reaching the institutions in which scientific knowledge becomes international policy and influence?

This policy brief recommends four priorities:

Measure the science–diplomacy gender gap across the Western Balkans.

Create a Western Balkans Women in Science Diplomacy Fellowship.

Integrate science diplomacy into existing regional research and EU-integration structures rather than creating another isolated policy field.

Build regional expert networks that connect women scientists directly with ministries, diplomatic missions and international organisations.

Introduction

Science diplomacy connects scientific knowledge, international cooperation and foreign policy. It is commonly understood through three overlapping functions: science in diplomacy, where scientific evidence informs foreign-policy decisions; diplomacy for science, where diplomatic relations facilitate scientific cooperation; and science for diplomacy, where scientific collaboration helps build relationships between countries (Royal Society & AAAS, 2010). For the Western Balkans, these functions are no longer abstract.

Air pollution, climate change, shared river basins, energy transition, public health, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, food security and biodiversity all cross national borders. None can be addressed effectively by one Western Balkan economy acting alone. Many also directly intersect with the region's European integration process. The institutional conditions for deeper cooperation already exist. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are all associated with Horizon Europe, allowing their researchers and institutions to participate in the EU research programme under conditions broadly equivalent to those of EU Member States. The EU's Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport also explicitly promotes evidence-informed policymaking, regional research cooperation, human-capital development and reduction of gender and digital divides (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2025).

The European policy environment is moving even further in this direction. In 2026, the Council of the European Union adopted the first European Union framework for science diplomacy. Significantly for the region, the framework explicitly identifies the Western Balkans among the geopolitically strategic environments in which science diplomacy can contribute to sustainable development and international cooperation (Council of the European Union, 2026). This creates an opportunity for the Western Balkans: science diplomacy can become not only an instrument of European integration, but a means of strengthening the region's own capacity to cooperate internationally. The question is whether the region is using its full talent pool to do so.

Where are women in science diplomacy?

Globally, science diplomacy draws from two professional systems in which women have historically faced barriers: science and diplomacy. Women can be lost from the pipeline in scientific careers, diplomatic careers, or precisely at the intersection of the two. However, the Western Balkans present an important variation on this global pattern. The region does not simply suffer from an absence of women scientists. UNESCO data show that Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are among the countries where women researchers outnumber men. Earlier regional analysis by ISED-wb similarly found relatively strong female participation in several areas of tertiary science education and research, although large differences remain across disciplines, career stages and leadership positions.

Western Balkan strategy for women in science diplomacy should not start from the assumption that qualified women are unavailable. Instead, it should examine what happens after women enter science. Are they selected for international scientific delegations? Do foreign ministries draw on them as external experts? Are they involved in negotiations on artificial intelligence, climate, health, energy and technology? Do they become science advisers, research attachés, representatives to European research bodies, national contact points, members of international scientific committees and leaders of cross-border initiatives?

At present, these questions are remarkably difficult to answer. No harmonised Western Balkan dataset tracks the gender composition of science advisers, science attachés, science-diplomacy programmes, international R&I delegations, or related positions. This reflects a broader international problem: comparable gender-disaggregated data on science diplomacy remain extremely limited. Evidence from the two feeder professions shows why the question deserves attention. Globally, women represented only 31.4% of researchers in 2023, according to UNESCO's latest R&D data, while historical GenDip data show that women held only 19.9% of bilateral ambassador postings in 2014–2019 (UNESCO UIS, 2026; Niklasson & Towns, 2023).

National data also suggest that representation can decline at senior levels. In Serbia, for example, women held 29.6% of ambassador and chargé d'affaires positions in 2022, despite substantially stronger female representation in the national research workforce (Commissioner for the Protection of Equality of Serbia, 2023).

The available indicators measure different populations and should not be directly compared. Nevertheless, they reveal a policy blind spot: Western Balkan governments collect considerably more information about women in education and employment than about who represents scientific expertise internationally.

Why this matters for the region

Human Capital

Western Balkan economies are relatively small research systems and continue to face constraints in research funding, infrastructure and human-capital retention. The OECD has noted substantial differences in R&I capacity across the six economies and limited strategic use of intra-regional cooperation in European research programmes. Under these circumstances, excluding or overlooking qualified experts is particularly costly. A region concerned about brain drain cannot afford an additional "invisible talent drain" in which experienced women researchers remain inside the scientific system but are absent from the international networks where scientific cooperation, funding priorities and policy agendas are shaped. The objective is not preferential diplomacy. It is better use of existing expertise.

Better connection between knowledge and policy

Science diplomacy increasingly concerns subjects whose effects are unevenly distributed across society. Climate adaptation, digitalisation, health systems and artificial intelligence are technical subjects, but the decisions surrounding them determine who has access to resources, who bears risk and whose needs are represented. Gender diversity does not guarantee better decisions, and women do not constitute a single perspective. Nevertheless, institutions drawing expertise from a narrow segment of the available professional population risk narrowing the questions, experience and networks represented in decision-making. The goal should therefore be epistemic range: ensuring that international policy has access to as broad and competent a knowledge base as possible.

Regional cooperation

The Regional Cooperation Council's Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap already recognises that the limited individual R&I capacities of Western Balkan economies make regional collaboration particularly valuable. Research cooperation can create relationships among institutions and experts even where political relations are more difficult. Women scientists are already active across regional, European and international research networks. Connecting these networks more systematically with diplomacy could expand the channels through which cooperation takes place.

European integration and international visibility

All six Western Balkan economies participate in Horizon Europe, and the region is increasingly connected to the European Research Area. Research cooperation is therefore already part of the European integration process. Science diplomacy would give Western Balkan governments an additional way of converting participation in European research into policy influence, international partnerships and visibility. An inclusive approach would also align the region with the principles of the emerging EU science-diplomacy framework, which places diversity, equality, inclusion, academic freedom and evidence-informed policymaking among the values underpinning international R&I cooperation

Policy recommendations

The Western Balkans have already developed programmes encouraging girls and women to enter STEM. These initiatives remain necessary. But participation in science is only the first stage. A woman can earn a science degree, become a researcher and publish internationally while remaining almost completely disconnected from the institutions in which governments formulate international technology, climate, health or research policy. Policy must therefore begin following career progression rather than headcount alone. The relevant indicators are no longer simply how many women study science or how many become researchers.

They should also include:

- Who represents the country in international R&I negotiations?
- Who sits on national science-policy advisory bodies?
- Who participates in Horizon Europe and European Research Area policy structures?
- Who is appointed to diplomatic and scientific missions abroad?
- Who advises governments on emerging technologies?
- Who speaks for national research systems at international meetings?
- Who receives international assignments and leadership opportunities?

1. Gender desegregated data

Science ministries, foreign ministries and national statistical authorities should map women's representation across the science-diplomacy interface. At minimum, common indicators should cover:

- international science and technology delegations;
- diplomatic staff responsible for science, technology, environment, health and innovation;
- science advisers and external scientific advisory bodies;
- national representatives in European and multilateral R&I structures;
- Horizon Europe National Contact Point structures;
- international research-infrastructure governance bodies;
- leadership positions in national academies and major publicly funded research institutions.

The Regional Cooperation Council could coordinate a common methodology, allowing comparison across the six economies.

The objective should not simply be to produce another gender database. The data should identify where talent is lost: recruitment, nomination, international assignment, promotion, retention or leadership.

From women in STEM to women at the science-policy-diplomacy interface

2. Establish a Western Balkans Women in Science Diplomacy Fellowship

Participants would receive practical training in:

- diplomacy and negotiation;
- science communication for policymakers;
- EU research and innovation policy;
- multilateral institutions;
- technology and research governance;
- policy writing and scientific advice.

A placement component should allow fellows to work temporarily with foreign ministries, ministries responsible for science and innovation, diplomatic missions, EU institutions, international organisations or relevant regional bodies. The programme should be regional rather than six separate small initiatives. This would simultaneously create professional pathways for women scientists and build a new pool of experts capable of translating between research and international policy. Participation should ultimately be open on competitive criteria and designed to strengthen institutions rather than create a permanent separate category of "women's diplomacy."

3. Put science diplomacy inside existing regional cooperation

The Western Balkans do not need another isolated strategy with no institutional home. Science-diplomacy capacity should instead be integrated into structures that already exist: the Western Balkans R&I agenda, Horizon Europe participation, smart-specialisation strategies, Regional Cooperation Council activities and EU-accession policy dialogues. Joint regional initiatives could focus initially on areas where scientific interdependence is obvious: climate and air pollution; energy transition; public health; artificial intelligence and digital governance; biodiversity; food and water security; disaster resilience. Every such initiative should incorporate transparent selection of experts and monitor gender composition in advisory groups, delegations and leadership. Regional science diplomacy could thereby achieve two objectives simultaneously: strengthening evidence-based cooperation and ensuring that the region does not reproduce representation gaps when constructing a new policy field.

4. Build a regional expert network connecting women scientists to diplomacy

Governments and regional organisations should establish a searchable roster of women experts willing to contribute to scientific advice, international negotiations, diplomatic briefings, foresight exercises and multilateral initiatives. Members should receive opportunities for:

- policy and negotiation training;
- mentoring by senior diplomats and scientists;
- participation in international delegations;
- cross-border research-policy workshops;
- public visibility as experts in their disciplines.

Existing scientific diaspora networks should also be incorporated. For a region experiencing significant researcher mobility, science diplomacy can help transform part of brain drain into brain circulation, maintaining professional connections between scientists abroad and institutions in the Western Balkans.



Conclusion

The European Union has formally elevated science diplomacy into its international research policy, all six Western Balkan economies participate in Horizon Europe, and scientific questions increasingly shape foreign and security policy. The region also possesses an underused advantage: a substantial pool of highly educated women scientists and researchers. The challenge is therefore no longer simply to bring women into science.

It is to ensure that scientific talent can travel all the way from laboratories, universities and research institutes into the rooms where international decisions are made. There is currently too little evidence to conclude that women are systematically excluded from Western Balkan science diplomacy. The more important finding is that governments do not yet have the data required to know.

That gap should be addressed before science diplomacy becomes more institutionalised. If the Western Balkans build their science-diplomacy structures now, they have an opportunity to avoid reproducing old professional hierarchies in a new field. Better measurement, targeted career pathways, regional cooperation and stronger connections between researchers and foreign-policy institutions would allow the region to draw on a broader pool of expertise.

For small research systems navigating European integration and increasing geopolitical complexity, this is not only a gender-equality objective. It is a question of how effectively the Western Balkans use the scientific human capital they already have.

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