

Employment and Social Affairs Platform 3 – ESAP 3

Open Call for Consultancy Services

Subject:	Benchmarking among the Public Employment Services (PES) in the Western Balkans Six (WB6)
Contracting Authority:	Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Secretariat
Reporting to:	RCC Secretariat
Duration:	16 March 2026 - 16 December 2026
Eligible:	Legal entities and consortia of experts
Application Deadline:	2 March 2026
Reference Number:	012-026

Terms of Reference:

I. BACKGROUND

I Background and Context

ESAP 3 is part of a larger Action titled EU4Employment, financed by the EU under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III). The Action includes two (2) areas of support: Youth Guarantee (YG), to be implemented by the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Employment and Social Affairs Platform – ESAP 3, implemented jointly by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the ILO. The ESAP 3 project started in March 2024 and will go on to February 2029.

The overall objective of the ESAP 3 project is to promote fair and well-functioning labour markets in the Western Balkans Six (WB6)¹ in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The overall objective will be achieved through advancing the alignment with the EU *acquis* and the implementation of the EPSR in the areas of undeclared work, health and safety at work and social dialogue.

¹ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

This objective will be achieved through (1) making the Western Balkans Network Tackling Undeclared Work fully functional, aligned with the best EU practices, and prepared for integration in the European Labour Authority (ELA); (2) generating reliable evidence on transition to formality; (3) improving the performance of Labour Inspectorates in the area of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH); (4) **strengthening the Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and Public Employment Services (PES) in the development of competitive and resilient labour and social policies and measures, aligned with EU standards and the EPSR, and involvement in the work of the EU PES Network**; and (5) increasing the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue.

A core objective of the RCC ESAP 3 is to strengthen the organisational capacity, effectiveness and performance of Public Employment Services (PES) in the WB6 through structured mutual learning, peer exchange and evidence-based performance improvement.

Building on the two previous PES Benchlearning cycles implemented under ESAP 1 and ESAP 2, the 3rd cycle - 2026 PES Benchlearning exercise will be aligned with the EU PES Excellence Model, as set out in the updated EU PES Benchlearning Manual (2024). This model places stronger emphasis on strategic maturity, service quality, customer orientation, digitalisation, resilience, partnerships and continuous improvement.

II. OBJECTIVES

Objective

The overall objective of the 2026 PES Benchlearning initiative in WB6 is to strengthen the capacities of PES. To this end, the Benchlearning initiative will contribute to their enhanced organisational development and improved performance through identification, sharing and replication of good practices.

Additionally, the objective of this specific assignment is to increase involvement of the WB6 PES in the work of the EU PES Network and support close cooperation with the EU PES Network, aimed at alignment of procedures and practices of PES in the region with those of their EU peers. In line with that, ESAP 3 supports the WB6 PESs with regular PES Benchlearning exercises, ensuring transfer of methodology and knowledge from the EU experts to the region's PES.

PES Benchlearning is a comprehensive system for benchmarking and mutual learning among its members. The Benchlearning methodology acknowledges the diverse contexts in which PES operate, recognising the significant influence on performance. By focusing on performance enablers and employing both qualitative and quantitative assessments, Benchlearning helps PES identify good practices, and adapt strategies to local contexts.

As the WB6 strive to align with EU standards and practices while also addressing domestic labour market challenges and promoting social inclusion, the role of PES becomes increasingly vital. The Benchlearning approach aims to support the efficiency and effectiveness of PES operations.

WB6 PES Benchlearning is entirely modelled on the identical EU exercise that aims to help PES improve their performance by comparing themselves with peer PES and learning from them via qualitative and quantitative assessments. Hence, the overall concept relies on the EU PES Benchlearning methodology and draws from respective materials available at [EU PES Network Website](#) including the latest, 2024, EU [PES Benchlearning Manual](#).

III. SCOPE OF WORK

Specific Tasks

In line with the EU PES Excellence Model, the 2026 cycle will focus on maturity-oriented assessment, enabling PES to identify their current level of development and define realistic pathways towards excellence.

The Benchlearning process will integrate:

- **Quantitative benchmarking** (performance indicators and outcome measures)
- **Qualitative assessment** (performance enablers and organisational maturity)
- **Self-assessment and peer review** as complementary elements

The ultimate goal is to support WB6 PES in achieving measurable improvements in effectiveness, responsiveness, inclusiveness and resilience, while strengthening regional cooperation and alignment with EU standards.

The Applicant shall assist the RCC ESAP 3 Team to closely monitor the situation in all WB6, and adjust activities to the situation on the ground in a flexible manner while aiming to deliver on the objectives of this consultancy.

The Applicant shall provide comprehensive technical and analytical support to the 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning initiative for all phases of the PES Benchlearning in the WB6 and deliver:

- Overall technical approach to include draft methodology for WB6 PES Benchlearning both quantitative and qualitative, workplan and timeline;
- Materials and presentations at the WB6 PES Benchlearning launch event;
- Final WB6 PES methodology to include quantitative indicators, self-assessment, qualitative questionnaires for each WB6 PES;
- Expert support to PES Benchlearning self-assessments, peer assessment and exchanges for all WB6;
- A set of six (6) analytical reports on PES performance for each WB6, plus a regional, comparative report for WB6 region;
- Good practices fiches for each WB6 PES;
- PES Benchlearning practitioner's guide with an accompanying toolkit;
- Materials, expert support and presentations of the findings of the 3rd cycle of the WB6 PES Benchlearning exercise at the final Event, including learning workshops delivered; and
- Technical input for the study tours and participation in EU PES Network events, in consultation with RCC ESAP 3 project.

The implementation of the 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning exercise shall be carried out through the following phases:

- **Technical Preparation phase:** During this phase, the updated methodology for the WB6 PES Benchlearning shall be prepared. It should include both the quantitative and qualitative assessment scope. The methodology needs to be drawn from previous two cycles of WB6 PES Benchlearning exercise carried out during previous phases of the ESAP project – ESAP 1² and ESAP 2³, based on the EU PES Bench-learning Materials⁴ adjusted to the WB6 realities.
- **Launch of 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning exercise:** The launch of the 2026 PES Benchlearning cycle will convene all WB6 stakeholders and selected experts at a selected location of WB6. PES representatives from WB6 will be invited to participate and update their knowledge on the Benchlearning initiative, share previous experience, and agree on the specific PES Benchlearning methodology that will be followed, as well as the plans and timelines for the 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning process.
- **Self-assessment: this phase includes conducting both quantitative and qualitative benchmarking.** The Applicant shall technically support the WB6 PES self-assessment, ensure compilation of excel files for all participating WB6 PES and produce the comparative analysis of PES quantitative data. The self-assessment (both quantitative and qualitative) is expected to take place in each respective PES in each WB6. The self-assessment needs to be organised in cooperation with the respective PES and needs to be technically supported by the Applicant.
- **Peer reviews and exchanges:** Six (6) PES peer-reviews/exchanges through structured study field visits are planned to take place within the period of three to four months (TBC). Peers from participating WB6 PES will meet to provide feedback on the qualitative self-assessment to a respective PES host, in the spirit of mutual learning. These field visits will also be an opportunity to exchange ideas and knowledge, with good practices collected and shared, enabling PES officers to exchange different perspectives and practices from the WB6. The Applicant will technically support the implementation of external qualitative reviews following the WB6 PES Benchlearning methodology of the assessment and the use of the assessment framework. The Applicant will also ensure participation of several EU PES representatives and/or EU PES Benchlearning network representatives in these WB6 peer exchanges.
- **Conclusion of the 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning exercise:** The exercise will be concluded at the final event that will take place in a selected location in the WB6 region or other location, gathering relevant representatives from the WB6 PES offices. This Final Event will include presentations on best practices, including WB6 PES feedback on the 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning initiative, providing final conclusions and proposed

² Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project (ESAP 1): 1st WB6 PES Bench-learning cycle
<https://www.esap.online/esap1/themes/3/benchlearning>

³ Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project (ESAP 2): 2nd WB6 PES Bench-learning cycle
<https://www.esap.online/esap2/docs/180/rcc-esap-2-regional-report-on-western-balkans-public-employment-services-pes-benchlearning-cycle-2022>

⁴ 2024 EU PES Bench-learning manual: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/pes-network-publishes-its-new-benchlearning-manual-2024-03-22_en

recommendations for the future Benchlearning initiatives. The Applicant is required to technically support the final event, develop and present materials that will be the core learning materials and ensure participation and presentations from several EU PES Network representatives reflecting on their experience on the latest, 4th cycle of the EU PES Benchlearning. The Applicant needs to deliver at least two thematic mutual learning workshops at the final event.

- **Technical input/support for the study tour related to PES Benchlearning:** The Applicant will provide technical support to the RCC ESAP 3 team in organising the study visit for the WB6 institutional partners to EU PES representatives. The Applicant will support the technical aspects of this study tour (to include, but not limited to organisation of technical content of the study tour and technical meetings), while all arrangements and the cost of study tour will be borne by RCC ESAP 3 project.

NOTE: Prior to the commencement of 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning, RCC ESAP 3 plans to contract local experts from each WB6 (with an illustrative effort in the range of up to 10-12 consultancy days per each WB6). They will work directly with the respective WB6 PES and provide technical assistance for completion of self-assessment and peer-review and exchanges phase.

The 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning exercise is planned to start in early 2026 and presents a building-block to the earlier PES Benchlearning initiative in WB6.

The 2026 PES Benchlearning exercise needs to take into account the enlargement context, relevant developments and policies for the WB6 (such as the Youth Guarantee, WB6 Green Agenda, Digital Agenda and other), and the development in the EU PES Benchlearning and Network practises, and build on experiences and outcomes of the earlier PES Benchlearning in the WB6.

Methodology

In order to carry out the above tasks, the Open Call is intended for Applicants with relevant expertise and experience, detailed below.

The Applicant is required to review various PES and other documents, materials and reports, and develop the methodology that will address the above scope, in line with the relevant international standards (EU PES Benchlearning standard, and other standards as applicable). The proposed methodology needs to be accepted by the RCC ESAP 3 project.

The following guiding principles need to be taken into consideration:

- Working material, reports of technical quality related to PES Benchlearning process in the context of relevant EU and international standards (to include but not be limited to EU PES Network, and other relevant standards);
- Review and analysis of documents, reports, available data, evaluations, carry out own research, including qualitative and quantitative assessments, including any other analytical and research method as applicable;
- High-quality technical presentations in workshops (online, hybrid or in-person events, subject to the circumstances).

The following documents need to be taken into consideration: the [EU PES Network Benchlearning Manual](#), [relevant EU PES Performance Management Documents](#), and the [RCC ESAP 1 and ESAP 2](#) WB6 PES Benchlearning Documents and other.

IV. LOGISTICS AND TIMING

Timeline

The engagement is expected to take place in the period from March 2026 to December 2026.

Below is an illustrative timeline of deliverables, while the final timeline, as proposed by the Applicant, is to be approved by the RCC ESAP 3 as part of the contract and work plan.

Deliverables	Illustrative timeline
Overall technical approach to include draft methodology for WB6 PES Benchlearning both quantitative and qualitative, workplan and timeline	2 weeks upon engagement
Materials and presentations at the WB6 PES Benchlearning Launch Event	Final date of the Launch to be confirmed subject to availability of WB6 PES
Final WB6 PES Methodology to include quantitative indicators, self-assessment, and qualitative questionnaires for each WB6 PES	1 week upon the Launch
Expert support to PES Benchlearning self-assessments, peer assessment and exchanges for all WB6	2 nd to 6 th month of the engagement
A set of six (6) analytical reports on PES performance for each WB6, plus a regional, comparative report for WB6 region	7 th month of the engagement
Good practices fiches for each WB6 PES	7 th month of the engagement
PES Benchlearning practitioner's guide with an accompanying toolkit	7 th month of the engagement
Materials, expert support and presentations of the findings of the 3 rd cycle of the WB6 PES Benchlearning exercise at the final Event, including learning workshops delivered	8 th month of the engagement
Technical input for the study tours and participation in EU PES Network events, in consultation with RCC ESAP 3 project	8 th month of the engagement

The Applicant needs to be available at the required times during the contract period and exact dates shall be agreed with the ESAP 3 project based on input from WB6 PES partners.

Lines of Communication

Data and information collection, meetings, interviews, and other relevant methods including engaging relevant stakeholders in the WB6 to achieve the goals of the Benchlearning within the

duration of the assignment need to be carried out in close consultation and with guidance from the RCC ESAP 3 project team.

The Applicant will submit all deliverables to the RCC ESAP 3 project team for review and approval.

The Applicant will work closely with the RCC ESAP 3 project team from whom they shall seek guidance to efficiently conduct the work.

Profile and Competencies of the Expert

The Applicant needs to provide expert(s) who will have specific, extensive experience in the EU PES Benchlearning and will carry out the technical tasks and activities related to the overall PES Benchlearning methodology, preparation of final reports (6 individual reports + 1 regional report), capacity development activities and overall technical guidance and quality control of the 2026 WB6 PES Benchlearning to ensure alignment with the EU PES standards.

The lead expert could propose a team of relevant experts that would contribute adequately in the delivery of the required tasks. The expert applying to this open call would be the lead one, and the only individual representing the team and guaranteeing its performance.

Qualifications:

Education:	Advanced degree in economics, statistics, social sciences or related field
Experience:	<p>Qualifications and Skills Required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Applicants that have demonstrated experience in the EU PES Benchlearning will be considered.- Expert(s) - At least 10 years of highly-relevant work experience in labour market policies and PES, with demonstrated experience and track record in the EU (required) and the WB6 (preferred) environment, able to demonstrate/prove relevance of their experience to this ToR. Technical expertise in analysing issues related to PES performance, active labour market policies and measures, performance assessment and PES peer and Benchlearning in the EU (required) and WB6 (preferred) with a particular focus on the PES Benchlearning methodology.- Previous experience of working with labour market institutions (Public Employment Services, Ministries of Labour (optional)) and in the EU PES network (required) and with same partners in WB6 region (preferred).- Excellent communication and writing skills.- Analytical skills and ability to conceptualise and write concisely and clearly.- Able to interact with professionals of and representatives from the administrations in the WB6 region.

Language requirements:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fluency in English, as the official language of the RCC. ▪ Knowledge of other language(s) of the WB6 region is an advantage.

Core Values

- Demonstrates integrity and fairness by modelling RCC values and ethical standards;
- Displays cultural, gender, religion, race, nationality and age sensitivity and adaptability.

Core Competencies

- Demonstrates professional competence to meet responsibilities and post requirements and is conscientious and efficient in meeting commitments, observing deadlines and achieving results;
- Result-oriented; plans and produces quality results to meet the set goals, generates innovative and practical solutions to challenging situations;
- Communication: Excellent communication skills, including the ability to convey complex concepts and recommendations clearly;
- Team work: Ability to interact, establish and maintain effective working relations in a culturally diverse team;
- Ability to establish and maintain productive partnerships with regional and national partners and stakeholders.

Quality Control

The Applicant should ensure an internal quality control during the implementing and reporting phase of the assignment. The quality control should ensure that the Benchlearning process and mentoring comply with the above requirements and meet adequate quality standards.

The quality control should ensure consistency and coherence between findings, conclusions and recommendations. It should also ensure that findings reported are duly substantiated and that conclusions are supported by relevant judgment criteria.

The views expressed in the report will be those of the expert and will not necessarily reflect those of the RCC, ESAP 3 project or the EU. Therefore, a standard disclaimer reflecting this will be included in the report(s).

Quality Control by the Regional Cooperation Council

The Applicant's outputs shall undergo external reviews by all relevant stakeholders, including the representatives of the ESAP 3 Project Team and the RCC.

Application Rules

- Qualified candidates are invited to send an application through the website link Apply no later than 2 March 2026 by 12.00 Central European Time;
- The assignment will be awarded to the highest qualified applicant based on the skills, expertise, and the quality of the concept note and the cost-effectiveness of the financial offer;
- The best value for money is established by weighing technical quality against price on an 80/20 basis;
- Only shortlisted candidates will be contacted for the competency-based interview.

The Technical Offer

- Legal entity's profile, including a brief description (up to 2 pages) of the entity. In case of a bidding consortium, the team leader should submit the profile of the consortium;
- Copy of legal entity's registration certificate (in case of consulting companies/legal entities). In case of a bidding consortium, a corresponding written authorisation, power of attorney is treated accordingly;
- Financial records - balance sheet and profit-and-loss statement for the past 2 years (only in case of bidding of legal entities);
- CV of all experts, including outlining relevant knowledge and experience as described in the Qualifications section, along with contact details (e-mail addresses) of referees;
- Concept Note describing the main issues, methodology, and tools to be employed as well as the approach to the work to be undertaken;
- List of references for relevant activities implemented over the past 10 years demonstrating relevant experience in the subject matter;
- Signed Statements of Availability (Annex I).

When preparing the financial offer, the applicant should take into account the following:

- The proposed budget should include daily fee rate for consulting services broken down by deliverables as below; the fee rates should be broadly consistent with the EU framework rates for these types of professional services for international experts.

Deliverable	Maximum number of person days	Daily fee
1		
2		
3		

4		
Total		

Evaluation and Selection

The application is evaluated on the basis of the profile and competencies and the responsiveness to the Terms of Reference (ToR).

1. Profile and Competencies
2. Concept Note
3. Financial evaluation

The best value for money is established by weighing technical quality against price on an 80/20 basis.

Technical Evaluation

EVALUATION GRID	Maximum score
Education background;	20
Experience -qualifications and skills;	50
Concept Note;	30
TOTAL SCORE	100

In addition to the results of the application, a competency-based interview may be held with the short listed candidates.

Financial Evaluation

Financial Proposal/ cheapest price has maximum score	100
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ANNEX I: STATEMENT OF AVAILABILITY

REF:

By representing the Entity_____we agree to participate in the above-mentioned tender procedure. We further declare that we are able and willing to work for the period(s) foreseen for the position for which our CVs have been included if this tender is successful, namely:

[illegible]

