

**Speech by RCC Secretary General at
the first Local Self-Governments Forum “Unlocking the Future: Innovate,
Eco-vate, Elevate - Western Balkans Unite for Smart Cities”
Tirana, 12 October 2023**

For the first time in history, the majority of world's people are living in cities. Growing cities face enormous challenges, worsen the most common headaches of city life, such as traffic jams, overcrowded buses, trams, air pollution. Overpopulated cities can also strain vital services, including water supply, energy production, waste management, stress the citizens who cannot afford to buy a new apartment and so on and so forth.

Said this, the other side of the coin is true: cities are increasingly becoming incubators of change and drivers of innovation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with *great pleasure*, yet also with a *heightened sense of urgency* that I welcome you at the first meeting of the Local Self-Governments Forum, focused on the *implementation of our region's Green Agenda*.

Three particular aspects of today's vital gathering are an *inspiring backdrop* for our discussions - as we launch the *structured regional dialogue with local self-governments*.

First, our *venue* - This Pyramid-shaped monument put up as a museum celebrating the legacy of the Albanian Pharaoh was designed as a mark of power, repression, force and wealth. As our renowned writer Ismail Kadare described it: “the pyramid is the domination of the rabble, the narrowing of its mind, the weakening of its will, monotony and waste”.

In stark contrast, innovation breathe life into societies, is the catalyst of economic development, encourages creativity, nurtures competition and entrepreneurship like this Tumo Centre - the new hub of innovation, a symbolic beacon of Albanian *transformation over the years*.

Second, our *composition and set-up*. Honoured to be co-organising this Forum in collaboration with *NALAS* and the *Municipality of Tirana*.

This Forum, along with the *voice of the civil society within the NGO Forum*, can be an important lever for *translating the global and regional strategies into local, grounded and tangible actions*.

And *thirdly*, the *context*. Exchanging among each other on the *eve of the Berlin Process Summit*, amidst the reinvigorated discussions on *accelerated EU integration* and a bolder *Growth Plan*, but also after a prolonged *energy crisis* – is a timely *opportunity to pave the way of localisation and decentralisation* of the implementation of the Green Agenda. As we speak, the European Week of Regions and Cities is concluding in Brussels, channelling the challenges that local and regional authorities face while implementing the Green Deal.

Same as we will be doing today: discussing with representatives from all around the region, at the institutional, national, regional and local level.

Series of *challenges* related to governance and capacities, limited fiscal decentralisation or financial constraints, but also *development and growth opportunities* lie on this path – and today's high-level discussions will shed light on the crucial ones. What is imperative though is that *our solutions are part of the EU-wide solutions on green and energy transition*. That all our solutions meet the *smart, clean&green* and *inclusive* criteria.

Dear all,

Though it's evident that the Western Balkans share the same goal of achieving climate neutrality as the EU, regrettably, their starting points **are not aligned, financially, administratively, nor infrastructural**.

Cities are often *at the forefront when faced with pressing environmental issues*, from air pollution to waste management, and the impacts of climate change. Tackling them requires substantial changes in our urban infrastructure, transportation systems, and energy sources, which can be complex and costly endeavours.

As climate mitigation heavily relies on urban initiatives, it is imperative that *cities and regions are supported in accelerating their transitions towards environmentally-friendly and digitally advanced urban environments*. *Digital technologies remain essential* as with the growing environmental challenges the need for smart and creative solutions also grows. This

is particularly relevant considering that cities consume more than sixty five percent of the world's energy and are responsible for over seventy percent of global carbon emissions.

We see the capitals from the region being active and launching urban green initiatives, such as:

1. Tirana's Orbital Forest project with planting two million trees to increase urban greenery and create a natural boundary to combat urban sprawl.
2. Sarajevo with energy efficient solutions, and upgrading lighting to reduce emissions equivalent to removing one thousand cars from the streets.
3. Pristina, with the energy-efficient upgrade of buildings resulting in energy savings and reduced CO2 emissions.
4. Podgorica on Two Wheels promoting environmental-friendly and alternative transportation modes.
5. Skopje's Bus Rapid Transit project aiming to cut CO2 emissions up to forty two percent, with Compressed Natural Gas buses.
6. Belgrade's one hundred three, MW waste-to-energy facility contributing to reducing CO2 and the city's dependence on fossil fuels.

It is paramount that cities *nurture and fully tap* into the potentials of the *eco-friendly entrepreneurial ecosystems* we have in the region. To *walk the talk* – today we in RCC are proud to *provide a platform and showcase* some of the past winners of the *RCC's Balkathon* competition, whose solutions can make a concrete impact towards *cleaner and smarter urban environments*. These digital solutions can make a real difference by providing, among others, *eco-friendly packaging machines, organic fertilizers, PET recycling machines - contributing to cleaner urban environments*.

Dear colleagues,

Today's event and dialogue is also about *the Sum being bigger than its Parts*. And about ramping up the collective efforts to *innovate, eco-vate and elevate*. Collaboration between *local and central governments*, engagement with the *civil society* and the *private sector* and our talented *entrepreneurial youth* can bring diverse expertise and resources to the table and help our region transition to a greener and more digital future.

The transition towards the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans is undoubtedly a challenging journey that **implies encouraging sustainable practices in citizens' daily lives** which might be **gradual and challenging**. It implies harmonising policies with the EU standards and the Green Agenda which is vital but complex process.



Therefore, while there are certainly some improvements in respect of providing financial framework support within the EU, the gap remains huge.

Additional nine billion under the Economic and Investment Plan apart from the EU funding of forty **flagship projects, with one point eight billion EU support and a total investment value of almost six billion euros**, can certainly serve its aim, but it will be smart exploring additional investment projects that will help filling the gap to enable the green transition of the WB region.

The platform we are honoured to be jointly launching today can play an important role in our green and smart transformational journey. It can give a valuable spark, a well-timed impulse, good practices' inspiration, commitment to yearly award the Green City of the Western Balkans, and a much-needed contribution to the best actors that promote and work hard on smart transformational journey.