

**Opening speech by RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu  
at the Western Balkans Coordination Meeting  
“Revolve to Evolve - Go Circular”  
8 February 2024, Pristina**

Excellencies, colleagues and friends,

It is a pleasure to welcome you all today in Prishtina, in the middle of a snowless winter season, the best illustration of how the climate change is affecting our lives. It gives me a great pleasure to see here today a full room, but also many online, with representatives of WB governments, around 20 donors and IFIs, 66 international organisations, 45 companies and more than 50 representatives of CSOs.

Not by coincidence, we started the series of packed calendar of events by dedicating energies and jointly discussing the Green Agenda and Circular Economy, and likewise launching the platform on Circular Economy in Prishtina. Three years from the endorsement of the Western Balkans Green Agenda, now is the right momentum to *reaffirm our “reform alliances”* and our *“coalition of the willing”* - *as the implementation necessitates a true Governments-EU-Private sector-Donors nexus to shape our region’s environmental footprint, the competitiveness of our economies and ultimately the living standards of our citizens.*

As this is indeed a *tall order*, this regional coordination meeting we are co-organising with our partners in WBCIF and EU4GREEN project will be an important platform:

- to *renew the high-level commitments taken in the frame of GAWB;*
- to spur a *regional learning and knowledge exchange hub on Circular Economy, and*
- to *align funding avenues and unlock green investments.*

Dear all,

Though becoming a *hotspot for climate change*, our region, which finds itself all too often crushed against the heaviness of various socio-economic or political crises, can often instinctively resort to *myopic lenses*. Lenses that still *do not truly capture the urgency and omnipresence of the climate change* nor, for instance, the *alarming low recycling rates and the high municipal waste generated per capita*.

These lenses, our Balkan Barometer reveals, also hold that *only 30% of business owners see climate change as a problem for their businesses*, while *43% believe the green transition will not have any impact on their business*, with *37% not having taken any steps to reduce the environmental impact* of their businesses. Unfortunately, more than a third of businesses (39%) do not perform any circular economy activities/initiatives. Most of businesses consider it cheaper to produce a new product than a recycled one. These percentages *will not take us off the track of the linear resource-use models!*

Those percentages seem to be *in stark contrast to the encouraging percentages* that I am sure *have rallied us all* here today: the circular economy strategies can *reduce the global greenhouse gas emissions by whooping 40%*; *create 700,000 new jobs in EU alone by 2030*, or unlock a *\$4.5 trillion economic opportunity*. We therefore need more *action-oriented* and more *opportunity-oriented lenses* among all key stakeholders in the area!

Colleagues,

*It takes a village as they say*, and the *collective efforts, in which all of us have an important role to play. They are a must* for irreversible sustainable growth.

*Governments'* commitment to CE transition, GAWB and ultimately to the European Green Deal and SDGs presupposes enacting *robust and enabling policy and regulatory frameworks*, along with *incentive models for businesses*. It is precisely our businesses that *bear the biggest brunt of the transition and require systemic support* so that the CE scaling up follows across the board and all mainstream economic players. They also champion a *leading role in accelerating CE*, with the instrumental *financial underpinning extended by the financial sector and donor community*.

If we look through their lenses, the key constraints to move towards circular economy model are:

- additional cost for 49% of the businesses,
- lack of skills and expertise (30%),
- lack of a regulatory framework (28%),
- lack of government subsidies (29%),
- lack of consumer demand (20%), according to Balkan Barometer Business Opinion 2023.

Our *vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem must innovate new businesses models*, which rest upon the reuse and sharing principles. *Citizens* too have a marked contribution via *embracing sustainable practices for "more with less"*.

The *long list of challenges* on this path that entails finances and skills-gaps, inherent limitations of recycling, key missing economic enablers and many others – it *a call for joining efforts!*

Neglecting to embrace circular economy principles is not viable, as it poses the risk of anchoring the region in outdated, carbon-intensive technologies. This stance could undermine the Western Balkans competitiveness in the EU single market.

We can be **“going around circles”** or we can be resolutely **embracing the “full circle” of the new value, resourcefulness and innovation!**

GAWB must be seen in the light of **true development, growth, and opportunities and be recognised through positive perspective it has**. **GAWB cannot just be seen from a cost perspective**. **GAWB can be a source of substantive growth** in the region. Recent examples of massive expansion in renewables capacities and building interconnectors in parts of the region are a step in the right direction. Important avenues for green growth lie in greening our transport and mobility, investing in energy efficiency, building upon EU's renovation wave. In greening jobs and investments.

GAWB is a **dynamic and evolving initiative** that, like a living organism, **requires collective efforts** of the governmental, private and non-governmental sectors **to nurture, grow and shape towards a sustainable plan for the future**.

Today's full house regional meeting and the key stakeholders it unites attests **we are together in the right direction**. Making our **important contribution and a leap towards sustainable development**. Let's revolve to evolve or choose to reuse.