

Check Against Delivery



OPENING REMERKS of the SECRETARY GENERAL of the REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL (RCC)

WomEn who Launch: Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurs

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Women who Launch

We are all heartened and deeply saddened by the unjust war Ukrainian people are going through. Our profound solidarity goes to the women of Ukraine whose life is tinged with sorrow and trauma. We wish it would finish as soon as possible, otherwise the impacts of hostilities will compound further the vulnerabilities of women.

Welcome to all of you at the Women Who Launch.

A great part of you have already started a business, some others are planning to and I have to admit this might be a good moment if we consider that.

The current workplace was developed in the first burst of economic growth after the Second World War.

Still, I do not believe times we are living in are glamorous. On the contrary, these are dark moments. The World Bank confirmed the economic impact of the war stretches beyond Ukraine's borders, and the rises in global energy prices, hydrocarbons, food, inflation, disruption of **supply chains in** particular will hit the poor the most. That's why I will not sugar-coat the situation.

Contrary to what one might think the economic weight of Russia in the Balkans is not enormous, given that the first trading partners and major investors in the region are the European countries. Russia accounts for 4.9% of imports (mostly gas and oil to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia) and 3.1% of exports. And this is where the Balkans are exposed to great risks. If on average the EU imports about 40% of its gas from Russia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are completely dependent on Russian gas. Serbia supplies almost 90% of its needs through Russia, Croatia two thirds, and Slovenia a half.

Said that, concern is present in the Western Balkans. Geopolitical and economic problems make our region one of the areas particularly sensitive to possible serious repercussions linked to the ongoing conflict.

That's why all forms of deepening the economic integration of our region are now becoming more vital than ever.

To survive, life has to win every day. We all know the feeling. Whether we are career women, business owners, leaders or housewives or homemakers, we know that a woman's day is full of real problems that need to be solved.

That's why WE started the journey at RCC. WE is one of our initiatives aiming at promoting Togetherness of women from our region, women who face obstacles, endured war, who are facing social struggles, but are promoters of reconciliation through economy.

One might ask: Why Women Economic Empowerment is so important for this region where the culture of business is designed with specific kinds of employers in mind; men, married with wives employed in public administration or services, taking care of homes and children, while the businessmen patch deals among themselves over long drinks and dinners.

Well, first this is not a passing fashion. We do recognise the untapped potential of women in this region.

Women's role in building any economy, in our case, rebuilding our economies, cannot be underestimated.

Women in the Western Balkans represent half of the population; *thus, half of the region's human capital.*

One in two women in Western Balkans is out of the labour market.

Thirty eight per cent of young women are unemployed.

Only one in four of business owners in the Western Balkans are women.

And just one in nine top managers of companies are women.

The gender gap in economic participation remains too high in the Balkans, being the second largest worldwide. Unfortunately, the slow progress in closing this gap is making the world shake while calculating that we will take another two hundred sixty seven years to close it, IMF estimates.

So why we need more women in the labour market?

The answer is simple. **We need more women in the labour market, to foster growth and prevent disasters.**

Because each year the Western Balkans lose on average **eighteen percent** of their Gross domestic product, due to gender gaps in the labour market.

Why we need more women entrepreneurs?

The region needs women entrepreneurs, and women entrepreneurs need all of us.

We need to have more women in entrepreneurship if we want to have **five percent** of GDP growth per year.

As usual, the process isn't as certain as numbers are. **Businesses owned by women are mostly in service sector while men dominate construction, transport and agriculture.** Women have less experience than men when they start a business and they are less likely to borrow money for their business, leading them to earn **thirty to forty percent less than their male counterparts.**

Sure, the benefits go beyond the bottom line. Women business leaders inspire other women to pursue their dreams, employ more women in their business, are resilient and do not lack empathy. In emerging markets, women reinvest 90% of their earnings in their families and communities— which **means that investing in women is an investment in our collective future.**

But again...

A number of barriers such as,

- access to finance,
- unfavourable business regulations,
- lack of (access to) social and support networks
- educational and occupational segregation,
- cultural barriers,
- concentration in certain business types and sectors,
- lack of information and training gaps,

stand tall in front of them. **Therefore, closing the gender gaps in entrepreneurship must be a key part of any strategy aiming a competitive market and sustainable economic growth.**

Dear ladies,

Some researchers unpoetically found out that the most commonly used positive term to describe men is **analytical**, while for women it is **compassionate**. At the other extreme, the most commonly used negative term to describe men was **arrogant**. For women, it was **inept**. It is true. Stereotypes are resistant to change because **individuals tend to ignore evidence.**

The evidence is that women's economic empowerment is critical to our economies.

Even more at a time when the global economy is suffering from an unprecedented pandemic and is entering a new crisis because of the shared challenges we will be facing because of the war in Ukraine. Imagine: if it was not for the entrepreneurs and women working day and night under

Russian shelling to provide all the goods that are needed for Ukrainian civilians, or converting warehouses into makeshift humanitarian aid centers, distributing food and medicines, the night would have been even darker.

Here we can stop and say loudly: **after many years global cooperation is taking a collective action.**

Until some days ago, there might have been reasons for people to question the continuing benefits of international cooperation. Countries, economies need more cooperation, not less, more solidarity, not less, more energies than less.

That's why cooperation is a revolution so much needed these days.

Because the world has become more interdependent than ever before.

The same logic stands true for our region. A region whose main trade partner is European Union. A region where sixty six percent would like to do business with European Member States.

The Western Balkans is a region composed of small markets that need to come together as one to survive and be part of the global supply chains, given that economies increasingly rely on foreign inputs for their own exports and production has become increasingly international.

The ideas are flowing everywhere, however the list of shared problems is daunting. It includes: unemployment, trade, green agenda, natural disasters, the risk of pandemics, cyber-crime, terrorism, large-scale migrations, etc.

Our region has a bright generation of young women whose level of education is significantly higher than was the case in previous generations.

This has resulted in higher female employment in high skilled occupations. Recognising their potential, combined with purpose and passion can be the key to transform this region.

That's why the RCC, together with UNDP, launched the Network of Women in STEM.

Women and Girls that invent, code, start up a business, take role in science and technology.

Okay. We do know that creating a path for success, and building a network of women in entrepreneurship which will help all of you, exchange knowledge, experience, develop and propose initiatives to promote economic and trade activities in order to empower and strengthen entrepreneurship skills for Western Balkans women will not be easy peasy.

Despite the rise in women owned businesses there is little evidence of sectors where firms owned/administered by women operate, which is one of the most important factors in explaining the different characteristics of businesses operated by women. Challenges will be present.

We are just launching today the first Regional Women in Entrepreneurship Network.

We will not boil the sea right away. But sometimes the smallest act can lead to the biggest impact.

We will engage ourselves not only to connect you with each other but also to lend a helping hand with the informational support and mentorship for the start-uppers. And then, together, we will work on common endeavours such as financial challenges, including high start-up costs and equipment/maintenance fees, assets like cash grants or marketing, all the way up to policy making.

One thing we at the RCC are sure of is that when women engage, take responsibilities, grow and help each other they can be a rising tide that lifts all boats.

Let me finish with the story of one young woman in innovation we interviewed for our We stories.

When she was asked “Do you think you can change the reality with this?”

She looked panicked and replied “By myself? Oh God no. I can’t fix all the problems.”

Then she realised the “you” is plural, which changes everything.

“Oh, you mean all of us women in this group,” she said with a sigh of relief.

“Of course we can.”

Now I would like to invite our today’s event moderator, a strong business woman from Kosovo^{*}, with a long experience as creative producer in different economies of the region; a member of European Film Academy, co-founder of Prishtina Film Fest, Director of Europe Houses in North Macedonia - Vjosa Berisha.

Vjosa is a gem in her professional life and, moreover, an inspiration for many other strong women that are fighting cancer daily. This later battle has not slowed her down from being engaged in numerous creative documentaries, movies and projects. Vjosa, welcome and all the stage is yours!

* 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