



Talking Points by the RCC Secretary General *Majlinda Bregu*
at the
European Economic and Social Committee's 580th plenary session

Dear President Ropke, dear members of the EESC,

Finally, we managed to sign our Memorandum of Understanding, marking a significant milestone as we elevate the cooperation between civil society and regional cooperation to a higher level.

Today, a brilliant writer has left this world; the famous Czech writer Milan Kundera, who tried his best to build a bridge between the burden of history and the uncertainty of Eastern Europe. He saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history, where Europe represented the Grand March, moving from revolution to revolution, from struggle to struggle, ever onward. (Franz in "The Unbearable Lightness of Being")

This march for Europe has been and still is our collective effort for years. On one hand, we've endured a painfully long accession process (with 20 years already passed since the famous or infamous Thessaloniki pledge), which has eroded the belief of our citizens that they will one day become EU citizens. As in all facets of life, the words of truth are always paradoxical.

Levels of trust in the EU have considerably increased among candidate countries in the last year. Albania leads with 77%, the highest level of trust, and Serbia closes with 32%. However, 1 in 3 of our friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances have stopped believing that the process will end with membership in their lifetime, according to the RCC Balkan Barometer.

Nonetheless, everyone agrees that reenergized discussions on enlargement, considering the new geo-strategic context and the momentum created since the war in Ukraine, are urgently needed. For the next enlargement(s) to happen, both the EU and the Western Balkans need to be ready, not just in terms of rules and treaties but also in mindset. The EU is not just a set of rules; it's a state of mind.

Technology has erased many boundaries and distances, increasing the mobility of people who aspire to obtain EU citizenship, and, in a highly globalized world, job opportunities in Europe are more enticing than in the Balkans.

The Western Balkans have made significant progress in the last two decades, but the transformation from balkanization to Europeanization is ongoing. Unfortunately, friction among countries persists, and conflicts can hinder investments and economic growth in the region, including the Balkans.

As we chart our way forward, we need to decide what kind of enlargement or partnership (preferably) we should focus on and what practical benefits, such as accelerated integration, projects, and policies,



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can be unlocked along the way. This is the current state of play, driven more by circumstance than by design.

Time is of the essence! We need to work on parallel tracks, including focused domestic reforms, deeper regional economic integration, and regional cooperation, to narrow the convergence gap with the EU and ensure economic closeness.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a fundamental role in this endeavor. Their vast experience, expertise, substantive capacities, and knowledge networks in the region and beyond are essential for the maturity of our projects, the inclusivity of our policies, and the diversity of perspectives.

Key areas of focus include:

1. Education and skilling for economic transformation.
2. Digitalization as a top priority offering unlimited growth opportunities.
3. Addressing social cohesion as both an opportunity and a challenge.
4. Energy, climate, environment, and health.
5. Harnessing the potential of diaspora, migration, and brain gain to improve living standards.
6. Upholding the rule of law and good governance.

These areas can open new opportunities in the region.

With the expected acceleration of negotiations, specialized knowledge will be increasingly necessary. These capacities are pivotal for our region to feel the impact of the announced Growth Plan and to actively shape and contribute to EU policies.

In RCC, we cannot imagine coordinating regional efforts on the challenging Green Agenda for WB without our CSOs Consultative Forum. Likewise, coordinating efforts towards a regional market without the strong voice of our chambers of commerce is unthinkable. Our youth policy labs, which enable dialogue platforms for co-designing policies relevant to youth employment and mental health, rely on the collective intelligence and deliberative spaces created by youth organizations and CSOs working in the field of youth.

More than 30 CSOs from the region are represented and consulted daily at the economy level in designing our youth-proof policy recommendations and interventions. Youth and CSOs inspire our regional efforts to promote innovative, scalable solutions through initiatives like our Butterfly Award and Balkathon competitions.

The same goes for our women entrepreneurship agenda, where we partner with remarkable civil society organizations that work tirelessly to harness the full potential of new and sustainable jobs for women and men.

In closing, our data from the Balkan Barometer are encouraging in terms of recognizing CSOs as providers of effective services for the benefit of communities, especially among the young population.



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Most importantly, our data consistently reflect genuine commitment and interest in regional cooperation, which encapsulates the essence of RCC's work. The 76% support for regional cooperation is a formidable force, combined with the expertise and knowledge networks of our civil society sectors, making them decisive contributors to our enlargement and integration agenda.