

**ASSESSMENT REPORT ON THE TRAINING NEEDS OF
PARLIAMENTARY STAFF
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS ON THE
COMMON REGIONAL MARKET**



Title:

ASSESSMENT REPORT ON THE TRAINING NEEDS OF PARLIAMENTARY STAFF IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS ON COMMON REGIONAL MARKET

Publisher:

Regional Cooperation Council
Trg Bosne i Hercegovine 1/V
71000 Sarajevo Bosnia and Herzegovina
Tel: +387 33 561 700; Fax: +387 33 561 701
E-mail: rcc@rcc.int Website: www.rcc.int

Author:

Group for Integration and Democracy team of researchers

Editor:

Jorida Shytaj

Consulting Editor:

Amer Kapetanovic

The report is based on comprehensive research, organized and overseen by the Group for Integration and Democracy in Albania, between March – April 2024, with Ketrina Çabiri Mijo as Research Team Leader.

April 2024

Disclaimer: Responsibility for the content, the views, interpretations, and conditions expressed herein rests solely with the author(s) and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) or of its participants, partners, donors or of the European Union.

RCC employees and partners participating in any program or activity conducted or funded by RCC, are prohibited from discriminating based on race, religion, political beliefs gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, disability, marital status and national origin.

TABLE OF CONTENT

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	4
<u>METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE</u>	5
<u>FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY</u>	6
<u>RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SURVEY</u>	20
<u>FINDINGS FROM THE WORKSHOP</u>	21
<u>RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP</u>	22
<u>CONCLUSIONS</u>	23



INTRODUCTION

The Common Regional Market (CRM) initiative – one of the most ambitious regional integration effort in the Western Balkans (WB) – aims to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region, seeking to reduce the distance to the EU markets and diversify their suppliers, thereby creating jobs, offering greater choices at lower prices for its consumers, and enabling people to work throughout the region. Overall, the CRM seeks to align the region with EU markets and integrate it more closely with the EU single market even before accession.

Given the transformative potential of the CRM in fostering economic growth, stability, and prosperity in the region, it is crucial that parliamentary staff are well-informed and equipped to support and contribute to its successful implementation. This is particularly important because parliaments are the main site of political debate and the repositories of direct popular sovereignty. For parliamentary staff to effectively assist MPs in policymaking, advocacy, and oversight activities related to regional integration initiatives, a comprehensive understanding of the objectives, mechanisms, and benefits of the CRM is a prerequisite.

Therefore, assessing the expansion of knowledge and awareness of parliamentary staff regarding the CRM ensures that they are adequately prepared to play a constructive role in enabling the advancement of regional cooperation and integration efforts in the Western Balkans. Based on this understanding, Group for Integration and Democracy (GID) undertook a structured review of the existing knowledge base of parliamentary staff in WB economies regarding the CRM, with the aim of identifying potential capacity building instruments RCC might deploy to further such knowledge. The Report identifies the capacities, awareness level, and potential gaps within the technical staff of parliamentary bodies concerning CRM. Based on these insights, RCC will prepare relevant future training strategies and tailor-made capacity building programs, which provide the necessary information and knowledge regarding CRM content, its components, and the work related to it.



METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

This analysis was commissioned by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), as an instrument to shape its upcoming capacity building activities regarding parliamentary staff involved in the scrutiny of legislative initiatives concerning CRM issues in the Western Balkans.

First, the ‘target population’ of respondents was identified by focusing on parliamentary advisors/staff for the finance/economy and European integration/affairs committees of the Western Balkan economies under analysis. Selection of the parliamentary committees was based on the findings of RCC study ‘*Assessing and strengthening the institutional capacities of Parliaments of the Western Balkans region related to the Common Regional Market*’¹. **Second**, a semi-structured survey was developed, based on the priorities of the CRM and validated internally by the research team. The survey was delivered via email to 25 parliamentary staff from the Western Balkan economies. **Third**, a hybrid regional workshop was held in the Albanian Assembly on 29th of April, 2024 where participants from all six parliaments and RCC were presented with the findings of the survey, discussed impediments and opportunities, and shared perspectives regarding the most suitable avenues in which the RCC might contribute towards creating a community of practice among WB parliaments and increasing the knowledge and capacities of the parliamentary staff involved in the scrutiny of parliamentary acts related to RCM issues.

The following report summarizes the findings of the survey and workshop and presents a comprehensive list of recommendations deriving from both of them. The report is organized conventionally as follows. **First**, we present the findings from the survey and potential recommendations that derive from those findings. **Second**, we present the findings from the workshop and the potential recommendations deriving from it. **Lastly**, the report provides the overall conclusions with some contingent generalizations.



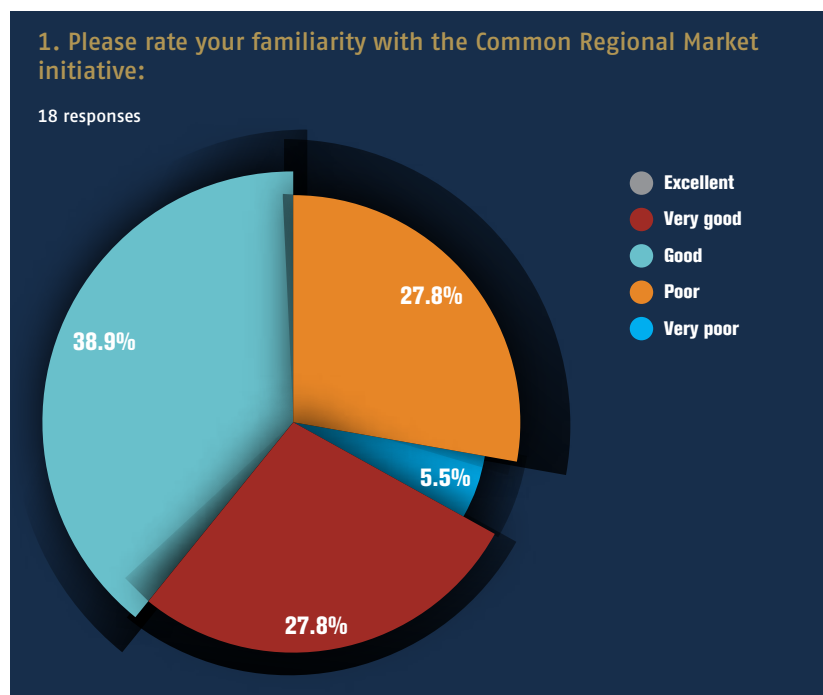
1 <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/165/assessing-and-strengthening-the-institutional-capacities-of-parliaments-of-the-western-balkans-region-related-to-the-common-regional-market>



FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

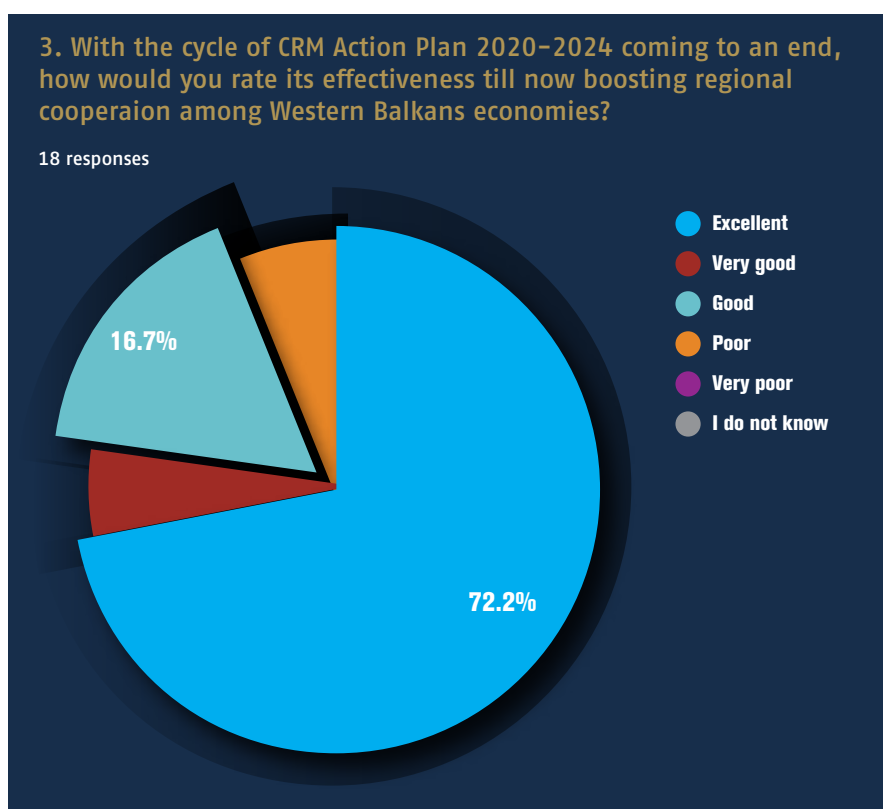
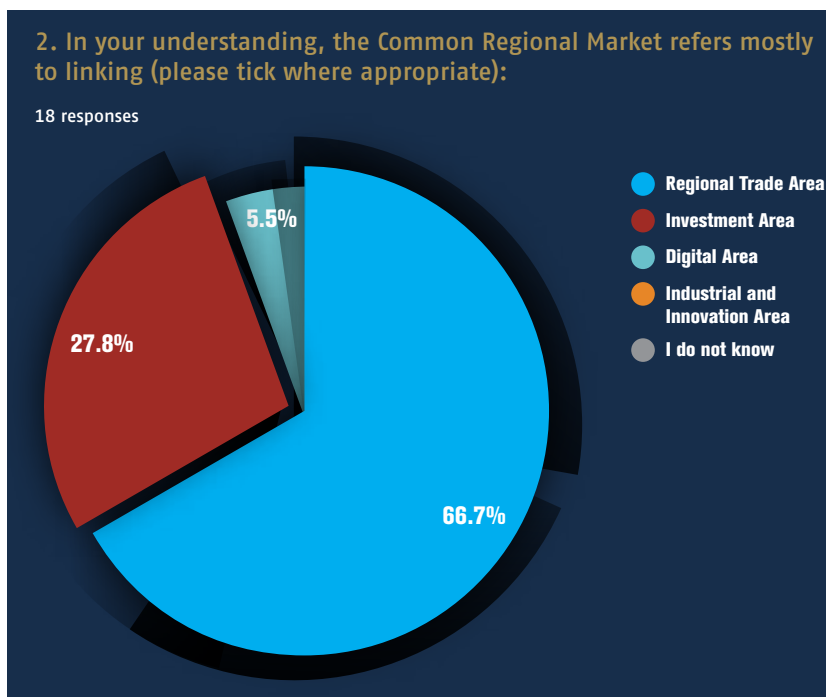
As mentioned above, questionnaires were sent to staff members of Committees of European Affairs/ Integration and Economic Affairs and Finance among all the WB parliaments.

The semi-structured survey consisted of a mixed method approach, incorporating both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) questions. Eighteen respondents successfully completed it online. Below is the graphic summary of the responses.

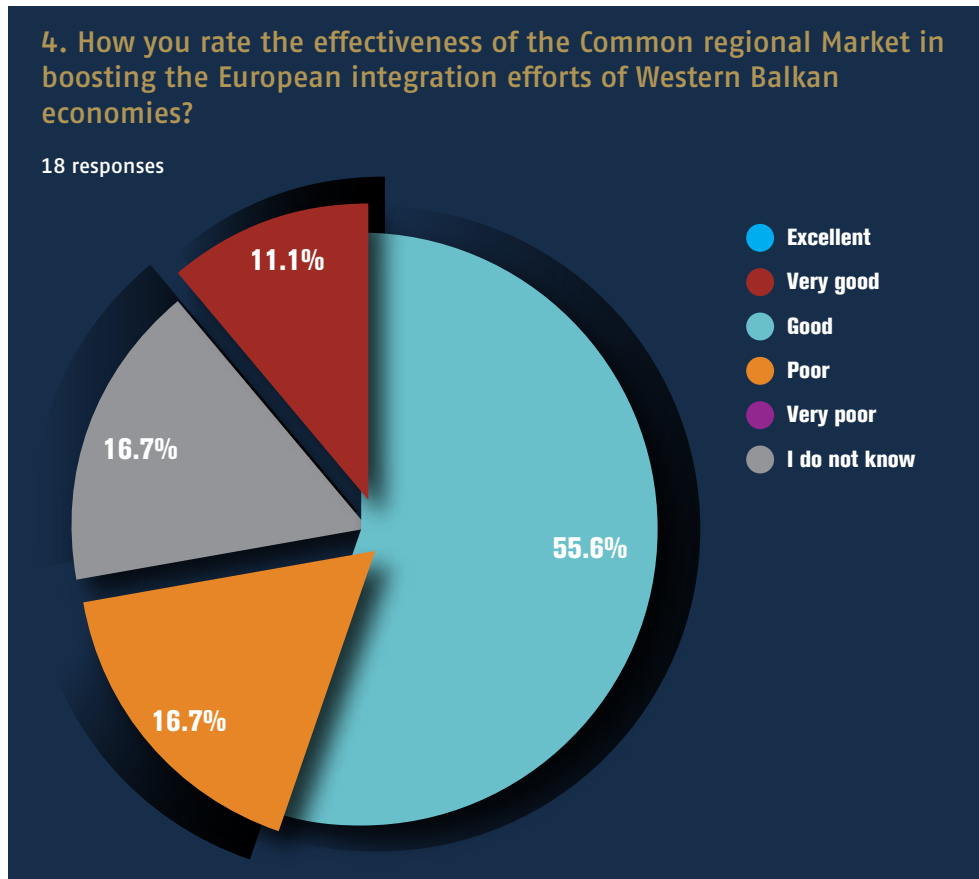


When asked to rate their familiarity with CRM, 38.9% of respondents claimed to have good knowledge, 27.8% claimed very good knowledge, and another 27.8% indicated poor knowledge. This shows that overall, parliamentary staff have a satisfactory level of familiarity with the CRM, which provides a solid foundation upon which to base future trainings and capacity raising initiatives.

As it regards the overall understanding of what the CRM mostly stands for, the vast majority of respondents view it as a regional trade area and very few view it as a digital or industrial innovation area. This means that if the CRM aims to expand its scope of activities it has to reshape its image as it regards parliamentary staff and likely even the broader public.



The vast majority of respondents rate positively the effectiveness of the CRM action plan 2020–24. Specifically, 72.2% rate it as good while 16.7% expressed uncertainty by indicating they did not know how to answer. While overall positive, these answers indicate that there is space for improving knowledge on the CRM. In the political science literature regarding the methodology of surveys, the answer ‘good’ usually is a politically safe answer for people who are not sure of the answer, but are also inclined to be supportive. Overall, we take this to mean that more can be done to disseminate the tangible outputs of the CRM.

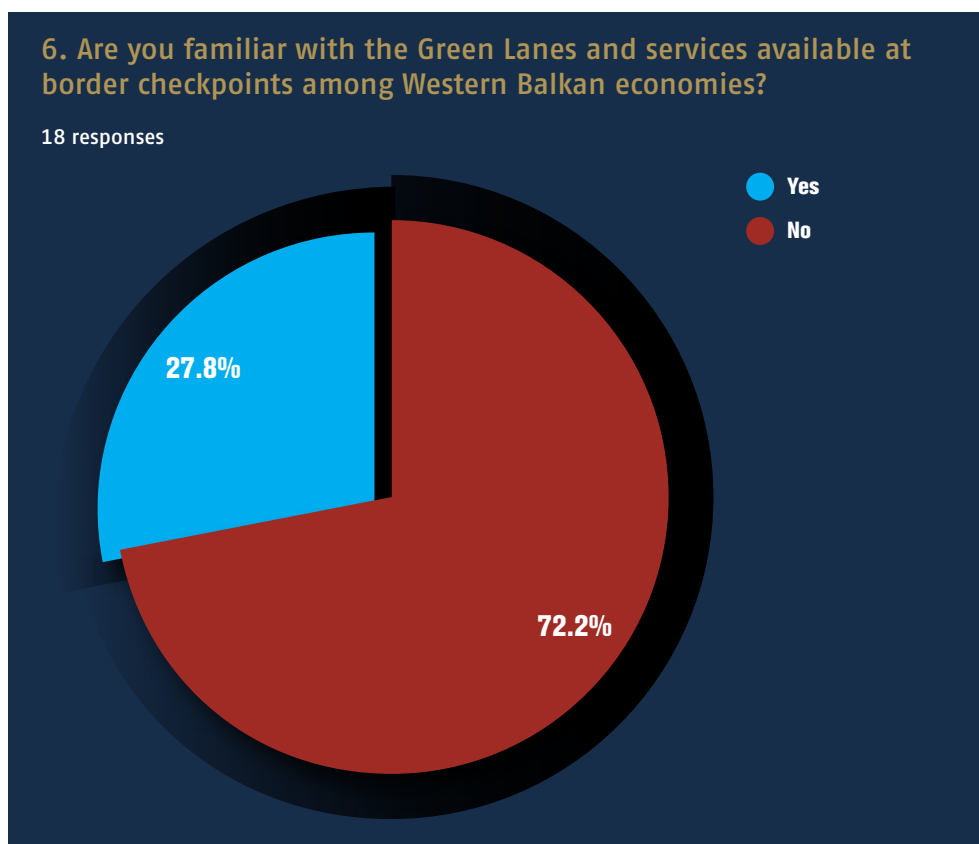
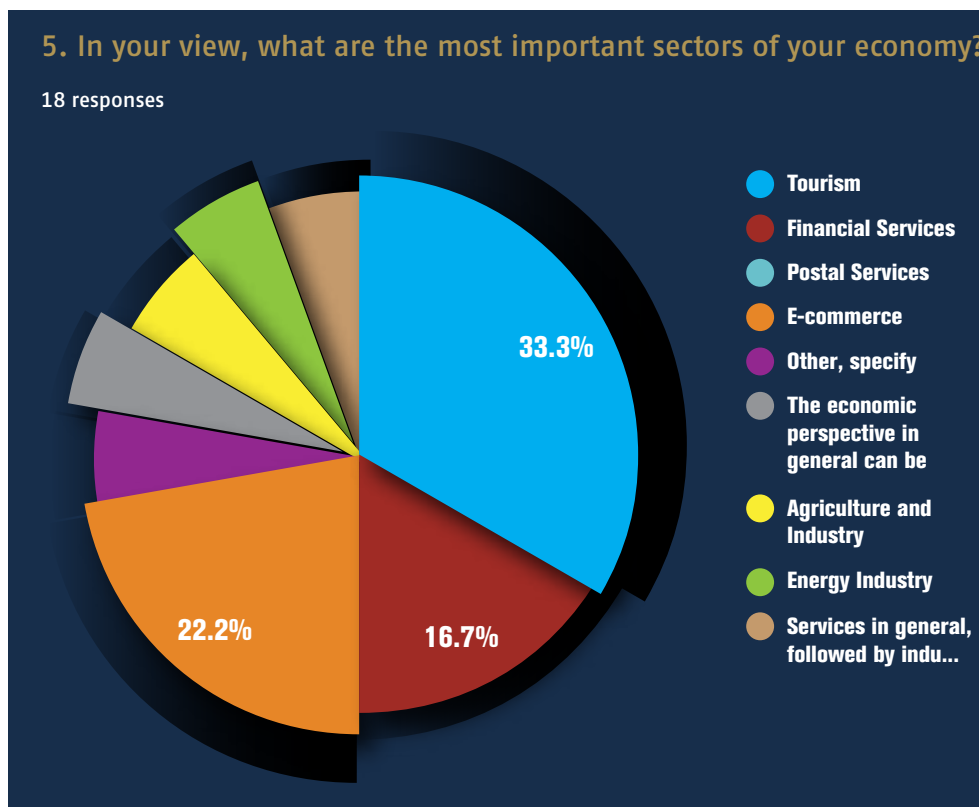


When rating the effectiveness of the Common Regional Market in boosting the European integration efforts of Western Balkan economies, 66.7% rate it as good or very good versus 33.3% who rated it as poor or who didn't know how to answer. Similarly to the above, this indicates that there is still ample room to share information and share how the CRM has contributed positively to European integration. That said, we are cognizant that European integration is a different and much more complex issue, nevertheless, based on the answers, we find that there is space to share more information in this regard so that the staff can see the connection more clearly.

When identifying the most important sectors of the economy, participants recognize three primary essential sectors: tourism (33.3%), e-commerce (22.2%), and financial services (16.7%). This means that very likely, when it comes to potential trainings regarding the CRM, they would probably be more inclined to participate in those that are related to these three areas.

Regarding familiarity with Green Lanes, 72.2% of respondents lack familiarity. Among the 27.8% of respondents who are familiar with Green Lanes, they describe them as:

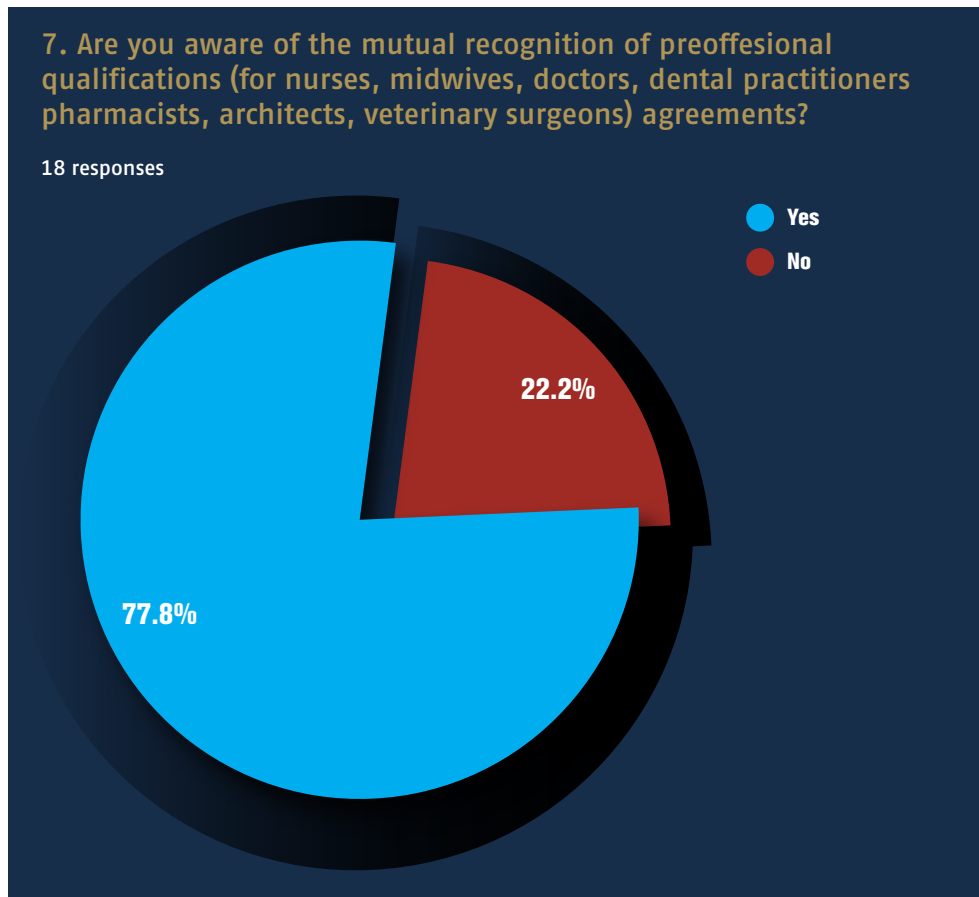
- ➔ Facilitating cross-border trade in goods.
- ➔ Aimed at streamlining and expediting the movement of goods across borders.
- ➔ Simplifying border crossings without long waiting times between Western Balkans economies.



Besides telling us that most of the staff do not know much about green lanes, the answers bring into new perspective the answers to question 3 and 4 above. In both those questions respondents were asked to rate effectiveness and most of them chose the safe answer



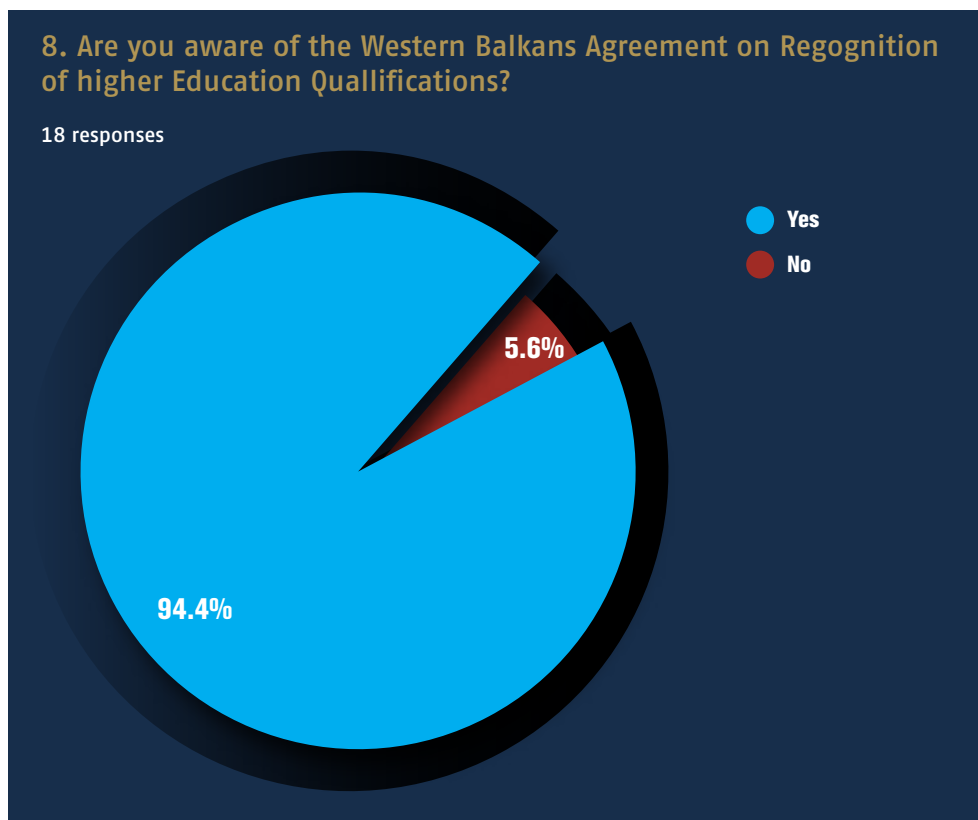
‘good.’ When they were asked something very specific the vast majority show a lack of information. Together these answers indicate that there is room to share more information regarding practical and specific issues of the CRM with parliamentary staff to increase their knowledge of the CRM.



Regarding the respondents’ awareness related to mutual recognition of professional qualifications (for nurses, midwives, doctors, dental practitioners, pharmacists, architects, veterinary surgeons), 77.8% are informed. In addition, some respondents have provided the following perspectives on how the free movement of professionals will affect the region:

- ➔ Employees can maintain competitiveness within their region and beyond, thereby enhancing personal growth and the overall success of organizations;
- ➔ It increases competitiveness and expands the cross-border labor market in specific fields, offering additional options and opportunities within the region;
- ➔ They can all work within our region or share and enhance their experiences;
- ➔ The growth or decline of demand for certain occupations in the region may now depend on the availability of workers within the region.

The high degree of awareness reading this topic can be taken to mean that the issues that touch directly people’s lives have a way of ‘cutting through the noise’ and reaching people.

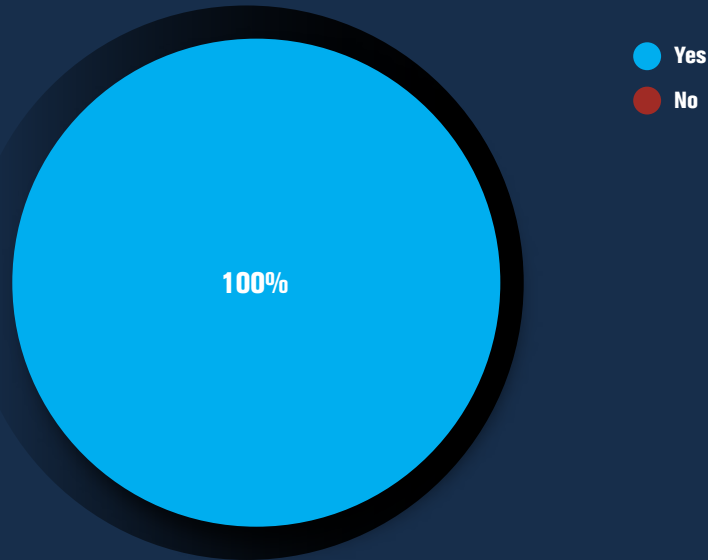


Similarly, regarding the respondents' awareness of the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, 94.4% state that they are informed. Similarly to the above, this is a cross-cutting issue, which reaches people. From RCC's potential future trainings perspective, these issues that are so well known can be used as bridges to shed light on other less known, but as important topics of the CRM and in so doing expanding the overall knowledge base regarding the CRM.



9. Are you aware of the roaming free regime within the WB and the process of gradual reduction of roaming charges WB/EU?

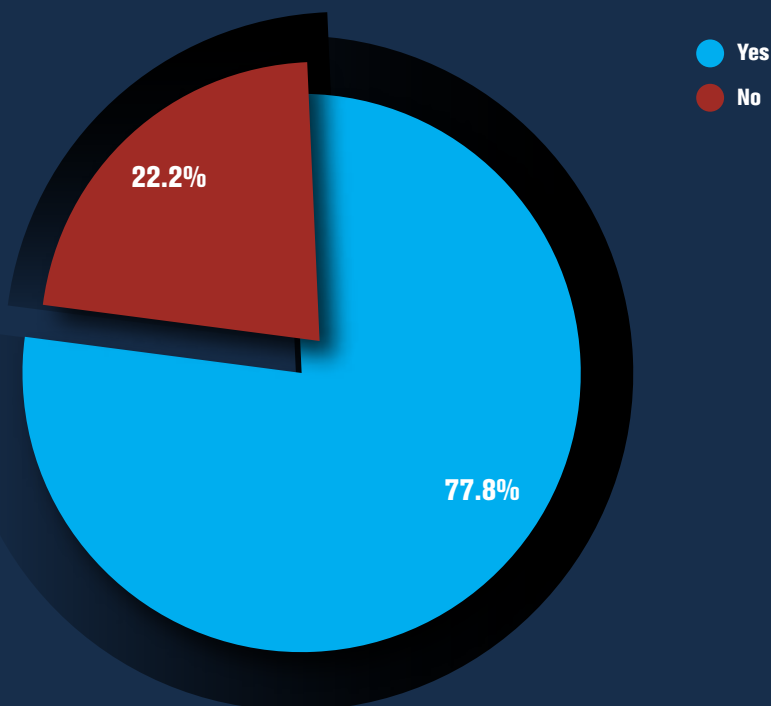
18 responses



Regarding the respondents' awareness on the roaming free regime within the Western Balkans and the gradual reduction of roaming charges between the Western Balkans and the EU, 100% of respondents are informed.

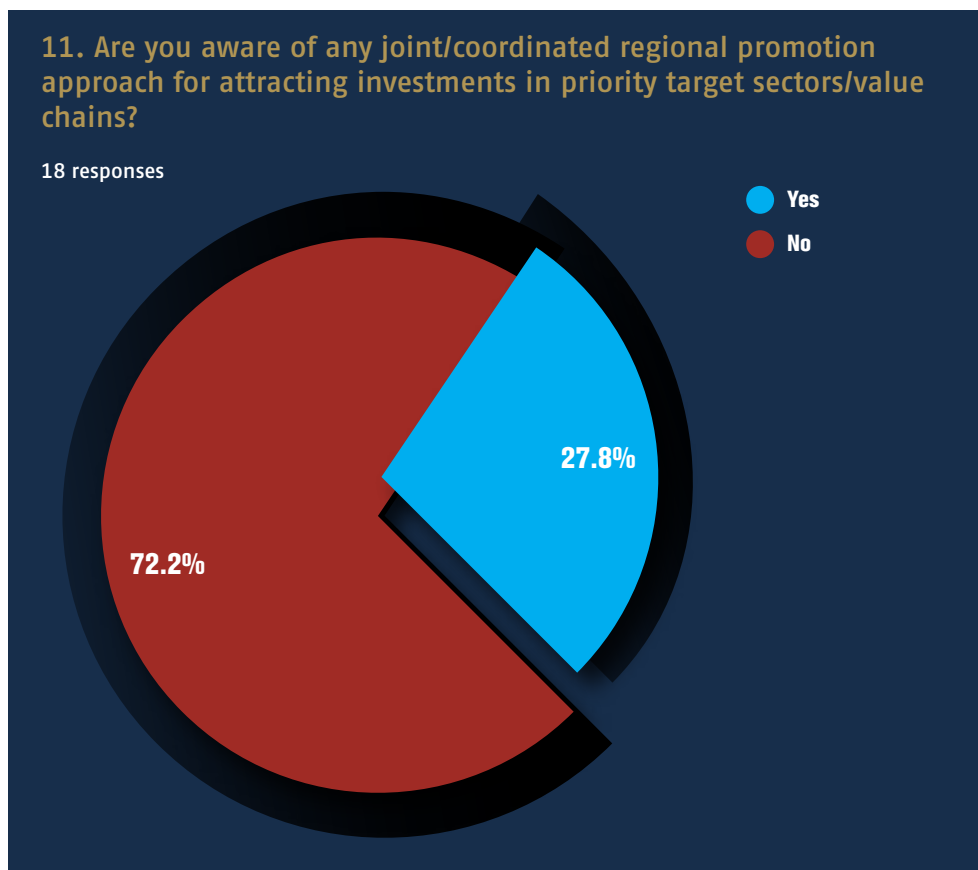
10. Have you personally benefited while traveling in WB/EU?

18 responses

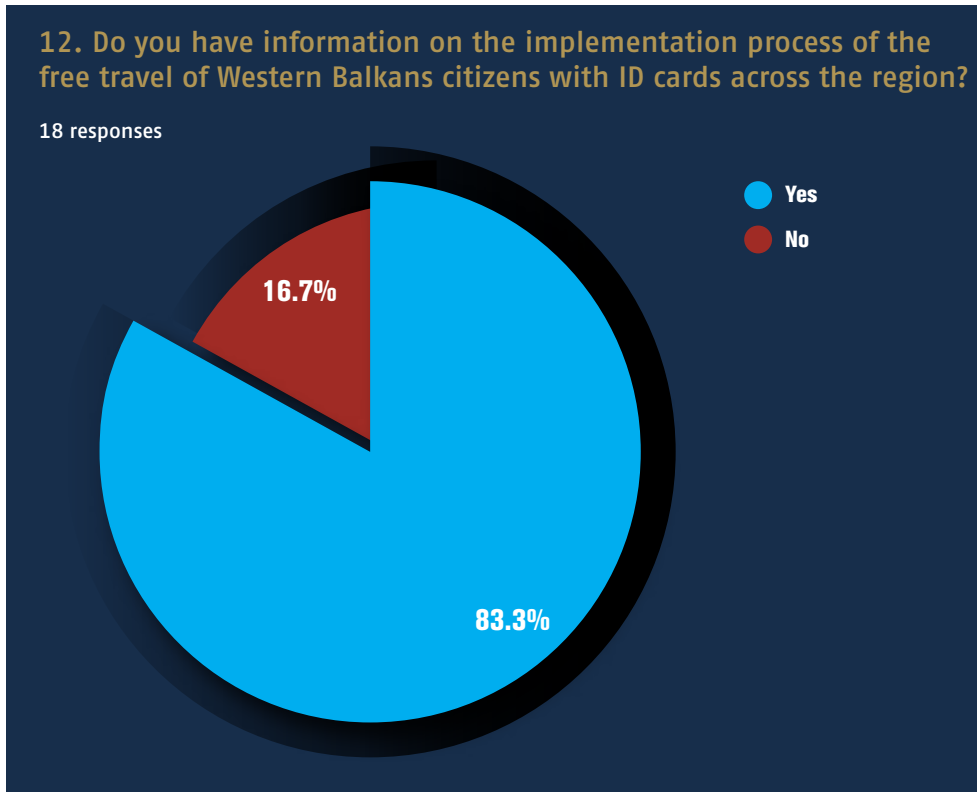




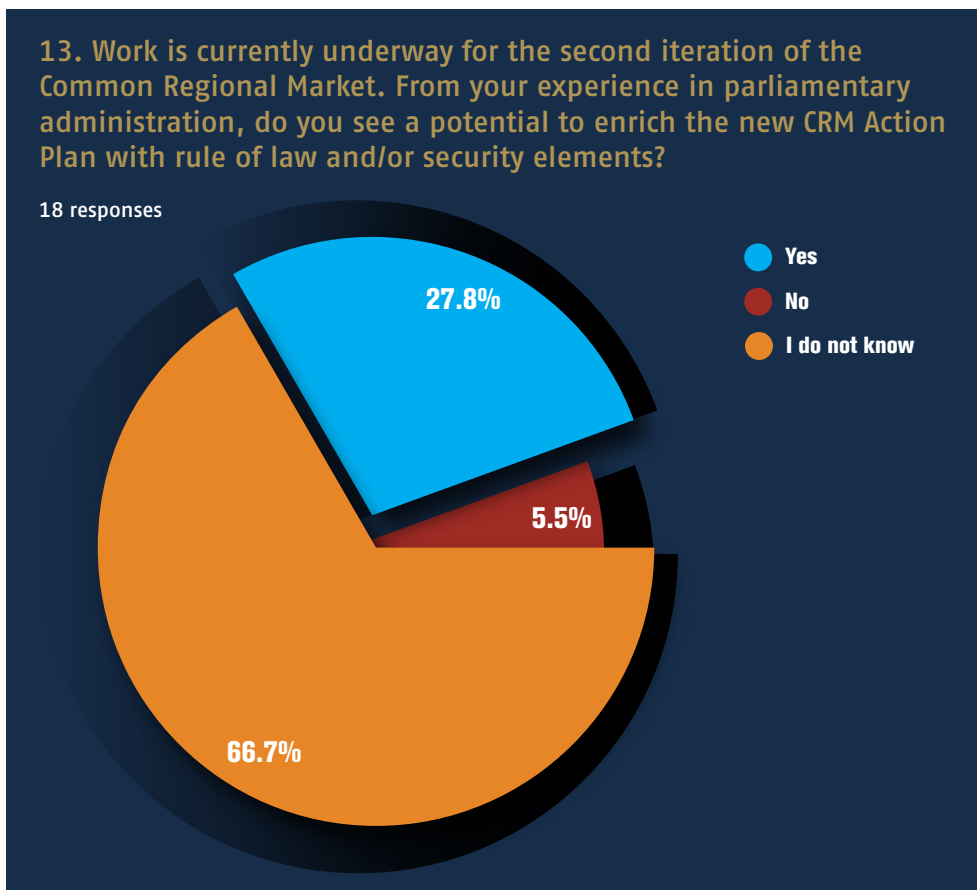
Importantly, besides the full level of information, the vast majority of respondents indicate that they have personally benefitted from the roaming free agreements while traveling in the region.



However, regarding the awareness of a joint/coordinated regional promotion approach for attracting investments in priority target sectors, 77.2% of respondents indicate that they lack information. Similarly to the discussion above, as soon as the questions move towards issues that do not affect them directly and become more abstract, the level of information falls significantly.

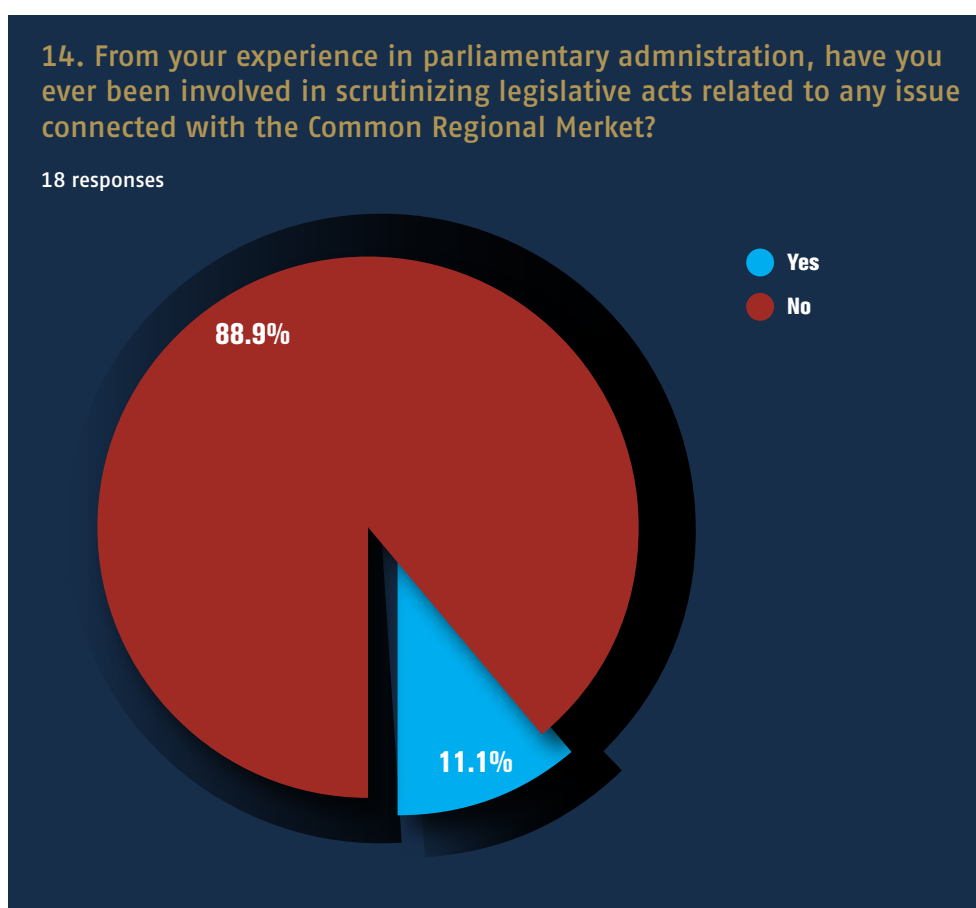


Again, when the topic moves back to issues closer to daily life, such as knowledge about the implementation of free travel for Western Balkans citizens through ID cards across the region, 83.3% are informed.





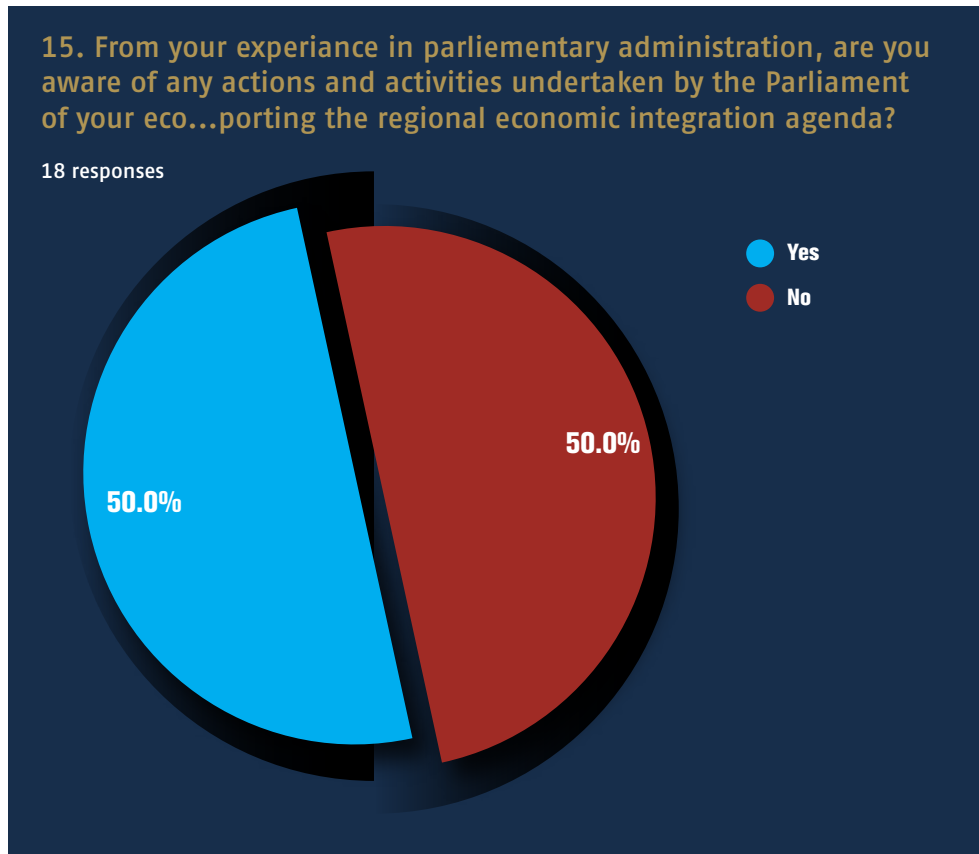
Regarding providing recommendations and suggestions for enriching the 2nd iteration of the CRM action plan with rule of law and/or security elements, 66.7% had no opinion, while 27.8% responded positively and 5.6% negatively. Despite the region's struggle with endemic corruption and interference from malign influences, the majority of respondents were unable to address these issues. This means that this is an area for which RCC can design tailored trainings and capacity raising instruments for parliamentary staff.



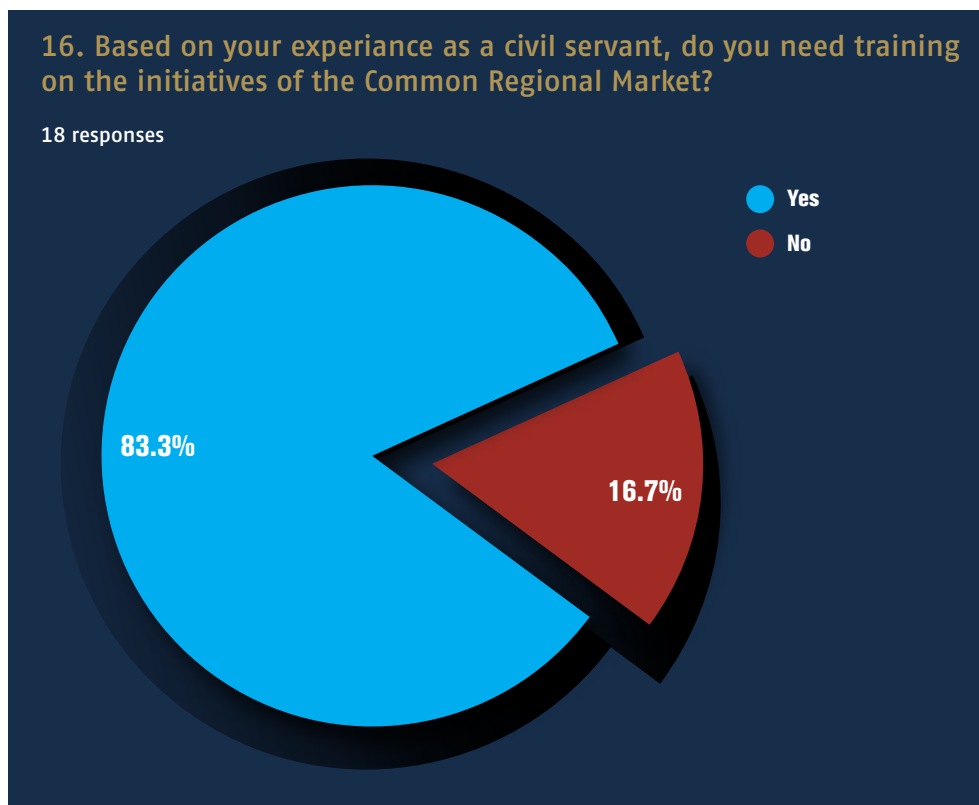
Concerning involvement in scrutinizing legislative acts related to any issue connected with the Common Regional Market and or regional cooperation, 88.9 % state that they have not been involved. We take this to mean that here there is ample space for staff to be made aware – also by their governments – as to which acts are related to the CRM. There is clear need for more awareness in regard to the legislative acts related to the CRM.

Importantly, based on the answers, the areas where the 11.1% of the respondents have been involved in law scrutinizing were:

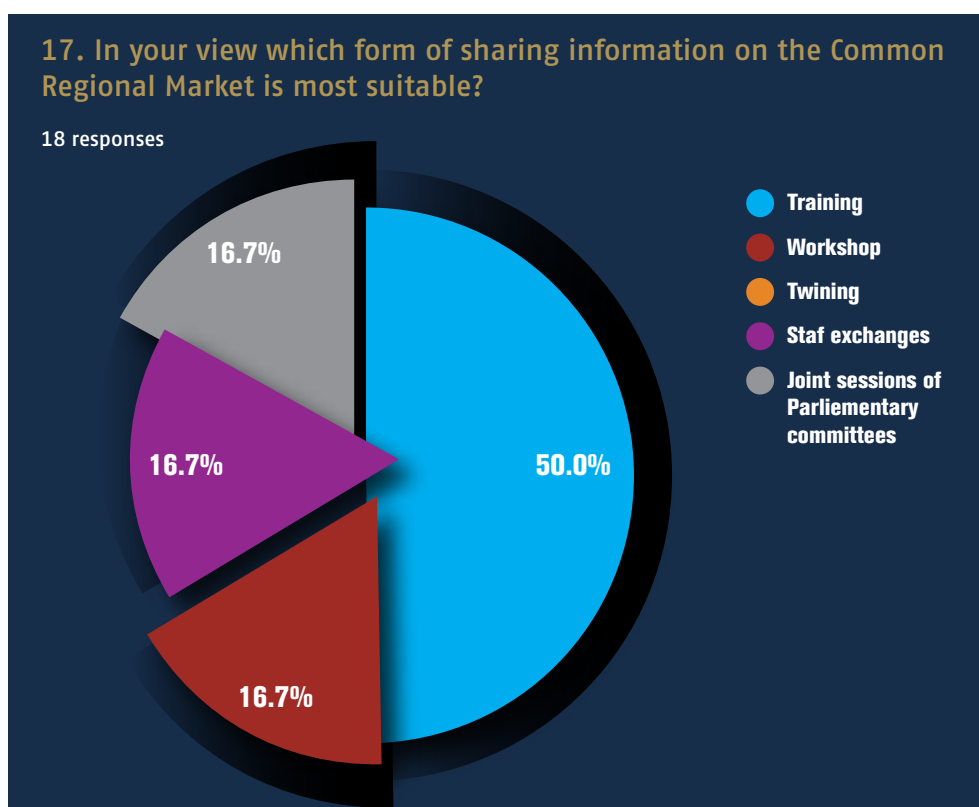
- Energy legislation;
- Telecommunication legislation;
- Foreign trade legislation.



Regarding awareness of actions and activities undertaken by respective Parliaments in supporting the regional economic integration agenda, there has been an even split, meaning that half of parliamentary staff are not aware of any actions. Building from the discussion of the question above, these answer further solidifies our earlier suggestion that there is clear need for undertaking activities that increase parliamentary staff awareness regarding actions undertaken from their parliaments in regard to the CRM.



Our findings and recommendations for activities/trainings that increase staff knowledge regarding the CRM are solidified by the answers to question seventeen (the necessity for training on CRM initiatives) to which 83.3% of respondents affirm the need for further capacity building and training initiatives.





When asked, which form of training they prefer, the respondents recognized as follows:

- Training: 50%
- Workshops: 16.7%
- Staff Exchanges: 16.7%
- Joint sessions of Parliamentary committees: 16.7%



FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Based on the succinct overview presented above of the survey findings, we present a number of contingent findings as follows:

- ➔ There is a strong, positive attitude towards CRM and its Action Plan;
- ➔ There is high awareness and information regarding the free travel of Western Balkans citizens with ID cards across the region, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, roaming regime, and mutual recognition of diploma;
- ➔ Knowledge regarding green lanes and regional promotion approach for attracting investments is low.
- ➔ The majority of respondents cannot suggest any initiatives or activities to enrich the new CRM Action Plan with rule of law and/or security elements.
- ➔ The majority of respondents have not been involved in the process of scrutinizing legal acts related to the CRM and are not aware of any action undertaken by their parliaments on the CRM;
- ➔ The majority of respondents express their need for trainings on the various initiatives related to the CRM.



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SURVEY

Based on the findings from the survey summarized above, we present a number of contingent recommendations as follows:

- We recommend a structured approach to share information periodically with parliamentary staff regarding CRM initiatives;
- We recommend the enactment of periodic training programs (training sessions, workshops, exchange visits) to enhance the capacities of parliamentary staff;
- We recommend tailored capacity-building initiatives for parliamentary staff supporting parliamentary committees of finance/economy and European affairs/EU Integration and other relevant parliamentary committees;



FINDINGS FROM THE WORKSHOP

As mentioned above, the survey was succeeded by a regional workshop conducted in Tirana, hosted at the premises of the Albanian parliament. Representatives from all parliaments in the Western Balkans participated in person and online. In this workshop the findings of the survey were presented and followed by a discussion focused particularly on identifying the mechanisms most conducive to increase the knowledge and abilities of staff regarding the CRM.

The workshop findings will be presented in an aggregated manner, taking into account the prevalent issues and common trends observed during the session.

Findings from the workshop indicate:

- ➔ The government's provision of information on regional cooperation and integration is minimal, further exacerbating the lack of awareness and hindering parliament's potential for meaningful engagement in regional initiatives;
- ➔ Participants highlighted the lack of adequate information regarding the regional cooperation agenda;
- ➔ Familiarity with regional cooperation initiatives is primarily limited to certain committees, such as the foreign affairs committee, indicating a need for broader awareness and engagement across all relevant parliamentary bodies;
- ➔ Despite being asked to report on specific agreements, committee staff members express that their day-to-day attention is not primarily focused on regional cooperation initiatives;
- ➔ A clash of roles among committees creates uncertainty about responsibilities, potentially hindering effective collaboration.
- ➔ There is recognition of the importance of involving additional committees in addressing the common regional market agenda, emphasizing the need for broader interdisciplinary collaboration.
- ➔ There is a pressing need for improved information sharing and targeted training to facilitate effective collaboration and exchange of information between the region's parliaments.



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP

- ➔ Provide targeted trainings for advisors of standing thematic committees, providing both information regarding CRM and analytical instruments necessary for the scrutiny of legislation related to it;
- ➔ Establish knowledge exchange mechanisms to facilitate the exchange of data and information among parliamentary staffers, enabling enhanced communication and collaboration across the region;
- ➔ Develop a community of practice regarding regional integration, potentially nestled in the Parliamentary Institutes/Research services of the region's parliaments to serve as a knowledge repository regarding the CRM and regional integration;
- ➔ Create a dedicated newsletter to provide regular updates on the Berlin process and regional matters, ensuring that parliamentary staffers stay informed and engaged with relevant regional integration developments;
- ➔ Implement communication strategies to broaden awareness and engagement across all relevant parliamentary bodies, ensuring that all members are actively involved in regional cooperation initiatives and informed about their importance.
- ➔ RCC engagement with the region's governments to encourage and facilitate the sharing of information regarding regional integration with parliaments is considered very useful.



CONCLUSIONS

The findings gathered from the survey and workshop combined with the recommendations deriving from them, present valuable insights and actionable steps to be implemented in the near future that can further strengthen the CRM, regional cooperation, and parliamentary engagement with these processes.

First, by organizing tailored training sessions with the goal of enhancing both the information level and the capacities of parliamentary staff, we can ensure create an enabling structure that increases the level and quality of parliamentary engagement with the CRM and regional integration. Second, establishing dedicated platforms for data exchange and regular newsletters will facilitate improved communication and engagement among parliamentary staffers, keeping them informed and involved in regional matters. Thirdly, by creating a community of practice, there is great potential that parliaments become knowledge hubs regarding regional integration and simultaneously become more integrated among each other.

Besides all the above, there is great potential for the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) to foster greater information sharing among executives and legislatives within each of the WB countries. This would strengthen the role and oversight of parliaments on the process and simultaneously democratize it further and provide it more legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat

Trg Bosne I Hercegovine 1/V
71000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
T: + 387 33 561 700
www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer



@rccint



@RegionalCooperationCouncil



@regionalcooperationcouncil_rcc



@RCCSec



@regionalcooperationcouncil



@rcc.int



good.better.regional.