

## Speech by the RCC Secretary General, Amer Kapetanovic, at the 2025 ESG Adria Summit

*Advancing Regional Cooperation: The Key to Our European Future*

9 April 2025, Porto Montenegro

Distinguished excellencies, esteemed guests, colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

Here we are in *Porto Montenegro* — a place that, in many ways, reflects the essence of change. Once a naval shipyard and a military base, now a luxury marina, home to many businesses and a world-class destination, this place has undergone a drastic transformation.

It's a reminder that **change, while often difficult and invoking scepticism for the future, is sometimes inevitable. That even long-standing roles have to evolve, and that what defines a place — or a region — is not simply its coordinates, but how it adapts.**

And that, in many ways, is what brings us together today.

We are not strangers to scepticism.

In our region, scepticism, or caution if you prefer, is not just a habit — it's a philosophy. It's woven into our language, our humour, even our wisdom.

You've heard these before:

*"Ne laje pas sela radi, nego sebe radi."* Literally translated it says: A dog doesn't bark for the village, but for itself. Meaning: One's not doing something for others — there's always a self-interest.

or

*"Obećanje ludom radovanje."* A promise is a fool's delight. Meaning only a fool believes in a promise.

These aren't just sayings — they're kind of a survival tools. Born of experience. A defence mechanism passed down through generations, shaped by history, hardship, and too many unkept promises. Thus, we witness a rising mistrust towards institutions in the region.

But here's the **silver line**: Despite the deeply ingrained caution, despite the justified doubts, despite the slow pace of enlargement and endless reform fatigue — **despite it all — our region still believes.**

And more importantly, **our youth believe.** They see regional cooperation as a driver of political, economic, and security stability. And when it comes to the EU, their stance is clear—**they want to see the region as part of it!** The latest *Balkan Barometer* data show that **59% of youth believe that EU membership is good for the region.**

**But they are not just believers—they are doers.** Right now, in another room, young people from across the region are shaping policies on the Green Agenda as part of the Western Balkans Youth Lab, an initiative we implement with EU support. They are working side by side with policymakers, **proving that meaningful youth participation is not just a concept, but a reality.** This is the kind of engagement we want to see—not just for young people but for all of us.

On the sidelines of this Summit, they are the driving change, and it is up to us to listen. That is why I am proud that RCC also supported this year's edition of the **Summit's NextGen Programme** to ensure young leaders have a seat at the table, because **our youth demand to be genuine partners in shaping the policies that affect them.** And we at the RCC meet that demand.

And it's not just the youth—the entire region still looks toward the EU. According to the latest *Balkan Barometer* data, **54% of citizens in the Western Balkans still do support EU membership. That's not a small number. It tells us that even in the face of slow accession processes, reform fatigue, economic uncertainty, and shifting global dynamics, the idea of Europe still holds weight.** People still see the EU as the path to stability, prosperity, and peace.

Every time we surrendered to our own scepticism – we stalled. We lost momentum. We lost years. But when we chose cooperation, when we dared to believe and act on it — we moved forward.

However, belief needs fuel. It needs proof. Because hope with no delivery eventually fades.

That's why the real challenge for all of us — both in the Western Balkans and in the European Union — is to translate integration into impact. People need to see the results. Feel them. Live them.

And there is **one bright spot that shows just how much our region understands this truth: regional cooperation.**

The latest Balkan Barometer shows that the **support for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is the highest it has been in a decade — 82%. That number speaks volumes. It tells us that people get it. That they recognize the value of working together, of breaking down barriers, of building common ground — even when politics gets messy.**

People see that when we work together markets open, standards rise, mobility increases, opportunities multiply.

They see that **regional cooperation is not a side project. It is the foundation for the future.**

**We've come a long way — from a fragmented landscape to the beginnings of a *Common Regional Market*. This isn't just a bureaucratic term. It's a stepping stone to the EU Single Market.** For the first time ever, the EU recognized this connection in the Growth Plan — linking individual reforms to regional frameworks and, ultimately, to full integration. It's a *roadmap*. This is how we move forward — step by step, reform by reform, result by result.

And we must be honest with ourselves: **regional cooperation is not optional. It is *necessary*.**

This is not about whether we want to or whether we feel sceptical about it.

Because here's a hard truth: If we can't make six economies work together — how do we expect to fit into twenty-seven?

If we struggle to align with our neighbours — who share our languages, our history, our habits — how will we align with countries whose systems, cultures, and expectations are even more different?

**The Common Regional Market is not just an economic tool. It's a practical bridge from where we are to where we want to be.**

**And regional cooperation is not a warm-up act. It's the main show. It sharpens our competitiveness. It strengthens our economies. It gets us ready for the real test — the EU.**

And let's not forget — **we are Europeans**. All of us. Not aspirationally. Not theoretically. Not just geographically. But in spirit, in culture, in ambition.

Let me offer two quick stories — one closer to our region, and one a bit further west.

Look at Croatia. Since joining the EU, its GDP growth nearly tripled compared to the decade before. It received tens of billions in EU funds, and infrastructure projects that are no longer just ideas on paper but a reality that lifts the living standard.

Look at Ireland. Once on the margins of Europe, it embraced integration and transformed its economy. Fifty years later, it's one of the most prosperous and globally connected countries in the Union.

These are not exceptions. They are examples. These are not miracles. They are the result of commitment, cooperation, and vision.

And we have the chance to be the next ones. Our citizens are telling us: *we're ready*. They believe in Europe. They believe in each other.

Now it's up to us — leaders, policymakers, institutions, young people — to match that belief with action. To turn cautious optimism into confident progress. Scepticism may be part of our DNA — but so is resilience, and ambition, and belief in a better future.

**Regional cooperation isn't just a nice idea — it's *the* idea.**

So, yes — we measure twice. We cut once. We approach with care. But we move forward. With clarity. With courage. And with commitment to something bigger than ourselves. Together.

**Let us build wisely, act boldly, and believe — not in empty promises, but in shared purpose.**

That is our task. That is our responsibility. And that is our moment.

Let's not miss it.

Thank you.