

Talking Points by the RCC Secretary General *Majlinda Bregu*

at the SEECP Summit, Podgorica

Distinguished Presidents and Prime Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we meet today for the annual SEECP Summit on the eve of the 20th anniversary of Thessaloniki Agenda and RCC's 15th anniversary - we witness and acknowledge some undisputable truths:

One: Regional cooperation nurtures, consolidates, transforms. It keeps delivering concretely on the ground despite ups and downs. It is nowadays a region with a dense web of cooperation initiatives, with joint strategic visions, underpinned by strong public support and trust for regional cooperation. Just last week, we received the latest data of the Balkan Barometer new edition and I want to share with you 3 of them:

- Region in which more cooperation is the “order of the day” - 76% of the citizens believe that regional cooperation is good for their economy;
- Nearly 2 in 3 citizens agree that what brings them together is more important than what divides them.

Yet, regional cooperation cannot be taken for granted. “More cooperation instead of less” remains crucial for addressing the recent worrying regional tensions.

What is worrisome for us is that when citizens are asked about the feeling they associate the Western Balkans with, more than a third of them (35%) associate the region with a source of doubts, fear and conflict.

Second: Europe can be more. But an Enlarged one. Enlarged not only due to the geopolitical necessity lens. But an enlarged one that acknowledges that integrated Western Balkans is a genuinely smart investment as well. That our youth, entrepreneurs, culture, overall potentials - add to the “whole”. That they are part of the “main”.

Two decades ago, there was a clear promise of EU perspective for WB, but unfortunately now we have a “waiting fatigue” of WB citizens. Although the support for EU membership remains high in the WB, unfortunately we have noticed a negative trend in the last years (this year 59% of the citizens supported EU membership).

Third: Regional integration through concrete achievements alongside European integration is the best and most credible way forward.

Dear all,

- SEECP remains a focal point of dialogue, development, security and stability in South East Europe. Its significance further grows with the growing complexity of global issues we are facing.

- I know you are expecting me to report on report.

- Reports can sometimes be as exciting as watching clothes dry or as thrilling as counting sheep. But fear not. I promise I will reduce the objective prism of publicity in line with the reality.

- In the Annual Report of the Secretary General, endorsed by RCC Board at the Annual Meeting in Budva, you will find a detailed overview of our organisation's performance in the past year.
Equally important, it sheds light on the challenges we have faced and areas where we can maximize our potential.

- As a main line for this forum I can say
- There are three areas where both non-EU members and the EU ones could enhance cooperation:
 - major climate change/ environment /disasters. In view of the challenge posed by natural disasters under the strain of global climate change and the strong display of solidarity and support by SEECF Participants to Ankara after the dreadful earthquakes – this year's report devotes additional attention to disaster management and risk reduction, and inflation regarding food and energy products as a result of the war in Ukraine.
 - economic growth
 - convergence that can will require further quick actions to enhance connectivity, innovation, boost investments and address the adverse impact of the aging population - opportunities and obstacles for sustainable cooperation.

Our South East Europe 2030 Strategy holds immense significance as a shared development vision and a roadmap for sustainable development and progress of SEE region. Energy, climate, security and cyber-security, food supply, economic growth, water and waste management, health, and agriculture are some of the key themes emphasised by SEECF Participants in connection to the implementation of SDGs and Agenda 2030.

While referring to the Western Balkans allow me to use this opportunity to highlight few of our achievements of the past 12 months.

- This year marks one of the most impactful ones for WB, marking the long-awaited turning point towards commitments taken by the economies of the region through the CRM. In the past year, we found political courage and wisdom to move things forward and to commit ourselves even more against the odds of political roller-coasters and the overall fragility.
- Under the Berlin Process, we have facilitated the adoption of three milestone mobility agreements. These agreements, which entered into force in 4 economies, exemplify our



efforts to provide citizens with the freedom to move and work, an essential requirement for a functioning CRM.

- In addition to this, negotiations for mutual recognition of a new set of 4 additional professions are also on-going. Alongside a full ratification and start of implementation of the mobility agreements, this could also be a crucial prospective deliverable for the Berlin Process Summit in October in Tirana.

- Stemming from the signed EU-WB Roaming Declaration, substantial price reductions for data roaming between the EU and WB will start this October, making data roaming more affordable for citizens and businesses alike.

- All our joint regional economic integration agendas and results attained so far constitute a solid basis for the recently announced plan to accelerate WB's growth and re-energise the journey towards the EU. I am proud to say that RCC, with the support of SEECP Participants, has been deeply involved in bringing the region closer to EU's Single Market with notable achievements and, together with our regional partners, it remains a focal point of economic integration of the region. We look forward to this timely initiative of President Von der Leyen, as the need for convergence between the EU and the WB is greater than ever. We also stand ready to support the region in identifying all concrete agendas in which accelerated integration and concrete tangible benefits are possible ahead of accession.

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Presidents Milatovic and Pendarovski,

- As Podgorica is passing the baton to Skopje, let me joint the other guests wishing you a success during the upcoming Chairmanship. It is a very good coincidence for the region's stability that Skopje now has Chairmanship of SEECP and that of OSCE.

- With strong integrity, collegiality and competence towards our cooperation, convergence and integration agendas - under the clear political guidance of SEECP!