



DRAFT REPORT
ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE
REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL SECRETARIAT

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COOPERATION COUNCIL

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Executive Summary

Throughout the reporting period (1 October 2024 – 28 February March 2025), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) played a key role in advancing regional integration, economic development, security cooperation, digital transformation, environmental sustainability, and social progress across the Western Balkans and South East Europe. According to the World Bank Group, economic growth in the Western Balkans Six is expected to accelerate through 2025, with a projected collective growth rate of 3.7%. The RCC's efforts were instrumental in finalising the next phase of the Common Regional Market and starting its implementation, supporting investment promotion, research and innovation, digitalisation, green transition, workforce mobility, and security coordination. These achievements reinforce the region's commitment to European integration, aligning policies with EU standards and global development goals, while fostering regional stability and growth.

A major milestone in this effort was the **Berlin Process Summit**, held on 14 October 2024, in Berlin, where WB6 leaders endorsed several landmark agreements and initiatives facilitated by the RCC. These included the **Common Regional Market 2025-2028 Action Plan (CRM 2.0)**, the **Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study**, the **Regional Investment Screening Standards**, the **Declaration on Science and Innovation Infrastructure Access**, and the **Hamburg Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans**. Each of these agreements is expected to deliver tangible benefits, strengthening economic integration, academic mobility, investment transparency, and sustainability policies.

Following the adoption of CRM 2.0, the RCC launched structured regional consultation and dialogue with Prime Minister's Sherpas, regional partners, and European Commission representatives with the aim of defining priority actions for 2025 and feasible deliverables for the upcoming Berlin Process Summit hosted by the UK, governance models, and sustainability mechanisms to ensure effective implementation and monitoring of regional economic development efforts. Additionally, discussions included revisions to the **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan**, ensuring alignment with EU policies and reinforcing the region's commitment to sustainability.

Economic cooperation took centre stage with the launch of CRM 2.0, prioritising connectivity, workforce mobility, and access to the **EU Single Market**. 122 million EUR in foreign direct investment (FDI) was generated through investment promotion campaigns, supported by the RCC and the World Bank, while the **Regional Investment Screening Standards** were successfully negotiated and endorsed. **RCC Support Programme for Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs)** helped the region secure over €5 million in funding from Horizon Europe and Digital Europe, strengthening collaboration, capacity building, and access to EU opportunities.

In the area of roaming, the **WB6/EU Roaming Assessment** and the third edition of the **WB6 Roaming Report** are in the final stages of preparation and are set to be published in March 2025. The findings of these reports highlight a significant increase in data consumption per

roaming user, with growth rates of 51% in the WB6 and 89% in the EU from 2022 to 2023, demonstrating the strong impact of reduced retail roaming prices. Additionally, the number of Western Balkans Six roaming users choosing reduced-price tariff options for use in the EU surged by 49% in Q4 2023 compared to Q4 2022. **Cybersecurity cooperation** was strengthened through bilateral consultations with WB6 institutions, leading to the development of a **regional cybersecurity database** to bolster cyber resilience. Meanwhile, [Balkathon 5](#), RCC's flagship innovation competition, attracted over 80 teams, including high school students for the first time, promoting digital entrepreneurship and fostering innovative solutions. |RCC's commitment to innovation was further demonstrated through the third editions of the [Butterfly Innovation and Business Forum](#) and [Butterfly Innovation Award](#), and the [Skills4Jobs](#) event, all of which stood out as a testament of the ongoing efforts to enhance region's preparedness and future-orientation.

Progress on the **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB)** was marked by the first-ever GAWB Ministerial Meeting, where the adoption of the Hamburg Declaration reaffirmed WB6's commitment to carbon neutrality by 2050. The [GAWB 2023 Implementation Report \(GARI\)](#) has been finalised, assessing progress across 58 actions in climate, energy, and environmental protection, while the RCC advanced the **WB6 Climate Adaptation Roadmap** and partnered with IUCN to develop the **Western Balkans 2030 Biodiversity Strategy**. The push for a circular economy gained momentum with the Regional Action Plan on Plastic Pollution Prevention, set for endorsement by the end of 2025.

With the entry into force of the **Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Midwives, Veterinary Surgeons, and Pharmacists (MRA 2)** across all Western Balkans Six, implementation kick-off is scheduled with a meeting of the RCC – CEFTA Joint Working Group on 4 March 2025. Meanwhile, efforts are ongoing to operationalise the **Regional Recognition Database (RRD)**, facilitating streamlined qualification recognition and enhancing professional mobility throughout the region.

RCC, in cooperation with SEECP Participants, finalised the **Third Annual Interim Implementation Report on the South East Europe 2030 (SEE2030) Strategy**, assessing the region's progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report, approved at the sixth SEE2030 Strategy Monitoring Committee meeting in Belgrade on 5 December 2024, provides strategic recommendations to accelerate economic growth, social inclusion, women's empowerment, depopulation mitigation, green and digital transitions, and private sector development. SEE economies reaffirmed their commitment to updating the SEE2030 Strategy to achieve more tangible results, while aligning it more closely with EU policies and global SDG agendas.

Recognising the increasing risks posed by climate change and natural disasters, the RCC also took steps to enhance regional disaster preparedness and financial resilience. Under the SEE2030 Dialogue Mechanism, a high-level meeting with insurance sector regulators was held in Istanbul on 3 December 2024, focusing on disaster insurance schemes and risk-sharing mechanisms. This led to the proposal for a **SEE Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing**, aiming to strengthen cooperation among insurance regulatory

authorities, insurers, and reinsurance associations. The RCC has requested formal approval from the SEECP Political Directors and the SEE2030 Monitoring Committee, with plans to present it to the RCC Board for endorsement.

In the security domain, the RCC reinforced regional coordination through the **9th Regional Security Coordination Conference, the 16th SEEMIC and 14th SEENSA meetings**, and the launch of the [WB SecuriMeter 2024](#), offering valuable insights into regional security perceptions. The RCC remained engaged in addressing **Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)** control, underscoring its commitment to tackling organised crime and improving regional stability. Judicial cooperation was advanced through the **8th South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes (SEE JTI) Network Meeting** and the **2024 Regional Mediation Conference, promoting judicial reforms** and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

RCC's achievements together with the SEECP participants and partners highlight its pivotal role in fostering regional cooperation, strengthening economic and digital integration, and supporting security and environmental sustainability. However, challenges remain, requiring sustained commitment from all stakeholders to continue prioritising cooperation over fragmentation, action over rhetoric, and integration over isolation. The RCC stands ready to lead these efforts, ensuring a future of unity, prosperity, and sustainable growth for the region.

Support to the Implementation of Regional Programmes

A. Western Balkans Common Regional Market (CRM)

A1. Economic Competitiveness

A1.1. Investments and Financial Markets

One notable milestone in investments is the adoption of the **Declaration on Regional Investment Screening Standards for the WB6** at the **Berlin Process Summit**, establishing a baseline for the **WB6** to develop investment screening mechanisms. Moreover, during the reporting period, the RCC continued its dialogue on investment policy through the **Joint Working Group on Investments (JWGI)**. A meeting of the JWGI was organised on 27 February 2025 in Dubrovnik, where discussions around developing an overarching **Recommendation on FDI Qualities for Sustainable Development** have commenced. The Recommendation aims to support the WB6 in maximising the contribution of FDI to sustainable development. It will be structured around key high-level policy principles and directions, including governance, legal frameworks, development cooperation, and other areas that enhance the region's ability to attract FDI aligned with goals such as high-quality job creation, decarbonisation, and broader sustainability objectives. Moreover, options for improving investment facilitation have been deliberated, and all existing International

Investment Treaties (IIAs) have been examined in terms of dispute risk to help each WB6 better prioritise future IIA negotiations.

On the promotion side, last year's investor lead generation campaigns carried out by Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs), with the support of the RCC and the World Bank, have started **producing tangible results**. The results to date include 56 investment interests, 16 investment leads, 8 investment commitments, 7 realised investments, and a total FDI of EUR 122 million. Potential pipeline through interested investors is EUR 466 million. Preparations for another round of outreach campaigns, drawing on lessons learned from the previous ones, are underway.

In the area of financial markets, five out of six Central Banks of the WB6 have signed a cooperation agreement with the Bank of Italy to implement a Target Instant Payment Settlement (TIPS) clone. This will initially facilitate instant domestic payments and pave the way for regional instant payments and integration into the EU TIPS.

The RCC has introduced two new topics as part of the **Working Group on Financial Markets (WGFM)** dialogue, namely sustainable finance and financial literacy. A tentative plan for developing **Regional Green Bond Standards** and a **Regional Financial Literacy Framework for Individuals** has been agreed upon within the group. The standards will help create a conducive environment for mobilising capital towards sustainable development, while the literacy framework will help in addressing financial knowledge gaps across the region.

A1.2. Industrial Development and Sustainable Tourism

During the reporting period, RCC continued its dialogue on industrial development through the meetings of the **Working Group on Industrial Development (WGID)**. A meeting of the WGID was organised on 16 October 2024, in Tirana, focusing on WGID discussing preliminary findings of the "Impact assessment of industrial policy in the Western Balkans Six". The latter is a comprehensive impact assessment of industrial policy on the economic development in the Western Balkans Six, commissioned by the RCC, with the aim to stocktake industrial policy and assess the economic, environmental and social performance of key sectors (manufacturing, agri-food, automotive and metal-processing) in the region. Given the cross-cutting nature of **Creative Industries (CIs)**, in addition to strengthening synergies between CIs and tourism, this time RCC worked to strengthen synergies between CIs and youth engagement in culture and creative sectors. Organised jointly with WBYL project, RCC and the Working Group on Industrial Development contributed to the discussions of the **Regional Conference on Youth Cultural Cooperation** (13 November 2024, Belgrade). RCC led the discussions on the importance of cultural civic activism and the state of play in the WB6, highlighting the significant impact of cultural activism among young people.

On 24 – 25 October 2024, RCC organised the regional **Tourism Conference "A Sustainable Future: Cooperation, Communication, and Connectivity in the Western Balkans' Rural and Adventure Tourism – synergising strategies"**, in cooperation with GIZ. The conference brought together various stakeholders from the region, policymakers (including Tourism

Expert Group), international organisations and tourism associations, and women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector (from RCC's Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year initiative).

Following the launch of the regional tourism branding process to explore strategies for ensuring the sector's long-term sustainability amidst its rapid growth at the TEG meeting of 4 June 2024 in Skopje, RCC organised the next TEG meeting on 3 December 2024, in Sarajevo, with the aim to discuss and present recommendations for a **roadmap for Western Balkans Six regional tourism branding**. The roadmap showcased the distinctiveness of each economy and WB6 assets, presented best practices, tourism brand development strategies and creative campaigns, and highlighted adventure and cultural tourism in particular.

A2. Human Capital Development

A2.1. Research and Innovation Area

Western Balkans continued its outstanding performance in [Horizon Europe](#) programme. The region absorbed EUR 159.1 million in initial three years of the Programme. As an illustration, the region attracted EUR 171.7 million throughout the previous Horizon 2020 programme. Notwithstanding noticeable strides in improving its innovation performance over the recent years, the region is still at less than 70% of the EU's average. The region's economies remain Emerging Innovators according to the [European Innovation Scoreboard 2024 \(EIS\)](#).

The RCC has bolstered the regional innovation ecosystem by promoting collaboration across different economies, improving research and innovation infrastructures, and recognising innovative achievements. In the reporting period, RCC completed coordination of the **Western Balkans Innovation and Research Platform**. The focus was on facilitating the introduction of an institutional framework to encourage the use of existing research and innovation infrastructures in the region. To this end, RCC successfully coordinated drafting of the regional [Declaration on Research and Innovation Infrastructure Access and Collaboration](#) which was adopted at the Berlin Process Summit. The Declaration provides substantial advantages for regional researchers by promoting open access to research facilities, encouraging mobility, and fostering collaboration. It sets the stage for researchers to participate in joint projects, share expertise, and utilise advanced research infrastructures, thus enhancing regional scientific cooperation and driving innovation. In addition to this, the RCC continued close collaboration with [GÉANT](#)¹ to encourage Bosnia and Herzegovina to join GÉANT, the last region's economy that remains outside the network in Europe.

The RCC completed the **Follow-up Support Programme for the development of Digital Innovation Hubs** (DIHs) in the WB. The Programme was a successor of previously implemented support mechanism for the region's DIHs (2023) that focused on assisting their collaborative efforts towards the preparation of joint project proposals for funding and capacity-building schemes offered by the EU. Apart from regional networking and trainings

¹ The GÉANT Association is the collaboration of European National Research and Education Networks (NRENs)

offered to DIHs, the Programme enabled the participating DIHs to attract more than EUR 5 mil through Horizon Europe and Digital Europe (since recently available to WB6), including both EU and WB6 funds. This support has been provided both directly through project proposal writing and indirectly through other means. Similar to 2023, the Programme participants identified networking, knowledge transfer and fund raising component exceptionally useful.

The RCC successfully organised the third regional [Butterfly Innovation Forum \(Forum\)](#) in Podgorica and [Butterfly Innovation Award \(BIA\)](#) competition. The Forum is a premier regional event focused on fostering collaboration and innovation. It gathered leading experts, policymakers, innovators, and business leaders to explore the latest trends in artificial intelligence, green growth, and innovation-driven competitiveness. Featuring a dynamic agenda with flash talks, panel discussions, and networking opportunities, the event highlighted the region's potential to drive transformative change through innovation and collective action. The BIA seeks to inspire the region's creative minds and organisations to advance their innovative, scalable, and market-based solutions. This award supports the region's economic development by embracing both green and digital transformations, and by promoting a culture of innovation through the recognition of successful achievements. Teams from all Western Balkan Six were awarded for their promising solutions across six categories: green innovation, industry, STEM, women, university, and youth. Thus far, the BIA has provided support to 18 teams, offering financial awards and increasing their visibility through RCC's social media platforms and traditional media outlets.

A2.2. Women's Economic Empowerment and Regional Network of Women in STEM

Following the initiation of development of a regional framework for gender-responsive Green Finance, RCC organised a meeting of the **Working Group on Industrial Development (WGID)** jointly with the **Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship (RNWE)** on (27 November 2024 in Petrovac). The meeting underscored the significance of this topic by addressing two critical challenges faced both globally and by WB6 - climate challenges and gender equality, the latter sometimes overlooked despite its importance. Additionally, this framework aims to contribute further to the implementation of CRM 2.0 and address issues of access to finance for women-led enterprises in green transition. The discussions resulted in approving [Gender-responsive Green Finance Roadmap for the Western Balkans Six](#), which was subsequently published in February 2025.

Establishment of the Regional Network for Women in Entrepreneurship has delivered a platform to address policy gaps and advance women's economic empowerment (WEE) initiatives at the regional level. RCC has initiated preparations for the organisation of the fourth edition of the **Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year**, with the [call for nominations](#) launched on 23 January 2025 for nominations of women entrepreneurs in the following categories: green, tourism, artistic, ICT, social star and young woman entrepreneurs. In preparation for the final ceremony (13 March 2025, Pristina), RCC continued wide

promotion of the call for nominations and organised [info sessions](#) (6-7 February 2025, online) to increase the outreach to women entrepreneurs across the region.

A2.3. Free Movement of People

Building on its extensive facilitation efforts, RCC played a pivotal role in the signing of the fifth mobility **Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans** at the Berlin Process Summit on 14 October 2024. This Agreement represents a major milestone in academic mobility, enabling students from the WB6 to apply for university admission across the region under the same criteria as local applicants. By fostering mutual recognition of secondary education qualifications, the agreement strengthens regional cooperation and educational integration. The start of Agreement implementation is to date pending parliamentary ratifications.

The implementation of **the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans**, another key regional initiative, remains stalled, requiring high-level political resolution. In the meantime, the RCC continues to support activities regarding the **Regional Recognition Database (RRD)**, which even though essential for streamlining qualification recognition, strengthening cooperation among institutions, etc. is awaiting inputs from the Parties to the Agreement. RCC upholds its commitment to support all Parties to the Agreement at both political and technical levels to establish a sustainable and functional framework for its implementation.

Workforce mobility also advanced with the **Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Midwives, Veterinary Surgeons, and Pharmacists (MRA 2)**, which has been ratified by all Parties to the Agreement. Following the adoption of the Terms of Reference for the Joint Working Group on Recognition of Professional Qualifications (JWGRPR) by the CEFTA Joint Committee in October 2024, preparations are underway for its first official meeting, which will oversee the implementation of all seven professional qualifications (doctors of medicine, doctors of dental medicine, architects, nurses, midwives, veterinary surgeons, and pharmacists) signed so far.

Additionally, the RCC has been instrumental in **aligning regional Quality Assurance Agencies with European higher education standards**. To advance compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and facilitate membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and registration with the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), RCC, in collaboration with the Agency for Science and Higher Education of Croatia (ASHE), developed a comprehensive report with recommendations for strengthening quality assurance frameworks and concrete operational procedures for all Western Balkans Quality Assurance Bodies, supporting the region's integration into the European Higher Education Area.

A3. Digital Integration and Implementation of the Digital Agenda for Western Balkans

During the reporting period, a regular dialogue with the WB6 institutions responsible for telecommunications as well as telecommunications operators has been maintained. Three back-to-back meetings were held in this regard in Zagreb in December 2024 - the meeting of the signatories of the EU/WB Roaming Declaration, the meeting of the WB6 Working Groups on Roaming Policy, Broadband and 5G as well as the Advisory and Coordination Group meeting.

Through the EU/WB Roaming Declaration (Declaration), the signatories of the Declaration committed to an annual review of all agreed obligations. In this context, two meetings with the operators were held in July and September 2024, focusing on the methodology and an appropriate questionnaire for assessing the Declaration's impact. Based on the collected data, the WB6/EU Roaming Report was drafted, presented, and discussed during the meeting in Zagreb. The report is now in its final preparation stage, with data validation and findings review underway, while its publication is expected no later than March 2025.

The meeting of the WB6 Working Groups on Roaming Policy, Broadband, and 5G in Zagreb focused on discussing the plans for 2025 in the area of connectivity in line with the CRM 2.0, the draft third edition of the Western Balkans Six Roaming Report, and regional needs for TAIEX support. The latter will focus on increasing capacities on the Gigabit Infrastructure Act (GIA), integrated in all Reform Agendas (RAs) under the Growth Plan.

Inclusive regional dialogue between public institutions and telecommunications operators on the importance of GIA has been discussed during the Advisory and Coordination Group (ACG) meeting, which brought together around 50 participants, including representatives of WB6 institutions dealing with telecommunications, WB6 and EU operators and European Commission. As previously discussed within the ACG framework, permit granting procedures remain a major challenge in the WB6 telecom sector. To address this, the RCC will develop a questionnaire for WB6 institutions and operators to assess these procedures in detail. Based on the collected data, follow-up interviews will be conducted, leading to tailored recommendations for each economy and, where feasible, for the region as a whole.

As part of the Butterfly Innovation Forum, the RCC, in cooperation with UNDP, hosted the Skills4Jobs: Making the Western Balkans' Businesses More Resilient side event, focusing on digital skills and workforce development. Skills4Jobs aimed to address the urgent need for upskilling to bridge the gap between the demands of WB6 businesses and the current workforce skill set, supporting the region's green and digital transitions. The event also introduced the Digital Pulse tool, an online self-assessment platform for measuring business digital maturity. Originally developed by UNDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it has been expanded to the regional level in collaboration with RCC. The event gathered leading experts, policymakers, and business leaders to discuss solutions for strengthening the region's workforce.

In addition to these ongoing activities, the RCC is in the process of establishing new working groups to address key emerging priorities within the digital landscape defined in CRM 2.0. This includes ongoing organisation of working group meetings with the participation of the

World Bank. These new working groups will focus on critical areas such as development of a Regional Digital ID Wallet, a crucial component of every Reform Agenda, and establishment of a robust Data Governance Framework for the Western Balkans. This framework will encompass guidelines and policies on data management, data privacy in line with the GDPR, data sharing, data security, and interoperability, as well as considerations related to the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA). These initiatives reflect the RCC and WB6 commitment to fostering a secure, inclusive, and interoperable digital environment across the region. Crucially, the RCC is dedicated to ensuring a safer, more functional, and trustworthy online environment for WB6 users. The fifth edition of the RCC flagship initiative [“Balkathon - Where you turn your idea into a masterpiece”](#) competition was organised in Tirana on 3 October 2024. The competition invited teams composed of people up to 35 years of age coming from WB6. The teams were encouraged to include amongst their members qualified individuals including students, legal entities, start-ups, non-governmental and educational institutions. Almost 80 applications were received in the areas of technology of services, green and energy, transport, tourism, agriculture, and others. Six winners of the competition were announced at the final event, which was attended by respected representatives of the European Commission, various embassies in Tirana, and other organisations and public institutions of Albania. Recognising the importance of supporting the younger generation and promoting early education and digital solutions, the RCC extended the invitation to participate in the Balkathon competition to high schools, dedicating three special recognitions for high school teams.

In October 2024, the RCC started the process of preparation of the **WB DESI 2024 Report** under the RCC umbrella. The Report will monitor digital developments in each WB economy and the region in order to ensure a better track of the digital transformation within the region, and will be in line with the European Union norms and practices. Data necessary for the WB DESI calculation will be supplied through Eurostat, a questionnaire filled out by WB6, statistical offices, relevant regulatory authorities and ministries, and broadband competence offices. The Report is planned to be finalised in the first half of 2025.

When it comes to **cybersecurity**, in January and February 2025, the RCC, IISG (Integrative Internal Security Governance), and EC organised consultations on the identification of cybersecurity needs in the WB6. The inputs from the bilateral consultation meetings provided additional information for further development of the cybersecurity database, which is part of the existing IISG Database. The database will improve regional dialogue on cybersecurity by exchanging needs at the economy and regional level through a non-public framework/platform, as well as enable a user-friendly framework/platform for simplified and open donor coordination for cybersecurity projects/initiatives in the Western Balkans.

Preparations for the new cycle of the Western Balkan Digital Summit (WBDS) started with internal preparations and consultations with EC, German Federal Ministries, and the Host of the WBDS 2025, North Macedonia. The preparations for the 7th WBDS will begin with the first WBDS Steering Committee meeting to be held in March 2025.

A4. Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Resilience

During the reporting period, the RCC actively contributed to the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) Action Plan (2021–2030). This was achieved through regular meetings of the Regional Working Group on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (RWG GAWB), RCC's monitoring and reporting mechanisms to assess annual progress, and organisation of the First Ministerial Meeting to provide political guidance for GAWB implementation. Additionally, the RCC provided targeted support and expert assistance to steer regional processes and develop regional documents while ensuring extensive coordination on GAWB-related matters. Comprising civil servants from climate and environment ministries from Western Balkans Six, the RWG GAWB leads technical discussions, oversees the implementation of the Sofia Declaration components, and prepares for the Annual GAWB Ministerial meeting.

The RCC prepared 2023 Edition of **GAWB Action Plan Implementation Report**, which offers a detailed evaluation of progress made across 58 targeted actions, within the seven thematic Roadmaps: **Climate Action, Energy, Sustainable Transport, Circular Economy, Depollution, Sustainable Agriculture, and Protection of Nature and Biodiversity**. It highlights the challenges and opportunities faced by the WB6 and outlines priority actions.

The monitoring mechanisms established by the RCC allow for regular tracking of implementation progress, while identifying bottlenecks and delays. Monitoring is conducted annually through pre-defined qualitative and quantitative indicators, in close cooperation with the WB6, regional partners, the European Commission, and other key stakeholders.

One of the RCC's main efforts was organising the **first Ministerial Meeting on GAWB**, in collaboration with Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, with the support of European Commission, and in close coordination with RWG GAWB members. Held on 8 October in Hamburg, within the framework of Berlin Process 2024, this meeting marked a major milestone in regional environmental cooperation. Through close coordination with PM Sherpas from WB6, RWG GAWB, Germany, and the EC, the meeting resulted in the endorsement of the **Hamburg Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans**.

This Declaration reaffirms the WB6's commitment to implementing the Green Agenda and its 2021-2030 Action Plan, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050. It proposes **establishment of an annual Ministerial Meeting on the GAWB** to ensure political momentum and coherence, and highlights initiatives such as finalisation of the Regional Action Plan on Prevention of Plastic Pollution, including Marine Litter, and the Western Balkans Six Climate Adaptation Roadmap. It also **emphasizes just transition governance, phasing out coal**, establishing Monitoring, Reporting, Verification and Accreditation (MRVA) for emissions monitoring **and welcomed alignment with the EU acquis, particularly on environmental standards**. It underscores the role of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) and the commitment to develop the Western Balkans 2030 Biodiversity Strategy.

In addition, through the Declaration WB6 outlined key priorities for 2025, including revision of the GAWB Action Plan in collaboration with RCC and regional partners through the RWG GAWB.

Advancing Climate Adaptation and Biodiversity Conservation - The RCC has prioritised development of the Western Balkans Six **Climate Adaptation Roadmap**, aligning regional objectives with EU policies such as the EU Adaptation Strategy and overall GAWB AP targets. Expected to be finalised in 2025, this Roadmap will serve as a strategic framework for enhancing climate resilience across the region. The first draft of the Roadmap was developed following a series of online consultations with WB6 throughout December 2024. A draft version will be discussed at the upcoming RWG GAWB meeting in March/April 2025, with the final version set for technical approval later in 2025.

In parallel, RCC is collaborating with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to establish a regional network of protected areas and conservation measures under the **Western Balkans Biodiversity Strategic Plan (WBBSP) 2030**. This plan, a key component of the Protection of Nature and Biodiversity pillar of the GAWB Action Plan, is designed to combat biodiversity loss and enhance ecosystem resilience. Aligned with international and EU biodiversity frameworks, including the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the WBBSP will integrate NbS in line with the commitments outlined in the Hamburg Declaration.

Under the **Depollution pillar**, RCC has conducted a legal and institutional analysis assessing the transposition and implementation of EU water legislation in the WB6. The report evaluates progress on key directives, including: the Water Framework Directive, the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, the Drinking Water Directive and the Nitrates Directive.

Additionally, RCC has supported development of two policy briefs prepared by GIZ, which are to be validated by RWG GAWB/WB6: **Mitigating Negative Social and Labour Market Impacts of the Energy Transition in the Western Balkans 6**, and **Addressing Vulnerable Groups in the Energy Transition, with a Focus on Workers in the Coal Sector and Women in the Western Balkans 6**. Both policy briefs integrate perspectives from the GAWB Action Plan and align with Green Agenda objectives.

RCC is conducting **donor mapping exercise** to identify and analyse donor-supported regional projects that align with the GAWB objectives of achieving carbon neutrality and alignment with the European Green Deal. The mapping provides a comprehensive view of active donors, facilitates strategic regional planning and alignment with sustainable development objectives, and enhances coordination, fosters synergies, and addresses funding gaps to support the WB6 green transition.

In addition, in January 2025, RCC started planning the development of **GAWB Observatory Platform**, with the aim of providing a visual presentation on the Sofia Declaration implementation progress. The Observatory will include a user-friendly web platform with all indicators grouped per policy areas, for the whole region of Western Balkans or individually,

with timelines, web accessories for different parameters, and databases to be filled in through annual data collection cycles. The purpose will be to ensure that various groups of users, including policy-makers, researches, regional organisations, donors, citizens and many others, have access to a quick and user-friendly platform for better understanding and tracking the implementation status.

B. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security

B1. Political Cooperation

During the reporting period, a significant political development was the assumption of duties by the **new Secretary General of the RCC**, Mr. Amer Kapetanovic, on 1 January 2025.

Within the framework of the **Tirana SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office** (C-i-O), several key events were organised to foster collaboration and regional development.

On 23 October 2024, an **International Workshop titled Digitization, Access, and Protection in the Cultural Heritage Sector in Central and South-East Europe** was held as part of the Albanian CEI and SEECP Chairmanships. Organised by the Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation of Albania, this event highlighted the crucial role of digitisation in preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

On behalf of Tirana SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office and the Albanian Presidency of the Central European Initiative (CEI), an **expert panel “Enhancing cross-border connectivity in the Central and South East Europe region exploiting sustainable transport solutions”** was organised on 14 November 2024 in Vlora, Albania. This event was organised in cooperation with the CEI Executive Secretariat and the Transport Community Permanent Secretariat. Experts and civil servants working on transport policies from the CEI and SEECP economies attended the expert panel, which was divided in two sessions: “Freight transport facilitation across the CEI region, multimodal connections and digital logistics” and “Facilitation of passenger transport, improving rail connections and rail passenger transport in CEI region”. The event was opened by the Deputy Minister of Infrastructure and Energy of Albania, Ami Kozeli, who underlined the importance of initiatives such as the Blue Corridor and Corridor 8 in the context of transport connectivity, as well as Albania’s commitment to green and digital solutions.

Further strengthening political dialogue, Tirana hosted the second meeting of the **Political Directors of SEECP** on 26 November 2024, within the framework of its Chairmanship-in-Office. During this meeting, the activities of Tirana SEECP Chairmanship for 2024 and 2025 were presented, reinforcing the commitment to fostering closer ties among the SEECP participants.

The SEECP Parliamentary Assembly Steering Committee meeting was held on 10 December 2024, in Tirana, where the SEECP Chair for 2024-2025 presented the priorities of Tirana’s SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office. The central topic of the meeting was Parliamentary

Cooperation for Enhancing Regional Interconnectivity and the delegations exchanged views on the importance of strengthening parliamentary cooperation to foster greater regional integration and connectivity.

Cybersecurity also took centre stage on 11 February 2025, when, in observance of **Safer Internet Day**, Albania's Cyber Security Authority (AKSK) organised a regional meeting in collaboration with the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania. Held under the Tirana Chairmanship of SEECF, this event brought together representatives of 13 SEECF participants and international organisations to discuss pressing cyber challenges and strengthen cooperation for a more secure digital landscape.

Another significant regional initiative took place on 27–28 February 2025 with the **XXI Conference of the European Integration/Affairs Committees of countries participating in the Stabilisation and Association Process in South-East Europe (COSAP)**, themed Twenty Years from Sarajevo: Looking Forward. The RCC contributed to the panel discussion From Political Discussion to Functional Cooperation – The Western Balkans Gap, emphasizing the need to build on the existing agreements within the Berlin Process and explore further avenues for cooperation.

These developments reflect the ongoing efforts to enhance political dialogue, regional cooperation, and digital and cultural advancement in South East Europe, reinforcing a shared vision for sustainable growth and stability.

B3. Good Governance

The **8th Meeting of the South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes (SEE JTI) Network** took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 10 December 2024, co-organised by the Regional Cooperation Council and the Judicial Training Centre of Slovenia.

The event brought together judicial professionals and legal experts from across the region to address emerging challenges in judicial training, focusing on cybercrime and the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in the judiciary. The meeting gathered representatives from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Türkiye, reaffirming the region's collective commitment to enhancing judicial cooperation and capacity building.

Discussions highlighted the growing complexity of digital fraud, identity theft, cryptocurrency issues, and ransomware, emphasizing the need for specialised judicial training in cybersecurity and digital forensics. Experts addressed the challenges of cross-border/boundary cooperation and evidence collection, particularly in light of the upcoming EU legislative package on electronic evidence. The role of AI in judicial processes was explored, with participants examining ethical concerns, regulatory frameworks, and the balance between AI-assisted

* 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.

decision-making and human oversight. Key takeaways included the need for structured regional training programmes, stronger collaboration on cyber-enabled financial crimes, and harmonised legal frameworks to address those security threats.

The Regional Cooperation Council reaffirmed its readiness to support JTI initiatives by facilitating dialogue, promoting knowledge exchange, and fostering collaboration on AI governance and cybersecurity.

In cooperation with the International Association of Mediators from Southeast Europe the Regional Cooperation Council organised the **Regional Mediation Conference: “Improving access to justice through mediation”** on 25 October 2024. This conference gathered participants from Ministries of Justice, judiciary and Chambers of Mediators from SEE economies, as well as representatives of the Notary Chamber of Serbia. The focus of discussions was on the benefits of mediation in economic disputes; mediation's role in reducing court backlogs and enhancing judicial efficiency; resolution of disputes through mediation - right of ownership of immovable property. The speakers from the abovementioned institutions also presented case studies on successful mediation and best practices. The RCC informed about its activities under the Rule of Law, and on the latest findings on the usage of mediation in the Western Balkans according to the Balkan Barometer.

In cooperation with the Albanian Centre for Competitiveness and International Trade (ACIT) and Albanian Centre for European Policies (ACEP), the Regional Cooperation Council organised a four-day **executive training for staff of parliaments and ministries from the Western Balkans**. The executive training took place in Tirana, Albania, from 2 to 5 December 2024. The overall objective of the training was to assist the RCC to support regional exchange and raise awareness and technical capacities of parliamentary staff and ministries on measures linked with Common Regional Market. It was designed and implemented through a tailor-made programme based on the needs for capacity building and awareness on Common Regional Market, Growth Plan for the WB and the reforms required in this respect, while also providing a comprehensive overview of other regional cooperation processes. The findings of a previous “Assessment Report on the training needs of parliamentary staff in the Western Balkans on Common Regional Market” were also taken into consideration. 21 representatives of the parliaments from the region and other ministries attended the training.

B4. Security

During the reporting period (1 October 2024 to 28 February 2025), the Regional Cooperation Council focused on advancing regional security cooperation through the activities outlined below.

Key milestones included the successful [9th Regional Security Coordination Conference \(Jumbo\)](#), [presentation of the 2024 SecuriMeter findings](#), finalisation of the Jumbo-related Working Group Outcomes Report, organisation of the **16th SEEMIC Conference** in Split and the **14th SEENSA Meeting** in Sofia, and initiating the 5th edition of SecuriMeter survey for 2025.

Efforts were also directed towards further institutionalising security-related working groups, exploring additional financial support for the initiatives, and deepening cooperation with key regional and international partners. The RCC maintained its engagement with the Ministries of Interior in the Western Balkans, EU stakeholders, and specialised agencies.

Additionally, the RCC actively participated in SEESAC regional meetings, including the **Regional Workshop on Weapons and Ammunition Management** (8-9 October 2024), reinforcing its commitment to addressing Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) control as part of broader security cooperation efforts.

The RCC also participated at the Project Board meeting for the project support for enhancing the fight against illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans, held online on 27 February 2025. The Project Board is chaired by the Manager of UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub, who serves as the Project Executive, together with the RCC and the European Commission (DG NEAR and DG HOME).

Moreover, the RCC facilitated and contributed to two key SEE-level security cooperation platforms:

The **16th Conference of the South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs** (SEEMIC), held on 7-8 October 2024 in Split, under Croatian Co-chairmanship-in-Office. The conference gathered intelligence leaders from across the region to discuss contemporary security challenges. A significant outcome was the adoption of the OSINT assessment draft report on “Security threats for the SEEMIC region emanating from emerging disruptive technologies”, which aims to equip political and military decision-makers with a comprehensive intelligence picture of these evolving threats.

The **14th Meeting of the Heads of the Security Authorities of SEE** (SEENSA) was held on 16-18 October 2024 in Sofia, under Bulgarian Co-chairmanship-in-Office. The meeting focused on good practices and innovations in classified information protection and regional security development, strengthening regional security frameworks.

On 11 February 2025, the RCC met with the 2025 SEEMIC Co-Chairmanship-in-Office team, as preparatory activities for the forthcoming working group meetings and the main Chiefs’ Conference to be held during the second half of 2025.

On 7-8 November 2024, the RCC successfully organised the **9th Regional Security Coordination Conference** in Sarajevo, bringing together over 150 participants, including security institutions, international organisations, academia, and civil society representatives. The conference served as a high-level platform for dialogue on pressing security challenges, focusing on organised crime, and cyber threats.

A significant outcome of the conference was the formalisation of security-related Working Group sessions, which aim to serve as structured mechanisms for continued engagement on

specific thematic priorities in future years. The event also featured discussions on integrating data-driven approaches into policymaking, leveraging findings from the SecuriMeter.

For more details, the full report on **Working Group Outcomes and Recommendations** can be found on this [link](#).

The **SecuriMeter 2024** findings were launched at an [event in Tirana](#) on 16 December 2024.

The 9th Jumbo Conference incorporated key insights from SecuriMeter, with the RCC Secretary General framing her opening remarks around its findings. The standalone launch event in Tirana allowed for a dedicated focus on the survey results, promoting a discussion with key regional and international stakeholders.

Recognising the importance of continuously tracking security perceptions in the Western Balkans, the RCC has initiated work on the 5th edition of SecuriMeter (2025). This edition will incorporate additional efforts of relevant academicians who will support RCC in strengthening the methodology and a refined questionnaire with a greater emphasis on trust in institutions and perceptions of corruption.

During this reporting period, the RCC continued to expand its security portfolio. The 9th Jumbo Conference effectively enhanced cooperation frameworks, while the launch of the WB SecuriMeter 2024 and preparations for its 2025 edition further solidified the RCC's role as a leading provider of security insights informed by public opinion data.

Moving forward, the focus will remain on institutionalising working groups, securing sustainable funding, and advancing collaboration with regional and international stakeholders. The upcoming 10th Jumbo Conference and further regional security initiatives will be instrumental in achieving these objectives.

B5. SEE2030 Strategy

During the reporting period, the RCC, in cooperation with SEECF participants, finished the preparation of the Third Annual Interim Report on Implementation of the South East Europe 2030 (SEE2030) Strategy. The current report provides an overview and assesses the state-of-play of regional efforts towards meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its findings are meant to help the SEE region calibrate its efforts to achieve sustainable economic growth, reduce poverty and inequality, improve social inclusion, empower women, decelerate depopulation, enhance the overall quality of life for citizens, and accelerate the green and digital transition while strengthening competitiveness and private sector development.

The report was approved by the SEE2030 Strategy Monitoring Committee at its sixth meeting held in Belgrade on 5 December 2024. The SEE economies participated in the Monitoring Committee meeting and provided their strategic guidance and recommendations regarding the SEE2030 Strategy updating exercise. All delegations that participated in the meeting confirmed

their intention to see an updated Strategy which aims to reach more tangible and visible outputs. The delegations also emphasised the need to strengthen connectivity and complementarities between the SEE2030 Strategy and EU policies and strategies on SDGs and global agendas.

Under the SEE 2030 Dialogue Mechanism activities, a meeting with the representatives of insurance sector regulators and sectoral representatives was held in Istanbul on 3 December 2024. The meeting focused on disaster insurance schemes and risk sharing with its main objective to discuss the possibilities and willingness of the sector to extend the regional cooperation on risk sharing and exchanging good practices in disaster insurance schemes in the context of SEE 2030 Strategy. The participants shared their positions on the possibilities of establishing a Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing consisting of representatives of insurance sector regulatory authorities, and insurance and reinsurance sector associations of SEE economies.

The RCC Secretariat has requested the consent of Monitoring Committee and the SEEC Political Directors on the establishment of a SEE Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing and has provided them with draft Terms of Reference of this Regional Network and a preliminary Work Programme listing activities that the network is recommended to focus on. If the Monitoring Committee and SEEC Political Directors have no objections, the RCC Secretariat will present the proposal on the establishment of SEE Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing to the RCC Board for its approval according to the procedures foreseen by the SEE2030 Strategy.

C. Projects

C1. Western Balkans Youth Lab Project² (WBYL)

During the reporting period, the Western Balkans Youth Lab 2 (WBYL2) made significant strides in fostering regional youth cooperation, strengthening Youth Councils, implementing the **Youth Policy Lab on the Green Agenda** and ensuring participation of Western Balkans youth in high-level international dialogues. These efforts align with the broader objective of enhancing youth engagement and policy influence across the region.

In October, WBYL2 facilitated participation of young representatives from the Western Balkans at the **Global Gateway High-Level Youth Event in Brussels**. The event gathered high-level public figures from political, economic, and social spheres, members of global and local European Union youth programmes and representatives of the EU and civil society organisations. At the event, young people from the region got an opportunity to discuss EU's external action and shape future of Youth Action Plan.

In November, **Regional Conference on Youth Cultural Cooperation** organised in Belgrade served as a platform for fostering dialogue and collaboration among young artists and cultural

² This project is funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2019/409-790

stakeholders. The conference emphasized the role of youth artistic expressions in reconciliation of the region and provided a platform to the young emerging artists to present their work at the side event exhibition.

During the reporting period, WBYL2 **provided comprehensive capacity-building support to all Youth Councils in the Western Balkans Six** to strengthen their internal structures and operational efficiency. The initiatives undertaken and the support provided have enhanced the councils' strategic direction and will contribute to regional cooperation through their improved ability to effectively advocate for youth policies at a regional level.

Building on the momentum of the Kick-off Conference for the Youth Policy Lab on the Green Agenda, in collaboration with the Working Groups the WBYL2 team conducted **Youth Policy Labs in each economy to assess their specific needs and initiate targeted activities**. As a result, activities have commenced, notably in Skopje, where efforts are focused on reviewing and identifying relevant legislation, simplifying Green Agenda policies into youth-friendly language, and developing an Eco Youth Dictionary for use in schools. In Pristina, work is underway to conduct a comprehensive analysis of policies and legal frameworks to strengthen youth participation in environmental decision-making.

Further to this, WBYL2 organised a series of meetings with EU Delegations, Youth Councils, RYCO, and other partners in the capitals of WB6. During the tours, the project conducted consultations on the topic of the 2nd Youth Policy Lab to commence in the 4th quarter of 2025 as well as to plan key regional activities for this year.

C2. Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)³

The Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) is a key regional mechanism that fosters EU-Western Balkans security cooperation, with strong regional ownership and active participation of all WB6 Ministries of Interior/Security. Focused on counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism (WBCTi), countering serious and organised crime (WBCSCi), and border/boundary security (WBBSi), the IISG continues to strengthen regional security frameworks. In response to evolving digital threats, the addition of a Cybersecurity pillar to the IISG Database marks a significant expansion of its scope, reinforcing efforts to address emerging security challenges in the digital domain.

As the operational arm of the IISG process, the IISG Secretariat has played a pivotal role in advancing key initiatives outlined in the IISG Terms of Reference. Throughout the reporting period, IISG Secretariat has focused on mapping security needs and responses, enhancing donor coordination, and integrating cybersecurity into regional security strategies.

The **Second Biennial Needs Mapping Report** was developed and is awaiting one more contribution after the finalisation of security strategies. Simultaneously, the **Third Annual Response Mapping Report** is being finalised, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of progress

³ This project is funded by the European Union, grant number IPA 2020/414-918

in addressing security needs while streamlining efforts to prevent duplication with EU Delegation (EUD) reporting mechanisms. Both reports are scheduled for completion by April 2025.

To further enhance regional coordination, the 16th Regional Network of CT-P/CVE Coordinators (RNNC) Meeting was successfully organised on 15 October 2024, in Sarajevo, under the IISG Secretariat's facilitation. The event served as a platform for CT-P/CVE coordinators, regional experts, and stakeholders to exchange best practices and develop counter-terrorism strategies. Following an EU decision, IISG has assumed full responsibility for coordinating the RNNC process, in close collaboration with the EU Regional Security Advisor.

The IISG Database, a central tool for tracking security projects and initiatives, has been further developed, with new projects and an increasing number of users from WB6 institutions and partner organisations. The Cybersecurity component has undergone substantial progress, with all administrative work finalised and stakeholder log-in credentials distributed. By June 2025, cybersecurity will be fully integrated into the IISG Database, ensuring comprehensive coverage of cybersecurity needs, ongoing projects, data analysis, and donor engagement.

Additionally, donor coordination has been incorporated as a new feature, providing stakeholders with real-time insights into security needs and corresponding projects. This step is critical in preventing overlaps and ensuring targeted support, and the RCC is actively exploring ways to expand its role in coordinating donors to optimise regional security efforts.

To strengthen IISG's operational capacity, the recruitment of key personnel was completed, with a Pillar Coordinator and Analyst officially joining the IISG Secretariat on 15 January 2025. This addition has significantly enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of IISG operations.

In parallel, the IISG Secretariat undertook several key administrative and strategic initiatives, including:

- Finalising economy reports for each security pillar (WBCTi, WBCSCi, WBBSi, and Cybersecurity);
- Organising consultations in Belgrade and Sarajevo to refine security priorities;
- Transitioning the IISG website from WordPress to the Easy framework platform to enhance accessibility and functionality;
- Preparing the 2024 IISG Annual Report for submission to the European Commission.

Looking ahead, IISG will continue strengthening its regional security governance efforts through:

- Completion of the Needs and Response Mapping Reports by April 2025;
- Full integration of cybersecurity data into the IISG Database;
- Initiation of regional stakeholder coordination meetings by late June 2025;

- Advancement of the Security Governance Hub, a strategic initiative aimed at streamlining security frameworks and enhancing cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans.

C3. Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP)

RCC's Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP 3) project has commenced its new phase by organising field visits and having in-person meetings with all partners from the Western Balkans Six. The in-person meetings were held with all key partner institutions: Public Employment Services (PES), Labour Inspectorates (LI), Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs, Tax Authorities (TA) and Agencies for European Integration, aimed at informing them about the project goals, soliciting their inputs, and ensuring their continued commitment to joint project activities.

Following the inception phase, ESAP 3 has embarked on the operational activities. Together with the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and the project's implementing partner – International Labour Organization (ILO) RCC has organised a regional kick-off event for ESAP 3. The two-day hybrid event titled *Balanced Labour Markets in the Western Balkans: Innovative Solutions for a Sustainable Workforce* was held on 23-24 October in Budva, Montenegro, and convened all project stakeholders, including social partners. The opening remarks at the event were delivered by the EU, RCC and ILO experts addressing key aspects of the ESAP 3 work, reflecting on the context in which the project operates. Laura Corrado, Head of Unit International Affairs, from the DG EMPL said that the EU enlargement process remained the top priority for the European Commission and that all EU institutions stood ready to support the region in the complex path of EU accession. She added that the importance of ESAP 3 project lied in addressing different components of effective labour market and social policies, tackling undeclared work, formalisation, approximation of WB6 to labour and social standards, fostering social dialogue, and raising standards in occupational safety and health. The very positive evaluation of the first two phases of ESAP project demonstrated its added value.

The event was envisaged as a combination of informative and networking but also technical working sessions dealing with the core project goals. During the kick-off meeting the RCC segment of the project organised separate regional working sessions dealing with undeclared work and alignment with the EU acquis, Chapters 2 and 19 in particular, as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The first day of the event was marked by the panel discussion on the employment and social outlook of the WB6, occupational safety and health, and social dialogue. Additionally, the afternoon session formally initiated mutual cooperation between the WB6 PES and the EU PES Network. The official part on the second day hosted the first plenary session of the Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work, and the meeting on aligning with EU Acquis Chapters 2 and 19, with productive discussions and next steps agreed.

The reporting period was also marked with operationalisation of mutual cooperation between the WB6 PES and the EU PES Network. Namely, upon official invitation of the EU PES Network, a delegation of WB6 PESs attended the [Stakeholder Conference 'Rethinking support for those furthest from the labour market'](#) (November 2024, Brussels). It was the first mutual learning event to which representatives of the WB6 PESs were officially invited by their European peers as part of the initiative for increased involvement of the WB6 PES in the work of the EU PES Network, supported by the ESAP 3 project. The Conference intended primarily for PES as well as social partners, private employment services (PrES) and employers, NGOs, training providers and international organisations, explored new and effective approaches to reintegrating jobseekers furthest from the labour market. These jobseekers have different needs, sometimes multiple and complex, and have different degrees of vulnerability in the labour market. WB6 PES representatives actively participated in the four thematic workshops (outreach and support; lifelong career guidance; cooperation with private employment services; and evidence-based services for those furthest from the labour market) and just as many collaborative workshops (strategies to support the (re)integration of older workers; partnerships to support women in vulnerable situations and caregivers, support to persons with disabilities; and sustainable integration of NEETs into the labour market).

Working towards closer cooperation of the WB6 enforcement agencies with the European Labour Authority (ELA), ESAP 3 project reached another milestone by including WB6 Network for Tackling Undeclared Work into regular mutual learning ELA scheme of events. The WB6 delegation has been included into preparations and will be taking an active part in the upcoming ELA-led thematic review workshop: Inter-institutional cooperation to tackle undeclared work within the EU Member States taking place in Rome, Italy on 12-13 March 2025. The aim of this thematic review workshop is to engage in mutual learning and deepen the understanding of successful inter-institutional cooperation at the economy level, specifically focusing on inter-institutional cooperation on operations (i.e. inspections, education, awareness raising campaigns and other support measures) and on data collection, sharing and analysis to tackle undeclared work. This will provide an opportunity for WB6 enforcement authorities to share insights with their EU colleagues from the European Platform tackling undeclared work as the participants will have the chance to share best practices, operational insights, challenges and innovative approaches.

Additionally, ESAP 3 project has started the preparations for the first regional performance reviews regarding the EPSR, out of three regular reviews envisaged for this project cycle. The open call for consultancy support to produce six individual-economy and one regional overview, comparative report and the [Social Scoreboard of key EPSR indicators](#) was published on 31 January 2025. The WB6 employment [Observatory](#) was also updated in the reporting period to present the latest labour market trends in the region, comparing them to those of the EU. Based on the latest available data, for 2nd quarter of 2024 (Q2), the average employment rate in the region is on the rise (Q1 2024=59.6%; Q2 2024=60.3%) but still lags behind the EU average for around 10%. Even more pronounced is change in the unemployment rate that decreased by 0.6% from Q1 to Q2 of 2024 (the decline in the EU for the same period was 0.4%). However, skills mismatch, general lack of labour force and other labour market issues

the region is facing are not reflected in the Observatory data, and the EPSR 2024 performance reviews will shed more light on such structural labour market challenges.

As part of its support to regionally-driven activities ESAP 3 project is involved in preparations for the WB6 ministerial conference of ministers of labour. The Conference titled *Labour Migration: Supporting Economic Growth in the Western Balkans Six* is to take place in Montenegro on 15-16 of May 2025, back-to-back with the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) 10th Civil Society Forum. Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue of Montenegro initiated the Conference that is to be co-organised with the RCC and supported by the RCC's ESAP 3 project, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the European Union Delegation to Montenegro. It will convene Ministers and representatives of governments, private sector, and development banks active in the WB6 to discuss labour migration as a driving force for economic growth.

D. Horizontal Activities

D1. Programming, Monitoring, Coordination

The Berlin Process Summit, held in Berlin on 14 October 2024, represented a significant milestone in advancing the integration of the Western Balkans Six into the EU Single Market. The Regional Cooperation Council played a central role in coordinating and facilitating key deliverables within the Summit's framework, working closely with regional partners and WB6 governments.

During the Summit, WB6 leaders endorsed several landmark agreements and initiatives facilitated by the RCC, which are expected to yield concrete benefits in the near future. These include:

- **Common Regional Market 2025-2028 Action Plan** – Setting the foundation for deeper economic integration and regional cooperation;
- **Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans** – Enhancing student mobility and academic collaboration across the region;
- **Regional FDI Screening Standards of the Western Balkans Six** – Establishing a framework to attract and regulate foreign direct investment, ensuring transparency and security;
- **Declaration on Research and Innovation Infrastructure Access and Collaboration** – Promoting research collaboration and technological development to drive regional innovation;
- **Hamburg Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** – Reinforcing commitments to sustainability and aligning regional environmental policies with EU standards.

In line with the launch of the **Common Regional Market 2025-2028 Action Plan (CRM 2.0)** and within the framework of the annual **Prime Ministers' Sherpa Consultation Meetings**, the **RCC** convened the first high-level gathering (28 February 2025, Brussels), bringing

together key decision-makers from the **WB6**, regional partners, and representatives of the **European Commission**.

This meeting served as a strategic platform for advisers to WB6 Prime Ministers to engage in critical discussions, define priorities, and establish robust monitoring and sustainability mechanisms for the next phase of regional economic development. As the WB6 moves into the next phase of CRM implementation, the meeting focused on identifying and agreeing on the most pressing priority actions for 2025. The discussions aimed to align economy-level efforts with regional objectives, ensuring a coordinated approach to economic integration. With the adoption of CRM 2.0, a well-defined governance model and effective monitoring mechanisms are essential to track progress and uphold accountability. Drawing on best practices from the **Berlin Process**, the meeting refined these structures to enhance coordination across the region. In addition, the meeting elaborated on **the revision of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan** and provided informative insights to ensuring alignment with **EU policies** and reinforcing the region's commitment to a sustainable and greener economy.

Additionally, RCC has launched the preparation of **the Balkan Barometer 2025**, including the Business Opinion and Public Opinion surveys. The kick-off meeting has taken place, setting the stage for data collection and analysis. We are now in the process of refining the methodology and survey framework to ensure comprehensive and insightful results. A working group has been established with a task to streamline the future editions of the two major RCC surveys, Balkan Barometer and SecuriMeter.

D2. Communication

During the reporting period from October 2024 to February 2025, the Regional Cooperation Council implemented its Communication Strategy with the overarching goal to continue to be recognised as the driving force and key partner for regional cooperation in South East Europe.

The aim was to keep raising awareness about the importance of inclusive and sustainable regional cooperation, promoting EU and RCC commitments to the region, and highlighting the benefits of EU integration. The focus was on enhancing regional cooperation, advancing the facilitation in implementing the Common Regional Market, and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, as well as the South East Europe 2030 Strategy.

Significant emphasis was placed on promotion of CRM2 and the RCC flagship initiatives, such as the Balkathon competition, Butterfly Innovation Award, and SecuriMeter 2024. These initiatives were highlighted through various communication channels to engage stakeholders and the public effectively.

A notable event during this period was the transition in RCC leadership on 1 January 2025. This leadership change was communicated across RCC's platforms to inform and engage the regional audience.

The RCC utilised its official website and social media channels to disseminate information, share updates, and engage with the public. A number of articles, interviews, news items, Daily

News Overviews, as well as specific media content and campaigns have been created and distributed via a plethora of channels. By maintaining strong relationships with media outlets across the region and the EU, RCC ensured continuous public visibility and reinforced the significance of regional cooperation and EU integration for the Western Balkans.

Through these communication efforts, the RCC aimed to foster a deeper understanding of its initiatives and strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Abbreviations

BIA	Butterfly Innovation Award
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CEI	Central European Initiative
CI	Creative Industries
C-i-O	Chairmanship-in-Office
CRM	Common Regional Market
CRM 2.0	Second Action Plan of the Common Regional Market
DIHs	Digital Innovation Hubs
DG	Directorate General
DG EMPL	Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG HOME	Directorate General for Migrations and Home Affairs
DG NEAR	Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EC	European Commission
EIS	European Innovation Scoreboard
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
ESAP	Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GAWB	Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IISG	Integrative Internal Security Governance
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPAs	Investment Promotion Agencies
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
JWGI	Joint Working Group on Investments
PES	Public Employment Services
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RISS	Regional Investment Screening Standards
RNWE	Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship
RRD	Regional Recognition Database
RWG GAWB	Regional Working Group on Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEE	South East Europe
SEE JTI	South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes
SEE2030	South East Europe 2030 Strategy
SEECF	South-East European Cooperation Process
SEEMIC	South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs forum
SEENSA	Meeting of the Heads of South East Europe National Security Agencies
TEG	Tourism Expert Group
WB6	Western Balkans Six
WBBSi	Western Balkan Border/Boundary Security initiative

WBCSCi	Western Balkan Counter Serious Crime initiative
WBCTi	Western Balkan Counter Terrorism initiative
WBDS	Western Balkans Digital Summit
WBYL	Western Balkans Youth Lab Project
WGFM	Working Group on Financial Markets
WGID	Working Group on Industrial Development

Annex 1: PR and Communication – website links

Regional cooperation and Common Regional Market

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DEnd6Nbt8XW/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1Qdx5JmWcc/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1877393845123424343>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1877436681596391713>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1877722607828783327>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1879513154733912258>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DE2L6LRNO4e/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1Dfkygkrvx/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7460125924953050373>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/19wQ3DtX4C/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1887124791796154734>

<https://www.rcc.int/docs/731/rcc-secretary-general-for-montenegrin-vijesti>

<https://www.rcc.int/docs/730/rcc-secretary-general-for-n1>

- Digital agenda

Promotion of Balkathon competition

<https://www.rcc.int/news/893/bregu-you-have-the-power-to-make-a-difference-this-is-the-time-to-dream>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DAqH0DltkGb/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1Xtq2KHeup/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1841797365386137977>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7421504421483367685>

https://www.instagram.com/p/DAvP6GvNhkV/?img_index=1

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DAx0-AZNLWO/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1DtL189ic7/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1LFASxbDeD/>

<https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064669752792/search/?q=Meet%20%23Balkat+hon%205.0%20winners>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1292M4THU9t/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/15jXCrjJKc/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18B3pYaDHY/>

<https://www.facebook.com/RegionalCooperationCouncil/videos/880310643867414/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1AzKf6DM7z/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1842890619313684758>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2IDM4BNed5/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2cVdHuNdJS/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2sT-RBNUN2/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DCPRpaJNvIP/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7422590609120120069>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18GMhcdAaM/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1856019565765177601>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DDKKGK9TNt-5/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1B323JJiCe/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7444554870788558135>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1864306715556237315>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DDaGYNNt5ve/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18cnPAsko3/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7446851914047819013>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1866524281129078808>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18Pnf8ixrY/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DEpczQJtzDg/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7458292257733479685>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DE5OJGnt20q/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1ABKsbPzVU/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7460876428427463941>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1879895686994362817>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DFIQIHftSqN/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18AAsq9xcm/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/746274512011119621>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1882056912717422620>

- **Competitiveness**

Production and promotion of Investment agenda

<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/193/the-western-balkans-the-investors-next-hotspot-booklet>

<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/196/invest-in-ict-in-the-western-balkans-brochure>

<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/195/invest-in-renewables-in-the-western-balkans-brochure>

<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/194/invest-in-manufacturing-in-the-western-balkans-brochure>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1853785189379342491>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7428605912086105350>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1QiFsZgxQr/>

https://www.instagram.com/p/DB_Y9kINL-N/

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DCpIZMNNODX/>

<https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064669752792/search/?q=With%2076%25%20of%20the%20region%E2%80%99s%20exports%20in%20manufacturing%2C%20%23WesternBalkans%20offers%20a%20chance%20for%20manufacturing%20investment%20success>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7439794692461530424>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1PJXwC4jtU/>

- **Human Capital Agenda**

Innovation & Research

Promotion of Butterfly Innovation Award & Butterfly Innovation Forum

News

<https://www.rcc.int/news/901/the-third-regional-butterfly-innovation-forum-opens-in-podgorica>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/902/rcc-reveals-winners-of-the-2024-regional-butterfly-innovation-award>

Social Media promotion

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7423794256898313478>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1844033311578235226>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1FTrrJbCo8/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DA6ICUJNXgJ/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DCj-RkTNFvO/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1858954534413914389>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7439021433524653368>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18nA8moC8Q/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7440446231001763128>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1860295520100487398>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1860667550612226310>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18QBnc3vnZ/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DCzKIUptyFb/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DCzKIUptyFb/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7441248195491024183>

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<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/151esKSr1k/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1861435850103410909>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1861720735531647131>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1862136941178671319>

https://www.instagram.com/p/DC6wRxCNlkv/?img_index=1

https://www.instagram.com/p/DC_x_NFtpTE/

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1862854197277782442>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/19ntKvuJdK/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15hbmV897q/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1BLYu99ws6/>

Women empowerment

Promotion of Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year 2024 recognition

News

<https://www.rcc.int/news/913/rcc-nominations-for-western-balkans-women-entrepreneurs-of-the-year-2024-are-open>

Subpage

https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/65/western-balkans-women-entrepreneurs-of-the-year

Social Media promotion

https://www.instagram.com/p/DFKu-D_NEAN/

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18TfE8eimR/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7463090734464355589>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1886787122587427089>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7467574297490427141>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DFp2za3tbZ0/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/15sd4mRuFV/>

Green Agenda

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DChYWYeNKWb/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7438727350340160823>

SEE2030 Strategy

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DDG8ycot9OP/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1WmDVroeu8/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1863840088834056216>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1BR3ti8tFN/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DFusPMEtEbg/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1887466450119487620>

Security Cooperation

Promotion of 9th Regional Security Coordination Conference

<https://www.rcc.int/news/899/bregu-our-commitment-to-building-a-resilient-adaptive-and-forward-looking-security-framework-is-a-must>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DCD77SLNYj6/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/19qgbRxwmR/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1854427327003758978>

https://www.instagram.com/p/DCEg3PCtiOR/?img_index=1

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1854519869368316059>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15yY5sQ8uD/>

Promotion of SecuriMeter

- Website/subpage
- <https://www.rcc.int/securimeter/> - Publication, infographics, database
- News

<https://www.rcc.int/news/905/rcc-to-present-findings-of-securimeter-2024>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/906/only-39-of-citizens-consider-western-balkans-a-safe-place-to-live>

- Social Media promotion

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DDnLaWQNZp8/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1FM2LNpTPr/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7450089040793193733>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1868577049230639590>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DDnLaWQNZp8/>

https://www.instagram.com/p/DDpBazaIKLi/?img_index=1

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/14qbKYRLnT/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1868651153971413446>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DDwjTPNNHiU/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/15yruLum9k/>

Youth Agenda and WBYL

News

Youth Artistic Expressions Have the Power to Inspire Communities and Drive Positive Change across the Region

<https://www.rcc.int/news/900/youth-artistic-expressions-have-the-power-to-inspire-communities-and-drive-positive-change-across-the-region>

WBYL Social media promotion

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DCUDummN1t2/?igsh=eHhxd2l5bm5wMGtt>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCZKcXoNf9H/?igsh=MXM2OWJhOGxhZXNubg=>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DDMmDeIN6iV/?igsh=NjBobTRoYTg2b2Fp>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DEzv97QNXym/?igsh=OXY5aTBuOGkydDhp>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFNy9U8NLjr/?igsh=MTVtbWdzbm4xNnMwZg==>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1882809760472248723?s=46>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1879181830295015848?s=46>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1864654545210544485?s=46>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1857414210768036343?s=46>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1856694420097097748?s=46>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1856373830630912119?s=46>

Employment and ESAP

Employment and Social Affairs Platform 3 (ESAP 3)

News

□ *Third phase of the Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project (ESAP) kicked off in Budva, Montenegro*

<https://www.esap.online/news/209/rcc-esap-3-third-phase-of-the-employment-and-social-affairs-platform-project-esap-kicked-off-in-budva-montenegro>

□ *Representatives of the Western Balkan Public Employment Services for the First Time Ever Attended European PES Network's Stakeholder Conference*

<https://www.esap.online/news/210/rcc-esap-3-representatives-of-the-western-balkan-public-employment-services-for-the-first-time-ever-attended-european-pes-networks-stakeholder-conference>

Website

• *Launched ESAP 3 website – www.esap.online*

Social media

- <https://www.instagram.com/p/DBizzj7t4c3/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/DBZJrHktxBv/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1268361101280444>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1853717560853725337>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7255530049326501888>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7254170464191717376>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1886811872520782086>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1853717560853725337>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1853721319461855574>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1849761074175791415>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1849082366272077881>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1848752676814676202>
- <https://x.com/rccint/status/1848405096281084309>
- <https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1848618330061496643>