

REPORT
ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE
REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL SECRETARIAT

For the period 15 May 2020 – 1 October 2020

BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE REGIONAL
COOPERATION COUNCIL

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Executive Summary

As the region focused on mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, RCC remained vigilant in facilitating and advancing implementation of the regional cooperation processes and the Strategy and Work Programme (SWP) 2020-2022. Economic impact of the containment measures and the global downturn have already left their mark on nearly all sectors of socio-economic life, with World Bank estimating the growth range between -3 and -5.6 percent – whereas pre-Covid the region had been on a path of reacceleration and positive growth. Tourism, which contributes 10,2 percent of the region's GDP and employs 11,4 percent of the total employees, was especially hard hit, but no other sector had been spared.

In a special edition of Balkan Barometer assessing the public and business opinion of the COVID-19 impact, it was revealed that 81 percent of Western Balkans businesses had been affected by the spread of coronavirus. Unsurprisingly therefore, 72 percent of the region's citizens consider the corona virus a high threat to their economies, and 68 percent fear for their or their family member's job, whereas less than half of the respondents (42 percent) believe that their governments are doing enough to protect employment.

The road to recovery will be long and likely difficult, with regional cooperation constituting the key element in pushing the process forward in a steady and sustainable manner. In the period between May and October 2020, RCC sought to intensify its efforts to promote the regional agenda, in alignment with the EU accession process and with the findings of the Balkan Barometer 2020 which show strong and growing support for regional cooperation among citizens (77 percent). Practical restrictions transformed the *modus operandi* from in-person meetings to the digital sphere, while minimizing any potentially negative effects on productivity.

In line with the SWP 2020-2022, RCC retained focus on enhancing economic competitiveness, human capital development, digital integration as well as political and security cooperation in the region. In terms of **investments**, work is being conducted toward creating grounds for a Western Balkans regional investment area, and in **financial markets** it was decided that cooperation will focus on three main directions: financial services, payments, and strengthening cooperation in terms of relief, recovery and resilience.

In human capital development, **Protocol on Open Access to Research Infrastructures** is being prepared for its expected endorsement at the Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process, whereas the Support Programme has been launched to assist the development of the Network of Open Access Research Infrastructures to become operational by the end of 2020.

The way forward to **Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) on professional qualifications** has been proposed jointly by RCC and CEFTA, envisaging MRA to be signed

as a standalone agreement within the context of CEFTA. In the meantime, groundwork for supporting **removal of obstacles to recognition of academic qualifications and alignment of Western Balkans with EU Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance** has been prepared, with the launch of the Joint Information System in July and the finalization of the Regional Recognition Database in August, respectively.

In an effort to increase **participation of women and youth in regional socio-economic development**, preparations for establishing the Western Balkans Network of Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) has been initiated, and RCC has partnered with UNDP to draft the Roadmap on Women Economic Empowerment, currently in process. Meanwhile, Youth Project has together with its partners come to the consensus that the first Regional Thematic Youth Policy Lab will be focused on youth unemployment, whereas the **Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP)** project launched its second phase with the aim of tackling undeclared work by transforming it into declared work. In line with efforts to encourage youth employment and participation, ESAP had engaged three recent graduates from the region as interns, with the task to collect and analyse data on employment and labour markets in Western Balkans.

In the field of **digital integration**, the region marked the first anniversary of the entry into force of the Regional Roaming Agreement (RRA), and it is a good sign that the preparation of Roam Like At Home regime in Western Balkans is already at an advanced stage of preparation. The next step will be developing the Roadmap for lowering roaming charges between Western Balkans and the EU, for which DG CONNECT and RCC have drafted a non-paper. The Roadmap is expected to be finalized within 2021.

In the preceding period, the first ever **Balkathon** – “Smarten up the future” had been held, a regional online competition for young people and digital start-ups to develop innovative and practical business solutions in the areas of smart tourism, digital learning and online payments solutions. In this way, participants were encouraged to offer their creativity, skills and knowledge to the regional recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in a safe and sustainable manner. The three winners chosen by the jury will develop their digital solutions to make them applicable in all Western Balkans economies.

In the area of environment protection, **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** is being prepared through the process of regional consultations, to address issues in decarbonisation, depollution, circular economy, sustainable food system and nature protection, all in line with the EU Green Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals and aimed toward enhancing the quality of life and health in the Western Balkans. Guidelines for implementing the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans had been presented, and it is expected they should be adopted at the Sofia Summit.

Political cooperation, good governance and security continue to underpin the efforts of RCC, and strengthening regional capacities in this field remains a priority. The two security platforms, South East European National Security Authorities (SEENSA) and South East European Military Intelligence Chiefs (SEEMIC), have been turning toward capacity-building modi, with SEENSA participants taking part in the “Communication and Information Systems Protection” online training and SEEMIC participants in a Gender Awareness Seminar.

Integrative Internal Security Governance project has now been fully set up under the RCC political umbrella, and initiated its activities by establishing key contacts with its partners and developing the working concept of its Secretariat.

A large proportion of RCC focus was devoted to elaborating with its partners the measures of the action plan 2021-2024 for the Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan¹ which would accelerate convergence and narrow the socio-economic gap between the Western Balkans and the EU. The plan builds upon the achievements and lessons learned from the Multi-annual Action Plan for Regional Economic Area (MAP REA), as well as the principles re-confirmed within the so called ‘mini-Schengen’ initiative, namely commitment to EU four freedoms as the core of the future regional economic integration.

The preparation of the **SEE 2030 Strategy** is resting on a round of consultations with a number of stakeholders, from government representatives to international organizations, private sector and civil society. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as the main guidance for a smart policy mix and targeted instrumental policy areas to best address the SEE economies’ needs. The draft SEE 2030 Strategy is planned for finalization by 2021.

The most important ingredient of successful drafting and implementation of regional actions continues to be an all-inclusive regional ownership, buttressed by political will. In the preceding period, elections had been held in Serbia, Republic of North Macedonia and Montenegro, and significant steps have been made within the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, in Washington as well as in Brussels. Commitment to the regional agenda, good neighbourly relations and the principles and values embodied in the EU accession process are the utmost added value which the governments in the region can provide to their economies and citizens.

In efforts to support and assist this priority, RCC stands at the service of its Board and of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECPP), the key regional cooperation framework of South East Europe (SEE). Regular Board meetings and the Annual meeting of the RCC in the preceding period were under the current circumstances held online, but ensured the

¹ The official title of the upcoming action plan had not yet been confirmed. A new title, “Common Regional Market” has been proposed but awaits the final decision of the WB6 participants of the Berlin Process. Until the official title is approved, Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan is used to designate the upcoming four-year agenda.

unobstructed flow of information and coordination on RCC activities and strategic orientation.

Unfortunately, many of the activities of the first-time SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office (C-i-O) of Kosovo* had to be cancelled due to the travelling restrictions. Nevertheless, the Prishtina Chairmanship navigated the difficult circumstances well, and the C-i-O was transferred smoothly to Turkey. Turkish Chairmanship had presented an ambitious programme for 2020/2021, with special emphasis on sectoral cooperation and coordination with all partners in mitigating the consequences of COVID-19. One of the priorities of the Ankara's Chairmanship will also be reviewing the role of the SEECP in addressing common regional challenges and in that context strengthening of the role of the RCC, as SEECP's Secretariat, in line with the Sarajevo SEECP Summit Declaration of 2019 ("As the world is changing and the regional challenges are growing, thus the necessity to strengthen the role of the RCC is evermore present, on the basis of the effective synergy between SEECP and the RCC").

In addition, Secretary-General of the RCC maintained close communication with regional economies and continued to promote the regional agenda at the relevant regional, European and global fora. In the September round of regional consultations she visited Western Balkans Six capitals to discuss the approval or endorsement by the Western Balkans leaders of the Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan.

Implementation of the RCC Strategy and Work Programme

A. Support to implementation of the Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA)

A.1 Economic Competitiveness

In view of the ongoing economic and financial crisis triggered by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, RCC shifted its activities to assist the region in mitigating/curtailing possible long-term negative effects. Planned investment promotion activities had to be postponed, while planned capacity buildings and events transferred to the online sphere, addressing the impact of the pandemic on investment and industry in the Western Balkans.

The focus in the *Investment policy and promotion* agenda was turned to defining and elaborating together with regional partners – SEEIC, CEFTA, and Investment Component Contact Points – the regional measures which would create grounds for a Western Balkans regional investment area. A high priority in the EU agenda, the FDI screening mechanism received special attention, whereas the agreement on termination of intra-EU bilateral investment treaties was flagged as an important policy development. Regional economic

* 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

integration has never been so relevant and building common regional market based on EU rules has to be a prominent part of the socio-economic recovery efforts of the WB as recalled in the Zagreb Summit Declaration.

In the area of *Financial Markets*, World Bank's report „Western Balkans - Deepening and Diversification of Financial Sector to Support Growth” together with the Regional Roadmap served as a basis for prioritization of the regional work program in the financial sector field for the upcoming 3 years. As the continued development of financial markets and EU market integration require a solid legal and institutional background, the region decided to further cooperation in three main directions: financial services, payments, and enhancing cooperation in terms of relief, recovery and resilience.

Work on *Industrial development* of Western Balkans was elaborated within the developing Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan, with the sectoral leg being introduced for the first time. Concrete proposals of regional measures have been conceptualized within the automotive, tourism, green and circular economy, agrofood and metal industry sectors. Business sector needs were also taken into account through series of roundtable consultations where RCC partnered up with the WB6 Chamber Investment Forum, ensuring all-inclusive approach to development of this part of the agenda.

A.2 Human Capital Development

Following intense coordination meetings, RCC and CEFTA finalized the *Joint paper on Way Forward to Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA)*. MRA had been an expected deliverable for the 2019 Poznan Summit. The new approach proposes the MRA to be signed as a Standalone Agreement within the context of CEFTA. Based on the joint proposal, RCC would facilitate the automatic recognition of professional qualifications, compliant to EU Directive 2005/36/EC, and CEFTA the general system of recognition of professional qualifications.

Following the Western Balkans Declaration on Recognition of Academic Qualifications at the Poznan Summit, RCC assisted the region with implementation of set goals. Steps included familiarization of ENIC/NARIC bodies with the model of the automatic recognition systems, operationalization and launch of the Joint Information System (JIS) at www.wb-recognition.org, the onset of the Comparative Study of National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of Western Balkans Six, and the beginning of the ‘mock review’ and evaluation of Western Balkans quality assurance with the EU Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG).

JIS currently contains information about recognition procedures, accredited institutions and study programmes in the region, and will integrate requests for recognition once the Regional Recognition Database is completed. Recommendations of the Comparative Study of NQF will be finalized and endorsed by December, as will the guidelines developed in the course of the Western Balkans quality assurance ‘mock review’.

Western Balkans Research & Innovation and Open Science Working Group in the preceding period focused on polishing the *Protocol on Open Access to Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans*, in view of its expected endorsement at the Sofia Summit.

In parallel, the RCC has launched a complementary *Open Access Research Infrastructure in the Western Balkans Support Programme* to assist development of research infrastructures (RI) in the region. The Support Programme's purpose is to guide the preparation of the Open Access policies for 30 selected RIs in the Western Balkans and to train management, administrative and research staff to introduce principles of Open Access to selected RIs in the Western Balkans. The regional virtual training has been held at the end of June that hosted a total of 90 participants. The Programme is intended to assist the RCC launch the *Network of Open Access Research Infrastructures* by the end of 2020.

As part of the *women economic empowerment* the RCC has initiated preparations for establishing the Western Balkans Network of Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) including mapping of women in STEM initiatives at individual-economy and regional level.

The RCC established contacts with the United Nations Development Programme to leverage public-private partnerships aimed at translating education and skills into STEM employment and ICT/digital roles for girls and women. The goal of this activity is to catalyse and enhance closer partnerships with government ministries and institutes, secondary and higher-education STEM academia (including virtual schools), ICT and digital skills training institutes, STEM sector and digital companies, incubation centres, research and development labs, civil society and women's STEM organizations, regional bodies and networks.

A.3 Digital Integration and implementation of Digital Agenda for Western Balkans

After the pandemic started, RCC initiated several online meetings with Western Balkans economies in the area of digital transformation, in order to keep the momentum and seize the potentials offered by digital platforms. This allowed a smooth implementation of all activities and enabled regional coordination on several agendas. Hence, many coordination meetings with WB economies, partners and other stakeholders have been organized.

RCC activities in this period were focused on defining regional measures related to digital transformation as part of the Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan, with the goal to support Western Balkans economies and deepen digital integration within the region. Proposed measures have been guided by the inputs received from the economies, but they are also the result of the whole series of meetings and consultations with different stakeholders, including line DGs, CEFTA, private sector through WB CIF support, IFIs and other international organizations working in the field.

The ICT Ministerial meeting was organized on 1 July, in order to mark the first anniversary of the entry into force of the Regional Roaming Agreement (RRA), signed at the second Western Balkans Digital Summit in Belgrade in April 2019. According to the data provided by the ministries responsible for ICT and the NRAs in each economy, there is marked increase of mobile data usage while in roaming in WB. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 pandemic, mobile traffic significantly declined in Q2 2020, thus providing less data to measure the impact of the agreement in 2020. All WB economies expressed strong commitment to implement RRA and they are already advanced in preparation of Roam Like at Home (RLAH) regime in WB starting on 1 July 2021.

On 16 July, RCC organized the first ever regional online competition, Balkathon – “Smarten up for the future”, with the idea to help the region recover from effects of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak that has hit businesses and citizens, as well as to boost resilience to such global challenges. Balkathon brought together young innovative people, start-ups, digital innovation centers, science parks, universities, small and medium enterprises, etc. from the Western Balkan region, in order to trigger digital innovative and practical business solutions in the following areas: smart tourism, digital learning platform and online payments solutions.

Eighty eight applicants had a chance to work with designated mentors to develop their ideas further for two days, followed by the screening and initial selection of the finalists by the pool of experts in the given fields from across the region. The selected nine finalists, three from each category, had a chance to present their ideas to the members of jury, based on which the jury voted and selected the three winners of 2020 Balkathon. The winners are obliged to further develop their digital solutions, in order to be applicable in all WB economies.

In regard to the preparation of the Roadmap for lowering roaming charges between WB and the EU, DG CONNECT and RCC prepared Non-paper “Considerations regarding the objective to lower the cost of roaming between the Western Balkans and the EU”. In line with the Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan, finalization of the Roadmap and its effective implementation is planned for 2021.

In an attempt to address high digital skills gap present in the Western Balkans, which became evident during the lockdown, RCC initiated and hosted the first meeting of the Western Balkan Digital Skills Multi Stakeholder Working Group. One of the key tasks of the new working group is to provide support to the economies to develop digital skills strategies and to regularly review the needs and challenges in the implementation of these strategies.

A webinar had been organized in consultations with SEEHN and mHealth Hub, touching base on the digital solutions which could potentially be provided to Western Balkans Six from the EU-financed project mHealth Hub, and launched the regional dialogue on e-health

and services. This action will be followed up with concrete needs from each economy and consideration of possible assisting role of RCC and/or mHealth Hub.

RCC support to the region is ongoing in the areas of broadband and personal data protection: consultancy on Broadband Competence Offices (BCOs) aims to support the WB economies to establish BCOs and to reinforce the existing one(s), while the objective of the consultancy on GDPR is to support economies to achieve full compliance with the GDPR requirements and to ensure its smooth and effective enforcement.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, third WB Digital Summit 2020 planned to be held in April, was postponed. 4th Digital Summit Steering Committee proposed to apply a hybrid approach for the Digital Summit, with virtual sessions held during the last week of October covering all pillars of Digital Agenda and one physical Ministerial meeting on 2 November 2020 held in Tirana. The Ministerial meeting will also endorse the Digital Summit Conclusions and potential deliverables (i.e. MoU on interoperability and trust services in the Western Balkans and MoU on 5G for digital transformation of the Western Balkans).

A.4 Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Resilience

In the area of environment and sustainable development, activities in May, June and July were concentrated around the organization of regional consultations and obtaining inputs necessary for the development of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB). In cooperation with the EC a series of online meetings with WB authorities, SEE Biodiversity Task Force, various regional organizations, and representatives of IFIs, NGOs and other partners have been organized. GAWB was expected to be adopted at the Zagreb Summit, however due to COVID-19 pandemic, the process has been prolonged with the intention to launch GAWB at the Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process.

The development of the Green Agenda is focused on five main areas: Decarbonization, Depollution, Circular Economy, Sustainable food system and Nature protection. It is expected the Green Agenda will be adopted at the Sofia Summit under co-Chairmanship of Bulgaria and Republic of North Macedonia.

In the reporting period, RCC commissioned a Study on “Integrating biodiversity elements of the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans in the biodiversity frameworks of WB economies”. The study is expected to analyse the status of biodiversity protection in the region, the requirements of the European Green Deal including the European Biodiversity Strategy launched in May this year and to propose actions and measures for a swift alignment of WB economies with the newly imposed requirements and integration of biodiversity protection and restoration principles. The study is expected to be finalised by the end of 2020.

B. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security

B.1 Political Cooperation

COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions left its mark also on the operability of SEECP. It was an unfortunate turn of events that the lockdown prevented many of the planned activities of the first-time Chairmanship-in-Office of Kosovo*, whereas the SEECP Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the SEECP Summit had been held online.

Chairmanship-in-Office has been transferred to Turkey, which defined among its priorities the strengthening of the role of SEECP, clarifying the legal personality of the RCC and enhancing synergy with other relevant regional and international organizations, all with the aim of better equipping SEECP to respond to the needs and cooperative potential in South East Europe, especially in the context of post-COVID recovery. RCC continues to provide its full backing, assistance and support to the C-i-O programme.

As part of the efforts to coordinate and synergize with the regional participants and partners, Secretary General of the RCC maintained close communication with the key stakeholders, promoting the regional agenda at regional events and forums and holding consultations in Western Balkans Six capitals, with particular focus on ensuring support for the upcoming Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan and exploring the possibilities for a tentative agreement on ID Card travel. Regular communication also continued with the representatives of European Commission, whereas European Parliament's AFET Working Group exchanged views and information on regional developments with RCC Secretary General in September.

B.2 Parliamentary Cooperation

Following the invitation from COSAP² to support its efforts towards the establishment of a parliamentary dialogue covering all the key areas of the region's political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation, RCC commissioned a comprehensive regional study which will analyse the current involvement of the Parliaments of Western Balkans economies in the Berlin process, aiming to ensure better information sharing on measures linked with regional integration agenda so as to contribute to a strengthened consultation process at regional level. The study will provide information on the current familiarity by the regional parliaments with the commitments undertaken by the respective governments, and present a set of recommendations for strengthening the role of Western Balkans parliaments in the Berlin Process, in line with the 2019 Poznan Summit Chair's conclusions.

RCC Secretariat has also offered full support to the Parliamentary Assembly (PA) of SEECP and reiterated its commitment to provide full expert assistance stands ready to provide them with full expert support in line with the PA SEECP Declaration adopted under Slovenian CiO of SEECP in 2018.

² Conference of Parliamentary Committees on European Integration/Affairs of the Participants in the Stabilisation and Association Process in South-East Europe

B.3 Good Governance – Justice Reforms and Rule of Law

Regional Cooperation Council in cooperation with the Judicial Academy of Serbia organized on 28-29 September the 4th Meeting of the South East European Judicial Training Institutions Network (SEE JTI). The meeting brought together the SEE JTI Network participants to discuss issues of mutual relevance and agree on the objectives of the network's activities in the upcoming period. Specific focus of the meeting was on the exchange of best experiences from the many different approaches being taken by each of the JTIs towards distant learning solutions. Relevant experiences in distance trainings from the SEE Judicial Training Institutions and partner organisations such as the European Judicial Training Network, HELP - Council of Europe and GIZ, were presented and discussed with the view to assist the JTIs endeavours in ensuring efficiency in using digital training techniques.

B.4 Security Cooperation

In security cooperation, activities focused on defining and responding to contemporary challenges, in line with the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem of disinformation has been recognized as an urgent one with a massive impact on socio-economic security. Accordingly, planning has begun for the organization of a Disinformation Conference in cooperation with the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.

RCC also continued to support the work of two SEE-level platforms, South East European National Security A and South East European Military Intelligence Chiefs (SEEMIC). In the framework of facilitating alignment of SEENSA participants with EU standards in defence and security procurement from an industrial security point of view, cybersecurity, exchange of classified information and others, RCC in cooperation with State Commission on Information Security of Bulgaria, as the SEENSA chair for 2020, organized the two-day online training "Communication and Information Systems Protection". The aim of the training was to raise capacities of 30 representatives of SEENSA participants in providing the communication and information systems with a level of protection proportionate to the impact and nature of the risks to which they are exposed to.

Additionally SEENSA participants have intensified cooperation and efforts with a view of establishing a comprehensive regional framework on protection and exchange of classified Information, which lays down the basic principles and standards of security for protecting classified information.

Furthermore, South East European Military Intelligence Chiefs (SEEMIC) platform has been turning toward enhanced result-oriented cooperation, with the aim to better equip regional military intelligence agencies to respond to contemporary challenges. In addition to drafting the Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) report "Impact of Irregular Migration on Security of South East Europe" to be adopted at the SEEMIC Conference in November, for the first time Gender Awareness Seminar in cooperation with RCC partner UNDP/SEESAC was provided

to the middle-rank level staff, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 and 16 – Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, respectively. Moreover, SEEMIC participants have been asked to provide an assessment of needs regarding potential capacity-building exercises in 2021.

C. Horizontal activities

C.1 Programming, Monitoring, Coordination

This reporting period brought about the launch of the sixth edition of the Balkan Barometer (BB) Public and Business Opinion surveys that measure regional perceptions and attitudes across a wide array of social, economic and political factors on an annual basis. The latest developments related to the COVID-19 outbreak, however, significantly impacted the public and business opinion in the region in many ways. With the specially commissioned COVID-19 edition of BB, RCC presented the first comprehensive snapshot of citizens’ and business perceptions as well as prognosis on the developments in light of the pandemic,

The pandemic outbreak also impacted the usual *modus operandi* of the SEE 2020 Strategy Monitoring Committee which did not take place as the collection of data in Western Balkan economies was substantially delayed. The data have been uploaded to the RCC SEE 2020 monitoring platform for data entry and the drafting of Annual Report on Implementation (ARI) is at an advanced stage of preparation. Although with a delay in a few months, this year’s ARI will manage to capture the most notable achievements and progress, including obstacles and challenges that the Western Balkan economies encountered during the implementation of the SEE 2020 Strategy.

The regional post-2020 Strategy report was completed and updated in line with COVID-19 pandemic. It will be published at RCC website within October. The internal preparations for laying the concept of SEE 2030 Strategy have already begun. The first set of data by each Sustainable Development Goal and sub-indicators has started to be collected, and processed. The informal level of consultations with WB and UN Institutions has started. In the upcoming period, further consultations with other international and regional organisations would be held.

Horizontal activities related to MAP REA mostly concerned the preparations for an enhanced Regional Economic Area (REA) agenda that will run from 2021 to 2024. REA 2021-2024 agenda establishes an ambitious four-year plan, aimed to further accelerate convergence, bring far-reaching impact and reduce the socio-economic gap between the Western Balkans and the EU. Experience with MAP REA as well as the underlying principles of the so called ‘mini-Schengen’ initiative – resting on the EU four freedoms – served as the baseline for developing, in close consultations with participants and all relevant stakeholders, the direction and key deliverables of REA 2021-2024.

The MAP REA diagnostic report which had been prepared analysed progress across the three MAP REA components (investments, skills and mobility, digital integration) and assesses

successes as well as obstacles. The following have been identified as some of the major achievements:

- Signing of the Regional Roaming Agreement
- Annual Digital Summits
- Endorsement and validation of the Regional Investment Reform Agenda
- Increase of FDI inflows from EUR 4.9 bn in 2017 to EUR 6.5 bn in 2019
- Agreeing to create a regional database on Regional Infrastructure and open avenues for interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers, industry and wider society
- Agreeing on the information and data collection for recognition of Academic Qualifications protocols
- ...and others.

Some of the lessons learned which are duly noted in developing the REA 2021-2024 agenda include the necessity to enhance internal coordination, not only at the level of each economy but also at the regional level. Monitoring process has likewise experienced certain obstacles in terms of reporting, including due to different timeframe of the measures implementation and a mix of national and regional measures. Furthermore, a more user-friendly approach in showcasing the progress will be taken into consideration for the REA 2021-2024 monitoring tool.

REA 2021-2024 agenda is complementary to the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, integrating the region more closely with the EU Single Market prior to accession. It is expected that REA implementation would bring additional 6.7 percent GDP growth to the region and leverage Western Balkans privileged relation with the EU.

RCC and CEFTA Secretariats have now developed the second iteration of action plan for REA 2021-2024. Third iteration will be ready for internal procedures and validation by WB economies mid-October, after which the REA 2021-2024 Roadmap, including the political statement and list of deliverables would be ready for Sofia Summit.

C.2 Extending Partnerships

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, RCC organized online consultations with regional organisations and initiatives in South East Europe (RAI, CEFTA, ERI SEE, MARRI, SWG RRD, TCT, CEF, RYCO, ReSPA, NALAS, Energy Community, GWP Med, NALED, etc.) to inform on each other's plans of activities in the post-pandemic context and potential synergies for joint collaboration. On RCC side, the meetings served the purpose of exchanging information in the context of the upcoming Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan and SEE 2030 Strategy, where regional organizations and initiatives provided insights into their activity plans and work programmes, also touching upon areas of mutual interest.

C.3 Communication

The primary communications objective remains building up the understanding on what the RCC does and raising awareness of the organisation and the regional cooperation process in general while simultaneously building and promoting the SEE image. Another layer of the RCC's communications efforts is directed towards the Western Balkans citizens and wider audience on RCC agenda as well as the core EU values and position of the region compared to a successful example of regional cooperation embodied in the EU, aimed at generating support for key regional cooperation postulates and European integration.

In the reporting period the RCC adjusted the communication activities to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, which challenged the organisational activities this detouring the efforts and opportunities from envisaged promotion of the RCC's agenda to novel circumstances and common challenges to not just planned activities but to public health, economy and functioning of societies in general. While RCC continued to promote RCC activities and agenda, as well as the region as a destination with its citizens and their success stories, special attention was devoted to communication to regional citizens by sharing COVID-19 outbreak information, its consequences in the region, enhancing EU narrative in the region, sharing information on EU initiatives, contributions, regional measures and actions contributing to the joint fight against the common enemy marking year 2020.

RCC continues developing and utilizing various promotion tools for user-friendly dissemination of information on RCC's role and activities in the region, gaining better understanding and interest from different target audiences. Such an approach results in constant increase of media interest and coverage of RCC's events and projects, and also with general support to the RCC and its activities, across the board – thorough traditional and online media. These achievements are annually measured by the annual public and business opinion surveys that year by year captures raise in support for both regional cooperation and European integration.

During the reporting period, RCC:

1. Communicated and organised campaigns for the following RCC's agenda activities:

- **Promotion of public and business viewpoints through findings of the 6th edition of Balkan Barometer.** Promotion included livestreaming of the event, publications of Balkan Barometer 2020 Public Opinion and Business Opinion publications, Balkan Barometer infographics, Balkan Barometer - COVID19 pandemic Impact Assessment Infographics, Balkan Barometer 2020 video, Balkan Barometer - COVID19 pandemic Impact Assessment video. The RCC is continuously promoting its findings through various promotional contents, using different communication channels, making sure that the voice of people and businesses in the region is being heard by decision makers, general public and other stakeholders as well and not only in the region itself, but in Brussels as well, entire EU and the world. Communications efforts resulted in a number of media reports and continues citing of Balkan Barometer 2020 data in regional and international media;
- **Youth and Digital Agenda: Organised the campaign of Balkathon-** , the first regional online competition on smart digital solutions to help the Western Balkans in its recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Communications team produced video on Balkathon, provided livestream of the main event for journalists, promoted the competition through press releases, social media posts, video stories from the competitors and winners gaining huge interest of the public for such an initiative. In addition to promoting Digital agenda, RCC produced video podcast with Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Majlinda Bregu on Regional Roaming Agreement entering into force reducing roaming costs across our region;
- **Promoted the WB as a culture destination by partnering with Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF)** – for the 4th year in a row, RCC was supporting one of the biggest film festivals in the region – Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF) by being the International partner of the Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF) 2020 - The Heart of Sarajevo for the Best Student Film has been under the patronage of the RCC. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, SFF went partly online this year. Communication activities included video promotion of Balkathon, panel discussion with young filmmakers from the region moderated by the RCC Deputy Secretary General and attended by regional journalists, video stories featuring competitors for the best student film on regional cooperation, TV interview with RCC's Head of Political Department and press releases gaining significant media attention.
- **Promotion of Youth agenda** – RCC presented its new project through a video on Western Balkans Youth Lab and video on Western Balkans Youth Engagements During Pandemics. In addition RCC's projects ESAP2 and WBYL joint forces in producing a video on youth employment in the Western Balkans
- **Promotion of Employment agenda** through promotion of RCC's ESAP2 project- RCC produced video 1st of May 2020: Not the Labour Day as We Know It – on effects of COVID-19 outbreak to employment in the region, video COVID-19 vs jobs in the Western Balkan on consequences of COVID-19 to employment rate in Western Balkans

- Promotion of Roma integration in the region through mitigating the negative narrative on Roma. RCC produced video by RCC's Roma Integration project, marking the first anniversary of Poznan Declaration and *The Roma - a forgotten genocide*, video marking 2 August - European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day
- **Promotion of Western Balkans as a touristic destination** – In addition to RCC's continuous promoting of the region as a touristic destination through a regular/weekly social media posts presenting various destinations throughout the region, promoting Triple P grantees and their success stories, RCC is linking promotion of WB with different international days on tourism – RCC produced a video promoting WB on a World Tourism Day; on International World Museum Day RCC presented WB virtual museum tour promoting history, art and cultural heritage of the region facing consequences of COVID-19 lockdown.
- **Promotion of Security agenda** in the WB – during the reporting RCC kept raising awareness on currently hot topic of fake news by producing and disseminating Op-ed focusing on spreading fake news

2. Promotion of RCC agenda

Over the reporting period RCC produced ten videos, published six publications and other information materials, executed a number of supporting campaigns and a number of articles, interviews and op-eds in order to raise awareness and present the following topics to the larger audience: Regional Economic Area 2021-2024 Action Plan, Sofia Summit, COVID-19 outbreak and mitigation of its consequences, regional roaming agreement, digital agenda, Balkathon, Balkan Barometer, RCC projects: Roma Integration, Tourism Development and Promotion, employment (ESAP2), Western Balkans Youth Lab, IISG, etc.

Continued promotion **of the most relevant activities** of the Secretary General, the Programme and Political departments, as well as the RCC projects is executed through RCC website and social media channels, traditional media, direct contact with relevant stakeholders, etc., resulting in 25 news items, multiplied through daily posts on social media, generating more than 2500 media reports in May-September 2020 period.

The RCC Secretary General as well as other RCC staff gave numerous interviews and statements to the regional and international media, such as Radio Free Europe, European Western Balkans, Deutsche Welle, etc. In addition, a number of targeted, topical articles and op-eds were produced and shared with regional and international media.

3. Continuous promotion of RCC work

In order to maintain continuous and regular interest in what the RCC does, Communication team is producing promotional content to follow various significant “international days” in order to keep the topics of the RCC's interest in focus as well as the use these days as opportunities to step up promotion of the Western Balkans and the EU values, e.g. linking Press Freedom Day with

combating fake news in in the region, Europe Day with raising importance of EU path of accession economies, International Environment Day with region's green agenda, International Museum Day with activities within the RCC's Tourism and Promotion Project, marking International Youth Day by producing a short video on WB youth engagements during pandemics, etc.

4. Communication on COVID-19 outbreak

RCC is continuously updates information for targeted publics about COVID-19 outbreak and its consequences in the region, sharing information on EU initiatives, regional measures and actions contributing to the joint fight against the unexpected common challenge. This type of communication, underpinning regional priorities but also actions of the organisation in mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic is still ongoing and will continue to the normalisation of the situation and remedying the negative effects.

Projects

Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP)³

The Western Balkan economies have embarked on the implementation of a 2-year action plan, as part of a regional network for tackling undeclared work, under the RCC ESAP 2 auspices. The aim is to help shift the objective from “reducing undeclared work” to “transforming undeclared work into declared work”, to support the development of a whole government coordinated approach and to implement the full range of policy measures .

Undeclared enterprises and workers, who are a relatively large proportion of all enterprises and workers in the Western Balkans, witnessed severe reductions in their revenues during the pandemic confinement and the gradual opening up. Many of these undeclared workers and enterprises have also been unable to fully access the short-term financial support provided by governments to businesses and workers during the crisis period.

The representatives of Ministries of Labour, Labour Inspections and Tax Authorities from the 6 Western Balkan economies discussed and agreed on regional cooperation objectives and activities developed in the framework of ESAP 2, aiming for the development of a holistic approach to innovative policy development on undeclared work, improving the capacity of relevant national authorities and increasing public awareness of issues relating to undeclared work. This approach can improve the existing fragmented and uncoordinated approach across the multifarious government bodies responsible for tackling undeclared work and the limited integration of social partners.

³ This project has been financed by the European Union and implemented by the RCC, grant number VS/2016/0054 (March 2016 to February 2019), VS/2019/0094 (March 2019 to October 2019) and VS/2019/0348 (November 2019 – October 2022)

ESAP 2 has commissioned analytical work, including a regional overview of recent labour market trends in the Western Balkans and 6 individual-economy analyses of youth employment, with the aim of supporting knowledge exchange among the Western Balkan economies and developing feasibility and readiness analysis for stepping up youth employment programmes towards an alignment with the EU youth guarantee. The results of the studies will be available by the end of the year.

A regional observatory is currently being developed with the aim of enhancing the comparative knowledge and evidence on current employment and labour market trends in the region and the governments' responses to the COVID-19 crisis. The observatory will collect and publish existing administrative and survey data on employment and related economic activity, in order to monitor the impact of the crisis on employment and labour markets trends in the Western Balkans and map public policies that the economies are implementing to limit the impact of the COVID-19, with a focus on measures aimed at employment retention and creation. Three young interns have supported the ESAP 2 team in collecting and analyzing all relevant data and information.

Drawing on the EU experience with the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, ESAP 2 has supported DG EMPL in updating six national reviews of the performance of Western Balkan economies with respect to the principles of the Pillar of Social Rights, covering the areas of equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion. Further, a regional comparative overview has been prepared by ESAP 2 staff based on the six reviews at economy-level, highlighting overall trends, achievements and challenges in the Western Balkans.

The assessments reveal that:

- In the area of equal opportunities and access to labour market, Western Balkan region has experienced positive trends; however progress has not been even: women and youth participation in the labour market is low, particular challenges exist with regard to both inclusiveness and quality of education and training, skills mismatches are considerable and social dialogue should be strengthened.
- In the area of fair working conditions, legislative changes have introduced measures for furthering both flexibility and security in the labour market, however oftentimes implementation lags behind.
- The effectiveness of social protection and social inclusion should be strengthened to reduce poverty and enable citizens of the Western Balkans to lead full and productive lives.

ESAP 2 continues to provide individual-economy, small-scale, demand-driven technical assistance to beneficiaries. The assistance has been deployed to support the improvement of organizational performance of National Agency for Employment and Skills in Albania, to

enhance the online transparency platform of the State Labour Inspectorate in Albania and to conduct a survey on the impact of Covid-19 on employment in Kosovo*.

Triple P Tourism⁴

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020 has had a tremendous negative impact on the industry of tourism globally and in the Western Balkans. The travel and safety restrictions imposed locally and internationally have brought tourism industry to a complete halt. This has affected the implementation pace of the Triple P Tourism. Over 2020 the tourism industry in the Western Balkans was very much dependent on government support to assist the industry survival. The pace of government aid specific for tourism industry was slow, partial or non-existent. In April 2020, Triple P Tourism conducted a survey with aim to measure impact of COVID-19 among the regional tourism operators and travel agencies. Even that early into the pandemic, 78% of respondents reported high impact on income projected for 2020, over 70% of respondents reported that between 50% and 100% of planned trips had already been cancelled, and the industry had already started introducing measures to minimise costs that included reducing salaries to minimum wages, but also, unfortunately, cutting the number of employees (42%). Triple P Tourism, through Tourism Expert Group (TEG) facility provided exchange of information on measures and their effectiveness.

The regional route development continued with completion and adoption of the strategic documents for Via Dinarica Mega Trail, including marketing strategy (5 years), marketing plan (2 years), and the action plan for regional governing structure. All have been adopted at the 4th Via Dinarica Regional Coordination (VDRC), held online. On the cultural routes the focus was on completion of the tools needed for their promotion and visibility: visual system for the Western Balkans Crossroads of Civilisations; completion of marketing strategy (5years), marketing plan (2years) and branding strategy with fully developed visual system for the Balkan Monumental Trail (BMT); and three packages for the market uptake of the Illyricum Trail. An impact assessment study is under way for the Balkan Monumental Trail.

The planned promotional activities have been severely affected. The promotion of the regional routes was planned to be delivered through a group of international trade fairs and delivery of a set of familiarization trips (FAMs), most of which (except IFT fair in Belgrade and one ski-tourism FAM) had to be cancelled. The remaining FAM trips (11) are currently under development. Their delivery is under continuous monitoring, as due to still existing travel restrictions the conditions for delivery change. The implementation will be between September and December 2020, with delivery models adjusted to the travel situation on the ground.

After delivery of the tourism policy assessment at the end of 2019, the focus of the policy effort was, in coordination with TEG, shifted due to COVID-19 pressures. Under way are the COVID-19 impact assessment on tourism industry in the Western Balkans, and development

⁴ This project is funded by the European Union and implemented by the RCC, grant number 2017/392-591

of more specific policy proposals for establishment of green border/boundary crossings for adventure travel and development of common health and safety protocols for tourism industry.

Within the small grants facility a total of 36 small grants were awarded through three grant cycles in the amount of 1,68 mil EUR. Currently 24 grants are active (16 of 2nd Call and 8 of 3rd Call) in the total value of 1,142,823 EUR (759,000 EUR 2nd Call and 383,823 EUR 3rd Call). Among other the grants will lead to development of new regional cultural and adventure tourism products including two regional gastro routes, improvement of infrastructure and quality of services including development of three mobile apps and construction of two new via ferratas on Via Dinarica, training of service providers, and inclusion of women and youth in tourism industry in the Western Balkans.

In the backdrop of numerous COVID-19 caused travel and safety restrictions, the 24 active grants of 2nd and 3rd Call have been significantly impacted. Short in duration and many including regional and international travel and group activities, most grant beneficiaries were urged to rethink their delivery modalities in terms of digitalizing meetings, substituting regional with national actions, postponing events and replacing in person promotion with printed promotion, among others. With the purpose of maximizing opportunities for grants' success, the Triple P Tourism project has been working closely with individual grant beneficiaries in devising responses, in a case-by-case manner, including grant contract prolongations (until the end of 2020) and activity adjustments.

Roma Integration 2020, Phase II⁵

The Roma Integration 2020 facilitated a broad societal dialogue regarding the government responses to the Covid-19 crisis and its consequences on the Roma community in order to ensure broad needs assessment, proper short, medium and long term response, and adequate consideration of Roma in the mainstream measures. The project engaged in gathering information about the situation of vulnerable Roma communities throughout the Western Balkans in cooperation with the National Roma Contact Points, various Civil Society Organizations and International Organizations. In particular, the action organized 18 online coordination meetings (three per economy) to discuss the needs for technical assistance in coordinating, preparing plans, gathering information, and preparing budgets based on Roma Responsive Budgeting principles. Following such online meetings, the project monitored the situation with regards to COVID-19 and its impact on Roma and provided continuous policy advice to governments on how to adapt their response measures to address the specific needs of Roma. In addition to this, the project developed a comprehensive assessment of the situation (including mapping of most deprived localities) and prepared short, medium and long term plans to respond to the crisis within the Roma communities.

⁵ This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2018/400-736

Youth Lab Project⁶

From May to September 2020, the Western Balkans Youth Lab Project (WBYL) focused on establishing communication with all relevant stakeholders in the region and EU, adjusting project activities to the new circumstances as a result of Covid-19, establishing required mechanisms, and engaging experts to conduct activities.

During the reporting period, DG NEAR approved the Inception Report for WBYL, which included adjustment of activities, budget, and logical framework in line with consultations held with wide range of relevant stakeholders in the region as well as the new circumstances arising from Covid-19. The inception phase involved establishment of the project team and office, nomination of Contact Points in Administrations in six economies, consultations with stakeholders, selection of the thematic priority for First Thematic Regional Youth Policy Lab, and visibility activities for the project.

Six individual-economy reports and a comprehensive regional report have been developed, related to mapping of youth policies and identification of existing support and gaps in financing youth actions, and to elaborating a concept for establishing informal mechanism for donor coordination in the youth area in the region.

WBYL team conducted consultations with Administrations, Youth Councils and Youth Umbrella Organizations, Youth Organizations, and other relevant actors on the first thematic priority for the first Regional Youth Policy Lab. Following consultations, the wide consensus was reached that the first Regional Thematic Youth Policy Lab should be focused on youth unemployment. In July, WBYL jointly with Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP) organized a webinar on youth unemployment gathering over 60 participants, young men and women and policymakers from the region as well as officials from the European Commission.

In September 2020, WBYL engaged a team of experts, all members of the pool of trainers and experts of the European Youth Forum, to develop methodology for Youth Policy Labs so as to ensure mechanisms to provide safe space for young men and women to work jointly with policymakers to co-produce and co-create important youth policies. Due to the COVID-19 circumstances, all activities will take place online.

WBYL developed Guidelines for Technical Assistance, an instrument which aims to complement regional activities with additional support to the Project beneficiaries in order to strengthen their policy and administrative capacities in the different stages and processes related to youth policy development and implementation and participation of youth in decision making.

WBYL also developed Guidelines for Capacity Building which is an instrument that aims to complement regional activities with additional support to the National Youth Councils and

⁶ This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2019/409-790

Youth Umbrella Organizations in order to help their transformation and advance their role in contributing towards development of youth policies.

Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)⁷

Since April, the IISG project has been focused on setting up the Secretariat, finalizing the recruitment process and enabling full operability of the Secretariat team. Consultations and needs assessment ranked high on the initial IISG agenda, and meeting to that effect were held throughout the summer, including all Western Balkans governments, European Commission, donors and regional organizations active in the field. Moreover, as part of the needs mapping process, questionnaires for the Western Balkans and European Commission had been developed. Based on the inputs, the annual work plan had been developed which will guide the activities and priorities of the Secretariat in the upcoming twelve months.

In the coming period, IISG will organize its first Board meeting, develop the working methodologies, begin the development of a security database and the development of IISG communication and visibility strategy.

⁷ This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA 2019/414-918

List of Abbreviations

BB	Balkan Barometer
BCO	Broadband Competence Offices
BIT	Bilateral Investment Treaties
CCPs	Component Contact Points
CEF	Centre of Excellence in Finance
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
C-i-O	Chairmanship-in-Office
CLO	Country Lead Offices
CoE	Council of Europe
EC	European Commission
EJTN	European Judicial Training Network
ENIC/NARIC	European Network of Information Centres/ National Academic Recognition Information Centres
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
ESAP	Employment and Social Affairs Platform
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines
EU	European Union
EU MS	European Union Member States
EWG	Expert Working Group
GWP-Med	Global Water Partnership-Mediterranean
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IISG	Integrated Internal Security Governance
JTI	Judicial Training Institutions
MAP REA	Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area
MARRI	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
NALAS	Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East Europe
NALED	National Alliance for Local Economic Development
NCP	National Contact Point
NFP	National Focal Point
NPR	National Point of Reference
NSA	National Security Authority
ORF	Open Regional Fund
OSINT	Open Sources Intelligence Assessment
RAI	Regional Anti-corruption Initiative
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
ReSPA	Regional School of Public Administration

RI	Research Infrastructure
RLAH	Roam Like At Home
RRA	Regional Roaming Agreement
RRD	Regional Recognition Database
RWG Env	Regional Working Group on Environment
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SC	Steering Committee
SG	Secretary General
SEE	South East Europe
SEE 2020	South East Europe 2020 Strategy: Jobs and Prosperity in a European Perspective
SEECF	South-East European Cooperation Process
SEEIC	South East Europe Investment Committee
SEELS	South East European Schools of Law Network
SEEMIC	South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs
SEENSA	South East European National Security Authorities
SWG RRD	Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group
SWP	Strategy and Work Programme
TCT	Transport Community
TEG	Tourism Expert Group
VDRC	Via Dinarica Regional Coordination
WB	Western Balkans