

KEYNOTE SPEECH

by Amer Kapetanović, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

at the

“Advancing EU enlargement: Italy’s role and strategic convergence on the Western Balkans’ integration” conference

Rome, 15 April 2025

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

It is a pleasure to be here in Rome today to take part in a timely and important discussion on the Western Balkans and its European future.

Italy has been **a long-standing and reliable partner** of the Regional Cooperation Council. As an active participant of our Board, Italy has consistently supported our efforts – most notably through its backing of **the Jumbo Security Conference and the SecuriMeter**, which have become key platforms for dialogue and data on regional security.

This partnership is deeply valued and continues to make a real difference in shaping a more secure and cooperative Western Balkans.

Today, we are here to reflect on a key question: **What lies ahead for the Western Balkans on its path to the European Union? Or more concretely, what are the regional challenges ahead of enlargement?**

Allow me to say what I think are the challenges to the Western Balkans’ path to the EU:

a) Geopolitical trepidations;

- b) Crisis of multilateralism;
- c) Political situation;
- d) Crisis in Brussels Dialogue;
- e) Open bilateral disputes;
- f) In some corners of the region, we *do* have disappointment and fatigue;
- g) Fragmented markets and stalled reforms;
- h) A socio-economic convergence gap too wide;
- i) depopulation and a significant decrease in human capital. ...just to name some of them.

But, as someone once said, “**never allow a good crisis to go to waste**”, I do believe that, thanks to geopolitical shifts, the necessity for EU strategic autonomy – of which Balkans is a vital part – the region has got a serious chance to pull itself together and move ahead by 2030.

Let me now say what I believe are our opportunities:

- a) The fact that we have been steadily working together with CEFTA and other partners since the Trieste Summit of the Berlin Process on creating as much coherence in our market as possible has helped the region to make significant strides. **GDP per capita has increased from 25% to 39% of the EU average.** This is notable, but at the current pace, convergence with the EU will take over half a century. That is a timeline our youth, our businesses, and our societies cannot accept.
- b) This is what brought us to the *EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. And this is where regional cooperation, spearheaded by the RCC and our flagship initiative – the Common Regional Market Action Plan 2.0 (CRM 2.0) - comes into play.
- c) **CRM 2.0 is** not just a technical exercise or a collection of trade protocols. It is **a transformative force – our roadmap for socio-economic alignment with the European Union.** By unlocking the region’s potential through the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital, we estimate our economies can grow by an additional 10%.
- d) We are not starting from scratch with CRM 2.0. The first iteration of this Action Plan already yielded the results. Roaming charges across the region have been abolished. Data roaming between the **EU and WB6 has dropped by up to 99%.** CEFTA is moving again. The implementation of the mutual recognition of professional qualifications has finally begun. **These are not promises. These are deliverables.**

- e) But the convergence we seek is not only economic. It is **digital**, social, **environmental**, and civic.
- f) The **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** – currently undergoing revision – **is being shaped** with the input of governments, civil society, chambers of commerce, youth networks, and local authorities. It is a regional agenda, owned by our region.
- g) We are also shaping a regional **Climate Adaptation Roadmap**, and soon we will establish a new **Steering Group of Central Bank Governors** to coordinate reforms on consumer, sustainable, and digital finance. These efforts are not just ticking boxes – they are about ensuring that the green and digital transition is not a luxury, but a shared reality.
- h) Human capital is another vital pillar. **Our people are our greatest asset – but also the most vulnerable to disillusionment and departure. The region must become a place where young people can see a future, not a departure gate.** This requires education reform, mobility opportunities, and mutual recognition of skills, and we are working steadily on all these fronts.

Let me be honest. We know reforms are not easy. We are fully aware that administrative capacities remain limited, and that institutional fragmentation persists. **But the commitment is there. The sense of urgency is there. The political alignment, at least in economic terms, is stronger than it has been in years.**

The upcoming Berlin Process Summit – to be hosted by the United Kingdom later this year – will be a moment of truth. **Together with our partners, we are preparing an ambitious and actionable set of deliverables. Because what the region needs now are not more declarations, but implementation, investment, and integration.**

The Western Balkans **cannot afford to be Europe's waiting room.** We must become a **functional extension of the European single market.** That is what CRM 2.0 is about. That is what the Growth Plan enables. That is what our people demand.

In times of geopolitical uncertainty, **where the very idea of a united Europe is tested**, the Western Balkans offers a rare commodity: a living proof of how far we can go, thanks to the EU enlargement soft-power magnetism. We managed to get all six governments on board

despite many odds, challenges, open issues, status issues. It was not easy, but we made it possible!

The longer we wait, the greater the chances of **turning this soft power into hard disappointment**, and I am sure no one wants that – neither the WB nor the EU. Therefore, without exaggeration, I think **we have to seize the opportunity offered by the EU through the Growth Plan, CRM** as its second pillar, and we also need to offer the region more incentives when it comes to gradual integration into EU single market. Why not **gradual accession to Schengen** as Friedrich Merz said in his campaign, or access to **the Just Transition Fund** to smoothen up the implementation of the Green Agenda!!??

As the Draghi Report showcased some structural weaknesses of the EU that need to be rectified in order to boost EU's resilience in a dramatically changing world, I *do* also believe **the Western Balkans needs its Draghi Report** that would assess our real vulnerabilities against the backdrop of the offered remedies for socio-economic transformation. There is no time left for correctness and no luxury of taking things for granted.

Dear friends,

This is a moment to build bridges, not barriers – to see the Western Balkans not as a region of problems, but as a region of partners. A region that is ready, able, and willing to contribute to Europe's resilience, security, and prosperity.

Let us move forward together – united in vision, firm in commitment, and bold in action.

Thank you.