



5th MINISTERIAL PANEL ON ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE ACTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

18 December 2020

Opening remarks by the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) *Majlinda Bregu*

- Dear Ministers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,
- Let me start by welcoming you all to the fifth Ministerial meeting which represents a kick-start of the implementation of the Sofia Declaration on GA.
- Through this Declaration, the WB leaders are committed to undertake necessary measures, work together and support ecological transformation of all sectors of economy, with the view of achieving carbon-neutrality by mid-century.
- The Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is an excellent example of a successful cooperation in the region. The process which was coordinated by us from RCC and with the full engagement of the WB Governments confirmed regional ownership of this strategic vision.
- Therefore, we would like to thank you all for your invaluable inputs and to also extend our gratitude to regional organizations, IFIs, NGOs and other partners who contributed significantly to the preparation of the Sofia Declaration throughout this year.
- One of the main principles during the development of the Declaration was taking into account the reality in WB, comprehending different levels of alignment and starting points of WB economies and EU Member States, and understanding what are real

priorities and opportunities for our region, because the objective of this strategic document is to achieve the same final destination at the same time with the EU Member States, which is carbon-neutrality by 2050.

- The Green Agenda will shape our future to a great extent. It will change the way how we produce and use various products. It will change our irresponsible behaviour towards nature, it will change the way we use energy, and the sorts and amounts of energy we use, how we commute. It will change our everyday life, in order to provide a healthier environment, cleaner air, and to preserve fresh drinking water, the importance of which we are not always aware of.
- Of course, if you ask me whether it will be easy, I can promptly answer - NO. It won't. It will be a very demanding mission, with a lot of challenges and unpredictability. It will require tremendous efforts, knowledge, and of course financial strains.
- But we hope that through joining forces and brining our knowledge and experience together, we can do it in a more efficient and more successful way. On the other side, 9 bil. € in grants provided by the EC through the Economic and Investment Plan for WB, as announced in the beginning of October, will represent a flywheel for the implementation and for much needed economic recovery in the post pandemic period.
- We also welcome strengthening of the WBIF as a key EU financial instrument which will have separate investment window for Environment and climate change but also for Sustainable transport and Clean energy.
- The 2020 edition of our flagship annual report - Balkan Barometer has shown that a staggering 74% of the citizens of the region perceive climate change as a very serious or serious problem. The same situation is with pollution in the region, where also 74% consider it as a problem.
- However, despite a pretty high awareness level, the same survey shows that the environment and climate protection are among the last at the priority list of problems for our citizens, far behind unemployment, economic situation, corruption, brain drain, crime, education, political disputes, health system, etc. etc.
- However, we do not need the Balkan Barometer to know that the WB region has some of the most polluted cities in the World, and that 70% of our electricity is produced by burning coal. Not only this, 16 thermal power plants in WB produce more pollution than 250 plants in the EU. Besides, coal is often heavily subsidized. Mobility sector is

almost 100% dependent on fossil fuels. Therefore, we have air pollution which is directly responsible for up to one in five premature deaths in 19 Western Balkan cities. In many cities, wastewaters are discharged untreated. Waste generation is growing fast. Linear economic model and “take-make-dispose” principle keep us locked in the past. Recycling rates in the region are below 3%, while the EU average is 44%. The pristine WB rivers and biodiversity are also endangered.

- Therefore, the Declaration adopted in Sofia aims at addressing all these issues. The most challenging phase is yet to come, and this is the implementation. As foreseen by the Declaration, RCC remains ready to support this process and work closely with all WB Governments, with regional organizations and other partners on developing an Action Plan and necessary roadmaps for the implementation of the Declaration, as well as on establishing of a functioning monitoring system.