

Opening speech by RCC Secretary General
at the
Western Balkans Civil Society High-Level Conference
“Continuing the success story of EU enlargement – Bringing benefits to the Western
Balkans in advance of accession”
organised by EESC in Ljubljana on 24 May 2024

Dear Mr Ropke

Dear Ms Fajon,

Dear participants,

It's a pleasure being with you today, in Slovenia, one of the *staunchest supporters* of our region's EU integration path.

EU integration has been the promise and the **North Star**

our region looks upon for decades, despite the serious blows, disappointments **and sluggish advancements**.

EU's "cold feet", "*enlargement fatigue*", the "self-focus" under the weight of various earlier consecutive crises – often met with our *region's reform fatigue* and reform records that haven't always been convincing! A lot of *vicious instead of virtuous circles being* created!

Western Balkans has *come a long way over the last two decades*. But developing the region's potential will require *new sources of dynamism and* transformation to overcome deep-seated social, institutional and environmental challenges. In nature, the whole is ontologically superior to the part, thus the EU needs to overcome divergences among member states on how to make its institutions more flexible and better equipped for staged enlargement.

The newfound geopolitical urgency should not vanish but help to accelerate the six Western Balkan states' accession without suggesting an alternative to enlargement.

Our BB data shows a *further steep decline* of the support of WB citizens to **EU membership, sitting at 54% after an 8% drop since 2021**, yet coupled with decreased pessimism as percentage of those **thinking that the EU accession will never happen dropped by 5% at current 18%**.

Until the aspirations of around 18 million citizens for a stronger Union that can be more, with WB firmly in its fold, materialise – the *CRM and entry into the Single Market are going to bring the region closer together, fast-tracking its much-needed convergence*. The scenarios that put our region on a *24 to 72 years convergence approximation journeys ring* loud that not even a fraction of a growth percentage is wasted!

While a welcome additional tool, the Growth Plan alone cannot be a change-maker. The four pillars are all intertwined, meaning Single Market access is dependent on implementing fundamental reforms, as well as the Common Regional Market (CRM).

In theory, such conditionality makes sense, as it encourages regional cooperation and an increased pace of EU-related reforms. However, after years of ambiguity and unfulfilled commitments, it is not surprising that regional leaders did not greet more conditionality with open arms.

Thus, the most difficult part of the new gradual accession of WB into the EU will be planning - starting from the budgetary debate, the next Multiannual Financial Framework, AND reconceptualising the EU Instruments vis-a-vis WB like the SAA.

Do not take me ill, but knowing the Balkans and the processes of revision, adoption of an agreement or EU instrument, it is harder than expected. Furthermore, some fine-tuning of SAA will not be enough to allow WB entrance into the Single Market.

This is where *RCC is putting its undivided focus!* While we work on the new generation of CRM, whose actionable plan should be endorsed at the October BP Summit, – the *results of the current AP are telling*. They evidence the *tangible socio-economic impacts* of boosted intra-regional trade, slashed communication costs, unobstructed green lanes, regional private sector joined-up forces.

Yet, they also show the *still vast economic integration potential* that can still be unleashed so that 10% growth can be added to our economies.

The new CRM plan, that will *focus on human capital and skills development, digitisation and business enabling environment*, is a “*plug-in vehicle*” and “*access gateway*” for progressive integration into the EU single market and socio-economic convergence.

The road towards enhanced economic consolidation with the Union’s market leads via a “*barrier-free*” *Common Regional Market* and will be paved by “*Learning by doing*” approach. That is why it is even more important that the *instruments for our region are as streamlined* and as closely mirrored with those used in EU!

And that is why truly *operationalised gradual integration* that is mainstreamed rather than on an isolated/pilot basis and spans across a whole spectrum of policies and institutions is key!

All this has to start seriously before late is too late.

71% of young people in the region are on standby to leave the region at the first opportunity around the corner. In the last three decades, due to massive emigration, **Serbia has lost 9 percent of its citizens, North Macedonia 10 percent, Bosnia and Herzegovina 24 percent, and Albania 37 percent.** These are mostly young, educated, and skilled people who decided to leave their country due to poor democratic and economic conditions and low quality of life. On a global scale, the WB6 rank among the countries most affected by brain drain. It is expected that the region will lose around 1 million youth in the forthcoming decade, worsening the already serious repercussions for democratic and economic prosperity and the future of the region.

Thus, the *implementation of GP and CRM and follow-through hinges on the inclusive involvement of all stakeholders, with active role of social partners and civil society.*

It is for this reason that it gives me *greatest pleasure that this conference is co-organised with European Economic and Social Committee* that has been a *trailblazer EU body* when it comes to the appointment of enlargement candidate members to engage in the advisory activities and the Committee’s work.

Our hopes are that this *bright example of Western Balkans with a stronger voice, shaping the future of EU actively is followed by others*, and I thank EESC President Ropke for his stewardship and vision on this!

Dear all,

As we meet *on the eve of the upcoming elections* in EU, those of us who cannot vote *extend our best wishes to the progressive, responsible Europeans who will cast their ballots also on our behalf*, as we watch with hope that the *future of Europe unfolds positively*, despite our inability to directly shape it.

We also hope for the *next Enlargement Commission* and an *agile, decisive, credible, predictable, irreversible*

completion of generational aspirations for our region's EU integration.

Europe focused on people, one that is adaptable, reformed, revitalised, and inclusive, with our region firmly integrated, remains the optimal investment in peace and security for the entire continent.