



RCC Secretary General Amer Kapetanovic

**Guest lecture at Faculty of Political Science of University of Sarajevo
titled: Growth Plan for the Western Balkans:**

Walking the Talk – Regional Cooperation in Action

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The Western Balkans has two choices: grow together or struggle alone. 82% of people in the Western Balkans believe in regional cooperation, an all time high. Yet, how often do we turn belief into action?

Distinguished Dean, Prof. Dr. Turčalo, esteemed professors, dear students, representatives of institutions, the diplomatic corps, and international organisations, it is a privilege to be here today at the Faculty of Political Science—a place where the next generation of leaders, policymakers, and diplomats is being shaped.

Before showing you how we are making our beliefs happen, allow me to reflect on the context as nothing happens in isolation – our work included.

Three dates are important to better understand the context from which both RCC and all important things we have achieved so far grew:

On 30 July 1999 the entire world gathered in Sarajevo. On that hot summer day, leaders from over 40 countries of the world gathered in Zetra and adopted a document pledging their assistance to the region's economies to strengthen peace, democracy and economic progress. It was a year after Kosovo* conflict, four years after signing the Dayton Peace Accords and two years before the conflict in North Macedonia.

* 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

Fifteen years later on 28 August 2014, the whole of European Union gathered again, in Berlin, and committed to supporting the Western Balkans to ensure economic development, political stability, social cohesion and environmental transition.

On 8 November 2024, ten years after Berlin, EU made a decision to create the Growth and Development Plan for the Western Balkans, coping in fact its own Growth Plan and offering economies assistance of EUR 6 billion to work on strengthening economic integration, develop Common Regional Market modelled on the EU's, continue reforms of the rule of law and phase in to the EU Single Market.

Though there are other very important dates, these three and all developments in the region over the span of 26 years testify to the process full of challenges and ups and downs, but progress as well. Who could have even thought at that Summit in Sarajevo that it would be possible to travel in the region with ID cards, have roaming free region, customs-free zone and such a level of governments' readiness to, despite challenges, sit down and agree on how to create European Single Market in the Western Balkans before becoming part of the EU's.

Over these 26 years we have done much, learned some lessons and some not. Economic determinism and strong magnetism of European integration were the soft power that pushed the progress forward. However, the region has not gone through the full transformation yet and the question remains whether we will ever agree on all disputed issues?

And it is just about somewhere here that the story which brought me here today starts. It is a story about an organisation that has been here for 17 years, working on finding common denominators, not dividers, in the region, and trying, as far as possible, to curb the narcissisms of small differences focused on divisions.

At RCC, our goal is simple: to help our region bridge the gaps with the EU and create an economic environment where people do not have to leave to succeed.

The Regional Cooperation Council is not just about the Western Balkans. It is much bigger than that. We represent 13 participants from all of South East Europe, including five EU member states. Our Board includes the EU, the majority of its member states, as well as the United States of America, Norway, and Switzerland. We are the operational arm of SEECP, South-East European Cooperation Process, working to deepen prosperity through sustainable economic growth, digital transformation, and green policies. We are also supporting the Berlin Process.

As you can see, the Growth and Development Plan for the Western Balkans was not created in a vacuum but was born out of a years-long process in which we experienced ups and downs and realised several key things:

- a) There is no approximation to the EU without reducing the huge socio-economic gap between the EU and Western Balkans Six;
- b) There is no socio-economic prosperity without efficient regional cooperation focused on creating the Common Regional Market prior to the entire Western Balkans becoming part of a market of 450 million users;
- c) None of this will happen without the rule of law, human rights and democratic mechanism based on meritocracy; and also
- d) None of this will happen without efficient digital and green transition, which guarantees sustainability.

These premises were the starting point for launching the creation of Common Regional Market, based on the results and needs of which the Growth and Development Plan was developed.

When we commenced the implementation of CRM Action Plan in 2021, we set ourselves some objectives whose achievement lead to CRM2 and Growth and Development Plan.

These are the objectives we managed to achieve so far:

- a) Trade within the region has doubled – cooperation among businesses in the region is thriving;
- b) Zero roaming costs within the Western Balkans – mobile usage increased by 500%;
- c) Lower roaming costs with the EU – the first step to full EU free roaming integration;
- d) Faster border crossings – green lanes, launched during the pandemic, have cut waiting times, now extended to the EU;
- e) Workforce mobility – through mutual recognition of seven professions, allowing professionals to work freely;
- f) One of the most impactful reforms has been the automatic recognition of university diplomas. Until recently, professionals had to pay between 250 and 500 euros just to have their degrees recognised in another Western Balkan economy.

We have demonstrated that despite it all we can be partners to the EU. The war in Ukraine changed the European perception of strategic objectives, and continuation of efficient enagement has become an imperative. This bring us to the third key date mentioned in the introduction – the Growth Plan.

Through the Growth Plan, the EU has given us new opportunities:

- ✓ Opening door to access to the EU Single Market—before full membership;
- ✓ 6 billion euros in investment—to modernise our economies;
- ✓ New job opportunities—that will strengthen our labour market;
- ✓ The Western Balkans must integrate among itself before it can integrate with the EU.

This means:

- ✓ Completing the Common Regional Market—which could increase our GDP by 10%.
- ✓ Implementing key reforms in governance, the judiciary, and public finance.

Some Western Balkan economies have already submitted their reform agendas and will soon receive pre-financing instalments. Unfortunately, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet finalised its reform agenda. And if we do not act, we risk losing access to these funds.

I want to underline that this is not just about politics. This is about the future of our economy, our youth, and our place in Europe. Let me remind you—this is not a condition placed only on the Western Balkans. The EU follows the same rule for its own member states:

No reforms, no money. After the pandemic, **NextGenerationEU funds** were distributed under the same principle: First, reforms. Then, financial support.

We have a limited window of opportunity to:

- ✓ Strengthen regional integration
- ✓ Seize the benefits of the Growth Plan
- ✓ Move closer towards the EU Single Market and full EU membership
- ✓ We cannot afford to let internal divisions or bureaucratic delays hold us back.
- ✓ The EU has made its offer—now it is up to us to step up and deliver.
- ✓ The priorities of my work over the next three years are clear from everything said.

This is why, during my term as Secretary General, my focus will remain clear:

- ✓ Strengthening the cooperation in order to create the Common Regional Market.
- ✓ Supporting EU integration for the Western Balkans.
- ✓ Enhancing regional preparedness and resilience.

- ✓ Facilitating the implementation of SEE 2030 Strategy and supporting the SEECF. This strategy aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It focuses on reducing poverty and inequality, improving social inclusion and empowering women. It advocates for accelerating the green and digital transition, addressing challenges like depopulation and economic disparities

This is all regional cooperation in action, tailored to the needs and wishes of the citizens across the region.

It makes sense to ask oneself about the forth important date in the future? I think that Montenegro, and perhaps even Albania could become EU member states by June 2030.

And no, this is not about a goal or a date. It is about a process that will prove it can be done, because regional cooperation is not about dates, nor even politics, institutions, or bureaucracy—it's about people.

It's about making sure that you have more opportunities, better jobs, and an easier path to success right here in the Western Balkans.

That better future is not far away—but it is up to us to choose it and build it together.

Thank you.