

**Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms on
Education and Training & Research and Innovation**

2 December 2020

**Keynote, Regional Cooperation Council, *Majlinda Bregu*, Secretary General
~ Talking points ~**

Dear Commissioner Gabriel

Dear participants

- It is my pleasure to be with you today in this Ministerial Meeting.
- The 2020 has been unprecedented year by all accounts. We live and work in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemics that disrupted all important life flows both globally and locally.
- Some experts' estimates say that the Western Balkans will experience the worst recession in the two decades. The burden falls heavily on those least able to bear it.
- The regional growth is forecasted to fall to -5.1%. Unemployment is on the rise by 15% in the region, especially in hardly-hit sectors such as tourism and among vulnerable groups such as youth and women.
- Yet too little capital is being channelled into innovation. When it comes to technological advancement Western Balkans is not among the frontrunners. The investment in R&D is on average less than 0.4 % of the GDP, while advanced countries invest 10 times more.
- In the Western Balkans it is still a discovery process to check the capacity to incubate, accelerate new technologies, and make a U-turn in the economic development trends.
- Besides the gloomy economic trends and the health crisis, the pandemic calls to our minds that innovation is more **than just a buzzword, and that, as some** entrepreneurs and economists say, it needs to be **taken as a science of progress.**

- **With** the conviction that *accelerating and prioritizing innovation now is the key to unlocking post-pandemic growth.*
- We in the RCC have worked hard with our partners during the last several months to reach a common understanding about the Western Balkans' future economic development. And only a month ago, WB Leaders adopted the Common Regional Market (CRM) at the Sofia Summit. It is a plan based on four freedoms, the same as EU single market, strengthened with Investment, Digital, Industry and Innovation. **We are proud to have shouldered the heavy burden of this process together with DG NEAR, regional organizations, IFIs, CSO and Business Community and other partners. But, WB6 governments are the authors, holders and doers of making CRM a reality.**
- This plan facilitates free movement in the region, enables business community to experience the potential provided by a common market based on EU single market model, and highlights the necessity of upskilling the working age population which is shrinking in the region.
- We are very happy to see that the measures foreseen in our CRM Action Plan – including research & innovation, education, and support to youth development – are highly aligned with the proposed Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport.
- This achievement is only the first step towards the implementation in the coming four years that will be marked by economic and social uncertainty. **Green Agenda, also endorsed at the Sofia Summit, will be a huge area for innovation. Governments need to get involved in several ways, because the market will not do enough on its own to bring the needed shift. But the private sector still has a crucial role to play. Investors and entrepreneurs are best at commercialising new ideas, and they are the allies, and I'm sure they will find the next shining star from the region, apart from Tesla.**
- I hope clear and firm investment in innovation will continue to avoid any hit-and-miss affairs.

- Let me shortly walk you through some of our recent agendas on Innovation and Research.

Open Access to Research Infrastructure:

- With the assistance of our partners from the region, we have prepared the **Protocol on Open Access to Research Infrastructures** in the Western Balkans that was endorsed by the WB Leaders at the Sofia Summit. The first tangible result stemming from this document will come in just a couple of weeks when we plan to launch the Network of Open Access Research Infrastructures in the WB aimed at increasing mobility of researchers and brain circulation.

Regional Innovation Fund:

- This year we partnered with the **World Economic Forum to launch the Competitiveness and Innovation Accelerator in the Western Balkans**. One of the Accelerator's key outputs – alongside foresight and designing innovative policies – is the Regional Innovation Fund initiative aimed at supporting early stage innovation teams which is to be launched in 2021.
- The Regional Innovation Fund initiative has received unequivocal bottom-up support by business leaders and policy makers alike. The initiative is envisaged in the CRM and we should build on this positive momentum together.

Mobility of students, researchers and professors

We are working on a three-fold approach in this regard:

- a. We successfully negotiated the Agreement on Recognition of Academic Qualifications. It is an important step to ensure that diplomas are recognized according to the accepted common criteria.

- b. We have started the negotiations on **Travelling with IDs and Agreement on recognition of professional qualifications**. We want to see more opportunities in the region for our people, and I am happy to see the commitment of WB6 governments to do so.
- c. But it is not enough to keep this wide mobility only in the region. Together with the European Commission and DG EAC, and as a part of the CRM, we are committed to further encourage the participation of the Western Balkans in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), while preparing the region to benefit from the European Education Area (EEA) by opening the European Universities Initiative (EUI) to the Western Balkans Universities. This would speed up the reforms in the education in order to meet the criteria to participate in the EUI, and also enable our students to complete their studies in the European Union.

Youth Lab:

Finally, with 3.6 million people or 21.27% of total population in the Western Balkans being youth – our key resource for present and driving force for future perspectives – we are very happy to inform you that we have already started working on one of the most important priorities of the Western Balkans Agenda presented by the Commissioner Gabriel today.

Namely, within EU-funded Western Balkans Youth Policy Lab Project we are developing a Methodology for youth labs to be established throughout the region. We will kick off the Youth Labs on 14th December, the first one being focused on youth unemployment: **35% of Western Balkan youth are unemployed, while around 25% of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 are not in employment, education or training.**

Women in STEM:

Within the next two weeks we are going to unveil the Western Balkans Roadmap for Women's Economic Empowerment that we developed with the United Nations Development Programme. The first practical result of this activity will be the launch of the regional Women in STEM Network designed to encourage girls and women to consider enrolling in higher education programmes and pursuing professional careers in STEM fields.



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I would like to conclude by commending the efforts of Commissioner Gabriel that have closely incorporated the Western Balkans as part of her portfolio. We are all the more self-conscious that the EU integration process of the WB is a long bumpy ride, and we need bridges to overcome the gaps among us. Having this in mind, we welcome the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport and look forward to deepening our regional cooperation further.

Thank you!