

Dubrovnik Forum “Together in a world apart”

“European Union, Three Seas Initiative and 17+ China: How to support Central and Eastern Europe’s Economic Growth and Societal Development”

Talking Points

Ms Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of RCC

Dear hosts and distinguished participants,

I am very happy to be taking part in this panel, at the highly respected Dubrovnik Forum. It is a beautiful city, one of my favourites. It also reminds me that Balkan politics can sometimes be like The Game of Thrones, a Song of Ice and Fire! .

It is great to be in Croatia, one of the staunch supporters of EU perspective of the WB6.

Talking about regional and global initiatives, and cooperation across various areas is always timely, but particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery.

In trying not to repeat myself - too many panels happening this month - so I will highlight only three main key points.

1. In South East Europe, regional cooperation constitutes an essential and vital element of its socio-economic development.

- Because of Covid-19, **SEE suffered a 5.7% decrease of GDP.**
- **Average unemployment is at 11%**, while EU unemployment level is 7.3 %.
- **And youth unemployment stands at 22.3%.**
- **Average life expectancy is 3 years less than that of EU citizens.**
- **Use of coal energy supply is at 26%, in some cases going above 50%.**

2. It is not bureaucracy and business as usual agenda that gives a sense to regional cooperation.

- It's kinship. Solidarity and pragmatism. That's what we are trying to do. To give a face to valued cooperation in a process where people are participating.
- **Benefits of cooperation have been proven time and time again, success stories that RCC has been able to coordinate among its participants.**
- Ten days ago, **roaming charges have been abolished** throughout the Western Balkans as a result of good faith cooperation – and

immediately it eased lives of those travelling and doing business in the region.

- **Roam-Free is the blueprint for the future of the Balkans**, and we have started with preparations to extend it with the EU.
- This has not been the only endeavour of the region during this year.
- **Keeping the borders open during pandemic for common goods and medicines, Green lanes, is a SUCEESS story of regional cooperation.**
- **I hate pitching on paperwork, but I am proud that last month a new South East Europe 2030 Strategy** in line with UN Sustainable Development Goals has been born from **South East European Cooperation Process.**
- **I'm sure the Strategy will be successful only if it has its walk.** That walk has to be made of thousands steps, to **enhance its economy, societies, and security, aligned with the EU and global trajectories of green and digital transformations.**
- This is particularly crucial in the **context of brain drain and depopulation**, the average rate of which is estimated at **6.7 per thousand** in the next 80 years.
- What makes the SEE 2030 Strategy unique is the fact that this is the **first comprehensive Strategy which addresses the entire**

South East European region – including the Western Balkans; EU Member States: Croatia, Slovenia, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania; and Turkey and Moldova. **Moreover, two of the economies in this area are part of Eurozone, and one is a member of G-20.**

- Such geographic coverage is in itself a strong political message.
- It reconfirms, in most concrete terms, the fact that **the region has committed itself to a joint future**, based on common interests and shared values.
- It should be noted that according to the World Bank, **the GDP of SEE in 2019 reached some 2 trillion USD**, which would make it the **8th largest economy in the world**. The potential of such a market is immense.

3. **Finally, economic cooperation and political relations are never an issue when they are conducted in good faith, with mutual respect and respect of globally established standards, and to mutual benefit.** What we insist on persists. The good can help us build new stories of cooperation, the bad will keep us hostage of ruminating.

- **I do hope that socio-economic bolstering will have positive impact on the security of the region.** Social resilience is closely connected with economic prosperity, and therefore we expect that SEE 2030 implementation will benefit the overall regional security,

working in favour of democratic standards, values and practices rather than alternative narratives.