



RegionalCooperationCouncil

REGIONAL RESPONSE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2023 – 2025

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Executive summary

The SWP 2023-2025 serves as the main mid-term plan to prioritise RCC’s activities in line with RCC’s objectives defined by the Statute and the SEE 2030 Strategy, which focuses on the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals through the regional approach.

The SWP embodies EU enlargement priorities for the region in the spirit of SEECF Charter and European Commission’s 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, and in line with the EU’s Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. Likewise, it builds on the commitments made within the Berlin Process – CRM and GAWB.

Both **pandemic and recent geopolitical developments** are complicating already economically fragile region. In such an uncertain environment, there are some opportunities for the Western Balkans to be seized. Current geopolitical crises may lead to re-energising European and Euro-Atlantic integrations and will require deepening regional cooperation on issues such as energy security and transition to green energy, and seizing the opportunities to attract more nearshoring investments for the EU. Looking forward, the **speed of the Western Balkans convergence with the EU will depend on the pace of implementation of wide-ranging structural reforms** to include a renewed focus on regional economic integration and inclusive growth and green policies.

The overarching goal of SWP 2023-2025 is to promote the prosperity of South East Europe by supporting sustainable and equitable economic growth policies to enhance regional economic integration, green and digital transformation, while reducing the poverty and narrowing the existing social, economic, and environmental divergences with the European Union.

As the regional cooperation evolves, **SWP 2023-2025 captures results, achievements, lessons learned of previous SWPs, and it builds on on-going initiatives** within the SEECF framework to the utmost benefit of SEE participants in line with the SEECF guidance, Charter, and RCC Statute. It is under this context that RCC proposes following key objectives which will be prioritised in the next three years.

- **Accelerate post-pandemic recovery and boost resilience** to improve the quality of life, decelerate depopulation, and unleash the untapped socio-economic potential, by enhancing the implementation of SEE 2030 Strategy to achieve UN Sustainable Development Goals in the region.
- **Improve competitiveness** to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU markets by enhancing the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan. The global economic and political crisis will sought to be cushioned by tailor-made activities to facilitate higher investment inflows and to create more financing opportunities for the private sector in the region. Further development of key region’s industries, including tourism will be prioritised along with the integration into regional and European value chains.

- **Enhance digital transformation** to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU Digital Single Market by supporting the implementation of the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans. The progress achieved thus far will serve as a stepping stone for more robust and ambitious digital agenda, particularly in the field of roaming charges reduction between WB and EU, 5G deployment, digital upskilling and reskilling, cyber security, regional interoperability and free flow of data, etc. RCC will therefore focus on digital-led recovery hand in hand with the green transition of the region. Digital transformation of the SEE region is also one of the cross-cutting areas of SEE2030 Strategy in addition to its vertical priority related to reducing digital divide through better broadband connectivity, development of digital skills, and accelerated digitalisation of industry and public services.

- **Enhance green transformation and just transition** by facilitating and supporting the effective and inclusive implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan in line with the European Green Deal and global efforts to achieve sustainable green economy. Transformative ambition and multidisciplinary nature of the GAWB requires a holistic approach to the implementation (to include adequate governing structures, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, platforms for consultations with key groups of stakeholders (including civil society, local and business communities, youth, woman, and development partners) and analytical underpinnings to support the implementation). The ultimate goal is that implementation of GAWB Action Plan is in line with indicative timeframes and EU ambitions in the area. As all RCC participating economies are going through green transformation processes, this all-inclusive priority is derivative from the SEE2030 Strategy dimensions on Prosperity and People to enhance the green transformation and just transition across the region, and as such remains highly relevant for all SEE participating economies.

- **Support sustainable transformation towards a knowledge-based economy** that creates equal opportunities for all citizens in South East Europe and leaves no citizen behind under the common People First principle. Developing human capital as a driving force behind economic growth will require forging indispensable ties between all societal actors, including governments, private sector, academia, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and media. Facilitating conditions for socially vulnerable groups, including Roma population, improving employment opportunities and working conditions, further integrating youth in socio-economic and political processes and decision-making, and pursuing gender equality vis-à-vis women economic empowerment are RCC immediate priorities.

- **Promote political, security, and judicial cooperation in the region** by ensuring political support to the implementation of regional programmes, and strengthening the security portfolio in SEE, improving efficiency and accountability of the SEE judiciaries, by improving judicial intra-regional cooperation. Bolstering links with Euro-Atlantic partners, regional and international stakeholders and relevant initiatives will spearhead regional cooperation efforts for the next three years.

1. Introduction

This document presents the **Strategy and Work Programme (SWP) of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) for the period of 2023 to 2025**. The RCC Statute defines Triennial SWP as the main mid-term plan to prioritise RCC's activities. This SWP is informed by RCC's long-term strategic objectives and commitments defined in the RCC Statute and the SEE 2030 Strategy.

The RCC Statute provides the RCC mandate of the operational arm of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), and a focal point for guiding, monitoring, and supporting cooperation in South East Europe (SEE). The RCC promotes regional cooperation to enhance security, social and economic development, and the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. The Statute defines priority areas for cooperation:

1. Economic and Social Development,
2. Energy and Infrastructure,
3. Justice and Home Affairs,
4. Security Cooperation,
5. Building Human Capital.

In addition to five priority areas of cooperation, the Statute defines the following crosscutting themes to help achieve the RCC mission: parliamentary cooperation, media development, gender mainstreaming, and involvement of civil society. Be that as it may, this SWP enlists existing key documents and strategic frameworks that will underpin the activities proposed for the next three years.

The SEE2030 Strategy represents an overarching effort in implementing UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) in SEE through regional approach within the SEECP framework that is facilitated by the RCC. It was adopted by the leaders of the thirteen economies of South East Europe at the SEECP Summit in Antalya in 2021. The Strategy focuses on three dimensions of sustainable development: Prosperity, People, Peace, and Partnerships. The Strategy envisions regional, all-inclusive, and coherent policies to achieve sustainable economic growth, reduce poverty, inequalities, and social inclusion, empower women, slow depopulation, and enhance citizens' overall quality of life. Also, the Strategy prioritises acceleration of the green and digital transition without disrupting competitiveness and private sector development in the region. The SEE 2030 Strategy is in line with EU priorities, and it promotes Euro-Atlantic integration of the region and sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery. The Strategy stipulates 78 actions under thirteen priorities to achieve 45 economic and social targets. The achievement of these targets has the potential to complement the RCC-led implementation processes of the other two important agendas for the Western Balkans, such as the CRM Action Plan 2020-2024 and GAWB Action Plan 2021-2030.

The SWP 2023-2025 builds also on regional strategic commitments made within the Berlin Process (which include, among others, Action Plans for Common Regional Market and Green Agenda for the Western Balkans). The SWP embodies EU enlargement priorities for the region, as provided in the European Commission's 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy

and is in the line with EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans adopted in 2020. RCC will continue to focus on the rule of law, security, and migration, socio-economic development, mobility and connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation, and good neighbourly relations (in the line with five priority areas defined by the RCC Statute).

Regional economic integration remains the core of RCC's work moving forward. The Common Regional Market Action Plan 2021-2024 was adopted at the Berlin Process Summit in Sofia in 2020 by six leaders of the Western Balkans. The implementation of CRM will contribute putting the region on the map for global investors seeking to reduce the distance to the EU markets and diversify their suppliers, thereby creating jobs, offering greater choices at lower prices for its consumers, and enabling people to work throughout the region based on EU rules Building on the achievements of the Regional Economic Area, the action plan focuses on four key areas: (1) Regional trade area (free movement of goods, services, capital, and people), (2) Regional investment area, (3) Regional digital area, (4) Regional industrial and innovation area. Since the CRM Action Plan covers the period from 2021 to 2024, the regional economic integration agenda beyond 2024 will be based on results and lessons learned from the implementation of the current plan.

The SEE's ability to enhance green transformation will have significant impact on regional competitiveness, as well as the well-being of people in the longer term. All participating economies of SEE, committed to ambitious green goals (EU member states from SEE are enhancing policies to implement the European Green Deal, while Türkiye is implementing its own Green Deal Action Plan. The Western Balkan region has also committed to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and to align with the other European Green Deal key elements at the Berlin Process Summit in Sofia in 2020 by adopting the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The Action Plan for the Implementation of the Green Agenda 2021-2030 adopted in October 2021, defines 2030 energy and climate policy targets and measures (to include carbon pricing, coal phase-out plans, pollution control, nature, and biodiversity protection, regional integration, indicative timeframe for harmonisation with the EU Emissions Trading System as of 2024). Enhancing the implementation of the Action Plan and its regional dimension will require intensive coordination and facilitation at the regional level. As such the implementation of the Action Plan will be at the core of RCC work moving forward.

Finally, rapidly evolving digital technologies are transforming economies and societies globally. To capture the benefits of digital transformation, such as faster economic growth, more jobs, and better services, SEE2030 Strategy focuses on reducing digital divide through better broadband connectivity, development of digital skills and accelerated digitalisation of industry and public services. The European Commission together with six Western Balkan partners adopted Digital Agenda for Western Balkan in 2018 within the Berlin Process. Key commitments within the Digital Agenda include investing in broadband connectivity increasing cybersecurity, trust, and digitalisation of industry, strengthening the digital economy and society, and boosting research and innovation. Building on the results and lessons learned from the early implementation of the Digital Agenda so far, the RCC would continue to have this rapidly evolving topic as a core of its mid-term priorities.

1.1 Background and policy context

This SWP comes in a time of extraordinary uncertainty. While South East Europe is on the road to recovering from the COVID-19-caused recession, the pandemic is still taking a death toll.¹ The war in Ukraine adds another layer of uncertainty, including security, constraints, and further economic disruptions that will have a substantial impact on the global economy and financial markets, with considerable spillovers on economies of South East Europe.² If the conflict persists or escalates, the economic damage would be more significant.

Therefore, the macroeconomic outlook for South East Europe is uncertain and subject to downside risks. Following a contraction of 3.3 percent in 2020, the Western Balkan's GDP growth is projected to be 7.4 percent for 2021³. The growth was mainly driven by improved external conditions, higher commodity prices, recovery of tourism, and consumption. The economic recovery in 2021 was accompanied by a strong inflationary pressure caused by global supply chain disruptions. However, since the beginning of the recent developments in Ukraine, the World Bank estimates the regional GDP growth at 3.2 percent for 2022, and 3.1 percent for 2023, with a revision of -0.9 percent for 2022 and 0.7% for 2023.⁴ Similar projections were made also by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development report describing this event as “the greatest supply shock since at least the early 1970s”.⁵ The Western Balkan's GDP has had an annual average growth rate of 2.3% since 2010. The GDP per capita in the Western Balkans remains 28 percent of the EU's average, PPP adjusted⁶.

After a considerable drop in 2020, public and private investments were recovering and have contributed 1.3 percentage points to growth in the region in 2021. Due to COVID-19, FDI inflows shrank by 16 percent in 2020, compared to 2019. In 2019 FDI inflows to the Western Balkans accounted for 4.9 percent of regional GDP, compared to 6.1 percent average for the period from 2010 to 2019. The Western Balkans performed still relatively well in attracting foreign investments when compared to 73 percent FDI inflows decline at the EU level⁷. Disruption of global value chains may provide opportunities for the region to attract more investments inclined toward nearshoring. To seize these opportunities, the regional economies need proactive policies to boost their investment competitiveness.

Higher demand and prices for commodities such as metals and minerals have driven the export surge in 2021, adding 1.2 percentage points to growth in the region. The EU is the largest trading partner to each of the Western Balkan economies, reaching an annual volume of EUR 55 billion before the crisis. The trade with the EU represents close to 70 percent of the

¹ The World Bank, Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.20, Fall 2021, available at: [World Bank Document](#)

² The IMF, Alfred Kammer, Jihad Azour, Abebe Aemro Selassie, Ilan Goldfajn and Changyong Rhee, How War in Ukraine Is Reverberating Across World's Regions?, blog, March 15, 2022, available at: [How War in Ukraine Is Reverberating Across World's Regions – IMF Blog](#)

³ The World Bank, Europe and Central Asia Economic Update: War in the Region, Spring 2022, available at: [World Bank Document](#)

⁴ The OECD, Competitiveness in South East Europe 2021 A POLICY OUTLOOK, available at: [OECD Competitiveness and Private Sector.pdf](#)

⁵ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, In the Shadow of the War: The Economic Fallout from the War on Ukraine, March 2022, available at: [EBRD sees war on Ukraine causing major growth slowdown](#)

⁶ The World Bank, Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.20, Fall 2021, available at: [World Bank Document](#)

⁷Ibid

total regional trade, with a steady growth of almost 130 percent over the past decade⁸. The trade within the region continues to grow steadily.

Over the longer term, all Western Balkan economies continue to face multiple structural challenges that undermine productivity growth and capital accumulation. Even with significant progress, the business environment continues to be challenging due to corruption, weak contract enforcement, long and expensive procedures for licensing and permitting, unfair competition from the informal sector, weak access to finance for SMEs, and low levels of innovation. The infrastructure gap undermines regional competitiveness, private investments, and deeper integration into global value chains.⁹

Unemployment remains a significant problem for economies in the region, with rates ranging from 9 percent in Serbia to 25.7 percent in Kosovo*. Youth and women unemployment is still particularly high as well, as long-term unemployed¹⁰. Most of the employment consists of low-wage, low-productivity jobs. The 2020 recession brought a reversal of previously improved labour market and well-being outcomes in the region. Close to 84,000 jobs were lost in the first half of 2021 in the Western Balkans, compared to the 2020 average, but a major recovery started in the second half of 2021. Job losses caused by the recession have disproportionately impacted women and youth¹¹.

With a full-year growth recovery in 2021, the poverty rate for the region is projected to resume its past downward trend and fall by around 1 percentage point to 20.3 percent, close to its 2019 level¹². A recent surge in energy and commodity prices is especially impacting poor households in the region. High inequality still significantly affects well-being in the region across gender, ethnicity, and regions, with well-being also undermined by high pollution levels and environmental degradation.

Looking forward, the speed of the region's convergence with EU will depend on the pace of implementation of wide-ranging structural reforms to include a renewed focus on regional economic integration and inclusive pro-growth and green policies. If current commodity supply disruption continues, economies may be inclined to consider trade restricting measures. The security cooperation in the region in the frame of European and Euro Atlantic integration may gain more policy attention moving forward. In such an unfavourable and rapidly evolving external environment, there are some opportunities for the region to be seized. Geopolitical crises might carry implications for European and Euro-Atlantic integrations, the direction of which is yet to clarify.

Moreover, recent events call for more coordinated and extraordinary efforts for improving human development policies, ranging from strengthening health care systems, ensuring that the labour market and educational institutions adequately respond to fast-changing needs for new skills, and protecting those in need during the adjustment times to

⁸The OECD, Competitiveness in South East Europe 2021 A POLICY OUTLOOK, available at: [OECD Competitiveness and Private Sector.pdf](#)

⁹ Ibid

* 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.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ The World Bank, Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.20, Fall 2021, available at: [World Bank Document](#)

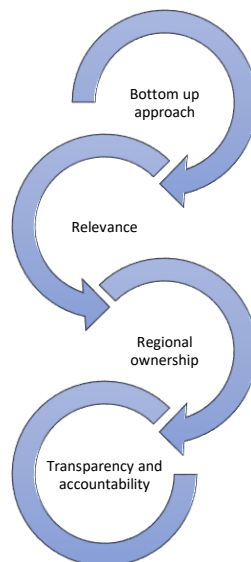
¹² Ibid

revise negative demographic and migration tendencies in the region. RCC agendas, developed further in this SWP, are presented here as a tool to mitigate all of those challenges for the Western Balkans and broader, South East Europe. Additionally, the UN 2030 Agenda and the effective implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals which provide qualitative and quantitative objectives for the next 9 years have the potential to prepare the region for the future, by taking into account the importance of human dignity, stability, a healthy planet, fair and resilient societies and prosperous economies.

1.2 SWP 2023-2025 and SEE2030 Strategy

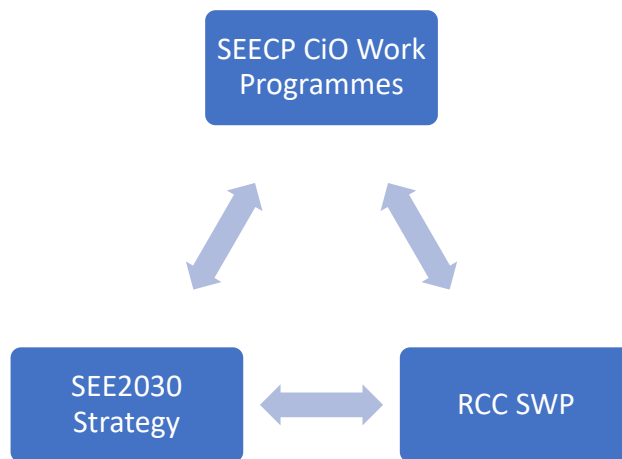
The SEE2030 Strategy has been established on the economy level priorities of the thirteen Participants of the SEECP through a bottom-up approach. Thus, its text offers an actionable joint trajectory genuinely owned by the SEE region and creates its own implementation mechanisms directly owned by the SEE region. Through bottom-up approach, the Strategy ensures a high level of relevance to the real socio-economic needs of the SEE region. Those actions in regionally cross-cutting policy areas require governance structures being genuinely regionally owned. Thus, SEE 2030 governance structures composed of all thirteen Participants of SEECP, which start functioning as of November 2021, could only function properly through enhanced transparency and accountability.

Regional cooperation within SEE is key to the implementation of SEE 2030 Strategy and towards achieving the objectives outlined within this document. This regional document complements ongoing economy-level and sub-regional processes, such as in the Western Balkan region, with regards to implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda, among other.



In all these areas of intervention, SEE2030 relies on a high-level of interaction between RCC, SEECP, and SEE 2030 Structures. As its regionally fully-inclusive features and depending on an open and accountable consultation with each SEECP Participant, particularly with the rotating SEECP Chairmanships in Office and its work programmes, SEE 2030 is drafted as a

concise, actionable and regularly updated text, binding the policy level context between SEECP and RCC.



Through its SWP 2023-2025, RCC will steer its policy agendas towards UN Sustainable Goals and Agenda 2030. SEE2030 provides by default the correlation between each vertical sector level actions including sub-regions of SEE and UN SDGs and Agenda 2030. In addition, it complements efforts towards the implementation of existing agendas of the Western Balkans, namely the CRM and GAWB. It is therefore required to strengthen the visibility of policy linkages of sub-regional actions and vertical agendas with the SEE 2030 strategic objectives. Therefore, the SWP is deemed an appropriate text to offer a coherent clustering of vertical sub-regional agendas under SEE 2030 higher-level policy objectives and its pillars of action.

1.3 Advancing European integration through regional cooperation

Promoting and advancing the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region is embedded in the Statute of the Regional Cooperation Council and remains a duty and one of the focal points of RCC activities. Regional cooperation has proven to be a decisive stepping-stone in the integration of the Western Balkan region to the European Union. In addition to the economic benefits of regional integration, cooperation contributes to good intra-regional relations, democratisation, stability, and security. A pre-requisite for a positive, coherent and result-oriented regional cooperation is a comprehensive approach by local, regional and international stakeholders and partners, who share a common vision, a conscious understanding of the benefits and a commitment to the regional agenda, and who work in tandem and synergy.

The main partners in this process are the SEECP, as the main cooperative framework in SEE, the European Union, its Member States and the transatlantic partners. Regional approach should take the centre stage and become embedded in all of the most important events and initiatives that concern the future of the region and Europe. As a regionally owned organisation and framework, RCC provides the voice of the region by retaining a strong cooperation with the aforementioned partners and seeking coordination with the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU and chairmanships of initiatives bordering or overlapping with the SEECP participants (such as Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, Central European Initiative, different global forums, etc.). Besides raising the visibility, presence and participation of the region in that

regard, such instances will allow maintaining or strengthening a global view, support and commitment by the region's partners.

In-depth regional cooperation has already yielded many important achievements in the Western Balkans, first through Regional Economic Area and now through CRM and GAWB agendas, which are crucial for closing the gap between the EU and the Western Balkans. RCC has been at the helm of these processes and continues to be the main overarching regional organisation to facilitate neighbourly relations and regional economic integration initiatives. In this regard, CRM is the only regional framework that works in two directions; on the one hand it supports economies to establish a single market and, on the other, it introduces joint actions between the Western Balkans and the EU to accelerate necessary convergence with the EU. This is a solid foundation for the phasing-in to EU policies for all WB economies, regardless of their stage of negotiation process, as it would allow same level of advancement in specific areas.

RCC's role has proven to be fundamental in advancing cooperation in the region, not only through CRM and Green Agenda but also through other areas such as response to Covid-19 pandemic, reconciliation process, and security. In this respect, RCC will continue to promote the principles of good neighbourly relations, reconciliation and regional cooperation as a cross-cutting element in all its agendas.

1.4 Results from the 2020-2022 period

RCC's previous triennial strategy focused the organisation's efforts on enhancing socio-economic, digital and human connectivity within SEE, and between the region and the EU through strengthened regional cooperation and development of a shared, inclusive and competitive economic space. Importantly, this time period also included the development and adoption of two regional agendas, namely the Common Regional Market Action Plan 2021-2024 and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan 2021-2030, with the aim of unlocking the region's economic potential for growth and pushing forward its post-COVID-19 recovery on the basis of the green transition and circular economy principles.

Implementing the objectives outlined in the SWP 2020-2022 has provided a series of important deliverables. These include:

1.4.1 Human Capital Development

To facilitate removal of barriers for professionals, a new draft Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects was prepared. The scope of this draft Agreement covers the rules applied when relevant service providers move both temporarily and permanently within the region. To facilitate mobility of students a draft Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications was prepared, aligned with the Lisbon Convention on Recognition of Qualifications, which removes costs for students and provides a two-week fast track procedure for recognition of qualifications. Finalised in accordance with set plans the Joint Information System (JIS), a facilitating tool for recognition of academic qualifications is operational and open to the public. In addition, the **Regional Recognition Database (RRD)** was developed, and is in the testing phase with regional ENIC/NARIC offices. An in depth **mock review of quality assurance agencies** against

European Standards and Guidelines in Quality Assurance has been delivered to the Western Balkans to assist them in undertaking the necessary reforms in quality assurance. Enabling free movement with ID cards within the Western Balkan region represents one of the key aspects of four freedoms within CRM. The **Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards in the Western Balkans** has been technically concluded and intensive political consultations are being held to address the outstanding politically sensitive aspects and finalise the draft agreement at the level of Working Group, to open the way for starting the internal approval procedures within the Western Balkans. In order to assist the region in post-pandemic recovery, especially during the tourism season, an advanced technical draft of the **Agreement on Freedom of Movement of Third-Party Citizens within the Western Balkans** is being discussed by the Working Group. In addition, RCC oversaw the conclusion of technical discussions on a regional **Agreement on Recognition of Academic Qualifications**. The scope of the Agreement covers public universities and gradually extends to private universities, with strengthened quality assurance. Following adoption, the Parties will have 3 months to prepare for its implementation.

The **Protocol on Open Access to Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans** was endorsed by the Western Balkans Leaders at the Sofia Summit in November 2020. The Protocol will serve the purpose of encouraging mobility of researchers and scientific collaboration in the region. In parallel, RCC has successfully completed a complementary **Open Access Research Infrastructure in the Western Balkans Support Programme**, designed to assist development of research infrastructures (RIs) in the region. The institutional framework defined by the Protocol was the key condition for establishing the **Network of Open Access Research Infrastructures in the WB** that is now fully operational. In addition, the **Technology Transfer Support Programme in the Western Balkans** has been launched to support technology transfer practices and facilitate regional networking of Technology Transfer Offices.

Through the second phase of the **Employment and Social Affairs Platform project (ESAP 2)**, RCC is improving employment opportunities and working conditions of women and men in the Western Balkans by providing assistance on improved policies for tackling undeclared work, strengthening institutional capacities of government partners, and increasing engagement of the Western Balkans in EU employment and social policies. Responding to the pandemic, ESAP 2 has focused on assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the region's labour markets. A regional online [RCC ESAP Employment Observatory](#) was launched in January 2021, which publishes monthly and quarterly data on employment, monitoring the impact of COVID-19 crisis and also mapping public policies. In addition, ESAP 2 developed an interactive [Social Scoreboard for Western Balkans](#) modelled on EUROSTAT/EC Social Score Board, serving as a data hub of WB performance across headline and breakdown indicators for the European Pillar of Social Rights. Currently, the proposal for a third phase of the project is in preparation, building on the previous work and complementing the CRM and GAWB Action Plans.

Within the framework of the **Roma Integration Project**, RCC facilitated a broad societal dialogue regarding government responses to COVID-19 and its consequences on Roma

community in order to ensure needs assessment, proper short-, medium- and long-term response, and suitable consideration of Roma in mainstream measures. Following the endorsement of the **Declaration of the Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration (Poznan Declaration)** in 2019, support and assistance was provided in furthering the Poznan Declaration objectives through the implementation of the Roadmaps 2019-2021 for housing and employment of Roma (adopted by the governments at the beginning of 2019). Currently the project proposal for the next phase has been submitted for approval to implement these objectives.

Under the **Western Balkans Youth Lab Project (WBYL)** a Mapping of Youth Policies and Identification of Existing Support and Gaps in Financing of Youth Actions in Western Balkans was prepared. To bring the region closer to the European Youth Dialogue practice, WBYL developed the Methodology and Model of Youth Policy Lab incorporating successfully elements of co-creation and co-management, which brings a participatory and youth-centred approach in policy making.

On women economic empowerment, RCC and UNDP launched for the first time a joint initiative on **Women Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans (WEE agenda)**, with the aim to foster regional partnerships and facilitate regional dialogue on reforms with a lasting impact on women in different sectors. In addition, the **Regional Network of Women in STEM** was successfully launched in April 2021 to encourage open discussions about challenges of women and girls in STEM education and careers throughout the region, and to explore opportunities for women to succeed in STEM. As part of the entrepreneurship support actions of CRM, **Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship** was launched in March 2022 to enhance discussion about women entrepreneurial challenges in the region, promote women entrepreneurs in the region and increase visibility of success stories as well as enable networking across sectors and across the region and beyond. Within the same framework, RCC launched the Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year initiative, the first of its kind to recognise successful women entrepreneurs of the region.

1.4.2 Digital Integration and Implementation of Digital Agenda for WB

RCC organised two **Annual Western Balkans Digital Summits**, which produced the regional MoU on 5G Roadmap for Digital Transformation and MoU on Regional Interoperability and Trust Services in Western Balkans Region. Importantly, in line with the implementation of the Regional Roaming Agreement (RRA), the **Roam Like at Home (RLAH)** regime entered into force in July 2021 allowing citizens within in the region to not pay extra charges for calls, SMS and mobile data compared to what they pay in the economy of origin. As a result, the number of roaming users, as well as roaming traffic, increased in the first three months of RLAH. In some of the economies, data volumes in roaming increased up to 14 times in Q3 2021 compared to Q3 2020, while in some total roaming traffic increased by 760% for the same period. With the successful implementation of RRA, the development of the **Roadmap for Lowering Roaming Charges between the EU and WB** (Roadmap) has been facilitated by RCC and was aligned by WB economies while the EU-WB Summit held in October 2021 welcomed the Roadmap in Brdo Declaration. The ultimate goal of the process is to lower the roaming charges

with the EU to the level close to domestic prices in 2027, contributing to a decrease of roaming charges by more than 90% in the currently most expensive WB mobile networks. Structured consultations with WB and EU mobile operators were held in 2021 (three meetings were organised) aiming to understand better challenges and concerns they are facing regarding the implementation of the Roadmap while the establishment of an **Advisory and Coordination Group** with participation of mobile operators from EU and WB, and institutions from WB economies and EC to enable regular consultations on the implementation of the Roadmap is in progress.

In addition, the region advanced in broadband development, with the implementation of projects that are mostly focused on the rural fixed broadband rollout with the aim to cover white areas, as well as on connecting schools and public institutions. Currently, there are 11 active WBIF projects in the region, 10 at economy level and one regional project. To address the high digital skills gap present in the region, **Western Balkans Digital Skills Multi-Stakeholder Working Group** was formed in April 2020 to provide support to the economies in developing digital skills strategies and propose concrete actions and initiatives to support upskilling and reskilling in WB. RCC conducted the mapping of key priority sectors, emerging industries and target groups to support a fully-fledged assessment of digital skills gaps and needs. Preparations have started to launch a **WB Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition**, mirroring EU practice, to establish direct links between digital skills supply and demand, creating conducive environment for innovation and start-ups creation and supporting knowledge transfer and increased job opportunities for youngsters and other target groups.

In July 2020, RCC organised the first-ever regional competition on digital smart solutions **Balkathon**, as an agile solution to support the region to recover from the effects of COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the second edition **Balkathon 2.0** in May 2021 promoting six innovative digital solutions proposed mostly by youngsters from the region. Preparations for the third edition have already started.

The vision of an Interoperable Western Balkans has proposed a practical approach and concrete action plan toward achieving the operational interoperability in the region as well as between WB and EU, in line with CRM. In 2021, WB economies also embarked on the new initiative related to the establishment of the framework for free flow of personal and non-personal data in the region.

1.4.3 Investments and Financial markets

In strengthening the promotion of the region as an attractive destination for foreign direct investments (FDIs), the prioritised sectors in the industrial policy, namely automotive, food processing and metal processing were chosen as sectors for regional investment promotion, under CRM. With the support of regional Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs) the **regional investment incentives database** was launched to enhance transparency and predictability of regional investment policies, which would lead to higher flow of investments and promotion of the region as a safe and transparent destination for business.

Free movement of capital is one of the main pillars under the CRM agenda, including one of the four freedoms of the EU Single Market. In this regard, supporting development of a modern

payment system is key to reduce costs in inter-regional payments and payments between the region and the EU, including remittances from which the region is highly reliant on. Through the Working Group on Financial Markets, RCC supported the endorsement of the **framework for development of modern payment systems** with the aim of cutting the costs of regional payments and those with the EU, focusing also on interoperability and joining the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA).

1.4.4 Sustainable growth and climate change resilience

Mirroring development of the European Green Deal, RCC oversaw the process of development and adoption of **Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB)** in November 2020 to support the region in properly and timely addressing the growing environmental and climate challenges by putting sustainable development, resource efficiency, nature protection and climate action in the centre of all economic activities. RCC coordinated preparation of the **Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021-2030** which was subsequently adopted by the EU-Western Balkans Brdo Declaration in October 2021. The Action Plan outlines the framework for its coordination and monitoring, while the main responsibility for implementation of the commitments made under the Sofia Declaration lies with the Western Balkans authorities following inter-sectorial and inter-institutional cooperation.

1.4.5 Industrial Development

With the adoption of CRM, the sectors with high potential for development in the region were prioritised, namely the automotive, agro-food, green and circular economy, metal processing, tourism and creative industries, in addition to strengthening of the private sector component. In view of the regional industry development measures, activities for the establishment of a **Regional Supplier Development Programme (RSDP)** leading to the mapping of automotive sector, light manufacturing and agro-food sectors, circular economy and the mapping of clusters in these sectors were performed. As of December 2021, two databases were established and are available: Market Intelligence database (<http://market-info.wb6cif.eu/>) and Market Access database (<https://www.market-access.wb6cif.eu/>), to be updated and promoted during 2022.

In April 2021, the **Triple P Tourism Project** was finalised resulting in development of new regional cultural and adventure tourism products and their promotion, among other. The Tirana Declaration on Joint Regional Protocols endorsed in the first half of 2021 paved the way for further support to sustainable tourism recovery and growth in the region. Given the importance of tourism in the region in terms of its contribution to the region's GDP, employment and other positive effects on various socio-economic areas, tourism became part of CRM as a sustainable tourism pillar. Preparations have started on the establishment of a **Western Balkans Tourism Crises Committee (WBTCRC)** aimed for 2022 with the purpose to unite the tourism sector, while leading to a strong and consistent response to intermediate and long-term crises. To mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic through innovative digital solutions, in March 2021, RCC organised first regional competition Futourismo, where seven winners across the Western Balkans were chosen to further develop their ideas with the support of RCC.

The second edition of the competition is due in second half of 2022, where competitors will seek to propose innovative solutions in broader tourism industry.

1.4.6. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security

1.4.6.1 Political Cooperation

Success of the RCC activities and the regional agenda has hinged upon the political support and engagement of its participants. RCC supported political cooperation through its statutory obligations, namely the regular meetings and reporting to the RCC Board and heightened synergy with the SEECF framework and its consecutive Chairmanships in Office. RCC assisted the work of the SEECF Parliamentary Assembly, ensuring that regional legislatures are aware of and engaged in the regional programs. Moreover, RCC established and maintained communication with all of its participants, extended cooperation with different stakeholders and strengthened coordination with relevant presidencies or chairmanships, such as those of the Berlin Process, Council of the EU, and others. This resulted in better streamlining of the regional agenda in order to retain focus and a coherent approach, as well as raising the visibility of the region, regional cooperation and RCC.

1.4.6.2 Good Governance – Justice reforms and rule of law

Sustained focus on the rule of law and supporting judiciaries to reach EU standards remains an important part of RCC's work. In this context the periodic professional exchange among RCC-led networks, **WB Working Group on Justice (WB WGJ)**, **SEE Judicial Training Institutes (SEE JTI)** and **SEE Associations of Mediation (SEE AM)**, have contributed to improving mutual trust amongst jurisdictions in the Western Balkans.

Engagement and support to these networks by the SEECF participants have been to the highest level ensuring meaningful engagement and proper ownership for a stronger judicial cooperation in areas of: improved efficiency, accountability and modernisation of the judiciaries; improved judicial intra-regional cooperation in civil and commercial matters; establishment of stronger regional links for the use of mediation and reduction of backlog of cases; enhancing competence in EU law implementation through initiating, supporting, organising and streamlining regional activities in the area of justice; improved capacities of Judicial Training Institutes to provide and set the regional standards on regional judicial trainings and online trainings.

1.4.6.3 Security Cooperation

RCC has, both directly, through the actions it has organized and lead, and indirectly, as a coordinator of efforts in the region, played a major role in streamlining regional security cooperation and enhancing the understanding of the context, threats, and effective policy solutions.

RCC has been engaged in the regrouping of the entire security portfolio in the Western Balkans in order to support the Common Regional Market activities (CRM) and other regional cooperation activities stemming from the Berlin Process. In this regard, a whole range of security-related activities was implemented by the RCC. The **first-ever regional Security Public Opinion Survey project, "SecuriMeter"**, introduced the tool to monitor trends in

public opinion across a range of security issues. **RCC Annual Regional Security Coordination Conference (“Jumbo”)**, after six years, has become the main security coordination platform for practitioners across the region to analyze achievements and challenges among law enforcement institutions. The foundations have been laid for a unique regional platform for coordinating comprehensive responses to the field of hybrid security threats, more specifically in the area of **Countering Disinformation**, and more particularly when it comes to a malignant threat of foreign actors. Annual regional conferences on Countering Disinformation are now a focal and evolving part of RCC security activities.

Two regional specialized security initiatives at SEE level, **SEEMIC** and **SEENSA**, facilitated by the RCC, maintained commitments of MICs and NSAs to build mutual trust and heighten awareness and capacities with regard to regional cooperation.

1 RCC Strategy 2023 – 2025

The overarching goal of SWP 2023-2025 is to promote the prosperity of South East Europe by supporting sustainable and equitable economic growth policies to enhance regional economic integration, green and digital transformation, while reducing the poverty and narrowing the existing social, economic, and environmental divergences with the European Union.

In achieving this goal, the SWP 2023-2025 will *inter alia* (1) support implementation of UN SDGs through the SEE 2030 Strategy to accelerate the post-pandemic recovery, enhance resilience to exogenous shocks, improve the quality of life of its citizens, decelerate depopulation, and unleash the untapped socio-economic potential; (2) increase attractiveness and competitiveness of the region aimed at bringing the region closer to the EU markets; (3) expedite digital transformation and increase convergence with EU Digital Single Market (DSM); (4) enhance green transformation and just transition of the region by facilitating and supporting the effective and inclusive implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) Action Plan 2021-2030 at the regional level; (5) support sustainable transformation of the region towards a knowledge-based economy that creates equal opportunities for all citizens and leaves no citizen behind; (6) promote political, security, and judicial cooperation in the region and strengthen available mechanisms and processes of regional cooperation in a way that supports long-term, sustainable and efficient delivery of the strategic goals.

It is through these specific objectives that RCC will implement SWP 2023-2025 by grouping them under key pillars, as demonstrated below.

1.4 Competitiveness

Objective:

Regional economic integration aims at increasing the region's attractiveness for foreign investors and facilitating higher investment inflows through joint investment retention and promotion activities to foster sustainable industrial activity, more financing opportunities for private sector, trade and ultimately, jobs. The objective of this area is also the regional development of key industries in the WB region in line with EU standards and supporting of entrepreneurship across these key industries in order to enhance their competitiveness and facilitate integration into regional and European value chains.

Background:

Economic growth in the Western Balkans is still predominantly connected to the investments rather to industrial production, hence greater regional alignment of investment policies and better coordinated investment promotion, particularly in most promising value chains, holds significant potential for the economies of the Western Balkans to increase their attractiveness for foreign direct investment (FDI). Western Balkans is particularly well positioned to offer nearshoring alternatives for EU-based investors looking to adopt a more balanced distribution and diversification of supply sources and develop means of production closer to consumers. It

is of utmost importance for the region to join forces in removing existing barriers to regional investment as investors look at the region and the potential of its markets as a whole. There is a need to engage in concrete policy reforms in defined areas where, together with improvement of the investment environment, Western Balkans will be promoted to the global investor community as a unique investment destination.

While financial markets is the engine that drives the economy and a crucial component in the economic system, the goal of its development is to increase the capability of financial market to serve proficiently as an intermediary. These will further enable opportunities for private sector investments, as diversified financial markets and access to funding are needed in the region. The work on implementation of Free Movement of Capital facilitated by RCC with technical support of the World Bank Group will entail assessment of challenges and issues in development of cost-efficient payments within the Western Balkans and with the EU through the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA), proposal for implementation of domestic instant payments and linkages of those systems in the region, including the strengthened regional cooperation on financial market issues such as partial credit guarantees, public financial institutions, pre-insolvency and insolvency frameworks, Non-Performing Loans (NPL) resolution, etc.

Furthermore, COVID-19 pandemic showed the gaps and difficulties in many industries, especially tourism, automotive and other service sectors. Higher transportation costs, remote labour or reduced workforce, emerging need for digital skills and disconnected value chains showed the vulnerabilities of many industries and highlighted the importance of regional market integration and shortened value chains. In addition, it showed the importance of business networks and the need to invest in human capital through upskilling and reskilling. The WB region identified and agreed on key industries important to the region but further progress is needed in terms of harmonisation of EU acquis, adaptation of common frameworks and standards of production and development of key industries in line with EU standards and rules and embracing the twin (digital and green) transition. More instruments supporting entrepreneurship, mainly start-ups and SMEs, as well as further support for region's entrepreneurial community to benefit from EU programmes (such as the Single Market Programme) to enhance their competitiveness and further integrate into regional and European value chains are needed. Since tourism is one of the sectors which was the most severely hit by the pandemic, more importance is given to the specific tourism activities by integrating them into the CRM as a separate pillar - Sustainable Tourism. The aim is to lengthen tourist stay in the region, increase revenues and contribute to the employment in the industry and beyond due to the anticipated spill-over effects that tourism has on other horizontally linked areas.

Results:

These actions are estimated to result in a reformed investment policy framework, increased investments and modernised payment systems in the Western Balkans. More specifically, the actions will contribute to align further investment policies with the EU standards and best international practices, promote the region to foreign investors and reduce the costs of regional payments and prepare for joining the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA). Actions under

industrial development are expected to contribute to the creation of a Regional Industrial Area in line with EU standards and to facilitate inclusion of priority industries into EU value chains. Furthermore, it takes into account the COVID-19 pandemic consequences related to supply chain disruptions and market fragmentation, as well as the twin transition requiring investment in digital and green skills and methods of production. In line with the updated EU Industrial Strategy (2021) activities aim to support industrial alliances in key sectors and improve the competitiveness of private sector (in particular start-ups and SMEs) to access markets.

1.4.5 Investments

2.1.1.1 Investment policy reforms

Prepare grounds for development of FDI screening mechanism based on the emerging EU standards and policy; prepare grounds for negotiation of economy-specific International Investment Agreements (IIAs) between the EU and each of the Western Balkan economies; provide support to negotiations of International Investment Agreements (IIAs) between Western Balkans and third countries based on the Regionally Accepted Standards.

2.1.1.2 Investment promotion

Build on the promotion grounds set with the previous EU-funded project on investments; support the Investment Promotion Agencies (IPA) in improving their services and moving to digital marketing; promote investment opportunities in the region to increase intra-regional investments.

2.1.1.3 Investment retention and expansion

Establish regular exchange of information between Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs) with the aim to increase resilience to global shocks and facilitate re-investments in strategic sectors/value chains; reduce the risk of costly investor state disputes (ISDS).

1.4.6 Financial markets

2.1.2.1 Development of modern payment system

Facilitate cost-efficient payments within the Western Balkans and with the EU through the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA); support implementation of instant payments interoperability models.

2.1.2.2 Strengthening of regional cooperation on priority financial market development topics

Exchange on development of products or solutions focusing on areas of market failure and opportunities for market creation; use of available EU funds and IFI funding to provide support to local institutions actively explored/enhanced; adaptation and further progress on insolvency reforms, including financing; exchange of experiences on exit strategies and repercussions of various borrowers' measures that have been implemented such as COVID-19 response.

2.1.2.3 Regional financial services improvement

Scanning of financial markets of the Western Balkans, covering inter alia: feasibility of an EU-compliant mechanism for market integration of relevant markets and/or products with the objective of regional market integration and closer cooperation with the EU; facilitating innovative technical solutions for financial services.

1.4.7 Industrial development

2.1.3.1 Build industrial alliances

Expand cooperation and promotion platforms in key industries; reinforce linkages between relevant industries; tap into the Regional Supplier Development Programme potential in facilitating networking and market integration, support WB authorities to increase capacities in support of key industries.

2.1.3.2 Supporting micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs)

Explore support options for enhanced access to finance and alternative financing mechanisms for MSMEs; liaise with universities to promote development of entrepreneurial courses for students and executive training for entrepreneurs; foster internationalisation of MSMEs; support the ecosystem of business incubators, accelerators, and angel investments while widening the discussion among policymakers in order to regulate the policy framework and establish the necessary mechanisms; support in particular the greening of MSMEs, facilitating the green transition.

2.1.3.3 Regional development of creative industries

Enhance regional dialogue in creative industries, potentially considering extending and developing regional dialogue on a sectorial basis (focusing on key sectors of the creative industry, identified by the WB region) and enhance stakeholder partnerships.

2.1.3.4 Sustainable tourism development

Support establishment of a sustainable regional tourism development and management framework; accelerate digitalisation of tourism industry and establishment of informal regional tourism forum; develop joint regional product promotion in tourism; support mutually recognised practical training programmes; improve regional tourism data and statistics.

1.5 Digital transformation and convergence with EU Digital Single Market

Objective:

The actions aim to integrate the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital space, focusing on removing obstacles to development of digital technologies in the region, aligning with EU Digital Single Market (DSM) policies and practices, ensure greater availability of digital infrastructure by closing connectivity gaps and digital divide in WB and improve e-services delivery for the citizens of the region.

Background:

The region made progress in the last period in all policy areas of digital transformation, but greater development of digital infrastructure, use of e-services, interoperability, harmonisation

with EU acquis, improvement of cybersecurity, and implementation of new technologies are still needed to make the region more digitally integrated. Introduction of Roam Like At Home (RLAH) regime from 1st July 2021 contributes to better connectivity in the region, while high roaming charges between WB and EU remain as an obstacle to further economic development.

Particular attention has been given to digital upskilling and reskilling activities – yet 2/3 of individuals in the region lack the basic digital skills and further efforts are needed to close the digital skills gaps. The economies of the region are advancing in the area of trust services and interoperability, while the conditions for free flow of personal and non-personal data across the region should be fulfilled. Four WB Digital Summits were successfully organised, and economies reconfirmed the commitments and willingness to continue working on key priorities for the benefit of WB citizens.

Yet, the digital market in the Western Balkans is still fragmented, with not fully developed digital infrastructure, uneven levels of harmonisation with the EU acquis and of enforcement capacities. Usage of e-services in the region still lags behind the EU MS level, slowing down the possibility to reap the benefits of e-Government, e-Procurement and e-Health technologies and services, in particular in a post-pandemic phase.

Results:

The activities implemented under the regional digital area are intended to result in enhancing digital transformation in the region in line with the DSM, DAWB and CRM. The actions will contribute to reducing roaming charges between the WB and EU; improve digital infrastructure; enhance digital upskilling and reskilling capacities; improve participation of WB economies in EU frameworks and initiatives; improved regional dialogue on the new technologies; improve e-services delivery and regional interoperability; maintain high-level regional dialogue on digital transformation through organisation of Digital Summit(s); enhance regional cyber resilience.

Key activities:

2.2.1 Reduce roaming charges between the WB and EU and support digital infrastructure development

Support the reduction of roaming charges between the EU and WB through regional dialogue and permanent consultations with mobile operators; support the implementation of policy reforms aiming to improve business environment in the area of electronic communications; support development of fixed broadband networks and 5G deployment through regional activities aiming to increase the uptake of different financial instruments available; strengthen cooperation of WB BCOs with EU BCOs; etc.

2.2.2 Strengthen digital skills and competencies

Support development of digital upskilling and reskilling capacities in all WB economies; support knowledge transfer and increase job opportunities for youngsters and other targeted groups; boost digital skills and equip citizens with the adequate level of skills to respond to fast

technological development; support integration of WB economies in EU frameworks and initiatives starting with participation of WB in EU Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition Initiative.

2.2.3 Improve e-services delivery and maintain high-level policy dialogue on digital transformation

Improve e-services delivery including through cooperation on e-government services; support establishment of an Interoperable Western Balkans vision; support actions aimed at improved regional interoperability and enabled free flow of data; promote regional dialogue on new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, High Performance Computing, smart cities, etc.; regional cooperation in organisation of WB Digital Summit (WB DS) at the highest political level through WB DS Working Group.

2.2.4 Enhance regional cyber resilience

Improve and strengthen cybersecurity through: structured regional coordination, enhanced peer-to-peer learning and experience sharing, improved networking of a wide range of public and private stakeholders, etc.; support integration into ENISA work; cooperate and liaise with other leading international organisations active in the field following the EU values and principles.

1.6 Human Capital Development

The aim of the Human Capital Development pillar is to support sustainable transformation of the region towards the knowledge-based economy, which creates equal opportunities for all citizens and leaves no citizen behind.

1.6.5 Mobility

Objective:

The aim of mobility within the Human Capital Development pillar is to support increased mobility in the Western Balkans and sustainable transformation of the region towards the knowledge-based economy which creates equal opportunities for all citizens and leaves no citizen behind.

Background:

Transforming the Western Balkans towards a knowledge-based economy to deliver value-added products and services is essential for successful integration and sustaining competitiveness of the EU innovation-driven economies. Retention and leveraging of human intellectual capital is of fundamental importance for both developing knowledge-based economies as well as establishing and maintaining international competitiveness of the Western Balkans. Thus, achieving the regional legal framework through regional agreements aimed at enhancing mobility, cooperation and removal of barriers will yield significant benefits in migratory trends and pave the way for human capital retention within the region. In achieving this goal, a particular emphasis is placed on ensuring demonstrated regional commitment and intra-regional cooperation, all-inclusive quality of education and lifelong learning

opportunities across the region, as well as removing barriers for professionals, students, researchers and professors both within the region and between the region and the EU.

Therefore, the Human Capital Development pillar brings forward a set of key activities which addresses opening up opportunities for mobility and cooperation in education and science within the region; increases opportunities for businesses by opening up possibilities for cross-border/boundary provision of services; increases quality of education provision; effectiveness of employment and social affairs policies; Roma integration through direct work with the governments, exchange of practices and setting regional standards, and reflecting EU promising practices at regional level; development of youth policies and inclusion of youth in decision-making in the region.

Results:

The activities are meant to ensure full mobility of people within the region, intra-regional mobility of students, researchers and professors and between the region and the EU, removal of barriers within the region for professionals, and acquis-aligned reforms in quality assured education, which will fully integrate the WB into European Education Area and European Higher Education Area.

More specifically, the results include: supported and facilitated regional dialogue and cooperation in negotiated, adopted and implemented regional agreements on recognition of professional qualifications to ensure mobility of professionals and cross-border/boundary provision of services; supported and facilitated regional dialogue and cooperation to enhance mobility of students, researchers and professors through negotiated, adopted and implemented agreements on recognition of higher education qualifications and access to study; supported the region in quality assurance reforms to achieve European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) to ensure successful association and integration of Western Balkans quality assurance agencies in relevant European networks; supported the region in reforms in education and further integration in European Higher Education Area; free movement of people across the region on the basis of ID card enabled; the entry, movement and short stay of third-party citizens within the region achieved.

Key activities:

2.3.1.1 Increased Mobility of Professionals

Support mobility of professionals and free cross-border/boundary provision of services through conclusion of regional agreements on recognition of professional qualifications for doctors of medicine, dentists, architects, nurses, midwives, veterinary surgeons and pharmacists, while ensuring full alignment with relevant EC directives and their transpositions, including establishment of common minimum training requirements, quality education, alignment or curricula, and implementation and monitoring of the agreements.

2.3.1.2 Increased Mobility of Students, Researchers and Professors

Removal of barriers and intra-regional mobility for students, researchers and professors through regional adoption of acquis compliant Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education

Qualifications and Agreement on Access to Study; including support of regional implementation mechanisms, data collection, and capacity support to relevant institutions; support continuous integration of the Western Balkans in EHEA.

2.3.1.3 Enhanced quality of education systems

Support the Western Balkans to advance in successful membership in European Network on Quality Assurance and European Quality Assurance Register through implementation of commonly identified reforms in quality assurance bodies related to fulfilment of European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), including supporting the necessary policies, networking and training for relevant institutions.

2.3.1.4 Monitoring possible obstacles to free movement; monitoring and supporting the implementation of the Agreement on Freedom of Movement and Stay with ID Cards and the Agreement on Freedom of Movement of Third Party Citizens within the Western Balkans.

2.3.1.5 Ensuring application of free movement rules on the ground: increasing capacities of local authorities to fully understand free movement rights.

1.6.6 Research and Innovation

Objective:

The regional innovation area's overarching goals are aimed at full integration in the European Research Area (ERA) and development of a regional innovation ecosystem that drives the WB's competitiveness and green and digital transition.

Background:

The region is not fully integrated into the European Research Area and is poorly integrated into large pan-European research infrastructures. Despite increases in recent years, the WB records moderate absorption of EU research and innovation funds. R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP is estimated at around 0.4% in the WB, compared with 2.2% in the EU (Eurostat). The outcome is modest average scientific and innovation performance (European Innovation Scoreboard, 2021) rendering the region less competitive and attractive to investors. Therefore, the field of research and innovation (R&I) has two strategic priorities: full integration into the ERA including increased R&I performance and development of a regional innovation ecosystem in the Western Balkans.

The focus should be on smart and targeted investments in R&I human capital and infrastructure to attract private investors, particularly foreign companies that allow both knowledge and technological spillovers and direct links to international markets. In addition, regional R&I cooperation should be promoted through concrete projects that illustrate potential benefits to individual R&I organisations and businesses, particularly in the regional priority industrial sectors (processing, green & circular, agro-food, automotive and creative industries). Specifically, attention should be directed towards supporting the expansion of a culture of experimentation among various stakeholders in the region. This includes industry-academia collaborations based on scientific excellence, supporting innovative solutions that respond to the needs of niche markets in the European and global value chains.

Results:

Maintained regional coordination and dialogue among innovation stakeholders including working groups on R&I, diaspora and international partners; facilitated expanded use of innovation and research infrastructures including academia–industry collaborations; promoted creation of innovation culture in the region; supported increased participation of women in STEM fields; facilitated creation and expansion of a regional innovation support scheme.

Key activities:**2.3.2.1 Support co-creation of a regional innovation ecosystem**

Facilitate region’s efforts to join European R&I agendas through full integration in the ERA; support development of R&I infrastructures in the region; promote and build academia–business collaboration models; encourage alignment with adoption of EU R&I good practices; expedite collaboration with the key EU R&I stakeholders; boost efforts to create regional R&I projects and support development of human capital.

2.3.2.2 Increase R&I performance

Encourage targeted R&I investments and policy reforms to increase public research systems’ performance; support development of conducive environment to help increase R&I performance in all WB economies; promote diffusion of knowledge and information sharing in the region to empower researchers and innovators, partly through the annual Butterfly Innovation & Business Forum and regional Butterfly Innovation Award; ensure market uptake of research and innovation results.

2.3.2.3 Strengthen regional financial and non-financial capabilities

Facilitate introduction of regional financial and non-financial R&I support mechanisms to curb uneven development of Western Balkan economies’ innovation ecosystems; facilitate introduction of a regional innovation fund aimed at supporting early-stage (pre-seed and seed) innovative teams get their operations off the ground and prepare them for subsequent funding phases.

1.6.7 Women Economic Empowerment**Objective:**

The main objective is economic empowerment of women, as a key element of economic empowerment of the region. On that, some of the areas that require particular attention are: removal of gender inequalities in the labour market, creating opportunities for women across the region to thrive in their professions, including through digital skills enhancement, uptaking innovative solutions and fostering a regional collaborative network of successful and inspiring role models for young female and male generations.

Background:

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an awakening call in this respect as it has underlined the existing gender inequalities and deepened them even further. Women globally make 70% of

workers in health and care sectors and have been at the forefront of fighting the pandemic since its inception. At the same time they have been shouldering much of care work at homes. With high risks of facing job losses and already high level of female unemployment, women in the Western Balkans are as vulnerable as their colleagues globally.

RCC has laid ground for a more meaningful regional work towards women economic empowerment, including through Common Regional Market by bringing to region's attention the need to increase participation of girls and women in STEM education and careers and create enabling environment for women entrepreneurship to flourish. In addition, RCC has further laid ground to support women and girls in the region and across key industry sectors in their entrepreneurial efforts and strengthen networks of women entrepreneurial community in the WB to jointly raise awareness about obstacles and address challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the region. During the Women Who Launch event in March 2022, the Declaration on the Launch of the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship was adopted, aimed to serve as a tool to drive regional actions in support of women entrepreneurship in the region. The Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship has identified initial needs in their support, such as the need for networking within the region and with EU partners, the need for promotion of their entrepreneurial efforts, the need for more visibility of good practices and role models, support regarding EU programmes and initiatives to enhance their access and ability to benefit from them; the need to tackle the gender digital divide; and the need to create a roadmap for joint actions with a sectorial-approach (e.g. agriculture, tourism, creative industries, green and circular economy, etc.)

Key activities:

2.3.3.1 Support women economic empowerment

Support expanding and strengthening the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship (RNWE) to increase regional cooperation and joint regional initiatives; promote agenda setting and push forward regional policy on women economic empowerment by engaging key stakeholders and empowering local networks of women entrepreneurs; promote the entrepreneurial culture among young women, marginalised communities, male-dominated sectors, etc.; facilitate networking; enhance stakeholder partnerships; enable best practice sharing and knowledge exchange; devise mentorship and coaching programmes and training modules for women entrepreneurs in the region.

2.3.3.2 Harness untapped human capital

Support further developing of two existing regional initiatives: the Network of Women in STEM and the Regional Knowledge Transfer Initiative; foster the uptake and diffusion of innovation skills and practices among researchers, innovation practitioners and businesses; promote the importance of increased participation of women researchers; promote skilling and upskilling initiatives to assist the needs in the region's labour market.

2.3.3.3 Strengthen women's footprint in GAWB

Increase the gender dimension in the implementation of Green Agenda for the Western Balkans through maintaining existing and building new partnerships and coalitions in the region that

advocate for women's increased role in the implementation of GAWB at all levels; promote women-led and women-focused sustainable solutions across the region; support education activities towards women and girls regarding adoption of sustainable techniques; maintain continuous dialogue with CSOs and NGOs in the region that foster gender-active approach toward the implementation of GAWB.

2.3.3.4 Promote importance of STEM for women economic empowerment through practical actions

Promote the importance of STEM for women's economic empowerment through practical actions; support digital upskilling and reskilling through tailor-made and needs-driven mentorship programmes; engage in regional activities to equip women with valuable skills to enable STEM-related employment; facilitate complementary actions with STEM related work to offer a wide range of digital skills training opportunities to girls and young women.

1.6.8 Employment (ESAP)

Objective:

The objective in the employment area/agenda is to support WB government partners to increase employment opportunities for citizens in the Western Balkans and advance WB alignment on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In achieving this objective, activities will leverage the WB Common Regional Market Agenda, specific thematic WB Agendas (Digital and Green Agenda), and the EU Investment Plan for WB (Youth Guarantee) for greater job growth and greater alignment of WB with the EU Pillar of Social Rights.

Background:

Labour markets in Western Balkans are characterised by low rates of activity, low employment, and high unemployment, especially of women and youth. The average employment rate in the WB region in 2020 was 50.7% compared to EU27 at 67.6%. There is a large gender gap in employment rates, where female employment rates did not exceed 55% in any WB economy in 2020 (ranging from as low as 14.1% to 54.8%).

The average unemployment rate in WB in 2020 stood at 16.5 % (compared to EU 27 at 7.2%), with marked variation across WB economies. One of the distinctive characteristics of unemployment in the Western Balkans is the large share of long-term unemployment. Average WB youth unemployment in 2020 stood at 35.1%, ranging from 26.5% to as high as 49.1%. Similar trends are observed in the rate of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), where for both men and women, five Western Balkan economies had NEET rates above 20% in 2020.

Results:

The activities are expected to result in strengthened institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and PES in developing, monitoring and evaluating labour market

policies and measures, greater alignment with the EU acquis (Chapter 2 and Chapter 19) and advancement in implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Key Activities:

2.3.4.1 Strengthen institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs, Public Employment Services in Western Balkans

Strengthen institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs, Public Employment Services and other relevant government stakeholders in Western Balkans in developing, monitoring and evaluating priority employment and labour market policies.

2.3.4.2 Provide assistance on employment policies and measures to leverage WB Agendas, EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans to foster job growth

Provide assistance for enhanced quality labour market analyses and evaluations of active labour market programmes and policy design, to be carried out on a systematic basis, as a precondition for improved design of policies.

Provide assistance to policy makers (Ministries focused on employment policies) and PES to effectively respond to the WB Digital and Green Agenda in developing policies and operational capacities to reap benefits of the digital transformation and greening of WB economies, including support for digital upskilling and reskilling and green jobs. Provide assistance to policy makers and PES to identify changes in skills requirements and jobs due to digitisation and greening of WB economies.

2.3.4.3 Conduct PES bench-learning cycle

Support implementation of the next cycle of PES bench-learning innovated and adapted with specific programmatic areas in focus (digital, green and youth), with the overall objective to increase PES capacity to deliver more effective ALMPs and services.

2.3.4.4 Western Balkans enhanced alignment with EU Employment and Social Policies and EU Pillar of Social Rights

Increase the capacity of WB government partners (responsible for EU acquis Chapter 2 and 19) and their policy and operational processes in the process of alignment with the EU acquis (Chapter 2 and 19) and the alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

2.3.4.5 Developing and enhancing the enabling environment for social economy/social entrepreneurship in the WB economies

Develop the capacity of WB partners in the area of social economy and social enterprises. Social economy and social entrepreneurship will be promoted both as models for tackling unemployment and as models for greater social inclusion and cohesion, but also related to preparation of WB economies in their EU accession and future use of European Social Fund (ESF).

1.6.9 Bolstering Youth

Objective:

Youth Agenda aims to aid the transformation of the region towards knowledge-based societies which can deliver more value-added opportunities. It intends to bring in focus the needs and expectations of young people by establishing and supporting appropriate mechanisms of including youth in socio-economic and political processes and decision-making.

Background:

Addressing youth and their needs is a critical element in creating sustainable, prosperous and forward-looking societies. Brain drain is an important factor contributing to depopulation, whereas youth-oriented policies may provide an incentive for young people to invest their knowledge and skills in their home economies/in the region. Over the past three years RCC supported inclusion of youth in decision-making processes, enhancing the capacities of relevant public administrations and youth councils and making space for youth voices at events and initiatives important to the region. In order to ensure long-term sustainability, these efforts require a focused follow-up, in addition to exploring additional venues of strengthening and supporting youth and their socio-economic opportunities and cooperation.

Results:

Implementation of the Youth Agenda is expected to result in increased regional youth cooperation; increased youth-friendly policy making processes in the region; active involvement of youth in the decision-making processes, and aligning with EU practices such as Youth Dialogue; support efforts towards establishing networks or collaboration in arts and culture at the regional level; established Student Associations Network; established mini-mobility scheme between the National Youth Councils of the Western Balkans and of the EU.

Key activities:

2.3.5.1 Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs

Continuation of the successful practice of Western Balkans Youth Policy Lab, including by strengthening the capacities of National Youth Councils and public administrations, and extending and enhancing collaboration with regional initiatives relevant to youth and youth policy labs.

2.3.5.2 Youth Talent Promotion

Supporting young talented individuals from the region to create and showcase innovative mechanisms in line with the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, and in particular supporting collaborative regional projects and those which promote the positive view of regional cooperation.

2.3.5.3 Student Engagement in Regional Cooperation Agenda

Promoting regional cooperation agenda by engaging students and supporting academic work contributing to the pool of knowledge and research relevant for the region. The action will aim at establishing appropriate networks, enabling study visits as appropriate and streamlining student inputs in RCC and regional agendas.

2.3.5.4 Youth Network

This activity will target the increased cooperation among youth, youth organisations and youth-centred initiatives in the region, as well as between the region and the EU. It will include support to youth participation at regional and international events.

1.6.10 Roma integration

Objective:

RCC aims to increase the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, with a plan to directly provide support for civil registration, housing legalisation, and formalisation and digitalisation of their work. Roma challenges are mainstreamed in different regional agendas and the IPA programming.

Background:

The [Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process](#) was adopted within the Berlin Process in July 2019 setting clear goals that the governments intend to achieve by their EU accession. This represents a commitment to continue and further enhance efforts to achieve equality and full integration of Roma, as part of regional cooperation and the accession process to the European Union.

The Declaration foresees the achievement of specifically defined objectives in the areas of employment, education, housing, health care, documentation and combating discrimination. It also envisages the adoption of regional public budgeting standards related to Roma integration, and the establishment of official channels and mechanisms for joint involvement of local governments and Roma communities in policy formulation, as well as adequate mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of policies related to Roma integration.

Results:

The planned impact to increase the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma in the Western Balkans mirrors the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation up to 2030 (EU Roma Framework). This will extend the focus beyond the socio-economic inclusion in the areas of education, employment, housing, health and civil registration to effective equality and meaningful participation. The concrete support to the governments in the region will result in actual contribution to the implementation of the Declaration of the Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process (Poznan Declaration) and the achievement of its targets. These efforts also contribute to a number of Sustainable Development Goals, including poverty reduction, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities and peace, justice and strong institutions.

Key Activities:

2.3.6.1 Promoting equality towards Roma

Promotion of equality, particularly through addressing discrimination and racism towards Roma, is the leitmotif of the EU Roma Framework policy, and thus in the focus of the RCC

efforts for Roma integration, aiming to reduce discrimination experience among Roma. Practical steps include recognition of anti-gypsyism, a specific form of racism directed towards Roma, and supporting institutions to monitor and combat discrimination. Negative narratives regarding Roma and inclusion policies will be challenged and the governments will be encouraged to employ Roma as public servants. RCC also promotes addressing the challenges of Roma in the mainstream policies. Actual access to civil registration will be provided to unregistered Roma men, women and children.

2.3.6.2 Improving socio-economic inclusion of Roma

Concerning the socio-economic inclusion of Roma, the focus is on areas of housing and employment. In housing, the rate of dwellings owned by Roma will increase through providing direct support for legalisation and influencing housing policies to improve housing conditions of Roma. The employment rate of Roma, in line with the Poznan Declaration, should be increased from 16.5% to at least 25% in the region. RCC will provide support in policy development and implementation, focusing on transforming informal work among Roma. It will also support employment initiatives through innovative measures.

2.3.6.3 Complementing relevant regional and EU agendas

Within the green agenda the circular economy is particularly relevant for Roma in terms of informal workers in waste management and recycling materials. Other areas, such as depollution (cleaning illegal dumps) and sustainable food systems are also relevant. The digital agenda should tackle the particular challenges of Roma such as combating online hate speech against Roma, ensuring means and access of Roma children to digital education and promoting digitalisation of businesses among Roma entrepreneurs. RCC ensures this needs of Roma are mainstreamed in the relevant agendas.

2.3.6.4 Strengthening institutional capacities of the governments

RCC will strengthen institutional capacities of the governments in the Western Balkans to work on equality, inclusion and participation of Roma through supporting the governing of the Roma inclusion policies. Capacity building will be provided to the National Roma Contact Points (NRCPs), as well as other officials directly or indirectly encountering the issues of Roma, including law enforcement, judiciary, equality bodies, etc. The social dialogue on Roma equality, inclusion and participation will be maintained at economy and regional level, and the monitoring and budgeting processes will be strengthened.

2.3.6.5 Providing support to National Roma Contact Points

RCC will continue to partner with the NRCPs to organise wide economy-level dialogue with all relevant stakeholders in the form of National Platforms. It will also continue to support coordination of Roma integration process at regional level through Ministerial Meetings on the Poznan Declaration and Roma Integration Task Force meetings.

1.7 Green Agenda

Objective:

To enhance the green transformation of the region by facilitating and supporting effective and inclusive implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) Action Plan 2021-2030 at the regional level, in the line with responsibilities assigned within the plan.

Background:

By endorsing the GAWB at the Summit in Sofia in 2020, the region has committed to aligning with the European Green Deal's ambition to active carbon neutrality by 2050, and its key elements. The RCC has coordinated the process of drafting a Declaration on the GAWB. Actions required within the GAWB will have a significant economic and social impact across the sectors, and affect different groups and territories in different ways. The transformative ambition of the GAWB, accompanied by the complexity, and multidisciplinary nature of the Agenda, requires a holistic approach to the implementation. Following the GAWB endorsement, the RCC has centered its work on translating commitments within the GAWB into a set of well-defined actions embodied in the Action Plan for the Implementation of the GAWB 2021– 2030.

The GAWB Action Plan outlines the framework for its regional coordination and monitoring, while the main responsibility for the implementation will be at the level of Western Balkan economies. The governance mechanisms for GAWB Action Plan build on the existing regional structures and define key regional coordinators that will coordinate and support the implementation of the measures in line with their statutory duties, such as the Energy Community Secretariat (EnCS), Transport Community Permanent Secretariat (TCPS), Standing Working Group on Regional Rural Development (SWG RRD) and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), among other.

Results:

Results should be reflected in functioning mechanisms for steering the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan, accompanied by well-functioning platforms for consultations with key groups of stakeholders and improved analytical underpinnings to support implementation of the GAWB Action Plan. Timely and on track implementation of GAWB Action Plan in line with its indicative timeframes; adjusted GAWB Action Plan to reflect the evolving environment and lessons learned during the early implementation.

Key Activities:

2.4.1 Establishment of fully functional governing structures for the implementation of GAWB

Establishment of fully functional governing structures for the implementation of GAWB (both on the political and technical levels) to include the RWG ENV in extended format and the Regional Biodiversity Taskforce accompanied with the work of existing and newly established platforms and mechanisms for effective participation in the policy debate of civil society, local communities, businesses, donors and other development partners, and vulnerable groups such as youth.

2.4.2 Enhancement of institutional capacities to implement GAWB, accompanied with technical assistance and analytical work and awareness rising activities to support the implementation

Enhancement of institutional capacities at the level of WB economies to implement GAWB, accompanied by the technical assistance and analytical work conducted to support evidence-based decision-making related to the GAWB implementation. Awareness raised among key stakeholders about opportunities and challenges related to the green transition of the region.

2.4.3 Establishment of fully functional monitoring and reporting mechanisms

Establishment of fully functional monitoring and reporting mechanisms for regular tracking of implementation progress, timely identification of challenges, and design of corrective actions to adjust to an evolving environment. The first revision of the Action Plan should take place in 2024. Also, monitoring and reporting mechanisms will serve as a platform for knowledge sharing and awareness-raising about the GAWB among key constituencies.

1.8 Political and security cooperation

1.8.5 Political cooperation

Objective:

RCC will focus on strengthening political commitment of both the participants in the regional cooperation framework and the region's partners, in line with the RCC Statute to develop and maintain a political climate of dialogue and openness towards cooperation. The principal structure within which cooperation will be developed will continue to be the SEECF. The objective of political cooperation will be to ensure political support and commitment to the implementation of regional programmes of socio-economic development by strengthening the main drivers of regional cooperation frameworks embodied in the RCC.

Background:

Regional cooperation depends on the political commitment of participating economies, and therefore the achievement of results envisaged by SWP 2023-2025 hinges on developments in political processes and RCC capacity to navigate them. The latter is in the first instance provided by RCC Statute and structures, namely the RCC Board and Annual meetings, as well as coordination and support to SEECF and SEECF CiOs. Further strengthening of RCC framework will enable it to fulfil its tasks with greater sustainability and effectiveness and is a critical task in the context of implementation of ambitious socio-economic regional agendas. Moreover, fostering political cooperation and striving for synergy with the region's Euro-Atlantic partners, as well as with relevant initiatives, organisations and forums, is an important link in the efficiency chain of regional cooperation and development.

Results:

Results of political cooperation should be reflected in improved political climate toward the implementation of socio-economic programmes, subsequent successful finalisation of

deliverables, as well as in strengthening of SEECF and a successful implementation of SEECF CiO priorities and calendar of activities.

Key activities:

2.5.1.1 Fulfilling the RCC statutory obligations, namely RCC Board, Annual meeting, providing operational support to SEECF and SEECF CiO in order to provide and strengthen frameworks of regional cooperation at political level

2.5.1.2 Coordinating with the region's EU and Euro-Atlantic partners, including relevant global, European and regional forums and initiative, to ensure extensive, focused and efficient engagement with the region

2.5.1.3 Engaging legislatures and supporting parliamentary cooperation in South East Europe to increase socio-political inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of the regional cooperation process

2.5.1.4 Establishing a SEE Diplomatic Forum in the spirit of open and friendly dialogue to contribute to strengthening of diplomatic corps in the region

1.8.6 Security

Objective:

The objective will be to establish regional security cooperative order through strengthening and enhancing coherence of security portfolio in SEE, and efficient coordination of security cooperation mechanisms which have been established. Following the establishment of these mechanisms, the objective is now to focus on delivering results, in terms of awareness-raising and outreach, capacity-building and accumulation and exchange of knowledge. This should concern the relevant authorities, agencies and actors, but also broader population in order to enhance social resilience. In this process it will be equally important to coordinate with international partners, particularly the EU.

Background:

In addition to constituting one of the statutory priorities and overarching areas of cooperation, security cooperation provides the foundation of sustainability of socio-economic programmes and a prerequisite for peace and stability in the region. In light of new global developments and new emerging global security threats in the preceding years, regional security has become an increasingly important matter for the region and its partners. Thus the RCC has been expanding its core security portfolio while at the same time acting as a hub of regional security cooperation initiatives such as the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG), Small Arms and Light Weapons Clearinghouse in SEE (SEESAC), Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative in SEE (DPPI) and Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI). The RCC has also undertaken efforts to lead the process that incorporates the goals of the entire Justice and Home Affairs portfolio into intrinsic pre-requisites of the socio-economic agendas in the region (SEE2030, SWP, CRM, etc.). To that end, RCC has created a working platform for all security agencies and regionally-owned organisations to discuss and exercise their regional commitment and work on issues such are: fighting organised crime and corruption,

disinformation and hybrid threats, illegal migrations, reducing illegal possession of small arms and light weapons, etc.

Results:

The result of activities in this area will be an improved regional awareness of current and imminent security threats, a heightened capacity of security cooperation mechanisms to be proactive and act in coordination, and an improved social resilience.

Key activities:

2.5.2.1 Continued support to existing SEE level specialised security cooperation initiatives

This activity envisages work on organising and facilitating regular regional meetings, events and dialogues through established security initiatives to discuss current and new security challenges in the region, but also the needs and responses of the participants themselves. At the same time, the focus is on building the established mechanisms of security cooperation towards joint actions focused on results. In addition, work to strengthen and improve security cooperation mechanisms would meaningfully support the RCC's unified position as a regional organisation.

2.5.2.2 Continued support to the coordination of security cooperation formats and platforms operating under the RCC umbrella

The efficiency of regional and domestic responses to contemporary security challenges relies on a proactive, coordinated, and holistic regional approach. The RCC plays a major role, both directly, through the actions it organises and leads, and indirectly, as a coordinator of efforts in the region streamlined through a web of regional security cooperation platforms. The set of these actions implies continuation of streamlining of regional security activities for most efficient implementation of regional priorities in the field of security, namely a close engagement with all relevant SEE and Western Balkans strategic partners dealing with security issues, support to SEE-level security cooperation platforms, continuation and upgrade of the Annual Regional Security Coordination (Jumbo) Conference, synergy with SEESAC, DPPI and other regional security initiatives, commitment to strengthened social and public resilience and engagement, and exploring further venues of coordination and cooperation as appropriate, including in the field of cyber security.

2.5.2.3 Contributing to countering disinformation in coordination with relevant partners

This activity refers to the work on strengthening awareness and responses, of both citizens and institutions, regarding the reduction of hybrid threats in the form of disinformation, through the organisation of regional conferences on countering disinformation in the Western Balkans. This activity includes work on upgrading the “Conference on countering disinformation” to make the RCC a meaningful hub for regional dialogue and action in this field. At the same time, through the work of this Conference, the RCC opens the possibility of supporting all relevant actors in strengthening cyber security and other hybrid threats.

1.8.7 Rule of Law and Good Governance

Objective:

The interventions under this heading aim at improving efficiency, accountability and modernisation of SEE judiciaries, improved judicial intra-regional cooperation on civil and commercial matters, establishment of stronger regional links for mediation promotion and enhancing competence in EU law implementation through initiating, supporting, organising and streamlining regional activities in the area of justice.

Background:

Good Governance and the Rule of Law lie at the core of the EU accession process and constitute key prerequisites for functioning societies and economies. Although these issues are mainly part of the domestic agendas, because of the benefits of cooperation at regional level, they will remain in the focus of RCC's work in the time to come.

In line with the RCC's statutory mandate to pursue cooperation in Good Governance (justice and home affairs), the activities will support more efficient and accountable judiciaries in SEE, support development of an area of justice based on mutual trust and thus contribute to an enhanced trust of citizens in the judiciaries. While progress in this area rests mostly on internal drivers, it can still benefit from the regional context, especially with regards to professional exchange and peer learning. In the period ahead, the RCC-led platforms will continue to steer practical cooperation among economy-level and regional structures in the aforementioned fields. The operation of these structures benefits from the strong support by economies' judiciaries and ministries of justice.

Results:

Activities in this area will contribute to improved competencies, mutual trust and enhanced intra-regional and regional cooperation among the judiciaries in SEE. In addition, they will seek to improve the institutional capacity of Ministries of Justice, Associations of Mediators and Judicial Training Centres.

Additionally, consistent promotion of the use of mediation will contribute to increased percentage of cases resolved through alternative dispute resolution, consequently reduce the cost of accessing the justice system, reduce the high backlog of cases throughout the region, and ultimately contribute to improve access to justice.

Key activities:

2.5.3.1 Support regional cooperation and capacity building among judiciaries, judges, prosecutors and other legal professionals in EU law by facilitating and supporting networking and lifelong learning of judges, prosecutors and legal professionals

2.5.3.2 Promotion of alternative dispute resolution by facilitating networking, peer support and institutional building of associations of mediators and judges. In parallel, implement regional awareness raising activities to promote alternative dispute resolution to the wider public.

2.5.3.3 Contribute to reducing the backlog of cases and improved access to justice through increased use of ADR

2.5.3.4 Improvement and modernisation of judicial intra-regional cooperation. The activities will aim to support digital judicial exchanges at the regional level and facilitate exchange of experiences related to the introduction of new legislation or e-Justice tools in the region.

1.9 Regional coordination

In compliance with its mandate, the implementation of planned interventions in specific sectoral areas will be complemented and supported by RCC's general and horizontal activities. These activities will be grouped within several intervention areas, as shown below:

1.9.5 Monitoring and Reporting

The implementation of SWP 2023-2025 and its elements, such as the Common Regional Market 2021-2024 Action Plan, Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021-2030, and SEE 2030 Strategy, will continue to be supported by already established and well-functioning horizontal processes. A wide-ranging programming process and regional coordination involving public administrations, regional organisations and structures, and international partners has proven useful in defining and developing projects with a regional dimension. RCC will continue with these processes in this SWP aimed at aligning needs with concrete RCC-led activities and projects.

Monitoring will continue to be based on quantitative and qualitative assessment through inputs provided by different regional working platforms, collection of quantitative data through the authorities and statistical offices, as well as on collection of other data available through international sources. In this regard, Balkan Barometer as an already consolidated RCC-led survey for measuring both the public and business sentiment in the region and RCC SecuriMeter as the first-ever regional public opinion survey on security threats, such as fighting terrorism, organised crime, border/boundary security, gun ownership, disinformation, etc. will only complement the ongoing quantitative and qualitative assessments. Currently, Balkan Barometer is established as an instrument and a reference source of data and recommendations that the governments in the region and several international actors, including public media, are using as a reference to provide a picture of the socio-economic developments in the region, and ways in which they are perceived, in addition to identifying key areas for future policy.

1.9.6 Donor Coordination

RCC will continue with the practice of putting to use the donor coordination mechanism with a view of maximising operational effectiveness and alignment policy and development outcomes. In comparison with the previous period, RCC and its partners, with the regional ownership of Western Balkan economies, have set themselves on a more demanding path in terms of implementation of ambitious regional initiatives that are in line with EU's ones. The CRM agenda and GAWB, among others, have the potential of transforming the region's capacities and setting a strong precedent for regional cooperation initiatives to have a stronger

impact on the EU accession process. The growing pressure to deliver on regional commitments have also put a stronger emphasis on joint collaboration and development cooperation.

What is more, in the context of SEE2030 Strategy and under SEE2030 structures, exploratory steps will be taken to enhance aid efficiency and overall correlation between development assistance and SDGs in South East Europe through cooperation of SEECF Donor Agencies. SEE 2030 regional dialogue mechanisms will lead to the creation of financial sector oriented private sector dialogue and think tanks oriented civil society dialogue mechanisms to support policy making and coordination capacities of regional level decision makers. Thus, both open to public and transparent dialogue mechanisms will strengthen the implementation of SEE 2030's people first vision and combine it with its private sector oriented SDGs responsiveness. In this respect, RCC will seek to contribute to more efficient implementation of regional activities and promote broader engagement with partners and international financial institutions whose policy objectives meet those of broader region.

1.9.7 Partnerships

RCC will actively seek to expand its network of partnerships to improve the quality of regional cooperation and maximise the effectiveness of agendas' implementation. In this regard, RCC plans to increasingly foster partnerships with a diverse set of partners, including but not limited to non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, academic, private sector, start-ups international and regional organisations and agencies and other local and domestic governments. In its quest to expand the existing network of partners, RCC will be guided by the principles of all-inclusiveness, fairness and transparency, long-term equitable economic growth and mutually enforcing interests.

The wide scope and ambitiousness of RCC agendas necessitates pulling of efforts and establishing a platform of joint collaborative mechanism, particularly in the context of transfer of knowledge and know-how in those policy fields with which RCC does not deal exclusively. RCC values the interests of its partners and the opportunities that have been emerging for joint initiatives in a number of policy areas under RCC mandate. In this respect, deepening and expanding the dialogue with existing and potential partners is of utmost importance in the upcoming period and will, therefore, be pursued by RCC without further ado.

1.9.8 Communication

The overarching communication goal in the next three years will be to continue to be recognised as the driving force and key partner for the regional cooperation in South East Europe for all the parties, regional, EU and wider and build the reputation, based on its achievements.

In order to reach this goal and retain the position, the RCC will utilise its current and forthcoming activities, resources, knowledge, lessons learned, information and know-how, and keep strongly developing its communication efforts, strategies, tactics, channels and tools to a maximum. Following the vision and planned activities of the RCC, as stipulated by its Strategy and Work Programme 2023-2025, a set of different strategies, tools and tactics will be executed to achieve the communication goal, through the following specific objectives:

- Continue raising awareness on the importance of all-inclusive and sustainable regional cooperation for the region;
- Promote EU's and RCC's dedication to the region and the benefits of EU integration;
- Raise awareness on the benefits of the EU enlargement process to both regional and EU audiences, focusing on affirmative stories of cultural diversity but also common heritage and geography;
- Continue with awareness raising and storytelling on the RCC's activities and goals in simple, clear language, messages and success stories identifiable for the region, thus increasing political, financial and public support and buy in.

The existing communications efforts of the RCC will have to be extended and strengthened, differentiating strategic approaches, tools and tactics to cover the wide range of RCC's themes and reach various target audiences. To this end, to achieve general communication objectives, a detailed Communication Action Plans will be developed for each activity/project, in accordance with the SWP 2023-2025 implementation dynamics.

The RCC communication activities mirror the agenda of the organisation, upgrading the established RCC profile to reflect its increasingly regionally-owned, active and all-inclusive role and influence. It continues to streamline ways in which the RCC Secretariat builds the organisation's public profile, with guidance and backing from the Secretary General, as well as with support of all RCC staff.

All activities, initiatives and efforts, however, need to be adequately communicated with the selected audiences in order to gain/maintain momentum, full regional ownership as well as thorough understanding of essence of regional cooperation and its benefits. Therefore, communication remains one of the key RCC activities in promotion of its work, goals, achievements, results, plans and efforts of the region, in line with the organisation's mandate and plans. It also represents a continued set of activities aimed at mobilising the region to support and get engaged in the regional cooperation and EU integration processes. While promoting the region itself, its potential, qualities, efforts, positive stories, values and beauties, RCC communication simultaneously promotes European Union and its values, the EU being the main RCC contributor, regional supporter and aspiration of the SEE region's economies. RCC communications raise awareness, inform and educate about the processes and initiatives leading to the overarching goal of the SEE and WB in particular - EU integration, while at the same time telling the stories of the citizens and their concerns to raise awareness and incentivise actions of the relevant policy-makers.

The RCC communication efforts will be focused on reaching out and connecting to the general public, the citizens of our region, working to match our actions and vision with their expectations. Thus, communication is in harmony with the RCC goals, exercising a more active role in appropriate approaches to communicate clearly, simply, and comprehensively on what we do – the results of our actions and tangible impact on citizens' lives that these results would have. All available outreach opportunities and channels will be explored to reach out to

grassroots audiences for specific RCC's activities, in order to step up the influence and gain feedback from variety of groups (i.e. associations on women, youth, vulnerable groups, etc.) across the region.

The communication's focus would go beyond the regular strategic, political and programmatic efforts in an attempt of 'humanising' the effects and impacts of the regional cooperation and the EU integration reform agenda to present the region to the citizens of the EU, thus improving the image of the region beyond its footprint. Besides the stress put on the economic topics, the RCC will also keep focus on social aspects and issues in order to complement the expectations of the citizens, clearly voiced in the region (in the Balkan Barometer's surveys as well) by addressing their concerns and utilising such findings as lessons learned, to re-tailor the communications approach. Simultaneously, the communication would also strive to reinforce the enhanced EU support and engagement, and present the advantages and benefits of the EU membership, aimed at raising the support of the region's population to the EU integration.

The RCC-lead projects focusing on employment and social policies in the region (Employment and Social Affairs Platform/ESAP), integration of Roma population into Western Balkans and Türkiye societies (Roma Integration/RI), boosting youth policies (Youth Policy Lab Project), and strengthening security cooperation in the region (Integrative Internal Security Governance – IISG) provide additional areas and fora for communication within the RCC's scope of action, adding a valuable, specialised communication grounds. The RCC-led projects work symbiotically with the core RCC team, thus additionally anchoring regional partnerships in their own fields from political level to the technical one. By working directly with the practitioners on the actual implementation of the regionally-agreed goals, the projects open another communication avenue to reiterate the messages followed by specific actions. Another important feature of the communication efforts involves networking and exchange of public information and communication contents with the partners/stakeholders/beneficiaries of the organisation.

In line with the tasks and set goals, the target audiences of the organisation are divided into two main groups: internal audience and external audience. The internal audience, being the most important one as it serves as a pool of RCC's communicators, continue to be the RCC employees. External publics can be divided into the following groups: **a) Primary:** general public in 13 RCC SEE participants; governments and agencies of 13 RCC SEE participants; European Union (European Commission, European Parliament, etc.); youth and youth organisations in the Western Balkans; donors; partner initiatives in SEE; media, as a distinctive public, but also as a channel to the wider, general public; **b) Secondary:** international organisations; business community/investors; academia, researchers; civil society groups.

Results:

The main communication goals set in the previous Strategies have been successfully reached. Reviewing just some of the quantitative measures, the RCC scored splendid results, as the total number of RCC portal views has increased by 83% with a 153% growth of number of new users; number of media reports increased by 400%, and number of social media users increased by 70% over the past 3 years, with over 4,000,000 users reached across all RCC social media

channels. According to the Balkan Barometer 2020, when asked if they heard of the RCC, 69% of WB citizens said yes. In 2015 that percentage was only 32%. The RCC communication efforts in the period 2023-2025 will be translating the joint RCC-regional priorities into concrete goals and objectives, with all available resources. To achieve this, the communication activities will utilise different set of messages, tools, tactics, and address multiple audiences through RCC communication channels, subject to results and lessons learned in the past and resources available.

Key activities:

- Developing Communication Action Plans for each activity;
- Developing and communication of key messages;
- Maintaining and strengthening direct communication with stakeholders and target audiences;
- Expanding the followers on social media and boosting interactions with them, especially with younger audience;
- Advancing photo galleries and enhancing video production promoting the regional cooperation and EU integration through story-telling;
- Raising awareness on selected topics of RCC work through series of coordinated actions and tools and implementation of mini, midi and mega campaigns, depending on the certain activity and the set budget;
- Continue upgrading RCC portal and satellite websites in more user-friendly way;
- Expanding regional, Brussels-based and international media pool, familiar with RCC's activities and mission, getting them more engaged in the regional cooperation agenda in order to maintain and step up the interest on the RCC activities;
- Increasing stakeholders' understanding of RCC results and future activities through production of online, fresh and updated public information materials;
- Increasing primarily quality, followed by quantity of storytelling information materials on the RCC activities through organised/co-organised and supported events, focusing on processes and/or outcomes and not the events themselves;
- Increasing information share and interactivity in communications space with regional projects operating in South East Europe, thus demonstrating the power of togetherness and true spirit of cooperation.

1.10 Key risks and possible constraints

Political risks. Existing bilateral disputes in the region, rooted in the legacy of the past may limit the RCC capacity to strengthen the constructive policy dialogue and related decisions for enhancing key priority agendas. While this risk is mostly outside RCC's direct influence, it needs to be closely monitored to allow quick and flexible adjustments of SWP implementation to adapt to changing political circumstances.

Risks related to capacity constraints of beneficiaries' implementing bodies. Insufficient institutional capacities and limited intragovernmental coordination at the level of participating

economies could pose a medium risk for the implementation of this plan. The fast-changing external environment requires swift focus and rapid policy responses on the level of individual economies, which may limit responsible institutions from effectively engaging at the regional level. In addition, rapidly evolving priorities both on regional and economy levels require fast acquisition of knowledge and skills within public administrations to adequately respond to emerging new requirements. Finally, the complexity of some of the actions envisioned within this SWP requires systems for multilayer, cross-sectorial coordination which may stress already limited institutional capacities across the region. To mitigate this risk activities planned will be coupled with further strengthening of technical, managerial, and administrative capacities within the responsible bodies both at levels of economies and the region as a whole. To mitigate this risk, this SWP aims at synergising and mainstreaming existing governance structures to support the implementation.

Risks related to the need for ensuring adequate inclusion of a range of stakeholders in processes at the regional level. The implementation of this SWP requires the inclusion of a broad range of constituencies beyond public administration at the level of economies. Key priority agendas including the CRM, GAWB, and DAWB will have a significant impact on businesses, people, and the environment, therefore effective consultations with civil society, businesses, and local communities is the prerequisite for successful implementation. Further development of mechanisms for adequate participation and representation of different views at the regional level is a mitigating measure. This dialogue at the regional level cannot serve as a substitute for the relevant policy dialogue among constituencies at the level of individual economies.

Finance-related risks. On the macro level, some of the key priorities within this SWP require significant investments (i.e. green and digital transformation) pooled from different sources. EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans funding should be accommodated with an adequate level of funding from regional economies' resources and funding from other financial institutions. Absorption capacity constraints and lack of viable projects could pose a significant risk to the implementation. On the micro level, the absence of formal recognition of RCC status spills over into the financial agreements with donors, where RCC became reliant on structured and contracted contributions that are often irregular. This, in turn, makes it difficult for RCC to balance the EC operating grant schemes with those donors' contribution on equal terms.

2 Annex 1. Work Programme 2023 – 2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
2.1 Competitiveness					
2.1.1	Investments				
2.1.1.1	Investment policy reforms	Prepare grounds for development of FDI screening mechanism based on the emerging EU standards and policy; prepare grounds for negotiation of economy-specific International Investment Agreements (IIAs) between the EU and each of the Western Balkan economies; provide support to negotiations of International Investment Agreements (IIAs) between Western Balkans and third countries based on the Regionally Accepted Standards.	Enhanced alignment with the investment standards of the EU; Modernised investment policy framework in line with the EU standards; Enhanced investor confidence as measured by various international reports; Enhanced capacities of investment experts in the region;	WBG, WB economies, CIF	2023-2025
2.1.1.2	Investment promotion	Build on the promotion grounds set with the previous EU-funded project on investments; support the Investment Promotion Agencies (IPA) in improving their services and moving to digital marketing; promote investment opportunities in the region to increase intra-regional investments.	Developed work programme on regional investment promotion; A set of regional promotional materials completed, including online sector brochures, investor presentations, pitch books; New investor leads in targeted priority sectors/value chains generated; New FDI attracted in targeted priority sectors/value chains; Visibility of the region increased in key target markets for investment attraction as measured by media mentions; Intra-regional investments increased to support the expansion/ revitalisation of targeted priority regional value chains.	WBG, WB economies, CIF	2023-2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
2.1.1.3	Investment retention and expansion	Establish regular exchange of information between Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs) with the aim to increase resilience to global shocks and facilitate re-investments in strategic sectors/value chains; reduce the risk of costly investor state disputes (ISDS).	Strategic anchor investments de-risked and retained in targeted sectors/value chains; Re-investments in regional value chains increased; Risk mitigation enhanced, leading to lower risk of costly investor state disputes (ISDS); Enhanced investor confidence and re-investments.	WBG, GIZ	2023-2025
2.1.2	Financial markets				
2.1.2.1	Development of modern payment system	Facilitate cost-efficient payments within the Western Balkans and with the EU through the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA); support implementation of instant payments interoperability models.	Intra-regional investments increased to support the expansion/ revitalisation of targeted priority regional value chains.	WBG, CEFTA, EPC, ECB, EC	2023-2025
2.1.2.2	Strengthening of regional cooperation on priority financial market development topics	Exchange on development of products or solutions focusing on areas of market failure and opportunities for market creation; use of available EU funds and IFI funding to provide support to local institutions actively explored/enhanced; adaptation and further progress on insolvency reforms, including financing; exchange of experiences on exit strategies and repercussions of various borrowers' measures that have been implemented such as COVID-19 response.	Exchange enabled on development of products or solutions focusing on areas of market failure and opportunities for market creation; Use of available EU funds and IFI funding to provide support to local institutions actively explored/enhanced; Adaptation and further progress on insolvency reforms, including financing.	WBG, CEFTA, EBRD, EIB, EC	2023-2025
2.1.2.3	Regional financial services improvement	Scanning of financial markets of the Western Balkans, covering inter alia: feasibility of an EU-compliant mechanism for market integration of relevant markets and/or products with the objective of regional market integration and closer	Availability of long-term finance increased; Expedited establishment and service supply enabled through 'passporting' or similar trade facilitation system;	WBG, CEFTA,	2023-2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
		cooperation with the EU; facilitating innovative technical solutions for financial services	Decreased insurance related costs of movement of people, goods and services in the region; Making financial markets more attractive for investments.		
2.1.3	Industrial development				
2.1.3.1	Building industrial alliances	Expand cooperation and promotion platforms in key industries; reinforce linkages between relevant industries; facilitate networking and market integration; support WB authorities to increase capacities in support of key industries and enhance regional dialogue.	Enhanced partnerships and alliances across key industries in the region; reinforced linkages between industries (e.g. tourism and creative industry).	WB6CIF, EIT, EC/line DGs, other, other relevant organisations	2023-2025
2.1.3.2	Supporting micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs)	Activities in support of access to finance and alternative financing mechanisms; Liaise with universities to promote development of entrepreneurial courses for students and executive training for entrepreneurs; Foster internationalisation of MSMEs; Support the ecosystem of business incubators, accelerators, and angel investments while widening the discussion among policymakers in order to regulate the policy framework and establish the necessary mechanisms; Support in particular the greening of MSMEs, facilitating the green transition.	Eased business networking; Key business pitfalls and actions for addressing them identified; Enhanced partnerships for access to finance; Capacity building provided to relevant authorities and private sector for enhanced access to information and financing tools, mainly provided by EU programmes, but not only; Green business networks enhanced; awareness on “green doing business” raised; Incubators, accelerators, angel investment, etc. networks in the region connected to create synergies and scale up activities at regional level.	WB6CIF, EIT, EC/line DGs, other, other relevant organisations	2023-2025
2.1.3.3	Regional development of creative industries	Enhance regional dialogue in creative industries; Extend to sectorial approach and enhance regional dialogue on sectorial basis; enhance stakeholder partnerships to address key challenges and needs.	Roadmaps of key actions in various sectors of the creative industries developed; Enhanced stakeholder partnerships; capacity building provided to WB	WB6CIF, EIT, EC/line DGs, other,	2023-2025

Area of intervention / Actions					Description of actions					Expected results					Partners					Timeframe				
										institutions; creative industry solutions promoted through various initiatives.					other relevant organisations									
2.1.3.4 Sustainable tourism development					Support establishment of a sustainable regional tourism development and management framework; accelerate digitalisation of tourism industry and establishment of informal regional tourism forum; develop joint regional products promotion in tourism; support mutually-recognised practical training programmes; improve regional tourism data and statistics.					Certification with EU tourism route networks initiated; Common regional identity (brand) developed and implemented; Regional product promoted at international markets; Increased awareness of the regional tourism destination and increased number of tourists from the EU; Tourism data and statistics improved.					UNWTO, WTTC, ERISSE, CEFTA, EC					2023-2025				
2.2 Digital transformation and convergence with EU Digital Single Market																								
2.2.1					Reduce roaming charges between WB and EU and support digital infrastructure development																			
2.2.1.1 Reduce roaming charges between WB and EU					Support the reduction of roaming charges between the EU and WB through regional dialogue and permanent consultations with mobile operators; support the implementation of policy reforms aiming to improve business environment in the area of electronic communications					Reduced roaming charges between WB and EU					Responsible ministries and NRAs, EC, EU and WB mobile operators					2023-2025				
2.2.1.2 Support digital infrastructure development					Support development of fixed broadband networks and 5G deployment, through regional activities aiming to increase the uptake of different financial instruments available, strengthen cooperation of WB BCOs with EU BCOs, etc.					Improved digital infrastructure					Responsible ministries, NRAs, BCOs, EC					2023-2025				
2.2.2					Strengthen digital skills and competencies																			
2.2.2.1 Foster digital skills and competencies					Support development of digital upskilling and reskilling capacities in all WB economies; support knowledge transfer and increase job opportunities for youngsters and other targeted groups; boost digital skills and equip citizens with the adequate level of skills to respond to fast technological development					Enhanced digital upskilling and reskilling capacities					Responsible ministries, academia, EC, international organisations working in the					2023-2025				

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
				area of digital skills	
2.2.2.2	Improve participation of WB economies in EU frameworks and initiatives in the area of digital skills	Support integration of WB economies in EU frameworks and initiatives starting with participation of WB in EU Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition Initiative	Improved participation of WB economies in EU frameworks and initiatives	Responsible ministries, EC	2023-2025
2.2.3	Improve e-services delivery and maintain high-level policy dialogue on digital transformation				
2.2.3.1	Improve e-services delivery	Improve e-services delivery including through cooperation on e-government services	Improved e-services delivery	Responsible ministries and institutions, EC	2023-2025
2.2.3.2	Improve interoperability between the economies	Support the establishment of an Interoperable Western Balkans vision; support actions aimed at improved regional interoperability and enabled free flow of data; promote regional dialogue on new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, High Performance Computing, smart cities, etc.	Improved regional interoperability in the WB economies; improved regional dialogue on the new technologies	Responsible ministries and institutions, EC	2023-2025
2.2.3.3	Maintain high-level policy dialogue on digital transformation	Regional cooperation in organisation of WB Digital Summit at the highest political level through WB DS Working Group	Organised Annual WB Digital Summit(s)	Responsible ministries and institutions, EC, businesses	2023-2025
2.2.4	Enhance regional cyber resilience				
2.2.4.1	Improve and strengthen regional cyber security	Improve and strengthen cybersecurity through: structured regional coordination, enhanced peer-to-peer learning and experience sharing, improved networking of a wide range of public and private stakeholders, etc. support integration into ENISA work; cooperate and liaise with other leading international organisations active in the field following the EU values and principles	Enhanced regional cyber resilience	Responsible ministries and institutions, EC	2023-2025
2.3 Human Capital Development					
2.3.1	Mobility				
2.3.1.1	Increased Mobility of Professionals	Support mobility of professionals and free cross-border/boundary provision of services through conclusion of regional agreements on recognition of	Regional Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects	CEFTA, Competent Authorities, EC	2023-2025

Area of intervention / Actions	Description of actions	Expected results	Partners	Timeframe
	professional qualifications for doctors of medicine, dentists, architects, nurses, midwives, veterinary surgeons and pharmacists, while ensuring full alignment with relevant EC directives and their transpositions, including establishment of common minimum training requirements, quality education, alignment or curricula, and implementation and monitoring of the agreements.	adopted; Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Midwives, Pharmacists and Veterinary Surgeons regionally adopted; a joint implementation body established and functional; a fully functional and operational database used by relevant authorities; curricula aligned with relevant EC directives		
2.3.1.2 Increased Mobility of Students, Researchers and Professors	Removal of barriers and intra-regional mobility for students, researchers and professors through regional adoption of acquis compliant Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and Agreement on Access to Study; including support of regional implementation mechanisms, data collection, and capacity support to relevant institutions; support continuous integration of the Western Balkans in EHEA.	Regional Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications adopted; a joint commission established and functional; fully operational and functional Western Balkans Regional Recognition Database (RRD) in use by relevant authorities; established networks of ENIC/NARIC centres; implemented Roadmap to harmonisation of VET qualifications; participation of the Western Balkans in Open European Universities Initiative	ERI SEE, Relevant regional institutions; EC	2023-2025
2.3.1.3 Enhanced quality of education systems	Support the Western Balkans in successful membership in European Network on Quality Assurance and European Quality Assurance Register through implementation of commonly identified reforms in quality assurance bodies related to fulfilment of European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), including supporting of necessary policies, networking and training for relevant institutions.	Regional Quality Assurance Action Plan implemented; individual economy action plans on quality assurance implemented; achievement of European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) demonstrated; positive review by ENQA and EQAR; regional network of QA bodies and peer reviewers established;	ERI SEE, Quality Assurance Agencies, EC	2023-2025
2.3.1.4 Monitoring possible obstacles to free movement: Monitoring and supporting the implementation of the Agreement on Freedom of Movement and Stay with ID Cards and the Agreement on Freedom of Movement of Third Party Citizens within the Western Balkans	Supporting regular meetings and work of the Commission on Freedom of Movement with ID Cards and the Commission for Freedom of Movement of Third Party Citizens, tasked to monitor the adequate implementation of the agreements. Support the capacity building for both Commissions.	adequate and unified implementation of the agreements ensured	Commission on Freedom of free movement with ID cards and the Commission for Freedom of Movement of	2023-2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
				Third Party Citizens	
2.3.1.5	Ensuring application of free movement rules on the ground: increasing capacities of the local authorities to fully understand free movement rights	Providing tailor-made trainings to local authorities regarding the development of procedures to ensure proper implementation of the agreements; Enable professional exchange between government authorities and relevant EU bodies.	Adequate and unified implementation of the agreements ensured	Ministries of Interiors, Border Police Directorates	2023-2025
2.3.2	Research and Innovation				
2.3.2.1	Support co-creation of a regional innovation ecosystem	Facilitate region's efforts to join European R&I agendas through full integration in the ERA; support development of R&I infrastructures in the region; promote and build academia-business collaboration models; encourage alignment with and adoption of the EU R&I good practices such as Open Science, S3 etc.; expedite collaboration with the key EU R&I stakeholders such as the EIT/KICs, EIC, Eureka Network, EEN, COST Association, etc.; boost efforts to create regional R&I projects; support development of human capital.	WB fully integrated into ERA; R&I infrastructures supported through networking and capacity building of Open Access Research Infrastructures, Technology Transfer Offices and Digital Innovation Hubs; facilitated adoption of good practices in Open Science and S3; strengthened close cooperation with EIT/KICs, Eureka Network, EIC/EEN and COST Association; at least one regional R&I project supported; empowerment of women in STEM and diaspora knowledge transfer supported.	Ministries of Science, innovation, education, economic development; Universities, DG R&I, EIT/KICs, COST, Eureka, EIC/ EEN, UNDP, international organisations	2023-2025
2.3.2.2	Increase R&I performance	Encourage targeted R&I investments and policy reforms to increase public research systems' performance; support development of conducive environment to help increase R&I performance in all WB economies; promote diffusion of knowledge and information sharing in the region to empower researchers and innovators, partly through the annual Butterfly Innovation & Business Forum and regional Butterfly Innovation Award; ensure market uptake of R&I results.	Encouraged targeted R&I investments and policy reforms; supported actions to increase R&I performance; annual Butterfly Innovation & Business Forum and regional Butterfly Innovation Award implemented, supported market uptake of R&I results.	Ministries of Science, innovation, education, economic development; Universities, DG R&I, EIT/KICs, COST, Eureka, EEN, international organisations	2023-2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
2.3.2.3	Strengthen regional financial and non-financial capabilities	Facilitate introduction of regional financial and non-financial support R&I mechanisms to curb uneven development of Western Balkan economies' innovation ecosystems; facilitate introduction of a regional innovation fund aimed at supporting early-stage (pre-seed and seed) innovative teams get their operations off the ground and prepare them for subsequent funding phases.	Facilitated regional R&I financial and non-financial support mechanisms including the introduction of a regional innovation fund.	Ministries of Science, innovation, education, economic development; Universities, DG R&I, EIT/KICs, COST, Eureka, EEN, international organisations	2023-2025
2.3.3	Women Economic Empowerment				
2.3.3.1	Support women economic empowerment	Continue developing and expanding the existing initiative of RCC to establish the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship, through partnerships, networking and visibility, education and mentorship; Implement flagship Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year Initiative; Develop and provide mentorship programme.	Functional Regional Network of WE; Enhanced partnerships; Increased number of women entrepreneurs promoted through RCC promotional campaigns; Increased number of women entrepreneurs recognised through the Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year Initiative; Increased number of trained women entrepreneurs.	WB private sector, mainly business women associations and networks in the region; UN/UNDP/ UN Women, EIT, other regional or international partner organisations	2023 - 2025
2.3.3.2	Promote importance of STEM for women economic empowerment through practical actions	Continue developing Regional Network of Women in STEM, with the introduction of tailor-made trainings and mentorship programmes to address the needs of women in the region in order to be able to compete in the labour market on equal terms	More girls and women entering STEM education and career; Increased number of girls and women trained in digital skills programmes. Increased number of girls and women offered skills trainings that boost job opportunities in STEM fields.	UNDP, UN Women, other regional and international partners, regional and economy-based networks and associations of	2023-2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
				women dealing with STEM fields, private sector	
2.3.4	Employment				
2.3.4.1	Strengthen institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and Public Employment Services	Strengthen institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and Public Employment Services in developing, monitoring and evaluating priority employment and labour market policies. Assistance to policy makers and PES to effectively respond to the WB Digital and Green Agenda in developing policies and operational capacities to reap benefits of digital transformation and greening of economies.	Strengthened institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and PES in developing, monitoring and evaluating labour market policies and measures; Verified by: number of policies or measures enhanced/implemented in the employment and social area as a result of ESAP assistance.	ETF, ILO, EU PES Network	2023-2027
2.3.4.2	Assistance on employment policies and measures to leverage WB Agendas, EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans to foster job growth	Assistance for enhanced quality labour market analyses and evaluations of active labour market programmes and policy design. Assistance to policy makers and PES to identify changes in skills requirements and jobs due to digitisation and greening of WB economies. Assistance to PES regarding digitalisation for both job-seekers and PES delivery channels and staff.	Number of policies or measures enhanced/implemented in the employment as a result of ESAP assistance; Number of technical assistance on priority employment policies or measures.	ETF, ILO, EU PES Network	2023-2027
2.3.4.3	PES bench-learning cycle	Topical PES bench-learning and mutual assistance projects focused on different phases of the YG implementation, including digital delivery of services.	Implementation of PES bench-learning exercise(s) and MAPs among Public Employment Services.	ETF, ILO, EU PES Network	2023-2027
2.3.4.4	Western Balkans enhanced alignment with EU Employment and Social Policies and EU Pillar of Social Rights	Assistance structured around specific policy priorities anchored in the WB progress on the alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights	Greater alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights for WB economies; Verified by: Progress reported in annual review of the WB alignment on the EU Pillar of Social Rights and WB Social Score Board indicators.	ETF, ILO	2023-2027

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
2.3.4.5	Enhanced environment for social economy/social entrepreneurship in the WB economies	Assistance for enabling and enhancing social economy/social entrepreneurship in the WB economies.	Strategic frameworks and other enabling environment elements related to social economy/social entrepreneurship developed and enhanced.		2023-2027
2.3.5	Bolstering Youth				
2.3.5.1	Western Balkans Youth Policy Labs	Building on the previously successfully implemented Youth Policy Labs to provide mechanisms of youth participation in decision-making and strengthening capacities of NYCs and PAs	Increased regional youth cooperation; Increased youth friendly policy making processes in the region; Active involvement of youth in the decision-making processes, and aligning with EU practices such as Youth Dialogue; Enhanced capacities of National Youth Councils and public administrations.	EC, RYCO, European Youth Forum	2023-2026
2.3.5.2	Youth Talent Promotion	Supporting young talented individuals from the region to create and showcase innovative mechanisms in line with the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, and in particular supporting collaborative regional projects and those which promote the positive view of regional cooperation	Networks or collaboration of youth in arts and culture at the regional level	RYCO, European Youth Forum	2023-2026
2.3.5.3	Student Engagement in Regional Cooperation Agenda	Engaging students and supporting academic work contributing to the pool of knowledge and research relevant for the region. Establishing appropriate networks, enabling study visits as appropriate and streamlining student inputs in RCC and regional agendas.	Greater awareness of students regarding the regional cooperation agenda and their more active involvement in these events.	RYCO, European Youth Forum, regional Universities, student associations	2023-2026
2.3.5.4	Youth Network	Initiating increased cooperation among youth, youth organisations and youth-centred initiatives in the region, as well as between the region and the EU. Supporting participation of youth at regional and international events	Strengthened cooperation between youth structures within the region and with the EU.	RYCO, European Youth Forum	2023-2026

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
2.3.6	Roma integration				
2.3.6.1	Promoting equality towards Roma	In line with the EU Framework on Roma, the action will focus on recognition of anti-gypsyism, a specific form of racism directed towards Roma, and supporting institutions with the aim to monitor and combat discrimination against Roma. Furthermore, the action will also address negative narratives regarding the Roma community and the policies aimed at Roma equality, inclusion and participation, and it will encourage the governments to employ Roma as public servants, work with the general public on reducing anti-Roma sentiments and ethnic distance. The third phase of the action will continue to promote addressing the challenges of Roma in mainstream policies, while effectively addressing the lack of equality of opportunities and results of such mainstream policies. For many Roma at risk of statelessness the action will provide actual access to civil registration and civil documents, enabling them access to basic human rights.	Reduced discrimination experience among Roma; Eliminated statelessness among Roma in the region.	Governments, civil society and international organisations	2023-2027
2.3.6.2	Improving socio-economic inclusion of Roma	Concerning the socio-economic inclusion of Roma, the action will focus on improving the situation of Roma in the areas of housing through direct support for legalisation of dwellings, influencing housing policies and mobilising funding in order to improve housing conditions among Roma in the region. In employment the action will provide support in policy development and implementation, focusing on transforming informal work among Roma. It will also support employment initiatives through innovative measures such as social entrepreneurship, and digitalisation and green transition of businesses. Other socio-economic priorities may also be tackled through the action as secondary priorities.	Increased rate of dwellings owned by Roma; Increased employment rate among Roma.	Governments, civil society and international organisations	2023-2027
2.3.6.3	Complementing relevant regional and EU agendas	The action will contribute to the green (circular economy, waste management, depollution) and digital (combating online hate speech, access to	Roma issues incorporated into and their needs being tackled by mainstream agendas at regional and economy level.	Governments, civil society and	2023-2027

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>	<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
	digital education, digitalisation of businesses) agendas in the region, as well as IPA programming, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, and the Western Balkans Investment Framework, in order to ensure the needs of Roma are mainstreamed. The action is also contributing to the implementation of the EC anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 in the enlargement region.		international organisations	
2.3.6.4 Strengthening institutional capacities of the governments	The governments will be provided support in managing their Roma inclusion policies by building the capacities of the National Roma Contact Points (NRCPs), as well as other officials directly or indirectly encountering the issues of Roma, including law enforcement, judiciary, equality bodies, etc. The social dialogue on Roma equality, inclusion and participation will be maintained at economy and regional level. Particular focus will also be put on strengthening the monitoring process by promoting and supporting mechanisms for obtaining official statistics, as well as on budgeting, including absorption of donor funds.	Increased capacities of the governments in the region to work on equality, inclusion and participation of Roma.	Governments, civil society and international organisations	2023-2027
2.3.6.5 Providing support to National Roma Contact Points	The National Roma Contact Points and other relevant officials will receive tailor-made capacity building on various topics that may include policy formulation assistance, responding to crisis situations or Roma responsive budgeting. As specific support, the governments will receive expertise in drafting methodologies and piloting specific Roma surveys, analyse census data on Roma, report annually on the implementation of Roma inclusion policies and plan budget for Roma inclusion that goes beyond targeted funds from the public budget. RCC will continue to partner with NRCPs to organise wide domestic dialogue with all relevant stakeholders in the form of National Platforms. It will also continue to support coordination of Roma integration process at regional level through Ministerial Meetings on the	Increased capacities of National Roma Contact Points for public policy governing, reading and responding to the context and mainstreaming Roma issues; Regional decisions regarding Roma issues are taken to set up standards for Roma equality, inclusion and participation.	Governments, civil society and international organisations	2023-2027

Area of intervention / Actions					
Area of intervention / Actions	Description of actions	Expected results	Partners	Timeframe	
	Poznan Declaration and Roma Integration Task Force meetings.				
2.4 Green Agenda					
2.4.1	Establish structures for the implementation of the GAWB				
2.4.1.1	Establishment of fully functional governing structures for the implementation of GAWB	Governing structures (both on the political and technical levels), to include the RWG ENV in extended format and the Regional Biodiversity Taskforce accompanied with the work of existing and newly established platforms and mechanism for effective participation in the policy debate of civil society, local communities, businesses, donors and other development partners, and vulnerable groups such as youth.	Regular meeting(s) of the Regional Working Group on Environment (extended format) organised; Regional annual ministerial policy dialogue on GAWB organised (extended format); Regular Sherpa meetings organised to discuss the key strategic issues related to GAWB; Regular meetings of the SEE Biodiversity Task Force organised; Organised annual CSO Forum to include youth and Roma representatives; Local Self Governments' Summit organised annually; Adequate participation of business community in the inclusive governance process, ensured building on the existing initiatives.	RCC experts, participating governments, EC, relevant, regional bodies and organisation, civil society, local governments, business community, development partners including IFIs	2023-2025
2.4.2	Enhance capacities, provide analytical underpinning				
2.4.2.1	Enhancement of institutional capacities to implement GAWB, accompanied with technical assistance and analytical work and awareness rising activities to support the implementation	Enhancement of institutional capacities at level of WB economies to implement GAWB, accompanied with the technical assistance and analytical work conducted to support evidence-based decision-making related to the GAWB implementation. Awareness raised among key stakeholders about opportunities and challenges related to green transition of the region.	Organised study tours, online trainings, and on-demand technical assistance support.	RCC experts, participating governments, EC, relevant, regional bodies and organisation, civil society, local governments, business	2023-2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
				community, development partners including IFIs	
2.4.3	Functional monitoring and reporting mechanisms				
2.4.3.1	Establishment of fully functional monitoring and reporting mechanisms	Establishment of fully functional monitoring and reporting mechanisms for regular tracking of implementation progress, timely identification of challenges, and design of corrective actions to adjust to evolving environment. First revision of the Action Plan should take place in 2024. Also, monitoring and reporting mechanisms will serve as platform for knowledge sharing and awareness raising about the GAWB among key constituencies.	Developed regular monitoring mechanism; annual monitoring reports produced for 2023 and 2024; GAWB Observatory developed and maintained; Green Agenda Report on Implementation (GARI) produced on an annual basis (2023, 2024); Conducted revision of the GAWB Action Plan in 2024.	RCC experts, participating governments, EC, relevant, regional bodies and organisation, civil society, local governments, business community, development partners including IFIs	2023-2025

<i>Area of intervention / Actions</i>		<i>Description of actions</i>	<i>Expected results</i>	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
2.5. Political and Security Cooperation					
2.5.1	Political cooperation				
2.5.1.1	Support to inter-governmental cooperation in established frameworks of RCC and SEECP	Fulfilment of RCC statutory obligations, namely responsibilities to RCC structures – RCC Board, Annual meeting – and operational support to SEECP and SEECP CiO	Regional cooperative frameworks maintained and strengthened	RCC Board Participants	2023-2025
2.5.1.2	Coordination with region's partners	Regular consultations and exchanges with region's EU and Euro-Atlantic partners and relevant initiatives, forums and organisations	Efficient, focused and targeted approach to the region maintained by all partners	EU, EU MS, USA, regional and international initiatives/orga	2023-2025

			nisations/forums relevant for or engaged with the region		
2.5.1.3	Parliamentary Cooperation	Supporting forums of parliamentary cooperation in SEE, including SEECF PA and COSAP	Enhanced awareness and engagement of parliaments in SEE in the regional cooperation process	SEE National Assemblies	2023-2025
2.5.1.4	Diplomatic Forum	Annual forum gathering diplomats from SEE to discuss current and incoming regional challenges from diplomacy and international affairs perspective	Strengthened diplomatic links and networks among SEE diplomatic corps	SEECF MFAs	2023-2025
2.5.2	Security				
2.5.2.1	Continued support to existing SEE level specialised security cooperation formats	Organise and facilitate regular regional events through established security platforms to discuss the current and new security challenges of the region	Security cooperation mechanisms strengthened and improved in a meaningful way would underpin the unique position of the RCC as the regional organisation; peer-to-peer learning and best practice; capacity building; enhancing data sharing efforts.	SEENSA, SEEMIC	2023-2025
2.5.2.2	Continued support to the coordination of security cooperation initiatives and platforms operating under the RCC umbrella	Continuation of streamlining regional security activities and initiatives for most efficient implementation of regional priorities in the field of security; political guidance and support to IISG and further streamlining toward greater coherence of security portfolio in the Western Balkans; continued support to the SEESAC; continuation of further investment in the development and organisation of future annual Regional Jumbo Security Conferences; support for development of topical surveys and analyses concentrating on areas of regional security-related importance (organised crime, border/boundary security, terrorism, online radicalisation, SALW, Illegal migration, disaster preparedness and prevention, hybrid threats - disinformation, corruption, and domestic violence).	Strengthened cooperation with international and regional practitioners and organisations with a security mandate. Improving awareness-raising and outreach, capacity-building and accumulation, and better exchange of knowledge. Enhanced and strengthened security cooperation in the region; Vigilance, flexibility and cooperation with regional partners is a sine-qua-non for a stable and prosperous region, and consequently for the financial survival and viability of each of the SEE economies. Measured public security perceptions trends that will help shape a coherent regional and domestic action; increasing synergies.	EU, IISG, DPPI, MAARI, UNDP SEESAC, NATO, IOM, RAI, governments of the SEE economies, Italy, France, SEE Academia, regional NGOs, international organisations and partners	2023-2025
2.5.2.3	Contributing to countering disinformation in coordination with relevant partners	Upgrading the Disinformation Conference to make the RCC a meaningful hub for regional dialogue and action in this field	Conducted peer-to-peer learning and best practice; developed and strengthened awareness and responses regarding the	EU, Hybrid CoE Helsinki, OBCT Trento, EEAS, regional	2023-2025

			reduction of hybrid threats in the form of disinformation.	NGOs, civil society, international organisations, WB Regulatory agencies for telecommunications, Universities	
2.5.3	Rule of Law and Good Governance				
2.5.3.1	Support regional cooperation and capacity building among judiciaries, judges, prosecutors and other legal professionals in EU law by facilitating and supporting networking and lifelong learning of judges, prosecutors and legal professionals	Facilitation of networking will contribute to the enhancement of regional policy dialogue in the area of justice and the increase of institutional cooperation.	Enhanced regional and intra-regional judicial cooperation; Enhanced competence of jurisdictions in EU law implementation.	Ministries of Justice, Judicial Training Institutes	2023-2025
2.5.3.2	Promotion of alternative dispute resolution by facilitating networking, peer support and institutional building of associations of mediators and judges. In parallel, implement regional awareness raising activities to promote alternative dispute resolution to the wider public	Raise awareness among legal and business communities but also the general public in order to increase the use of mediation and contribute to development of a culture of dialogue and mutual appreciation in our societies.	Increased and better use of ADR. Raised awareness on the importance and benefits of ADR as cost-effective dispute settlement mechanisms.	SEE Associations of Mediators, Ministries of Justice, Judicial Training Institutes	2023-2025
2.5.3.3	Contribute to reducing the backlog of cases and improved access to justice through increased use of ADR	Continue working with the Associations of Mediators, Ministries of Justice and all other regional stakeholders to promote and encourage the use of alternative dispute resolution with a view to strengthen mediation as a tool for extrajudicial dispute resolution. Better support a strengthened regional cooperation between mediation associations but also with the justice systems, decision-makers, business community, academia and other relevant actors in order to contribute to promoting the amicable settlement of disputes by encouraging the use of mediation and by ensuring a balanced relationship between mediation and judicial proceedings.	Eased backlog of cases and better access to justice because of increased use of mediation as faster and cost-effective extrajudicial dispute settlement.	SEE Associations of Mediators, Ministries of Justice, Judicial Training Institutes	2023-2025

2.5.3.4	Improvement and modernisation of judicial intra-regional cooperation. The activities will aim to support digital judicial exchanges at the regional level and facilitate exchange of experiences related to the introduction of new legislation or e-Justice tools in the region	Assist the jurisdictions to better assess their level of digital progress, identify the deficiencies in the legislation and infrastructure that need to be addressed in order to implement e-justice solutions and ultimately undertake concrete steps towards introduction of new legislation and e-Justice tools by making sure that access to justice is also ensured.	Modernisation and digitalisation of justice services. Facilitated intra-regional judicial cooperation.	Ministries of Justice	2023-2025
2.6. Regional Coordination					
2.6.1	Monitoring and Reporting				
2.6.1.1	Monitoring of implementation of SWP 2023-2025 and its constituent parts (including CRM, SEE 2030 and GAWB)	Support the monitoring process with quantitative and qualitative data collection, including through Balkan Barometer editions and cooperation with statistical offices of the region's economies. Producing regular reports on the implementation of RCC activities (Annual Report of SG, CRM Report on Implementation, Report for RCC Board, etc.)	The track of implementation progress along RCC main intervention areas kept up to date; Maintained better understanding of the region's sentiments in public and business circles on the important topics for the Western Balkans and South East Europe/	National administrations, statistical offices, external consultants, regional partners	2023-2025
2.6.2	Donor Coordination				
2.6.2.1	Annual donor coordination meeting	Organise annual donor coordination meeting on topics of CRM and GAWB with an objective to inform the wider community on ongoing and future initiatives planned in the field as well as to have the priorities of governments and donor community aligned so as to enable a more efficient coordination between all stakeholders involved.	Maintained regular dialogue on regional initiatives; Avoided duplication of efforts on behalf of regional and international partners on the key regional projects and agendas; Donor community informed on the needs of public and private sector.	Donor community active in the region, international financial institutions, regional and international partners, private sector, European Commission	2023-2025
2.6.3	Partnerships				
2.6.3.1	Strengthening and extending partnerships with wider community	Extending the network of regional and international partners in a view of promoting the benefits of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and South East Europe	Wider outreach to citizens and businesses achieved in other than governmental sectors; A structured communication established with a diverse set of actors that are	Non-governmental organisations, local authorities, academic, civil	2023-2025

		directly involved in the implementation of regional initiatives.	society organisations	
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