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Foreword.....	3
Summary.....	4
General Trends in Regional Cooperation.....	9
Developments in Priority Areas of Regional Cooperation in SEE and the Role of the RCC.....	12
A Support to the Implementation of Regional Programmes.....	13
A.1 South East Europe 2030 Strategy.....	13
A.2 The Western Balkan Common Regional Market (CRM).....	15
A.3 Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.....	23
A.4 Projects.....	25
B Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security.....	31
B.1 Political Cooperation.....	31
B.2 Parliamentary Cooperation.....	31
B.3 Good Governance.....	32
B.4 Security.....	33
C Horizontal Activities.....	34
C.1 Programming, Monitoring, Coordination.....	34
C.2 Extending Partnerships.....	35
C.3 Communications.....	36
Abbreviations.....	38

## Foreword

If the Covid-19 pandemic altered the way we go about our daily lives and work, the new crisis on the repertoire this year – the rapidly developing war in Ukraine – altered the way we look at the present and the future of Europe. Peace, stability and security are no longer granted. With the war posing a serious threat to global security arrangements, we stand together on the bulwark of our shared values and thus trace the path forward.

It is yet unclear what the economic impact of the war will be on the economies of the South East Europe. For now, citizens are witnessing an inflation of food and energy prices, affecting the most vulnerable: the unemployed, youth, women and the disadvantaged. Poverty and inequality are likely to rise, and with it the fall of social resilience to crime, destabilisation and harmful narratives.

Change may happen overnight; but transformation takes time. It requires careful assessment of the state of play, needs and the potential. Most of all, it requires staunch, unwavering commitment and determination to address the systemic threats to the post-pandemic recovery.

The region has set its forward-looking goals with the South East Europe 2030 Strategy (SEE 2030), endorsed by the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECPP) Summit in July 2021 under Ankara's Chairmanship in Office (CiO). Sustainable development encapsulated by SEE 2030 has the potential to foster prosperity, stability and progress of the region. Improving the quality of life, dispersing risks, sharing responsibility and turning our interconnectedness into an advantage are the cloth of the sails with which the region will weather the current and future crises.

In the preceding year, regional cooperation often encountered hurdles that slowed down or stalled the delivery of important new achievements. It is time to reaffirm our pledges.

We saw the power of Europe coming together as the events in Ukraine unravelled. As a region, we can display the same power each time we choose to cooperate, not despite our differences, but because what brings us together is more important than what separates us. At least this is what over two thirds of the region's citizens think; and 77% trust that regional cooperation can improve the state of their economies in political, economic, and security senses.

The Common Regional Market (CRM) has entered its second year of implementation with tangible results in some areas, and delays in others. A few years still lay ahead to unleash the full potential of the Action Plan. It is particularly important to take daring steps in that direction and counter the negative effects of exogenous shocks the region has been experiencing.

In this, the region is supported by incredible human capital. Over the past year, the RCC has undertaken initiatives that showcased the amazing capacities of women and men of the region: women and digital entrepreneurs, innovators, start-ups, youth and Roma were able to display their ideas and successes through a number of fora, such as Balkathon, Butterfly Innovation

Award, Women Entrepreneurs of the Year, Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship, Youth Policy Labs, and others.

The SEE 2030 Strategy, Common Regional Market and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans promise to offer these bright and productive minds an opportunity to make their invaluable contributions in the region, and decelerate the trend in which well over half of the population aged 18 to 34 would consider living and working abroad – or, at least, support their eventual return.

The Green Agenda is a great challenge, but it is an urgent one with great profit returns, in material and immaterial senses alike. The six economies of the Western Balkans are still polluting over six times the value of EU pollution limits. As the war in Ukraine continues to cause huge disruptions to the energy markets in Europe, the only strategic and sustainable decision in this regard should be to accelerate the energy transition away from fossil fuels, thereby building an increased and sustainable energy security.

In preparing the next triennial Strategy and Work Programme of the RCC, covering the years 2023 to 2025, we are taking great care to incorporate all of these agendas in a coherent and comprehensive manner, making sure our efforts are complementary, not overlapping.

As a region, we share risks: be it natural disasters, security threats, pandemics, or geopolitical shifts. The benefit of our progress is likewise collective. The EU, its Member States, our transatlantic partners, and others support in this endeavour; and, of course, through everything, the RCC has been and will continue to be the region's voice, facilitator, and friend.

## Summary

The preceding year may best be described as one of ups and downs: from the endorsement of the SEE 2030 Strategy at the Antalya SEECP Summit under Ankara's Chairmanship and the launch of the *Roam Like at Home* regime in the Western Balkans on 1 July 2021, to the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine as of 24 February 2022.

As the region cautiously eased Covid-19 related measures by autumn 2021, the World Bank's *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report* in the spring of 2022 was able to announce some good news, with the 2021 GDP rebound of the region's economies exceeding even the optimistic expectations and reaching 7.4 percent.<sup>1</sup> Yet, with the escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine, the growth rate projection is again turning downward, and the inflationary pressures are likely to have a negative effect on the improving poverty numbers.

If looking for the evidence of benefits of regional cooperation in times of crisis, one needs to look no further than the fact that, by mid-April 2022, 2 million trucks have utilised the *Green Lanes* initiated in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic to ease the cross-border/boundary transfer of goods.

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank. 2021. *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, No. 19, Spring 2021: Subdued Recovery*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35509>

A great boost to the regional cooperation in the South East Europe last year came with the endorsement of the SEE 2030 Strategy and the beginning of its implementation, with the first meeting of the SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee in November 2021. The Antalya Summit reconfirmed the importance of South East Europe working together on the many matters of common interest, with SEECP retaining its position as the unique regional forum for dialogue, exchange, and a shared vision.

Ankara and Athens, as the consecutive Chairmanships in Office in 2021 and 2022, provided staunch support to this regional cooperation process and established excellent synergy with the RCC in the joint effort toward enhancing regional cooperation, prosperity, security and stability.

The region also took some steps forward in terms of regional relations and EU integration in the reporting period, including the agreed use of the short name of North Macedonia between Skopje and Sofia, and the opening of a new cluster in the accession negotiations between Belgrade and Brussels. On the other hand, North Macedonia and Albania await their first intergovernmental conferences to begin the accession negotiations after the Council of the EU approved the negotiating frameworks, and Kosovo\* the visa liberalisation, as recommended by the European Commission.

The region continues to receive political and financial support from the EU and its Member States, as reflected in the *Brdo Declaration* at the *EU-Western Balkans Summit* (Brdo Summit) under the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU, and in the adoption of the legal framework for the implementation of IPA III. The latter brought the total financial envelope for the implementation of the *Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans* (EIP) worth up to 1.1 billion EUR.

It was also during the last year that the *Action Plan of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans* (GAWB) was agreed, under the RCC's facilitation, at the Brdo Summit in October 2021. Following this, the RCC has begun to build up a strong support network to GAWB implementation efforts and provide analytical underpinnings. Overall, the RCC holds a prominent role across a number of *Brdo Declaration* commitments, and has coordinated closely with the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU in the preparation of this event.

Implementation of the Common Regional Market remained a priority to establish a single market among the six economies of the Western Balkans in line with the EU standards, preparing the economies for accession to the EU, and as a crucial link in the post-pandemic recovery. Participants reaffirmed this and reinforced commitments both at the Brdo Summit and at the *EU-Western Balkans Berlin Process Summit* in July 2021, under the German Chairmanship of the Berlin Process.

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\* 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

The greatest achievement of regional cooperation in the preceding period and a tangible result to the benefit of the citizens has been the inauguration of the Roam Like at Home regime on 1 July 2021. In only three months after it entered into force, the roaming traffic in the region grew significantly, with an increase of total roaming traffic up to 440%, the data usage increasing from 370% to 520%, and number of roaming users by up to 30%. Since then, work has been underway to support reduction of roaming prices between the region and the EU.

In the pillar pertaining to the creation of a *Regional Investment Area*, efforts have been directed at actions which will lead to greater investment attractiveness of the region. The launch of the *Regional Investment Incentive Database* over the last year constituted a good step in that direction by providing investors with greater transparency and predictability.

The region has also been undertaking efforts to free the movement of capital and set the foundations for this by endorsing the framework for the development of modern payment systems. Delivering on this process will cut the costs of payments within the region and between the region and the EU, enhance operability and ease the transit into the *Single Euro Payment Area*.

To support *Industrial Development*, the region worked on developing a *Regional Supplier Development Programme*, by mapping suppliers and investors across different private sectors. Moreover, the RCC initiated regional dialogue in the field of creative industries, and began work on the implementation of the *Tirana Declaration on Sustainable Tourism*.

The region reached the highest level of agreement on the technical aspects of negotiations on the *Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects* and on the *Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications*, as part of the free movement of people agenda. However, open political questions have not resulted in the signing of these documents yet. In the meantime, the region initiated the work on developing the *Regional Quality Assurance Action Plan* and a *Roadmap to Harmonisation of VET Qualifications*.

In an effort to facilitate and promote the regional innovation ecosystem, the RCC introduced the *Western Balkans Innovation and Research Platform*, supporting synergy and streamlining among the key innovation and research stakeholders. Moreover, *Research Infrastructure Roadmaps* for each economy as well as a *Western Balkans Research and Innovation Roadmap* are now in place. The former will contribute to maximising the access to and effective use of research infrastructures, whereas the latter will enhance the cooperation between academia and businesses and encourage commercialisation of knowledge.

As part of the *Regional Diaspora Knowledge Transfer Initiative*, the region saw its first *Regional Diaspora Forum*, a link in the overall effort to identify and mobilise diaspora knowledge, skills and networks to make a valuable contribution to their home region.

Additionally, two new regional innovation initiatives came to life over the past year: the *Butterfly Innovation & Business Forum* and the *Butterfly Innovation Award*, as exercises in visibility, networking and empowerment of new start-ups and early-stage innovation teams.

Under the digital agenda, building upon the *Regional Roaming Agreement* and the *Roam Like at Home*, the *Roadmap for Lowering Roaming Charges* between the region and the EU was agreed in September through a structured consultation process with mobile operators. The finalisation of the Roadmap, which was welcomed by Brdo Summit, provides a sound framework for lowering roaming charges with the EU that will see us nearing the domestic prices in 2027.

The 4<sup>th</sup> *Western Balkans Digital Summit* that took place in Podgorica in October 2021 affirmed the commitment of participants to the Joint Statements on the free flow of data and interoperability in the region. Both of these topics are being discussed by the region through relevant working groups and are supported by studies commissioned by the RCC.

The preceding period also saw the second edition of Balkathon, the regional competition on digital solutions. This year, Balkathon attracted 90 applicants from across the region. In addition to preparing for its third edition, the RCC is also focusing its work in the digital agenda on preparing a digital skills and competence needs assessment (beginning with public administrations at central and local levels), and a *Digital Economy Society Index for the Western Balkans*, tracking the level of regional digital transformation.

Within the *Women's Economic Empowerment* agenda, a study published by the RCC revealed that a rapid action toward labour sector gender equalities could lead to 1.5% GDP per capita increase by 2035, and introduced a composite *Women's Empowerment Index* for the region for the first time.

Taking into consideration the immense economic potential of women, the RCC facilitated the establishment of a *Regional Network of Women Entrepreneurs* for the first time, as a joint voice to strengthen their partnership and share experiences. A call was also made to nominate the *Women Entrepreneurs of the Year* across six categories which will bring mentorship programmes and capacity building to winners. Finally, a *Network of Women in STEM* was established by the RCC and the UNDP, and is now awaiting the finalisation of its Council's governing bodies.

Youth is another social category severely underutilised by the region. Through the Western Balkans Youth Lab (WBYL) project, over the last year the RCC supported greater youth involvement in decision-making processes, marking the mid-term of the implementation of the *Youth Policy Lab on Unemployment*, and the launch of the second *Youth Policy Lab on Mental Health*. The project also supported the inclusion of youth in important regional and international events, and a mobility scheme with the National Youth Council of Slovenia to exchange experiences and best EU practices.

In addition to WBYL, in supporting the role of youth in the regional agenda, the RCC partnered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy and other partners, including RYCO, to organise the *EU-Balkan Youth Forum* in November 2021– an initiative to bring together EU and region's youth and provide recommendations for the future of Europe. Moreover, the RCC Secretary General visited a number of Universities in South East Europe and beyond to discuss

the role of SEECP, RCC and regional cooperation in the regional and European contexts with students.

In order to support socio-economic integration of the Roma population, the RCC's Roma Integration Action continued to work towards advanced management of the official Roma policies in line with the EU commitments, as well as on the enhanced implementation of the 2019 *Poznan Declaration*, particularly in the areas of housing mapping and legalisation, transformation of undeclared work and civil registration.

In the meantime, the Employment and Social Affairs platform has been hard at work to assist the region in addressing undeclared work through regional exchanges of good practices and peer-learning. Moreover, the project prepared a number of online tools and materials to increase knowledge and raise awareness on youth unemployment, Youth Guarantee, women and work, and economies' performance relative to the European Pillar of Social Rights headlines and indicators. In addition, the *ESAP Employment Observatory* is being continuously updated and provides the most current data on labour market trends. Finally, ESAP has been a great contribution to strengthening institutional capacities of Public Employment Services with its tailor-made, demand-driven technical assistance mechanisms.

Since the success of implementation of the socio-economic agendas hinges on strong foundations of political commitment, security and good governance, the RCC has continued to provide the necessary and needed impetus. As the operational arm of SEECP, in particular, it aligned with and supported the consecutive SEECP CiOs in the implementation of their work programmes and activities, including the joint organisation of *Junior Diplomats Forum* under the Athens Chairmanship in Office, and the support to the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly.

Regional policy dialogue in the area of justice has continued through the regular exchange of RCC-led networks, namely the *Working Group on Justice*, *SEE Judicial Training Institutes* and *SEE Association of Mediators Networks*.

In the field of security, the RCC has been vigilant and proactive. It undertook initiatives such as the first-time-ever public regional survey on public opinion on security issues – [\*SecuriMeter\*](#), organising an expert discussion in the wake of the transfer of power in Afghanistan, co-organising a high-level event within the framework of the *Munich Security Conference* and addressing the challenge of disinformation during the pandemic at its second edition of the *Disinformation Conference*. The successful 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the flagship *Annual Regional Security Coordination (Jumbo) Conference*, co-organised with French partners in Paris, reconfirmed the position of the RCC as the hub of security coordination and streamlining.

In the meantime, under the RCC umbrella, the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) conducted relevant activities to ensure coherency of Western Balkan efforts to combat security threats such as terrorism and violent extremism, organised crime and border/boundary security. Over the preceding period, the IISG increased its membership and strengthened the governance structure, developed its Database and the biennial needs and annual response mapping reports.

The implementation of all regional agendas is being thoroughly monitored by appropriate mechanisms, the SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee, Common Regional Market Component Contact Points, Sherpas' meetings and the [Balkan Barometer](#) public and business opinion survey. The 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the 2022 *Balkan Barometer* will be presented in June this year.

The experience with these and previous regional programmes, as well as the new global developments and in-depth assessment of the state of play, will feed into the new *Strategy and Work Programme 2023-2025*, providing a holistic and comprehensive strategic orientation for the next three years.

Political will and commitment remain the most important elements determining the success of the agendas and the meeting of deliverables. To sustain the focus and engagement of the participants from the region and the region's partners, the RCC Secretary General held regular consultations, exchanges and good-faith communication, while the fulfilment of RCC statutory obligations guaranteed each RCC Board participant an equal seat and treatment, thus creating a participatory, cooperative forum.

## General Trends in Regional Cooperation

The easing of the pandemic and the pandemic-related measures in the summer of 2021 offered hope that the region may begin its gradual recovery. The EBRD increased its estimates for the GDP growth of thirteen South East Europe economies in 2021 by nearly 2% between June and November 2021.<sup>2</sup> By the third quarter of the year, ESAP Observatory recorded a fall in unemployment rates across the Western Balkans.

However, the world and the region faced yet another crisis, the full impact of which is still uncertain: the war in Ukraine since February 2022. In light of this, the latest EBRD *Regional Economic Update* reversed its previous estimates and now predicts that GDP growth in 2022 will be 1.17% lesser than previously projected.<sup>3</sup> The report itself notes the high level of uncertainty as the global developments unravel.

One of the immediate effects has been the inflation of energy and food prices, with the latter increasing by some 11.4% across the Western Balkans – a trend which is likely to continue and which might negatively affect previous improvements in the poverty level.

The pandemic and now the war in Ukraine have exposed the socio-economic challenges and vulnerabilities of, and related opportunities for, South East Europe. As the assessment of the state of play in the region during the preparation of the SEE 2030 Strategy has shown, economies of South East Europe have ample space to enhance intra-regional trade, improve

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<sup>2</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. 2021. *Regional Economic Prospects in the EBRD Regions: Bittersweet recovery*. <https://www.ebrd.com/documents/comms-and-bis/regional-economic-forecasts-november-2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. 2022. *Regional Economic Update for the EBRD Regions: In the Shadow of the War – The Economic Fallout From the War on Ukraine*. <https://www.ebrd.com/documents/comms-and-bis/rep-ukraine-war-310322.pdf>

the inclusivity, access to and quality of health and education, and strengthen risk sharing and cooperation in disaster prevention and management.

These are constitutive elements of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, ingrained also in the strategic priorities of the EU. Transforming challenges into opportunities would mean a deceleration of depopulation for South East Europe – the average rate of which is estimated at 6.7 per thousand in the next 80 years<sup>4</sup> – and stronger overall resilience and sustainability. To a great extent, the process requires full commitment to green and digital transitions.

Due to geographical proximity, green transition of each South East Europe economy is in the highest interest of all its neighbours, as air pollution affects societies far beyond those where the pollution occurs. In addition to the tragedy of preventable deaths, a report by CEE Bankwatch Network, looking at the Western Balkans, estimated that the health costs caused by coal power plant emissions amounted to between 25.3 billion to 51.8 billion EUR over a three-year period (2018-2020).<sup>5</sup>

The SEE 2030 Strategy is a call for action to the region to advance and accelerate its efforts to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals, thus contributing to prosperity and positive long-term stability. It is a unique regional approach when it comes to the UN SDG implementation, and as such has the potential to lead by example in regions across the world.

The endorsement of the SEE 2030 Strategy was therefore a watershed moment in regional cooperation in the South East Europe. With the mandate given to it by the SEECP to facilitate and oversee the process, the RCC began with the implementation of the Strategy with the creation of the SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee, which ensures that the Strategy is a fully region-owned and region-led process. Now, the programming cycle begins, allowing for regular assessments and adjustments as per the developments and needs of the region.

The SEE 2030 Strategy will furthermore contribute to strengthening the SEECP as the key regional forum of cooperation. At the Antalya Summit, the SEECP marked its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Noting the achievements of this forum over the preceding two and a half decades, the participants recognised the need for further growth, including by utilising the synergy between SEECP and RCC, as well as finding the most appropriate modalities of strengthening the role of the RCC.

Moreover, the Antalya Summit reconfirmed the commitment to the Euro-Atlantic integration of SEECP participants and called on the EU to reinforce the enlargement process. In the past year, Belgrade opened a new cluster in the accession negotiations, but otherwise, the slow pace of the process has undermined the optimism of respondents in the *Balkan Barometer* regarding

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<sup>4</sup> UN Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2019. *2019 Revision: World Population Prospects*. <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

<sup>5</sup> CEE Bankwatch Network. 2021. *Comply or Close: How Western Balkan coal plants breach air pollution laws and cause deaths and what governments must do about it*. <https://www.complyorclose.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/En-COMPLY-OR-CLOSE-web.pdf>

the time of their economies' accession to the EU. Over a quarter of them no longer believe it will ever happen.

The consecutive Presidencies of the Council of the EU in 2021/2022, by Slovenia and France respectively, have shown commitment to support and advance the EU perspective of the Western Balkans. The *Brdo Declaration* of the *EU-Western Balkans Summit* in October under the Slovenian Presidency reaffirmed this fact, highlighting the advantages of a close and effective partnership – which provided 2.9 million vaccines by the EU and EU Member States to the region's economies in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic – and agreeing to enhance the market integration of the region with the EU Single Market.

The Brdo Summit also saw the launch of the *Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans* – agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth and sport, which complements the CRM's *Regional Innovation Area*. It is also in line with the issues related to the state of youth in the region, which is twice as likely to be unemployed compared to their EU peers. Even more concerning is the fact that a quarter of 15-24-year-olds are neither in employment, nor in education or training.<sup>6</sup> These are all contributing factors to the large scale of brain drain – latest estimates suggest that the region had a net emigration of between 623,500 and 738,500 in 2012-2019.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the brain drain may cost as much as 3% of the economies' GDP as a foregone loss of investment.<sup>8</sup>

Another aspect emphasized by the Brdo Declaration was the importance of standing together in foreign policy positions. All SEE participants voted in favour of the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In another positive show of mutual support and action, the European Council confirmed that the Western Balkan economies will be able to partake in the common purchasing platform of gas, liquefied natural gas and hydrogen.

The Covid-19 pandemic, the developments in Afghanistan and the armed conflict on European soil all served as a reminder that security and stability constitute the foundations for any indication of sustainable development and progress. According to the latest figures collected through the RCC's public opinion survey on security issues, *SecuriMeter*, on average 57% of Western Balkan respondents consider their economy a safe place to live – but this figure goes as low as 38% when comparing answers in individual economies. Economic crises, poverty and social exclusion still top the security concerns (66%). 74% believe that disinformation is a security threat to their economy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Regional Cooperation Council. 2021. *Report: Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans*. <https://www.rcc.int/docs/573/study-on-youth-employment-in-the-western-balkans>

<sup>7</sup> The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies. 2021. *Net Migration and its Skill Composition in the Western Balkan Countries between 2010 and 2019: Results from a Cohort Approach*. <https://wiiw.ac.at/net-migration-and-its-skill-composition-in-the-western-balkan-countries-between-2010-and-2019-results-from-a-cohort-approach-dlp-5682.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Westminster Foundation for Democracy. 2020. *The Cost of Youth Emigration in Western Balkan Countries: Regional Overview*.

<sup>9</sup> Regional Cooperation Council. 2019. *SecuriMeter* <https://www.rcc.int/securimeter/>

At SEE level, vulnerability to natural disasters remains a particular concern, with as many as 80% of respondents considering it a serious security threat to their lives and material assets. The 2021 SEECP Summit likewise recognised this issue, calling on the region to boost the efforts of working together to ensure the coherency of SEECP participants' preparedness and prevention mechanisms, including potentially strengthening the synergy between the RCC and Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative (DPPI).

In facing the new challenges, the RCC is relying on the guidance and coordination of SEECP, the lessons learned in the recent crises and the complementarity of regional programmes that will comprise the substance of the new RCC Strategy and Work Programme (SWP) 2023-2025. The SWP will build upon the achievements in regional cooperation so far and address the gaps that require enhanced effort. As with each regional agenda, the success of the SWP will relate to the political will and commitment of participating economies, whereas the RCC remains fully devoted to facilitating the process to the utmost benefit of the South East Europe.

## Developments in Priority Areas of Regional Cooperation in SEE and the Role of the RCC

In view of supporting the region and its commitments to a comprehensive transformation, green and digital transitions, the RCC has been directing its focus to the implementation of the key regional agendas: the SEE 2030 Strategy, the Common Regional Market and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. It complemented these efforts by the implementation of projects supporting employment, youth, and Roma integration, as well as by the activities pertaining to political cooperation, rule of law, good governance and security, all in line with the RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2020-2022.

In the same period, the RCC began developing the Strategy and Work Programme 2023-2025. It has taken into consideration both the strengths and the lessons learned to shape ambitious and comprehensive triennial goals. Maintaining and strengthening commitment of the region and its partners and the complementarity and streamlining of regional actions will require consistent attention to support in order to reach the deliverables for the absolute gain of each participant and for the region as a whole.

In addition to the political commitment of regional participants, which is the first prerequisite for the successful delivery on desired results, the capacity of the RCC to assist and implement the process ensures sustainability and predictability of regional cooperation in the long term. In that light, recognised within the *2019 SEECP Declaration* and picked up on by the *SEECP Working Group* established under Ankara SEECP CiO, the RCC has continued the internal assessment during the reporting period and will seek the respective optimal modalities within the SEECP framework.

## A Support to the Implementation of Regional Programmes

### A.1 South East Europe 2030 Strategy

The pandemic and difficult recovery highlighted the fact that regional cooperation is the best tool for achieving results for collective benefit. The SEECP thus took a critical step forward by endorsing the South East Europe 2030 Strategy at the 2021 *SEECP Summit* in Antalya, which brings thirteen SEE economies together in their efforts to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the three dimensions: peace; prosperity; and peace and partnerships.

The strategy, as a regional call of action in line with the UN SDGs and Agenda 2030, aims at reaching sustainable economic growth through reducing poverty and inequality, empowering women, improving social inclusion, decelerating depopulation of the SEE region through enhancing quality of life of its citizens, and speeding up the green and digital transition, without widening socio-economic inequalities and disrupting competitiveness and private sector development, through a genuinely regionally owned political process.

The Strategy stipulates 78 different actions under thirteen priorities consolidated through three pillars, Prosperity, People, and Peace and Partnerships in the SEE.

Preparation of the Strategy followed a broadly consultative and bottom-up approach, taking into account contributions of the SEE private sector, civil society, academia and think tanks, as well as those of the SEECP participants, international and regional organisations, with which over fifty consultation meetings had been held. Contributions by the civil society representatives were gathered through two workshops organised in May 2021 in cooperation with TEPAV (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Türkiye) and ELIAMEP (Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy) from the former and current SEECP CiOs capitals, Ankara and Athens, respectively.

The first SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee meeting took place in November 2022 and adopted its rules of procedure, programming and monitoring guidelines of the SEE 2030. It furthermore mandated the RCC Secretariat to undertake actions per programming and monitoring cycles and to revitalise the dialogue with SEE think-tanks employed during the preparation stage.

The Monitoring Committee adopted the following as selection criteria for prioritising programming activities of the SEE 2030 Strategy:

- Relevance and policy integration
- Private sector orientation
- People-first focus
- Donor priority alignment
- Stakeholder engagement
- Long-term vision
- Policy coordination

In addition, project proposals, which take into account the aid effectiveness principles, and foresee the actions according to the instruments of assistance as listed by the Strategy, will be eligible for consideration.

In this regard, the Monitoring Committee mandated the RCC to prepare a project proposal template in line with these eligibility and selection criteria. The project proposal template was prepared by the RCC and disseminated to the SEECP Participants and other relevant regional and international stakeholders in January 2022.

Following the bilateral meetings with SEE donors, the RCC organised a regional roundtable meeting with six donor agencies of the SEE: those of Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Türkiye and Slovenia. Participants discussed the aid effectiveness and SDG responsiveness aid programmes, information exchange and consultation between SEE donor agencies, a short list of project proposals which could be financed by the SEE donors, and alternative financing mechanisms to support the implementation of SEE 2030.

On 6 and 7 April 2022, the RCC organised two side events on the margins of the UNECE *Regional Conference on Sustainable Development in Europe*. This was used as an opportunity to present the priorities of the SEE 2030 Strategy and their correlation to the work programmes of the SEECP CiO Troika – Ankara, Athens and Podgorica, as well as to discuss aid effectiveness and Official Development Assistance responsiveness to SDGs.

In addition to these meetings, the RCC discussed with the Secretariats of DPPI and Centre for Excellence in Financing (CEF) their expected roles in the programming cycle of SEE 2030, as well as establishing communication with data and programming officers of the UN Country Offices in SEE, OECD and World Bank.

According to the monitoring guidelines adopted by the SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee, the monitoring of SEE 2030 will include qualitative and quantitative monitoring. In terms of the quantitative monitoring, the RCC prepared a gap analysis regarding the availability and quality of data according to the list of indicators included in the SEE 2030. As for the qualitative monitoring, the RCC discussed with the OECD, UN, and the World Bank how they may contribute to the qualitative monitoring of the SEE 2030 through their reports on individual policy areas referring to various parts of the region. The RCC has also undertaken exploratory talks with OECD and World Bank to create a sub-regional group for South East Europe in their international databases.

Based on the mandate received from the SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee, the RCC re-activated the dialogue with partners from academia who had not been involved in the regional consultation workshops held in May, yet had concretely expressed interest in becoming involved in the SEE 2030 activities. Moreover, the RCC established contact with the UNSDSN Secretariat with an aim to organise a regional meeting with the regional networks of UNSDSN in SEE.

Furthermore, the RCC discussed a possible roadmap to regularise the dialogue with civil society in the context of SEE 2030 with a number of SEE think-tanks. The proposal of establishing a *Civil Society Dialogue* and *Think Tanks Dialogue* mechanism within the SEE (T4SEE) will be presented for the endorsement of the SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee at its second meeting scheduled for 7 June 2022.

As part of the regional dialogue mechanisms and particular activities regarding development financing, the RCC held a bilateral meeting with the Hellenic Banking Association to launch a

regional dialogue on development financing and an SDGs responsive financial sector mechanism with the participation of all SEECP banking associations.

Follow-up actions on the SEE 2030 Strategy will include the organisation of a *Donor Conference* for fund raising for the received project proposals. In addition, the *SEE Statistics Network* (SSN) will be established to monitor the implementation. The *Interim Annual Implementation Report* will be presented to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Monitoring Committee meeting which is to be submitted to the SEECP Summit upon endorsement by the SEECP Participants delegations.

## A.2 The Western Balkan Common Regional Market (CRM)

### A.2.1 Economic Competitiveness

Having in mind substantial collapse of FDIs as an immediate result of the pandemic crisis, joining forces of the region in the area of investment promotion and policy reforms was more important than ever. These efforts have been conducted within the implementation of the *Regional Investment Area* pillar of the CRM, whereby combining strength and competitive advantages would significantly increase the visibility and relevance of the region for foreign investors. In this regard, the economies agreed on three sectors for regional investment promotion – automotive, food processing and metal processing. These proposed sectors are also found under the *Regional Industrial Area* of the CRM, thus underlining complementarity and coherency of overall efforts.

As foreign investors continue to seek transparent and stable conditions for their investments, the region has initiated and successfully launched a regional investment incentive database with the support of regional investment promotion agencies. As the database enhances transparency and predictability of regional investment policies, it is expected to contribute to a higher inflow of investments and promotion of the region as a safe and transparent destination for business. Foreign investors are still seeking transparent and stable conditions when thinking about investing abroad.

As the region has concluded 214 investment treaties in total, making 7.6% of all such treaties concluded in the world<sup>10</sup>, there is a possibility that the region will be exposed to investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) claims in the near future. In order to ensure that regional governments are prepared to mitigate potential risks, the RCC supported a full-fledged assessment of the impact of Covid-19 related restrictive measures in this regard.

One of the main efforts of the *Free Movement of Capital* pillar of the CRM is the development of a modern payments system, designed to facilitate cost-efficient cross-border/boundary payments (including remittances) within the region and with the EU. The first step in the right direction has been the endorsement of the framework for development of modern payment systems through the *Working Group on Financial Markets*, with the objective of cutting the costs of regional payments and those with the EU, also focusing on interoperability and joining the *Single Euro Payment Area* (SEPA). Together with the World Bank Group, intensive

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<sup>10</sup> UNCTAD, Investment Dispute Settlement Navigator, available at [Investment Dispute Settlement Navigator | UNCTAD Investment Policy Hub](#)

bilateral consultations with the economies were conducted on all four pillars of the framework, including on interoperability, SEPA requirements, safety and security of payment systems and innovative product design. After the assessment of the pillars dedicated to interoperability and SEPA requirements, the region will be able to decide on the implementation modalities of the modern payment systems development.

Work on *Industrial Development* focused initially on the development of a *Regional Supplier Development Programme* (RSDP), with WB6CIF leading the private sector-related activities and RCC strengthening the regional dialogue between government institutions and the private sector. Within the RSDP agenda, mapping of suppliers was concluded for the automotive sector, agro-food, light manufacturing and circular economy (as a cross-cutting sector), as was the mapping of investors (potential partners) in order to gather information and develop tools and services that would enable establishment of linkages and partnerships. A mapping of these sectors can pave the way towards actions in key value chains of the *Regional Industrial Area* of CRM, such as green and circular economy, automotive and agro-food sectors.

Furthermore, the RCC initiated a regional dialogue towards the development of creative industries. To help these efforts, the RCC commissioned a study which analyses the policy environment, challenges and opportunities in the region and provides a detailed mapping of key stakeholders, initiatives, networks, clusters and events of creative industries and economy overviews of the region. The study will be made available during May 2022.

The *Sustainable Tourism* agenda of CRM built upon the respective *Tirana Declaration* and the Triple P Tourism Project. The Western Balkan Tourism policy partners<sup>11</sup> recognised the necessity to coordinate among the various tourism agendas in the region (both on the regional and individual-economy levels) in order to develop synergies, where possible, and avoid duplication of work.

An assessment of the current state of the tourism industry statistical data collection, conducted within the reporting period, proposed a system of definitions, concepts, classifications and indicators. The proposed system provides consistency and facilitates the link to other macroeconomic frameworks of the *Tourism Satellite Account* – a standard statistical framework and a widely used method of measuring the direct contributions of tourism to the local economy.

The weaknesses and strengths of the region's tourism industry were also assessed with regard to its compatibility with the OECD's *Green Innovation Strategy* and the *European Tourism Indicators System* (GCST and ETIS indicators). As a lead to recommending methodology and strategy to maximise the indicators systems' application efforts, this was the first development

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<sup>11</sup> CEFTA, GIZ, Increasing Market Employability Programme, OECD, Via Dinarica Alliance BiH/Greenenvision, USAID Developing Sustainable Tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cross-border Institution Building (CBIB) and World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC)

step, critical to the long-term benefits and successful implementation of sustainable tourism roadmaps adhering to GCST and ETIS.

#### A.2.1.1 Women's Economic Empowerment and Regional Network of Women in STEM

In the framework of the *Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Agenda*, the RCC published a comprehensive study on *Economic Benefits of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Western Balkan Six*<sup>12</sup> in April 2021, which demonstrated that rapid actions toward removing gender inequalities in the labour market could increase the region's GDP per capita by 1.5% by 2035. Additionally, the study introduced a composite *Women's Empowerment Index (WEI)* for the region and a set of recommendations across various domains. It is the first regional study on this issue, and as such represents a great contribution to women's economic empowerment in the region.

Strengthening cooperation with regional and international partners that operate in the same area is an important element of the RCC's WEE Agenda. In the framework of the Joint RCC-UNDP *Initiative for Action in WEE*<sup>13</sup>, a *Regional Roundtable*<sup>14</sup> on *Women's Economic Empowerment* was organised in December 2021. The Roundtable brought together renowned women leaders and entrepreneurs in the region to discuss further strengthening of partnerships, establishing a *Regional Network for Women Entrepreneurs* and sharing inspiring experiences between women in the region.

The RCC started the year of 2022 by recognising women entrepreneurs in the region and their efforts amidst different challenges. The *Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year 2021 Initiative*<sup>15</sup> aims to promote and recognise women entrepreneurs of the region with Recognition Rewards across six categories<sup>16</sup> (green entrepreneurship, creative entrepreneurship, travel and hospitality, minority groups, start-ups and young entrepreneurs). Women entrepreneurs representing a rich variety of backgrounds and business solutions received the Awards. Winners include: an innovative tourism company that promotes active holidays and sustainable tourism in the region; a company producing plant-based medicinal products; an IT training provider offering over 400 courses to businesses, governments, students and customers; a Solutions Delivery company, providing web and mobile solutions, particularly in the hospitality industry; a sewing business owner from the Roma community, showcasing a success story of supporting employment for vulnerable communities and integrating them into Business Incubators; and a company providing learning in electronics and computer engineering for kids aged 8+.

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<sup>12</sup> [Regional Cooperation Council | Economic Benefits of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in the Western Balkans Six \(rcc.int\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Regional Cooperation Council | Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans \(rcc.int\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.rcc.int/events/1472/women-economic-empowerment-wee-roundtable-building-a-sustainable-western-balkans-women-entrepreneurs-hub>

<sup>15</sup> [Regional Cooperation Council | Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year \(rcc.int\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Regional Cooperation Council | Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the year 2021 \(rcc.int\)](#)

The RCC organised the initiative back-to-back with the *Women Who Launch: Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship regional event*<sup>17</sup> where participants adopted the *Declaration on the Launch of the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship*<sup>18</sup>. The Regional Network will serve as a platform for joint actions between women entrepreneurs of the region, women who can influence decision making together, and women who can have a positive impact in the society. Through this Regional Network, joint actions will begin prioritising the upskilling of women and girls in the region; providing mentorship programmes; promoting the young people of the region; and responding to other needs of the women entrepreneurs in the region. In that light, the RCC has initiated a series of consultation meetings in each of the economies in order to consult with women entrepreneurs and leaders and support them at the grassroots.

In addition, the RCC continues to promote women entrepreneurs in the region through the WE Campaign, to be further enriched by the *Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year*. A mentorship programme will be offered during the course of 2022, enabling capacity building and networking among them and businesswomen networks of the region.

The RCC and the UNDP established the *Network of Women in STEM in the Western Balkans* in 2021. Its goal is to encourage the increased participation of girls and women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education and careers. The STEM Network's Council was created as the first step to introduce governing bodies, as were the founding documents.

#### *A.2.2 Free Movement of People*

Following the endorsement of the RCC and CEFTA's *Joint Paper on Way Forward to Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA)*, the region began negotiations on the *MRA of Professional Qualifications of Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects* and harmonised most of the complex technical aspects of the Agreement. Thus, the process was concluded at the technical level by October 2021. The implementation of this Agreement would transpose principal EU rules for recognition based on agreed minimum training requirements for the levels of qualifications, conditions for recognition and compensation measures. The Agreement applies to all categories of natural persons who are granted entry and temporary stay in accordance with the CEFTA Additional Protocol 6.

The Agreement covers three regulated professions, while the negotiations for the remaining four regulated professions – midwives, nurses, pharmacist and veterinary surgeons – planned for 2022, were postponed until the draft MRA is signed. Upon its signature, participants will have 18 months to prepare for its implementation.

The technical negotiations on the *Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications* taking place between March and July 2021 resulted in a successful conclusion

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<sup>17</sup> [Regional Cooperation Council | Western Balkans: RCC to present 'Women Who Launch – Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship'](#)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.rcc.int/docs/613/declaration-on-the-launch-of-the-regional-network-of-women-in-entrepreneurship>

of most of the aspects of the agreement, closing 17 out of 18 Articles. The initial disagreements on the Preamble were solved by a mandate to the RCC to provide a new version, which was presented and unanimously endorsed.

The Agreement rules for recognition of levels of qualifications, conditions for recognition, shortens the period of recognition to 14 days from existing period of several months, establishes joint standards and procedures for recognition of qualifications, and removes the existing fees for recognition. It also links the responsible recognition bodies through the *Western Balkans Regional Recognition Database*. 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 its implementation.

Moreover, the RCC undertook a regional mapping on access to the study, which will assist the region in preparations for initiating the process of negotiations for a regional *Agreement on Access to Study*.

In line with the meeting conclusions of the *Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications* in December 2021, work commenced on compiling the *Regional Quality Assurance Action Plan* to assist both the region and economies individually to meet the European Standards and Guidelines on quality assurance. Following the finalisation of the Technical Assistance on the state of play on VET in the region, a *Roadmap to harmonisation of VET qualifications* has been initiated. The RCC will furthermore explore the potential for establishment of a joint Master's degree in ICT, in line with the requirements of the region's economies.

The designated Working Group concluded the *Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards in the Western Balkans* at the technical level. Intensive political consultations are now underway in order to enable finalisation of the agreement in its entirety, by addressing the outstanding politically sensitive aspects and open the way for starting the internal approval procedures within each of the participating economies. Enactment of this Agreement would enable citizens to travel freely within the region by removing existing barriers, strengthen closer people-to-people relations and enhance cultural exchange.

The *Agreement on Freedom of Movement of Third-Party Citizens within the Western Balkans*, in accordance with the EU legislation and directives, would allow a validity of a single visa for all economies for residents of third countries, who normally require a visa to enter either one or the other of the six economies. In July, the participants of the Working Group requested the RCC to technically discuss and address outstanding technical issues with the relevant European Commission's services and to provide supporting legal expertise. External Expert hired by the RCC reviewed the draft agreement and the outstanding technicalities and, after consultations with DG HOME, provided an advanced technical draft agreement addressing the concerns raised. The Working Group is now discussing this advanced draft of the Agreement with the aim to finalise it at the technical level.

### A.2.3. Innovation and Research Platform

The region reached two major milestones in the field of research and innovation. Firstly, the endorsement of the *Western Balkan Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport* at the *EU-Western Balkans Summit* at Brdo; and secondly, the signing of the association agreements to the Horizon Europe, ninth *Framework Programme on Research and Innovation*, by all economies in the region. Researchers, innovators and businesses from the region now compete on equal terms with the EU Member States for the world's largest research and innovation programme worth €95.5 billion.

The RCC introduced the *Western Balkan Innovation and Research Platform* to encourage key innovation and research stakeholders to synchronise and coordinate their activities and avoid duplication of efforts. The RCC established close cooperation with the key European organisations focusing on innovation and research in the region: European Institute of Innovation and Technology (Knowledge and Innovation Communities - KICs), Enterprise Europe Network, Eureka Network and COST Association. These contacts allowed a smoother information exchange with the region's innovation partners such as research organisations, policy-makers, businesses and CSOs. To assist efforts aimed at facilitating and promoting the regional innovation ecosystem's developments, the RCC launched a separate website that will allow regional streamlining of innovation and research policy, resources and efforts.

Through the *Western Balkans Competitiveness and Innovation Accelerator*, the RCC provided assistance in the preparation of the *Strategic Foresight in the Western Balkans: Recovery on the Horizon* report on science, technology and innovation. The report presents three probable political and economic scenarios by 2035 that may influence the nature of research and innovation policies, strengthening preparedness and resilience.

To assist the region to fulfil the EC's requirements, the RCC supported the creation and translation of the first *Research Infrastructure Roadmaps* in the jurisdictions of Pristina, Sarajevo, Skopje and Tirana. Now, each economy of the region has its respective roadmap, maximising the access to, and effective use of research infrastructures in the region. As a follow-up to this activity, the RCC supported the creation of the first *Western Balkans Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap* to identify the strategic fields for innovation, ecosystem investments, boosting regional cooperation between academia and businesses and encouraging commercialisation of knowledge.

The RCC implemented the *Technology Transfer Support Programme* designed to bolster technology transfer practices and facilitate the regional networking of Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs). Additionally, the Support Programme aims at motivating universities, research organisations and innovation infrastructures towards establishing their TTOs in the future.

Following the official association to the EC's Horizon Europe framework programme, the RCC assisted capacity building of research and innovation National Contact Points (NCPs) to

increase their knowledge and skills. The aim is to ensure that NCPs assist the research and innovation community to absorb the available EU funds.

Following the regional mapping of *Digital Innovation Hubs* (DIHs) in 2021, the networking of DIHs has been initiated in parallel with identifying their needs. The alignment with Open Science practices with the EU has continued smoothly. The RCC promoted the importance of Open Science principles, particularly in the context of the Horizon Europe's new requirements.

To support the expansion of innovation ecosystems, the RCC introduced two regional initiatives. In December 2021, the RCC and Enterprise Europe Network organised the first *Butterfly Innovation & Business Forum*. The event featured successful start-ups, established innovative companies and early-stage innovative teams from the region. The two-day event has seen several intense sessions, adding visibility to the region's innovation ecosystem and creating valuable contacts with potential investors. In addition, the first regional *Butterfly Innovation Award* was inaugurated during the Forum while the call was opened in early 2022. The Award displays and encourages innovation achievements and empowers sensitive groups such as youth, women and Roma.

In 2021, the RCC established the *Working Group on Diaspora* as part of the *Regional Diaspora Knowledge Transfer Initiative*. The goal of the Initiative is to identify and mobilise the diaspora's knowledge, skills and networks of contacts to foster innovation and entrepreneurship, assist efforts in attracting investments, and boost economic recovery in the post-pandemic era. One of the outputs of the Working Group exchanges on successful diaspora projects in the region includes the *Compendium of Best Practices in Diaspora Engagement*. The Compendium was a precursor to the first *Regional Diaspora Forum* held in February, in Belgrade and online. The Forum was a regional awareness-raising event designed to discuss various ways of knowledge transfer between the diaspora and home communities and promote the importance of diaspora among a wider group of stakeholders.

#### *A.2.4. Digital Integration and Implementation of the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans*

From 1 July 2021, when roaming free regime took effect in the region, citizens do not pay extra charges for calls, SMS and data, relative to what they pay at home. *Roam Like at Home* (RLAH) regime is implemented in full in accordance with the *Regional Roaming Agreement* terms and conditions. In the first three months of the implementation, the number of roaming users, as well as roaming traffic significantly increased.

An information campaign undertaken by the RCC and all economies through the preparation of Frequently Asked Questions<sup>19</sup> has helped end-users to understand RLAH better and enjoy its benefits in full.

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<sup>19</sup> [Regional Cooperation Council | Answers to Frequently Asked Questions on Roaming Free Western Balkans \(rcc.int\)](https://www.rcc.int/answers-to-frequently-asked-questions-on-roaming-free-western-balkans)

After intensive work on preparing the *Roadmap for Lowering Roaming Charges between the EU and WB* (Roadmap), the region's economies agreed on the document by the end of September 2021, which was welcomed by the Brdo Declaration. The ultimate goal of the Roadmap is to have roaming prices between the region and the EU gradually reduced starting from 2023 and closer to the domestic ones in 2027. Besides the glide path for the reduction of roaming charges, the Roadmap consists of a set of policy reforms to be implemented by the participants' competent ministries and regulatory authorities responsible for electronic communications, improving the overall business environment in the telecom sector. A structured dialogue with the region's and EU mobile operators has been established over the last year with three constructive meetings in July, September and December 2021, helping to address their challenges and concerns regarding the implementation of the Roadmap. Assessment of the state of play of the proposed policy reforms in each economy has been prepared and will be discussed with the economies in mid-May 2022.

The regional *Working Groups on Broadband and 5G* met in October 2021 to discuss the state of play in the area of broadband and 5G in the region, as well as to kick start the implementation of the 5G MoU, signed during the 2020 *Western Balkans Digital Summit*.

With regards to interoperability, the *Study on Regional Interoperability and Trust Services in Western Balkans – Methodology, Implementation Vision and Action Plan*, published at the end of 2021, proposed a practical approach and concrete action plan toward achieving the operational interoperability between the region's economies, as well as between the region and the EU Member States. As the first step towards launching pilot project(s) in the region, the economies identified cross-border/boundary use cases. Five of these were discussed as potential pilot use-cases/project(s) at the regional *Working Group on Interoperability and Trust Services* meeting in April 2022.

The RCC conducted a pre-assessment of digital skills gaps and needs in the region, aiming to identify key priority sectors, emerging industries and target groups in each economy. Moreover, it prepared the corresponding methodological framework and the questionnaire based on the approach of the EC DigiComp for citizens. The first sector to be assessed is public administration at the central and local levels in 2022.

In addition, tracking the digital transformation within the region, the RCC published the *Study on the State of Application of Digital Economy Society Index (DESI) in Western Balkan Economies*. As a follow-up, the RCC will embark on a regional process to enable the calculation of the DESI index for the region (covering data for 2020 and 2021).

In 2021, the region embarked on another initiative: establishment of the framework for free flow of data. This initiative aims to create the conditions for free flow of personal and non-personal data across the region by removing any existing barriers and optimising the utilisation

of existing data centres. The draft regional report was discussed during the meeting of regional *Working Groups on Data Protection and Privacy and Interoperability* in September 2021.

The 4<sup>th</sup> *Western Balkans Digital Summit* took place in Podgorica from 11-13 October 2021. Due to the pandemic, the Summit was held online, while the Digital Ministerial meeting was held in-person on 13 October 2021. Although two *Joint Statements* prepared (i.e. *on the free flow of data in the Western Balkans* and *on Interoperable Western Balkans*) were not endorsed, all economies stay committed to their objective and scope. Preparations for the 5<sup>th</sup> Digital Summit commenced with the first Steering Committee meeting in February 2022.

The second edition of the regional online competition, *Balkathon 2.0* was organised in May 2021, aiming to further develop innovative and unique ideas as a response to the challenges of day-to-day life. Of 90 applicants, 37 teams with over 120 team members were shortlisted and got an opportunity to work with assigned mentors, while 12 finalists presented their ideas to the expert jury that decided on 6 winners (one winner for each thematic area and two special awards). The winners worked to further develop their digital solutions after the competition, and presented them at the 4<sup>th</sup> *Western Balkans Digital Summit*.

The region discussed cyber security in December 2021, focusing on recent developments, main challenges and needs in the region as well as the potential future support and regional actions in the area of cybersecurity. In April 2022, the RCC supported the organisation of *Regional Cyber Camp*, with the aim to improve and strengthen collaboration among economies of the region to increase the level of cybersecurity.

Supporting the region through the dedicated “in-economy support” by providing technical assistance on the specific need(s) in each economy related to the CRM *Regional Digital Area* started in 2021. Three economies used this kind of assistance last year, while the same model will be used in 2022.

### A.3 Green Agenda for the Western Balkans

In line with the EU ambition to become climate-neutral by 2050, the region has committed to achieving carbon neutrality by the same year, and to align with the European Green Deal’s key elements by endorsing the Green Agenda for Western Balkans (GAWB) at the Summit in Sofia in 2020.

During the last year, the RCC centred its work on translating the commitments within GAWB into a set of well-defined actions embodied in the *GAWB Action Plan 2021-2030*. The process of developing this Action Plan, facilitated by the RCC, was based on intense consultations to identify concrete steps, supporting organisations and structures, and an indicative timeframe for each measure to be implemented.

The Action plan was agreed at the *EU-Western Balkans Brdo Summit*, and it envisages 58 actions and 7 roadmaps for implementation. The Plan focuses on (i) Climate policy, ii) Sustainable energy, iii) Sustainable mobility, iv) Circular economy, v) Depollution, vi)

Sustainable agriculture and food supply, and vii) Protection of nature and biodiversity. Among others, the Plan anticipates the adoption of the 2030 energy and climate policy targets to reflect the Fit for 55 Package and measures.

The GAWB Action Plan outlines the framework for its regional coordination and monitoring. The main responsibility for the implementation will be at the level of each economy following inter-sectorial and inter-institutional cooperation. Apart from the governing structure to include the authorities from the region and regional supporting organisations, it expects broad participation in GAWB-related policy dialogue by other relevant groups of stakeholders (NGOs, local governments, business community, donor community, other development partners, including IFIs, and youth).

Following the adoption of the Action Plan, the RCC has focused on building a strong constituency to support the GAWB implementation efforts, and providing analytical underpinning. The first *NGO Forum* took the place in October 2021, serving as a platform for an initial discussion on the GAWB implementation with civil society. Building on the lessons learned from the NGO Forum, the RCC has continued to work on developing mechanisms for adequate and effective participation and representation to reflect on the intraregional and sectoral diversity of the sector itself.

The main outputs of those activities are subject to the *Regional Working Group on Environment* (RWG Env) discussion planned to take a place in May 2022. They include:

- Work on further elaborating of governance structures, monitoring, and reporting mechanisms, built upon existing structures, and basing it on lessons learned from CRM implementation, as well as the earlier work of the RWG Env. The result of this deliberation is the Note of governance, monitoring, and reporting for GAWB action plan implementation;
- Developing a draft regional instrument on plastic pollution and marine litter, supported by the EU Environment Partnership Programme for Accession (EPPA) to address concerns in waste management and cleaning up rivers and seas at the regional level;
- Preparatory work on the draft *Regional Plan for Development of Green Infrastructure and Ecological Connectivity*. The draft regional instrument will be prepared based on the EPPA's previous analytical work on green infrastructure, which includes a comprehensive set of transboundary ecological corridors;
- Reestablishment of the *NGO Forum* for the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan to enhance participation of civil society in the GAWB-related policy debate. The adequate participation of NGOs will be based on an open and transparent process of open calls for participation based on sound criteria to reflect good regional and sectorial representation.

#### A.4 Projects

##### *Western Balkans Youth Lab Project<sup>20</sup>*

Through its [Western Balkans Youth Lab \(WBYL\) project](#), the RCC is attesting its dedication to provide opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes and ensure a safe space for policy-makers and young people from the region to co-create policies, which are to benefit young people of the region. Thus, in the preceding period, the region saw the *Mid-Term Conference of the First Thematic Youth Policy Lab on Unemployment* and the *Kick-Off of the Second Youth Policy Lab on Mental Health*.

The process of the Youth Policy Lab implementation brought the region a number of achievements. Across economies, these include: passing of legal amendments on youth participation and youth unemployment, development of a National Youth Roadmap on school-to-job transition, finalisation of four surveys pertaining to youth unemployment, and creation of strategies and organisational charts of Youth Councils.

Through a consultative process, the youth and the policy makers flagged youth mental health as a policy topic requiring urgent attention. The [Kick-Off of the Second Youth Lab on Mental Health](#) took place in December in Tirana, hosting 32 senior policymakers and youth representatives from the region in the working sessions and close to 50 youth representatives from the region, as well as representatives of the European Commission and the WHO. The Kick-Off resulted in the co-creation of thirteen regional policy recommendations envisaging how to raise mental health awareness, support measures and communicate the importance of prevention of mental health of young people.

To support the inclusion and voices of youth at relevant international events, the project enabled participation of 63 young people from the region at the *Prespa Youth Forum*, *Sarajevo Film Festival*, *Bled Strategic Forum*, *International Youth Conference*, *Tirana Youth Capital Grand Opening*. Moreover, the project supported the organisation of the *Western Balkans Youth Forum* which contributed to incorporating inputs by youth at the *Berlin Summit 2021*.

Further to these opportunities and following the Open Call prepared with the European Youth Forum, the National Youth Council of Slovenia has been chosen, jointly with the National Youth Council of Croatia, to host the [five-day comprehensive study visit](#) organised at end of March 2022. National Youth Councils or Youth Umbrella Organisations in the region thus strengthened their knowledge about the EU Youth Dialogue, youth advocacy, and the good practices of EU Youth Councils.

As per results of the *First Donor Coordination Meeting* organised in April 2021 and with a significant volume of data gathered on donor support to youth agenda in the region, the project developed [Donor Assistance Database](#) in order to improve availability of important

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<sup>20</sup> This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2019/409-790

information on youth legislative, strategic and institutional frameworks in the region. The platform was developed and presented on the occasion of the *Second Donor Coordination Meeting* organised in Sarajevo in December 2021. The Meeting resulted in the adoption of the [\*Joint Communiqué on Youth: Western Balkans Co-creating Future with Youth as Agents of Change\*](#), confirming the shared values, principles and way forward by the *Broad Coalition on Youth*. This beneficial tool ensures more transparent and constructive exchange amongst donors, policymakers and youth.

#### *Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP 2)*<sup>21</sup>

ESAP 2 project continued its efforts to advance employment opportunities and working conditions in the region through:

- a. Monitoring employment and labour market trends in the region
- b. Providing technical assistance to regional government partners
- c. Assisting regional partners in EU alignment/standards in employment and social policies
- d. Policy enhancement and capacity building of regional partners

#### **a. Monitoring employment and labour market trends in the region**

A regional online [\*RCC ESAP Employment Observatory\*](#) has been developed and is regularly updated in order to provide the region with up-to-date information related to the labour market trends. The Observatory publishes monthly, quarterly and annual data on employment, monitoring the impact of Covid-19 crisis on labour markets in the region and overall labour market and employment developments.

#### **b. Technical assistance to regional government partners**

ESAP 2 provided individual-economy, demand-driven technical assistance to government partners in the region. The technical assistance instrument has been deployed eight times to address immediate needs and priorities of government institutions in the realm of employment and social issues. Examples of assistance include assessing the impact of Covid-19 on labour markets, evaluation of active labour market policies and measures, development of a specialised web-based platform for job-seekers, development of an application for quality monitoring of employment programmes, analysis and workshops focused on specific policies/Youth Guarantee, and other.

#### **c. Assisting WB partners in EU alignment/standards in employment and social policies**

In terms of the activities that focus on enhancing the region's alignment with the EU *Acquis*, ESAP 2 completed a comprehensive analysis of the implementation of 20 principles of the

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<sup>21</sup> This project has been financed by the European Union and implemented by the RCC, grant number VS/2016/0054 (March 2016 to February 2019), VS/2019/0094 (March 2019 to October 2019) and VS/2019/0348 (November 2019 – October 2022)

European Pillar of Social Rights (Pillar) in the region's economies, with the special focus on the impact of Covid-19. The Pillar serves as a reference for progress in alignment with the EU in areas that include equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion. The *Western Balkans Social Scoreboard of Indicators*, modelled on EUROSTAT/EC Social Scoreboard, was developed for the first time for the region and serves as the data hub of economies' performance across headline and breakdown indicators of the EU Pillar of Social Rights.

For the first time, with the support of ESAP 2, the region established the (informal) *Western Balkans Network of EU Chapter 2 and Chapter 19 negotiators and civil servants*<sup>22</sup>. The Network provides peer learning and capacity building focused on EU *Aquis* Chapter 2 and Chapter 19, and the European Social Fund. To enhance the capacity of Network participants, in cooperation with the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, ESAP 2 organised a three-day study visit of the representatives of the region's economies to Croatia. The comprehensive programme included presentations and site visits, combining theoretical and practical elements and peer exchanges.

#### **d. Policy enhancement and capacity building of regional partners**

In the area of tackling undeclared work, the regional *Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work* (UW Network), established with ESAP 2 assistance, has contributed to enhancing effectiveness of enforcement authorities (labour inspectorates and selected tax authorities) through regional exchanges of good practices and peer-learning, contributing to capacity building of partners (Labour Inspectorates and other partners). Specifically, the ESAP 2 project implemented five Mutual Assistance Projects (MAPs) involving labour inspectorates and tax authorities from four economies' jurisdictions (Sarajevo, Pristina, Podgorica, Belgrade) and with EU/EEA peers – labour inspectorates (from jurisdictions of Zagreb, Athens, Amsterdam, Oslo and Helsinki) and tax authorities (Ljubljana). MAPs recommended a number of policy and operational enhancements related to tackling undeclared work. In addition, a number of peer learning events with UW Network members took place through plenary meetings, thematic workshops, and regional seminars. Also, ESAP 2 developed a number of analytical products, resource and learning materials for Network members available at the Members' Corner, a closed section of the [ESAP 2 website](#), further contributing to capacity building of the regional UW Network members.

In the area of strengthening institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and Public Employment Services (PES), ESAP 2 project focused on two topics of relevance for partners: youth employment and women's employment; and developed regional and individual-economy studies with policy roadmaps focused on youth and women's employment, supporting partners in their efforts to address youth and women's unemployment.

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<sup>22</sup>Civil staff dealing with topics related to these two chapters in those WB-economies where negotiation structure still does not exist

Enhancing youth employment programmes and implementing the EU's flagship Youth Guarantee in the region received a strong political momentum. In this context, ESAP 2 developed and published a comprehensive analytical study on *Youth Employment in the Western Balkans*, with six individual Youth Guarantee policy roadmaps, and a number of online tools and materials: [Youth & Jobs online quiz](#), [Youth Guarantee Leaflets in WB languages](#) and [Youth Employment Brochure and Infographics](#). The peer review workshop for the Youth Employment Study took place in May 2021 and brought together government officials and youth representatives from the region. Since then, partners have been active in preparing for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, a major policy initiative.

ESAP 2 developed the (draft) *Regional Study on Women's Employment in the Western Balkans* and six economy studies with proposed policy roadmaps to contribute to reducing the gender employment gap in each economy. The ESAP 2 project presented the draft study and its recommendations at a peer-review regional event *Women and Work & Stronger Public Employment Services* in April 2022, focusing on review and refining of recommendations by partners in a collaborative process and peer learning and exchanges of practices.

In addition to analytical studies and policy roadmaps, ESAP 2 launched the 2022 cycle of bench-learning for PES, with the aim to strengthen institutional capacities of PES across the region. The cycle is modelled on the EU PES bench-learning model and will take into account the Youth Guarantee and the Digital Agenda. The project accordingly held a regional capacity building workshop for PES representatives, with EU PES and EC DG EMPL/PES Network representatives.

#### [Roma Integration Action 2020<sup>23</sup>](#)

The Roma Integration continued its successful implementation in the reporting period, with the main focus on the *Declaration of Western Balkan Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process (Poznan Declaration)* adopted within the *Poznan Summit of the Berlin Process* and referred to in the *EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation* (EU Roma Framework).

The key endeavour during the last year was the support to governments in preparing new or revised National Strategies for Roma in line with the EU Roma Framework and the Poznan Declaration. This process was completed in the early 2022, although some of the governments continue to work on the accompanying action plans, for which they also receive support through the Roma Integration action. These efforts were combined with the efforts to promote Roma responsive budgeting.

The governments focused their primary efforts on the continued crisis management and economic recovery, and topics such as Roma inclusion were pushed down on the priority lists. Nevertheless, the Roma Integration action maintained a solid implementation pace and adjusted in order to respond to the newly created context. It also contributed to the process of

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<sup>23</sup> This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2018/400-736

recovery by providing data on the impact of Covid-19 on Roma in the region for the purpose of planning the recovery measures and future targeted and mainstream policies. The data from the research were presented at the Regional Conference [\*The Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Roma in the Western Balkans\*](#) held in December 2021.

The Roma Integration action enhanced its efforts to assist the governments in implementing concrete measures that bring permanent change to the lives of Roma, primarily by piloting legalisation of dwellings. As a pilot, in one of the economies, 50 dwellings of Roma received support for submitting full documentation required for legalisation. This effort has not only been successful, but very welcomed by Roma communities. The Roma Integration action continues with the support for legalisation of dwellings, and has already rolled out such initiatives in two more economies, while continuing the process in the first one.

The action organised the first *Digital Boost Academy* together with the Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative (REDI). The Academy supported 30 young Roma entrepreneurs, male and female, to improve their overall business and extend it online. There are already requests to multiply this good practice for more entrepreneurs and in more economies in the region.

As part of the RCC, the Roma Integration is mainstreaming Roma issues in the relevant regional agendas. For example, informal work among Roma was discussed within the ESAP 2 and the need for participation of Roma is included in the *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021-2030*.

Within the Berlin Process, the Roma Integration action supported the organisation of a ministerial meeting on Roma Integration, co-organised with the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees under Sarajevo's jurisdiction in June 2021. High officials from the EU and the region took part in this meeting resulting in [important conclusions](#), including the commitment to transform informal work among Roma, utilise the housing mapping data for developing housing programmes, mainstream Roma policies in the Green and Digital Agenda plans, and continue the ongoing initiatives that were encouraged by the previous ministerial meetings.

According to the *Balkan Barometer* data from last year, a quarter of the regional population is still uncomfortable when it comes to interacting with Roma. With this in mind, the Roma Integration action has produced media content to promote positive narratives regarding Roma inclusion and countering prejudice towards Roma, but will also focus more on the issue of combatting antigypsyism in the future.

While the second phase of the RCC's Roma Integration action is now being implemented within an extended deadline, the third phase is already being planned and it envisages building on all the initiatives that have commenced in the first and the second phases, in order to continue producing effective changes in the lives of Roma in the region.

The IISG is a regional mechanism representing strategic EU-Western Balkans security partnership and strong regional ownership, with all Ministries of Interior/Security from the region being stakeholders in this process. The aim of the IISG is to contribute to regional security through its three pillars: Counter-Terrorism (WBCTi), Counter-Serious Crime (WBCSCi), and Border Security (WBBSi).

As the operational hand of the IISG process, within the reporting period, the IISG Secretariat had supported the development and strengthening of several processes and products as agreed among the regional partners under the IISG Terms of Reference, namely:

- Increasing the membership of the IISG and strengthening the Governance Structure of the IISG;
- Development of methodologies for IISG processes;
- Development of the first *Biennial Needs Mapping* report;
- Development of the *Annual Response Mapping* reports;
- Development of the *IISG Database*.

Concerning the first point, the IISG membership has increased significantly. The number of new members has almost doubled from the beginning of this action. Seven new members joined the IISG, with three more to officially join during the next, 6<sup>th</sup> IISG Board meeting, thus bringing the total number of IISG members to 25<sup>25</sup> in mid-2022.

As for the second point, several methodologies were developed, such as the Methodology for mapping responses; Methodology for mapping support (IISG Database); and the Update of the Methodology for mapping needs. In addition to this, the process of development of the methodology on regulating the roles and responsibilities of the IISG members in the IISG processes has commenced, whereas the actual consultations with the partners and development of this methodology will be conducted after the next IISG Board.

With regards to the third point, the IISG Secretariat coordinated development of the first Biennial Needs Mapping reports, which will be adopted at the next IISG Board meeting. The Needs Mapping reports were discussed and negotiated through an elaborative process with regional partners, while the other IISG members supported the development of the needs filters. These reports map the security needs of the regional partners in the areas of the three IISG pillars every two years.

The first set of Annual Response Mapping reports is being developed in the reporting period. The reports map the responses to the security needs in the areas of the three IISG pillars. The mapping covers responses provided in the past year, and responses planned for the coming year, to the extent possible. The document identifies gaps, duplications, and potential for improvements in the coordination activities.

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<sup>24</sup> This project is funded by the European Union, grant number IPA 2020/414-918

<sup>25</sup> Full list will be exposed upon official IISG Board decision and approval.

Last but not least, the IISG Secretariat developed the IISG database that registers the information from IISG members on their ongoing actions in the region, with the aim of creating a consolidated and up-to-date overview of ongoing and future actions from a regional perspective. The first analytical reports stemming from the database are expected by the next IISG Board meeting.

## B Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security

### B.1 Political Cooperation

In terms of political cooperation, the RCC was fully focused on meeting its statutory obligations to ensure fair and equal treatment to its Board participants, provide an appropriate and relevant forum for regional dialogue and cooperation, and serve as the operational arm to the SEECP and its consecutive Chairmanships in Office.

During Ankara's Chairmanship in Office, the RCC was proud to assist SEECP, as per the request of the SEECP Working Group, among other by developing a dedicated SEECP website, which is now up and running and administered jointly by the RCC and the CiO.

With the transfer of the rotating Chairmanship in Office of SEECP to Athens, the RCC maintained its close relationship with the CiO and the SEECP Troika, comprising regular consultations, updating the Troika on the developments in regional programmes' implementation, and aligning the calendar of activities as appropriate.

In February 2022, the RCC and SEECP CiO by Athens undertook a joint effort to organise the *7<sup>th</sup> SEECP Junior Diplomats Forum*. The Forum served to introduce junior diplomats from the region to the past and present state of regional cooperation and provide them with capacity building in matters of negotiating techniques, sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, using the invaluable experience and expertise of Greek diplomats and other relevant actors.

Moreover, the Secretary General of the RCC regularly communicated and consulted with the partners from and beyond the region in an effort to retain and strengthen commitment of RCC Board participants to the regional cooperation agenda.

In support of the implementation of the Strategy and Work Programme 2020-2022 and the RCC founding documents, the RCC has been working in close cooperation and synergy with the Athens Chairmanship-in-Office of SEECP. Important cooperation was established with the rotating Presidencies of the Council of the EU, and the RCC will be proud to contribute to the *Western Balkans Conference* organised by the French Presidency in June.

### B.2 Parliamentary Cooperation

The RCC supports the parliamentary forums in the region so as to ensure the awareness and engagement of region's legislatures in the matters pertaining to regional cooperation. In this vein, the RCC stands ready to assist and update the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly (PA) on the main developments in regional cooperation agenda, as it has done during the preceding period by informing the General Committees of SEECP PA on the state of play regarding the implementation of the SEE 2030 Strategy.

Moreover, the RCC supported the 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of COSAP, organised in Sarajevo under the chairmanship of the National Assembly in June 2021. Representatives discussed the potential to advance EU enlargement through regional cooperation, particularly through the implementation of the Common Regional Market, and recognised COSAP as an important platform for regional parliamentary dialogue.

### B.3 Good Governance

Regional policy dialogue in the area of justice has continued through the regular exchange of the RCC-led networks, *Western Balkans Working Group on Justice* (WGJ), *South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes* (SEE JTI) network and *SEE Association of Mediators* network (SEE AM).

During the past year, WGJ dedicated a special focus to the digitalisation process in the justice systems of the region and its potential for further modernising of the justice system and facilitating and improving access to justice. *Promotion of the Mapping the Digitalisation of Justice in the Western Balkans* assessment took place in March 2022 in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice in Skopje's jurisdiction. Two principal objectives of the mapping were to identify and assess the digital solutions and the availability of digital options in the justice systems, and to identify potential options for a regionally harmonised exchange of electronic data and documents among the judicial systems of the region. Additionally, it aims to help the region's jurisdictions to self-assess their level of progress in the digital transformation while making sure that they have a clear understanding of deficiencies in their legislation and infrastructure that need to be addressed in order to implement e-justice solutions. Such stocktaking of existing solutions is also instrumental for proposing concrete steps towards digital judicial exchanges at the regional level. Moreover, it has the potential to facilitate the exchange of experiences related to the introduction of new legislation or e-Justice tools in the region.

At the *Regional Conference Promoting Cross Border Mediation in SEE*, organised in October 2021, in cooperation between the RCC and CSSP - Berlin Centre for Integrative Mediation, the RCC presented the *Promoting Cross-Border Mediation in Resolving Civil and Commercial Disputes in the Western Balkans* study. The study primarily focuses on the potential of mediation to facilitate cross-border/boundary trade and set the grounds for a regional boost of mediation as an efficient and less costly tool in resolving civil and commercial disputes.

The fifth meeting of SEE JTIs in Skopje in December 2021 focused on the exchange of best experiences of JTIs practices during 2021, and on the possibility to promote mediation in the region with a view to reaching a balanced relationship between mediation and judicial proceedings. Taking into consideration the practices of distant learning solutions, the meeting was an excellent opportunity for the presentation of the *Regional guidelines for effective judicial E-learning in SEE*, prepared by the RCC in cooperation with GIZ ORF Legal Reform. The overarching goal of this document is to provide specific and practical advice for

administrators and teachers at Judicial Training Institutions in the SEE region regarding planning, designing, preparing and conducting online training.

Finally, in cooperation with the Council of Europe (CoE) Programme for Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP), the RCC organised the online course *Access to justice for women* in June. This course, organised in the SEE JTI framework, is designed for judges and prosecutors from South East Europe, but also representatives at the technical level from the SEE JTIs. The HELP online course provides a comprehensive overview of international and European women's rights and gender equality standards, case-law and good practices. It is the first HELP course to provide a single resource on gender equality and justice covering the extensive CoE standards, monitoring reports and soft-law instruments on the matter. Over 25 judges and prosecutors from the SEE successfully finalised this training.

#### B.4 Security

Between April 2021 and April 2022, the RCC stayed vigilant, proactive and forward looking in shaping its security portfolio activities to best fit the security concerns and needs in South East Europe.

Thus, the RCC conducted the first-ever survey of the public opinion on security issues in the region and presented it to the public in May 2021. The [SecuriMeter](#) quickly positioned itself as a flagship project of the RCC's security portfolio, exploring the most important contemporary regional security issues and public perceptions towards them, ranging from terrorism, organised crime, border/boundary security, to disaster prevention, hybrid threats, and disinformation. The RCC is now finalising the second edition of *SecuriMeter*, to be presented to the public in the coming months.

Public opinion confirmed that disinformation has a distinct security dimension. With that in mind, the RCC partnered with the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT) to organise the second edition of the *Disinformation Conference*, titled *Spread of disinformation during the pandemic and its impact on the Western Balkans*. The RCC's Disinformation Conference aims to become annual regional awareness raising event, as any effective effort to counter disinformation lies in seeking of cross-economy and inter-sectorial synergy.

The paradigm change in Afghanistan has been a global development with potential security implications for South East Europe in the preceding period. In return, the RCC organised a webinar in November 2021 to discuss the issues of potential radicalisation and outflow of citizens to the system of religious extremism, organised crime and illicit substance trafficking, and others.

The RCC organised the 6<sup>th</sup> *Annual Regional Security Coordination (Jumbo) Conference* on 6 December 2021 in Paris, in partnership with the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Higher National Defence Studies (IHEDN). The conference

recognised the importance of regional security cooperative order as the main precondition for implementation of ambitious socio-economic, digital and green agendas. [Conclusions of the conference are available on the RCC website.](#)

The participants also called upon the RCC to continue facilitating the Annual Security Conference as an important and all-inclusive platform for dialogue between law enforcement institutions from the region, the relevant institutions in the EU Member States and beyond.

Furthermore, the RCC supported the two SEE-level security cooperative platforms, the SEE National Security Agencies (SEENSA) and SEE Military Intelligence Chiefs (SEEMIC) platforms.

In 2022, SEENSA has committed itself to exploring points of convergence between the security awareness and the security aspects of classified information from domestic, regional and Euro-Atlantic perspectives, and continuing to reinforce streamlining of regional security initiatives.

SEEMIC, chaired extraordinarily by the RCC in 2021, adopted the Open-Source Intelligence Assessment Report *Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the security of South East Europe*. In line with the practice of maintaining consistency between the annual OSINT Reports, the SEEMIC Chairmanship, transferred to Ministry of Defence in Sarajevo's jurisdiction in 2022, is preparing the OSINT assessment on the *Role of the Military in Disaster Preparedness and Prevention in South East Europe*. Moreover, UNDP/SEESAC continued to be a valuable partner to the SEEMIC platform by providing trainings on gender mainstreaming-related issues in the security sector and armed forces.

Finally, the RCC retained commitment to all security initiatives within and outside its umbrellas, maintaining excellent cooperation and coordination with the UNDP/SEESAC, DPPI, MARRI, OBCT, Helsinki CoE and others, including partnering with the French Presidency of the Council of the EU on organising a workshop on the implementation of the *Western Balkan SALW Control Roadmap* in April 2022.

## C Horizontal Activities

### C.1 Programming, Monitoring, Coordination

Implementation of RCC's horizontal activities continued despite the challenging circumstances posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since last year, the RCC has been mandated to lead the overall coordination of the CRM agenda in close cooperation and consultation with other regional partner organisations. In this regard, regional dialogue was maintained at both technical and political levels through the CRM Contact Points and PM Sherpas to ensure the successful implementation of the CRM Action Plan, which requires a strong commitment from the region.

The first *CRM Report on Implementation* for 2021, coordinated by the RCC, was developed jointly with regional organisations involved in the implementation of CRM and domestic authorities. The report provided insights into the achievements and attained results in the 2021 implementation process both at the regional and economy levels. Through regular regional

dialogue with PM Sherpas and the European Commission, and in close consultations with regional partners, the RCC agreed on CRM priority actions for 2022, taking into account the current context and the feasibility of implementation of regional activities. These deliverables will provide the common ground for continuation of CRM implementation ahead of the *Western Balkans Conference* to be organised by the French Presidency of the Council of the EU in June and the *EU-Western Balkans Summit* planned for October under the Czech EU Presidency.

On the next edition of *Balkan Barometer*, preparations for the new Call for Applications on *Balkan Barometer Public and Business Opinion* surveys were successfully launched in October 2021. The official launch of *Balkan Barometer 2022* is planned for June, when the findings on Public and Business Opinion, including COVID-19 recovery sentiments/opinions, will be presented to regional and international partners. Organised for the 8<sup>th</sup> year in a row, *Balkan Barometer* is now firmly established as a reliable source of regional data widely used and referenced by media, business, civil society and decision makers in the region.

### C.2 Extending Partnerships

The success of the implementation of regional programmes depends on strong commitment by the regional governments, as well as on firm relationship with the region's principal partners. Thus, the Secretary General of the RCC held a number of consultations with SEECP and RCC Board participants to ensure both their understanding of the importance of regional cooperation agendas facilitated by the RCC, and the reflection of their priorities in the RCC's activities.

Streamlining of activities and priorities with the RCC Board participants is best reflected in partnerships established to support different events or initiatives. Thus, in the preceding year, the RCC joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, OBCT, Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) and Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) in the organisation of the *EU-Balkans Youth Forum* in Rome in November 2021. This event provided an opportunity to 78 young people from the EU and the region to submit their recommendations to the Conference on the Future of Europe and launch the *EU-Western Balkans Youth Network*.

In addition to SEECP and Board participants, the RCC nurtures partnership with the EU and its institutions as well as related Brussels-based organisations. The RCC Liaison Office regularly works closely with these partners, including European Commission services, European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee, Friends of Europe, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., European Policy Centre, Euractiv, EU Observer and others.

Thus, the RCC was actively supporting initiatives and events contributing to regional cooperation and EU integration. One notable example includes assisting the co-organisation of the virtual *EU-Western Balkans Summit* in December, and partnering with the EESC to organise the 8<sup>th</sup> *Western Balkans Civil Society Forum* in Skopje in October. Moreover, partnership with the EESC was extended to allow support to the preparation of EESC opinion on youth and innovation in the region.

Finally, to avoid overlapping or duplication of efforts, in all its activities, the RCC cooperated with relevant partners in the civil society and international community, working closely with CEFTA, WB6CIF, UNDP, CoE, WEF, and others.

### C.3 Communications

The communication efforts of the RCC in the reporting period focused around communicating the results of the RCC activities, especially those related to SWP 2020-2022 and Common Regional Market. The communication activities were implemented in line with the RCC's triennial Communication Strategy 2020-2022 whose overarching goal was for the EU integration and regional cooperation to be recognised as a driving force which improves the lives of citizens in South East Europe. The communication and visibility actions mirrored the agenda of the RCC, increasing the visibility of the SEE 2030, CRM benefits, results and potentials, upgrading the established RCC profile to reflect its increasingly regionally-owned, active and all-inclusive role and influence. It continued to streamline ways in which the RCC builds the RCC's public profile.

In May 2021, the RCC launched a big region-wide campaign on the entering into force of the *Regional Roaming Agreement*, facilitated by the RCC and the EU. A set of different strategies, tools and tactics has been employed in order to achieve the communication goal of the Campaign through various targeted visual social media adds, videos, interviews, articles, op-eds, finally culminating in the regional all-stars concert in Otesevo, that was livestreamed through the RCC social media channels and gained high media and public attention. The region-wide campaign yielded excellent results, raising awareness of the free regional roaming, role of RCC and the EU, and benefits of the regional cooperation. The campaign resulted in significant overall increase of performance of the RCC's website and social media accounts, enabling more than 170,000 website clicks in a three-month period and over 170,000,000 impressions in the same period, while the number of social media followers increased by more than 1K and social media daily average impression increased by more than 40%.

Beside the overarching roaming free campaign, the RCC communicated all other activities as per SWP 20-22 and CRM. Successfully launched in 2019, the Women's Empowerment campaign continued, with a number of selected contents through numerous communication channels. Furthermore, the communication activities included information on mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications, research and innovation, women in STEM, WB digital agenda, green agenda, rule of law, security, etc. that were communicated by a tailor-made content, including but not limited to videos, photos, interviews, articles, op-eds, infographics, special events, etc., through various communication channels available region-wide and even further. In addition, special attention has been paid to the promotion of direct products of regional cooperation within the RCC's various agendas – Balkan Barometer, SecuriMeter, Balkathon, Network of Women in Entrepreneurship, Butterfly Innovation Forum and Award, Digital Summit, etc.

The RCC has maintained and continued spreading its partnership networks with the regional media representatives, making sure the regional cooperation agenda is widely understood and

communicated, especially through our field correspondents – a group of respectable journalists from the region who have helped widening the RCC narrative and creating opportunities for promotion in each of the economies, by using their media network and making sure the RCC’s messages overcome language barriers.

Recognising the importance of young generations, the RCC invested its efforts in specific activities to inform and include them in the regional cooperation communication circles, for their voice to be heard and listened to. A set of different tools, tactics and channels has been used in this regard. From specific content based on real life human stories, to organising visits to their universities, to opening Tik Tok as a communication channel prevalently used by youth.

As in previous years, the RCC supported important regional initiatives and successful projects (Such as the Sarajevo Film Festival), whose good image and reputation could contribute to general public awareness raising of the regional cooperation and EU integration.

Results of all communication efforts were closely followed through Mediatoolkit – an online monitor of mentions of the RCC and its key indicators in real-time, providing us with the proper data for quantity and quality analyses of our presence in the media, as well as Google Analytics and other available tools. These metrics served as a corrective factor as, based on these findings, the communication actions were adjusted to generate greater values and wider outreach.

In the reporting period (April 21-April 22), the RCC produced 70 news releases and 18 written interviews/articles/op-eds (on average 1.5 per month), that were published in a number of media around the region and wider. Comparing to the previous period, in the reporting period, the number of RCC website users increased by 95%, while page views increased by 38%. The number of media reposts has risen by 12%, from 7,100 in the period April 2020-April 2021 to almost 8,000 in the period April 2021-April 2022. The RCC’s Facebook page obtained a 2,157,664 people reach which is a 48.9% growth during the reporting period. It had 12,550 unique visits – 20.3% more than in the past period and 1,480 new page likes - 239.4% more than in the period April 2021-April 2022. Our Instagram profile obtained a 1,183,448 people reach during the reporting period or 19.3% more than in the past period. The profile got 1,164 new followers, and 23,852 new profile visits, all of them organic. During 2021, our Twitter account earned 881.7K impressions, 1212 link clicks, just under 4600 likes, 1090 retweets without comments, and over 47 700 minutes of video watching. The RCC LinkedIn page had 4374 page views, 2280 unique page views, with most of the visitors coming from political organisations, telecommunication companies or non-profit organisations. The official RCC YouTube channel got 430,162 views in the past year, which is by over 900% more than in the past period, with over 5500 hours of watching and 348 subscribers. The channel and its videos got over 872,900 views, which is by 408% more than in the past period.



## Abbreviations

AM	Association of Mediators
CEF	Center of Excellence in Finance
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CiO	Chairmanship-in-Office
COSAP	Conference of the European Integration Parliamentary Committees of States participating in the Stabilization and Association Process
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DESI	Digital Economy Society Index
DG	Directorate-General
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
DG HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DIH	Digital Innovation Hub
DPPI	Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative
EC	European Commission
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EPPA	Environment Partnership Programme for Accession
ESAP	Employment and Social Affairs Platform
EU	European Union
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GIZ ORF	GIZ Open Regional Fund
IISG	Integrated Internal Security Governance
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
JTI	Judicial Training Institute
MAP	Mutual Assistance Project
MARRI	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
MRA	Mutual Recognition Agreement
NCP	National Contact Point
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSA	National Security Authority
OBCT	Osservatorio Balcan e Caucaso Transeuropa
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSINT	Open Sources Intelligence Assessment
PES	Public Employment Services
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RLAH	Roam Like at Home
RSDP	Regional Supplier Development Programme
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SALW	Small Arms and Light Weapons
SEE	South East Europe
SEE 2030	South East Europe 2030 Strategy
SEECF	South-East European Cooperation Process
SEEMIC	South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs
SEENSA	South East European National Security Authorities
SEESAC	The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons
SEPA	Single Euro Payment Area
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
SWP	Strategy and Work Programme
UN	United Nations



# Regional Cooperation Council

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNSDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
US	United States
UW	Undeclared Work
WB	Western Balkans
WBBSi	Western Balkans Border Security Initiative
WBCSCi	Western Balkans Counter-Serious Crime Initiative
WBCTi	Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework
WBYL	Western Balkans Youth Lab
WB6CIF	Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum
WEE	Women Economic Empowerment
WEF	World Economic Forum
WEI	Women Empowerment Index
WHO	World Health Organization