

Europe Day: From Promise to Practice

Op-ed by Amer Kapetanović, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council on the occasion of Europe Day

Europe Day is often treated as a date of commemoration. It should be more than that. It should be a discipline of political thought: a moment to ask whether Europe is still capable of turning its promise into practice.

The Schuman Declaration was not a ceremonial text. It was a strategic act. It offered Europe a way out of the logic of rivalry by binding states through shared interests, shared rules and shared responsibility. It understood that peace could not rest on sentiment alone. It had to be organised. It had to be made practical. That is why Europe Day matters. It reminds us that Europe was built not by avoiding difficult questions, but by answering them through cooperation.

South East Europe now faces its own version of that test. The region is no longer in the immediate post-conflict moment in which cooperation was first designed as a safeguard against relapse. That purpose remains important, but it is no longer sufficient. The world around us has changed. The geopolitical climate has hardened, the margin for ambiguity has narrowed, and multilateralism is increasingly judged by tangible outcomes rather than by the integrity of its processes. Even the European Union is redefining its priorities around competitiveness, security and strategic autonomy. Regional cooperation cannot stand aside from these shifts.

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was created eighteen years ago, at a moment when South East Europe was emerging from conflict with a shared conviction that dialogue could prevent relapse and that common values could anchor lasting stability. At that time, simply keeping political actors in the same room required effort and patience. Establishing habits of cooperation was not symbolic; it was stabilising. Presence mattered because it gradually rebuilt trust.

That logic still holds value. But Europe Day invites us to ask a more demanding question: what should regional cooperation become now? Eighteen is the age when survival alone no longer impresses and relevance becomes the real measure of maturity. For the RCC, relevance lies in maintaining a careful balance between mandate, geography and shared values. If that balance tilts too far in any direction, cooperation risks losing either credibility or purpose.

Yet, uncertainty is not only a constraint; it also reveals opportunity. Geography, often treated as destiny, can also be strategy. South East Europe has become a critical corridor at a time when the

continent faces disruption in energy supply, logistics and supply chains. The region is increasingly viewed as a nearshoring destination as companies reassess risk and proximity. It is a logistics axis, a labour market and a digital space integrated into European value chains. Within this broader landscape, the Western Balkans function as connective tissue, linking EU Member States with neighbouring economies and anchoring vital transport and energy routes.

Enlargement, therefore, is no longer merely a normative promise. It is connected to the EU's own resilience and strategic coherence. The question is less whether enlargement should proceed and more how it can be advanced with credibility and urgency. The institutional pathways exist. What determines progress is political will.

This is why Europe Day in 2026 should also be a moment to think about the future of regional cooperation. Montenegro has a serious chance to become the next member state of the European Union. Albania may follow. These developments would be historic for those concerned, but they would also reshape the logic of cooperation across the region. What happens when some economies move inside the Union while others remain outside? Does regional cooperation weaken under the pressure of differentiated integration, or does it evolve into a more ambitious and functional framework capable of preparing the whole region for deeper participation in the European project?

This is not an abstract institutional question. It goes to the heart of Europe's credibility in South East Europe. If enlargement advances country by country, regional cooperation must ensure that accession by one does not become fragmentation for others. It must help keep the region connected through markets, infrastructure, energy systems, digital services, skills, mobility and shared standards. The next level of cooperation must be designed for a region in motion: partly inside the EU, partly negotiating, but all of it tied to the same European future.

The first phase of regional cooperation was centred on reconciliation, stabilisation and rebuilding trust after conflict. That mission remains historically important. But the next phase must focus more directly on economic convergence, integration into the EU Single Market, energy connectivity, digital interoperability, infrastructure resilience, labour mobility and strategic preparedness. The objective should not simply be to preserve dialogue, but to create conditions in which progress by one economy strengthens the region as a whole.

Regional cooperation must therefore mature alongside the European aspirations of the region itself. If Montenegro enters first, and Albania follows, their accession should not represent the end of regional cooperation. On the contrary, it should represent its upgrade. The region will need stronger coordination mechanisms, more practical forms of solidarity and a clearer understanding of how cooperation functions across both EU and non-EU members. Enlargement and regional cooperation

should not be viewed as competing processes, but as mutually reinforcing pillars of long-term European stability.

The decision of the United States administration to withdraw from the RCC Board should be understood within this broader context. The United States has played an indispensable role in stabilising the region over the past three decades through diplomacy, security engagement and sustained institutional support. That contribution remains foundational and is not diminished by withdrawal from a single institutional format. The transatlantic partnership continues to matter. At the same time, the message we have received is clear: responsibility for shaping the region's trajectory increasingly rests with European actors themselves. Strategic coherence cannot depend on external guarantees alone.

This responsibility ultimately derives from citizens. For more than a decade, the RCC has measured public opinion across the Balkans on political, economic and social issues. Over 60,000 citizens have taken part. Their perspectives vary when it comes to EU membership, institutional trust and democratic performance. Yet one aspiration remains remarkably consistent: the desire for a quality of life comparable to that enjoyed within the European Union. Citizens want less corruption, stronger rule of law and greater opportunity. These expectations are practical rather than ideological.

Support for regional cooperation reflects that pragmatism. In 2025, 64% of respondents continued to view it as a mechanism capable of producing concrete improvements. In some areas, such as free roaming, instant payments, trade facilitation and mobility, results are visible and measurable. In others, the groundwork has been laid but implementation requires sustained political commitment. Regional institutions do not operate in isolation; they function within mandates shaped by governments. Outcomes therefore reflect both institutional capacity and political resolve.

Setbacks are inevitable in a region shaped by complex histories and fragile political environments. The decisive factor is how institutions respond to them. Credibility is not built on the absence of difficulty but on the ability to adjust, learn and persist. Trust grows through consistent performance over time. This is particularly important at a moment when challenges accumulate quickly and unpredictably, stretching political attention and administrative capacity.

The pressures confronting regional cooperation extend beyond unresolved bilateral disputes. A broader transformation is visible in how multilateral initiatives and development assistance are assessed. Greater emphasis is placed on measurable returns and speed of delivery. Such scrutiny is justified; public funds demand accountability. However, cooperation evaluated solely through short-term metrics risks overlooking its structural value. Processes are not bureaucratic ornamentation;

they are the means through which predictability, fairness and confidence are built among partners. Durable results depend on that foundation. Without it, gains may prove temporary.

Institutional maturity, in this environment, requires both reflection and strategic ambition. The RCC has therefore initiated an assessment of the cumulative impact of 30 years of the South-East European Cooperation Process, offering forthcoming Bulgarian and Romanian chairmanships analysis grounded in evidence rather than ceremony. The SEE2030 strategy similarly reflects a shift towards long-term resilience. The proposed Disaster Insurance and Financial Risk-Sharing Mechanism responds to clear scientific evidence that South East Europe ranks among Europe's most disaster-exposed regions. Resilience cannot rely on improvisation; it requires structured instruments and shared responsibility.

The Common Regional Market is also being examined for its measurable economic impact, particularly as it supports the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Policy refinement must be informed by data rather than assumption. Conclusions from the Berlin Process Summit in London are being translated, together with partners such as CEFTA, the Energy Community, the Transport Community and RESPA, into concrete measures. These include deeper integration of regional industries into EU value chains, portability of social rights and interoperability of digital services, among many others. Negotiations on a roaming-free zone between the EU and the Western Balkans will further test readiness for closer participation in the EU Single Market.

Regional cooperation does not replace enlargement, nor can it resolve every political dispute. It cannot generate political will where it is absent. What it can do is reduce friction, manage interdependence and lower systemic risk. In a period marked by fragmentation and geopolitical competition, cooperation must demonstrate steady, practical value. Its strength lies not in rhetoric but in consistent delivery of stability, resilience and shared prosperity that individual states cannot secure alone.

Europe Day should remind us that the European project was never merely about institutions. It was about turning interdependence into peace, rules into confidence, and proximity into shared progress. That lesson is again relevant for South East Europe. The region does not need cooperation for ceremony. It needs cooperation that prepares it for the Europe that is emerging: more geopolitical, more competitive, more demanding and, if we choose wisely, more united.

The objective is not institutional preservation for its own sake. It is to ensure that cooperation remains useful, credible and aligned with the expectations of citizens. When it achieves that alignment, its relevance follows naturally. Europe's promise must become Europe's practice. On

Europe Day, that is the message South East Europe should send: we do not only aspire to join Europe; we are ready to help shape it.

In uncertain times, maturity is measured not only by adaptation but by the capacity to remain principled while evolving. We are ready for that.