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Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs within the Berlin Process

9 November 2020

Speech by the Secretary General of the Reginal Cooperation Council *Majlinda Bregu*

Dear Minister Zaharieva and Osmani,

Dear Commissioner Gabriel and Varhelyi

Your Excellency Minister Maas,

Dear colleagues and Ministers of Foreign Affairs,

This year we have experienced one of the biggest shocks in the last century. Western Balkans, a region uninterruptedly saturated with a concatenation of crisis, has to face the worst pandemic which has unfolded without any mercy.

"We are as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided"- the famous Harry Potter author Rowling catches at her best the lessons learnt during the first 6 months of the pandemic.

All of us here together today are real testimonials of how quickly this pandemic revealed the truth **that crisis forces commonality of purpose on one another.**

With disaster threatening, lack of medical kits, proper Covid-19 medical uniforms, equipment/ventilators, recovery protocols, shortage of doctors and nurses in our economies, goods being delayed in long queues on borders - the main question became how to respond quickly.

I am proud RCC coordinated a prompt reaction between WB6 and EC, and with the prominent work done by TCT and CEFTA we established Green lanes for food and medical equipment; this worked out surprisingly well. We started with 2.000 trucks per day and now we reached 13.000 per day. I hope that this deal will continue to be implemented until we achieve 24/7 border crossing points with EU MS bordering with our region.

We are thankful that EU swiftly supporter the region during the first months of pandemic and later adopted the Economic and Investment Plan to spur the economic recovery of the WB.

Dear ministers,

Tomorrow your leaders will endorse the new Action Plan for this region - Common Regional Market.

When Regional Economic Area (REA) was born and endorsed in Trieste a bit more than 3 years ago, WB6 **leaders agreed to give a chance to this region to build its own economic area by enabling unobstructed flow of goods , services capital and highly skilled labor, making the region attractive and fit for investment.**

If I was asked today how far REA has been implemented I would clearly say: **REA paved the way to Common Regional Market through a mixed track record of success stories.**

Mostly, it helped citizens and business community **leverage the necessity of regional cooperation even more** and **passed the message to politicians that politics focused on borders and disputes will not make WB richer.**

Common Regional Market is not a novelty from the scratch: It is a great plan based on four freedoms, the same as EU Single Market, strengthened with Investment, Digital, Industry and Innovation. We are proud to have shouldered the heavy burden of this process together with DG NEAR, regional organizations, IFI-s, and other partners. But, governments will have to shoulder the responsibility to implement this plan.

WB is not a perfect region. **Unemployment, economic situation, brain drain, young people leaving our economies is the daunting reality of WB.**

20 years ago a lot of people who sought refuge from the wars were coming back home.

Today 71% of Western Balkans youth think about going to work abroad whilst **43% of them are ready to leave in search of the lost hope.**

The regional growth is forecasted to fall to -5.1%. GDP drop in the second quarter of this year is striking, in some cases up to -20%, largely due to collapse in tourism.

In this environment it is not easy to progress, and that is why we need not complicate our lives further, but give a chance to put in place the very proposals WB6 economies helped to shape.

I do hope Common Regional Market will be endorsed and implemented so as to ensure a deeper economic integration of the region. If so happens, the gains will be broadly shared.

Finally, I need to thank both Chairs for the organization of this Summit, although marked by a series of complications.