



**THIRD ANNUAL MINISTERIAL MEETING ON THE GREEN AGENDA FOR THE
WESTERN BALKANS**

Opening Address by RCC Secretary General Amer Kapetanovic

Žabljak, Montenegro, 18 September 2026

Excellencies, Ministers, Ambassadors, dear friends,

On the mountain above us, there is ice: **Debeli Namet**. Only about **thirty years ago**, researchers established that this drift was in fact moving a small glacier, one of the southernmost in Europe, holding on roughly **five hundred metres below the altitude at which glaciers normally form**. It survived on shade, avalanche snow, and luck.

In recent summers it has all but disappeared. The researchers who study the small ice of these mountains are now increasingly worried that it might reach **the verge of extinction**.

That small struggle for survival of a tiny glacier teaches us something. **The words we use so proudly to describe this region (water-rich, green, forested) are accurate today, but none of them is guaranteed**. Without action to preserve what they describe, they may easily become a description of the past.

In Tirana, some time ago, at a similar regional gathering, I used a famous film ***Don't Look Up*** as a metaphor for a denial we have no luxury of adopting. You remember the message of the movie: the comet is coming, we can see it, we can measure it, and we decide to look down instead and do nothing.

We should not allow ourselves to move from metaphorical denial into a real one, or even worse, into **resignation**. That is the quieter failure: sleepwalking through one bad summer, then two, then ten, and then calling it a new normality.

This is why the RCC took up the Green Agenda, and why we have worked to turn the political mandate our leaders gave us in **Sofia** into concrete steps. A year ago, we adopted a declaration in Dubrovnik; today we are adopting another. Between the two ministerials, we have been working **on the regional climate adaptation strategy**. We promised the biodiversity outline would grow into a real plan and **it has**. The plastics plan has become two concrete things: **a pledge on the five items we litter most, and we work on a system where whoever puts packaging on the market helps pay to collect it**. The forest restoration plan that nobody promised last year is here anyway. **But none of them yet has a budget, or a responsible name behind it**. Making that happen is the test for the next declaration and our joint work in between.

Between the two ministerials, a carbon border adjustment mechanism also came into force, and the green transition stopped being a policy discussion and became a line in a trade account. The cost of the transition arrived before the transition did. That is why we must hurry up and stay open-minded about solutions.

Before I close, three numbers on what this is already costing us.

One. Two days ago, in her State of the Union address, President von der Leyen called this **the summer of truth** — 660,000 hectares burned across Europe this summer, and **more than 35,000 excess deaths in the heatwaves**. She announced a **European Heatwave Plan** built on health preparedness, and a resilience framework that will map **Europe's hundred most vulnerable territories**. **We share the same weather. Last year alone 225,000 hectares burned across the Western Balkans in more than 430 large wildfires.**

Two. Last summer our rivers ran **almost dry**, and towns across this region were put under **water restrictions**. It has happened again this year, with **record-low river levels** that left South East Europe as the most exposed part of the European power system.

Three. The World Bank puts the health cost of air pollution in parts of our region at between **3.6 and 8.2 per cent of GDP**, every year. **That is not only an environmental statistic. That is a growth statistic and a health statistic.**

So we need to regroup. **We should become part of the EU Heatwave Plan.** A map of Europe's vulnerability that stops at our borders is not a map of Europe. We should also think

of bringing **health ministries** into the conversation. With the **WHO** and other partners, I believe we can find regional remedies. If there is a will, there is a way.

Excellencies, one last thing and I will stop.

In two days, this town has an anniversary. On **20 September 1991**, the Parliament of Montenegro did not meet in a hall. It met **in the open air, here in Žabljak**, and adopted the **Declaration on the Ecological State of Montenegro** — the first country in the world to define itself that way. It speaks of a **debt to nature**, to be honoured “in the name of our own survival and the future of our descendants.”

We are the descendants. We are sitting under the same mountain, deciding whether we pay that debt — or refinance it for one more generation.

Thirty-five years later, let us be the generation remembered for delivering.

The mountain has been patient with us. I would not assume it stays that way.

Thank you.