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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

by **Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council,
Majlinda Bregu**

Balkan Barometer 2021 launch

24 June 2021

- Dear panellists, dear participants, partners and journalists, it gives me great pleasure to open yet another launch of the Balkan Barometer edition.
- BB was initially launched as an attempt to measure the impact of regional actions implemented under the South East Europe 2020 Strategy. Now the Barometer is considered as a reliable source of regional data widely employed and referenced by media, business, civil society and decision makers alike.
- For its seventh year in a row, Balkan Barometer remains an independent guide to attitudes towards cooperation and integration, as well as to other key policy areas both at domestic and regional level that affect the daily lives of the Western Balkan citizens and businesses.
- This year we engaged in three comprehensive surveys: **the Balkan Barometer Business and Public Opinion** composed of citizens' and business perspectives and **Securimeter** which we launched a month ago.
- I can say: **human uncertainty and vulnerability are the main concerns** followed by **some goodish news which is the consciousness about the benefits of regional cooperation.**



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- We asked citizens of the region “to name the problem they consider as the most striking one. **49% replied unemployment and 46% economic situation; unemployment concerns young people the most.**
- You should not be puzzled by the fact that, same as the last year, public institutions are looked upon with a steadily rising dose of distrust. It is too blatantly displayed and this is not at all surprising.
- The least trusted public institutions are again the political parties with 71% followed by parliaments and courts and judiciary with 61% and governments with 57%.
- Arthur Schopenhauer said “**reality is an act of willingness**”, but how willing are the media to mirror the reality independently? The answer is: 62% think that media is not independent.
- Pandemic shifted opinions and influenced realities. People are more hesitant to leave and work abroad – 37% of citizens would do it – a decreasing trend in comparison with last year. **The rationale behind it: pandemic.**
- This year, the results of the pandemic snapshot of the Balkan Barometer depict a **decline of regional public and business sentiment across the region.** This is not surprising if we consider the actual output loss in terms of GDP in the Western Balkans that amounts to -5%.
- As we anticipated last year, a neighbour **in need is a neighbour indeed.** WB citizens have increased their support to regional cooperation and EU.
- Balkan Barometer records **continued growing support for regional cooperation** with **77% of citizens**, whilst **69% of businesses see the quality of regional cooperation as important for their business.**
- In the same vein, **support for EU integration and accession has significantly increased during the pandemic year**, despite the slowness



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of the enlargement process. **62% of respondents see EU membership as a good thing, as do 66% of businesses.**

- The vast majority of Western Balkan citizens – **73% perceive EU as the most preferred block to trade with**, while the Union tops the first place as the **most supportive in anti-pandemic efforts by 43% of**

respondents through medical and financial help – well ahead of China – 14%, Turkey – 9% or Russia – 7%.

- We take pride in the fact that the regional achievements from the last year, including the endorsement of an ambitious four-year regional economic integration agenda – **Common Regional Market** and the **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** have been recognised by citizens and businesses.
- **Western Balkan businesses note they will undoubtedly benefit from travelling across the region with ID cards** – an agreement being negotiated as part of the Common Regional Market agenda. 61% of respondents support this initiative, as travelling between some of the economies of the region is facing further hurdles.
- Guess who is leading: **Kosovars with 74%** who do not travel freely either in the EU or in the region.
- Balkan Barometer points out to an incremental impact of digitalisation on everyday life. **The overall satisfaction with the quality of internet remains at remarkably high levels – at 85%.**
- **Regional Roaming Agreement** has helped almost half of respondents to save money on phone costs (48%). This gives a positive stimulus in the run-up to an important 1st of July milestone – when the roaming charges will be reduced to zero within the region!



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- However, Internet brings challenges of its kind: Online radicalisation of youth in WB6 has been observed as a big threat. Namely, **70% of the region's respondents indicated that there is a strong probability for online radicalisation** of their children.
- Under Common Regional Market digital policy area, the region will continue working towards providing broadband internet access for the vast majority of households, significantly reducing roaming costs

between the WB6 and the EU over time, coordinating data protection approaches, and many more.

- Post-pandemic recovery efforts are expected to prioritise economic growth followed by environmental protection.
- Encouragingly enough, more than **70% of WB citizens see both climate change and pollution as a problem** in their economy; while **55% of businesses see pollution as a priority**.
- This gives **wind in the sails for the region** ahead of the implementation of Green Agenda for the Western Balkans that seeks to tackle these problems, among many others.
- At the same time, the importance of public health in this period shows that healthcare is another area where regional cooperation and investment is urgently needed.
- All WB economies prioritise healthcare as one of the most immediate problems their economies need to tackle.
- Looking at the business perspective, **59% of Western Balkan businesses were forced to downscale and reduce their operations** in the midst of the pandemic, 16% temporarily paused or closed their operations, and 1% permanently ceased their operations.



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- For around 62% of businesses, access to financial resources decreased due to the pandemic and for 69% investment incentives are quite important when making the decision to invest abroad.
- **The three biggest concerns for Western Balkan businesses at this moment** are loss of income (30%) reduced productivity (20%), with possible cessation of operations closely following with 19%.
- In terms of prioritisation once the pandemic is over, **economic recovery is seen as the main priority by a wide margin of 56% of respondents**, followed by health and wellbeing (29%), social progress (14%) and environmental protection (2%).
- The scepticism towards the vaccination remains; 42% of Western Balkan respondents are not willing to take vaccine, **while 56% are willing**. The fraction of respondents who claim to be ‘against vaccines in general’ is quite high (13%).
- One reason being attributed to higher scepticism is the spread of disinformation – Securimeter points out to **75% of respondents who consider disinformation a problem for democracy, causing harm to economy and finance**.
- **54% of respondents admit to several times a month come across news or information that misinterpret the reality.**
- The *infodemic* is as dangerous as the pandemic so it will be important to scale up efforts to counter the growing surge of disinformation that impedes access to trustworthy sources and reliable information.
- Once again, the power of regional cooperation and working together has stolen the limelight of this edition, providing us hope that only by joint efforts we can walk the last mile towards our European goal.
- That is why we continue our joint endeavour with our regional and international partners.



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- Speaking of our partners, allow me to warmly welcome and invite Ms. Alessandra Viezzer to take the floor.
- Alessandra, the floor is yours.