

Marković-Bošković (RCC): New investments in gas must not sideline investments in RES

New investments in energy sector in the Western Balkans should support the decarbonisation target and not sideline investments in renewable energy sources (RES), grids, energy storage and energy efficiency, stated Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Green Agenda Coordinator Ivana Marković-Bošković.

For Beta Agency's Zelena Srbija portal she said that the region had seen visible development of solar and wind farms, but the strong dependence on coal remained and the decarbonisation process needed to be accelerated.

The latest RCC's Report on the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GARI) notes that large hydropower plants continue to dominate the renewable energy capacity, especially in Albania and Serbia which have the largest total installed capacities.

It also points out that the developing technologies, such as those using biomass and biogas, have a negligent share in the region, indicating untapped potential for further diversification.

By signing Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda in 2020, Western Balkans Six (WB6) committed to working together with the EU on achieving carbon neutrality of Europe by 2050.

However, new gas infrastructure projects are being planned or developed in the region, justified by WB6 by their need to diversify supply and ensure energy security. New gas power plants are under construction in Niš and Novi Sad in Serbia, including gas lines and storage facilities; Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are constructing gas interconnectors, while Albania has announced development of an LNG terminal.

RCC's GARI does not assess individual gas projects, but, according to Marković-Bošković, it indicates region's strong dependence on electricity production from coal and the need to accelerate decarbonisation, along with maintaining security of supply and just transition which provides support to workers and communities whose livelihoods depend on coal.

Marković-Bošković said that decisions on individual energy projects fell within the competence of each WB6, in line with its needs and priorities, including its climate commitments, and that their impact on achieving energy and climate targets depended on what energy sources they replaced, whether better alternatives were available and how long they would remain in use.

"It is important that new investments do not sideline investments in renewable sources, grids, energy storage and energy efficiency," said Marković-Bošković.

She also pointed out that these projects should be assessed in terms of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which adds to the importance of emissions reduction for Western Balkans competitiveness and access to the EU's market.

“And that is why today’s investment decisions should support the long-term goal of decarbonised energy system, underpinned by reliable emissions measurement and further integration of the regional market with the EU’s,” said Marković-Bošković.

She reminded of the Declaration adopted by the region’s ministers at the Green Agenda Meeting in Žabljak in September, which calls for accelerated development of locally available renewable sources, with investments in the energy security, more resilient grids, energy storage and regional connections.

“The Declaration recognises the vulnerability of hydro-dependant systems to droughts and changes in precipitation, highlighting the importance of diversification of energy sources to ensure security of supply. Development of new capacities must be accompanied with the protection of nature and local communities,” said Marković-Bošković.

GARI states that the share of large coal combustion plants in total energy production in the region is 59% and that they are the primary sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

However, as estimated, WB6 still do not have sufficiently developed plans and detailed timelines for their closure.

“Coal phase-out requires concrete answers: how to ensure reliable and affordable supply, how to replace existing capacities and how to support coal-dependant workers and communities. Žabljak Declaration emphasises that just transition requires affordable financing, targeted investments and technology transfer,” said Marković-Bošković.

Regulations advance faster than their implementation

RCC’s GARI estimates that in 2025 WB6 have made gradual overall progress in implementing the Green Agenda, in particular regarding strengthening policy framework and extending regional cooperation; however, translating these commitments into efficient action and measurable results in the area of environment remains the key challenge for the upcoming years.

Marković-Bošković stressed that most work has been done in passing laws, adopting strategies and plans, and strengthening regional cooperation.

“Greater challenge is their implementation, which often lacks sufficient funding, institutional capacities, good coordination and reliable data to monitor the results,” said Marković-Bošković.

She added that the realistic assessment of progress must take into account that the Western Balkans had a different starting point compared to the EU and that it does not have the financial instruments, scientific and expert support or data sharing mechanisms available to the EU member states.

“Green Agenda involves a shift in the way in which we produce and use energy and manage our resources. It is a demanding process, involving considerable investments and long-term support,” said Marković-Bošković.

As for decarbonisation, which is the first pillar of the Green Agenda, Marković-Bošković said that four of WB6 adopted their climate laws, with advances in developing or updating energy and climate plans and added that it was now crucial to complete the remaining plans and ensure their implementation.

In the area of transport, regulations, rail infrastructure and road safety are being improved, with road transport still dominating the sector.

“Some progress has been made in the area of waste management and air pollution reduction; however, waste collection and recycling, wastewater treatment and consistent implementation of regulations remain some of the biggest challenges,” said Marković-Bošković.

As she noted, the next step is to ensure that the agreed measures have clearly designated implementers, funding and timelines.

“The citizens reasonably expect the adopted plans to be translated into clearer air, less waste, more affordable energy, better public transport and greater security against climate risks. It is these changes that should measure the success of the Green Agenda,” said Marković-Bošković.