

Launch of Balkan Barometer and SecuriMeter 2022

24 June 2022, Brussels

Opening remarks by the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Majlinda Bregu

Dear guests,

Distinguished speakers, partners and journalists,

Ladies and gentlemen present in the room and online,

There is an old saying: if you want to know, just ask, which leads to the decision RCC has taken years ago to conduct its own surveys on the Western Balkans.

So, a warm welcome to the twenty-twenty-two (2022) launch of Balkan Barometer and SecuriMeter, back-to-back with yesterday's EU-Western Balkans Summit.

While many things change, our public and business perceptions surveys remain a truthful source of sentiments across the region.

At times, the results surprise us, sometimes they serve as a wake-up call, while on other occasions they confirm that our efforts are not in vain as citizens and businesses feel the benefits of our work.

Seventy six percentage (76) of Western Balkan citizens find regional cooperation a great approach.

This figure number one (1) I want you to remember.

Remember that figure because it is more than we expected it to be.

The *EU membership continues to enjoy support by majority of citizens*, by sixty percent (60%).

At the same time, sixty percent (60%) of Western Balkan businesses consider their economy's EU membership as a good thing in terms of their business.

And this is a figure I would also like you to remember.

Why business is so supportive?

They are the first to foster partnerships and business relations and they always look for the most serious, solid partners within the vicinity of their countries.

A lot of business community in the Western Balkans is composed mostly of small and medium enterprises.

Those are the backbone of every economy. More importantly, the small and medium enterprises account for more than seventy-two percent (72%) of total employment in the region. They are key to foster economic growth, innovation, social inclusion and job creation.

Being European is a state of mind and our citizens and businesses not only recognise it but also try hard to run their business as efficiently as possible.

The EU is just around the corner and with the war in Ukraine we saw how close this corner actually is.

The war has awakened the spirits of the past by bringing up security concerns. We cannot overlook the deep apprehension that has settled across our region, which is being increasingly faced with security, energy security and economic implications of the war in Ukraine.

The war also has its impact on the information space of the Western Balkans.

The transnational nature of disinformation makes disinformation campaigns seeking to promote anti-Western sentiments and threaten the stability of the Western Balkans capable of travelling freely from their geographical domains to the new ones. ***Seventy-four percent (74%) of respondents agree that disinformation is a security threat to their economies.***

This is figure number three (3).

SecuriMeter shows that false news or news misrepresenting reality remain widespread for forty-seven percent (47%) of people. **It is somewhat striking that in the eyes of the public, journalists and press and broadcasting management are among the top three spreaders of disinformation, considered so by forty-six percent (46%) and thirty-three percent (33%) of respondents, respectively, but at the same time they are seen as the ones mostly responsible for stopping the spread of fake news.**

Addressing security challenges remains highly important. This is especially the case with five biggest challenges: serious and organised crime ninety-one percent (91%), financial crime eighty-nine percent (89%) and terrorism eighty-eight percent (88%), as well as

disinformation eighty-six percent (86%), violent extremism eighty-five percent (85%) and natural disasters eighty-five percent (85%).

One (1) in three (3) citizens again and again see corruption as a major threat to their lives.

Please remember that on all security threats citizens have almost the same level of worries.

And here we are at number four (4) to be remembered.

We did not beat around the bush but asked people to give us a clue about two most important problems in their economies: 1) *economic situation* is considered the biggest challenge by forty-seven percent (47%) of citizens, and 2) *unemployment* comes in second with thirty-nine percent (39%) considering it to be detrimental for their economy.

Yes. People need to know they will have an income, that they will be able to provide for their children and that they can afford the healthcare if and when needed.

Along the same lines, the most *pressing concern for young people* are inadequate employment opportunities – as stated by sixty-three percent (63%) of citizens.

Sixty-seven percent (67%) of young people between eighteen and twenty-four (18-24) years of age are considering living and working abroad. This figure is a demonstration of societies which are emptying.

Number five (5) is this one.

It seems we are still not done.

Judicial systems remain the least independent of political influence for an average of two-thirds (sixty-six percent (66%)) of citizens. **Only one-fifth – or twenty-one percent (21%) - trusts political parties, while seventy-five percent (75%) does not.**

And this is figure number six (6).

Ladies and gentlemen,

On average, people living in the Western Balkan cities lose up to one point three (1.3) years of life to air pollution. The population is exposed to some of the highest

concentrations of air pollution in Europe, which is five times higher than the prescribed EU guideline levels.

The citizens in the region (sixty-seven percent (67%)) are well aware of climate change being a very serious or somewhat serious problem. **Sixty-six percent (66%) view pollution in their place of living as problematic.**

Here we are at figure number seven (7).

Addressing environment and climate change challenges is not a desirable option – it is the *only* sustainable way forward.

You reap what you sow, at least this is true for *roaming in the region*.

Since the implementation of the roaming agreement as of last July, there has been an increase of roaming usage by five-hundred percent (500%).

And this is the eight (8th) figure I want you to remember when leaving this room and is a great one.

The impact of Regional Roaming Agreement was well spotted in business circles, where forty-three percent (43%) of businesses admitted it having a positive impact on their business operations.

We are surely continuing our roaming journey and are investing sizeable efforts in regulatory dialogue with the EU member states in order to have a tailor-made approach to reducing roaming charges between the EU and the region.

Here I am coming to an end.

Why do I kindly asked you amidst a lot of interesting figures that can be of great use to formulate policies and face challenges to remember only eight (8)?

First because no one can remember all numbers.

Second and the more important one is that the eight (8) figures are powerful and create a cascade of dynamics present in the Westerns Balkans.

There is no EU perspective supported at the level of sixty percent (60%) without regional cooperation being supported by seventy-six percent (76%) of people.

But there are less chances to convince the tough liners at the EU that we will cause no problems to EU if corruption and organised crime are still a concern for more than eighty percent (80%) of the citizens.

It will be hard to innovate and upskill the region, while trying to turn it in a great investment hub, if sixty-seven percent (67%) of youth would like to leave.

Well. Instagram and Facebook connects people but disinformation is a threat to national security worldwide. Here, the region is fully aligned in sharing the same concern with the rest of the world.

The same goes for air pollution. It affects disproportionately people everywhere and statistics here can only serve to again recognise the fact that air pollution and environmental challenges know no borders.

And finally: where there is a will there is a way. That is the lesson learned from the Roam Like at Home the region embarked on and successfully made it happen.

I am sure these and more will be discussed further today, as there is no going back. The old slow local world is gone.

Thank you.