

Ministerial conference:

“Lifting Barriers for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Western Balkans”

12 May 2022, Tirana/Hybrid

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

Dear ministers,

Dear Erjon,

Dear all,

Welcome to this Tirana Tourism Ministerial which bears testimony to the changing paradigm in the tourism industry.

Tourism is about transformation and has the power to bring us all together

**“To move, to breathe, to fly, to float,
To gain all while you give,
To roam the roads of lands remote,
To travel is to live.”**

Danish poet and novelist Hans Christian Andersen is best known for the dozens of fairy tales he wrote. At age twenty-five, he embarked on a trip, and left instructions for the publication of his first *Autobiography*, should he fail to return alive. *These verses are taken from that: The Fairy Tale of My Life*

Travel has existed since the beginning of time when primitive man set out, often traversing great distances, in search of game that provided the food and clothing necessary for his survival.

But, tourism as we know it today is distinctly a twentieth-century phenomena.

Today, tourism has grown significantly in both economic and social importance. It has been the fastest growing economic sector of most industrialised countries over the past several years

It is not just about holidays and new adventures. This incredible industry, quite literally, makes the world go round. From supporting local businesses to making up trillions of dollars of the global GDP, the importance of tourism for the economy is simply massive.

In our region Pre-pandemic life showed some positive trends. In two thousand nineteen, more than twelve million people visited Western Balkans, which brought us profit of seven point two, billion euros. Tourism made ten point two percent of the region's GDP and accounted for more than twenty-five percent of exports!

On average, eleven point four percent of the total employees in the Western Balkans were from this sector, and fifty five percent were women.

Post-pandemic period of last summer shows seventy percent recovery in all tourism visits, while Western Balkan regional travel shows ninety-two percent of recovery.

Let me spice it up a little bit. Last year, the total number of foreign nationals who visited Albania surged by one hundred fourteen percent year-on-year, reaching five point seven million, and most of the visitors are our neighbors.

As per our latest data from this year edition of Balkan Barometer, Montenegro – by twelve percent, Serbia by- twelve percent and Albania by eleven percent were the most visited economies by their regional counterparts. From those who had travelled within the region, tourism was the main purpose for fifty-three percent of respondents.

However, Tourism was and still may be the most affected sector. Tourism will be the third sector which will be affected by the war in Ukraine. The reliance on Russian tourist arrivals in some Western Balkan economies is exceptionally high. For example, Montenegro received fifteen percent of its foreign tourists in two thousand nineteen (pre-COVID year) from Russia. And travel and tourism sector contributes to Montenegro GDP by thirteen percent. Other economies in Western Balkans are less reliant on the Russian inbound tourists.

Tourism has a great potential to accelerate progress and transform the *threats* into **opportunities** if managed well and wisely. The sector can generate quality jobs for an inclusive and sustainable growth, reduce poverty and offer incentives for environmental conservation – a way to help transition towards a region more *inclusive, open* and *resilient* to the crises.

During the last three years tourism development was particularly focused on development of joint cultural routes (Western Balkans Crossroads of Civilisations, Balkan Monumental Trail, Illyricum Trail), support to adventure/rural tourism (Via Dinarica route among others), international

promotion of region's tourism potential, dissemination of small-scale grants across the region's tourism sector.

However, there is an open question to us all – how to *position Western Balkans at the world tourism map*;

Removing barriers is the first step.

Enable free movement of people across the region. The Agreement on Freedom of Movement with IDs in Western Balkans and Agreement on Freedom of Movement of Third-Party Citizens within Western Balkan are ready to be signed and they will give a new boost to the tourism;

Ease the path

Humans tend to look for finding the smoothest route without obstacles and roadblocks.

We are frequently asked what the Roaming Free Western Balkans Really actually meant for tourism.

I'll say is more than the value of money we save by roaming free in the region.

Is more about connectivity! People feel better creating deeper connections. Talking to a loved one on phone or videocall, maybe does not gives the same level of happiness one gets from hugging, but is human and now among us cost zero.

Roaming free region is an opportunity to boost touristic offer and complement progressive tourism policies and practices. Increase of up to **five-hundred percent of data usage** after the Roam Like At Home is not to be neglected. There was as political motivation to eradicate the so called 'bill shock'.

There was a clear market value on doing this, business community was eager to make use of this policy, citizens deserve this and more. That is why we have seriously, and not without a cost, embarked in having the roaming reduced regime among western Balkans and Europe.

On June 8th, WB-EU star the process of aligning policies and regulatory practices.

Promote and build a new image

A couple of years ago, RCC launched the campaign "Balkan we live it you love it", promoting the best capture of the gems of our small and colourful region.

In a bit over than two-hundred thousand square kilometres, you can find breath-taking mountains, *clean lake waters, stunning waterfalls, flawless beaches and rich culinary offer.*



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We are blessed to be surrounded by these beauties of the Western Balkans, but a unique investment destination needs to go hand in hand with the development of new tourism products.

To achieve the traveling trends, we need to think of new creative strategies of targeting new markets.

Why we at RCC put our soul to support innovative ideas on tourism coming from youth, in the last two years?

Because our region is emptying. As much as 61% of young people want to leave and if we do not think of creative, democratic and smart policies to keep them home, they, -the innovators that are paving the way for more innovations to come, will leave our communities, our city, our countries.

We launched “Futurismo”, a regional competition that invites interested start-ups, entrepreneurs, organisations to propose and develop innovative technological digital solutions that will have a positive effect in the future of tourism in the region.

Seven most impactful and innovative proposals were awarded. Embarking on very creative solutions from the last year, whose testimonials you will see shortly, we decided to go along with this year “Futurismo” first thing after the summer season.

Tourism has a vast potential as a major catalyst for job creation and a driving force for economic growth and development especially for tourism dependent regions like ours.

As Pierre Bourdieu said: to design the future, a hold on the present is needed. In the present the development of sustainable tourism in our region, requires the existence of an infrastructure, as well as hotel accommodation and other facilities specific to tourism.

In many cases these utilities are economically connected indivisible in the sense that, in providing them for the tourism industry, those at the same time become available for the use of local people.

Well, changing a town, a country or a region into a destination, does not happen overnight. There is all in here in this region, beauty and pain, swirling realities come together and contemporary are pulled apart.

Flares of emotions that rise like waves, break, foam, repel, make being happy quite difficult. But right in the middle of all this, we at RCC, were tempted to see the earth, day, night, space, path, dream, love, sorrow, loneliness, friendship, animosity, rebellion, survival, through the Stars that are born in this Balkan’s chaos of ours. From Anri Sala, Biljana Durdevic, Driant Zeneli, Flaka Haliti, Nada Prlja, Selman Selma, Šelja Kamerić, Sokol Beqiri, Yanecalovski, part of the Art House idea. Other artists from the Balkans have been and will continue to be the nexus to promote culture and tourism regionally and globally.



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Dear participants,

I know Western Balkans needs to work harder and faster in order to outdo itself, and to become that region that completes Europe, not only joins it. I am confident too, time is now to shift the narrative from the date of joining the EU to the real transformation of our economies and our region.

I am sure you will have many ideas to share and discuss further during the day. So, let me wish us all a very fruitful discussion.



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