



DRAFT REPORT
ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE
REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL SECRETARIAT

For the period
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BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE REGIONAL
COOPERATION COUNCIL

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Executive Summary

Regional cooperation has achieved many notable successes over the past few years and this must be highlighted, in particular in the last year of the implementation of the first Common Regional Market (CRM) Action Plan. Green Lanes were established during the pandemic to keep critical supplies flowing without interruption, a system that has since expanded to the European Union (EU). Roaming usage in the Western Balkans Six (WB6) saw a 500% rise, reflecting improved connectivity. Nearly 1,200 new companies joined the regional trade network, strengthening economic integration, while workforce mobility improved with the recognition of higher education qualifications and seven key professions. Our joint initiatives with regional partners led to a 19% increase in trade of goods and services in the last decade and a doubling of intra-regional trade in the past five years. Over the recent years, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has facilitated the signing and endorsement of more than 20 agreements, declarations, and joint statements, all striving towards improving regional integration and cooperation. Apart from our efforts to implement the existing CRM Action Plan in the reporting period, we have also worked hard on the deliverables for the **10th Berlin Process Summit** that was held in Berlin on 14 October.

This enthusiasm for regional cooperation is partly reflected in our recent [2024 Balkan Barometer survey](#). It continues to reflect **strong support for regional cooperation**, with 82% of respondents viewing it as crucial for improving political, economic, and security conditions, while 54% of respondents believe **EU membership would positively impact their economies**, still showing relatively strong support for European integration, although falling for the third consecutive year. Worries about key issues such as inflation, corruption, and unemployment however remain prominent amongst the population.

During the reporting period, in particular, the Regional Cooperation Council, in coordination with WB6, regional partners, European Commission, and German Government, coordinated and prepared the **second iteration of the Common Regional Market Action Plan 2025-2028 (CRM2 AP)** signed by WB6 leaders at the Berlin Process Summit. In the next CRM, as a critical pillar of the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, measures will be implemented to enhance access to the EU Single Market, including initiatives to ensure that WB6 students can attend EU universities without incurring additional costs and that their diplomas are recognised across the EU. Additionally, we are transitioning from a purely economic cooperation model to a socio-economic partnership. Moreover, we are providing support to young and women entrepreneurs to help them successfully establish their businesses. Our focus in the next CRM Action Plan is also on developing a skilled workforce capable of addressing current gaps in digitalisation, while gradually supporting businesses in their transition towards a green, circular economy.

RCC offered continuous **support for the Berlin Process** during the reporting period. Apart from the successful adoption of the CRM2 Action Plan, RCC also contributed to several other important deliverables of the Summit. In the reporting period, **the Regional Investment Screening Standards (RISS) and the Declaration on Research and Innovation**

Infrastructure were negotiated and endorsed in the Berlin Process frame. The RCC continued to play a key role in implementing the **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) Action Plan 2021-2030**. RCC coordinated and moderated efforts in the Regional Working Group on Green Agenda (RWG GAWB) for the Joint Declaration of the **first Ministerial Meeting on the Green Agenda (the Hamburg Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans)** which was adopted on 08 October as one of the Berlin Process Summit deliverables.

Additionally, the RCC played an important role as a facilitator of the negotiations for the **Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans** which were successfully concluded and the Agreement was signed at the Berlin Process Summit. Moreover, in the mobility agenda, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, and Montenegro ratified the **Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Midwives, Veterinary Surgeons, and Pharmacists** (so-called MRA 2), which thus entered into force on 22 August 2024.

Regarding our **digital portfolio**, the most important developments in the reporting period were in the area of **roaming**, while the focus was also on the preparations of the fifth edition of **Balkathon**. In October this year, **we celebrate the first anniversary** of the implementation of the **EU/Western Balkans Roaming Declaration**. Over the past year, we have been pleased to observe a significant increase in roaming usage from the Western Balkans Six, reflecting the positive impact of the agreement. Additionally, telecom operators have been actively implementing the provisions of the Declaration, ensuring its successful execution.

Over the last couple of months, some of the signatories of the EU/WB Roaming Declaration have introduced new data roaming packages, with reduced prices, aiming to meet increased demand. WB6 operators and 87.5% of EU operators offer at least one data roaming tariff below the agreed price cap for 2026-2027. Three operators in the region have reduced the regular price of mobile data roaming in the EU to 18 EUR, preventing bill shocks for their customers. This reduction represents savings of up to 99.8%. The RCC also held the **fifth edition of Balkathon**, a regional competition inviting young teams to develop innovative solutions in areas such as technology, energy, and tourism.

In our security portfolio, RCC advanced its work on the **SecuriMeter 2024**, gathering data on public perceptions of security issues across the region. Additionally, the RCC is preparing to host the **9th Regional Security Coordination Conference**, the so-called Jumbo Security Conference in November 2024 in Sarajevo.

RCC continued its efforts to implement the **SEE2030 Strategy** and began work on the **Third Annual Interim Report (AIR)** while updating its webpage for further engagement.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

In the political domain, an important development under the Skopje Chairpersonship-in-Office of South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) was the selection of Mr. Amer Kapetanovic as the **new Secretary General of the RCC** in June 2024. His appointment was made with the consensus of 13 participants, marking a new chapter for the organisation's leadership.

In conclusion, the Regional Cooperation Council remains dedicated to driving progress in South East Europe and the Western Balkans Six through increased cooperation, innovation, and strategic planning. However, there is still room for all stakeholders to do more. The region needs more integration over disintegration, more cooperation over isolation, and more actions over words. The RCC is committed to fostering this growth, ensuring a future of unity and prosperity for the region.

Support to the Implementation of Regional Programmes

A. Western Balkans Common Regional Market (CRM)

A1. Economic Competitiveness

A1.1. Investments and Financial Markets

During the reporting period, the Regional Cooperation Council continued its dialogue on investment policy through the **Joint Working Group on Investments (JWGI)**. Enhancing the investment environment, particularly for investments that support sustainable development, is expected to be a key priority in the business enabling environment and competitiveness pillar of CRM2. Following our initial work, the **Regional Investment Screening Standards (RISS)** were negotiated and agreed upon after several meetings and endorsed at the Berlin Process Summit. These standards will provide a baseline for Western Balkans Six (WB6) to develop investment screening mechanisms, establishing a legal framework for screening investments in line with their priorities and strategic goals. Additionally, the regional investment incentive database has been transformed into an interactive platform, now accessible to investors through the RCC website, enhancing transparency and serving as a tool to assess the effectiveness of incentives.

On the promotion side, four **Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs)** from WB6 have successfully completed outreach campaigns in the EU and beyond, with the support of the RCC and the World Bank. They have attracted interest from investors and expect this to translate into actual investments. IPAs from the remaining WB6 are in the process of completing their campaigns and will finalise them soon.

During the reporting period, the RCC maintained dialogue on financial matters through the **Working Group on Financial Markets (WGFM)**. Sustainable and digital finance are expected to gain more prominence in CRM2. The RCC commissioned a comprehensive

assessment of sustainable finance in the Western Balkans Six, serving as a baseline to initiate a regional workstream aimed at facilitating mobilisation of finance to support the green transition.

A1.2. Industrial Development and Sustainable Tourism

Work on Industrial Development has been focusing on various value chains as per the strategic ones defined in the CRM Action Plan. A comprehensive impact assessment of industrial policy in the Western Balkans Six and of the overall economic development over the past decade is at the final stage of preparation. The report also reflects on the implementation of the CRM Action Plan 2021–2024, and aims to measure the effectiveness of industrial policies in achieving economic growth and generating employment, including their impact on strategic sectors. The importance of enhancing industry competitiveness in line with the ambitions of EU Green Deal is reflected in all regional industrial development activities, aligned as well with regional partners, international organisations and regional working groups.

Given the cross-cutting nature of **Creative Industries (CIs)**, RCC worked to strengthen synergies with tourism activities in order to facilitate collaborations that can result in cultural improving tourism, promotion of local art, entrepreneurship, etc. In this regard, the Working Group on Industrial Development (WGID), with focus on creative industries, joined the **Tourism Expert Group (TEG)** on 4 June 2024, in Skopje, with the aim to explore and strengthen collaboration considering that CIs can enrich tourism experience by incorporating cultural products and creative events, and transform tourist destinations into cultural hubs.

In addition, RCC continued to extend partnerships under its activities on industrial development, and in this sense, worth noting is the recognition that RCC received for its support and partnership (in particular on creative industries) by the **Foreign Investors Council Bosnia and Herzegovina on 27 June 2024 in Sarajevo.**

The Western Balkans Six is at a critical stage in its **tourism development**. While the post-pandemic recovery has been remarkable, with tourist arrivals rising by 30.3% and overnight stays increasing by 24% when comparing 2019 to 2023, the region now faces a series of challenges that demand a coordinated response. Recognising the importance of collective action, a key meeting took place on **4 June 2024 in Skopje**, bringing together members of the Tourism Expert Group from the Western Balkans Six, WGID's Creative Industry group members, and international partners involved in regional tourism. This meeting aimed to launch the regional tourism branding process and explore strategies for ensuring the sector's long-term sustainability amidst its rapid growth.

The primary goal of this initiative is to develop a unified tourism identity through a **roadmap for Western Balkans Six regional tourism branding**, showcasing the distinctiveness of each WB6 while presenting the region as a connected and attractive destination. The creation of a cohesive brand is a key step towards boosting the region's visibility on the global tourism stage.

A strong regional identity is expected to drive growth, attract investment, and strengthen the tourism sector, making it more resilient in the face of emerging challenges.

A2. Human Capital Development

A2.1. Research and Innovation Area

In the reporting period, RCC coordinated efforts in drafting a regional **Declaration on Research and Innovation Infrastructure Access and Collaboration** which was one of the Berlin Process deliverables. The Declaration offers significant benefits for researchers from the Western Balkans Six by promoting open access to research facilities across the region, encouraging mobility, and fostering collaboration. It enables researchers to engage in joint projects, share expertise, and utilise advanced research infrastructures, thereby strengthening regional scientific cooperation and driving innovation.

The region's innovation performance has slightly improved over the last years. However, entire WB6 remain Emerging Innovators according to the [European Innovation Scoreboard 2024 \(EIS\)](#). The region performs well in business process innovation and the creation of new products, and reasonably well in job creation within innovative enterprises and sustainability measures amongst firms. Its relative weaknesses include insufficient R&D expenditure in the public sector, limited venture capital, and a lack of direct government support for innovation that affect low levels of patenting and other intellectual property measures, and challenges in producing new doctorate graduates and fostering lifelong learning. On the other hand, according to the latest **Balkan Barometer Business Opinion**, some 52% of businesses in WB6 will likely or somewhat likely invest in research and development in their company in the next three years.

The **Western Balkans Innovation and Research Platform** continued supporting the region's research and innovation infrastructures. RCC and [GÉANT](#)¹ joined forces to encourage Bosnia and Herzegovina to become a member of GÉANT, the only remaining outside the network in Europe. **RCC and GÉANT co-organised a successful regional meeting with GÉANT** in Sarajevo which enabled partners from Bosnia and Herzegovina to learn from best practices shared by representatives of National Research and Education Networks (NRENs) from South East Europe and discuss a roadmap to potential integration into the network with the GÉANT's executives. GÉANT offered Bosnia and Herzegovina additional support to prepare its application for association into the network.

The RCC continued assisting the growth of region's **Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs)** through its **Follow-up Support Programme for the development of DIHs** in the WB6. Its purpose is threefold: (1) identify existing and upcoming funding and capacity-building opportunities suitable to the region's DIHs, (2) build a pipeline of project proposals matching such

¹ The GÉANT Association is the collaboration of European National Research and Education Networks (NRENs)

opportunities, and (3) encourage networking within the region and the EU. As part of the Follow-up Support Programme, the **RCC organised a regional workshop in Rijeka** in collaboration with the University of Rijeka which coordinates the European Digital Innovation Hub Adriatic Croatia (EDIH Adria) implemented within the framework of the Digital Europe Programme (DEP). The workshop assisted less experienced DIHs from the WB6 in understanding how to strategically position themselves within the digital and innovation ecosystem and absorb opportunities offered through the DEP framework. It also encouraged regional knowledge exchange and learning from the EU success stories.

In the reporting period, RCC launched the third regional **Butterfly Innovation Award (BIA)** call. Previous editions of the BIA showcased exceptional innovative solutions and deep talent pool in the WB6. **The BIA's goal** is to encourage region's creative individuals and organisations to further develop their innovative, scalable, and market-based solutions. The Award aims to support the region's economic development by embracing twin green and digital transformations and promoting innovation culture through showcasing successful innovative achievements. Teams of young people from the WB6 will receive awards in green, industry, STEM, women, university and youth categories.

A2.2. Women's Economic Empowerment and Regional Network of Women in STEM

Following the publishing of the study on **"Women Entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans: Stocktaking on constraints and good practices"**, RCC has initiated development of a regional framework for gender-responsive Green Finance, aiming to address some of the study's recommendations related to improving access to finance for women entrepreneurs; enhancing financial literacy and entrepreneurial learning; and supporting women in the green transition and, in particular, circular economy.

The establishment of the Regional Network for Women in Entrepreneurship has delivered a platform to address policy gaps and advance women's economic empowerment (WEE) initiatives at the regional level. In an effort to further strengthen the Network, women's economic empowerment has received a greater focus within CRM2.0, with new measures introduced to facilitate access to finance for women entrepreneurs and improve gender-disaggregated data, essential for evidence-based policymaking. These priorities have been reflected in the discussions and recommendations of the **Gender Equality Forum within the Berlin Process 2024**, underscoring RCC's contributions during the Forum's meetings and the institutionalisation of the WEE component.

To further strengthen the Regional Network, RCC continues to explore **partnerships with various organisations and institutions** on the women economic empowerment agenda (such as cooperating with United Nations Development Programme and UN Women on green

women entrepreneurship), as well as showcase women entrepreneurs of the **Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship** in various RCC events and activities (such as promoting the importance of Women in Tourism at the upcoming Regional Tourism Conference, planned for the end of October 2024).

A2.3. Free Movement of People

After significant efforts by RCC in facilitating negotiations, **the Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans** was signed at the Berlin Process Summit on 14 October 2024. Students in the Western Balkans Six will benefit from this Agreement through the recognition of their secondary education qualifications, allowing them to apply for admission to universities in any of the WB6 with the same criteria as local applicants, thus promoting regional academic mobility and cooperation.

Another agreement whose implementation is subject to higher political level discussions is **the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans**. Meanwhile, RCC continues to support the technical maintenance of the **Regional Recognition Database (RRD)**, which is an operative tool for the implementation of the Agreement, and await the Parties to finalise the necessary internal procedures and actively engage in finding the best working solution for integrating and/or populating the database. Parties' collaboration on the RRD is crucial as it plays pivotal role in the implementation of the Agreement and serves as a vital communication tool. The RRD is instrumental in fostering cooperation, improving evaluation processes, and maintaining the integrity of educational qualifications.

Acknowledging that both Agreements aspire to streamline access to higher education across the Western Balkans Six and foster academic mobility within the region, RCC remains committed to facilitating and supporting the achievement of Agreements' objectives and promotion of academic excellence throughout the Western Balkans Six. Such endeavour necessitates sustained collaboration and unwavering commitment from all stakeholders.

The Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Midwives, Veterinary Surgeons and Pharmacists in CEFTA Context (the so-called MRA 2), signed in 2023, entered into force on 21 August 2024 while the process of ratification is pending in the two Parties. Meanwhile, the **Rules of Procedure** agreed in 2023 for the establishment of Joint Working Group on Recognition of Professional Qualifications which is the final step needed to start the pre-implementation activities of this and the **Agreement on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications of Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Dental**

Medicine and Architects in CEFTA Context, which is ratified by all Parties,² were recently approved by CEFTA Joint Committee.

RCC continues its support to the alignment of region's **Quality Assurance Agencies** with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and future membership in ENQA, in cooperation with Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) and the Agency on Science and Higher Education of Croatia to be further achieved by the end of 2024.

A3. Digital Integration and Implementation of the Digital Agenda for Western Balkans

During the reporting period, a regular dialogue with the WB6 institutions responsible for telecommunications has been maintained. The meeting of the **WB Working Groups on Roaming Policy, Broadband and 5G** was held on 6 June 2024 in Sarajevo. The meeting aimed to discuss the activities and objectives for the upcoming four years as well as kick start the **preparations of the third edition of the WB Roaming Report**, which will cover data from 2022 and 2023. The report is at the final stage of preparation and the validation of data and findings will follow soon to allow publication by the end of 2024.

In October we mark one year of the implementation of **EU/WB Roaming Declaration**. Reductions of roaming charges in both WB6 and EU brought significant spike in roaming traffic. Based on the preliminary results of the new WB Roaming Report, data consumption of WB6 roaming users is growing constantly: only in 2023, compared to 2022, data consumption per WB6 roaming user in the WB6 grew by 55%, and 94% in the EU. After the reductions of data roaming charges with the EU, one of the WB6 operators reported thirty-fold increase in data traffic.

The discussions with the EU and WB6 telecom operators, signatories of the EU/WB Roaming Declaration, continued with two meetings of the signatories of the Declaration held in the reporting period, on 11 July and 27 September 2024. The first meeting aimed to discuss the methodology for the impact assessment of the EU/WB Roaming Declaration and to reflect on the state of play of the data roaming charges reductions.

Compared to the previous review prepared in January 2024, some operators from both WB6 and EU introduced new data packages with increased data traffic, likely in response to user demand. All WB6 operators as well as 87.5% of EU operators offer at least one tariff option for data roaming in the EU below 14 EUR/GB, i.e. the agreed price cap for the period 2026-2027. Three operators from WB6 reduced regular price of mobile data in roaming in the EU to 18 EUR, thus avoiding bill shocks for their customers. Two EU operators also have these prices for the WB6 in line with this price cap. These reductions went up to 99.8%. The second meeting with the signatories was organised end of September, aiming to discuss further the

² So-called MRA 1

methodology to be used for measuring the impact of the Declaration and to find the solution acceptable to all the signatories.

The RCC continued the preparations of the **6th Western Balkans Digital Summit (WBDS)**, through the organisation of the 2nd WBDS Steering Committee meeting for the preparation of the 6th Digital Summit (DS) in June 2024. As the discussions within the WBDS Steering Committee could not define the host of the Digital Summit 2024, the meeting served to discuss the possible event structure, including the topic(s) of the DS and topical work sessions covering all components of the digital area, as well as possible new solution perspectives.

When it comes to **cybersecurity**, the RCC, with the support of the European Commission (EC), organised the **2nd High-Level Cybersecurity Conference** – Cybersecurity challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans Six which was held in Tirana on 9 July 2024. The conference gathered more than 120 high-level participants, coming from WB6 ministries and agencies responsible for cybersecurity, EC, donors, international organisations, private sector, etc., who exchanged views on the outstanding challenges in the field of cybersecurity, including regulations and protocols, cyber threats, regional platforms, including critical infrastructure, and ways in which emerging technologies may help strengthen critical infrastructure security by bringing practical solutions from the private and public sector perspective ways in which. During the conference, the RCC had consultations with the EC and Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) on the development of an interactive database to collect, review and address needs in cybersecurity. The database will be developed in the partnership with IISG, and will be part of the existing IISG database.

Building on this successful encounter and to further strengthen the partnership between the data protection authorities of the region and their EU counterparts, European Data Protection Board (EDPB) and European Data Protection Supervisor, the RCC in cooperation with SIGMA/OECD Programme, Eastern Partnership Regional Fund for Public Administration Reforms (led by GIZ), and ReSPA organised the **2nd high-level exchange and learning week on data protection** in Brussels in the period from 9 to 13 September 2024. In collaboration with the European Commission (Directorate General Justice and Consumers), a Western Balkans Six and Eastern Partnership Region's Data Protection Academy was jointly developed as part of the event. The Data Protection Academy provided a platform for data protection authorities outside the EU to exchange views, best practices, and lessons learned with their EU counterparts. Further, it helped to build capacity, establish contacts, and facilitate effective international cooperation between data protection authorities, which often find themselves dealing with or investigating similar issues.

In addition, the RCC held the **5th regional competition event Balkathon** – *When you turn your idea into a masterpiece*. The competition invited teams composed of people up to 35 years of age coming from Western Balkans Six. The teams were encouraged to include amongst their members qualified individuals including students, legal entities including start-ups, non-governmental and educational institutions. Almost 80 applications were received in the areas of technology of services, green and energy, transport, tourism, agriculture, and other. The [six](#)

[winners](#) of the competition have been announced at the final event held on 3 October 2024 in Tirana. In addition, recognising the importance of supporting the younger generation and promoting early education and digital solutions, the RCC extended the invitation to high schools to participate in the Balkathon competition, dedicating three special recognitions for high school teams.

A4. Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Resilience

During the reporting period, RCC continued to contribute to the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan 2021-2030 through the **Regional Working Group on Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (RWG GAWB)** and **extensive coordination on GAWB-related matters**.

These efforts involved close collaboration with the European Commission, regional partners as outlined in the GAWB Action Plan, and other key international stakeholders, including Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ) and its Regional Climate Partnership with WB6 - endorsed at 2023 Berlin Process Summit, OSCE, UNECE, World Bank, UNEP, WHO, the Joint Research Centre, GIZ, OECD, EU4 Green, etc.

The RCC's main efforts focused on preparing the first **Ministerial Meeting on the GAWB**, in collaboration with BMZ and supported by the EC. The meeting was held on 8 October in Hamburg as part of the Berlin Process 2024.

The **Annual Ministerial Meeting on the GAWB** serves as a vital platform for fostering regional collaboration and advancing environmental sustainability and climate resilience. In alignment with the Sofia Declaration, the meeting brings together key stakeholders to review progress, address challenges, and define the path for future collective action. Its primary objective is to assess the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan across all seven components and provide strategic guidance by endorsing the **Hamburg Declaration on Green Agenda for the Western Balkans**. Insights from this Ministerial meeting will inform the 2024 revision of the GAWB Action Plan to ensure alignment with evolving regional priorities and challenges.

As part of preparations of the First Ministerial meeting, the RCC convened the meeting of the Regional Working Group on GAWB on 20 September in Belgrade, gathering representatives from WB6, European Commission, BMZ and regional partners. This meeting was held to discuss and gather preliminary feedback on several key deliverables mentioned above. The Hamburg Declaration reiterates the commitment to a full and timely implementation of the Green Agenda and its Action Plan 2021-2030, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050. It proposes the establishment of an annual Ministerial Meeting on the GAWB to ensure political momentum and coherence. It highlights the establishment of **emissions Monitoring, Reporting, Verification and Accreditation**, emphasizes just transition governance, phasing out coal, and welcomes alignment with the EU acquis, particularly on environmental standards. It underscores the role of Nature-based Solutions and the commitment to develop the Western Balkans 2030 Biodiversity Strategy. It recommends a comprehensive implementation

approach, involving all sectors, local governments, private sector, and civil society, and leveraging platforms such as the Western Balkans Green and Circular Economy Stakeholders Platform.

At the meeting in September, the **Regional Working Group on GAWB** also discussed the Regional Action Plan on Prevention of Plastic Pollution, including Marine Litter developed by RCC collaborating closely with Western Balkans Six in alignment with the Joint Statement endorsed at 2023 Berlin Process Summit.

Another RCC deliverable - the Western Balkans Climate Adaptation Roadmap - has been discussed at the meeting of the RWG. The Roadmap would aim to achieve two key objectives: first, to acknowledge the urgent need for climate adaptation and reaffirm the region's commitment to action; and second, to establish a long-term vision for climate resilience. Draft Roadmap requires further elaboration on regional cooperation and additional time to incorporate the positions of the WB6 on the document.

RCC continued to support the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) by co-organising the 12th Regular Meeting of the Biodiversity Task Force of the Western Balkans (BDTF). This meeting focused on presenting the plan for developing a comprehensive **Western Balkans Biodiversity Strategic Plan (BSP) and engaging in further discussions with BDTF members**. In 2023, the RCC supported development of the Analytical Paper on Biodiversity which offers strategic guidance for development of BSP aligned with the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, European Green Deal, and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

In addition, the meeting facilitated discussions on the IUCN-led regional project titled ADAPT 2.0: Nature-based Solutions for climate change mitigation and adaptation in the Western Balkans Six.

Second Edition of the GAWB Action Plan – Implementation Report 2023 (GARI 2023) provides a comprehensive assessment of the progress made in 2023 across all seven components of the Action Plan, identifies challenges, and proposes necessary adjustments. Its preparation is in the final stages and will soon be shared with the WB6, European Commission, and regional partners for validation.

B. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security

B1. Political Cooperation

One of the important developments in the political domain within the reporting period has been the **selection of the new Secretary General of RCC** Mr. Amer Kapetanovic in June 2024. The selection procedure had been initiated and led by the Skopje Chairpersonship-in-Office (C-i-O) earlier this year and it was successfully concluded with consensus of 13 Participants

voting for Mr. Kapetanovic. The SEECP Political Directors, at a meeting held on 12 June 2024, made the nomination proposal of Mr. Kapetanovic for the position of the Secretary General of the RCC, which was endorsed at the 53rd RCC Board meeting (ad-hoc) after which the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs appointed Mr. Kapetanovic as the Secretary General, while the SEECP Summit approved the appointment.

16th Annual Meeting of RCC was held in Skopje on 12 June 2024 and was co-chaired by the RCC and Skopje SEECP Chairpersonship-in-Office. The meeting served as an opportunity to exchange views on the overall regional development and for the RCC Secretary General to present the organisation's Annual Report for the past year – which was adopted by Participants – and to deliver information on the SEE2030 Strategy implementation and next steps.

Annual Meeting was held back-to-back with the **Meeting of the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs** and the **SEECP Summit** that took place on 13 June also in Skopje.

On 1 July 2024, Tirana took over the Chairpersonship-in-Office of SEECP from Skopje and the **first meeting of Political Directors** was held in Tirana on 10 July. During the meeting, the priorities and activity schedule of [Tirana SEECP's Chairpersonship-in-Office](#) were outlined. These priorities encompass European integration, security cooperation, economic growth, health collaboration, tourism and culture, as well as interconnectivity and transport. Additionally, the representative of the Regional Cooperation Council provided an update on the progress of implementing the Mobility Agreements signed under the Berlin Process.

On 26 September 2024, the Regional Cooperation Council organised an **informal meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the SEECP** in cooperation with Tirana SEECP Chairpersonship-in-Office in New York, at the margins of 79th annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The theme of the informal lunch was “Leveraging Competitiveness in South East Europe to Improve Economic Growth and Convergence with the European Union” on which the Participants exchanged their views and they commended the RCC's leadership in driving and facilitating regional cooperation and emphasised the relevance of the second phase of Common Regional Market (CRM).

In the framework of Tirana SEECP Chairpersonship-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process and the Presidency of the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Tourism Agency of Albania organised an international conference titled “**Tourism in Central and South East Europe – New paths of development**” on 27 September in Tirana.

B3. Good Governance

When it comes to the good governance portfolio of the RCC, the reporting period saw ongoing activities for the preparation of the **regional conference titled Improving Access to Justice through Mediation**, to be co-organised by the Regional Cooperation Council and *Mediator* Centre for Peaceful Dispute Resolution on 25 October 2024 in Belgrade. This conference aims

to gather representatives of the most relevant bodies concerned with mediation, i.e. Ministries of Justice, Judicial Councils, and Mediation Associations/Chambers, etc. The focus of the conference will be on ways in which mediation can serve as an effective tool in **enhancing judicial efficiency and reducing court backlogs**, which are prevalent issues in South East Europe.

In the reporting period, RCC also continued to support the strengthening of regional dialogue and institutional cooperation in the field of justice. In the **framework of the RCC-led South East Europe Judicial Training Institutions (SEE JTI) network**, in close cooperation with Council of Europe HELP programme and the National Institute of Justice of Bulgaria, the RCC organised the online course titled The Importance of Quality of Justice in Mediation. Judges and prosecutors from South East Europe and also mediators and representatives of the technical level of the SEE Judicial Training Institutions participated in the training. Besides contributing to the capacity building of judges and prosecutors, the training is also in line with RCC endeavours to promote and encourage the use of mediation and other Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms in SEE.

Preparation activities are also ongoing for the organisation of a **four-day workshop** aimed at supporting the regional exchange as well as raising awareness and **technical capacities of parliamentary staff and ministries regarding measures linked with the Common Regional Market**. This regional workshop will address the findings of the regional assessment conducted by RCC on the training needs of parliamentary staff in the Western Balkans related to CRM, which identified the lack of proper and timely information sharing amongst Governments and respective Parliaments on regional reforms as one of the most important gaps. Hence, an important objective of this workshop is to achieve increased interaction by strengthening the inclusiveness of all stakeholders, especially Parliaments, in moving forward the regional cooperation agenda.

B4. Security

From 1 June to 30 September 2024, the Regional Cooperation Council focused on advancing security cooperation in the Western Balkans Six through the activities outlined below.

The RCC made significant progress with the [SecuriMeter 2024](#), which assesses public perceptions of security-related issues across the Western Balkans Six. In June 2024, the first phase of data collection was successfully completed, gathering responses from over 6,000 respondents across the region. The results will provide a comprehensive view of public concerns, including some of the key issues such as corruption, organised crime, trust in institutions, disinformation, gun ownership, and others.

Following data collection, a kick-off meeting was organised to commence the **second phase**, which focused on data analysis and report drafting. The key findings indicate a persistent sense

of regional insecurity amongst respondents, with concerns about the future stability of the region and personal safety.

As mentioned, RCC is preparing to host the **9th Regional Security Coordination Conference** (so-called Jumbo Security Conference) on 7-8 November 2024 in Sarajevo, marking the first time the event is organised in the Western Balkans Six. This event will bring together government officials, security experts, and international partners to discuss regional security issues. The conference will include discussions informed by the SecuriMeter 2024 findings, and particularly Working Group sessions focusing on organised crime, cybersecurity, and migration management, amongst other things. The Working Groups aim to produce practical recommendations that can inform future security policies. The overall goal of the Conference is to provide a platform for dialogue and to encourage regional cooperation in security matters.

Additionally, the RCC participated in the **South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Deputy Chiefs of Defence Meeting (SEDM-DCHODs)** held in Istanbul, Türkiye, in June 2024. This meeting, chaired by Romania, provided a forum for discussing regional military cooperation. At the meeting, the RCC highlighted ongoing initiatives such as the SecuriMeter 2024 project, presenting its relevance to the security of the region and emphasizing the need for informed decision-making.

RCC participated in the **SEESAC regional meetings**, such as the 11th Regional Roadmap Coordination Meeting and 19th Regional Meeting of SALW commissions, held on 9-11 July 2024 in Podgorica. During those meetings, concerns related to the misuse and proliferation of SALW and its impact on regional security were emphasized.

Preparation activities have been ongoing in the reporting period for the organisation of the **16th Conference of the South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs (SEEMIC)**, to be held on 7-8 October in Split, under Croatian Co-chairmanship-in-Office, and the **14th Meeting of the Heads of the National Security Authorities of SEE (SEENSA)**, to be held on 16-18 October 2024 in Sofia, under Bulgarian Co-chairmanship-in-Office. During the SEEMIC Conference, the participants will discuss contemporary matters of intelligence interest for the region and will adopt the OSINT assessment draft report on the “Security threats for the SEEMIC region emanating from emerging disruptive technologies”. The report is intended to provide the political and military decision-making bodies with timely, relevant and comprehensive intelligence picture on the subject. SEENSA participants are expected to discuss the good practices and innovations in the field of classified information protection and regional security development.

B5. SEE2030 Strategy

During the reporting period, the SEE2030 Strategy team held online information **meeting with SEE2030 Strategy Contact Points** on the current state of play regarding the implementation of SEE2030 Strategy, a panel discussion on the **Emigration of Medical Doctors from South**

East Europe at the symposium 15th Days of BHAAAS (Bosnian and Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Sciences), started working on the **Third Annual Interim Report (AIR)** on the Implementation of the SEE2030 Strategy, and conducted work on updating the SEE2030 webpage. Moving on to the second stage of **South East Europe Inclusive Growth Index (SEE IGI)** implementation and its content is pending.

The online information meeting with **SEE2030 Contact Points** on the current state of play of the implementation of SEE2030 Strategy was held on 05 June 2024. The objective of the meeting was to inform the Contact Points about the latest status of the programming, monitoring, and reporting cycles of the SEE2030 Strategy with a focus on SEE IGI and SecuriMeter, as well as the status of the preparations for the SEE2030 Strategy Annual Implementation Report for 2024, and the updating exercise of SEE2030, the procedure of which was launched on 28 March. The meeting was held before the RCC's Annual Meeting and SEECF Summit. Thus, the SEE2030 National Coordinator Offices were updated about the current state of play regarding the implementation of SEE2030.

In parallel and with regards to the **third AIR**, a team of consultants was engaged and work on the Report is in progress. On 10 June 2024, the preparation of the third AIR was officially announced to the SEE2030 National Coordinators and Contact Points. The Report will cover the period from 01 June 2023 to 31 May 2024. The draft outline of the Report was circulated to the SEE Participants. The third AIR will focus on the following key areas: demographics and human capital, inclusive economic development, and human security. As in the case of the second AIR, this Report will be a result of joint efforts of RCC Secretariat, SEE Participants and other relevant partners. Therefore, the representatives of SEE Participants were asked to share their inputs and answers to four questions; the inputs will be the core of one of the chapters of the Report that will be dedicated to the assessment of resilience and implementation challenges. Inputs from all SEE Participants will be of crucial importance for the regional inclusiveness of the reporting cycle and reconfirming the commitment of SEE Participants to the SEE2030 process. Having a collective discussion will help reaching a common understanding about the objectives of the upcoming Annual Report that would also be used as inputs to the updating of SEE2030 Strategy.

As part of the dialogue with SEE academia, RCC Secretariat organised **Emigration of Medical Doctors from South East Europe panel** at the 15th Days of BHAAAS in Sarajevo on 20 June 2024. This session aimed at shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics and implications of healthcare professionals' emigration from South East Europe, gathering health professionals, representatives of WHO, SEE Participants' representatives (from Ankara, Bucharest, Sarajevo and Tirana), as well as the representatives of private health sector, academia and youth.

During the reporting period, updating and upgrading the [SEE2030 sub-webpage](#) has started. The updated webpage is expected to be operative by the beginning of October 2024. The sub-page will also be used as an interface to disseminate SEE2030 related documents and communications to the National Coordinators electronically.

Moreover, the **SEE IGI's first phase** was finalised and the second stage is expected to start. Nevertheless, RCC received some comments related to the selection and weighting indicators in their aggregation from Athens, Zagreb, and Sofia. Thus, the content of the second stage in SEE IGI would only be possible to commence after the consensus amongst SEE Participants is reached. In this regard, RCC organised the first bilateral consultation meeting with Athens to clarify its comments on SEE IGI in July. A follow-up meeting is planned to be held with SEE Statistical Authorities Network to agree on the date of the second meeting in the upcoming period.

C. Projects

C1. Western Balkans Youth Lab Project³ (WBYL)

During the reporting period from 1 June to 31 October 2024, the Western Balkans Youth Lab 2 (WBYL) conducted key activities including the **Training on the Youth Policy Lab Methodology and Kick-off Conference on Youth Policy Lab on Green Agenda**. These events marked significant steps in enhancing youth participation within the region, aligning with the broader goals of the WBYL to empower young people and foster their involvement in policy-making processes, particularly within the context of the Green Agenda.

The Kick-off Conference, held in Sarajevo from 19 to 21 June 2024, brought together youth representatives of Youth Councils, umbrella organisations, policymakers, and experts to focus on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. This three-day event brought to life development of regional policy recommendations that reflect youth perspectives, strengthening their advocacy for the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. It aimed to establish a model for youth co-creation of policies and promote cross-sectorial cooperation. This initiative supports overall RCC work in regard to GAWB and is complementary to GAWB Action Plan. The recommendations and Working Group's Action Plans underscored the crucial role of youth in shaping a greener future for the Western Balkans Six and produced a comprehensive set of activities that will guide future efforts in the region.

The training held prior to the conference used interactive methods to challenge participants' knowledge and foster critical thinking on youth involvement in environmental policies. Participants were introduced to the EU Youth Dialogue principles and practical implementation strategies which emphasize inclusivity and stakeholder engagement and are needed to implement Youth Policy Lab.

Furthermore, the **WBYL supported youth councils from the region in their capacity-building efforts**, focusing on strategic planning and development of essential organisational documents.

³ This project is funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2019/409-790

During the reporting period, **WBYL facilitated a Regional Fireside Talk** and supported participation of 12 youth representatives from the Western Balkans Six in the 10th edition of **Looking Forward: Exploring New Ways to Strengthen Regional Cooperation** on 16th September 2024 in Tirana. The event provided a unique opportunity for youth to engage in open discussions on Balkan Barometer 2024 youth data and trends from various fields with RCC Secretary General and EU Ambassador to Albania. Representatives of Youth Councils from the region were given the chance to contribute to discussions on key issues affecting Western Balkans Six citizens and businesses, allowing their voices to be heard at a high level and influencing the regional agenda.

The activities conducted reflect a strong commitment to empowering youth in the Western Balkans Six and underscore the importance of **integrating youth perspectives into decision-making processes** and ensuring that young people are not only heard but also have the skills and support to influence outcomes that affect their futures. During this period, International Youth Day was marked as well, celebrating youth contributions and raising awareness about their vital role in shaping a sustainable future.

C2. Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)⁴

Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) aims to enhance regional security through its pillars: Counter-Terrorism and Preventing Violent Extremism (WBCTi), Counter-Serious and Organised Crime (WBCSCi), and Border Security (WBBSi). The **addition of Cybersecurity pillar to the IISG Database** marks a significant expansion of the IISG's scope, aligning with emerging security needs in the digital domain. Also, on 6 June 2024, the grant contract for Phase 2 of the IISG (2024-2026) was officially signed between the RCC and the EC.

As the operational arm of the IISG process, during the reporting period, IISG Secretariat has continued to provide support in developing products and strengthening processes as agreed amongst the regional partners under the IISG Terms of Reference.

Key activities included:

- Mapping security needs in the Western Balkans Six across all three pillars– development of the Second Biennial Needs Mapping Report;
- Mapping responses to security needs in the WB6 in all three pillars – development of the third Annual Response Mapping Report;
- Mapping current projects, activities, initiatives (actions) implemented, primarily by IISG members from a regional perspective – development of the IISG Database, which is only available to members of the IISG process;
- Analysing whether needs are adequately addressed in order to prevent duplication and gaps, and proposing and facilitating potential synergies;

⁴ This project is funded by the European Union, grant number IPA 2020/414-918

- Developing the cybersecurity pillar within IISG Database platform;
- Facilitating the Regional Network of National CT-P/CVE Coordinators of the Western Balkans Six;
- Planning stakeholder coordination through the IISG database.

In this respect, within the period 1 June – 30 September 2024, the following was implemented:

Analysis and preparation of the second biennial needs mapping report on three pillars

Biennial needs mapping is part of the planned action under the current Terms of Reference. Following the decision of the 7th Board meeting the IISG Secretariat is tasked to finalise the second edition of the mapping needs. This mapping exercise follows the approved methodology of previous reports, incorporating a more integrated approach by reflecting regional and individual threat assessments, EU directives, and priority-based lists.

During the reporting period, IISG Secretariat conducted a desk review of relevant documents and has been collecting data on security needs from Western Balkans Six. Individual consultations were held, and the analysis will be completed once all needs are submitted.

The second biennial needs mapping report is expected to be finalised following regional working group meetings in October 2024, where gathered data will be reviewed and negotiated to create a cohesive and accurate representation of regional security needs.

Analysis and preparation of the third Annual Response Mapping report on three pillars for Year 3 (i.e. 2023)

The third annual response mapping follows the tasks from the 7th IISG Board meeting. This report will conclude the annual reporting on the progress made by partners in regard to the needs expressed. The IISG Secretariat undertook the process of collecting data and analysing responses received from the Western Balkans Six.

Following the analysis of individual inputs, IISG Secretariat focused on making in-depth analysis at regional level in order to develop narrative reports concerning responses for the whole phase. This involved a comprehensive review of data, reports, and feedback submitted by the Partners. The analysis aimed to achieve two objectives:

- Assessment of Progress - IISG Secretariat assessed the progress made by WB6 Partners in implementing various filters under the four sub-pillars of each IISG pillar;
- Alignment with Needs - the analytical work aimed to establish alignment between the responses provided by WB6 Partners and the needs identified through the needs mapping process.

The third year will be reported as “cumulative reporting” by including all responses versus the needs listed in the needs mapping report. The process followed the same methodology and steps as the previous reports. The response mapping process was discussed during the

consultations with the Western Balkans Six Partners. The third annual response mapping report is expected to be finalised after regional meetings in October 2024. These meetings will provide an opportunity to discuss the findings of the draft report with relevant authorities and ensure that any outstanding concerns are addressed moving forward.

Analytical report on the IISG Database

The IISG Database has been successfully updated, with 84 projects currently listed. IISG Secretariat individually analysed projects and referred them to the database following the filters of needs per each partner in order to allow stakeholders to grasp the projects' dynamics versus needs listed by beneficiaries. The IISG Secretariat is foreseen to conduct a deeper analysis of the database in order to be able to reflect on possible gaps and duplications.

During the reporting period, IISG Secretariat organised trainings for DG NEAR, DG HOME, and EUDs on database functionalities. IISG Secretariat will organise similar trainings for other IISG members (Slovenia, Austria, France, Italy, UK, UNODC, and GIZ), discuss access to the Database for non-IISG members, and continuously update the Database with new projects.

It is important to mention that IISG Secretariat plans to organise the stakeholder coordination meetings in each WB6 capital in November and December 2024 in order to familiarise them with the database information and make full use of it.

Cybersecurity component

Cyber security is a newly developed feature within the IISG Database, marking the initial version of this pillar. The European Commission tasked IISG with facilitating the integration of cybersecurity pillar into the region's security needs and ongoing support through the IISG platform. Following the presentation of the idea at the 7th IISG Board meeting, the IISG Secretariat worked closely with ARK IT, the company responsible for the IISG Database, to translate this vision into a concrete proposal for the EC and RCC.

On 28 May 2024, the RCC organised a regional cybersecurity meeting in Skopje, where a better understanding of the technical requirements was in the focus as well as gathering input from the Western Balkans Six on the proposed pillar. Furthermore, the IISG Secretariat participated in the High-Level Cybersecurity Conference in Tirana on 9 July 2024, where high level officials from the Western Balkans Six discussed the most pressing cybersecurity challenges, including cyber threats, regulations and protocols, and regional initiatives. Following this event, the EC provided to the Secretariat the model and structure for the cybersecurity pillar to be integrated into the IISG Database.

The **initial version of the Cybersecurity Pillar** has been successfully integrated into the IISG Database platform. The official presentation of this new pillar is scheduled for mid-October 2024 at the EC donor coordination meeting. The development process was completed in two phases:

- Phase 1: Requirement Gathering and System Design – A thorough analysis of cybersecurity needs and corresponding platform modifications;
- Phase 2: Development and Integration – Successful development and integration of the cybersecurity module into the IISG Database.

The remaining phases will be completed during the period October-December 2024.

- Phase 3: Testing and Quality Assurance
- Phase 4: Deployment and Training
- Phase 5: Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Interim Report for January - June 2024

The IISG Secretariat reported all activities in the interim report to the European Commission, covering the period from 01 January to 30 June 2024. In addition, the financial report with budget forecast and payment request were prepared and sent to EC.

C3. Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP)

The third phase of the RCC’s Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP 3) project has operationally started working since June 2024, after finalising administrative procedures with the European Commission. Financed by the European Union, implemented together with International Labour Organisation (ILO), ESAP 3 will last 5 years, until February 2029. Building on the achievements of the previous two phases, the third phase of the project strives to improve employment opportunities, working conditions, and social policy for citizens of the Western Balkans Six.

The activities of the ESAP 3 are divided into **two operational components**: Employment Formalisation and Advanced Alignment with the EU Acquis and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

Activities under the Employment Formalisation component, implemented jointly with International Labour Organisation (ILO), aim to **further strengthen the capacities of the Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work** to formulate and implement evidence-based policies, ultimately preparing it for integration into the European Labour Authority (ELA).

The Advanced Alignment with the EU Acquis and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) component continues to support Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and Public Employment Services (PES) in aligning employment and social policies with EU acquis Chapter 2 and Chapter 19. Additionally, ESAP 3 facilitates exposure of Western Balkans Six officials from Ministries of Labour, PES, Labour Inspectorates, and Tax Authorities to EU-wide networks and processes to ensure peer learning and necessary alignment.

In the inception phase of the project, the ESAP 3 team informed all partners about the start of the project's third phase after which project team visited all partner institutions and **held in-person meetings with all partners from the Western Balkans Six**, namely, Public Employment Services, Labour Inspectorates, Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs, Tax Authorities and Agencies for European Integrations. The purpose of the consultations was to solicit input from the partners and ensure their further commitment. Also, progress in implementation of initiatives initiated during the previous phase of the project were discussed, as many of the good practices shared previously were incorporated in action plans and work strategies of the partners, i.e. changes to the law on tax administration to reflect employers' obligation to register new employees a day before they start working; data-sharing between enforcement authorities as a basis for risk assessments and better planning of inspection visits; adjustment of labour law to include provisions of the EU Directive on platform work, etc.

The engagement of thematic experts to support various components of the project followed after completing all required administrative procedures. The ESAP website has gone through a facelift, and the new [ESAP 3 website](#) has been launched. The [Observatory](#) has also been updated accordingly. The new data show the record high employment throughout the region (the rate increased for 4.4 percentage points from 2022 to 2023) as well as record low unemployment rates (decreased for 0.7 percentage points in the same period). However, the rates still lag behind the EU's (11.5% lower employment rate than in the EU; 6.3% higher unemployment rate than in the EU). Also, youth employment rate, although marking an increase of 0.8% in period 2022-2023, is still rather low (23.5%) compared to both WB general employment rate of 58.9% and the EU youth employment rate of 35.2%.

The **official launch event of the ESAP 3**, to be hosted together with European Commission DG EMPL and International Labour Organisation, and envisaged as the technical meeting with all stakeholders and partners from the Western Balkans Six, is to be held in Budva on 22 and 23 October. This event is to gather representatives from the Western Balkans Six ministries in charge of labour and social issues, labour inspectorates, tax administrations, public employment services, and social partners. It will also host representatives of the European Union, partner international organisations, and thematic experts. The topics to be discussed include tackling undeclared work, social dialogue, occupational safety and health, alignment of the Western Balkans Six with the European Pillar of Social Rights, EU acquis Chapter 2 and Chapter 19, and cooperation of the Western Balkans Six Public Employment Services (PES) with the EU PES Network.

The joint initiative that started at the end of the previous phase of the project together with the **Public Employment Service of Slovenia** has successfully resulted in the provision of the New EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans reading "participation in some activities of the European Network of Public Employment Services (PES Network) and cooperation with the Network⁵ strengthening the capacity of the public employment services in Western Balkans".

⁵ In accordance with the conditions laid down in the Decision No 573/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on enhanced cooperation between Public Employment Services (PES) and in particular for

To this end, EU PES Network has, for the first time ever, invited Western Balkans Six PES peers to their annual conference, this year dedicated to the support for those furthest from the labour market. ESAP 3 project is actively coordinating and supporting this cooperation.

D. Horizontal Activities

D1. Programming, Monitoring, Coordination

The RCC has worked intensively on surveying public and business opinion on the attitudes and aspirations of citizens and businesses across the region on various topics and issues relevant to citizens' everyday life, and in conjunction with policy areas within RCC's remit. Over the past decade, the Barometer has become an essential tool, shedding light on opinions of citizens and businesses across the region on important topics relevant to several policy areas within RCC remit such as regional cooperation, EU integration, green transition, digitalisation, labour mobility issues, and many more. It has earned a strong reputation as a trusted source of regional data, frequently referenced by the media, business leaders, civil society, and policymakers. This year, Balkan Barometer marked its **10th Jubilee Edition of the [Balkan Barometer Public and Business Opinion Surveys](#)**. This edition provided unique insights into public and business opinions across more than 80 questions, allowing the observation of trends on critical topics over the past decade in the Western Balkans Six.

The results of both surveys were presented at a launch event on 16 September in Tirana, specifically targeting youth audience. This time, the Balkan Barometer was launched in a different setup, as an open discussion with more than 40 youngsters from the region, presenting a comprehensive analysis of key regional trends, particularly in areas such as EU accession prospects, regional cooperation, and more. The event offered a unique opportunity for young people, including representatives of region's Youth Councils, to engage in open discussions with the RCC Secretary General and the EU Ambassador to Albania about the survey findings, particularly those relevant to youth. The data presented also highlighted key issues affecting citizens of the Western Balkans Six from a youth perspective, and the discussions that followed allowed young voices to be heard at a high level, helping to shape the regional agenda.

RCC coordinated and facilitated the work of regional partners and WB6 in the preparation of the second iteration of the **Common Regional Market Action Plan 2025-2028 (CRM2 AP)** as well as the political Declaration (Western Balkans Six Leaders Declaration on CRM 2025-2028) that were endorsed at the Berlin Process Summit in October. This successor to the 2021-2024 Action Plan is aimed at introducing measures designed to further integrate the region with the EU's Single Market, a key driver of growth.

In May 2024, in Kotor, at the Western Balkans Six Leaders' Summit, the WB6 leaders voiced their readiness to endorse the CRM Action Plan 2025-2028 at the Berlin Process Leaders'

which have joined the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

Summit 2024 and invited the RCC, in cooperation with relevant regional partners, to coordinate this new phase of the CRM. From June to September, **intensive consultations** took place between Western Balkans Six and regional partners (CEFTA, TCT, and WB6 CIF), resulting in an advanced draft of CRM2 AP being shared with the WB6 by mid-June. All WB6 provided their comments on the draft Action Plan. After integrating these comments and consulting with civil society, a second draft, along with a table of comments, was distributed and certain political issues were discussed and addressed at the Prime Ministers' Sherpas meeting in Brussels on 19-20 September.

In July, the RCC also engaged in **extensive consultations with Civil Society Organisations and Think Tanks** across the region. A consolidated version of CRM2 AP was presented in Skopje during the Preparatory Meeting of the Berlin Process Civil Society and Think Tank Forum from 9 to 11 July 2024, and shared with over 500 CSOs and Think Tanks for feedback. Their inputs were systematised and incorporated into the second draft, which was sent to WB6 in August. A summary of key achievements on CRM 2021-2024 was published on the RCC website.

D2. Communication

RCC focused its communication activities on promoting the regional cooperation and its benefits, especially the **Common Regional Market** and its agendas, but also promoting the **entire South East Europe region** and SEECP activities, as well as **Green Agenda**, emphasizing always the positive outcomes of activities within these agendas for the region's citizens. A significant focus was placed on promoting **RCC's flagship initiatives**, such as Balkan Barometer, Balkathon, and Regional Butterfly Innovation Award, which took place or are in the pipeline during the reporting period, but also on promoting RCC Annual Meeting and accompanying SEECP events, Champion of Regional Cooperation, SEE as a tourist destination, as well as the SEE2030 Strategy.

Furthermore, RCC consistently promoted its activities related to environmental and human capital agendas, youth initiatives, women's empowerment, and the South East Europe tourism sector—particularly relevant during the summer reporting period. The Champion of Regional Cooperation award and RCC's continued support of the Sarajevo Film Festival were also highlighted. The RCC is currently working on updating and upgrading the SEE2030 webpage so it would reflect the current status of implementation and steps forward.

The main communication objective was to keep citizens informed about the benefits of regional cooperation achievements, stressing the necessity of continuous and unhindered cooperation and its possibilities. We have been producing original and engaging content approaching our target audiences creatively, emphasizing shared values within the SEE and the EU as well. Special attention has been given to approaching younger audiences through modern tools and channels, encouraging youth participation in key topics.

RCC maintains regular communication with both internal and external stakeholders, providing updates on activities, events, publications, and regional developments via its website, social media, Daily News Overview, and other platforms. The organisation also fosters strong relationships with regional and EU media outlets, ensuring ongoing interest in its initiatives.

D3. Extending Partnerships

Regional Cooperation Council was honoured to have been invited to a number of meetings and events over the reporting period and met with numerous partners, as well as be included in the discussions on the Western Balkans Six accession to the European Union and other important events.

This year, the financial support from the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria (BMEIA) for the **Champion of Regional Cooperation Dr Erhard Busek Award** was doubled to 10,000 EUR, reinforcing the commitment to fostering collaboration and development in the region. In June 2024, back-to-back with the RCC Annual Meeting in Skopje the Award was handed to the **Youth Sports Games**. Youth Sports Games' primary motive was to enable children to take part in organised sporting events and other free activities and have since become the largest amateur sports event for children and young people in Europe.

After the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with the **College of Europe (CoE)** to offer one scholarship to a student from an SEECP Participant to attend the Master's programme at the recently opened CoE Campus in Tirana, the **first student from SEE** enrolled into the programme from September 2024.

To enhance efficiency and avoid redundancy in its activities, the RCC continued working closely with relevant civil society organisations and international and regional partners. This includes establishing robust relationships with organisations such as CEFTA, Western Balkans Six Chamber Investment Forum, United Nations Development Programme, Council of Europe, and World Health Organisation, amongst others. Moreover, while the RCC Secretariat sustains relationships with the South-East European Cooperation Process Participants and RCC Board Participants, it also develops ties with the European Union institutions and associated entities based in Brussels.

In September 2024, Central European Initiative (CEI) brought together senior representatives from the Secretariats of regional bodies, including the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, Black Sea Economic Cooperation, and Regional Cooperation Council to Trieste for the 18th **Coordination Meeting of Regional Organisations**. Special guests included the European Commission, Regional School of Public Administration, and Regional Anti-corruption Initiative. Regional Cooperation Council **offered to host next year's meeting** in Sarajevo.

The agenda featured an in-depth exchange of perspectives on best practices and potential collaborative actions in areas of shared interest, particularly those aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and European Union cooperation.

In the respective period the **Brussels Liaison Office (LO)** carried out numerous activities and these included: introductory and regular meetings with diplomats, ambassadors, and EU representatives from various missions, such as those from the Western Balkans Six and key EU institutions like the European Commission, EEAS, and EESC. The Office also focused on analysing, processing, and distributing important documents related to the EU enlargement process, particularly for the Western Balkans Six, while preparing daily bulletins on key EU activities.

Furthermore, the LO attended numerous think tank and political institute events on EU enlargement and Western Balkans Six policies, including forums and meetings on the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the VI4IS EU Project, and technical negotiations on agreements and deliverables for the Berlin Process.

Annex 1: PR and Communication – website links

Regional cooperation and Common Regional Market

CRM

Interview - RCC Secretary General for KALLXO.com

<https://www.rcc.int/docs/707/rcc-secretary-general-for-kallxocom>

Interview - RCC Secretary General for Radio Free Europe

<https://www.rcc.int/docs/709/rcc-secretary-general-for-radio-free-europe>

Social Media

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C7ysthnNFQG/>

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/CZZ4xJsAot4>

https://www.instagram.com/p/C71U_cft09x/?img_index=1

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C8XRPYdt6Ci/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C8ZvunooMe4/>

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/N1V1Jowt7ns>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8o28UUtfkU/>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C864dBPNzj/>

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/N1V1Jowt7ns>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9cM0J3N4Lk/>

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/CfJtHqgAIYU>

https://www.instagram.com/p/C_IpcKONibr/

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/15MdNPPYfB/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/12AUhF4yBwY/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/17xxvAs5Rf/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AoihfgjiC/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Pc1VHQk6j/>

<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/15HrqypD53/>

<https://x.com/rccint/status/1803447037125427692>

<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7234982083620728833>

<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7218567042499543040>

<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7213882685285400577>

<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7211338268599062531>

Digital agenda

Promotion of Balkathon competition

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C7wbsG3tAG7/>

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/vCJ8mQupW6Q>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8UOY4vtPuK/>
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/rCXngDSLH2s>
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/mM2rHQIMMts>
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8mTtSDtqDA/>
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/rCXngDSLH2s>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C8w4zbqNvs0/>
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/mM2rHQIMMts>
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C89VkCJtcWL/>
<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1CFLAnPrfS/>
<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/14tXo1VxeA/>
<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1ZUTsfGKe3/>
<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/17d9AXfF1z/>
<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/17vxWpwjX5/>
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7214230978225963008>
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7210984739783012353>
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<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7208440024957087744>
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7203404510361186306>
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7201252145868816386>
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7199292727216205825>

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Human Capital Agenda

Promotion of Women Empowerment

Interview - RCC Secretary General for Monitor

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Videos https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlav_9cQa14;

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Promotion of regional cooperation through regional flagship activities

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Promotion of Champion of Regional Cooperation

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SEECF

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Youth Agenda and WBYL

News

*RCC's EU-funded WBYL launched Youth Policy Lab on Green Agenda
Regional Cooperation Council | RCC's EU-funded WBYL launched Youth Policy Lab on
Green Agenda*

WBYL Social media promotion

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Employment and ESAP

Start of ESAP 3 Project

News

*Facilitating Well-functioning Labour Markets and Social Policies in the Western Balkans
ESAP2 | Facilitating Well-functioning Labour Markets and Social Policies in the Western
Balkans*

Social media promotion

<https://x.com/rccESAP/status/1810985396349616248>

Evaluation Report

ESAP: Final Evaluation of the Employment and Social Affairs Platforms (Phases I and II)

ESAP2 | ESAP: Final Evaluation of the Employment and Social Affairs Platforms (Phases I and II)

Other Social Media Links

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Abbreviations

AIR	Annual Interim Report
BDTF	Biodiversity Task Force
BHAAAS	Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Science
BIA	Butterfly Innovation Award
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CEI	Central European Initiative
CI	Creative industries
C-i-O	Chairpersonship-in-Office
CoE	College of Europe
CRM	Common Regional Market
CRM 2	Second Action Plan of the Common Regional Market
CSOs	Civil society organisations
DIHs	Digital Innovation Hubs
DG	Directorate General
DG NEAR	Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EC	European Commission
EIS	European Innovation Scoreboard
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
ESAP	Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project
ESS	Employment Service of Slovenia
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GAWB	Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
GARI	GAWB Action Plan – Implementation Report
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IISG	Integrative Internal Security Governance
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPAs	Investment Promotion Agencies
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
JWGI	Joint Working Group on Investments
LO	Liaison Office
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PD	Political Directors
PES	Public Employment Services
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RISS	Regional Investment Screening Standards
RNWE	Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship
RRD	Regional Recognition Database
RWG GAWB	Regional Working Group on Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEE	South East Europe
SEE IGI	South East Europe Inclusive Growth Index
SEE JTI	South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes

SEE2030	South East Europe 2030 Strategy
SEECF	South-East European Cooperation Process
SEEMIC	SEE Military Intelligence Chiefs forum
SEENSA	Meeting of the Heads of South East Europe National Security Agencies
SEPA	Single Euro Payments Area
TCT	Transport Community Treaty
TEG	Tourism Expert Group
ToR	Terms of Reference
WB6	Western Balkans Six
WBBSi	Western Balkan Border Security initiative
WB6CIF	Western Balkans Chamber Investment Forum
WBCSCi	Western Balkan Counter Serious Crime initiative
WBCTi	Western Balkan Counter Terrorism initiative
WBDS	Western Balkans Digital Summit
WBYL	Western Balkans Youth Lab Project
WGFM	Working Group on Financial Markets
WGID	Working Group on Industrial Development