



**REPORT**  
**ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE**  
**REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL SECRETARIAT**  
**For the period**  
**1 November 2023 – 1 February 2024**

**BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE REGIONAL**  
**COOPERATION COUNCIL**

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## Executive Summary

The enticing offer that the Western Balkans (WB) recently received from the European Union (EU) in the form of the [Growth Plan](#) (GP) is already taking concrete shapes. As Western Balkan economies commit themselves to implement their comprehensive reform agendas, it is becoming increasingly clear that the path to the full integration into the EU Single Market leads through the **completion of the Common Regional Market (CRM)** - the commitment that was reiterated during the **EU-WB Summit held in December 2023**. Moreover, the European Council recently reached an agreement on the revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and this includes substantial funding **for the Growth Plan** through the proposed **Reform and Growth Facility** for the Western Balkans.

The focus on hastening EU-related reforms in the Western Balkans, enhancing regional cooperation, and fostering closer ties with the EU for quicker benefits to its citizens were topics addressed at the last EU-Western Balkans Summit in December 2023. The Summit reviewed progress since the last meeting in Tirana and addressed current complex geostrategic challenges. It was underlined that strengthening good neighbourly relations and economic integration within the region are key conditions to align more closely with the EU Single Market.

RCC has started the work on the second iteration of the **Common Regional Market Action Plan** that will serve as a vessel for Western Balkan economies on their way to join the EU. We are in close consultations with our regional partners regarding the methodology and the content of the document mainly working in two vectors: in addition to preparing the new multiyear CRM Action Plan, we are also working on producing concrete deliverables for this year's Berlin Process Summit. The region finds itself at a crucial inflection point and we see a significant momentum of stakeholders pulling in the same direction. RCC is ready to make this a reality.

Future steps for the **second iteration of the Common Regional Market were outlined at the Western Balkans Meets EU Conference** – a WB leaders' meeting in Skopje in January 2024. *“The region is ready to take additional decisive actions to finalize transformation of the Common Regional Market into a reality”*<sup>1</sup>, it was emphasized in the Joint Statement from the leaders of the Western Balkans in Skopje, which was followed by the Leaders' Meeting in Tirana in February 2024. The successor of CRM aims to put forward a set of activities to contribute to enhancing economic integration with the EU single market as the main driver of economic growth. This entails, among other things, aligning with the EU Single Market rules and opening relevant sectors and areas, incentivising and implementing fundamental reforms with a view to close convergence gap with EU, advancing the four freedoms and improving

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Statement from the Leaders of the Western Balkans, *The Growth Plan: Western Balkans Meets EU Conference*

sustainable economic growth, including through attracting foreign investments, facilitating intra-regional trade and trade between EU and WB, expediting digitalisation, opening up the service sector, and facilitating movement of workers. After intensive consultations with WB economies, regional partners and other stakeholders over the following period, our intention is to have the new phase of the CRM Action Plan adopted by Western Balkan leaders at the **next Berlin Process Summit**.

After a bumpy start, we are happy to note that Montenegro recently ratified all **four Mobility Agreements** and the ratification instrument was deposited in January 2024, at the same time when Bosnia and Herzegovina deposited its ratification instrument for two Recognition Agreements (on Higher Education Qualifications and on the Professional Qualifications). We once again call upon Bosnia and Herzegovina to finalise the ratification procedure of the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards in the Western Balkans, which entered into force in other five Western Balkan economies.

The Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, which simplifies cross-border/boundary movement, fostering closer ties between people and businesses in the region, resulted in over 13 million entries/exits of WB citizens within the region's economies only for the period of June-September 2023.

Citizens of the Western Balkans and European Union have **enjoyed their winter holidays** this season with **significantly reduced data roaming charges**. Currently, all data roaming plans offered by WB operators in the EU **cost less than the limit of 18 EUR/GB** agreed and, similarly, EU operators have at least one special plan for data roaming in the WB area that also costs less than this limit. Additionally, all WB operators and 75% of EU operators already fulfilled conditions agreed for the next phase of data roaming charges reduction process, to be implemented in 2026, i.e. to have one package below 14 EUR/GB. Several WB operators even offer data at less than 2 EUR per GB, and three operators from different economies have cut also the regular roaming prices in the EU between 95% and 99%, eliminating the need for buying special roaming packages.

In November 2023, Rome was the host of our eighth annual gathering of regional security practitioners, organisations, and networks dealing with security issues in South East Europe and the Western Balkans – namely the **Regional Security Coordination (Jumbo) Conference**. This conference highlighted shared issues and challenges in represented economies, and discussions resonated with broader concerns in the region and across the EU. Notably, it broadened its scope, embracing broader societal challenges, including the pressing issues of brain drain, human security, disaster reduction, pandemics, etc.

Featuring a diverse line-up of over 55 speakers from 19 different economies from 3 continents, the event drew in more than 100 participants and security practitioners representing the Western Balkan economies, Italy, and various European Union Member States. Attendees also included representatives of the EU Commission, FRONTEX, United Nations Development Programme, International Organization for Migration, Integrative Internal Security

Governance, Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, World Health Organization, pertinent regional and international organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs), and law enforcement agencies.

RCC's [SecuriMeter survey for 2023](#) was presented at the Jumbo Conference, and it showed that most concerns of Western Balkan citizens are related to corruption and organised crime. More than 60% of Western Balkan citizens rank crime and organised crime, drugs and human trafficking as their top security concern, which goes hand in hand with corruption with 55% of region's citizens believing the level of corruption has increased. Misuse of firearms and arms trafficking is perceived as a security threat by 48% of respondents. When speaking about migration, 70% of our citizens agree our region should shelter migrants needing protection, but majority, 80% of them, believes EU should do more to share the burden. Additionally, overwhelming 80% of citizens in WB consider fake news or disinformation as a problem in their economies, while 1 in 2 citizens consider that intentional disinformation causes most harm in provoking hatred and divisive opinions (47%).

In the **landscape of misinformation**, our SecuriMeter survey revealed perceptions of leading contributors to the spread of fake news. At the forefront of these perceptions are anonymous social media users (46% of respondents). Journalists closely follow (44%), while politicians also play a significant role (34%). In response to this growing concern, the public has voiced their opinion on who should be at the helm of combating this issue. They suggest that the press and broadcasting management should take the lead (47% respondents). This is closely echoed by the need for journalists themselves to step up (46%). Additionally, 45% of respondents believe that online social networks ought to play a more active role in halting the spread of misinformation.

In the domain of **SEE2030 Strategy**, the fifth meeting of the **Monitoring Committee** took place in Athens in November 2023. Participants unanimously agreed to intensify their efforts in implementing the SEE2030 Strategy. In accordance with the RCC Secretariat's recommended new approach, which received the Monitoring Committee's approval, each SEECP Participant now has the discretion to **voluntarily increase their annual financial contribution** to the SEE2030 Strategy. Reflecting this decision, Ankara has led the way as the first SEE economy to increase its contribution to the Strategy, raising it by 40,000 EUR.

One way RCC tries to motivate young people to stay and work in the region is through its **flagship Regional Butterfly Innovation Award**. In December 2023 in Sofia, Regional Cooperation Council presented the winners of the second edition of its flagship Award at a ceremony co-organised with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria. The Butterfly Innovation Award incentivises innovative ideas, networks of innovators from WB, and focuses on endorsing digital transformation, encouraging environmental sustainability, and cultivating an innovation-oriented culture in the region. This is achieved by highlighting successful innovations and specifically empowering groups like youth and women.

This year, we **received 87 entries across six categories**. Notably, the Industry category led with nearly one-third of submissions, closely followed by the Green and Women categories. Moreover, we observed a remarkable diversity in ideas, spanning from food-tech to circular economy concepts, from molecular modelling to ed-tech innovations. Markedly, nearly half of all submissions centred on digital solutions, signalling a promising trajectory towards a digital transition.

At the end of the year, Regional Cooperation Council organised the second edition of [\*\*EU-Balkan Youth Forum \(EUBYF\)\*\*](#), funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in Novi Sad. The Forum, which gathered young people from EU and WB, was titled *Western Balkans Futures: How Can You(th) Shape Europe?*, capturing the essence of the Forum as a basis to discuss the pressing issues and potential paths for the region's future development in the context of European integration.

As we look to the future, we are happy to announce that the three **RCC projects** - namely Western Balkans Youth Lab (WBYL), Employment and Social Platform (ESAP), and Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) – were included in the recently adopted IPA Committee Decision for 2024. The journey ahead is ambitious, but with the solid foundation laid by the RCC and other partner organisations, the region is well-equipped to navigate this path towards prosperity and integration.

# 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, Regional Cooperation Council continued to facilitate regional dialogue on investment policy through the Joint Working Group on Investments (JWGI). It proposed a **Work Process Plan for the drafting of Regional Investment Screening Standards (RISS)**, which received endorsement from all Western Balkan economies, and the process of drafting these standards has commenced. In the realm of capacity building, the RCC has made preparations for simulation investment negotiation sessions customised for Western Balkan economies. In addition, the RCC has facilitated a dialogue on investment incentives within JWGI, proposing options (i.e. cost-based incentives) to enhance their effectiveness and streamline them across the region. An **updated inventory of investment incentives** is currently in progress to enhance transparency for investors.

Moreover, RCC, in collaboration with the German Development Agency (GIZ), has made formal contribution to the **UNCITRAL Working Group III proposal for the Advisory Centre for International Investment Law**. Economies in the region would benefit from an institution that offers continuous support, including technical assistance and legal advisory services.

The RCC continued facilitating **dialogue on payments and payment services**, mainly under the auspices of the Working Group on Financial Markets (WGFM), with a particular focus on **Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA)** membership. Throughout this period, the Western Balkan economies have made notable progress in transposing the relevant legislation and meeting other requirements for SEPA membership.

The **harmonisation of licensing regime for non-bank payment service providers (PSPs)** in the Western Balkans and the **adoption of the European Payments Council (EPC) QR code standards in payment transactions** are two specific topics introduced under the WGFM. Both received a positive reception and a commitment to further discussion. Achieving harmonisation of the licensing regime would level the playing field, create more competition, and ultimately lead to cheaper and faster payments, while adopting the EPC QR Code would provide a seamless experience for transaction parties.

During the reporting period, the RCC has assumed the responsibility of creating a unified front of responsible institutions from the **Western Balkan economies to address the issue of legal operation of PayPal and other similar PSPs** throughout the entire region.

## *A1.2. Industrial Development and Sustainable Tourism*

In the **area of industrial development**, during the reporting period, RCC focused on the implementation of actions regarding the Common Regional Market's **green and circular economy value chains**. With the aim to establish the Regional Green and Circular Economy Stakeholders Platform, RCC continued dialogue with key policymakers and ensured to create synergies among CRM green and circular economy actions and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) Circular Economy pillar. The Green and Circular Economy Stakeholders Platform was established on 8 February 2024. Further under industrial development, RCC maintained dialogue with the region on **creative industries (CIs)**, centring on cities of culture, sports and youth and promoting various cultural events and opportunities for the region. In addition, RCC participated at the Western Balkans Steering Platform for Culture, which enhances the opportunity to exchange on developments in the region on CIs and connect the Western Balkans with the EU-level policies and strategies on CIs.

Following an exceptionally successful tourism season in the Western Balkans last year, with more than 20,000,000 tourist arrivals to the region and each economy experiencing more than 100% increase relative to the previous year, up to 150% in Albania, the RCC has revitalised the **Tourism Expert Group (TEG)** in the WB. This revitalisation aims to engage in in-depth discussions regarding both remarkable advancements and significant obstacles in the sphere of Sustainable Tourism confronting the economies and the region at large. During a meeting convened by the RCC in Podgorica in December 2023, TEG members highlighted the imperative of strengthening the region's branding. This enhancement is crucial for boosting competitiveness and establishing a distinct identity for the region as a unique tourism destination within the international market. The unanimous agreement was that the strategic development of a WB regional brand is essential not only for attracting tourists and investors but also for encouraging a sense of unity and cooperation among the Western Balkan economies. This endeavour is characterised by its complexity and dynamism, necessitating ongoing efforts to refine and promote a positive and engaging image of the region.

Responding to these strategic considerations, RCC organised a **Regional Tourism Forum**, which was part of the Tourism and Travel Show Albania, titled *Elevating Tourism, Empowering Sustainability*. This event took place on 1 February 2024 in Tirana, and brought together panellists from relevant sectors, including representatives of ministries, academia, regional organisations and the private sector. The Regional Tourism Forum brought to light two unanimous conclusions critical for the growth of competitiveness of tourism sector in the Western Balkans. Firstly, the Forum established a strong consensus on the urgent need for developing a distinctive regional tourism brand in the increasingly competitive global tourism market. This will ensure the Western Balkans standing out as a unique and attractive destination, promising an unforgettable experience that combines cultural heritage, adventure, natural beauty and tradition that is still alive and practiced.

Secondly, acknowledging the acute pressures on natural resources intensified by tourism activities and global climate change, the Forum emphasized the critical need for harmonising tourism development with green and digital transformation initiatives, including the adoption



of EU best practices. This strategic alignment seeks to position the Western Balkans at the forefront of sustainable practices and promote unwavering advancement within the tourism sector.

The Forum highlighted that combining sustainability with regional branding could significantly boost the Western Balkans' global tourism presence and economic gains, signalling to investors its stability and appeal as an attractive investment hub, thereby stressing the critical value of strategic tourism development for the region's economies.

## A2. Human Capital Development

### *A2.1. Research and Innovation Area*

For the second time, the RCC successfully organised the regional **Butterfly Innovation Award (BIA)**. The BIA aims to encourage the 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 from each WB economy received awards for their innovative solutions in six categories ranging from green, industry to STEM and women to university and youth.

This year, we received **87 entries across six categories**. Notably, the Industry category led with nearly one-third of submissions, closely followed by the Green and Women categories. Moreover, we observed a remarkable diversity in ideas, spanning from food-tech to circular economy concepts, from molecular modelling to ed-tech innovations. Markedly, nearly half of all submissions centred on digital solutions, signalling a promising trajectory towards a digital transition.

Western Balkans continued commendable [Horizon Europe](#) programme performance. For the first two years of the Programme, the region absorbed 107 million EUR through 630 grants. Out of 500 participations in various projects, 20% account for SMEs. The region was predominantly active in agri-food and energy. The Innovation Pillar of the Programme remains most underused with only 2 million EUR absorbed in the previous programming period.

The RCC continued coordinating research and innovation-related activities through its **Western Balkans Innovation and Research Platform**. Its key focus in the reporting period was on the practical steps required to create a research and innovation infrastructure and open online science data hub. RCC consulted various stakeholders - from WGs on Research & Innovation and Open Science to **Policy Answers** Horizon Europe and the **Rectors' Forum of South East Europe and Western Balkans**. Such a hub would be an add-on to the successful [Platform's website](#) designed to streamline regional innovation and research developments. The

RCC, in cooperation with the EU funded Policy Answers project, contributed to designing regional pilot initiatives on researcher mobility and innovation voucher scheme to be inaugurated in 2024. In the reporting period, RCC initiated preliminary talks regarding priority actions to be fine-tuned for the next regional strategic document.

The RCC completed the **Support Programme for the development of Digital Innovation Hubs** (DIHs) in the WB. While the EU's DIHs and EDIHs are developing rapidly, the DIH concept is novel in the Western Balkans. Therefore, the Programme's goal was twofold. First, to assist DIHs' collaborative efforts towards the preparation of joint project proposals for funding and capacity-building schemes offered by the EU. Most of the participating DIHs (or DIHs in the making) joined consortia created to bid for the EU funds in 2024. The second goal was to enable regional networking among DIHs. The networking dimension of the programme has been identified as very beneficial to all participants. The participants agreed the Programme was exceptionally useful, informative and practical. Overall, considering the above-mentioned and experience with a similar programme designed to support Technology Transfer Offices in 2022, the RCC has been called to strongly consider a follow-up programme in 2024 through such a multiplier model.

The RCC published a foresight study [\*Unleashing the Potential for Competitiveness: Trends in the Western Balkans\*](#). The study rests on the Strategic Foresight method and features trends that are expected to have implications on the region's competitiveness until 2035 (enabling environment, human capital, markets and the innovation ecosystem). It also outlines potential implications that these trends could have on future challenges and opportunities for inclusive growth in the region.

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

In line with the objectives of the [Declaration on the launch of the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship](#) and recommendations from meetings of the **Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship (RNWE)**, over the reporting period, RCC worked towards creating an interactive online platform that will allow matchmaking between mentors and mentees and will fulfil one of the recommendations: need for mentorship, coaching and education; upskilling and reskilling. The Platform, which will support both the Network of Women in STEM and the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship, is currently being populated with data. In addition and in line with the above-mentioned Declaration, RCC launched the Call for Nominations for the [\*Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year 2023\*](#), an annual event focusing on the Women Economic Empowerment Agenda through recognition of successful women entrepreneurs across the region.

### *A2.3. Free Movement of People*

Montenegro recently ratified **all four Mobility Agreements**<sup>2</sup> and the ratification instruments were deposited in January 2024, at the same time when Bosnia and Herzegovina deposited its ratification instruments for two Recognition Agreements (on Higher Education Qualifications and on the Professional Qualifications of Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Dental Medicine, and Architects). As envisaged by the Agreements, for each Party that finishes the internal ratification procedure, the Agreement will enter into force 30 days after depositing the formal notice of ratification with the Depository.

In the context of the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, during the reporting period, the **Joint Commission on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications met twice** – in November in Skopje and December (online). The economies delivered the lists of accredited public universities and a technical model was agreed to connect the domestic databases of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia with **Regional Recognition Database**.

Regarding the process of implementation of the Agreement on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications of Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Dental Medicine and Architects in CEFTA Context, the agreed **Terms of Reference** for establishment of **Joint Working Group on Recognition of Professional Qualifications** are awaiting approval by CEFTA Joint Committee, a final step needed to start the pre-implementation activities of this Agreement.

Smooth implementation of the **Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards** has been reported so far by all parties in which the Agreement has already entered into force. Additionally, relevant information on the ID cards specimen and the relevant legislation on the travel of minors have also been exchanged by these parties, contributing thus to the smooth implementation. The Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, which simplifies cross-border/boundary movement, fostering closer ties between people and businesses in the region, resulted in over 13 million entries/exits of the WB citizens within the region's economies only for the period of June-September 2023.

**The Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Midwives, Veterinary Surgeons and Pharmacists in CEFTA Context** that was signed at the Tirana Berlin Process Summit in October 2023 is under internal ratification procedures by parties and was only ratified by Montenegro so far.

RCC has increased efforts to begin negotiations on the final mobility agreement – on Access and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans. The negotiations are expected to begin in

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<sup>2</sup> Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identify Cards in Western Balkans, Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, Agreement on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications of Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Dental Medicine and Architects in CEFTA Context, and Recognition of Professional Qualifications of Nurses, Veterinary Surgeons, Pharmacists and Midwives in CEFTA Context.

early March 2024. This Agreement will pave the way for the second CRM Action Plan, as it aims to create conditions in the Western Balkans where, among other, students are treated the same (as domestic citizens) in enrolment or continuation of studies, including rights, obligations, tuition, and removal of all administrative taxes.

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

In the area covering the Digital Agenda and digital integration the notable activities and events in the reporting period are provided below.

Joint meeting of the WB Working Groups on Roaming Policy, Broadband and 5G was held on 12 December 2023. The meeting aimed to present the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and to discuss the progress in the implementation of policy reforms as part of the Roadmap for Lowering Roaming Charges between the EU and WB. Based on the needs of the economies related to the implementation of policy reforms that were collected and consolidated by RCC, a regional TAIEX workshop was organised on 6 and 7 February 2024 for experts from all WB economies. The workshop was focused on the broadband developments, and it was concluded that the challenges in this regard are very similar for the economies and that follow-up workshops to be organised should be dedicated to tackling a particular challenge related to broadband.

The **meeting of the signatories of EU/WB Roaming Declaration** was held in Belgrade on 22 January 2024. The meeting aimed to discuss the state of play and the ways to monitor the implementation of the Declaration that started on 1 October 2023. It was acknowledged that all the operators introduced the reductions in line with the glide path. RCC will continue consultations and brainstorming aiming to prepare the methodology on how to measure the impact of the Declaration. The monitoring is planned to be carried out after the summer break.

The **Advisory and Coordination Group**, officially launched on 23 January 2024 in Belgrade, brought together around 60 representatives of Western Balkan institutions (ICT Ministries and Regulators), telecommunications operators from both WB and EU, GSMA, as well as the European Commission and BEREC to discuss various topics, including transposition and implementation of the European Electronic Communication Code, as well as one of the biggest challenges for all the economies, permit granting procedures. Compared to the Round Table on connectivity held in Tirana in June 2023 when the discussion was focused on the views of WB institutions related to permit granting procedures, this time it was up to the operators to give their comments in this regard, aiming to prepare the regional overview and support follow-up actions.

In cooperation with UNDP, the digital tool called [Digital Pulse, developed for MSMEs in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), will be **scaled up to the regional level**, providing comprehensive analytics on digital readiness of MSMEs in WB covering different aspects, including digital

skills and cybersecurity awareness of the private sector. This tool is planned to be presented at the event to be organised in spring 2024.

With the sixth edition of the **Western Balkans Digital Summit (WBDS)** held in Sarajevo in October 2023, the first cycle of WBDS events, which started in 2018, finished with the capital of each WB economy having hosted the event. Throughout this period, WBDS proved to be a leading regional digital event, which facilitated high-level discussion on various challenges in digital transformation, supported the region in the exchange of news from the region and beyond, and helped develop digital innovation in the region. In December 2023, the RCC initiated consultations with EC, German Federal Ministries, German Eastern Business Association, WB economies and private sector on the organisation of a new cycle of WBDS. Discussions between WB economies and partners suggest that the new cycle of WBDS builds on the lessons learnt, experience of each host, suggestions and ideas from all partners and follows the rotating principle, hence being organised in each economy on annual basis. The Digital Summit Steering Committee meeting is planned to be held in March 2024.

#### A4. Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Resilience

During the reporting period, RCC's contribution to the implementation of regional climate-related goals continued through the **Regional Working Group on Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (RWG GAWB)**, whose **inaugural meeting** was convened on 15-16 November 2023. A newly established technical framework, outlined in the 2023 approved Note on Governance, signifies the **transformation of the RWG on Environment into the RWG on GAWB**. This structure delineates the operational framework of the RWG to fulfil its mandate as outlined in the GAWB Action Plan. The RWG GAWB serves as an inter-governmental platform to steer and coordinate the implementation of political commitments outlined in the Sofia Declaration and the GAWB Action Plan. The RWG on GAWB operates under the auspices of the RCC, which serves as the RWG Secretariat, and puts forward key decisions, conclusions and other outcomes in the Annual High-level Policy Dialogue on GAWB Meeting.

RWG on GAWB is composed of civil servants who are representing ministries in charge of climate change and environment from Western Balkan economies. RWG on GAWB meetings can take an extended format to include other relevant ministries in charge of specific topics.

The meeting on 15 November served as a platform for Western Balkan economies to engage in discussions concerning climate adaptation, implementation of the **Regional Joint Statement** on Preventing Plastic Pollution, including Marine Litter (referred to as the Joint Statement) endorsed at 2023 Berlin Process Summit in Tirana, monitoring and reporting under the GAWB Action Plan and priorities for 2024.

On 16 November, RWG GAWB meeting expanded to include the Working Group on Industrial Development (WGID) to foster synergy between the CRM Regional Industrial Area and the

GAWB Circular Economy pillar in the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan at the regional level. Discussions at the meeting centred on the establishment of the **Western Balkans Green and Circular Economy Stakeholders Platform**. The Platform was launched at the Western Balkans Coordination Meeting *Revolve to Evolve - Go Circular* on 8 February 2024 in Pristina, organised by RCC, with the in-kind support of the EU4Green and WB6 Chamber Investment Forum. Focused on the Circular Economy pillar, this gathering aimed to identify regional needs, address funding gaps, and enhance coordination among donors, businesses, industrial sector and WB economies to propel the Western Balkans towards climate neutrality by 2050.

Following the meeting of RWG GAWB and endorsement of the Joint Statement, the RCC has undertaken technical consultations with the WB economies throughout December to outline the methodology for development of the **Regional Action Plan**, ensuring alignment with the 2023 Circular Economy Operational Plan. The Regional Action Plan transforms the political commitment of the region into practical measures and recommendations aimed at protecting biodiversity and water ecosystems from plastic pollution including marine litter.

On 15 December 2023, RCC, in collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), convened the 10<sup>th</sup> regular **meeting of the Biodiversity Task Force of South East Europe (BDTF SEE)**. The meeting centred on the thorough review of the Terms of Reference (ToR) and Rules of Procedure for the BDTF SEE. These documents were submitted for the approval of BDTF members in January. The review considered the dual co-chairmanship role of the RCC within this regional framework, as well as the new Note on Governance on GAWB.

Moreover, discussions during the meeting focused on the strategic direction for development of the Western Balkans Biodiversity Report and Biodiversity Strategy, recognising these as pivotal deliverables requiring focused attention under the Protection of Nature and Biodiversity pillar. In continuation, the RCC provided technical assistance to the BDTF and IUCN to establish the foundation for the Western Balkans Biodiversity Strategic Plan which will undergo further development in 2024.

Throughout December, the RCC also engaged in intensive consultations with the economies to **develop an Analytical paper** that would offer a comprehensive analysis of domestic targets and actions, existing indicators used for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) reporting, ensuring alignment with the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, EU Green Deal, and CBD Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. It identifies deficiencies and outlines requirements for additional data collection essential for creating a comprehensive Western Balkans Biodiversity Strategic Plan. Additionally, it evaluates prevailing economy-wide nature conservation programmes, biodiversity strategies, and action plans that provide insight into the status of biodiversity in WB economies. The Analytical Paper also provides recommendations on integrating the Joint Statement in the WB Biodiversity Strategic Plan framework to safeguard the region's biodiversity and water ecosystems.

In the area of **climate action**, RCC has been explicitly recognised for its role in the overall coordination of GAWB processes at the regional level in the Joint Declaration of Intent between the Leaders of the Western Balkans and the Federal Republic of Germany on the **Regional Climate Partnership** that was endorsed at the Berlin Process Summit in Tirana in 2023. In light of this, the RCC has commenced discussions with the German Development Agency (GIZ) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) **to advance the implementation of Climate Partnership** within the existing governance structures outlined in the GAWB AP.

## A5. Projects

### *A5.1. Western Balkans Youth Lab Project<sup>3</sup>*

Between November 2023 and February 2024, the Western Balkans Youth Lab (WBYL) Project continued working on promotion of active participation of youth in decision-making processes.

During this period, the Project organised [Third Informal Donor Coordination Meeting on Youth Agenda](#) on 5 December 2023. The event gathered representatives of youth organisations, line ministries and donors supporting youth in the region. Following panel discussions and presentation of the Mapping Reports, informal donor coordination process has been successfully completed on behalf of RCC. Future meetings are to be organised by RYCO.

Additionally, the Project prepared 6 economy reports and 1 comparative report on [Mapping of Youth Policies and Identification of Existing Support and Gaps in Financing of Youth Actions in the Western Balkans](#). The reports comprehensively review the existing framework for youth policy, programmes, and mechanisms for youth participation in the region. They also highlight support and financial gaps in youth initiatives. Comparing to previous [edition of Mapping Reports from early 2020](#), WB economies have made progress in the implementation of participatory mechanisms that ensure youth voices in policymaking processes. However, despite the fact that most of economies have approved and implemented an economy-wide strategy on youth, actual meaningful participation varies across the region. As per findings of the reports, monitoring and evaluation of youth policies remains a major challenge in all Western Balkan economies. Further to this, there is a significant deficiency in the availability of systematic, disaggregated youth data to inform evidence-based policies.

The second edition of [EU-Balkan Youth Forum \(EUBYF\)](#), organised by the Regional Cooperation Council in cooperation with and funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, was also co-organised by RCC's WB Youth Lab project. The Forum was organised in Novi Sad on 13-15 December 2023, gathering more than 30 young people from Western Balkans and European Union. The three-day Forum empowered

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

participants to understand the dynamics of the Common Regional Market, environmental protection, and skills promotion. Through workshops and discussions, attendees gained the tools and knowledge to impact their communities and raise awareness about opportunities in an enlarged EU. The conference ended with EU-Western Balkans young delegates drafting concrete conclusions, which will serve as a foundation for further cooperation within and beyond the EUBYF network.

In order to provide space for young people and those working with youth from the WB to discuss youth-related issues from different perspectives, WB Youth Lab will support participation of 20 young people from the region at **Bridging the Gap high-level dialogue** to be held in the Parliament of Albania on 23-24 February 2024. Bridging the Gap initiative promotes dialogue between civil society and elected representatives from the region and the European Union. The event will be co-organised by the European Parliament's Mediation and Dialogue Support Unit and the European Commission's DG NEAR together with the WB Youth Lab project.

As the reporting period was a non-cost extension period for the Project, significant emphasis was also placed on actively promoting the project's outcomes and engaging in meetings with project partners and beneficiaries to explore potential themes for the upcoming phase. Further to this, the new Action Document for the phase 2 had been prepared and agreed with DG NEAR and the project has been included in the recently adopted IPA Committee Decision for 2024.

### *A5.2. Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)<sup>4</sup>*

The IISG is a regional mechanism representing strategic EU-Western Balkans security partnership and strong regional ownership, with all Ministries of Interior/Security from the region being stakeholders in this process. As the operational hand of the IISG process, within the reporting period, the IISG Secretariat supported development and strengthening of several processes and products as agreed among the regional partners under the IISG Terms of Reference. The following documents were adopted at the [7<sup>th</sup> Board meeting](#) in December 2023:

- The first Annual Response mapping report on three pillars for Year 1 (i.e. 2021);
- The second Annual Response mapping report on three pillars for Year 2 (i.e. 2022);
- Analytical Report on the IISG Database;
- Annual Report for 2022;
- Annual Plan for 2024.

IISG Secretariat reported on the **Annual Response** mapping for the year 1 as part of the ACTION goals. Methodology was approved at the previous Board meeting and followed the

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



needs mapping progress made by partners. More than 50% of the needs listed were reported in all three pillars as completed or in process. In the second Annual Response mapping report more than 75% of the needs were reported as completed through the response mapping process.

The **IISG Database** is reported to have been completed. Currently, there are 87 ongoing projects reported in the Database. The next year's agenda foresees conducting a deeper analysis of the database in order to be able to reflect on possible gaps and duplications. It is important to mention that the IISG Secretariat plans to organise stakeholder coordination meetings annually in each WB capital in order to familiarise partners with Database information and make full use of it. Database will be updated on a quarterly basis. Cybercrime is proposed as a new element in the IISG Database.

In the **Annual Report for 2022**, the IISG Secretariat reported its activities covering the time from the 6<sup>th</sup> Board meeting in June 2022 until the 7<sup>th</sup> Board meeting in December 2023.

**The Annual Plan for 2024** approved at the 7<sup>th</sup> Board meeting includes tasks such as:

- Completion of needs mapping reporting for second edition;
- Conclusion of the third Report on the responses;
- Completion of the Database analysis.

The 7<sup>th</sup> IISG Board also tasked IISG Secretariat to conclude the work on the following:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial Needs Mapping report;
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Response Mapping report;
- Updating the IISG Database and analysing support;
- Revising the methodology on becoming a member;
- Developing Rules of Procedures for the overall work of the IISG;
- Developing Methodology for the work of the Support Group.

IISG project has been included in the recently adopted IPA Committee Decision for 2024.

### A5.3. ESAP 2

The Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP 2) project officially ended on 31 December 2023. In the period from 1 November until the end of the second phase, the project team was involved in programme activities and wrapping up. The Employment and Social Affairs Platform is continued with Phase III under IPA 2024.

The final project activities under IPA II undertaken with the partners from the **Western Balkans Network Tackling Undeclared Work** pertained to distribution of final deliverables, obtaining partners' feedback and approval. These deliverables include: reports on two thematic regional workshops on under-declared work and on platform work, in Tirana, Albania and a study visit to Nicosia, Cyprus, held in September and October 2023 respectively; and reports from Mutual Assistance Projects (MAPs) and their follow-ups. These reports were all approved by the partners and published in the Members' Corner, closed section of the ESAP 2 project website dedicated to partners' interactions. Moreover, the project has developed an interactive toolkit for enforcement authorities from the region involved in the Network. The tool is aimed at assisting Labour Inspectors and Tax Authorities in their day-to-day work to identify good practices from both European peer Network and the region and explore modalities on how to enhance their own work based on these. It can be navigated by regions, sectors and type of measures.

In November 2023, ESAP 2 published a regional report on practices with classification and recording of **Labour Market Policies (LMPs)** [Aligning Western Balkan Labour Market Policy Databases with the EU Guidelines](#). The report scans the situation in each Western Balkan economy with accompanying roadmaps on how to align them with the EU methodology and Eurostat reporting criteria. The regional overview finds that the most significant gap between EU guidelines and current LMP classification practices in all economies of the Western Balkans is present in mixed interventions, designed to include characteristics of different subcategories of interventions. The report greatly benefited from inputs and insights of Public Employment Services (PES) from the region and it helped them compare their practices with those of other PESs from the region. The regional workshop that preceded publication of the report was, upon the publication of the report, extended with another regional gathering to exchange plans for alignment and challenges facing PESs in this endeavour. On top of that, on 7-8 December 2023 ESAP 2 organised a two-day Study Visit for representatives of PESs from all six Western Balkan economies to Employment Service of Slovenia (ESS). ESS hosts introduced their system and approach to classification and recording of LMPs, decision-making based on monitoring of performance and evaluation of the policies and measures, IT solutions, etc. They also at length explained development of their current system including the challenges they faced in the alignment process and solutions to overcome them. Western Balkan PES representatives visited ESS Headquarters, the biggest Field Office in Ljubljana and its Career Centre. The comprehensive and elaborate Study Visit resulted in a letter of recommendation issued by ESS and ESAP 2 project to the Chair of the European PES Network to involve PESs from the region in its work.

The other regular activities in this final stage of the project included regular update of [Observatory on employment in the Western Balkans](#) database as well as of [Social Scoreboard database](#) presenting data on region's performance regarding implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

## B. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security

### B1. Political Cooperation

Last **RCC Board meeting** of 2023 took place on 8 November 2023 in Sarajevo. Participants approved the Regular Report on the activities of the Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat for the period 1 May 2023 – 1 November 2023, as well as the Decision on the Budget of the RCC Secretariat for 2024 and the Decision on Dates of the RCC Board Meetings in 2024.

In the framework of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the **first meeting of SEECP Political Directors** (PD) under Skopje's Chairpersonship-in-Office (C-i-O) took place on 26 October 2023. The meeting was attended by Political Directors and representatives of all SEECP Participants, representatives of the Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat and a representative of the European Union (EU). The meeting was an opportunity for the C-i-O to present the priorities and the rolling calendar of Skopje's SEECP Chairpersonship-in-Office.

Secretary General of RCC Ms. Bregu met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova Mr. Nicu Popescu during her **visit to Chisinau** in November 2023. The meeting was an opportunity to discuss Chisinau's engagement in the SEECP format, to explore possibilities of Moldova's reengagement in RCC, as well as their progress on the EU path.

Secretary General of RCC Ms. Bregu also took part at an event dedicated to the discussion on the Western Balkans accession to the European Union, the role of regional cooperation and RCC, organised within the frame of the Spanish Presidency of the EU Council by the **Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid** in November 2023. The event, moderated by the Director of Elcano Royal Institute, gathered representatives of governments, the diplomatic core, media as well as other relevant regional and EU stakeholders.

At the end of November 2023, representatives of RCC participated at the **Coordination Meeting of Regional Organisations** that was this time organised in Sarajevo.

### B3. Good Governance

**The seventh Meeting of the South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes (SEE JTI) Network** took place in December 2023 in Tirana, organised by the RCC in close cooperation with the Albanian School of Magistrates. The meeting brought together the SEE JTI Network participants, representatives of DG NEAR, European Judicial Training Network (EJTN), CoE HELP Programme, European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), European Centre for Judges and Lawyers (EIPA), GIZ and international judicial experts, with the aim to discuss issues of mutual relevance and agree on the objectives of the network's activities in the upcoming period. The meeting also aimed at establishing a more regular exchange and coordination among donors in order to increase cooperation, avoid future duplication and overlapping, and identify possible synergies for future collaboration.

With regard to future activities, it was agreed that the SEE JTI network will engage in:

- Preparing and delivering training sessions in cooperation with HELP Programme on topics of common interest;
- Supporting the delivery of regional Training of Trainers on soft skills for judges and prosecutors;
- Supporting the delivery of regional Training of Trainers on use of digital tools and IT skills;
- Preparing methodological tools to measure the impact of judicial training in SEE.

**The regional conference titled *Mediation in the Context of EU Accession*** was organised by the RCC in cooperation with CSSP - Berlin Centre for Integrative Mediation on 11-12 December in Skopje. The Conference brought together representatives of the most relevant bodies concerned with mediation, i.e. Ministries of Justice, Judicial Councils, and Mediation Associations/Chambers. Through the combination of working group sessions and panel discussions, the Conference provided a space for professional exchange on promoting the amicable settlement of disputes by encouraging the use of mediation and ultimately promoting a balanced relationship between mediation and judicial proceedings.

The new study commissioned by RCC titled [\*Fostering Cross-Border/Boundary Mediation Excellence - Towards Harmonised Quality Standards and Best Practices in Civil and Commercial Dispute Resolution across South East European Jurisdictions\*](#) was also presented and discussed during the Conference. By focusing on the EU perspective, inter-domestic instruments, private international law, and the unique dynamics of SEE jurisdictions, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in this domain. The study highlights the commendable practices existing in the SEE region, such as the voluntary nature of mediation, continuous alignment of domestic mediation laws with inter-domestic standards and EU directives ensuring that mediation frameworks remain relevant and effective over time, and flexibility in court procedures allowing for the transition from litigation to mediation at various stages. Based on best practices existing in SEE and EU, the study also provides a set of specific recommendations for efficient cross-border/boundary settlement

discussions and a substantial boost to mediation in resolving civil and commercial disputes in SEE.

## B4. Security

From November 2023 to February 2024, the Regional Cooperation Council continued enhancing security cooperation across the Western Balkans.

**The 8th Regional Security Coordination Conference** was the result of a collaborative effort between the Regional Cooperation Council, the International Relations Service of the Office for the Coordination and Planning of Police Forces of the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the government of Italy. It took place at the Police Institute of Advanced Studies in Rome, 13-15 November 2023.

This conference highlighted shared issues and challenges in represented economies, and discussions resonated with broader concerns in the region and across the EU. Notably, it broadened its scope, embracing broader societal challenges, including the pressing issues of brain drain, human security, disaster reduction, pandemics, etc. Interestingly, these thematic shifts echoed many key findings of the [SecuriMeter 2023 results](#), underscoring the conference's timeliness. Marking a full return to an in-person gathering, the 8<sup>th</sup> conference fostered open and productive dialogues, creating a positive energy that resonated throughout the venue over conference days.

Featuring a diverse line-up of over 55 speakers from 19 different economies from 3 continents, the event drew in more than 100 participants and security practitioners representing the Western Balkan economies, Italy, and various European Union Member States. Attendees also included representatives of the EU Commission, FRONTEX, United Nations Development Programme, International Organization for Migration, Integrative Internal Security Governance, Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, World Health Organization, pertinent regional and international organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs), and law enforcement agencies.

[SecuriMeter 2023](#) presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Regional Security Conference showcased the RCC's continuous efforts to explore public opinions on security matters in the Western Balkans. The 2023 edition brought insights into the public's concerns and attitudes towards organised crime, terrorism, cyber security, misuse of firearms and arms trafficking, the impacts of global geopolitical tensions on regional stability, corruption, migration, natural disasters, fake news and disinformation, etc.

Back to back with the 8<sup>th</sup> Jumbo Security Conference, the regional **Forum of Negotiators of Chapters 23 and 24 of the EU acquis**, funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, was organized for the first time, providing a valuable opportunity

for shared discussions and experiences, given the common aspiration of Western Balkans economies for a full EU membership. Acknowledging the diverse stages of progress across economies, the consensus among panellists was that collaborative dialogue is of paramount importance for the inherent support that economies could extend to one another in overcoming shared challenges.

Panellists underscored the substantial efforts already invested in both chapters, and presented some of notable achievements, including comprehensive judicial reforms and the development of strategic documents addressing issues such as terrorism, organized crime, migration, and asylum. New laws, addressing areas like asset confiscation and anti-corruption, were highlighted as examples of progress. However, identified areas requiring further attention for some encompassed freedom of media, cybersecurity, and other reform needs.

The reporting period was initiated with the early planning stages for the SecuriMeter 2024 project and the upcoming 9<sup>th</sup> Regional Security Coordination Conference planned for 2024. These endeavours were characterised by an effort to refine survey methodologies and thematic scopes, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of regional security perceptions.

RCC coordinated and prepared the [Western Balkans Security Synopsis: Reflections and Recommendations](#) publication from the 8<sup>th</sup> Regional Security Coordination Conference. This document, drafted with the assistance of independent security experts, provides a brief analysis of the security landscape in the Western Balkans. It encompasses detailed reviews of Conference panel discussions, analysis of current challenges and trends, and forward-looking recommendations to enhance future gatherings.

The RCC's engagement extended beyond conventional security dialogues, as evidenced by participating in the *Digitalisation and Democracy* conference in Podgorica, highlighting the intricate nexus between technological advancement and democratic governance, further illustrating the RCC's broad spectrum of interest in regional security.

Simultaneously, the RCC demonstrated its role in orchestrating collaborative efforts among **South East European National Security Agencies (SEENSA) and Military Intelligence Chiefs (SEEMIC)** under the auspices of the co-chairmanships of Bulgaria and Croatia. This period was marked by planning and organising activities for 2024, aiming to cement the foundation for robust regional security cooperation.

## **B5. SEE2030 Strategy**

During the reporting period, the **SEE2030 Strategy Monitoring Committee** held its 5<sup>th</sup> meeting in Athens on 28 November 2023. At the meeting, SEECP Participants reached a consensus on deepening the implementation of SEE2030 Strategy. In line with the new

approach to the implementation of SEE2030 recommended by the RCC Secretariat and agreed by the Monitoring Committee, each SEECP Participant will decide individually **to increase its annual contribution for the SEE2030 Strategy** implementation on a voluntary basis. Based on that decision, **Ankara has become the first SEE economy that increased its contribution to the SEE2030 Strategy by 40,000 EUR**. The official letter confirming the increased contribution of Ankara by its SEE2030 national coordinator was received on 18 December 2023.

The SEE2030 Monitoring Committee agreed upon the four flagships constituting the backbone of the new approach to the implementation of SEE2030 Strategy. Accordingly, high-level (ministerial) meetings on SDGs and SEE2030 Strategy will be organised annually. At these high-level meetings, the outputs of four flagships, namely, peer-learning activities to be organised among SEE economies, SEE Inclusive Growth Index, SecuriMeter, and aid effectiveness will be presented at the policy level.

In line with the conclusions of the 5<sup>th</sup> Monitoring Committee meeting, Greece will organise the first peer learning activity to exchange experiences among SEE economies on the preparation of Voluntary National Reviews.

As to be recalled, the Monitoring Committee had earlier agreed to initiate regional discussions and consultations with think tanks in the SEE region. This consultation mechanism is called T4SEE. Upon the advice of SEE economies, meetings to be organised in the framework of T4SEE will initially be low profile. The **first T4SEE meeting** focused on human security and resilience in South East Europe and held in collaboration with TEPAV (The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Türkiye) took place in Ankara on 5 December 2023. Academics and think tank representatives from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, North Macedonia, and Romania attended as speakers of the first event of T4SEE and made presentations on energy security, environmental security, political security, trust in institutions, and migration.

The work in constructing a **composite regional index** to measure the performance of SEE region in inclusive growth in comparison with the remaining EU Member States is in progress. According to the draft **SEE Inclusive Growth Index (IGI)**, the definition of inclusive growth will be “*sustainable economic growth, which reduces poverty and inequality, empowers women, improves social inclusion, and reduces depopulation through enhancing the quality of life for all*”. Compared to other inclusive indices which similar regional or international organisations run, RCC’s SEE IGI emphasises the interaction between depopulation trends and the quality of life, and embeds both into its concept of inclusive growth. The work is in its finalisation phase. The statistical authorities of SEE economies meet regularly to review the progress achieved so far. The final draft of SEE IGI will be endorsed by the South East Europe **Statistical Authorities Network (SSN)**, and approved by SEE2030 Monitoring Committee. SEE IGI is one of the four flagships proposed by the RCC to be reported to SEE2030 high-level meetings and will also be part of the SEE2030 monitoring exercise.

During the reporting period, RCC's SEE2030 Team had a number of meetings with regional and international organisations. RCC attended **SEECF Parliamentary Assembly's** first standing committee meeting under the chairmanship of Skopje and made a presentation on the new approach to SEE2030 Strategy.

## C. Horizontal Activities

### C1. Programming, Monitoring, Coordination

During the reporting period, RCC advanced with the preparatory work for the **next edition of the Balkan Barometer**. Balkan Barometer has solidified its position as an indispensable and extensively referenced resource, providing current insights into the perceptions and attitudes of both the general public and businesses. It serves as a valuable resource trusted by policy-makers, academia, businesses, civil society, and decision-makers.

RCC has initiated the process of developing the conceptual framework for the **new phase of the CRM Action Plan**, which was launched at the Western Balkans Meets EU meeting held in Skopje in January 2024. Following extensive discussions with the WB economies, regional partners, and other stakeholders in the upcoming period, we plan to have the new phase of the CRM Action Plan endorsed by the Western Balkan leaders at the forthcoming Berlin Process Summit.

The successor to the CRM is designed to initiate a series of measures aimed at bolstering economic integration with the EU's Single Market, which is seen as a key driver of economic growth. This includes, but is not limited to, aligning with EU single market regulations, opening up significant sectors and areas, promoting and executing essential reforms to narrow the convergence gap with the EU, advancing the four freedoms, and enhancing sustainable economic growth. This should be achieved through means such as attracting foreign investments, facilitating intra-regional trade and trade between the EU and the Western Balkans, accelerating digital transformation, liberalising the service sector, and easing the movement of workers.

During the reporting period, the **RCC Liaison Office in Brussels** has been actively engaged in a series of activities including high-level meetings, in-depth analyses, and active participation in summits and events.

The Liaison Office conducted a series of introductory and regular meetings with a range of institutions and organisations. These meetings included interactions with ambassadors, deputy heads of missions, and diplomats from EU Missions of the region. Additionally, the Office engaged with EU institutions, including representatives of the EU Council, European Commission, EEAS, European Economic and Social Committee, EU Member States, COWEB/COELA, and CEFTA representatives.



## C2. Communication

During the reporting period, communication efforts were focused on promoting the benefits of regional cooperation, CRM, EU-WB roaming reduction, the EU-Balkan Youth Forum, RCC's flagship competitions (Balkathon and Butterfly Innovation Award), and the promotion of SecuriMeter 2023. Additionally, consistent promotional activities were carried out for Balkan Barometer, environmental and human capital agendas, youth agenda, women's empowerment, etc. The promotion extended as well to the EU-WB Summit utilising various channels such as press releases, interviews, direct communication, social media, and digital content.

The primary communication objective was to inform citizens about the advantages of signed agreements, underscoring the significance of regional cooperation and EU's support in uplifting the region. Special emphasis was placed on roaming agreements and human capital agenda, with a dedicated focus on promoting the Women Empowerment agenda, particularly addressing the critical issue of violence against women through a 16-day social media campaign.

In a broader context, RCC's communication efforts were directed at promoting the Common Regional Market Action Plan, WBGA agenda, security cooperation, and the benefits of regional cooperation, as well as highlighting the EU's commitment to the region and its integration. To reach a wider audience, diverse and engaging content was created using different communication channels.

RCC consistently keeps the public, both internal and external, informed about its activities, events, publications, and the overall situation in the region through its website, news updates, social media platforms, Daily News Overview, and other suitable communication means. The organisation actively maintains and develops positive relations with media outlets in the region and the EU, resulting in sustained interest in RCC's activities.

## Annex 1: PR and Communication – website links

### **Regional cooperation and Common Regional Market**

<https://www.rcc.int/news/857/european-union-western-balkans-cooperation-in-focus-this-week>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/860/bregu-fully-functional-common-regional-market-can-be-our-vessel-to-the-eu-single-market>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/862/new-phase-of-the-common-regional-market-to-be-ready-for-leaders-endorsement-at-the-next-berlin-process-summit>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0MpZJ1NGx2/>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/855/rcc-secretary-general-promotes-regional-cooperation-at-the-elcano-royal-institute-in-madrid>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C2Z932gtocX/?img\\_index=3](https://www.instagram.com/p/C2Z932gtocX/?img_index=3)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCwcyG1yqQQ>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTGtYnvc\\_aQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTGtYnvc_aQ)

Interview with RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu for KDPolitik.com

<https://www.rcc.int/docs/692/interview-with-rcc-secretary-general-majlinda-bregu-for-kdpolitikcom>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2fEiCXNSmX/>

Interview with RCC Secretary General Bregu for RTV Klan's "31 Minuta"

<https://www.rcc.int/docs/690/secretary-general-bregu-for-rtv-klans-31-minuta>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1685CctN2d/>

#### - **Digital agenda**

Promotion of EU-WB roaming reduction

[https://www.instagram.com/p/CzVmdIPN\\_JL/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CzVmdIPN_JL/)

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYPMd7yO2Hk>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0WwOXRNAMI/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0yoB-ZsKxn/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2CSJ2bNIIF/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2P44tltUDz/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2kySKDtpHE/>

#### - **Human Capital Agenda**

<https://www.rcc.int/news/856/bregu-can-you-put-a-price-tag-on-people-leaving-the-region-in-a-way-yes-you-can>

*Talking Point video*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIV739DxK9k>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0RDpzYN64n/>

#### - **Innovation & Research**

*Promotion of Butterfly Innovation Award*

News

<https://www.rcc.int/news/859/rcc-reveals-winners-of-the-2023-regional-butterfly-innovation-award>

Social Media promotion

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzgOb-itNML/>

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

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cz3r48yNR2l/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0ti-rRt4SU/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1KJDxgNPXK/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1uKTxDtNEF/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C19f5Uat1hI/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2maJgINOVv/>

*Promotion of Balkathon competition*

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2IDM4BNed5/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2cVdHuNdJS/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2sT-RBNUN2/>

- **Environment Agenda**

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzL-U7WNCyQ/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0hVgCqt2rk/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Czycsu-NeGy/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0Ow16FNfIN/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0hVgCqt2rk/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1Hejl-tkuv/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2Kr78mtgyo/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKonguZGyDw>

- **Women Empowerment agenda (WE)**

Social Media campaign on violence against women

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0Ewz6Itb5R/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0HgAtLN0u-/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0JdDBMtYhS/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0MOVpmtHbc/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0PNSFGtgo-/>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C0Ryaz6No- /](https://www.instagram.com/p/C0Ryaz6No-/)

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C0UXN-mtY -/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C0UXN-mtY-/)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0XNwHvtpF5/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0Zi0dZtX3b/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0cbUVVNEZk/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0eM1s-txnN/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0hIT1EtI9y/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0jY641tBg-/>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C0mJtjiNEY /](https://www.instagram.com/p/C0mJtjiNEY/)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0pCtm1tkZf/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0rJ1M7NRZx/>

- **Tourism**

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzONnTcN3GD/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2huUVaN4Pb/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kh61Q5cuiLM>

## **Security Cooperation**

*Promotion of Jumbo Security Conference*

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzIL8GNN5Vd/>

Promotion of SecuriMeter

- Website/subpage

- <https://www.rcc.int/securimeter/> - Publication, infographics, database

- News

<https://www.rcc.int/news/853/bregu-brain-drain-is-becoming-not-just-human-capital-but-security-issue-too>

- Social Media promotion

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzoguTpNa-o/>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/CzqbX5vtPjT/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CzqbX5vtPjT/?img_index=1)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0eqXBONdBH/>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C0\\_9w08tmxY/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C0_9w08tmxY/)

## **Continuous promotion of Balkan Barometer 2023**

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

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1CuTbFI7dz/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C14dduptxcq/>

## **Youth Agenda and WBYL**

*Promotion of youth mental health issues*

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2NRCCWtuhm/>

*Promotion of EU-Balkan Youth Forum organised by RCC and supported by WBYL*

News

<https://www.rcc.int/news/857/european-union-western-balkans-cooperation-in-focus-this-week>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/861/the-second-eu-western-balkans-youth-forum-hosted-by-the-rcc-ends-in-novi-sad>

Social media promotion

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0cRPQ7tc0l/>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C0r0T6qNi\\_Z/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C0r0T6qNi_Z/)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C01sbVhtbV1/>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C06iWlJmKPa/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C06iWlJmKPa/?img_index=1)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C07KWoSNIuT/>

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C1Mbd\\_MNo3c/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C1Mbd_MNo3c/)  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1W9btFt4sT/>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jBC2rXGeYs>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zscgUxV4Vr8>  
<https://twitter.com/rccWBYL/status/1735652268584616282>  
<https://twitter.com/rccWBYL/status/1737843765086429287>

### *Third Informal Donor Coordination Meeting on Youth Agenda*

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<https://twitter.com/rccWBYL/status/1732054833044025384>  
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### *Mapping of Youth Policies reports*

Website

<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/170/mapping-of-youth-policies-and-identification-of-existing-support-and-gaps-in-financing-of-youth-actions-in-the-western-balkans--comparative-report>  
<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/176/mapping-of-youth-policies-and-identification-of-existing-support-and-gaps-in-financing-of-youth-actions-in-the-western-balkans--serbia-report>  
<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/175/mapping-of-youth-policies-and-identification-of-existing-support-and-gaps-in-financing-of-youth-actions-in-the-western-balkans--north-macedonia-report>  
<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/174/mapping-of-youth-policies-and-identification-of-existing-support-and-gaps-in-financing-of-youth-actions-in-the-western-balkans--montenegro-report>  
<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/173/mapping-of-youth-policies-and-identification-of-existing-support-and-gaps-in-financing-of-youth-actions-in-the-western-balkans--kosovo-report>  
<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/172/mapping-of-youth-policies-and-identification-of-existing-support-and-gaps-in-financing-of-youth-actions-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina>  
<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/171/mapping-of-youth-policies-and-identification-of-existing-support-and-gaps-in-financing-of-youth-actions-in-the-western-balkans--albania-report>

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<https://twitter.com/rccWBYL/status/1733116116031991831>  
<https://twitter.com/rccWBYL/status/1747961174837043495>

## **Employment and ESAP**

*Tackling under-declared work – workshop in Tirana*

News

<https://www.esap.online/news/192/rcc-esap-2-western-balkan-enforcement-authorities-address-challenges-of-under-declared-work>  
<https://www.rcc.int/news/840/rcc-esap-2-western-balkan-enforcement-authorities-address-challenges-of-under-declared-work>

Social media promotion

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<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1707773109829320718>  
<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1708769207570112672>

*Classification of Labour Market Policies in the Western Balkans and Roadmaps for their alignment with EU practices – workshop in Budva*

News

<https://www.esap.online/news/193/rcc-esap-2-strengthening-capacities-of-western-balkans-public-employment-services-for-alignment-of-the-labour-market-policies-databases-with-the-eu-requirements>  
<https://www.rcc.int/news/844/rcc-esap-2-strengthening-capacities-of-western-balkans-public-employment-services-for-alignment-of-the-labour-market-policies-databases-with-the-eu-requirements>

Social media promotion

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<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1710273908765598019>  
<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1711334305455014369>

*Tackling Undeclared Work – Study Visit to Cyprus Labour Inspectorate*

News

<https://www.esap.online/news/197/rcc-esap-2-western-balkan-enforcement-authorities-explore-cyprus-approach-to-undeclared-and-discuss-platform-work>  
<https://www.rcc.int/news/851/rcc-esap-2-western-balkan-enforcement-authorities-explore-cyprus-approach-to-undeclared-and-discuss-platform-work>

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<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1719321786309853544>  
[https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cy5j\\_epNIU5/](https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cy5j_epNIU5/)  
<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7294589554990845190?lang=en>

*Active Labour Market Policies and Measures: Aligning Western Balkans practices with the EU requirements – Study Visit to Slovenian Employment Service*

News

<https://www.esap.online/news/199/rcc-esap-2-western-balkan-public-employment-services-visit-employment-service-of-slovenia-to-discuss-aligning-western-balkan-practices-with-the-eu-requirements>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/858/rcc-esap-2-western-balkan-public-employment-services-visit-employment-service-of-slovenia-to-discuss-aligning-western-balkan-practices-with-the-eu-requirements>

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<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1734930214331805723>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0oT-IYtqFD/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rcc.int/video/7310551612685159685?lang=en>

Other social media links:

<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1712024659921711192>

<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1724733545657082141>

<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1729076605887394059>

<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1729878276473336098>

<https://twitter.com/rccESAP/status/1738132176389001323>

## Abbreviations

BIA	Butterfly Innovation Award
BEREC	Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CEPEJ	European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice
CI	Creative industries
C-i-O	Chairpersonship-in-Office
CRM	Common Regional Market
CSOs	Civil society organisations
COELA	Working Party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the EU
COWEB	Working Party on the Western Balkans Region
DIHs	Digital Innovation Hubs
DG	Directorate General
DG NEAR	Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EC	European Commission
EIPA	European Centre for Judges and Lawyers
EJTN	European Judicial Training Network
EPC	European Payments Council
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
ESAP	Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project
ESS	Employment Service of Slovenia
EUBYF	EU-Balkan Youth Forum
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FRONTEX	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
GAWB	Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GP	Growth Plan
GSMA	GSM Association
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IISG	Integrative Internal Security Governance
JWGI	Joint Working Group on Investments
LMPs	Labour Market Policies
MAPs	Mutual Assistance Projects
PD	Political Directors
PES	Public Employment Services
PSPs	Payment Service Providers
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RISS	Regional Investment Screening Standards
RNWE	Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship
RoP	Rules of Procedure
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
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'
SEENSA	Meeting of the Heads of South East Europe National Security Agencies
SEPA	Single Euro Payments Area
SSN	Statistical Authorities Network



TEG	Tourism Expert Group
TEPAV	Economic Policy Research Foundation of Türkiye
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNCITRAL	United Nations Commission on International Trade Law
WB	Western Balkans
WBDS	Western Balkans Digital Summit
WBYL	Western Balkans Youth Lab Project
WGFM	Working Group on Financial Markets
WGID	Working Group on Industrial Development