

Talking Points by the RCC Secretary General
Majlinda Bregu
at the
SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs meeting, New
York, 21 September 2023

Honourable Deputy Prime Ministers,
Esteemed Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Addressing you today in the vibrant heart of New York City, amid the UN General Assembly High-Level Week, is indeed a pleasure.

We find ourselves united under the auspices of the South East European Cooperation Process Chairpersonship-in-Office and the RCC Secretariat. Over the years, this meeting has carved its niche as a platform to dissect and discuss pressing issues confronting South East Europe, charting our collective path forward.

Sincere appreciation to the Skopje Chair-in-Office for their commendable kick-start of the SEECP Chairpersonship and their role in co-organising today's gathering. Furthermore, I am grateful to each Participant, the representative of the European Union and the special guest, Deputy Assistant Secretary Mr Gabriel Escobar for carving out time from their UN High-Level Week agendas to join us today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As stewards of regional cooperation, we are acutely aware of the prevailing disruptions in the world order – like the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Against the backdrop of these vast geopolitical shifts, we must ponder the evolution of regional entities like SEECP. Our collective history has shown us that when global institutions and frameworks are stretched thin, regional bodies can step in to provide stability, continuity, and direction.

Established nearly three decades ago, SEECP stands as a genuine and authentic platform for political dialogue, promoting good-neighbourly relationships and encouraging collaborative endeavours, all designed to shepherd our integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

SEECP's value could perhaps be in its pre-negotiation capabilities, its function as a conduit to pre-empt and resolve disagreements before they reach larger multilateral stages. Can we envision SEECP as a regional bastion — a true reflection of South East Europe's unique

characteristics, bound by shared values echoing the ethos of the European Union?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Navigating this intricate geopolitical juncture, I circle back to our central questions for reflection: With its unique assembly of EU member states and EU aspirants, how can SEECP be pivotal in accelerating the overall EU and Euro-Atlantic integration endeavours? How can we leverage our region's intrinsic ties and idiosyncrasies on the EU integration trajectory? Could the SEECP emerge as a mechanism to untangle potential bilateral knots en route to EU membership?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has generated creative new thinking about possible modes of integration.

Following a period of cautious approach, both Skopje and Tirana started their respective EU accession talks, while Chisinau and Sarajevo obtained EU candidate status. Ankara has lately reaffirmed commitment to its EU path, and Kosovars have received well-deserved EU free travel status, although not yet only in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Furthermore, European Commission President recently proposed a New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans to boost its economic potential and phase into the EU Single Market. We look forward to the implementation on the ground of this timely initiative and stand ready to play our role in its deliverables.

As in all facets of life, the words of truth are always paradoxical.

The Western Balkans has made significant progress in the last two decades, but the Western Balkans is not where its inhabitants or outside peacemakers hoped it would be twenty-plus years after the guns went largely quiet. Unfortunately, friction amongst economies persists, and conflicts can hinder investments and economic growth in the region.

I am afraid we entered a phase of a vicious circle. While acknowledging the need for improving, accelerating the accession process, asking for tangible incentives to strengthen our ability to become EU MS, there is a great deal that WB itself can do and is not doing.

Three years ago the leaders of WB committed and tasked us, RCC, to lead the coordination of constituting a common regional market, the one that could bring the region closer to the EU single Market.

The Balkan economies are amongst the least competitive in Europe and comparable to those of developing countries facing much worse historical legacies and contemporary difficulties. Bulgaria had its per capita GDP at only 41 per cent of the EU average when it acceded in 2007. That may be too little today. Croatia, the last to join in 2013, had 60 per cent. The WB6 range from 26 to 46 per cent of the EU average and have made only halting progress, gaining between 1.8 and 6.6 per cent over the past decade.

The growth of Western Balkan economies has slowed considerably over the past decade as domestic demand moderated and export-led growth subdued by weak competitiveness.

Migration and brain-drain present considerable challenges for all societies in the region.

Yet, progress comes down to implementation and reliability.

Closer integration with the EU in such sectors as trade, climate, energy, research, health, and foreign and defence policy would make candidate economies feel as part of the EU space

even while still on their way to membership.

But while these ideas are being sorted out, it will continue to be important to focus on practical steps to build ties, identity and cooperation through other means as well.

The question of our today's gathering is not whether SEECP has a role to play; it's about how expansive, proactive, and transformative that role should be and how can we jointly contribute to this end.

The SEE2030 Strategy is our joint attempt to explore the avenue of sustainable development as an overarching path towards global betterment, something that even this year's session of UNGA is solemnly dedicated to.

I call upon all of you to help us more resolutely (financially and politically) to move the implementation of this strategy to a new qualitative level – people oriented deliverables!

In conclusion, I look forward to seeing some of you again in Tirana in two weeks' time for the meeting of ministers of foreign affairs within the Berlin Process framework, as a run-up to the Leaders' Summit. It would be yet another opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to regional cooperation and explore ways of improving it.

Thank you!