



Talking Points by the RCC Secretary General *Majlinda Bregu*
at the
NGO forum on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, Belgrade

Dear guest, those present in the room, and those joining us virtually,

While we were working intensively on the preparations for this event, we received some good news from Albania: Vjosa has become the first Wild River National Park in Europe, cementing its status as one of Albania's natural wonders. This is one of those positive examples where the determination and advocacy of CSOs managed to influence policy-making regarding the protection of the environment.

The drive and shared commitment towards a greener and climate-neutral Western Balkans that we all share in this room are an excellent starting point for what we hope will be a successful, long-standing, and impactful NGO Forum.

We are immensely grateful for this regional "Coalition of the Willing" that we have gathered here.

On the side of RCC, we are proud to fully utilize our regional convening capacity, both among governments and international organizations, in launching today's platform for dialogue and collaboration.

While we collectively reflect on the progress in implementing the Green Agenda in 2022 and look ahead to the perspectives for 2023, the context is extremely challenging.

In addition to the wide range of environmental challenges already present, including air and water pollution, deforestation, coal-dependency, climate change, and loss of biodiversity, the war in Ukraine has triggered energy and commodity price hikes, leading to energy security concerns and high inflation. While short-term measures were prioritized to mitigate the crises, the situation highlighted the urgent need for green and digital transitions as drivers of sustained growth and diversification.

Following the start of the war in Ukraine, the three main concerns for the citizens of the Balkans are economic decline (77.3%), food and gas security (62.6%), and the urgent need for investments in renewable energy (85.6%).

In a developing region like ours, daily life-related concerns take precedence, making it challenging to contemplate the future and the threats it may hold. However, climate change and environmental degradation are existential threats that require swift action, even though they may not be perceived with the same level of urgency as energy, inflation, and food crises. It's crucial to note that politicians should pay serious attention to the growing number of youth citing broader quality of life and environmental reasons for leaving the region.



As you all know, the Green Agenda was born in 2020, a pandemic year, following the presentation of the European Green Deal a year before. Despite its birth in a challenging year, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is a dynamic and evolving initiative that, like a living organism, requires collective efforts from both governmental and non-governmental sectors to nurture, grow, and shape it towards a sustainable future.

The solution lies in enhancing regional cooperation and integrating our region into EU's energy and food security and environmental initiatives, plans, and instruments. In this regard, the Energy Support Package, worth EUR 1 billion in grants, has been particularly welcomed to help our region mitigate the impact of the energy crisis and accelerate our green transition. The capital-intensiveness of the green transition and alignment with EU standards can be intimidating, so greater resource mobilization from the EU in terms of expertise, funds, and investments is essential. Investing in a Green Western Balkans is a strategic investment in the European Green Plan and the EU itself.

While there are some positive highlights in our region, such as agreeing on energy and climate targets for 2030, increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix, and expanding the number of protected areas and areas under organic farming, challenges persist. Sadly, we still have some of the highest energy poverty rates in Europe, consume three times more energy to produce one unit of GDP than the EU average, and struggle to meet the mandatory renewable energy targets in the transport sector. We also mourn the thousands of air pollution-related premature deaths.

Important avenues for green growth lie in greening our transport and mobility, investing more in energy efficiency, and building upon the EU renovation wave. We must also focus on greening our jobs and investments and adopt a growth and opportunities perspective when addressing the green transition.

Our region wants to demonstrate that we are part of the solution, not the problem. We want to contribute to making a climate-neutral continent by 2050 a reality rather than delaying it.

The severity of the context demands that not a single ounce of commitment, knowledge, or initiative is wasted if we hope to have a thriving environment for future generations.

Today's meeting marks the hopeful start of a continuous process of engaging and including the perspectives of CSOs in the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, in collaboration with partner regional organizations, projects, and other relevant stakeholders.

The role of civil society in the implementation and monitoring of these processes is indispensable. A vibrant civil society, equipped with significant expertise, contributes strongly to a more environmentally sustainable and equitable future for the region through advocacy efforts, community engagement, monitoring, innovation, and collaboration.

I hope that today's event and the established platform of the NGO forum serve as an opportunity for civil society organizations, experts, and policymakers to come together and discuss pressing environmental issues, as well as how to create a better enabling environment for civil society to effectively fulfil its role



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in the Green Agenda-related processes.



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As the proverb by an unknown author says, "When spiders unite, they can tie down a lion." So let's start weaving this web to unite and tackle the environmental challenges together, going green. Thank you.