

**REPORT**  
**ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE**  
**REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL SECRETARIAT**  
**FOR THE PERIOD 1 OCTOBER 2020 – 1 MARCH 2021**

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

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Implementation of the RCC Strategy and Work Programme.....	9
A. Support to implementation of the Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) ...	9
B. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security .....	15
C. Horizontal activities .....	18
Projects .....	24
Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP) .....	24
Triple P Tourism.....	26
Roma Integration 2020, Phase II .....	28
Youth Lab Project.....	29
Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG).....	31
List of Abbreviations .....	33

## Executive Summary

In the past months, South East Europe (SEE) as well as the world followed with great attentiveness the developments in the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for the public health and economic wellbeing. The ‘second wave’ was greeted with significant variations in policy responses across the region, from relatively strict lockdowns to milder containment measures. According to the available data, almost 2,5 million people globally have lost their battle against the virus since the beginning of the pandemic, of which over 92,000 in South East Europe, at the time of writing this report.

Globally and regionally, the socio-economic impact has been significant, and will continue to present the key challenge to regional economies in the coming period. The regular economic report prepared by the World Bank for the fall 2020 projected that, in the Western Balkans (WB), economic activity will have contracted by 4.8 percent in 2020, with serious implications for employment and poverty levels.

That is why the political commitment expressed by the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans economies (WB6) in the past months provides a much needed momentum for kick-starting socio-economic recovery and resilience. In addition to the assistance provided by the EU to the Western Balkans during the first months of the pandemic, the **Economic and Investment Plan** (EIP) presented by the European Commission (EC) on 6 October 2020 offers a firm foundation for the region’s recovery based on green and digital transitions, mobilizing up to EUR 9 billion of funding. Besides being a notable catalyst for managing the pandemic-induced recession and its aftermath, the EIP once again demonstrates the strong interlinkage between the EU and the WB, and reaffirms unequivocally the EU support to and for the region.

On their part, Western Balkans leaders have showcased great political maturity and understanding of the fact that only a comprehensive and structured regional cooperation can ensure effective and sustainable recovery and development, necessary both for enhancing the welfare of the region’s citizens and for advancing the EU integration. Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process, held on 10 November 2020 and co-chaired by Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia, saw the Leaders endorse the **Common Regional Market Action Plan (CRM AP) 2021-2024** and the Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. These documents will be the foundations of regional cooperation paving the way to sustainable growth in the coming period.

In particular, CRM AP builds upon the successes and lessons learned during the implementation of the Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) from 2017 to 2020 and on the principles expressed in the so called ‘mini-Schengen’ initiative launched in 2019 by Albania, Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia. Targeted actions have been developed and endorsed to contribute to the creation of a: regional trade area; regional investment area; regional digital area; and regional industrial and innovation area,

based on EU rules. In that way, the region will utilize the benefits of the EU's 'four freedoms' approach, make its economies more competitive, increase their attractiveness to investors, create jobs and enrich the labour market pool. It is estimated that the implementation of the regional economic integration could generate 2,5 percent of GDP in case of EFTA-level integration, and as much as 6,7 percent in case of EU level integration.

From the outset, RCC has together with partners been involved in shaping this agenda and will be in charge of the overall coordination and monitoring of the Action Plan in close cooperation and consultation with the CEFTA Secretariat. It should be noted, however, that the process will be fully owned by the region and political commitment of WB6 will be the key determinant of the CRM AP's success.

Regional framework of cooperation remains the most important and appropriate platform for elaborating and advancing the agenda of Euro-Atlantic integrations, with full support of the EU. In that sense, South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) continues to provide political guidance to the RCC and the efforts of the current **SEECP Chairmanship in Office (CiO)**, Ankara, and other SEECP participants to enhancing the efficiency of this platform and promote synergy with international and regional organizations have been most welcome. Ankara's Chairmanship introduced regular, monthly meetings of SEECP Political Directors and of SEECP Working Group, which contributed notably to the strengthening of SEECP overall and of the role of the RCC as the platform's secretariat.

In this context, RCC has been working on the development of the broader regional strategic document, the **SEE 2030 Strategy**, along the lines of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030, as it has been mandated to do by the SEECP Summit Declaration of 2019. The preparation process is marked by a high level of coordination and synergy with the EU, international and regional organizations, SEE economies and other stakeholders. The principle aim of the document is to improve the quality of life in SEE, underpinned by green and digital transitions, fed by a bottom-up approach, and developed in complementarity with the CRM and EU integration process. Once prepared, the Strategy is expected to be endorsed at the SEECP Summit in the summer of 2021.

In the past month, the work of the RCC has in line with these developments been focused on the final stages of the MAP REA implementation, contributing to the preparation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan and beginning its technical implementation, including defining the deliverables for the 2021 Berlin Summit of the Berlin Process, all of which align with the goals outlined in the RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2020-2022.

In promoting **Economic Competitiveness**, three main areas received special attention: regional investment promotion, regional investment policy reforms and regional investment retention and expansion. In addition, free movement of capital and free movement of services in the region will benefit from the work on deepening the capital markets through financial

services and cost efficient payments among the WB and between the WB and the EU. The latter is also among the deliverables set for the Berlin Summit.

In assisting the **Human Capital Development** and thereby strengthening the socio-economic base of the regional economies, progress has been made on the path toward establishing a regional research and innovation area with the endorsement of the Protocol on Open Access to Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans, which allowed for the creation of a regional Network of Open Access Research Infrastructures.

With the adoption of the CRM AP, the region is also expected to resume the negotiations on an Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (MRA). The new agreement has been jointly drafted by the RCC and CEFTA, is fully in line with the relevant EU Directive and is proposed to be signed in the context of CEFTA. As concerns the Agreement on the Recognition of Academic Qualifications, the process of negotiations is expected to begin upon the completion of the internal governmental procedures.

One of the most notable novelty initiatives within CRM AP regarding **mobility of people** will certainly be the facilitation of the Regional Agreement on Freedom of Movement with ID cards. The respective Working Group is currently considering the Zero draft Agreement, prepared and shared by the RCC, and it is envisaged that the Agreement will be finalized within March. Furthermore, RCC will facilitate the negotiations on an Agreement on Free Movement of Third Party Citizens, for which the establishment of a Working Group is expected after the internal governmental procedures within WB economies are completed.

The **Women Economic Empowerment** agenda has benefitted from the partnership between RCC and UNDP, which resulted in an important initiative that will serve as the basis for furthering the agenda with an all-inclusive approach for all relevant stakeholders. Studies commissioned by the RCC and concluded in the preceding period will likewise add to promoting integration of women in the labour market and in the area of STEM.

**Digital Integration** and approximation to the EU Single Digital Market present one of the preconditions for an accelerated and sustainable regional growth, and ambitious measure to that end have been elaborated in the CRM AP, spanning digital infrastructure and connectivity; digital skills and competence; digital economy in the era of new technologies; and trust and security.

In the preceding period, region has made positive steps with the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 5G Roadmap for Digital Transformation in WB Region and the MoU on Regional Interoperability and Trust Services in WB Region. Moreover, steps toward the introduction of a roaming free region regime from 1 July are on good track while the regional consultations leading to the finalization of the roadmap for EU-WB roaming charges reduction have been kick-started.

RCC has devoted great attention to furthering the **Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Resilience** flagship of its SWP, contributing notably first to the development of the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, incorporated in the EIP, and finally to the Declaration on the Green Agenda endorsed at the Sofia Summit. The implementation of the Declaration was kick-started with the 5<sup>th</sup> Ministerial meeting on Environment and Climate Action, organized by the RCC.

**Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security** are objectives under the RCC SWP which aim to provide the region with fundamental prerequisites of sustainable socio-economic growth. In this field, RCC has devoted efforts to enable and enhance judicial and parliamentary cooperation which can aid economic development, as well as to address the most pressing security challenges in a holistic and coordinated fashion modelled on the best international and EU practices. Equally importantly, through this objective RCC supports the work of SEECP and SEECP CiO and maintains a continuous dialogue with all relevant regional actors – from regional governments and their representatives to EU, its institutions and other international and regional organizations.

The entire process of regional cooperation, including implementation targets and public opinion, continues to be monitored through the **Horizontal Activities**. Preparations for the 2021 Balkan Barometer edition have been started, and this edition of public and business opinion will also include the prognosis of future developments in the context of the pandemic.

Furthermore, in addition to contributing to the preparation of deliverables for the Berlin Summit, RCC has been keenly aware of the importance of coordinating, monitoring and communicating progress. Meetings with PM Sherpas on CRM implementation have already been initiated, as has the Matrix of governance of CRM agenda, devised a set of key indicators for tracking and monitoring implementation of CRM policy areas. Communication on CRM has been enhanced by the RCC through the appropriate channels.

Finally, the number of **RCC-implemented projects** has in the past year risen to five: Employment and Social Affairs (ESAP), Tourism, Roma Integration (phase II), Youth Policy Lab (WBYL), and Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG). These projects add to the holistic nature of RCC work, ensuring social inclusivity, maximizing growth and setting sound groundwork for development.

**ESAP** has been focusing on assisting the region in tackling undeclared work as one of the main challenges in the employment landscape of the Western Balkans. Accordingly, two analytical tools were developed and shared with the respective governments. In addition, ESAP has continued to provide demand driven technical assistance to strengthen the institutional capacities of relevant ministries, and developed a regional online Employment



Observatory to address the region's need for up-to-date information on labour market indicators and government policies.

**Triple P Tourism** project has produced an assessment on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in the Western Balkans, whereby it is estimated that recovery will require some 3-4 years. Nevertheless, the work on the Cultural and Adventure Tours has continued, with familiarization (FAM) tours expected to significantly contribute to the promotion of the region. Likewise, despite the dire conditions of the pandemic, all 36 grants awarded through the Small Grants Facility have been implemented with a proven capacity for innovative and adaptive thinking.

As a new initiative to assist the touristic sector and aid international promotion of the region, regional competition "FUTOURISMO - Ride the digital wave" launched at the beginning of February 2021 to award the innovative solutions for the industry in the face of the pandemic.

The second phase of the **Roma Integration** project has focused on assisting the advancement of the Poznan Declaration objectives, concerning the housing and employment of Roma as well as responsive budgeting and data collection and monitoring. Sofia Summit welcomed the progress since the Poznan Summit of the Berlin Process in 2019 but also set the path for further work, as agreed by the responsible Ministers in October 2020.

**Western Balkans Youth Lab** project in the preceding period prepared the preliminary reports on 'Mapping of Youth Policies and Identification of Existing Support and Gaps in Financing of Youth Actions in Western Balkans', on the basis of which a draft concept for a long-term mechanism for donor coordination was developed. In addition, Regional Pool of Experts network was established in November and trainings for its members provided, and the project has begun utilizing the technical assistance and capacity building instruments to address the needs of the beneficiaries, so as to strengthen the capacities of public administrations and youth organizations.

**Integrative Internal Security Governance** has held its 5<sup>th</sup> Board meetings, the first one since coming under the RCC umbrella, which accepted the IISG working methodology developed over the past period following a round of consultations. After the Board meeting, the Annual work plan for 2021 is now in place, as are the IISG governing structures. Still under development are the IISG communication and visibility strategy, the IISG website and the security database, which are expected to be completed in the coming period.

Overall, RCC has adapted to the maximum extent to the pandemic conditions, incorporating the emerging needs and challenges in shaping the vision of strategic documents and their implementation. RCC Secretary General maintained the practice of high-level political consultations to ensure both the awareness of benefits of regional cooperation and regional programmes and the reflection of wants and needs of RCC Board participants in those





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programmes. The high-level meetings in the past months, including the Sofia Summit and the informal meeting of the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), have reaffirmed the unequivocal support by the region, its leaders and its partners for the regional cooperation agenda. Likewise RCC remains fully committed to implementing the regionally owned programmes, of Common Regional Market and, once prepared, SEE 2030, to the benefit of the South East European region, its citizen and the process of EU accession.



## **Implementation of the RCC Strategy and Work Programme**

### **A. Support to implementation of the Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA)**

#### ***A.1 Economic Competitiveness***

In view of the ongoing economic and financial crisis triggered by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, RCC shifted its activities to assist the region in mitigating/curtailing possible long-term negative effects. Planned investment promotion activities had to be postponed, while planned capacity buildings and events transferred to the online sphere, addressing the impact of the pandemic on investment and industry in the Western Balkans.

Activities within the area of *Regional Investment Area* agenda were dedicated to the final development and endorsement of the CRM AP 2021-2024, where the emphasis was on three main areas: Regional Investment Promotion, Regional Investment Policy Reforms and Regional Investment Retention and Expansion. Means to further the agenda have been explored in consultations with the international partners (World Bank Group, CEFTA, WB6 CIF), with the emphasis on strategic sectors for the regional investment promotion and regional investment incentives database.

On 10 November 2020, parallel with the endorsement of CRM AP, six economies of the Western Balkan region endorsed the ‘Regionally Accepted Standards for Negotiating International Investment Agreements’ which set a common baseline for the negotiation of future investment agreements of the WB6. The standards were developed in line with the Regional Investment Reform Agenda (RIRA) whose goal is to achieve greater alignment of the WB6 investment policies with the EU standards and international best practices and latest trends in investment policymaking.

In preparation for the endorsement of CRM AP, when it comes to the area of *Free movement of Capital* and part of the *Free movement of Services* agenda, the focus has been on cost efficient payments among the WB and with the EU, and deepening the capital markets through financial services. WB region continued its work on prioritization of the proposed reform activities, including the agreement on regular exchange of information as part of relief, recovery and resilience. Background work for the next meeting of the Working Group on Financial Markets is under way, including preparations of a detailed programme for the cost efficient payments among the WB and with the EU as the agreed deliverable for the upcoming Berlin Summit in 2021.

#### ***A.2 Human Capital Development***

Following the adoption of the CRM AP 2021-2024, and the Sherpas’ meeting in December 2020, based on the RCC and CEFTA *Joint paper on Way Forward to Mutual Recognition*

*Agreement (MRA)*, a new, jointly revised draft Agreement by RCC and CEFTA Secretariats has been shared with the WB6. The new approach proposes the MRA to be signed as a Standalone Agreement within the context of CEFTA. Based on the joint proposal, RCC would facilitate the automatic recognition of professional qualifications, compliant with the EU Directive 2005/36/EC, whereas CEFTA would facilitate the general system of recognition of professional qualifications. The new draft Agreement is fully in line with the EU Directive, and following internal governmental procedures and appointment of Lead Negotiators, negotiations on this agreement are expected to resume.

Following the Western Balkans Declaration on Recognition of Academic Qualifications at the Poznan Summit, RCC assisted the region with implementation of set goals. Steps included familiarization of ENIC/NARIC bodies with the model of the automatic recognition systems, operationalization and launch of the Joint Information System (JIS) at [www.wb-recognition.org](http://www.wb-recognition.org), development of the Regional Recognition Database (RRD) which was presented to ENIC/NARIC bodies in Tirana in October. JIS currently contains information about recognition procedures, accredited institutions and study programmes in the region, and will integrate requests for recognition once the Regional Recognition Database is completed.

Further, the Comparative Study of National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of Western Balkans Six, and the ‘mock review’ and evaluation of Western Balkans quality assurance with the EU Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) were delivered to the Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications. Recommendations of the Comparative Study of NQF are expected to be endorsed by March 20201, as will the guidelines developed in the course of the Western Balkans quality assurance ‘mock review’.

In line with CRM AP 2021-2024, a draft Western Balkans Agreement on Recognition of Academic Qualifications was delivered to Sherpas. Once the internal governmental procedures are completed, it is expected to initiate the process of negotiations on the Agreement through WGRAQ.

Further to the agenda concerning the *mobility of people* in the region, two draft agreements are in the pipelines. As an important deliverable expected for the Berlin Summit, Regional Agreement on Freedom of Movement with ID cards was endorsed at the Sofia Summit as part of the CRM, previously initiated within the so called mini-Schengen initiative. In the preceding period, the Working Group comprised of economies’ representatives has been established, which accepted the rules of procedure and the time plan and took under consideration the Zero draft Agreement prepared by the RCC, envisaged to be finalized by mid-March.

Furthermore, a draft Western Balkans Agreement on Free Movement of Third Party Citizens was shared with Sherpas. Once internal governmental procedures are completed, an

establishment of a Working Group on the issue is expected, where RCC will facilitate the negotiations.

Upon adoption of the CRM AP, RCC has liaised with regional partners (CEFTA, WB6 CIF, and Transport Community Secretariat) and EC in order to start the technical implementation, including in the field of the Regional Industrial and Innovation Area. Following consultations with these partners, a list of CRM deliverables for the Berlin Summit 2021 has been defined and relevant documents developed to keep track of implementation progress. Consultation meetings have been held with international partner organisations in order to discuss potential collaboration and seek ways of materializing cooperation under the industry component.

In support and promotion of the *Innovation Area*, focus had been on polishing the *Protocol on Open Access to Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans* which would encourage the mobility of researchers and ease scientific collaboration in the region. Protocol was agreed after an intense round of bilateral and multilateral consultations with the participants of the WB Research & Innovation and Open Science Working Group in October, in time for its endorsement at the Sofia Summit.

The Protocol defined an institutional framework that was the key condition for establishing the ‘Network of Open Access Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans’. Twenty-one selected RIs in the region joined the Network at the end of 2020, after completing the RCC’s ‘Open Access to Research Infrastructure in the Western Balkans Support Programme’, designed to guide the preparation of the Open Access policies and to train management, administrative and research staff to introduce the Open Access principles.

RCC further launched the “Technical Assistance to Creating Roadmaps of Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans” to assist line ministries in charge of science, research and innovation of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\* and Republic of North Macedonia to prepare their RI roadmaps. Together with such roadmaps already created in Montenegro and Serbia, joint Western Balkans’ RI Roadmap will become possible and with it the enhanced mobility of researchers and their cooperation. The final phase of the technical assistance is envisaged by the mid-2020.

The RCC continued partnership with the World Economic Forum on the “Western Balkans Competitiveness and Innovation Accelerator” as a public-private leadership collaboration platform. Currently, the best model for the establishment of a regional innovation fund is being explored through regional and bilateral consultations, including a mainstreaming foresight instrument into public and private decision-making in the Western Balkans.

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

*Empowering women in the labour market* is part of the Human Development component of the RCC's SWP 2020-2022, and for most of its part the Women Economic Empowerment (WEE) agenda is also embedded in the CRM AP. The latter encapsulates activities dedicated to encouraging women to pursue entrepreneurship careers, increase their participation in education and STEM careers, take part in digital upskilling, establish women entrepreneurs' networks and women-led innovative teams.

In promoting women's economic empowerment, RCC joined forces with the UNDP to launch the 'Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans' initiative, aimed at increasing women's labour force participation and entrepreneurship, enabling women's leadership in the economy, boosting innovation and growth, contributing to higher quality of governance, empowering number of women in companies' top management and so forth. It is a timely initiative that merges comparative advantages of UNDP and RCC and creates a platform for further development of the partnership. In addition, it welcomes an all-inclusive approach for all stakeholders in the society: academia, policy makers, civil society organisations, private sector, donors, and international and regional organisations.

RCC is furthermore finalising a comprehensive study on 'Economic benefits of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in WB6', which seeks to increase the focus on empowering women in the labour market and to develop a composite index of measures of women economic empowerment in the region.

In furthering the Women in STEM agenda, RCC commissioned a study on 'Mapping of gender-related policies, programmes and mechanisms on gender disparity in STEM in Western Balkans', to assess and understand current practices and needs on the ground and thereby provide a base for future actions, including launching of the 'Network of Women in STEM' in the second quarter of 2021.

### ***A.3 Digital Integration and implementation of Digital Agenda for Western Balkans***

After Regional Roaming Agreement was signed in April 2019, WB economies have placed great importance on the lowering of roaming charges between EU and WB through the implementation of a respective roadmap. The process of EU-WB roaming charges reduction has also been reiterated in the conclusions of the WB Digital Summits held in Skopje, Belgrade and Tirana, as well as in the strategic regional documents, i.e. Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans and CRM.

In October 2020, WB economies agreed on the "Elements for the Roadmap on WB-EU roaming charges reduction" non-paper, prepared by DG CONNECT and RCC, as the first step towards the roadmap for EU-WB roaming charges reduction. The meeting of WB6 held

on 23 February 2021 confirmed that the implementation of the Regional Roaming Agreement is going smoothly and preparations to landmark the full introduction of RLAH regime in WB by 1 July are on track. Furthermore, the meeting elaborated on the steps needed to define the glide path for roaming charges reduction between EU-WB that will be prepared through a transparent and inclusive process of consultation with mobile operators.

The third Western Balkans Digital Summit was hosted by Tirana and held online on 26-28 October 2020. 740 registered participants and 67 speakers discussed over the span of eleven sessions issues related to Networks and connectivity; Digital economy and society; Trust and Security; and Digital skills. The Summit was followed by the Digital Ministerial meeting held on 2 November 2020, which resulted with the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 5G Roadmap for Digital Transformation in WB Region and the MoU on Regional Interoperability and Trust Services in WB Region. In line with the MoU on 5G, the region is fully committed to provide timely access to 5G pioneer bands, deploy 5G networks, and ensure cybersecurity of 5G networks by implementing EU toolbox on 5G cybersecurity. Through activities defined in the MoU on interoperability aimed at the recognition of trust services at the regional level. Consultations with the Host of the 4<sup>th</sup> WB Digital Summit have started and regional discussions will be held within the Steering Committee, with the respective meeting planned to be organized within March.

Measures regarding digital transformation in the CRM AP are very ambitious and cover four areas: Digital infrastructure and connectivity; Digital skills and competence; Digital economy in the era of new technologies; and Trust and security. Some measures are built on the achievements on MAP REA, such as providing broadband internet access for the vast majority of households until 2024, establishing roaming free region from 1 July 2021 and reducing the roaming costs between WB and the EU, aligning regional actions to ensure personal data protection and privacy, introducing mutual recognition of trust services, etc. New measures introduced are based on new technologies and practices, such as Artificial Intelligence, smart cities, High-Performance Computing, etc.

RCC support to the region is ongoing in the areas of digital skills, interoperability and trust services, digital innovation hubs (DIHs) and indicator-based monitoring of the digital transformation. Preparations of these assessments are in the final phase and are expected to be completed by April 2021.

Finally, RCC has started preparations for the second edition of Balkathon, an online competition organized for the first time with notable success in 2020. Launching of the competition is planned for March, while the final event will take place in May. This year, the competition will be organized with a slightly different concept and will be linked to the Digital Summit to be held in Montenegro in the second half of the year.

#### ***A.4 Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Resilience***

Activities in the area of sustainable growth were marked by continued intensive consultations on development of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB). The process was coordinated in close cooperation with the European Commission and involved the Regional Working Group on Environment (RWG Env), the SEE Biodiversity Task Force (BDTF), many relevant regional organizations, IFIs, NGOs and other partners. The process contributed significantly to the preparation of the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans published by the EC as part of the Economic and Investment Plan.

Final consultations and negotiations with the WB governments during October resulted in the general agreement on the text and final endorsement of the Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (Sofia Declaration) by the WB Leaders at the Sofia Summit. With this Declaration the region committed to jointly work on a comprehensive ecological transformation with an overarching goal of achieving climate neutrality by mid-century, joining on this way the EU's efforts and setting goals of same ambitions.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting on Environment and Climate Action, organized by the RCC, marked the official kick-start of the implementation of the Sofia Declaration. WB economies committed to jointly and resolutely work on the implementation of the Sofia Declaration which requires actions beyond Chapter 27 and mainstreaming of green and sustainable elements into all policy areas.

The process will among others also be assisted by the findings of the RCC-commissioned report on "Integrating biodiversity elements of the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans in the biodiversity frameworks of WB economies". The report (presently under final review) provides an outlook on the status of biological diversity in the WB, challenges and opportunities and focuses on the main needs related to the successful implementation of the GAWB.

In addition, in an effort of establishing a foundation for a successful implementation of the Declaration, RCC outlined a working plan which foresees a development of a detailed Action Plan, roadmaps and establishment of an effective monitoring system to track future progress in the implementation of the GAWB.



## **B. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security**

### ***B.1 Political Cooperation***

SEECP has continued to provide the main framework for and guidance of RCC activities, in line with the Statute and other founding documents of the RCC. Informal meeting of the SEECP MFAs in November in Antalya recognized the achievements important for the region, such as Green Lanes initiative, Common Regional Market and others and reconfirmed the full support to the regional framework of cooperation, assisted and facilitated by the RCC.

Relationship between RCC and SEECP received increased attention under the SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office held by Ankara since July 2020, and efforts have been devoted to exploring in greater depth further possibilities for the RCC to act as an operational arm of SEECP, for SEECP to enhance its efficiency and for RCC to clarify its legal status based on its *de jure* mandate and *de facto* role. Upon request of the CiO and SEECP participants, RCC provided inputs and assessments which framed the discussions of the SEECP Working Group tasked with the above mentioned topics. These efforts, which are ongoing, have so far been successful in contributing to providing a better structure to the logistical and administrative assistance by RCC to CiO.

In the drafting of the post-2020 SEE Strategy (SEE 2030), for which the RCC received a mandate by the SEECP Summit Declaration of 2019, a series of online bilateral consultations had been held in February and March with SEECP participants, based on the substantiated Outline of SEE 2030 previously presented by the RCC to the SEECP Political Directors. Inputs by SEECP participants will provide the core guidance in preparation of the final draft of the SEE 2030 Strategy, as will the insights from the consultations with the civil society sector, private sector, academia and the general public, to be conducted at a later stage. In that way, the process is calibrated to ensure full, all-inclusive regional ownership, fed by a bottom-up approach and the key strategic documents to which the region subscribes: UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Agenda 2030, European Green Deal and the EU *acquis*.

In a broader framework of political cooperation, the Secretary-General of the RCC has remained active in ensuring political awareness and support for the regional agenda, by maintaining close communication with RCC Board participants and other partners throughout the reporting period. The focus has been on discussing the goals and implementation of CRM, and establishing synergy with the incoming SEECP CiO and Presidency of the Council of the EU.



## ***B.2 Parliamentary Cooperation***

Upon the request of COSAP<sup>1</sup> and in line with the Poznan Summit Chair's conclusions, RCC has commissioned and finalized a comprehensive regional study which provides an analysis of the current involvement of Western Balkans parliaments in the Berlin Process. In addition to the assessment of the level of familiarization of regional parliaments with the commitments undertaken by their respective governments in the framework of the Berlin Process, the study provides a set of recommendations for strengthening the legislative dimension of regional cooperation. Particularly the study emphasizes utilizing the existing frameworks, such as COSAP, to intensify regional parliamentary dialogue and the interlocutor role the RCC may take on in this regard.

RCC is currently providing its support and assistance to the 2021 COSAP Chairmanship held by Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## ***B.3 Good Governance – Justice Reforms and Rule of Law***

Sustained focus on the rule of law and supporting judiciaries to reach EU standards remains an important task for the RCC's work and as such the periodic meetings of RCC-established networks remain useful and effective tools for exchange of good practices and improving mutual trust amongst jurisdictions. Western Balkans economies have enhanced their engagement in transformative reforms of the respective judicial systems with the primary aim of further strengthening and consolidating its independence, impartiality and professionalism. Therefore RCC is supporting the strengthening of the regional exchange, capacity building and regional cooperation in order to jointly and efficiently move the justice reform further and bring about sustainable societal change in the region.

RCC in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice of Serbia organized in October 2020 the 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Western Balkans Working Group on Justice (WB WGJ), bringing together high level representatives from Ministries of Justice of the Western Balkans region and Croatia, representatives from European Commission and partner organization GIZ to discuss and exchange best practices on streamlining the regional approach in accordance with EU standards, alignment with the new Enlargement Methodology and the strengthened focus on fundamentals as well as further strengthening of the judicial cooperation to better support the economic development of the region.

The regional conference 'Mediation and Justice in the Western Balkans: Strengthening the Links', was held online in cooperation with CSSP – Berlin Center for Integrative Mediation and the International Association of Mediators from Southeast Europe (IAMSEE). The conference not only contributed to strengthen this interlinkage, but particularly supported regional expert networks and exchange around mediation.

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<sup>1</sup> Conference of Parliamentary Committees on European Integration/Affairs of the Participants in the Stabilisation and Association Process in South-East Europe

In support of reforms undertaken by the jurisdictions towards establishing independent, accountable and efficient judiciaries based on EU standards and values, dedicated technical assistance was offered through the following regional assessments:

- Regional assessment “Promoting judicial cooperation in support of economic development in the Western Balkans”, with the aim to identify the current legal and procedural gaps in the judicial cooperation and provide recommendations on standard-setting and technical cooperation, in order to eliminate any obstacles deriving from incompatibilities between the various legal and administrative systems. The study also evaluates to what extent a strengthened judicial cooperation can support the implementation of the Common Regional Market and the overall socio-economic progress of our region;
- Regional assessment ‘Relevant Experiences in Judicial E-Learning in the See Region’, with the aim to support the activities related to strengthening the Judicial Training Institutions cooperation by facilitating and supporting networking and lifelong education of judges, prosecutors and legal professionals, which should contribute to improved competences, mutual trust and enhanced regional cooperation among the judiciaries in SEE.
- Regional study on ‘Mediation practices in the Western Balkans’, evaluating the current legal framework of WB economies, its approximation with EU acquis and the existing best mediation practices. Awareness rising for an increased use of mediation as an alternative dispute resolution tool is also one of the key objectives of the study. A set of recommendations is prepared with the view to assist the WB economies in their reforms towards enabling the appropriate development and operation of mediation for the settlement of disputes so as to simplify and improve access to justice.

#### ***B.4 Security Cooperation***

RCC continued to facilitate the work of two SEE-level platforms, South East European National Security Authorities (SEENSA) and South East European Military Intelligence Chiefs (SEEMIC). The 10th meeting of the SEENSA directors, held under the Chairmanship of Bulgaria and with support of the RCC, resulted in a ‘Joint Statement for Cooperation in the Field of Personnel and Industrial Security of Classified Information’ being adopted by ten participants. The participants also adopted the ‘Minimal Standards for Training of Employees with Access to Classified Information’. It was agreed that Bosnia and Hercegovina will host the 11<sup>th</sup> SEENSA meeting.

In line with the efforts to enhance added value of the platform, SEEMIC participants agreed at the 10<sup>th</sup> Chiefs’ Conference in November 2020 to enrich the SEEMIC programme in 2021.

In order to raise the capacities of regional military intelligence services' staff and to improve the annual OSINT reports produced by SEEMIC, a webinar on OSINT data collection and analysis will be organized. Participants furthermore chose to build upon the Gender Awareness Seminar organized last year by the RCC and SEESAC. An advanced gender mainstreaming training to again be organized with the assistance of SEESAC will be another important element toward contributing to the implementation of the SDGs 5 and 16.

Under a lack of consensus, Chairmanship of SEEMIC in 2021 is provisionally held by the RCC, with a view of establishing a new protocol for rotating Chairmanships as of 2022.

The annual Regional ('Jumbo') Security Coordination Conference, which had become the most recognized RCC brand in its security portfolio, saw its fifth edition, online in November 2020, in co-organization with the Ministry of Interior of Italy and together with partners: the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), SEESAC, Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI) and IISG. Over 200 participants from the region and the EU were provided a platform to present their experiences and discuss on six most pressing security topics for the region: terrorism, anti-corruption, cyber threats, organized crime, small arms and light weapons and illegal migrations. The Jumbo Conferences are considered a highly beneficial tool for coordination of security actions in the region, exchange of experiences and good practices, and maintaining and updating the network of the most relevant experts and security actors in the region and the EU.

As the issue of disinformation has been growing as a matter of security concern for the region, RCC has partnered with the Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) and EEAS to organize a two-day online conference in November 2020, "Addressing the challenges posed by disinformation in the Western Balkans". The conference provided valuable insight from the perspective of experts, practitioners and regulators, thereby assisting in a holistic and comprehensive manner the work towards actionable policy recommendations for the region, based on best EU practices.

## **C. Horizontal activities**

### ***C.1 Programming, Monitoring, Coordination***

RCC continued with the execution of its horizontal activities, adjusted to the limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The preparations for the launch of the seventh Call for Applications on Balkan Barometer Public and Business Opinion surveys were successfully launched in October, although it should be noted that this edition is expected to be affected by the pandemic in terms of the duration of the field surveying. Drawing on the COVID-19 edition of Balkan Barometer Survey that was launched in May 2020, the seventh, 2021

edition of Balkan Barometer Public and Business Opinion will contain the continuation of citizens' and business perceptions as well as the prognosis on the newest developments against the backdrop of the pandemic.

The ongoing economic and health crisis affected the SEE 2020 Strategy preparations and brought a slight delay in report on the Annual Report on Implementation (ARI). RCC produced the first draft of ARI, mostly reflecting on the progress of SEE 2020 Headline targets for 2019 but also providing a snap shot analysis of the main developments of 2020, including but not limited to COVID-19 crisis and its effects in the region and the most recent regional achievements in the face of CRM agenda and GAWB. The SEE 2020 Monitoring Committee was held online on 23 February and provided an opportunity to officially kick-start the new and the final monitoring cycle for 2020, present and discuss the ARI and inform on the recent developments and current state of play regarding the SEE 2030 Strategy preparations. Considering the initial delay caused by the pandemic and taking into consideration that 2021 is the final year of reporting on SEE2020 Strategy progress for 2020, RCC suggested to SEE 2020 Monitoring Committee participants to endorse ARI for 2019 through written procedure so as to easier facilitate the upcoming SEE2020 monitoring cycle and be able to initiate the data collection process on time.

In close consultation with the European Commission, RCC and regional partners have devised a prioritised list of deliverables for Berlin Summit which are to be implemented by the time Summit takes place. Being aware of the enormous potential CRM agenda has but also aware of the opportunity for the region to showcase its cooperation in the post-pandemic crisis, RCC initiated the Matrix of governance of CRM agenda, which is to help coordination of the CRM implementation. In this respect, Western Balkan economies provided their nominations and appointments for key contact points in the Matrix of governance along every CRM policy area to enable a smooth technical preparations and consultations on subsequent regional agendas that are to be implemented.

Besides, RCC initiated two CRM Coordinators meetings, which build on the PM Sherpas meeting and act as the main guiding body mechanism in the CRM implementation, through which WB6 provide their invaluable strategic views and suggestions for the implementation of regional activities within CRM. As agreed with PM Sherpas, CRM Coordinators meeting will be held on a bi-monthly basis to allow for a timely and efficient tracking of the implementation process.

Finally, with the kick-start of CRM implementation, RCC led the process of devising a set of key indicators which are to be used for tracking and monitoring the progress of CRM agenda along each policy area. The list is a joint effort from RCC and regional partners and will present a comprehensive set of measurement indicators, to monitor the success of this ambitious regional agenda.

The donor coordination process on CRM agenda is underway, with the preparations undergoing to identify the needs per economy and available financial instruments in the region in order to ease and facilitate the implementation along CRM policy areas.

### ***C.2 Extending Partnerships***

With the endorsement of Common Regional Market 2021-2024 agenda, RCC continues with its over-arching role of having the convening and main coordination role in the implementation of activities within the agenda. In the immediate aftermath of the Sofia Summit, RCC liaised with regional partners who will have their role along the lines of their expertise in implementing the regional activities defined per CRM policy areas. A series of consultative meetings with CEFTA, World Bank Group, Transport Community Secretariat, private sector – WB6 CIF and European Commission have been held to agree on the most immediate steps related to technical implementation of the agendas.

Likewise, in the context of the preparation of SEE 2030 Strategy, RCC held consultative meetings with relevant international partners, which include the ones with which RCC has cooperation under the framework of CRM and which are mentioned above, but also with others, in particular with UNECE as the organization best placed to assist with data collection process. In addition, consultations have been extended to SDG Coordinator Offices in SEE economies and with their cooperation, outreach process to stakeholders to be included in the drafting of the Strategy – private sector, civil society sector, academia, think tanks, etc. – has begun.

### ***C.3 Communication***

Along with the continued efforts to maintain and build up the awareness and understanding on the importance of sustainable regional cooperation and EU integration for the region, communication in the reporting period has mainly focused on promoting the Common Regional Market, its goals and benefits for the citizens of the region.

RCC continued promoting regional cooperation and EU integration, Western Balkans as the region with its affirmative stories and positive examples, as well as the EU, its contribution and partnership efforts in creating a safer and better region, and its values as postulates for the EU integration of the Western Balkans.

RCC has communicated negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic which severely hit not only the region but the entire world, stressing ways of mitigating the consequences of the pandemic for socio-economic situation in the region. Furthermore, this communication included promotion of trustworthy sources of information regarding safe practices, modes of work and socialising during the pandemic, but also promotion of EU narrative in fighting the



pandemic, EU's initiatives and its contribution, as well as regional measures and actions contributing to the joint fight against the common enemy the world is still facing.

RCC continues developing creative ways and utilising various promotion tools for user-friendly dissemination of information on regional cooperation and EU integration, including the RCC's role and activities, gaining better understanding and interest from different target audiences. Such an approach results in constant increase of both media interest and coverage of organisation's activities, and also general support to regional cooperation of public at large – thorough traditional and online media.

The promotion has focused on the following:

### **Common Regional Market:**

- RCC subpage dedicated to CRM <https://www.rcc.int/pages/143/common-regional-market>
- Common Regional Market Factsheet in 5 WB languages, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/541/common-regional-market-factsheet>
- Public consultations on Regional Economic Integration, <https://rcc.int/pages/142/public-consultations-on-regional-economic-integration>
- Promotion of Regional trade area:
  - Free flow of goods - video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efLtd-E1gew>
  - Free movement of people, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0V-rRorFezg&t=26s> , <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHK-YjPHhgW/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHTFdIHH8oP/>
- Promotion of Regional digital area  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkK4\\_scPPaU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkK4_scPPaU),  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CGm2T-iAAvI/>,  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CGsDJeXAsTt/>;  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CG7h4a-nNhN/>
- Promotion of Regional industrial and innovation area  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/CHQeI\\_pn4s7/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CHQeI_pn4s7/)  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CHVc4DaH-02/>
- Promotion of Green agenda for the Western Balkans  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CHNWXNHgts1/>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OivEuG7hGOg>
- Op-Ed: RCC Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General for European Western Balkans: In times like these anchored cooperation-bashkepunim-saradnja-suradnja-соработка-сарадња, takes on more importance; interview of the RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu for Novi Magazin, Four Freedoms for Western Balkans, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/540/interview-of-the-rcc-secretary-general-majlinda-bregu->





for-novi-magazin, <https://novimagazin.rs/region/232863-majlinda-bregu-generalna-sekretarka-rcc-cetiri-slobode-za-zapadni-balkan>

- Interview with RCC SG for Politicki.ba: Common Regional Market is a tool that will get us faster to the EU accession, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/552/bregu-common-regional-market-is-a-tool-that-will-get-us-faster-to-the-eu-accession>
- Promotion of EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the WB and the CRM, promoting the synergy between the RCC and the EU in making the region better

## EMPLOYMENT/ESAP2

- Regional Overview of Western Balkan Economies Regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights  
<https://www.rcc.int/docs/549/regional-overview-of-western-balkan-economies-regarding-the-european-pillar-of-social-rights>  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIGGKZLHsBx/>
- Video on benefits of declared work,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btKXAnMlcw8&t=17s>
- Promotion of Youth Guarantee Initiative,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgfAiOMDCDA>
- Promotion of ESAP2 Observatory on Employment in WB,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dINeKj5XxMM&t=3s>
- Article by Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC): Recovering from COVID-19: How and With Whom?, OBSERVING the Western Balkans through Employment Observatory,  
<https://www.rcc.int/docs/560/recovering-from-covid-19-how-and-with-whom>

## WE- Women Empowerment

- Promotion of Women in STEM, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CG0VIuEnsy7/>
- Op-Ed: Women's empowerment is essential to Western Balkans' efforts to build back better from the pandemic, joint Op-Ed by Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and Mirjana Spoljaric, Regional Director for UNDP's Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States,  
<https://www.rcc.int/docs/561/op-ed-womens-empowerment-is-essential-to-western-balkans-efforts-to-build-back-better-from-the-pandemic>
- Study: Mapping of Gender-Related Policies, Programmes and Mechanisms on Gender Disparity in STEM in Western Balkans, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/107/mapping-of-gender-related-policies-programmes-and-mechanisms-on-gender-disparity-in-stem-in-western-balkans>





- Information material - Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/556/womens-economic-empowerment-areas-for-joint-actions-in-the-western-balkans>
- Factsheet - Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans Factsheet, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/555/womens-economic-empowerment-areas-for-joint-actions-in-the-western-balkans-factsheet>

### Security agenda

- Video on Disinformation in WB, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3xKY2ufSLw&t=15s>
- Video on Migrations in WB, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLCCbFUDv1c>

### Roma Integration

- Video on Roma Housing, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GR7jTspfS0&t=9s>
- Video on Roma civil registration, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIL0QhpZJTE&t=11s>
- Interview with Orhan Usein, Head of Office of the RCC's Roma Integration project for Euro News Albania, Discriminated and segregated: Orhan Usein urges to do more on Roma Integration, <https://euronews.al/en/social-issues/2020/12/10/discriminated-and-segregated-orhan-usein-urges-to-do-more-on-roma-integration>

### Youth agenda

- Series of videos "Talking points", RCC SG answering questions by youngsters on importance of regional cooperation and CRM  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTWNwsoXd3Q>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwqZ-ENzUYE&t=7s>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDoQaJDTQa4>
- Promotion of activities within the WBYL – social media presentation of members of the Regional Pool of Experts  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CINt6zRnyyW/>  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIQRIL3Ht2y/>  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIVgMzngH97/>  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIYPHdrHI8T/>  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/CIk\\_ITZgNQi/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CIk_ITZgNQi/)
- Brochure: Youth Policy Lab Draft Working Group Rules of Procedure, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/108/youth-policy-lab-draft-working-group-rules-of-procedure>
- Factsheet: Western Balkans Youth Lab Factsheet, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/554/western-balkans-youth-lab-factsheet>

- Presentation of Pool of Experts of the first Regional Youth Lab, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/553/pool-of-experts-of-the-first-regional-youth-lab>

## Projects

### Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP)<sup>2</sup>

The overall objective of the ESAP 2 project is to improve employment opportunities and working conditions of women and men in the Western Balkans through:

- Improved policies for **tackling undeclared** work through enhanced cooperation and operationalization at central level of a holistic/strategic compliance approach to undeclared work;
- Strengthened institutional capacities of Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs and PES in **developing, monitoring and evaluating labour market policies and measures**;
- Increased **engagement of the Western Balkans in EU employment and social policies**.

In addition to meetings and workshops related to tackling of the undeclared work, two analytical tools for that area were developed and shared with the WB6 government partners: a handbook on preventative approaches, which reviews the four types of preventative approaches (supply-side incentives, demand-side incentives, education and awareness raising, and modernising formal institutions) and a learning resource on preventative measures, which documents for each preventative approach: (i) the challenges experienced in introducing them; (ii) the ways forward, and (iii) examples of good practice potentially transferable to other economies both from the EU and Western Balkans.

In terms of activities that focus on labour market policies and measures, ESAP 2 has continued to provide individual-economy, demand-driven technical assistance to WB6 government partners. During the reporting period, assistance was provided to the Employment Agency of Kosovo\* with focus on the analysis of the data of citizens' experiences and perceptions regarding the current employment situation in Kosovo\*. In addition, ESAP 2 has increased the institutional capacities of the Employment Agency of Kosovo\* through a training course on statistical data analysing with SPSS.

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<sup>2</sup> This project has been financed by the European Union and implemented by the RCC, grant number VS/2016/0054 (March 2016 to February 2019), VS/2019/0094 (March 2019 to October 2019) and VS/2019/0348 (November 2019 – October 2022)

To address the needs of the region to have up-to-date information on labour market indicators and also relevant government policies, a regional online Employment Observatory has been developed and launched on 29 January 2021. The Observatory has quickly proven to be effective in enhancing the comparative knowledge on employment and labour market trends in the Western Balkans and governments' responses to the COVID-19 crisis, as only in one of the peak days since its launch, there were over 1,100 visitors at the Observatory site, while three of six WB government partners have decided to publish and/or publicize the Observatory. The Observatory publishes monthly and quarterly data on employment, monitoring the impact of Covid-19 crisis on labour markets trends in the Western Balkans and is also mapping public policies that the six economies are implementing to limit the impact of the COVID-19, with a focus on measures aimed at employment retention and creation. Moreover, a new website for ESAP 2 has been developed and will be launched on February 17, 2021.

In addition to the Observatory, ESAP 2 is working on the WB 6 regional analytical report, to enhance the analytical capabilities of government partners in the region. The report assesses in detail the employment trends and underlying factors in each of the six Western Balkan economies' labour markets during 2019 and 2020, with a special attention to how the COVID-19 pandemic and the related government measures have affected labour market outcomes.

In the context of strong political momentum for strengthening youth employment programmes in the Western Balkans, during the reporting period, ESAP 2 has been developing a comprehensive analytical study on Youth Employment in six Western Balkan economies, with six individual policy roadmaps to be presented to government partners in March 2021

In terms of the activities that focus on enhancing WB6 alignment with the EU Acquis, a regional workshop was organized in November 2020 on the current status of implementation of the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the Western Balkans, with the representatives of Ministries of Labour, Ministries of Education and Ministries of Finance from the Western Balkans, as well as representatives of the European Training Foundation (ETF) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

In addition, for this area (WB 6 alignment with the EU Acquis), ESAP 2 has initiated the establishment of the Western Balkan network of EU Chapter 2 and Chapter 19 negotiators and civil servants dealing with topics related to these two chapters in those economies where negotiation structure still does not exist (Network). Once this Network is established, ESAP will provide support in mutual learning, facilitation of information exchange, analytical work and contribution to strengthening capacities of Network participants.

Overall, in all three areas, ESAP 2 has continued to successfully deepen the cooperation among Western Balkan institutions on employment and social affairs.

### **Triple P Tourism<sup>3</sup>**

The Covid-19 pandemic continued to have an enormous negative impact on the tourism industry in the last quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 which also affected the direction of the Triple P Tourism project activities, particularly in the segment of international promotion.

‘The WB6 Tourism and Travel Industry Assessment: COVID-19 Diagnostic and Future Prospect’ was produced in November 2020, providing essential recommendations for the recovery and new start of travel industry in the region. The assessment shows that in WB6 there was a 75% decrease in international visitors in the first half of 2020 compared to 2019, and a return to pre-COVID 2019 growth levels is expected to take between 3-4 years.

The Assessment Report recommended a crisis management mechanism and resilience strategies for WB6 that need to be developed through joint regional protocols and identified responses, based on mutual understanding and creation of tourism flow accessibility within WB6. The recommendation on joint communication and unification of promotional content that provides all necessary information on inter-WB6 traveling will require strong partnership and cooperation in the region, in order to better communicate, plan and achieve increased visibility of the region in the global tourism market, through common branding activities of WB6.

Two proposals had been prepared and offered to the economies: development of common health and safety protocols for the industry (based on the WTTC protocols); and development of policy solutions to easy green border/boundary crossings for adventure tourism in WB6. Both proposals were accepted by the economies to be further worked on, while RCC will work on the declaration that will be endorsed at the Final Conference in April 2021.

Cultural Routes development had in focus two priority areas, Balkan Monumental Trail (BMT) and the Illyricum Trail (ILYT). For the BMT, an Impact Assessment Study was produced, and Guidelines for tourism signalisation and their application on a pilot project in Montenegro are underway, while sustainability network creation and full marketing portfolio for ILYT are currently being implemented. Six Familiarization (FAM) tours were successfully conducted for each of the three priorities in the cultural segment and a lot of material created will be used in the future for the promotion of the region.

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<sup>3</sup> This project is funded by the European Union and implemented by the RCC, grant number 2017/392-591

Adventure routes development and regional promotion of new products have been completed with organisation of FAM tours in autumn. The implemented FAM tours for promoting the regional adventure programs aimed to: a) increase awareness of the diverse adventure product available throughout the Western Balkans and along the Via Dinarica corridor; b) create mutually beneficial business relationships between the wholesalers, agents, travel operators and travel media; as well as c) build confidence among the regional and international agents in promoting the WB region as an adventure and culture tourism destination.

In addition, the FAM tours are being accompanied by video productions of the tours in order to be published online for further promotion. Such tours are important for intra-regional and domestic markets, and crucial for tour operators as well. FAM Tours will serve to greenlight ideas and as good examples for a fast start in the post-pandemic era, which will be useful for further workshops/training on entrepreneurship digital skills of tour-operators by teaching them how to launch their tours in intra-regional and domestic markets. Similar on-line trainings are envisaged to take place in late February - March 2021.

Small Grants Facility, the pilot component of Triple P Tourism project exceeded most of its initial targets by supporting 36 small grants (1.65 mil EUR), instead of 30 grants (1.62 mil EUR). By October 2020, all 36 small grants were successfully implemented and closed, with an impressive volume of products and results achieved. On average, grant implementation lasted 8.6 months; budget utilized was c.c. 54,000 EUR, wherein almost 15% was grantee co financing. Half the grants were implemented within the priority area of culture tourism and the other half in adventure tourism and fairly balanced geographic distribution of grants was achieved across the Western Balkans Six.

Pilots led to development of new regional cultural and adventure tourism products, improvement of infrastructure and quality of services, training of service providers, and inclusion of women and youth in tourism industry. More specifically, 35 new itineraries were generated through pilot projects, over 2,500km of travel routes developed and 23 local routes integrated within regional routes (such as the establishment of the Illyricum Trail as the sub route of the Council of Europe Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route -RERDWR). The benefits of pilots have been felt in at least 125 local communities including all the bigger cities of the Western Balkans Six region but also numerous rural and remote micro localities. Furthermore, the mandatory threshold for co-financing was surpassed overall (10 % => 15%) showcasing commitment and local ownership of grant beneficiaries and local authorities, and enhancing sustainability outlooks for the developed products.

The regional competition “FUTOURISMO - Ride the digital wave” launched at the beginning of February 2021, with an aim to award prizes to innovative solutions that assist the industry to overcome the immediate and mid-term negative effects of COVID-19. The

regional competition is organised as an open call for interested start-ups, entrepreneurs and organizations to propose and develop innovative technological solutions that will have a positive effect in the future of tourism in terms of keeping jobs, maintaining operations and promoting the region as a safe tourist destination.

Measures envisaged for the tourism sector in relation to the CRM Action Plan (2021 – 2024) were prepared, in order to define regional actions and activities which are focused in two areas, trade services and industry and innovation. The work will be directed to policies and agreements for safe and seamless travel in terms of ease of crossing borders or boundaries, health and safety measures, regulatory mechanisms and pilot actions required for sustainable management of destinations, innovation and digitalisation of entrepreneurship and SMEs capacities, branding and communication for the whole region and further development of transnational routes and other tourism products. The current measures take into account the WB6 Tourism and Travel Industry Assessment: COVID-19 Diagnostic and Future Prospects.

#### **Roma Integration 2020, Phase II<sup>4</sup>**

The Roma Integration 2020 project has provided support and assistance in furthering the Poznan Declaration objectives, the implementation of the Roadmaps 2019-2021 for housing and employment of Roma (adopted by the Governments at the beginning of 2019), as well as the ongoing work on Roma responsive budgeting and data collection and monitoring exercises.

The Roma Integration 2020 project has contributed to the achievement of the Poznan Declaration targets and commitments through:

- Supporting the process of mapping of informal settlements;
- Facilitating the development of Roadmaps towards ending statelessness of Roma that are expected to be endorsed by the end of 2021;
- Encouraging statistical surveys for data collection in each economy and supporting a Roma specific survey in the Republic of North Macedonia;
- Providing expert support for furthering the implementation of the Roma responsive budgeting process; and
- Facilitating the development of the post-2020 Roma integration strategies.

Government of Albania and the Roma Integration 2020 project co-organized a high level ministerial meeting in October 2020 to discuss the progress achieved in the first year of implementation of the Poznan Declaration and set the path for further work.

The conclusions of the ministerial meeting were further endorsed at the 2020 Western Balkans Leaders' Summit in Sofia organized within the Berlin Process. While welcoming the

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<sup>4</sup> This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2018/400-736



achievements so far, the Leaders acknowledged the high necessity for data collection on the socio-economic status of Roma, which must be dealt with according to EU standards. The Leaders also reaffirmed that certain processes must be accelerated for achieving greater results, in particular related to improving the housing situation of Roma by mapping informal settlements, as well as developing roadmaps for the purpose of ending statelessness among Roma. Finally, the Leaders welcomed the Economic and Investment plan, which recognizes the need to improve access to education and labour market for Roma, measures which will be dealt with in the upcoming period while taking into consideration the Roma responsive budgeting guidelines and principles. The Leaders agreed to continue assessing the progress of implementation of the Declaration targets at the upcoming Leaders' Summits.

The project also organized its 5<sup>th</sup> Task Force meeting in December, which adopted several important conclusions that will guide the project activities throughout 2021, among which are also exploring ways to mainstream Roma integration within the Digital Agenda and the Green Agenda of the Western Balkans.

Finally, the project also published several analyses on mainstreaming Roma Integration in the general socio-economic strategies, policies and programs. The analyses provide information where focused investments are most likely to have significant positive impact and ensure that Roma integration is appropriately mainstreamed. The results include identified actions under different national policies and thematic objectives that concern Roma integration, as well as an outline of how Roma can be considered in the context of mainstream programmes, projects and interventions. In addition to this, the analyses have also identified existing obstacles for Roma to benefit from mainstream policies and input for constructive and evidence-based policy planning.

### **Youth Lab Project<sup>5</sup>**

From October 2020 to March 2021, the Western Balkans Youth Lab Project (WBYL) continued to maintain strong cooperation with public administrations as well as National Youth Councils and Youth Umbrella Organizations in the region. In absence of the in-person activities, the project made use of RCC's social media channels for promotion of the project activities, and strengthening youth perspective in all RCC activities.

During the reporting period, research has been completed and preliminary reports were prepared on 'Mapping of Youth Policies and Identification of Existing Support and Gaps in Financing of Youth Actions in Western Balkans' (six individual and one comparative report), providing evidence with regard to the legal, strategic, institutional and financial framework for youth in the Western Balkans, at the same time identifying gaps which will be used for further discussions with representatives of administrations and youth in the following period. From the findings of the Mapping exercise, WBYL Project developed 'Draft Concept

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<sup>5</sup> This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA/2019/409-790



Proposal for Setting up Informal Mechanism on Donor Coordination’ in order to set up a long-term mechanism of donor coordination.

Furthermore, the Project developed the ‘Draft Methodology and Model of Youth Policy Lab,’ incorporating successfully elements of co-creation and co-management, widely based on the principles of the European Youth Dialogue process, which brings a participatory and youth centered approach in policy making.

In November 2020 network of *Regional Pool of Experts* has been established, consisting of 34 members, being policy makers and youth representatives from all six Western Balkan economies, who will be having key role in implementing Youth Policy Labs at the economy level.

Six trainings were organized (one in each economy) from 30 November to 2 December 2020, for members of Regional Pool of Experts and prepared Draft Methodology and Model of Youth Policy Lab.

On 14-15 December 2020 Kick-Off event dedicated to youth unemployment was organized, which hosted 32 senior policymakers and youth representatives from the Western Balkans in the working sessions and more than 100 representatives of CSOs, donor community and media at the opening segment of the event. The participants utilized Youth Policy Lab model to co-create 11 policy recommendations to tackle youth unemployment at regional level.

Request for use of Technical Assistance Instrument (to meet the needs of public administrations) and Capacity Building Instrument (to meet the needs of youth organizations) have been submitted in order to address immediate needs of the beneficiaries and were provided to:

- 1) public administration in Montenegro, for the purpose of capacity building of the civil servants who administer youth services (youth centres and youth clubs) at local level,
- 2) public administration in Kosovo\*, for preparation of analytical report to provide informed decision making with regards to youth participation mechanisms while drafting new legislation (in progress); and
- 3) National Youth Council in the Republic of North Macedonia, for development of the strategic communication and advocacy outreach of the organization for the period of 2021-2023.

With the aim to adapt regional policy recommendations from the Regional Youth Policy Lab on Youth Unemployment held in December 2020 to the context of each economy, in February 2020 the process of establishment of Six Working Groups as an informal policy

development mechanism at economy level responsible for conducting Youth Policy Lab activities has been initiated. For this purpose WBYL prepared Draft Rules of Procedures in order to guide the Youth Policy Lab process (membership, composition and co-chair management at economy level) as per Draft Methodology and Model developed.

### **Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)<sup>6</sup>**

Since October, the IISG has been focused on establishing the IISG governing structures, developing the IISG working methodology, launching the call for development of a security database and the development of IISG communication and visibility strategy, and creating and uploading content in the new IISG website. Moreover, as part of the needs mapping process, templates had been developed. Based on the inputs, the annual work plan had been developed which will guide the activities and priorities of the IISG Secretariat in the upcoming twelve months.

In October and November 2020, the IISG Secretariat had initiated bilateral consultations in all WB6 Partners in order to establish the IISG Governance structure and to operationalize the development of the key IISG strategic documents. The aim of the mission in each of the WB6 was to provide detailed elaboration on the IISG Mission, Objectives, Methodology and Strategy and to create structures with responsible persons at the economy level for the three pillars of the IISG: WBCTi – Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism Initiative; WBCSCi – Western Balkan Counter Serious Crime Initiative; and WBBSi – Western Balkan Border Security Initiative.

The meetings provided the WB6 authorities with a clear understanding of the mission and objectives of the IISG and the expectations from the IISG processes. Furthermore, the consultations resulted in clear list of each economy's representative in each of the IISG Governing structure bodies. Based on the consultations process, IISG began developing its Working Methodologies: IISG methodology on biennial needs mapping reports, and methodology on IISG new membership.

The mapping needs are the first contribution of the Action prepared from relevant law enforcement departments of the six WB partners. Their aims is to improve collective efficiency by mapping needs, coordinating responses concerning security threats in the Western Balkan region, as well as mapping the support to deal with those treats in the three IISG pillars.

The IISG Secretariat developed the first **set of templates for each of the three pillars**. The process of development of the templates started in October 2020 and commenced with

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<sup>6</sup> This project is co-funded by the European Union, grant number IPA 2019/414-918

consultations in January 2021, which concluded that the templates would be finalized after the adoption of the IISG Working Methodologies at the Board meeting.

IISG Communication and Visibility Strategy is currently being developed, with the key objectives being raising awareness of stakeholders, facilitating progression of stakeholders into proactive and supportive participants in the IISG project activities, and raising awareness on the IISG activities by the general public. The work related to the development of the IISG website also progressed and the beta version of the website is now functional.

The deadline for Open Call for consultancy services for hosting, developing and maintaining **Secure Database** solution (IISG-D) for mapping support was 18 December 2020. There were no applications for this Open Call. The IISG Secretariat, in coordination with the RCC IT officer, embarked in market research as to provide sufficient information on the reasons for absence of interest for applying to the open call. The conclusion was that the development of such application goes beyond the initially planned funds and should be 35.000 EUR. In this respect, reallocation of additional 15.000 EUR to this budget line (from one of the budget lines for the meetings, using existing funds) was proposed to Contracting authority which was approved. Following the green light for approved funds, the IISG Secretariat republished the call.

5<sup>th</sup> IISG Board meeting, held in February 2021 for the first time under the new Terms of Reference, adopted the two working methodologies of IISG that had been developed, adopted the 2021 Annual Work Plan and approved as new IISG members France, Italy, UK, OSCE, GiZ and MARRI. The meeting also appealed to all IISG partners to actively participate in the project in order to improve collective efficiency and encouraged the IISG and its Support Group to expedite work on mapping products.

Finally, RCC and IISG have set to develop a questionnaire for the first perception based survey on security issues in the Western Balkans. The perception will be implemented as Balkan Barometer Special Edition measuring the “Attitudes towards security: Perceptions of security and threats in Western Balkans (WB)”. The first Balkan Barometer on Security will serve as serious reference for WB6 implementing partners during the whole IISG action i.e. when developing needs and providing responses to the needs. Potential benefits from BB may also include enhanced visibility of the IISG to the IISG members and wider public.

## List of Abbreviations

<b>ARI</b>	Annual Report on Implementation
<b>BB</b>	Balkan Barometer
<b>BDTF</b>	Biodiversity Task Force
<b>BMT</b>	Balkan Monumental Trail
<b>CEFTA</b>	Central European Free Trade Agreement
<b>CiO</b>	Chairmanship-in-Office
<b>CIF</b>	Chamber Investment Forum
<b>CoE</b>	Council of Europe
<b>CRM AP</b>	Common Regional Market Action Plan 2021-2024
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>EIP</b>	Economic and Investment Plan
<b>EJTN</b>	European Judicial Training Network
<b>ESAP</b>	Employment and Social Affairs Platform
<b>ESG</b>	EU Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<b>ETF</b>	European Training Foundation
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EU MS</b>	European Union Member States
<b>FAM</b>	Familiarization tours
<b>GAWB</b>	Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
<b>GIZ</b>	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
<b>IAMSEE</b>	International Association of Mediators from Southeast Europe
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>IFI</b>	International Financial Institutions
<b>IISG</b>	Integrated Internal Security Governance
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>ILYT</b>	Illyricum Trail
<b>JIS</b>	Joint Information System
<b>JTI</b>	Judicial Training Institutions
<b>MAP REA</b>	Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area
<b>MARRI</b>	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
<b>MFA</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<b>MoJ</b>	Ministry of Justice
<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>NGO</b>	Nongovernmental Organization



<b>NSA</b>	National Security Authority
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>OSINT</b>	Open Sources Intelligence Assessment
<b>RAI</b>	Regional Anti-corruption Initiative
<b>RCC</b>	Regional Cooperation Council
<b>RI</b>	Research Infrastructure
<b>RIRA</b>	Regional Investment Reform Initiative
<b>RLAH</b>	Roam Like At Home
<b>RRA</b>	Regional Roaming Agreement
<b>RRD</b>	Regional Recognition Database
<b>RWG Env</b>	Regional Working Group on Environment
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SEE</b>	South East Europe
<b>SEESAC</b>	South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons
<b>SEECF</b>	South-East European Cooperation Process
<b>SEEMIC</b>	South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs
<b>SEENSA</b>	South East European National Security Authorities
<b>SG</b>	Secretary General
<b>STEM</b>	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
<b>SWP</b>	Strategy and Work Programme
<b>TCT</b>	Transport Community
<b>TEG</b>	Tourism Expert Group
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNECE</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
<b>VDRC</b>	Via Dinarica Regional Coordination
<b>WEE</b>	Women Economic Empowerment
<b>WB</b>	Western Balkans
<b>WBYL</b>	Western Balkans Youth Lab project
<b>WGJ</b>	Working Group on Justice
<b>WTTC</b>	World Travel and Tourism Council



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