



**Speech by RCC Secretary General
at the opening of the Western Balkans Digital Summit**

Herceg Novi, 12 October 2026

Distinguished Minister Dukaj,
Minister Jagxhiu,
Representatives of Western Balkans governments,
Representatives of the European Commission,
Excellencies,
Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), it is my honour to welcome you to the **8th Western Balkans Digital Summit**, a key regional platform for dialogue and cooperation, here in Herceg Novi.

Let me begin with a simple question.

What would a truly connected Western Balkans look like, not in our strategies, not in our declarations, but in the everyday lives of our citizens?

It would be a region where a student can access opportunities across the region without unnecessary administrative barriers. Where a small business can reach customers across the region and in the European market without being held back by fragmented systems. Where public services work for people, not the other way around. And where technology creates opportunity rather than new forms of exclusion.

These are practical expectations. Our task is to make them everyday realities.

And that requires more than technology. It requires political decisions, institutions that work together, and the confidence that commitments made around this table will be followed through.

Our region has already demonstrated that regional cooperation can deliver tangible results.

The roaming-free Western Balkans remains one of the clearest examples of cooperation that people can feel directly. What once represented an everyday cost and inconvenience has become a practical benefit of working together.

The **EU-Western Balkans Roaming Declaration** has provided an important stepping stone towards the ambition of Roam Like at Home (RLAH) between our region and the European Union.

Last year, we committed to bringing more operators into that effort and working with signatories to reduce data roaming charges further. Since then, the focus has shifted towards the EC initiative to introduce RLAH between the EU and WB6. In this context, the Declaration has served as an important stepping stone towards RLAH with the EU.

There has also been progress in the market: **data roaming prices continue to fall**. The average price of 1 GB of WB6 signatories ranges from 0.7 to 5.5 EUR, well below the agreed price cap of 14EUR/GB. Some operators are also integrating roaming allowances into domestic packages.

These are welcome developments. But lower prices and full integration are not the same thing.

The next stage requires negotiations, alignment with the relevant EU rules and fulfilment of the necessary conditions.

Our ambition should remain clear: to make connectivity with the European Union simpler, more affordable and, ultimately, part of everyday life.

Connectivity also depends on what happens before a network becomes available.

Across our region, **permit-granting procedures** remain a major obstacle to faster broadband deployment. This may sound like a technical issue. For an investor waiting for approval, a business needing a reliable connection, or a community still underserved, it is anything but technical.

Over the past years, the RCC has worked with telecom authorities and operators **to develop recommendations to streamline and simplify permit granting procedures across the region**, in line with the relevant EU acquis.

That work has confirmed strong regional support for reform. **The Declaration on Streamlining Permit Granting Procedures in the Telecommunications Sector in the WB6**, prepared for endorsement by our leaders at the forthcoming Berlin Process Summit, should give it the necessary political backing.

The test will come afterwards: whether procedures actually become clearer, decisions faster and infrastructure easier to deploy.

Our next challenge is not simply to digitalise six economies. It is to connect them.

This is why the Western Balkans Digital Summit matters.

It is more than a technology conference. It is a political platform for shaping a more integrated, competitive and resilient region, and for bringing the Western Balkans closer to the European Union through practical results.

A service can work well within one economy and still stop at the border/boundary. A business can become more digital and still face six different sets of requirements. Unless we address that fragmentation, we risk reproducing existing barriers in digital form.

This is why the commitments made in Skopje last year matter: **interoperable digital identity wallets and trust services, closer alignment with the European digital framework, stronger cybersecurity cooperation and better connectivity.**

Their value will not be measured by how often we refer to them. It will be measured by whether people can use services across the region, whether companies face fewer obstacles and whether institutions can work together securely and effectively.

For the RCC, this is an essential part of the Common Regional Market and our preparation for closer integration with the EU Single Market.

Regional integration must strengthen our capacity to compete. It must help our businesses grow, our institutions perform and our people see a future here.

That is also why skills deserve a central place in this discussion.

The **RCC's regional study on ICT skills** points to a clear need: better anticipation of future demand, needs, stronger practical training and closer links between education and the labour market.

We cannot build a competitive digital economy if the skills we develop consistently lag behind the technologies we adopt.

Nor can we call the transition successful if its opportunities remain available only to those who are already equipped to use them.

Artificial intelligence (AI) brings these questions into even sharper focus.

It is changing how businesses operate, how institutions deliver services and how people access information. It offers opportunities for a region seeking to become more productive and competitive. It also raises difficult questions about accountability, privacy, employment and trust.

We need to take both sides seriously.

For the Western Balkans, the task is to build the skills and institutional capacity to use AI well, while ensuring that its development respects fundamental rights, human dignity and our European direction.

This is why I particularly **welcome the endorsement here of the AI Roadmap for the Western Balkans Six**, prepared by the RCC together with the WB6.

A roadmap is a starting point, not a result in itself.

The RCC will support its implementation through an Implementation Action Plan, to be developed by the end of this year. We will work with our partners to translate the regional priorities into practical measures, stronger policy coordination and complementary support.

We should be clear about what success means: institutions better prepared to govern AI, businesses better equipped to adopt it, and citizens able to benefit from innovation without being left unprotected.

That is where political commitment must become sustained work.

Trust and security must advance together, and **cybersecurity must be part of the same conversation**.

The more connected our economies and public services become, the more important it is that people can trust them.

Cybersecurity is therefore not a separate technical agenda. It is part of the credibility of our digital transformation.

Our priorities must remain practical: stronger institutional capacities, better exchange of expertise and closer cooperation across the region and with our European partners.

The **Western Balkans Six Cybersecurity Database** needs to be regularly updated and actively used. Its value lies in helping institutions understand capacities, identify gaps and coordinate support.

Continued **cooperation with the European Commission and European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA)** is equally important for strengthening preparedness and bringing our capacities closer to European standards.

Here in Montenegro, the **Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre** in Podgorica is an important regional asset. Its training, capacity-building and knowledge exchange can help turn shared priorities into stronger professional capabilities.

Closer cooperation among the Centre, the RCC, the European Commission and ENISA should help ensure that these efforts reinforce one another.

We also need to invest in the people who will carry this work forward: through closer cooperation among universities, opportunities for joint learning and research, and stronger pathways into cybersecurity professions.

And we must keep children and young people firmly within this agenda. Access to digital opportunities must go hand in hand with digital literacy, effective protection and the ability to recognise and respond to online risks.

A connected region must also be a region that takes responsibility for the safety of its people.

Distinguished participants,

European integration remains our strategic objective. The Growth Plan and the Common Regional Market offer opportunities to accelerate convergence and prepare our economies for closer integration with the European Union.

Digital cooperation can make that process tangible.

People may not follow every negotiation or regulatory discussion. But they know when a service works, when a procedure becomes simpler and when a barrier disappears.

That is how confidence is built, both in institutions and in the value of cooperation.

For the RCC, our responsibility is to help bring the right partners together, maintain continuity between political commitments and technical work, and keep the focus on results that matter.

This Summit should help us do precisely that: identify where progress is possible, be honest about what is holding us back, and agree on who will take the next steps.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We do not need to pretend that cooperation is always easy. We know the political differences, the institutional constraints and the uneven capacities across our region.

But we also know the cost of allowing those difficulties to become reasons for standing still.

Our task now is to apply lessons learned more widely, to infrastructure, digital services, skills, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

Let us leave Herceg Novi with a clearer sense of responsibility for what comes next: what each of us will deliver, with whom, and by when.

A digitally connected Western Balkans will be built through that work, and through the trust we earn by doing it together.

Thank you!