

EU – Western Balkans Summit

speech by RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu

Tirana, 6 December 2022

Your Excellencies,

A *first EU-WB Summit in our region*, not least my very home town Tirana, is *significant in so many ways*. Embracing all good the EU has to offer, bringing in a fresh breeze to the **pursuit of togetherness** between **EU decision makers and WB decision shapers**. *To work on EU WB political connectedness and to keep this inclusive it takes work*.

Yet, what would make it *beyond symbolic into a historic one* – are the *results we attain* and the *joint commitment towards a bold, accelerated EU accession*.

Nothing less does *such a geopolitical priority* for the EU and for the region itself *warrant*. Sadly, the *context couldn't be more different from our encounter in Brdo*, with a whole world happening in-between.

In all the Western Balkans the impacts of the war in Ukraine can be grouped in **three major concerns: Economic downturn, Food and Energy security, National safety and security**. As we speak, our *region shivers with energy insecurity mostly on affordability of prices and inflation woes*, reaching *up to 25%*, while the consumer price shocks could push *additional 13%* of our population *in poverty*.

Our special security edition of the *Balkan Barometer* however also *captures encouraging signs to build upon* - with *83%* holding that *regional cooperation can contribute to better economic resilience*.

The *wide consensus for regional cooperation*, which is a *constant feature* in all the opinion polls is the strongest *tailwind* for our actions **based on a sober acknowledgment of the fact that our interests can no longer be separated from those of our neighbours** and an *all-inclusive regional cooperation delivers direct results for those intended for,- citizens*.

Strong collaboration and region's integration in EU's joint actions in the area of *energy security and green agenda* remain a priority and in this regard. *EU's 1 billion energy support package is extremely valuable*.

One *doesn't need to look further* to see the manifested impact of regional cooperation than *the three recently concluded regional mobility agreements, endorsed during Berlin Summit that will enable academic and professional mobility and service-provision in one common regional market*, progress made on the extension of green lanes to borders between the Western

Balkans and the EU. From this week, we will have four EU member states extending Green or Blue lanes with Western Balkans: Greece, Italy and Croatia. We hope that others will join as soon as possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since societies and humans cannot survive without some degree of anticipation, we started the day with the *signature of the Roaming Declaration which regulates roaming prices reduction between the region and EU. The challenging self-regulatory and voluntary reduction process, paired with strong policy reforms on the side of governments, will significantly reduce data roaming charges as of 1 October 2023. Reductions will continue until the final objective of roaming prices at the level nearing domestic ones is attained in 2027.*

Negotiations to reach an agreement are never easy. Sometimes are tooth and claw.

But again today that signature showed that:

-WB can be a scene of competing policies and disputes, even frustrations,

But there is a huge space of acting together, motivated by a consensual understanding of progress.

-bringing people, goods, services and capital closer together, speaks of affirmative perspective of connectivity with purpose, not random.

-we can, because we do.

All these form *essential elements of a true common regional market in the making*. A market whose *potential can be maximized if duly integrated in EU's single market*.

I hope that my bursting *and vibrant Tirana spirit positively spills over our future joint work*, as we have to *work harder together: as a region, as a European family and as the international community*.