

EU-Western Balkans Brdo Summit

6 October 2021

Talking Points by the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Majlinda Bregu

Your Excellences,

Distinguished Prime Minister Jansa,

Thank you for inviting us to the EU-WB summit.

The EU first presented the Western Balkans 6 with the opportunity to join at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, and it still has a commitment to meet.

Though there are both important achievements and crucial differences among WB6, still democratic societies, regional cooperation and economic growth are intertwined with the EU accession progress.

As the agendas of regional cooperation build in intensity and challenges get bigger, we witness daily that the process of cooperation among WB6 cannot afford a stalemate.

The current form of cooperation we are trying to facilitate depends not only on the specific historical, geographical and political circumstances in a region, but its success also depends on the power of the perspective.

European perspective of Western Balkans, in a more regionalised world, is the one that can make the process of cooperation beneficial to all in the long-term!

Massively more ambitious actions for integration of WB in the EU single market policies are the antidote for a slowing down EU enlargement process.

The growth potentials unlocked only through regional economic integration in WB6 hold little vis-à-vis the potentials from earlier integration in selected EU single market policies.

This is the ultimate aim of the Common Regional Market Agenda that we in RCC spearhead.

With RCC's sustained support our region has unconditionally delivered on the regional roaming-free policy, fully based on EU's policy.

If we are to eventually inbreathe the substance of what is called "phasing in" the EU policies – it is crunch time to deliver on reducing roaming costs between the EU and WB.

No market logic, especially at a time when EU itself is extending its successful roaming free regime, **can explain retail margin or profit exceeding 700% in 2020 for WB operators.**

The enormous costs have so far acted as limits to roaming use and a **stable reduction path is a win-win solution for all – operators and end users alike.**

Together with our WB6 governments and EC, we at the **RCC have developed a sound, balanced and pragmatic Roadmap that charts the way for roaming reductions that will see us nearing the domestic prices in 5-year time.**

The benefits of starting this process are evident.

Now, it is up to all of us here present to **proactively and publicly, in unison, invite and encourage operators to work vigorously together.**

This **costs and barriers dismantling agenda** should **inspire and propel other joint EU-WB agendas to follow.** Such, for example, is the elimination of high financial transaction costs and the accession of our region in the Single European Payment Area. Or the mutual recognition of various licenses, certificates and services between the WB and EU.

Of immense importance for our youth is **harmonisation of the recognition of academic and professional qualifications to ease the process of mutual recognition of qualifications between the EU and the WB.**

5,000 students from the region applied for recognition of their BA or MA level.

Each of them has to pay 150EUR and they have to wait at least 6 months.

With the regional agreement under CRM the costs will be ZERO and the procedure is to be completed within 2 weeks. If we want youth not to leave thus emptying our societies, these long due agreements should have already been endorsed.

Since the Summit of the Berlin Process adopted the Action Plan on the Common Regional Market in November 2020, RCC has been wholeheartedly working on the facilitation of four agreements aimed at enhancing people-to-people mobility in the region.

These agreements include recognition of diplomas and academic qualifications that I just mentioned, plus the freedom of movement with ID cards and Agreement on freedom of entry, movement and stay of third-party citizens.

We consider these agreements technically ready.

With the support of all sides involved, EU first and foremost, RCC will continue until a solution on the politically sensitive issues that are horizontally affecting all four agreements is reached.

We just need decisive steps to be taken.

On a different tone, we are proud that we are advancing the Green Agenda in the WB6.

This is tabled here today.

WB6 governments, together with the sectoral regional organisations, outlined a far-reaching, paradigm-shattering and costly yet ultimately transformative and rewarding green reform agenda until 2030.

With the Green Agenda, we have made a giant leap in the right direction.

Solid fuels (coal and firewood) are used for domestic heating by over 60% of the population. Only 12% of the buildings in the Western Balkans are connected to district heating systems. 70% of electricity is produced in coal-fired power plants. The 16 thermal power plants in WB are outdated and produce more hazardous emissions than the 250 coal power plants in the EU territory.

We are conscious the transition to green will cost a lot – in terms of time, energy, efforts, and financial resources. **The region therefore counts on frontloading and expediting significant pre-accession funds** dedicated to this agenda.

Distinguished leaders,

We are fully aware that each step forward in the regional cooperation is a step closer to the EU.

This should be the common objective of both the EU and WB.