



Speech by RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu At the SecuriMeter 2024 presentation 16 December 2024, Tirana

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- The notion of security *rings different and grave since war ravaged on European soil.*
- In an era of profound changes and evolving security landscape, *crisis and security preparedness has topped to become a chief objective* - touching upon all aspects of politics, economics, society.
- The security agenda has *substantively widened*, including with the emergency of non-military threats, new dangers linked to cyber, hybrid or space, environment security, energy security, economic security - you name it!
- The *enlargement policy*, which occupies each and everyone in this room, is also increasingly *viewed through the lens of security* - as it can make EU more secure and it can help anchor democracy, stability and the rule of law across Europe.
- Today, as we join to *launch the newest SecuriMeter*, the 4th RCC one has been producing, the *spotlight is on our region's citizens perceptions*, concerns, aspirations. Above all, their desire for a meaningful change and a stable, thriving and secure region that can enrich and strengthen the European project.
- The wealth of data and insights we unveil today are *beyond just numbers and statistics*, they represent a *roadmap for action* that can *shape the things to come!*
- By exploring the *infographics that distilled the essence of SecuriMeter 2024*, where each visual tells a story and makes a point, we will be *bringing these findings to life:*

SecuriMeter unfolds:

- A story of resilience amid uncertainty;
- A story of challenges in demand of solutions;
- A story of hope for a safer, more stable Western Balkans and a shared future within Europe.

General Security Perceptions

We are starting off against the backdrop of overall *low perceptions of the security state of play*, with less than 40% of respondents agreeing that our region is a safe place to live. Deep-rooted security concerns fuel these sober statistics. Perceptions of security differ significantly across economies, with Montenegro having the highest proportion of citizens (42%) who feel secure, while Albania (40%), Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia show greater levels of insecurity. These concerns about regional security are likely shaped by ongoing issues, including tensions between Serbia and Kosovo*, ethnic antagonisms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and fears of external influences, particularly from Russia.

By contrast, respondents feel more secure about their own economies (52%) than they do about the region as a whole (39%). Montenegro and Kosovo* have the highest levels of perceived economic security, with 57% and 54% of their citizens feeling secure, respectively, while Albania has the highest proportion of citizens who feel insecure about their economy (32%).

Moreover, the threat of a potential war is not a distant fear, with nearly half of the respondents seeing it as a real one. A much welcomed, *slight improvement is noted* with dissatisfaction decrease in some economies, linked potentially to the economic rebound or the renewed EU accession momentum.

The *future outlook* and reported optimism are also *not overwhelming!* The future security outlook in the Western Balkans appears bleak, with only 31% of respondents believing the region will be more secure in the next 12 months. Concerns about potential conflicts are widespread, with 48% of citizens fearing a war between Western Balkan economies, including significant worries about terrorist attacks (41%) and civil wars (40%). These anxieties are most pronounced in Serbia (58%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (51%), and Montenegro (49%)

Personal Security Perceptions

59% of WB citizens feel secure on an individual level, which contrasts with broader regional insecurity perceptions. Economy-wise, almost the same share of respondents in Albania feel the same about the security of the economy and the personal security, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has the lowest share of respondents who feel personally secure. To our surprise, despite their importance and relevance, two issues reported as a threat to personal security are not the most threatening ones.

The **large majority of respondents reported the problem of people begging in the street** (60%), followed by alcohol consumption in the streets (41%) that intimidate the citizens. Rather than posing a physical security threat, begging affects mostly emotional security, as citizens may feel for these vulnerable people and may be keen to help but on the other hand, they are aware that this is a broader social responsibility that need to be addressed by the institutions. Due to ineffective safety nets and the role of criminal networks that often take advantage of the vulnerable people from marginalised communities or with disabilities, including children, begging remains the top issue that affects personal security.

Gendered security issues are prevalent. On average, a woman is killed in the region every week, with the number of femicides rising in recent years to the hundreds.

4.1 million citizens report to have information from friends on **domestic violence** cases and **3.1 million** have obtained such information from relatives. Considering the cultural barriers to communicating these kinds of

* 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

experiences the figures may be higher. Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have the highest percentage of citizens who responded to have had information on domestic violence from both friends and relatives.

Perceptions of Emigration and Depopulation

Emigration-driven *depopulation* threatens not only the socioeconomic stability but also long-term *regional security*. With scores of our youth leaving, we will soon have economies with *bigger population abroad than in!* (e.g. 21% of region's population live abroad, while for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina this mounts to 44% and 49%). 36% of the respondents see depopulation as a major issue, with *one in four WB citizens thinking or already in the process of emigrating*.

Perceptions of Immigration

SecuriMeter also evidences concerns over potential crime hikes linked to immigration, highlighting the need for clear communication and policies to manage integration effectively. The public opinion on *immigration* reflects a *cautious yet pragmatic stance* - while many recognise immigration's potential to address labour shortages, there is a strong preference for controlled migration. Public officials are slowly coming around to recognising the urgent problem of population decline, caused by a combination of both low birth rates and high levels of emigration. The results of 2024 SecuriMeter show that people are mostly indifferent or do not see a positive or negative impact of migrants coming to their economies. However, it is worth noting that more people have a negative view of migrants compared to a more optimistic perspective.

Perceptions of Corruption

Statistics here are *devastating, screaming loud for heads-on tackling* of this pervasive and persisting phenomenon with 83% of citizens finding corruption as widespread, and almost half of all consider it a significant issue. Corruption remains one of the most entrenched barriers to public trust and governance. On a more positive note, slight progress compared to previous years is reported when it comes to bribing incidents.

The Three Most Important Economic Problems Today

Residents of the Western Balkans are greatly concerned about the high cost of living and inflation, which 77% of people in the region identify as the most critical economic issue, with concerns ranging from 73% in Albania to 81% in Serbia. This worry spans all demographics, including gender, age, education, and ethnicity.

Perceptions of Emerging Security Threats

WB citizens feel the brunt of the global security context and the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, with about 40% pointing that these conflicts negatively affect their security. In such an increasingly unstable world, the *mechanisms of security cooperation have taken on critical importance*. The growing trust in NATO indicates its perceived role in regional stability, with continued importance of EU integration and alignment in promoting security. Particular attention must be given to challenges associated with the *rise of AI* and the potential to compromise security, disrupt labour markets or misuse personal information.

Amid eroding trust in public institutions, the SecuriMeter also attests to the *significance of social networks and influencers as important sources of increasingly widespread dissemination of misinformation*, with political parties and politicians seen as most biased sources.

Dear all,

Accepting reality is a good starting point for policymaking. Though the questions in our SecuriMeter poll are oversimplified for categorisation, it helps a lot to illustrate how the region is changing in a daily changing world. SecuriMeter findings reflect the *interconnectedness of security challenges*, where issues like corruption, organised crime, migration, trust in institutions and misinformation cut across borders/boundaries and demand collective solutions.

- At its core, *security is a process*, much like cooperation – requiring doubling down of efforts, underpinned by *dialogue, mutual trust, and a commitment to shared democratic values*.
- The RCC, whose helm I steered in the past 6 years, has markedly contributed to *fostering cooperative, resilient, adaptive, and forward-looking security framework*.
- Encouraged by the *increased trust and support for regional cooperation*, which topped 82%, by working together on cybersecurity, firearms control, climate resilience, and more, we are not just enhancing security for the region, but for all of Europe!
- **Security is not a privilege for the few but a right for all, rooted in justice, political realism, guided by wisdom and sustained by unity.**

And now,

- The panel discussion that will follow, moderated by *Mr. Lutfi Dervishi*, a prominent journalist, media expert, and academic, together with the panellists: *Zhidas Daskalovski*, Political Scientist from North Macedonia, and Director of the School of Political Studies Mother Teresa and Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM); *Alida Vračić*, a Political Scientist, a co-founder and Executive Director of Populari, a Sarajevo-based think tank specialising in European integration of our region; and *Agon Maliqi*, Policy Analyst and Co-founding editor of Sbunker.net from Prishtina, will explore how *governance, trust, and security intersect*, and what *practical steps can be taken to address the challenges identified* in the report.