

## Talking points by the RCC Secretary General, Majlinda Bregu, at the presentation of Balkan Barometer 2024

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There is a story by Gabriel García Márquez, “*No One Writes to the Colonel*”, where hope is perfectly captured in a brief exchange. The wife of the colonel says, ‘You can’t eat hope,’ and the colonel replies, ‘You can’t eat it, but it sustains you.’

This simple yet profound reflection on hope resonates deeply with the findings of our Balkan Barometer. Despite the region’s many tangible challenges, it is hope that continues to sustain and motivate its people. Today, as we dive into ten years of data, we’ll explore not only the struggles but also the resilience that defines the Western Balkans.

But before I start dwelling into the insights, let me just say few words on what makes the Balkan Barometer unique.

- ✓ Its focus is on the Western Balkans specifically, targeting our region, offering a detailed region-specific analysis that is often overlooked by broader European or global surveys.
- ✓ It offers a dual perspective by collecting data from both citizens and businesses providing a comprehensive view of public sentiment alongside business confidence and market trends.
- ✓ It is conducted annually, thus it tracks changes over time, enabling the identification of trends and shifts.

Having said that, after a decade of capturing the pulse of the Western Balkans, we are thrilled to share the latest trends and fresh insights from the 2024 edition of the Balkan Barometer. And today, we want YOU to be part of the conversation. Let me start by giving you a taste of the data we've gathered.

What do you think is the biggest concern for the people of the Western Balkans today?

Here’s a hint: over the past ten years, this particular issue has surpassed concerns like unemployment and economy as the top worry.

If you guessed rising prices and inflation, you’re correct.

It’s no surprise given that inflation in the Balkans is almost double - eight point one percent (8.1) - that of the EU which stands at three point four (3.4) while food prices are nearly the same as in the EU. Yet, our GDP is only half of the EU’s.

Interestingly, for the first time in a long time, unemployment is no longer a top-three concern for young people. Instead, their attention has shifted to corruption and rising cost of living.

Meanwhile, businesses remain uncertain about the region's economic future. One-third believe the situation will improve, while one-fifth expect it to worsen. While this is a slight improvement compared to last year, optimism remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Things are changing—not just the circumstances around us, but also how we see the world.

Support for EU membership, started at 39% percent in 2015 reached its peak of sixty-two percent in 2021 at 62% and from that moment the decline started. Today, it stands at 54% —the lowest in six years.

Albanians and Kosovans leading the pro group with 77% and seventy-four percent 74% respectively, while Serbians and Montenegrins are the frontrunners of disbelief with respectively 34% and 39%.

This patience fatigue is also felt, though to a lesser extent, amongst business leaders. While support for EU membership amongst businesses has declined by 7% this year, it still remains higher than amongst the general public, with 64% of businesses in favour.

Despite these challenges, hope persists. Forty-three percent of citizens believe that EU accession will happen by 2035 in comparison to 1/3 who think it will happen after 2040 or never.

On a more positive note, trust in regional cooperation is on the rise. A record of 82% of citizens now support it, the highest percentage since the launch of the Balkan Barometer in 2015.

**This underscores that regional cooperation is having a value of its own, rather than being approached as years ago in the context of European integration.**

Fifty-nine percent (59%) of them anticipate gains from being able to travel with ID cards and using roaming free while travelling in the region.

However, nationalism as a powerful creed is undergoing many transformations and remains a significant barrier to deeper cooperation.

When asked “what hampers regional cooperation” 47% responded it is nationalistic politics, followed by 37% indicating lack of trust due to history.

Ten years ago, the prevailing sentiment amongst citizens in the region was "Hope," today it is "Conflict", with the most noticeable trends being with Kosovans 34%, Bosnians and Herzegovinians 26%, and Serbians 25%.

The unaccomplished Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, the threats of secession in Bosnia Herzegovina, problems North Macedonia faced with Greece and Bulgaria, social tension, frustration, the slow

pace of modernisation of regional infrastructure, common market impediments and depopulation are the main causes of this shift.

However, there has been a constant during this decade.

The constant unchanging throughout 10 years of Balkan Barometer is the distrust in political parties with 74%. Sure, political distrust has become a norm rather than exception in many established democracies, but in the region, understanding people's reasons for political distrust is quite important for democratic legitimacy.

But trust in the judiciary and police is improving across the region. An increase of ten percent during the last five years, likely thanks to ongoing judicial reforms and anti-corruption efforts.

Political partisanship is driving the distrust in media as 64% of people believe that media serves political interests.

Sixty percent (60%) say social media is not a reliable source of information, almost the same percentage believing that fake fast news is on rise.

As you see, over the past ten years many people have written a lot to their "colonel". Now, it is time for the colonel to read the letter.