

**Roundtable with the Energy Ministers of the Western Balkans
24 October 2022, 15:00-17:30**

Dear Minister Habeck,

Dear Ministers and partners

Our reality, focus, fears and struggles today are much different than the ones before the 24th February. Different also from the ones in 2020 & 2021 when we in the Regional Cooperation Council coordinated the preparation of the *Green Agenda for WB (GAWB) and its Action Plan.*

Keeping the torch alight on the implementation of GAWB that was developed in times of stability is a *hellishly difficult task* in these times of adversity. It is clearly *overshadowed by the impact of the war and the pan-European energy price surge.*

Fiscal support measures in response to the increase in energy prices are estimated to exceed 1.5 % of the GDP from mid-2019 to mid-2022. Most of this support reflects price controls and subsidies rather than direct support.

The Western Balkans has high rates of energy poverty compared to the EU. As a result, the energy crisis has contributed to increased household expenditures for energy and other products. The average household in the region spends *7-10% of its total budget on energy.* This disproportionately weakens low-income households - those affected by energy poverty.

Gas prices have risen by more than 10 times compared to before the pandemic while the purchasing power in our region, a region that has only 1/3 of the EU's GDP per capita, is *simply powerless against such hikes!*

There will be no quick fixes and silver bullets for this colossal challenge ahead of us. But what we know for sure is that there can be *no U-turn, nor turning back the clock on sustainable and green transition,* especially in such a climate change-vulnerable region as ours.

The solutions lie in **a regional and a European approach**, solidarity, cutting reliance on energy imports and fossil fuels through *utilizing vast renewable energy potential. A European-level market intervention!*

While on a regional approach we should enable cross-border sharing, joint interconnectors, or coordination on securing food production and export, why not a Regional Strategy on Energy and a regional stock market on energy – as proposed a few days ago by Minister Osmani in Skopje discussing with CSO on this topic.

The *gas interconnector between Greece and Bulgaria* will have a major impact on the wider SEE region's energy security. *Securing energy supply is a joint regional and European imperative! Fragmented solutions are not an option!*

Our region *suffers from long-term under-investment in the energy system. The change will need major finances and time. It will be years before we can diversify!*

Energy and green transition have a human face and strong support measures are needed for our most vulnerable, struggling businesses, our coal-dependent regions...

Every one of us has a role to play on the path to a green future. From changing individual consumption habits, to leading by example by reducing energy consumption in our organizations, to raising awareness on the financial, environmental and security benefits of renewables.

Important avenues lie in *greening our transport and mobility*, investing more in *energy efficiency, retrofitting brown industries*, and building upon the EU *renovation wave* to renovate schools, hospitals, and buildings. In *greening our jobs, fiscal systems and investments*.

We, in the RCC, will continue actively to keep the Green Agenda torch alight despite the grave war and energy crisis context!

As part of our contribution to GAWB, jointly with the governments we have negotiated and agreed on two regional statements:

- Regional joint statement on preventing plastic pollution including marine litter
- Regional joint statement on biological diversity.

These protocols are ready to be endorsed at the Berlin Summit.



This will be *our regional contribution* towards the UN and EU's attempt to reach a globally binding agreement on preventing plastic pollution and to the post-2020 global Biodiversity framework. *All allies are welcome, especially among the very dedicated civil society organizations.*