



Speech by Secretary General Majlinda Bregu

at the

SEECF Summit

Skopje, 13 June 2024

Honourable Chair-in-Office,

Esteemed Presidents and Chairman of the Presidency,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Dear colleagues,

I wish to begin by extending my sincere gratitude to the Skopje Chairpersonship-in-Office for organising this Summit and to congratulate Madam President Siljanovska-Davkova on her appointment. Allow me also to wish every success to the incoming Chairpersonship-in-Office of Tirana.

As new configurations form in the aftermath of recent European elections, we sincerely hope for an Enlargement Commission and a future for Europe that unfolds positively through credible and predictable completion of the generational aspirations for our region's EU integration.

As for WB and other candidate countries, we hope that the Strategic Agenda that will be agreed soon by EU Leaders will make us visible, and no one better to do it than the 5 EU MS part of SEECF.

EU integration has **been the promise and the North Star our region has looked upon for decades**, despite the serious blows, disappointments, and sluggish advancements.

The past year has seen some progress in the EU enlargement: **the opening of accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova, and the long-overdue visa**

liberalisation for Kosovo*. In December last year, yet another **EU-Western Balkans Summit** was held, which has become a traditional forum to discuss important issues of EU accession, following the **successful Berlin Process Summit hosted by Albania**. The **EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, supported by a commitment of 6 billion EUR** in grants and loans, will stimulate economic growth and socio-economic convergence in our region, providing a significant boost to our EU aspirations.

Excellencies,

When I assumed the role of Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in January 2019, I was prepared for a challenging yet inspiring professional journey. However, **I did not anticipate the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and a war in our continent. This era-defining crisis reshaped global health, security, and rich economies, let alone our region.**

These challenges have demonstrated that even in the most difficult times, cooperation and resilience are possible. From the very beginning, we have been guided by the principle that cooperation is our strongest asset in a rapidly changing world.

True to my word that I will not stay a day longer at RCC beyond the 6 years of statutory mandate, allow me to warmly wish one of my friends in arms during these 6 years of my tenure Mr. Amer Kapetanovic all the best in meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

It is not common to see both the incumbent and the next chair of an institution or organisation celebrate together. But I am sure I'm speaking even on his behalf: our last 6 years have been a remarkable journey witnessing achievements, pride, headaches of an institution that has grown significantly in importance over the years. RCC has not only stood the test of time but has also evolved to meet the ever-changing needs of our region with unwavering dedication and excellence.

Through the dedication and hard work of its staff, RCC has transformed into a cornerstone of cooperation.

If one was about to ask me: what is the biggest achievement of these 6 years at RCC, I would say without hesitation: **the ability to adapt and grow.**

That's why at the peak of the pandemic the **RCC initiated the timely push for opening green lanes, ensuring essential goods could travel smoothly**. This commitment to cooperation prevented shortages and saved businesses money, as a 3-hour reduction in waiting times is equivalent to a 2% reduction in tariffs. I am proud that, together with TCT and CEFTA, we not only established the Green Lanes but extended them with the EU.

Instead of status quo, we tried to work on the **agendas that are people-centred.**

A historic, all-inclusive **Western Balkans agreement eliminating roaming costs** entered into full effect on 1 July 2021. In less than a year, **data usage increased by up to 500%, and the number of roaming users by up to 50%.**

We didn't stop there. A year later, we managed to sign the **EU-WB Roaming Declaration with 38 operators from the region and the EU**. The first data roaming charge reductions started on **1 October 2023**. **As we speak, all Western Balkans operators are applying roaming charges lower than those committed to in the Declaration.**

Improve, innovate, and expand its reach.

The RCC has shown utmost commitment as a key contributor to the Berlin Process, understanding that the pace of regional development influences the pace of our European integration.

The region moved steadily from cooperating on a regional economic area to establishing a common regional market. Amidst the pandemic, we managed to endorse the establishment of the Common Regional Market as a stepping stone to the EU Single Market. **It hasn't been an easy journey considering the high political tension in the region, but it was worth the ride.** Now, we have four mobility agendas already endorsed, ensuring the mobility of citizens, students, and professionals in the region, laying the groundwork for accelerating the Western Balkans' access to the EU Single Market. Nearly 13 million citizens have used their ID cards to move within the region; students from nearly 70 public universities will benefit from the recognition of their higher education diplomas, and seven professions will be automatically recognised in the region to the same standards as in the EU.

The work we have started for the next **CRM phase is conceived as an “access gateway” for progressive integration into the EU single market and socio-economic convergence with the EU.** And this was highlighted even in the new instrument of the Growth Plan.

We prioritised the culture of excellence, inclusivity, and innovation.

RCC focus was broadened from an organisation centred on the economic agenda **to one encompassing a wider socio-economic context, incorporating new ideas like women's economic empowerment, Balkathon—by the way, the call for the 5th edition of this RCC trademark is open now—Futourismo, local government cooperation, youth mental health.**

Dear all,

Balkans is not a fair stage for everyone. There is one thing I wish could have happened these years. I would have preferred to witness more tangible actions rather than just signatures on paper. A greater display of genuine commitment to mutual respect. I would have liked to see the implementation of the agreement on freedom of movement with ID cards from Bosnia and Herzegovina, meaning no visas between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosova, as I am happy to see that Kosova offered full consensus cooperation to the Bosnian candidate for RCC SG, allowing to solve a problem that seemed too complex.

Dear all,

Developing the region's potential will require more sources of dynamism and transformation to overcome deep seated social, institutional and environmental challenges.

I hope that we at RCC have shown that bridge between today and the future EU perspective of the Western Balkans is not paved with heroism, smoke and mirror pro-European talks, but with concrete commitment to reforms.

* 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.

