

# ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE RCC  
SECRETARY GENERAL

1 JUNE 2024 – 1 JUNE 2025

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ANNUAL REPORT OF THE RCC SECRETARY GENERAL JUNE 2024 - JUNE 2025

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# Foreword

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The Regional Cooperation Council enters this reporting cycle at a moment of continuity and transition. This Annual Report bridges two phases of leadership - capturing the final stretch of the previous leadership's mandate and marking the beginning of a new one. It reflects both the consistency of RCC's core mission and the evolving priorities that lie ahead. As the new Secretary General of RCC, I take this opportunity to recognise the foundations already laid and to outline how we intend to build upon them in response to the region's changing context.

I also want to acknowledge the dedication of the RCC Secretariat, whose efforts have elevated the institution's credibility and reach. The RCC has grown into a trusted and capable platform, one that delivers consistently. We are not starting from scratch. We are building on solid ground.

But the expectations before us are shifting. The region today is navigating a dense network of interrelated challenges: economic fragmentation, political uncertainty, demographic pressure, climate urgency, and technological disruption. These are not abstract issues. They touch every aspect of how people live, work, and plan for their future. And they demand a response that is not rhetorical but operational.

For RCC, this means a more assertive orientation toward delivery. We will focus our resources and partnerships where they have real leverage:

- ✦ advancing the Common Regional Market as a practical tool for convergence with the EU,
- ✦ moving with determination into a more operational phase of the SEE2030 Strategy,
- ✦ accelerating the Green Agenda with region-wide, streamlined, and measurable actions,
- ✦ embedding skills, innovation, and digitalisation into every layer of our programming.



Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Amer Kapetanovic (Photo: RCC/Armin Durgut)

What we need is not a catalogue of initiatives but a coherent shift: from fragmented agendas to a shared regional framework that is smart in design, inclusive in process, and sustainable in outcome.

This Annual Report provides an overview of key milestones achieved over the past year, while implicitly setting the course for what lies ahead. Among the notable developments is the adoption of the Common Regional Market 2 (CRM2) Action Plan, endorsed by the leaders at the Berlin Summit, which stands out as a strategic turning point. As the second pillar of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, CRM2 lays out a structured path for deeper regional economic integration and a credible gateway to the EU Single Market over the next three years. The establishment of the SEE Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing under the SEE2030 Strategy is a concrete step toward strengthening regional resilience through shared mechanisms. In parallel, the ongoing revision of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan reflects our readiness to not only

reaffirm political commitment but also recalibrate our approach to better align with operational realities and ensure climate priorities are both actionable and regionally coherent.

Our approach will be disciplined. We will invest in streamlined priorities, executed better. We will listen more closely to the region's realities — especially to younger generations whose sense of urgency is justified — and we will be pragmatic in aligning regional cooperation with economies' interests and priorities.

There is no shortcut to trust. It is earned through results. RCC will continue to provide the connective tissue between governments and people, but we will also move forward to greater ownership in driving outcomes where coordination alone is not enough.

The strength of this institution lies in its ability to adapt without losing direction. That is what this report reflects. And that is what the next phase of our work will require.

*Amer Kapetanovic*



# Executive Summary

While the reporting period was marked by the leadership transition in the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) with Amer Kapetanovic assuming his duty of the new Secretary General of the RCC as of 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2025, the RCC has continued to serve as the primary regional facilitator for policy dialogue, strategic alignment, and implementation of transformative initiatives in South East Europe.

RCC focused on driving forward the Western Balkans region's European integration, **strengthening the Common Regional Market (CRM)**, and **advancing the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) and steering the SEE 2030 Strategy**, while deepening cooperation in digitalisation, human capital development, youth engagement, and regional security.



16th Annual Meeting of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) took place in Skopje on 12 June 2024  
(Photo: RCC/Armand Habazaj)

The **SEE2030 Strategy** continued to serve as a unifying policy platform for sustainable, inclusive, and cohesive development in the region. A flagship achievement of the reporting period was the launch of the **SEE Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing**, a cross-sectoral mechanism aimed at identifying, analysing, and responding to key risks—ranging from economic divergence and demographic decline to climate threats and geopolitical instability. By supporting evidence-based foresight and early warning, the Network would enhance

policy resilience and reinforce the strategic objectives of SEE2030.

With the endorsement of the **CRM 2025–2028 Action Plan** at the Berlin Process Summit in October 2024, RCC supported the launch of a new phase of regional economic integration. A series of **Sherpas' consultations** and technical meetings led to the identification of priority reforms, future deliverables, and the design of a regional **monitoring and evaluation framework**.



RCC Secretary General 2019–2024 Majlinda Bregu and RCC Secretary General for the term 2025–2027 Amer Kapetanovic hosting RCC Annual Meeting on 12 June 2024 in Skopje (Photo: RCC/Armand Habazaj)

Progress in **economic competitiveness** was notable: RCC facilitated the adoption of the **Declaration on Regional Investment Screening Standards**, launched the Western Balkans Six (WB6) **Investment Incentive Platform**, and coordinated investor outreach campaigns yielding over **€122 million in FDI**, with an additional pipeline of €466 million. The RCC also led dialogue on **sustainable investment** and supported joint efforts to **brand the WB6 as a unified tourism destination**.

Integration into the **Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA)** by four economies marked a major milestone in financial harmonisation.

The RCC continued to advance human capital development through regional frameworks on education, innovation, and labour market reforms. The signing of the **Agreement on Admission to Higher Education and Access to Study** and the operationalization of **mutual recognition of professional qualifications** are key milestones toward a more mobile and interconnected region.

Under the **Horizon Europe programme**, with RCC's tailored support, **WB6 participation doubled**, reaching €160 million over three years. RCC provided technical and coordination support to expand **Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs)** and launched follow-up support, helping hubs attract over €9 million in funding.

Innovation and future-proofing the region were further leveraged and promoted through flagship events such as the **Balkathon** and **Butterfly Inno-**



Common Regional Market (CRM) 2025–2028 Plan Action was endorsed at the Berlin Process Summit in October 2024



**vation Forum & Award**, encouraging green, tech, women, and youth-led entrepreneurship.

The RCC also elevated **gender equality and youth empowerment**, launching the **Gender-Responsive Green Finance Roadmap**, delivering capacity-building to all WB6 youth councils, and organizing high-level events such as the **Women Entrepreneurs of the Year Awards** and regional **Fireside Talks**. The **Western Balkans Youth Lab (WBYL2)** helped institutionalize youth participation in climate and circular economy policymaking.

RCC's digital agenda focused on strengthening regional frameworks for **cybersecurity, e-governance, roaming, and digital identity**. The **WB6/EU Roaming Report 2024** confirmed a **99% drop in data roaming costs**, while cross-border/boundary data use increased significantly.

In cooperation with the European Commission and other partners, RCC supported: The **Cybersecurity Database** under the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) framework; Workshops and coordination on **eIDAS** and **Digital Identity Wallets**; con-



Balkathon 5.0 winners with RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu at the Award Ceremony, in Tirana on 3 October 2024 (Photo: RCC/Armand Habazaj)

tinued development of the **WB DESI 2024 Report**, enabling data-driven regional benchmarking.

The RCC acted as coordinator of the **GAWB Action Plan (2021–2030)**, with major progress achieved at the **first GAWB Ministerial Meeting**, where the **Hamburg Declaration** was adopted—reaffirming the region's commitment to carbon neutrality by 2050.

Key achievements included: Finalization of the **Regional Climate Adaptation Roadmap**; technical completion of the **Regional Action Plan on Plastic Pollution**; advancement of the **GAWB Action Plan revision**, in line with the EU Green Deal; development of the **GAWB Observatory Platform**, a digital tool to support transparency, data monitoring, and evidence-based implementation.

The RCC also led work on addressing the **social dimensions of green transition**, supporting policy briefs on vulnerable groups, coal sector restructuring, and labour upskilling.

RCC continued its work on **justice sector, governance, and security cooperation** through structured, multi-stakeholder platforms. The **SEE Judicial Training Institutes (JTI) Network** focused on AI and cybercrime in justice, while the **Regional Mediation Conference** promoted alternative dispute resolution.

On security, the RCC coordinated the **9th Regional Security Coordination Conference**, the **South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs** (SEEMIC) and **Heads of the Security Authorities of SEE** (SEEN-SA) meetings, and participated actively in the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the

Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) framework and the **Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) control agenda**.

The **SecuriMeter 2024** survey provided actionable insights into regional security perceptions. While trust in public institutions remains fragile, the majority of citizens continue to support greater EU and NATO integration.

The RCC's outreach strategy amplified the visibility of its flagship initiatives—CRM, GAWB, SEE2030, and youth empowerment—through multimedia campaigns, public diplomacy, and high-level events. The RCC's platforms reached **millions of users across**

**digital channels**, and the **Balkan Barometer 2024** (10<sup>th</sup> edition) remained a trusted policy resource for data and regional trends. The **Brussels Liaison Office** served as a crucial link with EU institutions, think tanks, and civil society.

The period June 2024- June 2025 was marked by **strategic progress across economic, environmental, digital, and institutional domains**, reinforcing the Western Balkans' pathway toward EU convergence. With the SEE2030 Strategy and Risk Monitoring Network providing long-term direction, and CRM and GAWB offering operational frameworks, the RCC remains among the central drivers of transformation, integration, and resilience in South East Europe.

# Support to the Implementation of Regional Programmes

## A. Western Balkans Common Regional Market (CRM)

### A1. Economic Competitiveness

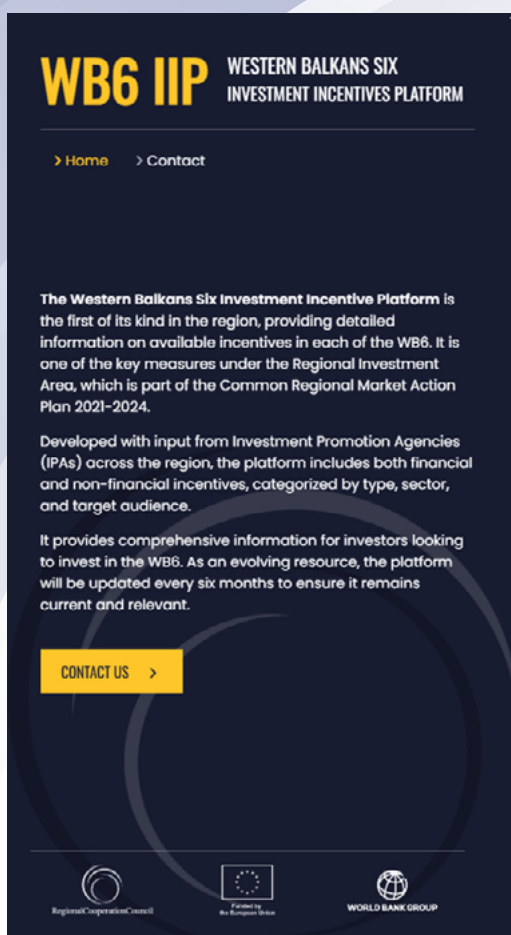
#### A1.1. Investments and Financial Markets

During the reporting period, notable progress was achieved in strengthening the investment environment across the WB6. A key milestone was the adoption of the **Declaration on Regional Investment Screening Standards** at the Berlin Process Summit, establishing a baseline for the development of investment screening mechanisms in the WB6 economies.

Another significant achievement was the launch of the **WB6 Investment Incentive Platform** — the first platform of its kind in the region — consolidating information on available incentives across the WB6 in one place. This initiative directly enhances investment facilitation efforts by making incentive information easily accessible to potential investors.



Declaration on Regional Investment Screening Standards was adopted by Western Balkans leaders at the Berlin Process Summit held on 14 October 2024 in Berlin (Photo: Elmas Libohova)



Western Balkans Six Investment Incentive Platform, launched in October 2024 is the first of its kind in the region, providing detailed information on available incentives in each of the Western Balkans Six

In terms of investment promotion, Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs), with the support of the RCC and the World Bank, conducted investor lead generation campaigns that delivered outstanding results. As of the reporting period, these campaigns have generated **56 investment interests, 16 investment leads, 8 investment commitments, and 7 realised investments**, totalling **€122 million in FDI**. Additionally, the potential investment pipeline, based on expressed interest, stands at €466 million. Preparations for a new round of investment outreach campaigns, incorporating lessons learned, are currently underway.

The RCC continued to drive regional dialogue on investment policy through the Joint Working Group on

Investments (JWGI) under CRM 2.0. To foster a shift toward sustainable investments, an initial draft of the Recommendation on Sustainable Investment has been developed and is currently under technical negotiation within the JWGI. Additionally, an initial draft of the Regional Investment Facilitation Standards has been prepared and is also under negotiation at the technical level.

**Albania, Montenegro, Moldova, and North Macedonia joined the SEPA**, paving the way for faster and more cost-effective intra-regional payments and transactions with the wider SEPA area. The remaining WB6 economies are well on track to follow.

Meanwhile, WB Central Banks, with support from partners including the RCC, have continued efforts toward full integration into the main SEPA schemes. The Bank of Albania and the Central Bank of Montenegro, together with the majority of financial institutions (measured by asset size), have submitted applications for integration into SEPA scheme(s).

In parallel, the region has made important steps toward the development of instant payments systems, a critical complement to SEPA. Four WB6 economies, with one participating as an observer, signed a Letter of Intent agreeing in principle to develop a TARGET Instant Payment Settlement (TIPS) clone with the support of the Bank of Italy. This is intended as an interim step toward future integration into the EU TIPS platform, with RCC actively supporting the process alongside other partners.

Additionally, initial drafts of the WB6 Green Bond Standard and the Regional Financial Literacy Framework for Individuals have been prepared and are currently under technical review within the Working Group on Financial Markets (WGFM). The former will serve as an additional tool to mobilize finance toward the green transition and contribute to delivering on sustainability goals, while the latter will provide a conceptual framework for regional stakeholders to support financial well-being efforts.



## 41.2. Industrial Development and Sustainable Tourism

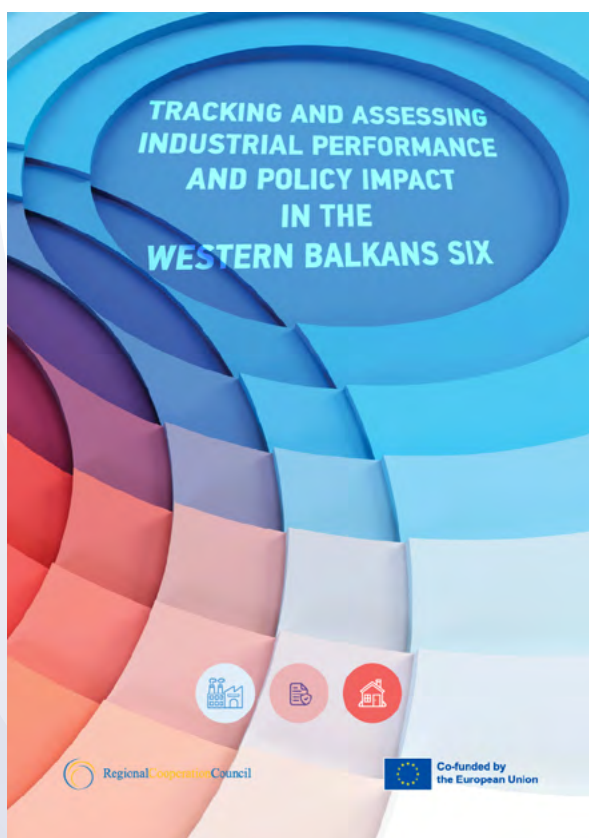
Informed by the need to build on evidence from the previous period, particularly the 2021–2024 CRM Action Plan, the RCC has drawn on its assessment **“Tracking and Assessing Industrial Performance and Policy Impact in the Western Balkans Six”** to support this reporting cycle. The assessment, which reviewed industrial performance in the region over the past decade, found that the WB6 have significantly expanded their industrial capacity – growing nearly twice as fast as the EU average (3.54% vs. 1.99% annually since 2010). By analysing strategic sectors such as automotive, agri-food, and metal processing, and applying economic, social, and environmental lenses, the report provides a robust knowledge base to inform ongoing regional efforts for inclusive and sustainable industrial development.

Overall work and dialogue on industrial development was developed through the meetings of the Working Group on Industrial Development (WGID): a meeting of the WGID was organized on 16 October 2024, in Tirana, focusing on preliminary findings and presen-

tation of the data and analysis for the industrial performance overview and assessment of the Western Balkans Six. In addition, given the cross-cutting nature of industry activities, some of the meetings were organized jointly with other regional working groups, such as a joint meeting of WGID and TEG (*see below, under tourism*) and a joint meeting of the WGID and Working Group on Financial Markets (WGFM) on 29 April 2025, in Pristina, bringing together representatives of various institutions to centre discussions on (voluntary) green public procurement as a tool for industrial transformation, on a potential regional call for joint action on a gender-responsive green finance, green bonds and financial literacy; all aiming to create regional frameworks for harmonized action and criteria that facilitate regional integration into EU.

On Creative Industries (CIs), RCC continued its support to regional creative events by bringing the policy dialogue on creative industries closer to the creative industry stakeholders; specifically, this time, in cooperation with RCC’s WBYL2, a Regional Conference on Youth Cultural Cooperation was organized on November 2024, in Belgrade, with focus on the importance of cultural and creative industries for empowering young people. Participants of the regional WGID shared insights on the CI policies and activities in place for youth engagement. RCC efforts, support and collaboration on creative industries were further recognized by the Foreign Investors Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, during its annual event on 27 June 2024, in Sarajevo.

In the context of creative industries, RCC is further exploring regional cooperation for the WB6 in the gaming industry by defining potential areas for further research, support and policy interventions. With this objective, a regional meeting was convened on 28 April 2025, online, inviting various stakeholders (such as gaming industry associations, policy institutions, film industry and creative hubs representatives) in order to discuss on challenges, development and potential intervention actions.





Given the cross-cutting nature of CIs, RCC further worked to strengthen synergies with tourism activities in order to create synergies and facilitate collaborations that can result in cultural tourism, promotion of local art, etc. In this regard, the sub-Working Group on Industrial Development for creative industries joined the Tourism Expert Group (TEG) in June 2024, with the aim to explore and strengthen collaboration considering that CIs can enrich the tourism experience by incorporating cultural products, creative events; and transform tourist destinations into cultural hubs.

The reporting period in the Sustainable Tourism activities features discussions with the TEG through two regional meetings, held on 4 June 2024, in Skopje (jointly with WGID) and on 3 December 2024, in

Sarajevo with focus on the importance of branding the region as a single tourism destination by focusing on the key factors driving growth in the WB6. The meetings discussed challenges and opportunities and explored good practices in developing a Regional Tourism Branding Roadmap. On 24–25 October 2024, in Bar, RCC, in collaboration with GIZ, hosted the regional Tourism Conference titled “A Sustainable Future: Cooperation, Communication, and Connectivity in the Western Balkans’ Rural and Adventure Tourism – Synergising Strategies.” The event gathered a wide range of stakeholders from across the region, including the TEG, international organisations, tourism associations, and women entrepreneurs from the tourism sector, particularly those involved in RCC’s “Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year” initiative.



RCC, in collaboration with GIZ, hosted the regional Tourism Conference titled A Sustainable Future: Cooperation, Communication, and Connectivity in the Western Balkans' Rural and Adventure Tourism – Synergising Strategies, in Bar on 24–25 October 2024 (Photo: RCC/ Mihael Djuricic)

## A2. Human Capital Development

### A2.1. Research and Innovation Area

WB6 have doubled performance in the Horizon Europe programme. The region absorbed EUR 160 million after first three years as opposed to attracting EUR 171.7 million throughout the previous Horizon 2020 programme (seven years). The region's strongest performance remains in Pillar II with 400 Grants and €90 million attracted, followed by Agri-Food (170 Grants, €38 million), Climate, Energy, Mobility (84 Grants, €20 million) and Digital & Industry (58 Grants, €12 million).

Despite these commendable developments, all WB6 remain at less than 70% of the EU's average and Emerging Innovators according to the **European Innovation Scoreboard 2024 (EIS)**. Serbia is ranked 4th among Emerging Innovators and 29th in the extended EIS, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina improved their positions, with increases of 4% and 3% respectively, while Montenegro and Albania moderately improved their innovation performance. The region performs well in business process innova-



Declarations on Research and Innovation Infrastructure Access and Collaboration was adopted at the 10th Berlin Process Summit held on 14 October 2024 in Berlin (Photo: RCC/Elmas Libohova)

tion and the creation of new products, and reasonably well in job creation within innovative enterprises and sustainability measures among firms. Its relative weaknesses include insufficient R&D expenditure in the public sector, limited venture capital, and a lack of direct government support for innovation that affect low levels of patenting and other intellectual property measures, and challenges in producing new doctorate graduates and fostering lifelong learning. The EIS suggests that tailored policy interventions are necessary to boost innovation capacity in the region, focusing on enhancing collaborations and digital skills.

The Follow-up Support Programme for development of DIHs<sup>1</sup> in the WB that was extremely successful. It focused on assisting DIHs collaborative efforts towards preparation of joint project proposals for funding and capacity-building schemes offered by the EU. Apart from regional networking and trainings offered to DIHs, the Programme enabled the participating DIHs to attract more than €9 million in 2024 and Q1 2025 through Horizon Europe and Digital Europe (DEP) programmes, including both EU and local funds. As part of the Follow-up Support Programme, the RCC organised a regional workshop in Rijeka in collaboration with the University of Rijeka which coordinates

<sup>1</sup> RCC has facilitated two support programmes for DIHs in 2023 and 2024, respectively.



Sinisa Marcic, RCC's Senior Expert on Human Capital Development at the opening of third annual Regional Butterfly Innovation Forum in Podgorica on 26 November 2024 (Photo: RCC/Danilo Papic)

the European DIH Adriatic Croatia (EDIH Adria) implemented within the DEP framework. The workshop assisted less experienced DIHs from the WB in understanding how to strategically position themselves within the digital and innovation ecosystem and absorb opportunities offered through the DEP.

The RCC brokered the endorsement of the *Declaration on Research and Innovation Infrastructure Access and Collaboration at the 10<sup>th</sup> Berlin Process Summit*. The Declaration sets the stage for researchers to participate in joint projects, share expertise, and utilise advanced

research infrastructures, thus enhancing regional scientific cooperation and driving innovation.

The RCC successfully organised the third regional **Butterfly Innovation Forum (Forum)** in Podgorica and **Butterfly Innovation Award (BIA) competition**. The Forum is a premier regional event focused on fostering collaboration and innovation. It gathered leading experts, policymakers, innovators, and business leaders to explore the latest trends in artificial intelligence, green growth, and innovation-driven competitiveness. Featuring a dynamic agenda with flash



Winners of 2024 Regional Butterfly Innovation Award with RCC's Head of Office of the Secretary General Elda Kalaja and Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro for Foreign and European Affairs, Filip Ivanovic at an award ceremony on 26 November 2024 in Podgorica (Photo: RCC/Danilo Papic)



talks, panel discussions, and networking opportunities, the event highlighted the region's potential to drive transformative change through innovation and collective action. The BIA seeks to inspire the region's creative minds and organisations to advance their innovative, scalable, and market-based solutions. This award supports the region's economic development by embracing both green and digital transformations, and by promoting a culture of innovation

through the recognition of successful achievements. Teams from all WB6 economies were awarded for their promising solutions across six categories: green innovation, industry, STEM, women, university, and youth. Thus far, the BIA has provided support to 18 teams, offering financial awards and increasing their visibility through our social media platforms and traditional media outlets.

## A2.2. Women's Economic Empowerment and Regional Network of Women in STEM

On Women Economic Empowerment, RCC initiated work towards a Gender-responsive Green Finance, a framework that aims to contribute further to the CRM Action Plan 2025 – 2028 and address issues of access to finance for women-led enterprises in a green transition. Following a meeting of the WGID, jointly with the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship (RNWE), in November 2024, the framework was agreed and the report **Gender-responsive Green Finance Roadmap for the Western Balkans Six**, was

published in February 2025. Further discussions on this Roadmap continued in the joint meeting of the WGID and the Working Group on Financial Markets (WGFM) in April 2025, in Pristina, aiming to turn this roadmap into a joint "Call for Action" for various regional and international partners by focusing on key elements such as women entrepreneurs in a green transition, green access to finance and financial literacy.

As an annual flagship promotional event of the Regional Network for Women in Entrepreneurship, RCC organized the **fourth** edition of the **Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year**, in March 2025, in Pristina. Following the **call for nominations** launched in January 2025, which resulted in over 200 nominations, six women entrepreneurs were recognized across the categories of: green, tourism, artistic, ICT, social star and young woman entrepreneurs.

In order to support good practices in the region and connect the region's women entrepreneurs as much as possible, RCC continued to enhance partnerships with various organisations and institutions. On 1 April 2025, RCC joined the Regional Policy Dialogue on Good Governance and Women's Leadership in Southeast Europe, organized by the Regional Anti-corruption Initiative (RAI), in Sarajevo, bringing together stakeholders focusing on the role of women leaders in promoting good governance, challenges and opportunities for women in decision making and strengthening networks.



### Gender-Responsive Green Finance Roadmap for the Western Balkans Six





Western Balkans Women Entrepreneurs of the Year 2024 with RCC Secretary General Amer Kapetanovic (on the right), Atifete Jahjaga, Founder and Chairwoman of the Jahjaga Foundation and Former President (in the middle) and Aivo Orav, Head of the EU Office and European Union Special Representative, at the ceremony held on 13 March 2025 in Pristina (Photo: RCC/Valdrin Xhemaj)

### A2.3. Free Movement of People

Notable progress was recorded at the outcome level in advancing the EU's four freedoms within the WB6. A milestone was achieved in the area of "Free Movement of People" through the signing of the Agreement on Admission to Higher Education and Access to Study in the Western Balkans at the Berlin Process Summit on 14 October 2024.

Meanwhile, the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications has been ratified by all Parties and entered into force as stipulated in Article 14. Similarly, by 27 January 2025, all WB6 economies completed the ratification and entry into force of both the Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists, and Architects, and the Agreement for Nurses, Midwives, Veterinary Surgeons, and Pharmacists.

Key outputs to date include also the initiation of tailored Action Plans for Quality Assurance Agencies; ongoing work toward a Joint Leaders' Statement recognizing the regional relevance of STEM education at all levels, as well as the design of technical assistance frameworks in collaboration with strategic partners.

Over the period June 2024 to June 2025, the RCC continues to advance its strategic mandate by fostering regional cooperation, addressing structural barriers to mobility, and supporting reforms aligned with the EU integration pathways. The impact of these efforts is reflected in the strengthening of regional frameworks for mutual recognition of higher education and professional qualifications, the promotion of labour market resilience through social security portability, and the establishment of a foundation for regional cooperation in STEM education. The results achieved contribute directly to the implementation of the CRM 2.0 and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, enhancing the region's socio-economic integration and convergence with EU standards.

Fostering Regional Mobility and Recognition of Qualifications: RCC remains a steadfast facilitator in supporting the ratification and implementation of key regional agreements. Monitoring and support for the ratification of the Admission to Higher Education and Access to Study Agreement continues, despite the persistent impasse. RCC shall maintain its political and technical engagement to unlock the implementation



of the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, with particular focus on resolving bilateral issues impeding progress. As of April 2025, a high-level consultant has been engaged to explore innovative and sound recommendations to address the stalemate. The ongoing deadlock has also hindered efforts to populate the Regional Recognition Database (RRD), a key operational tool for the Agreement's implementation. To date, only Bosnia and Herzegovina and, partially, Montenegro have started populating the RRD, while Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have functioning online systems that require further integration. Meanwhile, RCC continues to maintain the RRD through dedicated consultancy support and is actively appealing to all Parties to engage constructively.

In a significant institutional development, the first meeting of the Joint Working Group on Recognition of Professional Qualifications (JWGRPQ) was jointly facilitated by RCC and CEFTA in Podgorica on 4 March 2025. Representatives from all WB6 economies, along with Moldova as an observer, reaffirmed their commitment to the full implementation of the Agreements on Recognition of Professional Qualifications (ARPQ). The meeting underscored the importance of advancing compliance with key obligations and embedding recognition frameworks within the broader CRM 2.0 and Growth Plan agendas. Operational support shall continue as the activities of the JWGRPQ formally commence under the initial chairmanship of Montenegro. During the meeting, the Group reviewed the current state of ARPQ implementation. It welcomed the continued coordination between RCC and CEFTA and reiterated the Parties' commitment to advancing mobility agreements. The Group emphasized the need to address outstanding obligations, particularly regarding notifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists, and Architects, and called for timely reporting on alignment with the EU acquis. It also acknowledged the importance of establishing a general system for recognition as a complement to automatic recognition. Bosnia and Herzegovina was specifically requested to provide feedback on the draft CEFTA Joint Committee Decision, presented

during the most recent Subcommittee on Trade in Services.

**Advancing Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Western Balkans:** RCC has overseen the submission of Action Plans from all six Western Balkan Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs), with internal consultations currently underway across the region to finalize priorities for the next phase of support. As of April 25, 2025, RCC—together with the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE), the Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) — has concluded a thematic workshop focused on strategic planning, expert training, and alignment with ESG standards.

Recognizing both the varying levels of progress across economies and the current fragility of the Accreditation Agency in North Macedonia, RCC places particular emphasis on supporting its independence and functionality. Institutional autonomy is seen as critical to the credibility of the region's quality assurance frameworks. To this end, tailored technical assistance for North Macedonia has been approved, with political engagement foreseen if necessary.

A mid-term review is scheduled for late 2025 to assess progress and recalibrate support as needed, ensuring that quality assurance reform remains firmly aligned with the region's EU integration aspirations.

**Labor Market Reforms for Economic Opportunities:** RCC is seeking partnerships to deliver on Labor Market Reforms embedded in the new CRM 2.0 Action Plan (AP). Discussions with the World Bank focused on supporting social security portability, pension system sustainability, and labor retention through technical assistance. Engagement with GIZ centered on linking social inclusion, local governance, and economic activation, particularly for vulnerable groups. Next steps include formalizing cooperation and aligning activities with EU social rights frameworks.

**STEM Education at Regional Level:** Following consultations with the EU STEM Coalition and a needs analysis, RCC is working to advance regional cooperation on STEM education under CRM 2.0 AP, consulting all

stakeholders and fully aware of the scale and complexity of this bottom-up exercise. Priorities identified include aligning education with labor market needs, promoting teacher exchanges, and increasing awareness of international funding opportunities. Work on the zero draft of a Joint statement by the Leaders of the WB6 acknowledging the benefits and needs of STEM education at a regional level, and

establishment of a Regional STEM Education Policy Network commenced and will soon be circulated for further consultations at both regional and EU levels. Consulted professionals are enthusiastic about the initiative but recommend setting a more realistic timeline, given the complexity and ambition of the process.

### 43. Digital Integration and Implementation of the Digital Agenda for Western Balkans

With the support of the European Commission (EC), the RCC continued maintaining the regional dialogue on cybersecurity through the organisation of the **High-Level Cybersecurity Conference: Cybersecurity challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans**, held in Tirana on 9 July 2024. The conference gathered more than 120 high-level participants, coming from Western Balkan ministries and agencies responsible for cybersecurity, EC, donors, international organisations, the private sector, etc., who

exchanged views on the outstanding challenges in the field of cybersecurity, including regulations and protocols, cyber threats, regional platforms, critical infrastructure, emerging technologies, etc.

In April 2025, the RCC and the EC, with the support of the Western Balkan Cyber Capacity Center (WB3C), initiated the preparations for the organisation of the next High-level Cybersecurity Conference, which will be held on 2 July 2025 in Podgorica.





Pranvera Kastrati, RCC's Acting Head of Programme Department speaking at the event dubbed Skills4Jobs: Making the Western Balkans' Businesses More Resilient, on 26 November in Podgorica  
(Photo: RCC/Danilo Papic)

In addition, from September 2024, the RCC, IISG, and EC actively worked on the development of the **database for the identification of cybersecurity needs** in the WB6. The beta version of the database is developed and is part of the existing IISG database. The database will improve regional dialogue on cybersecurity by exchanging needs at the economy and regional level through the database, and will simplify the coordination with donors for cybersecurity projects in the WB. The official launch of the database is planned during the donor coordination meeting, which will be organised back-to-back with the High-level Cybersecurity Conference on 3 July 2025.

The RCC, in cooperation with the SIGMA/OECD Programme, Eastern Partnership Regional Fund for Public Administration Reforms (led by GIZ), and the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA), organised the 2nd high-level exchange and learning week on data protection in Brussels in the period from 9 until 13 September 2024. In collaboration with the European Commission, the European Data Protection Board (EDPB) and the European Data Protection Supervisor, it was jointly developed a WB6 and Eastern Partnership Region's Data Protection Academy as part of the week. The event provided a plat-

form for data protection authorities outside the EU to exchange views, best practices, and lessons learned with their EU counterparts.

On 3 October 2024, the RCC organised the fifth edition of the flagship initiative **"Balkathon - When you turn your idea into a masterpiece"** competition in Tirana. The competition invited teams composed of people up to 35 years of age coming from WB6. Almost 80 applications were received in the areas of technology of services, green and energy, transport, tourism, agriculture, and others. At the final event, the 6 winners of the competition were announced, including 3 special recognition awards for high school teams. Since the beginning, 31 solutions from the WB6 have been awarded.

Building on the first WB DESI 2022 Report developed under the RCC umbrella, the RCC started the process of preparing the WB DESI 2024 Report in October 2024. The Report will monitor digital developments in the WB region, and will be in line with the WU norms and practices. The first results of the Report were presented on the technical level to the WB6 on 7 May 2025, and the process of validation of data is planned to be finalised by June 2025. The Final Report is expected to be completed in July 2025.





High-level panel: Strategic discussion on cybersecurity priorities in the Western Balkans region for the next four years at the second Western Balkan High-Level Cybersecurity Conference held in Tirana on 9 July 2024  
(Photo: Armand Habazaj)

The official preparations for the new cycle of the Western Balkan Digital Summit (WBDS) started with the first WBDS Steering Committee meeting, held in March 2025, with the Host of the same capital that started the first cycle, Skopje. The second WBDS Steering Committee meeting was held in May 2025, where the first draft Agenda of the WBDS was presented.

Between June 2024 and June 2025, the RCC organized regular discussions with WB6 and EU telecommunications operators that are signatories of the EU/WB Roaming Declaration. These discussions addressed the implementation of the Declaration, which commenced on 1 October 2023, and the development of a unified approach for assessing its impact. The meetings in July and September 2024 were dedicated to shaping the methodology and finalizing the assessment questionnaire. Based on the data provided by the signatories, the draft WB6/EU Roaming report 2024 was prepared and discussed at the meeting held in Zagreb in December 2024. The report was subsequently approved by the operators and published in April 2025. The assessment indicates that data roaming prices for WB6 users in the EU and vice versa have decreased, in some cases by more than 99%. The report further shows a notable increase in the number of roaming users and roaming traffic: the number of WB6 users roaming in the EU rose by 22%

in Q4 2023 compared to Q4 2022, while the number of EU users roaming in the WB6 increased by 28% over the same period. Additionally, total data traffic made by WB6 users in the EU grew by 89%, and data traffic by EU users in the WB6 increased by 70% in the same quarters. During this time, in line with the CRM 2.0 activities, efforts were made to encourage other operators to join the Declaration.

Regular dialogue with the WB6 institutions responsible for telecommunications has been maintained with two meetings held in June and December 2024. The meeting in Sarajevo in June aimed to discuss the activities and objectives for the upcoming four years in the area of telecommunications as part of CRM 2.0 as well as to kick start the preparations of the third edition of the WB6 Roaming Report. As a follow up, next meeting of the WB6 Working Groups on Roaming Policy, Broadband and 5G held in Zagreb in December 2024 was focused on discussing the plans for 2025 in line with the newly adopted CRM 2.0, the draft third edition of the **Western Balkans Six Roaming Report**, and regional needs for TAIEX support. Based on the discussions held during the meeting, a regional TAIEX workshop on the Gigabit Infrastructure Act, integrated into all Reform Agendas under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, is to be held in June 2025.



RCC's Expert on Digital Connectivity Tanja Maras and Senior Advisor of the Liaison Office Brussels Elena Grabul at the opening of the Data Protection Academy for Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership Region, in Brussels on 10 September 2024 (Photo: RCC/Laure Geerts)

To support dialogue between the public and private sectors on improving the business environment in the telecommunications sector across the WB6, the Advisory and Coordination Group (ACG) was established in 2023. During the reporting period, an ACG meeting was held in December 2024, bringing together around 50 participants to discuss key challenges facing the regional telecom sector. As previously identified within the ACG framework, permit granting procedures remain a significant obstacle in the WB6. To address this issue, the RCC has developed a questionnaire targeting WB6 institutions and operators to assess these procedures in greater depth. The findings will result in tailored recommendations for each economy and, where appropriate, for the region as a whole, drawing on best practices from EU Member States.

As part of the Butterfly Innovation Forum held in the end of November 2024, the RCC in cooperation with UNDP hosted the **Skills4Jobs: Making the Western Balkans' Businesses More Resilient** side event, focusing on digital skills and workforce development. Skills4Jobs aimed to address the urgent need for upskilling to bridge the gap between the demands of WB6 businesses and the current workforce skill set, supporting the region's green and digital transitions. The event also introduced the Digital Pulse tool, an

online self-assessment platform for measuring business digital maturity. Originally developed by UNDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it has been expanded to the regional level in collaboration with RCC. The event gathered leading experts, policymakers, and business leaders to discuss solutions for strengthening the region's workforce.

The WB6 economies continued to advance the implementation of eIDAS and eIDAS 2 at the economy level, as outlined in their respective reform agendas. In parallel, the RCC is closely monitoring the progress of these reforms and facilitating regional interoperability, with a particular focus on the recognition and cross-border/boundary acceptance of electronic identification schemes across the region.

In the period from December 2024 to May 2025, the RCC held a series of coordination meetings with the EU4Digital project implemented by GIZ, aimed at aligning activities, identifying synergies, and maximizing regional impact in the area of digital identity and trust services. This collaboration resulted in the joint organization of a regional workshop on eIDAS and Interoperability, held in May 2025. The event provided an important platform for exchanging experiences and technical insights related to Digital Identity Wallet initiatives in the Western Balkans, including



a discussion on the eIDAS 2.0 Assessment Scheme, country interviews and reports, and lessons learned from EU Large Scale Pilots.

The workshop served to explore models for developing interoperable, cross-border/boundary prototypes of Digital Identity Wallets.

Back-to-back with the workshop, the in-person meeting of the regional Working group on e-services, including the Digital wallet, was held. During the meeting, the members reviewed the status of regional actions and outlined plan for WG for 2025 under the

CRM 2025–2028 Action Plan, along with indicative priorities for 2026 and 2027.

Among the key outcomes of the meeting was the agreement to establish Platform for supporting high level dialogue on regional Digital Identity Wallet, with the RCC assuming the role of coordinator and facilitator. This Platform will serve as a central mechanism to support political alignment, technical coordination, and regional cooperation on the implementation of interoperable Digital Identity Wallets, in line with EU standards and practices.



Balkathon, October 2024

## 44. Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Resilience

During the reporting period, the RCC actively contributed to the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan (2021–2030). Implementation efforts were supported through regular meetings of the Regional Working Group on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (RWG GAWB), RCC led monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and the organization of the First GAWB Ministerial Meeting which provided high-level political guidance. Additionally, the RCC provided targeted support and expert assistance to steer regional processes and develop regional documents while ensuring extensive coordination on GAWB-related matters. The RWG GAWB, comprised of senior civil servants from WB6 climate and environment ministries, steers technical coordination, monitors the implementation of Sofia Declaration commitments, and prepares inputs for annual Ministerial meetings.

The RCC prepared **GARI 2023 – Report on the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan**, assessing progress across 58 actions, under seven thematic Roadmaps: Climate Action, Energy, Sustainable Transport, Circular Economy, Depollution, Sustainable Agriculture, and Protection of Nature and Biodiversity. The report highlighted regional achievements, challenges, and priority actions. GARI 2023 shows that most planned actions are underway, reflecting momentum of the WB6 in aligning with the GAWB objectives. However, while legislative activities are progressing, actual on-the-ground accomplishments lag behind, requiring intensified efforts and innovative policy approaches to close the gap. Moreover, coordination across sectors remains inadequate and needs strengthening through well-targeted thematic workshops, cross-sectoral publications, and structural improvements to the GAWB framework. Implementation of GAWB actions remains particularly challenging in sectors such as energy, transport, Nature-based Solutions (NbS), land use, land-use change and forestry



(LULUCF), circular economy, and climate adaptation. Monitoring is conducted annually through pre-defined qualitative and quantitative indicators, in coordination with RWG GAWB/ WB6 authorities, regional partners, the European Commission, and other key stakeholders.

One of the RCC's key milestones in 2024 was the organisation of the first **Ministerial Meeting on the GAWB**, held on 8 October in Hamburg as part of the 2024 Berlin Process. The event was convened in partnership with the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, with the support of the European Commission and in close coordination with WB6/RWG GAWB members. This meeting marked a significant step forward in strengthening regional environmental cooperation and political ownership of the Green Agenda. It resulted in the endorsement of the **Hamburg Declaration**.



Western Balkans Six Meeting on the Green Agenda, on 8 October 2024 in Hamburg, Germany  
(Photo: RCC/Elmas Libohova)

This Declaration reaffirms the WB6's commitment to implement the Green Agenda and its 2021-2030 Action Plan, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050. It proposes the establishment of an annual Ministerial Meeting on the GAWB to ensure political momentum and coherence, and highlights initiatives like the finalisation of the Regional Action Plan on Prevention of Plastic Pollution, including Marine Litter, and the WB6 Climate Adaptation Roadmap. It also emphasizes just transition governance, phasing out coal, establishing Monitoring, Reporting, Verification and Accreditation (MRVA) for emissions monitoring and welcomed alignment with the EU acquis, particularly on environmental standards. It underscores the role of Nature-based Solutions and the commitment to develop the Western Balkans 2030 Biodiversity Strategy.

In addition, WB6 through Declaration outlined key priorities for 2025, including revision of the GAWB Action Plan in collaboration with RCC and regional partners through the RWG GAWB.

The aim of the Revision is to:

- ✦ Enhance the Action Plan's effectiveness, ensuring that measures lead to tangible, positive changes in the region.

- ✦ Address ambiguities in the original plan, providing clearer guidance for implementation.
- ✦ Align with evolving EU policies and new developments under the European Green Deal.

The overall process is led and coordinated by the RCC, in close collaboration with WB6 line ministries through the RWG GAWB, and under the political guidance of the PM Sherpas. It also involves the European Commission and key regional partners—including the Energy Community Secretariat, Transport Community Permanent Secretariat, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Standing Working Group on Rural Development. In addition, the process actively engages the private sector, local self-governments, international organisations, donors, civil society, and youth representatives to ensure broad inclusiveness and ownership. RCC launched a public call for CSO engagement, while regional partners lead the revision of respective pillars. The revised Action Plan is expected to be endorsed at the Second GAWB Ministerial Meeting in September 2025.

The RCC has also prioritized the development of the **WB6 Climate Adaptation Roadmap**, aligning regional objectives with EU policies such as the EU Adaptation Strategy and overall GAWB AP targets. A first draft of the Roadmap was prepared following a series



of online consultations with WB6 economies in December 2024. The findings confirm the region's growing vulnerability to climate change, posing serious risks to both economic stability and social well-being. Expected to be endorsed at the Second GAWB Ministerial Meeting in 2025, the Roadmap will serve as a strategic instrument to:

1. underscore the urgency of climate adaptation and reaffirm the region's commitment to action, and
2. lay the foundation for a long-term vision of climate resilience.

It includes concrete recommendations for the development of a Regional Adaptation Strategy by 2026, ensuring alignment with the objectives of the GAWB Action Plan.

In parallel, RCC is collaborating with the IUCN to establish a regional network of protected areas and conservation measures under the **Western Balkans Biodiversity Strategic Plan (WBBSP) 2030**. This plan, a key component of the Protection of Nature and Biodiversity pillar of the GAWB Action Plan, is designed to combat biodiversity loss and enhance ecosystem resilience. Aligned with international and EU biodiversity frameworks, including the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the WBBSP will integrate NbS in line with the commitments outlined in the Hamburg Declaration.

Under the depollution pillar, RCC has conducted a legal and institutional analysis assessing the transposition and implementation of EU water legislation in the WB6. The report evaluates progress on key directives, including: The Water Framework Directive, The Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, The Drinking Water Directive and The Nitrates Directive

The RCC has supported GIZ in the development of two policy briefs, currently under validation by RWG GAWB/WB6: *Mitigating Negative Social and Labour Market Impacts of the Energy Transition in the WB6* and *Addressing Vulnerable Groups in the Energy Transition, with a Focus on Coal Sector Workers and Women*. Both

documents align with GAWB objectives and provide targeted recommendations.

The first brief examines labour market policies and the socio-economic impacts of the energy transition, offering policy solutions for social protection and improved energy market functioning. The second focuses on the specific needs of vulnerable groups, proposing tailored measures for up-skilling, re-skilling, and the development of qualification standards across the WB6.

In line with the Hamburg Declaration's emphasis on circular economy approaches and building on the 2023 Tirana Berlin Process Summit endorsement of the Regional Joint Statement on Plastic Pollution Prevention, the RCC finalised the **Regional Action Plan on Plastic Pollution Prevention, including Marine Litter** at the technical level in September 2024. Political endorsement at the upcoming GAWB Ministerial Meeting is now required.

To this end, the RCC coordinated closely with RWG GAWB, the WB Green and Circular Economy Stakeholders Platform, and key partners including the EC, UNEP, JRC, OECD, GIZ, EU4Green, and civil society to finalize the Action Plan. The plan aligns with the Circular Economy Operational Plan and transforms political commitments into concrete measures to protect biodiversity and aquatic ecosystems—particularly the Adriatic Sea. It sets out six goals, 26 measures, and 100 activities to safeguard marine and riverine environments across the region.

The RCC conducted a donor mapping exercise, identifying 88 regional projects relevant to GAWB, funded by approximately 32 major donors, including multilateral institutions, financial bodies, and development agencies. The analysis revealed a significant financing gap and uneven distribution of funds across WB6 economies, underscoring the need to mobilise additional public and private investments and improve coordination. To address these gaps, the RCC plans to convene a GAWB Donor Coordination Meeting by the end of 2025, as foreseen in the Action Plan 2021–2030. The report recommends establishing a centralized donor coordination platform, improving

data collection, and enhancing alignment of donor support with WB6 priorities as key actions to accelerate the green transition.

Complementing these efforts, in January 2025 the RCC began developing the GAWB Observatory Platform to track implementation of the Sofia Declaration. The platform will offer a user-friendly, web-based tool with disaggregated indicators by policy area and economy, timelines, and data visualizations to support transparency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making for policymakers, regional partners, donors, and the public.

Demonstrating its commitment to intergovernmental coordination, the RCC convened two in-person RWG GAWB meetings and one Biodiversity Task Force (BDTF) meeting during the reporting period, engaging international organisations such as UNECE, UNEP, UNDP, UNICEF, OECD, OSCE, GWP, GIZ, EU4Green, SWEPA, the European Commission, and regional partners to foster inclusivity and collaboration.

The Second RWG GAWB Meeting, held in May 2024 in Podgorica, focused on key priorities, including the WB6 Climate Adaptation Roadmap, the draft Regional Action Plan on Plastic Pollution Prevention,

and preparations for the 2023 GARI. In parallel, the WB Green and Circular Economy Stakeholders Platform met on 16 May to explore collaboration with EU networks, its integration into the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform to enhance regional and EU-level cooperation, promote decarbonisation, and propose initiatives such as a regional digital platform, an RCC-led awareness campaign, and a waste materials database.

Ahead of the first GAWB Ministerial, the third RWG GAWB Meeting on 20 September 2024 in Belgrade finalised discussions on Ministerial deliverables. On 19 September, the 12th BDTF meeting reviewed governance documents and advanced the development of the WBBSP 2030.

By the end of 2025, RCC priorities include finalizing the 2024 GAWB Implementation Report, completing the first revision of the GAWB Action Plan 2021–2030, organizing the second GAWB Ministerial Meeting to endorse a series of deliverables including the revised GAWB Action Plan, WB6 Climate Adaptation Roadmap and Regional Action Plan on Prevention of Plastic Pollution, Including Marine Litter; finalization of WBBSP and launching of GAWB Observatory Platform.



## 45. Projects

### 45.1. Western Balkans Youth Lab Project (WBYL)

During the reporting period, WBYL2 undertook a series of impactful activities aimed at promoting youth involvement and policy-making in the Western Balkans. Following the success of previous Labs on Youth Unemployment and Mental Health, Green Agenda was selected as a priority issue, reflecting the aspirations of young people in the region to create policies that can bring about meaningful change. The **Youth Policy Lab Kick-Off Conference** in June 2024 brought together youth and policymakers to co-create regional recommendations on Green Agenda ad-

vocacy, preventing plastic pollution, and advancing the circular economy. These recommendations serve as the foundation for working groups in each economy of the Western Balkans, who will collaborate over the course of a year to develop solutions for these critical issues. Prior to the launch of the Youth Policy Lab on the Green Agenda, a training session was held to engage participants using interactive methods that challenged their knowledge and fostered critical thinking on youth involvement in environmental policies.



The RCC's WBYL hosted a Regional Fireside Talks with High-Level Officials on 10 April 2025 in Tivat, on margins of the ESG Adria Summit, providing over 30 young people from across the Western Balkans with the opportunity to directly engage with decision-makers in an open and youth-friendly dialogue  
(Photo: RCC/Danilo Papic)

Working groups in the various economies engaged in specific activities and presented their progress at the **Mid-Term Conference on Green Agenda** in Tivat in April 2025. Building on the momentum from the Kick-off Conference, each Working Group from the region showcased the progress they had made. Across all WB6, the initiatives ranged from the development of eco-etiquette guides and green dictionaries for schools, to the introduction of "green seats" in local youth councils, as well as comprehensive analyses

of youth engagement in environmental policymaking. These initiatives, co-created with economy-level institutions, are designed to integrate youth participation into local and economy-level green strategies, ensuring a lasting impact on environmental policies.

The **Regional Conference on Youth Cultural Cooperation**, held in November 2024, provided a platform for dialogue and collaboration among young artists and cultural stakeholders. The event highlighted the



RCC's WB Youth Lab Team Leader Ognjen Markovic while opening Kick-Off Conference on Youth Policy Lab on Green Agenda in Sarajevo on 20 June 2024 (Photo: RCC/Jasmin Sakovic)



RCC's WBYL Project, in cooperation with the Hellenic Youth Council and the European Youth Forum, organised the study visit to Athens from 12 to 16 May 2025, offering representatives of Youth Councils from the Western Balkans valuable insight into EU practices and youth policy frameworks (Photo: Giorgos Petrou)

transformative role of youth artistic expression in inspiring communities and driving positive change in the region. Emerging young artists were given the opportunity to showcase their work in a side event exhibition.

Additionally, WBYL2 supported the participation of young representatives from the Western Balkans at the high level conferences, namely at the *Global Gateway High-Level Youth Event* in Brussels in Octo-

ber 2024 and *ESG Adria Summit* in Tivat in April 2025. These events gathered key public figures from political, economic, and social spheres, as well as EU and civil society representatives. The youth from the region had the opportunity to discuss the EU and region challenges with the high official and contribute to shaping the future of the Youth Action Plan and regions development. Their engagement is ensuring the inclusion of youth perspectives in global policy discussions.





Ognjen Markovic, RCC's WB Youth Lab 2 Team Leader at the opening of Regional Conference on Youth Cultural Cooperation, in Belgrade on 13 November 2024 (Photo: RCC/Nemanja Brankovic)

WBYL2 also provided significant capacity-building support to the all economy Youth Councils in the WB, enhancing their internal structures and operational efficiency. The Youth Congress of Albania received assistance in developing a Strategic Plan for Sustainable Organizational Growth, while the Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was supported in crafting their own strategic plan and establishing a Memorandum of Cooperation with other youth councils in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Other councils in the region also benefited from strategic

planning, communication, and fundraising support, strengthening their ability to advocate for youth policies effectively.

Furthermore, WBYL2 facilitated two Regional Fire-side Talks, bringing together youth representatives from the Western Balkans to engage in open discussions on key issues affecting the region. The **"10th Edition – Looking Forward: Exploring New Ways to Strengthen Regional Cooperation,"** held on 16 September 2024 in Tirana, provided an opportunity



Regional Conference on Youth Cultural Cooperation dubbed Stirring the Cultural Scene: Spotlight on Youth Talents, organized RCC's EU funded Western Balkans Youth Lab 2 took place on 13 November 2024 in Europe House Belgrade (Photo: RCC/Nemanja Brankovic)

for youth to engage with decision-makers and share insights on the findings of the Balkan Barometer 2024. Another Fireside Talk, held on 10 April 2025, featured over 30 young participants who engaged in discussions with high-level officials, including Amer Kapetanović, RCC Secretary General, Johann Sattler, EU Ambassador to Montenegro, and Maida Gorčević, Minister of European Affairs of Montenegro. These events fostered dialogue on environmental sustainability, youth inclusion in governance, and the future of EU integration, empowering young people to influence regional decision-making and contribute to the shaping of the region's future.

WBYL2 also successfully implemented the Mini-Mobility Scheme, a key initiative in collaboration with the European Youth Forum. The activity provided 25 staff members from Youth Councils in the region a unique opportunity to engage in a structured five-day mobility program, hosted by a Hellenic Youth Council in Athens. The short-term mobility program

allowed young leaders from the region to gain valuable insights and hands-on experience by visiting youth councils and institutions from EU, exchanging best practices, and engaging in in-house knowledge-sharing activities. Coordinated with the hosting Youth Council, the program not only strengthened EU integration efforts but also empowered participants to champion progressive policies and advocate for meaningful youth involvement in regional decision-making processes. This exchange has significantly contributed to building bridges between the WB6 and EU Member States, fostering deeper collaboration and strengthening the capacity of youth organizations in the region.

Through these initiatives, WBYL2 has significantly advanced youth engagement in the policy-making process, bridging the gap between youth, government, and international organizations, and fostering constructive dialogue and collaboration to address the unique challenges facing young people in the WB.

## 45.2. Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)<sup>2</sup>

The reporting period was marked by substantive progress in the implementation of the IISG framework, reinforcing the EU–Western Balkans strategic partnership on internal security. The IISG Secretariat, in close coordination with regional counterparts, finalised the draft of the second iteration of the Regional Needs Mapping Report across the three established pillars: Counter-Terrorism and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (WBCTi), Countering Serious and Organised Crime (WBCSCi), and Border Security (WBBSi). This comprehensive exercise reflects the evolving security priorities of the Western Balkans and provides an updated baseline for strategic planning and donor coordination.

In parallel, the European Commission proposed for the first time, a role for the IISG Secretariat in supporting the monitoring of the forthcoming Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism in Western Balkans (JAP). This

will further enhance and consolidate the IISG's role on WBCTi pillar.

Notably, the operationalisation of the Cybersecurity Pillar was completed during the reporting period. The IISG Secretariat launched a fully functional and upgraded version of the Cybersecurity Database, featuring improved user interface and advanced functionalities to facilitate data input, retrieval, and analysis. The platform supports strategic planning in nine key thematic areas and strengthens the region's capacity to respond to cyber threats.

In addition, RCC and EC have advanced preparations for the establishment of a dedicated regional Security Hub within RCC. The IISG is foreseen to be integrated as a core component of this structure, which aims to ensure stronger institutional coordination and sustainability of regional security cooperation frameworks.

<sup>2</sup> This project is funded by the European Union, grant number IPA 2020/414–918



The IISG Secretariat key achievements included:

### 1. Second Biennial Needs Mapping Report (WBCTi, WBCSCi, WBBSi):

The second edition of the Biennial Needs Mapping Report was prepared with contributions from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo<sup>3</sup>, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Serbia is expected to provide updated data following the finalisation of its new economy-level strategies and action plans. The draft regional and local needs maps across the three pillars have been developed and are currently under consolidation with the regional partners. Notably, the WBCTi pillar alone identified over 380 individual needs, reflecting a continued high level of partner engagement. IISG will organized a series of intensive Regional Working Group meetings across all three pillars (May–June 2025) to validate the needs.

### 2. Third Annual Response Mapping Report (WBCTi, WBCSCi, WBBSi)

The third Annual Response Mapping Report is under preparation, aiming to assess progress made in addressing identified security needs. Preliminary findings indicate tangible progress across all three pillars, particularly in legislative and institutional alignment with the EU acquis, and in enhanced cooperation with EU agencies such as Europol. For the first time, individual response mapping reports are being prepared for each partner, enabling more tailored programming and reducing the risk of overlap in international assistance.

### 3. Analytical Report on the IISG Database

The IISG Database has been updated to reflect 65 ongoing or completed projects. Each project was analysed and categorised according to partner-specific needs to improve visibility on alignment between needs and ongoing interventions. Trainings on database functionalities were delivered to DG NEAR, DG HOME, European Union Delegations (EUDs), Austria and GIZ. Future sessions are planned for additional IISG partners (France, Italy, Slovenia, UK, UNODC,

and discussions are ongoing on extending limited access to non-IISG members. Further analytical work will assess potential overlaps and gaps in project implementation.

### 4. Cybersecurity Pillar

The Cybersecurity Pillar was formally integrated into the IISG framework, in close cooperation with the European Commission. Developed through extensive bilateral and regional consultations, the Cybersecurity Database is fully operational and structured around nine key areas (e.g. governance, institutional frameworks, risk management, CSIRT support) and four types of support (capacity building, technical assistance, events, ad hoc training). Identified needs have been matched to current projects, and user access continues to expand. The database's intuitive interface has significantly improved accessibility and data management. In the Cybersecurity Database, 24 projects have been fully analyzed and matched with 222 identified needs from the WB partners. As part of this process, a mapping support analysis was conducted for each of the Western Balkans Partners. This included a detailed review and matching of expressed cybersecurity needs with corresponding ongoing or completed projects. The results of this analysis, including charts that present each Partner's specific needs alongside the respective ongoing support, are now available in the Cybersecurity Database to facilitate strategic coordination and avoid duplication of efforts.

The IISG Secretariat actively supported the RCC-led Cybersecurity Consultation Meetings across the region, contributing to technical discussions and needs validation. Moreover, a **Regional Meeting was held in Tirana on 2–3 April 2025**, with participation from WB6 authorities, RCC, the European Commission (including DG ENER and DG NEAR), and the IISG Secretariat. The Cybersecurity Database was presented in detail, with its official launch planned during the High-Level Cybersecurity Conference in Tirana on 2–3 July 2025.

<sup>3</sup> \* 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.

## 5. Regional Network of CT-P/CVE Coordinators (RNNC)

In line with the EU decision to entrust the IISG with coordination of the RNNC, the Secretariat organised two periodic meetings in Sarajevo (15 October 2024) and Podgorica (10–11 April 2025). These meetings gathered coordinators, EU representatives, and relevant stakeholders to enhance strategic coordination and share best practices.

At the 17th RNNC meeting, the European Commission initiated discussions on the draft Joint Action Plan (JAP) on CT-P/CVE with the Western Balkans. This strategic framework, for the first time enhances the role of IISG at the regional level, by proposing that IISG Secretariat will support the regular monitoring of the implementation of the JAP. The new JAP is expected to be endorsed in October 2025.

## 45.3. Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP 3)

The third phase of the RCC's Employment and Social Affairs Platform 3 (ESAP 3) project has operationally started in June 2024, after finalising administrative procedures with the European Commission. ESAP 3 is fully funded by the EU, implemented jointly with International Labour Organisation (ILO). It will last until February 2029, with the activities divided into two operational components: Employment Formalisation and Advanced Alignment with the EU Acquis and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

Building on the achievements of the previous two phases, the ESAP 3 strives to improve employment opportunities, working conditions, and social policy

for citizens of the WB6. To this end, the project team marked operationalisation of its 3<sup>rd</sup> phase by field visits and in-person meetings with all partners from the region. The meetings we held with all key partner institutions: Public Employment Services (PES), Labour Inspectorates (LI), Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs, Tax Authorities (TA) and Agencies for European Integration, aimed at informing them about the project goals, soliciting their inputs, and ensuring their continued commitment to joint project activities.

Following the inception phase, ESAP 3 has embarked on the operational activities. Together with the European Commission's Directorate General for



RCC Secretary General Amer Kapetanovic opened High-Level Conference on labour migrations in the Western Balkans takes place in Budva on 15 May 2025 (Photo: RCC/Daniilo Papic)

Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and the project's implementing partner – ILO, **RCC has organised a regional kick-off event for ESAP 3**. The two-day hybrid event titled “Balanced Labour Markets in the Western Balkans: Innovative Solutions for a Sustainable Workforce” was held on 23-24 October in Budva, convened all project's stakeholders, including social partners. The opening remarks at the event were delivered by the EU, RCC and ILO experts addressing key aspects of the ESAP 3 work, reflecting

on the context in which the project operates. Laura Corrado, Head of Unit International Affairs, from the DG EMPL said that the EU enlargement process remained the top priority for the European Commission and that all EU institutions stood ready to support the region in the complex path of the EU accession. She added that the importance of the ESAP 3 project lied in addressing different components of effective labour market and social policies, tackling undeclared work, formalisation, approximation of WB6 to labour



Filip Ivanovic, Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro opening High-Level Conference on labour migrations in the Western Balkans takes place in Budva on 15 May 2025 (Photo: RCC/Danilo Papic)

and social standards, fostering social dialogue, and raising standards in occupational safety and health. The very positive evaluation of the first two phases of the ESAP project demonstrated its added value.

The event was envisaged as a combination of informative and networking but also technical, working sessions dealing with the core project goals. The RCC segment of the project, within the kick-off meeting organised separate regional working sessions dealing with undeclared work and alignment with the EU acquis, Chapters 2 and 19 in particular as well the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The first day of the event was marked by the panel discussion on the employment and social outlook of the WB6, occupational safety and health, and social dialogue. Additionally, the afternoon session formally initiated the mutual cooperation between the WB6 PES and the

EU PES Network. The official part on the second day hosted the first plenary session of the Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work, and the meeting on aligning with EU Acquis Chapters 2 & 19, with productive discussions and next steps agreed.

The reporting period was also marked with operationalisation of mutual cooperation between the WB6 PES and the EU PES Network. Namely, upon official invitation of the EU PES Network, a delegation of WB6 PESs attended the **Stakeholder Conference ‘Rethinking support for those furthest from the labour market’** held in Brussels, Belgium on 5 November 2024. It was the first mutual learning event to which representatives of the WB6 PESs were officially invited by their European peers as a part of the initiative for increased involvement of the WB6 PES in the work of the EU PES Network, supported by the ESAP 3 proj-



ect. WB6 PES representatives actively participated in the four thematic workshops (outreach and support; lifelong career guidance; cooperation with private employment services; and evidencebased services for those furthest from the labour market) and just as many collaborative workshops (strategies to support the (re)integration of older workers; partnerships to support women in vulnerable situations and caregivers, support to persons with disabilities; and sustainable integration of NEETs into the labour market). In addition, ESAP 3 together with the regional PES's and with support of DG EMPL further explores opportunities for more structured cooperation that would go beyond participation at the EU-based events.

Working towards closer cooperation of the WB6 enforcement agencies with the European Labour Authority (ELA), upon ELA's invitation ESAP 3 project supported WB6 partners gathered around the Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work to join a thematic review **workshop: Inter-institutional cooperation to tackle undeclared work within the Member States** that took place in Rome, Italy on 12-13 March 2025. Prior to that, Western Balkans Network met in a plenary meeting when a 3-year work programme was agreed, envisaging continuation of cooperation with ELA, kick-started in Rome. The aim of the ELA-led thematic review workshop was to engage in mutual learning and deepen the understanding of successful inter-institutional cooperation at the economy-level, specifically focusing on inter-institutional cooperation on operations (i.e. inspections, education, awareness raising campaigns and other support measures) and on data collection, sharing and analysis to tackle undeclared work. This provided an opportunity for WB6 enforcement authorities to share insights with their EU colleagues from the European Platform tackling undeclared work as the participants have had a chance to share best practices, operational insights, challenges and innovative approaches.

Additionally, ESAP 3 project has commenced work to produce regional performance reviews regarding the EPSR, first of out of three regular reviews envisaged for this project cycle. There will be six individual-economy and one regional overview, comparative report as well as 2023, 2024 update of the online database **Social Scoreboard of key EPSR indicators**. The presentation of the review findings is planned for the last quarter of 2025, involving all key stakeholders and the EU partners.

In an attempt to advance alignment with the EU Acquis Chapters 2 and 19, ESAP 3 jointly with European Training Foundation (ETF) has designed a regional training event regarding European network of employment services (EURES) and European multilingual classification of Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO) that is to take place in the last week of June 2025. In order to best prepare for the event, RCC ESAP 3 and ETF have organised a webinar involving all potential participants of the June training event. The training itself will involve representatives of ministries in charge of labour, education, PESs, agencies for skills and statistical institutes.

Finally, ESAP 3 project provided support to the **Ministerial Conference Labour Migration: Supporting Economic Growth in the Western Balkans**, jointly organised by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue of Montenegro and the RCC in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), ILO, and the EU Delegation to Montenegro in May 2025. This high-level conference aims to build a shared understanding of the economic potential represented by labour migration, building on robust analyses and the knowledge and experience of regional and international panellists to highlight the importance of inclusive labour migration policies for the short, medium and long-term growth of the WB.



## B. Political Cooperation, Good Governance and Security

### B1. Political Cooperation

Within the political scope of work, the RCC concentrated on its statutory duties. During this period, the RCC supported the **Tirana Chairmanship-in-Office (C-i-O)** in all its initiatives, including the three meetings of the **SEEC Political Directors** in November 2024 and March and May 2025.

In March 2024, in cooperation with Tirana C-i-O and the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA),

RCC organised the **SEEC Junior Diplomats Forum (JDF)**, a flagship activity under SEEC umbrella.

The RCC is committed to supporting Tirana Chairpersonship-in-Office and SEEC Troika in their ongoing and upcoming activities, including the drafting of the Tirana SEEC Declaration, SEEC Summit and to organise the Annual Meeting of RCC in June 2025.

### B2. SEE2030 Strategy

During the reporting period, the RCC, in cooperation with the SEEC participants, finished the preparations of the **Third Annual Interim Implementation Report of the South East Europe 2030 (SEE2030) Strategy**. This Report was approved by the RCC Board, at its meeting held on 12 March 2025. The current report provides an overview and assesses the state-of-play of regional efforts towards meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its findings are meant to help the SEE region calibrate its efforts to achieve sustainable economic growth, reduce poverty and inequality, improve social inclusion, empower women, decelerate depopulation, enhance the overall quality of life for citizens, and accelerate the green and digital transition while strengthening competitiveness and private sector development.

Activities related to the biennial update of the SEE2030 Strategy took place throughout this period. The SEE 2030 Monitoring Committee, at its sixth meeting held in Belgrade on 5 December 2024, confirmed its intention to see an updated Strategy which aims to reach more tangible and visible outputs. The

delegations also emphasised the need to strengthen connectivity and complementarities between the SEE2030 Strategy, EU policies and strategies on SDGs, and the global agendas.

Under the SEE 2030 Dialogue Mechanism activities, a meeting with the representatives of insurance sector regulators and sectoral representatives was held in Istanbul on 3 December 2024. The meeting focused on disaster insurance schemes and risk sharing with its main objective to discuss the possibilities and willingness of extending the regional cooperation to risk sharing and exchanging good practices in disaster insurance schemes in the context of SEE 2030 Strategy.

As a follow up to this meeting, the RCC Secretariat requested the consent of Monitoring Committee and the SEEC Political Directors on the establishment of a **SEE Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing** and provided them with draft Terms of Reference of this Regional Network and a preliminary Work Programme listing activities that the network is recommended to focus on. In line with



RCC organised discussion on SEE Disaster Risk Sharing on the side-lines of UNECE Regional Forum in Geneva on 2 April 2025 (Photo: RCC/Marc Bader)

the procedures foreseen by the SEE2030 Strategy, the RCC Secretariat presented this proposal along with the abovementioned accompanying documents to the RCC Board for its approval. The Decision for the establishment of the SEE Regional Network on Disaster Risk Insurance and Risk Sharing and its Terms of Reference were approved by the RCC Board, at its meeting held on 12 March 2025. As foreseen by the Network's Terms of Reference, the RCC Secretariat has now started with the nomination process of the members of this Network by all SEECF participants.

Another important activity was the organisation of an RCC side event in the margins of the 2025 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region, on 2 April 2025 in Geneva. The side event was organised in cooperation with and with the support of Greece, Romania and Türkiye. It was a panel discussion titled: "Regional Cooperation in Disaster

Financial Risk Sharing in the Context of the SEE2030 Strategy".

The main objective of this side event was to highlight the importance of ensuring accessible and affordable disaster insurance for all, and underline the positive externalities of having an inclusive disaster insurance coverage and financial risk sharing on the relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

In order to provide an opportunity of experience exchanging and best practices, the panel speakers were chosen from disaster insurance sector and public regulatory authorities from SEECF participants with an advanced framework related to disaster risk insurance and risk sharing (Greece, Romania and Türkiye). Experts from the European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority (EIOPA) and the World Bank were also among the panel speakers.

### B3. Parliamentary Cooperation

In cooperation with the Albanian Centre for Competitiveness and International Trade (ACIT) and the Albanian Centre for European Policies (ACEP), the Regional Cooperation Council organized a four-day executive training for staff of parliaments and ministries from the Western Balkans. The executive training took place in Tirana, Albania, from 02-05 December.

The overall objective of the training was to assist the RCC in supporting regional exchange and raise awareness and technical capacities of parliamentary staff and ministries on measures linked to CRM. It was designed and implemented a tailor-made programme based on the needs for capacity building and awareness on CRM, Growth Plan for the WB, and

the reforms required in this respect, while also providing a comprehensive overview of other regional cooperation processes. 21 representatives from the parliaments of the region and other ministries attended the training.

RCC engaged actively with presentations in the XXI Conference of the European Integration/Affairs Committees of Countries Participating in the Stabilisation and Association Process in South-East Europe (COSAP) in February 2025 and the Parliamentary Assembly (PA) of the SEECP meeting of the General Committee on Economy, Infrastructure and Energy in April 2025, under the topic "Opportunities for Regional Cooperation in Renewable Energy in SEE".



Executive training on the Common Regional Market (CRM) for civil servants from parliaments and ministries across the Western Balkans Six opened on 2 December 2024 in Tirana (Photo: RCC/Armand Habazaj)

## B4. Good Governance

The RCC in cooperation with the International Association of Mediators from Southeast Europe on 25 October organized the **2024 Regional Mediation Conference: “Improving access to justice through mediation”**.

This conference gathered participants from Ministries of Justice, judiciary and Chambers of Mediators from SEE economies, as well as representatives from the Notary Chamber of Serbia. The focus of discussions was on the benefits of mediation in economic disputes; mediation’s role in reducing court backlogs and enhancing judicial efficiency; resolution of disputes through mediation - right of ownership of immovable property. The speakers from the above-mentioned institutions also presented case studies on successful mediation and best practices.

The **8th Meeting of the South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes (SEE JTI) Network** took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 10 December 2024, co-orga-

nized by the RCC and the Judicial Training Centre of Slovenia.

The event brought together judicial professionals and legal experts from across the SEE region to address emerging challenges in judicial training, focusing on cybercrime and the role of AI in the judiciary.

Discussions highlighted the growing complexity of digital fraud, identity theft, cryptocurrency issues, and ransomware, emphasizing the need for specialized judicial training in cybersecurity and digital forensics. Experts addressed the challenges of cross-border/boundary cooperation and evidence collection. The role of AI in judicial processes was explored, with participants examining ethical concerns, regulatory frameworks, and the balance between AI-assisted decision-making and human oversight. Key takeaways included the need for structured regional training programs, stronger collaboration on cyber-enabled financial crimes, and harmonized legal frameworks to address those security threats.

## B5. Security Cooperation

From June 2024 to May 2025, the RCC engaged in activities aimed at facilitating regional security cooperation in South East Europe through dialogue, information exchange, data collection, and engagement with relevant institutions.

The **9th Regional Security Coordination Conference (Jumbo)**, organised with the support of the Italian Government, was held in Sarajevo in November 2024, gathering over 150 participants, including officials, security experts, diplomats, and international partners, to foster dialogue and share expertise on regional security and governance. For the first time, the conference introduced formal Working Group (WG) formats, focusing on three priority areas: border security and migration, organised crime and cor-

ruption, and cybercrime. WGs aim to serve as structured mechanisms for continued engagement on specific thematic priorities in future years. The event also featured discussions on integrating data-driven approaches into policymaking, leveraging findings from the **SecuriMeter**, producing a **report on Working Group Outcomes and Recommendations**.

The RCC completed and launched the 2024 edition of the **SecuriMeter public opinion survey**, with data collected from over 6,000 respondents across the WB. Results showed that only 39% of citizens consider the WB a safe place to live, a marked decrease from 54–57% in previous years, and only 31% believe the region will be more secure in the next year. Simultaneously, 48% of respondents fear a potential con-





9th Regional Security Coordination Conference dubbed "Working Together in Times of Global Uncertainties" took place on 7 November 2024 in Sarajevo (Photo: RCC/Jasmin Sakovic)

flict between regional economies. Organised crime remains the top concern (60%), followed by poverty (49%) and corruption (48%). The survey also highlighted institutional distrust, especially among youth and residents of economically weaker areas. Despite this, over 50% of respondents supported EU and NATO integration.

The RCC's security-related activities over the reporting period contributed to ongoing regional dialogue, data gathering, and institutional coordination. With preparations underway for the 10th Regional Security Coordination Conference and the 5th iteration of the SecuriMeter survey, efforts will continue to support engagement on shared security.

The drop in perceived safety at the regional level, from previously steady rates above 50% (ranging between 54% and 57%) to the current 39% is cause for concern. This shift in 2024 likely reflects increased public anxiety, possibly triggered by a combination of political tensions (both internal and cross-border/boundary), ethnic antagonisms, global crises such as the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza, and persistent economic difficulties. These factors appear to contribute to an amplified sense of insecurity across the region. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that 52% of respondents still perceive their own economy as a safe place to live. This discrepancy suggests there is

space to strengthen regional cooperation and joint initiatives to improve perceptions of security across the Western Balkans. Parallel efforts to tackle corruption, rebuild institutional trust, and boost economic opportunity could meaningfully enhance citizens' long-term sense of safety.

Security pessimism is particularly noticeable among the youth and those in economically weaker areas. Organized crime remains the top security concern (60%), followed by 49% that identified poverty as the most critical non-economic issue, while 48% consider corruption in society a significant issue. At the same time 83% of citizens believe corruption is either "very widespread" or "fairly widespread".

Despite these concerns, public support for greater regional cooperation and stronger ties with the EU and NATO remains robust. Trust in various institutions of society from the press to political parties and labour unions is low in the WB in general. There are few exceptions where majority respondents have trust: religious organisations (60% a great deal and quite a trust); armed forces (55%); police (54%); universities (53%); European Union (55%) and NATO (54%). Regionally, there is least trust in political parties (80% have none at all or not very much), social media (75%), parliament (72%), the press (71%), and television (65%).

**FROM DIALOGUE TO ACTION:  
Working Group Outcomes and  
Recommendations from the 9th Regional  
Security Coordination Conference 2024**



Regional Cooperation Council

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The 2024 findings were launched as a standalone event in Tirana in December, allowing for a focused presentation and discussion. In parallel, RCC initiated preparations for the 2025 SecuriMeter edition, with methodological enhancements and academic contributions aimed at better capturing perceptions of institutional trust, corruption, and regional stability.

Additional RCC-led security activities in the SEE economies continue to advance dialogue through the security cooperation platforms of the (SEENSA) and the (SEEMIC).

The **16th Conference of the South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs** (SEEMIC), held on 7-8 October 2024 in Split, under Croatian Co-chairmanship-in-Office. The conference gathered intelligence leaders from across the region to discuss contemporary security challenges. A significant outcome was the adoption of the OSINT assessment draft report on "Security threats for the SEEMIC region emanating from emerging disruptive technologies", which aims to equip political and military decision-makers with a comprehensive intelligence picture of these evolving threats.

The first WEEMIC Expert Working Group, under the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Co-chairmanship-in-Office met on 24 April 2024. The aim of the meeting was the coordination of the preparatory activities for the 2025 SEEMIC Conference to be held in Sarajevo, on 16-18 September 2025.

The **14th Meeting of the Heads of the Security Authorities of SEE** (SEENSA) was held on 16-18 October 2024 in Sofia, under Bulgarian Co-chairmanship-in-Office. The meeting focused on good practices and innovations in classified information



Panel discussion "From Perceptions to Policies: Addressing Security, Governance, and Trust in the Western Balkans" at the SecuriMeter 2024 data presentation, on 16 December 2024 in Tirana (Photo: RCC/Henri Koci)

protection and regional security development, strengthening regional security frameworks.

The RCC actively participated in **SEESAC regional meetings** in the capacity of umbrella organisation for this initiative.

The RCC participated at the Regional Workshop on Weapons and Ammunition Management (8-9 October 2024), reinforcing its commitment to addressing Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) control as part of broader security cooperation efforts. The RCC participated at the Project Board meeting for the project support for enhancing the fight against illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans, held online on 27 February 2025. This project Board chaired is by the Manager of UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub, who serves as the Project Executive, together with the RCC and the European Commission (DG NEAR and DG HOME).

The RCC also participated and, together with UNDP, co-chaired the annual meeting of the Regional Steering Group on SALW, held on 5 March 2025. The aim of these meetings is to provide an update on the implementation of SEESAC's activities in line with the Regional Implementation Plan on Combating Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. During the reporting period, RCC representatives participated in activities in the framework of SEDM process (South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Coordination Committee meeting (SEDM-CC), 26 March 2025, Bucharest).

Likewise, RCC participated in **activities in the framework of SEDM process** under the Romanian Chairmanship-in-Office (SEDM Deputy Chiefs of Defence meeting, 26 June 2024 in Istanbul; SEDM Coordination Committee meeting, 26 March 2025, Bucharest).



## C. Horizontal Activities

### C1. Programming, Monitoring, Coordination

The 10th edition of the **Balkan Barometer, Public and Business Opinion Surveys**, was presented in mid-September 2024, marking a departure from its traditional launch format. This milestone edition offered a focused analysis of stakeholder perceptions across the principal pillars of the CRM, including the regional investment and digital areas, labour mobility and skills development, the industrial and innovation ecosystem, as well as the implications of the GAWB for businesses in the region. Organised by the RCC, the event convened a broad spectrum of participants, notably representatives of regional youth organisations such as the Young Professionals Network, the Youth Congress of Albania, youth councils from the WB6 economies, and the Young European Ambassadors.

The Barometer's findings provided valuable insights into current public and business sentiment regarding regional cooperation, socio-economic

challenges, and EU integration prospects. Over the past decade, the Balkan Barometer has evolved into a leading evidence-based instrument for informing policy and strategic decision-making. Its credibility and relevance are reflected in its widespread use by policymakers, academic institutions, civil society organisations, and the private sector, who rely on its data to support regional development and integration efforts.

RCC contributed to the preparation of yet another edition of the Berlin Process. RCC supported the 10th Berlin Process summit in October 2024 by providing its inputs within CRM and GAWB and worked closely with the organisers. During the Summit, WB6 leaders endorsed several landmark agreements and initiatives facilitated by the RCC, which are expected to yield concrete benefits in the near future. These include:



Presentation of Balkan Barometer 2024 data took place in Tirana on 16 September 2024 (Photo: RCC/Henri Koci)



- ✦ Common Regional Market 2025-2028 Action Plan – Setting the foundation for deeper economic integration and regional cooperation.
  - ✦ Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study in the Western Balkans – Enhancing student mobility and academic collaboration across the region.
  - ✦ Regional FDI Screening Standards for the Western Balkans Six – Establishing a framework to attract and regulate foreign direct investment, ensuring transparency and security.
  - ✦ Declaration on Science & Innovation on Infrastructure Access and Cooperation – Promoting research collaboration and technological development to drive regional innovation.
  - ✦ Hamburg Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans – Reinforcing commitments to sustainability and aligning regional environmental policies with EU standards.
- In line with the launch of the CRM 2.0 and within the framework of the annual Prime Ministers' Sherpa's Consultation Meetings, the RCC convened the first



Balkan Barometer 2024 presentation held on 16 September 2024 in Tirana (Photo: RCC/Henri Koci)

high-level gathering at its Brussels office for 2025, bringing together key decision-makers from the WB6, regional partners, and representatives from the European Commission.

This meeting served as a strategic platform for Prime Minister's Sherpa's to engage in critical discussions, define priorities, and establish robust monitoring and sustainability mechanisms for the next phase of regional economic development. As the WB6 moves into the next phase of CRM implementation, the meeting focused on identifying and agreeing upon the most pressing priority actions for 2025. The discussions aimed to align local efforts with regional objectives, ensuring a coordinated approach to economic integration.

With the adoption of CRM 2.0, a well-defined governance model and effective monitoring mechanisms are essential to track progress and uphold accountability. Drawing on best practices from the Berlin Process, the meeting refined these structures to enhance coordination across the region. The meeting also focused on the revision of the GAWB Action Plan and provided informative insights, by ensuring alignment with EU policies and reinforcing the region's commitment to a sustainable and greener economy.

Throughout 2025, the RCC played a leading role in advancing dialogue and cooperation across the region in support of both the CRM2.0 and the GAWB. The RCC hosted another strategic meeting with Sherpas, regional actors, and European Commission officials



During the Berlin Process Summit held in Berlin on 14 October 2024, WB6 leaders endorsed several landmark agreements and initiatives facilitated by the RCC (Photo: RCC/Elmas Libohova)

on 4 April 2025. This session was in building consensus on the deliverables for the Berlin Process 2025.

As part of its commitment to ensuring effective implementation and accountability, RCC is in the process of developing a comprehensive monitoring mechanism for CRM 2.0. This framework will include a set of clear-

ly defined, measurable indicators designed to track progress across the key pillars of CRM 2.0. The monitoring system aims to provide data-driven insights to inform policy decisions, enhance transparency, and support evidence-based evaluation of regional integration efforts within the WB.

## C2. Communication



RCC organized several interviews with Secretary General and RCC staff promoting organization's agenda







RCC organized several interviews with Secretary General and RCC staff promoting organization's agenda

### **Amplifying Regional Cooperation Narratives**

Throughout the reporting period, RCC's communication efforts remained focused on amplifying the benefits of regional cooperation, spotlighting progress achieved through joint initiatives such as the CRM 2.0, SEE 2030 Strategy, GAWB, and security cooperation. Integrated campaigns, video stories, and dynamic visual content conveyed the tangible impact of regional cooperation on the lives of citizens of our region – from roaming cost reductions, travel with ID cards to mutual recognition of qualifications, and many more – reinforcing public and institutional support.

### **Promoting EU Integration and Its Benefits**

RCC communication strategically promoted the region's path towards EU membership, showcasing how alignment with EU standards is improving everyday realities. Through storytelling, articles, youth-focused reels, and EU partnership visibility, RCC underscored the EU's commitment to the region and the shared benefits of integration.

### **Elevating SEECP and SEE2030 Visibility**

The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the implementation of the SEE2030 Strategy remained among core themes of RCC communication, particularly around sustainability, economic development, and human security. RCC marked SEECP Chairmanship events and milestones with tar-

geted visibility activities and engaged stakeholders through regional media and as well as social media, ensuring continued public recognition of SEE2030 as a shared vision for the region's future.

### **Strategic Flagship Promotion and Event Visibility**

Communication activities prominently featured RCC's flagship initiatives and regional events, including the 10th anniversary of the Balkan Barometer, the Berlin Process Summit and the launch of CRM 2.0, Champion of Regional Cooperation, Balkathon and Butterfly Innovation award, as well as green transition and security-related initiatives such as Jumbo Conference and SecuriMeter. Targeted outreach campaigns, digital promotions, and media relations ensured strong engagement across audiences, from youth to policy-makers and regional and international partners.

### **Targeted and Adaptive Communication**

Tailored communication plans were implemented for each strategic RCC priority. Audience-specific messaging was deployed via various communication forms including, but not limited to reels, photo carousels, infographics, press releases, and op-eds. All RCC target audiences were engaged through appropriate formats and narratives, increasing awareness and support for regional cooperation. In line with shifting consumption habits, RCC expanded its use of creative visual formats and partner collaborations. Content creation focused on humor, clarity, and relatability, especially on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook,



RCC organized several interviews with Secretary General and RCC staff promoting organization's agenda





and YouTube, while more formal formats targeted regional and international stakeholders and media, as well as LinkedIn and Twitter.

### Supporting EU-Funded and RCC-Led Initiatives

RCC communication actively supported visibility for EU-funded initiatives under its coordination, namely ESAP, WBYL and IISG. These efforts fostered broader awareness of EU support while strengthening RCC's reputation as a reliable implementing partner across the region.

### Leadership Transition and Evolving Narrative

On 1 January 2025, RCC welcomed its new Secretary General, Amer Kapetanović. Communication efforts marked this leadership transition through a carefully curated campaign, ensuring continuity of the RCC's vision while introducing new leadership priorities to internal and external audiences.

### Performance Metrics and Impact

The impact of RCC's communication efforts during the reporting period is evident in the continued growth of digital engagement and media presence. The RCC website recorded over **737,000 views, marking a 42.3% increase, with 125,000 new users** compared to the previous year. During the reporting period we published 60 news releases and 21 interviews, articles, op-eds, vlogs, and video podcasts

across RCC platforms, and regional and international media outlets. Media engagement remained strong, with more than **6,000 media reports covering RCC activities** throughout the year. RCC's social media platforms maintained robust performance with Facebook reaching 1.1 million users and generating 3.3 million content views, with continued audience growth. Instagram maintained solid engagement with a **reach of 1.1 million, over 15,100 content interactions** and gathered new followers. Content views totalled to 1.9 million, of which over **670,000 were video views and 35% were organic**. The volume of content shared also increased compared to the previous year. RCC's X registered **156,000 impressions**. LinkedIn profile recorded nearly **6,000 page views**. YouTube account achieved over **24,900 views and 216 hours of watch time**, while RCC's TikTok gained traction with 277,000 views and a notable increase in audience interaction, recording over 3,300 comments.

### Addressing Challenges and Evolving Priorities

In a changing geopolitical landscape, RCC refined its messaging to also highlight security cooperation, resilience, and economic sustainability – key concerns for both the regional and EU partners. While digital reach expanded, maintaining continuous engagement across diverse audiences remains a challenge, especially having in mind persisting budgetary constraints.





### C3. Extending partnerships

During the reporting period, the RCC Brussels Liaison Office (LO) actively engaged in initiatives to enhance regional cooperation, support the EU enlargement process, and strengthen the RCC's presence within EU institutions, NGO's and think tanks.

#### **Diplomatic outreach:**

The LO held numerous meetings with ambassadors, deputy heads of missions, and diplomats from EU permanent representations, as well as representatives from key EU institutions, including the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), The European Council and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Notably, an introductory meeting was held with the European Parliament's unit responsible for parliamentary capacity-building activities.

Significant engagements also took place with representatives of other partners and different international organizations, to explore synergies between RCC activities and their ongoing projects.

#### **Participation in Summits and High-level events preparations**

The LO played a crucial role in the preparatory activities of the Berlin Process Summit, including meetings of WB6 Sherpas and regional organizations, exchange of proposals, and finalization of action plans and declarations adopted at the Summit. RCC high-level visits and meetings in Brussels, involving the Secretary General, received essential and logistical support from the LO, encompassing preparation of visits, contributions to technical assistance for meetings with EU representatives, participation in meetings, reporting, and logistical organization.

In the mention period the LO attended and took part in the various think tank and political institute events focusing on EU enlargement and WB policies (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Martens Center for political studies, Friends of Europe, European Policy Center etc).

#### **Analytical and communication activities**

The LO was instrumental in analyzing, processing, and distributing vital documents related to the EU enlargement agenda, including insights from briefings and summaries of European Commission enlargement reports. Daily bulletins on key EU activities were prepared to keep stakeholders informed.

#### **Youth engagement and capacity building**

Demonstrating a commitment to youth engagement, the LO provided internship opportunities for young individuals to acquaint themselves with the RCC's work, thereby gaining knowledge and experience in regional cooperation and EU enlargement policies. Interns' involvement in daily activities was subject to continuous monitoring, evaluation, and guidance, enhancing their understanding of the EU integration process of the Western Balkans Six region.

#### **Strategic planning and visibility**

Participation in the RCC Programming Meeting allowed the LO to propose a series of activities aimed at improving the visibility and impact of the Brussels LO, aligning with the RCC's overarching goals of fostering regional cooperation and supporting EU integration efforts.

# Abbreviations

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<b>ACG</b>	Advisory and Coordination Group
<b>BDTF SEE</b>	Biodiversity Task Force of South East Europe
<b>BIA</b>	Butterfly Innovation Award
<b>BMEIA</b>	Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria
<b>CEFTA</b>	Central European Free Trade Agreement
<b>CEPEJ</b>	European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice
<b>CI</b>	Creative Industries
<b>CE</b>	Circular Economy
<b>CoE</b>	College of Europe
<b>C-i-O</b>	Chairpersonship-in-Office
<b>CRM</b>	Common Regional Market
<b>CRM2</b>	Second iteration of the CRM Action Plan
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil society organisations
<b>DIHs</b>	Digital Innovation Hubs
<b>DG</b>	Directorate General
<b>DG NEAR</b>	Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EIPA</b>	European Centre for Judges and Lawyers
<b>EJTN</b>	European Judicial Training Network
<b>ENQA</b>	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<b>EPC</b>	European Payments Council
<b>EPSR</b>	European Pillar of Social Rights
<b>ERI SEE</b>	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
<b>ESAP</b>	Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project
<b>ESS</b>	Employment Service of Slovenia
<b>ETS</b>	Emission Trading Scheme
<b>EUBYF</b>	EU-Balkan Youth Forum
<b>FDI</b>	Foreign Direct Investment
<b>GAWB</b>	Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
<b>GIZ</b>	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technology
<b>IFIs</b>	International Financial Institutions
<b>IISG</b>	Integrative Internal Security Governance
<b>JWGI</b>	Joint Working Group on Investments

<b>LMPs</b>	Labour Market Policies
<b>LO</b>	Liaison Office
<b>MAPs</b>	Mutual Assistance Projects
<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>NALAS</b>	Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East Europe
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>PD</b>	Political Directors
<b>PES</b>	Public Employment Services
<b>PSPs</b>	Payment Service Providers
<b>RCC</b>	Regional Cooperation Council
<b>RNWE</b>	Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship
<b>RoP</b>	Rules of Procedure
<b>RWG GAWB</b>	Regional Working Group on Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SEE</b>	South East Europe
<b>SEE IGI</b>	South East Europe Inclusive Growth Index
<b>SEE JTI</b>	South East Europe Judicial Training Institutes
<b>SEE2030</b>	South East Europe 2030 Strategy
<b>SEECp</b>	South East European Cooperation Process
<b>SEEMIC</b>	SEE Military Intelligence Chiefs
<b>SEENSA</b>	Meeting of the Heads of South East Europe National Security Agencies
<b>SEPA</b>	Single Euro Payments Area
<b>SSN</b>	Statistical Authorities Network
<b>SWP</b>	Strategy and Work Programme
<b>TEG</b>	Tourism Expert Group
<b>TEPAV</b>	Economic Policy Research Foundation of Türkiye
<b>TCT</b>	Transport Community Treaty
<b>ToR</b>	Terms of Reference
<b>UNECE</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
<b>WB</b>	Western Balkans
<b>WBBSi</b>	Western Balkan Border Security initiative
<b>WBCIF</b>	Western Balkans Chamber Investment Forum
<b>WBCSCi</b>	Western Balkan Counter Serious Crime initiative
<b>WBCTi</b>	Western Balkan Counter Terrorism initiative
<b>WBDS</b>	Western Balkans Digital Summit
<b>WBYL</b>	Western Balkans Youth Lab Project
<b>WGFM</b>	Working Group on Financial Markets
<b>WGID</b>	Working Group on Industrial Development





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