

Talking Points by RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu at the TRATOLOW Ministerial Western Balkans and Türkiye Conference

26 April 2024

Dear Excellencies, Ministers, Colleagues, and Partners,

We meet today in lovely Vienna—a city consistently topping the liveability and green cities index for years in a row. However, Vienna also sits in stark contrast to some of our region's cities, especially when they are engulfed by hazardous and debilitating air pollution.

My sober messages today will focus on two main points:

First, on RCC's role in coordinating, facilitating, and monitoring the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) and our forthcoming contributions in this vital area.

Second, on the criticality of the current momentum, in light of the region's accelerated integration and the overall severe geopolitical context.

1. Role of RCC: We in RCC juggle many hats and roles in relation to the GA. We act as a high-level green agenda setter, bringing the urgency of issues to the forefront for key political processes and decision-makers, and boosting regional ownership. We also serve as a convenor of policy and regional efforts; we are proud coordinators of the preparation of the GAWB and its Action Plan, and we monitor progress and challenges. Additionally, we advocate ardently for regional cooperation as a powerful catalyst for advancing green reforms and seizing the opportunities inherent in green growth. RCC also voices the needs of the WB economies for concerted financial instruments and support, proportionate to the region's needs. Projections show that the region needs 30 billion EUR for energy transformation by 2030.

This autumn, in collaboration with the European Commission and Germany, we will host the inaugural Ministerial Meeting on the Green Agenda, within the framework of the Berlin Process. This will provide an important platform not only to review our progress but also to underscore our collective dedication to environmental sustainability.

2. Criticality of the Current Momentum:

- Firstly, the call for accelerated integration of our region and earlier access to the EU's single market necessitates that our region delivers strongly on green and energy transitions, also with regard to integration into the Internal Energy Market.

- Secondly, geopolitical tensions strain available resources and might impact policy prioritisation. Neglecting the green transition is not viable, as it poses the risk of anchoring the region in outdated, carbon-intensive technologies. This stance could seriously undermine our competitiveness in the EU single market.

- Thirdly, the large convergence gap between the WB and the EU means that the green transition cannot be achieved without substantial support, particularly in the field of energy. Our region is still heavily reliant on coal as a primary energy source, and transitioning to greener practices comes with a hefty price tag. Our struggling economies cannot afford it. For example, repurposing the Tuzla power plant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which at 60 years old is one of Europe's major air pollution sources, would cost between 7 and 35 million EUR.

While the EU is mobilizing over 100 billion EUR of investments, including a 17.5 billion EUR Just Transition Fund, for citizens and workers in regions most impacted by this economic transformation, our region lacks dedicated funding for moving away from coal reliance and addressing the social and economic impacts of such a change.

What We Need: Opening the possibility for the WB to benefit from the EU Just Transition Fund and establishing the Decarbonisation Committee could be two concrete steps that would ensure a socially equitable transition away from coal reliance.

Lastly, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is a dynamic and evolving initiative that requires the collective efforts of governmental, private, and non-governmental sectors to nurture, grow, and shape towards a sustainable future.

Dear all—as all too often—ours is a region of contrasts. United in the shared goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and richly blessed with natural resources, hydro potential, abundant sunshine, and winds, our region at the same time grapples with outdated infrastructure, underinvestment, coal dependence, and economic limitations.

Leaving behind a legacy of sustainable development for generations to come means that we need to seriously engage with all the challenges but also to smartly capitalise on all the inherent opportunities in green growth!