



**Speech by RCC Secretary General, Amer Kapetanović
at the presentation of Balkan Barometer 2025
on 11 December 2025 in Brussels**

Good morning everyone,
Excellencies, colleagues, dear friends,

It is a pleasure to see so many partners, colleagues, Brussels friends in the same room.

Brussels is a city where the Western Balkans feels both close and far at the same time. Close because so much of our present and future revolves around it; far because sometimes we feel the road is long. Today, with the findings of the Balkan Barometer 2025, I hope that distance will seem a little shorter.

For those encountering it for the first time, Balkan Barometer is our annual survey of citizens and businesses across the Western Balkans. We launched it 11 years ago as part of the monitoring of the SEE2020 Strategy, because before measuring policies, we wanted to understand something deeper: how people live, what they worry about, and what they hope for.

So, for more than a decade now, the Balkan Barometer has been our way of listening, really listening, to the people and businesses of the Western Balkans. Balkan Barometer is beyond the most comprehensive survey of its kind in the region. It is the region speaking in numbers, in concerns, in hopes, in frustrations, and in a surprising amount of clarity.

Before I dive into some of the most intriguing details of this year's survey, I would like to thank the European Commission for supporting this endeavour many years in a row, which I am certain helps EU policy- and decision-makers as much as those in the Western Balkans.

Let me begin with the citizens' views.

Their top concern remains the same as last year, rising prices and inflation, mentioned by 66%. The economic situation follows close behind, then corruption, political instability, unemployment and brain drain. These are stubborn problems, and people feel them every day.

The most important finding of this year's Balkan Barometer is the renewed public optimism towards the European Union.

Despite the pressures I mentioned, people in the Western Balkans are more hopeful about the EU future this year than they have been in a decade.

After several years of stagnation or slight but consistent decline, **support for EU membership across the region jumped by 10 percentage points, from 54% last year to 64% today. This is the highest level ever recorded since we began asking this question.**

This tells us that EU-hopefulness is making a comeback, not because the region suddenly became easy, but because something changed in the political atmosphere. People felt movement. They saw decisions. They saw timelines, chapters, statuses, negotiations, and visas finally opening.

In our region, when Europe moves, people move with it.

The EU's presence, engagement, and clarity matter tremendously in shaping people's perceptions. Balkan Barometer reveals that the EU stands among the three most trusted institutions by the Western Balkan citizens, alongside religious communities and the armed forces.

A new question introduced in 2025 shows that 64% of people believe regional cooperation can improve the economic situation in their home economy.

The message is clear: **citizens do not see regional cooperation as a political narrative, they see it as a practical tool.**

The Business Opinion gives a similar message.

Businesses are facing heavy headwinds, informal economy, corruption, labour shortages, energy costs. Yet they are not discouraged. If anything, their expectations for growth are more balanced than last year.

And when it comes to cooperation within the region, their answer is loud and clear:

7 out of 10 say removing trade barriers is crucial for stronger regional business ties,

39% say the roaming-free regime reduced their operating costs,

and 66% expect concrete benefits from traveling with only an ID card within the region, which is 6% more than last year.

This is precisely the logic of the Common Regional Market and the EU Growth Plan: reducing barriers, enabling mobility, reducing costs, and harmonising rules.

People and businesses recognise the value immediately, and respond with higher confidence.

When the region lowers barriers, businesses lower their risks. When we align rules, we unlock markets. And when we cooperate, the whole region becomes more predictable. And trust me, businesses in the Western Balkans crave predictability more than anything else.

The deeper data analysis we made this year reveals something profoundly important:

Trust drives cooperation. Cooperation drives growth. And both trust and cooperation are strongly linked to the EU.

People who trust their local institutions are much more likely to support regional cooperation. More educated citizens are systematically more open to collaboration. Younger people see regional cooperation and EU integration as two sides of the same coin.

And here is another remarkable finding. Entrepreneurs with a positive view of EU integration are more likely to have growth ambitions. In other words, belief in European Union creates belief in oneself.

This is powerful.

It means the accession process is not only a political project, it is also an economic engine and a psychological boost.

No information about our region is complete without the youth.

Yes, **68% are considering working or living abroad.** This is not news. But for the first time, we know the **nuance. Half want to go temporarily, half permanently.**

And here is the real headline: **Youth trust the EU more than any other age group.**

A remarkable 71% say EU membership would be good for the economy, the highest youth endorsement in five years.

They see Europe not only as geography, but as opportunity. They see cooperation not only as policy, but as mobility. They see integration not only as alignment, but as freedom. If we ever needed a reminder that our job is to deliver for the next generation, here it is.

Also, let me note that this conversation could not come at a better moment. Next week, leaders from Europe and the Western Balkans will gather here in Brussels. The timing is not symbolic, it is strategic. The findings of the Balkan Barometer could serve as a compass for that summit.

A reminder that citizens are watching. That EU-hopefulness is rising again. And that trust, once restored, must be protected.

For the Western Balkans, this summit is a chance to show that the European path is not theoretical, not seasonal, not conditional, but credible. And credibility, as the Balkan Barometer shows, changes perspectives.

When we look at the full picture, citizens, businesses, institutions, youth, a simple truth emerges. People in the Western Balkans are not asking for miracles. They are asking for results. They reward progress with trust. They believe in Europe when Europe believes in them.

To bring these findings to life, I invite you to watch a short video created especially for this year's Balkan Barometer, featuring our colleague Jona, representing the generation that will shape and inherit the future we build.

After the video, we will continue with our panel discussion "Evidence above Assumptions" moderated by the distinguished journalist Gjeraqina Tuhina.

Thank you, and let's begin.