

## **Messages of the Western Balkans business community to the New European Commission and European Parliament**

**About WB6 CIF:** *Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF) is a joint initiative of chambers of commerce and industry from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, that established a platform of cooperation in 2017 with the aim to provide a joint voice to the business community in the region and to facilitate inter-business contacts and promote the region as one investment destination.*

*WB6 CIF represents around 350,000 companies, mostly small and medium-sized enterprises in its mission to open new opportunities for stronger networking of business communities within the region by removing the remaining obstacles to the development of the regional economic cooperation and improving business and investment climate in the markets of the WB region. WB6 CIF is the business community's response to political processes in the region, which take place within the Berlin process as an additional incentive of the Western Balkans to join the EU.*

*Regional economic integration and cooperation has become one of the key tools for contributing to the economic dimension of the Western Balkans region's integration into the EU, for releasing new potential for economic growth and for underpinning political cooperation in the region. The Berlin Process has so far produced ambitious agendas aimed at enhancing connectivity among people and businesses in the region and with the EU. Further to that, the governments in the region with the support of the EU institutions have committed themselves to further deepening economic integration by removing obstacles to free movement of goods, services, people and capital.*

Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF) believe that the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans will enhance economic and trade relations and strengthen stability in the region to the mutual benefit of the EU and its future Member States. A credible enlargement perspective for the entire region is the right approach for ensuring peace, prosperity and reconciliation. It gives renewed hope to the societies, as they carry out ambitious reforms and provides impetus to young people to stay engaged in their countries. With its strengthened credibility, the process brings back a more stable and predictable business environment.

WB6 CIF is supporting the process of normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo as one of the key prerequisites for providing a prosperous and stable future to all citizens in the region, that will have a positive effect for overall economic, social and political development of the Western Balkans.

Finding a long-lasting, sustainable and comprehensive agreement between the two sides, with carefully designed plan of implementation would provide the future stability of the Serbian and Kosovo societies, laying the ground for unleashing their development potential.

Policy approach based on the idea to use the policy and legal convergence embedded in the EU accession process to create concrete benefits for businesses and their employees in the WB region, but also in the EU member states we call inclusive enlargement. It requires a new policy approach in which the Western Balkan economies are seen as an integral part of the EU economic ecosystem able to contribute to its growth and development rather than a mere trading partners. It also suggests strong cooperation with the business community in identifying where and how it can be applied to produce the best economic and social results.

The EU perspective for Western Balkan provides business community with certainty of upcoming changes in legal and policy environment as well as prospects of enhanced trade and investment in Western Balkan region. For this reasons, WB6 CIF offer their capacities for stronger engagement of the business community in policy making on the European and regional level.

Even though the accession negotiations are in the hands of the policy-makers, the relationship between the EU and the candidate countries is important, since the reforms that should be implemented will have tremendous transformative impact on each society, changing the framework in which citizens live and work. The role of business representatives and business support organizations, is to bring the voice of the business community to the decision makers and to provide services, especially to SMEs, to maximize benefits of the enlargement process.

For businesses to be able to benefit from the implementation of the EC Enlargement Strategy, we believe that the importance of clear integration perspective, available instruments and institutions who will implement them in efficient and transparent way is essential.

The business community of the WB6 offers its full commitment to work together with the decision makers in the framework of continuous, structured and interactive private-public dialogue.

**Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum call upon European Parliament and new European Commission to:**

- **Implement a mechanism in which the market access could be granted upon the agreement of the both sides, EU and the EU candidate, when the necessary requirements related to legislation, policy and/or institutions are met. This system should not be based on existing and time-consuming instruments, as envisaged for**



regular trading partners from third countries, but should be „fast-tracked“ taking into consideration the achievements made in the accession process, regularly monitored by the EU in the context of the accession negotiations or the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreements. This is of particular importance for sectoral regulation of industrial products;

- **Include support for innovation, digitalization and compliance with EU rules and standards (e.g. environmental and consumer protection, sector based requirements) for Western Balkans SMEs.** Activities should equally focus on vocational training and should provide support to the development of the work-based learning and dual systems based on EU best practice;
- **Further strengthen business support mechanisms in the Western Balkans, in line with practices in the EU Member States.** This entails a more ambitious evolution of the pre-accession funds towards volumes and mechanisms envisaged in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the European Fund for Strategic Investments as well as extending the scope and boosting the Western Balkans Investment Framework in terms of private sector development;
- **Further develop access to finance mechanisms to include „average SMEs“, namely to go beyond targeting the business niches with high growth potential;**
- **Include Western Balkan partners in different EU technical committees and Commission working groups,** in particular dealing with economic, financial and standardization matters. Equally a stronger Connectivity Agenda will serve to decrease transactional costs and further strengthen the regions competitiveness;
- **Enhance dialogue with the business community with a view of maximizing positive economic impact of the enlargement.**

We use this opportunity to remind European Commission and European Parliament of WB6 CIF publicly stated mission in Trieste that we stay committed to:

1. Advocating for the creation of effective institutional and political structures on the highest political level by WB6 governments to support and enable implementation of the Regional Economic Area.
2. Advocating free movement of goods/ services throughout the region to cut costs and make goods and services more competitive on the global market.
3. Advocating free movement of people – allowing people from the region to travel, study and work within the region without extra paperwork (travel without a passport, only with ID card) and too much administration.

4. Jointly promoting the region as a unique investment destination by joining the funds and efforts in presenting the region's investment potential, creativity, food and cuisine, tourist attractions, with the emphasis of the needs of the businesses.
5. Calling for joint digital transformation strategy that would lead to the transformation of companies, business models and entire industries. If utilized timely, Digital Transformation will contribute to the economic growth, job creation and improve competitiveness and business prosperity of the region. Digital Transformation will relate to the ICT industries and it will lead the comprehensive changes within the traditional industries (e.g. automotive, electricity, consumer goods).
6. Calling for joint regional energy strategy especially in the domain of electricity production/ trade could result in making the region more sustainable and thus energy secure as it would rely on its own resources. Further focus on renewable energy to make the region greener and energy sustainable.