



**HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON SOUTH EAST EUROPE**  
**DRIVING COMPETITIVENESS, ACHIEVING CONVERGENCE**  
**Launch of the Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024**

**Draft Agenda**

**26 June 2024**

OECD Conference Centre, CC 1  
2 rue André Pascal  
75016 Paris  
France



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OECD Global Relations  
**South East Europe**

## ABOUT THE OECD SOUTH EAST EUROPE REGIONAL PROGRAMME

The [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) is a unique forum where governments work together to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of globalisation. The OECD provides a setting where governments can compare policy experience, seek answers to common problems, identify good practices and work to co-ordinate domestic and international policies.

Since 2000, the [OECD South East Europe Regional Programme](#) (SEERP) has been closely collaborating with economies of the region to foster growth, investment and employment through reforms that support competitiveness and private sector development. The Programme addresses regional and national needs, capacities and reform priorities while translating OECD standards and good practices into actionable recommendations for the six Western Balkan economies (WB6).

## WHAT IS THE CONFERENCE ABOUT?

Over the past two decades, SEE has made significant strides in economic growth and in their journey towards economic convergence with the EU. The average GDP (PPP) per capita of Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania nearly doubled, reaching EUR 30 158 in 2022. This brought the average for these three countries to 68% of the EU average, up from 40% in 2000.

In the six Western Balkan economies (WB6) during the same period, the average GDP per capita increased by 79%, rising from EUR 9 384 to EUR 16 790. However, despite these advancements, the GDP per capita in the Western Balkans still lags, standing at slightly over one-third (38%) of the EU and OECD averages. Although this marks an 11-percentage point increase from 2003, when the region stood at only 27% of EU levels, it underscores the considerable ground the region must cover to achieve full economic convergence.

The OECD's [Economic Convergence Scoreboard for the Western Balkans 2023](#) found that persistent policy challenges remain across five policy clusters (business environment, skills, infrastructure, greening and digitalisation), hindering the convergence efforts.

Drawing on the findings of the OECD's flagship report [Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024](#), the high-level conference will examine policy pathways to boost competitiveness for economic and social wellbeing. This conference aims to delve deeper into policies that will accelerate the region's socio-economic convergence towards the OECD and EU in support of more resilient, sustainable, and prosperous societies.

## HOW IS THE EVENT STRUCTURED?

The high-level conference will open with the launch of the fourth edition of the [Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024](#), alongside the related [Western Balkans Competitiveness Data Hub](#) that will, for the first time, present the results on an interactive online platform complementing the report. The Data Hub will enable policymakers to easily assess and benchmark economic policy, ultimately facilitating policies that drive competitiveness and further convergence efforts.

**Two Ministerial Panels** will explore strategies aimed at facilitating the socio-economic convergence of the SEE region towards the EU and OECD. These sessions will provide a platform for dialogue, enabling distinguished panellists to discuss critical priorities and collaborate on overcoming future challenges affecting the SEE region.

## WHO WILL BE THERE?

The high-level conference will bring together Ministers in charge of foreign and economic affairs, high-level representatives from SEE, OECD and EU member countries, the European Commission, as well as from other international and regional partner organisations.

### Contacts

Mr Ali-Fuad Turgut  
Team Leader  
Tel: +33 1 45 24 99 88  
Email: [AliFuad.TURGUT@oecd.org](mailto:AliFuad.TURGUT@oecd.org)

Ms Linda Rubene  
Event Administrator  
Tel: +33 1 45 24 14 26  
Email: [Linda.RUBENE@oecd.org](mailto:Linda.RUBENE@oecd.org)

## HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON SOUTH EAST EUROPE

### DRIVING COMPETITIVENESS, ACHIEVING CONVERGENCE

OECD Conference Centre – CC Room 1

Wednesday, 26 June 2024

**09:00-09:30**     **REGISTRATION AND WELCOME COFFEE**

**09:30-09:40**     **WELCOMING REMARKS**

- **Mr. Ulrik Vestergaard Knudsen**, Deputy Secretary General, OECD

**09:40-10:30**     **OPENING SESSION**

**MODERATOR: Prof. George Pagoulatos**, Ambassador, Permanent Representative to the OECD, Chair of the Friends of South East Europe

**KEYNOTE SPEECH** (pre-recorded video remarks)

- **Mr. Mathias Cormann**, Secretary-General, OECD

**OPENING REMARKS**

- **Mr. Péter Szijjártó**, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- **Mr. Zdenko Lucić**, State Secretary for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs
- **Mr. Mathieu Bousquet**, Director, European Commission Directorate General for the Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR)
- **Ms. Majlinda Bregu**, Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council
- **Mr. Carlo Monticelli**, Governor, the Council of Europe Development Bank

**10:30-11:00**     **LAUNCH OF THE WESTERN BALKANS COMPETITIVENESS OUTLOOK 2024 REPORT AND THE DATA HUB**

- **Mr. Ulrik Vestergaard Knudsen**, Deputy Secretary General, OECD
- **Mr. Andreas Schaal**, Director, Global Relations and Cooperation, OECD Sherpa to the G7, the G20 and APEC, OECD



The *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook* is the flagship publication that offers an in-depth assessment across 15 policy areas key to bolstering economic competitiveness in the Western Balkans. The 2024 outlook is the fourth edition and comprises seven reports: one regional and six profiles for each Western Balkan economy. Each economy profile evaluates performance across each of the 15 policy dimensions, highlighting areas of progress as well as those requiring continued improvement. The regional profile presents findings for the whole Western Balkans across five policy clusters – *infrastructure and connectivity, skills, business environment, digital transformation and greening* – and seeks to evaluate the broader regional trends in these areas.

The 2024 edition is complemented with the *Western Balkans Competitiveness Data Hub* that showcases the progress of the economies, and the Western Balkans as a whole, over time and toward aligning with the OECD and EU standards. This online platform allows for improved visualisation, accessibility and dissemination of the assessment results. From 26 June 2024 onwards, please use this link [OECD-ilibrary](https://westernbalkans-competitiveness.oecd.org/) to access the Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024 regional profile and <https://westernbalkans-competitiveness.oecd.org/> to access the Western Balkans Competitiveness Data Hub.

**11:00-11:15**      **COFFEE BREAK**

**11:15-12:45**      **FIRST MINISTERIAL PANEL**

**Pathways for smart convergence to boost competitiveness**

Smart convergence leverages technology as a catalyst for enhanced productivity, by driving efficiency, innovation, and improving access to information, knowledge, and global markets. Among others, digital and emerging technologies help firms reduce the time and cost of their operations and provide them with new tools to design, produce, and sell goods and services. Additionally, these technologies offer individuals novel mechanisms for social and economic interactions. Investing in technology adoption and integration, alongside improving the access of the workforce to technology and necessary skills by reducing informality, offers a strong potential to increase the contributions to growth from both physical resources and human capital, thereby contributing to the economic convergence of the region.

### ***Objective***

This panel aims to catalyse a paradigm shift towards a more innovative, competitive, and digitally empowered economies. It will explore policy pathways for stimulating economic growth by leveraging technology, with an emphasis on increasing its adoption by governments, businesses, and citizens across the region. It will also discuss policies to promote formalisation, by addressing multiple challenges workers face – ranging from limited access to technology and skills to poor working conditions.

**MODERATOR: Mr. Gerhard Jandl**, Ambassador, Permanent Representative to the OECD

### **PANELISTS**

- **Mr. Nik Gjelošhaj**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Development
- **Ms. Sandra Dokić**, State Secretary of the Ministry of Environmental Protection
- **Mr. Luca Niculescu**, Secretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- **Mr. René Troccaz**, Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs
- **Mr. George Christopoulos**, Secretary General of the Finance and Economy Ministry
- **Dr. Slobodan Šešum**, Director-General, Directorate for Economic and Public Diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs
- **Mr. Christoph Denk**, Managing Director for Policy, Strategy and Delivery, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)
- **Ms. Maja Handjiska Trendafilova**, Director, Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA)

### ***Questions and answers***

**12:45- 13:00**

**FAMILY PHOTO**

**13:00- 14:30**

**NETWORKING LUNCH** Marshall Room, Chateau de la Muette

**14:30- 16:00**

**SECOND MINISTERIAL PANEL**

### **Sustainability as a driver for economic growth**

While economic convergence is critical to fostering prosperity and well-being of citizens, it is imperative that this convergence is not pursued at the expense of the environment. Embracing sustainable practices not only preserves ecosystems but also enhances resilience to shocks, ultimately contributing to long-term economic prosperity. It is equally imperative that policies promoting inclusiveness and addressing social aspects, such as empowering the most vulnerable communities and reducing income inequality, are pursued, so that economic convergence goes hand-in-hand with a sustainable economy. Therefore, the efforts to converge with EU and OECD standards present a unique opportunity for the Western Balkan economies to



implement structural reforms that harmonise economic convergence with both environmental sustainability and social inclusion objectives.

### ***Objective***

This panel aims to discuss the efforts towards increasing well-being of citizens in a sustainable manner. The panellists will explore ways to support a resilient economy focused on long-term economic growth that simultaneously supports inclusiveness and environmental efforts. The panel will also examine the challenges associated with sustainable convergence and provide insights into the good practices necessary for effectively overcoming these obstacles.

**MODERATOR:** **Ms. Christina Kokkinakis**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the OECD, UNESCO and to the Principalities of Andorra and Monaco

### **PANELISTS:**

- **Ms. Rozeta Hajdari**, Minister of Industry, Entrepreneurship and Trade
- **Mr. Blendi Gonxhja**, Minister of Economy, Culture and Innovation
- **Mr. Manuel Sarrazin**, Special Representative for the Western Balkans
- **Mr. Jakub Wiśniewski**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs
- **Ms. Colleen Hyland**, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary
- **Mr. Matteo Rivellini**, Head of Division, Western Balkans and Türkiye, European Investment Bank (EIB)
- **Ms. Pranvera Kastrati**, Head of Programme Department, Regional Cooperation Council
- **Mr. Matej Zakonjšek**, Director, Transport Community Permanent Secretariat

### ***Questions and answers***

16:00-16:30

### **CLOSING REMARKS**

- **Ms. Christina Kokkinakis**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the OECD, UNESCO and to the Principalities of Andorra and Monaco
- **Prof. George Pagoulatos**, Ambassador, Permanent Representative to the OECD, Chair of the Friends of South East Europe
- **Mr. Ulrik Vestergaard Knudsen**, Deputy Secretary General, OECD



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