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**Joint Declaration from the business community and civil society on the Regional Investment Reform Agenda (RIRA)**

We the representatives from 18 business chambers, economic think tanks and civil society organizations from the 6 Western Balkan economies gathered in Skopje to discuss the challenges and opportunities that the Regional Investment Reform Agenda brings to the Western Balkan region.

**We acknowledge** that the people and businesses from the region demand economic reforms, development, improvement of quality of life, better and more job opportunities. They are calling for greater civic participation in public affairs, in policy development and seeking ways to make their governments more responsive, accountable, and effective in pursuing economic reforms.

**We recognize** that countries are at different stages in their efforts to attract investments, and that each of the 6 economies pursues an individual approach consistent with the national priorities and circumstances.

**We accept**the regional investment reform agenda (RIRA) as an opportunity and take seriously the responsibility for seizing this moment to strengthen cooperation between our countries, and between civil society, business and the government to make RIRA a success story which will create value for the societies and citizens in the Western Balkans.

Together, **we declare our commitment** to:

**Work on putting the regional agenda higher on the policy agenda for all the governments**

Political instability, corruption and weak legal systems are the main obstacles for attracting investors to the region. A resolute political engagement in practice, not only in words is needed to eradicate these systemic issues and establish solid foundations for attracting and retaining foreign investments. Civil society and business need to become partners of government, recognized stakeholders in the regional policy dialogue on investment reforms. The business community has developed networks and invaluable first-hand experience in the practical implementation of investment measures which should be leveraged to better inform regional investment policies. In addition, the expertise of the civil society in terms of policy research and awareness-raising should be used to ensure evidence-based, transparent and efficient policy making and to strengthen the link between government policies and their target groups.

**Participate actively in development of national and regional investment policies**

Strategies, legislation, and other policy instruments need to be developed in participatory processes. Consulting draft legislation with business and civil society is not enough. Civil society and business need to be included in working groups that determine policy options and assess their impact. Drafting legislation in line with EU standards and practices needs to go hand in hand with solid enforcement mechanisms in order to tackle the informal economy which harms fair competition and undermines prospects for socio-economic development. In addition, new enforcement mechanisms need to be designed and implemented to ensure the smooth implementation of the CEFTA agreement and its additional protocols. Policy certainty and continuity, especially for regional policies should not be affected by changes in government.

**Support the development of a regional investment attraction strategy and institutional framework for its implementation**

The region possesses untapped potential in valuable resources, such as natural, energy and human resources above all. This potential should be put forward to attract new investors. A regional investment attraction strategy needs to be designed, along with an appropriate action plan. It should be based on the identification of key industries for the regional economic integration, such as renewable energy, IT, food and agriculture and tourism. In order to make the economies more complementary, additional research needs to be conducted to identify and support the development of unique brands in each economy that will be promoted as regional brands and unique products to be integrated into the European and global value chains. The waste economy needs to be explored as a new avenue as well. Such pre-defined criteria need to be used as basis to target and approach specific investors. This process could be facilitated with the creation of a regional investment agency that will be also tasked with developing a positive regional narrative in order to break up with stereotypes and negative associations about the region.

**Advocate for regional development priorities: transport, education, innovation, digitization**

Regional infrastructure development should rank among the top government priorities, along with the creation of regional transportation hubs. Cooperation with relevant key stakeholders needs to be facilitated to put focus on education and innovation. One stop shop for imports needs to be established in each economy. Streamlining and digitizing of procedures needs to be accelerated and taxes and custom duties need to be reevaluated in order to ease the burden for doing business.

**We acknowledge** that the regional investment reform agenda is a process that requires ongoing and sustained commitment. We commit to reporting publicly on actions undertaken to realize commitments from this declaration, to consulting with the public and other stakeholders in our countries and in the region, and to updating our commitments in light of new challenges and opportunities.

**We pledge** to lead by example and contribute to advancing the regional investment reform agenda by sharing best practices and expertise and by undertaking the commitments expressed in this declaration on a non-binding, voluntary basis. Our goal is to foster innovation and spur progress, and invigorate cooperation that will promote the region as an attractive destination for investment.

