

FOREWORD EU

INTRODUCTION

It is with genuine conviction that I pen this foreword to the 2025 edition of the White Book, a landmark publication by the Foreign Investors Council (FIC), one of the most authoritative voices of the international business community in Serbia. Since 2003, the White Book has not only represented a barometer of the country's business climate but also a platform of constructive dialogue between the private sector and public authorities. Each year, it highlights where progress has been made and where effort must be renewed, offering an honest and practical roadmap for Serbia's business environment. This year's edition comes at a moment of renewed opportunity — when the European Union is bringing the Western Balkans closer than ever to its heart.

THE NEW MOMENTUM

The European Union's message to Serbia and to the Western Balkans is clear: your future lies within our Union, and that future begins now. Every country that has joined the EU has experienced profound economic transformation. EU membership is not just a political destination — it is an engine of growth. Over the last three decades, countries that embraced reform and integration have seen their economies double or even triple in size, unemployment fall dramatically, and living standards rise.

The same path now lies ahead for Serbia. The Growth Plan is designed precisely to turn this growth potential into reality. It links financial support and gradual access to parts of the EU's Single Market with tangible progress on reforms — from the business environment, to the green and digital transitions, to human capital, to fundamentals. Reform is the foundation of prosperity: the stronger the institutions, the more predictable the business environment and the greater the investment.

GROWTH PLAN, SINGLE MARKET, AND SEPA — REAL BENEFITS FOR SERBIA

Under the Growth Plan, Serbia stands to benefit directly from deeper economic integration with the EU. Access to key segments of the Single Market will open opportunities for Serbian companies to trade and invest with a market of 500 million consumers. Serbia's expected entry into the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) will allow individuals and

businesses to make euro payments across borders as easily and cheaply as at home — a practical and symbolic step in Serbia's economic Europeanisation.

These are not distant promises but real, measurable opportunities that depend on reforms being implemented here and now. Every step towards the EU brings new investment, better connectivity, and greater confidence from businesses that seek stability and fairness.

The EU's vision for the Western Balkans is not about assistance — it is about partnership and shared competitiveness. Serbia is already part of this forward-looking agenda spanning from innovation to sustainability and resilience of supply chain.

- In innovation, the EU is opening its network of AI Factories to the region. We are starting by setting up two Factory Antennas, one of them in Serbia. And we are rolling out a high-speed digital backbone across the whole region. It will allow companies in all six Western Balkan countries to connect with these factories, allowing local start-ups and companies to develop and deploy next-generation technologies using Europe's computational infrastructure. In other words, our technology will be at your service, and you will be at its core.
- In clean energy, the EU is investing together with Western Balkan partners to build a new, interconnected energy backbone — supporting renewable energy generation, storage, and transmission. Serbia's role as a regional hub for energy production and trade will be crucial for our collective energy independence and competitiveness. Reliability and solidarity are underlying principles of this partnership, especially in the time of crisis. We have concrete projects in motion for Serbia. The Trans-Balkan Power Corridor, for example, linking Serbia's grid with its neighbours and with the EU, as well as the Serbia-Bulgaria gas interconnector. And we are prepared to invest further in it. We also invited Serbia to join the EU's joint gas procurement mechanism to avert energy crises and foster energy security. Because together we are stronger.
- In industrial value chains, Serbia's industries — from batteries and pharmaceuticals to advanced manufacturing — are linked into Europe's production networks. The goal is clear: to bring Serbia inside the EU's industrial policy and strengthen our collective resilience.

Together, these initiatives aim to double the region's GDP in the next decade — a realistic ambition if reforms are sustained and integration continues.

REFORMS AS THE CORNERSTONE OF GROWTH

Sustainable growth cannot exist without trust in institutions and predictability in policy. That is why reforms remain at the heart of Serbia's European path. Serbia's potential is undeniable. Its skilled workforce, strategic location, and strong entrepreneurial base provide a solid foundation for growth. Yet to unlock this potential fully, predictability and the rule of law must always underpin economic policy.

Businesses — both domestic and foreign — need predictability, clarity on regulations, fairness in competition, and trust in institutions. Transparent public administration, independent oversight bodies, and consistent enforcement of laws are not only democratic principles but also the best guarantees of investment security and true economic assets.

The White Book continues to play an invaluable role in this process. It provides detailed, data-driven recommendations that translate directly into better conditions for investment and growth. I commend the FIC for preserving

its high standards clarity and professional rigor, being a solid bridge between businesses' real problems and policy solutions that can make a difference. I value this partnership with the business community, which helps ensure that reforms are grounded in real-world needs and implemented with consistency.

LOOKING FORWARD

The European Union remains Serbia's largest investor, trading partner, and reform supporter — and the opportunities ahead are greater than ever. With the Growth Plan, access to SEPA, participation in the Single Market, and integration into Europe's green, digital, and industrial transformations, Serbia is closer than ever to the tangible benefits of membership.

Our message is simple: the future of Serbia and the Western Balkans is within our Union — and the time to invest, reform, and grow is now.

At every step that Serbia takes towards our Union, new opportunities will emerge. And the business has a central role to play. Your perspective is vital. Therefore, this 2025 White Book should serve as both a reflection and a call to action — to deepen reforms, unlock new investment, and bring Serbia ever closer to a European future of shared prosperity, innovation, and resilience.

Sincerely,

Andreas von Beckerath