

Distinguished guests, dear colleagues, dear friends,

On behalf of the entire Mykolas Romeris University academic community, it is my great honor and pleasure to open this already traditional International Scientific Conference on the Economies of the **Balkan** and Eastern European Countries (EBEEC 2024). Welcome to our **University community**, our vibrant **capital city Vilnius**, welcome to **Lithuania!**

Our conference, focused on people-centered economic recovery, brings together researchers from various countries and disciplines. Together with our esteemed partner, the **International Hellenic University**, we are opening a forum for meaningful discussions and insights into their important research and experiences in **resilience, sustainability, and social progress**.

Since the first conference in 2010 (EBEEC 2010), much has changed. Since then, many changes have occurred in the Baltic countries, the Balkans, and throughout Europe and the world. One of the most important factors of our development and progress is the fact that we have been members of the European Union and NATO for already 20 years, reaching the average level of well-being of the EU population. Despite all the difficulties, my generation has experienced a real "golden age" of European integration.

This year the World Happiness Report ranked Lithuania as the happiest country for Generation Z (zi) and millennials. Even in the face of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine, and its socio-economic consequences, we have shown that it is possible to persevere in difficult times.

However, the threats have not disappeared; they are present not only in the Balkans and the Baltics but all over Europe and the world. This makes the discussions at this conference on resilience, sustainability, and progress particularly relevant. Deep and comprehensive scientific debates on resilient and secure economies, the benefits of sustainable governance initiatives, and the empowerment of digital transformations will contribute to solving the problems that concern us all.

In the face of global uncertainty, our societies and countries need **university communities** to be active agents of change, generating, supporting, and promoting sustainability and social innovations in collaboration with all individuals and institutions that can contribute to solving identified social problems. By investing our greatest asset—our intellectual capital—in finding collaborative solutions to today's challenges, we can create the social innovations that society needs as much as technological innovations.

I believe that this event is more than just a conference. It is a great platform for international strategic networking and the co-creation of knowledge for the sake of our common future.

In closing, I would like to encourage all of us to face life's challenges and seek the most efficient, goal-oriented solutions. Let's work together to create resilient, peaceful, prosperous, and fairer societies for ourselves and future generations.

I hope that your brief tour of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, will help you discover the many common features of our history, culture, and contemporary life. It is highly beneficial for scientists and researchers to step out of the office after intense brainstorming sessions and dive into the streets to observe people's everyday lives.

Once again, I congratulate all our friends, speakers, and participants of this conference. I wish you inspiring presentations, thought-provoking discussions, and a very warm welcome to Lithuania, Vilnius, and Mykolas Romeris University.

Thank you for your attention.