

Interview of Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)
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European Union is Our Future, No Alternative

Young people need a change, a perspective, opportunity and they will thrive and our region together with them, says Majlinda Bregu for *Novi Magazin*, convinced that regional cooperation is key for progress

Balkans is traditionally, demographically, culturally, etc. Europe. Still, politically, it will take some hard work, reforms, changes of behaviour, diplomacy, and many other things to get there. Let's not be fooled by narratives that frequently dominate our regional media suggesting that EU might fall apart due to their 'disagreements', lack of unanimity in decision-making. The EU is a big family of 27 nations. Unanimous agreement on all issues is difficult to achieve but that is exactly the strong suit of this Union – each economy keeps the right to protect its own interests within it (be it economic, cultural, social), yet not disabling the functioning of their joint 'machinery', and this continues to exist, says Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) for *Novi Magazin*.

Agreeing on things that are obviously beneficial to all – things to do with economic prosperity, she explains, not invading individual sense of pride, tradition, identity here, with us, counting the region of only 6 economies, seems to be a 'mission impossible': "Moving forward seems to be the hardest step. With few exceptions, I must say, but just enough to confirm the rule. With the important achievements and even crucial differences among WB6, still democratic societies, regional cooperation and economic growth are intertwined with the EU accession progress. As the agendas of regional cooperation build up in intensity and challenges, we daily witness that the process of cooperation among WB6 cannot afford a stalemate. European perspective of the Western Balkans is the engine that can make the process of cooperation beneficial to all in a long-term," emphasises Bregu and adds that one needs to be frank - when we sum everything up, we come to the fact that the EU is our future, no alternative.

The environmental issue is gaining importance in our region. Pollution in one economy means pollution in neighbouring economies too. How can the region act in such cases?

As people living here we are not taking pride in being among the most polluted regions in Europe, and wider even. People are aware of climate changes and effects they have on their lives. Citizen's awareness on pollution has increased - 91% of WB citizens see climate change as a problem, and 93% say it too for pollution. As for businesses, 55% say pollution reduction should be a priority for our region's Green Agenda, and 41% see reduction of energy

consumption as a priority. People begin to realise this it is not a race after the high European standards, but actually a race against devastating droughts, floods, premature deaths, and so on.

When it comes to climate change and environmental protection – politics and administrative borders have no meaning here and hence, our approach to protection of it should be common, with no hesitation. To have quality lives here and leave it to future generations we must respect the fact that we are reliant on common water resources and share the same land for agriculture, tourism and for ensuring our well-being. Only through a joint regional approach and harmonisation of policies can climate change adaption and decarbonisation be truly effective.

A positive step in that direction is the fact that the six leaders of the region recognise this issue, as seen in their commitment to the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The RCC stands ready to facilitate its implementation. We are all aware that the transition to green will not happen overnight and will not be cheap. It is, however, inevitable. So the region counts on frontloading and expediting significant pre-accession funds dedicated to the Green Agenda.

Is the EU perspective still out there for the Western Balkans?

I'll start off with RCC's Balkan Barometer 2021 findings once more to reiterate what this public and business opinion survey showed: 62% of Western Balkan (WB) citizens support European Union (EU) membership and that number is on the rise every year – in 2016 it was 39% (in Serbia it was 21% and now is double, 42%) - despite or because of everything that is happening around us. From the region's unpreparedness, bilateral issues, stagnation of economic progress, to Brexit, pandemic, and EU's own reluctance towards enlargement, or to be precise reluctance of some EU members. Everything is interconnected.

Whenever there is strong EU leverage, our region responds with a steady progress. When the leverage is loose and weak, we tumble into our own same, old issues or turn towards the 'other kids from the block'. But the EU is still by far the region's preferred trade partner, with 73% of WB citizens saying so. WB was first presented with the opportunity to join the EU at the 2001 Thessaloniki Summit and the EU has still a commitment to be met. True, methodologies, criteria and deadlines are constantly tweaked and adjusted to the developments, but the commitment remains and the EU officials keep reiterating it.

Do you think the EU is still interested in WB economies becoming part of the Union? Or their resistance to accepting new members has grown over the years?

I do believe so. It can't be denied that a weak Western Balkans makes the EU weak too. But a lot is being said each day by both the EU and Western Balkans leaders. The truth is that the enlargement has become a lot more brutal. In times when geostrategic shifts are taking place across the globe, the impasse of Western Balkans EU accession is never a good news. The scale of problems in the Western Balkans is a call to go beyond nudges and patches. Western Balkans is part of Europe, and is of the vital importance in this political realism. The need for Europe is as powerful as it is unsatisfied.

What is your assessment of thus far regional response to global crisis caused by coronavirus pandemic?

If you ask me, the regional cooperation is the only way to go. It became the *mantra* of all the efforts undertaken recently as a response to the pandemic crisis. The pandemic has hit us hard and the Western Balkan economies are still recovering from the COVID-19 recession with a pace faster than expected in 2021. According to some forecasts, the outlook for the region has improved significantly, with GDP growth now projected to reach 5.9% in 2021, after a 3.1 percent contraction in 2020. Growth in the region is projected at 4.1% in 2022 and 3.8% in 2023.

Nonetheless, the pandemic has been a great lesson for all of us. It opened new avenues of opportunities by revealing our shortcomings – weak healthcare systems and lack of any readiness in terms of resilience, vaccine deployment. Neglect of the improvements in healthcare systems across the region is costing lives so cooperation in this sector to build up mechanisms for joint response, resilience and preparedness is crucial.

In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic outbreak, the region has demonstrated its strength in responding to the challenges. Back in the days, with the disaster threatening, the region was left without medical kits, proper COVID-19 medical uniforms, equipment/ventilators, protocol of recovery, doctors and nurses, so we needed to do something. And do it quickly. I am proud to say that RCC coordinated a prompt reaction between WB6, EC, and with the prominent work done by TCT and CEFTA, to establish Green Lanes for food and medical equipment; it worked out surprisingly well.

What we are now trying to do is to extend this regional response to other areas under Common Regional Market (CRM). The CRM is in complementarity with EU recovery efforts, its firm anchoring in the Economic and Investment Plan of the European Commission that aims to mobilise up to EUR 9 billion of IPA III funding for the period 2021-2027 to support economic convergence with the EU primarily through investments and support to competitiveness and inclusive growth, sustainable connectivity, and the twin green and digital transition. It is, therefore, a stepping-stone to integrate the region more closely with the EU Single Market.

The entire region lacks labour force because of its workers going to the EU; how to protect the rights of workers that are increasingly more moving around the region for work?

What's missing in Europe is being fulfilled by newcomers to their labour markets and the same applies for us, here in the Balkans and this is only the natural turn of events. Our people are leaving in pursuit for better living and working conditions and people are coming to the region where these conditions are better than where they come from. This pretty much explains our constant appeal for urgent action in economic and social policies and practices. It all boils down to acting fast to ensure better conditions, more and decent jobs in the region, primarily for our youngsters but also to professionals and labour in general to make them stay and contribute to betterment of their own labour markets, our economies. The Common Regional Market in its essence is all about it, so to answer your question – yes, of course it can help. The aim is to

create opportunities for all those unemployed, idle, inactive, socially excluded, underpaid, under-skilled, etc. so they would have a chance in their own societies instead of leaving to work abroad.

But it's not just CRM action; it's also aligning with Europe's standards and policies, alike those in employment and social protection domain (European Pillar of Social Rights for example or Youth Guarantee initiative), initiatives tackling undeclared work, occupational safety and health, that can help advance creation of new employment opportunities and fair treatment of the workforce. The idea of EU-accession is exactly the way to achieve that – CRM is a tool on that journey. But in its core, aligning with the EU means ensuring better policies and measures to protect workers, both domestic and foreign working in the region. It means strengthening domestic institutions with laws, regulations and adequate tools to enforce these higher standards.

All these measures already exist in Europe (not saying that Europe is perfect in applying all those but numbers show that they are much more efficient), so living up to the EU standards would drastically improve situation in the region as well. In the 1st quarter of 2021 employment in WB region was 49.1% (compared to 66.8% in the EU in the same quarter); unemployment rate was 17.1%, which is more than double the EU rate (7.9%); labour market participation was also lower than in the EU – WB=60.1%; EU=72.9% in 2020. On top of that, youth unemployment in 2020 was 35.1% (EU=16.8%). There is also very evident mismatch between labour market demand and offer and extremely high rate of young people who are neither in Employment, Education or Training or the so-called NEETs, which is 23.7% (EU rate=11.1%). Undeclared work in WB ranges from 18% to very high 30%, which clearly calls for immediate action to detect it, act upon it and find ways to transition undeclared into declared work for benefits of the workers themselves but also public funds in all the economies.

Youth without future

Surveys show that young people in all WB economies are conservative and more prone to radical right; why is this so and what is being done wrongly

Young people are looking for the solutions and unless occupied with something creative and constructive (as jobs or education) they tend to explore all available options. It is especially the case in the environment where youth is unemployed (and in WB unemployment is 35%) or idle (WB rate of youth neither in employment, education or training is 23.7%) with plenty of time on their hands, access to internet and natural youth curiosity. When they realise that systems in which they live offer no solution, they challenge it and explore further, trying to find their place under the sun.

According to Balkan Barometer, 62% of young people in our region see inadequate employment opportunities as their biggest problem; 93% of them think public administrations should strengthen mechanisms for consulting and involving young people in decision-making.

Still, definitely the most striking data is that 61% of region's young people are considering living and working abroad! Which is more than 2 million young people who are just waiting to leave, besides the ones who have already left, and it is a potential loss that our region would not bear.

This paints the picture pretty well. Connecting the dots is now easy - mistrust in the government institutions, inadequate employment opportunities and wish to leave the region for a better future, going extremely right and radicalisation can seem as a straw of salvation. Hence the fear of 70% of Western Balkans citizens afraid that their children or young relatives might be

radicalised online. Under-delivered political promises and lack of action are taking their toll. Luckily, the process is not irreversible – these are young people we are talking about, prone to change and adjust as soon as given the alternative that would engage them and give them a sense of self-worth.

Do you believe that the issue of region's brain drain could be resolved through a joint effort in education?

I read recently that 85.000 people, mostly young ones, left Bosnia and Herzegovina just from the beginning of this year. I suspect the situation is pretty much similar in the entire region. And that is terrifying. It's not a mystery that the reasons that make people leave the region are not exclusively economic in nature. We've seen many personal testimonials confirming that it is much more than that – lack of employment opportunities, unfavourable education outcomes, unreliable services, lack of rule of law, corruption, social insecurity, lacking health system, etc. So, it has to be treated from many different aspects. Lack of employment opportunities is closely linked to education-labour market offer and demand (skills mismatch). To this end the RCC is dedicating much of its time and efforts in implementing regional agenda in education to increase integration of the WB in the European Higher Education Area and European Education Area, including establishment of the Regional Innovation Area and Regional Digital Area. This stems from the Western Balkans commitment to implement the Common Regional Market, particularly Free Movement of People component, based on the EU four freedoms.

Recognition of professional qualifications and diplomas in all WB6 is also a part of the CRM Action Plan. The same applies for mutual recognition of higher education and academic qualifications that the RCC facilitates. But not just this - CRM envisages traveling across the WB with ID cards only as recognition of diplomas and qualifications does not make sense if we still need visas in the region. Our region will go nowhere without young, smart, educated people and we must, and I say **must** deliberately, find a way to give them an incentive to stay. Not just through diplomas and qualifications recognition, but through everything. Better, more 21-century friendly education, better jobs, youth guarantee, better future prospects of our economies, including them more actively into decision-making, entice and reward innovation and good work, etc. We try to contribute to this through all our areas of cooperation, from our Youth Lab project to ourselves. Over the past 3 years we have hired so many young people that our firm is getting younger by the day.

Young people need a change, a perspective, opportunity and they will thrive and our region together with them.

The situation is changing in media, but not for better

Are you concerned with the current state of play in media in the region and Can development of regional media contribute to increasing media freedom in individual economies?

Even though this is not exactly the topic RCC is working on at the moment, it is very close to me. I have started my career in media, and once in media, always in media. I see the situation is changing but not necessarily for the better. Not just in our region but globally as well. The fake news phenomenon that came with the expansion of social media is not helping either. All is 'just a click away' but differentiating true from false became a demanding discipline, on top of ever-so-present control over media that persistently exists.

But, we shouldn't forget the fact that we earned all our freedoms the hard way. So freedom of speech and freedom of media is very precious. I do now know if regional cooperation is enough to turn the situation but it certainly can contribute. What we are doing to help in this demanding task is promoting credible sources of information, cyber security, raising awareness about fake news. This is a hard labour of educating audiences but every effort builds up on the empowerment of the citizen's scale.