

## Western Balkans and the EU2020

### Growth is badly needed

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“We have to take a longer view towards the EU2020 goals”, said Hido Bišćević, Secretary General for the Regional Cooperation Council last week in Brussels. The Council arranged a two-day conference on how to gear the Western Balkans towards achieving the EU’s aims of convergence and growth set for this decade.

“The Western Balkan economies had a rough ride in the crisis”, Bišćević said, recalling that the Western Balkan countries were the fastest growing before the crisis. “But now they have slumped to slowest growing in the world and 240,000 jobs have been lost.”

The Regional Cooperation Council fears that the trend of growing unemployment will be difficult to reverse. In some countries, such as Bosnia and Serbia, the unemployment figures are up by 6,5%. “The resulting structural problems means that failing to act now will lead to severe problems in the future. The current political state-of-play is full of conflicts, institutional fragility and social problems”, Bišćević said. He warned of the democratic framework in the region being under pressure by rising poverty, saying that should serve as a wake-up call for the need for urgent economic recovery.

Commenting on the prospects for EU accession, Bišćević said ironically it has become a ‘moving target’. The EU’s economic development aims for this decade are formally not part of the accession criteria for the Western Balkans, but the European Commission encourages the candidate countries to embrace the EU2020-agenda. In the past year, the Regional Cooperation Council has strived to promote the emergence of a regional electricity market and common transport and health policies.

Michael Leigh, the Commission’s Director-General for Enlargement, was cautiously optimistic in his address to the Western Balkans delegates convened in Brussels last week.

“We have witnessed unthinkable developments in the EU’s relations to the region in the past year”, Leigh said. “We have the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, the Commission’s opinion on Serbia, Croatia on the finishing line for EU accession and Montenegro’s candidate status.”

Leigh said the Commission now works to address challenges to infrastructure, education and environment in practical terms.

“Inclusiveness is crucial for progress in the region”, Leigh said. “It is about participating in concrete actions and finding workable solutions.”

Freedom of opinion and expression in the Western Balkans will be promoted by a Commission conference in Brussels this summer.

“Media freedom has to be ensured”, Michael Leigh emphasized.

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