

## **Bregu: Zero roaming with the EU is possible by 2027**

**The EU perspective for the Western Balkans is no longer a date-centred process; the EU is changing, and maybe we should also change our perspective towards more realistic tasks, says the incumbent RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu in an interview with Radio Free Europe. On her successor, she says new challenges await him.**

South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) Chairpersonship-in-office is soon to be handed over from North Macedonia to Albania. Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) serves as an operating hand of the SEECP. Radio Free Europe (RFE) interviewed the incumbent RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu. She was the Acting Secretary General of the RCC in the last three years since the 13 members failed to reach a compromise on her successor. An agreement was finally reached in Skopje before the Summit of Heads of States and Governments and the newly appointed Secretary General is Amer Kapetanovic. Radio Free Europe discussed with Bregu her work as the head of RCC, projects implemented, common and similar problems of the countries in the region, as well as challenges awaiting her successor.

**Why are there so many processes for regional cooperation for the Balkans, such as the Open Balkans, the Berlin Process and many others?**

Maybe it was because everyone wanted to leave their mark in the Western Balkans or maybe the idea rose after the war in an attempt to put some pressure on everyone to cooperate more strongly together. But among all those cooperation processes, I think ours is the best.

## **What are the biggest common problems of the countries of the region?**

At times it is a lack of will to consider that regional cooperation can really bring benefits to the lives of citizens. One cannot see it and no one says it out loud, but sometimes it can be felt. It's the meaning and the pressure of the fact that everyone feels that we are such small economies out there. As such, the biggest interest is the partnership with important countries, with stronger economies, having bigger market, where investors are more serious, where one can find investors able to really bring a perspective and hire a large number of unemployed people.

So, that may be the thing, plus the requirement to be serious in maintaining and delivering on commitments. We have shown, time and again, that even when we make very serious commitments or promises, we deliver, we fulfil our obligation, in an environment where even with everything signed and/or approved on paper sometimes there is a problem in practice. Thus, I could only point this out as a problem that is quite common with regards to policy.

## **Is there enough political will in the countries of the region to really cooperate with each other?**

There have been changes regarding this issue. Perhaps the situation concerning the political will was tougher some years ago. Now there is more political will. All countries cooperate at different levels. The important fact is they cooperate at the regional level, meaning it's something they own. Thus, part of the cooperation is the joint work to build a common market in the region. The Common Regional Market is a task we coordinate with our partner organisations. We work together and collaborate to produce results as part of the Berlin Process. The importance of closer cooperation became a commonly shared awareness.

But, as mentioned, the problem often starts due to having a very small network. Such a level of competitiveness, with which we would like to partner with the largest players, sometimes makes cooperation difficult.

However, I must say that things are improving compared to the years before. And what adds extra value to this is that the citizens of the region increasingly appreciate regional cooperation every year. So, when we asked the citizens how they feel about regional cooperation and if they believe such cooperation can change their lives for the better, 80 percent said yes, and we've seen this figure increase from year to year.

But, as we've seen, unfortunately, when asking people today whether they believe that their respective country would soon become a new EU member state and when, what are the prospects, there is a decrease of 8% compared to 2021. The frustration and unkept promises regarding the enlargement process on the European side starts to have effects on citizens' perception.

**Some of the countries in this region are still having some bilateral issues. For the first time in years, a Greek minister comes to Skopje. Bearing in mind the bilateral problems North Macedonia has with Greece, what should we expect from this meeting and further cooperation?**

First of all, I do not comment on bilateral issues, and second, I am not a person who really wants to offer recipes to local politicians. They get the mandate, they get the votes, and once elected, they know how to deal with state issues or bilateral ones.

What I can see is that the set-backs in any of the WB countries will never help any of us in the region.

However, it is a big problem that we face, see and feel from time to time with the countries or economies in the region that have bilateral disputes.

The future is not bright for anyone. It is paved and coloured by conflicts everywhere. This is a small region. Our economies are less than 1% of the GDP of the European Union. Our children and youth are leaving in droves. There are

almost no new-borns anymore. The families get up and leave, and are getting smaller.

All this speaks of depopulation, high figures in migration. Less human capital at home, more brain-drain, which means less power towards the politicians to exercise or to encourage the right decisions and to make them accountable for the given votes given, which means less democracy in our countries.

But, what if we decide to respect our promises?

We won't leave this piece of land once we become member states, by carrying our countries on our shoulders and leaving them in the middle of Brussels. We will live here with our neighbours just as we have for years. And it is of the utmost importance that we do not only survive, but to thrive. Otherwise, there will be bigger problems down the road.

### **What is the perspective of the European Union for the countries of the Western Balkans?**

Last year there were some positive decisions, such as those regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina or the visa liberalisation with for Kosovans that was long overdue. The process of European integration took longer than any of the countries in the region expected.

All those dreamers in the first years of European integration are now citizens of the EU, but only because they decided to leave their countries. Not because their country or our countries became member states. Well, I'm not saying this for the first time. I said this years ago, even before I joined the Regional Cooperation Council.

It may be wise to perhaps slightly change the perspective, because in the wave of 2000-2010, those 10 years, we kept waiting for the EU to consider us, trying to behave just to convince that we merit to be the next in line.

So, we're good for you. We need to be a member state. Still, all we keep getting is corrections with all the deadlines, all the calendars, dates. Once it was said - 2014. Then again - 2020. What we have heard now, last year, the President of the European Council said 2030.

Although this process is no longer a matter of date, as the EU has changed. The world has changed. There are conflicts and they are getting the priority. Consequently, the problems have changed.

The United States have also changed. It is worth mentioning, whenever a strong European and transatlantic partnership is present locally, things usually work better.

The present issue is that we need to shift, to change our perspective, to change our way of thinking into something more realistic. There will soon be a new Commission and a new European Parliament. We don't know what the decisions will look like.

Perhaps those decisions would not be the ones we would like or they may be the kind that might help us in the process of EU membership. We are all aware of the stronger presence of right-wing parties in the European Parliament. We have to wait and see.

What we can have now is those policies that really help us towards joining the European Union or to keep our citizens in our countries with better living standards. Like the ones in the EU.

Let's take the example of the roaming agreement we made. Created to at one point enable to talk to each other and to our friends and relatives in the EU under the same tariffs they talk to each other. I mean, the EU member states among themselves.

Or the mutual recognition of professions. If the labour market in Belgrade lacks, for example, midwives while there's a surplus in Albania, in Tirana, people can easily move. They can go and work where the need is. Recognising diplomas as well, so that students don't have to face all the bureaucracies in our countries, run around and pay fees just to have their diplomas recognised.

What will help us now is to focus on improving standards, supported with some EU funds, with the goal being to fulfil those reform agendas that we have committed to in order to have better standards at home.

**What are the new challenges the newly appointed Secretary General of RCC Amer Kapetanovic will be facing? What is your message to him, from this point of view?**

Well, it's not that I've formulated any official message, because I keep texting him every day. We've been closely cooperating for six years, so I think it's all like an open book to him. What the RCC faced, what the RCC delivered, where the RCC was, where it is now, and then, hopefully, where the RCC will be in the near future and during his term in the office.

However, coming from a country like Bosnia and Herzegovina, there will be many challenges. First, to convince those "at home" to fulfil all the obligations, and to respect all the agreements that have been signed as part of the process, not only the Berlin Process, but also commitments made for regional cooperation and deeper integration. Second, to maintain the spirit of consensus that is present and omnipotent in the Regional Cooperation Council.

Then, working according to the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, by facing and approaching the Common Regional Market and the EU Single Market, as a task that should be implemented jointly with the European Commission and the member states.

Furthermore, the security challenges will be greater. I hope that RCC will get even more involved with them. We have already started during the lockdown and in the last two years since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

But as I said, the situation is changing day by day. RCC has a clear programme. It has the plan to bring the region closer, i.e. the countries closer to each other, as well as closer to the EU Single Market. As an insider, I'm convinced that with the commitment of the RCC team, as well as their knowledge and competences, there is no one who can really do it better than RCC. Together, as I keep repeating, with our local partners, with partner organisations and with the European Commission.

### **What is the most successful RCC project?**

There are many: the roaming, the mobility, the recognition of professions and diplomas, convincing people about the importance of Green Agenda, not only because it is an action plan signed on paper but because it's about tackling the pollution; the attempt to bring into focus the economic empowerment of women in the region. Agendas that are usually seen as soft-power agendas, but it is very important that this whole region understands that if women are not employed, if women are not strengthened economically, our economies will be poorer, and our economies will be less democratic. Further on, focusing on young people too, working and focusing on their mental health. With all these daily life novelties such as social media and the problems it has brought to our societies. So, a lot of things that I'm really proud of, and I think that is a great foundation for the next Secretary General.

### **When you mention roaming, when can citizens of this region expect the roaming free communication with the countries of the European Union?**

It should be borne in mind that this process cannot be done by force or upon order. One cannot order the business community to offer a price waiver for their service. Even the existing agreement, such as in the EU, is based on their goodwill.

So, the decision was theirs, we approached everyone, coordinated and managed to have a fair process for all telecom operators, for all 38 that participated in the story of the reduction of roaming costs. We helped to bring everyone together and positively inform them that the prices they kept for the citizens of the Western Balkans are incredibly high and unacceptable.

As a result, they significantly lowered the prices. According to our experts, they have even exceeded their promises. In the Declaration they promised they would start with the first 30% price reduction and would continue further from there. Some of them went with even more than 50% price reduction. There were few in Bosnia and Herzegovina that did even more so. Finally, more than 80% reduction by now. Let's not forget the summer packages, they always go further, always cheaper than the rest of the year.

So, this is expected to be a step-by-step process. Roaming like at home or zero roaming tariffs I hope will be possible by 2027. But like I said, I do not like dates. It can happen earlier. For me, it could happen tonight. But I am not a telecom operator.