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INTERVIEW

Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Majlinda Bregu for “Vijesti”

Vijesti: How do you assess current scepticism within the EU related to the enlargement and does it mean that the countries of the Western Balkans will not be joining the EU soon?

Bregu: The scepticism within the EU on enlargement is not a new thing – the enlargement fatigue has been around for quite some time now. The EU citizens seem wary to the new members, probably out of the fear of weakening the Union. Which, I believe to be unfounded and result of longstanding prejudices and misinformation or lack of it. It will take a lot of awareness rising from both EU Member States and us in the region to convince the sceptics the opposite – to show them that we deserve the title by walking the talk.

On the other hand, we have a new European Commission in place as of recently, and although they have a very demanding agenda for reinvigorating the Union, the President Ms van der Leyen was very clear in saying that the Western Balkans belong in Europe as we share the same continent, culture, history and destiny, and that the EU door is open for the region.

And we shouldn't fixate ourselves towards some date. The EU accession is much than that. It is about the process of getting there. About besting ourselves in that process. Even if we would be offered to access the Union tomorrow, we are not ready. For instance, Western Balkans economic growth trend was 3.5% in 2019, with the forecast of the grow to be 3.8 in 2020, yet the GDP per capita is still less than one third of the richest EU member state — Germany. And this is just one example. It is a lot of work ahead of us that needs to be done and at a faster pace than so far.

Ultimately, Europe is what Europeans make of it. It is an idea, a project, not a method. Let's widen the frame and enlarge the image of the Balkans.

Vijesti: Do you expect the proposal of France to be accepted and that criteria for accession to the EU would change? What would that mean for Montenegro specifically that has fared in the accession negotiations the most?

Bregu: The French non-paper seems to have grabbed a lot of attention and it is highly likely for it to become a skeleton for a new, updated accession criteria. We will see soon enough. But until then, regardless of its name, I personally (and I think our partners in the region would agree with me) expect a model that is clear and precise on what is expected from both sides, setting a ground for a fair, predictable process that all sides could rely on. It's time we end the pretences and stick to our promises and commitments. The no decision on opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania revealed the lack of clarity and ambiguity of the existing process.

And I am not going to hazard a guess on what will happen with the opening of negotiation talks with Albania and North Macedonia, or what the model will mean for all, Montenegro included, but I hope the lucidity will prevail in taking all decisions. Completion of Europe with Western Balkans is a duty, not a favour!

Vijesti: What slows the path of the Western Balkans to the EU the most? What are the problems that countries of the Western Balkans are not resolving?

Bregu: There isn't one particular thing that slows the region's progress on the EU path. But I would say that whenever there is a strong political will and determination to make the change, the region delivers. That is what we need the most.

As I said, the EU accession is a process, not a date, and the changes are needed, not just for the sake of fulfilment of the EU requirements but for us, living here and those that are leaving as well.

We are a small market – altogether around 18 million people and learning that 61% of young people (now I talk about the future) support EU integration but obviously are not ready to wait for changes in their societies to make it happen as also 61% of them are ready to leave their homes and go abroad in search of a better life. Addressing this is a priority. And to make that, we have to work together, leaving the past, disappointments, bitterness, disputes and regrets behind and turn the new page – for the youth that is coming. Make conditions for them to study, find jobs, travel, discover, settle, have families....make them feel that they can count on us.

Vijesti: What do you expect of the Croatian Presidency of the EU Council – will it help the Western Balkan countries?

Bregu: I expect a lot from the upcoming Croatian EU Council presidency in 2020, as well as the region. Croatia is the youngest EU Member State and the only one from the region that has joined the EU since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, when the European Council declared that “the future of the Balkans is within the EU”. I think that they understand the circumstances and will be on our side. However, we cannot expect Croatia, France or Germany for that matter to resolve our issues, perform the needed reforms, transform our societies. That is something that we must do ourselves – roll our sleeves up and do the job.

Vijesti: **There was an initiative on creation of a common Western Balkans market, which has failed. Now we have a new initiative – mini Schengen? Do you expect this initiative to live?**

Bregu: If you are referring to the Regional Economic Area as the initiative – it hasn’t failed. It is still on the scene although the timeline for reaching the results has been stretched. But still, the major achievement is Regional Roaming Agreement signed this April, according to which the prices of roaming have drastically dropped as of this summer and as of 2021 the Western Balkans will have no roaming charges amongst ourselves, and we’ll be working on reduction of roaming costs between the region and the EU. We also have

Regional Investment Reform Agenda (RIRA) in place and plans for promotion of a region as an attractive destination for investors. There are also plans to enable mutual recognition of professional and academic qualification across the region. Still, this plan, agreed by the WB leaders in 2017 is at the stage when it requires a ‘facelift’. The RCC, together with our partners in the region and the EU, is working on its updated version to include social dimension, women, youth, dimension for upskilling for contemporary labour markets, transition from informal to formal employment, security, etc. to reflect the realities of today as things have changed since 2017. And this is something that EU strongly supports.

The RCC is fully committed to regional cooperation. 74% of the citizens in the region believe in it. Regional cooperation, however, is a developing story. So Ohrid or Novi Sad or mini-Schengen initiative – however you call it, as an initiative aimed at dismantling of barriers in the region must be considered. Still, the regional cooperation makes sense only if the final destination is the EU integration, with all six economies on board. Will it live? Let’s wait and see.

Vijesti: **Montenegro has not accepted this initiative – do you think that this decision is good? What does Montenegro lose by rejecting the initiative?**

Bregu: President Djukanovic took part at the meeting in Tirana in December last year on the free movement initiative where he clearly stated that Montenegro is very committed to regional co-operation, adding that it will be a pleasure to continue to participate in these talks within the framework of this initiative in the future, and to contribute to the region of the Western Balkans to achieve its full European integration as soon as possible.

And to add up on that - regional cooperation is always useful, and with a strong political will, effective as well. Our citizens know it - 74% support it and believe it can improve their lives; European Commission knows it as it is one of the prerequisites for the region's EU accession path; the leaders in the region know it, therefore all efforts in this regard can only be a step forward but also a sign of the regional leaders' recognition, ownership of our commitments and credibility.

Vijesti: Is mini-Schengen just a replacement for the EU membership that is going to be waited for long?

Bregu: EU membership cannot be replaced with anything; therefore, I take this initiative as a step towards joining forces and dismantling existing barriers for trade, mobility of people, professionals, etc. goods, etc. and it should be viewed as such.

Regional cooperation in general is not a substitute for EU integration – it is a model of functioning of the Union. Since the EU integration is a common goal of all economies in the region, why not finally take it seriously and start taking advantages it has to offer.