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Jelica Minic: Candidate Status Realistic in 2011

Published: 12 January 2011 | Updated: 13 January 2011

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It is not unrealistic to expect Serbia to receive a candidate status for EU membership in 2011. The Hague Tribunal remains a prerequisite for this, while the pressures regarding the Hague Tribunal and Kosovo will continue to decrease and increase this year too. Resolution of the issue between Belgrade and Pristina is in the interest of both parties and international support is needed for its success. Serbia should be engaged more on realization of regional cooperation.

How realistic is it for Serbia to receive candidate status in 2011?

I believe this is not an unrealistic expectation. Of course, the Hague Tribunal is a known condition, but there has obviously been some progress in other areas, which have, if not explicitly then implicitly, appeared as conditions, such as Kosovo; thus, one of the prerequisites to master during this year will probably be cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. However, after the approval of candidate status for Montenegro, and having in mind that both Albania and Serbia applied for candidate status, I do not see any larger barriers for Serbia to receive the candidate status especially since high-scale preparations are being carried out within the European Commission for the period after receiving the candidacy. If Albania receives the candidate status in the same package as Serbia, this would mean that, except for BiH, almost all Western Balkan countries are candidates, thus having the new EU financial assistance lines within the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) opened... Secondly, it has been announced that sector approach will be used within the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance in the coming period. Countries are expected to define their sector strategies.

You have mentioned the Hague Tribunal as a condition for membership. Do you think there is a chance that the EU Council of Ministers approves candidate status without Mladic and Hadzic being apprehended?

There is this assessment of the amount of pressure. At the time when President (of the Government of Serbia Zoran) Djindjic was killed, the amount of pressure and expectations were excessive on all fronts at the same time. I believe this is fine tuning. Serbia was under tremendous pressure regarding Kosovo, and this problem was overcome. In order to overcome this problem easier, the leverage of European integration was increased and it was made possible for Serbia to apply for candidacy which, in a way, gave Serbia wings. Pressures regarding the

Hague Tribunal and Kosovo begin increasing or lessening in certain sequences and I believe this process will continue throughout the year. Of course, it also depends on how skilful the EU partners in Serbia are in this process. Therefore, there is the administration efficiency, the Hague Tribunal, Kosovo, relations with neighbours – several issues around which pressures will continually increase or decrease. In this operational area, Serbia has to function and demonstrate capacity to successfully manage all these issues.

Do you believe that presently there is room for essential dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo which would actually resolve some concrete issues such as living, movement of people, customs?

All stakeholders expressed readiness to have this dialogue initiated, to have the existing flows carried out in a transparent and regulated manner... In 2006 and 2007, I dealt with trade between Serbia and Kosovo. The trade at the time was largely unregistered. The statistical data that could be obtained from UNMIK and found in Serbia at that time were largely at variance. This is not the interest of Serbia or Kosovo authorities. We are talking about regulating all these areas from retirement insurance, various receivables, ownership issues, transport, energy, education, movement of people, documents, use of different funds that could be obtained for different projects and are now blocked. These are all issues where there is objective interest. Energy is also an important domain of joint interest. All this could ease living and enhance development of certain sectors both in Serbia and Kosovo if there is an agreed manner to work against while respecting that there are serious issues due to everything that had happened and that we should work with a lot of consideration, very carefully and with large international support. The support to any arrangement made should be of substance.

In which areas Serbia needs to work the most to be aligned with the EU standards?

Messages from Brussels are very explicit. Rule of law, efficiency of judicial bodies and institutions in general is a message sent more or less to all countries of the region, implying anti-corruption, efficiency of home affairs bodies and fight against organised crime. Thus, this package is one of very important prerequisites for further advancement and there are observable results here, in particular in the work of police services in the entire region. However, one of the large obstacles is inadequate efficiency of judicial bodies; this is important both for businesses and quality of living as well as for general efficiency of institutions. Of course, there are other topics mentioned in the enlargement strategy published in November in Brussels. The region is invited, and thus Serbia as well, to follow not only the most actual issues and alignment in the area of enlargement but also the vision of Europe and this is (Strategy) Europe 2020, a 10-year vision extending the Lisbon agenda – it is a society based on knowledge and innovations, a society that will develop green economy which will save energy and be competitive.

How is Serbia to accomplish this if it is lagging behind in the area of EU standards?

Sometimes, in a long evolution process, steps can be skipped. Countries coming into the scene later can accelerate the process by skipping some of the sequences or accelerating development in certain timelines using the lessons learned from others. This is expected from the entire region – and not to go down the slow evolution path that everyone else passed. In this sense, the challenges are much larger. Each new wave of countries faces a larger package of challenges, the countries that aspire to integrate into the EU. Another important topic is social inclusion of territorial units that are lagging behind and marginalised social groups. Employment rate is expected to be much higher. Thus, Serbia has to define its social agenda as well. There is also infrastructure that should be developed without endangering the environment, with an integrated approach, so that all infrastructure segments are developed simultaneously, and that no segment puts the other at risk. These are very demanding processes and this should be debated.

It is very good that a group of experts came out with a vision of Serbia after the crisis, (Development Strategy) Serbia 2020. Of course, it does not need to be perfect but it is important to open both social and political debate on this topic, and finally start competing around our visions of future rather than around our interpretations of the past. It is a good sign of the recovery of society. Thus, a new vision is one of the main challenges for Serbia.

Do you believe Serbia is doing enough to combat corruption, reform judiciary and fight organised crime? As we can see, Romania and Bulgaria, though entered the EU, are still encountering these problems.

These are societies that find themselves in a similar situation regardless of the fact that Romania and Bulgaria have become EU member states. They have many issues similar to ours and no wonder there are numerous projects of regional character in which, in addition to Western Balkan countries, both Romania and Bulgaria participate. Of course, this is one of the key areas where large advancement will be needed and as we can see from the developments in the broader region where large number of corruption affairs are opened whose actors are from high political levels, that this, I believe, will be one of the topics where neither Serbia will be bypassed. This is, as journalists say, “great cleansing” in the region and, having in mind that this is explicitly mentioned as a problem in all countries of Western Balkans, including Serbia, much larger engagement of both administration and political stakeholders, as even citizens themselves, is expected.

What are the biggest issues of regional cooperation thus far and who precedes today, economic or political cooperation?

For a long time, political cooperation was lagging behind numerous processes which were already underway in the areas of economy, education, science, police cooperation. Political cooperation was in a way an obstacle to all other normal processes that began in the region.

There was a big advancement in 2010, so the gap between economic and political cooperation, as well as cooperation in number of other areas, was reduced.

How do you assess development of relations between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina?

It would be good that Serbia cooperates with Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, and that this cooperation is not solely focused on the Republika Srpska entity. The assumption is that after the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there will be a relaxation of atmosphere on the BiH scene, thus facilitating more intensive networking with partners throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a very important economic partner for Serbia as is Serbia for BiH. It is very important to bring this cooperation to a higher level. Owing to CEFTA Agreement and South East Europe Investment Committee, there is an opportunity for enhancement of industrial cooperation in the region, so that this is not solely an exchange of agricultural and primary products, and some semi-manufactured goods, but intra-industrial cooperation. Namely, to have joint products of the region emerging, where industrial capacities of a country provide a part of the production process. This facilitates a diagonal accumulation of origin, and we are thus joining the same process as the EU and we will have regional products.

It is important to (...) provide some value added products and processes, and not only those primary ones. Adequate labour force which is qualified, trained and follows labour market demands is needed for this. We say we have well trained and cheap labour force. This is only relatively true as there are large gaps in labour markets. There is a hyperproduction in some segments and complete lack in other. This will need some tailoring both at the regional level as well as at the level of Serbia. The perspective lays in greater opening of labour markets in the entire region. Each year, Montenegro advertises for tourism workers, engineers, qualified workers it needs. When this becomes common in the region, it will be easier to overcome the gaps and qualified labour force will find job more easily. On the other hand, there will be adequate programs within the education of this labour force that will follow labour market demands in long run. This is a very important prerequisite for more serious foreign investments as foreign investors need adequate and not just any labour force.

Is there a risk of countries from the region holding each other back in European integration as was the case with Croatia and Slovenia, [The Former Yugoslav Republic of] Macedonia and Greece, which is still unresolved?

This will largely depend on the development of living processes and economic integration. When this happens, interest groups are formed to defend projects they participate in. Naturally, exporters in the region will be interested to see continuation of export, prevent some potential political issues of having adverse effect on economic actors in Serbia or vice versa. These processes are not carried out overnight. There are monopolists who are not interested in cooperation and are even prepared to take advantage of potential political issues that are

protecting them by closing the market. Overbalance of concrete interests is very important to be transposed to political level.

In addition to this, countries of the region are facing a big challenge to prepare themselves for using new forms of cooperation with the EU and new EU assistance lines. Serbia's aim should be to use European funds as better as possible. This represented a serious problem for new member states in the enlargement wave in 2004 and 2007 both before and after the accession. If the interest of concrete social, economic and political actors focuses on this, it will be easier to resolve bilateral issues between Western Balkan countries.

Brussels assessed that Serbia had advanced in the area of developing good neighbourly relations; what should Belgrade do now to further strengthen and develop these relations?

Declaratively, Croatia is not making many statements to the benefit of regional cooperation but practically, it is working a lot on this agenda. Six very important institutions and headquarters of regional initiatives are located in Croatia, four in BiH and four in [The Former Yugoslav Republic of] Macedonia. In fact, Serbia is somewhat lagging behind in this concrete manifestation of will to operationally support regional cooperation. South East Europe Transport Observatory is located in Serbia, it is not certain it will remain in Serbia, as well as a centre for control of small arms. Just recently, Serbia has undertaken an obligation to host a very important regional initiative for educational reform in South East Europe. It would be extremely good that Serbia demonstrates the capacity to provide full support to this initiative which countries of the regional are interested in. These are the challenges Serbia is facing today – to translate regional cooperation from a declarative, positive story to a very concrete level.

What are the Council's activities that you are especially satisfied with?

We have made a big step forward in coordination of cooperation through large number of regional initiatives. We have mapped regional initiatives and found that there are already over 50 regional initiatives active in the region, from task force dealing with rural development, excellent cooperation network in the area of public health in South East Europe that was supported by the World Health Organisation, networks in the area of education, human resources, infrastructure, and trade such is CEFTA with which we closely cooperate. We try to assist these initiatives, to make them more successful, more visible, provide access to funds, but also to coordinate them, and decrease duplicating. There was no awareness of many initiatives not even among donors.