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**Interview: Jelica Minić, Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, seated in Sarajevo**

## **Regional Cooperation Resolves Problems**

Delay in association and accession to the European Union is not good for either country of the region as their main interest is to use all opportunities the EU offers for economic, technological, social and cultural development.

Western Balkans countries have the same goal – European Union, but each of them, in addition to the common, has its own, specific issues on this path. Jelica Minic, Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, headquartered in Sarajevo, speaks of how much these countries can and should mutually support each other on their European path, whether European values have been sufficiently and adequately promoted in these countries and whether the awareness on regional cooperation exists.

**\* As of 1 January next year the EU has announced visa abolishment for citizens of Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. However, Serbia and Montenegro have still some more conditions to meet until then. Can you explain these conditions and whether citizens can look optimistically on 1 January 2010?**

-Visa liberalization should be considered as a completely realistic perspective. However, Serbia and Montenegro must demonstrate that they are able to manage their borders and that they are able to meet all administrative and technical prerequisites for successfully meeting the requirements which such EU visa policy implies. Serbia has special obligations to fulfil where part of them is related to regulating the relations with EULEX. In addition to increasing demand for passports in Serbia since announcing the new visa regime as of next year, there is an additional demand of BiH citizens who have grounds for obtaining Serbian passports. All these issues should be adequately tackled in order that liberalized visa regime with the EU takes effect as of 1 January next year which will mean a great deal for not only businesses, academic circles and youth who want to

go to school, further training and get to know Europe, but also for the entire political scene in the region. It would be good that these three countries being granted liberalized visa regime help BiH and Albania so that these two countries get the same treatment as soon as possible. This would also further facilitate internal communication within the region.

**\*Are European values sufficiently promoted in the Western Balkan countries; how is the substance of European integration process presented in these countries and whether it is well understood?**

- European integration process coincides with the extensive internal reforms process in the countries of our region. It would be necessary to implement the reforms even if countries were not in the process of integration with the EU as they are in the interest of citizens. The pace of reforms is at risk by delay in the process of European integration and world financial and economic crisis. It is essential that the reforms are channelled and harmonized with the reforms in EU. Reforms imply meeting legal and institutional standards of the EU while values generally accepted in the EU are thus considerably adopted. These values imply high level of protection of human and minority rights, observing the law and law-based state, fight against organized crime, environmental protection and a range of other issues as are connecting the infrastructure with the trans-European networks, improvement of investment climate, especially for small businesses, etc. Wide range harmonisation does not directly include education and health care, but numerous Community programs in which EU member states participate are open to Western Balkan countries, including, among others, the programs in the two mentioned fields. General quality of human resources in the region will be increasingly important for successful EU membership while future competitive power will depend on development of regional labour market where EU assistance will play an important role. All this requires much more detailed citizens' informing.

**\* In terms of economy, to what extent is Serbia dependant on the continuation of European integration process? Is there possibility that foreign investments inflow stops if the European integration process slows down? Is it possible to slow down the process now if the remaining two indictees, Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic, are not extradited to the Hague Tribunal?**

-European integration process has already slowed down, Serbia was constantly exceeding some limits, however, we cannot speak of accelerated European integration process in the last couple of years. It is a known fact that the main obstacle in this is cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. It is only when administration works on reforms extensively and on daily basis

with full cooperation with EU partners, which at the same time conduct monitoring and technically and financially support the reforms, that we can speak of satisfying pace which generates results. Croatia has such a pace but it is too presently at a standstill. Standstill is not good for any country from the region as their essential interest is to utilize great opportunities the EU offers. There is a risk that funds which were important support in tackling various issues, are now at much lower level than they were when used by countries which previously entered the EU. The time factor is extremely important for all Western Balkan countries and EU members should also be encouraged not to tire in the enlargement process.

**\* Which powers in Serbia inhibit the EU related story and why? Who is best suited if Serbia does not become the EU member? Is the EU a strategic goal for Serbia or is there an alternative?**

- There is a specific situation in each of the countries from the region. Some acquired interest in the area of doing business, politics and even gray economy, as well as in other areas of life, presented a serious hindrance to reforms and European integration. Reforms always change balance of forces and thus there are those to whom reforms do not serve their purpose. Status quo suits them as reform put their interest at risk. It can be often heard in Serbia that future lies in cooperation with other European and non-European countries and that the EU is not the only desirable alternative. It is good to cooperate and have well developed economic and political relations with everyone and the EU membership should not be an obstacle to this in any way. Finally, some traditional partners of Serbia, such is Russia, state that EU membership is no obstacle for further improvement of relations with Serbia. Circumstances have changed and it is very important for Serbia to belong to the largest and most powerful bloc in Europe, and that is the EU.

**\*To what extent is cooperation of representatives of civil society, political parties and political elites important for advancement to Europe? Which powers in Serbia should be reconciled so as this progress is accelerated?**

- If the European integration process is happening only at the level of elites, then it is not an in-depth process and there are numerous misunderstandings – so-called democratic deficit. This is the experience of even the oldest EU member states. Successful absorption of the entire integration process depends on the attitude of the whole society towards it. Very important role in this process is played by non-governmental organizations and the entire civil sector – media, academic institutions, trade unions, non-governmental organizations. If integration process is accepted by these social groups then it is less painful and better understood, and it is possible to be better prepared for it. Even in 1990's, non-governmental and

civil society organizations in Serbia undertook the important role in popularization of European ideas. After political changes in 2000, non-governmental organizations participated in some processes that are by rule implemented by administration, such is preparation of some legal acts, since there was a high level of expertise in these organizations. Many new institutions, processes and social aims have been introduced in social life through the non-governmental sector.

**\*In which way and through which actions the Western Balkan countries can mutually support each other in the process of association and accession to the EU? Is there political will for such kind of support and awareness on the necessity of mutual cooperation in these countries?**

-The awareness on the necessity of mutual cooperation is very developed at sectoral – horizontal level starting with local communities which have intensive cross-border cooperation. There is good cooperation in the areas of transport, energy, justice, home affairs, judicial institutions, combating organized crime, and business. Horizontal sectoral cooperation is very well developed; it has around 40 active regional organizations, initiatives and working groups which successfully develop regional cooperation in specific areas. The most serious problem thus far has been war heritage from 1990's and some unresolved bilateral issues remaining from this period. It is important that political structures and administration are firm and support sectoral cooperation so as the unresolved bilateral issues would not jeopardise the essential interest of citizens.

### **Optimism**

By all indications, citizens can optimistically await for 1 January of next year. It is estimated that there are capacities and there are some more assurances to be provided by September so as liberalised visa regime could be effective as of 1 January 2010. This is even more important since the EU has provided numerous scholarships for young people from the region who want to go to school or additional training and education in EU countries. All this will be a great incentive for European integration of the entire region. At one time this was a big step for both Bulgaria and Romania since visa liberalisation overcome the big psychological barrier on the path to EU.

### **Cooperation**

Illustrative example of mutually being directed to cooperation is the recent Ministerial Conference in Sarajevo at which the agreement was reached on joint activities on Regional Research and Development Strategy for Western Balkans. After the countries from the region joined the EU

Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Development, it was quickly understood that their capacities are very limited and that they need to act jointly. It is only one of the examples for a range of fields where problems are faster and easier resolved if tackled regionally.

**Violeta Cvejić**