

European integration is impossible without regional cooperation

Bota.al published an article called "European integration is impossible without regional cooperation" featuring Regional Cooperation Council's (RCC) Secretary General Majlinda Bregu on integration of Western Balkans to the European Union. The following translation contains excerpts of the article.

Do you believe that the European Union was less "exacting" in the post-1990 enlargement waves when countries with a past similar to Albania's became part of the large European family? Was the addition of what you refer to as "obstacles" in this process mostly due to the Union's own historical and political position or was it rather because of the multitude of political crises Albania has been embroiled in in the past 30 years?

As I've said, we are not without "fault". What is almost always recurrent in Albania is holding the political normality of the country hostage just so one's opponent/s can gain no ground whatsoever, whilst preferring the alternative – that the country wastes time – simply because we cannot be heroes on the other's watch.

However, breaking with the past necessitates the start of a new project. The trap of nationalism is still in place in the Balkans. Therefore, whenever nationalism, as an embellishment of patriotism, is restored and revived, we are more at risk of self-punishment.

For over 19 years, the Western Balkans have been striving – through all sorts of obstacles – to become part of the EU but the only country that managed to gain full membership was Croatia.

The European Union came about as a political process though, unfortunately, in the recent past this was the only thing that failed to materialise. The founders of the EU had the grand idea of bringing countries closer, of achieving peace, security and stability, of creating a common market in the continent to showcase the power of transformation that unity can bring. Nevertheless, slowly but surely, politicians lost their grip on political decisions, which were fragmented by bureaucrats, thus pulling the process increasingly towards the framework of obligations. I do not wish to underestimate the lengthy process of harmonisation with the EU in any way, however, in truth the fulfilment of technical requirements did not bring about either visa liberalisation for Kosovo or the start of accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia.

At this moment we are going about our daily lives in the midst of a major change to the geopolitical architecture as we know it. The EU's positive response to the Ukraine and Moldova for their EU membership reawakened political neurons/sensations reminding us that EU accession is not merely a methodological process of approximating legislation but a political act instead. The thing is that political acts do not last a lifetime. Should the European perspective lose its power of transformational change in our countries, then it means that it has lost out on its mission altogether – and that mission today is to maintain security and stability.

“If Europe is an idea, then we can turn it into reality in every part of the world, including in the Western Balkans, the very heart of the European continent.” These are your own words. How do you see the role regional cooperation can play in the future, as a catalyser for this process of no return which commenced with the opening of negotiations?

There can be no European integration without regional cooperation. On the other hand, however, regional cooperation becomes meaningful only because the common objective is European integration itself. The concept of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has changed profoundly since 2014 with the start of the Berlin Process. Regional economic cooperation is the mantra of the Western Balkans which enjoys the support of 76% of its citizens.

Just like the EU became part of a political and economic project 65 years ago, so the Western Balkans have embarked on a Common Market to pull down the barriers and obstacles that exist among them by enhancing trade and economic cooperation using the EU’s Single Market as a model. In addition, they are approximating their standards to the EU’s by keeping their borders open, as they did during the pandemic with the establishment of green lanes, thus enabling the circulation of foodstuffs and medicinal products. Similarly, they have created a roaming-free area, and have achieved the mutual recognition of certain services and licences. This, therefore, is not a process that marks the departure of the region from its European integration path. On the contrary, regional cooperation brings the region closer to the EU on a daily basis. The general vision of integrated cooperation amongst ourselves and, later, with the EU is, without a shred of a doubt, our common and shared vision. This is one side of the medal. Thus, whilst the region approximates its standards ever more to the EU’s, it is high time the European Union involved the region increasingly in its policies, programmes and market, as part of the accession process.

[Full article in Albanian language.](#)