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South East Europe jointly promotes cooperation projects

Role of Western Balkan parliaments in EU accession was debated at a two-day meeting held in Sarajevo in organization of the Regional Cooperation Council and European Commission. This is a first in series of meetings to result in a joint project which parliamentarians from the region will candidate for funding through the EU's Pre-Accession Assistance – IPA funds.

Pascal Herry, in charge of regional cooperation at the European Commission, reminded that 90% of EU's IPA funds to potential candidate countries is intended for country's national programmes while 10% is for joint projects focusing on promotion of dialogue and cooperation in the neighbourhood.

Thus, South East Europe parliamentarians have decided to jointly develop projects in order to use these 10% of Per-Accession Assistance funds.

“The aim is to develop one cooperation project to be funded by IPA, i.e. Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, as of probably next year. So, we want to improve the existing cooperation of parliamentarians from the region and, if possible, establish new mechanisms to support even more efficient cooperation of parliaments,” said Pascal.

Croatia, which is on the track of becoming the 28th EU member state, has so far substantially used the IPA funds.

“They have assisted us significantly in strengthening administrative capacities. Croatia has used the first programme substantially, as much as 99%, and afterwards ISPA programme, and SAPAR programme, which was related to agriculture, little less. There were objective reasons for this, fragmentation of the countries, etc. Strengthening administrative capacities has considerably improved the situation in Croatia, lead us to the situation to, hopefully, soon be the 28th EU member state,” said **Dubravka Suica**, Vice-chair of the Croatian Committee for European Integration.

Turkey, which has been EU candidate country for years, also used part of the EU funds, though they say they did not have the same treatment as other candidates.

“Firstly, we are talking about rural development and development of infrastructure projects focused on roads, then there was development of industry in rural areas, but the assistance of EU funds was used the most for improvement of institutions in our country. I have to point out that Turkey received less support from EU funds per capita than other candidate countries, but despite this, achieved substantial progress,” said **Sadetin Kalkan**, representative of Turkey.

Important role of non-governmental sector

Gordana Comic of Serbia underlined several areas in which parliamentarians from South East Europe could improve their cooperation.

“All sector policies, basically. So, from energy, transport, environmental protection, and environmental improvement to all kinds of pressures – if necessary – on our governments, for as stronger as possible regional cooperation. Geographical closeness, and not only geographical but also joint economic history, joint development over a long period could be a basis for accelerated development in future. It is up to us to open these roads and force all our ministers, prime ministers, all those making decisions on where to invest, to work harder,” she said.

Dubravka Suica, Vice-chair of the Croatian Committee for European Integration, says:

“It seemed to me that local level is a big opportunity, because I do think that we need to, in some way, spread and raise awareness on the importance of the EU at local level, and not only at national. National Parliaments, of course, and National Government, however, local and regional self-governance is extremely important. I believe the focus should be on these projects, because Europe is the Europe of citizens and without the support of citizens from local and regional level there will not be sufficient awareness on the great Europe.”

Representative of Kosovo’s administration, **Selman Imeri**, says that Kosovo hopes to also see cooperation on the issues burdening each individual country.

“I believe that intensive cooperation of parliamentarians of the region is to the multiple benefits – both for exchange of information and for the recommendations that those with more experience can give to others, but also for the opportunities to improve cooperation in different areas. We would like to talk about CEFTA, about the role of UNMIK, but also about the exchange of opinion and recommendations for strengthening this cooperation,” added Imeri.

Jelica Minic, Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, mentioned that parliamentarians should not neglect the cooperation with civil sector which can substantially assist in aligning local legislation with that of the EU.

“Extensive expertise can be found in non-governmental sector in our countries, namely in its think tanks and analytical institutions, and can be of substantial assistance. Often, especially in

the initial phases, civil sector was the one coming up with initiatives for endorsing important laws in line with that of the EU, with the acquis communautaire,” said Minic.

The next parliamentary meeting is scheduled for the beginning of summer, and it is expected that by the end of the year, a joint project will be defined and applied for EU funds.