



TALKING POINTS

by Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, **Majlinda Bregu**

High-Level Plenary Session

“Resetting the EU-US Synergy towards the Western Balkans”

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- 2021 Prespa Forum Dialogue -

- Most people perceive time differently. In our region the sense of history and its immersive emotions still define the time in which we live. This part of Europe has changed a lot during the last 20 years, but far from progressing fast. *Adagio lento* is the rhythm in play.
- More than 20 years ago Stability Pact was launched in Sarajevo. It brought together leaders of the world to draw an end to the wars in our region and to set the course of cooperation around peace-security-stability-development nexus.
- Today that pact is replaced by the Regional Cooperation Process, a mantra that speaks volumes on the need to stand by each other in a world that is changing fast. This is one of few examples where the region, most of EU members states and USA sat together and discussed regional agendas.
- **The geopolitical set up of the region has changed in the last decades, but its priority remains the same: EU integration. The EU support in the region has been steadily increasing in the last decades. If we compare it to 5 years ago there is an increase of**



support by nearly 40%,- from 39% to now 62% of the citizens considering EU membership vital for their economies.

- **While the EU support has been increased, we have sadly noticed the increase of brain drain. The number of WB citizens that consider brain drain to be a major concern has increased. We are at the age of emptying our economies, as 71% of young people would like to leave their economies and this raises the alarm.**

- **European Integration of WB is not only a territorial agenda. It is a Transformational agenda, which in the broader orientation towards fundamental European values has worked.**

- The prospect of potential EU membership has been a driving force during all these years, for all Western Balkan economies.

- **It has been the predominant factor in urging the economies of the Western Balkans to engage with one another in a more positive manner as well as address not only the domestic problems they face, but also the unresolved issues in the region.**

- 20 years ago nobody would speak of trade, technological development, start/ups or digital agenda, smart cities and human capital investment.

- Today the region has embraced building the Common Regional Market similar to the EU Single Market, even though nothing is running smoothly.

- I keep hearing that the regional cooperation is like a parking slot substituting the EU enlargement process. But this is not the opinion of 77% of the citizens of the WB that consider crucial enhancing ties within the region.

- Amidst the pandemic recovery the best thing we can do is to move fast and remove barriers.

- The negotiations of regional agreements and initiatives are in full swing – we are preparing a handful of agreements in the area of Free Movement of People, including on the

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travel with ID cards and of single visa for third party citizens, recognition of academic and professional qualifications, and we are working on a roadmap for roaming charges reduction between the EU and WB and extending green lanes to EU.

- I know that these are agendas that cannot come from a computer, those require leaders to deliberate choices measured by their actions and words.
- Hand in hand with our European counterparts, the region has been quite vocal and eager to deepen and additionally strengthen the ties with our transatlantic partners. While the region is replicating global trends, its specificity arises from the promise of EU membership.
- We welcome the U.S. greater interest and involvement in the region and in the CRM and GA in particular and hope that we will continue working on solving practical issues and agendas to the benefit of our citizens and businesses.
- These, among others, include green investments, climate change mitigation and pollution reduction, curbing corruption, attracting investments, energy investments and improving digital infrastructure in the region.
- Within the Common Regional Market agenda, we are seeking to make room for a more practical collaboration with our partners, through the abolition of barriers to free movement of people, goods, capital and services, mobility of students and professionals, joint investment promotion, cutting payment transaction costs and joining Single Euro Payments Area, enhancing our innovation infrastructure and working towards reducing the roaming charges between the WB and the EU.
- The endorsement of Common Regional Market was a huge success for the region last year in Sofia – and I hope it will not be just another commitment on paper.



- **Enforce and emphasize the rule of law.** The EU is and remains an actor that is stronger in setting norms than in playing geopolitical games. The best way to regulate the role of



external powers in the Western Balkans is to insist on and promote rule-based engagement. Thus, in order to help the region become immune to the disruptive aspects of external engagement, the EU should focus on the fundamentals and on rule of law reforms.

- **Associate the Western Balkan economies more closely to the EU in policy domains** such as energy and transport where third parties have already vested their interests. The region's inclusion in EU policy-making on these matters could raise the level of its resilience to external interests.
- **Support citizens' empowerment, engagement and involvement throughout the region.** An empowered civil society would act as a watchdog against opaque deals, abuses of power, conflicts of interest and cases of mismanagement. Also, endorse its demand for greater transparency with respect to decisions on these topics and the implementation of relevant projects.