

RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu

Interview with James Kanter/EU Scream

- Transcript -

Kanter: In October President Macron vetoed the start of the EU membership talks with North Macedonia and Albania. Macron said that the process of enlarging the EU first needed reform and only then could the talks go ahead. But many in Brussels believe that Macron is being obstructive, because EU enlargement is still so unpopular in France.

Macron, meanwhile has singled out Albania as unsuitable for EU membership, on the basis that Albanians still apply for asylum in France in large numbers.

Former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called Macron's veto a historic mistake and the former president of the European Council Donald Tusk declared himself embarrassed since so much preparatory work has been completed.

As for the senior officials from the Western Balkans who feel Macron is betraying European dream, the situation was, extremely, well, ...

Bregu: Awkward. And uncomfortable. It is not only the vacuum in economic terms, you are not a part of a bigger club of people.

Kanter: Majlinda Bregu heads the Regional Cooperation Council based in Sarajevo. Backed by the EU and the 46 participating countries, the Council spearheads development in the region that was torn apart by the war in the '90's. The Council also strongly backs efforts by six Western Balkans countries to join the EU.

Bregu: The EU leverage in the region is at its highest peak when the process of negotiations are starting, because the public administration and the reforms are pushed harder, you have all the decisions being monitored carefully and that's how the process is goes.

Kanter: In fact, there was a major breakthrough in the region a year ago when Macedonia officially changed its name to North Macedonia. That ended a 30-years standoff with Greece and it was meant to smooth the way to North Macedonia to join the EU.

For its part, Albania had been overhauling its judiciary ahead of anticipated EU membership process.

Bregu: What is going to happen now to this agreement with North Macedonia and Greece, because for that agreement to be alive you need to open the negotiations?

And then you think, OK, what is going to happen with Albania now. The system has been shaken completely, the judiciary reform that started in 2017... so it's a lot of things.

Then, what is going to happen with the rest of our agendas in the region, because the regional cooperation has a sense once the final end is the EU integration.

Kanter: After Macron's NO foreign policy experts were quick to warn that Russia and China would be even freer to continue expanding their influence in the region.

Bregu: There are countries that have a lot of investments from China, some others from Russia as well. China is investing, and not only because of the vacuum from the EU but because China is trying to invest everywhere in the world. So, they are bringing in the investments but then you take loans for those investments. Investing in what is called debt diplomacy.

And for big investments in infrastructure you need to employ people, people are unemployed in the region. You need investments – it takes 9 hours ride from Tirana to Sarajevo and it's only 385 km. So it's not an easy call for politicians to have Chinese investments.

Kanter: Bregu says that if Macron really wanted to avoid the precipices that he spoke about in his Economist interview then he needs to be more open to EU membership for Western Balkan countries now and not at some ill-defined later day. She said enlargement would help overcome some of the existential challenges Marcon says is most concerned about.

Bregu: President Macron said that the "world is on the edge of the precipices". I don't think that the recipe against the precipices would be leaving or postponing the process of accession of the Western Balkans.

And I think that Western Balkans is part of these challenges, is part of the global post-truth threats - these are issues of European identity – is part of the concern on the unemployment, part of the concern on the brain drain, is part of the concern on the climate change also and the disasters that know no border.

Kanter: Though based in Sarajevo, Bregu has been pounding EU corridors intensively since Macron's veto. At the dinner we both attended last month in Brussels I saw her face-to-face with Europeans who are airing doubts that her country, Albania, should ever be a member of the EU, partly because of its legacy of 400 years of Ottoman rule.

Bregu: So we are there together and you heard that I was trying not really to go back and make differences or trying to analyse the European identity or the European values based on our ancestors coming from Athens or Spartans.

So, can anybody tell me, who is more European, an Albanian doctor who servers and treats patients in Hamburg or Frankfurt or the Italian doctor coming from the EU member state who treats Albanian patients in Albania?

And these perceptions are not based on facts, but build and rebuild on stereotypes, stigmas that you keep and it goes on year after year. Sometimes, unfortunately, century after century.

Kanter: Bregu pushes back somewhat against reputation against some Western Balkan countries as breeding grounds for jihadi fighters. But she acknowledges problems like weak border controls, which can make it easier for large number of foreign fighters to return and compound the regional security challenges.

Bregu: We realize that the foreign terrorist fighters from the Western Balkans in total were 1.057, while the foreign terrorist fighters from the EU, joining the fighting groups in 2012, have been 5.000, and coming from the EU Member States.

Now, I wouldn't really dare to say that the EU is having the biggest number of the foreign terrorist fighters, which make the EU look in a worse shape than the Western Balkans. Because there are other things happening in the Balkans as well: institutions are weak; then, border controls might be weak so there are other elements that might enhance this number of 1 thousand and make it appear more problematic.

And we do have problems and situation is problematic. Challenges are high. Being poorer, not having the right conditions in place, as I said, to control, could really dismantle any trust that this region is the one looking forward and it has European perspective.

Kanter: So, to what extent do Muslims in the Western Balkans feel that Macron is using a double standard on who gets to be – well, European?

Bregu: Well again, since you are mentioning President Macron, I know that there are more Muslims living in France than there are Muslims living in the Western Balkans and I don't think that Islam, and moderate Islam and the right to respect your religion is something that should frighten anybody.

There are three religions in Albania: Orthodox, Christians Catholics and Muslims. 70% are Muslims but nobody could say that Islam in Albania is not a moderate one.

I would really challenge everybody to pick out who is a Muslim, who Christian Catholic or Orthodox in a group of ten Albanians.

And that's diversity that I think should be always appreciated.