

Interview by Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Majlinda Bregu for Montenegrin daily *Vijesti*
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Bregu: “Knowing the right people” does not lead to the EU

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The Western Balkan economies must deal with the problem of corruption institutionally, but also as a society and the citizens must change their behaviour and stop considering that giving a present to someone for doing one’s job is normal, said Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Majlinda Bregu.

In the interview to the daily "*Vijesti*", she said that corruption was and still is a huge problem in the Western Balkan societies on their path to the EU, and that in 2015, 15% of citizens considered corruption the biggest problem, while that percentage is currently at 26%. “It is a huge rise, which has been clearly triggered by the rise of obvious tangible corruption that citizens face”.

After the online summit of the Berlin Process on July 5, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that the process of accession of the countries in the EU region takes longer than many expected and that there is still much to be done in the fight against corruption. Is this a clear message that without visible results in the fight against corruption, the countries of the Western Balkans will not enter the EU?

This is not a novelty for us. All our economies need to deal with this, not just institutionally, but as a society as well. We need to change our behaviours and stop considering that giving a present to someone for doing one’s job is normal. It is not. It has to stop being socially acceptable for people to ask for connections or pay bribes whenever they need something. And we especially as a society need to condemn those who do so. Especially those in high positions, positions of power. In the region it’s called “knowing the right people”, meaning people who can deliver after being bribed. This especially applies to justice and being able to rely on an independent judiciary. Now, in 2021, for 54% of people in the Western Balkans (76% of them think that the judiciary is corrupt), ‘knowing the right people’ is critical for getting ahead in life. So, this is what people see, look and strive for...if not found at home, they are ready to go look for it elsewhere. By going to the EU, individually. Does it have to be a prerequisite for joining the EU to be acted on? I would say, no. The sooner we deal with it, the better off we are. We need to fight it to lead normal lives, to progress and develop, to be able to keep our children here, at home.

EU officials have been repeating for years that EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is a priority, but no agreement was reached last month on opening negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Where is the problem, in the EU or the region?

The authorities in Montenegro expect that Montenegro could become a member of the EU by the end of the mandate of this European Commission. Are those expectations realistic?

It takes two to fight, as our people would say just the same - it takes two to tango. It's the TWO in the saying who make the choice. The EU and the Western Balkans are both aware that they are 'destined for each other' as they share history, culture, geography, demography. But this commonness is not enough, for this furthermore is tested frequently by immense challenges present in the Western Balkans such as economic, security and demographic ones. On the Western Balkans' side, there is still a lot to be done to live up to the initiation standards, so constant disputes and stubborn denial of this fact lead nowhere. On the other hand, there's the EU with multifaceted views and voices on what would be the best approach to get things moving in the right enlargement direction, which doesn't always resonate well in our region. It would definitely take some tweaking and adjusting on both sides to harmonize this duet. Enlargement or Accession itself needs to be reformed with clear, credible and realistic incentives.

An incentive could be found in the voices of citizens from the region: according to Balkan Barometer, 24% of them believe the EU accession would happen until 2025, 40% by 2030 and 22% think it will never happen, while 14% refused to make a prediction. For Montenegro these numbers are similar: 27% by 2025, 42% by 2030, 16% never. But the EU accession process has never been about dates. It has to happen through an attainable life cycle deadline.

The prospect of eventual EU membership has been a driving force during all these years for all Western Balkan economies and a background against which many common initiatives in the region were undertaken. For us dealing with regional cooperation, it has been the predominant factor in urging 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. I keep hearing though whether the Western Balkans is a geopolitical priority for the EU. Even though this might be a farfetched question, it is not a question of choice BUT necessity, imperative and vision. One that begs for just one sole answer - it must.

I believe the EU has all the leverage needed to keep the EU perspective in the Western Balkans alive. It is the main trading partner and the main investor. It helps the region through investments and let's not forget that a lot of funds given to the Western Balkans are grants, not loans. Let me remind you of the latest 9 billion Euros for better economic integration. The business community from the region prefers (72%) trading with the EU. The EU does not threaten any country's security, it promotes values. So, one might ask what is wrong then? The long prolong of EU membership impedes the right decisions and damages the reality. At the same time, the region must walk the talk.

According to the Balkan Barometer, the support of the citizens of the Western Balkans for EU membership is growing. Is the reason for this that the citizens are losing trust in their governments, given that they are still far from the standards of EU citizens?

In 6 years, compared to the 2016 Balkan Barometer, when this support was 39%, it almost doubled and this year's edition shows that 62% of Western Balkan citizens support the EU. In Montenegro specifically, that ratio was not as drastic - 38% in 2016 and now, in 2021 the EU has the support of over half of the population (51%). We can only assume the motives for such sentiment of our citizens, which I am sure, are complex, and closer to a set of reasons, not just one. But surely, the EU stands out as a model of better quality living for all of them, regardless of the segment they look up to.

When asked if they would like to leave their economies and go live and work abroad, 71% of young people said yes. It's almost two-thirds of our youth! Every 10th South East European lives outside the region nowadays. In 2019 alone, the EU issued almost 350,000 first permits to people from South East Europe. So, the simple, painfully obvious truth is that the people of the region are joining the EU one by one. They are not leaving it to a political chance of their economies, but are going forward finding better chances for themselves. This is an alarm bell for all of us.

What does the abolition of roaming mean for the citizens of the region, which came into force on July 1 this year?

Yes, as of 1 July, the Balkans is one grid – NO MORE roaming charges within the Western Balkans. This has taken considerable effort, and we couldn't have done it without the EU Commission and the support and commitment of all Western Balkans Six. But roaming-free is not only about saving money on roaming charges, and it doesn't just eliminate mobile network borders, it eliminates psychological borders as well. This Regional Roaming Agreement is indeed a game-changer. This actually makes us feel at home in our entire region.

“Unemployment in South East Europe reached 11%, and even twice as much (22.5%) for young people. The entire region is an aging society, the population of which is projected to shrink by 20% in a matter of decades. Our life expectancy is three years less than that of the people in the EU. On top of that, 12.5 % of South East European people live below the poverty line. So, what's there that we wouldn't like to change? Not much really, right?”

Regional cooperation will prevail on the strength of its ideas and ideals, not on the disputes

The Western Balkans without roaming and lowering roaming prices with the European Union is part of the common regional market programme. What are the next steps in establishing a common regional market?

Common Regional Market represents an excellent framework for establishing our own Western Balkans Single Market alike the EU one, to use its capacity and generate additional 6.4% GDP growth and create a regional area in trade, investments, digital and industry and innovation.

I hate pitching on paperwork, but I am proud to say that last month a new South East Europe 2030 Strategy, in line with UN Sustainable Development Goals, was born from South East European Cooperation Process. I'm sure the strategy will be successful only when it will have its walk. That walk has to be made of thousands of steps, to enhance its economy, societies and security, aligned with the EU and global trajectories of green and digital transformations. This is particularly crucial in the context of brain drain and depopulation, the average rate of which in the next 80 years is estimated at 6.7 per thousand.

We know, regional cooperation will prevail on the strength of its ideas and ideals, not on the disputes and the name of documents. We know, economies of the region will be competitive when they should be, collaborative when they must be. We just hope those will be adversarial only when this is inevitable.