

Interview with Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

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It is democracy that seeks women!

From the end of nineties this region was called Ex-Yugoslavia, South Eastern Europe, West Balkan, or just the Region. It's been almost 30 years from the end of Yugoslavia, some countries are in the EU, some on the way, some not at all, but this territory is considered as a compact region. Why so?

For aficionados of the history there are different terms and even different explanations. For me this European peninsula is part of South East Europe, called the Balkan region, where much progress has been made, but more attention and engagement are still needed. And it is not all former Yugoslavia. Albania, to mention here, was never part of former Yugoslavia.

As for the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), we are all-inclusive - working with both non-EU and EU-members in South East Europe. The term encompasses similarities, traditions, heritage....and there is much we share. From cultural heritage, music, art, architecture, languages, mentality, interests...this is what makes it, in your words, a compact area. There's a lot of common ground. Even our differences are much more familiar to us, neighbours from these geographical coordinates. We lean on each other, literally and metaphorically.

How do the RCC and you look at the identity of this region? What are the major challenges for you in this position? Would you define this region (who belongs and who doesn't and why) and could you give us a name of the Region we share?

It's simple, the name is Europe. We belong to Europe and working our way to make it happen! Together.

Just recently the region, together with the RCC and the EU, has produced a success story, which is a step that makes a difference. I am speaking about the new Regional Roaming Agreement for the Western Balkans, signed by the WB ministers at the WB Digital Summit in Belgrade beginning of April, which will pave the way for further reduction of roaming prices within the WB but between the region and the EU as well, and finally have the Western Balkans a roaming free, RoamLike@Home, zone as of mid-2021.

This agreement marks a new era for the entire region. Western Balkans has shown that together it can and will deliver, through regional cooperation, decisive and concrete results, a tangible benefit for our citizens. From an economic perspective, it means a huge deal for the region – it connects businesses-to-businesses faster and cheaper, it attracts tourists.

It reinforces the message that Europe, regional cooperation, delivers!

And we will keep up the good work! For years, and even decades now, the region has unfortunately been a place sending troubled signals to the world but it also showed determination and willingness to change that. And here is where the RCC sees the region's strengths.

We all want to see it blossom and the RCC has a privilege to assist the region and each economy individually to get there, to work on developing its strengths and eliminating the weaknesses. This is also the major challenge on the way to prosperity and growth – leaving the disputes behind and going towards a common vision, the future, better life of the citizens as they expect and deserve it. This path, as the region has chosen it – the EU integration, is a way forward. It means working on the common goal, to become a member of the European community, still maintaining the individuality and trademarks of each participant of this journey, and turning our differences into the strengths.

How do you see the position of women in this region? Achieving real gender equality should be one of the key solutions for social development. It applies to societies all around the world. It is a universal agenda, it seems. What about our region regarding feminist issues?

Women of this region are really like teabags – in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt. Poured in the hot water, testing the fire and their strengths. Women who endured war, communism, transition, are still fighting day after day to win the battles.

Real gender equality and parity? It is only one indicator of progress. Women are underrepresented in the labour market in the entire region. Only 2 of 5 women in the region have a job or are even looking for one. Employment rate of women across the region stands at 43.2%, and each year Western Balkans economies lose on average 18% of GDP due to gender gaps in the labour market. Women networks are weak. Women still face barriers to accessing justice, are challenged on daily basis to remove discrimination. Stereotyping, stigma and indifference on their needs. Talent is not gender related, but resources still are.

Whichever way you look at it – be it feminism gender equality, integration of vulnerable societal group or unused economic potential...there is much room for improvement on all these levels.

We need more women in the labour market to foster growth. Need to think about new skills, learnability efforts, digital and technological primarily, but also financial entrepreneurship, skills, etc. to equip them for the new job market realities...we need to think of services to help women join labour market and not keep faith only with traditional models of raising your children, like grandmothers or mothers at home. Women are the key to unlocking regional economic potential. Reconciliation through economic activity is another crucial aspect of empowerment of women in the labour markets.

Employment of women primarily means economic security, and many other strengths grow from there.

As Simone de Beauvoir predicted: “never forget that all it would take is a political, economic or religious crisis for women’s rights to be called into question. These rights will never be vested. You have to remain vigilant your whole life”.

The RCC dedicated the month of March to women as a prelude to a new chapter for women in the region, as we embarked on the initiative to improve the current situation, empower women in the region and make their ideas and businesses a market competitive category. WE want the voice of people trying to improve their lives, ownership of their initiatives and ideas to be heard and to act upon that.

Have a look at the video we have recently published, it explains a lot https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScM_bXdjtwM&t=3s

What are the priorities according to the strategy of RCC until 2020?

The name of the game is Connectivity – to connect better in many ways: infrastructurally, digitally, people-to-people connections, mobility of labour, ideas, knowledge in the region, etc. Our individual markets are too small to make the impact globally. Hence, the idea of the regional economic area. That is what we and the entire region are working on right now.

I have already mentioned the roaming agreement, but there is another activity in the pipeline as we speak that is also going to have some real tangible results, something our citizens will be able to feel already as of July.

And that is the regional agreement on mutual recognition of professional qualifications, for which we are currently leading the negotiations, as it is expected to be signed by the region's leaders in Poznan in July. In the first stage it will be for doctors of medicine, dentists, architects and civil engineers, and it means freer movement across the region in pursuit of adequate job. The procedure for recognition would be easier, faster and transparent. This stage is aimed at these 4 specific professions but it could be extended in the future to more professional qualifications to be mutually recognised on regional level.

I single out just these two, but we are continuously working on many other fronts, these are just the most recent ones.

What are the biggest difficulties in implementing changes for the development of the region? What are the common problems for all the parts?

Each of the societies that we are working with is a story of its own, with its own dynamics, aspirations and processes. However, for our common goal to be achieved there is a broad consensus – becoming part of the EU is a driving force behind all regional activities and initiatives. So, there is no specific problem as such, as we are all on the same page. However, it is a journey and synchronisation of all steps is a complex matter. We are only as fast as the slowest 'vehicle' in this race but, nevertheless, our job is to make sure that no one is left behind.

Who are your partners in the countries (institutions, NGOs, associations...)? What about the leaders, do they fully cooperate?

All forward-looking Europe-oriented people in our region eager to see it prosper are more than welcome partners and support to work of the RCC.

However, the changes required for the steps or rather leaps forward on the EU-integration part are rather demanding and firstly include governments. We work closely with all governments in the region, provide support wherever and whenever they see fit or necessary.

Still, in order to explain the process, necessities for change, etc. we do work with civil society, associations, academia, media...including a broad scope of audiences to make the process of transformation a smooth and transparent one but also to promote the ultimate benefits of, sometimes painful decisions, to our citizens. They need and deserve to know.

EU is facing numerous challenges; scepticism regarding its future is growing within the EU itself as among the citizens of EU candidates. Do you see the future of this region entirely and exclusively in the EU? Is there another option for us?

Europe is indeed facing an uncertain shift. That's why it becomes even more important for all of

those who believe in Europe to stand by each other. The region has changed thanks to the European narrative. I know we still have some homework to do. But the choice is simple. We do it to transform our societies or we just sit back and gaze on what's happening around us. Let me share with you a piece of data from RCC's annual survey Balkan Barometer, which is still not published. For the first time in 4 years, the majority of the Western Balkans citizens, 56% of them, agree that EU integration is going to make a huge impact and positive changes to their lives. And this speaks a lot. Not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of priorities of our citizens and them recognizing the importance of the EU and what it is standing for, what the EU integration is bringing to them. Security, and not just economically speaking, better health system, better judiciary, simply better quality of life.

Our priority and the only option is to advance our societies, to fight for better ...to aspire to more quality. Europe is the region's decision not by chance but by choice, and the need for Europe is powerful.

Europe has passed the 'project' stage and is for a long time now a well-functioning community of many nations, where beyond geographical boundaries lies their common political, security and economic interest. Their standards and values are something we look up to and want to see in our societies.

How do you go around this men's Balkans world? As a woman in Albania, now in Sarajevo, and in politics? Mother, good looking woman, politician in a high position. Do Balkan men take you seriously enough? Do other women judge you?

There is a continuing saturation of people's hope and faith in politics of real change and this is not always gender specific. There are good men and women politicians as there are men and women who in politics rely only on others command and end up as subordinates. Don't take me ill, but without courage no one in politics could mark a change. Loyalty to a petrified opinion does not break any chain and will not bring any change. We know that sometimes we will win and sometimes we will lose. As I just said, the Western Balkans, and the world if you want, is pretty much 'man's world', maybe even more so when it comes to politics as a job. It is a struggle of its own, fighting with prejudice, stereotypes, standards. One humble advice I give to my male friends: stop advising women how to be women. We know we should have nerves of steel. We know it requires a lot of work, efforts, patience and dedication to succeed. But it is democracy demanding women, not the establishment. It's people who believe women get the job done. Women as men who love right politics will always energise and inspire.

As for me I feel quite responsible of my actions and decision not falling for shallow or easy solutions. I keep fighting, working on what I am passionate about. Women empowerment is one of them. Keep putting smiles on some faces makes it all worth the effort and this is what keeps me moving forward. And I choose to make some of that "trouble" among men power, on behalf of women☺
