

Interview by RCC Secretary General, Majlinda Bregu, to *Austria Presse Agentur (APA)*

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Regional Cooperation Council sees EU unity weakened

Secretary General Bregu: Delay in the EU enlargement generates "disappointment climate" in the Western Balkans

Brussels (APA) - The unity of the European Union is not as strong as it once was. This is the view of Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) for South Eastern Europe, regarding the EU enlargement debate. "Politicians are thinking more of their own country-specific agenda," she told APA in Brussels on Tuesday.

There is nothing wrong with that, it is the job of politicians, "but once you are in a Union you have to respect the responsibilities and obligations," said Bregu, who was Albania's Minister of European Integration from 2007 to 2013.

The delay in the EU enlargement has created a "disappointment climate" in the Western Balkans. "People are the ones who really support the EU accession process," says Secretary General. "They believe that if the EU standards apply to their country, they will feel safer, have equal opportunities to find a job, and be treated fairly in court of justice."

Bregu fears of the effects this will have on the countries' reform efforts. So far, their performance was at its best when the EU influence was the strongest, she says.

The France veto had prevented a positive decision at the EU summit in October on opening of accession negotiations with the two candidate countries, namely Northern Macedonia and Albania. Paris calls for a reform of the accession process. The EU Commission is now to submit proposals.

Bregu advocates for the EU enlargement process to continue in parallel, demanding clarity and setting clear timeline. "We need to know what's going to happen, should we continue with the reforms and which ones first?" This also corresponds to the position of the new EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who pleaded on Wednesday in Brussels for the revision of the accession process to be actively pursued, "but in parallel for the two mentioned countries, North Macedonia and Albania, to be given an opportunity for the opening of accession talks as soon as possible."

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has been the successor to the Stability Pact since 2008. The Stability Pact was established in 1999 for reconstruction in the Balkans. Six countries in the region are considered candidates for EU membership: Serbia and Montenegro are in the accession process, Albania and North Macedonia are waiting for the green light to open the accession negotiations, while Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina still face some obstacles