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Lecture by RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu

at the College of Europe:

"The Western Balkans and the EU: First-hand insight after the Berlin Process Summit 2023"

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When I was preparing for this lecture today a famous essay of James Baldwin Letter from a Region in My Mind crossed my mind again. The essay is not written about South East Europe, but the title is compelling and can lead anyone in a state of analysis.

How would I write a letter of the region in my mind if I were asked to let the recipient know more on the shape of the Balkans today.

The Western Balkans region is like a canvas painted with all hues of history and diversity, a tapestry of languages, cultures, and painful conflict. Yet it is precisely in this diversity that the true potential for cooperation lies.

If the Balkans seems complicated and confusing, it is because it is. But there is nothing incomprehensible or even covert that doesn't exist elsewhere.

The issues that rose for years in the Balkans were not unique to the Balkans. When not settled in advance, territorial partition, especially when attached to ethnicity or other identities, leads to conflict. The region is a good place or should have been to learn that and other lessons.

And as the founder of this College Salvador de Madariaga said: "No one has ever succeeded in keeping nations at war, except by lies".



So, first question

1. Why should the Balkans join Europe? Short answer: Balkans is Europe.

At peace. A result of EU-USA alliance and interventions of NATO, since 1995. Working in tandem towards democratisation and progress of the region that might be slow but is palpable.

In the 1990s Europe was still thinking of Balkans as a neighbourhood issue not membership. The idea of a Euro-Atlantic destination for all the Balkans can be traced back to Sarajevo Summit of 1999, which launched the Stability Pact Initiative, which is today transformed into the Regional Cooperation Council.

This was the dawn of one Big Idea. **Those Balkan economies that want to join EU, NATO and other EU organisations should join forces and work together!**

The idea was then copied at the 2003 Thessaloniki EU Summit. “The future of the Balkans is within the EU”.

This remarkable political decision gave the Balkans a sense of **direction and purpose**.
But the truth is things surprise.

The prospect of eventual 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.

The EU has been the single most important leverage in the region to promote democracy, rule of law, respect for fundamental rights and minorities.

I believe EU has all the leverages needed to keep the EU perspective in WB alive.



- EU is already the largest trading partner, with over 70 percent of exports from the region going to EU member states.
- The EU is also the biggest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region, similarly, accounting for around 70 percent of total FDI, and it offers access to a market of more than 500 million high-income consumers.
- In 10 years, the region increased its exports to the EU by 142%.
- Unlikely the wrong perception, China's share in trade in WB is at the level of 5.5% of the overall total regional trade whilst its FDI in the region is at the level of 3% of the overall stock.

In the same limited ration is the share of trade with Russia, as imports stand at 4.8% of the total share in WB, whilst Russian originating FDI is only 4.6 percent.

2. Is it realistic to think that enlargement will happen soon? Has the EU enlargement fatigue turned to enlargement exhaustion?

I keep hearing whether WB is a geopolitical priority for EU. This might be a farfetched question; however it is not a question of choice BUT of necessity, imperative and vision. One that begs just one sole answer - it must.

Europe can be more. But an ***Enlarged one.*** Enlarged not only due to the geopolitical necessity lens. But an enlarged one that acknowledges that ***integrated Western Balkans is a genuinely smart investment*** as well.

Montenegro opened accession talks in 2012 and up to now has closed provisionally only 2 chapters. With the same pace, it would take Albania or North Macedonia around 124 years to complete accession negotiations.

That fatigue or disappointment of a promise not kept is felt now across the region. The support for EU membership remains still high in the WB, but unfortunately there is a **negative** trend of 5 points in the last 5 years (**this year 59% of the citizens supported EU membership**).

The highest is Albania 92%

The lowest in Serbia 34%



But what we noticed is that whenever citizens see waters moving from the EU side in right directions, their support follows the trend, or vice versa. Let me give you a couple of examples:

- A. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, after the positive decision on granting the candidate status, the support for EU membership has slightly improved from 50% that has been in the last couple of years to 52%;
- B. This year, the support of North Macedonia to EU membership has dropped from 56% to 50%;
- C. A negative trend of dropping the EU support is noticed in Kosovo* as well; last year it was 73% while in 2023 it stood at 66%.
- D. Anger is a letter away from danger. 1 in 4 citizens in WB believe they will never join EU and this negative sentiment has increase mostly among the front runners Montenegro and Serbia.

What we witness today is not a pathology, but a series of transformations
The bridge between today and the future EU perspective of the Western Balkans is not paved with heroism, smoke and mirroring pro-European talks, but with concrete commitment to reforms and regional economic integration.

3. Is regional cooperation a prerequisite of gradual EU integration, thus a substitute of enlargement?

Realistically, Somehow yes.

As the EU enlargement process is taking decades, regional cooperation is establishing a norm, not a normative, but a norm of Europeanisation, a new **SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS**.

The scale of human cooperation consciousness in the region is an evolutionary puzzle. It stands at 78% today.

In 2014, Germany initiated Berlin Process as a platform to intensify political and economic cooperation among WB economies, focusing on **regional cooperation, regional connectivity and economic governance**.

It was a political process between WB government and a few big EU MS, a time when the enlargement agenda was totally off the table of EU.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence



Nine years back, we have a region with a **dense web of cooperation initiatives, with joint strategic visions**, underpinned by **strong public support and trust** for regional cooperation.

As of 2020, **WB has established Common Regional Market, similar to the EU Single Market**, aiming on one hand to bring the region closer and bring it in one grid, and on the other hand providing WB the access to EU Single Market. Regional Cooperation Council is the overarching coordinating organisation of this plan.

Let me give you three concrete achievements:

- a. Established Green Lanes amongst WB, and between WB and most of the neighbouring EU MS, that avoid phytosanitary checks and time at the border, similar to the EU model. A simple reduction of waiting time at the border by three hours would be similar to lowering ad valorem tariffs by around 2 percent across all economies in the Western Balkans.
- b. Roam Like at Home in WB as of 1st October 2023 drastically reduced data roaming tariffs between the EU and WB telecom operators;
- c. Ensure free movement of workers/services, mutual recognition of professions and recognition of academic qualifications with zero costs and shorten period.

Thus, yes we need a clear EU perspective but have a long road to that, hence: ***Regional integration through concrete achievements alongside European integration*** is the best and most credible way forward.

Offering access to some areas of EU policy at different stages in the process, as proposed in the EU Commission's revised enlargement methodology, could bring interesting development **in the entire region**. Although I firmly believe **Enlargement is not a methodological process, it is a political one**.

President of EC has launched a Growth Plan for WB that aims at providing more access for WB to EU Single Market, supported with 6 billion Euro.

Rule of law



Reforms implemented

Regional cooperation

Three new conditions for funds to be delivered

We as RCC started with concrete steps, bringing closer the EU with WB by reducing roaming charges. I mentioned briefly above that as of 1st October, roaming charges between the EU and WB have been reduced. **1 figure here can be enough: a Bosnian citizen while roaming in Greece a year ago would pay 9000 euros for 1 GB used, and today it will not exceed 17 euros.**

This might be the new start to closing the convergence gap with EU. It keeps delivering concretely on the ground despite ups and downs.

Currently, the EU support per each EU citizen is around 4500 Euro while EU support per WB citizen is 138 Euro.

The Tirana Summit, as part of the Berlin Process, was an important milestone in regional cooperation of WB and EU integration process.

Way forward:

Either we need a new mind-set of the enlargement or we all need to decide what kind of EU integration we want to be following from now on. Is there a need to shift the focus? I personally believe we only have 3 ways.

- **One is the way of domestic reforms,**
- **the other of deeper economic integration and regional cooperation, and**
- **the third one is to catch up with the EU no matter what.** Catch up at the level of reforms that will bring Western Balkans economically closer to the EU.

This doesn't mean just enlargement and membership as we were told years ago, and still are, but it means at least that we will be closer to concrete terms and projects and policies. It means as well that we will have a more solid legal frame bringing us closer and faster to the EU. As the



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hidden benefit, we can have WB, not just as the region but the economies separately, becoming greater players in the international arena.

Finding any *silver lining in such strained global and regional contexts* is all but impossible.

A *human-centric Europe that is adapted, reformed and more, with our region firmly in its fold* – is the *best investment* in peace and security for the entire continent and beyond.

The Western Balkans' standards of living are between one-quarter and one-half of that of the EU average, but convergence is moving at different speeds, gaining between 1.8% and 6.6% over the past decade. It would take up to 200 years for WB to reach the EU average of GDP.

Croatia: The greatest benefit of EU membership – impact on economy

In 2013, Croatia had a GDP *per capita* of 61% of the European average, while in 2022, it reached 73% of the European average. In the year of EU accession (2013), Croatians had a GDP per capita slightly above EUR 10,000; whereas, in 2022, it exceeded EUR 17,000. In terms of GDP per capita, Croatia surpasses Slovakia and Greece.