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Political Will and Administrative Capacity Are Crucial

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Compared with ten years ago, what would you single out as the most significant progress in BiH regional cooperation, as well as progress towards the EU integration?

Regardless of all present difficulties, the area of regional cooperation and process of EU approximation have progressed significantly over the last ten years throughout the area of so-called Western Balkans which includes countries formed on the territory of former Yugoslavia, except for Slovenia, but including Albania. The same goes for Bosnia and Herzegovina which is one of the most active members of around 50 different regional structures in South East Europe and it is also hosting several of them: Regional Cooperation Council, Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative, Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative under the auspices of UNDP Office in Sarajevo, e-SEE Initiative. Not a week goes by without at least one important regional event taking place in Sarajevo or in other centres in the country. On the wave of regional cooperation prosperity, as of 2000, BiH inevitably obtained an important role. This is becoming increasingly recognized among local public and relevant institutions and it is being transformed into a useful instrument of consolidation of international position, particularly when it comes to the EU approximation. Positive evaluation of BiH regional cooperation can be found in the EU Enlargement Strategy and Progress Report, presented to wider public in November last year, as well as in the Monitoring of BiH European Integration Process, presented last week by the BiH Foreign Policy Initiative, an important local think tank. Successful cooperation is particularly evident in the area of justice and home affairs, though the same could be said for security, culture, education, science, health, agriculture, trade, energy, transport... Unfortunately, many of these important and efficient networks operating in the region still lack sufficiently visibility, as well as their very concrete results. One has to have in mind that this raising wave still comes across reefs of open bilateral issues, but their relative significance is objectively decreasing.

In the area of European integration, the situation is less uniform. BiH has serious issues which are listed and carefully analysed in the abovementioned reports. Political will and administrative capacity are crucial prerequisites. Political will does not lack, at least not declaratively. But its realistic weight is reflected in efficiency – and this is a topic in a daily focus of media.

However, if the positive scenario is implemented, the prospects are good for BiH. Proposed conditions need to be met and BiH could get the candidate status at the end of this year. These are no empty promises – and requirements are realistic. If the scenario is implemented, BiH would enter a new status framework which facilitates further internal changes.

In addition, BiH is burdened with the same problems year after year, citizens have a sense that we are spinning in circles. In your opinion, how do we influence people in power in terms of accelerated and simplified decision-making that hinders BiH's path towards the EU?

The question could be asked in any country of the region and the answers would not differ much. However, BiH is specific – it has very complex state and governance structure. As much as this is a large deficiency now, once the country gets the candidate status, European integration process goes down to more of a regional and local level. When this happens, some of the key issues BiH faces with regards to administrative inefficiency could be gradually transformed into advantages of decentralised development. Motivating local and cantonal administrations and availability of significant resources, based on feasible development programmes and projects, open new areas of positive competition and cooperation as already demonstrated by the cross-border cooperation projects which the EU supports and will continue to do so.

BiH economy is poorly developed and on top of that insufficiently protected. What are the Council's guidelines to maintain good economic neighbourly relations and at the same time strengthen and protect local capacities?

The best protection is stimulating business environment. Numerous contractual obligations have already been undertaken with regards to liberalisation of economic area in the region – trade, investments, public procurement, energy, etc. Perhaps things were done too fast and taken too far in some areas, but they resulted in overall more attractive regional economic area. Global economic crisis hindered faster demonstration of results of such policy, but the fact speaks volumes that after the outset of crisis, trade among the countries from the region was more stable than trade with partners beyond the region, and that over the last five years, its share in the total trade in the region increased by 25%.

But, the state has its role too – stimulating entrepreneurship, support to research and development, education reform, support to innovations and innovators, adaptations in the labour market...

Over the past years, we witnessed the increase of regional cooperation with regards to security and fight against organised crime? However, it seems that our border crossings are not sufficiently developed or adapted to the increasing rash of international criminal groups?

This changes too. And it could be changing faster. However, even the best border crossings are no protection if there is a lack of cooperation among the relevant services of neighbouring countries. And this is the area with the largest changes which are met with praise and not only in Europe – since, territorially, we are an intercontinental corridor.

On several occasions to date the Council held seminars, roundtables on improvement of the work of local justice system. These steps, though important, are not almighty. In your opinion, what are the key issues BiH should resolve when it comes to more efficient work of judiciary?

The answer is quite universal – relation of legislative, executive and judicial power, manner of recruiting and appointing staff, pressure of profession, fight against corruption, transparency of operations... issues that all countries of the region face, including some countries which are already EU members.

Would you say that BiH is a democratic country or that it is still a country aspiring to become democratic and law-respecting society?

If you take a look at the region, the situation does not differ much – ethnocracy, partitocracy. Establishment of a law-respecting country, rule of law is a problem everywhere. Of course, there are different degrees of this. The larger the mutual blackmails by ethnical or party affiliation are, the smaller is the manoeuvring area for efficient discussion and true democratic participation of citizens in public affairs. However, if other countries around us, which are now EU member states, managed to overcome this more or less successfully, I don't see why the rest of us that are still outside this economic and political block and yet fully surrounded by it, could not do the same.