

Article by Gazeta Si, featuring RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu and results ad successes of the Regional Cooperation Council

The unspoken of Majlinda Bregu/the International Mission

By: Nevila Perdoj

She does not have the face of anyone else.

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), an organisation with a good international reputation, but not known to many in Albania, tries its best not to talk the talk, as has been the case in the past.

This is because Majlinda Bregu does not belong to the political fabric which sees the objectives of an office only paper-related. Nor would she accept the office she is in, if there was no need for delivery.

The international mandate

In the third year of her mandate as Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Majlinda Bregu has torpedoed another political affirmation. Stepping beyond the stiff language that often times the office imposes.

With the experience gained as a former Minister of Integration, she began to translate the agendas of this organisation into real and tangible ones, beyond those consumed only by politics.

Aided by the armour of an intuitive politician, Majlinda Bregu quickly overcame her first and biggest challenge in an organisation where the history of leadership was the history of men.

"The biggest challenge was to have an Albanian have the office for the first time, and, above all, a woman, in an organisation which was run by men and the former Yugoslav part", says Bregu for the "Si" newspaper.

Has there been prejudice?

"At least not in my face. I have been welcomed and I have very good relations with all economies, which has increased RCC's representation not only in the region, but also with the international partners."

With a keen gift of adaptability, Majlinda Bregu has mixed the "bureaucratic" work with innovative ideas.

She has pushed the need for women's empowerment in the region, has entered into agreements with well-known international organisations in the field of tourism, is engaged in eliminating the risk of fake news, and for the first time has made the region have its own security loop (against terrorism), which is also run by an Albanian.

She has cast the attention of this organisation to the economy, but also to another prevailing phenomenon - depopulation.

But, was this journey filled with twists and turns?

"There have been many (such twists and turns), but the most delicate was the first year, when we had to conclude the regional roaming agreement.

Our hearts were throbbing up until the last moment when the agreement was signed in Belgrade, because the day before the agreement was reached and signed with the ministers, but we had a problem that had to be solved with the mobile phone operators.

Some of them had stronger and tougher stances to allowing the reduction of roaming tariffs in the region to start.

The Belgrade Summit was held on the 4th of April, the time when the agreement was signed, whereas just a day ago, on the 3rd of April, in the evening, we were still having a dialogue with the operators, and then with the regulators, which are the responsible institutions for roaming in each economy.

Due to the situation of Kosovo^{*}, I remember that the agreement was signed in the last half hour of the meeting," she recalls.

All the six Western Balkan economies signed a new Roaming Agreement, "Speak as if at home", reducing prices by up to 90% and paving the way to having zero roaming tariffs in the Balkans starting from July this year.

Another challenge of hers was the idea of a common regional market.

"A bigger Western Balkans' market gives us the opportunity to be exposed to more serious investments, because markets with 600 thousand inhabitants, two and a half million inhabitants, one million and a half inhabitants, or five million inhabitants are not interesting for large firms.

The same story repeated itself now with the vaccine.

Had it been possible for the Balkans to be all together as one market to seek, to apply through a common scheme to buy vaccines and, of course, had the EU counted the Western Balkans in terms of numbers and factored such numbers in ordering the vaccine, the situation would have been more normal.

Small markets and selling for the needs of Albania, or Montenegro, become less interesting in a global competition.

This is the idea of a common regional market -- trade, facilities, tariff abolition... ”

The pandemic

Her mandate also coincided with the unprecedented event, which is still a reality as we speak, the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have a more difficult situation in terms of infected people amongst our staff this year compared to last year."

The other big difficulty is limited movement and travel.

“We cannot do a job that forces us to stay locked in the office, despite of our two offices, one in Sarajevo and the other in Brussels.

^{*} 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

My job was to travel to all economies, attend meetings, ministerial summits and more. In order for us to push our main agendas, we had to move.

And the third and biggest challenge is to keep the people and the team motivated to work at the time of the pandemic with all the uncertainties and problems accompanying it."

However, Bregu confesses that the RCC had the best results last year.

"In March last year we established a green corridor for goods and medicines in the region. This is a story which today, wherever we are, everyone refers to as the RCC's success story. Hence, at the time of crisis, we managed to be engaged immediately, so that at least in our Balkan economies nothing was missing."

... Being Albanian

She can see in herself many things – the woman, the wife, the mother, the friend, the politician, the minister, the MP, the journalist, the lecturer.

But, what does not change in her is being Albanian.

"You walk with the weight and pride of your flag (which I have never hidden), but at the same time you have to strengthen and develop skills, aware that in this position you are an Albanian, but you cannot behave like one because you have to maintain balances and be neutral to everyone."

When she cannot convey messages in words, Bregu does so by virtue of her clothing.

This is a diplomatic tool clearly followed by successful politicians in the world, as the likes of Angela Merkel, or the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Alikeness in politics

Majlinda Bregu did not enter politics in 2005 because her name was recognised. Not in this field.

As part of the former DP's KOP, she initially made herself stand out from the group because of her instinct, later gained the intuition of a politician, and then moved on to experience.

Today she distinguishes two types of politicians. Those who love politics as a profession and engage in political battles and those who are appointed to make politics.

For those with politics as a profession, Bregu notes that they all have one thing in common, no matter if they are politicians in Albania, in the Western Balkans, or elsewhere in the world.

"What they share is the fight, the race and the challenge. And, at this point, it is very easy to tell the difference -- that is, those who want to fight and win because politics and power is to win, and those individuals who see politics or political engagement as a stage in their lives, but not as their passion."

She, herself, now sees things more cold-bloodedly, is more balanced and has established a distance with the mess of political developments in Albania, which apparently she had over-internalised.

She says she has gained a new perspective, seeing things more openly, differently, judging more rationally as well as being better at understanding what good policies are in one country, and what very good policies are in another country, why someone succeeds in a reform or in a certain field, and someone else does not.

Reflection

Majlinda Bregu has brewed a form of self-criticism that she associates with her growth and maturity as an individual.

Today, there are some things of her past she would never do again.

"For example, one thing I cannot do today and will never do again is attacking an opponent or someone with whom you have no affiliation or good relations, knowing that it can first hurt their children.

In other words, hurting a father or a mother in front of the child for the sake of the political war.

I would never do it again today."

"Today I would dig to find any political argument against an opponent, but I would never curse her or him as a bad wife or husband, a bad mother or father ", says Bregu, mother of two grown children herself now.

But, when she talks about her political battles in the DP, she has nothing to change.

Suffice it to mention the most recent ones, her efforts to convince the DP that it should vote the justice reform five years ago, or the usefulness and need of the right wing not to boycott the 2017 elections.

"I have never done anything, even for a single day, even when I was in the DP, to think about how to harm the DP.

In case anyone still thinks to this day that a good part of us opposed the justice reform, I am not saying that it was wrong. It was the right stance, despite the fact that the justice reform is long and difficult, but we could not go on forever where we had eventually ended up at.

If anyone thinks that we made a mistake back in 2017 while pushing the DP to take part in the elections and not to boycott them, look at what happened in the local elections. So, we were not wrong, because one is in politics to do politics and play one's part, not to leave the field empty."

Are there things that should have changed or been done differently today?

"I do not know about this, because we were killed in 2017 and you cannot be killed twice for the same 'crime', given that it was all us that left.

But, I do regrettably see today that nothing good has come out of it, at least from 2017 up until today. Hence, at this point, I have no regrets and there is no turning back."

Maybe this is also due to one's nature, too.

"I am very combative by nature, but as much as I do not want to step on somebody's toes, I am also that kind of a person who thinks that what is right should happen."

She and Basha

She, just like Basha, joined the Democratic Party at the invitation of Sali Berisha in 2005.

She, just like Basha, was quickly involved in the first and most successful test, that of being voted from the grassroots.

Both close associates of Sali Berisha, she, just like Basha, was elected MP, and yet again, just like Basha, was appointed minister, and the two of them established their names in the party. They were the new face of the party. But, that is not all. At the same time, both of them gained the affirmation (separately from the party) among the internationals as well.

Majlinda Bregu and Lulzim Basha set off for another chapter of their lives as fellow passengers of the former Policy Orientation Committee (KOP), where the only ones "surviving" were them.

But, in this long journey with somewhat similar political history, there was something preventing them both from trusting each other.

"For me, my intuition was an obstacle, for him maybe it was fear ", Bregu would say in a speech of hers without subsequent twists and turns over three years ago, when she, together with other (before 2017) DP members, was at the last moment removed from the list of party candidates for MPs by the order of Lulzim Basha.

Majlinda Bregu would get some matters straight regarding her political relationship with Lulzim Basha and the relationship with the DP.

"I have not been ever in the past, not for a single day, nor am I now against him. I have certainly not been the companion of his opinion without political opinion", she would say.

Politics brought them together, but different approaches got them apart.

Majlinda Bregu did not vote for Lulzim Basha as the party leader in 2013.

Like no one else from the subsequent departures from the party, she would openly state from the beginning that her vote would go for the late Sokol Ollashi.

Therefore, Bregu finds no reason to feel disappointed in or angry with Basha. Because she departs from Lulzim Basha in the way they love the DP, where unfinished processes are obviously being inherited.

Majlinda Bregu saw Lulzim Basha's run Democratic Party as a party "lacking form", "ideology", lacking "its natural supporting layers", "lacking enthusiasm" and, above all, "lacking change".

Still, in her view, Lulzim Basha remains "the reflection of the biggest problem of the DP".

"If we had loved the DP the same, we would not be where we are today," she stated about four years ago.

Future in the DP?

Majlinda Bregu belongs to a later Party generation, but she bluntly identified herself with the profile of a critical intellectual, that few could dominate.

She has passed her professional challenges, but has twice burned the test of transcendence for the party leadership.

The first time was when the Party's internal polls identified her as the most voted for politician in Tirana in 2010.

Back then, she was the Minister of Integration and her ambition to seize that opportunity did not go unnoticed. Even though only a few months later Berisha would entrust the challenge to run the Municipality of Tirana not to her, but to Lulzim Basha, the springboard of any politician today is to aim at leading the party tomorrow.

The second time around was in 2017, when the DP lost badly to the SP.

Neither this time Bregu tempted the fate by making a move, but listened to her friends in politics instead.

Things would have been different today.

Will there be a third chance for her? Bregu does not give an answer at this stage of her professional career. She does, however, provide assurances that she is not done with politics.

"I have not detached myself from politics, my job is of a political nature and I am involved in politics, but I cannot say anything more today about what tomorrow will be like. I cannot say that today, but what I can say is that I am still training and I have not left the political gym yet", she says for "Si" newspaper.

For Majlinda Bregu, the DP apparently turned out to be a testing ground for politics, one in which, unlike in 2010 or 2017, in another phase of her life, she will define her own priorities herself.

After all, as she puts it, timing is everything.

"Time tests one right or not and, perhaps, time has tested us right. But, for someone, it may be too late."

But, who is it too late for?

Article originally published at <https://gazetasi.al/te-pathenat-e-majlinda-bregut-misioni-nderkombetar-nje-requiem-per-pd-ne-bashen-dhe-e-ardhmja-politike/>