

## Region cannot wait forever in the line for EU

Decision not to open accession negotiations might get the situation to deteriorate

The new EU enlargement strategy has to be a bold, clear, coherent strategy, avoiding ambiguity, Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) told Politika. She stressed that the Western Balkans cannot stay forever in the loose waiting line for the EU membership, doing little things in between. Bregu, who succeeded Goran Svilanović in this position, adds that the EU is facing a lot of challenges and discrepancies on enlargement. Western Balkans, as she says, is living every day amidst uncertainties, though for a number of years witnessing that the accession perspective is not coming any closer to reality.

Former Minister of European Integration of Albania (2007-2013) and Member of Albanian Parliament (2005-2017) told Politika that every time the EU cloud was not at its peak, more problems became evident. Since she took office at the beginning of this year she has been strongly advocating for regional connectivity, though aware this is no easy task.

**Connectivity is still a huge problem in the region, unemployment is high, brain drain is worrisome, there are security challenges, bilateral disputes. Do we really need to tell ourselves that this region is our home?**

It is high time I believe to concentrate on how to better connect people and our economies, bearing in mind people-centric perspective, establishing better ties among Western Balkan economies to the benefit of the citizens, and trying to work a bit more on domestic reforms as well, instead of being obsessed with the dates or new methodologies that should be introduced to us.

**In your opinion, what should the new approach on EU enlargement look like?**

Let's wait for the new approach on the EU enlargement to be formulated first. WB was not on the list of priorities for some EU member states, but for WB I think the priority should be to be consulted on the new methodology. Whatever the new approach, new methodology, new reality, however it will be called, it **should be decided with all Western Balkan Six on board**. In times of uncertainty and mostly in these times, the new EU enlargement strategy has to be a bold, clear, coherent strategy, avoiding ambiguity, a methodology that could install better connection between the EU and the Western Balkans

even before accession, without empty promises, and definitely a methodology that could empower economies in the region to work on the reforms.

**When speaking about it, you said that the “geopolitical damage” to the region had to be avoided. What did you mean by that?**

The decision not to open accession negotiations might get the situation to deteriorate. A bad situation usually gets even worse when not addressed properly. We are all aware that there are some negative forces that might work against reforms in the region – and by that I do not mean third actors only, but I do mean that geopolitical damage to the region might come from political instability, which is a realistic danger. WB is a region that is still a periphery with competing influences. I know the rise of non-Western actors is not an exclusive approach reserved to WB. It is part of a global change of interests in power. Shortly, the geopolitical completion on the WB is not risk free.

**Could it happen, as is sometimes mentioned, that there is a “parallel EU” composed of these six Western Balkans countries?**

The EU is the model for this region. I can't get how 6 economies might be the same as 28, but I just hope that the day when all 6 will be EU member states will not be in the next century. I wish that all Western Balkans six economies could be EU member states in a foreseeable future. I wish the same standards applicable to the EU citizens are vital and indispensable in our region. While there is still a long road to hoe up to the moment of becoming the member states, we still have a chance to transform our economies and our countries. So, whenever any approach or any move that could really bring us closer to the EU model is applied, it means that we would have better standards at our home. If that path is clear, if the process will be a transformative one for each economy, we don't have to be too worried about the date on which we would officially become member states.

**One of the main issues of all countries of the region is economic migration; is there a way to at least reduce the consequences?**

I don't have a magic formula. It is up to the politicians who get voted to formulate proper policies, civil society to help, media to be serious in showing the multifaceted realities in the region, business community to welcome innovative ideas and new technology.

Economic migration is not homogeneous, not all have the same skills and for the skilled immigrants migration could be more beneficial than for the unskilled ones.

I know that people who are leaving the region are only leaving because they are unemployed. Some of them are unemployed, some others, younger ones, are leaving because they would like to get a better education that could offer them a possibility to find a job tomorrow or in the near future. Some others are leaving because they don't share, let's say, the same political beliefs that are present in their countries, so migration always has different meanings. But for the economic ones, I think that proper policies could help each and every economy of our region to make a proper use of those who might like to come back and invest in their homeland.

**There are long-standing conflicts and bilateral disputes between some of the countries of the region. Is it possible to overcome all of these and how willing are politicians to cooperate for the purpose of better life of citizens?**

Yes, there are a long standing conflicts and disputes in the region. This is only one part of the reality. Some political and bilateral disputes can spill over through the process of regional cooperation.

**You are from Albania. The fear of Greater Albania nationalism is present in Serbia and in other Yugoslav Republics due to Edi Rama's statements on joining Kosovo to Albania. What is your position on this matter?**

This is an unfounded fear. I am not going to comment on Edi Rama's or statements of any other leader from the region, but since you asked me as an Albanian, I am quite confident and hopeful that Kosovo\* and Albania do share the vision of unity within the EU family. And if that path is going to be clear for all economies of the region, I feel that in the near future we'll have a greater region being quite close to a greater Europe in terms of the right ideas and values.

**Facilitate cooperation among 6 economies of the region**

*What do you think about "mini-Schengen"? Our mission is to foster regional cooperation. The process of EU accession has been slow, I said it earlier. Now, it's even more unclear and muddled. While we have been facing difficulties in committing to and acting on regional agendas part of the Regional Economic Area, the process is vital for people and business. One of our tasks is to facilitate cooperation among 6 economies of the region. That concept stands at the basis of enlargement policy as well. Enlargement is about connecting markets and people. Every initiative to help and sort out the barriers within our region should be considered. The region is quite a small market, 18 million people for foreign investors. We have to stand by each other.*