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Balkans.com: The Regional Cooperation Council strives to promote cooperation between countries in Southeast Europe. In what ways does the RCC encourage or support the individual efforts of each country to contribute?

Jelica Minic: Regional Cooperation Council has a key role in supporting economic and social development and related reforms in South East Europe, and Western Balkans in particular; it promotes the region's European and Euro-Atlantic integration of which regional cooperation is an essential part; and links the region with donor community in areas with a regional dimension. This is its mission statement. Communication with individual members of the RCC goes through administrative structures, business community, universities, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, cultural institutions etc.

Encouragement and support are very concrete involving different national, regional and international stakeholders: RCC supported and facilitated adoption and implementation of the Single European Sky (SEE) legislative in line with the European Common Aviation Area Agreement (ECAAA); SEE Ministers of Justice and Interior endorsed RCC-facilitated Regional Strategic Document (RSD) and Action Plan; with Regional Anti-corruption Initiative the RCC contributed to the establishment of the Integrity Experts Network (IEN) responsible for conflict of interest and assets declaration; RCC established Task Force on Culture and Society, in Cetinje, a few weeks ago; contributed to the development of a regional project in the area of parliamentary cooperation which is expected to start in the course of 2012; supported the establishment of the European Association of Public Service Media in South East Europe; launched a Joint Research and Development Strategy for Innovation for the Western Balkans, the drafting of which will start in November this year; helped launch a project on Higher Education Reform in the Western Balkans; developed regional mechanism of cooperation among the SEE Chiefs of Military Intelligence (SEEMIC) and co-organized the first conference of the SEE Forum of the Chiefs of National Security Authorities (SEENSA); initiated a SEE Forum of the national councils of the European Movement International; set the three-year programme Social Agenda for the Western Balkans, etc.

Balkans.com: How does this cooperation help each country experience positive benefits to its own development?

Jelica Minic: Listed activities imply reforms, adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, establishment of cross-border and trans-border networks among different players, increased knowledge and sharing experience to define new, more open, competitive but also cooperative

landscape for any individual or group national players. In other words, through regional cooperation RCC facilitates establishment of new interest groups in the region which are not linked only to national resources and capacities, which implies new rules of the game – regional and international. It has to be underlined that the main external partner is European Union, but also many international organizations, international financial institutions and other donors, think tanks etc., which directly contributes to the development of a new political, business and civil society culture in the region.

Balkans.com: How challenging do you think it will be to achieve the desired level of cooperation? What obstacles to success do you perceive?

Jelica Minic: Monopolistic structures and interests are losing power in the region, not only because of regional cooperation, but regional cooperation makes this process easier. Although, obstacles should not be underestimated. Some of them are substantial and some functional. Political readiness to cooperate has been increased, but internal communication and coordination in the national administrations could be a serious obstacle even if we have full political commitment. Infrastructure is in a very bad shape to make physical communication easier. There is a lack of necessary knowledge even if sometimes there is readiness to perform. The RCC has invested huge efforts to bridge some of these gaps with more or less success. But the direction is clear, there are many results and the general climate is in favor of regional cooperation.

Balkans.com: Energy, infrastructure, and transportation are vital to each country. Should Southeast Europe integrate these functions across countries? If so, please share some recommendations on how this can and should be accomplished.

Jelica Minic: Yes, they should and they are aware of that. A small illustration: Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia have founded a common railway company. More and more projects and programs in this domain are of regional character because we do not have a critical size for fragmented projects. The RCC has developed a concept of an integrated infrastructure development indicating that it is not only cross-country but also cross-sectorial dimension demanding simultaneous planning of all infrastructure networks as they are heavily interdependent. We cannot afford ourselves a luxury of developing incompatible fragments of a big whole.

Balkans.com: What actions must countries in Southeast Europe take to reach the EU accession goals?

Jelica Minic: An answer is: permanent action in all domains with clear prioritization. Discussion on the new cycle of pre-accession assistance in the new financial perspective of the EU is very indicative: tailor-made approach, flexibility, equal opportunities to all but rewards to the successful ones, greater stress on regional acquisition of necessary knowledge and capacity building, as well as strengthened regional perspective in infrastructure development (Energy Community Treaty, Transport Community Treaty in the pipeline, Regional Environmental Network for Accession, Western Balkan Investment Framework for donor coordination etc.).

Balkans.com: How is the RCC helping individual countries meet the requirements of the EU's Europe 2020 Strategy?

Jelica Minic: Commitment to common goals helps to change national policies. The RCC plays an important role in developing strategic documents, action plans, common targets, and policy leaning towards Europe 2020's main objectives: smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Other dimension is adoption of good practice, which implies improving system of monitoring, peer reviews, benchmarking, and collecting indicators, harmonised with EU structural indicators.

The RCC also strives to get appropriate support of European Commission in facilitating implementation of Europe 2020 related deliberations through deepening policy dialogue with EU, strengthening institutional capacities and targeted support from pre-accession funds. One of the visible achievements of the RCC is opening a structured and targeted dialogue with numerous (about 30) regional initiatives, as an important asset for supporting reforms on coordinated effort and strengthened focus on Europe 2020 related reforms. The RCC role in that respect is primarily to provide political commitment, networking and coordination, streamlining, and strengthening bottom-up approach and regional ownership in that process.

Balkans.com: What support does the RCC expect from the Southeast European Cooperation Process?

Jelica Minic: First of all, a high-level political commitment to implement agreed strategic decisions and policy measures. This political structure, established in 1996, proved to be able to provide a favorable political climate for important structural reforms and development of a new image of the SEE region. Established as a "safety net" in the nineties, it evolved into an important structure contributing to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration (regional cooperation as a criteria and tool) of its participating countries and is gaining a growing importance in defining developmental goals and projects in the region. As its operational arm, the RCC follows this evolution of its political umbrella.

Balkans.com: Now that countries in Southeast Europe are working toward collaboration, how do you think this will impact the level of interest from potential investors?

Jelica Minic: Tim Judah wrote about Jugosphere. But the context is now even larger with several concentric circles of cooperation in South East Europe. Western Balkans is in the middle, surrounded by four EU Member countries – Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, with third circle consisting of Moldova and Turkey. They are all members of the RCC. They are becoming able to launch big projects of interest to big investors, like railways, airports, waterways, but also to offer better conditions to investors to operate regionally. The RCC is overtaking ownership of the SEE Investment Committee from the OECD in November this year and will be responsible for improvement of the business climate and harmonization of investment policies in the region. This is a great challenge but deserves to be undertaken. We hope to have investors as partners and not only beneficiaries in this endeavor.

Balkans.com: Can you discuss the short and long-term goals of the RCC?

Jelica Minic: Hopefully, the previous answers indicated our short-term goals: to implement all

the listed projects and programmes, as well as the RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2011-2013.

Long term goals are closely connected with further evolution of the SEECF, EU Enlargement Policy and how deeply rooted will become all undertaken measures to interlink regional players and to establish long lasting structures of interest that could keep region together even if we all join the EU in the foreseeable future. Maybe something similar to Nordic Council, Baltic Council, Visegrad Group in the existing or slightly changed format? Some SEE Macro Region? There are many factors influencing development of our region and the biggest challenge is to identify appropriately our real resources and long-term opportunities, as well as the potential/achievable readiness to combine them on the regional level.

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