

Talking points by Deputy RCC Secretary General, Jelica Minic  
at a regional conference

What kind of social agenda for the Western Balkans?

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It is a great pleasure, to welcome you to Sarajevo and to open today's event on behalf of the RCC. I would very much like to express my appreciation to our partner the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, for supporting this event, and for the excellent cooperation in preparing it. I am pleased to see around the table representatives of governments and social partners from the region. I would also like to thank for positive response to our invitation the keynote speakers: Mr. Gligorov, Ms. Kolin, Ms. Kovac, Mr. Bartlett, and Mr. Stubbs as well as representatives of international organizations: European Commission, International Labour Organization, Council of Europe, United Nations Development Programme and World Bank.

The countries of South East Europe share many common challenges but also the common goal of dynamic economic development combined with increasing living standards and improving working conditions. Given recent crisis, it is vital to refocus economic policies at job creation and reducing social inequalities, while the states continue to offer strong social protection and services to the citizens.

The recent economic crisis has highlighted the need for further reform and has reversed some of the positive trends evident in the past years. Declining employment and activity rates, and growing unemployment are becoming endemic (e.g. from 23.4% in 2008 to 29.9% in 2010 in Bosnia and from 13.6% to 19.2% in Serbia in the same period) and will be difficult to reverse given the dominant view of a jobless recovery. Sectors most hit are manufacturing, construction, trade and agriculture. Labor market segmentation between the public and private sectors has been particularly acute, with high job security in the public vs. high insecurity in the private sector. It becomes obvious that addressing social policies in a more structured way is both urgent and necessary in the region. Failure to act now could threaten the very fabric of societies in SEE.

Full EU membership stands as an additional strong incentive for these countries to implement reforms along a path that will need to be clearly defined. A considerable portion of the European *acquis communautaire* contains requirements related to social policy issues (e.g. employment, social dialogue, occupational health and safety, public health, etc). While there is no single ideal

social model, many EU countries' experiences provide a good base against which the countries of SEE can measure progress in their social policies' deliberation and implementation.

RCC, as the major focal point for regional cooperation in SEE aiming at supporting economic and social development and promoting region's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, has recently prepared its Strategy and Work Programme for the period 2011-2013. In this context, RCC recognizes the importance of mainstreaming social considerations in all economic reforms implemented in the region through a broad consultative process. Using a partnership approach, the RCC and FES will organize a series of regional events on specific social themes targeting a broad audience, including relevant government institutions, social partners, civil society organizations, regional initiatives and international stakeholders. Topics will be determined in consultations with a broad spectrum of stakeholders and through an open method of coordination. This will provide a framework for coordinating policies between the RCC members on issues relating to the social agenda. Possible themes include active employment generation, labor mobility, occupational health and safety, social protection and security, poverty reduction and social inclusion, to be further elaborated during this event.

These activities will help raise the awareness of different stakeholders about the importance of social policies and will aim at agreeing on a regional vision for the future of social policies in SEE. This forward-looking dialogue would also contribute to developing a regional social agenda as part of a broader Western Balkans 2020 exercise, initiated by the RCC - building a common regional vision compatible with the EU 2020 strategy – that would identify the policy priorities and determine policy targets that could than be measured across the region. Given the similar structural landscape of the SEE countries, the continuous exchange of know-how and experience make the reform process more efficient and cost-effective. Mainstreaming the social agenda into economic reform deliberations should be a priority for the countries of SEE in order to ensure an inclusive and sustainable development.

Strengthening social dialogue will constitute a key feature of these events. The region of Southeast Europe lacks a strong tradition of social dialogue. Basic institutional structures have been created over the past two decades and considerable investment has gone into the capacity building of social partners since. Nevertheless, the issue of establishing a trustworthy and productive relationship remains an outstanding challenge. Given the ongoing efforts of regional governments to develop measures aimed at addressing economic challenges, the time is also ripe to insert the social partners into the current economic policy debate.

RCC offers to coordinate the activities and serve as a platform for advocacy as well as dissemination and promotion of conclusions. Based on its mandate to support, facilitate, and coordinate regional initiatives, during the entire process RCC will liaise with different regional initiatives that directly or indirectly promote the social agenda.

Let me conclude by thanking you all for your participation. I am also very confident that today's meeting will provide a solid basis for strengthened cooperation in promoting social development in our region. RCC remains committed to this issue and looks forward to continue working with you.