

INTERVIEW of the RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu to BUKA online magazine

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BUKA: Having in mind many open issues in the region, bilateral disputes, how difficult is your mission? Is it possible to make any economic progress as a region without resolving our long-standing feuds?

Majlinda Bregu: Let me begin by quoting Mother Teresa, who said: “Yesterday is gone, tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today, let us begin.”

One thing is certain – the region has chosen Europe and its commitment on the European path is uncontested. European integration of the Western Balkans is a transformational agenda, which in the broader orientation towards fundamental European values has delivered in major ways. Should I spell out the most recent example of that? The Republic of North Macedonia, the brand new NATO member!

Still, divisions exist, and they are serious. Sometimes negotiations to reach an agreement are red in tooth and claw. There is bitterness, rancour, but there is as well the consciousness that together we stand, divided we fall.

But who said it was easy for the EU? In the 1960s the Empty Chair Crisis, triggered by De Gaulle, who felt himself more French than European, was quite severe. Then in the 1970s, there was a period of tensions between France and Germany on which currency was stronger. It was the time of a lack of synchronised economic policies. And I am not mentioning other crises, leave aside Brexit.

Long standing feuds?! The agenda we are working on is a shared commitment of all WB leaders. I do take very seriously their political commitment in regard to regional cooperation and citizens’ concerns.

Citizens’ concerns with regard to the pressing **economic situation** are clearly echoed in all Balkan Barometer editions so far. **63% of the respondents declare themselves unhappy with the economic situation.**

BUKA: How willing are the Balkan politicians to cooperate and make compromises for the benefit of the citizens of the whole region? What is your experience so far?

Majlinda Bregu: In the past little more than a month since I am heading the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), I have met most of the region’s leaders and the message I got from all of them is that they are willing and eager to do what needs to be done, to advance the regional cooperation agenda to the benefit of their citizens. Western Balkans is a fragmented market of small economies that cannot stand alone and compete on the international market or in any other format. Hence, the reality of joining hands and working together is an absolute for this region. It is our mutual interest to move forward as a region that speaks clearly that we need each other. As for the RCC, we continue with our work with the region and for the region, and we are pushing hard to deliver some concrete benefits to the WB citizens already by this summer.

The New Regional Roaming Agreement or “speak/ surf more, pay less”, which abolishes the roaming prices in WB6 in 2021, is in the pipeline, and negotiations on mutual recognition of professional qualifications in the WB6 for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists, Architects and Civil Engineers are well on the way. We expect both to be finalised within the summer time.

On the other hand, it is fair for me to say that these are challenging times, and they come with huge expectations. Each negotiation is a story of impact and dialogue; transformation included, hopefully, for individuals, communities, economies. Irrespective of the differences, I am sure no one can afford a failure.

BUKA: One of the biggest problems in the region is that people are leaving their countries in search of a better life. How can this be addressed through regional cooperation?

Majlinda Bregu: The brain-drain as popularly called is indeed a big problem of all economies in the region. And it is not just the young, educated people any longer. It has started to involve people across the educational and age board. In a recently published [Gallup study on brain drain](#) Western Balkans ranked worst in Europe.

I hope that authorities in the region clearly understand the reasons for this – people are looking for easier access to employment, better pays, fair treatment, less corruption, functioning rule of law – all in all conditions for better quality of life. I know this is quite easy to say, and I am not here to preach. I would like, since coming from this region myself, to see another picture and develop concrete emergency measures to deal with that.

BUKA: In reference to the above question, what will the mutual recognition of professional qualifications mean for doctors, dentists, engineers and other professionals in the region, for them personally, but also for the economies?

Majlinda Bregu: Primarily, it will remove long and expensive recognition procedures, firstly for these four professions included in the initial agreement, hopefully replicating these good practices to the recognition processes for many other qualifications. The recognition will become clear, transparent, faster and harmonised across the region.

For professionals in this case it would mean a lot – if you are a dentist who obtained your qualifications in Banja Luka, for example, you could easily apply for a job in your profession in Budva or Durres, and continue practicing your profession there. No obstacles for your free professional movement, in pursuit of the better conditions. This will be beneficial to at least 600 professionals each year.

For economies it would be a much easier access to highly skilled labour, filling the vacant positions in the system based on fair competition of skills and knowledge.

BUKA: Corruption might be the root of all problems in the region. Would you agree? What is the approach of RCC in tackling this issue, especially when it comes to corruption at highest levels of government?

Majlinda Bregu: Corruption is among the top 3 things that worry people in the region the most - one third think so, according to our Balkan Barometer survey.

Corruption prevents development of societies and fair competition in any walk of life. Unfortunately, no country is immune to it.

We closely cooperate with Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative on detecting problems and proposing solutions. For example, we were involved in the campaign on whistle-blowers in the region, aimed at providing better protection to those who loudly speak of this societal deviation. And we will continue with such practices as eliminating corruption is the key to regaining trust of our citizens in institutions and rule of law.

BUKA: Let us talk about something more positive. What are the comparative advantages of the region that can drive the economic development?

Majlinda Bregu: Yes, positive stories about our region tend to be put aside as we put the problems upfront. Luckily, there are many that we can take pride in.

For example, did you know that Western Balkans on average has 47% share of female researchers which is significantly better than the world's average of 28%? I think that is amazing, and we need to get the most of it, and not just in the area of science.

Women in the region are an unlocked potential that needs to be boosted and utilised – in business, politics, education, science...we need to empower women. Youth and their creativity, their impeccable talent in hi-tech will be our priority from the very beginning of 2020.

New start-ups are emerging, mobilising young people with fresh ideas, connecting with their peers in the region and beyond.

This region is rich in its diversities, common heritage, talented people, natural resources and beauty. Combining these leads to economic capitalising on our advantages. Slowly but surely people are starting to realise that, and every once in a while we see some new projects initiated by people here, or returning to the region, in tourism, agriculture, research, innovation, industry.

This needs to become a trend, to make a fresh, unique brand of our region.

BUKA: What is your vision of the region?

Majlinda Bregu: Europe! Europe is also a state of mind. This is my vision of the region. Investment in the European future of the Western Balkans is a win-win choice that is clearly in our common European interest.

I know the Western Balkans needs to work harder and faster in order to outdo itself, to become the Western Balkans that completes the Europe. It is time to shift the narrative from the date of joining the EU, to the real democratic and economic transformation of WB. The language of unity among citizens, by enhancing national reforms and regional cooperation with effect to the economic development of the region, is a recipe for a better region.

This is where I see us. Embracing all good the EU has to offer, bringing in a fresh breeze to its dynamics.

Majlinda Bregu
RCC Secretary General