

Bregu: There cannot be integration and a common regional market without the freedom of movement throughout the entire Balkans

For **Majlinda Bregu**, the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, the council which initiated the visa-free agreement between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the lack of implementation of the agreement stemming from the Berlin Process is unfortunate. She states that any agreement signed between parties should be implemented. In an interview with Kallxo.com, Bregu explains that they are trying in various ways to push forward the implementation of this agreement so that freedom of movement between the two countries can happen as soon as possible.

"We regret that the agreement aimed at breaking down the last remaining wall for freedom of travel in the Balkans has not been fully implemented," she declares.

Bregu, who took office as Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council on January 1, 2019, following her appointment by the Foreign Ministers of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) at the meeting held on April 23, 2018, in Brdo, Slovenia, says that the visa policy is based on the relevant Law on Foreigners and this is already a decision of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On October 21, 2022, she was the first to announce that an agreement had been reached to abolish visas between the two countries.

Bregu expresses concern that more political will is needed to move things towards ensuring a safe and fruitful environment for citizens to work and live in their homes.

The Regional Cooperation Council engages RCC participants from Southeast Europe (SEE), members of the international community, and donors on important and relevant topics for SEE, aiming to promote and advance the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region.

Within the framework of the general political guidelines set by the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), RCC works to develop and maintain a political climate of dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance, and openness to cooperation, aiming to enable the implementation of regional programs that target economic and social development for the benefit of the people in the region.

The RCC Secretary General says they cannot impose decisions on any national authority, mentioning the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which unlike the other party - Kosovo, has not ratified the visa agreement.

"They know their commitments and are responsible for the implementation of the agreements they have signed. That said, we are in close contact with the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, advocating for this agreement to be ratified," Bregu states.

The current visa regimes, as she says, significantly limit the freedom of movement for the citizens of both countries, restricting their opportunities for travel, business, education, and cultural exchange.

According to her, this not only affects individuals but also hinders regional integration and economic development.

Despite the agreement for freedom of movement between the two countries, neither Bosnians nor Kosovars can travel freely from Kosovo to Bosnia and Herzegovina and vice versa. All because such an agreement has not found support from all entities of the Bosnian Presidency, or in other words, has been blocked by the Serb Republic led by Milorad Dodik.

KALLXO.com: What are the main obstacles currently preventing the lifting of visa requirements for citizens of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and what steps are being taken to address them?

Bregu: The Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards was signed at the Berlin Process Summit a year and a half ago by the leaders of all Western Balkan Six. Once signing was finalised, it was up to the signatories to ensure its smooth and swift implementation. Since then, 5 out of 6 signatories have ratified the agreement, making it operational among them. The only one that hasn't ratified this Agreement is Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Regional cooperation can do a lot, bringing forth the know-how and providing a reliable space to facilitate regional integration. However, it cannot do all the work, as implementation still remains in the hands of each participant. The need to bridge the considerable gap between our region and the EU must be addressed in order for our region to join the Single Market and the EU. Regional integration is a prerequisite for this, not a matter of personal preference. There can be no regional integration and Common Regional Market (CRM) without freedom of travel across the entire region.

With time running out for our region, persistent stalemates and blockages are no longer affordable. The European Commission ensured mechanisms to prevent blockages, implying that attempting to stall progress at the regional level will only hinder the much-needed funding for the obstructing party, allowing others to proceed without interruption. In practice this means if one is obstructing regional agenda, the access to funds within the Growth Plan will not be possible and subsequently the access to EU Single Market as well. This has been clearly and unequivocally voiced at every high-level meeting since the beginning of this year, first in Skopje, then in Tirana, and recently in Kotor. On the other hand, all leaders voiced their commitment to the implementation of the Growth Plan, whose integral part are regional agendas of the Common Regional Market. The next leaders meeting is in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I hope for a breakthrough in this regard.

KALLXO.com: Why do citizens of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina still suffer from visa regimes despite the Berlin Process agreement? Does this indicate that the Berlin Process 'is failing'?

Bregu: Agreements signed have to be implemented. We regret that the agreement meant to tear down the only remaining wall to freedom of travel in the Balkans has not been fully implemented. But visa policy is based on the respective Law on Foreigners and this is now a decision of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I'd say the Berlin Process revived regional and EU integration processes after the pandemic stalemate. Since October 2022, under the Berlin Process umbrella, besides the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, three more agreements have been signed: on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists, and Architects, and on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications of Nurses, Veterinary Surgeons, Pharmacists, and Midwives. Ratification and implementation of these agreements are proceeding smoothly in all WB economies. But Berlin Process is not just these agreements, and certainly not only this particular one. The Common Regional Market was adopted at one of the Berlin Process Summits, and there are concrete results that came out of the CRM implementation besides the agreements. To mention just the

biggest ones - our region is a Roaming Free zone as of July 2021; the roaming prices between our region and EU are significantly lower since last October. Let's not forget the green lanes that were vital during the pandemic and now are extended through the entire region and with EU as well, thus shortening the waiting time on borders significantly.

For the next Berlin Process Summit, we are preparing the new phase of the Common Regional Market Action Plan, which is expected to be adopted by WB leaders. We are currently working with our partners to define priorities and build upon the results of the previous CRM Action Plan. In this new phase, our primary focus is on enhancing human capital. Education and innovation play instrumental roles in identifying new sources of economic growth and mechanisms for future transformation. Addressing the scarcity of good jobs and the ongoing emigration of young people is crucial. Migration and brain drain pose considerable challenges for Western Balkan societies. Additionally, the plan prioritizes women's economic empowerment, digitalisation for better governance and services, cybersecurity, and removal of barriers to citizen mobility within the region. Notably, the plan places a strong emphasis on the Green Agenda, addressing energy and air pollution, and aligning with EU climate laws.

KALLXO.com : Is the key to resolving this issue with Republika Srpska, or is there more to it? Why is this not being prioritised by the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and do you believe it will be addressed this year?

Bregu: We cannot impose decisions on any national authority. They know their commitments and are in charge of implementing agreements they signed. That being said, we are in close contact with the Bosnia and Herzegovina Council of Ministers, advocating for this agreement to be ratified.

KALLXO.com: How do you assess the impact of this situation on the freedom of citizens in both countries?

Bregu: The current visa regimes significantly restrict the freedom of movement for citizens of both, limiting their opportunities for travel, business, education, and cultural exchange. This not only affects individuals, but also hampers regional integration and economic development. For example, in 2018 almost 1500 Kosovan citizens applied for a visa. In 2021 that number dropped to close to 400, out of which the number of issued visas was 107, with the number of rejected applicants twice as high, 283. And let's not forget businesses. Bosnians and Herzegovinians export food, beverages, industrial products and construction material to Kosovans. Yet, between 2022 and 2023, instead of increasing export dropped by almost 12%.

This situation is not viable. More political will, rather than political wilfulness, is needed to move things in the direction of providing a safe and fruitful environment for citizens to live, work, and thrive in their homes. It is essential for youth to stay, as 71% of them voiced readiness to live and work abroad. This is the data from our still unpublished Balkan Barometer survey. I'm sure anyone would consider this pretty alarming.

KALLXO.com: The agreement to lift visa requirements is meant to deepen regional cooperation. How much are citizens of both countries currently excluded from such cooperation?

Bregu: Regional cooperation is always all-inclusive and has no borders. Passports or ID cards are not needed. However, to fully benefit from regional cooperation and reach our goal, each participant must do their own homework.

If our mutual goal is the EU, and it is, there is no doubt about that, then the path is pretty clear. Regional cooperation leads to regional integration, which leads to the single market, which leads to the EU. Will it

be an easy path? No, it will not. Nothing good comes easy. But can we do it? We certainly can and should. If we were to advise our own child or a friend, we'd say, don't miss the opportunities given, as they are few and far between. You can't afford not to use them.