

Four Freedoms for Western Balkans

Western Balkans economies are to soon have a regional summit in Sofia, and one of the key actors is the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu, former university professor, party member, politician and minister, personally and the RCC played a significant role in July last year in reaching a joint agreement of the economies from the region on roaming, which is an important step for further economic cooperation but also for the citizens. We ask Ms Bregu when and under which conditions could we attain the EU standards and status in this area?

“Thank you for your kind words. It was the result of combined efforts of a group of doers, EU, WB6 and RCC.

Yes, it was a great regional achievement within the Regional Economic Area. Actually last April, during the 2nd Western Balkans Digital Summit, the Ministers from all six economies signed the Regional Roaming Agreement, implementation of which started on 1 July 2019, drastically reducing roaming costs amongst the region’s economies. Already now we pay 83 to 96% less in roaming charges, and as of July 2021 that costs will be zero,” says RCC Secretary General for Novi Magazin: “Simultaneously, we are working on reducing the roaming prices between the WB6 and the EU Member States, as now for 100 MB and 30 minutes call some operators charge WB citizens from 325 Euro to 609 Euro. Implementation of our regional agreement is being closely monitored by our EU partners and I’m sure that once the region fully delivers upon the Regional Agreement and eliminates the roaming costs within the Western Balkans, the EU would respect their commitment and start gradual reduction of roaming costs with the region. It is important to mention that it took the EU 10 years to achieve this result for its citizens and only 2 years for the Western Balkan economies to agree on this demanding task.”

What are the plans now, when it comes to creation of Common Regional Market and what are your expectations of the Sofia Summit?

Well, the plans are very ambitious but I want to believe that we'll all agree – realistic as well. I'm very optimistic about Sofia Summit, believing that we would agree and move forward to establish the Common Regional Market (CRM) which is based on the four freedoms approach – core of the Mini-Schengen proposal and strengthened with digital, innovation industrial and investment – mirroring closely EU Single Market principles, rules and regulations.

Some expert estimates say that the Western Balkans will experience the worst recession in the past two decades. And it seems it has already started. The EU has already done a lot to mitigate those consequences in our region. Their Economic Investment Plan (EIP) envisages 9 billion EUR in grants. Together with the already announced 3.3 billion EUR to combat pandemic outbreak, it is an impetus to move on faster with economic development.

This EU investment, backed by the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility, has a potential to attract additional 20 billion EUR from public and private investments. When you put it together, it adds up to 32.3 billion EUR to be pumped in the region – massive stimulus – almost 30% of the Western Balkans' 100 billion EUR GDP.

But the Western Balkans needs to pull its own weight as well, and there comes the Common Regional Market Plan that goes hand in hand with EU's EIP. We are very small geographic area of around 18 million people altogether. And yet, almost 50% of people in the Western Balkans do not have the equal opportunity to free movement with identity documents. It is a region of scattered markets with different rules and procedures. The goal is to synchronise them to allow for smooth flow of goods, people, services, capital, but also to make the entire region an attractive investment destination. But we also have to bear in mind the global trend in digitalisation and develop plans to catch up with new technologies so we would be competitive.

Green agenda will also be a focus of our attention in the coming years, as it underpins all other living segments. Another weak spot of the region is the brain drain, especially of young people. At this point the region has almost 5.000 requests for intraregional recognition of academic qualifications. We need to make this easier. We need to act and work to make our societies attractive for businesses and for people to stay, contribute and work in the region rather than moving away. But, as you are aware – the common regional market is not an idea that we started from the scratch – its implementation is based on solid grounds set in previous achievements of Regional Economic Area.

All these efforts are intended for better lives of the citizens, healthier environment, more decent and better paid jobs, opportunities for start-ups, especially for young people, easier travel, education, better connectivity, faster internet, better public services, and competitive good value-for money markets. And now again we cannot but mention the pandemic – it really pointed out all the weakest spots of our societies and the fact that there's no time or room for solo actions of individual economies but that we need each other to share both good and bad. This eye-opener also created an atmosphere of decisiveness and determination among our partners to act. And this is what fills me with optimism.

The pandemic has disrupted all important life flows both globally and locally. The RCC has done a lot to overcome vital problems in the region, which the pandemic has only made worse. The public knows very little about the green corridors established during the pandemic. To what extent will the green corridors connect us with each other, and with Europe, and what would you single out as the most important initiatives?

Just as many of you, the corona outbreak has caught us off guard. But we all needed to quickly adapt and find a way to live and work in this 'new normal' situation that will continue for the foreseeable future.

But there was this moment in the lockdown when panic started to grow while people were buying excessively, be it food, medicines, toilet paper even, borders closing one by one, hearing more reports on the infected, and we were thinking what can we do, instead of just waiting for this storm to pass. So, I'm glad the regional governments, EU and our partners in CEFTA and Transport Community Treaty Secretariat accepted wholeheartedly our idea on green lanes in WB to ease the flow of essential goods like foods and medicine in our region. It was not beneficial to anyone for the drivers to wait more than 20 hours at each of the border crossings, and there are 14 among the WB and 18 with the EU. Every minute of the driver waiting at those crossings costs us 2 EUR. Imagine how many minutes/euros is that. And not just that. In a pandemic, being fast can mean a difference between life and death.

So we gathered quickly and started working on this. It was not easy. It is never an easy feat to reach a consensus over something in the region. But we, all together, did it in a record time. Because everyone understood the urgency and importance. I am happy it worked out. Now, as part of the Common Regional Market, we want the region to have joint border crossings, to save time and money. It has been calculated that by having all joint border crossings within the WB6 that work 24/7 the region would save 800.000.000 euro per year.

As soon as you were appointed Secretary General, you sent a message to the women of the region that the development of all societies of the region largely depends on them. Where are the women in the region today?

Today, according to the latest Balkan Barometer, the share of women in corporate employment in the Western Balkans is 38%. Even more discouraging is the fact that only 7% of Western Balkans business executives would rather hire a woman than a man. If, on the other hand, we know that Western Balkans economies lose 5% of GDP due to a gap in participation of women as entrepreneurs and the region's GDP could be 20% higher if women were to participate in the labour market at the same levels as men do, then that is a clear signal we need to change the odds.

Women are the most powerful force in the world and we need to celebrate our ambitions, live up to our abilities to be decision-makers, business owners, to determine outcomes of elections in our societies. We cannot allow being just

breaking news if we are successful – women’s success needs to become everyday story. And the only way to do this is to constantly and heartily work on empowering women. We have started it in the RCC, over 60% of our employees are women, almost all of the leading positions are held by women. Woman Empowerment – WE campaign is just one step in creating an environment where women are taking the lead.

In addition to this we promote women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and work with women who have employed other women, especially during these pandemic times. And we all know by now how challenging these times are – yet women have managed not only to keep their businesses, but to grow them, while at the same time keeping households together and remaining sane. Not an easy task, don’t you think?

I do not believe women, even in rather traditional and patriarchate Balkans, have less rights than in the rest of the world, but what we as a whole society need to work on is to make our voice loud, clear, competent and authoritative. Not because it is our right but because it is RIGHT.

In your extensive career you were a university professor, Minister for European Integration, you supported judicial reform, although at that time you were still member of the party. How to bridge the gaps between university and political careers, and between different opposing parties? That is, how is consensus reached when it comes to general interests?

You are right. Mostly. I’ve been all of these and not only that. I quit my academic career when I got involved in politics because I couldn’t do both and I hate when I cannot dedicate full attention my job deserves. Plus I had a great relation with students. I was teaching research, which is natural science, and students who want a degree in social science do not like math or statistics. But they never missed a lesson and I never did myself. So I didn’t want to disappoint them in terms of correctness. The political career was abruptly interrupted and that was not my decision. I’m currently committed to my job, heading the RCC. Still, in all these there are common denominators – I continue to practice my belief in Europe, and the role that EU can play in the region, as I’m a devoted European, and equal opportunities and inclusion of all societal groups (gender equality included) just in different environment – now it is regionally. Although I believe, women are the best.

At the very end one should be humble and serious enough as not to cheat oneself. All women face déjà vu battles, even without a life experience of world war we keep fighting on daily basis, some have bad jobs, some not a job at all, some have a good job and live through relentless feeling of not being home enough, some feel guilty without any definite guilt, some question themselves in front of a male boss whose ego is meaningless if he finds no one to boast off, so I do believe sincerely women should hold each other up. Personally I have no time for hypocrisy, tricks, quotas or medals of honour to be hanged like a curtain in my bedroom. As simple as that. I want to be sure my voice reflects the needs of the people I represent.

To make a change, improving a society and bettering lives of the people, be it through education, as policy-making while in the parliament, or policy-implementation in the government.

Youth is most disadvantaged

At the beginning of this year you launched a project dedicated to youth in the region. Can you tell us more about it? What is the situation with youth employment in the region, especially in the context of the pandemic? Do you employ young people?

Yes, we are very happy to say that youth is part of our agenda. Youth are the most vulnerable group employment-wise in our region – unemployment of the overall population in the region stands at 16%, while for youth it is around 35%. And the pandemic made the situation even worse - numbers of the unemployed youth have increased by 27% since March 2020 when the first effects of the pandemic were noted, compared to 15% increase of overall registered unemployment. This brings the number to almost 800.000 of the unemployed young people – enormous potential for development of any society and a plenty of work for our new project.

Our Youth Lab Project focuses on motivating young people to take part in design and implementation of policies that concern them the most. This is against the current background in the region in which we have almost a quarter (22.5%) of young people completely inactive – not in education, employment or training. On top of that one third of young people aged 18-24 are completely disinterested in the decision-making processes of their governments, many of which concern them and for half of them it is not even a topic to be discussed. So Youth Lab project is in a quest to change this narrative – to give incentive to young people to get involved

and with the relevant authorities shape the policies and actions concerning them.

To finish on a positive note – RCC is glad to report that we are an organisation that gives a chance to young people. We employ them whenever there is a possibility, so in this year only, 14 young people have joined our organisation. They are doing a good job, especially in these circumstances of hybrid working - a bit online, a bit from the actual office. It is not easy, but we all manage. Now more than 20% of the RCC are the young forces and I am very proud of it.

Roma are large potential

Belgrade has been hosting the Office of the Action Team for Roma Integration 2020 of the Regional Cooperation Council for years. How do you assess the results of Roma integration so far and do you think that the realisation that Roma truly are a potential for development of their societies and regions is surfacing?

In 2016, the Government of Serbia kindly offered to host our office for Roma Integration in Belgrade, for which we are very grateful. This also showed their commitment to work on Roma inclusion, and it made sense as Serbia has the second biggest community of Roma, right after the Republic of North Macedonia, with 147.604 Roma living there, representing a total of 2.05% of the whole population. Those are the official data, but it is estimated that numbers are much higher, up to 600.000. Roma inclusion does not only bring positive changes for them alone but also for the whole society and the economy. 88% of Roma live in severe material deprivation; 1 in 2 is not able to secure food on the table every day; only 16% are employed; and almost 10% do not possess an ID card. We are glad that our initiative to boost human capital development within Connectivity Agenda of Berlin Process, concretely enhancing its social dimension, is a reality.

Last year, we proposed the Declaration of Western Balkan Partners on Roma Integration, that sets important targets for the governments to achieve before they can join the EU, and it became shortly a flagship of the Roma integration in the region. And also, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, launched few weeks ago, reinforces EU's commitment to support the Western Balkan efforts to improve labour market and digital education of disadvantaged groups, including Roma.