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INTERVIEW: JELICA MINIC, DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL

Holding Back Balkans Integration Is a Threat to the Union Itself

By D. Milivojevic

A part of the traditional ministerial forum of the EU and the Western Balkans, this time to be organized by Sweden as the EU Presidency on 9 December in Brussels, will be dedicated to important development projects primarily related to regional infrastructure. As explained by the Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council seated in Sarajevo, Jelica Minic, in an interview for *Dnevnik*, it will be a “preparation for a cycle of important investments in the region after the end of economic crisis and with far better coordination of assistance.”

- The entire concept is partially linked to the EU initiative for better coordination of European investments in the region, implying coordination of donors, financial institutions awarding loans to the region – EIB, EBRD, CoE Development Bank, European Fund for South East Europe, and European Commission (EC). There is a far closer coordination regarding investments in important projects, and countries from the region wish to use this opportunity and, at the ministerial meeting, influence stimulation of investments in the region and prepare legal and institutional framework for the period following the end of international crisis so that the region would have a considerable inflow of investments into infrastructure projects – indicated Minic.

• How much donor funds and loans by the European financial institutions have been invested into development of region’s infrastructure thus far?

- I cannot give you this data off the top of my head, but the main financial institutions are currently reviewing how much and into what they have invested so far. However, in the last ten years, billions of euro were invested primarily into reconstruction and then into development of infrastructure in the region. Only one element of the broader picture is the Crisis Response Package developed by the European Union upon which, and based on the 150 million euro the EC will allocate, it will be possible to take a loan amounting around 600 million euro from international financial institutions. The largest portion of this will go to infrastructure. In addition, it is expected that even more money will be withdrawn within the EU initiative – the Western Balkans Investment Framework. This is a new package providing several billion euros in mid-term by consolidating the coordination of grants and loans. Therefore, both the EC and the international financial

institutions are preparing themselves for the new investment cycle in the Western Balkans; but it is necessary for the countries of the region to be prepared themselves, and that is what our Council in Sarajevo is currently working on.

● **From your position, what is the view of the thus far EU accession process of the Western Balkans?**

- Within the Regional Cooperation Council we have been considering three scenarios. The first would be ideal: all the countries of the region granted the candidate status as soon as possible, visa regime liberalized for all as soon as possible, functional and sector integration done, additional mechanisms and funds for the region secured. Bearing in mind the crisis in the EU and the region, as well as institutional obstacles, this scenario is not realistic at the moment. The second scenario is that, having in mind all the obstacles, the institutional integration progresses slowly, imposed by the issue of adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, but that it is functionally, by sectors, speeded up as much as possible through transport, energy, environmental protection, increased cooperation in justice and home affairs, as well as building human capital in the region, which also increases administrative capacities for integration. In other words, to compensate institutional slowdown through these channels. The third scenario is to stop the process and have it remain at status quo which represents a risk to the entire region of increasing tensions, strengthening extreme options and inciting different latent conflicts. This would mean going back to the starting point, to the end of the last decade, which is a great risk for both the region and the entire EU. The costs of calming down the region would be far greater for the EU than are the investments into its faster growth and faster integration into the Union.

● **Are the Council's activities burdened with some problems as it is less talked about than the Stability Pact?**

- It is not so much talked about as this is a new institution for regional cooperation operational for a year. Yes, the Council is the successor of the Stability Pact, but with different structure and is fully in the ownership of the countries from the region with regard to people working in it – exclusively from South East Europe – and leadership as it is run by the countries from the region while its umbrella political organization is the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECF). The Council is its operational arm. The Pact reported to the EU while the Council, through SEECF, reports to the countries from the region. Finally, the region participates in financing the Council with one third of the funds. During the past year, we have implemented numerous activities, the Council became well known in number of sectors and in numerous situations we had institutions referring to us to jointly start new projects and activities for the region.

- **To what extent are Council's activities burdened with the issue of Kosovo and Metohija?**

- Of course, a year ago when the independence of Kosovo was unilaterally proclaimed, followed by the recognition by a large number of EU members states and other countries, this reflected on certain issues among the countries in the region. As we know, Serbia reacted at a diplomatic level as well. However, we are trying to maintain the cooperation in the region at a functional level and we believe to have had success in this.

- **Surveys in Serbia show that almost two third of citizens believe that further EU integration process for Serbia will be characterized by new conditions, most likely Kosovo?**

- I believe that the EU officials, as well as the high-level officials from the U.S., stressed that such a pressure would not be made towards Serbia so as to hinder the European integration process. I also believe that, at least in this phase, there will be no such pressure.

- **What about the other phase when Serbia's EU membership comes onto the agenda?**

- It all depends on the negotiation position of Serbia at that time and generally, the atmosphere in the EU. Our full EU membership is still at the mid-term horizon, but until then, Serbia can do much to considerably improve its international position, while it is also important to utilize all the opportunities with the region itself. If the entire region moves forward and if it manages to prove its capacity to fulfill the obligations implied by European integration and also to resolve bilateral issues as much as possible, it will be far easier for each Western Balkans country to enter the full membership of the EU.

- **To what extent is the region burdened with bilateral issues and what do the countries do to overcome them?**

- The Council primarily deals with regional arrangements, but, of course, bilateral issues in the region are also reflected. There are problems between Skopje and Athens, Ljubljana and Zagreb, Serbia has its own open issues not only related to Kosovo but also with its neighbours. The Council is doing its best to strengthen the "soft tissue" of the regional cooperation and make relative different open bilateral issues through tackling trade issues, joint projects in the field of infrastructure, fight against organized crime, linking research potentials of the region, working on joint research strategy, i.e. through a range of areas. In other words, to have sector cooperation overcome open issues and facilitate their easier resolution.

Friends of Europe
as overture for ministers

A day before Brussels gathering in December, a meeting, organized by *Friends of Europe*, will be held on a similar topic of investing in infrastructure in the region, representing the motto for the conference itself. As Jelica Minic said, this is a significant institution with a very important promotional role. Different regional organizations dealing with infrastructure development in the region are foreseen to participate at the December conference such as the South East Europe Energy Community Secretariat, CEFTA, the South East Europe Transport Observatory seated in Belgrade...