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## **JAPANESE STRATEGY; BALKANS NOT A "FORGOTTEN CORNER"**

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Since its launch by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in January this year the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative has been seen as a new diplomatic step undertaken by Japan to strengthen its position in this region of southwestern Europe and assist these countries in their multifaceted development effort. This diplomatic move has not taken by surprise other big powers involved in that area because Japan as part of the 'club of the big guns' has always been active in the Balkans in different ways since long time ago. But its rising interest has been welcomed in unison by the regional countries, and it was not accidental that the initiative was unveiled during Mr. Abe's tour in some WB countries in January this year.

Although distant geographically the Balkans has never been considered as a 'forgotten corner' by Japan's strategy, while this Far East country has always been seen positively and with admiration by the people of the WB. A highlight of Japan's constant interest has been "The Ministerial Conference on Peace Consolidation and Economic Development of the Western Balkans," which was convened by Japan and Ireland, as the then chair of the European Union, at the beginning of April 2004 being attended by foreign and economic ministers of the relevant regional countries together with representatives from 40 countries and a dozen international bodies. High on the agenda was the discussion of political and economic issues having the attraction of Japanese business leaders to invest in the region as an expectation.

Even though there are not many details the declared areas of focus of the newly launched Japanese Western Balkans Initiative include economic support, sharing of knowledge and expertise in relation to regional interest, as well as promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises. In addition, its aim is to support those countries in their processes to join the European Union. Serbia and Montenegro have already opened the EU accession talks while Albania and Macedonia expect the start of that process in 2019. Bosnia and Kosovo are also aspiring to join the block.

Japan supports the efforts to bring the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU and its initiative aims at assisting that process, Prime Minister Abe was quoted as telling his Bulgarian counterpart Boyko Borissov in Sofia on January 14 this year. Besides Bulgaria, Mr. Abe paid official visits to Romania and Serbia in mid January.

### **JICA Laid the Ground...**

JICA Balkan Office covers Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and

Serbia and assistance to Balkan countries began in 1990, when JICA accepted first training participants from Albania to Japan, and last year JICA Balkan Office marked the 10th anniversary since its opening in Belgrade. The successful ten-year performance of JICA has apparently been the solid ground prompting the Japanese Government to launch the Western Balkan Cooperation Initiative especially at a time when countries of the region are tackling social and economic development as they are approaching the accession to the EU. So it can be said that the Initiative has started its operation in a familiar and friendly environment. "In all six countries there are people who admire Japan for its fast recovery after the World War II, modern technology and highly developed economy. Moreover, immediately after the conflicts in the Balkans ceased, Japan extended its helping hand in the reconstruction endeavors of Balkan countries. It seems that people from the Balkans do not forget it," said Hideya Kobayashi, Chief Representative of JICA Balkan Office on the occasion of latter's tenth anniversary.

In the meantime, the relations between Albania and Japan have a many decades history. The diplomatic ties were established in 1921 and restored in 1981. The Albanian Embassy in Japan opened in 2005 while Tokyo opened its mission in Tirana last year. These relations were particularly marked by its predisposition to help this Balkan country after the establishment of pluralism in the early 1990s. One of the key instruments, which provided multi-dimensional aid to Albania, was JICA, which established its office in Tirana in 2008, an office that has been operating in Albania for 10 years now. Until now, Japan has been supporting the development of Albania through that agency. Currently some of the major projects which are being implemented through Japan's assistance include the "Greater Tirana Sewage System Improvement Project" aiming to improve the quality of both groundwater and river water by constructing sewerage facilities in the Greater Tirana Area, the Project on Geospatial Information and Sustainable Development in Tirana-Durres Area, which started in January 2017 aiming at enhancing the social and economic developments activities of this area by utilizing large scale digital topographic maps, and the Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects in Albania providing an annual amount of approximately 75,000 USD every year. In 2017, the total amount of donations, loans and disaster relief donations reached approximately 11 million euros.

"Japan considers Albania as an important country which serves to the economic and political stabilization of the Western Balkan region. In this context the position of the Japanese Government is to fully support Albania's political, economic and social development as well as its democratization, as it also serves to the region as a whole. Our Government considers important that the European Union Member Countries as well as other countries show interest in development not only of Albania, but of the entire region," Ambassador Makoto Ito told Albanian Daily News when asked about the main target of the Japanese Initiative in an interview on April 16, 2018. According to the Ambassador, Albania's advantage include the high quality workforce, being close to the European markets, and he saw manufacturing, tourism and energy as the most attractive fields for Japanese businesses.

### **Balkan countries hail initiative**

The launch of Japan's WB Initiative has been welcomed by the regional countries without exception as it is expected to offer not only investments, technology and skills needed to revitalize their economies, but it can also upgrade the status of Japan as their strategic partner facilitating

cooperation with this highly developed country, which is a serious donor and can bring with it its inspiring values and culture and might also open channels to many global markets.

The launch of the Initiative was followed by the appointment of an Ambassador in Charge of the Western Balkans at Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and specifically the Deputy Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Europe, Hiroshi Kawamura was appointed as Ambassador for Japanese Western Balkans Initiative. His mission is to uncover new cooperation avenues with the regional countries and Mr. Kawamura was quick to start implementation of his task travelling to Macedonia and Bulgaria in May.

"The Western Balkans Initiative of the (Japanese) Prime Minister will be associated by concrete projects and programs and not only our institutions but the business community, too, need to make the most of it," said the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Ditmir Bushati in the talks held with his Japanese counterpart, Taro Kono during his visit to Tokyo at the beginning of May this year. According to him, Japan will have concrete programs for the countries of the region as part of the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative. "The opening of the Japanese embassy in Tirana has marked a new milestone in the relations between the two countries. We are determined to further strengthen this relationship because Japan is a very trusted partner and a highly developed country in the economic and technological fields," said Mr. Bushati. "Japan plays an important role through the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative," he said.

"I welcome the Japanese Initiative for cooperation with the Western Balkans and I sincerely hope that the Japanese Western Balkans Initiative, among other things, will result in a first Japanese investment in the Republic of Macedonia," Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov told Ambassador Kawamura in a meeting in Skopje on May 8 this year.

Ambassador Kawamura was earlier (May 7, 2018) in Belgrade where the talks with the Serb officials focused particularly on the prospects of cooperation within the framework of the newly established Japanese Initiative, offering vast opportunities for joint implementation of great many projects in areas of priority importance to Serbia and the region.

A Japanese Grant Aid amounting to a total of approximately 1.2 million euro (150 million yen), which will be used for providing the University Clinical Center in Pristina, a core medical facility in Kosovo, with medical equipment produced in Japan, is considered as part of the WB Cooperation Initiative. This grant actualizes the declaration made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in January 2018, announcing Japan's commitment to assist economic and social reforms in the six countries of the Western Balkans region including the Republic of Kosovo within the framework of the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative, said a press statement released by Japan's Foreign Ministry on the trip to Kosovo of Mr. Manabu Horii, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, on February 18 this year. He paid an official visit to Kosovo, and as representative of the Government of Japan attended the state ceremony and reception celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Republic of Kosovo gaining independence. "Relations between Japan and Kosovo are growing, helped by our active international cooperation," said the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

## Japan's initiative vs. China's 16+1?

The above question has not been rare in comments of diplomatic circles but also in analysis and researches of pundits, political and economic researchers in the region and beyond.

"Many analysts have pretended that Tokyo's Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative is an attempt to compete with Beijing on the global stage, it might prove to be an effective one, but perhaps in surprising ways," noted Ms. Jelena Gledic, an associate professor at Osaka University and a senior instructor at the University of Belgrade, in an analysis carried by Japan Today on February 2, 2018. She quoted an interview given in Belgrade by Prime Minister Abe stating that he does "not view diplomacy from the standpoint of two dots in a bilateral relationship," echoing his known strategy to try and proactively improve relations by rather "taking a bird's-eye view of the globe".

While the details regarding the newly launched Initiative by Japan in the WB are still scarce, the region is a potential battleground for a number of global actors like EU, China, Japan, and potentially Russia and the United States. Every big power, including Japan and China, have strategic ambitions besides their economic interests and in this frame it can hardly be ignored that there isn't a touch of competition between their respective initiatives. Considering their current stage it should be taken into account the fact that China is a first- mover in the region and numerous big projects have been implemented while others are under way in the framework of '16 + 1 Cooperation'. In addition the 'wallet' of China is thicker for this region as compared to the funds earmarked by Japan. However, as it was noted above, Japan is not walking in an unknown terrain because JICA has been present since many decades pumping considerable amounts of funds, especially in social, cultural, and democracy-building fields, which are solid foundation for the entrance of big Japanese businesses in the region.

But as the Western Balkans is the most undeveloped region of Europe there is a thirst for investments in the area, especially in economy and infrastructure and all regional countries are eager to welcome such initiatives not worrying so much about their open or hidden competition. The ideal case would have been that the 'Berlin Process', the '16+1 Cooperation' and the latest Japanese Initiative could be complimentary as long as they do not affect the aspiration of the regional countries to join the European Union considered as their natural 'family'.

Albania, for its part, might be the neediest country for the attraction of such investments and every opportunity should be taken to make the best of them as it is the case of the newly established Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative launched by Japan. Now everything moves faster and Albania has to set its pace to the speedy contemporary rhythm with a real touch of pragmatism within the guidelines of its declared economic diplomacy.

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