

New Sarajevo-based organization prepares to replace Stability Pact

Hido Biscevic talks to Kathimerini about the Regional Cooperation Council



It's a great challenge for the countries in the Regional Cooperation Council to work together without intervention by the international community, says RCC chief Hido Biscevic.

By Maria Sonidou – Kathimerini, 30 April 2008

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was set up by a decision of the foreign ministers' summit of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in February 2008 in Sofia. The Council is slated to replace the Stability Pact for SE Europe, which followed the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

The new institution, based in Sarajevo, aspires to become the first regional forum of its kind, its secretary-general, Croatian diplomat Hido Biscevic, told Kathimerini.

The challenge is sizable, since the member states must cooperate without the benefit of international mediation. Biscevic is nonetheless optimistic, believing this cooperation to be possible while realizing the problems and understanding the sensitivity of the issue. Nonetheless, Biscevic urges the region to get in step with the new global reality, observing that the combative view of international relations is a thing of the past and that Russo-European relations are at present excellent, favoring closer and more constructive relations between Southeast European states. The region's countries must rid themselves of historical baggage, through long-term planning and ambitious visions.

Would you please give us an outline of what is happening at the RCC and its specific goals? In which way will it differ from the Stability Pact that it will replace?

At the moment, the RCC is in the final stages of its operational setup. The office in Sarajevo is quite a busy place these days – staff and officials are assuming their new duties, the office is taking shape with a new communication system and equipment. It feels like a pioneering task because, for the first time ever, the countries of Southeastern Europe have decided to establish their own framework of cooperation. For the first time ever, it is genuine regional ownership, and not paternalism from the outside. It is neither Versailles nor Yalta – and this is where I come to the difference with the Stability Pact.

The Stability Pact was a valuable tool for overcoming the immediate postwar frustrations in the Balkans, but it was also perceived as something coming more from Brussels, or rather from the capitals of Europe, than as genuine interest from the countries of the region. Political classes in

the region accepted it, but they were still victims of the circumstances and political atmosphere in their own countries.

Now, almost two decades after the collapse of the former security and stability architecture in Southeastern Europe, the time has come to take the helm in our own hands. It is now all about maturity. The underlying question is whether the countries of Southeastern Europe are capable of taking their destiny in their own hands. My firm answer is – yes, they are. If for nothing else, then for the fact that we can benefit from the richness and diversity of our own relations and the relations between each individual Southeast European country with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Would you consider the RCC to be a political presence in the southeastern region or an opportunity for greater economic cooperation among member states?

The RCC is, of course, a political fact of life, a new one. Its very establishment at the summit of the Southeast European Cooperation Process in Zagreb, in May last year, was a reflection of the political decision that the time had come to take over from the Stability Pact.

But, at the same time, the RCC is not a direct political stakeholder in the region. It is an operational arm of the SEECP – the countries of the region at their annual summits or ministerial meetings decide about their priority agenda, and the RCC steps in as an operational body. In that sense, the RCC is more of a project-oriented and economic development-focused body than a political forum.

It is not the task of the RCC to deal with Kosovo or any other status issue in the region, but I would hope that through the good achievements of the RCC in sustaining the economic and social development of the region, we can contribute to creating a more conducive atmosphere for resolving even the most difficult issues.

‘Permanent dialogue can serve as instrument of lasting coexistence’

There are serious political differences between some of the states in the region, such as Greece and FYROM and Serbia and Kosovo. How can the RCC help them find a compromise solution?

This is a region of such strong historical memories and diversity of ethnic, religious, social and cultural patterns and habits that the only way to live in peace is to find a way to live with diversity, to learn not to search always for «final solutions», but to learn to develop a permanent dialogue as an instrument of lasting coexistence. No two SEECP countries are without some kind of recent or deeply inherited problems...

This is why EU enlargement is so important to all the SEE countries. If we allow the continuation of the present state of play, or if the region deviates from the Euro-Atlantic path of integration, we will be the greatest victims. History teaches us that disunity in Europe always takes the highest toll in the Balkans, in Southeastern Europe.

There is also Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. Some countries in the region have not recognized it; Serbia speaks of an unlawful act. How can Kosovo integrate in a distrustful atmosphere and how can the RCC prevent independence claims from minorities in other parts of the region?

I do recognize the sensitivity of the Kosovo issue for Serbia, but also in terms of concerns at the broader international level. Take for example the recent developments in Russian-Georgian relations against the background of the issues of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Historical realities have always created historical configurations and environments. The region will have to adjust to the new situation and to the new realities.

My best advice is to try to cope with it, taking into account the long-term strategic vision of Southeastern Europe. The RCC will also be faced with challenges as there are different positions and decisions relating to Kosovo's declaration among the SEECP participants. But this only underlines the need for dialogue, for the enhancement of political culture, mutual understanding and respect, even when differences are evident.

I am more than appreciative of the fact that Serbia continues to be actively engaged in the RCC and that regional cooperation remains one of its foreign policy priorities.

Given that Greece has always belonged to the Western bloc, unlike many of the other RCC member states, can Greece's role be more influential?

Greece is one of the most active and prominent players in the region. Greece is the oldest EU member in the region, thus leading the way. But it is not about the «Western bloc» or any other bloc. It is about the new Europe, undivided, democratic and free, where alliances are no longer forged around a set of ideologies, but around the common values of democracy, freedom, rule of law, market economy and social rights. This is where Greece's role is important, because Greece is the first SEE country that institutionally accepted these values through EU membership. Even the RCC Secretariat in Sarajevo is located in the building of the joint Bosnia and Herzegovina institutions, which was reconstructed through the donation of the Greek government, as another demonstration of Greece's dedication to regional development.

Establishing a permanent peace



The region needs 'an environment of cooperation, (not) confrontation.'

Given that it will be funded by the European Commission, could it somehow serve as a doorway for the full integration of the region's countries in the European Union?

The RCC is financed by contributions from the countries of the region, from the European Commission and from the international donor community, that is from the countries that

recognize the importance of establishing lasting peace, stability, security and cooperation in our part of Europe for broader European and international relations in general. In this context, the RCC reflects a synergy of interests. And, of course, as all countries of the region share the same strategic goals of becoming members of integrated Euro-Atlantic bodies, the RCC is here to serve this goal. Not as a tool of any one-sided strategy, not as anybody's instrument.

What this part of Europe needs more than anything else is an environment of cooperation rather than confrontation. History has taught us grave lessons whenever the divisions in Europe took their victims in the Balkans.

The region is plagued by organized crime and corruption. What are your plans for dealing with that?

Yes, corruption and organized crime are a problem for the region. It is partly a legacy of the old system in many countries, and partly a child of transition and wars, but we need to deal with it. Not only because it is a benchmark in the EU negotiations, but because it is a key to the health of our societies.

Within the RCC we have the Regional Anti-corruption Initiative as an affiliated body and my plan is to give it a more prominent role and responsibility by linking it more closely to individual government's activities in this area and to the European Commission.

Ties with Russia



‘What we need is to encourage a constructive approach and the engagement of all, including Russia.’

How does the RCC view Russia's role in the Balkan region, and the choice of some members to deal with it in economic and political terms? It is said that the Balkans will be the new bone of contention between the USA and Russia. What is your opinion?

Russia is today a strong partner of the EU. Today is a rare moment in modern European history as relations between Russia and key European countries are better than ever. Russia and the EU have developed a network of cooperation in all key areas, from economy to science and from security to energy. At the same time, Russia and NATO have also developed a permanent dialogue.

Yes, I do recognize the traces or re-emergence of some of the old-type rhetoric or competitive positions. But I would attribute it more to the general shaping of the world order or to immediate domestic considerations, including elections, rather than to the true rebirth of the confrontational concept of international relations. In view of this, we in the Balkans should certainly not invite any divisions. As I said, history teaches us that the Balkans is always the greatest victim of divisions in Europe. So, what we need is to encourage a constructive approach and the engagement of all, including Russia.

You have extensive diplomatic experience. How do you see the future of the Balkans? Is the region ready to fully assume the responsibility of governance?

My answer is simple and clear – in order to create a better tomorrow, one needs to look decades ahead.

The final picture must be a guiding line for tomorrow's actions. And what final picture does any reasonable citizen in Southeastern Europe want to see? This is not difficult to answer – a picture of a peaceful environment, with security and stability, without fears, frustrations and distrustful societies; a picture of a truly European area where people will live by the same standards as anywhere else in Europe, because they deserve it and because this is the only future for the coming generations.