

Interview: Hido Bišćević, General Secretary, Regional Co-operation Council

SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE IS A COLLATERAL VICTIM OF THE CRISIS

Co-operation between the countries in the region on large regional infrastructural projects regarding transport, energy and water management might not only contribute to sustaining engines of national economy, but might also include the region in European markets

Lada Stipić-Niseteo

“The economic crisis failed to bypass even the most vulnerable part of Europe, the countries of the south-east which as a group did not manage to integrate during the “big bang” of enlargement. The majority of the region has achieved significant economic growth. I dare say that South Eastern Europe is the greatest collateral victim of the crisis,” commented the General Secretary of the Regional Co-operation Council **Hido Bišćević** in his interview for *Privredni vjesnik* after the Sarajevo meeting of economy experts on the subject of regional situation and perspectives.



Has the crisis made recovery more difficult?

Taking into consideration current political conditions in the region and the still unfinished process of strengthening the long-term architectural stability and security, I would stress that it seems that modern European history has never recorded more difficult conditions and circumstances for post-war stabilisation and economic recovery. After two decades of war and transition, the region started slow movement towards the end of the tunnel only few years ago, moving towards stabilisation, economic growth and greater social security. The impact of the crisis has had a dramatic impact on the continuation of this historically important process. Furthermore, the seriousness of the economic situation with inevitable social consequences for the region still burdened with opened or unsolved political, bilateral and status issues, and which is not completely stable in a long-term sense, necessarily requires extra caution and the need to enhance the responsibility of the leadership in the region.

To what does this precisely relate?

In my judgement, this responsibility has to be multiple. Above all it needs to respond to the impact of the crisis with short-term measures which must not jeopardise the long-term reform policy connected to negotiations or expectations in relation to EU

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membership. On the other hand, it has to reflect greater awareness of the fact that this part of Europe, with all the remaining delicate and complex issues, is no longer at the top of the political agenda of the international community, since European leaders and the USA are preoccupied with a wave of new challenges and questions. Thus, it is logical to expect that

leaders of regional countries take on a historical responsibility in trying to solve the remaining issues by themselves in a spirit of co-operation and compromise. The EU is definitely in the phase of being preoccupied by its own priorities and institutional system. It is also burdened by the economic crisis which encourages scepticism towards enlargement and accession. Therefore it is certain that the lack of regional responsibility and unsolved issues would prolong stagnation and political lethargy, which would certainly not be beneficial in trying to achieve goals of the countries of the region – a faster approach towards the EU.

Since you are especially warning about the danger of prolonged stagnation, what are your plans for the future?

It is precisely these circumstances that have encouraged the Regional Co-operation Council, together with the European Commission and the Swedish EU presidency to speak in favour of more rapid economic development of the region as a precondition for long-term sta-

bility and eliminating any dangers ultimately caused by prolonged stagnation. I believe that co-operation of the countries in the region on large regional infrastructural projects regarding transport, energy and water management might not only contribute to sustaining the engines of national economies during the crisis, but might also strategically elevate the region's ability to penetrate European markets.

What is the Council doing in this respect?

We are already working on this concept. We have recently gathered leading regional experts to discuss priorities and plan possible projects of a trans-regional type. We are continuing our work with the EC and the Swedish Presidency and I hope that the whole idea will be supported by governments of South-Eastern Europe. I do not see any other answer to the conspicuous doubts about the future of this part of Europe except co-operating on more rapid development as a prerequisite for long-term stability and as the engine for conducting the necessary reforms. ■