

Balkans: It is time for cooperation

Matteo Tacconi

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Now, as wounds of Balkan wars are slowly starting to heal, it is time to build a common future for the region. Words by Hido Bišćević, Secretary General of Regional Cooperation Council.

Reconciliation, cooperation, collaboration, peace building, dialogue, “Yugosphere” (copyright to British journalist Tim Judah). Balkan vocabulary has lately been opened for words that had not been popular until now. This modification to the topic indicates that, although there are still discussions, misunderstandings and knots, recently the relationships among the regional actors tend to become stronger. Primarily economic relations. In addition to this, some encouraging signs are present on the political level as well. Good relationships between Presidents of Serbia and Croatia, Mr. Boris Tadić and Mr. Ivo Josipović, are signs of significance. We have asked Mr. Hido Bišćević, Secretary General of Regional Cooperation Council, the organization formed in order to strengthen regional cooperation, with its Headquarters in Sarajevo, to explain little further this new “story” of European Southeast.

More frequent meetings between State Presidents, Prime Ministers and Ministers, economic agreements, protocols, and Memorandums are taking place. It seems that during the last two years dialogue and cooperation in the Balkans have made a step forward. Why did this happen?

As they say, time is the greatest healer. War wounds are starting to heal and there is a growing recognition in the post-Yugoslavian area that past needs not be forgotten, despite recent tragedies, but there is no future in remaining a prisoner of the past. Without a doubt, there are still political forces, in the whole region, that intend to remain in the past, and find excuses for mistakes made in the 90’s, with the well-known external conspiracy theory, while, at the same time building fences in the attempt to isolate their country from neighbours and rest of the world. Nevertheless, these forces are losing ground and strength. There is a clear demonstration, a new dynamism in the region encouraged by the idea of Europe and a common goal of entering the big European family. When Stability Pact for Central-Eastern Europe was formed in 1999 (the successor of which is the Regional Cooperation Council established in 2008), cooperation was understood as an imposed process. Today, on the contrary, we could easily say that political elites of Balkans have understood that by cooperation they can distant themselves from the legacy of conflicts, fulfil the needs of their societies and come closer to the European Union.

After the war, Balkan context was characterised by the presence of more “nation states”, each one inspired by “autarchic” principles and less inclined towards any dialogue with its immediate neighbours. Is the cooperation dismantling this arrangement?

The creation and further affirmation of nation states, as a consequence of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, was something inevitable. However, this tendency is passing. Two imperatives are currently visible. First – accommodating architecture of security and stability in each country of the region to the European Union criteria. Second – developing, in each individual sector, cooperation initiatives focused on the final overcoming of fragmentation and on the promotion of economic and social development in the Balkans. One should add a fact that politicians are aware that the destiny of their nations depends on the destiny of their neighbours. If in 90's – I am giving you a practical example now – you could hear stories about Croatian electricity and Serbian water resources, now the idea of cooperation, as the best option for development of both of these, is gaining ground.

There is still a negative heritage behind this promising picture, the one of the war that still lives out there. How hindering is it for this cooperation?

Summits and joint statements of politicians that we are constantly witnessing demonstrate positive news that is reflected in many sectors of cooperation: media, university, fight against mafia, economy. At the same time, I believe that by extending politics of cooperation, this process of overcoming war legacies cannot but prosper. We should collect fruits of this new climate. Dialogue between political actors is without a doubt great thing, but at the same time it should be supported by the greatest possible spectrum of “stakeholders”. Indeed, not everything depends on the Heads of States or Governments. Media, civil society, entrepreneurship – each of these segments should also encourage this process.

What are the sectors where cooperation is the best? And what are the most venerable ones? Infrastructure, perhaps?

Since the formation of Regional Cooperation Council, there are many sectors where manifested desire for cooperation exists. Regional Strategy in Justice and Home Affairs, with the aim to fight corruption and mafia, has given positive results. The Development and Research Strategy has identified priority areas. Then, recently we have started programs in defence and intelligence. Results are visible here as well.

In this crisis situation, one could easily notice that cooperation in certain strategic sectors is becoming a greater necessity. As far as the most problematic areas are concerned, infrastructure indeed represents a vulnerable point. The consequences of war and of long transition have left different part of the Balkans in a stage of infrastructural underdevelopment. With only a few exceptions over the last two decades there was practically no investment in the transportation sector. How could one imagine that IKEA would come in Bosnia and Herzegovina and use vast raw wood reserves and labour if the country continues to have the least number of highways in Europe? How can Serbia make the best use of its geo-economic position in terms of railway transportation links between Central Asia, Turkey or Middle East and EU markets if over fifty percent of its freight wagons are practically non-usable? Cooperation in transport is necessary

not only to ensure a rapid respond to the current crisis but even more in the light of the integration in European Union, whose complementary part it really is.

In relation to Europe, some people say that the 27 MS should do more to speed up the integration of Balkans. What is your opinion?

In order to seize this momentum in the Balkans, it is indispensable that the idea of enlargement remains persistent. In my opinion, EU should maintain a visionary approach regardless of its current difficulties. Nevertheless, it is clear that there are elements that could block this process. However, the fact remains that if the Balkans continues to stay in the vacuum, there will be consequences in terms of security in the whole region. Hope is still there that, in a short period of time, anyone can achieve progress, on the basis of their individual merits.

To spin this question, what can the Balkans do for Europe?

It is very simple. The Balkans has to respond in a way which would give arguments to those in the EU supporting the enlargement. In other words, regional knots should be resolved and transform the Balkan territory in a reliable one, which represent a secure and stable part of Europe. This corner of the old continent does not have the luxury to lose time anymore. History has taught us that, after all, if the Balkans is not included in Europe, it may represent a problem in terms of security. This is why I am insisting on the urgency of the moment. Not only Europe but also the Balkans has to do more. With regards to this, it is possible to reason about BiH. If it is true that the political leadership has to work in order to remove the obstacles that prevent it from stepping toward the EU, this cannot be made concrete without an external European encouragement.

What is Regional Cooperation Council

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has been established in 2008 and is a successor of Stability Pact for Central-Eastern Europe, which was formed in 1999. With its Headquarters in Sarajevo, RCC represents a focal point of cooperation in Western Balkans. Its priority areas of work are economy, infrastructure, energy, justice, security, media and parliamentary cooperation. Its annual budget is approximately 3 million Euros. The RCC consists of the Board (composed of different state authorities, not only from the Balkan region) and Secretary General, currently Mr. Hido Bišćević. For more information please visit:

www.rcc.int.

<http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Balcani/Balcani-e-tempo-di-cooperare-103669>