

Interview by Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council,
Hido Bišćević, to BiH daily *Dnevni list*

Sunday, 25 September 2011

BiH without Croats Becomes Questionable

Interviewed by: Predrag Zvijerac

Reducing the Croatian corpus due to the uncertainty in BiH and the EU membership of Croatia may cause changes in the strategic national balance. BiH can function as a tripod, while as a biped it becomes questionable.

SARAJEVO - Hidajet Hido Bišćević is a born Sarajevan. As Croatian diplomat, Mr. Bišćević served as the State Secretary for Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Croatia in the period 2003-2007, and held various high-level diplomatic offices, among which was the office of Croatian Ambassador to Russia and Turkey.

South East Europe Foreign Ministers elected him twice as the Head of the Regional Cooperation Council, with its Headquarters in BiH capital. In his interview for *Dnevni list*, the “Head of the Western Balkans” talks about cooperation and non-cooperation, about European and Euro-Atlantic integration of South East Europe and about the relations of Zagreb, Belgrade, Ankara and Moscow towards BiH.

• Is Bosnia and Herzegovina locked in a “frozen conflict”, and how many steps have been taken forward or even backwards since the signing of Dayton Peace Agreement?

- Unfortunately, as much as it is pivotal for finalisation of the stabilisation process and lasting peace in this part of Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina is objectively lagging behind in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. Its internal post-Dayton blockade, marked and caused by deep divisions, and accompanied with the inefficiency of international community brought about the current stalemate. It all caused BiH's stagnation, “sinking in itself”, while so many years are passing by. A decade and a half after Dayton, all discussions in and about BiH are basically the same as fifteen years ago. The country seems to be standing in the same place while, objectively, its substance is gradually changing, because one political interest has taken a clear and firm shape during this period, while the other two partners failed to resolve a single essential or strategic issue of mutual relations over these fifteen years. As matters stand, one internal door is increasingly closing, while an outside window is opening, and in the other room inside this house, the noise and quarrels about the arrangement of tables and beds are still ongoing. Of course, I am using simplified and depictive language, but I want to point out the fact that the country is objectively lagging behind

in a sort of a passive lethargy maintaining the status quo, regardless of the verbal rhetoric about European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and ambitions. Of course, I believe that this is not good for BiH, but I also think that it is dangerous for the entire region because, alongside the unresolved issues that inhibit the EU enlargement policy or at least serve as an alibi, this is also the way for creating a broad strategic vacuum in this part of Europe. Namely, after the breakdown of communism and dissolution of the blocks, EU and NATO expanded alongside the entire former division line from the Baltic to the Eastern Mediterranean. When Romania and Greece joined NATO, this line was firmly established; the area of former Yugoslavia remained at the “western side“, let me use the old terminology, but the space has not been fully filled with the “western integrations” yet.

Therefore, excluding Slovenia and Croatia, which is about to join the EU as well now, this leaves a space yet unanchored in the Euro-Atlantic circle. The space of a strategic vacuum, twenty years after the fall of communism and the Berlin Wall! Twenty years! With its undefined and unclear issues, BiH thus indirectly lengthens the status quo period. In the most radical analysis, without raising the internal awareness of the fact that this country is by no means entitled to a luxury of endless competing about own constitutional and administrative structure, it is difficult to envisage a future unmarked by one of the three possible “Es”– Evolution, Eruption or Erosion: Evolution towards a political compromise, Eruption as a symbol of uncertainty and potential instabilities, or Erosion implying further sliding down and sinking.

• What is your estimate of the official Zagreb policy when it comes to BiH, as well as the official Belgrade policy, and also the policy of Sarajevo towards its closest neighbours?

- I could elaborate on this topic for hours, after all the events over the past two decades. However, I will summarize my estimates to the two I deem most important at this moment. Firstly, the need to absolutely and undeniably separate the issue of integrity and sovereignty of BiH from any other remaining open issues in the region. The increasingly clear assurances coming from Belgrade in this respect are encouraging. When it comes to Zagreb, however, it seems to me that it is of a crucial and historical importance to reach an agreement on the structure of BiH as a self-sustainable and functional state of equal and sovereign nations in the context of Croatia’s joining the European Union, in order to eliminate the danger of further demographic changes and reducing the Croatian corpus due to the very uncertainty in BiH and the EU membership of Croatia, which can cause changes in the strategic national balance, which again may bear graver and broader consequences for the entire region and Europe. I am saying this, among other things, because it is the primary interest of Croatian people in BiH, but of others as well. Because, BiH can function as a tripod, while as a biped it becomes questionable.

In this context, I would say that it is high time that both Zagreb and Belgrade abandoned their current policies of the so-called constructive disengagement when it comes to BiH and turned towards a constructive engagement, in agreement with all democratically legitimated political factors in BiH. With Croatia’s membership in the

EU and NATO, and Serbia that will hopefully start the negotiations soon, it is time that these two countries helped BiH on its European path with a range of possible specific activities, jointly agreed with BiH partners. This would eliminate many existing dilemmas and uncertainties. With Belgrade and Zagreb as the “engines“ of BiH’s advancement towards the EU, as a part of an appropriate broader international support mechanism for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the entire political process could be expedited, a dynamics could be ensured, objectives and deadlines set, and the most dangerous thing could be postponed – another fruitless lapse of time.

● **The Republic of Turkey has been more actively involved in the Western Balkans lately. To what extent are the fears of “Neo-Osmanism” objective and to what degree is this activity stabilizing or destabilizing?**

- First of all, I would like to remind you that various stereotypes and prejudices can be very dangerous in this region, because they lead to schematic simplifications that, at times of crisis and uncertainty, and various frustrations, mainly pave the shortest way to populism, strong words and noisy streets and stadiums. The world has changed so much that the perceptions of foreign forces representing the interests of any side in Bosnia and Herzegovina are simply pointless. Large forces did not give up on their interests, but nowadays they realise them through cooperation instead of confrontation. Turkey, for instance, had never had better and more developed relations with Russia in the past hundred years or even more than it currently does. I will remind you that Turkey was one of the few, if not the only country that helped Croatia and the entire Croatian corpus in the most difficult times during the nineties. I don’t know if current politicians are aware of these facts and to what extent, or it is still easier for many of them to live with a kind of cold-war projections where Russians hold Serbian side, Turks support Bosniaks, Vatican and Germans are on the side of Croats, etc. This reminds me of the logics of foreign conspiracies from early nineties, the logics that brought about so many tragedies. Moreover, one should keep in mind that Turkey currently also acts in this region within its broader foreign policy strategy, that it in a way “fills in” the space that remained undefined for too long in the aforementioned strategic vacuum with respect to the Euro-Atlantic integrations, that, in a certain way, Russia too “observes” this fact in an opportunistic manner, but that Turkey conducts balanced politics, seeking the space for compromise and balance. After all, the well-developed mechanism of cooperation with Belgrade and Zagreb as regards Bosnia and Herzegovina and with Bosnia and Herzegovina speaks to this fact.

● **Our region is unique because of the common strategy in the fight against corruption and organized crime. But how can we implement it if we know that corruption is most often linked to those who should implement it – primarily the politicians who have a direct influence on the police and investigative authorities, courts and prosecutors' offices?**

- True, we are the only region of Europe which adopted a joint strategy to fight corruption and organized crime. Furthermore, this strategy is accompanied by a joint mechanism to monitor its implementation. Although we cannot be satisfied with the overall situation in this area at all, one must admit that some progress is visible. The

fact that the fight against corruption and organized crime today is an important, if not a decisive criterion in the EU approximation process, significantly contributed to this. In many countries, this process has been given a powerful boost and it will certainly continue thanks to, among other things, the expressed political will.

After all, the accession process brings profound reforms in the overall justice field; it reduces or eliminates what you mention as a problem, i.e. the direct influence of politics on the investigative authorities, courts, and prosecutors' office. However, I have to mention two aspects of this problem that are often forgotten. First, it is not just about the fight against corruption and organized crime, but also the fight against a type of deeply-rooted worldview in this region. Regardless of the changing regimes, powers and ideologies, this worldview has kept renewing a sort of psychology of 'fraud', 'circumventing the system', whereas a mostly dark transition period, further obscured by the war situation, only additionally reinforced the mentality of 'using the opportunity' and 'hustling'. Second, perhaps more important, with the advent of democracy came the freedom, but the fear mostly disappeared - in an effort to move away, to be different from the former state, the new states have almost completely lost their repressive role, the role that is, by its nature, immanent to every state structure. A very low or even deteriorating level of good governance, i.e. effective and fair administration of public systems, clearly opened the space for criminogenic activities. We are talking about a strategic issue of the very functioning of new states, and even the fateful issue of their formation.

Russia wants to be respected and appreciated

Moscow has very clear economic interests in this region, some of which may be viewed as tools, leverages of certain political interests, due to the very fact that the EU enlargement process has not been completed. Not because the EU membership would mean "pushing" Russia "out" of the game at the Balkans – on the contrary, complementariness of balanced relations can bring a huge development potential for many economies here – if nothing else, to eliminate the dilemmas, uncertainties and calculations. At the same time, it should be noted that in this part of Europe, like in other regions, Russia wants to be respected and accepted as a valued partner. Excluding or bypassing anyone is probably not the happiest path to consensus, and let's not forget that, without the consensus of large forces, the Balkans was always the place of their confrontation. After all the events, this is certainly something we need the least!