

## Analysen Positionen Essays

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Born in Sarajevo in 1951, Bišćević graduated in International Politics and Journalism at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb. Before joining the diplomatic service, he was foreign affairs editor of »Vjesnik« daily (1985-1989) and later its Editor-in-Chief (1990-1992).

As a diplomat, he served (besides other posts) as Ambassador of Croatia to Turkey (1993-1995), Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs (1995-1997), Ambassador to the Russian Federation (1997-2002). 2003-2007 he was State Secretary for Political Affairs of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration.

Hido Bišćević took office as the first Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in Sarajevo on 1 January 2008. He was reappointed to the post on 22 June 2010 at the Istanbul meeting of the SEECP Foreign Ministers.

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The article was written in February 2012.

### **EU Enlargement versus Old Geopolitics: The Western Balkans at the Crossroads**

#### **Summary**

The Western Balkans region is burdened by a number of troublesome issues inherited from long lasting historical disputes, from the consequences of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia or from the war period in the 1990s. While it remains hard to achieve a solution, these issues are persisting against the backdrop of dramatic changes of the international agenda. The Western Balkans is therefore slipping down the list of immediate priorities of the international community. Issues are dealt on a low-key level; they are not being addressed from the perspective of firm interests and principles. If left unattended, the Western Balkans, with its "unfinished peace", might become a security problem again.

While the economies in the region are struggling to survive the current economic crisis, the EU enlargement momentum is a key prerequisite to stability there. The remaining problems should be addressed urgently, as the very goals of EU and NATO integration cannot be left to the will or rather lack of will within the region to resolve its issues and problems.

Finally, it is indispensable to enhance and consolidate regional cooperation. The South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) is being uplifted to a level of full responsibility. With an enhanced role of the SEECP, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), as a leading platform and guiding operational forum in South East Europe, will certainly benefit from this process.

Hido Bišćević

## EU Enlargement versus Old Geopolitics: The Western Balkans at the Crossroads

■ Within the broader South East European landscape, the core of the region – the Western Balkans – is going through another period of controversial development, characterized by the upcoming membership of Croatia to the European Union and, at the same time, by numerous political challenges and unresolved issues additionally fuelled by the suffocating spill-over effect of the current financial and economic crisis.

Encouraging steps forward are accompanied by stagnation and political lethargy, advancements are shadowed by residual problems, stability is tested by outbursts of insecurity, European and Euro-Atlantic integration is undermined by political unpredictability, durable peace and stability is questioned by subliminal tendencies to provoke or test the true irreversibility of the present Western Balkans architecture, whilst yesterday's optimism throughout the region as the most dynamic emerging market in Europe is shaken by today's shocking effects of economic crisis and its social aftermath.

In a word: a state of opportunities versus a state of uncertainties.

Croatia's upcoming full membership to the European Union is an endeavour in itself given the entire track record of its accession negotiations. Measured against the backdrop of conditions set before and during the negotiations and, alongside, measured by the political and economic crisis response of the EU itself – Croatia's future EU membership is going to create an entirely new geopolitical landscape in that part of Europe. Given Croatia's earlier NATO membership, the Euro-Atlantic zone is expanding and enlarging southbound, opening a way to connect, encompass and integrate the entire region within the Euro-Atlantic community of shared democratic values, freedom, stability and security. In the light of earlier EU and NATO accessions of Central European countries, Romania and Bulgaria, and with the "old" members Greece, Italy and Turkey (as NATO member), all adjoined to the core of the region, Croatia's EU accession is opening the way to complete the process and have the entire South East Europe anchored within the European and Euro-Atlantic framework.

In a broader sense, it opens a way to complete the historical endeavour triggered by the fall of the Wall and end of the Cold War. In a historical sense, it opens a way to

complete the project of a united and undivided Europe itself. What started after the Second World War with the reconciliation of the Europe's West and what continued by the reconciliation of Europe's East and West after the collapse of the Cold War division, should by now be completed by a continuation of the process in the Western Balkans, after two decades of exclusions caused by four wars and too many misunderstandings mixed with opposing political agendas. Thus, the whole of South East Europe would be included in the Euro-Atlantic community and the entire historical project of a new Europe would be completed.

In a word: an extraordinary opportunity, if not an irreversible necessity.

But, will it happen? What are the prerequisites? Is it really doubtless and irreversible? Will the opportunity be grasped? What could be broader considerations should it not happen?

These questions seem to be of primordial importance at this point and need to be assessed against the backdrop of the current realities, remaining challenges and subliminal tendencies in the core of the Western Balkans, in the area encircled by EU and NATO members. The current realities immediately indicate too many undeniable challenges, possibly even strategic barriers. They certainly add to a controversial perception of the region.

They are defined and burdened by a plethora of unresolved and open issues predominantly involving countries encircled by the EU or NATO ring in the Western Balkans. The entire region is affected by a number of troublesome issues inherited from long lasting historical disputes, from the political and legal consequences of the dissolution of former common states or from the war period. However, strategic challenge and essential issues for the future of stability and security in the region – and, in this sense, also for the completion of the European and Euro-Atlantic enlargement process – rest within the core of the region. This challenge is, essentially, defined by a rather small but complex number of issues, by now recognized by any political analysis or even broader public:

- the future self-sustainability of an integrated Bosnia-Herzegovina,
- the future character of Serbia-Kosovo relations,
- the resolution of Macedonia's/former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's/ name issue, and
- the effects of these issues on a broader regional stability and the Euro-Atlantic community's absorption policies.

In this light, the future mapping of the EU and/or NATO aspiring countries of the region within the European and Euro-Atlantic chart will be of outstanding importance not only for the fate of this part of the region, but also from the broader European and global perspective.

The preconditions for further advancement in this direction are easy to enumerate, but still hard to achieve. With Bosnia-Herzegovina, geo-strategically positioned at

the very core of the region and thus essential for the durable security and stability, still going through diverse and opposing options of its very future, if not existence, it is hard to conceive whether and how the internal processes may or may not be conducive for the European and Euro-Atlantic advancement of the region. With Belgrade-Prishtina relations reflecting domestic agendas and priorities of both parties, channelled even through the oscillating pattern of negotiations within the EU facilitated dialogue, it is hard to conceive whether a framework of pragmatic solutions could be obtained with a view to enable long-term consolidated stability of relations between the parties that would, in turn, enable the Euro-Atlantic advancement as well. Similarly, given almost two decades of persistency of the Skopje-Athens dispute, by now saturated more as a domestic than a foreign policy issue and thus becoming even more difficult to overcome, it is hard to conceive whether some pragmatic solution could be found in order to release current conditionality to Macedonia/former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia/ progress and create conditions for a substantial step forward towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Strategically important as they are, all these issues are persisting against the backdrop of dramatic changes of the international agenda and it is by now evident that the Western Balkans is slipping down the list of immediate priorities of the international community, in particular in terms of a coherent vision and integrated approach of an "end game" type. Issues are dealt on a low-key level as much as they come up and disturb the daily or routine agenda, with particular and isolated attempts or short-term soothing measures. It seems they are not addressed from the perspective of strategic interest to define a comprehensive set of irreversible interests, principles, measures and instruments to ensure their resolution as detrimental to completion of peace in the Western Balkans and completion of the European and Euro-Atlantic project.

In this sense, one can conclude that there are at least three main obstacles to overcome in the current situation that may lapse into a prolonged status quo, thus again leaving the European and Euro-Atlantic process on the margin and opening way to possible other developments.

*First*, in the light of gravity of the current state of play, the Western Balkans still deserves the full attention of the European and broader international community – economic and financial crisis is absorbing the EU political energy, unpredictable outbursts in North Africa and the Middle East are refocusing the attention of policy makers, Iran's nuclear programme has become a security priority, the missile deployment issue is already threatening to open a new page if not a new character of relations with Russia, Afghanistan, Iraq, climate changes ... certainly. The world is going through a profound change and international order is rapidly and dramatically shifting towards uncertainty, looming in search of firm paradigms and agreed pillars of stability and security. But, even in this sense, the Western Balkans with its unfinished peace, if left unattended, bears a set of scenarios that could negatively impact the European and Euro-Atlantic strategic interest and strategic credibility.

The Western Balkans, at this point, if left unattended, may still lapse from being a political problem e.g. EU/NATO integration to becoming a security problem again.

*Second*, due to the undeniable transformative and stabilization power of the EU enlargement, it is compulsory to uphold the EU enlargement policy so that the EU Commission and the EU Council may prepare recommendations and take decisions to ensure the continuity and clear timeline of the accession process. The EU enlargement momentum is a key prerequisite to stability in the Western Balkans. With the eventual EU enlargement slowdown, the region and Europe may be faced with the strategic imbalance or with the „quarantine ring“ around the core area of several aspiring countries. With the eventual EU enlargement slowdown, the way may be opening towards the creation of a prolonged strategic vacuum in the region which may invite other interests and different power play to fill the gap. In addition, as the current economic crisis has hit the region so severely that Western Balkans economies are suffocating and struggling to survive, with alarming social consequences, it is vital to keep the EU enlargement perspective and clear dynamic as a proven catalyst for necessary reforms, stability and prosperity of the region.

*Third*, the element of urgency should be added to the issue of resolving the main open problems in the region. Viewed from the point of the strategic interest of the Euro-Atlantic community to complete the project of a new undivided free and democratic Europe, it needs to impress upon the leaders in the region, in clear terms, that the very goals of the EU and NATO integrations cannot be left to the will, or rather lack of will, within this last un-integrated part of Europe, to resolve its issues and problems. With every EU and NATO enlargement circle so far, broader interests of the European and Euro-Atlantic community were perceived as paramount to any individual hesitation, misunderstanding or reluctance.

Political elites in the region should be made to understand that any delay and hesitation to deal with the open issues is not only hampering the EU and NATO enlargement but, in broader terms, is creating a strategic vacuum inviting the old geopolitics to the region.

*Final*, there is a clear need to enhance and consolidate regional cooperation, as the best platform and tool for the region to accelerate its accession to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration and, in addition, to deal with common issues of general modernization of the region and to ensure a joint response to the shared problems of evident underdevelopment in priority areas of infrastructure, transportation and energy. One can note with satisfaction that, in spite of evident differences and opposing views to a number of key issues, the region is learning to live with the differences by gradually adopting pragmatism and realistic coexistence, although from time to time outburst of the former crisis „remnants“ are noted – instabilities, violence, organized crime, juvenile delinquency, football hooliganism and many other phenomena testify to that.

In general, the enhancement of regional cooperation is by now recognized as a genuine necessity and the issue of forging a common strategic vision for the region to break through is now in the focus of political debate in South East Europe. It is encouraging that within the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEEC) this debate is opening the way to a true consolidation of regional cooperation, uplifted from a level of mere ownership to a level of full responsibility, as it is the case with other regional cooperative forums and formats in Europe.

The debate on the future of regional cooperation in this part of Europe will be focusing on lessons learned throughout fifteen years of experience with the SEEC and results achieved over the initial four years of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). It should result in a set of recommendations for the SEEC high level meetings in the near future, proposing ways, measures and steps that may be taken to strengthen cooperation, to minimize the effects of regional complexities and diversities on the genuine readiness to work together in terms of ensuring common approach to the economic and social development, broadening political dialogue in South East Europe, better profiling the region and its shared identities, targeting at adapted institutional modalities of the SEEC format by way of addressing current set up of ministerial and summit meetings ... It is a wide-ranging and comprehensive endeavour and it should generally increase political maturity and commitment to regional responsibility for a genuine cooperation, complemented with the necessary EU enlargement purpose.

The Regional Cooperation Council, as a leading platform and guiding operational forum for cooperation in South East Europe, will certainly benefit from this process. It will enable the RCC to profile itself even more as a provider and initiator of cooperation in a broadest term – from political dialogue to economic, social and infrastructural agenda, justice and home affairs, security, building human capital, culture etc. – whilst enhancing also its alignment with the EU enlargement process and, last but not least, getting a stronger leverage with the strategic economic development in the region.