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Interview: Hido Biscevic, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council

Incomplete peace in the Balkans worries EU

Cooperation and fight against corruption will be a key test for European integration of all countries from the region.

Advancement of Serbian-Croatian relations, as estimated by all analysts, is crucial for the stability of the entire region of Western Balkans. However, stability of the region is still threatened by unresolved internal relations of people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, lack of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, widespread corruption, long blockage of Macedonian Euro-Atlantic integrations...

In the interview to *Politika* daily, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Hido Biscevic, says that the advancement of Serbian-Croatian relations is of indispensable importance for the region, but that presently this positive climate needs to be transformed to concrete economic cooperation.

“I dare say the time has come for the region to start considering a regional approach to reconstruction and development. In the times of economic crisis, hardly any national economy can resolve its biggest issues alone and within its own borders. It is nice to see Tadic and Josipovic in good atmosphere, but it would be even better to include civil society, media, parliamentarians and business communities in this cooperation. Networked in this cooperation, they can make these trends irreversible.”

We can now see cooperation of local Serbs and Croats in BiH which is going in a direction that is not acceptable to a part of international community as it is based on establishment of the third entity. How realistic is establishment of Croatian entity?

It is impossible to expect a sustainable and permanent constitutional solution in BiH based on the principle of two against one. The only basis of permanent stability is the situation in which all three partners will find room for satisfaction through a realistic compromise. Bosniaks and Croats have lost 15 years failing to find a solution for their mutual relations within the Federation of BiH and it is high time to find a formula by which Croatian national issue in BiH will be resolved while observing constitutional category of sovereign constitutive equality of Croatian people in BiH. This can be done through territorial construction or through institutional protection of Croatian people against outvoting and majorization.

Is there a need for revising Dayton Peace Accords?

International community feels certain BiH fatigue and it has attempted, on several occasions, to get things moving through a weekend-intervention. It is disappointed with the fact that BiH political leaders fail to get things moving out of this too long lethargy and status quo in BiH which can be extremely dangerous in the context of very clear economic crisis and in the focus of events on the Mediterranean border. Intensified engagement of international community, in particular Germany, reflects EU's strategic concern regarding the incomplete peace in the Balkans in the context of wider unrest on the geostrategic border of Europe. BiH is indeed once again a historic spot of lasting European security and stability. BiH politicians bear particular responsibility as, at this moment, they are the ones shaping the future of generations to come. The scenario may be silent erosion, latent explosion or persistent revolution in the sense of dialogue and making compromises.

What are the odds to see Office of the High Representative (OHR) closed?

The entire story of closing down the OHR conceals the question of who expects what of the situation in which there is no OHR. However, I think that fast transformation of OHR into a strong EU mission, i.e. Office of EU Special Representative to BiH, is extremely important.

In the context of European integration, to what extent it will be necessary for each country to face the issue of high-level corruption?

Absolutely. I dare say this is the most important criterion for future EU membership due to the EU's aspiration to protect itself at all levels from any possibility of security threat, and corruption has become the issue of national security. Regional cooperation, as a test of future performance within a wider community, and fight against corruption, as the issue of national security, have become key issues of European integration. Regional Cooperation Council has finalised the Regional Strategy for the Fight against Corruption and Organised Crime which is to be endorsed at the Ministerial Meeting in Montenegro at the end of March. For the first time, there will be a common strategy in the region with jointly agreed monitoring mechanisms for implementation of this Strategy.

What is your assessment of successfulness of Belgrade-Pristina negotiations?

Though perhaps it is not the best moment now, having in mind the election year and internal political events, but it would be very useful in the long-term if this dialogue commences in the forthcoming months. When there is no dialogue, the frustrating elements in mutual relations immediately reappear as well as on the internal political scenes. This hinders focusing the energy on key strategic commitments, i.e. EU membership. Among ordinary people there is the need for this dialogue as there are dozens of outstanding issues. There is also interest from the aspect of regional cooperation since, for example, CEFTA does not function, Regional Cooperation Council functions based on ad hoc solutions, and we cannot sign the almost finalised Treaty establishing the South East Europe Transport Community due to the lack of dialogue on practical issues. At the same time, everyone wishes for cooperation in development of infrastructure what cannot happen without such a treaty.

Ethnic coloration of media continues

Ethnic and political coloration of media exists in all countries of the region and, according to Biscevic, “nationalism prevailed over communism in this region, and what was left of the two was prevailed by sensationalism”.

“What is often forgotten is the fact that the owners of most of these media in ex-Yugoslavia are from Western Europe. The paradox is that the owners, who are outside this region, tolerate editorial policies which renew tensions on the basis of ethnicity while, in an ideal world, everyone should advocate for the so-called European values. Due to the commercial interests, they approve editorial policies which, to put it in sports terms, renew tensions between Dinamo and Crvena Zvezda or Partizan and Hajduk, because, of course, it is easier to make money on these tensions since peace and friendship generate less profit,” says Biscevic.