

Bišćević: The Region Still Faces Enormous Temptations

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Hido Bišćević, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, counting down final days of his four-year mandate that ends on the last day of this year, gave an estimate of the achieved cooperation between countries of the Western Balkans for Radio Free Europe, noting that the countries are still burdened with numerous open issues and that they still hold back one another in reaching the joint goal: EU accession. Bišćević warns that this region is no longer in the spotlight of the EU or the United States, and stresses that the improvement of good neighbourly relations is the only way to overcome the crisis.

RFE: The Regional Cooperation Council tried to establish better relations between countries in the region in various fields. In which field have you achieved the most success?

Bišćević: After all the events that took place over the past twenty years or so, the situation in this region is very complex. Interstate relations in this area still oscillate tremendously, they are subject to daily politics, regional cooperation has not been stabilized yet, and the region has been facing enormous temptations. I think that, if we exclude Middle East and Northern Africa, there is not a more complex region at the international scene at the moment, which is at the same time more or less marginalized on the agenda of large powers, both of the EU and the United States. The only path available was to tread step by step, to try and build a meaningful cooperation network out of the fragmented relations, in the way to allow every state to find its place in such a perspective and to find space for achievement of own state and national goals. If I were to specify now and mention that we achieved significant results in security, internal relations and judicial areas, it is extremely important in the very context of all the turbulences that have been going on in the region. And if I say that we managed to take over the South East Europe Investment Committee from the OECD and that the RCC is currently its owner, it is a huge step forward. I think that the RCC has been an extremely useful cooperation platform, especially in the circumstances where political relations between countries still aggravate this cooperation.

RFE: To what extent has the politics come in the way of your job, and do the countries that were initially slightly sceptical about this platform have a different attitude today?

Bišćević: When RCC started functioning, when we were putting pioneer efforts in the establishment the Council as the Stability Pact's successor, a large political turning point occurred. Namely, all prime ministers, ministers and heads of departments in ministries viewed the Stability Pact as a whip from Brussels. Suddenly, the region became the owner of this whip, and it became something that does not have to be obeyed; establishment of RCC's authority was a big problem initially. The fact that regional cooperation was one of the three key preconditions in EU accession negotiations was very helpful. There were still huge oscillations in practice, due to oscillating political relations stemming from parliament relations, media pressure, local or other elections etc. Societies are not functional yet, they

have not been fully stabilized yet. They are often subject to a kind of national – manipulating rhetoric – I guess Balkan is the only place in Europe where elections are easiest to win when you start clamouring against your neighbours, then you can be confident in electoral victory. Another thing that proved to be a big problem is the lack of administrative capacities that would, in some countries of the region, turn in practice political promises and commitments taken by prime ministers and presidents at large, important meetings. Therefore, it seems to me that this lack of administrative capacities has been one of the key causes of economic, infrastructural and transportation under-development that has persisted in a large part of the region.

RFE: Can we say that this is one of the priorities for the period to come as well?

Bišćević: Absolutely. A vision of regional cooperation that would be beneficial for each participant in the process requires additional work, especially during this severe economic crisis – I am emphasizing this because I cannot see how Croatia, BiH, Serbia or Macedonia can overcome the crisis by fighting its causes and consequences exclusively within own state borders. I am deeply convinced that the only way to overcome this crisis is to open up to one another, for joint projects etc. It is not certain that the dynamics of further EU enlargement after Croatia's accession will be largely approved in the region. Unfortunately, there are numerous outstanding, unresolved issues in the region, from relations between Belgrade and Pristina, to the name of Macedonia and functionality of BiH, that mostly serve or may serve as an alibi and coverage for those in Brussels. These, of course, are not encouraging perspectives. What can be seen in the horizon is the Union's attempt, by stimulating the Europe 2020 strategy in the Western Balkans, to actually create a process compatible with future negotiations, i.e. to prepare our EU membership aspiring countries for the Union as it should be in 2020. It seems to me that this may happen even before any concrete negotiations start. I believe that the RCC will have an appropriate role there.

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