

INTERVIEW

Stable Architecture of Southeast Europe - Priority Goal -

Hido Biscevic

Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council

Hido Biscevic (1951) took office as the first Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council on 1 January 2008, following the appointment by the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SECP) Foreign Ministers on 10 May 2007.

A Croatian diplomat, Mr. Biscevic previously served as the State Secretary for Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Croatia (2003-2007), Ambassador to the Russian Federation (1997-2002), Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs (1995-1997), Ambassador to the Republic of Turkey, accredited to the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan (1993-1995), Ambassador and Adviser to the Foreign Minister (1992), and Head of Department for Asian and Arab Countries (1992). Before joining diplomatic service, Mr. Biscevic was the Editor-in-Chief of *Vjesnik* daily (1990-1992).

Alongside the transformation of the Stability Pact in Southeast Europe to the Regional Cooperation Council, we can conclude that the entire region also moved from the post conflict stabilization phase to an entirely new phase – the phase of integration. The countries from the region have also gradually assumed the responsibility for the existing forms of multilateral networking in Southeast Europe. Are there presently real dangers which may put the aforementioned process at risk?

No, I am convinced that there are no dangers to stop the initiated positive processes. Southeast Europe, and even the Western Balkans in narrower terms of post Yugoslav area, has been recording an evident progress in the last couple of years. Perhaps positive trends could be speedup, which would be both useful and welcomed, but one should not forget that this is the most turbulent European area not only in historic but also in the context of dissolution of former block system and communist ideology, i.e. federalism based on this ideology. Finally, this area has been in the focus of attention of international relations for the full two centuries. The potential for completion of the big project of new united Europe without division lines is in many ways examined and tested through forming a stable architecture of Southeast Europe. Within this, I see the completion of peace in the region as an inevitable and irreplaceable component of completion of the new Europe project. Moreover, in a wider historic sense, Europe faced three stages of defining its own identity after the World War II. In the first stage, immediately following the war and through forming the Union, Europe needed to find peace with itself – here I, of course refer to Western Europe of that time. This was followed by the period of large

European adjustment to post Soviet period. In order that this process is fully completed, Europe needs to finish the third, post Yugoslav stage of modelling a lasting comprehensive European architecture of safety and stability. The processes in the Southeast as well as those related to transformation of the Stability Pact into the Regional Cooperation Council are an integral part of that process. There is a clear and big responsibility against this background to continue the positive trends, to continue with accelerated reforms in countries which aspire to belong to Euro-Atlantic circle and in the same way to speed up the responsible dealing with the remaining open status and bilateral issues so as they would not permanently shadow the relations in the region and in order that this shadow would not influence the unwanted stagnation of the region.

Do you believe that particular regional problems or potential intrastate crises and instabilities in the countries of Southeast Europe may impact the intensity of regional cooperation?

This is precisely what I am talking about and what I am warning about. Presently, in circumstances when the order of the most important issues on the scale of interests of the most significant factors of international relations changes, when global attention moves to financial and economy sector or, in geostrategic sense, to Caucasus and Mid Asia, it seems to me that it is crucial that political leaderships in the region recognize the necessity of accelerating these positive trends, to recognize that time flies and will not stand still for open issues or those inherited from post Yugoslav period to be resolved and that, I will put this in simple words, the time is not on the side of Southeast Europe and the least on the side of Western Balkans. It seems important to stress that the time ahead of us, and I refer to the following year which has been from many sides already emphasized as decisive and crucial, requires greater responsibility on the part of political leaderships in the region to tackle the open issues within and those between the countries in a way that it will take into consideration the wider strategic picture of deep changes which both Europe and the world are entering. When talking to partners in Brussels, Washington, Berlin, etc, their main message is presently a simple one – finish up the work.

In which sense will the RCC develop in future and what will its relations be with the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECOP) as undoubtedly the leading forum for political cooperation of the countries in the region?

The relation between SEECOP and RCC is clearly defined: the Council is operational, executive body of the political forum which SEECOP represents. Through high-level meetings or meetings of relevant ministers, SEECOP's political forum determines the priority areas or priority initiatives which RCC then operationally implements. For example, our 2008-2009 Strategic Work Programme was approved at SEECOP Summit in Pomorie, Bulgaria, in May this year. We, of course, do not operate in an empty space nor is the Southeast of Europe still fully capable to strictly alone and through cooperation of countries of this region respond to the most important tasks, i.e. ensuring accelerated development, consolidating the achieved level of relations and cooperation, and providing support in achieving Euro-Atlantic ambitions of all countries of this part of Europe. Therefore, RCC closely collaborates with the European Commission, as well as with numerous countries interested to see that lasting peace, cooperation and stable development of this part of Europe are ensured through achieving the aforementioned goals. To that extent, the work of RCC has the EU component on one side and on the other, the component of a wider

international community and, of course, the component of national governments of the member countries themselves.

Regional Cooperation Council is designed as an intergovernmental forum for cooperation of Southeast European countries. Similar forums exist in other parts of Europe too. However, by accession of countries of the region to European Union, will the need for regional cooperation in the existing institutional form, and in the scope in which it is present today, cease to exist?

After 1990's, regional cooperation forums were created from diverse motives in different parts of Europe and Eurasia, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, ranging from safety motivation after the dissolution of Soviet Union to the interest to strengthen peace in certain parts of the continent through economic and development cooperation. I believe that RCC was created as a reflection of mature and responsible assessment of the countries of our part of Europe that the time of conflicts and distrust was behind us and that it is in the interest of each individual country to, through strengthening cooperation with its neighbours, strengthen its own position in Europe. Still, the need for this cooperation will not cease to exist with the accession of all countries into the EU, as the cooperation within the RCC framework is not the substitute for EU membership. For that matter, the Baltic Cooperation Council did not cease to exist by all Baltic countries accessing the European Union.

Will the Regional Cooperation Council manage in future to get closer to the citizens of the countries from the region, primarily through media promotion or implementation of specific projects?

Yes, it is one of the Council's goals, in particular because the new dimension of regional cooperation also represents eliminating the old stereotypes, mutual suspicions and distrust, changing the perception of the region, and, I would even say, developing a new image, a new profile of the Southeast Europe. In this connection I particularly refer to young generations, the future citizens of the common European home, generations which may not bring the "burden" of its predecessors, previous generations to this home.

Regional Cooperation Council took over around twenty smaller initiatives, organizations and centres from the Stability Pact. Some of them had very similar or even identical scope of activities. In organizational sense, how difficult it is to join their work within the five areas of RCC?

According to the decisions of the SEECP Summit and Council's Board, one of the tasks ahead of the Council is to initiate the process of "bringing order to" the entire network of initiatives, organizations and centres which have been created in this region for the last fifteen years as a result of political situation, interest of some entities and various other motives of that time. Useful as they are, it seems that it is time that a reasonable, efficient and transparent network of institutions, and I would even say "small secretariats", which will deal with some specific areas, for example, protection against natural catastrophes, cooperation in health sector, cooperation in combating corruption, etc, link around the RCC as clearly recognized umbrella institution of regional cooperation, which is as such presently recognized and accepted both by the EU and

international community. The RCC does not aspire to have a monopoly, but a certain level of order and coordination is necessary and everyone presently recognize this.

Countries from the region ensure one third of funds for RCC's operations, while, on the other hand, foreign partners provide almost two thirds of the funds needed. According to Financial Working Group data, this presently amounts to around three million Euros. Are these funds sufficient for very ambitiously designed activities of the RCC?

These funds are earmarked for efficient functioning of the RCC Secretariat. As much as our activities are designed and planned ambitiously, it is my belief that these funds are sufficient. As for financing specific development projects, this will be subject to future agreements among national governments, European Commission and international partners, financial institutions and donors. With regard to this, the Council will be the expert facilitator and coordinator.

By

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