

DNEVNIK, 11 November 2012

Interview, Jelica Minic Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council

American Interests Are Somewhere Else After All

A sense of enormous relief among EU officials was evident on Wednesday morning in Brussels, when official confirmations of Barack Obama's winning the second presidential mandate arrived. Although they were "wisely silent" during the US presidential campaign, not wishing to publicly choose sides, it is no secret that representatives of the European Union hoped for victory of the current White House tenant. According to those familiar with circumstances in Brussels, the reason behind this is because, on the one hand, they have gotten to know Obama over the past four years after all and, on the other hand, it is their anguish that his opponent, Mitt Romney may actually act upon his hard-line positions presented during the campaign – such as the one on "Russia as America's number one enemy". And Europe by no means needs another cold war.

According to Jelica Minic, Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Barack Obama's victory caused positive reactions throughout The Old Continent in the very context of his announcements of further development of good relations with the most powerful actors in the international community and promises of discontinuation of the US military deployment in hotspots.

-Moreover, his program of a more comprehensive social welfare, and primarily health care for US citizens also takes the direction of European market and social models i.e. the social market economy model, which allows Europe to provide as much as 60% of total world appropriations for social welfare with 10% of world population and 30% of GWP. Experiences of Northern European countries predominantly applying such model, especially Germany, show that it has been the most resistant to the global economic crisis. The US presidential elections confirmed that the actual care for citizens can be worthwhile, not only economically but politically as well, Jelica Minic, PhD says.

What can Barack Obama's victory bring to the region, especially in light of the fact that, quite uncommonly, Hillary Clinton visited this area at the very end of the campaign? Does it mean that the USA will significantly increase their political presence here in the time to come?

- Our region is severely affected by the global, primarily the EU crisis, as it is vitally connected to the EU in financial, trade, technological respects... It impacted further deterioration of internal political circumstances in many countries in this area, thus putting in question further EU

integration dynamics and resolving of outstanding issues with neighbours. To make matters worse, gambling on opposite interests of external “mentors” threatened to become undesirable practice that would adversely affect further stabilisation and recovery of the region.

Also, we must not forget that NATO completion has not been finalised yet, and that there will certainly be a delay in further EU enlargement after the accession of Croatia and Iceland, both due to the internal consolidation of the Union and due to the time that candidate countries need to implement comprehensive reforms. On top of that, Russia, China and Turkey are also noticeably present in the region, which may have ambiguous impacts on bilateral and multilateral relations on the Western Balkans.

Under such circumstances, the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton still sent a clear message to countries of the region with their fairly spectacular joint tour: that the USA and the EU coordinate their actions on the Western Balkans and that bases of their politics have not changed. Nevertheless, it is hard to expect the USA to significantly increase their presence in this area – American priorities are somewhere else.

If there was an evident upward movement on Belgrade-Zagreb-Sarajevo triangle communication scale over the past few years, the arrival of Tomislav Nikolic as the new President of Serbia put an end to it. How does the Council view the obvious regression of relations within the region?

- Regression exists in some, primarily bilateral relations, but multilateral cooperation continues to progress at the same time, which is essential for long-term stability of the region and largely “flattens” any edges in bilateral relations. It may sound pretentious, but it is true – this is how the EU functions as well. There are identified areas of common interest, where certain funds have been provided and multilateral cooperation is flourishing: trade, transport, energy, environmental protection, research and development, public health, rural development, justice and home affairs... And it is highly unlikely that these areas will suffer any serious consequences, despite the obviously deteriorated political relations in the so-called Dayton Triangle.

On the other side, prime ministers of Serbia and Kosovo, Ivica Dacic and Hasim Taci met twice in less than one month. In your opinion, does this really open up a perspective for untying the “Gordian Knot” of the Balkans?

- There are some status issues in the world that have not been solved for more than half a century, and life goes on, people trade, cooperate, exist, progress... This applies to the EU as well – the issue of Cyprus. Of course, everything impacts other things. But why would the Serbian interest be to isolate Kosovo, put it in a hopeless situation and become a chronic source of region’s destabilisation? Would the citizens of Serbia benefit from this? Or Serbs in Kosovo? Besides, we who live today will not live forever. We should give a chance to new generations to find their *modus vivendi* by making it easier for them today to work on this with fewer burdens tomorrow.

Will there be any changes in the RCC itself with regard to the status of Kosovo?

- At one time, Kosovo became a member of the Regional Cooperation Council via UNMIK. It appears in current documents with an asterisk and a footnote, and at RCC-organised events, its representatives sit behind a card that reads “Kosovo” with an asterisk. After the initial misunderstandings, it is now generally accepted. Again, our foundation documents still read “UNMIK on behalf of Kosovo”. But in the Regional Cooperation Council, solutions harming any member may not be imposed. Therefore, members need to be synchronised, so that all of them can be included in the Council’s work. These are some of the main operating principles of this multilateral, regional organization.

Except in psychological terms, what could a potential Decision of the European Council on a conditional date for start of negotiations with the EU bring Serbia? Do you expect such a step by the EU to stop the wave of Euroscepticism that has lapped Serbia?

- It is certainly a two-way process. The enlargement strategy is based on principles of consolidation, conditioning and communication, with the necessary capacity of the EU itself to integrate new members. On the other hand, any country aspiring to become an EU member must display capacity to implement the required reforms in order to be able to harmonise its political, institutional, legal, administrative and economic systems with regulations, rules, standards, policies and relevant practice in the EU. Even if we did not have an official standpoint as a state that we want to join the EU, we would still need this harmonisation. And the EU again sends the word: push, ask, impose yourselves, initiate, communicate better, present your successes... if you want to remain visible on the horizon. In other words – there is no justification for lethargy. Doubting Thomases, don’t get carried away: the EU will certainly not go down before our turn for accession comes. Or after that...

But is there a danger of keeping the EU border on “Danube near Vukovar” for a longer period of time, having in mind the questionings, targeting even Croatia’s accession to the EU? Is it possible to overcome the “enlargement fatigue” and scepticism of a part of the EU towards membership of the countries of Western Balkans?

- The scepticism is justified to a certain extent – just look at the problems of Romania and Bulgaria. However, on the other hand, nobody contests the successes of Central European and Baltic countries. Luckily, according to most indicators, Croatia is closer to the second group.

By the way, many of the current resistances are conditioned by internal political and economic circumstances in EU member states. But the EU will not put its credibility at risk. Croatia will join the EU, just like the rest of us, with more or less delay. Montenegro is constantly praised. Serbia has its successes, Albania stabilised its internal political relations, and [The Former Yugoslav republic of] Macedonia has “hidden” negotiations on accession, the so-called HLAD. We are all exposed to influences from our surrounding, and we influence it as well. We all like

those who send out positive energy, who believe in themselves and respect themselves. Such people are always good company. So let's be like that as well, primarily for our sake.