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New rapprochement in the Western Balkans: How to advance it?

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Despite a number of unresolved issues in the region, one can see a new spirit of rapprochement and genuine cooperation in the Western Balkans and its leaders must seize the moment in order to translate this trend into an irreversible process, writes Hido Bišćević, secretary-general of the Regional Cooperation Council for South-East Europe, in an exclusive commentary for EurActiv.

The following commentary was sent exclusively to EurActiv by Hido Bišćević.

"During the recent summit of the South-East European Cooperation Process in Istanbul, the highest level meeting addressing challenges in a corner of Europe still beset by a handful of unresolved issues tied up with EU advancement, one could witness the dawning of a new spirit of rapprochement and genuine cooperation.

From the perspective of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and after more than two years of hard work aimed at raising awareness of the genuine benefits of cooperation in an area with manifold stereotypes and prejudices, the Istanbul Summit reflected a genuine new opening.

There is growing evidence that leaders in the region have recognised the call of the moment and understood that it must be seized in order to avoid a prolonged status quo or political lethargy that could turn the region into a zone of unpredictability, if not instability, or even create a strategic vacuum in the context of EU enlargement policy.

There seems to be a general recognition that political and social inwardness and self-focused national agendas – as well as holding each other back over bilateral issues – makes everyone a hostage, thus adding fuel to current EU debates over the enlargement strategy.

What is even worthier is the fact that these new policies are stemming from new mind-sets and formulating new social messages throughout the region, where distrust and incredulity have so far prevailed over mutual understanding and appeasement.

There is a plethora of evidence to support this new rapprochement policy in the making.

A new, constructive engagement by Serbia and Croatia, followed also by Montenegro, over Bosnia and Herzegovina is certainly a central issue, just as the self-sustainability of Bosnia and Herzegovina itself on the basis of a mutually-agreed constitutional framework is central to the durable stability of the entire region.

A brick-building process accepted in Zagreb, Belgrade and Sarajevo – also advanced by a triangular supportive mechanism promulgated by Turkish diplomacy – has created a more stable and predictable environment for the renewed constitutional debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, hopefully to be rekindled after the autumn elections.

Feeling secure about the long-term strategic policies of their neighbours, political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina may feel more comfortable getting truly engaged in this crucially important debate, in order to prevent their country lapsing back into uncertainty and detrimental lethargy. So far, citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina have not truly benefited from this regional change of climate, as electoral rhetoric and social insecurity still prevail.

But on the other hand, via several strategically-important moves and decisions, Serbia has proved that its current generation of political leaders is ready to turn to a new page in relations with other nations and states in the region – as proven by the parliament declaration on the Srebrenica massacre, President [Boris] Tadic's visit to Montenegro and other steps.

In this line, the issues of all-inclusive regional cooperation and ensuring that Kosovo is also brought into the mainstream of this new rapprochement still need to be addressed, just as the resolution of the name issue of FYROM/Macedonia also should benefit from this new, conducive political atmosphere in the region.

Last but not least, Croatia's advancement and completion of negotiations with the EU in the near future will truly have a positive impact on the entire region.

The other side of the coin is, evidently, the EU's enlargement policy. And there, the word is clearly out – enlargement is a strategic policy decision of the European Union. This was stated clearly at the recent High Level EU-Western Balkans Meeting in Sarajevo and was confirmed during European Council President Herman Van Rompuy's tour of the region. At the same time, Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle has repeatedly sent clear messages of reinvigorated EU engagement.

There is an aspect of this mutuality between regional rapprochement and the EU enlargement process that needs to be addressed as yet another reassuring impetus to the capitals of the region.

It must focus on clear and unequivocal assurances that regional cooperation is not and will in no sense be a substitute for EU advancement and future membership, based on the individual reforms of each aspiring country. These assurances will constitute an important element in the network of support and advancement of the current rapprochement agenda in the region.

Indeed, at this point, there is a need to look into possible sets of tools and instruments to advance this positive trend further and turn it into an irreversible historical process.

Continued and genuine engagement in a regional cooperation network, under the Regional Cooperation Council's hub, is certainly an indispensable platform. Especially as the Istanbul Summit endorsed a new Strategy and Work Programme for the RCC for the next three years, this provides the countries of the region with a number of concrete and deliverable initiatives and projects to address their economic and social development needs.

Indeed, the countries of the region have by now recognised the value of turning to a regional recovery and development strategy and jointly approaching underdevelopment in many critically important areas – in particular energy and infrastructure.

At the time of the current crisis, which hit South East Europe harshly and, in the case of the Western Balkans, created the worst post-war recovery environment in modern European history, this new readiness to translate cooperation into a set of regional projects is probably the best way to advance the new rapprochement policy and turn it into a measurable benefit for national economies and citizens.

Advancement of the current state of play must also include many other players in the region, so as to emanate and expand the new spirit from the realm of political leaderships throughout the societies. There must be a new role for parliamentarians, civil society, the media, business communities and many others.

Elaborating the advancement measures to sustain the current rapprochement policy over the period ahead is a priority. The moment must be seized and the trend must be translated into an irreversible process. This is where South-East Europe and the European Union could find a true new agenda and the Regional Cooperation Council may take upon itself a new value-added role."