

DE VOLKSKRANT

With a series of disappointments with accession negotiations, politicians have created problems, Balkans expert warns

EU has lost its brilliance on the Balkans

INTERVIEW: Hido Biscevic

“If the EU agenda produces only frustrations in the Balkans, the politicians will turn to other agendas.”

Interviewed by: Leen Vervaeke
26 June 2009

BRUSSELS – Carrot and stick, reward and punish. That was always the way the European Union tried to move the Balkan countries to reforms. But “carrot” – the expectancy of EU membership – has become tarnished. “The frustrations in the Western Balkans regarding the delays in the EU accession process are building up”, says Hido Biscevic, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council. “The impact of this can be very negative and very serious.”

The Croat Biscevic (57), former editor in chief, State Secretary and ambassador, is with the Regional Cooperation Council responsible for regional cooperation in the Balkans. Also, the organization (that originates from the Stability Pact for the Balkans which was created in 1999, after Kosovo war) supports integration of the region into Europe.

But EU agenda, the large driving force behind reforms, is losing its popularity on the Balkans. Due to the problems regarding the Lisbon Treaty, economic crisis, “enlargement fatigue” and national sensitivities of EU member states, the accession processes have been delayed.

Take Croatia, for example, which, due to a border dispute with EU member state Slovenia, on Thursday saw its hopes to finalize negotiations this year gone up in smoke.

“I had hoped that the European Commission would have done more to bring Slovenia and Croatia to an agreement, because what is happening now is very disturbing”, said Biscevic on Tuesday, when the outcome for Croatia was already outlined. “The EU permits a member state to use bilateral issue to stop the enlargement. In such a way the Union shows a not very respectable side of itself.”

“Then naturally the support for the EU decreases in the entire Balkans. Politicians now say: poor Croatian President Sanader, he has done so much to reach Brussels and now they have closed the door.”

Biscevic says that pro-European politicians are now under pressure to abandon EU agenda. As is the case in Serbia, where the accession process is blocked by The Netherlands until former General Mladic is extradited to the Tribunal for former Yugoslavia. “It is simple: as long as the EU agenda produces only frustrations, the politicians will turn to other agendas”, says Biscevic. “In 2008, Serbian president Tadic won the elections owing to EU agenda, but if tomorrow he would go to the elections with this agenda, he would lose. If one would go to elections with an EU agenda after three years of standstill in the negotiations with The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, one would have a very difficult time.

With the EU perspective fading, the motivation to solve problems in the Balkans also decreases. The same is with the status of Kosovo, political relations in BiH and corruption.

A dangerous development, finds Biscevic: “EU admission process is like a bicycle. If it is not moving, it falls. If reforms stop, a revival of nationalism can occur in politics. This is dangerous. Instead of solving problems on the basis of the EU perspective, the open issues will only additionally heat up.”

For this reason Biscevic pleads for a new perspective: a new deal for the Balkans. “We must design large-scale development projects in the sectors of energy, infrastructure, transport, etc.” The Regional Cooperation Council is discussing this with the European Commission, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the World Bank and other institutions.

The economic crisis appears as an obstacle to such investments, but Biscevic does not want to hear of it. “Sometimes it is cheaper to invest in development than to pay the costs of underdevelopment. Furthermore, problems with transport or energy in South East Europe are detrimental for the European Union too.”

“A tunnel under the Bosphorus is being built in Turkey. This means that in three years time every businessman in Amsterdam will be able to get their products by train to Central Asia or even China in three days. But then the railway network in South East Europe must be ready for this too. Therefore, this is in the interest of the European economy as well.”