

Hido Biscevic, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council

Our entry into the EU brings relaxation into the region

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As the successor of the Stability Pack for South Eastern Europe, Regional Cooperation Council entered its fourth year of operations. From the commencement of its activities, the Council has been headed by the former Croatian diplomat, and presently Secretary General **Hido Biscevic**.

>> Could you summarise the thus far activities and say if the relations within the region are any better?

- If I was to use one example to depict the progress over the last couple of years, I could, of course, choose the example of Croatian completion of the accession negotiations and soon entry of our country into the EU membership. This breakthrough has an immeasurable positive and stimulating effect on the other countries of our South East neighbourhood. So, with the Croatian example, Montenegro's candidacy, the latest Serbian moves, and expected good news on the confirmation of the EU Enlargement Policy to this region, the progress is now obvious; it is clear that Europeization is expanding and taking roots in this region; thus complaining the peace but also the project of united and indissoluble Europe.

Hence, we need to talk about the progress simply because some five or six years ago the picture of the region was completely different, almost hopelessly submerged into the European and global dilemmas and almost infinitely trapped by the fiddle-faddle of various unresolved bilateral issues. It seems to me that people in Croatia are perhaps not fully aware that we have shown that breakthroughs of such strategic, historical importance are possible only and solely when looking up from the fences and walls of daily politics, when starting to think in long-term and stop acting as bigots, and when foreign policy objectives stop being hostages of internal party or other stakeholders' politics.

However, perhaps another example of progress would be even more illustrative, not to say intriguing, to the general public: could you have imagined, just couple of years ago, regular cooperation and joint meetings of the heads of security services or moreover, heads of military intelligence services in the region? Presently, such meetings and cooperation in such sensitive areas are held regularly, and information is being exchanged. Figuratively, today everyone agrees that security is larger when there are fewer secrets. It is completely clear that advancement towards the EU means advancement in mutual relations, it brings relaxation, frees from inherited aversions and stereotypes, it means opening at all levels, provides a kind of mental modernisation. Without Europe, everyone remains locked up in their backyards. Thus, it is necessary to especially appreciate each move and each example demonstrating that the countries from the region are ready to step out of their recent past, not forgetting what had happened, and prove through political meetings, statements and declarations that they want to turn to the future.

>> What are the issues which are currently burdening the relations of “Western Balkan” countries the most?

- There is no doubt that the largest remaining challenge is the outstanding issues – and I primarily refer to the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina with regards to a permanent constitutional structure of a self-sustainable, functional and integral country; I also refer to resolving [The Former Yugoslav Republic of] Macedonia's name dispute; and of course, a permanent arrangement of the relations between Belgrade and Pristina in a manner which would eliminate various frustrations and challenges as regards stability, and provide even economic development and thus, social and political stability. To speak openly, I also refer to a potential interrelation of these three key issues. I see the second largest challenge in the almost equally urgent need to transfer the present positive political processes in the region into the irreversible politics that will not depend on election flattery; that will find their way to all social categories; ensure parliamentary support to the politics of rapprochement, overcoming disputes and reconciliation; and find its advocates in media and business communities. In short, those that will not remain as a promotional flag of this or that president but will be widely accepted assets of the society and citizens. I do not think that any of this leads to restoration of some historically overcome relations or structures, because this region also includes Bulgarians and Turks and Rumanians and Greeks, etc. I simply refer to shaping one's consciousness so that my grandchildren will not have to live under a paradigm of repulsion, not to say hatred towards the other, in some self-sufficient ethnical isolation. Finally, a large challenge lies in the increasingly distinct need to respond to the consequences of difficult economic crisis, which has spilled over to all the countries of the region, regardless of whether they are EU members or in a state of unfinished transition, with a joint approach; to translate this positive political trend into an appropriate number of regional development projects in energy, transport, and infrastructure. I see no reason why we should not embark on a regional project of rehabilitation of rail network so that Slovenia and Croatia and Serbia and Bulgaria, and other country, would be ready when the moment comes for the rail corridor to become operational from the EU markets via Turkey, through the two already constructed tunnels below Bosphorus, to Middle East and China. I see no reason why a project

on restoration of navigation on river Sava in its part from Zagreb to Belgrade with immeasurable impact on employment, entrepreneurship, industrial production, agriculture, and tourism should remain sitting on one's desk.

>> How does Croatia seem today as seen from the Sarajevo's perspective?

- I have to reserve comment regardless of how difficult it is sometimes to keep silent. However, the fact remains that a distance provides better perspective, even a small distance such is the one from Sarajevo. Things are even better seen from the European distances and my job is such that I spend approximately half of my time in the capitals in the region and the other half in European capitals. Sometimes I have the feeling the Croatian citizens are constantly being swept over by some strange "ill-omened tsunami", some continuous output of disbelief and frustrations, constant discovery of "corps in ones' closet", commercialisation of difficulties and misfortunes, recycling of confusion and chaos, an inexhaustible source of self-proclaimed prophets, and to such an extent that even the progress is sometimes not measured or perceived.

>> Why are the last steps of our way towards the European Union covered with civic disappointment and lethargy? Has the journey to the achieving the desired objective taken too long?

- It seems to me that I have started answering this question just a while ago. Again, seen from a broader perspective – wasn't a similar "civic disappointment" and "lethargy" prevailing in Poland and Czech during the final stage of accession process; didn't the Polish farmers almost set the entire Warsaw on fire; didn't ethnophobia ravage the streets of Prague; weren't Bulgarian tycoons of fast privatisation panicking that the entering into the EU would bring along the rules that would blow away their profits earned on isolation and breach of laws and so they instrumentalised the media to spread fears and even found right populists to beat their patriotic chest. In short, the final sections of the path towards the EU are always filled with much turbulence and frustrations because it is clear that crossing this line means a breakthrough from one form of political and social behaviour to something completely new. On the other hand, there is no doubt that our path towards the EU was extremely long because of the new negotiation rules, EU institutional crisis, political aspects of, at some time past, relations with the Hague, and outbreak of economic and financial crisis. But, let me repeat, the work has been completed, it is time for relaxation, putting things in order and working.

KEY MOMENTS

>> Could you mark the key events that contributed to Croatia's entry into the EU?

- I would say that it is all about the continuity of state politics from its very beginnings – EU affiliation was never doubtful and all leading participants, stakeholders, governments acted along this guideline. It is clear that priorities changes, from maintaining the independence to freeing the country, followed by institutional

orientation towards the negotiations and the EU; so it is clear that there were various realistic and tactical detachments, but continuity clearly existed. From submitting the candidacy at the time of Racan to Sanader's authentic initial strong pro-European energy and decision to form a National Committee for Monitoring Accession Negotiations - these are all important steps on this path.

>> At one time, you had close cooperation with the former Prime Minister. Did Ivo Sanader disappoint you?

- I had closely cooperated with Tudjman, I had endeavoured to assist Racan too. At one time, Sanader pushed in a direction in which, in my opinion, Croatia should have headed long before. There is no doubt in my mind even today that during the first mandate, he displayed enormous energy, the country started changing its image, large efforts were invested towards Europeisation and commencement of negotiations, towards changing many patterns of political conduct, way out of the "war zone", new attitude towards the past, national reconciliation, new relation with the neighbours. All this in circumstances which were not easy and when European doors were not opened, thus making it difficult to "sell" European politics domestically. Similar situation was with the NATO membership. I remember an episode with President Bush when Sanader was explaining that low levels of attractiveness of NATO in Croatia resulted from the fact that by that time NATO had never clearly stated that it wanted Croatia in its membership and Bush said "Now I understand...you can't sell what you don't have!" and went to a press conference stating that USA wished to see Croatia in NATO. The support doubled the following day.

This is to shortly illustrate the circumstances under which we acted during the first Sanader's mandate. I also know, on my own example, that over the time there was enormous fatigue, both physical as well as psychological, because, among other things, the entire process was not a result of some broad actions, some full party support and support of parties in general. There is something odd in our democracy which seems still not able to function without a leader who generally ends up being in controversial circumstances or circumstances of dispute. Thus, I would differentiate the period of the first and second Sanader's mandate. Despite everyone knowing everything today and everyone having all the answers, I will remain within bound of civic decency which always, regardless of what I personally might be thinking about the possibility of one man having two faces, dictates to wait for the outcome of legal processes.

>> To which extent will the proceedings against the former Prime Minister impact the future European, and regional too, position of Croatia?

- After the initial interest, which would be aroused by arresting any European Prime Minister, and there were such cases, it is presently no longer a European topic. It is more of a story about us.

>> People from Dalmatia remember you as at one time the signatory to the trilateral document on application of the Ecological and Fisheries Protection Zone (ZERP). From today's perspective, would you again put your signature on this document?

- When one doesn't want to hear something, explaining it becomes tiring because everything gradually grows to become a political and media myth. And myths are rarely based on truth. And truth, which is of no interest to anyone today, is that the decision on ZERP was taken by the Croatian Parliament during the Government of Prime Minister Racan upon the incentive of a coalition partner and with the resistance of a party that later on rose to power, inheriting ZERP in the circumstances when Sanader made a strong push towards the negotiations with the EU, and then Croatian Parliament, and not some State Secretary Biscevic, had taken the decision on excluding the EU members states from ZERP, and all this State Secretary did was to fly the next morning to Brussels to officially report to the European Commission and interested members states of the Parliament's decision and sign it. So, Parliament's decision enabled removing the obstruction, one of many, during the negotiations process. At any rate, how could have I disregarded the decisions of Croatian Parliament?