

INTERVIEW

Their Own Scenario for Good Neighbourly Relations

For the first time in their newer history Southeast European countries are managing mutual cooperation process on their own. Mechanisms of decision making and agreeing on priorities of this cooperation are the same as in other similar regional forums in Europe from Baltic to Black Sea, says **Hido Biscevic, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council** for *Evropski Forum*.

The process of transformation of the former Stability Pact into the Regional Cooperation Council was completed as scheduled. What are the activities that exist now?

At the ministerial meeting held in Sofia at the end of February, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) officially replaced the Stability Pact. In the meantime, all personnel, legal and other activities necessary for establishment of the Secretariat in Sarajevo were completed. Around thirty experts and administrative assistants are already working in line with the 2008 Work Program adopted at the Summit of Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECPP) held in Bulgaria at the end of May.

It is important to stress that, in the meantime, together with European Commission and national coordinators of countries from the region, we setup a very detailed mechanism of future joint operations which will introduce a new dimension in regional cooperation primarily because it will enable a continuous and direct cooperation regarding specific initiatives and development projects. For example, in few days in Sarajevo we will host heads of relevant departments of European Commission especially those dealing with the issues of enlargement and use of pre-accession funds, as well as agriculture, environmental protection and energy, the idea of which is to, based on the new, supplementary EC Multi-beneficiary Strategy for Southeast Europe, invite governments to as soon as possible state their perceptions of, and concrete proposals for, accelerated development in the most important areas, from energy and infrastructure to education and health care.

What do Stability Pact and its successor, Regional Cooperation Council, differ in the most?

I would say that the difference is double-folded. Firstly, the Council is an institution fully owned by Southeast European countries. In terms of politics, it is not something coming from Brussels nor is it in any way a form of common and unwanted paternalism of co-called international

community. On the contrary, for the first time in their recent history, countries from this part of Europe decide to manage joint cooperation process on their own. Bearing in mind historical background, character of relations among the countries and peoples of this burdened part of continent, and without even mentioning the recent past, the importance of the entire undertaking is evident as well as the level of responsibility taken on.

In a word, it is a matter of proving maturity; awareness of the need to focus on future by learning from the past and turning a new, European page in the relations in Southeast Europe. On the other hand, the difference is also a concrete one – both the SEECP and Stability Pact existed before but without a joint institutional link. Thus, political declarations remained mostly on paper while the Pact operated on its own agenda. Presently, the link is a direct one – SEECP makes decisions at the level of heads of states and governments, and ministers regarding what needs to be done while RCC is there to implement them in cooperation with European Commission and international partners.

In your opinion, what are the main obstacles to establishing co-called regional ownership and generally, what are the main obstacles to better cooperation in our region?

Fortunately, the obstacles are becoming marginal but where they existed and where significant reluctances still exist, they are caused by political reflections of events in the last twenty years, the four wars fought in this region, and some stereotype heritage. At the same time, they are caused by former fears that institutionalization of cooperation in the region could be interpreted as a substitute for EU membership. However, seated in EU environment in different ways, countries from the region are presently more willing to open to regional cooperation.

What are thus far impacts of CEFTA?

Generally, very favourable. If you take a look at statistical data, you will notice a strong trend of mutual market opening and use of advantages brought by the free trade regime. I believe that this too contributed to very positive macroeconomic indicators in the region, from high growth rates to outstanding increase of foreign investments. If this trend is maintained, presenting a next great challenge in view of global elements of recession, energy prices, increase in food prices and inflator pressures, I see an opportunity for growing economy to start positively influencing relations in political area where clearly there are still many extremely sensitive outstanding issues.

Did the Kosovo declaration of independence decrease regional cooperation? How do you see resolution of problem of Serbia boycotting all events and initiatives where Kosovo is mentioned as an independent state?

I have to express satisfaction over the events of Kosovo not influencing regional cooperation in negative terms, in part owing to a big level of responsibility and interests of Serbia itself. In this I see readiness of Belgrade to regard regional cooperation in the context of a strong commitment to accession to European Union as we have to keep in mind that regional cooperation is an important part of criteria for achieving EU membership. In actual relations, of course, considering extreme political, legal and every other sensitivity of this issue, there is a need for much prudence, responsibility and skill. Life needs solutions, and I personally believe that it would not be wise to stop building schools and roads due to political reasons.

Does regional cooperation in Southeast Europe need to be more institutionalized what would imply establishment of new national institutions such as exist in, for example, Baltic region?

The Council is in many ways already operating by Baltic Council model. Hence, the issue here is not establishment of national institutions because with EU membership, countries from the region will, to the extent needed, transfer parts of their sovereignty to the joint family. RCC is no substitute for EU. Mechanisms of decision making and agreeing on cooperation priorities are the same as in other similar regional forums in Europe from Baltic to Black Sea. I reiterate that heads of states and governments, and ministers in their relevant areas, make decisions on projects they wish to cooperate in, and we are their operational, executive body that facilitates implementation with the support of EU, international financial institutions and other partners.