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Interview: Hido Biscevic, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council

Regional Cooperation Council promotes mutual cooperation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration aimed at fostering development in the region to the benefit of its citizens. Inciting and fostering measures to strengthen security in the region is of key importance for strengthening increasingly better regional cooperation process.

The interview with Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Hido Biscevic, took place recently at the Second Military Intelligence Chiefs Conference (SEEMIC) hosted by Military Intelligence Agency (VOA) of Ministry of Defence of Serbia in cooperation with Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat and under the patronage of the Director of the European Union Military Intelligence Staff.

A statement on cooperation among military intelligence institutions of Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) members from South East Europe was signed on this occasion by nine military intelligence chiefs.

The process of cooperation of the South East European (SEE) military intelligence chiefs began in 2009 with a meeting of the chiefs of military intelligence services in Bucharest and has been realized at the initiative of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). Inciting and fostering measures to strengthen security in the region, supported by significant resource investment, is of key importance for strengthening still fragile but increasingly better regional cooperation process.

Improvement of cooperation, trust and stability is just one segment of activities of the Regional Cooperation Council, which was established on 27 February 2008 as a successor of Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, with its headquarters in Sarajevo. It is the focal point of regional cooperation and a forum through which international community is engaged in the region.

What is the reason for this organisational change and what it essentially means?

- The answer could be summarized in one word – self-responsibility. In formal institutional sense, Stability Pact is the initiative of international community. It has been created in late 1990's as a joint initiative of the United States of America and European Union. It had no

direct political ties with the Southeast European Cooperation Process and it reported to Council of the European Union and other international partners, and not to the region.

Regional Cooperation Council was established by the decision of the governments of countries from the region to improve cooperation process in South East Europe. Our annual work plans are a result of both agreements and decisions made at the meetings of heads of states or ministerial meetings by priority area. These result in the Council's work plan under which we report to our founders.

This is a major difference as the region decided to take its destiny into its own hands for the first time in its modern history. This is a historical step for the region whose destiny was decided in Istanbul, Vienna, Washington, Moscow, etc. for over a century; and always outside the region.

This increases the responsibility of the member states?

- Responsibility is bigger and conditions in which it is realised are still burdened with number of issues inherited from 1990's which we need to gradually overcome. We also need to overcome the differences arising from establishing national identity in the transition process. This is not easy, but in historical sense, we have the same idea – Europe.

Over the last three years, since I have been leading this Council, I have observed a positive change in countries' readiness to regional cooperation. It was at a lower level couple of years ago since countries had fewer connections with the EU. Correlation in regional cooperation depends on how close the country is to the European Union. Most of the political elites believe that regional cooperation should not be a substitute for EU membership. The moment Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo anchored themselves closer to Brussels, mutual readiness for opening increased.

There is no EU membership without passing the regional cooperation test?

- This remains unclear only to those individuals in national scenes who believe that they can profit on isolation. When looking at the stabilisation and association process from institutional aspect, regional cooperation is one of the key political criteria for accession to the European Union.

Sarajevo became the RCC's headquarters, this is something new?

- It is a novelty as Brussels was the seat of Stability Pact. This seemed as if someone was looking after us. When the Council was established by decisions of governments from the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina offered Sarajevo as its headquarters, and this was accepted.

Sarajevo's symbolism is twofold. It is located in the centre of Western Balkans and the message Council communicates to the world is of importance for both the region and Europe. It also has a domestic value for Bosnia and Herzegovina since Council's philosophy should create environment for progress in BiH, where it is still not much observable. There is no lasting stability in the region without it.

□ *What are the main areas of cooperation and which generate good results?*

- There are several areas identified by the heads of states of our members from South East Europe. There are 46 countries, organisations and international financial institutions members of the Regional Cooperation Council. All of them are interested in lasting stabilisation in the region but Council's main pillar is members from the region.

Our activities are focused on five priority areas: economic and social development, infrastructure and energy, justice and home affairs, security cooperation, building human capital and parliamentary cooperation.

□ *What are the characteristics of security cooperation?*

- Security aspect has a special place in Council's activities since it is extremely important for former and latent issues in the region. We have several unresolved bilateral issues, different views as regards the status of some members, issues regarding the name of some countries, unresolved constitutional construction in BiH, with very different views as regards the prospects of this country...

In this sense, meeting of military intelligence chiefs is very important as it brings along strengthening of mutual dialogue, trust and predictability. Unpredictability is still present in this part of Europe and impacts political considerations.

□ *Belgrade Military Intelligence Chiefs Conference is a new contribution of Serbia to regional cooperation and strengthening European perspectives?*

- Ministry of Defence of Serbia and Minister Dragan Sutanovac contribute significantly to this process and my impression is that this is a genuine interest on the part of Serbia. This strong engagement confirms that over the last years and despite difficult internal circumstances,

Serbia has been making a true effort to strengthen the spirit of mutual understanding, cooperation in the region, resolving open issues by political means, readiness to dialogue...

□ *What is the Council's focus in the next period?*

- The main task of the Council, despite not being political body, is to maintain its activities and positive trend by improving cooperation with governments from the region aimed at strengthening overall regional cooperation. Everyone can and need to find the place and interest in maintaining and enhancing stability which is crucial from the aspect of predictability and creating positive profile of the entire region in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration.

If there would be a delay in some segment of this process, this would have a negative impact on accession to the European Union. The focus of our tasks is to identify the flagships of positive trend of mutual cooperation, define their tasks and goals, and assist in larger and strong support of the European Commission.

We wish to translate crisis moments in this part of Europe into concrete development projects in economy, energy and infrastructure which could obtain financial support of the relevant institutions.

□ *Which example would you single out?*

- We are working on identifying transnational projects and one of them is, for example, improvement of air connectivity in the region. We have to stop thinking that individual progress depends on us alone and start thinking that this is not possible unless our neighbour is moving ahead as well.

Identifying development projects in the region, primarily in the area of infrastructure, and their implementation brings us closer to Europe.

□ *Can we expect to see financial support to sound projects?*

- Certainly. Three large European banks have signed a joint agreement expressing readiness, together with the European Commission, to financially support such projects. What distresses me the most is the slowness and poor level of administrative capacities of our countries to indicate which projects are valuable for which country.

□ *To what extent could the Regional Cooperation Council be recognized as a true body and forum for promoting interests and mutual values?*

- The Council could hardly be something more than is the political will of those who founded us. I have to stress that we adopted opinions at our Annual Meeting in June in Istanbul that encourage the Council to assume a more decisive role in strengthening regional cooperation.
- *Does the Council have capacities to impose itself as an efficient body to achieve these ambitions?*
- I believe we are ready to assume a stronger role. Over the last six months, I have visited all capital cities in the region and had talks with all prime ministers. These were political meetings in the sense of identifying interests and national priorities.

Another important thing will be to launch small projects which are also very important. For example, I have been in Dubrovnik just recently at the second meeting of rectors from Western Balkans and we have signed a letter of intent regarding cooperation. Several weeks earlier, a meeting on Implementation of Single European Sky (ISIS Programme) was held in Budva. We can come to concrete cooperation projects through series of such meetings. ■

Regional Cooperation Council's work focuses on economic and social development, infrastructure and energy, justice and home affairs, security cooperation, building human capital, and parliamentary cooperation.

The cooperation among the military intelligence is a sign of maturity and commitment of the South East European countries to confronting regional security threats through organised and systemic joint efforts. The new RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2011-2013, endorsed by the heads of state and government of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in June 2010, prioritize SEEMIC as a key initiative in security cooperation.

There are 46 countries, organisations and international financial institutions members of the Regional Cooperation Council. In addition to its Main Office in Sarajevo, the Secretariat has its Office in Brussels for liaison with European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

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