

**Interview by Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC),
Hido Biscevic, to Montenegrin daily *Pobjeda***

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I Advocate for Balkan's New Deal

Failure to solve the problems of the region would be a large step back for the European Union itself. If it is not capable to solve the issue of enlargement to this region, which is relatively small, it can hardly play the global role

Journalist, publicist, diplomat, analyst

Born in Sarajevo in 1951. Political scientist by training – graduated in international politics and journalism at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb. Father of two.

To general public known as a life-long journalist, Foreign Affairs Editor and finally Editor-in-Chief of the *Vjesnik* daily – from the best days of this newspapers. The author of number of books addressing the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the topic of Middle East.

Croatian Ambassador to Turkey and Russia, Stare Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integrations.

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Looking at the retrospective three years back, substantial progress was made on the Western Balkans. There were many unresolved bilateral issues three years ago. Regional cooperation has reached the state where it is far better than the aggregated bilateral relations. There is also the institutional advancement with regards to the relations with NATO and the EU. Within the three years, Croatia and Albania had become members of NATO, while several countries signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement which was also later on ratified. Finally, the latest news is that the European Council has accepted the conclusion of negotiations with Croatia.

Montenegro has obtained the candidacy status just recently, and this is a substantial progress for your country as well as for the region, particularly in the sense of maintaining the dynamics of enlargement after Croatia. We are not saying this because this interview is taking place in Montenegro or as a matter of courtesy, but because it is necessary to have a wheel to pull the enlargement policy which does not exist in the European Union now in its full capacity due to different circumstances, from economic crisis to institutional relations within the EU, etc. Hence,

there needs to be someone to maintain this driving force in the region. Montenegro plays a strategic role for itself but also for the entire region, says Hidajet – Hido Bisevic in the interview to *Pobjeda* held Friday afternoon just a few hours after receiving the news from Brussels that the EU leaders concluded that Croatia had completed its European integration path.

POBJEDA: Why it is important to maintain this driving force?

BIŠČEVIĆ: If the dynamics of enlargement would not be maintained, the frustrating element of unresolved issues of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Constitution, blockage, so to say, of Kosovo in the current state, frustrating [The Former Yugoslav Republic of] Macedonia's issue and so on, there would be a standstill of enlargement policy in this region. In my opinion, it would be a large step back for the European Union itself because if it is not capable to solve the issue of enlargement to this Balkan area, which is relatively small, then it can hardly play the global role.

POBJEDA: You advocate the thesis that deeper involvement of Serbia in the negotiations process will change the anti-Western political climate in the country?

BIŠČEVIĆ: Of course. It changed Croatia, it changed all the Central European countries when they were in the accession process. Accession to the European Union leads to deep transformation not only in institutional sense – judiciary reform, reform of this or that segment – but also in a gradual change of social awareness. Societies are agonized during the negotiations. I watched Croatia agonizing during the negotiations. There was intense resistance due to mentality, interests, and interest groups. You need to open yourself the moment you begin with your accession, and it is that deep changes of structure also happen. It will gradually come to the mutual permeation of our, so to say, post-Yugoslav, not to use the term Balkans, societies.

POBJEDA: However, some fundamental problems are still unresolved. Kosovo, [The Former Yugoslav Republic of] Macedonia, not to mention Bosnia. And even the Serbo-Croatian relations are shaky – Tadic is not present at the celebration of Statehood Day, and it was very much in focus.

BIŠČEVIĆ: There was some rapprochement between the two countries. This trend is positive; however, it still not strengthened. It is susceptible to internal-political oscillations. It is a wall consisted of several columns but lacking sufficient number of bricks. It is a construction leaning on Josipovic and Tadic, or leaning on Tadic and Bosnian three-member Presidency. But it is not leaning on, let us say, all parliamentarians, it is not leaning sufficiently on media nor on businessmen in the region, and so what it seems necessary to me, is to expand the number of stakeholders in this positive process so that it would be strengthened through active involvement of parliamentarians; and it is good that Tadic and Jospovic meet, but somehow it seems to me that it is not good to be under the fire of their Parliamentarians when returning to Zagreb or Belgrade because of visiting each other. There are some interest groups which, let me put it this way, have a homework of renewing those stereotypes.

POBJEDA: Where do you and the organisation you head fit in all this? What do you do in this respect?

BIŠČEVIĆ: All that I am saying is my mission. All that I am saying is something we must, to put it like this, bring through publicly invisible diplomatic communication to capitals, political leaders, elites in the region to facilitate the Council to implement its fundamental mandate which is to strengthen cooperation on concrete projects. For me to provide, for example, participation of Belgrade and Pristina in a project on cooperation of universities, I primarily have to provide this political ambience, after which certain tools are developed to increase the number of those bricks through numerous concrete cooperation projects with the aim to strengthen the process. It is a very painstaking and, not to exaggerate and attribute large importance to the Council, but also a very patient work. It is not something where one could expect spectacular and fast progress, but with persistent and patient increase of the number of participants, a network of cooperation is slowly being created and expanded which, I dare say, is even better in some aspects than in many other regions in Europe.

POBJEDA: For example?

BIŠČEVIĆ: We are the only part of Europe that has recently adopted the regional strategy for fighting organized crime and corruption. By the nature of things and due to the heritage of war, it was necessary to embark on this regional approach; besides, criminals and corruption know no borders and thus, it is not possible to have no cooperation and deal with this issue solely at the national level. We are the only region in Europe preparing the joint strategy on research and development. There is a range of such things which the general public may not be very aware of. We bear part of the responsibility for not being strongly present in media; however, unfortunately, most of the media in this part of Europe, and you know it yourself, express more interest in some more commercial topics than is this one.

POBJEDA: Which results are you particularly proud of over the last three years, and what did you miss or could have achieved easier?

BIŠČEVIĆ: The failure is certainly the fact that we did not succeed in what I still believe to be crucial, though not part of our mandate, and that is the underdeveloped infrastructure in the region. The region finds itself in such a social and economic position that it makes it hard to expect its fast recovery without launching large-scale regional development projects in infrastructure, transport, energy... Hence, I advocate for a kind of a Balkan's New Deal that would be a driving force for national economies through large-scale joint projects that could be linked with the wider interests of the European Union, and other parts of Europe. The state of development is catastrophic and there is a need for urgent revitalisation of the entire infrastructural network from Croatia to Hungary and further towards Turkey. I consider this a failure because we were not successful in making the political elites from the region interested in initiating discussions on such large-scale joint multilateral projects.

POBJEDA: Why? It cannot be that politicians do not want to make promises of new roads, railways?

BIŠČEVIĆ: Because after the process of fragmentation at the beginning of 1990's which was probably inevitable in terms of history, the thinking remained exclusively within the national borders. There is no such political courage to say: o.k. this river is not just mine, and it does not

end at my border; this river flows to my neighbour and my neighbour and I could profit if we enter the process of renewing navigation on this river. I mention this example since the Study on renewal of navigation on rivers Sava and Danube has been completed two or three years ago. It exists as a completed Study in which funds were invested but there is no political will to embark on such a project. There are many studies including the recent World Bank's Study on the need for accelerated rehabilitation of railway network on the Balkans which is obviously in a catastrophic state. There are the two tunnels constructed under the Bosphorus and if the corridor does not go via Western Balkans, which is the most logical link Ljubljana-Zagreb-Belgrade-Nis-Sofia-Istanbul, it will go through Romania and Bulgaria. Thus, it can happen again that this voice of history bypasses the Western Balkans and that we are at loss. There are similar projects in the area of water management, railway infrastructure. Raising awareness on the need for large-scale regional infrastructure projects would be worth of financial support by the European financial institutions, etc. because it is easier to secure funds for investments that will include four rather than a single country. So, this is one of the failures despite it not being our direct mandate. The thing I would consider a success is the mentioned regional strategy on fighting crime and corruption. Another example which is not all that known to the public, as by the nature of things these are the matters which should not be too much in focus, is the cooperation which we have made regular now of South East European military intelligence institutions.

POBJEDA: No one knows anything about this.

BIŠČEVIĆ: No one knows, but they meet regularly. Presently, they are already talking about some joint projects, share information, etc. There are also regular meetings at the regional level of interior ministers, ministers of justice too. Therefore, we have made a substantial progress in the security aspect.

POBJEDA: Did those intelligence officers meet because of some outside pressure?

BIŠČEVIĆ: No, on the contrary. The meeting of the intelligence chiefs followed by the meeting of military intelligence institutions was initiated by the Regional Cooperation Council. And much to the amazement of the relevant institutions in Europe, i.e. European Union and Council of Europe which were very doubtful at the beginning that we are capable of reaching this point; but nevertheless, they supported us. We were successful in organising this meeting which was followed by the entire process, a number of meetings. This is good since it is strengthening security through exchange of information. The less secrets, the better is the security.

POBJEDA: Why do not you then try something in Bosnia, within the country, to try and reconcile them somehow? Which is the key Balkans issue – Bosnia or Kosovo?

BIŠČEVIĆ: Bosnia and Herzegovina absolutely. It is the most important security, i.e. the most important issue of long-term security and stability of this part of Europe, having in mind its position, and its neighbours.

POBJEDA: Which is the right recipe?

BIŠČEVIĆ: Very simple – realistic compromise between the diversities which are obvious – so, no imposed solutions that would be at the cost of one of the three interlocutors, as the situation where two are against one can never be a benefit.

There is the fatigue on the part of international community with respect to BiH. The EU does not have the capacities or power to “independently solve” this issue, it does not have a foreign minister that would wake up in the morning thinking of Bosnia and Herzegovina when you have all these other things – crises in North Africa, Middle East, tsunamis, financial crisis, etc. This fatigue with regards to BiH is something primarily BiH politicians need to resolve.

POBJEDA: How far can all of us in the region go with the unresolved problems in Bosnia?

BIŠČEVIĆ: In the case of failure to find a solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the consequences will be borne primarily by the region. They will not be borne by the United States of America nor Moscow but by the region. The social and economic situation there is very difficult, there is no functionality of the Constitution and they have a bleak future unless they enter into accelerated changes. Along with this, you have Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, etc. within less than two-hour flight. Thus, looking at a wider, strategic picture, we have a situation with incomplete peace on the Balkans and a volcano erupting at the South of Mediterranean threatening with waves of refugees. I think that the developments at the South coastline of the Mediterranean are the last wake up call for politicians in the Balkans to embark on serious and urgent resolving of their remaining issues to avoid simply slipping off the agenda of global priority.

POBJEDA: Why do not the politicians set about to agree, both those in Bosnia and those around having an influence on Bosnia?

BIŠČEVIĆ: Because of the elections due to which they are often inclined to get on the good side of the public instead of creating a visionary policy.

When we talk, for example, about the need for faster reconstruction of railway network Ljubljana-Zagreb-Belgrade-Nis-Skopje-Istanbul, it in real life means one meeting of the five Prime Ministers, followed by homework for the five ministers of transport and a responsibility of justice ministers to prepare the agreement, i.e. legal basis for something like this. However, in each of these countries there are interest groups that live off the non-existence of fast rail network; there are those that will profit on the fact that people cannot reach Belgrade from Zagreb in less than seven hours. They have certain media through which they create all this.

However, there is a problem behind all this and it is the institutional weakness – Constitution. I will make arrangements to bring the five ministers to the table and accept such a proposal. But, will it be accepted by the institutions? How much time will it take for it to reach the final head of transport unit of this or that country? That is the question.

Institutional strengthening will, in fact, be the next addition to EU accession. This will be requested. It seems to me that Montenegro will be the one to be in a way tested. If you wish to join the club of institutional professionals – you have to be institutionally professional.

European media owners behave anti-European in the Balkans

POBJEDA: Why is not someone thinking about, for example, a project of media from the former Serbo-Croatian language area where, for example, the Economic Editorial would be based in Belgrade, Sports in Podgorica, Foreign Policy in Zagreb, and it would all be based on profit considerations – many things are the same, and everyone would be adding their information which are not of interest for others. If National Geographic or Vogue can be printed in 10 metropolises or in ten languages, why this could not happen?

BIŠČEVIĆ: Sounds interesting, but seems impossible in this development phase. Well, Croatia is marking 20 years of its independence tomorrow, Montenegro has marked its fifth anniversary. It is a short timeline. Germans and French had no joint projects for decades either. It was only in 2003 that they agreed to start working on joint textbooks. Therefore, it is early for something like this. However, what we should focus more on in this phase is to try to understand the other. To understand their motives, to understand their situation and try to find a way to harmonise our relations too.

This fragmentation of the region brought us tall walls and it is only now that we have begun to realize that we need to go over these walls. I cannot spend my life within my backyard. If I do not know what is going on in Frankfurt, if Croatian or Serbian TV station fails to report on the importance of an event in China or on the importance of a trend in Europe, then I become increasingly conducive to manipulation, then I am censured to read only whether a child was kidnapped or whether a criminal was killed.

POBJEDA: Tabloidisation of media is a common ex-Yugoslav ill. It is unbelievable what is being printed.

BIŠČEVIĆ: The catastrophic thing is that most of the media from Slovenia to [The Former Yugoslav Republic of] Macedonia are owned by West European publishers. You have a paradox that they are sending to us in this region political messages such as “cooperation is needed”, “mutual opening is needed”, “be Europeans”, “become civilised”, “do not be a Balkan boy”, and then the same media, for the purpose of their own commercial interests, execute editorial policy which renews the old Balkans frictions. It is contrary to what in fact is the wish of our societies and our citizens. If Zagreb or Belgrade media keep on instating that I always have to hate a Croat or Serb or shout “Kill a Serb” or “Kill a Croat” at football matches or whatever is being shouted at those games, then something does not add up here in long-term. Why would my children or my grandchildren live with these stereotypes?

POBJEDA: How do we break out from this? State interventionism is not advisable, and Western owners in liberal capitalism, in its early phase in fact, will not change this style they have on their own?

BIŠČEVIĆ: It will happen due to the development of profession. Division of the so-called commercial from political journalism will happen eventually. What we are witnessing presently is the papers which are at the same time both yellow and black press that encompasses Daily Mirror and Guardian at one place. So it has both the sensationalistic and serious political dimension. Because of professionalism, it could be expected to see the division in this respect. You can bombard the people with sensationalistic contents, beautiful women from criminal circles, you may create this and that star, but one day, this will reach its limit and there will simply be no more hunger for such kind of media.

Unfortunately, what happened is that public TV station entered the race with this kind of printed media. I am not saying that we need to maintain the boring News from the communist times, but you have TV News, some information programs which are in fact racing for media madness that prevailed on the given day in Montenegro or in Croatia. It is a pity.

When talking about it, we have recognized the adversity, so to say, the deviation of public broadcasters, and together with the European Broadcasting Union, we have prepared a project, invited all public broadcasters from the region, organised and established the Association of Public Broadcasters from the entire South East Europe. Together with the members, we have launched seminars on professional journalism.

POBJEDA: Tabloidisation came with the war, didn't it?

BIŠČEVIĆ: There was a bit of everything in this respect, from private interests to secret services, etc. This wave raised, tsunami flooded media space of the entire post-Yugoslav region. However, I have a feeling that the market is gradually becoming tired of sensationalistic contents. People do want something else, they want to be informed of developments, hear and read comments, explain certain things to themselves. They do not want to be slaves of someone-sided interpretations.

POBJEDA: What do you read, how do you get informed over a cup of coffee in the morning, what is it that you read in fact?

BIŠČEVIĆ: I scan the Internet, of course, BBC and Guardian. These are my first pick. It seems to me that this is an objective overview, a kind of world's EMR when I wake up.

POBJEDA: And in the region?

BIŠČEVIĆ: I scan all the papers in the region. If I open *Vijesnik* or *Jutarnji*, I can see the pulse of Croatian society, but then I have to see what the priority in *Politika* is, what is written in *Oslobođenje*, etc. This walk through the media in the region shows, in a way, the pulse of the societies in the region, and much can be understood from this; in fact, we can even see which path we are on.

POBJEDA: And one can see the state of play in journalism too?

BIŠČEVIĆ: That is right. The greatest shock to me as a journalist is when after three or four days spent outside the country at some consultations, or a conference, and after Guardian, I take local newspapers from Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo. Trust me, it is literary a cultural shock.