

Hido Biscevic

Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council in Sarajevo talks for *Obzor* on the arrest of Karadzic, use of EU funds, Ciro, Dayton, ZERP, and Gotovina

Interviewed by: Zoran Kresic, Photo by: Zoran Grizelj

For several months now, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Hido Biscevic has been the informal "head of Southeast Europe", headquartered in Sarajevo. The headquarters of this office is located in the city where assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, took place, thus triggering the breakout of World War I; also, towards the end of the 20th century, this was the place of major war devastation and suffering. Sarajevo is now making the effort to initiate regional cooperation among the 12 countries that, in spite of their differing historical and social circumstances, have sought the same goal – membership of the European Union and NATO. All of the countries are experiencing problems related to lagging behind Europe by several decades.

To which extent does the Regional Cooperation Council, working under the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECp), constitute a continuation of the activity of the Stability Pact?

In the institutional and legal sense, this is a continuation of the Stability Pact. However, following all of the things that have happened in this region, after the wars, instability, missed opportunities and missed policies, this part of Europe has been found in the condition that requires quick development, seeking projects to compensate all of this time lost, almost two decades. There are countries in this region that have not built a single kilometer of highways, or that have not reconstructed their railways, let us not mention the stagnation in the education or health areas.

There are huge differences in place between this part of Europe and the EU zone. How does one make up for these?

At this pace, the level of the material and spiritual development prevalent nowadays in the EU is likely difficult to attain. If a comparison were to be made between the development standard of the narrower segment only, of the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, from 20 years ago and of the Baltic or Central European states with the situation today, a drastic difference would be observed. This part of Europe, particularly the post-Yugoslav one, has no more time to waste. Particularly so because the development of Europe runs at such pace that if we miss something today, it can no longer be attained tomorrow. This is why the work that the RCC is facing is particularly significant and challenging in terms of making up for the lost years and stimulating quick development in all of its aspects, in cooperation with the 12 countries and with the European Commission, or the EU, and with international financial institutions.

Are the SEECP member countries, not just in declaratory terms, ready to make up for the time lost?

All of the Southeast European countries are in a way associated with the European Union, either through the EU membership or as countries negotiating for membership or having another appropriate institutional status. At the time when some countries, including Croatia, were not clearly anchored in Brussels with EU membership perspectives, this readiness for regional cooperation was at a lower level. The higher the degree of association with the EU is, the higher the readiness is for regional cooperation.

Has this fear from regional cooperation, frequently packaged into the building of a Balkans union, disappeared in Croatia?

I believe this apprehension has been going away. After all, it had been based on a distorted perception, on a frequently stressed and exaggerated, for who knows what sorts of interests, thesis on the reconstruction of Yugoslavia, of a Balkans union. The real political life supports nothing of this all. Nevertheless, on the other hand, everyone aims at the same goal –the EU and NATO accession based on individual progress. There is evident progress in the way of thinking of the political representatives under the SEECP, in terms of using regional cooperation as one of the possibilities to accelerate a major number of such issues, which in general also pertain to a significant portion of reforms as an obligatory homework of each individual country on its path towards the EU. First and foremost, this is the issue of energy cooperation, infrastructure and transport development. The times when political classes thought that power lines ended at their borders, that rivers do not flow into other states, and that the Avian influenza does not fly across borders are now past times. The European Commission and the international financial institutions are increasingly opting for projects exceeding the objectively small markets in the majority of countries in this part of Europe. The increased competitiveness in the region also increases the competitiveness for each of the respective economies.

What are the ways to attract major funds into this region?

The European Commission has been preparing its new strategic document for Southeast Europe, to cover the period until 2011. The core philosophy of the new EU approach is exactly the provision of support to transnational projects. As an example, many Southeast European states have a lack of workforce, while there is yet no common approach or idea developed related to the flexibility of this market. All of these countries shall, and hopefully the sooner the better, become EU members, and this market shall be free. There is no reason for these countries not to open up towards each other according to the standards that shall be applied once they become EU members.

You have mentioned a strategic document. Which areas does it cover?

The RCC has been involved in the preparation of this document, scheduled for presentation this autumn. By no means shall the individual relation of each particular country with the European Commission, meaning through pre-accession funds and through IPA projects, be replaced with this approach; they shall be supplemented with this document, emphasizing projects of transnational significance. This document demonstrates that the political commitment from the Thessaloniki document is now being translated into concrete action.

While doing so, development programs have to focus exactly on the areas where stagnation is the most evident.

Does the new strategic document also include opening up of EU financial funds?

Yes. This shall include a very significant financial injection. First of all, in the areas of energy, infrastructure, transport, science, education cooperation, security cooperation, and increased labor market flexibility. In each of these areas, opportunities have been defined for governments to apply for projects they are interested in, with at least one or two of the neighboring countries. This is the so-called multi-beneficiary approach, which for instance in the area of infrastructure shall allow for a strong acceleration in implementation of the pertinent traffic corridors. In the energy area, priorities are being defined in transport routes for oil, gas, electricity, through Southeast Europe. All of this involves a project aimed at the revival of the geo-economic potential possessed by Southeast Europe. We have been in permanent contact with the World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and European Investment Bank.

Has the EU been preparing the Balkans Marshall Plan?

One could put it this way, although Brussels is less apt to call this area the Balkans. This is a plan for an accelerated development of Southeast Europe. This region has had a significant production growth rate over the past years, testifying of huge economic potentials. Even with the still outstanding issues, the degree of stability is much higher than it was in the previous years. The Southeast Europe area, particularly this post-Yugoslav part, is facing a crucial era, in which the next several years shall define how to continue the positive trends and raise this part of Europe up to the level required for the EU and NATO membership. There is also a possible scenario involving stagnation and perseverance of outstanding political issues. Should anything like that happen, with the global recession around the corner, and even with the potential changes in EU priorities, nobody guarantees that this area shall also be among priorities in five years. Then, this would open up space for some bad scenarios, for new stagnation.

May such a negative scenario be reflected on Croatia?

This least pertains to Croatia, which has already crossed the line in the negotiating and all other aspects, if I may put it so. The Croatian task and interest, and this is what Croatia is doing, is now to be responsible towards its neighbors. The way its neighborhood is regulated may also determine the way of life for its citizens. I wish to believe that the participation of Croatia in the SEECP has been exactly recognized as such, and that such an approach by Croatia has been exceptionally appreciated by Brussels.

There is an evident economic perspective for this region, however from the political side there is a strong institutional crisis within the EU related to the Lisbon Treaty. Does this involve a specific kind of a financial compensation for the opposition against enlargement?

The French, Dutch and Irish “No” has not resulted from the lack of desire to accept Southeast Europe on the part of their citizens. We in Southeast Europe must finally understand that we are not the centre of the world and that, when voters in Paris go out for a referendum, they are surely not thinking about the situation in Pozarevac, Sarajevo or Karlovac, or about how

much the accomplishment of desires of people from those states will encumber their lives or budgets. This would rather be another kind of fear; and the reasons for such silent closing in lie somewhere else. Then again, it should be noted that the European Union is constantly living with a specific form of an institutional crisis, but it has never regressed during its half-century existence. If ten years ago someone had told you that a common currency or Schengen would exist, it would have been hard for you to believe it. It is of particular significance for us to note that the institutional crisis has never prevented enlargement. There was also an evident crisis at the time of accession of Spain, Portugal, and of the ten most recent countries. I can point out with pleasure that, when I recently visited Paris, because France is now presiding over the EU, a clear message was sent – you continue with your reforms, and we shall resolve our problems.

How do you get by in Sarajevo, particularly because you are “running” Southeast Europe?

It is a big challenge to come to work and run an organization with 30 people coming from 12 countries.

Brussels looks similar!

A little bit more complex, but then again everything is only emerging here. This is the first time that such an organization exists on the territory of Southeast Europe. My deputy is from Belgrade, a political advisor is from Croatia, another one is from Turkey. Heads of departments for economy, energy and infrastructure, justice and internal affairs, security, human resources all come from different countries of Southeast Europe, and the office is administered by a colleague from Moldova. This also suggests some kind of opening up, of some preparedness for mutual cooperation, and not only for us in the Sarajevo Secretariat, but also at the level of our respective countries. In the aftermath of all of these tragedies that have occurred over the past two decades, and with an idea of a developing Europe, I believe it is time for all of us to let ourselves free of old stereotypes and old mistrusts, of that unfortunate Balkans syndrome. After all, we are not a part of Europe doomed by the Lord to have wars every 50 years, to kill some Ferdinand guy, and in the meantime to be identifying who is to blame for all of that. Citizens all the way from Mostar to Chisinau in Moldova or Ankara deserve a much better life.

You have received reinforcement from Croatia in Sarajevo. Ciro has arrived!

I do not know how Ciro will influence regional cooperation, but I would be glad to compete with him in football. He can compose the national team, and I will compose my regional one, so we'll see...

BiH is one of the more challenging problems in Southeast Europe. The war here has not resolved the internal issues concerning the system and the three-ethnicity, two-entity formula. How does one develop a functional formula while at the same time meeting the European Union expectations?

This is a very tough question. BiH is certainly the most complex state in Europe. It requires a lot of skill, openness, preparedness for coexistence with differences to start building a lastingly self-sustainable and effective constitutional model based on such philosophy. BiH has paid a high price in the process of dissolution of Yugoslavia; it has endured the most

terrible war tragedy. And then, to make the situation even more dramatic and alarms even louder, even after 20 years BiH is not facing any substantially different challenges, while having a horribly painful experience. I have been living here for months, looking and listening ... and I can hear that parents of all three ethnic groups are not yet able to tell their children with certainty what will happen tomorrow. It is hard for people to live under undefined conditions, let alone states. This is exactly why BiH's progress towards the EU is important, because it defines these conditions of living and sustainability.

You also used to be a close associate of President Tudjman, and you were directly or indirectly involved in the peace negotiations in BiH. Is it possible to replace the Dayton with passage of a new constitution for BiH?

It is more likely that the Dayton shall be built upon in order to increase the effectiveness of the system, to preserve integrity and to find the right balance between democratic representation and the ethnic pluralism of this country.

How do look at the ZERP case today, from a certain time distance, as you were the State Secretary who signed the document related to relations with Slovenia and Italy in Brussels, while Croatia has in the meantime relented on this issue?

I signed a document notifying the Union that the day before the Croatian Parliament had passed a decision on non-application of the ZERP to the Union members until the signing of the Fishery Partnership Agreement with the Union. In the meantime, negotiations had started with the Union and Croatia was no longer in the position to sign such an agreement. This is the paradox, the closer you are, the harder it may be. But this is politics. In politics, particularly international politics, there are moments when you have to make a good choice about the moment favorable for you to exercise a right of yours. Unless you do so, you will run into problems. Unfortunately, Dr. Sanader's government has inherited the problem from the previous period and it has been seeking for the best solutions between domestic expectations in some segments of the society, even politicization by some participants in political life, and the undisputable strategic interest of Croatia to join the EU as soon as possible. In the meantime, Croatia has to prepare itself even better for the application of the ZERP, and for the rights that belong to it to be translated into the benefit of the Croatian fishers, starting from fleet to wholesale market development.

You were heading the Action Plan for the arrest of General Gotovina ...

Wrong. I was one of the associates in completion of the Action Plan to address the relations with the ICTY.

You used to be perceived as such in Croatia, because you were the government coordinator for implementation of this Plan. However, your name used to be associated to the alleged information that Gotovina had turned himself in.

Financial Times has apologized for having published such information and has published a correction. I have never said nor would I ever say such a thing. However, in reference to the Gotovina case, I wish to point out that the Action Plan had a broader dimension, and if I was put in charge of something, then I was put in charge of raising the awareness of the need for introduction of the rule of law into the Croatian society. This is why this awareness needs to be raised and a shift should be made – and please do not misunderstand me – away from the

brigand-like perception and understanding that custom law and village customs are more important than the European law and than the place and role of law in Europe, where the Croatian people not only wish to go but where they believe to rightfully belong. So, the Action Plan was based exactly on such an assumption – the rule of law is the foundation for functioning of any healthy or regulated state. This is what I trust we all want.

UNBURDENING DUE TO THE ARREST OF KARADZIC

How important is the arrest of Karadzic for the regional processes and relations?

There is no doubt that the arrest of the ICTY indictee Karadzic will influence regional affairs. First of all, I would say, on the moral side, on the side of the clear message that justice is truly attainable, even when it seems to be too slow. Then, there is no doubt that this event has already brought a certain sense of unburdening, not oblivion – because such serious tragedies that have occurred in this region in these four wars cannot be forgotten – but an unburdening in the sense of closing of this file in a way that will lead to turning of new pages. And finally, it is an unburdening at thousands of personal levels.

What about the political level? What does this mean, first of all for Serbia and for reconciliation in the region?

As for the political level, this is also a confirmation of the fact that everyone has to seek truth and justice on their side first, among the responsible individuals, because one cannot maintain the collective guilt stereotype while at the same time hoping for better relations among the peoples of the region. It is human to believe that it is in the interest of each community and each individual to develop better relations, to progress. Also, at the political level, I would say that these moves from Belgrade have confirmed that a broader process is in place and that Serbia too is entering a new stage of its own development, following the recent elections, which is undoubtedly good for Serbia and its citizens, while at the same time it is also good for the overall process of “completion of peace” in this part of Europe. This path is still a long and demanding one, but it is important to move ahead and continuously and perseveringly maintain this positive trend.

SOUTHEAST EUROPE AS SPACE FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION

The Mediterranean Union enlarged last week-end. How do you view this parallel process in relation to the countries of this region?

The fact is that the Barcelona Process, as a foundation for the Union for the Mediterranean, has somehow come into a halt after almost fifteen years. The challenges that lie ahead of Europe from its southern shores are ever increasing ones, ranging from economy, refugees, to terrorism. In this aspect, the Southeast European countries also have huge space for strengthening of their economic cooperation with other regions.