



Regional Cooperation Council

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

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**„Regional Development in South East Europe: Challenges,
Opportunities and Prospects“**

Address by RCC Secretary General Hido Biscevic

**„Long-term stability prospects and prerequisites in the Western
Balkans“**

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies.

It is indeed a pleasure to be given the opportunity to participate at this honourable forum and share, with such a distinguished audience, some observations on the current state of play in South East Europe, and in the Western Balkans in particular, from the standpoint of the Regional Cooperation Council.

Allow me to start by posing a question – what precisely do we have in mind when speaking about long-term stability of this part of Europe.

To me, the answer is simple – it would imply irreversible geopolitical stability and democratic uniformity with the European values and standards.

Do we have these two principles embedded throughout the entire region by now. Unfortunately, the answer is also very simple - no. Peace

is still not completed, security is still not fully ensured, stability architecture is still being questioned, self-sustainability of regional cooperation is still not fully in place and uniformity with the European standards and values is still not fully embraced.

What are, then, prerequisites for attaining long-term stability in line with these two fundamental principles?

Let me try to answer this question by starting from the current landscape and progress achieved so far and then try to broaden the perspectives.

At the moment, the region is standing only a few days away from the assessments and recommendations of the European Commission on the status of accession of the aspiring countries and only little bit over two months away from the decisions of the European Council.

I dare say that these decisions will have a profound long-term and strategically critical impact on our part of Europe, in a way that may well influence not only the future political developments in the region, but also the geopolitical stability of this part of Europe.

Why and how?

First, the success of Croatia and its full EU membership ensured by now, together with its NATO membership, is expanding the zone of Euro-Atlantic peace, stability and security thus adding to the geopolitical stability and uniformity with the European standards.

Indeed, the Euro-Atlantic zone is encircling the Western Balkans by now.

This process is critically important against the backdrop of uncertainties and unpredictabilities in the rest of the region, with many

residual and unresolved issues that will, no doubt, to a different degree influence also the forthcoming EU and NATO decisions on the aspiring countries, from Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro.

And this is what makes the forthcoming European Commission's Report and December EU Councils decisions so strategically important.

And this is also why I strongly believe that the continuation of the enlargement policy, based on a clear strategic vision and geopolitical interest of the Euro-Atlantic community, translated into a concrete progress by the aspiring countries due to their individual merits, would ensure that the overall positive dynamics in the region over the last period is sustained and supported.

This would definitely benefit the safeguarding of a long-standing peace and stability of our part of Europe.

On the other hand, protraction and prolongation may bring in different, certainly disturbing scenarios, in particular against the background of unresolved issues and harsh social effects caused by the current economic crisis.

The choice may not be an easy one, but it is a simple one - it is either the persistent enlargement and inclusion or frustrative status quo and exclusion.

It is about the enlargement in South East Europe as an investment into security of Europe or allowing for a strategic vacuum in the region and giving-in to the undercurrent notions even tempted still to question current security and stability architecture in this corner of Europe.

By way of blunt illustration, there are two types of drums in the Balkan - with any sign of absence or silencing down of the European

drum, the other one, the one whose beat we have heard across the region in the past, may become fashionable again. It is hard not to see similar patterns and mindsets behind the latest developments in Kosovo, football hooliganism from Banja Luka to Mostar and Sarajevo or absence of agreement on the formation of government in Bosnia-Herzegovina. All these phenomena need to be read as a testing policies. They are, in essence, political messages of possible prolonged troubles, disturbances and instabilities.

Thus, the enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic integrations remains the most powerful tool to avoid potentials of destabilizing the region again and to avoid protracted geostrategic vacuum in this part of Europe.

Again, this is why the EU is coming to a point when its decisions will have a tremendous impact on the future of this region and beyond.

This is where I arrive at my second point. The one about greater self-responsibility by political classes in the region to ensure that long-term vision of peace, stability and Euro-Atlantic membership is not compromised by short-term interests, be it party-politics, parliamentary elections, crisis-driven populism or nationalistic „over the border blame-game“.

The expectation of each and every individual regarding the EU and NATO membership should be complemented by urgent resolution of the remaining open and residual issues between each and every aspiring country. Anything else is, simply, a costly and deceiving paradox, as the Western Balkans leaders simply do not enjoy the luxury of time - consolidation of durable peace, that would allow for a much needed economic and social development, and Euro-Atlantic membership, that would allow geopolitical stability of the region within the EU-NATO

environment, needs to be sustained and ensured by the resolution of these issues.

In a nutshell, it is about vision, not about political survival.

And it seems to me that there is no need of translating these notions into concrete issues of self-sustainability of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Kosovo impact or Macedonia's name dispute or any other open issues in the region. The negative impact that a stalemate has on the foreign policy priorities due to domestic constraints is already obvious and costly too. The impact of frustrating the neighbours whilst balancing between foreign policy priorities is also obvious, and in a long run detrimental too.

Thus, from whatever angle one tries to analyse the long-term stability prerequisites for the region it boils down to strategic necessity to ensure complementarity between the enlargement policy and resolution of the remaining issues.

This, in my mind, is the only charger that can ensure that the Western Balkans, after Croatia's advancement, is not left in the strategic vacuum that may be tempting for renewal of the Balkans' unfortunate history of rivalry instead of coexistence, confrontations instead of cooperation, history of being, again, either a „powder keg“ or the „trump card“ in a broader geostrategic power play.

From a broader historical perspective, not to have a long-standing and durable geopolitical stability in the region *twenty years* (!) after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and not to have this corner of Europe embraced within the Euro-Atlantic integrations *twenty years* (!) after the fall of the Berlin Wall, would be worrisome if not a disastrous lesson.

Finally, my third point.

There are also other prerequisites necessary to ensure that the entire region moves beyond the bellicose mentality and unfinished transition into the realm of geopolitical stability and democratic uniformity with the EU.

Foremost, the need for a deep transformation of the social patterns and paradigms of political culture in the region – it is hard to conceive durable stability and cooperation whilst national identity stereotypes are being perpetuated and pushed against each other, be it for domestic political interests, media commercial profits or any other short-term concept. This change towards the irreversibility of rapprochement and reconciliation would call for a far more comprehensive approach and input by all segments of societies across the region, not only political classes – it is commendable to see Presidents and Prime Ministers meet and talk about the reconciliation and cooperation, but is also regrettable to see how non-responsive their own parliaments or media tend to be later on, thus adding to the isolationist policies or perpetuation of mutually hostile attitudes.

Another crucial prerequisite, in line with the uniformity of standards of the EU, is the notion of good governance and functional democratic institutions. This goes far beyond the *Acquis communitaires*, far beyond the negotiating chapters, far beyond the urgency of fighting all remnants of the previous system and legacies of the war period – including, of course, organized crime and corruption. It touches upon the very trust of the general public in the functionality of the system, from the political decision making process to the effectiveness of the administrations.

At the same time, not everything depends on politics.

A long-term and irreversible stability of the region will also very much depend on economic development. Aspirations towards the EU membership need to be complemented by the strategic integration of the region into the broader European economic area, including in particular energy transportation routes, infrastructure and transportation. And it is precisely in these sectors that countries of the region share similar long-standing needs and common under-development.

The long term-stability will also very much depend on the ability and readiness of SEE countries to adopt a regional recovery and development master plan.

Functional and sectorial cooperation around large-scale trans-regional infrastructural, transportation and similar projects may not only be the most effective answers to the current harsh effects of the economic crisis and lack of direct foreign investment, but may also provide an ameliorating political and social environment in the light of possible frustrations over the EU enlargement time-frames.

And, last but not least, durable stability of the region integrated in the Euro-Atlantic framework – provided that the strategic vacuum scenario is avoided by the timely complementarity of the EU enlargement and the resolution of the remaining issues – will surely very much depend on the level of self-sustainability of the regional cooperation.

Whilst in this area we are moving forward, the in and out-of-the-region support, either in the region is still very much dependant on international terms of direct responsibility for the security and stability (Kosovo case), either in terms of political patronage (Bosnia-Herzegovina case), either in terms of international community's facilitation role in many disputes across the region. Thus, gradual

enhancement of the regional self-responsibility for peace and security in this part of Europe and full attainment of the self-sustainable regional cooperation will also be a measure of region's advancement towards the long-term durable stability.

Thank you for your attention.