



The outcome of the Presidential Elections in Serbia, scheduled to be held on April 2, is considered crucial for the future of the country's international commitments, as well as for its role in the Balkans. The situation in the region remains worrying, following the referendum in the Republic of Srpska, the elections in Montenegro and the latest developments in Macedonia .

Serbia's Foreign Affairs Minister Ivica Dačić, who is also the leader of the country's Socialist Party, granted an exclusive interview to New Europe. He explained the meaning of the elections, as well as the orientations of Serbia.

New Europe: Mr. Minister, Serbia is once again in the election process, facing the Presidential election. What do you think seems to be the key word for this election?

A. Stability. Without any doubt. I consider it to be the key word not only for these elections, but for the future of Serbia and the entire region. Every progress made in economic, social and political reforms, every fresh step towards EU integration has to do with this word. To put it simply, if there is stability, if it is ensured and achieved – all the work goals ahead of us will be attainable.

Otherwise, in the absence of stability, Serbia will find itself once again in the gloom, perhaps also descend into conflict, the entire process will be postponed indefinitely, and the region will follow suit. This is what makes the elections so highly important. This time the election will mean deciding on our future, on our relations with the world and the region, the pace of our EU accession, and our performance in further pursuing the reforms.

I firmly believe that Serbia's response will be unambiguous, that an overwhelming majority will be in favour of stability and a forward-looking approach for the country and themselves. We are tired of seeing anything else. We have tried other options, and neither we nor anyone else were pleased.

NE: How big is the need for securing stability affected by the developments in the region?

A. Immensely, but in terms of turbulences on the international and European political scene, and what we in Serbia refer to as "common sense" – the assumption from which we started our comprehensive reforms some years ago. For the first time in modern history, this has made us look at politics and relations with others rationally, without being overemotional, and endeavour to define our priorities and interests based on these rational premises.

We concluded that we needed a modern successful Serbia with a strong economy, and that it was important for Serbia to have friends worldwide in order to be able to attract investors... Consequently, the word "stability" figured as a prerequisite for it all. Without stability there can be no development.

Furthermore, an unstable environment is not conducive to reforms which are a condition sine qua non for economic recovery of the country which has been totally devastated in the economic sector.

NE: Your answer made little mention to the situation in your region. Does this mean that it now concerns you less?

A. Of course not. This only means that Serbia has learnt its lesson very well, and that it does not believe in seeking or insisting on justice anywhere beyond its borders.

We wish to cooperate with, and provide assistance to, everyone in the region, but that is not possible and we are unwilling to address issues for other parties. We are aware that Serbia is significantly affected by all developments in surrounding areas, but we know very well that any step taken on our part, though well intended, could be misinterpreted, and thus generate a new wave of instability.

This was best reflected in our attitude towards each and every disturbing situation in the region, from the referendum in the Republic of Srpska, elections in Montenegro, to the latest developments in Macedonia. For the first time in more than 25 years, Serbia was not accused by anyone, anywhere, for interference in the internal affairs of other countries. On the other hand, this honest attitude has enabled us to clearly underline our interests and draw attention, quite overtly, to all developments in the region that are detrimental – not to Serbia, but to the region in particular.

We have thus, rightly, warded off the stigma of great Serbian nationalism and been able to raise our voice against the resurgence of Ustashi and fascist sentiments in Croatia, as well as to win support at a juncture when Croatia attempted to block the opening of some chapters in our accession negotiations with the EU. In other words, all our endeavours, specifically those aimed at maintaining stability and conducting dialogue in the region and our commitment to peaceful settlement of all outstanding issues, made it possible for our voice to regain leverage. It brought us back respect and equality, so important in international relations.

NE: You seem to be quite optimistic when speaking about the region. On the other hand, there remains a plethora of contentious issues in the dialogue with Kosovo; Bosnia and Herzegovina has filed an application to review the ICJ judgment in the alleged genocide

case against Serbia; a number of Serbian nationals were arrested on charges of preparing a coup and assassination of former Prime Minister Djukanovic; you almost threatened Macedonia with the possibility of turning to its appellation as FYROM, the rhetoric used with Croatia frequently goes way beyond what is customary in diplomatic communication... Do you truly believe that this can be resolved?

A. When you are sitting on a powder keg, which is what the Balkans is, and when you have nowhere else to go, then there are only two options before you.

One is to set it on fire and burn in flames together with all others, and the other is to solve all outstanding issues and potential disputes, in a timely manner. And we clearly chose the second option.

We have been working on that option in such a way as to have become, I venture to say, the most peace-loving country in the region, and undoubtedly the most stable one, which enables us – and I emphasise once again – both to look after our own interests, as well as to steadfastly support all of our undertakings. I am aware that all you have referred to may seem "terrible" to some, The Guardian, for example, but to us it is nothing but a reality that we must deal with, and make an effort to sort out. And we have been doing that ever since 2012, but certainly without softening our stand where this is not possible. We have demonstrated this in the very case of Kosovo by trying to, in talks, come up with a model that would ensure for everyone in Kosovo, both Albanians and Serbs, a normal life, jobs, security and safety, at the same time never bringing into question our keypoint of departure, i.e. that we will never ever recognise Kosovo.

All else is acceptable to us, and we have made a number of compromises so that people in Kosovo could have a peaceful and normal existence, that they are not deprived of anything, and I believe that today no one expects us to make a "U turn" and recognise an illegal entity. We approach everyone else in the region in the same manner, frequently avoiding to use the common tools all states resort to when their national interests are at stake. You mentioned Macedonia, because of which, or because of its name to be exact, our relations with Greece have deteriorated considerably, only to witness it voting in favour of Kosovo's membership in the EU, disregarding our plea not to. How shall I put it? If someone had done this to another state, the ensuing response would have been brutal and immediate, I think so.

Yet we haven't done anything brutal by any means, other than bringing up and giving serious consideration to the possibility of beginning to apply the same standards to others, Macedonia included, they have been applying to us. The same goes to Montenegro. If you don't want to help us, because of your own interests, why would we want to help you? And at that, the assistance we have unconditionally extended is by no means to be sneezed at.

The latest developments in Montenegro, when we selflessly helped them in a very delicate situation for them, demonstrate my point best. More delicate moments are yet to come in the Balkans, and everyone should be aware that they will certainly need Serbia's help. And they should treat our country accordingly.

Anything else, such as the attempt to reactivate Bosnia and Herzegovina's genocide claim, are

unnecessary steps to steer Serbia and the region further away from a reasonable solution, which invariably leads to consequences not for Serbia, but for those making such irrational moves.

The reason for this being that Serbia is a welcome and needed friend today and because it has made a name for itself again, having a voice of its own. The lack of support by certain politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the initiative I mentioned earlier is the best illustration of this.

NE: A word often used when speaking of Serbia is "intransigence". This is how you are seen as far as Kosovo, sanctions against Russia etc. Are you sure this is good for the country?

A.If what you are saying were entirely true, it would not be good, surely. However, you forget that there was no "intransigence" whatsoever on Serbia's part when it came to a number of issues with Kosovo and any other stakeholder in the region, that we haven't been "unyielding" on refugees, combating terrorism... Serbia has become a truly honest player in international relations, a country meeting its commitments, ready to make a full contribution and offer help regarding crucial issues, a country that is quick to respond and precise, meticulously working on the tasks set before it, and committed to peace... Such a country has every right to protect its interests, a right respected by all. Today, this is no longer doubted by anyone. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that, when it comes to trade with Russia, Serbia is certainly one of its minor partners in Europe. Gas consumption in Moscow is higher than that of Serbia as a whole, and I think that our entire produce wouldn't be enough for a larger marketplace in Russia.

In this context, it is quite ridiculous to insist that we impose sanctions on Russia, particularly when it's, for example, known that Mercedes is about to open a plant in Russia, that Volkswagen asked for and was granted assistance from Putin himself, that the volume of trade with Russia of both the US and Europe has been increasing every day...All of this considered, why would anyone be seriously bothered by our principle of not being hostile to anyone, and particularly not to our ages-long friends.

Likewise, why would Serbia, at a point when it has met all its Brussels commitments, be asked to violate another of its principles and agree that a part of its territory be separated from it by force? How could they expect us to recognise it simultaneously when demanding Russia to return Crimea? This is quite awkward for those making such demands.

NE: One last question, Europe is facing numerous challenges, possible new "Brexit", and is threatened by the refugees and huge differences between big and small players. Are you in a rush to join?

A.I once said that we'd better join this Europe first, as we can easily leave it later on. All kidding aside, European integration was from day one important to us because of Serbia in the first place, and not Europe. This is a way for us to promote our society, raise it to a higher level, adopt new standards and improve it. We need Europe here, in Serbia.

We have got no identity issues or problems with a sense of belonging. We are a European

people, we are geographically situated there, and the history and blood spilt in the two world wars we share with Europe, as our sacrifice is built into its foundations.

In other words, when exactly this will be formalised by the very act of joining the Union is not a matter of priority for us. What is more important is that Serbia becomes, by all standards, including legislative and economic, a true European state – stable, successful and secure. It is important to us to be an equal partner and not a kind of European beggar, as well as to bring a new quality and an added value to the community in the future. This is a course we have embarked on in the belief that it would also benefit Europe itself.