

ROUND TABLE
"The Issue of European Integration in the Light of the Ukrainian Crisis"
Centre for Socio-Political Research of the Republic of Srpska
September, 2022

"The Ukrainian Crisis, European Integration and the End of the Western Domination of the International Order"

Obrad Kesic

Director of the Republika Srpska Office for Cooperation, Trade and Investment in Washington, D.C.

On the topic of European integration in the light of the Ukrainian crisis, I would like to give a broader view, but also some perspective from America on current events.

For the current administration and the establishment in America, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the biggest and most important success of this administration is that they managed to build resolve and unity in NATO and to, in a way, strengthen American influence in Europe to the extent that, in essence, Europe no longer has its own security policy, but is completely linked to American priorities and goals. This is why the political elite are congratulating this administration, and in the political establishment, within which there is rarely a consensus lately, between the Democrats and the Republicans in the political establishment, there is a consensus on the role of America: it is not only a good thing that this administration has intervened so violently in the war and supports Ukraine so decisively, but thinks that this issue is above all issues regarding American national and national security interests and that this policy and this support must be continued at any cost. Now we have an interesting situation and I think that this is definitely the end of the Western domination of the international order, a new historical moment. That end was approaching and a natural process of the weakening of the West and the influence of the West had been in sight for a long time. But just deciding on two key issues, two major crises: the corona and the pandemic on the one hand, and now the war in Ukraine, completely accelerated that process and somehow guaranteed the end of Western domination as an outcome. Now we can talk about what it means for this topic of ours.

For the issue of European integration, the fact that we have a major crisis in the West is very significant at the moment. This crisis is not only a crisis in the sphere of society, where societies in the West are deeply divided. Those societies, from America to Europe, are deeply divided for many reasons, and this division is not something that has arisen because of the war in Ukraine, but it is something that is now, because of economic and energy crises, is experiencing a, shall we say, new momentum. That momentum threatens a wider destabilization of the government, not only in Europe and individual European countries, but also in America. How does it threaten? It threatens because we are entering a period of uncertainty. We are entering a period where everyone must admit that nothing guarantees the certainty that it will end in a way that suits them best and protects their interests: state, national, and economic interests in every respect. Because of this and because of this uncertainty, we have four key obstacles on the way to the enlargement of the European Union.

The first obstacle: I would say that there is no consensus. Even during the previous situation before the war in Ukraine, and even now, there is absolutely no agreement on the issue of enlargement and

there is no agreement on the question of what are the criteria for it. The criteria have already been changed several times, the approaches to the European Union are changing to such an extent that it is completely questioned whether there are any clear criteria for joining the European Union. This can be seen from the decisions for Ukraine and Moldova; they absolutely violated all those stories about values, about conditions that must be met. It is clearly seen that the path of the European Union, built on a system of values, is much weakened. We can talk about the fact that the lack of consensus is not only a question of the path for the enlargement of the European Union, but it also exists around other key issues in the European Union, such as the green transition in terms of energy. You know very well that for the European Union, the priority for economic development and for the expansion of European economies was the complete abolition of the so-called dirty energy sources and the effort to completely introduce new, as they call them, clean energy sources. In this context, we can talk about the attitude of the political elites who still insist that it is achievable when we have this crisis because of Ukraine and the sanctions that have been introduced, which lead countries like Germany to return to coal in order to provide enough electricity, as about the absurdity. Let's take an example from America: in California, we have a decision made to abolish all vehicles that use gasoline and diesel and that only cars that use electricity will be purchased and registered. Now, what's the problem? The problem is that after 24 hours, the state, i.e. the government in California announces that it will ask citizens not to use electricity from 4 o'clock in the afternoon to 10 o'clock in the evening. This means that they are already introducing restrictions. This is not related to each other, but it shows that the absurdity is that the Western political elites do not understand that such measures cannot be taken during a state of emergency and an emergency situation, that is, during a crisis when the issue of energy is a fundamental issue for the development of the economy and for the stability of society.

Another issue that could be cited as an obstacle is the divisions in all Western societies and the political crisis, which is a serious political crisis, prepared in America. I would say that it is a political crisis that is present in all of Europe, and it is connected to two things: the elite and the political establishment have lost the belief that their political system is superior and the best. The idea that liberal democracy is the only alternative is a thing of the past, because many believed that they had reached that very important moment in history and that liberal democracy remained the only alternative for all countries. They built their belief on that because the unipolar moment and the strength of America guaranteed that the country had to adapt and build such a political system. And now, which is very important, we see that the political establishment no longer has that strong belief in the superiority of that system. We talk more and more often about the war in Ukraine, especially we hear those rumours in America, as a war that is not a war between Russia and Ukraine, it is a war between autocracy and democracy, with the fact that the democratic West must not lose that war because that would mean that the order they built is gone. Some already admit and recognize it: Orbán, Tony Blair... They are already talking about the fact that the West has lost its dominance over the world order and that it cannot return, but they can only upgrade to some new position that can guarantee interest of the West. Thus, we can state that the elites have lost confidence in their own political system, in their own economy. In America, this was seen during the crisis of 2008, when the state had to intervene and said that there were some big companies that were too big to fail. That means the idea that the market fixes everything, every economic flaw, no longer exists among those who decide, who make state policy... They no longer believe in it and without the state there is no survival for the largest financial systems and the largest companies in the West. Now the people themselves have also lost their belief that the Western system as a political system and an economic system is the best. How do

we notice this? We notice this through the growth trend of populist parties, populist politicians, through the victory of outsiders in the elections, from Donald Trump to, shall we say, populist ones in Europe... It is a wave that creates the feeling that there is an alternative for these elites (and this is the third factor of the obstacle), which are the worst political elites, the intellectual elites of the West in the last hundred years. I can say this clearly because they show that they are not up to the task of dealing with all these challenges; that they have a problem because they are no longer in touch with reality, with ordinary people. When Annalena Bearbock says "I am not interested in what the citizens, what the voters think about our policy of supporting Ukraine!" she is saying honestly what most of the political elite in the West believe: "What kind of voters? We know best! We should not represent the electoral will of the voters who voted for us, but what is best for them, even though they are not aware that it is the best for them." She is not alone in this opinion. We had a situation in America when the Senate was discussing the increase in fuel prices, where Senator Stabenow from Michigan said: "I bought a new electric car, and let me tell you, I was enjoying it, smiling as I passed the gas station." Now this indicates that there is no connection with the reality that every citizen does not have 70,000 dollars to buy an electric car and that she does not have a sense of understanding for ordinary people who depend on their work to earn bread for their family. We have such examples not only in Europe and America, but we also often see in these areas that politicians sometimes lose touch with reality and with ordinary people and that they somehow expect to convince ordinary people that they have to support a policy because there is no alternative. That's how it was until recently, that's how people looked at the whole situation here: "How can we small ones oppose the will of a great power like America? How can we oppose the European Union?"

And, finally, as the fourth obstacle, there is this economic recession and the energy crisis. The hardest blow to the European Union and the idea of the superiority of the European Union, in terms of the organization of society, states, state politics and economy, was the corona virus. What happened during the Great Panic showed that each country was fighting for its own interests. There was no solidarity. Don't forget one scene in Italy. Who sent aid at the very beginning of that crisis? These were Cuba, Russia and China. Even a plane from Serbia was sent at that moment, if you remember. So, those talk about solidarity, about the common, about the unique interest of protection through the community - that was thrown out the window. Likewise, we are having a heated argument now. There is this facade, which the Americans celebrate, that they managed to unite the Western world through NATO and through cooperation with the European Union, but behind that there are deep divisions, which cannot be solved easily. All this creates mistrust between the US and the European Union over the issue of the European Union and enlargement. For a long time, the Americans were the main proponents of enlargement. They often entered into discussions in various international forums when it came to enlargement and how soon it should be started. It still exists. If you look at the statements, for example, of Mr Escobar or his colleagues in the American administration, then you see that the Americans are impatient, that they think that Europe is making a big mistake because it has brought the process almost completely to an end, and that there is no clear path for countries that are in a waiting position in the Western Balkans. It not only creates mistrust, a factor of mistrust, but it creates a situation where I do not believe that what has succeeded in the short term, which is to build this facade of unity, is a future in the relations between America and the European Union. I also think that the future will essentially be defined by how the Western world finds itself losing dominance in the international order. I am not talking about this collapse of Western dominance as something that promises something better. I have to admit that I don't know that. I am not talking about the fact that

the overall situation will be favourable for small countries like Serbia, like the Republic of Srpska. But I think we have to recognize this moment and now start building a position that opens up the possibility for us to manage under the most difficult circumstances. As for the Republic of Srpska, I think that it will be much easier for us to find our way in the new order than some others in this area. First, we have political parties, political leaders, not only in Sarajevo but in many other capital cities, who completely tied to the West, not only the future of their own politics, but the future of the people and their countries. There is almost no dilemma - what the West wants, what the Americans want - they fulfil it. Sometimes they just try to manipulate the Americans, to bring them back to deal more with us, but basically their whole policy is related to the West. For them, this moment is the most difficult, because there will no longer be any space or opportunity for the West to deal with their political agenda, as it did in earlier periods. So the Republic of Srpska, where there is scepticism, where there is a policy that largely shows that it is not completely dependent on Brussels or Washington, opens up a space where we could more easily navigate the new circumstances of this new world order. Second, the bureaucracy of the European Union makes our way easier. When they deny economic programs and support for various projects in the Republic of Srpska, they force us to adapt, to look for other sources; to build better and stronger relations with alternative centres of funds and means, thus forcing us not to be passive, but to actively build stronger relations, not only with Russia, with China, but also with other BRICS members. I expect very soon, after these elections, that we will see the foreign policy of the Republic of Srpska and its economic interest directed towards India as well, where there are great opportunities for better and stronger cooperation. And, finally, the Republic of Srpska enjoys a stability that many countries do not enjoy: it has energy stability, there will be no increase in prices here until the end of the year and there is enough food. And these are the basic issues that determine social peace in Western Europe, but also in America. I would end by saying that when we look at this situation in the context of European integration, we must be pessimistic in the context of the possibility that Europe will somehow stand on its own feet and build its own unified policy and give a new priority to enlargement. We must be realistic that for us, although nothing promises that it will happen soon or that it will happen at all, the situation is not so bleak, if we know how to use this opportunity now, to build a much stronger position, much stronger relations with other sources finance, other sources of key factors for stability and for economic survival under the most difficult conditions.