



On the eve of assuming his capacity as Chairperson-in-Office of OSCE, the world's largest security organization, Head of diplomacy and First Deputy Prime Minister Ivica Dacic, in an exclusive interview granted to "Danas" weekly's editor-in-chief Zoran Panovic, among other things, said that after a long period of political exile Serbia had an opportunity to return to the global arena as a reputable partner. In his words, this opportunity, among other reasons, opened up due to the present-day Serbia not being the very focus of the global crisis, unlike many times before over the past 100 years.

This week Serbia assumes the OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office. What does this mean for us? Is it a problem, an opportunity or a challenge?

- I would say all of these combined. We are assuming chairmanship of the world's largest security organization, numbering 57 participating States and stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok, at a time when the world has been in a state of some kind of a concealed, yet ongoing war. From the Middle East, Ukraine to the heart of Europe, there are conflicts, wars of differing scale, terrorism, civilian victims and an increasingly noticeable lack of ability of the existing mechanisms and tools to prevent it all from happening. Furthermore, the most prominent roles related to those conflicts are played by the world's major powers, which often pose the question of support as a kind of ultimatum: you're either with us or against us. Keep in mind that we are a small country, largely dependent on both sides, willing to have good relations with either, a country embarking on a difficult and untrodden European path, and we don't expect their positions in this regard to change dramatically due to us chairing the OSCE. On the contrary, I believe that the expectations from us by all parties, however different they may be, would only continue to grow. This is where the challenge before us lies. How to deal with this while avoiding to threaten relations and fulfilling all the expectations? Nevertheless, this is at the same time an opportunity, because Serbia, a country having been ostracized by the international community for years, now has a chance by acting wisely to improve its authority and position in the international community. I personally believe that the next year, following the completion of the Chairmanship, may see Serbia as a country winning back the reputation and respect on a par with those of Yugoslavia in 1975, when today's OSCE, then CSCE, was

established, where our once country had played a major role.

Now that you have mentioned Helsinki, it appears that today's Serbia attempts to assume the same position Tito's Yugoslavia had. To admire the Russians and see them as an opportunity, at the same time being a bit scared of them and therefore, among other reasons, striving to find its place in the Western world, but to also retain a neutral position in the process. A difficult task, considering that the world has changed significantly over the past forty years. To what degree are we aware of this?

- I believe that the awareness of the new, changed world that you speak of is what made most impact on today's foreign policy of Serbia. And the current administration, the Governments formed by the SNS and us, was the first to acknowledge the reality of this new order and started to act accordingly. This is why we initiated the talks with Kosovo, this is the reason why we managed to start the EU accession process, this is why we embarked on the internal reform process that is bringing us closer to the world we strive to be a part of, and finally, this is why we have managed to restore, to a large degree, the reputation and respect of partners from the international community that we once enjoyed. And please, let's focus on that particular word before going on further. Serbia is, finally, a partner. And, at that, a partner whose positions are respected and understood. This, and not some attempts at emulating Tito, is what has enabled us to stay outside of this open conflict, as long as we can. At the end of the day, this is our interest we have no reason to conceal. As they say: it matters not whether the grass is trodden by fighting or mating elephants, because it suffers anyway. So, we don't want to be that grass. What we want to be, and what we actually are, a partner able to say – would you mind moving a bit and making some space for us, so we don't get hurt in whatever you're doing elsewhere. This is our main motivation and the reasoning behind our current foreign policy, one that will always respect the interests of others, but will never forget interests of our own – nor will it hide them. Furthermore, if one takes into account that we are at long last not being seen as the main culprit for what has been going on in the world, which was rarely the case in the past 100 years, isn't it only natural, and legitimate as well, to seize such an opportunity? Much like the fact demonstrating clearly that Serbia is the country which has, in previous years, been at the very forefront of the efforts aimed at resolving all issues in the Balkans through dialogue, compromise and non-violent methods. Or putting it another way, there is no neo-Titoism of any kind whatsoever, but we are merely playing the hand we were dealt. And we are under no illusion entertained by some of our predecessors that we were dealt a different hand than we expected, or that the next shuffle will bring us just the cards we need. No, to put it simply, we are just being realistic and nothing more.

Could one say that Serbia has taken advantage of its position in the international arena, and frequently its success, to cover up its shortcomings internally?

- If Serbia weren't the state which has already embarked on serious reforms, such question could have made sense. Considering that it is and that it has been, such question may be largely interpreted in the context of malevolence that is, at least the way I see it, deeply-rooted in those who justified their remaining in power for years by promises that Serbia would gain the kind of international position it actually has today, and who upon having failed to deliver on these promises and being defeated at the ballot-box, find their only satisfaction in openly

expressing animosity towards the fact that what was their dream has been made true by none other than Vucic and myself. Such frustration is the root cause of the majority of conspiracy theories they keep making up, having nothing better to do, including those you have just mentioned. At the same time, they disregard that none of this was accidental, and that we don't pursue our international policy guided by the motivation they had – to maintain an image – yet we are guided instead by our awareness of this position's influence on our main focus, namely the economy. So, everything we do, we do it for Serbia, to make it better suited for investors, to enable foreign capital to flow in, and create more jobs. Promotion of the reputation and position of a country in the international community correlates directly with its economic growth. Who would want to invest in a country with disputable and suspicious reputation? On the other hand, exactly what we are working on today in Serbia, namely reforms, combating corruption, initiatives aiming for better connectivity with neighbours, fostering a more favourable business environment – all of this is certainly a way to promote our status worldwide, bringing us closer to our main objective which is to create a well-governed European state, to our own benefit and not to the benefit of others. Trust me, the former is the precondition for the latter. Therefore, I believe that those who disapprove of this would have to come up with a different objection.

The economy that you have mentioned may often also be a weapon in the hands of major stakeholders. Therefore, an idea that is certainly not a conspiracy theory, one fearing that the very OSCE Chairmanship and in particular the neutrality you aspire to, would put us in a position of becoming a blackmailed and then crushed international puppet state. Aren't you afraid of such an outcome? What is the worst case scenario that you can think of?

- A man with a biography and experience like mine cannot think of any additional worst case scenarios. I have experienced them all. And survived. So has Serbia. The bombing, the sanctions, being excommunicated from the international community and blacklisted in the U.S. and Europe. We have been through it all. We would have to be, once again, at odds with the whole world for something like that to happen. Since we have crossed out conflict of any kind as a way and means, and seeing that we are a state of solutions and dialogue, as stated in the biography that we have managed to re-write, there is no danger of worst case scenarios. The real danger comes from the pressures we may be exposed to. Our friends, and when I say friends I mean Europe and the U.S. as well as Russia, are major stakeholders and have major opportunities to offer. The former have investments and our European path is in their hands and the latter have energy sources that we most certainly depend on. So, if you are asking me whether it is possible that we be deprived of some of that as a result of demands to align placed upon us, the answer is – yes. However, I am confident that whether this would happen or not primarily depends on the skilfulness we will show in our engagement. Our current position demonstrates that we are not mistaken in this basic assumption. We are not being deprived of anything and for this we have to thank in the first place our insistence on playing with open cards. We are misleading no one, telling everyone exactly what we think and what it is that we want and, at least thus far, such position of ours has been met with respect by all parties. We have openly told the Russians that EU membership is our key goal, we have told Europe and the U.S. that sanctions against Russia are most certainly not one of our goals, and we have found what we have been looking for – a respect for our position. To be completely honest with you, this position also includes the fact that, as we progress towards the final goal that is the

EU, we will have to increasingly align our foreign policy with the one of the EU. And since we intend to continue to act in such a manner and be completely frank, and since our role as OSCE Chair allows us to insist on dialogue and to promote international principles based on peaceful means and dialogue in the first place, I firmly believe that we don't have to ponder any worst case scenarios. Why wouldn't we finally begin thinking some "happy thoughts", and not nightmarish ones and, of course, work on them coming to fruition.

The OSCE was brought into disrepute in our region, and so did we with it. Today, while SPS members applauding Milosevic at the last party congress still reverberates in your ears, and as you recall his refusal of OSCE presence back in the day, it is no other than yourself as its Chairperson that has to address regional issues as well. And the region includes Bosnia, the Republic of Srpska, Albania, Kosovo. Disputes, and serious ones at that. What do you expect? Resistance because of the past, or a new result, a success? And how will you do it?

- The past, and the fact that I had the opportunity to be in close proximity to the key actors is helpful to me. I am aware of contexts and of how they had made mistakes. And I have no problem saying this today. What I feel good about is that my party, which still includes those who sentimentally applaud to the mention of Milosevic's name, remembering the period when the SPS had absolute power, and who today, nevertheless, almost unanimously elected as its leader a person who had been the first to distance the party from Milosevic and who had also been the first to speak about his mistakes. I could say that SPS members at the Congress applauded the past, which is understandable to me, but they voted for the future that I am glad they did, which encourages me to look forward into the future. A developed Western Balkans free from conflicts is that future. We have already made great strides towards that goal. Wherever I go in the region, either myself or representatives of Serbia, they are recognized as arriving with the best of intentions, sharing the interests of the neighbours, for our major interest indeed is a stable neighbourhood, as a foundation required for any progress to be made, and which is only possible if we treat our neighbours with attention. We have initiated a number of various forms of cooperation in the past years as well, we insist on joint projects and investments, offer joint ventures to investors, and we have in no way brought into question the key orientation of Serbia – peace in the Balkans. We endeavour to continue in this manner this year as well, in our capacity as OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office, and the Balkans, the region, will certainly be among our priorities. I can say without hesitation that this is our engine taking us to Europe, an exercise proving that we are a responsible and competent nation, able to provide democratic solutions based on civilized values, forward-looking solutions for the future. This is an opportunity we certainly won't miss.

And this is regardless of our strained relations with, for example, Albania? We have just made a demarche to them. How much does this conform to what you have just said?

- Fully, since none of what we are doing has disregarded, nor will it disregard, the dignity and interests of our country. We haven't and we won't be doing anything that could potentially be detrimental to our relations with countries in the region, including Albania. Also, it wasn't a flag of a "Greater Serbia" that was hoisted on the residence of the Serbian Prime Minister, but instead the flag of Greater Albania on the residence of the Albanian Prime Minister. We reacted

to that, and we always will. This, however, does not prevent us from welcoming properly that very Prime Minister, having talks and, what is even more important, reaching agreements on various forms of cooperation, while continuing to propose, to him and to others, solutions based on mutual interest. We respect the others, but we expect them to respect us as well. As they say, we don't ask others for anything we wouldn't be willing to give ourselves. This is the policy we pursue in relations with all our neighbours. And this is what we will pursue while holding the OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office. We will, of course, expect to be appreciated, but extend appreciation to others as well. We won't seek to be liked, which had been one of the worst features of Serbian politics in the decades behind us, but instead propose working to the benefit of common interests. The market, investments, improved flows of capital and goods, new jobs throughout the region, projects that connect us. Furthermore, it is very important that we have made a distinction between these notions and daily politics' petty games, dictated by short-term interests. This is why we have reacted in accordance with common, civilized, democratic practices. To the flag of Greater Albania on their Prime Minister's residence we responded by a demarche, but we have continued our cooperation with him, neither putting a halt to it nor bringing it into question. The same was the case with regard to the statements by Croatian politicians, fueled by the elections there. We respond in a civilized manner, and move on further. We never stop being a partner, nor seeing them as one. I believe this is the only proper policy and we will continue to maintain it further.