

INTERVIEW WITH JOVAN KOVAČIĆ, CO-FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COMMUNITY EAST WEST BRIDGE

Within the project “Russian Political Science — Space for Dialogue” the editorial board of the journal “Russian political science” publishes the next scheduled interview with Jovan Kovačić, Co-Founder and President of the international research community East West Bridge.

The East West Bridge community, as a Serbian initiative, has gradually evolved into an internationally recognized movement for sustainable and positive social change around the world. Jovan is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Tripartite Commission and Chairman of the Serbian national group of the Tripartite Commission (hereinafter-TC). Jovan is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Trilateral Commission and Chairman of the Serbian National Group of the Trilateral Commission.

Jovan was born in Belgrade in 1953 and educated in British, Serbian and US schools, MA in communications and media management. Former international reporter, a communications expert and policy advisor. He worked for decades worldwide as a war correspondent for CNN, ABC, NPR, BBC and other major media. He ended his award-winning reporting career as a Reuter’s correspondent for ex-Yugoslavia covering the wars from Slovenia in 1991 to Kosovo in 1998.

In May 2010, on behalf of EWB, Jovan attended the Plenary Session of the Trilateral Commission in Dublin. It was the first such prestigious invitation by the Commission to an individual or organization from Serbia. He then attended all consecutive TC sessions. In 2012 he was tasked by the TC Executive Committee to set up a Serbian National Group by 2013. This done, the National Group was inaugurated at the Berlin TC Plenary Session in March, 2013. Jovan hosted the 38th European Session of the Trilateral Commission in Belgrade Oct 31 to Nov 2, 2014.

Jovan is also a member of several global foundations and think-tanks and lectures worldwide.



Russian Political Science (RPS): You are the President of East West Bridge. Please tell us about your organization. When and for what purpose was it created? What has already been done and what are you planning to do?

Jovan Kovačić: The organization was formed almost 10 years ago as a reaction to the emergence of some extreme groups in the region, while post-war wounds were still fresh or festering. The problem throughout history is that it is always a well-organized and very loud minority that leads or forces a silent and disorganized incoherent majority into a ca-

tastrophe. We wanted to give a speaking platform to those experts, intellectuals, professors, ambassadors or anyone else good at their job to say what they felt needed to be heard without party lines. To promote the quintessential ingredient in every societal development — the dialogue. To promote not simple tolerance but embark on a much more arduous road to urge and teach respect for differences, be they political, racial, ethnic, gender or religious. This is a must in the Balkan region that suffers from too much history and is home to almost all confessions and cultures, where East meets West, the

North meets South. It is needless to say in a must in order to allow the people to live there in stability, security and prosperity.

Within months, much to our surprise and thanks to hard work of the founding Fathers and core members, EWB became an international organization. Many foreign experts recognized its potential quickly, even without state or foreign funding or help of any kind. The number of young wishing to become EWB members is surprisingly large which tells us we are on the right track.

Today, EWB has hundreds of members from 60 countries worldwide, including prominent Russian and American intellectuals. EWB is organizing chapters where it needs to be done. The membership level exists, and EWB cooperates with some 30 leading think tanks and similar organizations in the West, East and Far East and Russia. With seven task forces reporting on politics, economy, crime, terrorism, education and health, sports and youth issues, it is also involved in major peace or de-escalation talks and post-conflict confidence and institution building. Today, EWB is welcomed in major conflict or problem zones as a bearer of unbiased word of wisdom, patience, understanding and moderation. Its reports are read in such august organizations like the Trilateral Commission, etc.

RPS: Dialogue between the West and the East is necessary, it is obvious. Moreover, East and West need each other. It would seem that the end of the Cold War brought many opportunities for a full-fledged dialogue and comprehensive cooperation. Why did it happen that today there are new barriers, new tensions? And what can modern intellectuals of different countries do to prevent the development of a new Cold War and a new arms race?

Jovan Kovačić: Like every sane person in the world, I completely agree there is a dire need for a dialogue. However, the race for profit, lack of policy and vision

as well as a sense of complacency after the West won the Cold War account for the missed opportunity for mankind to take a path in the right direction — peace, stability and development. The West succumbed to one of the worst maladies in politics — arrogance — and failed to heed the warning signs that new powers are emerging to inevitably alter the unilateral world order. The recovery of Russia, the rapid growth by China and other BRICS countries were simply ignored in the early stages and due to the lack of coherent policy, while the later response was inadequate. Throughout history a lack of vision and coherent longer-term policy were substituted by a search for a common enemy as a rallying cry for internal forces. The best illustration of that is the United Kingdom today: the failure of a smooth Brexit is being covered up by a witch hunt against Russia, to divert the attention from the huge failure of the political elite in Downing Street. In the same context, fractured politics in Washington DC has yielded a new Joe McCarthy, now called Robert Mueller, and Russia is once again promoted to the role of the Bad Guy.

In turn, some schools of thought would say that this also suited Mr Putin just fine. Because of the pressure he consolidated support, mustered internal powers to his cause and magnified his successes achieved under sanctions. Paradoxically, the Western attitude helped him consolidate power and increase national pride, like no other factor, and think expansion of influence. Syria is the best example of that.

On the other hand, but along the same vein, after the Cold War ended, NATO badly needed a powerful common enemy to justify its existence. This pretext also in turn served Moscow well.

Russia is very successfully breathing a new life into NATO, giving the North Atlantic Alliance a *raison d'être* to expand its influence in Eastern Europe, former CIA boss General David Petraeus was recently quoted as saying.

To the point: what could we really expect when some countries spend hundreds of billions a year on arms production? The root of the problem is the fact that a massive chunk of their economies is based on production of means of mass destruction. The producers do not want to see their wares stockpiled and gathering dust, they want them used so to perpetuate the cycle of production and profit, so they need wars and are willing to help organize them because peace and stability is an anathema for them.

If world intellectuals were to shed the fetters of national identity and step forwards as champions of planetary values. I am sure they would strongly condemn the fact that every day now 20,000 children from the age of one to five die from hunger while the same day countries spend five billion US\$ for armament. This state of affairs is obscene. I am not naïve to think this can happen overnight. But once the motion starts snowballing then we have a fighting chance to step away from the abyss. Or perhaps, God forbid, we need an Armageddon to come to our senses.

The problem is that most intellectuals are also polarized according to national borders, bar a few shining examples to the contrary.

Their activity is chiefly limited to perpetuating the political positions of their home countries. Very few dare question the policies lest they be branded traitors. On the contrary, many are not the solution but a part of the problem, by rubber-stamping the acts of their respective governments. They would be the last to admit that we do not have the right to impose our respective systems of value on other countries or political systems or cultures in the name of a higher cause, as in the case of the ill-fated Arab Spring, or case of Libya or Syria. In the meantime, another country, leading oil exporter with dismal human and gender rights track record, supporter of terrorism, Saudi Arabia, was only occasionally chastised by the world public. I could never understand

how avowed liberal intellectuals could condone or advocate bombing of another country, no matter what the reason is, or on humanitarian grounds.

That said, neither can dictators be allowed a free hand to oppress own people and endanger neighbors like North Korea. But for that reason, the United Nations were established, only they have been greatly sidelined over the past few decades and desperately need an extensive overhaul.

RPS: Some believe that the problems between the West and Russia are related to the crisis in Ukraine, with the annexation of Crimea to Russia. If Crimea had not become part of Russia, it is obvious that the Black Sea region could have a great war with the involvement of Russia and NATO countries. The referendum on the status of Crimea in 2014 preserved peace in Crimea, the Black Sea region and throughout Europe. What do you think is the reason for the misunderstanding on the Ukrainian crisis between Russia and the EU? And what is the US role in the Ukrainian crisis?

Jovan Kovačić: Ukraine could have easily been a bridge between East and West and still could be if powers would act together and work for a viable solution. The answer is in the above and to repeat: it simply does not suit some countries and politicians to have a stable European continent. Just one of many examples as an illustration: Ukraine is now being used to try and throw out Russian gas from the EU market, citing sanctions. The fact that this plan is not working is also self-explanatory. Furthermore, we also have the persistent continuation of the policy of double standards — Kosovo was recognized by the US and most of the West when it seceded from Serbia without a referendum. Crimea had a referendum and yet the West proclaims its secession illegal.

Ukraine is a handy tool for big powers to continue their fight on third territories. It's bad because people in those countries are suffering. And it's short sighted and will inevitably prompt the consolidation of nationalism and extremism. Moreover, this war would lead to another world war, possibly nuclear.

Furthermore, the West made a big mistake, possibly with far reaching ramifications. It believed that the Truman doctrine and imposition of a new arms race would have the same effects on Moscow as it did on the USSR and helped the West win the Cold War. The authors failed to take into account series of factors, primarily that Russia is a wholly different ball game in every respect in comparison to the USSR. On the other hand, it helped strengthen the Russian-China alliance and gave boost to the development of BRICS and the Shanghai Club. The Ukraine story also has a damaging impact on EU's reputation and unity.

We are really in a quandary when trying to predict how things will develop. However, current economic indices are merciless: China is expected to overtake USA within a couple of years as world economic leader and so will India in ten years or so. How will the US industry and financial world act to protect their interests is anybody's guess. Hence the fate of Ukraine also hangs in that balance.

RPS: During the XX century there were several attempts to create a single state of southern Slavs — "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes", "Kingdom of Yugoslavia", "Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia" (since 1963 the socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). But as a result, we now see six independent countries. What is the reason for the collapse of the unified state of the southern Slavs?

Jovan Kovačić: The reason lies in the above and in internal reasons. Yugoslavia, with its non-aligned policy, could not be trusted to join the NATO camp or allowed to enter the Eastern bloc. Furthermore, whenever voices within the EU start call-

ing for joint defense forces and common foreign policy, things start happening on the continent which undermine EU's unity and credibility. The break-up of Yugoslavia served this purpose well. We only have to look at the history of various peace initiatives from start to finish. This could be the answer to the key question why was the Bosnian Moslem leader Alija Izetbegovic told not to accept Couteillero's peace plan in 1992 but was then coerced into accepting a much worse one for him in Dayton in 1995? Why did tens of thousands have to die and millions had to be displaced in the meantime? There was an agenda behind all this, to break the country into little malleable servile pieces which in turn would serve to cause tensions whenever necessary or as small change in the event of global negotiations.

I believe that Bosnia-Herzegovina is the best example of the dismal effects of such policy. USA is exerting influence over the Moslem-Croat Federation while Russia is over the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska. However, one needs to add to the mix — at least six Islamic states: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Turkey, Qatar, Malaysia who all hate the super powers and — each other. In such a situation, it is very hard for the local politicians to come to any kind of agreement because they are not serving only the interests of their constituents, but thanks to financial support, also of their foreign patrons with completely mutually conflicting agendas.

Yugoslavia was a precursor to the European Union as we know it today — six countries (republics), common currency, open internal borders.... The problem was also within the mindset of the ruling elites who, prodded by their foreign mentors, chose to tear down their own country in order to preserve their hold over much lesser but ethically almost pure and easier to control fiefdoms. Much of the suffering throughout history has a very base and simple explanation: Greed is the (much neglected) Mother of the Four Riders of the Apocalypse and from it stems the

danger of another greed-induced financial collapse which is clear and present.

RPS: Continuing the question of the former Yugoslavia. Just recently, it was decided to transform the Kosovo security forces into a regular army. What was the purpose of this decision, given that it could lead to a replay of the military conflict in the region?

Jovan Kovačić: I do not see that 5,000 lightly armed soldiers could really threaten Serbia in the military sense. However, this is yet another (futile) step taken to force upon the world and especially half of the UN membership which has not recognized Kosovo the idea that it is a regular state since having one's own armed forces is one of the strappings of a state. However, given the fact that this was done with mere tacit approval only by some segments of the US administration but against the wishes of its top allies and stakeholders in Europe as well as, more importantly, against explicit recommendations of the NATO supreme command as well, this move is yet another provocation and a whistle in the dark. It has certainly served to downgrade Pristina's rating in the EU as a reliable partner. It is becoming sort of downward spiraling trend given that it has not respected a single item of the Brussels agreement for the past five years. Pristina's spoilt-child behavior of counting on the Big Brother to clear up all its messes is becoming irritating to other stakeholders, especially in Europe. Pristina is using anything but the customary diplomatic language in blaming the EU in general and EC in particular for its own failures to respect the letter of agreements signed with Belgrade. These insults will come to due payment in not such a distant future, a fact that Pristina stubbornly ignores to its own peril.

RPS: If we compare several processes, it seems that Europe wants to get involved in a major military conflict. Look: The North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) continues to expand, the United States

has declared that it can withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty In Eastern Europe, elements of US missile defense are being deployed, while these elements were previously used to launch medium-range missiles from US naval vessels, so, they are capable of launching not only anti-missiles, but also cruise missiles. And this in general creates a very disturbing atmosphere, an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. Is it possible today to change this atmosphere, to approach cooperation, trust and interaction between the EU, Russia and the United States?

Jovan Kovačić: Another problem today is that international institutions, albeit to repeat myself in dire need of a major overhaul indeed, have been steadily usurped and sidelined over the past dozen years. NATO is now keen to expand in Eastern Europe and notably Western Balkans primarily due to the possibility that Turkey will leave its fold leaving Greece as the EU's Southern flank. This implies a stable rear which has strong and urgent political implications on the Balkan countries. The voices calling for détente, for cooperation and confidence building still are not falling in unison, or loud or important enough for the main protagonists of this drama to take notice. All cards are now in play and the rule book is about to be thrown out of the window, so I am a pessimist which is quite unusual for me. I do believe that sanity and wisdom will prevail at the end but I am afraid of the huge cost of the procrastination and delay.

RPS: You have worked in major world media: CNN, ABC, NPR, BBC and others. You know very well the work of journalists, both in peacetime and in military conditions. Now you can hear rather often the criticism towards the major media, occurring them of being largely involved in information wars, of being a tool for propaganda of individual states. In your opinion, what is the main mission of the media and what values should

journalists possess to cover events objectively?

Jovan Kovačić: The mainstream media, especially in the USA, have kowtowed to the political masters and purse-strings controllers and are deeply polarized. Journalists have become soldiers of a cause and lost sight of the basic principles which make journalism so important in our lives. This has led to an alarming loss of confidence in the media but also in political establishments. Indeed, the media both in the East and the West have now become major instruments in the renewed Cold war battle but the public is growing more and more bewildered who to trust, which again leads to apathy of the voters.

This has led to the emergence of several portals which have assumed the mainstream media's original roles but those, albeit reliable, have yet to reach the levels of reputation that media enjoyed only 25 years ago. Spin doctors are more prized than good investigative journalists. This is almost irreversible as the media struggle to stay afloat under the new circumstances of internet and globalization and entirely new sources of and access to information.

RPS: New information technologies are changing the world. Social media technologies allow to mobilize people to participate in neutral events and protest actions. The role of new media is great in the so-called "color revolutions". Another technology — Big Data — is used in election campaigns, it is believed that it was successfully implemented by the election headquarters of Donald Trump. How do you assess the role of new media in modern political processes, both at the global level and at the regional and country levels?

Jovan Kovačić: The social media has opened up a Pandora's box that the wisest of men cannot fathom where it leads to and how to control it. It is an uncharted territory. Just 10 years ago, one needed to be "somebody" to have his voice heard

in public and one had to be careful not to offend the sensibilities of the target public. Today, thanks to the social media, people across the globe can find siblings in ideas and mind within seconds. They post most incendiary statements with impunity which gradually makes the social stratum toxic. This pertains from Alt Right or Left, to terrorism and spreading of extremist and fundamentalist ideas — and when I say fundamentalism, I do not necessarily associate the word only with Islam, or just downright disenchanting. Organization of demonstrations or major events are now beyond the control of authorities. An entire new world dimension is being created before our eyes which can reshape every aspect of politics as we know it. This does not necessarily imply that it's all bad. For instance, certain local governments in the West have already started relying on social media to poll their constituents on policy issues to improve and hear better their voters and include them in the decision-making process. This in turn can change the face of today's (faltering) democracy where billions are spent on political campaigns implying only those with vast coffers can contemplate running for office. The best example of this is Bernie Sanders.

Interference in one's neighbor's political life has been going on since states were invented. This is nothing new and EVERYBODY is doing it. However, with the rapid globalization more and more countries and big companies across the globe are interested in the political fate of remote countries as never before in history. With the onset of Big Data, it's become now much easier not only to pin-point weaknesses in the rival camp or country, but now it's much easier to develop and exploit them. Huge amounts of money will be spent on cyberwarfare and security instead of being diverted for social development and welfare.

RPS: Policy is based on knowledge, the level of development of the so-called think tanks largely depends on the poli-

cies of entire countries. In your opinion, what modern think tanks have the mightiest influence on politics and politicians in Europe and the United States today?

Jovan Kovačić: Think tanks are the reservoirs of wisdom and know-how in developed countries. In fact, USA has made over decades huge strides in its comprehensive development by supporting think tanks and major universities to conduct research, analysis and production. Most of them are severely dependent on government, corporate and individual grants which makes them hostage of the current state of political play in their respective Western countries. The fate of many think-tanks revolves also around the issue who is in power in their countries. This also determines the fate and reputation of a given think-tank so the ups and downs are common. For example, the venerable Council on Foreign Relations has yielded scores of Secretaries of State from the ranks of its members, yet for instance, its recommendations not to bomb Libya

were ignored by Obama who went on and did just that, producing a massive tragedy and failure that CFR warned would happen. The Trilateral Commission has been around for more than 40 years and certainly is among the most influential in the world. Russian think-tanks are very good and they are now slowly appearing on the think-tank map of the world. Some of them have now approached very high reputational level and have become must-attend events. This interaction is necessary not just for the advancement of the knowledge base of a given country but also for its reputation.

RPS: We have a traditional question that we ask our guests. Is politics a science or an art?

Jovan Kovačić: It's a good question and the answer is — neither. Science tries to rationalize politics and let's not confuse art with cunning or good or bad luck. Politics is simply a craft, albeit with far reaching consequences.