
Interview by Goran Svilanovic, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, to BiH daily Dnevni avaz

The goal is to achieve at least 5% employment growth in the region and increase of mutual trade by 230% • We want every government to sense that we can help them and that we are helping them • We support regional combat against corruption • As long as politicians talk about the EU, it will be only a symbol for many. When chapters start opening, a whole country joins the process and things get much deeper and more serious • We managed to link together heads of intelligence agencies and they exchange information

Corruption is Cancer

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Interviewed by: Sead Numanovic

It has been only a month since the former foreign minister of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia assumed the office of Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). This multinational entity, consisted of 46 states and institutions, has been seated in Sarajevo for five years.

With Svilanovic's arrival, it seems that the RCC is coming out "from shadow ", increasing its public presence, and it already has something to boast about.

Visible results

- In November last year, ministers of economy in the region defined several joint goals. These are developmental objectives that will ensure economic growth of the countries by 2020.

One of the joint goals is to increase employment by at least 5% compared to 2010. Current employment rate is around 40%, and it should reach at least 45% by 2020. Level of trade between countries of the region in the same time period should climb by 230%. GDP rise from the current 38% to 46% of EU average is also one of the goals.

Ministers of economy also committed to increase productivity and performance of public administration – Svilanovic told "Dnevni avaz" at the beginning of the interview.

To what extent are your words realistic?

Let's be clear, this is not a prediction of the future. These are joint goals, and efforts will be put towards their achievement. RCC accepted this as a part of our job and it leans on the EU 2020 Strategy. We will try to ensure that governments of these ministers commit to include these and numerous other defined goals on agendas of governments from this region.

Economic and financial situation in the region is very difficult and nobody knows how long the crisis will last. People lose jobs, employment level is plummeting, certain finalized privatizations are problematic, workers' salaries are low... These are essential problems that surround us. Under such circumstances, we want to see how much and in what way can we help.

Investments are necessary. It won't be easy. Level of investments is decreasing due to the crisis. However, RCC can also help there, because we are linked with other multinational organisations. We want every government to sense that we can help them and that we are helping them.

Only 5% employment increase over the next seven years seems too modest.

- Maybe it does. However, I have experience from different political campaigns. A politician comes out and says: "Vote for me, I will employ 500.000 people over the next four years". All those campaigns ended up in defeat. It will be my great pleasure if we see together what has been done in 2020, and especially to exceed the 5% figure. However, I would interpret this figure as an amount of caution and seriousness of the ministers. The crisis we are talking about is not only specific for the Balkans, but for Europe and a large part of the world as well.

There is this data about trade improvement by 230%! This is a very important estimate and people who proposed it possess adequate expertise. We are there to help achieve this target.

Role of coordinator

In what way?

- Over the past several years, RCC was given the role of coordinator. Our job is to develop a "map", in order to see what everybody is doing, whether there is some empty space or duplication of activities. While we are talking here, a workshop on South East Europe 2020 Strategy is ongoing in the neighbouring room. We work on improvement of education systems in the region. Therefore, there are related projects with a joint goal – improvement of the current situation.

It is easy to set goals, but hard to achieve them. We help fulfilment of goals. We assist combat against corruption. Everybody understands that it takes its toll.

What are you doing with regard to corruption?

- The work of any government cannot be improved unless systemic anti-corruption measures are developed. Systems in the region are different, and they share same experiences in many situations. Our mandate is approved by countries from the region. If RCC members support our plan in November this year, we will be assigned a task to offer assistance to each member country in development of national anti-corruption systems.

Fight against corruption is becoming increasingly important in election campaigns as well. People want to hear what politicians will do about this problem. Our mandate is to help countries

and governments in the region on their Euro-Atlantic path, and fight against corruption is extremely important in this respect as well.

What can RCC do when it comes to fight against corruption in the region?

- We have people who exclusively work on this problem. They analyse ways for improvement of cooperation between countries in the region, in order to handle organized crime and corruption more successfully.

And what does their work look like in practice?

- We bring together people who deal with precisely defined problems. Sometimes, they are ministers, and sometimes employees of ministries, people from police agencies..., depending on the type of problem. We have a strategy on cooperation in fight against organised crime and corruption. Governments work on specific cases, we analyze if there are problems and how can they be solved, do countries mutually exchange information, do they cooperate on some cases, for instance BiH and Serbia, and how.

Cooperation between states

Well, do they cooperate?

- Of course they do. And the cooperation progressed owing to us as well. Formerly, we gave a proposal for improvement of the cooperation. We will soon publish what has been done, and I believe that some will be surprised at depth and extensiveness of the cooperation.

You are putting a lot of hope in region's EU integration. Few days ago, it was announced that public support for Serbia's European path plunged to the lowest point to date – only 41%.

- It was expected. It is a natural trend. As the country is getting closer to the EU, public fatigue is rising. People get tired from expectations, failed promises, unable people who cannot resolve problems. Slovenian or Croatian experience shows that support reaches the lowest point at the time when a country is about to join the EU.

This applies to countries that are at the EU doorstep. Serbia, however, is not. It is not a candidate yet.

- Serbia has been a candidate for one year already, but it has not started negotiations yet. However, the main explanation for the low support level is Kosovo status and accompanying issues.

Only Kosovo? It seems that the Russian role is more important there.

- I disagree. Russian role is not irrelevant, but not only in Serbia, but in the entire region and the EU. Russia's presence is increasing, especially when it comes to energy. I do not believe that Russia has such role that you are implying.

Just for the sake of clarification: average citizen of Serbia is looking at the EU, which "nags" about Kosovo, and Russia, which even provides financial support to Serbia's parallel institutions at the north of Kosovo. It is not hard to assume what an average reaction would be.

- It seems to me that you overly simplified things. The process of defining Kosovo's status is very complex, and currently at a very sensitive stage. It has been difficult for the public so far to accept certain agreements, but I would leave this issue to the government and people in Serbia. Getting back to the 41%, it reflects a realistic image when citizens are only asked about EU membership. However, look at citizens' answers about Serbian government's anti-corruption activities. Over 80% of people support them. It also applies to efforts aimed at clarifying the origin of certain tycoons' fortune. Citizens support unveiling of privatisation activities to the same extent...

But this is done by EU's directions.

- I would not call it "directions". It is rather a process of reforming the country in accordance with criteria from Copenhagen. Support for reform of certain elements of the state in accordance with EU standards proved to be enormous so far. And this is an integral part of the accession process. As long as politicians talk about the EU, it will be only a symbol for many. When chapters start opening, a whole country joins the process and things get much deeper and more serious. People who spent their entire careers in judiciary, education, science join the adjustment processes... In this way, the process gets existential importance and becomes everyone's business.

In this way, states "cross the Rubicon" and move from political topics to essential reforms. And public support for those reforms is always enormous. Everybody wants to live in a well-organized country. This applies to Serbia, just like to any other neighbouring country.

What is Kosovo's status at the RCC?

- When the Stability Pact existed, Kosovo was its participant. RCC has 46 participants. They are called participants, be they states, international or multilateral organizations.

NATO integration

You talk a lot about assistance to countries on their EU path. What about NATO? Do you do anything in that regard?

- Yes. Each country decides what kind of relations it wants to have with the Alliance. Through our activities, we support each of them in accordance with their expressed interests. Over the past few years, it was inconceivable that, for example, heads of intelligence agencies mutually cooperate. RCC managed to bring them together, and they agreed to cooperate on issues of joint concern – such as anti-terrorism activities. A great progress was made in this segment, and we currently work on establishment of data exchange system.

We do not need Thessaloniki 2

- Upon proposal to make Thessaloniki 2, sometimes you get the following answer from certain addresses: "Are you sure that you want to ask us again whether we stick by our promises from Thessaloniki ten years ago?" They continue by saying that they still follow their promise that countries of South East Europe have a future in the EU, that the door is open for them, and that aspiring states should do their part of the work.

I do not know whether Thessaloniki 2 is an option. I am more inclined to believe that efforts will be put in doing what we can to continue what was started in Thessaloniki. EU accession policy has been defined, with known criteria and procedures. Every aspirant state now enters negotiation process in accordance with known criteria – Svilanovic emphasized.

Dacic's support

- As far as I understand, with the initiative for closer cooperation, Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic wants to pay tribute to what has been achieved here, and of course, requests even more, a closer cooperation. Of course, he views it from political aspect, and we at the RCC try to make the cooperation as specific as possible. Dacic sends a message to everybody that regional cooperation is extremely important and that an even better cooperation can be achieved through the RCC. The EU shares this viewpoint – our interlocutor explains.

Budget exceeds three million EUR

- Our budget amounts to EUR 3 million. We also have several projects with provided funding for one, two or three years, so our budget is actually larger. We are trying to use additional funds from the allocated money, in order to have more at our disposal. We use the funds to help states in the region overcome obstacles they face in different fields more easily.

This year, a cycle of one model of funding pre-accession activities is coming to an end. A new mechanism is under preparation, the so-called IPA 2. It gives RCC a very important role as an advisory body for regional projects. RCC's role will be to say what projects are good, and what should be supported.

In addition, we are getting more space in European Commission's annual progress reports for each country, where we will be able to express our estimate of the achieved progress – Svilanovic said.

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