

**“I AM AN OPTIMIST BECAUSE OF WESTERN BALKANS’ STRONG DESIRE TO BE A PART OF THE EU FAMILY OF NATIONS”**

*Interview with Goran Svilanovic, RCC Secretary General*



*1) Let us start with your first 3 year term in office – what would you say was the greatest single achievement of the RCC in that period?*

Looking back at the genesis of the RCC – whose roots lie in the Stability Pact for South East Europe – it was initially a tool, a mechanism of the international community to facilitate the rebuilding of our part of Europe. To rebuild it both politically and economically; let us remember, that was way back in 1999 in the aftermath of the wars. It was an avenue to channel funds into the region and begin what we now know is an extremely long and difficult restructuring process which had two facets – the economic and the political one. Initially, it was about dealing with the immediate consequences of the wars – getting people back to their homes and providing glass for windows, bricks for walls, food for the table. Then it was a political process to provide conditions for former combatants to learn to become neighbours and then good neighbours. Seven years ago, both the region and the international community felt it was time for the region to take ownership of the process and that is how the Stability Pact based in Brussels became the Regional Cooperation Council based in Sarajevo. An organisation *from* the region, *by* the region, *for* the region. Assisted of course, by our friends from the EU, US and beyond. In the last three years, and this is what I would list as the greatest single achievement, we have dealt

with very complex political issues – just take Kosovo\* as an example – but have fundamentally immersed ourselves into economic recovery. Namely, while there are many political issues still unresolved, what hurts the peoples of the region most are much more mundane issues – jobs, salaries, the education system.

*2) You are talking about the South East Europe 2020 Strategy?*

Yes, the SEE 2020 Strategy is the cornerstone of RCC's activity. It is a composite strategic plan for turning around the negative economic trends that have shaken the region down to the core in the past 7-8 years. Since the beginning of the economic crisis, the region has lost 800,000 jobs! Unemployment among the youth is touching the 50 percent mark in some economies. And citizens are needing, wanting... actually... demanding a major change, a halt to the deterioration of the living standards; they want jobs and a future for their children in the region, not across the oceans. All of this can easily be seen in a comprehensive Public Opinion and Business Opinion poll which the RCC just published and which can be seen on <http://www.rcc.int/seeds/> It also includes a monitoring mechanism which enables every citizen, every business to check how their government is doing and how does their part of the region compare with others?

*3) So, what exactly is the SEE 2020, what does it offer?*

It offers a comprehensive plan of joint actions on how to get out of the rut. Of course, the RCC on its own does not have the keys to prosperity. Which is why the SEE 2020 Strategy (<http://www.rcc.int/pages/72/about-see-2020> ) was developed together with the region's governments who are the ones doing the main job. Our part of the endeavour is to coordinate those activities where, as a region, we can do much more than the sum of its parts. "One region, one economy", that is our new motto! Look at our economies individually – we are but a statistical glitch on the map of Europe. But together, we are much more important – both as a market for more developed economies and, crucially, as a stronger partner who can produce and export much more successfully than we can do individually. We have the potentials, we just never made full use of them.

*4) Potentials?*

Yes! We do have a fairly educated and skilled work force. We have human and economic resources which – when pooled together – can generate growth, jobs and prosperity. For example, look at the potential that the tourist industry has if they were not fragmented. Why should a tourist from – say Japan or China – travel across the world and visit Dubrovnik for 5 days and spend a thousand Euros if we can offer him

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\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

ten days to expand the experience and see Boka Kotorska, Mostar, Prizren, Ohrid or the Skadar lake and the great music party that the EXIT festival in Novi Sad is and cash in two or three times the amount? Once someone has landed in the region, why not offer him/her a superior and more enjoyable experience from which both the tourist and the region can benefit? Now, to be able to offer a quality experience, there is so much we need to do! We have to improve the infrastructure, no tourist is going to accept travelling on the trains and roads we have today or wait for hours in queues on the borders. And this is where the RCC kicks in as the right place to plan, coordinate and assist with the funding for strategic programmes of this kind.

Or look at the potential for a common approach of the food and beverages industries from the region on developed markets. With a modern and ecologically sound agricultural sector we could be a major player in organic and quality agroproducts. Or combining this with tourism, we could follow the advances that Italy has made in the very new field called Agro tourism!

*5) Plans and strategies are fine, but how do they translate into action, jobs, income?*

Together! Powered by RCC, the region can do it, I am confident of that. All the governments signed up to the SEE 2020 Strategy in November 2013. We are now already in the implementation and the monitoring phase in which citizens can see the progress made or the lack of it. They can check how their governments are performing, compare the situation to the one in the surrounding economies and demand better and more resolute action if it is lacking. Apart from assisting via national IPA funds, the European Commission has also set aside a significant sub for regional IPA funding to help those projects where regional approach achieves better results for everyone.

*6) And what would you say was the greatest single failure of the RCC in the last three years?*

I do not think that the RCC has had “failures” in these three years. And I genuinely think that I am not using a euphemism for “failure” when I speak of missed opportunities or time not best exploited. We could have done more, by “we” I mean both the governments and the RCC. We could have moved faster to confront the economic crisis, to find joint initiatives and funding and to start implementing solutions. But rather than cry over spilt milk, I would prefer to look ahead and see what we can achieve.

*7) So, what is it that you can achieve? What are your priorities for your second term in office as RCC's Secretary General?*

To keep walking. To start running where possible. To use all the avenues we have opened so far and to create new ones. The RCC is not a static organisation, we are a dynamic team which keeps one finger on the pulse of the region and another one on the pulse of EU institutions and governments. Which is why last winter we toured the region presenting the SEE 2020 Strategy and gathering comments and ideas on how to improve it. Which is why on May the 6<sup>th</sup> we had a major presentation of our activities in Brussels showing the Balkans with its problems and successes to the EU audience there. And even having a wonderful concert, bringing the best of ethno music from our region to the heart of Europe.

*8) Concert? What has a concert got to do with boosting the economy?*

Yes, a concert and yes, it has got a lot to do with boosting the economy! Preservation of cultural heritage and assisting the living art of today is not a burden on taxpayers. It is an opportunity which can be well used to also create jobs, enhance the tourist industry, create brand names which can be exported. The Balkans are a region which has a diverse and rich cultural heritage and the RCC has used the opportunities provided by the Ljubljana Process (I and II) and assisted with both preserving the past and opening ways towards the future via its Task Force on Culture and Society which is based in Cetinje.

*9) But can we go back to a specific goal, a specific priority for your second term? What will the RCC focus on, what will you achieve and how can citizens assess you and the RCC in three years' time?*

My goal is to constantly increase support for the regional programmes based on the national needs. "From national to regional" – that is going to be the attitude of the RCC in the future and whatever programme or project we present to the donor community for funding will be based on the needs of countries and will be guided by the idea that the regional activities constantly add additional value to the national policies. Last year, we presented programmes worth up to Euro 20 million. This year, it will be no less than that. Besides, the RCC will try to include civil society in its work and will deal with Roma integration. Before the end of this year we will bring the representation of the business community in Ankara and link them with the Business 20 gathering as part of the Turkish presidency of the G20 group. So, in one sentence, besides being focused on SEE 2020 as a growth strategy, the RCC will have another two very important pillars to empower the implementation of the SEE 2020, the business advisory council and the civil society forum.

*10) You mention Turkey... The RCC covers the region of the Western Balkans but doesn't stop there?*

No, it doesn't and that is what gives the RCC additional strength. We are the operational arm of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) which has been in existence almost two decades. It is the synergy with the SEECP which has enabled the RCC to be as successful as it was. The SEECP is led by the Chair in Office, the Albanian chairmanship just ended and Bulgaria is taking over for the next year, to be followed by Croatia. We have had excellent cooperation with the Albanian CiO and look forward to working with the Bulgarian one and to achieve even more progress in our region – both in the Western Balkans and beyond.

*11) Going back to the political field, where does the region stand? You said – “One region, one economy” – is that politically viable?*

Where there is a will there is a way. Of course it is possible, no... more than possible, it is a “must do”, an imperative which the people of the Western Balkans demand from their leaders and everyone else who is involved in the EU integration process – the European Commission, the RCC, everybody. It is a responsibility we cannot evade and we will all be judged on the success of this “one region, one economy” concept. Yes, there is a tremendous amount of work to be done but I am greatly encouraged by everything we have seen in the past couple of years. Look at the Berlin process for example. Already at its inception ten months ago, we have had leaders of, for example, Albania and Serbia coming to Berlin with compatible ideas on infrastructure projects or youth cooperation initiatives. Less than a year down the line and coming up to the Vienna summit at the end of August, we already have joint goals identified, funding lines in the process of being established and I expect to see a specific programme for youth cooperation in the region during the summer. With all that in mind, and there is much more further down the road, yes, regional cooperation definitely IS politically viable. After all, look at our Public Opinion Balkan Barometer and you will see that the vast majority of our citizens see regional cooperation as a prime instrument for growth in the region.

*12) What about ongoing and longstanding political disputes and problems, like the ones between Belgrade and Pristina or Skopje and Athens? Aren't they going to be an obstacle to the “one region, one economy”?*

You used the phrase “longstanding” and indeed they are. Are we going to be able to resolve them in the next three years? I do not know. But what I do know is that in many of these disputes there has already been significant progress, witness the Brussels Agreement. Is there a long way to go still? Of course there is, but the important thing is that despite the disputes, bilateral issues are being tackled, again, with the help of our friends from the EU, from Washington... and, just as importantly,

that regional cooperation IS getting better and that everyone sees the benefits it can bring.

*13) Aren't you being too much of an optimist?*

Surely there is nothing wrong with being optimistic. But let me emphasise – I am not being an optimist just because it is my nature or because I am blind to the obstacles. I am an optimist because wherever I go I see the strong desire to improve the quality of life, to create jobs and wealth, to become a part of the EU family of nations. And it is this overwhelming grassroots desire to better our lives that is abundantly clear to the region's politicians and they do have to follow those voices and do their utmost best to make those dreams come true.

*14) So who will be the first in that race, who will reach the EU gates first and when?*

This isn't a race and it is not about coming first or last. This is a process and it takes time. It is a process in which the journey is as important as the destination itself. The process of EU accession is actually making our countries better. Obviously, Montenegro has made most progress, it is the only West Balkan nation which has opened up chapters in the negotiating process. But that doesn't mean that with the right kind of a will and energy, the others cannot catch up. Let us be realistic – no one will become a member during the mandate of this Commission, Mr Juncker said that openly. And to be honest to ourselves, we will not be quite ready anyway. We need to do much more than sign up to the acquis. We need to make fundamental and genuine changes, we need to bolster our economies so that by the time we reach the gates – we will not be the poor cousins who are a burden, but deserving partners who are an opportunity.

*15) But isn't the EU being unfair, haven't they shifted the goalposts so many times already, how do we know that the gates will be open once we get there?*

There is no doubt in my mind that the EU is 100% committed to fulfilling the promises made first in the Thessaloniki Declaration back in 2003 and repeated several times since and that is that the whole of the Western Balkans belongs to the EU and will become a part of the EU. It is in the EU's best interest as much as it is our own best interest. The best political and the most pragmatic solutions are the win/win ones and this goal – EU membership for the region - is a win/win one. I can understand the impatience and the frustration which is often felt here. I sometimes feel exactly the same. But there is a job which needs to be done before we are ready for Europe and before Europe is ready for us. There are three elements of this job which are in our focus: economic growth based on improved economic governance, reform of the public administration and petrification of our democracy to improved rule of law. The



RCC is a crucial player in getting that job done and I promise that we will do our utmost best to get it done.