

RCC Secretary General Amer Kapetanovic for Forbes

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Kapetanović: The value of regional cooperation lies in building systems that communicate with each other

The value of regional cooperation lies in building systems that communicate with each other and comply with European standards, thus translating regional cooperation into tangible progress towards European integration, said Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Amer Kapetanović.

Ahead of the Western Balkans Digital Summit, he said for Forbes Montenegro that digitalisation made little sense if the same administrative barriers were simply digitised six times over.

Asked what measurable outcome this year's Summit in Montenegro would need to deliver to show it was more than just political messages, Kapetanović said that, for him, the test was pretty simple: after the Summit, there should be clear evidence of what will be easier for citizens and businesses than it was before.

“If all we achieve is declarations on the importance of digitalisation, then we have not done enough,” he said.

The Summit, which will be held 12-14 October in Herceg Novi, will gather Western Balkans Six (WB6) and focus on linking digital markets, public services, cybersecurity and converging towards the European Union (EU) Digital Single Market (DSM).

Digital identity and electronic signature should be recognised across borders/boundaries

He noted that regional cooperation can deliver very tangible results, citing abolition of roaming charges within the Western Balkans as an example. He reminded that this did not remain at the level of political agreement and citizens now feel the outcomes each time they cross borders/boundaries and use their mobile phones just as they would at home.

As he points out, the agreement was signed at one of the previous Digital Summits.

“That is exactly the kind of outcome we should be aiming for in other areas of digital cooperation too. We are not starting from a scratch, though. Last year in Skopje, the partners from the region supported a common direction of development of interoperable digital identities and trust services in line with the European eIDAS 2.0. This may sound technical, but it is actually quite simple: digital identity or electronic signature which the citizens use at home should gradually become usable across borders/boundaries,” he explained.

Therefore, as a specific result of this year’s Summit, he would like to see a clear agreement on the next steps: who is responsible for what, in what order and how to turn common intention into action.

“Roaming has shown that regional agreement can change everyday life of millions of people. The same principle should now be applied to digital services” he said, emphasising that digitalisation makes little sense if the same administrative barriers are simply digitised six times over.

Citizens should not be messengers between institutions

Interoperability of public administrations has been announced as one of the Summit’s key topics and Kapetanović reminds that we are still not at the stage where people can open their laptops and access the same digital service anywhere in the region without a second thought.

“But we are no longer at the beginning either. We now have a common direction and a much clearer idea of how to get there,” he said.

As he points out, citizens do not care what the system is called or what standard it uses. They want to know why they have to submit a document another institution has already issued or enter the same information for a third time when the government already has it.

“It is in fact the best way to explain interoperability: administrations should communicate with each other rather than making citizens act as messengers between them. Our goal is that citizens of Montenegro, and of all WB6, are gradually able to use electronic services in region’s partners with fewer additional procedures. This requires technical integration, but above all, trust among institutions, aligned rules and data safety,” he said.

And, as he points out, it will not happen overnight. It is, however, very important that we stop talking about it as some distant digital future. The work is already underway.

Asked about the specific digital standards or reforms WB6 are currently behind in meeting to align with the EU, Kapetanović said he would not rank them from best to worst as partners in the region are making progress at their own paces and in different areas.

“More important is whether we all go in the same direction. And this direction must be towards the EU.”

There are, as he emphasises, three key areas, first of which is digital identity.

European Union, as he explains, is moving towards a system in which its citizens can use European digital wallets to securely prove their identity, sign documents or use certain services across borders/boundaries.

“If we wish to be part of that space, our systems must be developed so they can, one day, function together with the European system.”

The second important area, according to Kapetanović, is interoperability of public services.

“It is not only the question of whether we have enough portals and applications. You can have ten excellent portals, but if the institutions do not share data, citizens will still be doing the institutions’ work for them,” he warned.

The third area is cybersecurity.

“The more lives, businesses and public services are moved online, the more serious consequences of cyber attacks become. Convergence with European rules, including NIS2, therefore, must be accompanied with the actual ability of institutions to prevent, recognise and swiftly respond to incidents,” he said.

According to Kapetanović, one thing is of utmost importance here: European convergence is not done once the law has been passed. It is only done when the system actually works.

“Regional cooperation helps us develop these systems to be compatible from the onset instead of trying to link six completely different solutions in a couple of years.”

Digital transformation or digital bureaucracy

Asked where he sees the biggest underlying issue of the quality of e-governance still widely varying among WB6 – in technology, legislation, capacity of administrations or political will – he said that technology was often the easiest segment.

“You can buy a good software. It is much more difficult to change the way in which institutions operate. If you take a complex procedure and just transfer it from a paper to a screen, you have not transformed it, you have just digitalised the bureaucracy,” he said.

Therefore, he adds, the quality of each e-service should be scrutinised through three very simple questions: can I complete the entire procedure without visiting an office in person; does the institution ask me for a piece of data it already has; and could the service be smoothly used by someone who is not an IT expert?

“If the answers to these questions are negative, then it does not matter how advanced the platform hosting the service is. We need qualified people, institutions which share data and a political decision to streamline the procedures. It is particularly important for the region that differences in capacities do not become new digital borders/boundaries. If someone developed a good solution, there is no need for all six partners to reinvent the same thing,” he said.

He added that the goal is not six digital islands, but a region where public services can communicate with each other.

Cyber attacks know no borders/boundaries

Answering the question if the region has sufficiently developed mechanisms for a joint response to large cyber attacks and whether he expects the Summit to result in a concrete regional cooperation model in this area, Kapetanović said that the basis was much better compared to a couple of years ago.

“However, I would not say that today there is one fully developed regional mechanism that would automatically respond to a cyber attack. Perhaps we do not

need a big new body with a new name and new administration. It is far more important that the existing systems can work together seamlessly.”

According to him, the region has local Computer Security Incident Response Teams (CSIRT) and the regional Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre (WB3C), with the RCC working on strengthening regional cooperation and a number of European and international partners active in the region.

“The next step is to connect these capacities more effectively so that the information is shared faster, we know who to contact in the event of an incident and the experience of one partner can quickly benefit others. Cyber attacks will not stop at a border/boundary because we have not aligned our procedures,” he pointed out.

This is why he hopes the Summit will give a further boost to practical cooperation, information sharing, peer learning and mutual support, rather than establishing a new body for its own sake.

“We should not forget the most important thing: cybersecurity is not an addition to digitalisation. It is its prerequisite. If the citizens do not believe their data are secure, they will not trust the e-service, no matter how sophisticated the technology behind it,” Kapetanović pointed out.

What can Montenegro gain from the Digital Summit

According to Kapetanović, hosting the Summit alone will not automatically attract investments or deliver new digital services.

“The value of hosting the Summit lies in what Montenegro does with the contacts, ideas and partnerships it generates. It is a major opportunity. You have decision-makers, companies, European partners, experts and people developing digital solutions all in one place. This is an opportunity for Montenegro to showcase what it is already doing well, be open to learning from others where there is room to improve and link its ICT sector with wider regional and European markets,” he said.

He added that this can mean new partnerships, joint projects, faster transfer of good solutions or greater visibility of Montenegro as a place for development and investment into digital economy.

“It is of particular importance that the Summit is held during Montenegro’s Chairmanship of the Berlin Process. It provides the host with the opportunity not only to organise the event but also to help move the regional digital agenda forward. And this is, in my opinion, the best result: not a photo of a successful Summit but projects and cooperation that continue long after the conference hall lights go out,” concluded Kapetanović.

Digital Summit is organised by the Ministry of Public Administration, under the auspices of the Government of Montenegro, and in partnership with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), within Montenegro’s Chairmanship of the Berlin Process.