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By: Antonela Riha

Interview – Goran Svilanović

The next Government will be pro-reform

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From the current position of Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and given the previous OSCE experience, Goran Svilanović is in the position to weigh Serbia in the context of the region and international state of affairs; and with the experience of Foreign Minister in Zoran Đinđić's Government, to follow the changes of powers and politics. The former anti-war activist and President of Civic Alliance of Serbia said he was not surprised with the fact that the Government led by Nikolić, Vučić and Dačić proceeded on the path of European integration: "Some processes, some decisions and some politics require time to mature... The time has now come. Enormous responsibility one undertakes makes you double check all that you thought while in opposition against concrete data on the country's state of play and political processes that started long time ago. One finds oneself in the mainstream of regional and global politics the course of which one cannot change as it had seemed from the seat in opposition. There are agreements with investors, IMF, EU, key partners from around the world and the most influential countries. One tries to navigate in this mainstream the best one can under the burden of expectations of those who voted for you and one's own ideas which at times cannot survive the test of new reality. I hope those presently in opposition have all this in mind when criticizing things done or not done yet".

There are various opinions in Serbia from those that we have been given the date to those of just being given the green light as negotiations need to be finalised and the agreed needs to be implemented. Where are we, in fact, on this path towards the commencement of negotiations?

A big step forward was made towards achieving the goals set by the previous Government led by President Tadić. His Government should be commended on Serbia's becoming a candidate country. The new Government faced new challenge of how to commence the accession process and has made a large step forward. To me, the most important thing in the overall process called European integration is the task ahead which will be started by this Serbian Government lead by Ivica Dačić and Aleksandar Vučić. They will commence negotiations on EU accession. It has been decided that negotiations are to start early next year and one needs to be prepared for this task. Within the negotiations that will last for several years and I hope they could be finalised in the next two election cycles, Serbia will significantly change. This change in Serbia is more important than the EU membership. Actually, if I were to allow myself to judge,

I would say that the thing citizens expect from this Government, as they expected from previous ones as well, is not so much the accelerated membership as it is the cry for Serbia to look differently. Primarily, jobs for everyone, stopping corruption; observing the order in the country, efficient work of law enforcement agencies, police and courts, respect for knowledge and education, and people being able to plan their life and lives of their children. It seems that this process of EU negotiations proved to be the best way to change a country.

The necessary steps towards the path to the EU include implementation of Brussels agreement. What will be the biggest difficulty in this respect?

As regards this agreement and number of new agreements currently being developed, related to telecommunications or energy, the biggest difficulty will in fact be to build greater trust amongst people from, so to say, both sides of the bridge. Mistrust is very deep and both Governments will have to invest much effort to explain to people what has been agreed, and whether and to what extent this will change living conditions of both Serbs and Albanians from both sides of Ibar river.

To what extent can resistance of Serbs from North of Kosovo block the implementation?

It would be easy to say that Serbs from North Kosovo cannot prevent implementation of the agreement. However, this is not entirely true. After all, the purpose of all agreements is to make life easier and simpler rather than making the conditions in which Serbs and Albanians live more difficult. For this reason, the Government deserves special acknowledgement for being very restrained in April and for making the effort to show respect to mayors of municipalities from the North and those that elected them even when the differences were large.

We are constantly hearing about Serbia's concessions. What about Prishtina? What is the position Thaci's Government is in?

I had the opportunity to talk to the top government officials, representatives of civil society, MPs and journalists in Prishtina. From Prishtina's perspective, it seems that they alone are making concessions. There is also strong resistance towards a dialogue with Belgrade and agreements made. Political situation Kosovo's Government finds itself in is different. Its majority in the Parliament is significantly smaller than is the case with the Government in Serbia. The biggest asset of Serbian Government, namely large level of trust amongst the citizens over its anti-corruption determination, appears as the biggest downside of Kosovo's Government.

Has Serbia's Government achieved other goals promised a year ago?

Not all goals can be achieved overnight; however, citizens respect the effort made to fight corruption and this is the main source of support to Government. This support will further increase once they see the same determination and energy as regards employment. The announced reconstruction of the Government will be seen as the signal this Government is now ready to turn its focus to economy. Economic and social challenges are, in fact, larger than the challenge over Kosovo and Government will need even more support in this respect. The time of severe cuts in administration and the time of economising are coming. Tightening the belt will be largely felt given that disproportionately large number of people in Serbia lives on working in public sector. The state of play in private sector is no better and hence people feel as if

having no option. This will lead to accumulating discontent and this is where I see serious source of pressure on Government to cancel the promised reforms. Should this happen, Serbia will continue sinking.

What happened to opposition in Serbia?

Opposition too finds itself in a transitional phase. As SNS, the leading Government party, has been re-profiling and consolidating itself in line with the new role and responsibilities for the situation in the country over the last months, so is DS, the leading opposition party, undergoing a period of serious changes to be able to accept very big responsibility for the situation in the country as the first controller of the Government. This role should not be underestimated. The first next elections will be of most benefit to the current opposition to full accept new reality at political scene, to measure itself, and to redefine political leadership and new politics in line with the election results.

You were Minister of Foreign Affairs in Đinđić's and Živković's Government. Could you make a brief comparison or analysis as to where Serbia halted, what did it miss, when did it progress?

The real opportunity to do the most in attracting FDI and privatisation process in order to lay foundations of country's economic recovery was between 2000 and 2004. Those Governments were under the pressure of unresolved issue of Kosovo and disrupted relations in the region following the wars. Disproportionally large energy of all in the Government was focused on the issues of cooperation with the Tribunal. Ten years later, this is almost entirely taken off the agenda. However, over these ten or more years, as if there had not been sufficient public space or energy to tackle other issues, primarily those economic and social.

And now, almost entirely new Government finds itself in the situation to have to tackle all economic and social issues amidst economic crisis due to which its manoeuvring space is significantly limited and embarks on a process of eliminating another burden – the unresolved issue of Kosovo. Following 2000 changes, all these topics we deal with today were present then and dealt with one way or another. Now we find ourselves in the situation that the Government to come after the present one will, in fact, be the first Serbian Government from the changes until today to be truly able to focus on economy by using all its capacities and advantages brought about by the EU accession process. Though all Governments until now claimed to be pro-reform, the first real pro-reform Government could, in fact, be the next one. The preceding ones dealt with mitigating the consequences of lost wars. The next one could finally deal with what Serbia's citizens expect of their Government – the change of Serbian society and its economy, setting the country in order.

There were opinions that this Serbian Government and President Nikolić made a standstill in regional cooperation, especially over President Nikolić's statements that Vukovar is Serb's city and that there was no genocide in Srebrenica. Has this been overcome?

Bold statements by President Nikolić and gestures that came later largely contributed to overcoming the lack of understanding and increase in trust into the new Government in Serbia in the eyes of its neighbours. This and the following year will be the right time to improve Serbia's cooperation with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. I believe that line ministers in Serbian Government are already working to set up the ambience and prepare for this.

Why there was no one from the highest Serbian Governmental levels in Srebrenica this year? How do you comment this?

I was in Srebrenica couple of days ago as Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council to commemorate victims and express condolences to their relatives together with large number of diplomats from Sarajevo, including representatives of Serbian Embassy to BiH. I believe that our top-level politicians will in future have sufficient humane honesty to express regret and join tens of thousands of those who come to Srebrenica on 11 July. I expect such important humane and political steps in future as well, but they need to be well prepared each time in order to have significant effects on deepening trust amongst people on both sides of Drina river.

The Hag Tribunal was expected to bring reconciliation in the region. The last acquittals (Gotovina, Haradinaj, Stanišić, Perišić...) are arguments to those claiming that this is a political court. Tadić's apology and Nikolić's "kneeling" did not generate the expect effect. What is necessary so that the countries once at war overcome traumas, what types of deeds and messages?

President Boris Tadić's visit to Srebrenica has large significance. Also, President Tomislav Nikolić's statement opened door to dialogue between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the most sensitive issues regarding the process of reconciliation of Serbian and Bosniak people. Perhaps the depth of the issue that exist has been underestimated. At the root of things is the opposing understanding of the cause of wars in the process of dissolution of SFRY. We face this every year when, for example, Croatia celebrates "Oluja" and Serbia weeps over its victims. The issues are deep and require that we firstly clarify what exactly happened and then begin to believe in the sincerity of the others whatever people they belong to. I do not wish to make parallels between events and persons, but I will mention, as an illustration, that, if I am not mistaken, the first German chancellor to visit Auschwitz was Schmidt in 1977 and the first Bavarian Prime Minister to visit Dachau, located in the Munich suburbs, so half an hour by car, was Stoiber in 1994.

Will Croatia's entry into the EU help tackle open issues with Serbia?

All that has not been agreed thus far will, even so, have to be agreed in the coming years. Truth be told, the roles are now considerably changed; Croatia is the EU member state and Serbia aspires to membership. Thus far, Croatia demonstrated large cooperatively and support to Serbia's accession to the EU. The examples of this include not only statements of encouragement and support by the highest Croatian officials but also, specifically, by giving the translated EU *acquis* to our Government in order to accelerate its own preparations for negotiations.

You have been away from Serbia for a long period, firstly in Vienna and now in Sarajevo. You keep permanent contacts with international officials. How does, from this perspective, Serbia look like on the map of Europe that is in crisis and absorbed in its own issues?

We do not always hear criticism but somehow criticism gets the biggest attention in Belgrade. And there are many successes. The last four years I worked in Vienna in OSCE and for this reason I believe the fact Serbia will chair OSCE in 2015 is a large acknowledgement for its constructive role in Pan-European area. OSCE gathers 57 countries, the EU, USA and Russian Federation and all former Soviet Republics. Everyone in the country should respect this and help Government which will have the opportunity in 2015 to practically lead the largest regional security organization.

A LOCK WITH TWO KEYS

What are the goals of SEE 2020?

The RCC prepared employment and economic growth strategy for the region. The main targets until 2020 are employment growth rate in the region by 15%, increase in mutual trade in the region by 230%, and the rise of GDP from the current 38% to 46% of the EU average. The targets also include increase in total FDI inflow in the region by 120% and finally, additional 300.000 highly educated young people. With, of course, serious chances of employment.

What are the prerequisites for attaining these goals?

European lock has two keys, one is economic stability and the other one is order in the country: penalising corruption and functioning of judiciary. Both keys are in the hands of each of the governments.

Everything else is politics. We can influence the least this “everything else” and it is what we focus on the most. For Serbia and its neighbours in the region, EU accession and citizens’ support to the Government will, in fact, depend on how successful they are in terms of economy and to what extent they are able to put the country into order.