

Isolation – Formula for Failure

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Bilateral relations in the region will move forward, despite occasional staggers, and economic interests and links between economies will provide the main impetus. Whoever tries to isolate others or oneself will end up without support, alone and unsuccessful. The Regional Cooperation Council will try to create an environment where “mutual differences will be respected and own interests adjusted to those of our neighbours.” Adoption of the South East Europe 2020 Strategy that should improve economic conditions and living standard of region’s citizens is expected to take place in November 2013. It is quite understandable that, with the severe economic crisis, the Balkans is not the EU’s top priority, but Brussels should support integration efforts of countries in the region. Both the EU and countries of the region should jointly work on resolving the issue of increased number of asylum seekers in EU member countries.

You mentioned development of South East Europe 2020 strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth in the region as the RCC’s priority for the time period ahead. Who will participate in its development, and when can we expect it to be completed? What do you expect from this strategic document?

For three years already, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has paved the road for the development strategy South East Europe 2020 (SEE 2020), and we have actively worked on it since November last year, when ministers of economy from the region adopted framework strategy goals. Our basic goal is to improve living conditions in our region and bring back in the region's focus competitiveness and development of each country and the entire region. This document leans on the EU strategy “Europe 2020.”

We are in the midst of a large economic and financial crisis, which made lives of the poorest impossible and practically destroyed the middle class. The majority is unemployed. Those who do have jobs, work for low salaries with constant fear of unemployment. SEE 2020 is focused on turning over the present economic stagnation and downfall, and fully concentrated on economic and social growth. Ministers of economy from the region gave green light to the strategy development and set goals they want to achieve together. We are here to do everything we can to help them be successful in achieving these goals. Let me mention the most important ones: employment growth from 40% to 45%, increase in mutual trade by 230%, region's GDP rise from the current 38% to 46% of EU average. In order to make this happen, production, trade, investments and education must be improved, and our national governments must be far more efficient than they are nowadays.

We want to create a harmonised framework in the regional cooperation process, where all participants have clear roles and responsibilities in achieving the agreed goals. This is why all relevant regional organisations participate in the Strategy development under the auspices of the Regional Cooperation Council, such as CEFTA, Energy Community, Regional School of Public Administration, Education Reform Initiative. Of course, there are national institutions as well: ministries of economy, education, employment, health care, justice, environmental

protection, culture, relevant agencies etc. International organisations, such as the EU, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Council of Europe, and World Bank will also provide support. Ministers of economy are expected to adopt the Strategy in November this year.

To what extent have the economic crisis and open political issues, such as Kosovo, functioning of institutions in BiH or the dispute about the name of Macedonia made the RCC's work and improvement of regional cooperation difficult?

Of course, the economic crisis and outstanding political issues affect regional cooperation. South East Europe 2020 Strategy is our contribution to overcoming the economic crisis in the region. Countries will always be occupied by their political problems, politicians and governments will try to implement their national interests and meet expectations of their citizens. When it comes to citizens' expectations, I believe this is the area all of us should focus on in our jobs: national governments and other participants in the regional cooperation, including us at the Regional Cooperation Council. As for bilateral relations, occasional staggers are possible, and there will be more in the future. Countries will always be occupied by their political problems, politicians and governments will try to implement their national interests and meet expectations of their citizens. When it comes to citizens' expectations, I believe this is the area all of us should focus on in our jobs: national governments and other participants in the regional cooperation, including us at the Regional Cooperation Council.

I expect relations in the region to move forward, because it is the only possible path. After all, we are already witnessing such developments. Croatian Prime Minister recently visited Belgrade, Serbian Prime Minister visited Sarajevo, and Prime Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina was in Belgrade. In addition to their symbolic importance and, of course, their role in increasing the level of trust and friendship between nations, all these meetings have an increasingly pronounced economic element. Therefore, politicians are fully aware that economies in the region are on their own, and that only mutually linked can they overcome the crisis and be competitive at third markets.

How can stability in the region be achieved, given that many more years will go by until countries of the region join the EU? How can the region's EU integration momentum be maintained, when the EU struggles with own dilemmas and problems? Should Brussels offer a more decisive support to the region on its EU path?

It is quite understandable that, with the severe economic crisis, the Balkans is not the EU's top priority. My job is also to constantly explain to those in the EU who extremely value stability in the entire Europe, which is the majority, that they need to support us; to support brave politicians and governments that make tough decisions and conduct serious reform processes; to support countries and politicians in the region that take primary responsibility for their destiny and view the assumed obligations as an opportunity to make progress in their countries. The Regional Cooperation Council will support them and seek concrete economic assistance for them.

How can RCC contribute to accelerating the process of European integration in the region?

Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are consisting parts of the EU Stabilisation and Accession Agreement that was signed by countries from the region aspiring

to become EU members. Of course, as such, it is an important membership precondition, which is evaluated through regular EC's progress reports. The Regional Cooperation Council, in cooperation with the European Commission plays an important role in preparing these reports, in evaluating the progress of each country in the accession process.

What I want to achieve during the preparation of a new strategy for financing development through pre-accession funds, the so-called IPA 2, which is underway in Brussels these days, is maximum level of consideration of region's interests in the EU, and designing of this new instrument of financial and development support in the pre-accession period with full participation of beneficiaries, countries of the region and their heads of national accession offices. We want their voice to be heard and listened to in the EU. The Regional Cooperation Council will be consulted during the process of making decisions about use of these funds at the regional level. I think that this is a practical way to maintain the EU integration dynamics and enhance region's stability at the same time. This testifies of EU's permanent support and commitment to the inclusion of entire Balkans, just like it was decided ten years ago in Thessaloniki.

What are the biggest obstacles for establishment of genuine good neighbourly relations and cooperation in the region – bilateral problems? What are region's biggest challenges?

We must be aware that, for many more years, there will be different interpretations of key political events that took place at end of the 20th century in the region. We witnessed this in the previous decade as well. However, in the same time period we also saw huge steps forward in mutual connecting of economies in the region, joint infrastructural projects, constant increase of the level of cultural exchange, cooperation in the fields of education, science, health care. So, all of us are jointly involved in two parallel processes, and only the second one, the process of improvement of cooperation, economic and cultural bonds, also leads towards the economic growth. Over the recent years, the Regional Cooperation Council played an important role in this process, and I will work on creating an environment where we will respect mutual differences, and adjust own interests to those of our neighbours. In this very situation when it is more difficult to establish bilateral cooperation, participation of third and fourth parties, and participation of the entire region may enable us to overcome the crisis and the lack of trust. I am deeply convinced that certain lessons have been learned. Whoever tries to isolate others or oneself will end up without support, alone and unsuccessful.

What is your view of warnings about possible suspension of visa-free regime in the EU due to large inflow of asylum seekers from the Western Balkans?

No matter how strong the possibility for visa-free regime abolishment may be, readiness of governments in the region to put maximum efforts to resolve this problem is even stronger. Legislation is amended quickly and concrete actions are taken that should reduce the pressure from "professional asylum seekers". Target EU countries of such "asylum seekers" should also re-examine their legislations and benefits they provide, thus encouraging those who actually seek a way out of enormous economic and social problems they are facing. We work on this together, the EU and us. There will be no unilateral responsibility if we ruin the biggest success in the EU integration process of the Balkans so far.