

# WE MUST DEVELOP BETTER REGIONAL RELATIONS

*COUNTRIES IN THE REGION ARE AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION, GIVEN ITS NUMEROUS ADVANTAGES AND THE NATURAL POSITION OF COUNTRIES TO RELY ON ONE ANOTHER*

› BY **GORDANA RAKOVIĆ** › PHOTO **RCC**

## EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW **GORAN SVILANOVIĆ** SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL

In an exclusive interview for Kurir Go International, Goran Svilanović, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, talks about relations among countries in the region. He says he believes it is possible to find an adequate solution for Kosovo, noting that the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is necessary. Svilanović, who served as foreign minister in the government of late Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, speaks about Serbia a decade after Đinđić's

death and the new government, which he says can be trusted.

› **Serbia's EU integration, judging by EC documents at least, requires better regional cooperation. What is your evaluation of the current level of cooperation in the region?**

- I think cooperation is much more intense than it seems at first sight. Despite different interpretations of key political events from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over the last 15

years we have witnessed important steps in mutually connecting the region's economies, constant increases in cultural exchange and cooperation in education, science, health etc. Over recent years the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has played an important role in this process and I will exert efforts to create an encouraging environment for such trends in the future. In a situation when it is more difficult to establish bilateral cooperation due to an unresolved issue, the

participation of a third and fourth party, of the entire region, may help us overcome the crisis and the lack of confidence.

› **What needs to be changed in order to improve cooperation between countries in the region?**

- We all have the chance to contribute to the improvement of cooperation through our work. Of course, the biggest responsibility lies with the politicians and governments that have to make decisions and open a path for cooperation by creating concrete, practical preconditions for economic cooperation, cooperation in combatting organised crime and corruption, cooperation between security institutions etc. Therefore, in order to open a path towards a

better life for their citizens, a higher level of security, dialogue, better understanding and tolerance are needed. I think countries in the region are aware of the importance of regional cooperation, given its numerous advantages and the natural position of countries to rely on one another. Examples of such cooperation exist in other European regions as well, e.g. the Nordic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Council etc. This is what the Regional Cooperation Council is becoming, slowly but surely: the main place for reaching agreements on joint interests and ways to achieve those joint interests and placing them within the EU and beyond its borders.

› **The RCC changed its statute early**

**this year to include Kosovo instead of UNMIK on its list of participants and organizations. Why did you decide to take this step?**

- I must clarify that this is decided by consensus. The Secretary General does not vote or decide on this. It is a joint decision of all participants of the Regional Cooperation Council, in accordance with the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina that was made last year under EU mediation. It practically means that instead of somebody from UNMIK, a representative of Kosovo authorities will now participate in the work of the RCC Board. When the dialogue reached the stage of direct discussions between the authorities of Belgrade and Pristina, firstly the prime ministers and then presidents, it was only a matter of when they would start directly talking to each other and cooperating in this main regional initiative, as opposed to through foreign bureaucrats.

› **Is this useful for reconciliation and advancing relations?**

- Of course it's useful and necessary, both for Belgrade and Pristina. Kosovo is the third most important market for Serbia. This is where Serbia generates its greatest income, after Bosnia and Herzegovina. For this reason, I feel that consensus on this issue is an important step forward in the work of the Council and its participants, because it enables inclusion and joint work of all for the benefit of people in our region. Regional cooperation comprises part of the Stabilisation and Accession Agreement that was signed by aspirant countries with the EU. Relations within the region must move forward, because it is the only possible path. After all, we are already witnessing such developments. The Croatian Prime Minister recently visited Belgrade, the Serbian Prime Minister visited Sarajevo and the PM 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,

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GORAN SVILANOVIĆ,  
SECRETARY GENERAL OF  
THE REGIONAL COOPERATION  
COUNCIL (RCC)

## WE MUST ADVANCE RELATIONS WITH THE EU AND U.S.

**You were once Serbian foreign minister. What do you think about Serbia's current foreign policy and would you advise any changes in this area?**

- Serbia has parallel and intense communication with the European Union and the Russian Federation. It seems to me that this is the key feature of Serbia's current foreign policy: to obtain maximum possible support, assistance and understanding from both the EU and Russia. The reasons behind this are partly historical and partly geostrategic, as we are on the EU's border. Serbia tries to be an economic bridge between the EU and Russia, but analysts note that the crisis within the EU, as well as Russia's fairly moderate interest in the Western Balkans, place serious limitations on such a strategy. In such a situation Serbia risks losing its genuine allies, which is evident these days. The serious improvement of relations with several key European states is required. In this respect, I value the efforts of this government to improve cooperation with Germany extremely highly. I think that there is room for further improvement of relations with other European states as well, including those outside the EU, as well as a constant need to find a joint interest with the U.S. As for cooperation in the region, I think Serbia is highly esteemed by all its neighbours and should soon seek to resolve several outstanding bilateral issues with its neighbours, so that these issues stop burdening neighbourly relations and the EU accession process.

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OUR JOB WILL BE TO CONSTANTLY SEEK MORE SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING FROM BRUSSELS ON THE EU ACCESSION PATH



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politicians are fully aware that economies in the region are on their own and that only through mutual links can they be competitive on third markets. We are in the midst of a large economic and financial crisis that has made the lives of the poorest impossible and practically destroyed the middle class. The majority is unemployed. Those who do have jobs work for low salaries, under the constant fear of unemployment. The Regional Cooperation Council is preparing its South East Europe 2020 strategy, which is our contribution to overcoming the economic crisis in the region.

› **What is the main goal of that strategy?**

- The main goal is increasing employment, as living conditions cannot improve without that. Let me mention the most important ones: employment growth from 40% to 45%, increase in mutual trade by 230%, a regional GDP rise from the current 38% of the EU average to 46%. In order to make this happen, improvements must be made to production, trade, investments and education, while our national governments must be far more efficient than they are nowadays. We are bringing competitiveness and development back into the region's focus, with EU accession of course also in focus because of this "Europe 2020" EU strategy document. Economy ministers are expected to adopt the Strategy in November this year. SEE 2020 is focused on turning around the present economic stagnation and downfall and is fully concentrated on economic and social growth. Ministers of economy from the region gave a green light to the strategy's 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, to link national interests and goals and make them become parts of the joint strategy. Let me mention the most important ones by 2020: employment growth from 40% to 45%, increase in mutual trade by 230%, region's GDP rise from the current 38% of the EU average to 46%. Another goal of ours is also to increase the total inflow of direct

## I'M SATISFIED WITH THE WORK OF THIS GOVERNMENT

**What is your view on the new government's work so far? Do you hold anything against them and what do you consider praiseworthy?**

- A year ago I wasn't sure what to expect from the new government, but now I can say, not as an international bureaucrat but as a citizen of Serbia and a voter, that I am satisfied. Not only am I satisfied with the fact that they tangled with the difficult task of reaching an agreement with Pristina, but with their fight against corruption as well. I can see that they have extensive support from citizens who could not wait to finally see a systemic fight against this evil. Settling accounts with corruption increases the level of responsibility of state institutions towards their citizens, which makes Serbia a better society. I expect this government to do what previous ones could not and that is to achieve an agreement about Kosovo that would enable this and future Serbian governments to fully concentrate on the difficult economic and social situation. I expect them to pay attention to the democratisation of the Serbian society and respect for the freedom of the media, further improvements to human rights, the existence of differences and strengthening state institutions in the future.

foreign investments in the region by 120% and the number of people with university education on the labour market by 300,000. In order to make this happen, production, trade, investments and education must be improved, while our national governments must be far more efficient than they are at present.

› **What do you think about Serbia's progress on EU integration so far?**

- After years of isolation, Serbia has achieved significant successes in the EU accession process since 2000 and became an official membership candidate last year. It now has the chance to get a date for the initiation of concrete negotiations. Of course, a

lot depends on the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Negotiators on both sides have a historical opportunity to display courage and responsibility, in order to enable even faster progress on this path. I expect more understanding from Brussels and other European capitals for all the good things that leaders did so far and for the very important incentive to the EU accession process given by the current Serbian government.

› **Do you believe that a sustainable solution for the Kosovo issue will be reached soon?**

- I am confident that it will and I believe what representatives of the Serbian government say. Over the past few months, since the establishing of the government, they already displayed great courage – primarily when they said they wanted to reach an agreement and did not want merely to freeze the conflict. I hope that there will be some sympathy for the government's decision to continue the dialogue, although it cannot support this proposal. The most important thing is that everyone exerts additional efforts and continues discussions on an agreement that their citizens could support. Everyone needs a little more courage and honesty in discussions. My job and the RCC's task will be to support them so that their agreement is respected and implemented in good faith by all participants. Also, our job will be to constantly seek more support and understanding from Brussels on the EU accession path. ■

## ĐINDIĆ'S POLICIES LIVE ON

**Can you share with us your opinion on where Serbia stands now, ten years after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić?**

- If he had not been assassinated I'm sure Serbia would have looked better, but I must admit that we had to do more during this period. We had to do a lot more and better. This is why it is now our duty to support those putting efforts into achieving the same goals. His policies obviously live far beyond him and his government. This is a good thing; it is good for Serbia that the political direction set in 2000 is still Serbia's dominant political feature.