

Interview by Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Goran Svilanovic, to BiH News Agency *FENA*

SVILANOVIC: THOSE WHO TRY TO ISOLATE OTHERS OR THEMSELVES, ARE AT THE END LEFT WITHOUT SUPPORT, ALONE AND UNSUCCESSFUL

SARAJEVO, January 31 (FENA) – In his first interview to FENA after being appointed Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) on 1 January, Goran Svilanovic talks about current issues of regional cooperation, approaching the EU integrations, the dangers of abolishment of visa-free regime for the Balkan countries and the priorities in its work.

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Commenting on his arrival to Sarajevo as the RCC Secretary General at a time when the regional relations seem to have hit a dead end street because of the preoccupation internal political issues (problem of Kosovo in Serbia, the reconstruction of authority in BiH, Croatia joining the EU) and emerging of old new problems after promising negotiations, Svilanovic said that he came to Sarajevo with a lot more optimism than contained in FENA's statement.

"I do not contest either of your assertions. Countries will always be occupied by their political problems, politicians and governments will strive to achieve their national interests and satisfy the expectations of their citizens. When it comes to citizens' expectations, I think we are dealing with the field of what all of us need to do. Not only national governments, but, also, other stakeholders in regional cooperation, and even us in the Regional Cooperation Council. We are undergoing major economic and financial crisis, which has made life impossible for the poor and virtually destroyed the middle class. Most of people do not have jobs. Those who have it, work for low wages and are in constant fear of losing their jobs," said Svilanovic.

Hoping the relations in the region will move forward since it is the only possible way, he said that it is already happening, referring to a recent visit to Belgrade by the Croatian Prime Minister, Serbian PM paying visit to Sarajevo yesterday and the announcement of visit of BiH PM to Belgrade on Monday.

"All of these meetings, apart from being symbolically important and serving to increase trust and friendship among peoples also have an increasingly significant economic dimension. Thus, there is complete awareness among politicians that the economies in the region depend on one another and that only by being interconnected they can competitive in other markets," stated Svilanovic.

Asked to comment on the "new old" problems in the regional bilateral relations which due to different interpretations of the events of 1990s brought to a halt in the regional cooperation (acquittal of Gotovina and Markac, relations between Serbia and BiH, and

the special RS-Belgrade relationship, denial of genocide and (non)recognition of Kosovo), Svilanovic said that there will be more failings of that kind.

"Different perception of key political events of the late 20th century, of the war and the crimes committed in it and the responsibility for them will be present in the region for a long time. We have witnessed all of it in the previous decade. However, in this same period we have seen tremendous steps made in the interconnection of regional economies, joint infrastructure projects, steadily increasing cultural exchange and cooperation in education, science and healthcare. So, we all participate in two parallel processes, of which only the latter, the process of improving cooperation, economic and cultural connections, also leads to economic growth.

The Regional Cooperation Council has played an important role in this process in the previous years and I will strive to create an environment in which we respect our differences and align our own interests with those of our neighbors. Perhaps, in a situation where it is more difficult to cooperate on bilateral level, the participation of the third and fourth party or the entire region will allow us to overcome the crisis and distrust. I am deeply convinced that some of the lessons have been learned. Whoever attempts to isolate the other, or to isolate themselves from others, will be eventually left without support, alone and unsuccessful," explained Svilanovic.

When asked by FENA about Balkans no longer being in the focus of interest, i.e. the EU seemingly being "tired" of the Balkans and constant promises made by regional countries to meet their commitments, which remain to be a "dead letter" or materialize only under the pressure of the European diplomats, Svilanovic confirmed that the Balkans is not the first priority for the EU.

"My job is to constantly explain to those in the EU which consider stability throughout Europe very important, and they make up a large majority, that they need to support us. They need to support the courageous politicians and governments that make difficult decisions and lead serious reform processes. The same goes for regional countries and politicians who assume primary responsibility for their destiny and who see in their commitments the opportunity to make progress in countries. The Regional Cooperation Council will support them and seek concrete economic assistance for them," specified Svilanovic.

He stressed that regional cooperation and good neighborly relations are an integral part of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, signed by all the countries in the region aspiring to EU membership.

"And of course, as such, it is an important prerequisite for the membership itself, which is assessed through regular progress reports by the European Commission. The Regional Cooperation Council, in cooperation with the European Commission, has an important role in preparing these reports, assessing the progress of each country in the accession process. What I want to achieve is for the interests of the region to be fully respected, in the preparation of the new strategy of development funding through pre-accession funds,

so-called IPA 2, that are being drafted these days in Brussels and for this new instrument of financial and development support in the pre-period to be designed with full participation of the users. The Regional Cooperation Council will be consulted when making decisions on the use of these funds at the regional level,” emphasized Svilanovic.

Commenting on the warnings of the suspension of visa-free regime for the countries of the Balkans, he said that as much as the possibility of abolishing the visa regime was imminent, even greater is the willingness of governments in the region to do the utmost for their part to address this problem.

“The legislation is being rapidly amended and governments are applying specific measures that should reduce the pressure that comes with "professional asylum seekers". It is necessary that the EU member states of, to which such asylum seekers arrive, also review their regulations and the benefits they provide, which act as an encouragement to those who are only looking for a way out of major economic and social problems they face. We have to do this together, both, we and the EU. There is no unilateral responsibility if the greatest success in the current process of the Balkans’ European integration gets ruined,” said Svilanovic.

Asked whether the Balkans countries would remain Balkan or become part of the EU, Svilanovic said he was confident that the Balkan countries would become EU members.

“This, however, does not mean that they will cease being the Balkans, with all the lovely things that belonging to this part of Europe bears. What I wanted to say is that joining the EU does not mean giving up your identity. Accession is a process of organizing your own country and the process of resolving bilateral and regional issues. The Regional Cooperation Council today can help to resolve these outstanding issues that stand in the path towards the EU. Tomorrow, however, the Regional Cooperation Council may be a forum of coordination of interests between the countries of the Balkans, which will then jointly be promoted in the EU forums,” considers Svilanovic.

When asked about the priorities of his work, Svilanovic said that the Council is preparing a Development Strategy called Southeast Europe 2020, which is focused on turning around this economic stagnation and decline, and is totally focused on the economic and social growth.

“Ministers of economy of the region have given the green light to develop a strategy and set goals they want to achieve together. We are here to do everything we can to make them successful in achieving these goals. I shall mention the most important ones: increase in employment for at least five percent, increase in mutual trade by 230 percent, GDP growth in the region from the current 38 percent to 46 percent of the EU average. To achieve this we must improve production, trade, investment, education and our local governments have to be much more efficient than they are today.

We will continue to support the development of infrastructure, the fight against organized crime and corruption, cooperation in the fields of security, science, culture, parliaments

and media. It is important to us to ensure the effective participation of all of our activities, through which we want to show that the region is able to take responsibility for their own future and create the conditions for the overall progress in the spirit of tolerance and cooperation,” said RCC Secretary General Goran Svilanovic in an interview with FENA.

Goran Svilanovic took office as the Secretary General of the RCC based in Sarajevo on 1 January. He came to the capital of BiH from Vienna where he has worked in the OSCE Mission since 2008, as a coordinator of activities in the field of economics and environmental protection. Prior to that, he was Minister of Foreign Affairs of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, after the overthrow of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic.

The foreign ministers of the member countries of the Process of Cooperation in Southeast Europe (SEECP) elected Goran Svilanovic the new Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) at the meeting held on 14 June last year in Belgrade.

Before Svilanovic, the duty of the RCC Secretary General was performed by Hido Biscevic for two consecutive terms since 2008.

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