

SEECP Sofia Summit Declaration “20th Anniversary of the SEECP - Key to regional Cooperation“

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We, the Participants in the Summit of the SEECP met in Sofia on 1 June 2016 on the eve of the 20-th Anniversary of the Process, Mr. Nicolae Timofti, Mr. Filip Vujanovic, Mr. Hashim Thaçi, Mr. Bakir Izetbegovic, Mr. Gjorge Ivanov, Mr. Rosen Plevneliev, Mr. Bujar Nishani, Mr. Dacian Ciolos, Mr. Lütfi Elvan, Mrs. Kori Udovicki, Mr. Karl Erjavec, Mr. Nikolaos Kotzias, Mr. Miro Kovac,

And the participating guests: the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Mr. Goran Svilanovic, the Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mr. Lamberto Zannier and representatives from the European Commission and the European External Action Service,

Reconfirming our commitment to the founding principles of the SEECP Charter,

Reiterating the importance of the SEECP as the main political format for regional cooperation and a factor for security, stability and prosperity in SEE,

Reaffirming the essential values of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as the basis of economic and social progress,

Emphasizing the important role of the SEECP in the process of European integration of the region, and acknowledging the contribution of the RCC, as its operational arm, to enhance regional cooperation in SEE,

Determined to continue to promote the good-neighbourliness principle through intensified regional cooperation in political, security, economic, trade, cultural and educational areas,

Working in cooperation with other European fora and formats of regional cooperation on the principles of regional ownership and all-inclusiveness, which are basic concepts for the successful and substantive implementation of regional cooperation in SEE,

Solemnly adopt this Joint Declaration on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the SEECP:

We recognize the valuable contribution of each Participant to the development of the SEECP, and reiterate the significance of the documents adopted and events held during these past 20 years, including:

- the “Declaration on good-neighbourly relations, stability, security and cooperation”, signed by eight participants in Sofia in July 1996, which marked the beginning of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP),
- Thessaloniki Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in the Balkans, adopted by the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Thessaloniki, June 1997,
- Joint Declaration of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants. Crete, 4 November 1997,

- The Istanbul Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in South-East Europe, adopted at the Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the SEECP Participants on June 1998,
- The Charter on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in South-East Europe, adopted at the Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants in Bucharest on February 2000,
- Joint statement of the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs, confirming the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region, Ohrid, July 2000,
- Action Plan for regional economic cooperation, adopted at the Fourth Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants, Skopje, 23 February 2001,
- Declaration of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants, reaffirming the strategic orientation of the SEE region towards European integration. Tirana, March 2002,
- Declaration of the Eighth Meeting of the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs, which states for the first time that the immediate goal of the Western Balkans is full membership in the European Union, Sarajevo, April 2004,
- Statement of Sofia at the Meeting of the Ministers of Defence of the SEECP Participants regarding a wider regional approach to the issues of defence and security. Bucharest, March 2005,
- Bucharest Declaration of the Eighth Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants. Text of solidarity with the Bulgarian nurses sentenced in Libya was included in the text, Bucharest, May 2005,
- Declaration of the Meeting of the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs focused on: strengthening political dialogue; developing cooperation in regional infrastructure and energy; the future transformation of the Stability Pact activities; supporting the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans, Athens, January 2006,
- “Together in Europe” Declaration of the Ninth Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants supporting the creation of a free trade zone in South-East Europe within CEFTA, Thessaloniki, May 2006,
- Final Declaration of the Sixth Conference of the SEECP Speakers of the Parliaments, which introduced the Troika format. The Republic of Bulgaria was approved as a host of the Regional Focal Point for Parliamentary Cooperation in South-East Europe; the creation of a Conference of representatives of European Affairs Parliamentary Committees (COSAP) was initiated, Zagreb, April 2007,
- Final Declaration “Europe’s New South-East” of the Tenth Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants, paying special attention to the development of the infrastructure as a key factor for the economic prosperity of the region, Zagreb, May 2007,
- Memorandum of Understanding on Interparliamentary Cooperation in South-East Europe, Sofia, April 2008,
- The First Meeting of the Regional Cooperation Council in Sofia in 2008, which officially institutionalized the RCC as the “operational arm” of the SEECP,
- Declaration of the Eleventh Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP reaffirming the role of regional cooperation in the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the SEECP Participants, Pomorie, May 2008,
- Chisinau Declaration of the Twelfth Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants, welcoming the establishment of the Regional Cooperation Council and declaring unconditional support of its work, Chisinau, June 2009,
- Declaration of the Thirteenth Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP Participants confirming the fundamental and essential principles of regional cooperation in South-East Europe – “regional ownership and leadership” and “all-inclusiveness”, as well as an European and Euro-Atlantic prospects of the SEE region, Istanbul, June 2010,

- The 8th Conference of the Speakers of SEECP Parliaments in Antalya in 2010, which adopted the declaration putting forward the intention of the National Parliaments to establish the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly (SEECP PA),
- Common Declaration of the SEECP Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs establishing the first Regional Strategic Document on Justice and Home Affairs for the period 2011-2013, accompanied by an Action plan, which set the framework for our joint efforts in this crucial area of cooperation in the region and with the EU, Budva, March 2011,
- Budva Declaration of the Fourteenth Meeting of the SEECP Heads of State and Government confirming the priorities for the further development of cooperation in the region, Budva, June 2011,
- Declaration of the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs, confirming the role of the political process as a unique forum for regional cooperation and of the RCC as its link with regional initiatives and organizations, Ohrid, May 2013,
- Declaration on the inauguration of the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly as a format for Interparliamentary Cooperation, Bucharest, May 2014,
- SEECP Bucharest Summit Declaration, June 2014,
- SEECP Joint Statement on Terrorism adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Tirana, February 2015,
- Consolidated conclusions of the Ad-hoc WG adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Tirana, May 2015,
- SEECP Tirana Summit Declaration confirming the European and Euro-Atlantic perspective for the region, Tirana, May 2015.

We recall the importance of genuine and solid regional cooperation, which contributes to overcoming historic differences and divisions of the past, in the spirit of good-neighbourliness and real partnership;

We recognize that throughout the 20 years of its existence, SEECP as a genuinely regional initiative has proved to be a credible and sustainable framework for cooperation and constructive dialogue among the SEECP Participants;

We confirm the strategic choice in favour of European integration of the entire region as the main policy instrument to guarantee peace, stability and prosperity, which was reflected in the Thessaloniki Agenda 2003, adopted by the European Heads of State and Government;

We welcome the active engagement of the European Union and confirm our shared commitment to the European integration process, the democratic stability and security of the region;

We warmly congratulate the SEECP Participants who joined the Union over the past twenty years, based on their own merits, and encourage the other Participants to remain consistently engaged on their European path;

In the spirit of solidarity and regional cooperation, SEECP Participants which are also EU member states confirm their commitment to act as the driving force of the process of full integration of the region in the European Union;

SEECP Participants which are also candidates or potential EU membership candidates, on their part, recognise their responsibility to committedly work to fulfil EU membership criteria;

We recognize the importance of the sectorial high level meetings and their valuable contribution to the work of SEECP;

We express our high appreciation for the work done by the RCC, which has proved its important role for transforming regional cooperation into concrete and target-oriented projects, thus promoting economic growth and stability, supporting the European integration process and coping with the challenges of the region. The synergy between SEECP and the RCC, as the operational arm of the SEECP, served as a catalyst to further enhance regional cooperation in SEE and developing projects addressing the needs of the region;

We praise the increased level of coordination and cooperation achieved between the SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office and the RCC through regular coordination meetings with the participation of the EU;

We welcome the results achieved by the RCC in the implementation of the Strategy and Work Programme 2014 – 2016 and the SEE 2020 Strategy aimed at fostering economic growth, jobs and prosperity in the region and in bringing the South East Europe region closer to the European Union;

We endorse the RCC Annual Report 2015 – 2016 and the RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2017 – 2019 presented by the Secretary General, pledge our political support for its successful implementation and call upon the development partners to continue assisting and supporting the implementation of the RCC Strategy and Work Programme;

We express our support for the RCC focus on mobility, connectivity and competitiveness, along with governance, rule of law and security, over the next three years.

We welcome the achievements of the Bulgarian Chairmanship-in-Office (2015 – 2016), which under the motto “SEECP – 20 Years Key to Regional Cooperation” worked actively towards raising the visibility of the SEECP among other international organizations and bodies, and reaffirming its role as a leading format in Southeastern Europe;

The Bulgarian C-i-O organised high-level meetings, including the Informal Meetings of the SEECP Ministers of Foreign Affairs in New York in September 2015 and in Sofia in February 2016, as well as the Formal Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Pravets on 31 May 2016, at which fruitful discussions were held on topical issues of common interest. At their meeting in Sofia in February 2016 the Ministers adopted the “Joint Statement on Migration Challenges”, which conveyed a strong political message on behalf of the entire region and restated that the SEECP provides the appropriate framework for an adequate joint approach to an emergency situation;

The Bulgarian C-i-O coincided with Bulgarian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. That gave the C-i-O the opportunity to synchronize the priorities of the two platforms and work for common regional interests. As a result, the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016 – 2021), the so-called Sofia Strategy, was launched during a high – level conference in Sofia in April 2016 and the Justice Ministers of Council of Europe Member States agreed to take the necessary steps to implement the Council of Europe Plan of Action on Strengthening Judicial Independence and Impartiality;

The Bulgarian C-i-O achieved tangible results in the three sectoral priority areas – connectivity, tackling the migration flows and media freedom and freedom of expression. Connectivity, as a pivotal component for the social and economic progress of Southeast Europe, remained a main focus of the Bulgarian C-i-O;

This has facilitated the joint efforts of the SEECP Participants to achieve tangible results in enhancing internal interconnectivity and diversity of energy supply as a necessary step for the creation of a regional energy market. The SEECP Participants reaffirmed their mutual understanding for active and transparent energy cooperation in Southeast Europe;

It put special focus on promoting the economic growth of the region by establishing a sustainable business environment in line with the good practices of environmental protection and regional sustainability. To achieve these purposes two high-level conferences on Energy Security and Infrastructure in the SEE and a Round Table of the Ministers of Economy took place in 2015 and 2016;

An International High-level conference also took place in Sofia on 12-13 May 2016 on “Facing the demographic challenges experienced by the SEECP Participants” where the Ministers in charge of labour and social policy from the region adopted a Joint Declaration;

The Bulgarian C-i-O also led intense consultations with the RCC on launching the Regional Platform for Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism; the first Meeting of National Focal Points in this field took place on 27 January 2016;

The Bulgarian C-i-O worked actively to enhance parliamentary cooperation in the SEE region. In this regard Sofia initiated a dialogue with the European Parliament aimed at institutionalizing this dimension by proposing a Cooperation agreement between the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly and EP;

To raise awareness of the cultural heritage of the region, the Bulgarian C-i-O assembled an exhibition of masterpieces from the entire region, presented the cuisine and the cinema of the SEE before a wide audience and brought together young diplomats to a Winter School in Sandanski in March 2016;

We are aware that on the 20th Anniversary of the SEECP, our region is witnessing new destabilizing forces generated by the crises in the Middle East and beyond. In particular, the migration and refugee crisis demands immediate and bold decisions based on cooperation and dialogue. Therefore, genuine regional cooperation and consolidation of the European path of the entire region are essential to face these unprecedented developments;

We are convinced that consistent coordination and effective cooperation are key to a sustainable management of all current or potential challenges and lasting peace and stability in the region. In this respect, we need the necessary political drive and an ambitious agenda in order to safeguard our common European future to tackle challenges of a changing world;

We therefore reconfirm the role of the SEECP as an authentic political voice of the region, which continues to be a valuable forum for regional cooperation, interaction, exchange and sharing of lessons learned and best practices with EU and other international actors;

We reiterate our commitment to pursue our joint efforts aimed at building a common, prosperous future for Southeast Europe, based on peace, democracy, regional ownership and economic prosperity, as well as full integration of the region into the EU;

We remain fully committed to strengthening our cooperation in addressing the ever changing challenges and new threats to the security and stability of Southeast Europe, which is indivisible from the security and stability in Europe; in this respect we welcome the role of NATO and the OSCE;

We confirm our joint commitment to the principles of regional ownership and all-inclusiveness, as essential concepts for the successful and substantial regional cooperation in SEE;

We agree that the European perspective of all Participants shall remain an essential priority for the Process;

In the light of the current developments in the region we shall further increase our efforts to improve the efficiency, visibility and the functioning of the SEECP;

We shall enhance our intensive high-level political dialogue, and further diversify and deepen regional collaboration for the benefit of the whole region, as well as each SEECP Participant;

We commend the work of the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly and commit to further support its activities;

We shall further intensify the efforts for efficient and valuable regional networking and cooperation in areas of key importance for the development of all SEECP Participants, including energy and transport infrastructure, economic interconnectivity, the creation of a favourable investment climate in the region, environmental protection, prevention and elimination of the consequences of all forms of natural disasters;

We shall focus our common efforts on priorities such as: strengthening the rule of law, promoting of human rights, ensuring freedom of expression, reforming the public administration, tackling migration and refugee issues and combating organized crime and terrorism etc;

We shall encourage and support the participation of civil society, academia and our citizens in the common efforts of implementing the challenging but needed reforms and raise citizens' awareness and participation in strengthening the cooperation among the SEECP Participants, as well as strengthening people to people contacts, particularly among young people in the region as a bridge between different nations and cultures;

We shall strive to further develop the reform agenda aimed at strengthening accountability, transparency and competency on all levels;

We shall further strengthen the functional framework of cooperation between SEECP and RCC, the European Union, other regional and international organizations, as well as major IFIs.

In conclusion

We express our gratitude to the Bulgarian Chairmanship-in-Office for the excellent organisation of the Summit;

We welcome the upcoming Croatian Chairmanship-in-Office 2016 – 2017 and thereafter Slovenian Chairmanship-in-Office for the period of 2017 – 2018.