



Regional Cooperation Council

**ADDRESS OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE REGIONAL
COOPERATION COUNCIL (RCC), HIDO BISCEVIC, AT THE
INFORMAL MEETING OF THE SEECP MINISTERS OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

31 January 2012, Belgrade

Thank you Minister Jeremic, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- It is indeed a pleasure to participate at this honourable forum and share, with such a distinguished audience, some observations on the current state of play of the regional cooperation process in South East Europe (SEE), from the standpoint of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).
- I wish to express gratitude to the Serbian SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office (C-i-O) and Minister Jeremic and his team for the leadership and invaluable guidance provided to us.
- This meeting today will consolidate the results attained over the last period and explore whether they firmly hold the high ground on political and socioeconomic stability in the region, more so as the Western Balkans, its core area, is faced with crucial challenges and choices. With this in mind, I would like to point several issues that from RCC's perspective, I deem the most important ones.
- As we applaud Croatia's full EU membership in the near future, we hope that this success will stimulate other aspiring countries from the region to rekindle their efforts and redouble the energy to overcome the remaining obstacles.
- In mentioning obstacles, I refer to the other less encouraging developments in the region, which are still part of its controversial scorecard – open and unresolved issues are becoming almost residual, perpetuating the climate of unfinished peace and unattained durable stability, with inevitable effects on the EU enlargement process.
- In this sense, I strongly believe in the potential of the leaders in the region to take a strategic long-term outlook at these issues – without the resolution of the outstanding open issues, at the times when the international agenda is moving the region down the list of its priorities and attention, we may be faced with a prolonged status quo and detrimental political lethargy.

- The second point, understandably, relates to the urgency of dealing with the open issues and avoiding delays of the region's ultimate goal to become a part of the EU and Euro-Atlantic community – it is about the EU enlargement momentum. In light of the current economic crisis and related political inward focus in the EU, the enlargement perspective and dynamics must be preserved and continued as a proven charger for further reforms, stability and prosperity of the region.
- We need to voice our common stance that the last thing we need in the region is a strategic imbalance, a new dividing line or 'quarantine rings' around the core of the region. And this is where, on the eve of forthcoming decisions of the EU Council, the strategic options meet – the ones that need to grasp the moment and push the region forward by resolving open issues and the one that needs to keep the entire Western Balkans on the accession track.
- My third point is about the current economic and social situation in the region. It is more than evident that the crisis has hit our region so severely that, with a very few exceptions, our economies are struggling to survive the general slowdown.
- Again, a broader view – take the chemistry of the unresolved political issues simmering insecurity and uncertainty in many parts of the region, take it against the background of EU enlargement prospects and timeline and add to this social effects from the hardest economic crisis in decades: to me, this is an alarming combination calling, recurrently, for a sense of common urgency. The way ahead, and a bold impetus, is through the regional cooperation, by elaborating a regional recovery and master plan and building on the vast human and natural resources in the region, by now fragmented and not put to a proper – meaningful use.
- What we need at this point in time, are well targeted and concrete development projects of a trans-regional dimension to bring rapid results in responding to the crisis and in what may or may not happen with the enlargement process.
- Once again, I want to refer to the initiatives already known and shared with you – the project of reconstructing and modernizing the railways systems in SEE, in particular the Ljubljana – Istanbul axis so that the region may build on its geo-economic assets within the future "Europe Bosphorus Corridor". There are many other projects of similar nature, from infrastructure corridors to waterways, which have to be seen as a "New Deal" type of chargers that can open new perspectives for national economies in times of crisis.
- As we are touching upon the future of regional cooperation, among the central issues noteworthy to be considered and that naturally come to mind is seizing the opportunity to stimulate discussions on the future modalities of cooperation related to the SEECP, such as but not limited to having SEECP Summits on targeted topics, advancing in relation to RCC from ownership to responsibility, or other possible decisions to ensure commitment to and the elaboration of the regional recovery and developmental approach.

- Dialogue on these topics has already started following exchanges of views at several meetings held so far in the region.
- And there are numerous reasons why it should be continued. I will mention just several of them – first, regional cooperation is by now one of the key requirements within the EU enlargement strategy and thus must be sustained and consolidated. Second, consolidation of the regional cooperation process is a pre-requisite to durable stability and even to the resolution of the open issues in the region. Third, there is a clear need to add an authentic regional responsibility to the regional ownership. Last but not least, it is by now 15 years since the inception of the SEECP – time has come, given the overall developments in the region, to evaluate the lessons learned and elaborate the future course.
- Moreover, the RCC would also benefit from the debate about the forms and frameworks of regional cooperation.
- With the first year of the implementation of the RCC Strategy and Work Programme (SWP) 2011-2013 behind us, it seems to me there is a need to look to the future and prepare the RCC for the period beyond 2013.
- First assessments of the implementation of the RCC SWP indicate a successful start and a need for full attentiveness and continuity within the RCC Secretariat.
- In my mind, the RCC needs to remain an operational arm of the SEECP, preserving its status neutral and all-inclusive character, with its stronger alignment with the EU enlargement strategy, just as it should be attributed a stronger role in the segment of strategic regional economic development.
- What we need in this sense is a clear political will based on the long term vision of the region. SEECP is the best format to ensure that will.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I would hope that our discussion today will pave way to a formal decision at the forthcoming SEECP high level meetings under the Serbian SEECP C-i-O leadership, at the RCC Board and Annual meetings, in consultations with the European institutions and other international partners, with the aim to agree on the procedures and best mechanisms to further evaluate the issue and prepare a set of recommendations for the future.

Thank you.