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Building on the Ashes of the Past with Cooperation and Dialogue: South East Europe Turns to Future

Sarajevo - As 2010 comes to a close, the time is right for tacking stock of developments in the south-eastern corner of Europe over the last year and, perhaps even more intriguing, to try to shed some light on the period ahead.

Looking back, stocktaking offers much more than routine and ritual overview, since this year was marked by truly positive drives in many segments of political and social life in South East Europe. In a word, the region continued to advance along the path towards European Union – importance of this progress cannot be overstated as the EU enlargement perspective and related reforms are still the most solid anchors of stability and cooperation in South East Europe. Visa liberalization is probably the most vivid and illustrative example, just as this progress was clearly reflected in the latest assessments by the European Commission regarding the status of each of the aspiring countries, pointing to the final stages of negotiation process of Croatia, granting a candidate status to Montenegro, appreciating the progress of Serbia and delivering it the Commission's questionnaire, and setting out roadmaps for delivery in other enlargement countries of the region.

Indeed, the very fact that they are termed “enlargement countries” testifies to the strategic persistence of the EU and a true commitment to the enlargement policy as a key pillar of the most needed process of “completing peace” in Europe's southeast. Given the broad challenges on EU agenda, this reinvigorated commitment is certainly the most commendable input from Brussels to the Balkans in the year 2010. Alongside the progress in institutional relations between the enlargement countries and the EU, the year was marked also by an unprecedented improvement of bilateral relations and general relaxation of political and social atmosphere in the region. As political leaderships undertook a number of vitally important steps related to tragic developments over the past decades of animosity, hatred, alienations and wars, the spirit of genuine reconciliation has taken root. Even in some “difficult cases” – from relations between Belgrade and Pristina to Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional debate – one could note gradual shift towards moderation and pragmatism that should create a stimulating framework for future developments on both issues. A new window of opportunities for tolerance, coexistence, mutual understanding and appeasement is in sight. Reconciliation and rapprochement are finally the call of the day.

With these two achievements, EU advancement and rapprochement within the region, South East Europe, and the Western Balkans in particular, now needs to build upon the positive trend and

translate it into a comprehensive and irreversible tendency, by defining precisely the role of every possible contributor to this process – parliamentarians, business community, academia, civil society, etc. – and by focusing on regional cooperation in the most needy areas of economic and social life.

Since the current economic crisis has brought enormously harsh effects on all countries in the region – with only a few exceptions – and revealed deep structural challenges for many national economies, it became evident that no country can resolve these problems without turning across the border.

South East Europe, especially the Western Balkans, needs a comprehensive regional recovery and development platform, in particular in the areas of evident underdevelopment, such as physical infrastructure, transport and energy, where it lags behind EU standards.

In this sense, regional cooperation will continue to be an indispensable platform for elaborating such regional “development master plan”, with support from the EU and international partners, by taking advantage of the Regional Cooperation Council, the South East Europe Investment Committee and other fora to identify concrete and region-specific projects and initiatives that would put to a better and proper use many neglected or underdeveloped natural and human resources of the region. With these lessons learned and achievement made in 2010, what could be expected from 2011?

First, one would hope that the enlargement countries will continue to advance – namely, that in the first quarter of the year Croatia would complete or be given a date for completion of the negotiations, Montenegro would qualify to get the date for the start of the negotiations, by the end of the year Serbia would qualify for a candidate status, and progress would be achieved in relations between the EU and the rest of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey.

This will largely depend on the will and the ability of political leaderships from the region to keep the pace of reforms, upgrade institutional capacities, and ensure good governance and the rule of law against the backdrop of economic crisis and accompanying social tensions. Furthermore, there is a danger that troublesome challenge of economic slowdown and disturbing social consequences in several critical cases match the remaining unresolved issues of political nature, thus potentially creating an environment of instability, renewed tensions, and “pockets of turbulence”.

It will be critically important that 2011 bring about further enhancement of the EU drive in South East Europe, that the region address economic recovery and development, and that political leaders find a way to resolve the remaining open issues by building on the current new spirit of rapprochement, thus boosting stability and “predictability” in the region, enabling the EU enlargement policy to keep the momentum.