

SEECP

neighbourhood in cooperation



HELLENIC CHAIRMANSHIP-IN-OFFICE
2005 - 2006

THESSALONIKI DECLARATION

**OF THE NINTH MEETING OF THE HEADS
OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT
OF THE SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN COOPERATION PROCESS
(SEECP)**

“Together in Europe”

Thessaloniki, May 4th, 2006

We, the Heads of State and Government of the States participating in the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) Dr. Sali Berisha, Mr. Sulejman Tihic, Mr. Sergei Stanishev, Mr. Ivo Sanader, Mr. Branko Crvenkovski, Mr. Kostas Karamanlis, Chairman-in-Office, Mr. Calin Popescu-Tariceanu, Mr. Svetozar Marovic, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Mr. Vasile Tarlev as observer, have met in Thessaloniki on the 4th of May 2006, at the Ninth Summit of the SEECP.

At the Meeting participated the Ministers of Foreign Affairs: Mr. Besnik Mustafaj, Dr. Mladen Ivanic, Mr. Ivailo Kalfin, Ms Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic, Dr. Ilinka Mitreva, Mrs. Dora Bakoyannis, Chair-in-Office of the SEECP, Mr. Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu, Mr. Vuk Draskovic, Minister of State Mr. Ali Babacan and Deputy Minister Mr. Valeriu Ostalep, as an observer.

Participating guests were: Dr. Hans Winkler, Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs, Austrian E.U. Presidency, Mr. Andrei Vdovin, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Hellenic Republic, Ambassador Marc Perrin de Brischambaut, OSCE Secretary General, Dr. Erhard Busek, Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, Mr. Martti Ahtisaari, U.N. Secretary General Special Envoy for the Future Status Process for Kosovo and Mr. Soren Jessen-Petersen, U.N. Secretary General Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission.

At this Summit we convened and confirmed the following:

We believe in the potential of the countries and peoples of Southeast Europe to work together to build a future of peace, stability and economic development for all.

The European perspective of the countries in the region and their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions constitute both an incentive and a catalyst for ever-closer cooperation and good neighbourly relations that preclude the use of force and any threat of the use of force.

The SEECP has pursued and continues to pursue these objectives, which voice the aspirations of the peoples of Southeast Europe. "Neighbourhood in Cooperation" and "Together in Europe" are two mottos that capture the essence and the momentum of our cooperation.

Future accession to the European Union is the primary goal of the countries and peoples of the region, which would bring stability and prosperity in this part of Europe and reaffirm the validity of the E.U. enlargement process.

We are convinced that the European Union will remain focused on this region and will uphold the commitments on the European perspective of its countries.

For their part, the countries of the region aspiring to join the European family are fully committed to adapting to its principles and values, and complying with the European Union's requirements and criteria.

We do not perceive the need for European adaptation as a mere obligation. It is a conscious choice of the countries and peoples of South-Eastern Europe. Together we are working to transform our region into a European area of stability, cooperation and prosperity.

The European Perspective of South-Eastern Europe

The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans, which has established the overall framework for the European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, thus making their European prospect more visible and credible, remains highly relevant and we support its full realisation and actualization.

We welcome the Joint Statement of the E.U. – Western Balkans Informal Ministerial Meeting, in Salzburg, last March, as well as the Communication of the European Commission "The Western Balkans on the Road to the E.U.", last January. We would like to strongly commit ourselves to the principles expressed by the document "An appraisal of the perspectives of the Thessaloniki Agenda in relation to the European integration of the Western Balkans", adopted by the ninth Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of SEECP in Thessaloniki, today and to ask the E.U. to actively take it into consideration, as the contribution of the countries of the region to a full realisation and actualisation of the Thessaloniki Agenda.

The Western Balkan countries have achieved considerable progress in the areas of stability, democracy and economic recovery. All have in the last year made significant steps along their road towards the E.U., with E.U. membership as ultimate goal in conformity with the Thessaloniki Declaration. They must now increasingly focus in adopting and implementing European standards and in fostering conditions for sustainable stability and prosperity throughout the region.

The countries of the region committed themselves to continue and accelerate the reforms furthering these objectives. All participants agreed on the importance of good neighbourly relations and on the need for finding mutually acceptable solutions on outstanding issues with neighbouring countries. Also, the participants agreed that each country's progress towards the E.U. continues to depend on individual merits in meeting the conditions and requirements set forth in the Copenhagen criteria and in the Accession and Stabilisation and Association Processes, including full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

We also welcome the positive steps and the decision taken at the South East Europe Summit, held in Bucharest on the 6th of April 2006, aiming at modernizing and improving CEFTA, in order to establish a Free Trade Agreement in South Eastern Europe, for a better application of the W.T.O. and the E.U. standards and thereby promote trade and investments in South Eastern Europe.

We actively support efforts towards the establishment of a visa facilitation regime for all SEECP countries still under visa obligation in order to facilitate their contacts with the European Union. The European perspective of this region remains a priority issue and we therefore strongly urge the European Commission to submit at the earliest possible, and in any case before the end of 2006, to the Council of the EU the draft negotiating mandates for initiating negotiations with all SEECP countries still under visa obligation for the prompt conclusion of bilateral Visa Facilitation – and Readmission – Agreements with the EU. In this respect, we fully support Greece's efforts, in its capacity as the sole current EU member among the States participating to the SEECP, to actively and constructively contribute to the relevant debate within the EU, and for the process of the adoption of the negotiating mandates by the Council of the EU to be concluded in a timely fashion.

Recent developments confirm that the European Union enlargement process is continuing and that the countries of the region are on the right track towards their future accession to the E.U.

The Greek Chairmanship-in-Office

A series of Ministerial Meetings in all basic fields were organized during the Greek Chairmanship-in-Office, in chronological order: Foreign Affairs, Health, Sports, Transport, Justice and Home Affairs, Economy, Energy, Culture and the meeting of Heads of Parliament.

Parliamentary cooperation is a constructive dimension of regional cooperation, functioning in a horizontal way. We welcome regular, annual meetings of the Heads of Parliament of the SEECP countries and we encourage closer contacts of relevant Parliamentary Committees.

A valid way towards progress and development is economic cooperation, cooperation in the development of regional infrastructure, cooperation in the field of trade.

Energy and transport are two pillars in the whole infrastructure of South East Europe. Energy is a priority field for cooperation. Important projects in the region are in progress. The establishment of the Energy Community of South Eastern Europe, within the framework of the Athens process, is pivotal. The treaty signed in Athens last October was an important step forward for South East Europe. The signatory countries should carry on with the implementation of the Treaty, in order to obtain concrete results to the benefit of the peoples of the region.

Pan-European corridors agreed in Crete and Helsinki, as well as the South Eastern Axis for the extension of the major trans-European transport axes to the neighbouring countries and regions constitute the framework for the development of the transport network in South Eastern Europe. To this end, financial coverage and economic viability are indispensable and self-evident criteria. The elimination of barriers and the simplification of procedures at border crossings according to the European standards are essential for facilitating transport operations in the area.

In this spirit, we welcome today's signing of an Agreement on the Establishment of a High Performance Railway Network in South East Europe by the Ministers of Transport of SEECP, which will modernize railways by reducing travel times and increasing quality of services in the area, thus promoting regional and cross-border communication and trade.

Terrorism, violence and extremism, be it ethnically, politically or criminally motivated, is condemned. The vision shared by us for the future of the region is one of open societies, impregnated by democratic principles, where civil rights are universally respected. In such a society corruption and organized crime have no place. Therefore SEECP countries will spare no effort in combating criminal phenomena, which obstruct the process towards this goal. To this end, it is necessary to continue the implementation of the Joint Campaign to fight organized crime and corruption in South Eastern Europe, launched in 2004, by further developing the activities undertaken within the SEECP Consultation Group on Fighting Organized Crime and Corruption.

We recognize the significance of the further development of the activities and goals of the Migration, Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), which were spelled out in the Declaration of the Ministers responsible for the area of migration, asylum and refugees, adopted 7 April 2006 in Belgrade, hence, encouraging and strengthening the enhancement of regional ownership on these issues by the countries of the SEECP.

Culture, for our region, has always been a motivating force. In many historical struggles and disputes, culture has acted as a unifying and soothing force. Culture is vital for the promotion of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect of human and minority rights. Cultural exchange is essential for cross-border contacts among societies, among non-governmental organizations and for the youth of the region. Having this in mind the Greek Chairmanship-in-Office organized the first SEECP Meeting of Ministers of Culture in Patras, actual Cultural Capital of Europe. In this respect we welcome the further development of Cultural Corridors Initiative of South East Europe.

Regional cooperation has proved essential in dealing also with urgent epidemic phenomena, such as the avian influenza. Health cooperation and coordination on regional level has been combined with the implementation of national plans and has contributed to the protection of the peoples of the region.

The Institutional Enhancement of the SEECP

Regional ownership and the crucial role of SEECP in this context, is of paramount importance for the further development of the regional cooperation. It is only natural that the countries of the region aspire to hold their destinies in their own hands, even more so as this constitutes a firm requirement for their future accession to the European Union. The countries of South East Europe share the unyielding belief in their euro-atlantic orientation and perceive their European perspective as a further useful motivation. In this framework, regional cooperation and ownership, strongly supported and long expected by the European Union, remain of paramount importance for the countries themselves.

The SEECP is the principal political forum and the single "authentic voice" established by the region itself, bringing together all the countries of South East Europe. As such, it embodies and best represents the principles of regional ownership and regional co-operation. As the necessity for stronger and better coordinated implementation of the two principles increases, SEECP should adapt to and prepare for the new challenges, as soon as possible. Moreover, in view of the future reshaping of the Stability Pact's activities, it is imperative that the SEECP prepares itself to take the necessary institutional and operational steps and play an active role in order to shoulder some of the tasks and responsibilities of the Stability Pact.

The institutional enhancement of SEECP is a means towards this end. It ensures a SEECP capable to face future developments, which directly concern and affect the region. The institutional enhancement of SEECP has, among others, as its aim to support and accelerate the European perspective of the region. Regional co-operation is by no means a substitute to E.U. accession. On the contrary, for E.U. membership, it is imperative to show that the countries of South East Europe are in a position to co-operate in an institutionalized and systematic way.

For the accomplishment of the above objectives, we welcome Greece's initiative to propose an "Action Plan on the Institutional Enhancement of the SEECP". Such a plan could contribute, for the first time, to the institutional enhancement of SEECP and in this respect to the stability and peace in the region, as well as to the future accession of the SEECP countries to the European Union. We call all SEECP countries to study it thoroughly and present their contributions.

We call upon the Croatian Chairmanship to conclude the consultations on this Action Plan with a view to implementing the relevant decisions by the end of its Chairmanship. We also call upon the Croatian Chairmanship to engage in consultations with the SEECP countries and the E.U. Commission to examine their positions on a future institutional enhancement of the SEECP, transitional arrangements with the Stability Pact and all other relevant organisational aspects of the process.

We deem productive and in conformity with the future accession to the European Union of the countries of the region to discuss the modalities of the appointment of a SEECP Liaison Officer with the European Union.

We are certain that the SEECP will be able to seize the historic opportunity to be at the center of crucial transformations promoting the development of the region and strengthening its European perspective. From the "voice" of the region, SEECP will thus become the "actor" in and for the region.

Kosovo

Every effort should be made to achieve a negotiated settlement of the status of Kosovo, mutually acceptable to the parties concerned. Any solution must be reached through peaceful means, excluding any form of violence, respecting the inviolability of borders and contributing to regional stability and security. Having in mind the UNSC Resolution 1244, the recommendations made by UNSG Special Representative Mr. K. Eide, the Contact Group guiding principles and the ongoing negotiations on the status of Kosovo, we express our full support for the work of the UN Special Envoy and his team. We also recall the importance of continued and effective standards implementation.

The keen interest of SEECP for developments in the region was particularly reflected in the Kosovo issue. The Troika visit to Pristina and Belgrade on the 6th and 7th of December 2005 and the Meeting with high representatives of the Contact Group and international bodies involved in the negotiation process, held in Vouliagmeni (Athens) on the 5th of April 2006, are a tangible proof that the SEECP, demonstrating a high degree of responsibility in addressing regional issues, can further contribute to the promotion of the principle of regional ownership and cooperation.

Incoming SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office – New SEECP Member

Moldova, after a period of productive participation as observer in SEECP, it has been unanimously decided to become a participating country.

The SEECP Heads of State and Government express their deep appreciation for the effective Chairmanship-in-Office of the Hellenic Republic and their gratitude for the excellent organisation of the Thessaloniki SEECP Summit.

They welcome the incoming Croatian Chairmanship-in-Office as well as its Platform and decide that the next meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the SEECP countries will be held in Croatia in 2007. At the same time, they gladly accept Bulgaria's proposal to take over the SEECP Chairmanship-in-Office after Croatia.