
SEECP-Key to Regional Cooperation Challenges Lying Ahead of the Current Bulgarian Chairmanship-in-Office 2015-2016

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Abstract

At this critical moment for Europe and the SEE region, Bulgaria took over, for the third time, the chairmanship of the South-East European Cooperation Process for the period of 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016. Under the slogan “SEECP – a key to regional cooperation over the past 20 years”, the Chairmanship aims at promoting constructive dialogue and cooperation among the SEECP participants in order to raise the effectiveness and visibility of the regional initiative among the international partners. In terms of the collision between European integration and growing nationalism, it is our responsibility to defend the European idea by guaranteeing the stability and territorial integrity of the countries in the region. The South-East European Cooperation Process is the proper format for reaching such ambitious perspectives for the benefit of all our friends in the region.

Key Words

Southeast Europe, Balkans, South-East European Cooperation Process, Bulgaria, regional cooperation.

The Balkans are once again in the focus of public attention. Many of the major issues that concern Europe are concentrated in the South-East Europe (SEE) region. In times of potential vulnerability and risks of destabilization, it is our responsibility to defend civil rights, the rule of law, and the democratic perspective for the countries of the region. We should collectively support the processes of severe reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration. Thus, our region will show that the integration processes on the continent are neither an exclusive “patent” of other states, nor can they be completed without the participation of the SEE countries. Along with that, close cooperation is needed in order to ensure political stability and conditions for the economic prosperity of our countries. The 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, which we commemorated on the 11th of July 2015, should remind us how fragile stability is in the Balkans and how important it is to work together towards sustaining it.

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At this critical moment for Europe and the SEE region, Bulgaria takes over, for the third time, the chairmanship of the South-East European Cooperation Process for the period of 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016. Under the slogan “SEECP – a key to regional cooperation over the past 20 years”, the Chairmanship will aim at promoting constructive dialogue and cooperation among the SEECP participants in order to raise the effectiveness and visibility of the regional initiative among the international partners. In terms of the collision between European integration and growing nationalism, it is our responsibility to defend the European idea by guaranteeing the stability and territorial integrity of the countries in the region. Bulgaria will always be on the side of dialogue and against the powers of collision; on the side of beneficial competition and against rivalry and resignation. The South-East European Cooperation Process is the proper format for reaching such ambitious perspectives for the benefit of all our friends in the region.

The celebration of the 20th anniversary of the SEECP in 2016, which coincides with the Bulgarian Chairmanship,

once again symbolically underscores Bulgaria’s role in the successful development of regional cooperation over the past two decades. The Member States of the Euro-Atlantic community have the obligation to be a democratic example and to stimulate the proper approach towards European integration. As an EU and NATO Member State, Bulgaria considers its commitment to being the exclusive partner of the countries from the region in applying the Euro-Atlantic norms and principles. We share, with the SEE countries, not only similarities in our culture and historical past, but we are also ready to share the perspectives for our economic and political future.

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Affirming SEECP as an effective initiative and seeking concrete results, that is the key to successful regional cooperation. Led by this principle, Bulgaria will focus on project-oriented and concrete results-based *interaction among the SEECP, the EU, and other international organizations and formats*. That will make our voice stronger and more important within the framework of international dialogue and interaction. It is of great importance for the cooperation in the region to go on deepening the fruitful

synergy between the SEEC-CP and the RCC Secretariat, also known as its “operational unit”.

Special emphasis will be put on the *policy of continuity* in SEEC-CP activities, considering it as an important step towards the promotion of that format as a reliable, consistent, and predictable initiative. The Republic of Bulgaria is prepared to carry on the efforts that have been made by the previous Romanian and Albanian chairmanships in particular areas of cooperation, such as stabilization and economic development, security and rule of law, preservation of the environment and fighting climate change, regional youth and sports policy, human potential development, culture, and education. *We highly appreciate the work done so far.*

As the main promoter of parliamentary cooperation in the region, our country will focus its efforts on developing the *SEEC-CP Parliamentary Dimension* as a key factor for sustaining stability and enhancing cooperation in the region. The eventual selection of Sofia as the place for deployment of the future Permanent Secretariat of the SEEC-CP Parliamentary Assembly will deepen the idea of parliamentary cooperation in Southeastern Europe. Having in mind our country’s contribution to the development of this initiative, we consider this to be the logical and correct choice. Regarding the future Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly,

without any doubt, the most effective and economically efficient solution is to use the already accumulated experience and resources of the current ad-hoc acting Secretariat, which has been functioning in Sofia for more than five years. In addition, concerning the need for deepening the relations among the SEEC-CP Parliamentary Assembly, European Parliament and the European Commission, placing the SEEC-CP PA headquarters in an EU Member State is an obvious advantage and it can be referred to as the most logical development of the campaign.

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The Bulgarian Chairmanship will concentrate its efforts particularly on **three priority spheres**: connectivity – transport, energy, and infrastructure; media freedom and freedom of expression; migration and coping with the refugees flow.

The first line of priority will coordinate and intensify the efforts of the countries of the region towards *establishing a transport infrastructure*

with a focus on those projects with the highest added value for Southeastern Europe. Our country will make efforts towards achieving visible progress in the process of establishing a modern transport network that will allow the activation of trade and economic cooperation among the countries, thus positively affecting their standards of living.

Although key transport corridors of the Old Continent pass through the region, the overall status of the infrastructure linking the Balkan countries is still far from the levels reached in other parts of Europe. Having in mind the fact that this is largely due to the shortage of financial resources, Bulgaria will focus its efforts on implementing alternative methods of financing the transport sector on the principles of public-private partnership. Different options will be discussed for increasing the efficiency and quality of the transport services through such means as modernization of the existing infrastructure, implementing modern transport systems, raising the competitiveness of the transport enterprises, and limiting the harmful effects on the environment.

In the context of the current security challenges for the region, the importance of energy security becomes more essential. Regarding this, during the chairmanship of the SEECF, Bulgaria will encourage seeking a coherent

energy policy among the countries in the region, based on ensuring energy supply and diversification of the energy suppliers and transport, raising energy efficiency, developing a competitive energy market, securing energy needs, and protecting consumers' rights. The provision of an infrastructure suitable for this purpose is seen by our country as a prerequisite for ensuring the energy security in one of the, in this sense, most vulnerable regions of Europe. To this end, the Bulgarian Chairmanship will maintain constant interest in the topic of implementing major diversification projects in the region and will subject this topic to discussion at the highest levels.

Providing public access to the full range of sources of information and emphasising access to the internet and new technologies is also an integral part of the priorities of the Bulgarian Chairmanship.

The main line of business will be directed towards connecting the national electrical grids as an integral part of the process for creating an integrated, liberalized, and competitive, regional energy market, which will successfully function even in cases of sudden interruption of the energy supplies. Considering that the development of

energy security based on a developed gas infrastructure is of priority concern for the European Union, these actions could be considered as an additional opportunity to prepare the Western Balkan countries in reaching their ultimate goal – full integration into the European family.

The recent events in the Republic of Macedonia have shown the necessity to reaffirm our support for the independence and territorial integrity of these countries.

In pursuing the above-mentioned priorities, the relevant Bulgarian authorities and institutions will actively participate in the management of the various activities set out in the calendar of events of the Chairmanship. For example, a regional meeting on energy efficiency and sustainable development will be organized, jointly with the Ministry of Energy, whereas regarding transport connectivity, a conference on transport infrastructure as a factor for promoting and improving economic ties in the region will be arranged. Organizers of the event will be the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The serious influence enjoyed by the media in the modern world also implies the existence of various types of abuse of media freedom and freedom of expression. That's why Bulgaria assumes this issue as one of its three main sectoral priorities and will direct the SEECP activity towards creating a diverse, independent, and stable media environment in the region as well as respecting the regional and the international instruments for freedom of speech and mass-media. The main target will be to ensure balanced, accurate, and objective information reflecting the entire range of different views and opinions, respecting the ethnic, linguistic, religious, political, and social diversity in Southeastern Europe. It is necessary to take adequate counteraction measures against the non-democratic tendencies arising in the mass-media, especially when it comes to the concentration of media ownership in the hands of oligarchic circles – a phenomenon which is still widespread in the countries of the region.

Providing public access to the full range of sources of information and emphasising access to the internet and new technologies is also an integral part of the priorities of the Bulgarian Chairmanship. In that respect, as far as existing media regulations are concerned, an equal footing of the electronic and print media should be

ensured, and, in addition, the use of electronic services should be promoted not only in the public, but in the private sector. One of the ideas of the Bulgarian Chairmanship concerning the development of that sector, is to create an online regional media platform. A meeting of the major mass-media from Southeastern Europe to discuss the challenges of the region in this aspect is scheduled for April 2016.

The Bulgarian Chairmanship will be led by the principles of democracy, rule of law, and ensuring freedom in political and economic terms, along with ensuring the necessary arrangements for their implementation. The integration of the Western Balkan countries in the European Union, as well as protecting their territorial integrity, have no alternative and are the main guarantees for peace and stability in the Balkans. The activities of the European Union in the region should be enhanced in order to provide an effective solution to overcome future crises and to create conditions for the establishment of modern institutions. The recent events in the Republic of Macedonia have shown the necessity to reaffirm our support for the independence and territorial integrity of these countries. The Republic of Bulgaria, in its capacity as the Chairman-in-office of the SEECP, will initiate and work for the adoption of a joint Declaration, confirming the

principle of inviolability of territorial boundaries in Southeastern Europe.

Within the framework of a comprehensive global approach, the efforts will be concentrated towards the creation of an effective regional policy based on solidarity with the most affected countries as well as on close cooperation with the countries of origin and the transit countries.

The Bulgarian Chairmanship will also focus on cooperation in the field of *migration and the successful management of the migratory pressure* – another major issue not only for the region but also in a broader sense, in the context of the various challenging events that are occurring in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and North Africa. The direct link between the political instability in these regions and the migration flows that cross Southeastern Europe challenges the SEECP participants to cooperate actively in supporting the international efforts to find a lasting solution to the problem. Profound analyses of the situation in the affected countries; the origin and the final destination of the migration flow as well as the attitude of the respective societies towards that

process and the domestic and foreign policy actions of each country should be made in order to meet successfully the challenges that stem from the migration influxes.

Special efforts should be made for achieving successful integration of the refugees and other vulnerable groups, susceptible to the dangers of speaking the language of hatred. At such difficult moments, the SEE countries should defend their European and Euro-Atlantic values. The SEECP will be the major coordinating format, while preparing a regional strategy for the integration of people that have received international protection status in the SEECP countries, based on the experience and good practice from other countries facing similar challenges. This policy will achieve the desired results if proper measures are taken to limit the language of hatred and reduce the xenophobia and intolerance that are observed in some countries of the region. Following the priorities of the Albanian SEECP Chairmanship (July 2014 – June 2015), particularly – the realisation of concrete goals in real time, we have started, along with the RCC Secretariat, consultations for the establishment of a regional platform for fighting terrorist threats. Forecasts for the duration of the conflicts close to the region are unspecified, but predictions point to an increasing number of returnee foreign terrorist

fighters. In this sense, the establishment of a network of counterterrorism mechanisms for identifying vulnerable groups at the national and regional levels is of major importance for Southeastern Europe.

Looking at the situation in a broader plan, the Republic of Bulgaria as an EU Member State will initiate the process of seeking cooperation not only within the framework of the EU, but also with other international organisations in order to better defend particular regional interests and needs derived from the intensified migratory flows. An active dialogue with the relevant EU organisations, such as the European Commission, EASO (the European Asylum Support Office), FRONTEX (the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the EU), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration, etc., is going to be conducted.

The international commitments and obligations of the SEECP participating countries have already predefined the necessity of coordinated and targeted actions in dealing with the refugee flows. Within the framework of a comprehensive global approach, the efforts will be concentrated towards

the creation of an effective regional policy based on solidarity with the most affected countries as well as on close cooperation with the countries of origin and the transit countries. All of this requires enhanced diplomatic contacts and close cooperation with key countries along the route of the migratory wave. Last but not least, the Bulgarian SEECP Chairmanship-in-office aims at assisting the allocation of the financial support rendered by the EU and the international community for the purpose of dealing with the migratory pressure. Guided by the European solidarity and its practical dimensions, all EU Member States should be involved in the process towards ending the crisis and overcoming the migratory pressure.

Conclusion

The countries in the Balkans have made remarkable progress in solving a number of serious problems over the past two decades, but more efforts are required in achieving lasting peace and prosperity in the region. Taking over the SEECP chairmanship for the third time, Bulgaria will work towards increasing the voice of the SEECP countries within the framework of the continental debates and the integration processes. A collective and persistent “we” – mutually spoken by all of us – will add more strength and legitimacy

to the countries from the region, and help prevail over alternative interests.

Looking towards the future, we should firmly and definitely wipe out the alternatives replacing democracy such as aggressive nationalism and populism. The European future is the unifying factor for the region, while the integration process is its driving force in that direction. Cooperation among the countries is a powerful tool for moving ahead in the future. Each country in the region can and should contribute to the peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Balkans. We should strive towards common standards in the interpretation of history, politics, diplomacy, rule of law, and media freedom. Finally, we should stop being hostages of the subjective interpretations of our historical past and start being people sharing a common interest in the future – decent incomes for our citizens, guaranteeing their regional security and democratic perspective.

That is the reason why the main priorities set out by Bulgaria are so clearly formulated and concrete in their search for an answer to the most relevant and serious challenges that the Southeastern European countries face. The South-East European Cooperation Process, which has proven itself as an effective and relevant mechanism for fruitful political dialogue among the countries of the region, will be the

key instrument for ensuring stability and security in the region. During the one-year period of its Chairmanship, Bulgaria will aim at achieving concrete results in major issues on the regional agenda. Only through joint efforts and shared values, can stability and economic growth be achieved and can the Southeastern Europe peoples enjoy the prosperity and fair-dealing which we deserve along with everyone else.

We thank our Romanian and Albanian colleagues for the fruitful cooperation within the “Troika”

format. We welcome the willingness of Croatia to take over the next SEECP Chairmanship. Our country will strongly support each successive Chairmanship of the Process that is committed to the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the region. We are convinced that our joint work within the SEECP will show to the rest of the world the effective and beneficial example of the Balkans. We all together will transform the current challenges in the region into new opportunities for the decent future of our peoples.