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**From the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe
to the Regional Cooperation Council:**

Enhancing the Voice of the Region

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THE SEECP HERITAGE AND THE REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL

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The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) already has a long record of success, but as with every success story, it contains aspects which need amelioration.

We can trace the beginning of SEECP, under its present format, in Sofia in July 1996, when a first meeting of Foreign Ministers took place, the first Summit following one year later on Crete. At present, we mark the completion of a 10-year existence, an important anniversary for SEECP. If we delve further in the past, we will discover the origins of this cooperation already in 1975: after a Greek initiative, Inter-Balkan Cooperation was set in motion. During the last ten years nine SEECP Summits were organised: Crete (4.11.1997), Antalya (13.10.1998), Bucharest (12.02.2000), Skopje (23.02.2001), Tirana (28.3.2002), Belgrade (9.4.2003), Sarajevo (21.4.2005), Bucharest (9.5.2005) and Thessaloniki (4.5.2006).

SEECP today disposes of a Charter, the Bucharest Charter of February 2000, as well as certain regional organisations functioning within its own framework, such as the Migration, Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI).

So far, so good concerning history and the formal aspects of SEECP.

Politically, SEECP is a big success for two reasons: First, it is a pure initiative of the region, born of the conviction of the countries of the region that they need this kind of cooperation as a forum to overcome hostilities and problems of the past. There was no external factor, which urged the region to proceed with the revival of this cooperation in 1996. It was simply a conviction of the need for such cooperation by the countries of the region. Second, the meetings of SEECP, Summits and Ministerials in many sectors, including those of infrastructure and development, have created a new perspective of cooperation in the region. Perhaps the results have not always been so spectacular, but important agreements have been made and the idea of talking together and discussing the solution of problems is progressing over absence of communication and unilateral actions.

The Charter of SEECP of 2000 was an enormous step forward. Without doubt, the main strength of SEECP is the political will of its participants; also, the fact that the countries of the region strongly feel the need for its existence. On the other hand, an institutional upgrading is necessary and desirable. Perhaps, this is the main area where SEECP needs urgently to move forward.

You know that the Greek SEECP Chairmanship spared no effort, during the last Thessaloniki Summit, to promote an institutional enhancement of SEECP. The Greek proposals were attached to the Thessaloniki Declaration and even if concrete decisions were not taken then, all participants agreed on the need for such institutional reforms. Again, many participants underlined the conviction that the main SEECP impetus lies in its political dimension that could be sapped by creating a bureaucratic organisation. We understand the truth of that view and this is the reason why the Greek proposals were and are aiming at an institutional enhancement of SEECP avoiding any bureaucratic trap.

In Thessaloniki, it was evident that most of the SEECP countries, although fully recognising the need for institutional reform, needed more time to think about its concrete form and application.

At the same time, the perspective of a re-shaping of the activities of Stability Pact was clear on the horizon. The common proposals of the European Commission and the Stability Pact of April 24th 2006, as well as the final report of the Senior Review Group, one month earlier, created a new development, which should be taken into consideration by SEECP.

The Greek Chairmanship of SEECP, again, made every effort to prepare the situation for those developments. May I remind you of the meeting of the SEECP competent Political Directors with senior officials of the European Commission and the Stability Pact, in Brussels, in September 2005, the meeting of Ambassador Rusi and members of the Senior Review Group with the SEECP competent Political Directors, in Athens, in January 2006, as well as the frequent meetings between SEECP and the Special Coordinator of the Stability Pact, Dr. Busek.

The common proposals by the European Commission and the Stability Pact, which were in principle endorsed also by the SEECP countries at the Belgrade Regional Table, on 30 May 2006, point to a new important development in the field of cooperation in South-Eastern Europe:

They promote the principle of regional ownership offering the initiative to the countries of the region. At the same time, they keep international donors on board and promote a fruitful marriage of the Stability Pact and SEECP inside the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The common proposals try to maintain and infuse the political and regional character of SEECP into the new organ, preserving the achievements and valuable experience of Stability Pact.

Personally, I see in these proposals an effort to reach a wise balance in the structure of RCC. I understand that they assign to SEECP the role of political motor of RCC, while through the Secretary General and the annual and quarterly RCC meetings they try to assure a necessary operational capability, in the lines of the so far experience of the Stability Pact, an experience that no one is interested in losing.

Greece already, in its capacity as SEECP Chair, clearly supported the common proposals. Simultaneously, we asked, in the new scheme of things, all SEECP countries to be fully included in RCC because of a number of obvious reasons. Mainly, there should not be a differentiation or disproportion between SEECP and RCC, which are called to work together in the future. In a contrary eventuality, there is a risk of encouraging diverging courses by SEECP and RCC, while we aim for the opposite. I understand that these thoughts find appreciation both in the European Commission and the Stability Pact.

The task on the shoulders of the present Croatian Chairmanship is to promote an official SEECP acceptance of the common proposals and subsequently to proceed with choosing the future Secretary General of RCC. This is a big challenge, but we have trust in the capability of the incumbent Presidency and the clear-sightedness of the SEECP member states.