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“Regional Co-operation in South Eastern Europe – Prospects and Challenges for the Regional Co-operation Council”

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Session I – Regional Cooperation as a Political Process – Achievements and Lessons Learned

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We set off with a demanding task of evaluating the lessons learned and challenges, but also opportunities for the RCC and regional cooperation in general.

The initial chronological account of the road from the Stability Pact to the establishment of the RCC served the purpose of putting this process into perspective and making us aware of different and many obstacles and bumps along the way.

However, as Ambassador Schmunk pointed out, this workshop helped lay the groundwork for future RCC activities, which can survive and be successful if accepted as a locally owned institution, promoting cooperation, trust and good neighborly relations. This puts significant responsibility on BiH as the host of the RCC, but also provides an opportunity which BiH is yet to explore.

Jelica Minic stressed the improved bilateral and multilateral cooperation as one of the most significant achievements of the Stability Pact and implied it to be a successful model, although the subsequent debate depicted it more as a process than a model, and there was a view that it was too much about politics and not enough about the process.

Nonetheless, a more positive image and visibility of the region has been developed and requires more communication inside our own societies, but outside the region as well.

The primary achievement according to Mr. Busek is the fact that we are all sitting here today, which was not very clear and certain at the very beginning. The EU in particular learned much from this process and the region grew closer to it. Close cooperation has been developed with member states too, but also with partners outside the EU, the US and different international organizations.

A major, however straightforward, lesson is that the regional cooperation is necessary. It is pragmatic cooperation, which has results and consequences which continue and further it.

Mr. Busek outlined a number of things that remain to be done:

- Further development of cooperation with the EU and member states in the fields of migration, education, fighting organized crime, health, social insurance, science and research, and infrastructure.
- Also stressed was the cooperation with international organizations and international financial institutions in particular, because as it became very clear

through further discussion, it is widely recognized that the region is still missing elaborated and fundable projects.

- On the so called ‘soft side’ there is a need for more cooperation among the NGOs and within civil society in general; the image of the region still suffers from relics of the past and needs to be improved. The same was said about the ‘mood’ of the countries in the region, which need to move beyond the mutual competitiveness and to turn into more cooperation.

Civil society is seen as more efficient and open to cooperation than the public sector, but needs more support and it should be more consulted by the RCC. In that regard, it was proposed that the RCC secretariat assists in establishing a representation of the regional civil society in Brussels.

The SP structures are an important precondition for good functioning of the RCC, but there is a need for more specific timelines and some quick results. Frequent changes of governments should not constitute an insurmountable obstacle and the RCC should be persistent in repeating its messages to all new governments and personalities that appear.

According to Mr. Busek, the most important lesson learned is to create a feeling to be a family and to learn from each other.

A point was raised about the importance of raising awareness concerning environmental issues and their impact from the region on the surrounding areas.

Much has been done on promoting the visa liberalization regime, particularly for the young people, but the unequal treatment of countries from the region remains a problem and may impose itself as a prominent obstacle to regional cooperation in the future.

In an ideal world, we would strive to achieve at a minimum a visa free travel inside the region. However, it is recognized that this is conditioned more by the progress of individual countries towards the EU and is not so much subject to good will and neighborly relations.

The role of the private sector was also discussed and it was suggested that it should rank very high in the RCC agenda, even though the private capital has generally moved much faster throughout the region regardless of the political processes.

An important point was raised that in order to establish a sense of commonness and common identity, there needs to be more cultural exchange which should be supported from the outside as well. Related to this is also a perceived lack of vision and political support from the top.

The political leadership should make a stronger point that regional cooperation is not separate or even an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration. Both are part of the same process, even though it was stressed that regional cooperation is not the first step towards EU integration, the process is far more complicated and we need to bear that in mind.

It is also important not to duplicate efforts in different regional initiatives.

The status of Kosovo in the RCC was also discussed, as well as the challenge which the Kosovo decision on independence may pose on regional cooperation. In that regard, it was encouraging to hear a repeated commitment of the Serbian government to continue to support the RCC and regional cooperation, even though a strong call has been made for the respect of the position of the Government of Serbia.

Finally, Jelica Minic reiterated that the substance of our effort is the same even though the institutional framework and the context are changing. That is why she formulated and concluded that regional cooperation as a political process is about patience.