

Overview of the Key Activities of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Secretariat

April 2009

1. On 2 April 2009, Workshop on Electronic Government (eGovernment) was organized at the premises of the RCC Secretariat in order to promote information society development, as a platform for economic growth, competitiveness, social inclusion and high quality of living. The Workshop gathered experts in the field of eGovernment from South East Europe. It was held under the auspices of the Southeastern Europe Telecommunication and Informatics Research Institute Academy, the Development Assistance Programme of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Centre for eGovernance Development and the United Nations Development Programme, with the involvement of the RCC.

2. On 7 April 2009, the Secretary General participated in the Meeting of the SEECP Political Directors organized in Chisinau by the SEECP Moldovan Chairmanship-in-Office. The participants at the Meeting elaborated on the draft of the Political Declaration that is being envisaged to be adopted by the Heads of State/Government at the SEECP Summit that will be held in Chisinau on 5 June 2009.

The participants agreed that an additional Joint Statement encompassing the reaffirmation of the European perspective of the participating States, economic development in South East Europe and the rule of law should be adopted. (The Chisinau Joint Statement has since been drafted).

3. On 7 April 2009, the 5th Conference of the Bled Process on Stolen Vehicle Crime was co-organized by the RCC Secretariat and the Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA) in Sarajevo. The participants, stressing that the stolen vehicle crime is a highly lucrative criminal business intimately linked with organized crime, concurred on the necessity for a concerted joint effort for curbing the crime.

They recommended the establishment of a regional Bled Network to strengthen the implementation of national action plans to fight stolen vehicle crime, the furthering of cooperation between regional and international partners with the support of Interpol and Europol, and the implementation of national action plans through twinning programmes, with SEPCA's involvement.

They further recommended that the Bled Process should be completed by 2011, while the RCC's coordination activities should aim at having all the parties implement their national action plans as a priority.

4. On 8 April 2009, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of France, Czech Republic and Sweden, as the previous, the current and the incoming Presidents of the Council of the European Union, visited the Secretariat of the RCC. The Ministers reflected on the importance of the work of the RCC for the countries of the region, as well as for all of Europe. They said that it is only by advancing cooperation and integration forward that the wider purposes of European integration can be served.

Secretary Biscevic said that the RCC is privileged by the said visit, which underlined the high profile the RCC enjoys within the EU, whose support will additionally help the Secretariat fulfill the RCC's mission of promoting mutual cooperation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration of South East Europe in order to inspire development in the region to the benefit of its peoples.

5. On 14 April 2009, the Secretary General held consultations with the Czech EU Presidency and delivered a lecture at the Prague Institute for International Relations. Within the framework of the regular consultations with the EU Presidency, the Secretary General met in Prague with the First Deputy Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic, Mr. Tomas Pojar. They discussed the preparations by the Moldovan Chairmanship-in-Office of the SEECP and the RCC Secretariat for the RCC Annual Meeting on 4 June 2009 and the SEECP Summit on 5 June 2009, both in Chisinau, especially in view of the current situation in Moldova following the recent parliamentary elections, reflecting on the need to show restraint and use of diplomatic means in overcoming current difficulties.

They highlighted the importance of the Summit, especially at the present moment when the region is severely feeling the impacts of the financial and economic crisis which in turn has the potential of negatively effecting social and political situation in the region.

The meeting touched upon the possibility for the Czech EU Presidency to provide support to the process of consultations among Bosnia and Herzegovina's political leaders to establish normalization in the country, as a follow-up to the talks that the French, Czech and Swedish Foreign Ministers held with the three political leaders while visiting Bosnia and Herzegovina on 7-8 April 2009.

6. On 16 April 2009 in Budapest, the Secretary General held political consultations with the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary. The Secretary General informed the State Secretary, Mr. Gabor Szentivanyi, of the ongoing dialogue with the EU's current Czech Presidency and incoming Swedish Presidency, aimed at maintaining the attention of the European Union on South East Europe at these times when the region is severely feeling the effects of the global financial and economic crisis, also giving information about the ongoing preparations for the convening of a High-level Meeting in December 2009 jointly by the RCC and the EU Presidency that is being planned for elaborating on and adopting a strategy for alleviating the impacts of the crisis.

The crisis in Moldova following the elections was also discussed during the consultations, expressing concern for its potential to negatively effect the upcoming SEECP Summit, yet adding confidence that a solution will soon be found ending the question.

The Hungarian State Secretary underlined the importance that Hungary attributes to the activities of the RCC for the benefit of South East Europe, pointing out at the significance of attaining the benchmarks set forth for EU accession, which can be achieved by the aspirants through regional cooperation, in addition to their individual efforts.

7. On 20 April 2009, the Secretary General met in Paris with the officials of the Council of Europe Development Bank. The Secretary General briefed the Bank's Vice Governor Mr. Imre Tarafas and his colleagues in great detail about the RCC's work in its priority areas and the working format and methods established among the RCC Secretariat, the National Coordinators from South East Europe, the EU Council, the EU Commission and the relevant international financial institutions, while exploring the ways the RCC Secretariat and the Council of Europe Development Bank can cooperate for the benefit of South East Europe.

8. On 24 April 2009, the Ministerial Conference on “Developing a Regional Research Strategy on Research and Development for the Western Balkans” was organized in Sarajevo under the auspices of the RCC Secretariat and the EU Czech Presidency. The Secretary General and the Czech Republic Deputy Minister of Education, Youth and Sports, Mr. Vlastimil Ruzicka, in their opening speeches, remarked on the relevance of the building of knowledge based societies for sustainable social and economic development in the region.

The participants, with the concluding Joint Statement, agreed to place cooperation on Regional Research and Development Strategy high on their political agendas and establish competitive regional centers of excellence in their fields of interest, thus also facilitating the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU.

9. On 25 April 2009, the first Meeting of the Heads of the Consular Services of the SEECP participating States was organized by the SEECP Moldovan Chairmanship-in-Office in Chisinau, with the involvement of the RCC Secretariat and the MARRI Regional Center. The Meeting aimed at holding discussions on the ways of addressing visa regime issues through bilateral mechanisms and identifying general practical principles for launching a systematic dialogue on the visa issue in the SEECP framework.

At the conclusion, it was agreed, among others, to regard the Chisinau Meeting as the launching of the SEECP Network of the Heads of the Consular Services of the SEECP Participating States, to make an assessment of the current difficulties encountered in visa obtaining procedures for experts from the SEECP countries and to assess the possibility of granting visas for experts from SEECP countries participating in the SEECP and **RCC** activities for periods longer than the current durations.

The Moldovan Chairmanship-in-Office invited the incoming Turkish Chairmanship to organize the next Meeting of the SEECP Heads of Consular Services as soon as possible.

10. On 30 April 2009, the Secretary General held consultations in Berne with the Deputy State Secretary of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The Secretary General, with regards the EU integration processes of South East European countries and the necessity of their perseverance for reform projects, stressed added urgency in these respects in view of the current financial and economic crisis.

Deputy Secretary of State Pierre Helg expressed the continuation of his Government's support to the RCC's activities, especially in the light of the December 2009 High-level Meeting that will be co-organized in Brussels by the RCC and the EU Commission.

During his visit to Berne, the Secretary General also met with the Assistant Director General and Head of the Department for Cooperation with Eastern Europe and the CIS of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Therese Adam, and presented her with the upcoming and planned RCC projects.

Sarajevo, 8 May 2009