

**Speech by Duško Lopandić, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia,  
current Chair-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)**

RCC Fourth Anniversary  
14 March 2012, Sarajevo

"From Ownership to responsibility: Regional Cooperation in South East Europe and EU  
Membership"

1. Regional cooperation represents a general trend in the development of relations among states in occurring on all continents. This process arrived comparatively late in the Balkans, or South Eastern Europe, due to the unfortunate centrifugal forces of the 1990's that clouded the prospects for any rapid inclusion of the region in broader European integration. The development of multilateral cooperation in the Balkans has not been a continuous process. It mirrors the same instability and impermanence that marked the history of the region and of Europe in the twentieth century.

Most contemporary initiatives for multilateral cooperation in the Balkans were implicitly or explicitly inspired by the experience of the European Community/Union, that is by the neo-functionalist theory of inter-state cooperation. The basic postulate of the theory is that close technical cooperation among state administrations or politicians will in the long term produce a spillover effect on the overall bilateral and multilateral climate in the region. In other words, they enable a process of rapprochement on the political and open the door to integration on the economic level.

2. In appraising the role and results of active regional initiatives in South Eastern Europe, several basic questions might be asked:

- To what extent do regional initiatives contribute to realising **the objectives** proclaimed in their founding documents?
- To what extent do regional initiatives contribute to advancing the economies, all forms of **exchange** in the region, overall **stability** (political, economic and military), **reform, modernisation** of the economy and society, and to improving the life of the inhabitants of South East Europe?

- To what extent have regional initiatives contributed to enhancing cooperation and **integration processes in the region**, including the geopolitical and economic shaping of the region as a specific entity in the architecture of Europe? In the same time, it is important to estimate how much those integrations have contributed in the promotion of the positive image of the entire region.
- Finally, we could ask ourselves to what extent have regional initiatives in South Eastern Europe contributed to the chief strategic objective of all the SEE countries: **integration into the European Union?**

3. It may well be pointed out that the existence and activity of initiatives in South Eastern Europe is undoubtedly a positive thing.

(1) They bring *about new models of behaviour* that can help defeat narrow-minded nationalism and the idea that states can be self-sufficient. The initiatives stimulate cooperation among administrations, economies and other circles in the countries of the region, eliminate various obstacles to regional communication while facilitating it, creating contact networks by their very existence, influencing public opinion and bringing about an awareness of the common objectives of all countries in the region. They facilitate the preparation of cross-border projects and the deployment of international financial assistance.

(2) Most, if not all regional initiatives in SEE are conceived from the outset as being *complementary to the integration process*, which mainly takes place within the European Union. They are supplementary to the architecture of Europe, not a replacement for the inclusion of the SEE countries in the EU and other pan-European organisations.

(3) An essential characteristic of regional initiatives in SEE is the comparatively *limited nature of their objectives*, often in contrast to the extent and difficulty of the problems confronting the countries, such as economic underdevelopment, social instability etc. However, this too has changed recently, particularly with the emergence of the *new CEFTA*, a promising step forward in the process of economic cohesion based on free

trade or the proposals concerning the *transport and other infrastructure (i.e. energy) projects in the Balkans*.

(4) Regulation of soft security issues and combating crime and corruption have proved to be key questions in the Balkans, requiring specific methods and solutions at regional level. This has produced a number of frameworks for cooperation with the ministries of defence or justice and home affairs in the countries of South Eastern Europe.

#### 4. The role of RCC

The changing situation in South Eastern Europe and the advance of all countries of the region on the road to the European Union required a change in the concept of regional cooperation, where the countries of the region would take on a more active role and greater responsibilities.

The RCC or its Secretariat has played an important role in directing, coordinating, dispensing information and in developing links with international partners in about 50 regional initiatives and task forces in various fields of cooperation. Due to the variety in their status, type of cooperation and activity, the Council's relations with them also vary, ranging from direct responsibility and involvement to monitoring and the exchange of information. The Council also has acted as initiator and facilitator in setting up new initiatives in which the region is interested. It is noteworthy that the number of initiatives and work groups has grown. This might be interpreted as growing maturity on the part of the region in articulating its needs as it moves to join Europe, and the awareness that problems will be solved more effectively by working together in an exchange of knowledge and experience.

After four years, the Regional Cooperation Council could be said to have *achieved the status of a significant representative of the region in Europe* and internationally, and that it had done much to consolidate the programmes, functioning and various themes of regional cooperation in South Eastern Europe. This was no easy task in the complex political and economical situation that followed a global economic crisis, Kosovo's declaration of independence and the deterioration in bilateral relations of several countries, and internal problems in the EU which dampened enthusiasm for further enlargement.

*The future* of the RCC will depend among other things on the engagement of its members in the region, but also on the wider political and economic circumstances such as the further effects of the global economic crisis, a possible slowdown in the process of European integration, the state of bilateral political relations in the region and the sustainability of the regional structures.

In my view, the future of the RCC lays in its abilities to address and to articulate some of the following issues:

- (1) How far it would be possible to approach the RCC from one side with the activities of the SEECF, on the other side? In my personal opinion, already existing interconnections and mutual support between the Chairperson in Office of SEECF and RCC maybe should be strengthened in some more institutionalised way. One of possible aims should be to have the RCC becoming the operational and implementing body of the SEECF.
- (2) It is also very important in near future to support the orientation of RCC developing its skills in support of EU supported multilateral and multi-annual programmes and projects. I think in particular to the issues of future IPA (pre-accession) funds after 2014.
- (3) Finally, the RCC should be instrumental in further helping the ways and means of regional integration and more functional cooperation, overcoming bilateral differences and helping in finding the solutions for large regional problems and issues. It should help in articulation in the future the common positions of the region vis-à-vis the European and other international issues.

One of the Council's most important duties in the near future should be to identify any duplication or overlap in the activities of the numerous regional initiatives and groups, to ensure that the basic criterium for launching cooperation in a new area is the interests of the region, meaning financial, personnel, programme and other capacities. There has been a noticeable jump in the number of initiatives. We should, once again, think and talk about the *downsizing and streamlining* with regard to maybe too many similar projects.

*In the long term*, there will be increasing insistence on stronger, more coherent and more concrete cooperation – institutional and other - between the SEE countries and the EU via particular regional initiatives. This is what may help bridge the gap between

the need for transnational settlement of questions as diverse as border crossings and the environment, and that still unknown point in time when EU enlargement will reach out to include the entire region.