

*South East Europe in 2011 and Beyond:
Sharing the Same Vision*

Panel discussion, 7 March 2011

Speech by Mr. Andris Kesteris, Principal Advisor on Civil Society and Inter-institutional Relations, Directorate General for Enlargement

Mr. Secretary General, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here with you today celebrating the third anniversary of the Regional Cooperation Council. I am sure that for many of you it seems, like it does for me, only yesterday that the countries of the region agreed to come together in a regional structure that would continue the work of the Stability Pact and deliver regional cooperation in South East Europe into the hands of its people.

The subject of our discussion urges us to look back to the first three years of the RCC and its prospects for the future, as it speaks about a shared vision. Let me say a few words about this shared vision. In the aftermath of the wars in former Yugoslavia, the people of the region decided to put the past behind them and develop their political and sectoral cooperation, their aim being to help strengthen peace, security and stability in the region and make progress on their road towards the European Union.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let us briefly review now how regional cooperation has contributed (in the last ten to fifteen years), to the efforts of the countries of the region to move closer to the EU, thus bringing their shared vision of the European future closer to a reality. And first, let us look at the principles of regional cooperation. Regional ownership is the first of them. The last three years of the RCC under the political umbrella of the home-grown South East Europe Cooperation Process have shown that regional ownership has indeed taken root. The latest proof of this is the RCC taking over this year two successful initiatives, the Ljubljana Process and the South East Europe Investment Committee.

Regional cooperation should also be results-oriented, especially where sectoral initiatives are concerned. The Strategy and Work Programme for the RCC, which is now under implementation, provides a solid basis for ensuring that activities undertaken will produce results. This should in turn lead to consolidation of the RCC position as the main interlocutor for regional

cooperation in South East Europe. This means also that the RCC will be able to assume more responsibility and exercise greater leadership in guiding regional cooperation.

By relying on the above principles, regional cooperation structures have been aspiring to provide joint solutions to common problems. Nowhere, perhaps, it is more evident than in the field of Justice and Home Affairs, where the problems are of a cross-border nature, and cooperation, either bilateral or multilateral, is essential for facing them. But also it is vital in areas such as the environment, disaster prevention and protection, trade, energy, transport. Indeed, cooperation has blossomed in these areas, either through structures such as CEFTA, with only regional participants, or through EU projects, for example RENA, the Regional Environmental Network for Accession, or through structures bringing the EU together with partners from the region, such as the Energy Community.

The developing network of regional cooperation structures has gone hand-in-hand, for the most part, with positive developments in the region as a whole: Croatia is nearing the end of its negotiations, Montenegro is a candidate country and the Commission is working to produce an opinion on Serbia's application to join the EU. All these highlights point to progress almost unimaginable not only ten, but even five years ago.

This progress is undeniable; however, the challenges that still remain are serious ones: Recent regrettable events in Albania, for example, or the delayed process of government-formation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, demonstrate that the reform process and the consolidation of stability and political culture of pluralism and tolerance in the region must be continued. Moreover, the whole region faces the challenges of organised crime and corruption, of overcoming the effects of the financial crisis, strengthening social cohesion, enhancing rule of law and public administration, ensuring freedom of the media, and working towards lasting reconciliation.

Regional cooperation should be among the first instruments used in addressing these challenges. Because regional cooperation starts with an is permanently accompanied by dialogues: dialogues between countries, government, prosecutors, energy companies. But to obtain a real local ownership and contribute to the culture of tolerance and democratic pluralism it has to include a dialogue with civil society. Such a policy dialogue should take into account and accommodate the pluralism of views existing in the society. In this regards, the RCC can continue to develop experiences as started in the sectors of environment and infrastructures, for example. Even more, the RCC is best placed to set an example to the Governments in the region of how important

policy initiatives, by including Civil Society Organisations, should be developed in a modern, I would say European way.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Are the efforts in terms of regional approaches deployed up until today enough? Let us be cautiously optimistic. Progress in intra-regional trade, for example, is a step forward, but it has been affected by the problems encountered by CEFTA due to questions of status. Progress in reconciliation is marred by the fact that there are still hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced and missing persons. Progress in cooperating on issues of organised crime has not blocked all the loopholes exploited by criminals.

So we are cautiously optimistic, but optimistic anyway. The vision of transformation into a peaceful and prosperous European region is, indeed, a shared one. Regional cooperation structures, with the RCC at the forefront, are working in order to turn it into a reality. In this endeavour you will have, as always, the support of the European Union.

Turning to the work of the RCC in the next year, this should be centred on the implementation of its Strategy and Work Programme. Additional activities are welcome when they promote the common aims of the region in implementation of the Strategy, which has been approved at the highest political level. In order to enhance the capacity of the RCC in playing its leadership role in regional cooperation, the Commission has, as you know, adopted a decision extending financial support to the RCC Secretariat beyond the original three-year period, which came to an end in 2010. At the same time, the Commission is financially supporting the two very important regional activities taken over by the RCC, the Ljubljana Process and the South East European Investment Committee. The successful continuation of these activities will demonstrate the maturity of regional ownership, and we are working with the RCC in order to help ensure this success.

The principle of regional ownership, however, also goes – or should go – hand-in-hand with the principle of inclusiveness. Regional cooperation is, by definition, inclusive and we should not allow differences over political issues to undermine it. I am referring, of course, to the issue of Kosovo. I hope that a pragmatic solution will be found that will allow the participation of *all* regional partners in *all* meetings and events.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to congratulate the RCC once again for its three years of successful operation, and wish it, and its members, all the best in the future.