

Conference to mark the 5th anniversary of the Regional Cooperation Council, 27 February 2013

'Five years of Regional cooperation Council: Building on Foundations and embracing new challenges'

Remarks by Ambassador Kieran Dowling

Secretary-General Svilanović, Fellow panellists, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here this evening representing Ireland.

I am double-hatted as Ireland is not just a board member of the RCC, which we have supported since its inception, but we also currently hold the EU Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

Being an island state, our own experience of regional cooperation is both more focussed – our immediate region is just ourselves and the UK – and more encompassing – we also consider ourselves part of the region of Europe. And it is membership of the European Union that has assisted us in overcoming conflicts within our more confined region.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Ireland's accession to the EU, in what was the first enlargement of the Union. The European Union is perhaps the gold standard when it comes to regional cooperation. It has created a level of cooperation between countries that is without parallel in history. This cooperation has allowed the EU to become the most successful force for democratisation and peace in the world today. And once peace and security are assured, increased prosperity can follow.

It is our membership of the regional group that is the European Union that has underpinned Ireland's transformation from a small, peripheral island state overwhelmingly dependent on trade with its closest neighbour to a state that is a mature, liberal democracy, with strong ties to its European and global partners, and internationally respected for its compassionate and principled pursuit of a safer, more just world.

The cooperation inherent within the EU has also played an important role in securing peace in Ireland's own small region and on our own island.

Working together with other countries in the European arena allowed both Ireland and the UK to reach a new, more mature relationship with each other, one not dominated by the past. I see similar relationships developing in the Balkans region, where cooperation on practical issues, such as building roads, or increasing investment, can help build relationships that are focussed on future benefits rather than past conflicts.

Although the Balkans region is very different, culturally, geographically, and historically from Ireland and the UK, I can see many of the same trends in terms of cooperation emerging here that have borne fruit in our own experience. The most important of these is the very opportunity for representatives of the various countries involved to meet and discuss issues and problems that are common to all and seek solutions for them. Parliamentary cooperation has been a particularly important aspect of the increasingly close relationship between the UK and Ireland, and I know its

importance has been similarly recognised in the RCC's mandate, which includes parliamentary cooperation as an overarching theme linking all the areas under its purview.

And the importance of regional cooperation in promoting peace, stability, and prosperity is the reason why Ireland is a member and continues to support the work of the RCC. We are ardent supporters of the enlargement of the European Union. We are long-time supporters of the European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans. The RCC's work assists those countries who have yet to become EU members to achieve the Copenhagen criteria. I believe it is particularly beneficial in that it provides a unique forum which allows experiences to be shared between EU Member States and aspirant Members.

The work of the RCC also ties in with the overall themes of the Irish Presidency. As you may be aware, the theme of our Presidency is Stability, Jobs, and Growth. The Irish Presidency is that of a recovery country driving recovery in Europe. While our official Presidency programme sets out in detail its legislative and other priorities across all formations of the Council of the European Union; the main priorities can be summarised as:

- Securing stability
- Investing in sustainable jobs and growth
- Europe and the world , in particular the importance of looking beyond our borders and engaging with global partners

EU enlargement is a key part of the Presidency programme and of its theme. The enlargement policy remains the EU's most effective tool in supporting reform and transformation throughout Europe. The adoption in the Western Balkans, and in other aspirant members, of the EU's values ensures *stability* and irreversible political reform. There are obvious economic benefits in the form of a larger common market which translates into *jobs* and economic *growth*, both for the EU and its new and aspiring members. Ultimately the policy contributes to both our security and our prosperity.

Thank you