

JOINT STATEMENT

Meeting of the Ministers of Defense of South East European Countries Sofia, March 11th 2008

1. We, the Ministers of Defense of the participating states of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECF), met in Sofia on March 11th 2008 to further continue the dialogue on regional security issues, which was initiated within the framework of our previous meetings in Sarajevo, on April 15th 2004 and in Bucharest on March 31st 2005.

The Sofia Meeting is entitled "Defense Policy – for security, cooperation and development of South Eastern Europe (SEE)".

2. H.E. Veselin Bliznakov, H.E. Selmo Cikotić, H.E. Vecdi Gönül, H.E. Fatmir Mediu, H.E. Evangelos Meimarakis, H.E. Teodor Meleskanu, H.E. Vitalie Vrabie, Deputy Minister Iljaz Halimi, representing H.E. Lazar Elenovski, State Secretary Dušan Spasojević, representing H.E. Dragan Šutanovac, Deputy Minister Rajko Novičević, representing H.E. Boro Vučinić, State Secretary Mate Raboteg, representing H.E. Branko Vukelić participated in the Meeting.

Dr. Erhard Busek, Special Coordinator of the SP for SEE, Amb. Nedžad Hadžimusić, Director of the Center for Security Cooperation – RACVIAC, Mr. Diman Dimov, Head of the SEESAC Initiative, Mr. Miroslav Vujančić, Head of DPPI, Dr. Theodor H. Winkler, Director of DCAF, Mr. Jan Truszczynski, Deputy Director-General from DG Enlargement, EC, Mrs Alda Silveira Reis, Head of Horizontal Unit, DG E VIII Defense Issues, General Secretariat of the Council of the EU, Mr. George Katsirdakis, Head of Defense Cooperation, Defense Policy and Planning Division, NATO IS made a valuable contribution to the work of the Meeting.

3. Recognizing the fundamental importance of the interdependency of security and stability, on the one hand, and the economic and social development of the democratic societies on the other, we declare our determination to continue the joint efforts in close cooperation with the international community.

4. Welcoming the successful course of the democratic reforms in the SEE countries we firmly believe that the way to achieving lasting stability and prosperity in the region is to accelerate the European and Euro Atlantic integration, based on solidarity and democratic values. This involves promoting good cooperation in the region, good neighborly relations, and mutually acceptable solutions to outstanding issues, in line with the EU's and the

Alliance's principles. In this respect we fully support the continuing "Open door" policy pursued by the EU and NATO for the countries in the region and we encourage the efficient use of the integration instruments from the SEE PfP countries.

5. Taking note of the respective progress achieved by the Membership Action Plan (MAP) countries in meeting the criteria for NATO membership, we do hope that the Alliance, after evaluating the three Adriatic Charter countries on their own performance, would extend invitations for joining the Organization at the upcoming Bucharest Summit. We also fully acknowledge other PfP countries' achievements and hope that this would properly be commended through elevating their level of partnership with NATO. We believe that such an approach will give an impetus to the defense sector transformation processes, enhance their contribution to the security environment, and have a strong stabilizing impact on South Eastern Europe as a whole.

6. Taking into consideration the existing intensive involvement of the EU and NATO with the overall transformation processes in SEE including the defense sector, we clearly state our will and desire to see its continuation. It is our firm belief that the further development of SEE regionally tailored approaches of the EU and NATO with clearly stated goals, more precise structuring of the institutional links and continuation of the multifaceted support for the transformation process will have a favorable effect on the regional and on the common European security and stability.

7. Acknowledging that the defense and security transformation already underway in the countries of the SEE region could be related to social and economic consequences, we are determined to share experience and cooperate with the international organizations as well as individual donor countries to minimize and overcome potential consequences.

8. Recognizing that the existence of surplus armaments, ammunitions and military equipment is still an issue in the SEE region, we are ready to cooperate and share experience in the utilization of those stocks as well as to seek cooperation with international organizations and donor countries.

9. We highly appreciate the achievements of the outgoing Stability Pact for SEE over the past nine years and more particularly those in the security and defense sphere. We are grateful to Dr. Erhard Busek and the Members of the Secretariat of the Pact for their outstanding contribution to its successful functioning. We express our satisfaction with the establishment of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and expect that the defense cooperation issues find their rightful place in its activities. We congratulate Amb. Hido Bišćević for his appointment

as the Secretary General of the RCC and express our support to him and his team.

10. Stepping on this solid foundation we are very well aware of the serious tasks, which we would have to cope with to finalize the stabilization of the SEE region. We welcome the transformation efforts of the regional cooperation in SEE based on “the regional ownership” principle and leading to enhancing the stability in the region and beyond.

11. We are engaged not only in contributing to the formal transformation of the SEE Stability Pact into the new Regional Cooperation Council, but also to finding the common grounds and cooperation mechanisms between major processes in the regional defense cooperation, especially between SEECP and South East Defense Ministerial (SEDM). This avoids possible duplication of activities, will concentrate efforts and increase efficiency of the cooperation. In that context our expectations are that the RCC will contribute to the realization of the ideas for regional cooperation among other regional initiatives, as well as for coordination among SEECP regional programs, including through their appropriate endorsement to the EU, NATO and the whole donor community.

12. Implementing the decisions taken at the 2005 Bucharest Meeting of the Ministers of Defense, we took into account the results achieved by the work of Center for Security Cooperation – RACVIAC. We are satisfied with the successful work of the Center in the area of extra military properties conversion and social adaptation of released servicemen as a result of the reforms. We welcome the decisions of the Multinational Advisory Group regarding the new objectives, tasks and funding mechanisms for the Center based on the Regional Ownership concept. We declare our readiness to participate in the formation of RACVIAC’s joint budget. We expect the Center’s leadership to actively work for the timely formulation of a new, adequate structure and optimized activities and expenditures plan.

13. Taking stock of the negative impact of the enduring existence of large amounts of small arms and light weapons on the security environment of the SEE region, we declare our firm support to the work of South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC). We are convinced that the continuation of its work on coordinating the control and downsizing of small arms and light weapons in the region will result in substantial reduction of the risks stemming from uncontrolled transfers and use of armaments. We expect the engagement of the international institutions in these issues would remain high in the future.

14. Mindful of the fact that the consequences of natural disasters and industrial accidents and incidents in the region are increasing we welcome the development of the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative into an effective regional mechanism for consultation and coordination of the efforts in this area. We are aware that the Armed Forces of the countries in the SEE region possess enough capabilities to cope with the consequences of disasters and accidents. To that end, we declare our readiness to further develop this cooperation potential between the Armed Forces, to ensure its effective practical use and maximize the intergovernmental coordination with the other state institutions having a stake in that.

15. Expressing satisfaction with the achievements of the regional cooperation initiatives within the framework of the Stability Pact, we reiterate the need to define them as priority areas for the work of the RCC as well. We believe that there is additional potential for development of the regional cooperation in defense and security area based on the principle of building a “network of networks”.

16. We welcome all new forms of cooperation including SEE Countries’ Chiefs of Defense Conference Process initiated in April 2007 in Thessaloniki. Undoubtedly, extensive and more frequent contacts at such levels would contribute to enhancing transparency and openness in the military sphere and more particularly to finding an effective military response to contemporary asymmetric threats. We expect that, through this process, concrete cooperation projects would be explored and put into practice in the near future.

17. The participants in the Meeting expressed their gratitude to the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria, Mr. Veselin Bliznakov for his excellent hospitality, cordial reception and outstanding organization of the forum.