



**2nd SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE REGIONAL MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON
“EFFECTIVE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AT LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL”
SKOPJE, 8-9 NOVEMBER 2006**

FINAL DECLARATION

SEE/CONF (2006)6DEF

1. The 2nd regional ministerial conference on “Effective Democratic Governance at Local and Regional Level” met in Skopje on 8-9 November 2006 under the auspices of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and the Council of Europe.
2. The delegations to the conference were headed by the following ministers and state secretaries, responsible for local and regional government, or senior officials representing their ministers: Mr Zoran Konjanovski, Mr Vitalie Vrabie, Mr Ferdinand Poni, Ms Milena Paunova, Mr Antun Palaric, Mr Liviu Radu, Mr Ostoja Kremenovic and Mr Mikosav Boskovic.
3. The purpose of the conference was to review the current state of local government in the Stability Pact beneficiary countries, assess progress made in the field of decentralised governance since the first regional conference held in Zagreb on 25-26 October 2004 and spur reforms towards enhanced local democracy in South-Eastern Europe. It also aimed to encourage targeted, demand-driven support by the international community for policy design and reform implementation.
4. Representatives of the associations of local authorities of South-Eastern European countries, and their umbrella organisation NALAS, actively contributed to identifying key priorities which require urgent attention. They highlighted the importance of capacity-building to strengthen local government institutions and thereby ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of local government reforms, and expressed a particular interest in organising the sharing of best practices.
5. The representatives of States and international organisations participating in the Stability Pact attended the conference in order to encourage more sustained efforts to reinforce democracy at the grass-roots level and to consider how they could provide adequate responses to requests for assistance with local government reforms which governments and local authorities of South-Eastern Europe have submitted.
6. The conference enabled ministers and other participants to enter into an enriching exchange of views and a constructive debate on their respective

concerns, expectations and agendas for local government reform, seeking to identify potential synergies and develop a collaborative approach to strengthening local democracy in the region.

7. At the close of the conference, the following conclusions were adopted:

A. The Ministers :

- (i) Express their firm conviction that solid democracy at the grass-roots level is an essential foundation on which to build democratic development and stability in the region;
- (ii) Refer, in this connection, to the European Charter of Local Self-Government as the fundamental frame of reference for the promotion, consolidation and expansion of local democracy in their respective countries and for the region as a whole;

I.

(Institutional reforms)

- (iii) Recognise that further efforts are required to enhance the institutional and legal framework for local government, provide local authorities with resources adequate to the tasks allocated to them and strengthen citizen participation in local public life;
- (iv) Declare that sound and effective local self-government is an essential component of their policies aimed at meeting fundamental European standards of democracy and good governance, in line with the stated political goal of all states of the region to seek membership of the European Union;
- (v) Reaffirm, [also] on behalf of their respective governments, their political commitment to the effective implementation of the "Work Programmes for Better Local Government" they have presented at the conference;
- (vi) Declare their readiness to review these Work Programmes regularly and in dialogue with the local authorities' representatives and the international partners, preferably in the framework of technical conferences to be held at regular intervals at domestic level;

II.

(Capacity building at local level)

- (vii) Stress the value that multilateral activities aimed at sharing experiences and expertise may have in building the capacity of central administrations to design local government reforms and sustain decentralised governance;

- (viii) Emphasise the importance of responsive leadership and reliable administrations at local level to ensure effective provision of services and promote citizen participation, and express their readiness to collaborate with the international partners to provide local authorities and their associations with the targeted help they may need to achieve these results;
- (ix) Welcome the decision taken by the Warsaw Summit of the Council of Europe to establish a Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform whose programmes could significantly contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of local government, and encourage the Centre to step up its action in their respective countries;

III.

(Institutional dialogue and citizen participation)

- (x) Acknowledge the positive role of the associations of local authorities, and their network NALAS, both at national and regional/international level, in promoting effective democratic governance at local level and in the strengthening of the capacity of their members;
- (xi) Will pursue the implementation of their governments' political agenda in the field of local and regional democracy in consultation with the associations and accordingly introduce or develop, as the case may be, the appropriate mechanisms for institutional dialogue at domestic level;
- (xii) Value the active participation of their fellow citizens in the process of ownership of democratic institutions at local level and undertake to adopt, implement and develop the appropriate policies at domestic level, in line with Recommendation (2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe;

IV.

(Cross-border co-operation)

- (xiii) Recall the role of cross-border co-operation in reinforcing mutual trust and fostering the development of border regions in their respective countries;
- (xiv) Agree that this objective would be more easily met if all countries of the region had ratified the Madrid Outline Convention and its protocols and resolve to take the initiative at governmental level for these instruments to be signed or ratified, as the case may be;
- (xv) Approve the two draft regional agreements on local border traffic and mutual assistance in the event of disasters in border areas, drawn up as a follow-up to the Chisinau Political Declaration of 6 November 2003, and note that they meet their countries' needs while respecting their commitments towards the European Union;

- (xvi) Note the intention of the government of Albania to host a diplomatic conference at which these draft agreements will be finalised and opened to signature by the countries of the region;
- (xvii) Acknowledge the contribution of “euroregions”, regional networks of municipalities and civil society organisations to enhanced co-operation, mutual trust and confidence-building across the region and welcome the recently established “Adriatic Euroregion” as a further step in this direction;

V.

(International co-operation)

- (xviii) Are grateful to the international partners present at the Conference for the readiness they have expressed to continue supporting both the design and the successful implementation of sound local government reforms and urge them to better adjust the provision of support to the priorities they have set in their “Work Programmes for Better Local Government”;

B. The representatives of international organisations and of the donor community:

- (xix) Note the progress accomplished by all the Stability Pact beneficiary countries towards the establishment of a democratic local government system, and the steps taken towards endowing local authorities with adequate powers and resources;
- (xx) Share the conviction that new steps forward must be achieved and welcome the Ministers’ renewed political commitment to further strengthen local democracy and develop effective local government in the region;
- (xxi) Acknowledge that further assistance will continue to be necessary in order to sustain both the design and the implementation of local government reforms, and affirm their intention to provide support that is targeted to the key objectives of the “Work Programmes for Better Local Government” and, in particular to:
 - assist with policy-making and law-drafting processes,
 - reinforce the capacity of institutions at national level, including central government administrations responsible for local government, and at local level, including through the associations of local and regional authorities,
 - promote dialogue and consultation between state, regional and local representatives, including through the establishment of platforms for institutional dialogue,
 - foster citizen participation and ownership of local community development, also by supporting local civil society institutions,

- encourage transfrontier co-operation between territorial communities or authorities,
- contribute to the effective regional development and capacity building for public-private partnerships.

C. The Representatives of the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe:

- (xxii) Acknowledge the progress made in the decentralisation process and in the co-operation with the national associations of local authorities, since the first regional conference held in Zagreb in 2004;
- (xxiii) Continue to stress the necessity of a true decentralisation, of local financial autonomy and institutionalised and regular dialogue between central governments and the national associations of local authorities, as well as the importance of close co-operation on the drafting and implementation of the Work Programmes and legislation on decentralisation;
- (xxiv) Underline the added value that the national associations of local authorities offer, due to their democratic legitimacy and their long term perspective;
- (xxv) Commit themselves to collaborate with central authorities and international organisations on improving the regional standards of local democracy;
- (xxvi) Invite the donors active in the field of local democracy to work closely with the national associations of local authorities with a view to co-ordinating the different projects and making them more demand-driven;
- (xxvii) Encourage all stakeholders on local, regional and central level to support and take part in relevant initiatives on:
- The promotion of citizen participation in democratic local government, especially that of women, youth and disabled persons,
 - Cross-border co-operation in order to improve mutual understanding and to benefit from the synergies it creates,
 - The creation of additional platforms for institutional dialogue between the different levels of government;
- (xxviii) Share the conviction that central authorities and international organisations should contribute to the capacity building at local level, by offering adequate political support, sufficient financial resources and technical assistance to local authorities and their associations, especially concerning training.

*

8. The conference welcomed the constructive approach of the Ministers responsible for local government in South-Eastern Europe, the representatives of the associations of local and regional authorities, the representatives of the international organisations and of the donor community in support of the implementation of the “Work Programmes for Better Local Government” and recommended that the matching of funds and priorities be constantly kept under review by donors and beneficiaries alike.

*

9. The conference

(a) requested its Chair to report on the Skopje Conference and the follow-up measures taken by States and international agencies to the 15th Conference of European Ministers responsible for Local and Regional Government to be held in Valencia in October 2007;

(b) noting that the Stability Pact will be phased out at the end of 2007, acknowledged the value of the work undertaken by it and praised the results achieved thanks to the commitment of its staff and the contribution of all its stakeholders, beneficiary countries and donors alike and expressed the wish that the Council of Europe would take up the leading and co-ordinating role played so far by the Stability Pact in the field of local and regional democracy;

(c) noted that a third regional conference could be organised in 2008;

(d) thanked the Chair and through it the host government for their hospitality and the excellent organisation of the event.