

Economic integration in South-East Europe – at the heart of stakeholders concern

A Brainstorming meeting entitled "A Pan-European Perspective for the Economic Integration of South Eastern Europe" took place at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on 6 December 2007. The importance that the international community attaches to the security and prosperity in South-East Europe was demonstrated by the high level of officials represented on the panel:



- Goran Svilanovic, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia, Founder and Chairman of the Stability Pact for South East Europe;
- Ambassador Giovanni Caracciolo di Vietri, Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations in Geneva;
- Christophe Solioz, Secretary General of the Centre for European Integration Strategies;
- Mario Apostolov, Regional Adviser, UNECE Trade Division;

The high level panellists painted an interesting portrait of the region. They especially stressed the challenging problems of a still fragile region. As a summary: Albania and Montenegro have signed agreements with the EU, while Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia have initiated negotiations in this direction. Serbia's trade is growing 8%, however, unemployment rates are still extremely high. Despite the government's efforts to attract FDI, investors still hesitate to bring money into the region. Present key investors in Serbia are Austria, Slovenia, Italy and Greece. However, on a global scale, the largest investments go to big markets, such as Russia, China and Central Asia. Discussions voiced preoccupations with the endemic corruption in the Balkans which makes business difficult.



The meeting was chaired by UNECE Executive Secretary Marek Belka.

In the last 15 years many sub regional organisations have worked to boost economic growth in South-East Europe and facilitate political cooperation. However, it is obvious that an effort is needed on a global scale to bring the states of Former Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria together again, i.e. something similar to the Marshal Plan, since, in spite of huge expectations, no money is seen flowing to the region.

Such an international effort is being undertaken in the form of a Regional Cooperation Council which acts as a forum, being chaired by Bulgaria, holds regular Summits, however, without sustaining a secretariat, but making use of the existing machinery. The Forum focuses on the following activities: trade; energy infrastructure; home and justice affairs and security; human capital building, education and science; parliamentary cooperation.

The panellist voiced a general concern as to whether a complete disintegration of the states of Former Yugoslavia is required, before an effective process of economic integration can be initiated. This high level meeting gave interesting insights into a region where we have been active, especially with international conferences. It helps us to provide better and more specific services to our members in the region. Currently discussions are going on with a number of our members identifying their needs within their current political environment.