

**Speech at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the
South-East European Co-operation Process on “Connectivity-
Collaboration-Communications: the way forward”**

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DEAR PRESIDENTS OF PARLIAMENTS,

DEAR COLLEAGUES,

DEAR GUESTS OF THE FOURTH PLENARY SESSION

I will begin my speech with the last part of our theme: the way forward, in order to note that it is important to have a clear idea for whom and how we are outlining the way forward. Because I am afraid that we, the politicians, sometimes forget that our sessions, debates, recommendations and decisions actually predetermine the direction of development and the changes in the lives of the people in our region. And the latter expect us to respond to their needs, problems and aspirations.

Therefore, during the Bulgarian Presidency of the South-East European Co-operation Process, the Bulgarian Parliament was led by the understanding that opportunities should be created so that the region's voice and the voice of its citizens could be heard and our Assembly would be able to direct its activities to the themes and directions of highest priority.

I will remind you of the results of the international conference entitled “The SEECP Parliamentary Assembly – Regional Synergy, Strategic Cooperation, Parliamentary Diplomacy” held in November 2016 in Sofia. The conclusions drawn by the participants in this conference, SEECP parliamentarians, members of the European Parliament, non-governmental experts, regional and international partners, contained a lot of good recommendations and ideas:

- making concrete steps to expand cooperation with the European Parliament;
- establishing a mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the resolutions of the general committees of the Parliamentary Assembly;
- applying for European funding with a joint project on a priority theme for all participants in the Parliamentary Assembly;
- and last but not least, making a proposal to develop rules for the accreditation of non-governmental organisations allowing them to participate in the work of the Assembly.

At that conference, the non-governmental sector's desire to assist and support the work of our Assembly through various projects, partnerships and networks was clearly stated. And I think that the meaning of the topic of our Conference **“Connectivity-Cooperation-Communications”** is precisely to bring together our Parliaments' efforts and regional organisations, initiatives and experts, whether it is in the field of infrastructure projects, energy diversification, connectivity or university exchange.

A clear proof of the importance of communication and partnership was also provided through the voice of the young people who participated in the other initiative of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Parliamentary Assembly– the essay competition “Young People from South-Eastern Europe for the Prosperity of the Region”.

The winner of the Competition, Alexandra-Bianca from Romania, recommended that the reform of the education system and the promotion of student exchange should become the first item on the regional cooperation agenda. We highly appreciate that all parliaments supported the National Assembly's suggestion, based on the relationship with young people, that university cooperation should become the subject of the report and the resolution of the Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) this year.

I have shared with you these facts and examples to emphasise that the Bulgarian Parliament has always argued that our regional organisation should be oriented towards working on specific issues, seeking in a spirit of cooperation solutions in the priority areas of the region and should be open to the highest degree and dialogic with the citizens of SEE. This is how we envisage the way forward.

The National Assembly, as the Parliament of an EU Member State, has always actively supported the European perspective of all SEECP member-countries. We have proven this support with specific activities– launching the institutional cooperation with the European Parliament at a meeting between the PA delegation and the EP Foreign Affairs Committee in March 2016 in Brussels. We did so guided by the belief that we were thus creating a platform for permanent communication and exchange of views with our European counterparts, which would give an additional impetus to the pre-accession efforts of the parliaments in the region.

Within half a year, Bulgaria will take over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and within less than a month the country will enter into the Troika, together with Estonia and Austria. Along with the great responsibility to set the priorities on the European agenda, we also see in this Presidency a tremendous chance to present the current issues and problems of our region to European politicians, opinion leaders, the media and the citizens of Europe. I would like to assure you that within the programme of the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency, Bulgaria again attributes an important place to supporting the European future of the whole of Southeast Europe. So our Assembly and Parliaments will have at their disposal a powerful tool to achieve concrete benefits and results for SEE citizens and I think we should make the most of it by generating ideas, initiatives and messages.

The principle of pragmatism and dialogue is at the heart of our approach to the issue of the Permanent Secretariat of the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly. As you well know, Sofia's proposal to host the Permanent Secretariat dates back to 2011 and contains specific organisational and financial parameters. Here I would like to specifically remind you that in May 2016 we also declared our readiness to take over the Secretariat's support for a period of 5 years according to the budget of 300,000 Euro proposed by us, which is especially relevant to date. An important point in our proposal is the one to maintain continuity and establish a Permanent Secretariat to build on the existing resource of the Regional Secretariat for Parliamentary Cooperation in SEE. I would like to remind you that for nearly 10 years our Parliament has supported the work of the Regional Secretariat, following a decision made by all SEECP Parliaments.

However, we must not forget that the establishment of a Permanent Secretariat is linked to responsible decisions that our Parliaments have to make in accordance with their domestic law, namely those on the legal status of the Assembly and its Secretariat, and the size of the financial contributions of each participant.

Important steps are ahead of us both in the field of institutionalisation of our Parliamentary Assembly and in its orientation to the important issues for the region. This is why the Bulgarian delegation calls on all colleagues to stick to the pragmatic approach, the principles of continuity and consistency, because this is the guarantee that we will be able to build an effective organisation that will be the voice of the citizens of SEE and we, as parliamentarians, will fulfil our duty to represent their interests not only at national but also at regional level.

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