



International Conference

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

**18-19 November, 2002
Osijek and Bizovac, Croatia**

Rationale

Background

The selection of Local Democracy and Cross-border Cooperation/Euroregions as a combined field of work and one of the priorities in the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe is built upon the fact that a truly regional, economic as well as social development, further democratization and stabilization of South-Eastern Europe (SEE) are not possible without a strong commitment towards the local level, in particular local authorities. At the same time sustainable solutions for SEE countries can only be achieved through enhanced local ownership. This is particularly true for the issue of cross-border co-operation, where the model of Euroregions has shown enormous results within the EU and its border regions, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. The reason for their success is that they are not imposed from above, but result from a bottom-up process, mostly initiated and carried out by local governments and local social partners.

Regional co-operation amongst the countries of South-eastern Europe (SEE) is a condition for closer integration with the European Union. It is also at the heart of economic development and stabilization in SEE. Cross-Border Cooperation between local actors (governmental, civic and business) across national borders provides the practical underpinning to regional cooperation while catering to the particular needs and interests of local communities in border regions: it serves as an important tool for reinforcing institutions at local level, regional economic development as well as security and the peaceful co-existence of neighbouring peoples and states

Cross-border co-operation as a means for reconciliation and regional development, going back to the 50s of the last century, proved to be an important tool for the integration process in Europe after the 2nd world war. Following this experience, but also the experience and positive results achieved through cross-border co-operation and Euroregions on the external borders of the EU, especially towards the Central and East European countries after 1989 and the fall of the iron curtain, one can recognize the importance of supporting such local initiatives of cross-border co-operation.

Within SEE there are some border regions, which already made first steps towards intensifying cross-border cooperation, at the same time institutionalizing it through the establishment of Euroregions. Examples are the border regions of FRY-Hungary-Romania; FRY-Bulgaria-FYROM; Bulgaria-Greece; BiH-Croatia-Hungary-FRY; Bulgaria-Romania.

(On behalf of the organisers)

The sixth meeting of the Stability Pact Working Table on Democratization and Human Rights in Istanbul in June 2002 concluded that Local Democracy and Cross-border Cooperation as key features of the democratization and stabilization process in South Eastern Europe should be given priority and that this new dynamism needs to be supported by the international community.

A strong support for existing initiatives, as well as the encouragement of new initiatives is of vital interest for the further democratization, reconciliation and development process in SEE as well for the process of integration into Europe. Also the fact remains that cross-border co-operation can only be filled with real content where local actors across borders face common needs and interests and meet these with a readiness for joint strategic planning.

Objectives

The overall goal of the Osijek International Conference on Cross-Border Cooperation is to give additional impetus and support to the process of intensifying interest-driven co-operation in cross-border regions in SEE, where Euroregions already exist or new strong initiatives are on their way to become institutionalized.

At the same time the aim of the Forum is to enhance stronger **links between the Euroregions and cross-border initiatives in SEE**, to facilitate the **exchange of best practise** among them and with adequate partners from Central and Eastern Europe as well as from the EU, to address the issue of **facilitation of cross-border co-operation** from the national governments point of view, to analyse the **potentials of multilateral agreements** and to discuss **perspectives and priorities for further development**.

The Conference will involve **plenary sessions for** the discussion of above mentioned issues as well as for presentations of the invited Euroregions and Cross-Border Projects in SEE. The Forum will additionally involve a specialist **Seminar session** with the aim of transferring know how on experiences of Euroregional projects, their development, funding mechanisms and implementation methods.

Expected Outcomes

The discussion on obstacles as well as potentials and priorities for development of cross-border cooperation in SEE will lead to recommendations for further actions to be taken by the local, regional and national actors as well as the international community.

The sixth meeting of the Working Table on Democratization and Human Rights in Istanbul in June 2002 agreed that the Steering Committee be established to coordinate efforts in the field of local democracy and cross-border cooperation with the goal of attaining a greater degree of coherence in this area of activity. The conclusions of the Conference will contribute to a better understanding of the status of cross-border cooperation in Southeastern Europe. This will enable the Steering Committee to address the agreed priorities within a wider international framework.

Furthermore, the Conference would show positive examples where Euroregions and decentralized cross-border cooperation crucially contribute to the process of regional, economic and social development, further democratization and stabilization as well as to the creation of stronger neighbourly relations in South-Eastern Europe. This will further strengthen the role of local communities within the overall process of European Integration and assure the needed international commitment towards their efforts.

It is the intention of the organizers to contribute through the Conference and the process of Local Democracy and Cross-border Co-operation to strengthening of the capacities of SEE Euroregional and cross-border practitioners and decision makers to formulate their strategies and implement action plans, at the same time improving their knowledge on handling of long term funding possibilities.