

SEEGROUP activities under Albanian chairmanship in 2009

Chair's report for 2009

Since its establishment almost 10 years ago, the South East Europe Security Cooperation Steering Group (SEEGROUP) continues to remain an important forum that contributes to fostering the regional cooperation of the SEEI countries through a number of projects, initiatives and exchanges of political and security information. It continues to be an informal and open-ended flexible regional forum led by the South East Europe Initiative (SEEI) countries, the only regional initiative that brings together Allies, Partners and MAP countries. Throughout its activities SEEGROUP has always had a direct positive impact to Euro-Atlantic security and an added value to the countries of the region and the Alliance. As a matter of fact, since its establishment the Alliance has embraced several countries from the region as new members. Albania and Croatia are the youngest ones, having joined it officially at the Strasbourg – Kehl Summit in April this year.

By taking the chairmanship in 2009, Albania was the first Invitee/Ally to chair the SEEGROUP, which has been a valuable experience for itself, but also a new dimension and experience for the work and activity of this gathering.

The SEEGROUP Action Plan for 2009 was presented and approved at the first SEEGROUP meeting. It was based on the previous achievements and the lessons learned in this forum, but also perceived as a follow-up process taking forward the ongoing projects from the previous chairmanship.

It is important to note that building on this background, the Albanian Chair tried to faithfully preserve two basic elements of the SEEGROUP – regional ownership and the spirit of cooperation through transparency and flexibility. Exchange of information and expertise on security and defense related issues stayed at the core of this gathering. On the other hand, based on the growing interest shown by the participants from the previous year, the Albanian presidency managed to increase political discussion among the participating countries, though acknowledging that it was not an easy task. The Chair's idea to put the exchange of information on political and security issues in the region as a standing point in the agendas of the regular SEEGROUP meetings proved to be a novelty and a useful element for more information, which was shared and supported by all participants.

Looking at the SEEGROUP activities for 2009, the Albanian Chairmanship combined a good mix of high level visitors from the regional countries and international organizations based in the South East Europe, interesting subjects of regional relevance and concrete cooperation projects.

In the framework of the security dialogue with other fora dealing with regional security cooperation, the Albanian chairmanship established good cooperation and contacts with the representatives of RACVIAC (Regional Center for Security Cooperation) in Croatia, exchange of information with other regional initiatives like SEDM and SEECF through expert presentations from the countries holding rotating chairmanships. Under these auspices the Albanian Chair was also invited to make a presentation at the regional conference “Regional Security through Regional Ownership: A New Era of Cooperation”, co-organized by Turkish SEECF Chairmanship and RACVIAC on the 9 – 10 December 2009.

Enhancing the public relations element and visibility of SEEGROUP in order to better promote regional cooperation was one of the aspects of this year’s activities as well. The events organised on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary SEEI-SEEGROUP (receptions, farewells, close cooperation with NATO Public Diplomacy Division etc.) contributed considerably to the increasing of visibility of our work. In this regard the warm message sent by the former Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer on the 10th Anniversary was a recognition of the SEEGROUP contribution and was most appreciated by all the members.

An important part of the SEEGROUP activity during the Albanian chairmanship has also been devoted to the two main projects. The first one, the project for “Improving Regional Units of Search and Rescue Team’s Capabilities in SEE Countries”, as a follow-up initiative from the previous chair, was developed in close cooperation with NATO’s Defence Policy and Planning Division, EADRCC and RACVIAC. The project is seen as a pure contribution for our preparedness in the field of civil emergencies and now it is at the final stage.

The second project, “NATO Photo Competition”, is an initiative developed by NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division and strongly supported by SEEGROUP. It involves young people from the region, who are actively participating by bringing pieces from everyday life in their pictures via internet. The best photos will be collected for a traveling exhibition, which will visit all SEE countries before coming to NATO HQ, Brussels.

Listed chronologically below are the activities that have been conducted under the Albanian chairmanship:

February

Invitation of the Director of RACVIAC, Ambassador Nedžad Hadzimusic, who briefed the SEEGROUP on Security Sector Reform in SEE and RACVIAC contribution to it. The thoughts and opinions shared with representatives of the SEEGROUP on this topic brought an added value to

our discussions in this important field.

March

Discussion on a specific subject: Energy security in the Western Balkans: implications in the aftermath of overall energetic crisis in Europe and ways of cooperation for smoothing the consequences in SEE: Briefers from Bulgaria – Ambassador Poptchev; from Albania – Director for Energy Policies (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Energy), Mr. Tugu, Adrian Kendru – NATO IS. This was a subject of substance, and timely, since it was taken up shortly after the interruption of natural gas following the dispute between Ukraine and Russia, and it was relevant since South East Europe was the region most affected.

April

Broad discussion took place on NATO public diplomacy in the Balkans. Speaker – Katrin Hett – responsible for Western Balkans within PDD. Start of the joint PDD-SEEGROUP project for a Photo Competition in the Western Balkans. The project is ongoing and the final selection for 20 winners and their announcement is foreseen at the end of this year. The SEEGROUP has continuously given its deserved attention and support to the project.

INSARAG Awareness Training Course, as part of a project on Urban Search and Rescue Teams in SEE, was held in RACVIAC (Croatia), from 27 – 29 April. All SEEGROUP countries in the region participated at this event.

May

Presentation by Czech Republic representative and COWEB Director, Mr. Jiri Kalasnikov, on the priorities for the Western Balkans from the perspective of the Czech Republic rotating EU Presidency.

Follow-up of the Project on “Improving Regional USAR Teams Capabilities” in SEE – a project carried forward by EADRCC, Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for SEE (DPPI), UN OCHA, RCC, Sweden and developed within SEEGROUP. Gynther Bretschneider briefed SEEGROUP on the course for this purpose carried out in Racviac (27 – 29 April 09). The project is ongoing and a SEEGROUP participating nation is

considering hosting the final stage – a field exercise, supposed to be held in spring 2010.

End of May

Reception hosted by Albania to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of SEEI and SEEGROUP. The activity aimed to celebrate this important date for SEEGROUP by bringing together its participants and at the same time to increase SEEGROUP visibility.

June

Presentation by Turkey – Coordinator for Turkish SEECF Chairmanship, Balkans Director at MFA – Mr. Ahmet Riza Demirer on Turkish priorities for SEECF.

Presentation by Albania – NATO Director at MFA, Mr. Agim Fagu, on the Albanian path towards membership to NATO: lessons learned.

Both speakers provided valuable information and food for thought, combining Turkey's priorities during its SEECF chairmanship as well as the lessons learned and best practices of Albania during the nine cycles of the MAP process.

July

Presentation on NATO's New Strategic Concept by Mr. Steven Sturm, Director of NATO's Defense Policy and Capabilities, DPP Division. The topic for discussion proved to be a very useful and timely one. Useful, because it concerned not only Allies, but Partners as well. Timely, because a public debate had just been initiated by NATO on this important strategic policy document.

SEEGROUP visit to Albania (24 – 26 September 2009)

The SEEGROUP visit to Albania was a major event during this chairmanship. It has been considered as a successful and useful visit, which provided the possibility for participants to get more information on Albania's foreign policy in the region and Albanian Armed Forces transformation. In the program was also included a visit to the Commando Force of Albania – an elite troupe structure used in NATO's and other peace keeping operations and missions. A field exercise was organized by this structure in honour of SEEGROUP participants.

October

Presentation by the Bulgarian MFA representative, Mr. Dragomir Zakov, on Bulgarian regional policy – priorities and challenges with a special focus on the Bulgarian SEDM Presidency.

October – November

Preparations for the SEEGROUP Ambassadorial.

November

The Ambassador level meeting – the most important activity of SEEGROUP for 2009, was held on the 17th of November. The main topic for discussion was “Perspectives for further reform, cooperation and integration in South East Europe in the 10th Anniversary of SEEGROUP”, which provided the participants with the possibility to look at the developments and achievements in SEE, the remaining challenges ahead and the perspective of European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. In order to bring insight and perspectives from both Ally and Partner countries, NATO and EU members, Montenegro, Norway and Austria were invited as keynote speakers. These countries provide a good combination of regional ownership, active participation and contribution to the region from an Ally and a Partner country’s perspective. This meeting provided a good platform for frank political discussions and good stimuli for the work of SEEGROUP for the year ahead.

December

The Chair of SEEGROUP was invited to make a presentation at the international conference “Regional Security through Regional Ownership: a New Era of Cooperation”, an event co-organized by the Turkish Chair in Office of SEECF and RACVIAC, from 8 – 10 December 2009. Apart from delivering some general thoughts on the security cooperation network under the new security challenges and threats in SEE, he provided information on Albania’s regional policy and SEEGROUP activity in 2009. This important event was welcomed by the former Turkish President, Demirel. It was attended by high level participants from regional countries and regional initiatives, such as RACVIAC, MARRI, RCC, SEEBRIG, DPPI etc., and also by participants from the regional academic community.

December

Last meeting of SEEGROUP, which marked the hand-over of the chairmanship from Albania to Montenegro.

Information on SEEGROUP

South East European Security Cooperation Group was set up in 2000, as part of the South East European Initiative, stemming from the 1999 Washington Summit. It is an informal and open-ended group. All 28 Allies are natural members of the SEEGROUP. Other than the Allies, regional PfP Partners – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* and also Moldova as non regional Partner are members. Other Western European Partners like Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland are also members of the SEEGROUP.

The following is the list of chairmanships since the group's inception:

2000-2001 - Bulgaria

2002 - Romania

2003 - the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*

2004 - Albania

2005 - Serbia and Montenegro

2006 - Bosnia and Herzegovina

2007 - Croatia

2008 - the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*

2009 – Albania

*Turkey recognizes the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name