Background

South East Europe (SEE) has suffered from the ravages of the last 20th century wars in Europe, which had aggravating consequence of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tension, hatred and violence. The experience of the region has demonstrated that the matrix of values and the underlying ethical, cultural and spiritual foundations are a major determining factor for the resilience of the social fabric and the vibrancy of each society. Countries in the region have committed themselves to making use of dialogue as the only way to achieve full stability and overall progress in South East Europe and a successful completion of their European integration process. Today, the region believes that mutual respect, rooted in open dialogue and nourished by ethnic, religious and cultural variety is indispensable for the preservation of peace.

Therefore, the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Albania and RACVIAC - Centre for Security Cooperation co-organized this conference with the aim to promote the idea of inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue which is not just one of the most powerful political tools in fostering regional stability and security, but also a robust element supporting the economic development of the region. In that light, the Conference provided a perfect setting for SEE countries to discuss this highly important topic.

Aim

The aim of this conference was to pave the way for a more constructive dialogue on security matters among the countries of South East Europe. The idea of the organizers was to provide a fertile ground for discussion on the topic of regional stability within the framework of religious and ethnic tolerance, both of which are vital dimensions of the SEE security policy-making process.

Venue, duration and participation

The Albanian city of Shkoder hosted the Conference from 24 to 26 November 2010. The Conference was organized as a three-day event, two of which were working days. The participants, fifty altogether, included national officials nominated by the contributing countries from the Region, diplomatic/defence representatives from SEE countries, members of the local community, as well as representatives of different ethnic and religious communities and regional security organizations.

Acknowledgement

RACVIAC wishes to acknowledge and give special thanks to the Kingdom of Denmark and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for their overall financial assistance in the course of the activity.
H.E. Ambassador Nikola Todorčevski, RACVIAC’s Director, opened the working part of the Conference. He used the opportunity to emphasize the crucial role of the Conference in strengthening and enhancing inter-religious and inter-ethnics dialogue in South East Europe. He also pointed out that national, religious and cultural differences that are so much in evidence in our region are, in turn, a great value and that we are duty-bound to preserve them. Yet, present-day Europe and the modern world do not recognize autarchic, isolated areas that refuse to communicate with neighbors. Therefore, as Ambassador Todorčevski underlined, the only way for us to achieve a balance between the respect of diversity and the need for an ever-closer collaboration, is to maintain and stimulate dialogue – every-day, well-meaning, and tolerant dialogue without setting any preliminary conditions or imposing ready-made solutions. Despite all obstacles, our region has managed to foster a new spirit of mutual confidence, dialogue and tolerance over the past period. According to Mr Todorčevski, the evident progress in all fields was due to SEE countries’ willingness to discuss everything, at all levels and on all occasions. Although agreement cannot be reached on all issues relevant to the citizens of our respective countries, the Ambassador was keen to stress that this does not and should not in any way discourage us from trying to find effective solutions, and that the sings of this commitment of ours should be exhibited on a daily basis.

The keynote speech was delivered by the Albanian Deputy Minister of Defence, Mr Arian Starova. The Deputy Minister emphasized that the engagement in inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue could accelerate and consolidate the successes of political or social dialogue. Therefore, everybody, and religious communities in the first place, should make a better use of their human capital in order to create peace, stability and security in our region. Mr Starova drew attention to the fact that, given the interrelation between inter-religious and inter-ethnic types of dialogue, they could have positive reciprocal influences. He also pointed out that our region, due to specific circumstances, needed special efforts in spreading positive initiatives and good examples of inter-religious dialogue. In his opinion, despite the evidence of inter-religious collaboration inside the countries, there is still a lack of such collaboration and dialogue on regional and international level. Therefore, he called on the SEE countries to reflect more on this issue, emphasizing that the diversity in ethnicities and religions of our region is but a propitious condition for such reflection.

The Conference proceeded with Session I which covered the topic: "Overview of the initiatives and activities fostering inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue in South East Europe". It was moderated by H.E. Ambassador Todorčevski, and it comprised the speeches by Ms Zhulieta Harasani from UNESCO and Mr Gordan Crpić, PhD, Director of the Centre for Promoting Social Sciences of HBK Church. Following their speeches, the floor was open for questions and answers, which gave the participants an opportunity to engage in lively discussions.

Session II of the Conference was dedicated to the topic: "Defining a framework for cooperation and identifying concrete initiatives and programmes that should be pursued for the benefit, prosperity and development among the countries and peoples of South East Europe". The audience was addressed by: Mr Milan Begović, National Coordinator for Regional Initiatives MFA (ME) and Mr Mladen Dragašević, Head of Building Human Capital and Cross-Cutting Issues from Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The participants’ questions & answers and open discussion concluded this session.

From left to right: Mr. Arian Starova, Deputy Minisiter AL MoD and Amb.Todorčevski, RACVIAC Director
In Session III, the participants focused on "Reinforcing the dialogue through education, culture, sciences, communication and information". The moderator of this session was Mr Rasim Hasani, Head of the Cult Committee, Authority for Religious Communities under the Albanian Government. This part of the Conference was reserved for speeches by different religious communities from Albania. The following religious representatives delivered their addresses: Mr Aga Gazmend, Representative of Islamic community; Monsieur George Frendo, Representative of Catholic community; Bishop Joan Pelushi, Representative of Orthodox community and Baba Sadiku, Representative of Bektashian community. The speakers concluded the Session by emphasizing that only dialogue leads to tolerance, tolerance to understanding, understanding to harmony and harmony to love.

The second working day of the Conference started with the fourth session dedicated to the "Importance of inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue and its contribution to a broader dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples". In this session, Ms. Kostandina Bezhani, Chair of the Minorities Committee (under Albanian PM), Prof.Dr. Bejko Lorenc, University of Tirana and Mr. Ifet Mustafić, Interreligious Relations (BA) addressed the audience on the above-mentioned topic.

The last Conference session was moderated by Ambassador Nikola Todorčevski and it concerned "Inter-Ethics of Communication in SEE as values, from a parliamentary point of view". In this session, the representatives of Albanian and Montenegrin Parliament, Mr Osman Metalla and Mr Djordje Pinjatić respectively, delivered their lecturers. The end of this session offered the participants yet another opportunity to engage in discussion and to deal with any questions that might have arisen.

The Conference on: "Strengthening Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Dialogue in South East Europe" paved the way for a more constructive dialogue on security matters among the countries of the region by providing a forum for discussion on religious and ethnic tolerance as vital dimensions of the security policy-making process in Southeastern Europe. Over the course of the conference, religious and ethnic understanding were presented as key tools in building a more peaceful region and in fighting instability that can stem from inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions.

In the course of the Conference, RACVIAC, together with the Albanian MoD, offered a fertile ground for an exchange of individual views and best practices, for discussion of existing challenges and priorities, and for engagement in a more effective inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue. This Conference can be regarded as a continuation of the commitment and readiness of South East European countries to further promote peace, stability and prosperity, through an intensified dialogue, not only in this part of Europe but even further.

Compiled by: Mr. Milan Janicijevic (MK); IRC Pillar;