Introduction

The “Annual Meeting of the Representatives of Defence and Security Committees from SEE Parliaments” was held in Skopje, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* on 24th - 26th June, at the premises of the MK Parliamentary Assembly.

The purpose of the Conference was to give a broad overview of the mechanism and practices of the regional parliamentary defence and security committees, enabling a discussion about parliamentary procedures, challenges and oversight mechanisms in the field of defence and security, as well as exchange of views on the contemporary security challenges in South East Europe.

The Conference was attended by eighty five participants and speakers from the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, Romania, Republic of Serbia, Republic of Turkey, the United States and Kosovo**.

Participating International organizations and institutions were DCAF Geneva, OSCE Mission to Skopje, NATO Liaison Office Skopje, Delegation of the EU, International Organization for Migration and MARRI.

Execution

The Conference was opened on 25th June 2018 with the Welcome addresses by:

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* Turkey recognizes the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.

** This Designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICI Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence (In accordance with Arrangements regarding representation and cooperation)
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- Mr Hari Lokvenec, Chairman of the Committee on Defence and Security of MK Assembly
- H.E. Talat Xhaferi, President of the MK Assembly
- H.E. Ambassador Haydar Berk, RACVIAC Director, and
- H.E. Radmila Shekerinska, Deputy President of the Government and Minister of Defence, MK.

In his Opening address Mr Hari Lokvenec emphasized the importance of the Greek-Macedonian agreement on the name issue for Macedonian Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. He appealed for strengthening of regional parliamentary cooperation and the joint approach to security challenges in South East Europe and beyond.

Mr Talat Xhaferi underlined the significance of parliamentary oversight for the stability and prosperity of societies and states. He praised the role of RACVIAC in regional security cooperation. He also emphasized the importance of the solution of the name dispute for integration processes and regional stability.

Ambassador Haydar Berk welcomed all speakers and participants and showed his appreciation to the co-organizers of this Conference. He pointed out that the nature of the current security trends imposes shifts in the traditional role of the military which consequently affects the role, mechanisms and practices of Defence and Security Committees. He expressed the expectation that the Meeting could generate some positive developments in parliamentary oversight practices and enhance regional parliamentary cooperation.

Ms Radmila Shekerinska highlighted MK’s political will and dedication to regional cooperation through regional initiatives and centres. Mutual cooperation is the key instrument for improving security and prosperity of regional countries. This is also reflected through support for Macedonian NATO membership which is mainly expressed by NATO members in the region. In this context she also complimented the Athens-Skopje agreement. Besides that institutional reforms related to the judiciary, rule of law, intelligence services, media freedom, election law, human rights and defence reform are of utmost importance, Ms Shekerinska stressed.

The first Panel topic was “Increasing Non-Traditional Missions of the Military and the Role of Parliamentary Oversight”. The Deputy President of the Committee on Defence and Security of MK Assembly Mr Ilija Nikolovski pointed out the broadened role of military in security policy of the country, especially assistance to civilian institutions and the need for better coordination among stakeholders and steady financial support to the military while performing non-traditional tasks.

Mr Dragan Nikolić, the State Secretary of the MK Ministry of Defence, stated that the engagement of the military in non-traditional missions must be strictly regulated in order to prevent potential misuse. Besides participation in disaster response activities during floods, forest fires and dealing with migrants, the military is also involved in peace keeping missions abroad. Such tasks require a comprehensive approach, improved inter-agency cooperation, adequate legal regulations and increased investments in military capabilities for non-traditional missions.

Captain (N) Gorazd Bartol, Chief of the NATO Liaison Office Skopje, pointed out to the implications of NATO’s presence in Skopje for the Euro-Atlantic integration prospects. It
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H.E. Talat Xhaferi, President of the Assembly

Colonel Stjepan Domjančić, Vice-Dean for International Cooperation of the Croatian Defence Academy, talked about defence and security policy and public interest in defence issues which should be driven by a more professional approach, he said. A strong involvement of the military in non-military activities can significantly contribute to the image of the military in public. On the other hand it can lead to the excessive reliance of the societies on military potentials and creation of dependence on the military. Defence and civil-military relations are good indicators of overall democratic consolidation of modern societies. Defence is still highly militarized and defence policy has some level of mystification inherent to a military organization which has implications for the management and creates the perception of being beyond the citizens’ reach, Colonel Domjančić stated.

During the discussion the participants highlighted the importance of the military in providing assistance to civilian institutions in crisis situations. The challenges are the lack of equipment and inadequate training and education for non-traditional military tasks. The legislation should be amended in order to allow for a more efficient parliamentary oversight in this area and the Parliamentarians should conduct more oversight activities in the field, it was concluded.

“Good Practices of Parliamentary Oversight of the Defence and Security Sector” was the title of the second Conference Panel.

Mr Trajche Dimkov of the Committee on Defence and Security of MK Assembly stressed the necessity of effective legislation aimed at regulating the work of the security and intelligence services.

Ms Frosina Tashevska Remenski, Vice-President of the MK Assembly, underlined that to achieve a more effective oversight of the security sector the Parliaments should overcome the lack of political will, adopt a proper legal framework, and build expertise. She also pointed out the importance of parliamentary diplomacy.

Mr Vlado Gjerdovski of DCAF Geneva stated that parliamentary oversight regulation in the SEE countries is well developed but that there are still some challenges when it comes to implementation such as the lack of parliamentary staff and institutional memory as well as financial constraints.

Mr Željko Grubešić of the Joint Committee on Defence and Security of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina put emphasis on the role of parliamentary staff as the institutional memory of the committees. He suggested to the committees to be focused on new trends such as cyber security, nuclear security and migrations as well as to work more closely with the academic community, NGOs, the religious communities and to foster regional cooperation.

The third panel focused on the Contemporary Security Challenges in South East Europe.

Mr Oliver Spasovski, Deputy President of the Government and Minister of Internal Affairs, MK, pointed out that organized and trans-border crime, terrorism, corruption, illegal migrations, cyber-crime, humans, drugs and weapons trafficking are the most significant
security challenges in SEE, which is the source and the transit route of criminal activities. He called for better inter-agency cooperation and coordination at the national and regional level.

As the most important security challenges Ms Frosina Tashevska Remenski highlighted the undermined citizens' confidence in the state institutions, high level of corruption, criminalization of intelligence services, violent extremism and negative demographic trends. In order to improve their response to these challenges the state institutions should cooperate more closely and efficiently and the Parliaments should organize thematic debates and regional conferences which will contribute to the exchange of experiences and raised awareness, she underlined.

Mr Jeffrey Goldstein, Acting Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, talked about the importance of the rule of law and transparency of state institutions. He briefly described what OSCE is doing in the region in order to try and help address current and future internal and external challenges. He also pointed out that transnational challenges can only be resolved through a combination of both the domestic and cooperative regional and international efforts. At the end he stressed that meetings like this one are excellent examples of how joint effort can resolve complicated and long term challenges and open the path for a better and safer future for citizens in the SEE region.

Conclusions

This successful high-level conference gathered a number of participants, experts and speakers. All participants agreed that conferences and meetings such as this one can bring all countries in the SEE region closer to one another. They also expressed the view that annual meetings should be held in the future too in order to improve parliamentary oversight of the defence and security sector and achieve stronger cooperation, exchange experiences as well as information and good practices among SEE Parliaments.

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