



Regional Cooperation Council



COMPASS TOWARDS STABILITY,  
SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN COOPERATION PROCESS  
SOFIA CHAIRMANSHIP-IN-OFFICE 2025 - 2026



CHARTING  
SHARED  
REGIONAL  
TRANSFORMATION

# good. better. regional.

**Title:** 30 Years SEECF Charting Shared Regional Transformation

**Publisher:** Regional Cooperation Council  
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May 2026

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# FOREWORD

Thirty years after its historic birth in Sofia - a milestone we are honoured to celebrate once again under Sofia's Chairmanship-in-Office - the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEEC) stands as a profound testament to regional ownership, political responsibility and the shared will to shape our own future. Over the decades, it has grown into an all-inclusive family of 13 Participants, providing the region with a steady platform for open dialogue and genuine cooperation. With the test of time, the SEEC proved to be more than a forum, but rather a strong anchor of stability, good-neighbourly relations and trust exactly when we needed it the most.

This is a meaningful achievement, a three-decade journey in which the cooperation process in South East Europe has helped our region to move from fragmentation to cooperation, from instability to predictability, and from post crisis recovery to a shared and prosperous European future. The accession of several SEEC Participants to the European Union stands as a clear confirmation of this broader transformation, while the European perspective of the region remains a central strategic horizon and a powerful driver of reform, convergence and cooperation, underpinned by the stable and sustained peace and stability fostered by SEEC.

Perhaps the most important and rewarding institutional achievement of SEEC Participants is the establishment of a genuinely home grown multilateral institution, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), as the successor to the Stability Pact. Fashioned as the operational arm of SEEC's political guidance, the RCC has given regional cooperation a visible and enduring form. Through its regionally inclusive approach, its convening power rooted in the statutory mandate granted by SEEC, its technical expertise and its operational capacity to implement regional strategies and multi annual programmes, the RCC translates SEEC's political ideals into concrete regional reality.

The results are both visible and felt across our region. From the SEE2020 and SEE2030 Strategies to the Common Regional Market, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, Green Lanes, the Roam Like at Home success, mobility agreements, digital cooperation and wider connectivity efforts, RCC-supported processes have touched the daily lives of our citizens, and offered tangible benefits that improve conditions in the region for citizens, businesses and institutions alike. In recent years, the Western Balkans, in particular, has been able to benefit from these platforms under the stable and inclusive political umbrella that SEEC has helped preserve.

The institutional bond between SEEC and the RCC is one of the region's strongest assets. While SEEC provides the political vision, the RCC delivers the space, instruments and continuity needed to translate that guidance into tangible results.

This skilfully crafted architecture has proven that regional cooperation is not just a shared principle, but a living, breathing mechanism for building peace, stability and prosperity, and for advancing European integration.

As we mark thirty years of SEEC, we do so with pride, but not with complacency. Much has been achieved, yet the potential of SEEC remains even greater than what has already been delivered. The region now faces a more complex environment, shaped by geopolitical uncertainty, the consequences of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, hybrid threats, energy insecurity, economic volatility,

increasing inflation, climate risks, natural disasters, and demographic pressure. These challenges require cooperation that is inclusive, but also more focused, more resilient, and more effective.

The next chapter of SEECP should therefore be fuelled by a clear ambition: to move past well established paths of diplomatic dialogue and step into an era of dedicated actions and tangible delivery. The region now needs the full potential of SEECP as a dynamic political platform capable of forging unified responses, strengthening regional resilience and advancing the European future of South East Europe through greater strategic coordination among its leaders. The region has outgrown the need for just a common voice; it now needs the capacity to act as one.

By deepening the institutional link between SEECP and the RCC, and by placing a smart, skilled, sustainable, and secure region at the heart of its strategic agenda, South East Europe can ensure that its collective efforts will become even more consequential for its people over the next 30 years of its existence.

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Regional Cooperation Council

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) marks its thirtieth anniversary in 2026. Born in Sofia in 1996 among eight founding Participants - Ankara, Athens, Belgrade, Bucharest, Sarajevo, Skopje, Sofia, and Tirana - and gradually widened to its present membership of 13 with the inclusion of Zagreb, Chisinau, Podgorica, Ljubljana, and Pristina, SEECP has become the only all-inclusive, regionally-owned political forum in South East Europe (SEE).

This document examines what SEECP has achieved across three decades through a reading of its annual Summit Declarations alongside the parallel institutional and policy developments they have shaped. The methodology is qualitative and content-based, identifying recurring priorities, continuities, and shifts in emphasis. Its purpose is to support a mature assessment rather than to substitute for a fully quantitative evaluation. The document reads SEECP's first thirty years as a single arc: a first decade that built the political habit of regional dialogue at the highest level, a second decade in which that habit produced an institutional expression of its own, and a third decade in which that institution was tested under pressure.

SEECP's principal role in the last three decades has been to provide political guidance for regional cooperation in South East Europe, and it should remain so in the decades to come. The Chairmanships-in-Office Summit Declarations have anchored European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the strategic horizon for the region, complemented by economic and security cooperation, good-neighbourly relations, and inclusive growth. The continuity of this guidance - sustained through periods of regional tension, economic crisis, pandemic, natural disasters, and renewed geopolitical instability - is itself a consequential outcome, and it has been preserved through consensus, inclusiveness, and equality among Participants.

But SEECP's most consequential achievement was not only that it survived as a diplomatic process. Its most important strategic contribution was that it brought the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) to life.

Through the RCC, SEECP gave regional cooperation an operational arm: a trusted, all-inclusive, and implementation-oriented platform capable of translating political guidance into concrete regional action. This is what distinguishes SEECP from many other political formats. It did not remain only a space for declarations. It generated an institutional mechanism with a secretariat, mandate, budget, strategy cycle, convening power, and implementation-support capacity. Over time, the RCC became the region's practical platform for turning political ambition into results - from the Common Regional Market and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans to Green Lanes, regional and EU-linked roaming arrangements, mobility agreements, SEE2020 and SEE2030 Strategies.

This matters because citizens and businesses do not judge regional cooperation by the elegance of summit language. They judge it by whether borders work better, whether trade becomes easier, whether services are more mobile, whether young people can study and work across the region, whether markets are more predictable, and whether the region is better prepared for shocks.

However, thirty years later, the question is no longer only what SEECP has been. The more difficult question is what it must evolve into in order to remain relevant and effective in the upcoming decades.

The same declarations that kept the region strategically oriented also reveal persistent gaps between political commitment and delivery. Non-tariff barriers, slow implementation of mobility and connectivity commitments, demographic decline, weak human capital development, uneven rule-of-law convergence, energy insecurity, and limited preparedness and resilience to climate change and security shocks all demonstrate that political guidance alone is no longer sufficient to promote a predictable and sustainable ecosystem in which the region can unlock its full potential.

The next phase of regional cooperation cannot solely be measured by the number of formats, declarations, or meetings convened. Rather, it must be measured by strategic direction, effective execution, and the delivery of tangible results that improve the lives of citizens and businesses. Such results should foster a competitive, sustainable, and predictable socio-economic space for inclusive development, leveraging the region's collective economies of scale, equivalent to the world's seventh largest economy.

This is where the anniversary must become more than a commemoration: it should mark the beginning of a new phase of action to address both present and future challenges.

South East Europe today is interwoven with many initiatives, organisations, forums and cooperation mechanisms. This richness is an asset, but it can also become a weakness if it produces fragmentation rather than direction. The regional cooperation ecosystem is not poor in ideas, processes or declarations. What it increasingly lacks is a shared strategic compass.

The strategic environment around SEECF has changed with a speed and magnitude that few could have predicted. War has returned to the European continent. Security is no longer limited to defence, but includes energy, cyber resilience, hybrid threats, disinformation, economic coercion, supply chains, climate risks, demographic pressures, citizens' trust in institutions, and institutional vulnerability. The EU's enlargement has returned as a geopolitical necessity, albeit in a more complex and demanding form. Competitiveness, resilience, and strategic autonomy now define Europe's internal debate, of which South East Europe is an integral part. Simultaneously, the green and digital transitions are reshaping the future of economies, while demographic decline and aging societies require policy horizons extending well beyond electoral cycles. Climate change-related risks and shocks are no longer future contingencies or scenarios; they are present, immediate fiscal, economic, and human security risks. Responding effectively to these interconnected challenges requires evidence-based policymaking, sustained multi-decade interventions, and stronger multilateral engagement, given the increasingly transboundary nature of contemporary risks. Consequently, neither isolationism nor short-termism can offer a viable pathway forward.

In this environment, SEECF cannot rely on legacy alone. Its continued relevance will depend on whether it can answer one fundamental question: why would SEECF's existence in the next decades be an asset for the entire region? What has to be upgraded and what requires a more serious overhaul?

The answer cannot be nostalgia. It must be strategic utility.

That strategic utility must now be stated more clearly. South East Europe is not a marginal space. It is a wider market of around 150 million people, positioned between the European Union, Central Asia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean, with energy, transport, industrial, digital and human capital assets that remain significantly underused. Its geography is not only a source of exposure but also of wealth. Properly connected, it can become a source of competitiveness and an island of stability and prosperity for a strategically autonomous Europe.

The next phase of SEECP should therefore focus on a limited number of forward-looking transformative priorities from which all Participants can benefit, regardless of whether they are inside or outside the European Union, inside or outside NATO, or at different stages of accession and integration. Organisational asymmetry should not become strategic paralysis but a basis of inclusiveness to prevent isolationism, exclusionism, and short-termism. On the contrary, SEECP's value lies precisely in its capacity to organise cooperation across these asymmetries and turn them into practical complementarities.

First, South East Europe should be treated as a strategic energy and resilience corridor between Europe and its neighbouring regions. This means better interconnection of electricity markets, gas and hydrogen-ready infrastructure, renewable energy potential, storage capacity, grid modernisation, regional balancing mechanisms, and climate resilience tools. Energy security is no longer only a domestic file. It is a competitiveness file, an industrial-policy file, a social stability file, and a security file. A region that cannot provide predictable, affordable and increasingly clean energy will not attract higher value industry, digital investment, or serious nearshoring.

Second, infrastructure connectivity should move from a project-by-project approach to a corridor-based economic logic. Roads, railways, ports, airports, border/boundary crossings, logistics hubs, and digital infrastructure should be understood as parts of regional value chains, not only as domestic investments. The question should no longer be only whether two capitals are connected. The question should be whether South East Europe can move people, goods, data, electricity, and services fast enough to compete as an integrated economic space.

Third, SEECP should support the development of regional industrial and service value chains with higher added value. South East Europe cannot build its future only on low-cost labour, remittances, consumption, and fragmented markets. The region needs a more deliberate agenda around advanced manufacturing, agri-food value chains, automotive and battery-related production, critical raw materials processing where appropriate, ICT and digital services, green technologies, sustainable tourism, high-tech construction services, logistics, and professional mobility. This is where the Common Regional Market, SEE2030 and future forms of gradual integration with the EU Single Market should be brought together into one strategic frame.

Fourth, human capital must become a central pillar of the next phase. Demographic decline, skills shortages and outward migration are no longer secondary social issues. They are binding constraints on growth, resilience and security. Regional cooperation should therefore focus more strongly on mutual recognition of qualifications, labour market intelligence, skills partnerships, lifelong learning, vocational education, youth mobility and the portability of rights and services.

Fifth, SEECP should give stronger political visibility to the existing implementation frameworks and provide an inclusive platform that connects the multi-level strategic initiatives implemented by RCC and other regional initiatives, thereby ensuring long-term political continuity and predictability of an all-inclusive regional cooperation mechanism. SEE2030 provides a broader inclusive development framework built upon policy nexuses to utilise the economies of scale of an integrated region and ensure content-strong regional cooperation to SEECP structures. The Common Regional Market provides an operational economic integration engine for the Western Balkans. The Green Agenda, digital transformation, mobility agreements, roaming, Green Lanes, and future EU-linked initiatives provide practical examples of what can be scaled. The task is not to invent a new ecosystem. The task is to discipline the existing one around fewer, clearer and more measurable priorities.

This would give SEECP a more concrete role in the next decade: to provide the political umbrella for a South East Europe that is more connected, more resilient, more competitive and a more strategic contributor to a prosperous and sustainable Europe as a whole. RCC's role, in turn, cannot remain static. If SEECP is to raise its level of ambition, the RCC Secretariat must also be equipped to operate at a more adequate level: with a clearer operational role, stronger analytical and monitoring capacities, sufficient human resources, and more predictable financial sustainability to serve all the tasks entrusted to it by SEECP.

The next decade should therefore bring a more deliberate articulation between SEECP political guidance and RCC delivery capacity. Summit Declarations should identify priorities that can be translated into regional workstreams, monitored through evidence, and linked to measurable outcomes. SEE2030 already offers an inclusive framework for this shift, built around prosperity, people, peace and partnerships. The task now is to make that framework more visible, more disciplined and more politically owned.

The future role of SEECP should therefore be less about adding another layer to an already crowded ecosystem and more about providing strategic direction to it and strengthening the harmonious interaction between RCC and SEECP in a way to utilise RCC's operational capacities to respond to multi-annual challenges in the region under the auspices of yearly rotating chairpersonships of SEECP. It should help clarify where regional cooperation adds value, where duplication weakens credibility, where political guidance must be connected to implementation, and where the region needs collective positioning towards the European Union and wider strategic partners.

The conclusion of this review is therefore one of continuity, but not complacency. SEECP's first thirty years proved the value of inclusiveness, regional ownership, consensus, and dialogue. They also proved that political dialogue becomes more meaningful when it produces institutions capable of delivery. The RCC is the clearest evidence of that achievement.

The next thirty years will require more. They will test whether SEECP can move from being a successful forum of regional political dialogue to becoming a strategic platform for regional direction and initiator. They will test whether the RCC can be used even more fully as the operational bridge between political ownership and tangible results. And they will test whether South East Europe can convert shared exposure into resilience, common geography into shared collective competitiveness, and joint challenges into a more stable, secure, and prosperous future for Europe.

SEECP's past justifies respect. Its future must justify relevance.

# INTRODUCTION

The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), founded in 1996, has served for three decades as the most inclusive regional cooperation forum in South East Europe, bringing the region into a single political framework for dialogue, consultation, and cooperation. Created in the aftermath of a period marked by instability and fragmentation, SEECP has aimed to strengthen good neighbourly relations and support the transformation of the region into an area of peace, security, stability, and cooperation, with full integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures as its strategic horizon.

Launched in Sofia in 1996 by eight founding Participants - Ankara, Athens, Belgrade, Bucharest, Sarajevo, Skopje, Sofia, and Tirana - the Process gradually widened its composition as the regional environment evolved, progressively integrating Zagreb, Chisinau, Podgorica, Ljubljana, and Pristina, to reach its current membership of 13 Participants. This step-by-step enlargement is itself one of SEECP's defining achievements: it transformed an initiative born among a limited group of neighbours into the only regionally-owned format that brings all South-East European Participants around the same table, giving the Process a uniquely comprehensive geographic footprint and full political representation of the region as a whole.

This analysis examines what SEECP has achieved over its first 30 years by tracing the evolution of its annual Summit Declarations, which function as the Process' central pledges and guiding documents. Since the Chairmanships-in-Office (CiO) conclude with a Summit of the Heads of State and Government of its Participants, the declarations offer a valuable longitudinal record of priorities, continuity, and change.

Rather than treating the declarations as isolated political statements, the paper reads them as a cumulative narrative of regional cooperation. The question, therefore, asks not only what SEECP repeatedly promised but also how those commitments were translated into institutional development, policy coordination, and gradual regional convergence over time.

The main argument of this document is that SEECP's most important achievement over the past 30 years has been to provide continuous and credible political guidance for regional cooperation in South East Europe, and that this guidance, anchored in the Chairmanship-in-Office and Troika system and translated through the RCC and Participant-owned frameworks, has helped move the region from post-conflict fragmentation towards a more structured environment focused on cooperation, reform and European integration. SEECP's significance lies less in any single breakthrough than in the sustained institutionalisation of annual summit diplomacy under regional ownership, and in the gradual translation of political commitments into regional frameworks, processes, and increasingly practical outcomes for citizens and businesses.

At the same time, the analysis argues that SEECP's evolution can be understood as a gradual widening of its agenda: from early emphasis on basic trust building, good neighbourly relations, and security, towards a broader set of priorities including economic connectivity, democratic governance, human dimension issues, resilience, digital transformation, and long-term sustainable development. The recurring Summit Declarations therefore reveal both progress and limits: they demonstrate that SEECP has succeeded in preserving regional ownership and continuity, while also showing that the process

remains most effective as a political framework for coordination and agenda-setting rather than as a direct implementation mechanism.

The analysis is based on a qualitative reading of SEECP Summit declarations adopted between 1996 and 2025, complemented by selected regional milestones and policy frameworks that illustrate how political priorities evolved over time. To support comparability across years, the relative emphasis given to each thematic category is also indicated visually through the figures accompanying each decade. This basic content-analysis approach is intended as a readable overview with the purpose of supporting the political reading of the declarations rather than to substitute for it.

For the purpose of the presentation, the commitments reflected in the declarations are grouped into five broad policy areas: European and Euro-Atlantic integration; economic development cooperation; security cooperation; democracy and the rule of law; and common future. The accompanying figures provide an indicative visual overview of the relative emphasis given to these themes in each declaration. They are intended to support readability and comparison over time, not to substitute for a full quantitative assessment.

# SEECP THROUGHOUT THE YEARS: 3 DECADES OF COMMITMENTS

This section traces the development of SEECP over its first thirty years by examining the priorities set out in its summit declarations and the regional progress achieved alongside them. It shows how the process has evolved from an initial focus on confidence building, stability, and good neighbourly relations towards a broader agenda encompassing European and Euro-Atlantic integration, economic cooperation, security, democratic governance, and a shared regional future.

The section is organised in three decade-long periods: 1996-2005, 2006-2015, and 2016-2025. Each period outlines the main political priorities reflected in the declarations and links them to key milestones in regional cooperation. The figures in this section are intended to provide a concise visual overview of SEECP's evolving agenda. Each pillar marks the year of a relevant regional development, while the bubbles<sup>1</sup> indicate the main priorities reflected in the Summit Declaration for that year.

For the purpose of the overview, the priorities are grouped into five broad policy areas:

- » European and Euro-Atlantic integration;
- » economic development cooperation;
- » security cooperation;
- » democracy and the rule of law; and
- » common future.

These categories capture the main areas of commitment that have shaped SEECP's agenda across the three decades.

The size of each bubble reflects the relative emphasis given to a particular theme in the relevant declaration. To keep the figures clear and readable, only the most prominent themes are shown for each year. Where several themes received similar levels of attention, an additional theme is included.

The thirty-year evolution of SEECP can be read through a simple policy sequence. The first decade established the political habit of dialogue and trust-building. The second decade gave this regional ownership a stronger institutional expression through the establishment of the RCC and the transition from the Stability Pact era to a more regionally anchored cooperation architecture. The third decade tested whether this architecture could support practical delivery under increasingly complex conditions, including economic volatility, security challenges, demographic pressures, and the need for sustainable development.

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1 The visual "bubble" figures are based on a two-step qualitative coding of the declarations using NVivo: declarations were first coded inductively for recurring priorities and then re-coded into five consolidated thematic categories (European and Euro-Atlantic integration; economic development cooperation; security cooperation; democracy and the rule of law; common future). Frequencies of references to each category within individual declarations were then used as the basis for the relative size of the bubbles. The approach is indicative and is not a fully evidence-based analytical methodology.

Seen in this way, SEECP's significance lies not only in the continuity of Summit Declarations, but also in the institutional and policy frameworks that emerged around them. The declarations provided political direction, while RCC-supported processes and Participant-owned initiatives helped translate that direction into cooperation platforms, strategies, and selected practical results.

## First Decade (1996-2005): Foundation and Trust-Building

The first decade of SEECP established the process as a regionally-owned political platform during a period of post-conflict stabilisation and early European orientation, with European and Euro-Atlantic integration consistently emerging as the dominant priority across declarations (Figure 1). This period laid the institutional groundwork for sustained regional dialogue while addressing immediate security challenges and economic reconstruction needs, though implementation remained constrained by conflict legacies and uneven individual capacities of the SEECP Participants.

This section focuses on the main developments in South East Europe and the key priorities outlined in the SEECP declarations during the first decade, covering the period from 1996 to 2005. As illustrated in the figure below, data is missing for some of the years due to the absence of available declarations. Despite this limitation, the available material still provides a sufficient basis for identifying the main developments and priorities during this period.

### Declaration Priorities and Evolution

**1996 Sofia Declaration:** The founding declaration established SEECP's core mission, placing European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the largest thematic priority, followed by economic development cooperation and security cooperation. It committed Participants to aligning political and economic structures with European standards, promoting good neighbourly relations as a stability cornerstone, and enhancing regional infrastructure in transport, energy, and telecommunications. Security priorities focused on combating organised crime, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and irregular migration through strengthened border/boundary controls.

As illustrated in the figure below, this year also demonstrates the strongest emphasis on the three most prominent thematic categories of the period. European and Euro-Atlantic integration emerges as the most extensively addressed theme, followed closely by economic development cooperation, as well as security cooperation.

Regarding European and Euro-Atlantic integration, the 1996 Sofia Declaration emphasises the ambition of the Participants to become integrated with the broader European political and institutional framework. This includes commitment to aligning political and economic structures with European standards. Furthermore, particular emphasis is placed on the promotion of good neighbourly relations, which is presented as a fundamental principle for regional stability and cooperation. In this context, good neighbourly practice refers to the development of constructive bilateral relations, the peaceful resolution of disputes, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the strengthening of dialogue and cooperation among neighbours.

Economic development cooperation is another important priority highlighted in the Declaration. The focus is primarily placed on strengthening regional cooperation aimed at improving infrastructure

in fields such as transport, energy, and telecommunications. These initiatives are seen as essential for enhancing regional connectivity and supporting economic development. In addition, emphasis is placed on the importance of promoting trade and investment to stimulate economic growth and deepen economic cooperation within the region.

Finally, security cooperation also receives significant attention in the Declaration. In this regard, the Participants underline the importance of cooperation in combating organised crime, illicit drug trafficking, and arms trafficking, as well as in addressing terrorism. The declaration also stresses the need to strengthen border/boundary control mechanisms and to promote joint actions against illegal and irregular migration.

**The 1997 Crete Declaration** continues to emphasise European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the most prominent priority, followed by security cooperation and economic development cooperation. Compared to the 1996 Sofia Declaration, however, the 1997 Declaration is considerably shorter, which is also reflected in the smaller bubbles illustrated in the figure. While the same core themes remain present, they are addressed in a more concise manner than in the founding declaration of 1996.

In this context, the Declaration highlights the European orientation of the Participants as an integral component of their political, economic, and social development. Attention is given to the promotion of good neighbourly relations, the strengthening of shared European identity, and the continued commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration as essential objectives for the region.

Regarding security cooperation, the Declaration largely reiterates the priorities identified in the 1996 Sofia Declaration. The Participants emphasise the importance of regional cooperation in combating organised crime, illicit drug trafficking, and arms trafficking, as well as addressing broader threats to regional stability.

Economic development cooperation similarly follows the priorities outlined in the previous declaration. The emphasis remains on strengthening regional cooperation aimed at improving infrastructure and promoting economic development within the region.

In **the 1998 Antalya Declaration**, European and Euro-Atlantic integration remains the most prominent thematic priority, followed by economic development cooperation and security cooperation. The Declaration underlines the importance of SEECP's efforts to promote regional cooperation in line with the Participants' aspirations for deeper integration with the European Union. Regional cooperation is framed as an important mechanism for supporting the broader process of European integration.

Within the area of economic development cooperation, particular emphasis is placed on the strengthening of trade relations, advancing economic reforms, and improving regional communication and transport networks. The Declaration also highlights steps towards gradually creating the conditions necessary for establishing a regional free trade area.

In the field of security cooperation, the priorities largely mirror those identified in the previous declarations, including continued cooperation in addressing organised crime, illicit trafficking, and other security challenges affecting regional stability.

**The 2001 Skopje Declaration** is the next declaration in line, with a European and Euro-Atlantic integration once again emerging as the most prominent priority, followed by security cooperation, and democracy and the rule of law.

With regard to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, the Declaration emphasises the importance of integration into both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Regional cooperation in SEE is presented as an important mechanism for advancing these integration processes and strengthening stability within the region. In this context, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe is also highlighted as an important framework for promoting peace and stability – an initiative that will be discussed in greater detail later in the analysis.

In terms of security cooperation, the Declaration largely reiterates previously identified priorities, including cooperation in combating organised crime and other security challenges. However, greater attention is also given to the role of NATO in supporting regional security, as well as to the readiness of the Participants in the region to cooperate in the fields of regional defence and security.

Democracy and the rule of law emerge as one of the central priorities in the 2001 Declaration. The Participants reaffirm their commitment to upholding democratic principles, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. While these principles are generally referenced in many declarations, the 2001 Declaration places particular emphasis on them as a core priority.

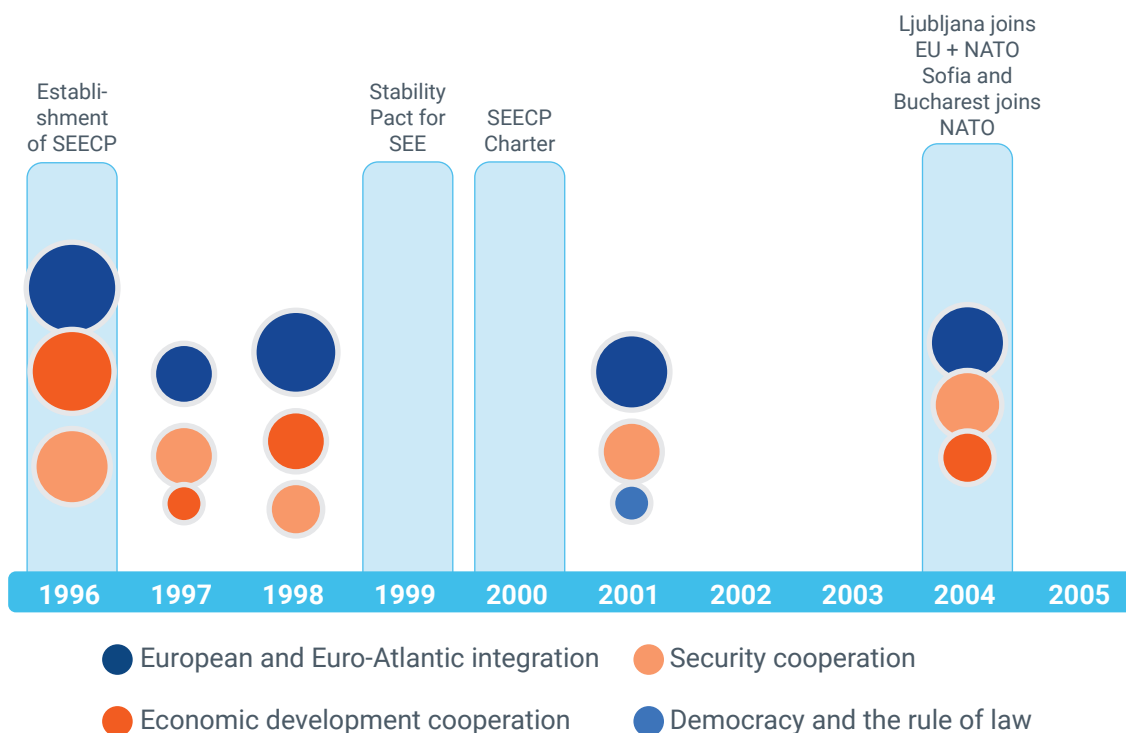
In **the 2004 Sarajevo Declaration**, the main priorities once again consist of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, security cooperation, and economic development cooperation. European and Euro-Atlantic integration is framed as an essential vehicle for achieving and maintaining long-term stability and security in the region. The Declaration emphasises the importance of bringing SEE closer to the European mainstream and ensuring compliance with European standards across various political and economic sectors.

Security cooperation continues to receive significant attention. The Participants strongly condemn terrorism in all its forms and call for effective measures to address it. At the same time, the Declaration highlights the progress made in combating organised crime and corruption, while emphasising the need to continue and strengthen these efforts. The role of the Euro-Atlantic partnership, particularly through cooperation with NATO, is also presented as an important mechanism for enhancing regional stability and security.

Economic development cooperation focuses on continued steps towards trade liberalisation and further development of regional infrastructure, particularly in areas such as transport and economic connectivity, building on priorities identified in previous declarations.

Taken together, the founding decade established the political infrastructure on which everything that followed has rested: an all-inclusive forum at the Heads of State and Government level, a Charter formalising principles and mechanisms, and a working habit of annual political guidance. The translation of that guidance into tangible regional outcomes would come later, but what the first decade delivered was the political precondition for any such translation to be possible.

Figure 1: Main priorities of the SEECP and advancements of the region, 1996-2005



## Main events

In addition to the thematic priorities outlined in the declarations, several key political developments shaped regional cooperation in SEE during the first decade of the SEECP.

### 1996: Establishment of the SEECP

The establishment of the SEECP in 1996 in Sofia represents a pivotal moment for regional cooperation in SEE. The SEECP was created as a regionally-owned initiative aimed at strengthening political dialogue, promoting stability, and fostering cooperation among the Participants. Unlike many other initiatives in the region at the time, the SEECP was established and led by the region itself, emphasising the principle of regional ownership.

The creation of the SEECP provided an institutional framework for addressing common regional challenges and promoting cooperation in areas such as political dialogue, economic development, and security. As such, it laid the foundation for a more structured and coordinated approach to regional cooperation during the following decades.

### 1999: The Stability Pact for SEE

Another important development occurred in 1999 with the establishment of the Stability Pact for SEE. The initiative was launched in by the international community in response to the conflicts in the

Western Balkans during the 1990s. The Stability Pact aimed to promote peace, democracy, economic development, and regional cooperation across SEE.

While the Stability Pact was primarily driven by international actors such as the European Union, NATO, and other international organisations, it also complemented the objectives of the SEECP. In this regard, the SEECP functioned as the political voice of the region, while the Stability Pact provided a broader international framework and resources for supporting regional stability and development.

### **2000: Charter on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in South-Eastern Europe**

In 2000, the SEECP Charter was adopted, representing an important step in the institutional development of the cooperation process. The Charter formally defined the principles, objectives and mechanisms guiding the SEECP, thereby strengthening its role as a framework for regional cooperation.

The adoption of the Charter further institutionalised the SEECP by clarifying the commitments of the Participants and reinforcing the principles of regional cooperation, good neighbourly relations, and political dialogue. As such, the Charter contributed to consolidating the SEECP as a central platform for political cooperation in SEE.

### **2004: EU and NATO Enlargement in the Region**

A final significant development during the decade occurred in 2004 with further integration of Participants of SEECP into Euro-Atlantic institutions. This year, Ljubljana became a member of both the European Union and NATO, while Sofia and Bucharest joined NATO.

These developments were highly significant for the region, as they represented concrete progress in the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration that had been consistently emphasised in SEECP declarations. The enlargement of these institutions also contributed to strengthening stability, security, and political transformation in SEE, while demonstrating that closer integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures was an attainable objective for the Participants.

## **Second Decade (2006-2015): Consolidation and Regional Ownership**

This section focuses on the main developments in SEE and the key priorities outlined in the SEECP declarations during the second decade, covering the period from 2006 to 2015. The section will follow the same format as the previous.

### **Declaration Priorities and Evolution**

In **the 2006 Thessaloniki Declaration**, European and Euro-Atlantic integration clearly emerges as the most prominent priority, as reflected in the comparatively large bubble in figure 2. Economic development cooperation and security cooperation appear as secondary priorities and are given roughly equal emphasis.

With regard to European and Euro-Atlantic integration, the Participants highlighted the European

perspective of SEE as both an incentive and a catalyst for deeper regional cooperation. The mottos “Neighbourhood in Cooperation” and “Together in Europe” capture the broader vision of the Declaration. Future accession to the European Union is presented as the primary strategic objective for the Participants of the region. In this regard, the implementation of European standards and reforms is emphasised as a key requirement, while the Declaration also reiterates that progress towards EU membership continues to depend on the individual merits of each candidate.

Economic development cooperation focuses primarily on the promotion of trade and investment as important drivers of regional economic growth. Security cooperation largely follows the priorities identified in the previous decade, with continued emphasis on cooperation in combating organised crime and other transboundary security challenges affecting the region.

The **2007 Zagreb Declaration** identifies European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the primary priority, followed by democracy and the rule of law, while economic development cooperation and security cooperation receive somewhat less emphasis.

European integration is described as the optimal framework for advancing cooperation in SEE. The Declaration emphasises the willingness of the Participants to further promote and share European values, particularly the principles of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation.

Democracy and the rule of law emerge as a key thematic priority. The declaration highlights the importance of full and unequivocal adherence to democratic values, including respect for the rule of law, human rights, and minority rights.

Security cooperation continues to focus on the importance of regional collaboration in addressing shared security challenges. In addition to cooperation in combating organised crime and other forms of illicit activities, the Declaration also highlights the value of sharing experiences related to security and military reforms.

Economic development cooperation focuses primarily on enhancing mutually beneficial economic and development cooperation, particularly through improvements in regional infrastructure.

The Zagreb Summit also marked a defining institutional milestone for SEECp, with the amendment to the Charter to define the relationship between SEECp and the future Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the decision to establish the RCC as the operational arm of the Process, based in Sarajevo.

In **the 2008 Pomorie Declaration**, European integration remains the most prominent priority, followed by democracy and the rule of law, and a newly introduced thematic focus on the region’s common future.

European Union integration is presented as the primary pathway for achieving long-term political, social, and economic stability in the region. The Declaration emphasises the EU enlargement process as one of the most powerful instruments for promoting stability and transformation in SEE.

Democracy and the rule of law continue to play an important role, with particular emphasis placed on the functioning of democratic institutions, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

A new thematic dimension appears in this Declaration in the form of a broader focus on the region’s common future. In this context, the Declaration highlights the importance of inter-cultural dialogue as a means of strengthening cooperation and mutual understanding within the region.

Held shortly after the official launch of the Regional Cooperation Council in Sofia on 27 February 2008, the Pomorie Summit endorsed the RCC's first Strategic Work Programme, thereby translating the Zagreb decision into operational reality and consolidating the SEECP - RCC institutional architecture that has supported regional cooperation ever since.

**The 2009 Chisinau Declaration** again identifies European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the primary priority, followed by economic development cooperation, while democracy and security cooperation receive somewhat less emphasis.

European and Euro-Atlantic integration is described as the main driving force for the advancement of the region. The Participants reiterate the importance of the EU enlargement policy as a powerful instrument for supporting democratic transformation and regional stability, while reaffirming the commitment of the Participants to continue the process of European integration.

Economic development cooperation is strongly influenced by the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. The Declaration therefore highlights the need for joint initiatives aimed at mitigating the economic impact of the crisis, particularly through infrastructure projects in areas such as energy and transport.

Democracy and the rule of law remain important elements of regional cooperation, with the Declaration emphasising the importance of open societies, democratic institutions, and respect for the rule of law.

Security cooperation focuses on condemning terrorism and all forms of violence, while reaffirming the commitment of the Participants to continue combating organised crime.

**The 2010 Istanbul Declaration** represents a unique case, as it adopted a more focused approach on cultural dialogue rather than the broader thematic categories. The Declaration highlights the importance of safeguarding and promoting cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, as a fundamental source for building sustainable peace, reconciliation, and regional harmony. Cultural cooperation is also presented as an important catalyst for strengthening regional cooperation.

In this context, the Declaration emphasises the importance of intensifying joint scientific, academic, and artistic exchanges within the region. It also calls for the integration of cultural heritage protection principles into joint projects in areas such as culture, education, science, communication, and information.

**In the 2011 Budva Declaration**, European and Euro-Atlantic integration once again emerges as the most prominent priority, followed by economic development cooperation and democracy and the rule of law.

The SEECP Participants emphasise the importance of a shared vision for SEE as part of a united and free Europe characterised by open and tolerant societies based on democracy, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental rights. The European and Euro-Atlantic perspective of the region is presented as the most effective pathway for achieving lasting peace, stability, security, and prosperity.

Economic development cooperation is strongly linked to the global economic crisis. Regional cooperation is highlighted as an important response to the economic challenges facing the region, while emphasising that sustainable economic development is essential for long-term stability and security. Particular attention is given to infrastructure development in areas such as transport, energy, and communication.

Democracy and the rule of law are also emphasised as essential components of regional cooperation. The Declaration highlights the importance of political dialogue, respect for international law, and constructive engagement in addressing unresolved regional issues.

**The 2013 Ohrid Declaration** places primary emphasis on European integration and economic development cooperation, while democracy and the rule of law appear as a secondary priority.

European and Euro-Atlantic integration continues to be framed as a central strategic objective for the region. The Participants reiterate the shared vision of SEE as a part of a unified Europe and highlight the importance of regional cooperation in advancing this goal.

Economic development cooperation is closely linked to the ongoing recovery from the global financial crisis. The Participants of the SEECP emphasise the importance of strengthening regional resilience to economic challenges and promoting sustainable economic growth.

Democracy and the rule of law remain an important foundation for regional cooperation, with the Declaration reaffirming the commitment of the Participants to democratic values and human rights.

**The 2014 Bucharest Declaration** emphasises the European and Euro-Atlantic integration strongly, as reflected in the notably large bubble illustrated in Figure 2. Security cooperation, economic development, and democracy and the rule of law are also highlighted.

European integration is presented as a key motivation for structural reforms and democratic transformation across the region. The Declaration emphasised that regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations remain essential elements of the EU enlargement process and contribute to stability, reconciliation, and the resolution of outstanding issues.

Taken together, the Berlin Process, the SEE2020 Strategy and the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly illustrate the broadening of regional cooperation during this period. They strengthened different but complementary dimensions of the regional agenda: high-level political engagement, economic and development cooperation, and parliamentary dialogue. They also show how SEECP priorities increasingly connected with RCC-supported strategic frameworks and wider European initiatives, reinforcing regional ownership while linking it to practical cooperation and the European perspective.

Security cooperation in this Declaration focuses particularly on energy security. The Participants emphasise the importance of strengthening regional cooperation in order to improve energy supply security, diversify energy sources, and enhance connections with the European energy market.

Economic development cooperation focuses on promoting economic prosperity and strengthening regional economic integration. Democracy and the rule of law are also emphasised as essential conditions for regional stability and sustainable development.

In **the 2015 Tirana Declaration**, European integration and security cooperation emerge as the two most prominent priorities. Economic development cooperation, democracy and the rule of law, and the concept of a common future are also highlighted. Due to their similar level of emphasis, all five thematic categories are illustrated in the figure for this year.

European integration continues to be presented as the most effective pathway for achieving lasting peace and stability in the region. The Participants highlight the role of both the SEECP and the RCC in supporting regional cooperation and advancing the European and Euro-Atlantic integration process.

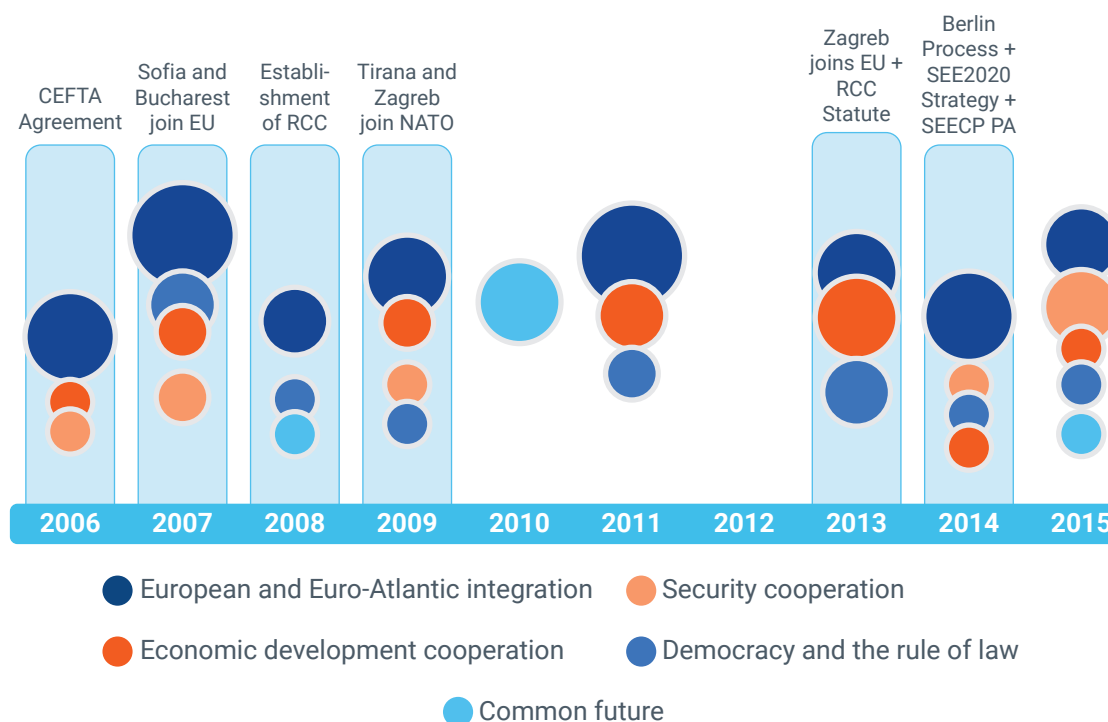
Security cooperation focuses on strengthening collaboration in defence and security, including participation in international peacekeeping missions and continued efforts to combat organised crime and corruption.

Economic cooperation emphasises the importance of regional trade and the development of a functioning market economy.

Democracy and the rule of law remain important priorities, particularly in relation to strengthening institutions, promoting human rights, and supporting gender equality.

Finally, the concept of a common future is linked to cooperation in the fields of culture and education, particularly as a means of strengthening good neighbourly relations within the region.

Figure 2: Main priorities of the SEECP and advancements of the region, 2006-2015



## Main events

### 2006: The CEFTA Agreement

The 2006 signing of the revised Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) was the clearest early translation of SEECP's economic priorities into a durable, rules-based instrument. Replacing a patchwork of bilateral agreements with a single multilateral framework, CEFTA liberalised trade, aligned regional practices with EU standards and served as a preparatory framework for EU accession.

As some CEFTA Parties joined the EU, CEFTA evolved into a working free trade arrangement now centred on non-EU Participants advancing towards membership, complementing SEEC's broader goal of regional economic integration.

### **2007: Bucharest and Sofia join the European Union**

In 2007, Bucharest and Sofia became members of the European Union. This development represented a significant milestone for the region, as it demonstrated that EU membership was an achievable objective for all parts of the region.

The accession of these two SEEC Participants reinforced the credibility of the EU enlargement process and strengthened the European perspective of the region, which had consistently been emphasised in SEEC declarations.

### **2008: Establishment of the Regional Cooperation Council**

The 2008 establishment of the RCC, mandated by the SEEC and led by the region, was the institutional translation of two decades of SEEC political guidance into a permanent regionally-owned structure. The RCC was created as a product of SEEC: SEEC provides the political auspices, the strategic direction and the consensus among Participants; the RCC provides convening services, donor-supported operational projects and the implementation-support capacity that allows political commitments to become regional frameworks and practical results on the ground.

### **2009: Tirana and Zagreb joined NATO**

In 2009, Tirana and Zagreb became members of NATO. This development marked another important step in the Euro-Atlantic integration of SEE. Their accession strengthened regional security and demonstrated progress in the broader process of political and military transformation within the region.

### **2013: Zagreb joined the European Union**

In 2013, Zagreb became the newest member of the European Union. This accession further reinforced the credibility of the EU enlargement process and provided an additional example of successful European integration within the region.

In the same year, the statute of the RCC was further consolidated, strengthening its institutional framework and its role in coordinating regional cooperation initiatives.

### **2014: The Berlin Process, SEE2020 Strategy, and SEEC Parliamentary Assembly**

The year 2014 marked a turning point for regional cooperation in South East Europe, with three mutually reinforcing developments that placed SEEC-guided cooperation on a more structured footing and gave the RCC an increasingly central operational role.

The Berlin Process, launched together with several EU Member States and institutions, was introduced at a moment when the EU enlargement dynamic had slowed to reinvigorate the European integration perspective of the Western Balkans and sustain political momentum for regional cooperation and reform. Centred on connectivity, economic integration and political dialogue, the Berlin Process

complemented SEECP's political guidance with concrete EU-anchored deliverables, while the RCC progressively assumed the role of regional partner, ensuring continuity between annual Summits and translating Berlin Process commitments into implementable regional projects, notably in connectivity, mobility and the Common Regional Market (CRM).

The SEE2020 Strategy, developed and coordinated by the RCC under SEECP political auspices, set out a shared regional agenda for growth, employment, trade integration, and governance, and sought to bring the SEE economic trajectory closer to EU convergence. SEE2020 was the first SEECP-era strategic framework to set measurable regional targets, and it remains the institutional predecessor of the SEE2030 Strategy and the current Common Regional Market Action Plans, with the RCC providing the coordination, monitoring, and reporting backbone that turned political commitments into a working strategy.

The SEECP Parliamentary Assembly (SEECP PA) was established in the same year, institutionalising the parliamentary dimension of the Process. Building on earlier inter-parliamentary cooperation among the Participants, the Assembly created a structured framework for dialogue among parliaments, complementing the intergovernmental character of SEECP with a parliamentary channel for exchange, consultation, and confidence-building, supported operationally by the RCC. Its establishment reinforced the all-inclusive character of SEECP by broadening participation beyond executive-level dialogue and by providing an additional platform for issues of common regional interest.

Taken together, the three 2014 developments illustrate how SEECP's political guidance, the RCC's operational support and Participant ownership have worked in concert to produce a denser and more functional architecture of regional cooperation.

## Third Decade (2016-2025): Resilience and Shared Transformation

This section focuses on the main developments in SEE and the key priorities outlined in the SEECP declarations during the third decade, covering the period from 2016 to 2025. The section follows the same format as the previous two.

### Declaration Priorities and Evolution

In **the 2016 Sofia Declaration**, European integration once again emerges as the most prominent thematic priority, while economic development cooperation, security cooperation, and democracy and the rule of law receive somewhat more balanced levels of attention.

European integration continues to be framed as the central strategic objective for the region. The Declaration emphasises the importance of genuine and solid regional cooperation as a means of overcoming historical divisions and strengthening good neighbourly relations. In this context, the European perspective of SEE is reaffirmed as the main policy instrument for guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity in the region. The Participants reiterate their commitment to building a common and prosperous future for SEE through deeper regional cooperation and full integration into the European Union.

Economic development cooperation focuses primarily on strengthening regional connectivity and cooperation in areas of key importance for economic growth, particularly energy and transport

infrastructure. The Declaration highlights the importance of transforming regional cooperation into concrete and targeted projects capable of generating tangible economic benefits. In this regard, the promotion of sustainable economic growth and the creation of a stable business environment are identified as important priorities.

Security cooperation remains an important component of regional cooperation, although it is expressed somewhat less explicitly than in earlier declarations. Participants of SEECP reaffirm their commitment to addressing evolving security challenges and emerging threats to regional stability. Attention is given to issues such as migration and refugee flows, organised crime, and terrorism, while also acknowledging the important role of international organisations such as NATO and the OSCE in supporting regional security.

Finally, the Declaration reaffirms the core democratic values underpinning regional cooperation, including democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and fundamental freedoms. Strengthening institutions, promoting freedoms of expression, and improving governance structures are highlighted as important elements of this agenda.

**The 2017 Dubrovnik Declaration** focuses on economic development cooperation as the most prominent priority, followed by European integration, while security cooperation and democracy and the rule of law appear as secondary priorities.

Economic development is framed as a central political objective for the region, particularly in relation to ensuring stability and prosperity. The Declaration emphasises the importance of economic interconnectivity among SEECP Participants and the strengthening of economic links with the EU Single Market. Attention is given to infrastructure development, especially in the areas of transport and energy, as well as to reducing barriers to investment and innovation.

European integration continues to be presented as a key strategic objective. The Declaration reiterates the shared belief in a common European future and emphasises that the prospect of EU membership remains the most powerful incentive for implementing necessary reforms within the region.

Security cooperation focuses on strengthening regional cooperation in addressing challenges such as terrorism, radicalisation, and irregular migration. It is highlighted that there is a need for enhanced information sharing and coordinated approaches to security threats in order to maintain long-term stability in the region.

Democracy and the rule of law are also reaffirmed as important foundations for regional cooperation, particularly in relation to strengthening democratic institutions, protecting human rights, and promoting fundamental freedoms.

**The 2018 Brdo Declaration** introduces a stronger emphasis on the concept of a common future, which emerges as the most prominent thematic category, followed by European and Euro-Atlantic integration and security cooperation.

The concept of a common future is closely connected to the role of youth in shaping the long-term development of the region. The Declaration highlights the importance of creating positive opportunities for young people through education, employment prospects, and improved social environments. Youth engagement is presented as an important factor for promoting reconciliation, strengthening democratic participation, and building more cohesive societies.

European and Euro-Atlantic integration continues to be framed as a key driver of transformation within the region. The Declaration emphasises that a credible EU accession perspective remains essential for promoting stability, prosperity, and political reform.

Security cooperation remains focused on addressing evolving regional and international security challenges, with continued emphasis on collaboration among SEECP Participants and cooperation with international partners such as NATO and the OSCE.

European and Euro-Atlantic integration is described as the most effective guarantee of peace, stability, and prosperity in Europe. The Declaration reiterates the shared commitment of SEECP Participants to a common future within a unified Europe and highlights the importance of maintaining the momentum of the EU enlargement process. Good neighbourly relations and constructive political dialogue are emphasised as essential elements for resolving outstanding regional issues.

Economic cooperation is presented as a key factor for achieving sustainable development and improving the prosperity of citizens across the region. In particular, the Declaration highlights the importance of enhancing connectivity not only through infrastructure projects but also through business and digital cooperation.

Security cooperation focuses on strengthening coordinated efforts to combat organised crime, terrorism, corruption, and other transregional threats. Particular attention is given to issues such as human trafficking, illicit arms trafficking, and money laundering.

**The 2021 Antalya Declaration** places particularly strong emphasis on security cooperation, which is reflected in the large bubble illustrated in Figure 3. Economic development cooperation follows as the second most prominent priority, while European and Euro-Atlantic integration, democracy, and the concept of a common future receive somewhat less emphasis.

Security cooperation is addressed in a broad sense and includes both traditional and emerging security challenges. The Participants highlight issues such as irregular migration, violent extremism, racism and xenophobia, organised crime, and illicit trafficking. In addition, increasing attention is given to natural and human-made disasters affecting the region. The Declaration also reflects the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, including discussions related to cooperation in vaccine development and mutual recognition of vaccination measures.

Economic cooperation is described as an area that has not yet been fully utilised and therefore deserves greater attention. The Declaration highlights the need to strengthen connectivity among regional economies, particularly in areas such as trade, investment, and infrastructure, while also deepening economic integration with the EU Single Market.

The Common Regional Market is also closely linked to the broader objectives of SEECP. While SEECP functions primarily as a political framework for regional cooperation, initiatives such as the CRM provide practical mechanisms through which many of the economic priorities repeatedly emphasised in SEECP declarations can be advanced through Participant-owned and RCC-supported processes. In this sense, the CRM represents an important instrument for translating political commitments to regional cooperation into tangible economic outcomes.

The CRM and SEE2030 Strategy also demonstrate the way in which SEECP-guided and RCC-supported cooperation can move beyond political declarations towards more structured results. Through RCC-facilitated processes, Participants have advanced regional frameworks and practical arrangements in

areas such as the Common Regional Market, Green Lanes, regional roaming, mobility agreements, digital cooperation and sustainable development. These outcomes remain uneven and require continued political commitment, but they provide tangible examples of how regional cooperation can produce benefits for citizens, businesses and institutions.

The political significance of this period is that, for the first time, SEECP-guided cooperation produced not only declarations and strategies but a recognisable set of tangible deliverables. Through Participant-owned and RCC-supported processes, the region established Green Lanes that kept goods and essential personnel moving during the COVID-19 crisis, secured a regional roaming arrangement that reduced communication costs for citizens travelling across the region, advanced mobility arrangements for professionals and students, and built the early architecture for a regional digital market. These are the kind of concrete results that translate SEECP's political guidance into benefits citizens and businesses can recognise.

European integration remains an important strategic objective, with the Declaration reaffirming the shared vision of SEE as part of a unified, democratic, and prosperous Europe.

Democracy and the rule of law continue to be emphasised as core values underpinning regional cooperation, particularly in relation to strengthening institutions and protecting fundamental rights.

The concept of a common future also reappears in the Declaration, particularly in relation to youth engagement, education, and employment opportunities, which are viewed as essential for the long-term development and stability of the region.

In **the 2022 Thessaloniki Declaration**, security cooperation emerges as the most prominent priority, followed by European and Euro-Atlantic integration, while economic development cooperation and democracy receive somewhat less emphasis.

Security cooperation is addressed through two main dimensions. First, the Declaration highlights the growing importance of energy security in the context of recent developments in global energy markets and the war in Ukraine. The Participants emphasise the need to diversify energy sources, strengthen energy infrastructure, and accelerate the transition towards renewable energy.

Second, the Declaration reiterates the continued importance of cooperation in addressing broader security challenges such as terrorism, violent extremism, organised crime, human trafficking, and irregular migration. Strengthening cooperation in disaster preparedness and prevention is also highlighted as an important priority.

European and Euro-Atlantic integration continues to be presented as a key instrument for achieving peace, stability, and economic development in the region. The Declaration emphasises the shared commitment to the European perspective of SEE, based on the principle of individual merit.

Economic cooperation focuses on strengthening investments, innovation, job creation, and economic competitiveness across the region.

The Declaration reaffirms the commitment of SEECP Participants to the future of the region within the European Union. European integration is described as the natural political framework for achieving peace, security, and sustainable economic development. Good neighbourly relations and inclusive regional cooperation are highlighted as essential components of the EU accession process.

Security cooperation focuses increasingly on new forms of security challenges, particularly cyber security and the resilience of digital infrastructure. The Declaration highlights the need for coordinated

efforts to strengthen preparedness and response capabilities against cyber threats.

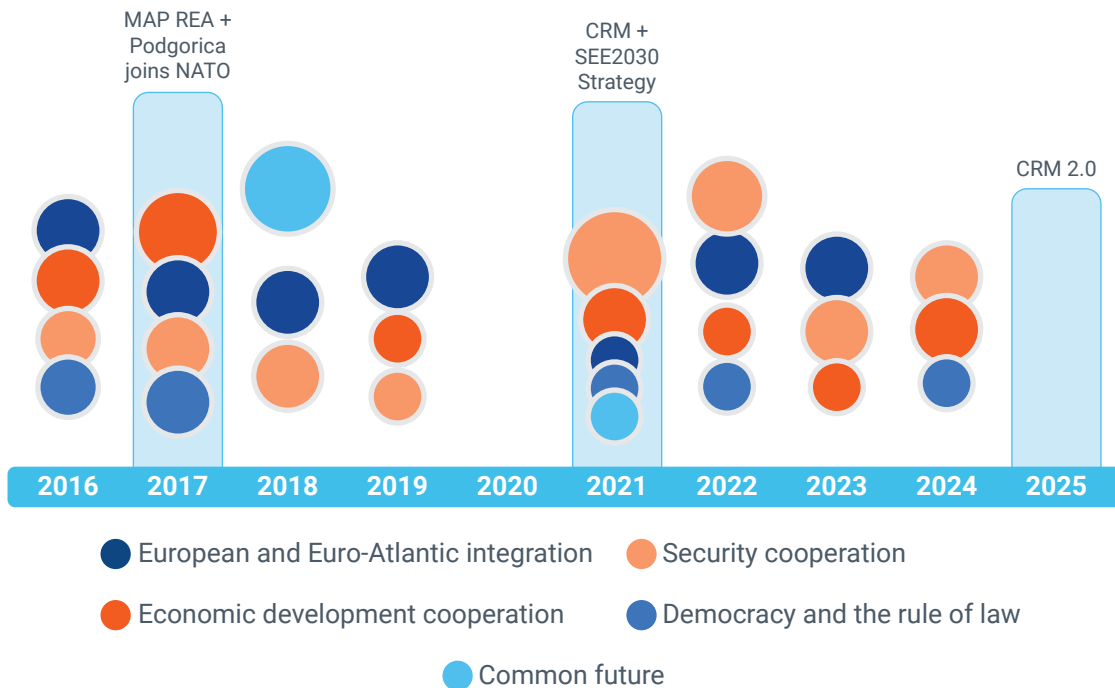
Economic development cooperation focuses on strengthening regional connectivity, particularly through infrastructure projects that improve mobility and economic exchange within the region and with the European Union.

In **2024 Skopje Declaration**, security cooperation and economic development cooperation emerge as the most prominent priorities, followed by democracy and the rule of law.

Economic cooperation focuses on strengthening regional economic integration and improving competitiveness. Attention is given to infrastructure connectivity, digital market development, and the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship within the region.

Democracy and the rule of law remain essential pillars of regional cooperation. The Declaration highlights the importance of strengthening democratic institutions, protecting human rights, and ensuring that EU-aspiring candidates continue implementing reforms in line with European standards.

Figure 3: Main priorities of the SEECP and advancements of the region, 2016-2025



## Main events

### 2017: Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) and Podgorica joining NATO

The year 2017 brought a further consolidation of SEECP-guided regional cooperation, with the adoption of the Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) and the accession of Podgorica to NATO.

MAP REA, adopted within the Berlin Process framework, marked the first attempt to convert SEECP economic priorities into a single coordinated regional action plan rather than a set of parallel bilateral arrangements. Designed and coordinated by the RCC under SEECP political auspices, MAP REA sought to deepen economic integration across the region by streamlining trade arrangements, harmonising technical standards and customs procedures, advancing mutual recognition of professional qualifications, and reducing administrative and regulatory obstacles to competitiveness and growth. Building directly on the SEE2020 Strategy, MAP REA translated declaration-level commitments on connectivity, trade facilitation and infrastructure into a concrete regional work programme, while also encouraging regulatory alignment with EU standards as preparation for future accession. The RCC subsequently carried the MAP REA agenda forward into the Common Regional Market Action Plan, ensuring institutional continuity between successive frameworks and consolidating its role as the operational backbone through which SEECP political guidance is translated into implementable regional projects.

Podgorica's accession to NATO the same year marked another important step in the Euro-Atlantic integration of South East Europe, reinforcing the regional security architecture and demonstrating continued progress in the political and security transformation of the Western Balkans, in line with the Euro-Atlantic integration objective consistently emphasised in SEECP declarations.

### 2021: The Common Regional Market (CRM) and the SEE2030 Strategy

The year 2021 marked the most ambitious consolidation to date of SEECP-guided regional cooperation, with two interconnected initiatives setting the strategic horizon for the third decade: the Common Regional Market (CRM) and the SEE2030 Strategy.

The Common Regional Market, endorsed at the Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process, built directly on MAP REA and represented a further step towards deeper economic integration in South East Europe. Designed and coordinated by the RCC under SEECP political auspices, the CRM Action Plan 2021-2024 was largely inspired by the principles of the EU Single Market, aiming to facilitate the free movement of goods, services, capital and people, harmonise regulations, and improve the regional business environment. Alongside traditional economic cooperation, the CRM placed particular emphasis on digital transformation, including a regional digital market, e-commerce, and digital infrastructure and skills, and on strengthening regional connectivity in transport, energy and infrastructure. The RCC has since carried the agenda forward into the CRM Action Plan 2025-2028, consolidating the CRM as the principal instrument through which SEECP economic priorities are translated into tangible outcomes for citizens and businesses and as a practical preparation track for EU accession.

The SEE2030 Strategy, adopted the same year by all 13 SEECP Participants in Antalya and coordinated by the RCC, provides the long-term strategic framework anchoring regional cooperation in sustainable

development. Closely aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, SEE2030 sets out a coherent agenda for economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, social inclusion and regional cooperation, with a deliberate focus on long-term structural transformation rather than short-term growth — addressing demographic change, labour markets, the green and digital transitions, and innovation capacity. Building on the institutional lineage of SEE2020 and reinforcing the priorities repeatedly emphasised in SEECP declarations, SEE2030 functions as the strategic umbrella under which RCC-coordinated initiatives, including the CRM, are implemented, and contributes to strengthening policy coordination across the region while supporting the broader objective of European integration.

Taken together, the CRM and SEE2030 demonstrate the mature working relationship between SEECP political guidance, Participant ownership and RCC operational support: SEECP sets the political direction and secures the consensus of all 13 Participants; the Participants own the agenda and its delivery on the ground; and the RCC designs, coordinates, monitors and reports on the regional frameworks that turn that direction into measurable progress.

### **2025: Common Regional Market 2.0 (CRM 2.0) – Action Plan 2025-2028**

The Common Regional Market Action Plan 2025-2028, launched in 2025 and commonly referred to as CRM 2.0, represents the next stage of regional economic integration in South East Europe. Designed and coordinated by the RCC, CRM 2.0 builds directly on the results of the CRM Action Plan 2021-2024 and aims to deepen integration across the four freedoms, accelerate the digital and green transitions, and bring regional regulatory frameworks closer to the EU Single Market in preparation for eventual EU accession.

The new Action Plan rests on a track record of concrete, citizen- and business-facing results delivered under the previous CRM cycle through RCC-coordinated implementation, in close cooperation with the CEFTA Secretariat on the trade and technical files. Green Lanes at Western Balkans checkpoints have reduced waiting times for goods and trade frictions, with green corridors progressively extended to the EU. The Western Balkans Roaming Agreement has eliminated roaming charges within the region, and a follow-on agreement with the EU has substantially reduced data roaming charges between the Western Balkans and EU Member States. Five RCC-coordinated mobility agreements: on freedom of movement with ID cards; recognition of higher education qualifications; recognition of professional qualifications for doctors of medicine, dentists and architects, and for nurses, veterinary surgeons, pharmacists and midwives; and on access to higher education and admission to study in the Western Balkans, together create, for the first time in the region's modern history, a coherent legal framework for the free movement of people, students and skilled professionals across the Western Balkans region. Further work under the CRM digital pillar, including progress towards SEPA membership and mutual recognition of electronic identification and trust services, is advancing the regional digital market in close alignment with the EU acquis.

CRM 2.0 carries this agenda forward, with the RCC providing the design, coordination, monitoring, and reporting backbone that turns SEECP political commitments into measurable progress, in close partnership with the Participants, the Berlin Process, and the European Commission. In doing so, it confirms the mature working formula on which the third decade of SEECP-guided cooperation now rests: SEECP sets the political direction, Participants own the agenda and its delivery, and the RCC translates that direction into the regional frameworks and tangible outputs that reach citizens and businesses across South East Europe.

# FORWARD-LOOKING CONCLUSIONS: REGIONAL COOPERATION IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL VOLATILITY

The thirtieth anniversary of the SEECP comes at a moment when the region is no longer asked only to preserve dialogue, but to prove that dialogue can protect societies, accelerate convergence and strengthen resilience. The SEECP was born in 1996 as a political commitment to good neighbourly relations, stability, security and cooperation. Three decades later, that same commitment is being tested by a more volatile international environment.

The central political conclusion is therefore not that regional cooperation should be reinvented. It is that regional cooperation should be made more consequential. The SEECP remains the only all-inclusive regionally-owned political forum in South East Europe, and the RCC remains its practical channel for translating political guidance into programmes, partnerships and results that citizens and businesses can recognise.

The thirtieth anniversary of SEECP is not an occasion for ceremony alone. It is the moment at which the Participants take political responsibility for what the next phase of regional cooperation in South East Europe must deliver. The strategic environment has changed: external shocks, hybrid threats, cyber and energy-security challenges, economic volatility, climate-related risks and long-term demographic pressures are now defining conditions, not contingencies. Regional cooperation must respond at the same scale and at the same speed.

The Participants, therefore, need to reaffirm a clear political message. As the only all-inclusive regionally-owned political forum in South East Europe, SEECP's main role is to provide political guidance for regional cooperation, and the test of that guidance is whether it is translated into outcomes that citizens, businesses, young people and institutions can recognise. The RCC, as a product of SEECP, will continue to serve as the regional convening and implementation-support platform through which that political guidance becomes regional frameworks and tangible results.

The Participants will further recognise the untapped potential of regional cooperation in South East Europe: a regional policy space which, thanks to the scale and complementarities of the thirteen Participants, can deliver actions that no Participant could achieve at the economy level alone. Regional cooperation should remain regional cooperation for the region - complementary to, and synchronised with, all ongoing initiatives in such a way that benefits are multiplied rather than diluted.

The political task for the 2026-2028 cycle is to move from a habit of dialogue to a habit of delivery: diplomacy that is visibly connected to safer communities, stronger institutions, affordable and secure energy, better skills, credible reforms and a shared European future for all Participants.

## **From Anniversary to Responsibility**

The SEECP 30-year story is best understood as a gradual widening of political purpose. Its early years helped restore regular contact in a region still marked by fragmentation. Its second decade placed

regional ownership more clearly alongside European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Its most recent decade added connectivity, digitalisation, green transition, mobility, security cooperation and sustainable development to the political vocabulary of the process.

The next stage should not abandon this heritage. It should give it a sharper meaning. The SEE2030 Strategy already offers a regionally-owned framework for prosperity, people, peace and partnerships, with attention to sustainable growth, social inclusion, women's empowerment, depopulation, quality of life and green and digital transition. The SEE2030 implementation update adds the useful language of human security, linking economic, social, environmental and governance conditions to well-being and resilience.

This is the bridge between the anniversary narrative and the forward-looking political orientation. SEECP has already created a durable political culture. The question for the next short-term period 2026-2028 is whether that culture can help Participants respond together to shocks that no single Participant can fully manage alone. This is also why the RCC's "smart, skilled and sustainable" framing in its Strategy and Work Programme 2026-2028 is politically so aptly calibrated.

A credible 2026-2028 agenda should be framed as continuity with purpose: the same SEECP principles, applied to a more demanding decade.

SEECP's all-inclusive and consensus-based character remains one of its greatest strengths. It helps maintain channels of dialogue, reinforces trust and ensures that regional cooperation is anchored in ownership by all Participants. At the same time, consensus also requires patience, continuity and political discipline. The next phase should therefore focus on areas where broad agreement can be translated into practical cooperation, supported by the RCC's convening and implementation-support role and by the continued commitment of the Participants.

The central question for the next period is not whether SEECP can produce more declarations, but whether its political guidance can continue to support cooperation that is visible, useful and credible. This means connecting the anniversary narrative to concrete regional priorities, including resilience, energy security, human capital, digital transformation, sustainable development, mobility and economic convergence.

## A More Volatile Neighbourhood

The strategic environment since 2024 has made regional cooperation more urgent. The war in Ukraine continues to affect European security, energy markets, trade routes, information integrity and the sense of vulnerability across the wider European neighbourhood. Security is no longer only a military or intraregional question. It now includes cyber- attacks, foreign information manipulation, electoral interference, critical infrastructure, organised crime, migrant smuggling, trafficking, violent extremism and the resilience of democratic institutions.

Economic volatility is equally political. The Western Balkans Six entered 2025 with growth still positive but slower than before, while businesses pointed to prices, unfair competition, corruption, labour shortages and political instability as important constraints. Across Europe, weaker external demand, trade uncertainty, tariffs, supply-chain disruptions and financial volatility have reinforced the need for the Participants to build resilience before the next shock arrives.

Energy volatility remains one of the clearest examples of shared exposure. The Energy Community framework provides practical tools for market integration, security of supply, renewables, energy

efficiency, climate rules and intraregional infrastructure. At the same time, regional energy-security analysis underlines the continuing importance of diversified routes, LNG, interconnectors, renewable generation and reduced dependency on vulnerable supply routes.

## The European Perspective

The European perspective remains the most important strategic horizon for South East Europe. The 2025 Enlargement Package describes enlargement as increasingly within reach, while also making clear that progress must remain credible, merit-based and anchored in fundamentals. The political opportunity is real, but it will be sustained only if reforms are implemented, institutions remain functional and regional cooperation supports rather than substitutes the accession path.

The regional picture is differentiated, reflecting the varied circumstances, reform trajectories and institutional contexts of SEECP Participants. Continued progress will require sustained commitment to reforms, constructive dialogue, institutional continuity and the fulfilment of agreed requirements, in line with the principle of individual merit. The European perspective remains an important strategic horizon for the region, supported by regional cooperation, good-neighbourly relations and solidarity among the Participants. The SEECP Participants that are EU members have a valuable role to play in supporting enlargement, reform and regional cooperation in a spirit of partnership and shared responsibility.

The EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Reform and Growth Facility for Chisinau give this political perspective a more operational form. They connect reforms with investment, market access, regional economic integration, digitalisation, energy security, public administration and rule of law. Their success will be judged not only by disbursements, but by whether citizens and businesses see credible benefits.

This is where SEECP can add political value. It can keep enlargement and regional cooperation together in one strategic conversation. It can encourage EU Participants to act as partners in reform, and it can help aspiring Participants maintain momentum even when domestic politics are demanding. Macro-regional cooperation and inclusive formats can help prepare the Participants for European integration when they are treated as serious policy instruments and when parallel initiatives reinforce, rather than fragment, trust.

## Economies, Energy and People

The economic argument for cooperation is straightforward: fragmented markets, weak connectivity, regulatory uncertainty and labour shortages make every Participant less competitive. The Common Regional Market, Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, Green Lanes, transport corridors, digital services, payments integration, mutual recognition and supply-chain cooperation are not technical details; they are instruments of political trust and economic convergence.

**RCC Balkan Barometer** Public Opinion also gives political guidance. In the Western Balkans region, rising prices remained the leading public concern in 2025, while support for EU membership reached its strongest level in a decade. The message for leaders is that citizens want both stability and perspective: protection from immediate pressures and a credible path towards a better future.

Energy policy sits at the centre of this expectation. Affordable and secure energy affects households, public budgets, industrial competitiveness and social confidence. The region's energy agenda should

therefore be presented not only as climate transition, but also as a resilience agenda: diversified routes, renewable generation, storage, interconnectors, electricity market integration, energy efficiency and protection for vulnerable consumers.

Depopulation is the slowest but biggest risk. Western Balkans demographic analysis points to shrinking populations, large diaspora shares, youth unemployment and labour shortages, while UN and Eurostat projections show longer-term ageing and decline pressures among several Participants. A region that loses its young people, skills and confidence cannot converge sustainably, regardless of how many infrastructure corridors it builds.

The political answer should be a human capital pact for South East Europe. It should connect education, vocational training, digital skills, women's labour-market participation, youth employment, professional recognition, diaspora investment, circular mobility and return pathways. This would give the SEE2030 Strategy "People" dimension a visible political flagship.

## Short-term Outlook

The most likely outlook for the near future is not one of dramatic transformation, but of important choices made under pressure. Growth may continue, but under conditions of weak external demand and high uncertainty. The European perspective may become more credible for some Participants, but only if political will and administrative delivery are sustained. Energy markets may become more stable than in the immediate crisis years, but supply routes, affordability and investment needs will continue to require political attention.

The upside scenario is one in which South East Europe uses available European and regional instruments, including SEE2030 Strategy, the Common Regional Market Action Plans and the RCC's convening, facilitating and implementation-support role to translate resilience into convergence. Sustained reform momentum would be recognised and encouraged, support from SEECP Participants that are EU members would reinforce the credibility of the European perspective, and SEECP as a whole would demonstrate the continued value of inclusive regionally-owned cooperation.

The downside scenario is one in which external shocks, hybrid threats, energy volatility, political polarisation, unresolved issues, climate-related events and demographic pressures place additional strain on trust and reform momentum. In such circumstances, SEECP's value remains clear. As an inclusive and regionally-owned forum for political dialogue, it helps maintain channels of communication, supports confidence-building and provides space for Participants to address shared challenges, even when progress is uneven.

Looking ahead, the Participants underline both the need and their willingness to deepen the interaction between SEECP and the RCC, preferably within the framework of the SEE2030 agenda, which already provides an inclusive and holistic perspective for regional cooperation across prosperity, people, peace and partnerships. To this end, the Participants invite the RCC to act as a conveyor and initiator of forward-looking regional discussions, complementary to and synchronised with all ongoing initiatives, while SEECP itself will provide the political guidance necessary for the governance and operationalisation of this forward-looking process, including guidance on the SEECP structures to be engaged and on the way Summit Declarations are translated into regional action. In this way, the thirtieth anniversary becomes the political foundation for the next phase of South East European regional cooperation: continuity with purpose, ownership with delivery, and a region that turns its scale and complementarities into shared resilience and a shared European future.

## CONCLUSION

SEECP does not need to be reinvented to remain relevant. The mature reading of its first thirty years suggests that its political value lies in being the best version of what it already is: inclusive, cohesive, regionally owned, politically experienced and connected to practical delivery through the institution it has produced. The first three decades normalised political dialogue at the highest level in South East Europe, established the regional cooperation architecture on which the Regional Cooperation Council and the wider regional frameworks now rest, and demonstrated that a regionally-owned political process can produce an operational institution with its own convening capacity and implementation reach - an outcome that remains uncommon among comparable regional formats.

The honest measure of the next phase is not whether SEECP continues to meet and to issue declarations, but whether the political guidance it provides continues to translate into cooperation that citizens, businesses and young people can recognise. Looking back, the strongest results of SEECP's first thirty years have emerged where political guidance, Participant's ownership and RCC's convening have moved in the same direction - through frameworks such as the Common Regional Market, SEE2020 and SEE2030 Strategies, and through tangible outcomes such as Green Lanes, regional and EU-linked roaming arrangements and the package of mobility agreements. Where this articulation has been weaker, recurring priorities have remained on the agenda from one decade to the next.

The strategic environment ahead is more demanding than at any point since 1996. Security, in its current meaning, extends well beyond traditional defence to include hybrid threats, cyber risks, energy security, economic volatility, climate-related challenges and long-term demographic pressures. These challenges are regional by nature, and they expose the limits of what any single Participant can address in isolation. At the same time, the European perspective remains the most important strategic horizon for South East Europe, with the credibility of enlargement depending on sustained reform, on the principle of individual merit and on regional cooperation that reinforces, rather than substitutes, the European trajectory of each Participant.

In this context, the central observation of the present review is that SEECP's most important untapped potential lies in a more deliberate articulation between its political guidance and the operational capacity of the RCC, preferably within the framework of the SEE2030 agenda, which already offers an inclusive perspective for regional cooperation across prosperity, people, peace and partnerships. Strengthening this articulation, while safeguarding both the political auspices of SEECP and the Participant's ownership on which it rests, would help ensure that summit declarations are systematically translated into regional action, and that the RCC's convening, facilitating and implementation-support role is used to its full extent.

The political reading of the thirtieth anniversary is therefore one of continuity with purpose rather than reinvention. The same founding principles of inclusiveness, regional ownership, consensus and dialogue, recognised in this review as the source of SEECP's legitimacy, and at the same time as principles that require patience and political discipline if they are not to produce lowest-common-denominator results, remain the right foundation for the period ahead. Applied with greater intensity, visibility and deliberateness through a smart, skilled, sustainable and secure cooperation cycle, and supported by the political ownership of the Participants and the operational capacity of the RCC, SEECP can help turn shared exposure into shared resilience, and shared resilience into a more stable, prosperous and European future for South East Europe.



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