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## **Quadripartite meeting on cross-border cooperation: Greece, FYROM, Bulgaria, and Albania**

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On the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> April the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Interior of Greece, Albania, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Bulgaria held a meeting in Thessaloniki. The European Commission and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands took also part to the meeting, as the country holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The main topic discussed during the conference was the cross-border cooperation in the region of South-Eastern Europe. The agenda was divided as follows: during the first day was held a meeting among the ministers of the four countries in order to discuss more general issues; during the second day the ministers of Interior, followed by a joint meeting with the ministers of Foreign Affairs, discussed more specific issues; e.g. police borders and security related topics. Finally, the meeting ended with a joint press conference.

The reasons behind the conference can be identified upon two levels: firstly, the short-term need to tackle with the urgent refugee and economic migrant crises; secondly, the long-term perspective of a broader cooperation among the countries of South-Eastern Europe and Southern Balkans. The two main goals of the conference are strictly interconnected: the enhancement of a cross-border cooperation is the only chance to deal with the great amount of migrants, which primarily means avoiding «human trafficking and organized crime», states the Bulgarian Minister Militov. The delegations of the four countries agreed on the effectiveness of the EU-Turkey agreement when it deals with reducing the number of migrants on the border. For instance: according to the *Sofia News Agency* there has been 30 % decrease of illegal attempts to enter into Bulgaria via Turkey in the past month compared to the same period last year. However, they also stressed the need to developing a long-term strategy, thus they discussed the possibility to re-forming the provisions of the Dublin Treaty.

It is not by chance that the common principles of the regional cooperation announced during the conference embrace a broad spectrum of economic, humanitarian, cultural, and political aspects. Briefly explained, the position shared by the four countries can be summarized as follows: they are seeking for regional stability with the support of the European Union; they expressed the intention to cooperate economically, e.g. on the economic migration and tourism related topics; finally, they expressed the intention to cooperate for a democratic development in the region. Indeed, the countries also manifested the intention to involve non-governmental organizations into the cross-border cooperation. Although this is just a proposal, it shows the intention to involve into the process a greater part of the society which is not limited to intelligence services. Last but not least,

the security aspect seemed to play a prominent role: the ultimate aim seems to be the stabilization of the South-Eastern region. Indeed, the *Sofia News Agency* reports the Bulgarian interior ministers' proposal of better using the Kulata-Promachonas border checkpoint between Bulgaria and Greece, and the intention to participate to a tripartite meeting with Turkey and Greece.

From a strictly economic point of view, the four delegations discussed problems and benefits derived from uncontrolled economic migration and tourism. The Albanian Minister Bushati stressed the interconnection of the two issues and the need to expand cooperation on the whole Mediterranean and Adriatic regions, including Italy, which he considers some of the European regions most negatively affected by the economic crisis.

Greece might gain a political advantage in playing the role of the leading country, namely the enhancement and strengthening of its own position within the European Union. This appeared very clearly from the words of the Bulgarian Minister Militov, who openly showed his solidarity with the Greek government « [which] is bearing a lot of responsibilities right now. A lot of burden. We need to focus in our efforts, in order to help Greece to manage this unprecedented situation». Furthermore, he stressed the importance of a common regional position regarding financial support from the European Union.

Moreover, it should not be neglected that the governments of Albania and FYROM might also have long-term advantages: the cross-border cooperation might be a first step towards closer relations with the European Union. Indeed, it might be a good chance for the candidate countries to promote their abilities in developing a cooperation based on democratic values and solidarity. The statement of the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Bushati perfectly summarizes the perspective of the candidate countries about the meeting. The Minister Ditimir Bushati declared that «The qualitative cooperation between candidate countries and EU member states should be transformed into an opportunity to strengthen the political commitment and accelerate the integration process of Western Balkan countries».

Apparently, the Greek press release shares this point of view. Accordingly, from the one hand, one of the main achievements of the conference is the establishment of a shared regional vision on burning topics and contemporary challenges, e.g. economic and refugee migration; from the other hand, the conference is an instrument to building common grounds of multilateral cooperation within the region, and between the region and the EU.

It is worthy of attention how the four countries approached the migration crisis. Indeed, against the mainstream fear of the “welcoming burden” of a huge number of refugees and/or economic migrants, they are trying to deal with the issue in a more pragmatic way. Furthermore, they approached it as an opportunity to finally enhancing a quadrilateral cooperation at a regional level, instead of considering the huge amount of migrants as a possible threat to national and regional security. The decision to deal with the migrant crisis in a collaborative way at a regional level might impeded further escalation of violence in already tense environments, e.g. the current political situation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Finally, the ministers of the four countries agreed to held this kind of meeting every six months -if necessary more often- with the perspective of including more countries of the Mediterranean and Adriatic regions. Although the conference is still an informal meeting and it is not yet institutionally

bounded, its influence within the EU and along its borders should not be underestimated. Indeed, the main by-product might be the enhancement of the bargaining ability of the South-Eastern “periphery” of the European Union.

*Written by Benedetta Macripò*

*PECOB' Staff*