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REPORT*

on

“SOCIAL COHESION WITHIN THE BSEC MEMBER STATES: CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICAL STABILITY”

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Since its establishment, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation has set as fundamental objective the transformation of the Black Sea into a sea of peace, stability and prosperity. Along with the economic integration of the BSEC region, the social well-being of its peoples was acknowledged as a main factor of development towards the realization of this vision. The “BSEC Economic Agenda for the Future towards a more consolidated, effective and viable BSEC partnership” explicitly refers to the promotion of social cohesion as a major BSEC priority.

2. The Parliamentary Assembly of BSEC in its capacity as the main BSEC body addressing social issues has discussed separately several aspects of social cohesion in the BSEC Member States and adopted relevant recommendations:

- Social guarantees during the transition period (14/1996);
- Rights and social protection of refugees and displaced persons (21/1997);
- The legal framework of the protection of migrant workers in the Black Sea countries and the relations between immigrant communities and the host country (51/2001);
- Women's participation in the political, economic, social and cultural life (61/2002);
- Social reintegration of jobless people (67/2002);
- The fight against poverty (74/2003);
- Improving social, economic and civil rights of people with disabilities (77/2004).

3. At its previous Meeting, the Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee discussed the issue of “Improvement of the quality of life in the BSEC Member States” (rec. 100/2007), which has been a central goal of societies for the last four decades. Going further into embracing aspects as the equality and the quality and structure of the social relations, the more recent concept of social cohesion has been increasingly receiving political attention. The Committee decided to take up the subject of “Social cohesion within the BSEC Member States: contribution to political stability” as the main agenda item of its 30th Meeting.

4. Contributions to the Report were received from the national delegations of Azerbaijan, Greece, Serbia and Turkey. Reference material was also obtained from the official websites of EU institutions and relevant international organizations such as UNDP, UNECE, the Council of Europe, the World Bank, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe etc.

II. SOCIAL COHESION – A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CONCEPT

Definitions

5. Social cohesion is a broad notion embracing various aspects of life, at different levels. Scholars propose several definitions of the term, a general one being “the processes of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community”. It is understood that the meaning of this concept can differ according to the socio-political environment in which it evolves. The Council of Europe concisely defines social cohesion as “the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization” and a cohesive society as “a mutually

supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means”.

6. There are three notions central to the concept of social cohesion, which co-define the modern perception of adequate identification of and response to social problems: *exclusion*, which goes beyond the poverty in material resources and also includes the decreased or non-participation in social, economical, political and cultural life; *solidarity* between different generations, social classes, countries and regions; *shared responsibility* between the society and the individuals, which entails the involvement of the individual in the process of his/her integration.

Dimensions

7. Given the above, social cohesion could be examined according to the degree of:

- a) regional disparities, inequalities (between women and men, generations, social strata, disabled, citizenship groups) and exclusion;
- b) quality of societal institutions and social and political participation.

8. Due to the multiple nature of the concept, social cohesion refers to numerous needs, in different life domains. The priority domains could be identified following the fundamental social rights, i.e. social protection, employment, housing, health and education. Consequently, it requires multi-actors measures and multilevel actions. Issues of social exclusion should be addressed at local, national, regional and international level and what is more important, by interaction of all these levels.

9. The notion of cooperation is inherent to the process of cohesion, what puts the latter among the top priorities not only of states, but also of regional and international organizations. The international dimension of cohesion finds an outstanding example in the European Union, the economic and social cohesion of which has been strongly emphasized by the EU Treaty as a main policy goal.

III. THE BSEC REGION

10. During the 15 years of BSEC's existence, most of its Member States have been going through the painful process of transition to market economy and democracy. They have struggled with economic crisis and hardships like inflation and corruption that market reforms and restructuring have brought. Some of them have even faced ethnic and civil conflicts, loss of life and property, displacement. Migration has affected demographic balance and separated families, caused brain-drain in the countries of origin and xenophobic phenomena in the receiving countries.

11. The social status of several groups of the population was shaken and large-scale poverty became one of the most important social problems. Although estimates of poverty varied widely, there was general agreement about the magnitude of its increase during the first half of the 1990s. The total number of people living in poverty rose more than tenfold between 1988 and 1994 in the transition economies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Changes in wealth and income distribution were among the most dramatic in the transition countries. The average Gini coefficient of disposable income -the most common inequality measure- rose from 24 to 33 during the first five years of the transition. To a large extent, the widening of income inequalities is attributable to a greater dispersion of earnings, lower social participation rates and an increase in unemployment.

12. The above mentioned trends have certainly improved by today. Over the past five years the BSEC region has ameliorated its economic profile, becoming one of the fastest growing in the world, while achieving a reasonable level of macroeconomic stability and accountable financial management. Relevant PABSEC Reports and Recommendations on the fight against poverty and on improvement of the quality of life provide us with sufficient information on the progress made in poverty alleviation and unemployment decrease in the region. The balance between economic growth and social justice, as a necessary precondition for the successful sustainable development in the Black Sea region, increased employment and the promotion of social cohesion, remains among the major BSEC priorities.

13. New economic opportunities and the potential for prosperity associated with the global economy do not reach everybody. The challenges of globalization and the technological developments have also brought about the feeling of insecurity of a part of the population in terms of access to a decent job, housing, health service and education.

14. Even in the most developed BSEC Member States, many people are excluded in practice from the benefits of the social and economic progress. Certain social groups are especially threatened by poverty and exclusion such as the unemployed (who are, for a great part, long-term unemployed); single parent families; single elderly citizens, mainly women; pensioners; families with three or more children as well as families with small children; people lacking vocational skills; disabled people; citizens in certain types of localities (periphery); ethnic minorities and immigrants; refugees and displaced people.

Gender, income and regional disparities

15. **Greece** has reduced the poverty rate, which nevertheless remains at high levels (19,6% in 2005). In spite of the considerable decrease of unemployment and an increase of the employment rates achieved during the recent years, unemployment continues to affect mainly young persons and women. The employment rates of these two groups lag behind by approximately 10% of the EU average. Boosting women employment, combating youth unemployment and further reduction of poverty and social exclusion still constitute challenges for the social policy.

16. In **Ukraine**, the female labour force participation rate is high (64% compared with 73% for men). Gender discrimination in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres is prohibited under the Ukrainian constitution and domestic laws, and Ukraine is also a signatory to relevant international conventions. However, in practice, Ukrainian women reportedly face obstacles to their full and equal participation in the labour force. Despite similar education levels, women tend to have lower-paid jobs.

17. Disparities are also reported between urban and rural areas of Ukraine. Since growth resumed in 2000, the decline in unemployment and the increase in real wages and pensions (including as a result of the government's decision to eliminate wage and pension arrears) have brought about an improvement in living standards in large urban areas. Rural areas, by contrast, continue to show a relatively high incidence of poverty. In spite of the faster reduction of poverty compared to some neighboring countries, the overall improvement has been paralleled by an increasing poverty gap between rural and urban households, reflecting an unbalanced economic growth.

18. Territorial imbalances in development find another example in **Russia**. The Central District itself is marked by enormous internal disproportions in development. Social problems are different in Moscow and most other central regions. The principal problems in the Moscow agglomeration are high cost of living, enormous income inequality, poverty, social exclusion of people with limited resources for adaptation (retired people, the handicapped, etc.), spread of HIV/AIDS and environmental issues.

19. In peripheral regions, most of the problems stem from economic factors. They include higher levels of youth unemployment, higher incidence of poverty (including extreme poverty), poorer access to medical services, poorly developed social infrastructure and public utilities, etc.

20. Similar region, income and gender disparities are acute in **Turkey**, and are particularly reflected in the field of labour and education. The extremely low labor force participation of women is closely tied to the structural change in the economy from agriculture to industry and services. Women seem much less able to integrate into the urban workforce and are experiencing falling participation rates. University-educated women are the only segment of the adult urban female population with substantial labor force participation. Women have been particularly affected by “discouraged worker” phenomenon. Returns to education are substantial, even more so for women than for men, which explains the female labor force participation patterns noted above.

21. An intense effort has been made to encourage girls’ enrollment in basic education and provide access to good-quality schools for poor children in recent years. For example, the government launched a massive increase in new boarding schools for children in rural areas. Nevertheless, empirical evidence confirms that significant disparities in educational access and inputs remain between genders, social and economic classes, and geographic locations. More than 70% of the children who are not enrolled in primary school are female, and more than 55% have illiterate mothers. These children tend to reside in rural areas (67%) and to be poor (53%). Gender and poverty gaps are even greater at the level of secondary education.

Roma and displaced people

22. In the South East Europe BSEC Member States, the above-mentioned problem is mainly observed among the Roma populations, which generally live in extreme poor conditions. A significant part of Roma communities cumulates a large spectrum of social disabilities: low education attainment or no education, low or no qualification, history of non participation informal education, poor living conditions, low experience on the labour market etc.

23. In **Bulgaria** the poor health connected to the living conditions of Roma is a persisting problem, in spite of the fact that the access to health is guaranteed by the legislation and a mechanism to provide access to quality health care has been put in place for individuals with low incomes and representatives of vulnerable groups.

24. In **Romania**, the poverty risk for Roma was 3 times higher as compared to average risk at national level in 2003. The economic situation of the community, the educational background of older Roma generations, as well as discrimination and segregation are impeding their equal access and participation in education. The absence of pre-school education and poor Romanian language speaking abilities of most Roma children negatively affect their performance in school. Moreover, the schools located in the areas

where Roma children live, provide poor learning conditions and education. Consequently, more than 70% of the Roma population has no qualification or they develop activities which do not require a formal vocational training.

25. Apart from the Roma, a special category of vulnerable people in **Serbia** is constituted by the 200,000 displaced persons and 150,000 citizens having the status of refugee, the majority of which are homeless, materially destitute and poorly integrated in society. Furthermore, 50,000-100,000 illegal migrants - returnees from EU countries are to be readmitted in Serbia on the basis of the readmission agreement as of 2008. This population group will constitute an additional challenge which will require an integral and coordinated response of the society and the state.

Migration

26. Migration is a phenomenon that has dramatically affected the social tissue of the BSEC Member States during the recent years. Especially Armenia, Georgia and Moldova have experienced an increasing outflow of their labour force. Since the beginning of the 1990s, around one million persons, or about 25% of **Armenia's** population, have left the country. While contributing to private consumption in Armenia through remittances, emigration has resulted in an aging population, a gender imbalance and a loss of skilled labour. **Georgia's** population has also decreased by almost 1 million from 5.4m to 4.5m since independence. As for **Moldova**, though estimates for the number of people working abroad (mostly in Russia, South East Europe and the EU) vary widely, some sources put the outflow at 30% of the entire work force.

27. Emigration flows from some BSEC countries have resulted in immigration increase in others. **Greece**, which had been traditionally a country of origin, is now a destination country of immigrants from the region, while **Russia** has become a country of transit and recently of destination for migrants. As ethnic homogeneity gives place to a growing multiculturalism, some people see this as a threat to traditional identities. New forms of social integration that take diversity into account need to be sought.

State institutions and civic participation

28. Inequalities, discrimination and exclusion are not the only impediments to cohesion. The quality of the state institutions and services and the degree of social and political participation are important indicators of a cohesive society. Improving perceptions of poor governance is still a challenge for **Albania**. Though confidence in local governments is increasing and a few municipalities and communes have been able to achieve tangible results in service delivery and urban development (e.g. the Municipality of Tirana), there are still institutional weaknesses and low implementation capacity which limit the voice and participation of citizens in local affairs as well as the transparency, and accountability of local governments. Governance problems like corruption have a direct impact on quality and access to public service delivery. According to opinion surveys in Albania, corruption is identified as a primary cause of the lack of growth in jobs and a general mistrust in political, legal and public sector institutions is expressed.

29. In **Georgia** as well, similar phenomena together with governing traditions of the past have created public mistrust in state institutions and lack of confidence in the rule of law. The Public Defender of Georgia (Ombudsman) is entrusted with supervision of state institutions and providing recommendations with respect to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, the problematic application of the Law on the Public

Defender, the frequent changes of Public Defender, including lengthy gaps between appointments, as well as the limited resources at the Defender's disposal, have meant that the post of Defender has yet to gain a high degree of public confidence.

Examples of national policies

30. All BSEC Members States have been increasingly giving priority to social policies, particularly with regard to improving social security and fighting poverty and unemployment. In the countries participating in the European Neighbourhood Policy, such efforts are streamlined by the relevant action plans. Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, as members of the EU, are intensifying their social policies in line with the EU cohesion policy and the support of the European Social Fund.

31. Priority given to employment policies has put **Azerbaijan** among the top ten states in terms of resolving problems of youth employment, according to the International Labour Organisation. The relevant activities of the state employment agency over the last decade have been yielding remarkable results in increasing access to the labour market as well as improving the system of vocational training and retraining. The organization of annual "Labour Fairs" in all regions of the country has resulted in employment of more than 9,000 and the enrolment of thousands of citizens in the professional training courses in 2007. Out of the total number of the people involved in training courses 57,1% are women, 78,0% youth, 30,4% high school graduates, 21,2% refugees and displaced persons.

32. The "Employment Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2006-2015)" endorsed in 2005 envisages further reduction of unemployment rate and enhancement of protection of unemployed and vulnerable groups of population during the first stage of its implementation (2006-2010).

33. In the framework of the project "Development of the National System of Social Protection and implementation of measures under the National Employment Strategy" implemented in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) substantial work has been done in the sphere of protection of labour and social rights of vulnerable groups of population – disabled, displaced persons, refugees, youth and women, as well as in the sphere of poverty reduction and enhancement of employment. In the same field, the "Decent Work Country Programme in cooperation with the International Labour Organisation 2006-2009" has set as main objectives ensuring decent work and gender equality, as well as advancing technical and professional qualifications, development of entrepreneurial and managerial skills in various sectors of economy, which will pave the way towards strengthening of social protection of population and enhanced social cohesion.

34. Finally, the "Programme of social rehabilitation of low-income families", elaborated on the basis of information collected since January 2007 by means of a questionnaire prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population, aims to gradually help the low-income families to overcome poverty through effective projects (in the sphere of employment, professional training, social services, medico-social rehabilitation, decent work, promotion of small business, psycho-social assistance, etc.). The experience of some CIS and EU countries in this field, as well as of international organizations like the World Bank, EU (through the TACIS Programme), UNDP and others was used in the process of elaborating this programme.

35. In **Greece**, the threefold goal Development – Employment – Social Cohesion keeping step with Economic Growth – Competitiveness – Innovation is the basis of social reforms. The reforms are conducted through targeted, coordinated and direct interventions, focusing on vulnerable groups facing difficulties in accessing the labour market such as women, young people with no previous job experience and older people approaching the retirement age, disabled, Roma, families with more than two children. At the same time, emphasis is attributed to geographical areas (i.e. the periphery) particularly suffering from unemployment.

36. In 2007, a National Social Cohesion Fund providing targeted support to those at risk of poverty and a Special Fund of Social Solidarity for the support of the older unemployed coming from regions particularly hit by unemployment, were established. Regarding the social integration of immigrants, an Integrated Action Plan coordinated by an Inter-ministerial Committee was created, while issues of family reunion and long-term residence are addressed by relevant presidential decrees.

37. Active engagement of civil society organizations in the implementation, monitoring and evaluating of social policies is encouraged with a view to enhance the interaction between the state and the NGOs in this field. NGOs involvement has been further intensified through their participation in programmes co-funded by the European Social Fund. Local authorities in Greece are also active participants in the fight against poverty and social exclusion through social care services, adapted to the special needs of their local communities.

38. Promotion of the partnership principle at regional and local level is of major importance in cohesion policies. In **Romania**, 8 Regional and 34 Local Partnerships on Employment and Social Inclusion were set up during 2005- 2006 with a view to promoting the local employment initiatives, improving of vocational training and thereby, increasing employability, fighting against discrimination on the labour market and promoting social inclusion for vulnerable groups.

39. At the level of each of the 8 Regions, in 2006, Regional Pacts for Employment and Social Inclusion were concluded and a Pact's Charter (PC) was signed. The PC proposes to approach the existing problems at regional level by applying the partnership principle which would represent both the community's and the private sector's interests. At the same time, the PC promotes local employment initiatives with a view to maintain and promote the increasing of sustainable employment, to reduce unemployment, to fight against social exclusion.

40. **Russia** is currently addressing the major problems of national development through the four Priority National Projects launched in 2005 in the fields of housing, health, education and agriculture respectively, with the further goal of improving the quality of life of the population. In 2007 GDP growth was 8,1 % and increased by 73% compared to 2000 and large-scale projects were implemented in various economic and life sectors. Real incomes increased by 2,5 times, unemployment and poverty level decreased two-fold. With a view to increase the life expectancy to 75 years by 2020, a systematic change in the health care administration and technical renovation of medical establishments is planned. Housing construction and various housing programs are established as a support to families. A maximum tax exemption is planned for expenses of companies and citizens in the sphere of education. The share of the middle class should reach 60-70% by 2020.

Further increase of pensions and aid for retirees, creation of thousands of jobs with high qualification requirements is also planned, while there is a positive forecast on quick income increase. Regional governments of the Russian Federation have been entitled to increase the minimum salary on their territories. In accordance with the macroeconomic task, Russia plans to become the fifth largest world economy by 2020, which will certainly be reflected on the living standards of the population.

41. A reform in the area of social protection accompanied by respective legislative activity was undertaken six years ago in **Serbia** with a view to alleviating the consequences of poverty and improving the quality of life of particularly endangered categories of citizens, i.e. elderly and disabled people, women, Roma, victims of trafficking in human beings, work migrants, persons treated for addiction, people living with HIV/AIDS, former convicts and juvenile delinquents.

42. Concerted actions involving the state, the local self-government, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and other entities are already taken in order to enhance the position of internally displaced persons and refugees. A strategic document has been planned for the re-inclusion of the returnees, this new socio-economically vulnerable group of Serbian citizens.

43. Furthermore, a Fund for Social Innovations was established in order to finance projects for the advancement of the improvement of social and family protection services at the local level thus supporting decentralization processes. The Fund is a program of the Ministry of Labor and Social protection realized in cooperation with UNDP and the support of the European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR). The Fund is active in the development of local projects in the area of social protection in cooperation with local, national and international actors.

44. Hey girls, let's go to school! ("Haydi Kizlar Okula!") was the girls' education campaign in **Turkey**, launched in 2001. Led by the Ministry of National Education and UNICEF, this massive inter-sectoral campaign mobilized various organizations, agencies and individuals in a drive to increase enrolment rates for girls and achieve gender parity in primary education attendance. In order to achieve this, the project focused on the fifty-three provinces with the lowest enrolment rates for girls.

45. The joint efforts of the project's partners (i.e.: the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Interior, NGOs, the EU, the World Bank, the private sector and the media) led to the enrolment of 231,879 girls in primary education between 2003 and 2006 as well as an additional 114,734 boys. Since the campaign was launched, the Ministry of National Education has built more than 101,497 new classrooms with funding from the EU and private sector organizations.

46. Vitally important inter-sectoral collaboration was evidenced by the formation of a Central Steering Committee consisting of Deputy Undersecretaries of the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health (MOH), the Social Services and Child Protection Agency (SHÇEK), the Ministry of Religious Affairs and UNICEF. At the same time, print and electronic media were enlisted in support of "Haydi Kizlar Okula!" at both national and local levels, providing access to the public in order to raise awareness.

IV. INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND EXPERIENCE

47. The *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)* has been present in the region through its bilateral development activities helping governments, civil society and private sector partners meet the global and national development challenges. At the same time, cooperation with BSEC is realized through the Black Sea Trade and Investment Promotion Programme (BSTIP) as well as the new cooperation agreement between UNDP and BSEC, signed in June 2007. The Agreement aims at intensifying cooperation in common areas of interest, including poverty reduction, regional integration, good governance, gender equality, crisis prevention and recovery, information and communication technology for development, and energy and environment. In order to facilitate this process, a UNDP Liaison Unit was established within the framework of the BSTIP and is based in the BSEC Secretariat.

48. All BSEC Member States are members of the *Council of Europe* and have signed the European Social Charter which protects human rights and in particular guarantees social and economic rights. The revised form of the Charter includes new rights among which the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion. The implementation of the Charter's provisions is monitored through national reports submitted by the countries that have ratified it, which reflect the progress and shortcomings regarding the equal access to social rights.

49. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe approved in 2004 the Revised Strategy for Social Cohesion. Improving access for all members of society to fundamental social rights as laid down in the Revised European Social Charter is in the centre of the social cohesion strategy. Within this framework, bilateral activities have been developed in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine. The Concerted development of social cohesion indicators - Methodological guide of the Council of Europe (2005) defines social cohesion strategic concepts and approaches and it provides with a method to develop questions and indicators which enable the creation of a framework for action.

50. The *World Bank* is developing numerous projects and programs based on its Social Development Strategy, which aims at fighting poverty through empowering people by creating more inclusive, cohesive, and accountable societies. The Trust Fund for Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development (TFESSD) is a multi-donor trust fund that provides grant resources for World Bank activities aimed at mainstreaming the environmental, social and poverty reducing dimensions of sustainable development into Bank work. TFESSD activities are managed in four Windows which correspond to the four Sector Boards (Environment, Social Development, Poverty, and Social Protection) managing the fund.

51. Of relevance to several of the BSEC countries which are either members of the EU or candidate countries is the *Lisbon strategy* to make the EU "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment" which was adopted by the European Council in 2000. Modernising the European social model, investing in people and combating social exclusion is part of the overall strategy towards this goal.

52. The *European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)* comprises five BSEC Member States i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, with which the EU is seeking to reinforce bilateral relations based on commitments to shared values, key foreign policy objectives and political, economic and institutional reforms. Individual action plans focusing on the promotion of greater economic development, stability, better governance and human rights were drawn up for each country. In addition to contacts between public bodies or businesses, the ENP aims at promoting cultural, educational and more general societal links between the Union and its neighbourhood. The social dimension of the ENP covers in particular socioeconomic development, employment, social policy and structural reforms. In this context, the EU encourages partner governments' efforts aiming at reducing poverty, creating employment, promoting core labour standards and social dialogue, reducing regional disparities, improving working conditions, enhancing the effectiveness of social assistance and reforming social welfare systems. Progress made in the ENP framework is reflected in the relevant country reports.

53. The *European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI)* was introduced by the Commission in 2007 as a comprehensive new fund to promote co-operation, together with a new lending mandate of the European Investment Bank (EIB). ENPI is targeting areas both inside and outside the Union's borders, including all the countries of the Black Sea region. The Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme (Black Sea JOP) is one of the EU operational programmes under the ENPI, to be implemented during the programming period 2007 – 2013. There are 10 participating countries in the Black Sea JOP, i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine, Romania, and Greece. Through the Black Sea JOP, communities in the areas concerned will be encouraged to further develop their local economy, confront environmental challenges and promote greater interaction among people.

54. At the regional level, the *Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe* developed an extensive cooperation program with Albania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania and Serbia within the Initiative for Social Cohesion launched in 2000. Particular emphasis has been placed on access to social rights (especially employment and social protection), children in care and vagrant children, and dependent elderly people. Regional projects in the fields of health, housing policy, social dialogue, social protection and employment have been supported by international donors including EU member states, specialized international organizations, IFIs and the European Commission. Greece has participated in the Initiative as a donor in the field of health.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

55. Disparities and inequalities exist in every society and economic system. If no action is taken to reduce them, they may grow so as to threaten the political stability. The concept of social cohesion consists in giving people the feeling that they have equality of opportunity to improve their situation.

56. A cohesive society is the one that can ensure concerted actions towards social protection, equal opportunities, social and economic inclusion and participation of all its members. In such social environment, people would develop feeling of security and trust, solidarity and feeling of belonging. Everyone is given the opportunity to find his/her place, integrate in the society. Therefore, individuals and social groups focus on maintaining the political system which ensures this equilibrium.

57. At the regional and international level, achieving cohesion among countries is an advanced step in reaching political stability. During fifteen years of cooperation, the BSEC Member States have been approaching the goal of mature partnership, working together to define common ideas, goals and principles.

58. The first large-scale projects in the transport sector, namely the Black Sea Ring Highway and the Motorways of the Sea at the BSEC Region are concrete steps to closer contacts among our countries. The establishment of the BSEC Working Groups on Education and on Culture in 2006 and 2007 respectively, create new grounds for intergovernmental cooperation in the vital sectors of cultural and educational dialogue.

59. The increasing engagement of the EU in the BSEC region as expressed in the Black Sea Synergy and the recent European Parliament resolutions of January 2008 on “A Black Sea Regional Policy Approach” and on “A more effective EU policy for the South Caucasus: from promises to actions” leads to “the multiplication of shared challenges and objectives, as well as to renewed opportunities for strengthened cooperation between the EU and the countries in the region, with a view to creating a genuine space of security, stability, democracy and prosperity”.

60. Enhancing political, economic and cultural relations with the EU will also involve the promotion of the European Social Model as a vision of society that combines sustainable economic growth with ever-improving living and working conditions, that means full employment, good quality jobs, equal opportunities, social protection for all, social inclusion, and involving citizens in the decisions that affect them. In other words, building social cohesion within and among the BSEC Member States will be a vital task in the context of cooperation with the EU and the integration of the region in a stable and prosperous Europe.

61. Cooperation among the BSEC Member States through the development and exchange of information, experience and good practices is necessary in order to identify national and international trends and further develop the concept of social cohesion in the BSEC context. Synergy of different approaches, levels of knowledge, traditions, political frameworks and expertise would give added value to this process.

62. Given the broad scope of the concept and its crucial role in fostering solidarity, social responsibility and interdependence, much of the prospect of creating peace, stability and prosperity in the BSEC region will depend on the success of efforts to establish stronger cohesion within and among the BSEC Member States.