Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Central European Initiative
Vienna, 3 June 2014

Communiqué

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the Central European Initiative (CEI) held their annual meeting in Vienna on 3 June 2014. The gathering organised by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, in the framework of the 2014 Austrian CEI Presidency, in cooperation with the CEI Executive Secretariat was preceded by a special Conference organized by the Austrian side on the European perspective for the Western Balkans.

The meeting was chaired by H.E. Mr. Sebastian Kurz, Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria and was attended by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Republic of Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. The Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Ukraine and a high representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina also took part in the meeting. Representatives of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Council of Europe (CoE), the Energy Community, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) were present at the meeting as Special Guests. Kosovo* participated in the capacity of Guest of the Chair. The CEI Secretary General and the CEI Alternate Secretary General also participated in the event.

The Ministers focused their discussion on the topic “New Challenges for the CEI”. They welcomed the priorities set out by the Austrian CEI Presidency as a forward-looking approach taking into account the changing political and economic environment of the CEI and its Member States. They commended the fact that the motto of the Presidency “CEI as Bridge between European (Macro) Regions/Synergies with International Organizations” in practice had already been addressed at the first meeting of the Committee of National Coordinators (CNC) in January 2014 when 18 International and Regional Organisations participated to discuss feasible coordinated activities for creating favourable synergies, maximizing efficiency and avoiding overlapping in their activities. The idea of regular coordination meetings among the involved International and Regional Organizations and the signing of Memoranda of Understanding with a number of them, as today with the Regional Cooperation Council, for the enshrinement of such a cooperation was welcomed as a useful approach. In addition, the Ministers expressed approval and recognition of the CEI’s important role in establishing links between European (Macro)-regions. The CEI contributed successfully in overcoming contrasting positions and in defining common interests, thereby enhancing peace and stability in the CEI area.

Furthermore, the Ministers emphasized that the CEI should focus its political dialogue and cooperation agenda on supporting all non-EU CEI Member States, including those CEI Member States which voiced their European aspirations, in strengthening and further developing their relations and partnerships with the EU. In this respect, the CEI EU Member States reaffirmed their commitment to continue to support the respective efforts of non-EU CEI Member States, in particular the efforts of the aspiring, candidate and potential candidate CEI Members to fully meet the EU accession criteria.

In this context, the Ministers strongly welcomed the continuation of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans. The Ministers recognised the progress made by Montenegro in the accession process, making it a success story in the region, and encouraged it to continue the initiated reforms with the same dynamics. They congratulated the Republic of Serbia for starting the accession negotiations with the EU and extended their support for their unhindered and successful progression. The Ministers looked forward to a positive decision of the Council of the European Union and the European Council regarding the opening of accession talks with the Republic of Macedonia by the end of 2014. The Ministers also looked forward to a positive decision of the Council of the European Union and the European Council in June 2014 regarding candidate status for the Republic of Albania. The Ministers referred to the April EU FAC conclusions on Bosnia and Herzegovina and encouraged its authorities to engage constructively in pursuing the necessary reforms.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the IJC Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
The Ministers welcomed the steady progress regarding the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo and expressed hope that the government in Pristina will take all necessary decisions with a view to allow further progress in this respect.

The Ministers expressed deep concern over the events in Ukraine. In this context, they underlined their conviction that the international law and agreements should be respected by all. They affirmed their commitment to the sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine and their full respect of all the principles of international law contained in the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and other bilateral international treaties. The Ministers supported Ukraine in taking forward a comprehensive reform program including constitutional and administrative reforms. They welcomed the wide national dialogue with involvement of politicians, representatives of all the regions and civil society aimed at stabilization of the situation in the country. Thus, the CEI Member States stand with the Ukrainian people in solidarity on their way towards building a stable, democratic and prosperous country.

The Ministers stressed the importance of the Eastern Partnership and welcomed the progress of cooperation between the EU and its Eastern Partners. The ministers endorsed the signing of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine on 21 March 2014 and call for prompt signing of the remaining provisions of the Association Agreement including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. The Ministers also welcomed the substantial progress reached by Ukraine in the visa-liberalisation dialogue with the EU. The Ministers welcomed the initialling of the Association Agreements, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, between the EU and the Republic of Moldova as well as with Georgia and welcomed their imminent signing on 27 June 2014. Moreover, the Ministers congratulated Moldova on obtaining a visa free regime with the EU, which has entered into force on 28 April 2014, as an important step on its EU path. They also welcomed the start of negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements between Belarus and the EU. They stressed the significance of further progress of both the association and the visa liberalisation processes between EU and its Eastern Partners.

The Ministers, furthermore, celebrated the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Initiative, which, first known as Quadrangle, was later renamed into the CEI. They appreciated the important role of the CEI in promoting stability, prosperity and cohesion among its Member States and regional cooperation for European integration. Indeed, the CEI significantly contributed to overcoming the division in Europe, which was a painful reality when it was founded in 1989 in Budapest. In the context, they highlighted the need to appropriately mark the achievements of this oldest and largest regional organisation by issuing a special Declaration in November 2014 on the occasion of the CEI Summit. Furthermore, the Ministers entrusted the CEI Executive Secretariat with the elaboration of a pertinent document about the CEI’s 25 years of existence to be presented also on the occasion of the CEI Summit.

Moreover, following the presentation of the Report of the High Level Reflection Group of the Energy Community for the Future of the Energy Community and recalling the extraordinary European Council held on 6 March 2014, the Ministers shared views on the energy security in the CEI economic space. In this regard, the Ministers underlined the need to diversify the sources of energy supply, as well as to develop the energy infrastructure and to increase interconnectivity with the aim to achieving an Energy Community – wide energy market. They agreed upon the fact that this issue was to be examined further and that energy efficiency, the efficient use of all internal resources (conventional and non-conventional sources in the countries which opt to use them), as well as the development of alternative energies, including renewables, should be given proper consideration in the future. In addition, ensuring a systematic dialogue in the energy field is crucial for increasing energy security of the region. Therefore, they called for strengthened cooperation in the field of energy security and market integration, inter alia and as appropriate within the framework of the Energy Community, which aims to set up secure, open, transparent and competitive national energy markets, based on the rule of law, a stable regulatory framework and investment-friendly principles, and to integrate markets regionally and within a pan-European energy market. The Ministers underlined how important it is to show solidarity in case of sudden disruption of energy supply in one or several Member States. Applying common rules increases energy security in Europe. Moreover, a comprehensive approach in this field was necessary to ensure an adequate energy flow while respecting the principles of supply security, sustainable development, and competitive energy prices as well as taking into account global challenges like climate change, energy efficiency, food security, and human health.

Then the Ministers continued their discussion on the CEI funds and instruments necessary for achieving the mission and objectives of the Organisation. In this context, they expressed appreciation for the CEI Fund at the EBRD established and fully financed by the Italian Government. Thanks to this Fund, the CEI has developed and maintained a strong institutional link with the Bank. The Ministers expressed their
gratitude to the Italian Government for pledging an additional replenishment of 2 million EUR to the Fund in 2013 - in spite of national budgetary constraints - totalling 38.5 million EUR since the Fund's inception. They highlighted the impact of the investment projects in the CEI member states that were unlocked by the technical assistance supported by the CEI Fund at the EBRD. This is also complemented by the CEI Fund’s resources committed to the Know How-Exchange Programme (KEP – Italy). Recalling the strong and effective CEI-EBRD cooperation, the Ministers expressed their wish to re-launch political talks for the establishment of a CEI Multi-Donor Fund for Policy Dialogue, once the European economies had entered a more solid path of recovery. In light of EBRD’s continuing expansion to east and south, the Ministers encouraged EBRD to maintain its support to the economies of its existing countries of operations from among the CEI members.

The Ministers commended the signing of the Agreement between the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and the CEI Executive Secretariat at the CNC meeting in January 2014 concerning a new Austrian contribution with the amount of 400,000 EUR for the period 2014-2016. These funds will be used for the continuation of the pertinent Know How-Exchange Programme (KEP Austria). With KEP Austria the country is the second biggest contributor to the CEI, after Italy.

The Ministers also expressed their satisfaction with the results of the CEI Cooperation Fund and adopted the scale of national contributions of the Member States for 2015. In order to strengthen the role of this important instrument the Ministers pointed out that a review of the current scale of contributions should be considered and encouraged voluntary contributions to the Fund. In this context, the Ministers expressed their appreciation with regard to the decisions of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Moldova to voluntarily double their annual contributions.

The Ministers also reflected on the disastrous floods that affected the three CEI Member States – Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Serbia and expressed their resolve to engage in finding further international support to alleviate the consequences caused by those floods.

The Ministers highlighted the important results achieved by the CEI EU-funded projects already implemented or under implementation, stressing that such projects constituted one of the most important cooperation tools of the Initiative. They noted in particular the success of the project “Improving Cooperation in South-East Europe by Actions for Strengthening the Regional Cooperation Council” where the CEI was a partner both to the EC and the RCC. The creation of valuable networks which were established during this cooperation is an asset to build on in the future.

The Ministers expressed satisfaction with the CEI Plan of Action 2014-2016 defining the CEI’s mission and strategic objectives for the said period, including measures for its structural and financial strengthening as well as for enhancing its visibility and looked forward for its smooth implementation.

With regard to the Business Dimension, the Ministers underlined the importance of continuing projects which had been initiated under the 2013 Hungarian CEI Presidency. Creating employment and generating welfare is an important contribution for fostering stability and social cohesion. They also welcomed the special partnership between the CEI with the Vienna Economic Forum (VEF). The events organised by VEF in 2014 underline the importance that the Austrian CEI Presidency attaches to the CEI Business Dimension.

The Ministers welcomed the incoming Italian EU Presidency and expressed their conviction that in that capacity Italy would guarantee an even better EU-CEI cooperation.

The Ministers extended their best wishes to the incoming 2015 Macedonian CEI Presidency, pledging full cooperation and support.

The Ministers commended the efforts made by the CEI Executive Secretariat in order to enhance CEI’s visibility as well as relations with the media.

The Ministers also expressed their gratitude to the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria and the CEI Executive Secretariat for the excellent organisation of the Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the CEI Member States in Vienna.