

**Speech delivered by Mr. Josip Leko, Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, on the
occasion of the Inaugural Session of the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly
(Bucharest, 9-11 May 2014)**

Honourable Speakers of Parliaments,

Distinguished Members of Parliaments,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by congratulating and thanking our hosts and President Zgonea for their hospitality, excellent organization of the Conference and successful chairmanship of the SEECP.

Since our last meeting in Ohrid, some significant changes and political processes have taken place in our immediate and wider region. It is an honour and pleasure to be participating in the conference of parliaments of the countries included in the South East European Cooperation Process, as the Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, the youngest member of the European Union.

I too should like to echo the process of European values pointed out by previous speakers. I welcome the fact that the Republic of Serbia started the accession negotiations and that Montenegro has made progress in several negotiation chapters. Albania will most probably be granted candidate status for EU membership in June. I conveyed our support to Albania in that respect during my recent visit to Tirana. It is also commendable that Moldovan citizens no longer require a visa to enter the European Union. However, aside from these positive developments, we should bear in mind that in our wider neighbourhood some unfortunate changes have been occurring at great speed, multiply affecting the area of Eastern and South-eastern Europe, entire Europe and the world at large. I am referring of course to the events related to Ukraine that have adverse impact on this region, at the political and economic level, and particularly so in the field of security, including energy security.

Although it joined the European Union, Croatia is of course still part of the region. Therefore, through its membership in the EU, together with other SEECP participating states which are also EU members, Croatia will continue to support further integration of the countries of its south-eastern neighbourhood and promote the cooperation in the region. The future Assembly of the SEECP seems to me as an excellent platform where we can transfer our experiences to the countries aspiring to become EU members and to help them prepare for future membership.

Partnership Agreements have been signed or are about to be signed with individual countries in the region, numerous seminars have been held and study visits have been organized, and the fact that the Croatian language became the 24th language of the European Union greatly facilitates access to numerous EU documents to the countries of the region whose languages are close to Croatian.

However, besides bilateral cooperation, we consider that it is extremely important to promote regional cooperation through multilateral forms and therefore I wish to take this moment to express my great pleasure to have the opportunity to attend this inaugural session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the countries participating in the South East European Cooperation Process. It is a significant step forward in the institutionalization of parliamentary cooperation in the region. The desire and the need for regional cooperation, both at the executive and at the parliamentary level, have resulted in a multiplication of forms of cooperation, but I believe that in the coming years the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly will prove to be the best umbrella mechanism that will contribute to effective cooperation, to the avoidance of duplication within various initiatives and to the synergy of activities. While taking into consideration the experiences of other European regions in creating their respective frameworks for parliamentary cooperation, we should at the same time take into account the specificities of our region. It is necessary to create a framework that can yield very concrete results. I also consider it necessary to take into account the capacities of our parliaments, both financial and professional, and to reach the most acceptable solution for future parliamentary cooperation in the setting where the budgets of our parliaments operate in restrictive circumstances.

As of today I am confident that by our next meeting the Ad-hoc Working Group will have successfully considered and resolved the issues of location and operation of the Secretariat of the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly as well as the issues of funding the Secretariat and all its activities. I hope that in the meantime the General Committees and other bodies provided for will become operational as well.

When I said that our cooperation, besides being based on partnership relations, must be well targeted and as substantial as possible, I was referring in particular to the need that, except for deepening our political, economic and cultural cooperation, the work of the General Committees of the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly should also be focused on concrete projects of cross-border cooperation, stronger infrastructure and energy connectivity, on the exchange of information regarding the measures taken to enhance economic growth, create employment and improve living standards. All of this must be to the benefit of our citizens. Citizens of our countries want to live in a safer and more just society and it is therefore extremely important to support further efforts in the reform of the judiciary, in the fight against corruption and the fight against organized crime, which will certainly be discussed in the framework of the Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Security Cooperation. Further strengthening of the role and

importance of parliaments and parliamentary system as well as support for all democratic processes in our societies should also be the focus of our work in the framework of the SEECP Parliamentary Assembly.

Regional stability, good neighbourly relations and the European future of all the countries of Southeast Europe are among the most important goals of Croatian foreign policy. The Croatian Parliament wants to actively contribute to the achievement of these goals. I am glad that on this occasion I can reaffirm that Croatia will continue its active engagement in strengthening our regional cooperation based on partnership and political dialogue. I am confident that in this respect the members of the Croatian Parliament will strive to give their most active and effective contribution.

Thank you for your attention!