

## Foreword

*General Raimund Schittenhelm* \*

The Republic of Austria joined the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes through its Ministry of Defense in 1999. Right from the beginning, Austria's primary interest centered on the issues of security policy and crisis management, with a special focus on the Western Balkans region. As a consequence, the Austrian National Defense Academy promoted the establishment of a Study Group on Regional Stability in South East Europe (RSSEE) jointly with Croatia and Bulgaria at the Consortium's second annual conference in Sofia in December 1999.

The study group, which convened its first workshops in 2000, rapidly established itself as a cutting-edge platform for the exchange of opinions and policies among regional and international actors engaged in South East Europe. Austria, due to its geographical proximity to and direct involvement in security, political, economic, and societal developments in South East Europe, is uniquely positioned to act as a key agent in leading discussions and shaping policy around issues in the Western Balkans.

Workshops have been held twice a year for the past decade, balancing one meeting in Austria and a second elsewhere in the region each year, relying on a network of regional partner institutions (meetings have taken place in Tirana, Ohrid, Dubrovnik, Sofia, Istanbul, Cavtat, Budva, Belgrade, and Sarajevo). In April 2010, the twentieth workshop of the RSSEE Study Group was convened at Chateau Rothschild in Austria. These workshops have provided an opportunity for civil society actors from the region to introduce practical conflict resolution ideas to each other and to international actors alike.

Moreover, the study group fills an important communication and information function both with and within South East Europe. The efficiency and reach of that tool is enhanced through the regular publication of the Study Group Information Series by the Austrian Ministry of Defense and Sports, and through the publication of occasional papers germane to South East Europe in *Connections*. The Austrian National Defense Academy has published thirty-five such proceedings in the ten years of the study group's existence. Through the simple process of advocacy-cum-advisory, actors and interested parties from the region (and beyond) ensure an information loop that leads to action.

In addition, it has made the crucial leap of imagination and action by taking the conclusions of each workshop over the past ten years and distilling them in the form of applicable advice and lessons learned. As can be expected, such advice is of great utility in the region, attracting the attention of local partners and institutions from the offi-

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cial and governmental spheres, and influencing major actors engaged in the field. This advice, through the conduit that the Consortium affords to its funding agents, is finding its way to NATO and European institutions, and ultimately to the Office of the Secretary of Defense of the United States of America.

The activities and publications of the RSSEE Study Group remain a cornerstone of Austrian security policy's orientation towards Western Balkan stability. It can be said that the study group's existence itself has had a beneficial impact in pacifying this troubled region. Especially in a policy-oriented group like the RSSEE Study Group, the expertise and opinion of people coming from outside of government institutions are of vital importance.

The year 2010 brings a culmination of security-policy related jubilees for the Republic of Austria and its Armed Forces: fifty years of missions abroad, and fifteen years of membership in the European Union as well as in the Partnership for Peace Program. With regard to peace engagements aimed at putting an end to the violent conflicts in the Western Balkans, Austria also marked fifteen years of participation in the first—NATO-led—Peace Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the year 2010, its successor mission, EUFOR ALTHEA, is being led by an Austrian commandant.

On a smaller, yet still clearly distinct note, the Austrian National Defense Academy and the Bureau for Security Policy were proud to celebrate ten years of research and policy shaping on Western Balkans issues—from crisis management to regional stability—within the framework of the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes in April 2010. We are equally grateful for the opportunity of providing the chosen articles on South East Europe for this Summer 2010 issue of *Connections*.