

Opening speech of Ms. Vesna Ratkovic PhD, Chairperson of Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative, at the Regional Anti-Corruption Conference held in Bucharest, Romania



Your Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm excited to address you as Chairperson of Regional Anti-corruption Initiative (RAI), opening the event, which will combine marking the 10th anniversary of the Initiative with presentation of the findings and conclusions of the survey focused on „Integrity and resistance to corruption of the criminal judicial system in South-Eastern Europe“. Thus, in the course of the next two days, we'll recall some pleasant memories related to the establishment and strengthening of RAI, as well as we'll touch some problems of the day by discussing and analyzing the survey results, trying to identify common challenges in fighting high level corruption, pointing out the areas that need assistance and accordingly orienting the regional policies supporting the field.

I would like to thank you all, who have been in touch with RAI activities during the years, fighting for diminishing the destructive influence of corruption over the society health, democratic institutions and economy development. I'm happy to see among us today RAI focal points from SEE countries, people who have worked in the Initiative, counterparts from partner organizations like UNODC and Council of Europe. During the second session the floor will be given to them to share their memories and impressions from their work with/for RAI.

Very briefly, I'll try to remind you some of the most important moments related to the history of the Regional Anti-corruption Initiative. RAI is established in Sarajevo in 2000 as SPAI – Stability Pact Anti-corruption Initiative, with the idea to play significant role in the stabilization process in the Balkans. It

represented an intergovernmental mechanism focused on fighting corruption – one of the most serious threats to the recovery, economical and social development of the region.

The second significant step was made in 2003, when RAI member countries agreed to launch RAI Secretariat in Sarajevo, with the idea to promote regional ownership of the initiative and enhance regional capabilities to lead the fight against corruption in SEE. Currently, it is the only center in SEE dealing solely with anti-corruption issues.

The main transition was made with the adoption of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which was opened for signature and ratification by the RAI member countries in Zagreb in 2007. By signing the MoU, the signatory countries ensured the financial sustainability of the Sarajevo based Secretariat of the Anti-corruption Initiative by providing certain annual grants and decided for the first time to raise a Chairperson of the Initiative from the region. It was a significant step towards a full regional ownership and leadership of the Anti-corruption Initiative, as the member countries committed themselves to further contribute not only by experts and technical assistance, but also providing financial sustainability, thus demonstrating the involvement of the SEE countries in the fight against corruption. This is the right moment to thank to US government for the strong support. During its first years of existence, RAI Secretariat was financially supported by grants donated by USAID through ABA – ROLI, which ensured its capacity development.

Since October 2007, through a decision of the member countries, approved at the Steering Group Meeting in Podgorica, Montenegro, the Anti-corruption Initiative of the Stability Pact (SPAI) has been renamed and received its current name - Regional Anti-corruption Initiative (RAI).

In the framework of RAI, which includes 9 member states – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia, and with the support of all the people who worked and made efforts to implement RAI tasks, a number of important results have been achieved. The member countries undertook consistent and complex reforms in their institutional and legislative framework, aiming to decrease the level of corruption and to ensure the efficiency of their policies. In this context, National Anti-corruption Strategies were approved together with Action Plans, underlining the political commitment to address the issue of corruption and state capture. Furthermore, the legal framework was mostly harmonized with the European standards set by the international conventions (all 9 RAI countries have already ratified UNCAC) and sensitive areas (conflict of interest, assets disclosure, free access to information, political parties financing, public procurement, money laundering, etc.) are now regulated. In addition, in all member countries, specialized anti-corruption bodies were created or are now under process of being established, reorganized or strengthened. The rhythm of reforms is now even stronger as Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU on January 1, 2007. Currently, Croatia is looking towards the end of the accession negotiations; while the other SEE member countries focus their efforts towards the same goal.

Having in mind that corruption is a social phenomenon with transborder character; our perception is that it should be addressed by the common efforts of all the stakeholders both on national and international level. This is the reason why we are supporting the process of setting up networks of

practitioners in various anti-corruption areas, providing the national experts with tools to meet, discuss their problems, share some new ideas and show the success of their work. The most recent example is the Integrity Experts Network agreed in Tirana two weeks ago. RAI Secretariat also supports the communication between young judges and prosecutors – the future of the anti-corruption fight by organizing the annual Summer School from SEE. The next step, which is under consideration, is the establishment of regional platform for cooperation among asset recovery experts.

However, though today we celebrate RAI as a success story, there are still some remaining challenges that are waiting for solution. Most of all, it's the ongoing reform of judiciary and public administration, the negative perception regarding the levels of corruption both from public and business community, the lack of sufficient efforts dealing with education and raising public awareness, understaffed anti-corruption structure and low salaries and the underestimation of prevention, focusing on repression as only feasible solution.

These weak points only draw the road ahead: in close cooperation with all partners and major stakeholders in the area, the Anti-corruption Initiative and its Secretariat in Sarajevo will continue, as long as necessary, to provide a regional framework for cooperation among the SEE countries on the anti-corruption field, as a prerequisite for achieving the overall goal of European and Euro – Atlantic integration.

I personally want to express my satisfaction, as the Chairperson of RAI, for the last three years. It is an honor for me to assume this responsible function, especially having in mind that Montenegro has the privilege to have its representatives holding the positions of the Executive Secretary previously and Chairperson now.

Finally, in this ceremonial occasion I would like to emphasize that RAI is growing, changing and taking new roles, assuming new responsibilities and building capacities to respond to them. At this stage, RAI went beyond the idea it was established on, because it has developed not as a plain network or platform, but an entity for itself, with distinguished identity we RAI members within RCC jointly and harmoniously, built upon.

Thank you very much for your attention.