

Cooperation in South-Eastern Europe as a Means to Promote the European Prospects of the Region

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Summary: Under the title above, I am sharing my thoughts with you on the opportunities to initiate new cooperation in South-Eastern Europe and understand its new meaning in light of the vast transformations that have taken place in the international system and the Balkans after the end of the Cold War. Special attention is paid on the streamlined policy of the countries from this part of the continent to achieve compatibility with the dominant trends of building a Common European Area. The article covers the view that the local regional cooperation is no more a substitute for the European integration; rather, the latter is essential for its effective progress. This idea is fundamental in the context of the attempts to break with the notorious image of the Balkans and promote their eventual europeanization.

Key words: regional cooperation, stabilisation and association agreements, Western Balkans.

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Nonetheless, the region still has the potential to balkanize Europe, in spite of all the optimistic trends throughout it. It was here where the last military conflict on the continent took place. Moreover, many

other factors that make the region unstable are still in place: weak states with unfinished political and economic reforms; political entities with unclear international status; strong aspiration for power without demonstration of good management skills. All this is putting the European prospects of the local people and states to the test.

The role of the European Union's policy and strategy for the region will be of utmost importance for it. With the development of the policy of stabilization and association of the countries from the Western Balkans, Brussels made it clear it understands that without the integration of South-Eastern Europe, the vast European unification project would be incomplete. Nevertheless, the indecision which process deserves a higher priority – stabilization or transformation, has drawn much criticism. Thus, the establishment of the Regional Council for Cooperation in South-Eastern Europe prompted the suggestion of a framework for the mechanisms promoting regional cooperation. The general view that has been expressed is that these mechanisms will have to ensure the common voice of the countries from the region, which on its turn would bear their shared interests and would help find rational solutions to the problems in front of their European future.

After the end of the cold war, against the background of radical transformations in the

international system, essential changes are taking place in the most troublesome and conflict-prone part of the European continent – the Balkan peninsula, known as the bloody fields of Europe, Europe's powder-keg, etc. The political and economic reforms in the different countries and the new trends in the development of the region as a whole, provide a basis for the conclusion that there is a process under way of overcoming the bad reputation of the region from the past and a stable development with the perspective of becoming an integral part of European structures, which have proved their vitality and sustainability.

In the context of the new trends in the development of world economy and international relations, the idea of regional cooperation in Southeast Europe acquires a new sense and new content can be added to it. Cooperation can be possibly defined in short as *joint actions to reach shared common goals*. It presupposes pursuing common benefit through accord, mutual assistance and solidarity, finding compromises on the basis of equality. Relations between different states depend on the extent to which each one of them has developed its productive powers, the division of labour, and its participation in international communication. However, the specific characteristics of economic and other forms of cooperation between the countries of Southeast Europe are determined by the objective situation, created by the economic capacity of states in the region to participate in the international division of labour, by the general state of their bilateral and multilateral relations, on one hand, and the general conditions in the world economy and the climate of international relations, on the other.

A region in the international system is not just a delimited territory, but a space where favourable geographic, political, economic, and cultural conditions for the realization of relatively more intensive interaction have been formed.

For now, it is the European orientation that dominates the policy of regional cooperation of all Southeast Europe states. A clear understanding is already present with respect to the fact that "to lower the risk potential of the region", it is necessary to "increase its compatibility with the unified European space under construction"¹. Although differing in the degree of resolution, the states consider their mutual cooperation as a way towards their full integration in European processes. This became an underlying starting point of regional cooperation in the Sofia Declaration of Good-Neighbour Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in the Balkans, adopted at the meeting of Ministers of external affairs of Southeast Europe states, which took place at the initiative of Bulgaria in July 1996, Sofia. On this meeting, the ministers considered the future opportunities of multilateral cooperation in European perspective as following from the efforts of each country to be integrated in Europe. In this context, they declared their desire to interact using other formats of regional cooperation. We are now witnessing the revival of ideas of the Sofia declaration with a new strength and of the development of the cooperation process in Southeast Europe in modified circumstances.

The European dominant of these initiatives has ensured a magnifying effect of developing regional cooperation at a larger scale. In principle, the opportunities of organising regional cooperation in Southeast Europe

¹ Radeva, J. Regional cooperation – an imperative in the process of europeisation of the Balkans. In: "Preventing military conflicts in Southeast Europe", Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Security Scientific Centre, Sofia, 1995, p. 144.

should be considered not only at the regional, but also at the systemic level.

The new circumstances in the global system obviously represent a serious trial for the European orientation of the cooperation in Southeast Europe. To avoid unfavourable consequences of the new configuration and trends in the relations between the global factors, the task of the small states in the region is still an adequate rethinking of further development of events and organising regional cooperation.

For the countries of Southeast Europe, overcoming their economic backwardness and making the region more stable is an important priority. Resolution of these tasks is a precondition of their integration into European structures. Therefore, the efforts of developing cooperation in the region have a deep sense in the context of its europeisation.

The category of cooperation itself presupposes organised interaction, through which a coordination of interests is achieved at the macro and micro level. The specific organisation consists in a number of actions and interactions from the part of governmental and intergovernmental, as well as public (non-governmental), national and international structures and economic agents creating political, contractual-legal, organisational-managerial and technical preconditions for the development of economic connections between the countries in the region. The strength of the trend towards organisation and management of international economic links at a regional scale is determined by the attained degree of international division of labour and by the bounds that other countries may have with other international cooperation mechanisms.

As long as ideas, rules, approaches, and specific practices are closely related to the organisation of international communication processes, the following is necessary for organising cooperation in Southeast Europe:

1. a shared vision between interested countries in the region;
2. shared values as a basis for interaction;
3. using coordinated and commonly acceptable means;
4. solidarity in the pursuit of the common goal;
5. a mechanism of decision-making.

The organisation of the interaction between the countries of Southeast Europe can be only based on mutually dependent activities, motivated by common or unidirectional interests, that can be inscribed into a common goal. It can be based on the relatively specific community of the countries in the region having in many cases identical or close interests with respect to their environment. Coordinating the interests is a condition for their subordination to commonly acceptable and reasonable options. The behaviour of an organised community is always purposeful². Looking forward to the formation of a favourable environment, such behaviour is also a way of adaptation to this environment.

The organisation of regional cooperation presupposes a certain structure of relations. Such a structure should assign the roles of the different players, i.e. it would ensure the efficient division of labour between the different participants and the coordination of their efforts. Whether cooperation would be able to fulfil its mission depends to a great extent on the way of its structuring. The stability of the structure of cooperation in the region depends on the political will of the participants, on the agreements between them, on the functioning

² Yukl, G., K. Wexley, *Organizational Behavior*. Dow Jones-Irwin, Homewood, Illinois, 1997, p.141.

of mechanisms, on the process of decision-making and the force of decisions. Regulating factors as principles, norms, rules, agreements, determine the framework for the cooperation agents behaviour.

In the relations between Balkan countries, the organisation of cooperation is most of all an issue of intergovernmental relations. However, in resolving this issue, public and business organisations, private companies, trade and industry chambers, etc. should be also involved together with governments. This circle of shareholders in the region should become the generator of a kind of regional cooperation code. And this is not at all easy, taking into account the multiple factors influencing the possibilities of cooperation and the wide range of economically and politically motivated interests. It is difficult to unify them in a common platform, which would become a basis for the creation of a regional cooperation mechanism.

Regional cooperation is not a substitute or an alternative of European integration and there are no more grounds for fears that regional cooperation could be an obstacle to European integration of the countries in the region. Moreover, such integration will not take place without regional cooperation. If the Stability Pact of Southeast Europe engendered doubts that it could turn into a waiting room for membership in the European Union, such doubts are cleared away after the actual accession of the countries in the region.

There is no doubt that without making the Balkans a part of the European project, such project will stay unfinished. Europeisation of the Balkans is a fact. The changes in the countries of the region, the adoption of the so called European principles and norms by including the countries in the Council of Europe, the enlargement of the European Union in

this direction by the accession of Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania, while Croatia, Turkey and Macedonia have the statute of countries applying for membership make the process of stabilising and association of the Western Balkan countries advance. The agreements with Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro have been signed, while negotiations with Serbia and Bosna and Herzegovina are under way. All Western Balkan countries repeatedly declare their desire to join the European Union. Since the European Council in Thessaloniki in 2003, the European Union has also confirmed its commitment to their eventual membership with the condition that they satisfy the membership criteria.

Despite the positive trends, despite of the fact that with the assistance of the USA the Balkans have been renamed to Southeast Europe, different countries are at a different stage in their way towards membership, statehood is weak, their economies are weak, and the efficiency of absorbing economic assistance is low. There are many reasons for insecurity. Still, a potential of the region to balcanize Europe is present. The last war in Europe took place in the Balkans. There are unfinished states and protectorates in the region. Let's just mention Kosovo. The efforts made so far to define the statute of the former autonomous region of Serbia do not provide reasons for optimism. The international community is facing a difficult challenge because of diametrically opposed positions of Belgrade and Prishtina.

The European Union is now directly involved in these issues, but will it manifest the capacity and will to become a major factor for the transformation of the region into an integral part of the model of social development that dominates the Old Continent? The policy of stabilising and association of the Western Balkan countries is not very convincing. The circumstances and processes in the region result in hesitations about which should be the main

priority –stabilisation or transformation. The policy of stipulating conditions in its traditional parameters will hardly make the desired changes happen. For Southeast Europe, the European Union should explore special combinations of its policies and tools. There is need for more carrots than sticks. Financial instruments should be adapted to realities – weak states, non-reformed economies, crime, etc.

This makes it necessary for the European Union also to rely on the potential of regional cooperation as an additional factor. The Stability Pact has ceased to exist with the consent of Brussels. Great hopes are reposed on the already constituted Regional Cooperation Council with a Secretariat based in Sarajevo. All this new construct aims essentially at adapting all existing ideas and initiatives of regional cooperation in Southeast Europe to ensuring the European perspectives of the region. Bulgaria has to play a special role, after taking the presidency of the Process of cooperation in Southeast Europe in May 2007.

The initiative of Black Sea Synergy was started in April this year – obviously, in order to strengthen the positions of the European Union in the region, It was very carefully defined, taking

into account the specific characteristics of the layout of power in this strategically important part of the world. The European Union already has a Black Sea outlet. The notion of synergy should be understood as joint actions and does not include any exaggerations or unrealistic cooperation slogans. The initiative does not encompass any special financial instruments, so it has been inappropriately interpreted by some as a reallocation of European Union resources for the development of regional cooperation. It is rather a political construct in the context of EU interests in the field of energy, which encourages interested countries to evaluate new opportunities for interaction

At this stage, in my opinion, the issue of the balance between the roles of the different factors becomes especially important. It is inadmissible to let the impression be formed that regional cooperation serves the interests of extraregional factors. Balkan nationalism is very sensitive to these issues, It is important that the new mechanisms of organising regional cooperation express the common voice manifesting common interests of countries in the region and helping to find regional solutions to problems and challenges related to their European perspectives. **VIA**