

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO REGIONAL COOPERATION IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

Within the modern system of international relations, regional cooperation fills in the niche that exists between the bilateral interstate relations, the integrational international structures and factors, and the newly emerging elements in the globalizing components of international relations. It reflects the specific nature of regional problems, as well as the need of codification of relations between the countries of a particular region.

The simplest approach in analyzing different regional relations formats is to view them as a system of multilateral interdependences and relationships that exist among the countries of a particular region aiming to achieve particular shared objectives. This type of new or open regionalism has a multidimensional character. Stimulated by the decentralisation or regionalisation of security concerns and by developments in the global economy, the current processes of regionalism come more from 'below' and 'within' than before and it is not only economic, but also ecological and security imperatives that push countries and communities towards cooperation within new types of regionalist frameworks. The actors behind regional projects are no longer only states, but also a large number of different types of institutions, business elites, organisations and movements (trans-regionalism). Unlike most old regional schemes, the new ones are characterised by overlapping membership of countries in a number of different groupings.

There is a multitude of regional formats, each one with a different geometry and degree of integration, in today's international relations. There is a number of regional organizations and initiatives on the European continent, e.g. the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Danube Cooperation Process (DCP), the South-East Europe Cooperation Initiative (SECI), the Northern Dimension (ND), the South-East Europe Cooperation Process (SEEC), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), etc. A large number of regional formats go beyond the borders of individual continents, thus making up the so called trans-continental regional schemes of cooperation, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Barcelona Process which gave rise to the recent establishment of the Mediterranean Union.

Main Characteristics of the South-Eastern European Region

Cold War period

Multilateral cooperation in South-Eastern Europe is not a new process. However, fundamental obstacles hampered regional cooperation during the Cold war period.

Firstly, there was a variety of political systems: two of the countries, Greece and Turkey, were NATO-members (and, what is more, were at enmity with each other); two other countries, Bulgaria and Rumania, were members of the Soviet Bloc, of the Warsaw Treaty, respectively (Rumania combining the internal repressive nature of its regime with a peculiar "foreign political dissidence"); Yugoslavia was among the leaders of the movement of the non-aligned countries which was trying to find an active and positive presence between the two blocs; and Albania, regardless of its communist regime, was isolated from the Soviet bloc, and from the whole world.

Secondly, there were serious bilateral contradictions and problems that hampered the normal development of relations: between Greece and Turkey, which, on several occasions, were on the verge of an armed conflict – over the issue of Cyprus, on the status of some of the islands, on the territorial waters and the air-space in the Aegean Sea, etc.; between Yugoslavia and Albania – for ideological reasons, as well as in connection with the Albanian minority in Yugoslavia, etc. At different stages, there was serious tension in the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (as a result of the contradictions between Moscow and Belgrade and over the issue of the Republic of Macedonia); with Greece (mainly in the period following the civil war in the country); and with Turkey (which reached its culmination during the so called “revival process” in Bulgaria).

Thirdly, the inter-state infrastructure was underdeveloped and impeded the development of more active communications, trade and mutual tourist exchange, including the normal exchange of information and communication between the people. The result was an absolutely irrational road, rail road, energy transmission and communication network between the countries, and in the region as a whole, which hinders any normal contacts until present day. There was a single main border check point between most of the countries, there were no rail road connections between others, most of the transport bound for Central and Western Europe was channeled through the territory of former Yugoslavia and the infrastructure of this country was primarily oriented in the North-South direction. There is only one bridge across the Danube River that runs between Bulgaria and Rumania which is an impediment, rather than a possibility for active and efficient communications with Europe.

Despite the above mentioned obstacles the Belgrade meetings of Foreign Affairs Ministers of six Balkan countries in February 1988 was good step forward. The main characteristic of the regional cooperation during the last years of the Cold War period was that it managed to bring together countries with different social, political and economic systems. Moreover, all Balkan countries adopted a constructive approach of setting the foundation of workable cooperation on the on the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. The second ministerial meeting in Tirana in 1990 gave further impetus to meaningful regional integration establishing mutually beneficial relations of peace, security, progress and development.

Post Cold War Dynamics

The decade following the end of the Cold War witnessed a resurgence of regionalism. The number, scope and diversity of regional schemes in South-Eastern Europe have grown significantly due to various factors, both internal and external to the region.

The painful disintegration of Yugoslavia halted efforts for genuine regional integration. The dynamics of the breakup led to the formulation of a new sub-region - the Western Balkans was set apart to incorporate the countries of former Yugoslavia (with the exception of Slovenia) and Albania. The conceptual logic of this division was to conditionally separate the unstable part of the peninsula from the stable one. The protracted instabilities in the Western Balkans as a result of the devastating civil wars were intensified by the internal and structural instabilities following the systemic reforms in former communist countries of Eastern and South Eastern Europe in particular in the first half the 1990s.

NATO's military operation in Serbia and Kosovo cast additional complexity to the regional dynamics. After the end of the operation Kosovo's political representation was exercised by the UN through UNMIK (the UN mission in Kosovo), and security was entrusted to KFOR

(NATO security forces in Kosovo). Being an international protectorate in conformity with Resolution No 1244 of the UN Security Council of 1999, Kosovo was somehow stabilized but the situation remains volatile even after the unilateral proclamation of the province's independence and its diplomatic recognition by some 50 countries. In actual fact, Kosovo is building up its system of government on the basis of the so-called "Ahtisaari Plan" which was formulated during the negotiation process. This process was sanctioned by the UN Security Council, but the plan was not. This is how Kosovo's independence did not get the support of the UN Security Council (the validity of Resolution No 1244 has not expired yet) and, as a result, Kosovo is neither a member of the UN, nor of any other international organization (irrespective of the fact that during the 2006-2007 negotiations under the guidance of Martti Ahtisaari, and, later on, in 2007, through the mediation of the troika consisting of the EU, the USA and Russia, Serbia agreed that Kosovo could apply for membership in the international financial institutions – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, etc.).

This issue is becoming a major impediment to the development of adequate regional cooperation in the Balkans because, apart from Romania and Greece, Kosovo has not been recognized by Serbia (of course), by Bosnia and Herzegovina and by Moldova (which is also part and parcel of the regional cooperation in South-Eastern Europe). All other Balkan countries have already recognized Kosovo: Albania and Turkey – right after the country's independence was declared; Bulgaria and Croatia (together with Hungary, in a common declaration) – on March 20, 2008; Montenegro and the Republic of Macedonia (also in a common declaration) – on October 9, 2008.

Bulgaria's vision for regional cooperation

Within the scale of Bulgaria's foreign policy priorities, regional cooperation ranks immediately after the country's membership in the EU and the North-Atlantic Alliance. This cooperation makes it possible for Bulgaria to play a proactive role in the region that stands high up in the EU and NATO strategic agenda.

The implementation of Bulgaria's foreign political priorities on a regional level involves a consistent and well-coordinated regional approach which should be in conformity with regional geo-political changes that have taken place in the meantime. New forms of often multi-layered inter-regional relations have moved away from the earlier static, inward-looking, and protectionist policies evident in the region in order to promote a more dynamic, open, outward looking approach, connecting South-Eastern Europe with the EU and the world economic system as a whole.

On one hand, Bulgaria's accession to the EU and NATO has placed the country in a new geopolitical configuration, while on the other, the coordination of the regional approaches and mechanisms is becoming a necessity that the countries of South-Eastern Europe already fully acknowledge. B. Buzan has defined a 'regional security complex' as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link [so] sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another." At the start of the 21st century, there is a tendency for regions to be transformed from security complexes into better functioning security communities. The most important characteristic of the approach of members of the security community is the belief that the use of military force is unthinkable and inapplicable in case of a dispute within the grouping. This is the rationale of any regional formation and it is what the countries of South-Eastern Europe also work towards.

Absence of clearly defined dominating regional power in South-Eastern Europe opens up good opportunities for equitable and mutually advantageous relations between the Balkan countries regardless of their specific national interests and agendas. Bulgaria considers regional cooperation an important platform for accomplishing the country's national interests.

From a **political perspective**, the strategic interests of Bulgaria require, first and foremost, that the national security of the country should be guaranteed by achieving a lasting political stability within the region of South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. As a matter of principle, this predetermines the country's support for all the countries of the Western Balkans in their striving for European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The Euro-Atlantic prospect signifies membership in both NATO and the EU after the countries have satisfied specific criteria and have reached the relevant degree of adaptation to the standards of NATO and the EU. This is a politically attainable objective. Furthermore, the integration of the whole region into NATO and the EU seems to be a prospect without any alternative from the point of view of the long-term security and peace in the region. This is the only way for the historical, national, ethnic, religious and cultural discrepancies and problems in the region, that have accumulated in the course of centuries, to find their modern, European interpretation and solution by dissolving into a broader community of shared values. However, it is important that South-Eastern Europe should maintain its unique position within the broader European space. A key objective of regional cooperation is the development of a common regional strategy. This strategy should not only highlight the comparative advantages and the economic role of the region in context of the wider European economy, but more importantly should promote its regional image.

There was an understanding among a number of countries at a particular point in time, that regional cooperation could substitute European or the Euro-Atlantic integration. Experience has shown that regional cooperation does not run counter to integration into NATO or the EU; just the other way round, it creates an environment that is favorable to cooperation and adaptation preceding such membership. It can be viewed as a preliminary and complementary cooperation process towards joining European integration as part of an overall Pan-European strategy.

From a **practical perspective**, this would mean rendering support to these countries so that they can accomplish the reforms, build up the democratic institutions, improve their governance, establish the rule of law, guarantee human and minority rights. Last but not least, they have to extend their cooperation with the structures of civil society and cultivate a spirit of partnership and good-neighborliness.

From an **economic perspective**, optimum conditions for economic development should be created by extending the cooperation on a bilateral, as well as on multilateral level. This calls for a functioning market economy, free movement of goods and capital, for building up, upgrading and diversifying the transport and energy sectors, establishing viable communication and information infrastructure in support of economic development. SEE states should build upon the fact that the region provides an important market for EU goods, it is a vital trade link between Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. Also, it is a vital transit route for energy resources for Europe. This is of particular importance given the huge natural resources, especially energy resources, of the Caspian basin and Central Asia.

From a **social and cultural perspective**, the interests of Bulgaria include stabilization of the social environment within the region, overcoming the national and country-specific ethnic isolation, and curbing the large-scale migration that results from poverty and unemployment. This calls for strengthening the administrative capacity and improving governance practices in the individual countries, as well as encouraging the people to people contacts and stimulating tourist, cultural, educational and scientific exchange.

Bulgaria's contribution to the post Cold War regional initiatives

After the end of the Cold War, the main regional ideas and initiatives for South-Eastern Europe were connected to overcoming the consequences of the Yugoslav wars and strengthening the peace, security and stability in the region. They usually came from external sources (mainly from the USA and the EU) and reflected the trends that prevailed at the particular points in time in seeking solutions to specific issues. The most visible among them were “the Royaumont Process” (1995) with regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the US based Shifter Plan for developing Southern Balkans and the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe (1999). These and other smaller initiatives were later amalgamated into independent regional formats, most significant of which is the South-Eastern Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP).

SEECP is the first all-embracing initiative which includes all the countries in South-Eastern Europe, without Kosovo and Moldova. It came into existence at the meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of the SEE countries which was held in Sofia on July 6-7, 1996. Its historic significance was that for the first time it was an initiative stemming from the region and working for the region, rather than decided for the region and managed by the international community or by some other interested parties outside SEE. It is important to note that SEECP is not a regional organization with a structure of its own. It is a forum for a political and diplomatic dialogue (there are no SEECP members; there are only participating countries). The cooperation within SEECP is coordinated by a one-year presidency on a rotation principle. In recent years, this rotation changes hands according to tradition in May every year. The framework of cooperation within SEECP is made up of the following formats: annual meetings of the heads of state and government of the SEE countries; annual meetings of the ministers of foreign affairs (often duplicated by informal meetings in the same format within the framework of individual presidencies); annual meetings of the presidents of the countries' parliaments (set apart within the framework of regional parliamentary cooperation since 2008); line ministers' meetings on issues that fall within their competence; meetings of the Political Directors Committee.

The Regional Cooperation Council

The Regional Cooperation Council was officially established on February 27, 2008, in Sofia when the last Regional Table of the Stability Pact was held and transformed into the first regional table in a RCC format. It tends to be regarded as an executive SEECP unit which preserves the political and financial commitments that were made by the EU and the international community with respect to the region.

The main objective of the new structure is to further develop regional cooperation in South-Eastern Europe by building upon the best that has been inherited from the Stability Pact, by preserving the political and financial commitments towards the region that were made by the EU and the international community, and by securing the SEECP strategic coordination with

the EU, NATO and the other European donors for the purpose of furthering the processes of regional cooperation.

A qualitative change occurred in the architecture of regional cooperation during the Bulgarian presidency of SEECP (May, 2007 – May, 2008). This change was the result of everybody's waking up to the need for **a new regionalism** which was to be instrumental in seeking solutions to problems that could not be successfully addressed within the framework of the national policies. These are the problems of security and stability in the region, of infrastructure development (in the broadest sense of the notion, and with focus on the energy infrastructure), of attracting large strategic investors, of fighting natural disasters (fires and floods) and addressing trans-border environmental problems, and of counteracting organized crime and the trafficking in people, arms and drugs. This new understanding of the power of regional approaches has grown into the concept of *regional belonging* which is based on the countries' capabilities to formulate their own agendas with regionally sorted out priorities, and to seek adequate (national, regional or international) mechanisms for the implementation of these agendas.

One should bear in mind that all these processes took shape against the background of fierce political fights in the context of negotiations on the status of Kosovo, and following the proclamation of Kosovo's independence by Pristina. An important circumstance that underlines the significance of regional cooperation is the fact that neither Serbia, nor Kosovo had any doubts about their own desire to take part in the regional formats which were, at that stage, the only place of interaction outside the system of participation, or outside the limits of negotiations within the framework of the UN.

During the process of transformation of regional cooperation, Bulgaria managed to uphold all the objectives that it had set itself to attain. First and foremost, that was the assertion of the leading role of the country in the process of transformation (also by the country's availing itself of the period of the Bulgarian presidency) which reflected the national interests. From the point of view of the stability of the structure of regional cooperation and of preserving regional belonging, it was almost imperative to preserve SEECP's leading role as a major political format of regional cooperation that was genuine for the region.

In order for Bulgaria to become more active and efficient within the structures of regional cooperation, the country nominated and had Sofia elected as host of the parliamentary dimension – the only SEECP permanent structure of regional cooperation – and signed the memorandum of understanding on inter-parliamentary cooperation in South-Eastern Europe. At the same time, a Bulgarian representative headed the newly established RCC Liaison Bureau which is to maintain contacts with the EU in Brussels, and a working group on security issues was also headed by a Bulgarian which guarantees the country's representation at a fairly high level in the RCC structures in Sarajevo.

As a result of implementing these objectives, the procedures of terminating the operations of the Stability Pact and of establishing the Regional Cooperation Council were successfully accomplished on time during the Bulgarian presidency. In February, 2008, the last meeting of the Regional Table of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe was held in Sofia and the launching of the Regional Cooperation Council was officially announced. Later on, in May, in Pomorie, the summit of the heads of state and government adopted the first strategic program of the Council. A thorough review was made of the legacy of the Stability Pact and its activities were consolidated within the framework of the five RCC working groups. This

marked the successful accomplishment of the process of transformation and adaptation to the new international realities of the regional cooperation structures of South-Eastern Europe.

The reconfirmation of the European and Euro-Atlantic orientation as a specific characteristic feature of SEECP was another important result of the activity of the Bulgarian presidency. The countries of the Western Balkans received a clear prospect for integration into the EU and NATO. The priorities and programs for development of South-Eastern Europe that were established in a regional format are gradually getting similar to those of the EU. At the same time, new parameters were introduced in the regional dimension of cooperation as a result of organizing and conducting a number of successful meetings in areas such as: defense, justice and home affairs, prevention of, and dealing with industrial accidents and natural disasters, the transport sector, energy efficiency, science, health care, tourism, and building up of human capital.

In the context of negotiations on the Kosovo status and the independence that was declared unilaterally, the Bulgarian SEECP presidency managed to achieve a tangible success because: 1) it did not allow the development of any disintegration processes in the SEE regional cooperation; on the contrary, it encouraged the improvement of its efficiency all the time; and 2) it did not allow any white spots in the geography of regional cooperation to develop by letting Kosovo take part in all the events in its capacity as an invited participant. Furthermore, representatives of both Serbia and Kosovo (taking part in the events officially as UNMIK (Kosovo) not only sat at the same table, but they took part in the preparation, adoption and signing of the joint documents and in the establishment of the new regional structure, the RCC, in which both countries have their representatives (a precedent in Kosovo's international representation).

The institutional incorporation of the initiatives that used to exist under the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe is an important element of the process of transformation of regional cooperation. The idea is to let these ideas function independently, so that every country can decide which initiatives to preserve and which initiatives to participate in by assuming certain financial responsibilities as well.

In this context, we would like to stress the genuinely **Bulgarian idea that “networks of networks” should be developed** in the SEECP format, as well as between individual regions as well. The logic of this initiative is not to allow the lack of interest in the implementation of particular regional projects on the part of some countries to turn into an obstacle for the development of cooperation in the same area by all other interested countries. This will make it possible to unfreeze some ideas that do not enjoy everybody's attention and to avoid the accumulation of duplicating structures and events. Thus, regional cooperation will be in a position to get closer to the specific problems and to orient itself towards particular projects and results. At the same time, a multi-layer institutional and functional regional structure is being created to provide “the content” for the regional cooperation political framework. If regional cooperation is to advance beyond its present stage, there needs to be a stronger degree of political will by all participants in order to enable the on-going projects to evolve into areas of national policy.

It is typical of every modern state, including Bulgaria, to participate in numerous regional cooperation formats which cover different thematic areas and problems, use specific instruments and incorporate different regions and partner-countries. This participation makes it possible for the country to seek specific approaches and solutions to particular political and

economic problems and to participate more efficiently, on the basis of its expertise and influence, in the political discussions within the framework of the EU and NATO. The multiple and regular diplomatic contacts of Bulgaria with neighbouring countries, within the framework set by the various intraregional initiatives, develop a new type of relationship in the region, marking the opportunities and positive prospects of regional integration. Integration develops at multiple levels and is enriched by various forms of cooperation. The multi-dimensional and steady integration processes in SEE boost regional security, providing a broader framework for the solution of contested issues through dialogue. This plan for co-operation contains considerable potential for crisis management and regulation. Meanwhile, bilateral and multilateral contacts create a certain compatibility of interests and synchronise the efforts of the separate countries for full-scale integration into European political and economic structures. For this reason, regional cooperation will remain a priority in Bulgaria's foreign policy which will also guarantee the pro-active international presence of the country.