



Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans - what next?



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Summary

Following the accession of Croatia to the European Union in 2013, the contemporaneous structures and mechanisms of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans require adjustment. The focus of multilateral cooperation in the region has moved from establishing peace and ensuring post-conflict stabilisation to expedition of the various states' accession to the European Union. The vast majority of regional initiatives launched so far have been initiated and extensively supported by the European Union and United States.

The future of regional cooperation shall be dependent on the dynamics of interstate relations in the Western Balkans as it requires a strengthening of the existent institutional frameworks and support for regional cooperation (especially the South-East Europe Cooperation Process and Regional Cooperation Council) on behalf of the various states in the region. The strategic document "South-East Europe 2020", adopted by the Ministerial conference of the Investment committee for South-East Europe at its meeting in Sarajevo November 2013, will be a substantial test of the effectiveness of the region's cooperation in economic and social development. This strategy, which opened a new chapter in the evolution of multilateral cooperation, combines the interests and resources of the Western Balkan states that have yet to join the European Union in an innovative manner. Its tenets follow the baseline offered by the EU's "Europe 2020" strategy that aims to increase competitiveness and boost economic growth. The new framework also includes a greater degree of collaboration in the fight against organised crime and corruption, capacity building for the rule of law and good governance plus the creation of a framework for the regional networking of social and health services.

The paper analyses the current fields of cooperation and types of institutionalisation, but primarily focuses on the new initiatives underway. These are based on the principles of rationalisation and amending existing solutions (regional intergovernmental organisations, interest group networks, projects etc.), which imply a deepening of cooperation through new structures and methods (e.g. multi-speed, variable number of participants).

This publication aims to contribute to improved monitoring and greater understanding of the latest trends in Balkan multilateral cooperation, relating these to the expectations and requirements of the EU. Additionally the text hopes to provide relevant decision-makers with the possible and necessary measures to improve policy in this field. Findings indicate acceleration of regional cooperation and important development potential which is also influencing channeling

foreign aid. Also, regional cooperation is becoming not only a condition but also a catalytic agent of the process of European integration of the region's countries. Based on these conclusions, recommendations have been created of which the most important are: full commitment of the various WB states and their respective institutions to the practical application of SEE2020, better intra-governmental cooperation, strengthening the region's role in managing the strategy and other programs and projects that relate to solving regional questions, greater cooperation with civil society and local government and improving the use of foreign aid (specifically the multi-beneficiary IPA II program).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Thus far the evolution of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has focused on utilising the opportunities for post-conflict stabilisation, but since 2008 this process has been sped up through the creation of a regional umbrella organisation for the more than 50 extant initiatives - Regional Cooperation Council. In the upcoming period there will be a definite strengthening of the existing structures of regional cooperation by expanding the scope and responsibilities of these frameworks. The aim is to ensure their long-term viability, even after the accession of all states and entities in the Western Balkans to the European Union.

The establishment of new forms and redefinition of current methods of regional cooperation requires clear and powerful EU support in addition to unanimous agreement amongst all relevant local actors. The experiences of other interstate cooperation frameworks in the European sphere (e.g. Nordic Council, BeNeLux, Visegrad Four) can provide crucial guidance.

The process of multilateral cooperation in the Western Balkans is in the common interest of the region's citizens, nations and states, unthreatened by and complementary to various states' entry to the European Union. The advancement of EU enlargement in specific countries (Croatia's accession, negotiations with both Serbia and Montenegro) is expected to create a climate that will allow a further deepening of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. This entails improved coordination amongst existing structures, avoiding overlap in the respective initiatives' activities and greater institutional adaptability.

Regional cooperation should gradually be transformed into a self-sustaining and ever more autochthonous coordinatory framework in fields related to increasing citizens' quality of life. Due to the dynamic and multidimensional characteristics these processes are indisputably linked to the perspective that the region's political elites and states have towards regional cooperation.

In the past decade Serbia has involved itself in the functioning of South-East European and Western Balkan regional initiatives, especially since the democratic transformation that followed the October 5th revolution. Nonetheless a certain indifference towards regional cooperation existed between 2005 and 2008, when Serbia was burdened with and focused on other matters, including the status of Kosovo.

In the forthcoming period Serbia should support all new initiatives formed within the framework of both the South-East European Cooperation Process and Regional Cooperation Council, thus showing interest for and displaying greater dynamism. The state can also offer logistical support to and the headquartering of newly proposed regional initiatives, as has been done with the South-East Europe Transport Observatory. The dynamics of regional cooperation can provide numerous benefits to Serbia and its citizens. Possible consequences are a lowering of ethnic tensions in some portions of the region and the strengthening of economic capacities. By adopting a more pro-active approach in the furthering of and improving the forms and efficacy of regional cooperation, the Serbian government could also confirm its role as a predictable and reliable partner in the region.

Beginning with the necessity of intensifying multilateralism in the Western Balkans, especially increasing its efficiency and effectiveness, following are the recommended measures to improve the quality of regional cooperation:

Government of the Republic of Serbia

- Strengthening the democratic discourse about the need for further regional cooperation within the context of European integration in addition to placing these issues at the top of the state's foreign policy agenda.
- Serbia should become a credible and reliable partner to its neighbouring states and expedite the resolution of outstanding bilateral questions.
- Deploy the full potential of the Serbian state towards the realisation of the "South-East Europe 2020" strategy whilst taking its contents into account when drafting related national development plans and strategic documents.
- Clearer and better coordination amongst governmental bodies and competent ministries in relation to regional cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Integration Office, Office of the Chief Negotiator etc.)

Existing structures of multilateral cooperation (especially the South-East Europe Cooperation Process and Regional Cooperation Council)

- Continued reconsideration of the future of regional cooperation, specifically its forms and policy fields, based on careful examination of the actual needs of states and entities in the region.
- Strengthen the principle of 'regional ownership' with the tenet of 'regional management' in the harmonisation and implementation of the policies and mechanisms used to solve the problems of the region's citizens, beginning with the enactment and further development of the "South-East Europe 2020" strategy.
- Ensure adequate care is taken in bilateral, multilateral and pan-regional consultations to comprehend and account for the sensitivity of regional cooperation whilst respecting the principles of inclusivity and comprehensiveness.
- Encourage greater inclusion for representatives of the respective states' regional and local government, civil society, professional organisations, media, academia, chambers of commerce and syndicates in the existent structures of regional cooperation.

European Union

- Support implementation of the SEE2020 strategy and monitor the convergence of its goals and mechanisms with those of the EU.
- Improve the use of assistance mechanisms on the regional level through the multi-beneficiary IPA II with increased involvement of NIPAC offices and relevant regional initiatives in the proposing, selecting, monitoring and evaluation of approved projects and programs.
- Increase the role of the region's countries in the work of the Western Balkan Investment Framework, giving priority to regional infrastructure projects that include the region in Trans-European networks (transport, energy, telecommunication, environmental protection, climate change regulation) or optimise the use of resources (energy efficiency, multimodal transport etc.)
- Continued insistence on regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations in the Stabilisation and Association Process in addition to the resolution of outstanding questions through bilateral or multilateral mechanisms.