Jelica Minić

The dynamics and context of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans

Abstract: Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has demonstrated its viability in the last two decades. In the initial phase, international support was the key factor inducing the re-establishment of regional connections. Since the transfer of ownership from internationally led structures towards those that are regionally owned began in 2008, the flourishing of regional initiatives, networks, task forces, and projects has expanded, and led to the new reality of one or two regional meetings (or meetings devoted to the region) per day in recent years. This article offers a short analysis of the general constellation and main players and mechanisms of cooperation, as well as the chronology, existing challenges, obstacles, and prospects for its further development.

I think the climate in the entire region is better now than it has been in the past 15 years. The relationship between any two countries in the region, especially in the group of countries made up of Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and also Montenegro, has never been better; despite the many open issues.¹

Zlatko Lagumdžija, BiH Minister of Foreign Affairs

What, where, who, why...

Regional cooperation is a global phenomenon which assumes a different form, size and scope in the many areas of political, social and economic life. This

article is about the dynamics and context of the regional cooperation within the Western Balkans, but also in the wider Southeastern European (SEE) setting. It is based on the growing literature on regional cooperation, several mapping and statistical exercises performed by the Regional Cooperation Council, and the personal experience of several years of active engagement in a regional organization.

The more than 15 years which have passed since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the re-establishment of multilateral cooperation in the region justifies the timing of this stock-taking exercise. The great number of players involved requires an appropriate structuring and prioritization in evaluating their role. The aspirations to join the EU and NATO, as well as an extensive reliance on international financial institutions (IFIs) and other donors, imply heavy conditionality – regional cooperation is among the major ones. The external incentives have played a crucial role in initiating the reintegration of the region, but authentic, indigenous initiatives of various regional players have had a growing role as the process has successfully progressed. From the very beginning top-down course of action has been followed, and in some areas even preceded, by another that was bottom-up (in particular by civil society organizations and local communities).

An active EU enlargement policy and the maintaining of its momentum remains a strategic goal for the EU and the Western Balkans. This includes

At the beginning, regional cooperation in the Balkans was regarded mainly as a peace strategy.

---

2 The SEE region includes countries that have been granted candidate status (Turkey, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), countries aspiring to achieve candidate status and eventually start EU accession negotiations (Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Kosovo* [* – This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence]), countries whose European aspirations are pursued within a different EU institutional framework (Moldova), as well as several EU member states (Greece, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia).

3 The process of ratification of Croatia’s Accession Treaty by the EU was successfully finalized on July 1, 2013 and she became its 28th member; steps were taken by the Commission and Turkey to implement the positive agenda in line with the negotiating framework; accession negotiations with Montenegro, opened in June 2012, have been progressing; the opening of accession negotiations with Serbia is very close and hopefully with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as well; the granting of candidate
regional cooperation as an important EU membership pre-condition, but also as a means to foster dialogue, reconciliation and stability across the SEE region. At the beginning, regional cooperation in the Balkans was regarded mainly as a peace strategy. Later on, regional cooperation in SEE was understood as part of the wider context of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and was seen as instrumental for the core objectives of the EU and NATO in this region. It took some time before it was understood as something valuable in itself – as instrumental in providing the requisites for socio-economic development, competitiveness, and an overall better image of the region before it is fully integrated into the EU.

Thus, the regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is:

• a precondition for reconciliation and for security, stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans;
• part of the conditionality for association and accession to the EU;
• support for socio-economic development in the region (through the coordination of various sectoral policies and donors’ assistance, and the development and promotion of regional projects demanding common efforts, networking, or an economy of scale which will attract foreign investors).

**Phases and forms**

Since the year 2000, when the conflicts and dissolution of the former Yugoslavia ended, regional cooperation in the Balkans has had an exponential growth. Although many countries of the region had already joined various regional organizations established in the previous decade, or even earlier, such as the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), or the Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AII), and in 1996 the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) practical, sectoral and SEE region-focused cooperation has flourished only after the achievement of peace arrangements and the basic stabilization of the political climate in the region.

status to Albania is expected; the EC’s high-level dialogue on the accession process with Bosnia and Herzegovina has been launched; and the decision to open negotiations for the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo* has been made. The aspirations of Moldova are being realized within a different institutional framework – the European Neighborhood policy’s Eastern Partnership – and the country signed the Association Agreement with the EU on November 28, 2013, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area as its essential component.
The SEECP and the Stability Pact for South East Europe provided the operational framework and principal guidance for this process. The first of these was fully regionally owned and operated at the political level. The second was externally induced by the EU and other interested international partners like the US and Russia, in 1999. This was preceded in the same year by the SAP, as the European perspective incentive which combined the real interests of the Balkan countries in peace, stability and prosperity, with a strong external conditionality (the EU and to a considerable extent NATO). That was the playing ground which was defined mostly from outside the region, but supported by the region itself. The next phase in the further consolidation of this framework was marked by the Thessaloniki EU–Western Balkans Summit in 2003, which explicitly opened the European perspective to this post-conflict region, and simultaneously offered additional incentives for regional cooperation in concrete areas in which the EU invited the region to follow its key policies (trade liberalization, development of small and medium-sized enterprises, research and development, access to specific EU programs, etc).

Evidently there was, already in the second half of the nineties, an emerging political will for cooperation among the countries surrounding the Western Balkans, as a response to the destabilization of the wider region, and even a “demand” for cooperation in vital areas such as security, transport, energy and trade, where the interdependence is obvious and unavoidable. There was also a readiness among political players and other social actors in the Western Balkans to support regional cooperation in these areas, in order to facilitate reconciliation and to increase security in the region. That is why the SEECIP was founded immediately after the Dayton Agreement, laying the groundwork for the flourishing of different regional initiatives after the year 2000. More than ten years later, we have besides the EU the following structure of regional players:

- the SEECIP as a strong regional promoter of stabilization and reforms, covering the whole of the Balkans, and fully regionally owned and governed from the very beginning;
• the Stability Pact for SEE has been transformed into the regionally owned Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which in 2013 celebrated its fifth anniversary as an effective operational arm of the SEECP and the main regional coordination mechanism;\(^4\) and
• over 50 different regional organizations, initiatives and networks operating in the wide spectrum of areas of common interest for the countries in the region. Most of them have been established by the interested stakeholders in the region, or in cooperation with external partners and, in some cases, by the EU or other international agencies/organizations.

In his celebrated article on “The Yugosphere,”\(^5\) Tim Judah envisages the strengthening of the latter process. In the discussions and interviews that followed, he compares the reintegration process to the ocean tides – an inexorable and unstoppable course of events. The gathering speed at which an ever increasing number of local independent mechanisms and institutions of regional cooperation are emerging – and not merely in response to pressure and/or financial inducement from outside the region – helps confirm this point of view. The RCC’s overview, covering over 40 regional structures in Southeastern Europe,\(^6\) showed that Western Balkan countries were the only ones participating in almost all of these initiatives. The presence of the other countries of the region is significantly lower, indicating that the driving force of reintegration is in fact the Western Balkans, strongly supported by the EU and SEECP. While the EU continues to be the strongest anchor of stabilization and reform, a key role in consolidating regional cooperation is played by the SEECP, as the most relevant regionally-owned and governed political forum, and the RCC, as an effective operational arm of the SEECP and the main regional coordination mechanism in SEE.

---

\(^4\) The SEECP high-level event and the RCC’s sixth annual meeting, in May 2013 in Ohrid, had a special significance as they reviewed the RCC’s results following the implementation of the RCC SWP 2011–2013, referred to the SEE 2020, and endorsed the RCC’s new triennial SWP 2014–2016. These documents embody the anchor of a new vision for the RCC, which undoubtedly strengthened its capacity to maintain an all-inclusive and regionally-owned framework. See the official web page of the RCC: www.rcc.int


\(^6\) The first mapping executed by the RCC, in 2010, included 43 regional initiatives. Innovated overviews, presenting these regional structures in more detail, were given as annexes to the RCC Strategy and Action Programme for 2011–2013 and 2014–2016.
Ultimately, there are specific interests behind the institutions providing the framework for some of the activities through which the multilateral cooperation manifests itself. When establishing and developing regional cooperation, these interests were not guided only by the prospect of European integration. The authentic regional interests emerged and were recognized. It may be said that the characteristics of these interests and those who uphold them differ from one field of cooperation to another. Certain forms of economic cooperation, science, culture, sport, civil society, and local communities, had all beaten their own paths to cooperation already, without too much intervention on the part of institutions – these came later. With increasing frequency, however, it is the governments that stand firmly behind key projects in regulating the regional market, infrastructure, energy and transport. Here the EU has stimulated and assisted the emergence of institutions of cooperation. New bodies of interest are being set up directed at making multilateral cooperation sustainable in the long term.7

In 2011, the RCC secretariat conducted a survey of regional initiatives (RIs)8 operating within and directed towards the countries of South East Europe, in order to provide an overview of the regional cooperation landscape in SEE and assess possible actions to support institutional strengthening, fundraising, networking, and streamlining of regional initiatives. The RIs were surveyed on general and institutional aspects, funding, projects and actions, and regional coordination activities and needs.

There are four broad groups according to the legal status and institutional characteristics of RIs:

- international inter-governmental organizations (IGOs);
- non-governmental organizations (NGOs);
- donor-funded projects referred to as initiatives; and

---

7 The relative power of the different drivers of regional cooperation has changed over time. This has been well described in two excellent books: D. Lopandić, J. Kronja, Regional initiatives and multilateral cooperation in the Balkans, Belgrade: European Movement in Serbia, 2011; D. Bechev, Constructing South East Europe – the politics of Balkan regional cooperation, Palgrave Macmillan, United Kingdom, 2011.

8 “Regional initiatives in South East Europe – Summary Findings,” Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo, March 2011. The survey, which included 30 regional initiatives, provided some basic inputs for the discussion at the “Western Balkans and Europe 2020 – towards convergence and growth” – a regional coordination meeting of the main regional initiatives and the donor community (EU, IFIs, international organizations, and bilateral donors) organized by the RCC on March 30–31 in Brussels.
networks whose structures and operations are hosted by other, mostly governmental institutions. An RI is defined as any type of incorporated or informal structure, network, or task force active in the region of Southeastern Europe, working in the areas defined as a priority by the RCC secretariat’s statute, and undertaking activities in supranational context.

Confirming the prevalent belief, the European Commission remains the single largest contributor to regional efforts in Southeastern Europe, sourcing over 30 per cent of all funds dedicated to RIs either directly through regional programs, or through national IPA contributions. Other individual donors and governments outside of the region aggregately contribute almost half of the RI funding, with the private sector directly financing less than 1 per cent of the overall budgets. The contribution of the governments in the region, which stood at 20 per cent in 2010, signals an ever greater commitment to regional cooperation and indicates an increase of regional ownership in RIs.

Although the work of RI’s was mostly aligned with the priorities of Europe 2020, the conclusion was reached that they could benefit from a strengthened governance mechanism in which systematic benchmarking, peer reviews, monitoring, and reporting (similar to the principles of Europe 2020) would be executed on regular basis. Associating the regional initiatives further with Europe 2020 (both in policy objectives and governance principles) was expected to help increase the effectiveness of the groups, provide better insight at the level of development of polices in countries and in the region, secure enhanced translation of regionally-agreed reforms to the national level, and, finally, prepare countries for obligations of membership. Most of the respondents indicated that the RCC should have a stronger role in assisting interaction and coordination with donors, as well as coordination with other regional and international organizations.

Much has been built up over the past 15 years. The underlying architecture is becoming visible, but the structure is still fragile, susceptible to shocks and periodic breakdown, and in need of a good deal of patient work.
New phase

A new phase in consolidating regional cooperation and making it more effective is marked by the SEE 2020 strategy,\(^9\) which has become the backbone of the RCC strategy aligning the region with Europe 2020. The creation of one million new jobs in SEE by 2020 is the most important aim of the strategy, which is named “Jobs and prosperity in the European perspective.” The goal of the SEE 2020 strategy is to improve living conditions in the region and bring competitiveness and development back into focus, closely following the vision of the EU strategy Europe 2020.

The SEE 2020 became the most comprehensive regional strategy aligning the region with the main trajectory of Europe 2020. It is a common endeavor, primarily of Western Balkan administrations with help of other regional initiatives and their external partners, to develop strategic guidelines and sectoral strategies for the period 2014–2020. Regional structures have been involved in this process, and the RCC plays a key coordinating and streamlining role in integrating different regional and national strategies into the wider context of SEE 2020. Most of the RIs are already working in line with the priorities of the SEE 2020 Strategy, as the main European framework for growth. The SEE 2020 was developed on the basis of Europe 2020 flagship initiatives, and amended to suit the needs and specific conditions of the region.

Europe 2020, although largely relevant to the Western Balkans development horizon, does not involve all priority areas that are of major concern for the region’s future.\(^9\) The RCC’s SEE 2020 strategy was adopted in Sarajevo on November 21, 2013 at the Ministerial Conference of the South East Europe Investment Committee. See “South East Europe 2020 Strategy – jobs and prosperity in a European perspective,” Regional Cooperation Council, 2013. Available online: http://www.rcc.int/download/pubs/SEE2020Strategy.pdf (accessed on December 2, 2013).
The dynamics and context of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans  29
growth (promoting closer regional integration), and governance for growth (emphasizing the importance of good governance). The selection of targets converging with EU 2020 in the areas of trade, investment, employment, education, and governance was influenced by several factors, including the availability of comparable data for measuring progress. The region’s Ministers agreed that these regional headline targets should be met by 2020, using 2010 as the base year. In order to meet them, they also agreed on:

- policy measures required at national and regional level;
- the development of a comprehensive set of indicators to measure progress in the attainment of these targets; and
- a governance process for the implementation of the SEE 2020 strategy.

The SEE 2020 framework provides clear advantages for external partners. Whether with respect to the EU or other donors, the SEE 2020 provides a transparent platform for identifying areas of greatest need as well as those of common interest, thus giving a clear regional perspective on donor assistance. It also contributes to the improvement of monitoring capacities as to whether IPA and other donor funding reflects the priorities of the regional cooperation.

In its latest report on the Enlargement strategy and the main challenges of 2013–2014, the European Commission underlined the point that good neighborly relations and regional cooperation remained essential elements of the stabilization and association process, and that regional cooperation needs to be further strengthened, and to be inclusive and regionally-owned. There is also the clear message that the Commission fully supports the work of the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the RCC, including the SEE 2020 strategy.10

A stronger focus on the EU Enlargement strategy and the Europe 2020 strategy provides the region and each regional country with a longer-term view, aligns their activities with broader strategies, and makes it possible to measure achieved results.11 The ongoing regional dialogue is expected to

11 In the same report, particular importance was given to the improvement of economic governance in the enlargement countries, implying appropriate adjustments in EU assistance to the region. “Through IPA II, the Commission will continue to support reforms
become more structured with a higher involvement of national policy makers in the implementation of regionally agreed issues. Additional project management mechanisms and tools will be put in place to facilitate the tracking, recording, monitoring and managing of an increasing number of activities, and in order to maintain a sufficient level of quality control in delivery. This also requires a stronger platform for reaching out to all stakeholders, involving increased communication as an integral part of all regional activities.

The listed activities imply reforms, the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, and the establishment of cross-border and trans-border networks between the various players, facilitating the increase of knowledge and the sharing of experience, and defining a new, more open, competitive but also cooperative, landscape for all national players, whether individual or group. In other words, regional cooperation facilitates the establishment of new interest groups in the region which are not linked only to national resources and capabilities. This implies new rules of the game, both regional and international. It must be underlined that the main external partner is EU, but there are also many international organizations, international financial institutions and other donors, think tanks, etc.

Among the main advantages of this strategy are knowledge sharing, the size of projects, a joint approach to key trade-related structural reforms, infrastructure development, job creation, regional image and competitiveness, fighting of organized crime and corruption, and in particular, improvement of economic governance in the Western Balkans area. The process of SEE 2020 development has already contributed to the fostering of a new culture of cooperation in the region, as one of the key European values.

The process of SEE 2020 development has already contributed to the fostering of a new culture of cooperation in the region.
Achievements

First, the region is now appropriately represented in different international and regional forums, even prior to its national administrations and other target groups. That a substantial majority of Western Balkan, as well as many other SEE countries are taking part, and even directly financing their participation in numerous regional activities, is proof of the relevance of these activities and a guarantee of their long term sustainability. The effectiveness of regional cooperation is to be measured by the extent of the acceptance, involvement and mutual benefits achieved by the SEE countries participating in each activity. The quality of representation depends on the feeling of ownership and leadership over regional initiatives, but first and foremost on the results achieved.

Second, the intensity of activity is becoming impressive. An analysis carried out by the RCC for 2011\textsuperscript{12} included 302 regional events, mostly organized by different regional initiatives, but also by some other partners in the region, primarily from the EU. These events included those of economic and social development in the region (51), justice and home affairs (39), energy and infrastructure (36), security cooperation (32), high-profile political meetings (31), the building of human capital (21), etc. According to the RCC’s estimate this represents only about half of the regional events, or events devoted to the region, this year – i.e. those for which there were available data.

Third, existing regional structures exerted their ability to develop important regional coordination and cooperation platforms. The development of multi-annual strategies in different areas has helped regional cooperation development because it has provided a more coordinated approach, addressing the entire complexity of regional cooperation challenges in an interconnected manner, and helped to identify the horizontally connected issues and to better plan activities in the wider context of regional cooperation. To list just a few of those developed under the RCC auspice: SEEIC,\textsuperscript{13} which launched a development vehicle for the region – the SEE 2020 strategy, the Regional

---


\textsuperscript{13} In 2011, the SEEIC, which was initiated by the Stability Pact and led by the OECD in its initial period, was transferred to the RCC, which transformed it into the most powerful engine within its own structure.
Strategy for Research and Development for Innovation for the Western Balkans; the RCC Task Force on Culture and Society; the establishment of the European Association of Public Service Media in SEE, as a non-profit professional body of public broadcasters; the 2011–2013 Regional Strategic Document in the area of Justice and Home Affairs, and the Action Plan for its implementation, as well as a related Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanism to measure progress; and a regional mechanism of cooperation between the Chiefs of Military Intelligence, the Heads of the South East European National Security Authorities, the South East European Counter-Intelligence Chiefs Forum, etc.

Other regional structures have their own strategies and working plans, adopted by different line ministries of SEE countries on trade, energy, rural development, health, transport, environment, research and development, education, culture, etc. All of them address some common problems and offer regional tools and mechanisms to facilitate their solution. The listed examples of sectoral planning have significantly helped the further development of regional cooperation in different areas. Obviously, considerable progress was shown visible in the augmenting of the SEE countries’ ability to display a common stance on formulated regionally attainable goals, in the strengthening of their synergy, cooperation and coordination, and in the streamlining of regional initiatives and task forces in SEE. This would not have been possible if regional initiatives had not developed notable analytical capabilities and expertise, which could be put to the further benefit of both the region and the main international partners.

Fourth, an important lesson learned is that regional cooperation is not something that can be defined as “self-existent,” but rather as the sum of readiness and mutually acceptable commitments and interests, mostly national ones. Continuous institutional consultations, therefore, have been used as instruments in reaching consensus, building upon various national interests, and finding the common denominator. This was especially so in the phase of initiating activity and finding solutions for issues of disagreement.

Fifth, the selected objectives and areas of intervention have undergone several screening phases before they were included in the various sectoral strategic documents. The process of identifying and prioritizing actions to
The dynamics and context of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans

be taken included reviews of national strategies, donor plans, and actions, engaging considerable human and other resources. Regional initiatives and task forces increased mutual consultations, as well as consultations with other regional and international partners. The process resulted in objectives that were deemed relevant and credible.

Sixth, regional consultative and/or monitoring mechanisms have been initiated or already created in most of the priority areas of cooperation, providing additional measurement of progress along the path towards the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans. The fact that some of the most sensitive security institutions in countries of the region were motivated to develop mutually beneficial cooperation is a great success in itself.

Seventh, by promoting a complex integrated approach, including inter-sectoral, multi-level and multi-stakeholder dimensions, as well as a “bottom-up” approach to match the “top-down” one, and through strengthening the role and capacity of local authorities, civil society and media, regional initiatives have gained additional room to reach expected results in priority areas, and to shape an appropriate strategic framework covering the SEE region.

Eighth, although a wider range of stakeholders has been involved, the coherence and complementarities of fundamental regional processes, mechanisms and networks have increased, contributing to the more harmonized strategic approaches of different regional initiatives, and have strengthened cross-border and inter-institutional trust and cooperation in many areas.

Ninth, the exponents of the new regionalism, from Björn Hettne to Mario Tel, have stressed the importance of the institutions. It is doubtless that numerous regional initiatives have contributed to the general advancement and strengthening of institutions in the Western Balkans. But the development of these initiatives has also depended on the strengthening of institutional capacities within their member countries. This means that the development of institutional capacities at both the national and regional levels has given birth to a plethora of multilateral institutions. At the same time, directly or indirectly, this process is contributing to the meeting of obligations stemming

---

from the process of European integration. Here the connection between regional cooperation and European integration is very visible.

Tenth, regional cooperation has also opened or facilitated access to various European programs. Regional initiatives, and in particular the RCC, contribute to the programming of the IPA Multi-beneficiary Program (IPA MB) through the participation of their experts in IPA MB working groups and IPA MB coordination meetings. The aim has been to ensure that both current IPA and incoming IPA II priorities\textsuperscript{15} correspond to regional priorities, and to focus attention on the need for beneficiaries to cooperate amongst themselves and liaise with other key stakeholders and the donor community.

The RCC and other regional structures, such as the Energy Community Secretariat (ECS) and the South East European Transport Observatory (SEETO), as active participants of the donor coordination process within the International Financial Institutions Advisory Group (IFI AG) and the Steering Committee of the Western Balkan Investment Framework (WBIF), contribute to a better defining of regional cooperation priorities.\textsuperscript{16}

In short, the main achievements of Western Balkan countries in their mutual relations in recent years are the continual strengthening of functional

---

\textit{More and more, a commitment to common goals is helping to change national policies.}

---

\textsuperscript{15} “IPA II introduces some important innovations, notably the focus on defining long term policies and strategies in a limited number of priority sectors, which will be aligned with the needs and capacities of each country. Clear targets and realistic indicators will be set and linked to multi-annual sector assistance. If countries meet the necessary standards of public financial management, they will be able to benefit from budget support – a further incentive for reform. Incentives will be available to countries that advance on their reform path. In case of underperformance, funds will be reallocated. The management of IPA programmes will be further streamlined, mainly through fewer and larger projects.” See “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2013–2014,” op. cit., p. 3.

\textsuperscript{16} The level of effective use of regional cooperation has been increased, but not to a very satisfactory level. One indicator of this is the insufficient use of IPA funds during the period 2007–2012. Although this was mainly due to the low level of national administrative capacities, it was understood that greater knowledge and information sharing, as well as a greater number of well-designed regional projects providing a critical mass of human resources, skills, size of coverage, and funds raised would have helped the implementation of certain key accession-related activities, and speeded up acquis adoption as well.
and sectoral cooperation, the improvement of multilateral political relations, and the improving, albeit oscillating, bilateral political relations. More and more, a commitment to common goals is helping to change national policies. This progress has contributed to the advancement of the EU enlargement countries of SEE in achieving an array of specific targets in different areas.

Obstacles and challenges

Obstacles to the overall advancement of regional cooperation still exist. Since the year 2000, this progress has not been uniform due to challenges of different nature, in particular: oscillating bilateral political relations and open issues within the region, the economic and financial crisis with its social consequences, developments within EU and on the broader international scene, and the not-always-full use being made of all opportunities in certain areas of cooperation. Fragmentation, lack of coordination, insufficient institutional capacity, and uneven development in different areas of cooperation were the main obstacles which have gradually been overcome. Although regional cooperation structures are more or less known to the central authorities, not all of them actually know how to resort to the tools that are available. To this list of issues which need an appropriate regional response, we could add also the necessity to address regional cooperation in a more strategic manner, and to develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms with more measurable and specific indicators. Moreover, several regional initiatives have met serious problems regarding financial or political support. Some of these problems are a reflection of the European and global economic crisis, but some are related to the relevance and effectiveness of the initiatives themselves.

It is the common understanding that the appropriate implementation of numerous activities at the regional level needs, primarily, more civil society and private sector involvement. There is a need for more inter-sectoral cooperation, and the inclusion of local authorities and civil society as the

---

17 The EC constantly underlines the importance of the bilateral dimension: “There needs to be a renewed effort to overcome bilateral disputes among enlargement countries and with member states. Bilateral issues need to be addressed by the parties concerned as early as possible and should not hold up the accession process. Developments in Serbia and Kosovo in particular have shown that countries can make progress towards overcoming the legacy of recent conflict, in line with the very principle on which the European Union was founded.” See “Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2013–2014,” op. cit., p. 2.
major implementers of the bottom-up approach, which is inevitably necessary to complement the so far predominantly exercised top-down approach. A multi-stakeholder involvement is needed in order to ensure a balanced representation of different interests and a consensus based development.

There is still a risk that planned activities will not be achieved in all areas, jeopardizing the sustainability of intervention. That is why many regional initiatives are requested to focus their activities and base them around several core initiatives that will make their work even more coherent and sustainable. It is important to notice that this shift is already occurring, and it is becoming evident that fragmented projects and activities are giving way to more structured, longer-term processes.

The experience has clearly demonstrated that where communication has been approached in a strategic manner, as part of policy planning, information on regional cooperation has reached a larger number of stakeholders and has had a more significant impact compared with approaching communication as an afterthought, or as a technical and fragmented affair. A proper dissemination of information on regional cooperation is of the highest political value, and is becoming one of the pillars in the work programs of many regional initiatives.

One of the main challenges for the further development of regional cooperation is the political will of its main players – their commitment and readiness to look for common solutions to common problems. The lack of appropriate institutional, human, and financial strength capacities to support political willingness is often a barrier to satisfactory results. This means that commitments are not always coupled with the tools needed to reach the objectives, or to put forward the appropriate governance mechanisms and incentives which are agreed at the political level. There is a problem of intra-governmental coordination within SEE administrations, which is a structural problem affecting many areas of governmental responsibility. There are many physical barriers to better communication in the region (transport and communications infrastructure, for example). Moreover, the further evolution of the EU enlargement policy, if it becomes even more demanding in particular regarding its regional approach, will have a substantial impact on multilateral cooperation in the Western Balkans.
Finally, the changes envisaged in the SEECP\textsuperscript{18} aimed at strengthening this initiative will also influence both political and sectoral cooperation in the region via the changing balance between the wider SEE framework and the Western Balkans.

Some of the obstacles and challenges listed above are of a substantial, and some of a functional, nature. But the direction of changes is clear, and the general climate is in favor of regional cooperation.

**Prospects**

The results achieved so far, the general political and economic context, and a clear vision for the future, will to a large extent shape the strategic orientation of the region and of each individual country for the period beyond 2013. The regional dialogue and multilateral cooperation will need, first of all, a growing political support. This should be followed by an appropriate pattern of coherently structured further work (in its political, operational, and financial aspects) at the regional level, in correlation with possible changes within the EU and its pre-accession assistance. In the next period, it will be of key importance to continue the vision-building process and to identify priorities of future regional cooperation through comprehensive and transparent consultations with all relevant stakeholders in the region – particularly national authorities, regional initiatives, task forces, and main donors (primarily the European Commission). Stability and growth are the key objectives of common action, and this is the only way to achieve them on a long term basis.

It is evident that there is a feeling of community and mutual responsibility in the region, given the shared governance of numerous (about 50) regional organizations, initiatives, networks and projects. The development of both sectoral and overarching strategies at the regional level shows that there is a common set of interests.\textsuperscript{19} But is there a clear answer regarding the direction of the future regional integration in the Balkans? There are three main lines of its development: of thought:

\textsuperscript{18} “SEECP Ohrid Declaration of the formal meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs,” Ohrid, May 31, 2013, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{19} For example, the SEE 2020 with the main messages: (i) job-creating growth through a renewed focus on competitiveness and regional economic integration, (ii) support for accession (functional integration, acquis adoption, good governance).
• multilateral and bilateral political arrangements/agreements (SEECP is the most prominent example);
• formal and informal multilateral cooperation based on the convergence of political regimes, economic policies, and security arrangements – CEFTA 2006, Energy Community Treaty, South East Europe Transport Observatory, Regional School for Public Administration, Standing Working Group for Rural Development, South East Europe Health Network, Regional Environmental Centre, and other numerous SEE regional task forces and initiatives;  
• passive integration through participation in the European integration process and various EU structures – association and accession process, participation in numerous European programs.

There are a number of accession related issues that have a regional dimension (enhancing reforms, preparations for negotiations, etc.), implying a more direct and concrete role of RIs within the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans. The RIs need to be given stronger leverage from EU institutions, in terms of being recognized, promoted and supported as key instruments for introducing and implementing a regional approach to economic recovery and development.

Certain changes in the new cycle of pre-accession assistance 21 (in the EU’s new financial perspective) are very indicative: a tailor made approach, flexibility, equal opportunity for all but rewards for the successful, greater stress on the regional acquiring of necessary knowledge and capacity building, as well as a strengthened regional perspective in infrastructure development, giving additional impetus to existing, or to the creation of new regional structures (Energy Community Treaty, Transport Community Treaty to be launched, Western Balkan Investment Framework for donor coordination, etc.).

Based both on achievements and lessons learned, RIs should evolve to a new stage, as the region needs a more coherent and consolidated cooperation based on genuine ownership and leadership. The process of evaluation, and thinking about modalities of a future course of action regarding cooperation in SEE, has already been initiated within the SEECP and the RCC, and the outcome of this debate will influence the modus operandi, mandate and other

---

20 Just to underline that civil society organizations were the first to re-establish regional cooperation after and even during the most recent conflicts in the Balkans.

aspects of the work of RIs beyond 2013. The RIs would also benefit from an innovated SEECP pattern of a more focused, thematic and concrete mode of operation, ensuring commitment at SEECP high level meetings in addressing the issues of crucial importance for the region, and in the implementation of related decisions.\textsuperscript{22}

The support from SEECP will be manifested, first of all, through a high level political commitment to implement agreed strategic decisions and policy measures in different areas of regional cooperation. This political structure has proved itself able to provide a favorable political climate for important structural reforms and the development of a new image for the SEE region. Established as a “safety net” in the nineties, it evolved into an important structure contributing to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of its member countries, and has a growing importance in defining developmental goals and projects in the region through its operational arm, the RCC.

Thus the long term development of regional cooperation is closely linked with the further evolution of the SEECP and the EU enlargement policy, and to how deeply rooted certain measures will become – namely, measures undertaken to interlink regional players, and to establish a long lasting structure of interests that could hold the region together even if most of these countries join the EU in the foreseeable future. Perhaps a Nordic Council, a Baltic Council, or a Visegrad Group, in an existing or slightly changed format, may be expected to evolve from the existing structures of regional cooperation in SEE. There are many factors influencing developments in the region, and the biggest challenge is to identify appropriately the real resources and long term opportunities, as well as the potential and achievable readiness to combine them at the regional level. It may be regarded as a sign of maturity that the process of assessing the costs and benefits of regional activities is already underway.

\textsuperscript{22} “Solidarity in action. Joint statement of the ministers of foreign affairs of the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP),” Ohrid, May 31, 2013, with joint commitments on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. This was the first thematic document adopted at the high-level annual meeting of the SEECP, introducing the new practice of political support for specific sectoral actions identified as regional priorities.