

Regional and Cross Border Cooperation on the South Borders of the EU – Hungary and Serbia –

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Neighborhood Programs and cross border cooperation are closely connected with the aims of regional cooperation. Regional cooperation is crucially important for the countries of Western Balkans. So, it is for Serbia, too. In the same time, Serbia seems to be the most important Balkan country for the development of regional cooperation in South East Europe, taking in account her geographical position and the political role in the region (in positive, as well in negative sense). The main partners in Neighbourhood Programmes of the EU towards Serbia are the neighbouring EU countries. But until now the cross-border cooperation using EU funds were insufficient. As Hungary and Serbia are on the same European transportation corridors connecting Western-, North and Central- with the Southeast part of the European continent the cross-border cooperation of the two countries should be much more developed than it is today. The Neighborhood Programs of the EU and the cross-border projects could give a strong basis for the regional cooperation among the countries of the Western Balkans including in the sheme of the regional cooperation the neighboring EU countries, too. In this case, Hungary.

The awareness of the fact stated above is gradually coming to awareness in in some sense more in Hungary, than in Serbia, taking in account the interest showing for the Balkans and Serbia as well. So, in Budapest a Balkan Centre was founded in October 2005. The Minister for Foreign Affairs at that time, Ferenc Somogyi, supported this civil initiative enthusiastically. The Europe Institute Budapest, being a privately funded institute, initiated and co-founded the Centre. The Centre for Social Studies at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences provides the administration and the Programme for Strategic Research contributes to the co-financing of publications and the events of the Balkan Centre. Many conferences were organised on ongoing processes and development in natural environment, territorial administration, transport and economy of the Balkans. Meanwhile, a Research Group on the History of the Balkan has been established in the Institute of History at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Szeged University had from earlier its' research professors oriented toward the south neighbours of Hungary. Taking in account the importance of Danube cooperation and the fact that for the future of the European Union the co-operation of the countries of the Danube region is of crucial importance, and during this process a significant mediating role can be attributed to Hungary, more projects was started in Budapest and some in Dunaújváros directed towards cross-border and regional cooperation with the Balkan countries of the Danube catchment area. A special place in this positive surrounding entitles the University of Pécs with its' Center for East Mediterranean and Balkan Studies (*Kelet-Mediterrán és Balkán Tanulmányok Központja*). Therefore, I am honored with invitation to take part in the Hungarian Political Geographical Conference organized by this Centre.

In spite of the above said, the realised cross-border project cooperation was insufficient till now. The goal of this paper is to lobby for the improvement of cross-border cooperation between the two countries, from the point of view of the interest of both countries and the EU.

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The paper is dealing with: The Importance of Regional Cooperation for the Western Balkans; The Regional Co-operation Council; Forms of regional cooperation and the cooperation of regions; The forms of regional cooperation based on the importance of the river Danube; Euro-regions in SEE and in the Danube region; and at the end is given a conclusion.

1. The Importance of Regional Cooperation for the Western Balkans

Regional co-operation implies concepts of multilateral collaboration viewed as a process in which the participating states realize their interests, which are entirely or partially identical and persistently develop a wide range of their forms and contents. In its concrete implementation, this concept gains specific characteristics of the region itself. Specificity of the relations among neighboring states is determined by geographic positions of the region and their historical background. Southeast Europe and the Balkans are surrounded by geographic areas of strategic relevance: the Danube, the Adriatic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Bosphorus which have always attracted the attention of great powers. Inter-ethnic tensions have always showed their interest in the political domination and control over the region. Besides these latent factors of conflict, factors of peaceful coexistence also exist in the region. Initiatives aimed at economic co-operation and neighborly relations contribute a lot to the process of consolidation of this historically turbulent geopolitical region. Instability is partly due to historical heritage and partly originates from contemporary tensions in international relations. But there are also factors of internal social and economic developments in respective countries that need to be addressed.

After the phase of bloody conflicts seemed to be over, new forms of functional, rather than ideological, economic and cultural co-operation in this region were re-established. Only new forms of co-operation can ensure optimal joint utilization of common natural resources, such as international rivers, and above all the Danube, as well as a common infrastructure, such as railways, highways and communication systems.

In my research works carried out decades before the crisis in Yugoslavia, issues related to ethnic minorities had been treated in the context of neighborly relations. Problems in this respect were viewed as factors hampering bilateral contacts with neighboring countries and regional co-operation. At the same time in the reality, contrary to research results, depending on the situation, minority issues were raised as a means for intensifying the political pressure or for disturbing mutual relations in the region.

Influenced by a series of internal factors, as well as political and economic trends in the world, during the final process of the confrontation of blocks, the ideas of co-operation became more viable than ever. Most countries in the East and Southeast of the European continent, together with the issue of structural disharmony, encountered the problem of the lack of capital for development of infrastructure and for the implementation of the most up-to-date technology, which, at the same time, stimulated these countries to co-operate. Simultaneously, they started to prepare for the opening up of those countries which were one step ahead in economic and technological development and had free capital for investing in infrastructure and exploitation of the world's natural resources. At the same time, the idea of enhancing both bilateral, neighborly co-operation and multilateral co-operation in this region became widely accepted.

Looking ahead at the 21st century we had to recognize the scarcity of many natural resources, one of them being water. We must also believe in the gradual abstinence of force among the nations in taking away natural resources from each other. We had to

believe that the sustainable use of natural resources will be organized in numerous forms of regional, sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation. Only then can mankind survive.

Regional cooperation is necessary as for all countries, as well as for an international region as whole. Also in South Eastern Europe, as well as in the countries of this region many issues, from fighting organized crime, to increasing trade and attracting investment, to strengthening disaster preparedness and prevention, can only be addressed on a regional basis. As a good example for that is the fact that a foreign investor will not be interested in investing into a country with a market of only 2 million consumers but a market of 55 million consumers, which is currently being established with the amendment and enlargement of CEFTA, also makes investments in SEE much more attractive. And also many of international partners, such as the International Financial Institutions, are taking a regional approach to their programming, in addition to their individual country programs.

Secondly, regional co-operation is both a prerequisite and a tool for the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of SEE. Namely, it is one of the criteria of EU and NATO membership, as the two organizations want to take in only those countries that show maturity in relations with their neighbors – regardless of how painful memories of recent events might be.

The example of the Stability Pact has shows that many companies are taking full advantage of regional free trade with the result of intra-regional trade doubling over the past few years. There is now a common approach to addressing difficult issues such as the fight against organized crime and corruption. Best practices in the area of migration are being exchanged. The Energy Treaty has created a regional electricity market consistent with EU standards. Four countries have formed the Sava River Commission to manage the economic and environmental issues of this important basin. Ever closer co-operation among the local authorities along the borders of SEE countries are also examples of some of the positive developments that have taken place in SEE over the past 8 years and it is obvious that the region is much more mature today, than in the beginning of the process of developing regional ties. Bearing this in mind, a transformation and streamlining process was launched in 2005 with the final aim of having the new framework for regional co-operation in South Eastern Europe in place by 2008.

2. The Regional Co-operation Council

Following a wide consultation process with countries of South Eastern Europe in 2005 and 2006, the Stability Pact's highest decision-making body – the Regional Table in Belgrade in May 2006 – took far reaching decisions on the transformation of the Stability Pact into a more regionally-owned, streamlined and effective regional co-operation framework in South Eastern Europe.² The main task of such a framework is to be a facilitator of regional co-operation and support the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, while ensuring continued involvement of the donor community, thus preserving the legacy of the Pact.

It was agreed that the streamlined Regional Co-operation Council (RCC) and its Secretariat should focus its activities on six areas which the countries of the region have already identified as those where regional co-operation will be beneficial to all: Economic and social development; Infrastructure; Justice and Home Affairs; Security

² <http://www.stabilitypact.org/rt/RTBELGRADEChairmans%20Conclusions%20of%20the%20Regional%20Table%20Belgrade%20-%20Final.pdf>

Co-operation and Building Human Capital with Parliamentary Co-operation being an overarching theme that is linked with each of the other areas.

The political work of the RCC in these six core areas will be supported on a technical and expert level by a network of Stability Pact's initiatives and task forces. A detailed assessment of regional ownership of each of the current 25 initiatives and task forces and their future relation with the RCC has been examined by the Stability Pact Secretariat and the Special Co-coordinator has presented its report with recommendations for individual transition strategies, time lines and required resources.³

Parallel discussions on several levels took place following the Belgrade meeting of the Regional Table in order to progress towards the agreement reached that the new Regional Co-operation Council would be fully operational by early 2008.

Most importantly, the representatives of the region (who met under the framework of the Financial Working Group) met under the leadership of the Croatian Chairmanship-in-Office of the South Eastern European Co-operation Process (SEECP) and the Stability Pact reached consensus on a refined cost-sharing proposal to cover €1 million, the agreed annual contribution by the region to the RCC Secretariat.⁴ The financial commitments made for the initial period of three years is based on dividing the countries in four sub-groups according to their economic size, and assigning different shares to each sub-group. This progress was an important sign of the political commitment of the SEE countries to the process.

Ultimately, it needs to be underlined that this phased evolution of the Stability Pact into a regionally owned framework should not be interpreted as the international community withdrawing its support or leaving the region on its own. On the contrary, many of Stability Pact's international partners have assured us that they will stay engaged, but want to see the countries of the region gradually taking more ownership of the process – politically, financially and also personnel-wise.

It is in all parties' interest to ensure the sustainability of the co-operation processes initiated within the Pact and thus safeguard its legacy for South East Europe. There are two preconditions for this to be successful: enhanced regional ownership and continued international support in the transition phase. To put it differently, the Regional Co-operation Council is required, in order to allow continued international involvement and support while enhancing regional ownership. Therefore, the South Eastern European countries, the SEECP (as the only regionally-owned organization so far) and the international community – must take the necessary decisions to make this a reality in a transparent fashion.

3. Forms of regional cooperation and the cooperation of regions

It is necessary to start from terminology, because clear definitions can ease the understanding of the complex and many-sided themes of regional cooperation. We have to make a distinction between “regional cooperation” in both a wider and narrower sense, and between “cooperation of regions”, “sub-regional cooperation”, and “inter-regional cooperation”.

³ <http://www.stabilitypact.org/rt/Annex%202%20-%20Report%20of%20the%20Special%20Coordinator%20on%20Regional%20Ownership%20and%20Streamlining.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.stabilitypact.org/about/Annex%201%20-%20Agreed%20Regional%20Annual%20Contribution%20to%20the%20RCC%20Secretariat.pdf>

The distinction of these forms should be defined, but they are in life in a very close inter-relation:

- Regional cooperation of neighbouring countries on inter-state level
- International cooperation on the level of the regional units inside the countries:
- Euro-regions – the cross-border regional cooperation
- Cooperation of international regions = Inter-regional cooperation

Regional cooperation« in a wider sense is a common term for all varieties and forms, while in a narrower sense »regional cooperation« means cooperation at the level of states and the participation of states in it. On the other hand in the co-operation of regions the participants are territorial units of two or more neighboring countries. Both in English and in southeast European languages, there is a terminological problem based on the term »region«. Namely in the sense of international relations »region« represents a larger territory of one continent in which many countries are divided by borders who want to succeed in overcoming the negative impact of borders by mutual multilateral cooperation. This is regional cooperation in a narrower sense. At the same time, all states have smaller territorial units near state borders which also act in the same direction and cooperate with each other in order to overcome the negative impact of borders. This is the cooperation of regions.

At the time of its launching, the conceptual objective of regional, international co-operation was to end the East-West division, as well as to eliminate nationalism. The concept of regional co-operation can be considered a specific self-organization of regions in this part of Europe, without the intention of the states to align in any direction. It is estimated, that this concept practically implements a version of »mini or regional internationalism« focusing on the research of concrete fields of mutually beneficial co-operation among the regions and in the common region.

The concept of co-operation of regions, together with macro-politics at state or inter-governmental level, gives priority mostly to small-scale multilateral and bilateral cooperation between small territorial units: cross-border zones, districts, provinces, regions or territories which are otherwise geographical units, as well as among cities and towns.

In inter-regional cooperation, regions of the continents cooperate by learning how to solve the problem of sustainable development and by supporting each other in this issue. There have been some very successful inter-regional cooperation experiences, for example between the Latin American and European regional organizations.

The inter-regional co-operation does not only give an important dimension to the new European structure, playing a vital role together with the regional cooperation in the process of building a united Europe, but it also contributes a lot to the sustainable use of natural resources on the global level.

4. The forms of regional cooperation based on the importance of the river Danube

The area of central and southeast Europe, which is dominated by the most important natural resource, the Danube, has a rather large number of varied forms of regional cooperation and co-operation in the regions based on the importance of the river Danube. Aside from the old regional organization, the Danube Commission, whose reform has also started,⁵ several new initiatives have been proposed.

The river Danube does not only represent a waterway for transportation and a bordering river between states, but is also a waterway which connects regions and is a base of economic and cultural communication. So, several new forms of regional cooperation arose. According to the concept of cooperation in the regions, new forms should harmonize the economic policy of rural development plans, the environment, tourism and other policies, and not only at the state level, but more often at local and county level as well. They should enable a considerably wider range of activities and more possibilities for developing both the smaller region in the neighboring countries, and the whole region.

Following the example of the Working Community of the Alpe-Adria, which emerged immediately after abolishing the block division in Europe, the Danube Working Community was initiated at the end of the 1980s and established in 1990.⁶ The Community gathered 16 regions of the six states, among them Serbia and Croatia as regions from the SFRY. The first presiding region was Lower Austria. Serbia presided the following year.⁷

The »Danube Cooperation Process« (DCP) was initiated in June 2001 by Austria and Romania and supported by the European Commission and the Stability Pact for South-East Europe. It was officially established at the first Ministerial Conference of the DCP on May 27, 2002 in Vienna. The aim of DCP is to give a new political support to the development of all forms of cross-border and regional cooperation among the countries along the Danube and its tributaries. The main document of the Process consists of the Common Declaration and Principles and working methods for the functioning.

Six "dimensions" are chosen in the Declaration in which the future cooperation in the framework of the DCP will be organized. These are:

- The dimension of economy, with special emphasis on the issues of transportation, taking in to account the already existing forms of cooperation in the Pan European corridors VII, IV, V, and X;

The ten Pan-European transport corridors were defined at the second Pan-European transport Conference in Crete, 1994, as routes in Central and Eastern Europe that required major investment over the next ten to fifteen years. Additions were made at the third conference in Helsinki in 1997.

A tenth corridor was proposed after the end of hostilities between the states of the former Yugoslavia. These development corridors are distinct from the Trans-European transport networks, which include all major established routes in the EU, although there are proposals to combine the two systems.

- The dimension of navigation, in cooperation with the Danube Commission, including the reform of the Belgrade Convention from 1948, in accordance with new relations in Europe and the Danube region;

⁵The Danube Commission was established at the Belgrade conference in 1948, with the aim of international regulation of river transport. Since the international relations changed a lot in the meantime, it is natural to make changes in the organization of the Danube Commission, seated in Budapest.

⁶ Established on May 17, 1990.

⁷ Therefore the project »Danube – River of Cooperation« was initiated at the Institute of International Politics and Economics and was started in 1989.

- The dimension of environmental protection including the already existing efforts in this field, like the cooperation in the framework of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube (ICPDR);
- The dimension of tourism, with an aim to develop potential for tourism in the whole Danube region in all forms, including agro-tourism and eco-tourism;
- The dimension of culture, aiming to further promote of the cultural heritage of all countries in the region and the common multi-cultural heritage in the whole region;
- The dimension of sub-regional cooperation for supporting all sub-regional initiatives and projects oriented towards the development of already existing projects and initiating new Euro-regions on the Danube, as well as other forms of cross-border and regional cooperation.

After the launching of the DCP, some projects were initiated under the auspices of the Process. For example, there was a revision of the 1948 Belgrade Convention on the Legal Regime of Navigation on the Danube. Two sessions of the Preparatory Committee and a meeting of the Working Group on navigation issues were started at the end of 2003.

In the economic dimension the most important project until now has been the Danube Region Business Conference (DRBC). It was organized three times in Vienna; the fourth took place in Bucharest, on 8th-9th of October 2003. The Fifth DRBC took place in Belgrade, November 10 – 11, 2005. At the next DRBC on October 6th and 7th, Representatives of the Danube states will gather with members of European Commission, European Parliament and the Committee of Regions in Brussels to discuss future perspectives of the Danube Region.

Euro-regions in SEE and in the Danube region

In the last decade of the 20th century a number of Euro-regions were created in the SEE, the Carpathian Euro-region being the first in 1993 with the participation of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Ukraine, while Romania was included later. Presently there are, or just about to be created, eight Euro-regions in Eastern Europe.

The contemporary concept of cross-border co-operation has been elaborated with the aim to establish a trans-frontier co-operation in the region of the most sensitive borders on the European continent, where, throughout history, but also in recent times (during the process of the disintegration of the USSR and the SFRY) these borders have given rise to conflicts. The targets of such co-operation are twofold: on the one hand, to prevent conflicts, and on the other hand to develop the region regardless of the existence of borders. As an extra effect of the »Euro-region«, they promote decentralization and development of the local democracy. Unfortunately, when such a concept was made public at the first conference of “Danube - River of Cooperation” in 1989 in Belgrade, the Yugoslav participants were suspiciously listening to it and finally refused it. Yet, the concept was accepted later and a Euro-region was really established, i.e. the Danube-Karash-Muresh-Tisa Region, including the Yugoslav region of Vojvodina, as well as Hungarian and Romanian ones.

Euro-regional cooperation in Southeast Europe started after a good experience of Euro-regions in other parts of the European continent. The already mentioned “Euro-region DKMT” (named by the rivers Danube, Karash or Körös, Muresh or Maros and Tisza or Tisa) was among the first to be established. Some more were established recently, but not enough in number and not sufficient in functional deepness. Namely, in this form of regional cooperation, the borders could mostly be softened and that is the precise need all along the borders in Southeast Europe. The Euro-region could be successful in cutting down xenophobia, mutual animosities, and the mental disease of nations, whereas some rational pros and economic and ecological benefits are inevitable.

Euro-regions and cross border co-operations should become determinant elements of the regional policy of all countries in Southeast Europe, as the best instruments of common regional stability.

Therefore it is necessary to develop euro-regional cooperation on all borders in SEE and especially on the borders of Serbia with Croatia and Bosnia but also on the borders with other neighbors.

As an example of creating initiative for euro-regional cooperation the experience of the International Scientific Forum “Danube – River of Cooperation” should be mentioned. Namely, it continued to work on this issue at the X international conference “Danube – River of Cooperation” held in 1998, and at the XI conference in 2000 Euro-regional cooperation was strongly recommended. Finally, at the XIII international conference “Danube – River of Cooperation” held at the Hydroelectric Power Plant “Djerdap I (Iron Gate) in Kladovo, where an Agreement was signed by Serbian and Romanian officials – the Euro region of “Middle Danube – Iron Gate” was established. It encouraged economic development of resources for transport, industry, agriculture and tourism in the region for sustainable use. It also ensured better protection of the environment and of historical monuments.

After the first phase in which the coalition of counties, municipalities and representatives of the civil sector was created, the initiative still needed huge support from both the ground and from above. The “ground” refers to the local authorities, NGOs, companies, and the “above” to the international organizations and national officials whose program encompasses giving support to cross-border initiatives. They have to take into account the fact that cooperation within the framework of the Euro-region “Middle Danube – Iron Gate” will contribute to other forms of fostering good-relations with neighbors and regional cooperation, which helps to keep the peace and maintain stability in the region.

It has been decided that the “Middle Danube – Iron Gate” Euro-region will support concrete elements of cooperation. Therefore, working groups for the development of tourism and for the protection of the human environment in Euro-region should be formed, where beside the experts from the International Scientific Forum “Danube-River of Cooperation”, the representatives of local authorities and local non-governmental organizations, the representatives of other interested structures would be included. It was also emphasized that the “Middle Danube - Iron Gate” Euro-region is open for cooperation and should experience exchanges with other euro-regions in the Danube-Basin, most notably, “Danube-Karash-Muresh-Tisa”, “Down Danube-Prut”, “Danube 21”, etc.

Conclusion

Regional, sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation forms have the utmost importance for overcoming the tensions created in the “use-of-force” history everywhere. Positive effects of multilateral cooperation are important especially for the sake of alleviation and absorption of international tensions in the region around Serbia. Nevertheless how we named this region, Balkans, Southeastern Europe, the Western Balkan, or the Middle-Danube region, all forms of regional and cross-border cooperation is needed more than anywhere else on the European continent. Namely, the unfortunate peoples of this region were “trained” to be divided by religious and nationalistic ideologies through the history, with wars even in the last decade of the 20th century. In such circumstances all appeals for peace and regional cooperation in that decade were accused of being dangerous for so called national interests.

Whereas in other parts of Europe all kinds of regional cooperation gained space and richness of forms, in Southeast Europe the process was more or less delayed in these countries. In some countries people were misled by the process of manipulation by so-called intellectuals, who were in fact nationalists and xenophobes, followed by politicians who used nationalistic slogans to lead people into war. Hopefully we are out of that storm, and now all forms of regional cooperation can be developed without misinterpretations and accusations.

Regional cooperation is urgently needed in all the countries of Southeast Europe, Balkans, and especially in Western Balkans in the fields of economy and protection of environment. The shape of Middle-Danube Region gives additional possibilities for pushing forward the regional cooperation in Western Balkans, as it involves the neighbor countries that are members of the European Union. So, funds of the EU are more open for projects. These projects might be from different branches of economy, culture, etc. But the regional cooperation based on sustainable use of natural resources, are the ones which were conceived and already have some results. This cooperation could be organized at the level of states, at the level of smaller parts of countries, and at the level of cross-border regional cooperation of municipalities and counties.

The Danube cooperation is based on the importance of the river and its tributaries, as well as by natural resources which should be used mutually in a sustainable manner for the benefit of all citizens in the Danube region.

What really matters is that the nations in Southeast Europe and in the Danube Region are dependent on each other. Therefore, a consequent affirmation of the peculiarities of nations can be imagined only within coordinated activities in the area. However, these peculiarities should be appreciated as a cornerstone of the multicultural wealth, both within the state border and the wider region. They should never be used as factors of division and conflict if survival is the objective.