

Serbia and the Balkans: An Overview of Regional Cooperation

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The paper gives an overview of Serbia's participation in various forms of regional cooperation in the Balkans. This cooperation became especially important in the post-Dayton period. In the case of Serbia, it was pushed back by the Yugoslav war, which led to international sanctions and the 1999 military intervention by NATO. Therefore, Serbia's full-fledged participation in regional organisations resumed only after the regime change of October 2000. European and Euro-Atlantic orientation constitutes today the principal direction of Serbia's foreign policy and in this connection the developing of regional cooperation in the Balkans, especially in their western part, is a prerequisite for Serbia's future accession to the EU, which can become possible between 2014 and 2017.

Serbia occupies a central place in the Balkan region. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East, it has experienced the influences of both eastern and western civilisations.¹ Recently, regional cooperation has become a prerequisite for Serbia's EU accession as an externally determined process with rigorous conditions and increasing expectations. Therefore, this article brings an overview of the role of Belgrade role in that cooperation.

Key words: regional cooperation, Serbia, EU, NATO

1. Creation of Conditions for Cooperation

Between 1918 and 2006, Serbia was a constituent part of various Yugoslav states whose attempts at regional cooperation did not yield serious results, owing primarily to the external impediments. However, since the early 1990s, the European Commission has drawn the attention of Balkan countries to the necessity of regional cooperation, devotedness to the resolution of open questions in a peaceful and constructive manner. Thus, regional cooperation and

good neighbourly relations have become a prerequisite for enabling these countries to move towards the EU. As for Serbia and Montenegro, the war for Yugoslav succession induced them to create the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) on 27 April 1992. The UN Security Council imposed economic and political sanctions on the FRY starting on 3 June 1992 due to its involvement in the Bosnian conflict.² Serbia's international position somewhat improved in the wake of the US-brokered peace accords in Dayton, Ohio, initialled on 21 November 1995. Slobodan Milošević's conciliatory stance secured the suspension of the UN sanctions against the FRY for an indefinite period starting on 15 December 1995,

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the day after the signature of the Balkan peace accords in Paris. The Erdut Agreement of 15 January 1996 provided for the demilitarization and eventual return of the Serb-occupied region of Eastern Slavonia to Croatian control after a transitional UN administration. It actually happened two years later. On 26 February 1996, the EU General Affairs Council adopted a Regional Approach to Albania and the former Yugoslav republics, except Slovenia, constituting the Western Balkans as the least integrated and stable part of Europe. Following the normalization of Yugoslav-Macedonian relations, the European Union in its declaration of 9 April 1996 recognized the FRY as one of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia.³ On 1 October 1996, all UN sanctions against Belgrade were lifted. With the intensification of the Kosovo conflict, the EU Council of Ministers starting from 19 March 1998 gradually imposed various sanctions on Belgrade, including a prohibition for Yugoslav and Serbian officials to travel to the EU member states from 6 May 1999. These sanctions were finally lifted on 9 October 2000 with the exception of the ban on visa issuance to Milošević and his entourage. In addition, between 21 May 1998 and 22 March 2000 air flights to and from Serbia were forbidden. The anti-dumping measures taken against Yugoslav steel exports to the EU from February 2000 were not abolished until September 2004.⁴

2. Forms of Cooperation

In June 1996, the Yugoslav government signed the Sofia Declaration which on the initiative of Bulgaria launched the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEEC) as a political forum for regional cooperation, namely for the purposes of creating an atmosphere of trust, good neighbourly relations and stability. Yugoslavia also joined the Royamount Process for Stability and Good Neighbourliness in South-Eastern Europe initiated by the Irish EU Presidency in December 1996, which embraced the SEEC, the EU and neighbouring countries in the region, the United States, Russia, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe. This process aimed at supporting the implementation of the Dayton agreement by promoting regional cooperation schemes and projects on good neighbourly relations.⁵

To strengthen the post-Dayton system of international relations in the Balkans, the FRY had been invited to the founding session of the South-East European Cooperative Initiative (SECI) held in Geneva on 5 and 6 December 1996 under the auspices

of the United States and the UN Economic Commission for Europe, but in view of the political crisis in the country, the US administration later cancelled its relevant decision. Therefore, Belgrade became its member only after the fall of the Milošević's regime, on 6 December 2000. The projects of this organisation have served to build such mechanisms that would secure lasting peace and stability in the Balkans through improving frontier traffic, developing the most important international roads, creating a regional grid of pipelines and electric power, rehabilitating rivers, lakes and seas, supporting small- and medium-sized enterprises and promoting foreign direct investment.⁶

Meanwhile, on 24 March 1999, in response to a deteriorating situation in Kosovo, NATO launched the Allied Force Operation. On 9 June 1999, a peace agreement jointly sponsored by Russia, the EU and the US was signed in Kumanovo, Macedonia, thus ending the air campaign the next day and placed the province under provisional United Nations administration (UNMIK).⁷ As a reply of the international community to the Kosovo crisis, the Royamount Process was superseded by a much more ambitious Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, signed to overcome regional antagonisms on the European Commission's initiative in Köln on 10 June 1999. Yugoslavia joined the Pact on 26 October 2000 and, along with other Western Balkan countries as well as Bulgaria and Romania, was among the nine beneficiaries of the Pact.⁸ The purpose of this institute seated in Brussels was to mobilise assets of non-governmental donors for the development of civil society. Its development projects covered democracy and human rights, the economy and security policy. The EU and the US were only coordinating the various initiatives, of which the Szeged Process, launched in October 1999, facilitated Serbia's democratisation.⁹

On 24 November 2000, the FRY was admitted to the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (IAI), aimed at resolving international crises through mutual cooperation among various peoples in order to identify and jointly define a range of common interests in all sectors, with especial regard to economic and technical assistance and trade cooperation; environmental protection; cooperation in the field of culture, education and tourism; and in combating all forms of crime.¹⁰ Next day, the FRY became a member of the Central European Initiative (CEI), a political, economic, cultural and scientific organisation, whose original mandate was to help transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe to integrate with the EU and achieve a higher level of socio-economic devel-

opment. Since May 2004, the CEI has focused its attention on the Balkans. It should be mentioned that in 1989–1992, Yugoslavia had already taken part in the work of that organization as one of its founding members.¹¹

On 4 February 2003, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro replaced the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In this loose union each republic maintained its own foreign policy, budget and fiscal system, trade and customs arrangements and currency. In April 2003, the SEECP held a meeting of heads of state and government in Belgrade. In April 2004, Serbia and Montenegro joined the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) that has played an important role in promoting stability in a strategically sensitive area at the crossroads of vital energy and communication links and in ensuring the openness of the enlarging EU towards immediate neighbours viewed as strategic partners. Serbia held the presidency of the BSEC in 2006–2007.¹² A treaty establishing the Energy Community of South-Eastern Europe was initialled in Brussels on 22 March 2005 by the Western Balkan countries, including Serbia and Kosovo (UNMIK), as well as by Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and the EU. Serbia is also included in the regional project for the development of transport infrastructure under the aegis of the EU and the World Bank, whose secretariat has had its seat in Belgrade since March 2005.¹³

On 1 January 2006, Belgrade acceded to the Central European Free Trade Association (CEFTA). On 5 June of that year Serbia succeeded to Serbia and Montenegro's membership in international organisations, and on 12 June the EU recognised Serbia as the continuing state of the dissolved State Union. A new CEFTA agreement covering the extra-EU Balkan countries and superseding the earlier system of bilateral trade agreements in the region was initialled in Brussels on 9 November and signed at the South-East European Prime Ministers' Summit in Bucharest on 19 December 2006. It was ratified

by Serbia on 24 September 2007. The agreement aims at establishing a free trade zone in the region by 31 December 2010.¹⁴

At the Zagreb summit of the SEECP in May 2007, the transition from the Stability Pact to a regionally owned cooperation framework began. It was largely completed on 27 February 2008 when a Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was officially launched with Serbian participation as the successor of the Stability Pact. The new framework operates under the guidance of the SEECP. Therein, the RCC, whose secretariat in Sarajevo provides simultaneous services for the SEECP, promotes the mutual cooperation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkan countries in order to reinvigorate economic and social development in the region to the benefit of its people.¹⁵

3. Conclusion

The war for Yugoslav succession (1991–1995) put an end to the previous forms of cooperation in the Balkans. As the conflict escalated, international efforts focused on its resolution, while new organisational structures emerged only in the post-Dayton era. In this context, the EU's conditionality was part of a wider, principally the US-led policy that reflected in the sanctions against the Milošević's regime and the 1999 military intervention by NATO. Therefore, Serbia's full-fledged participation in regional organisations resumed only following the regime change of October 2000. Beside the positive role played by the Stability Pact, the results achieved by the SECI in questions of easing border crossing and fighting trans-border crime should be particularly pointed out. Today European and Euro-Atlantic orientation constitutes the principal direction of Serbia's foreign policy and in this connection the developing regional cooperation in the Balkans, especially in their western part, is an important prerequisite for Serbia's future accession to the EU, which might occur between 2014 and 2017.

NOTES

1 "These influences were Byzantine, Ottoman, West European and Russian, and all of them conditioned the political culture of Serbia." Vujačić (2003), p. 378.

2 Đorđević and Lopandić (2001), p. 28; Simon, *ifj.* (1997), pp. 14–16; Simon, Jr. (2001), p. 219.

3 Simon, *ifj.* (1997), p. 17; Lopandić, D. (2007), pp. 54–55.

4 Đorđević and Lopandić (2001), pp. 35–39.

5 Elbasani (2008), pp. 5–6; Đorđević and Lopandić (2001) p. 28; Lopandić (2007), pp. 67–68; Simon Jr. (2001), pp. 218–219.

6 Héber (2007), pp. 28–29; Lopandić (2007), pp. 68–69; Simon, *ifj.* (1997), pp. 23–24; Simon Jr. (2001), p. 201.

7 Kosovo declared independence on 17 June 2008. Gy.S.

8 See: Lopandić (2006).

9 Héber (2007), p. 29; Simon Jr., (2001), p. 201 and (2003), p. 123.

10 See: Kekić (2003).

11 Lopandić (2007), p. 67; Simon Jr. (2001), p. 201.

12 Ban, I. (2006), pp. 5, 9, 11; Lopandić (2007), p. 68.

13 Lopandić (2007), p. 82.

14 Novák T. (2007), pp. 122–123.

15 Lopandić (2007), p. 69.

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