

THROUGH REGIONAL COOPERATION TO REGIONAL SECURITY – A VIEW FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract

Contrary to the expectations that the new millennium will initiate more peaceful relations in the world, unfortunately, even at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, we are witnessing the existence of serious threats and risks (both military and non-military) for peace and security. The region of the Western Balkans is not immune to such challenges either, which is particularly vulnerable to threats and risks due to the structural factors for peace and security. Considering the nature of such threats, the countries of the Western Balkans are simply faced with the need to find common solutions, the implementation of which will enable an efficient and sustainable response to the current regional security challenges. In this regard, the paper analyses the meaning and the impact of regional cooperation as an instrument for strengthening regional security in the Western Balkans. Within the framework of the paper, regional cooperation is moreover accepted as a multidisciplinary process whose success is determined by continuous dialogue and communication, active participation and collective decision-making by all involved entities. Understood and accepted only through this aspect, it can represent an effective instrument for the promotion and strengthening of regional security. Hence, the paper specifically analyses the benefits, as well as the challenges of the current regional cooperation as an instrument for promoting regional security in the Western Balkan.

Keywords: regional cooperation, regional security, Western Balkans, Berlin Process, Open Balkan

1. INTRODUCTION

The processes and challenges faced by the world in the past three decades, undoubtedly have initiated and developed the perception and understanding that the state security is determined both, by the social relations and dynamics within its internal framework, as well as, by its relations and dynamics with other subjects in the regional and international system. Hence, depending on the approach, security can be analysed in both, global and regional contexts. Specifically, in relation to this approach, it should be pointed out that as a result of the newly created environment during the mentioned period, a process of modifying and complicating the structure of the international system appears, as the number of regions is constantly increasing. In parallel with that, the essence and content of the terms region and regionalism, are also changing. Namely, the perception that

the states, although dominant, do not represent the only actors in regional cooperation and dynamics, but that the citizens themselves, non-governmental organizations, cultural actors, actors in the business sector etc., have also a significant role in this context.

Such indicated characteristics are equally applicable to the region of the Western Balkans from today's perspective. In fact, it is about the so-called political term of the European Union created in the 90's of the 20th century, to denote the region that includes: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Albania. In the beginning, Croatia was also a part of this "political constructed" region, until its full membership in the EU.

Actually, the term Western Balkans was given to the indicated region in 1999, during the EU summit held in Helsinki, with adoption of the so-called "composite document" of the European Commission, within the Western Balkans is defined as a region that is a neighbour of the European Union.

Basically, it is a region that by the end of the 20th century was faced with serious threats to peace and security, which is exactly why in the past period, serious attention in this region was devoted to the re-establishment of peace, security and stability. Even today, this region faces certain internal regional security risks and threats, as from a traditional aspect, i.e. the existing open issues between Serbia and Kosovo, then, the issue about the status of the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, further the different perception between the Macedonian and Albanian communities in the Republic of N. Macedonia regarding the issue of constitutional amendments and the inclusion of Bulgarians in the state's Constitution as a prerequisite for the continuation of its Euro-integration process, as well as from a non-traditional aspect, i.e. risks and threats related to corruption, organized crime, rule of law, living standards, environmental protection etc. From this aspect, it can be pointed out that a significant place in the agenda for dealing with the indicated risks and threats and consequently for the advancement of regional security dynamics is occupied by regional cooperation, as an instrument that should create new, positive energy within the region. In this regard, the paper more specifically analyses the previous experience, challenges and perspectives on this field.

2. REGION'S SECURITY SIGNIFICANCE – A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Contrary to the period of bipolarism, the region has become extremely influential in terms of security issues, in the past three decades. Confirmation about this is, among other things, the introduction and actualization of the concepts of: regionhood and regionality. According to Van Langenhove, with the term regional neighbourhood, an attempt is made to distinguish one region from another, while with the term regionality, the tendency is to include the historical, geographical, economic, cultural and social conditions that create these differences (Langenhove, 2003). In fact, the region is defined according to its unity, identity and to the scope of the borders.

In addition to the indicated characteristics, the analysis of the region security aspects, should be based on several basic elements, such as:

- Actors – regions are a formation made up of several actors;
- Relations between the actors – a basic characteristic is their interdependence;
- Space – the geographical scope and coherence of the formation;
- Time – the duration/sustainability of these forms (Langenhove, 2003).

The region's security significance is also being recognized by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, within., Barry Buzan, promotes the concept of a security complex, as a group of states whose primary (greatest) security perceptions and concerns

are sufficiently interconnected (interdependent), so that their national security (and security concerns) cannot realistically (reasonably) be analysed without each other (Buzan & Weaver, 2003).

In this regard, the concept of a security complex is set within the framework of regional security studies, and its explanation is based on the fact that it usually, but not necessarily, consists of neighbouring states, i.e. states that make up a certain geographic entity. However, it should be pointed out that the so-called “physical neighborhood” by itself, does not define the security complex. Actually, the security dynamics the Western Balkans region, especially in the period of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, represent an explicit confirmation of such thesis.

Hence, the essential aspects of the security complex are based on the common vulnerability and common concerns of states, regarding security risks and threats. Therefore, regional security would be the result of the successful creating and building of regional relations and dynamics, based on the joint determination for it, as well as, on the common perception and understanding about the need of undertaking common actions for prevention and dealing with both, existing and potential threats and risks.

When defining the region and its relations towards security issues, it is significant to point out that although a large number of regional agreements and agencies in their establishment refer to the provisions of the UN, however the UN Charter does not contain a concrete definition of the region. On the other hand, it defines a regional agreement as an organization that groups several states on a permanent basis in a certain geographical area, that due to their proximity, common interests or cultural, linguistic, historical or spiritual affinities, become jointly responsible for the peaceful settlement of any dispute that may arise, as well as, for the protection of their interests and for the development of their economic and cultural relations (Charter of the UN, 1945). In fact, regional agreement from such point of view, represents a union of states or an international organization based on a collective agreement or constitution and in accordance with the goals and principles of the UN, whose primary task is to maintain peace and security under the control and within the UN framework (Simma & Hermann, 1995).

It follows that the number of members of such a regional agreement or agency, must be smaller than the number of the UN members and it must be created according to the territorial principle in order to be able to effectively apply the procedures for resolving disputes.

In terms of the challenges facing regional organizations and agreements, the possibility of ambiguity regarding their focus and the application of their mandate, should be highlighted. Namely, while some of them have a clearly defined mandate, for other ones, this is not the case, which initiates a dilemma about legitimacy and the manner of their functioning. Moreover, differences are possible in terms of their focus, i.e. will they have a purely internal focus, or will they have an external focus and be oriented at the sub-regional, regional and/or global level. In this context, serious challenges can also arise in situations where the focus of the regional agreement or organization, exceeds the framework of its membership.

3. REGIONAL COOPERATIVE DYNAMICS IN WESTERN BALKANS – ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

From today’s perspective, a cooperation between countries in a certain region, is a perceived as a universal process, which does not imply only the formation of security alliances or trade arrangements, but also includes numerous connections and relations in

the sphere of: economic and social life, political structure, public order and peace, protection of natural resources, culture etc. So, it is complex and multidimensional process of connections, which does not imply only relations between the states administrations, but additionally as well, relations between numerous other social actors, such as representatives of the: business, politics, civil society, local communities etc (Minić, 2002).

From this paper analysis point of view, the purpose of such connection is primarily aimed at ensuring peace, stability, development and prosperity in the countries of the specific region. Therefore, it is necessary that the significance of regional cooperation and interaction should be truly recognized by all involved entities and hence, an approach for its continuous improvement and strengthening should be also applied. In this regard, regional cooperation would have additional value if it were an indigenous product of the determination for cooperation of the states themselves in a specific region. Contrary to such aspects, there are still regions within the regional cooperation initiation and development, is almost impossible without external influence. A specific example in this regard is currently the region of the Western Balkans.

Actually, the main feature of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, starting from the 90's of the last century until today, is its international and multilateral character. Namely, for the most part, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is primarily initiated by the international community, above all by the EU, with the main goal in contribution for overcoming the consequences of the conflicts in the 90's of the 20th century, and therefore to use as an effective mechanism for reconciliation and for the prevention of further adverse events in the region. In this context, a series of initiatives have been taken by the international community in the past period, aimed in establishing and strengthening the regional cooperation in various spheres, as a precondition above all, for security stabilization of the states, and then, as a condition for their Euro-Atlantic integration. In general, it is about the following initiatives:

- *within the political sphere*: The Central European initiative, The Royaumont process, The SEE Stability Pact, The Stabilization and Association Process, Council for Regional Cooperation;
- *within the economic sphere*: The Initiative for Cooperation in SEE, The Agreement on free trade zone;
- *within the military-security sphere*: The Process of the Defence Ministers of SEE, The NATO Initiative for SEE, the Adriatic Charter, The Civil-Military Council emergency planning in SEE and The SEE Clearinghouse.

In terms of scope, it should be noted that in addition to the countries of the Western Balkans, as well countries from the wider region of South-Eastern Europe, have also participate in the mentioned initiatives.

However, a common feature of all mentioned initiatives is the effort for contribution towards an all-round stabilization and progress of the Western Balkans, while precisely regional cooperation is taken as a central determination factor about the success and efficiency of such stabilization. In this regard, it should be highlighted that apart from the cooperation within the initiatives, an intensive cooperation has been established between the initiatives themselves, as well as their cooperation with international actors.

That practically means that the regional cooperation influence and success on the Western Balkans stabilization is determined by a wide range of cooperation spheres, as well as, by the numerous of actors involved within the cooperation itself. The first determining factor indicates that an effective conflict prevention and security stabilization

of Western Balkans isn't possible, if cooperation takes place only in one sphere of social life, while the second one, sets the necessity of participation of all Western Balkans countries and the relevant international entities in regional cooperation, regarding this issue.

In addition to the goals related to the security stabilization of the region, the second reason for actualizing and promoting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, stems from the fact that it represents one of the preconditions for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the states. In this regard, the states in the region must demonstrate capacities for long-term cooperation and trust building, both, among themselves, and with the wider international community as well. In this regard, the credibility of the states in the region, is directly determined by their capacities to overcome mutual differences (especially negative differences from the past) through active and effective participation in regional cooperation. Moreover, if the countries of the region manifest a firm and sincere determination for common action in regard of creating and promoting mutual trust and communication, there is no doubt that they will be closer to the valorisation, both, of their own and of the joint Western Balkans road towards Euro-Atlantic integrations.

4. RECENT STANDINGS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Despite to the previously indicated Western Balkans regional cooperation initiatives, the following initiatives have received a more specific attention in the past few years: The Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative. Actually, it can be pointed out that these initiatives did not reduce the importance of the previous ones, but they produced additional energy for the advancement of cooperation in the region.

From the aspect of the very initiation of the Berlin process, it is about the so-called external (German initiative), set up in 2014 as a platform for high-level cooperation between high official representatives of the Western Balkan Six (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, N. Macedonia and Serbia – WB6) and their peers in Berlin Process host countries. It should be also noted that this Process has been initiated in a period within the information was placed by the EU that there will be no its further expansion in the next 5 years.

However, the Process also involves the EU institutions, international financial institutions and the region's civil society, youth and businesses. Actually, it is a platform that foresees cooperation between a large number of actors, both at the regional level, as well as. their cooperation with international entities, bearing in mind the region determination for EU integration.

In terms of the reasons about such initiative launching, as opposed to numerous other similar initiatives, the recognized need to use the expected potential for increased regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is mainly highlighted. More specifically, an idea in this regard is fostering specific projects in order to increase connectivity in the region, as well as good neighbourly relations and interpersonal relationships, while subsequently supporting the EU integration.

As the main goals established in the founding declaration, the following are listed: resolution of outstanding bilateral and internal issues; achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region; enhancing regional economic cooperation; and laying the foundations for sustainable growth (The Berlin Process, 2014). Such goals confirm that this initiative's vision is aimed at improving the security dynamics and environment in the region, while the focus is placed specifically on the functional aspects related to the approach in solving open issues, as well as, on economic issues and sustainable growth, as

a significant integral part of contemporary expanded security agenda. Moreover, the solutions to the challenges related to nationalism in the region, according to this process lie in its economic strengthening and growth.

In this regard, the Berlin Process annual summits and the numerous meetings held related to them intensified the interaction between the EU and the WB high-level politicians and succeeded in making important challenges of the Western Balkan states regarding regional cooperation a subject of discussion, as well as subsequently keeping the WB6 on the agenda of the EU-states and institutions. In addition, the Berlin Process has also galvanized regional cooperation in resolving the problems of common relevance. Amongst the thematic areas are the infrastructure gap, youth unemployment, low competitiveness of economies and distant prospects of economic convergence with the EU, slow progress in reconciliation, bilateral issues, education and research, Roma integration, and environmental issues (The Berlin Process, 2014).

In terms of further improving of regional cooperation, this process succeeded in improving the cooperation of the WB6-governments and initiate new forms of interlinking, and first and foremost offered a consistent format for all 6 Western Balkan countries. Examples are the Common Regional Market, RYCO, and other institutions in the making. In the scope of the from the Berlin Process initiated initiatives led to an increase of the WB6-governments to take over more responsibility for the Process in the region.

Despite such mentioned Berlin Process, a new and indigenous initiative for the advancement of regional integration and cooperation, known as Open Balkan, was promoted during 2019. Actually, on November 11, 2019, at the summit in Ohrid, the President of Serbia and the Prime Ministers of Albania and Macedonia agreed to create an economic zone, which would further improve political and economic relations and strengthen cultural ties between the nations. It is distinctive that this initiative was launched during the veto period at the beginning of the EU membership negotiations of Albania and N. Macedonia.

The Open Balkans Initiative, stems from the need for greater regional integration. Initially, this initiative was referred to as the Advanced Regional Cooperation Initiative or “Mini Schengen”. Open Balkan is currently an initiative in which North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia are members, and is aimed on promoting and develop region’s capacity, as well as, in achieving concrete benefits to citizens and the business community. Three potential member countries are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo. However, for now Kosovo refuses to join the initiative, because according to its authorities Serbia does not treat it as an equal foreign and independent state.

As mentioned, the main goal of Open Balkan is to overcome the social, economic and trade barriers that hinder economic growth in the region by implementing the four freedoms on which European integration is based, freedom of movement of goods, workers, capital and services.

In this regard, within the Open Balkan, agreements have been signed establishing joint border crossing points and allowing shorter cargo delays at the border. Additionally, progress has been made in improving the business climate throughout the region by signing agreements on mutual recognition of Authorized Economic Operator (MRA). Green corridors have been established, ensuring that products and services reach the markets in the region faster. In sum, to date the following agreements have been signed within the framework of this initiative: Agreement on cooperation in the Western Balkans in the field of mutual recognition of diplomas and scientific grades issued by higher education institutions and other authorized institutions; Agreement on conditions for free

access to the labour market in the Western Balkans; Agreement on cooperation in the field of veterinary, food and feed safety and phytosanitary in the Western Balkans; Agreement on food security mechanisms in the Western Balkan; Agreement on cooperation in protection against disasters in the Western Balkans; as well as, Operational Plan in the field of Civil Protection between the Republic of Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia. In addition, there have been signed several memorandums as well, primarily in the area of facilitating the cross-border transit of citizens, goods and services. From this aspect, there is no doubt that in the past three years, additional positive, above all political energy has been manifested in the region, as a result of which the indicated agreements and memoranda have been signed, which has opened the possibility for new, cooperative dynamics in the economic, social and environment field.

Despite, the indicated positive vision and goals of the Open Balkans, the following can be highlighted as the most serious challenges for such initiative: 1) the inclusion of the remaining three countries from the Western Balkans; 2) the views of the political opposition in each of the states regarding the acceptability and sustainability of such initiative; and 3) the full implementation of the four freedoms, i.e. goods, people, capital and services. An additional challenge of such initiative, especially from the aspect of delivering the set goals, is the need for its eventual institutional regional framing. Namely, there is still no specific regional administrative service that would manage the issues and challenges related to the realization of the goals and tasks set in the signed contracts and memoranda on a daily level, hence the challenges with the concrete needs of the citizens and the business sector as well. Moreover, currently the regulation of these issues is part of the broader activity of several ministries of the three countries, with insufficiently clear guidelines as to whom citizens or entities from the business sector can turn to for issues from the Open Balkans agenda.

However, the indicated characteristics of Open Balkan, confirm that in essence it is fully in line with the Berlin process, i.e. both initiatives promote regional cooperation and are aimed at realizing the four international freedoms recognized and promoted by the EU, as well as towards a single European market and EU membership. However, as the theory of regional cooperation confirms, the advantage of indigenous initiatives stems from the possibility of more concrete identification of common goals, interests and needs, as well as their priority, by the involved parties themselves. For instance, the signed Agreement on cooperation in protection against disasters within the framework of the Open Balkans, enabled timely assistance to N. Macedonia from its neighbours (Albania and Serbia) in dealing with fires in 2021.

5. CONCLUSION

The theory, as well as the practice, confirm that if the states do not benefit from participating in concrete cooperative (regional) engagements, they are not at all interested in joining them. In that context, the main problem in certain situations arises from the challenge and capacities for identifying the benefits, i.e. of common needs, goals and interests. Another significant aspect in this direction is related to the expected degree of mutual trust or mistrust between the states before their participation in a specific regional engagement, hence the fear of the possible dominant role of one of them.

As the analysis in the paper presents, these aspects provide the answer about the reason for the dominant external influence in the initiation and promotion of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. In fact, the experience of the past three decades shows a lack of real

capacities among the states in the region for indigenous recognition and their unification around common functional issues and challenges. Consequently, the possibility of indigenous initiation and development of greater mutual trust and respect is also reduced. Actually, it is not that states do not have capacities for cooperation, on the contrary, the main problem is that the use of those capacities is generally present only in situations where it is an initiative or a forum under the patronage of external actors. The reasons for such situation can only be analysed from the perspective of insufficient mutual trust between the states.

On the other hand, the advantage of indigenous regional cooperation is based on the thesis that states can best identify common functional needs and interests by themselves, and at the same time, the perception of imposed and forced cooperation in certain situations is avoided. In this regard, the Council for Regional Cooperation and Open Balkans, can be singled out as positive examples.

On the other hand, in situations where indigenous regional cooperation is absent or deficient, certainly that the cooperation initiated “from outside”, represents the best acceptable solution. From the perspective of the research focus in the work, it is characteristic of the Western Balkans that such cooperation in the past period enabled the creation of a new political energy, which, in contrast to the previous disintegration, is increasingly aimed at the integration of the region. Namely, in contrast to certain open issues that burden the relations between the states in the region, today we can talk about a new positive impulse and environment, which largely eliminate the possibility of using force and the occurrence of armed conflicts.

Certainly, further continuation of such trend is necessary, among other things, due to the objective dependence and orientation of the neighbours towards each other, especially from the aspect of the limitation of the national markets, the need for infrastructure development and the necessity for regional regulation of the largest possible number of social and economic issues. In addition, contemporary security risks and threats, necessarily point to the need for a common approach and response, as well as the “pressure” from the EU to establish better and more efficient regional cooperation is no less significant.

6. REFERENCES

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