

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN 2008

By: Dr. Jelica Minic

A Look from the Bright Side

For over a decade, regional cooperation has been contributing to establishing trust, stability and safety and strengthening good neighbourly relations on the Balkans.

The overall balance of regional cooperation in Southeast Europe in the last ten years is positive. This is a statement with no additional restrictions. Who could have imagined in 1998 that a decade later military and police sectors from recently warring countries from the region would have a high level of cooperation; that ministries of economy and finances would harmonize their trade, financial and investment regulations and policies; that ministries of science would develop joint research strategy; that parliaments would cooperate; and towns in bordering areas apply their harmonized projects for European and other donors' funds? The regional picture has changed indeed. This is, however, a look from a brighter side without any dressing up. The light simply refracts this way from this angle.

If one takes a look from the cloudy side, all challenges and obstacles emerge: statutory and constitutional issues in several countries; weak institutions; incomplete structural harmonization in economy sector; poverty and unemployment; growing social and regional differences; lack of a stable international position; bad image of the region and high doing business risk tied to it. However, the statement of positive balance of regional cooperation cannot be disputed that easily.

For over a decade, regional cooperation has been contributing to establishment of trust, stability and security and strengthening of good neighbourly relations in Southeast Europe – a model that greatly follows the experiences of Nordic, Baltic and Central European countries. Though many regional initiatives were created involving large or small number of countries from the region depending on the main gravitation area (Central European Initiative, Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Southeast Europe Cooperative Initiative, Adriatic – Ionian Initiative, Danube Cooperation Process), a special role was played by the Southeast European Cooperation Process and Southeast Europe Stability Pact which were mostly focused on former Yugoslav republics and their immediate neighbours in the southeast. The former initiative enabled and incited development of political dialogue while Stability Pact, largely supported by the European Union, developed cooperation in many areas of importance to the citizens, specific social groups, economy, administration or local communities in the region.

Stocktaking

What does single out the year 2008 and why opening a topic of stocktaking? From the view of the regional cooperation, this year is of special importance as Stability Pact was officially transformed into the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in February. The change of the name is linked with series of other essential changes. From international forum, which mostly treated the region as a working object, especially throughout the first years after the establishment, Stability Pact gradually built a partnership relation with the regional players to this year when the region both, in political and operational sense, gained the role of a body within the Regional Cooperation Council. The region itself defines the scope, objectives, methods and instruments of cooperation through a team, exclusively consisted of representatives from the region and with equal financial contribution of Southeast European countries together with the European Commission and other donors. Though the main framework and scope of cooperation, as well as the accompanying regional structures (centres, initiatives, working groups and similar), that facilitated this cooperation, were inherit from Stability Pact, the forthcoming re-examination phase will provide opportunities to clearly see which of them were of temporary character and which have a lasting perspective and importance.

Regional Cooperation Council brings together 45 members – countries, institutions and organizations. Members that financially contribute to the budget of Council's Secretariat constitute the Council's Board. Presently, there are 29 of them.

The Council's role is to streamline regional cooperation, provide support to the reform process in the region, support European and Euro-Atlantic integrations and incite further involvement of the European Union and other donors in the region.

Such functioning should enable achieving the following objectives:

- Further improvement of stability, security, mutual respect and open dialogue in the region;
- Change of Southeast Europe image and raising awareness on the need for regional cooperation and thus far achieved results of regional cooperation;
- Successful mediation in relations between Southeast European Cooperation Process (gathering all Balkans countries) and EU in initiating and prioritizing projects especially regarding the multi-beneficiary EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance;
- Coordination of international political, technical and financial support to the region;
- Provision of a forum for dialogue between interested countries, international organizations and other partners.

In addition to Sarajevo Secretariat with 25 employees, there is a Liaison Office operating in Brussels with seven employees. All employees are exclusively from the countries of the region

and mostly experts in different priority areas of Council's activities. Regional Cooperation Council is headed by Secretary General, Croatian diplomat, Hido Biscevic.

Work methods are tailored to agenda-specific needs. The key words are cooperation, coordination and networking both among the members from the region and in relations with the international partners, donors and individual regional initiatives and institutions.

Regional Cooperation Council focused its activities on six priority areas: economic and social development; energy and infrastructure; justice and home affairs; security; building human capital; and parliamentary cooperation as an overarching theme.

Priority Areas

Numerous initiatives are already in place in the area of economic and social development out of which the most noted are CEFTA 2006, covering trade sector, with Secretariat in Brussels; Investment Treaty dealing with review, comparison and improvement of regulations in the area of investments; monitoring results in the area of regulations and policy with respect to small and medium-size enterprises; private sector dialogue within the Business Advisory Council; and initiatives in the area of labour and employment policies, social dialogue and public health. The initiative which is important for other areas too is e-Southeast Europe (e-SEE) within which e-Governance Centre is established in Ljubljana.

The most known initiative in the area of energy and infrastructure development is Energy Community of Southeast Europe with its Secretariat in Vienna. Negotiations were initiated in June on establishment of Transport Community of Southeast Europe while the institution already operating in this area is regional Transport Observatory in Belgrade. Regional Environmental Protection Centre has been successfully operating in Szentendre for years now. There are many institutions in the mentioned areas, in which countries from the region participate or are their beneficiaries, which we attempt to establish appropriate cooperation with (International Financial Institutions Advisory Group, Relief Program for Infrastructure Projects, Danube Commission, International Commission for Protection of Danube River, International Sava River Basin Commission, Single European Sky, Regional Program for Environmental Regeneration, Working Group for Danube and Black Sea, Black Sea Regional Energy Centre, Institute for Energy for Southeast Europe, Network of Associations of Local Authorities in Southeast Europe, Regional Centre for Efficient Use of Energy and Water Resources, etc.). Successful networking and coordination of operations with all these and other relevant programs, institutions and working groups also implies good cooperation with the European Commission directorates for energy, transport and environmental protection, UN Economic Commission for Europe, etc.

In the area of justice and home affairs, Regional Cooperation Council initiated a process of exchange of information and work coordination at the recently held meeting of the following initiatives under its responsibility: Regional Centre for Combating Trans-border Crime (SECI

Centre in Bucharest); Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI in Sarajevo); Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA in Sofia); Migrations, Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI in Skopje); and Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG in Belgrade).

Operating within the area of security are Centre for Security Cooperation (RACVIAC in Zagreb); Southeast Europe Centre for Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC); and Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative (DPPI). In the last couple of months, several initiatives were launched in this area out of which the most important is establishment of disaster insurance system.

The following initiatives have the main role in the area of building human capital: Working Group for Strengthening and Building Human Capital; Southeast Europe Education Reform Initiative (SEE ERI, with Secretariat in Zagreb); and Steering Platform on Research Management for Western Balkans. Though being one of the newer areas of cooperation, there is a significant level of preparedness to coordinate activities in the region, and even develop common strategies as is the case with, for example, research, where resources of countries from the region individually are quite limited.

Finally, as for parliamentary cooperation area, Regional Secretariat in Sofia has been established with which RCC has already developed series of joint activities, from security to energy sector.

Role of Civil Society

Regional Cooperation Council should offer numerous concrete solutions for concrete issues this being one of its main missions. Its success in effectively linking such a complex network, which requires cooperation with almost all relevant international institutions, implies existence of common interests and political will in the region to see this growingly scattered cooperation successful.

One has to bear in mind that the actors of these interests and political will are not only politicians and statesmen. Important role and great responsibility rests with the civil society in the region – educational, cultural and religious institutions, media and non-governmental organizations, entrepreneurs' organizations and labour associations. Their power to influence creation of a new climate in the region as well as development of relations with other European and international partners should not be neglected. European Union strives to strengthen this dimension of relations with the region while Regional Cooperation Council, though basically representing an inter-governmental multilateral framework, sees civil society in Southeast Europe as one of its key partners in development, implementation, promotion and even reassessment of its activities.

**The author is Deputy Secretary General and
Head of Expert Pool of the Regional Cooperation Council**