



JOINT CENTER FOR ALBANIA-SERBIA RELATIONS

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Sokol Lleshi

Background

Since the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, which constituted a landmark event in showing the commitment of the EU towards the European integration of the Western Balkans, high level initiatives such as the Berlin Process have emphasized a new pathway towards EU accession for the countries of the Western Balkans. The context of the so-called enlargement fatigue and the shift from the regalia principle to a more encompassing policy of connectivity and regional cooperation has provided a novel path of development and a different opportunity for the Western Balkan countries. On the other hand, this

particular region has experienced political instability, ethnic conflict and tumultuous transitions to democracy and market economy. In this respect, an improvement in intra-regional cooperation by furthering the 'Connectivity Agenda' of the EU and fulfilling the SEE 2020 strategy increases the chances of congruence between the regional market and democratic institutions of the Western Balkans with the EU market and institutions.

Regional cooperation has constituted an important part of the overall EU policy with regard to EU accession of the Western Balkans.



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Initially, regional cooperation has been framed and understood as primarily related to peace, stability, security and good neighborhood relations between the countries of the region. As a consequence, the mechanisms of regional cooperation rested on intra-state bilateral relations and mutual agreements of good neighborhood. As an official document of the EU policy of 2005, explains having a stable and peaceful region in the Western Balkans would contribute to economic development¹. The Stabilization and Association Process and the Central European Free Trade Agreement for quite some time have provided the framework of intra-state cooperation through the free circulation of industrial goods in the free trade area. Nonetheless, these mechanisms have manifested certain limitation with regard to creating a regional market, or a sustainable economic growth in the region. The new EU policy on the Western Balkans gives priority to a better economically integrated region, which constitutes a challenge as well as an opportunity for countries of the region to establish and sustain a shared regional identity not only culturally but also institutionally similar to other regions in the European Union such as the Visegrad countries or the Nordic countries.

The EU enlargement and neighborhood policy has been coordinated, during the last years, regional mechanisms and institutions of the Western Balkans such as Regional Cooperation Council and SEEIC, which have obtained an increasing role in facilitating the EU integration process of the region. Albania has been praised for its stable and peaceful neighborhood policy, albeit the limited interaction with the Republic of Serbia. However, few economic advantages have been accrued by pursuing this path by Albania. On the other hand, Serbia has recently moved away from the ambiguity of its positions towards European accession. This policy brief scrutinizes the changes in the foreign regional policy of Albania and Serbia and their shared policy aims towards further regional cooperation. Another dimension that the policy brief discusses is the institutional mechanisms available for local experts, public administration representatives, interest groups and civil society organizations that have a stake of enhancing regional cooperation. Concrete policy recommendations that identify possible solutions to sustaining regional cooperation are presented as well as prospective existing regional mechanisms such as Western Balkan Fund or Regional Youth Cooperation Office.

¹ Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans: a Policy Priority for the European Union 2005

Shared foreign policy goals on regional cooperation

In the last few years, decision-makers including the political elite of the Western Balkan countries, and in particular of Albania and Serbia have become aware of the limitations of pursuing local and national policies of economic development and EU integration. Albania has undertaken steps ahead beyond the usual good-neighborhood relations in the region, and the Republic of Serbia has started to overcome the ambiguous stance towards European integration², albeit incrementally so. It seems that the novel enlargement strategy of the EU for the Western Balkan region, namely the Berlin Process of 2014, and the advantages of economies of scale have had their impact on the shared policy goals of Albania and Serbia with regard to regional cooperation.

Contributing to stability of the region and to the normalization

of the relations, including those between Albania and Serbia, is only one dimension of the regional cooperation. The Albanian government has expressed the political will to “open a new page, and possibly even a new chapter in the relations between Serbia and Albania”³. It seems that a plausible strategy and path of normalizing the relations between the two countries necessitates what the Albanian government calls “active regional communication”⁴. Other stakeholders and experts have emphasized the advantages and the effect of the normalization of the relations between Albania and Serbia. The two countries are considered as “polycentric nations whose ethnic kin form substantial part of population in several countries in the region and possess more than one state/polity”⁵. It is for this reason that Serbia and Albania have been considered at the spearhead of the regional

² See: FES “Challenges of Serbia’s Foreign Policy” 2015

³ Rama, Edi. 2014 <http://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/speeches/the-forum-cooperation-between-albania-and-serbia>

⁴ Rama, Edi. 2014 <http://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/speeches/the-forum-cooperation-between-albania-and-serbia>

⁵ Krasniqi, Gëzim. 2015 <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/02/stability-cooperation-and-integration-the-future-of-serb-albanian-relations/>

cooperation⁶ by EU representatives and institutions, to a lower scale when compared to the Franco-German reconciliation. Henceforth, it seems that: "Relations between Serbia and Albania hold a key influence in terms of the overall stability in the Western Balkan region"⁷. Gazmend Turdiu, an Albanian career diplomat and deputy RCC Secretary General emphasized that: "regional cooperation becomes a necessity in the region given the current conditions in order to face common challenges"⁸

The economic dimension, which is of equal if not higher importance than the political dimension is that of achieving a cohesive, interconnected and developed Western Balkan region economically and with a shared regional identity. Strategic policy documents of both governments underline the objective of establishing a unified regional market as well as shared projects in infrastructure, energy and tourism. The official documents of Albanian foreign policy delineate the features

of the regional policy aiming at: "... common regional infrastructure, removal of non-physical barriers for the movement of citizens, goods, and capital, increase of exchange flows, and a better recognition of each other, a common commitment to improve the image of the region and transforming it into a competitive market"⁹. The process of EU accession is already seen as interlinked with regional cooperation: "Regional policy is a central importance of the Albanian foreign policy. Albania... is committed to a stabilized region where peace, socio-economic and cultural cooperation prevail"¹⁰.

A similar shift of the focus in regional foreign policy has transpired also during the recent years in Serbia, due to the continuous perseverance of civil society organizations and a shift in the political elite. The regional foreign policy of the current Serbian government is more cohesive and explicit than the previous governments since the democratic changes of 2000. The objective of regional cooperation is made clear

⁶ Plausible arguments could be put forward arguing for basing the process of reconciliation in the Western Balkans as a reconciliation that would involve Kosovo if the aim is to reach a reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs.

⁷ <http://www.usak.org.tr/en/usak-analysis/comments/albania-and-serbia-the-recent-hurdle-run-towards-normalization>

⁸ Turdiu, Gazmend. October 2016, interview with the author

⁹ http://arkiva.mfa.gov.al/index.php?option=com_multicategories&view=article&id=7197%3Ashqiperia-dhe-bashkepunimi-rajonal&Itemid=65&lang=sq

¹⁰ <http://www.integrimi.gov.al/al/prioritete/kriteri-politik/ceshtjet-rajonale-dhe-detyrimet-nderkombetare>

as: “Serbia attaches particular importance to the development of cooperation with the countries of the region...Sustained progress and deepening regional cooperation, particularly through regional initiatives, contributes to the integration of this part of Europe into the European Union”¹¹. Civil society organizations, such as the Forum for International Relations European Movement Serbia and other experts have criticized the four pillar concept¹² of the Serbian foreign policy and have suggested an increased focus on EU integration and regional cooperation. The civil society

organizations’ advocacy of the EU path for the respective countries, in this case of Serbia, provides the possibility for a wider societal consensus that endorses regional cooperation. “The Western Balkan countries depend on each other and will have to use the potential of regional cooperation in the best way possible in order to speed up their economic and social progress and European integration”¹³. The question remains how regional cooperation can be enhanced between Albania and Serbia and the Western Balkan region in general given the existing mechanisms and institutions.

¹¹ <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/eu/regional-initiatives>

¹² See: FES “Challenges of Serbia’s Foreign Policy” 2015, p 11

¹³ Minić, Jelica. 2015 FES “Challenges of Serbia’s Foreign Policy”, p.27

Regional ownership: mechanisms of intra-regional networks and institutions

The Berlin Process initiative apart from reaffirming the commitment towards EU integration of the region boosted the role of the existing networks and mechanisms of regional cooperation that were established either as a consequence of the strictly regional initiatives or as a consequence of Stabilization and Association process. The recent reports of the RCC Secretariat indicate concrete cooperation between EU institutions, and regional initiatives. Henceforth, the process of EU integration of the Western Balkan region gives more leverage to the existing intra-regional institutions such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and its working groups and paves the way for the establishment of new intra-regional institutions by facilitating the role of actual stakeholders from different sectors of the society to obtain the regional ownership of the transformative processes towards a developed and cohesive Western Balkan region.

The central platform that constitutes the focus of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is the South East Europe Strategy of (SEE 2020) of sustainable economic development and growth. The scope of the cooperation spans

from the establishment of economic corridors in the region, a unified regional market to narrowing the digital divide and preserving cultural heritage. The sectors of the economy that have shown higher yields in terms of cooperation between Albania and Serbia include transport, energy, tourism and trade. The governmental strategies of regional cooperation of both countries envisage cooperation with existing regional network and international institutions in order to enhance common developmental projects. The SEE 2020 long-term strategy follows the model of the EU 2010 strategy. This particular regional strategy, in which Albania and Serbia are parts, enforces the economic dimension of regional cooperation by aiming to improve the life of the citizens and overcome the limitations of local, national economies. The wide scope of the sectors of development that SEE2020 strategy focuses on can become loci of exchange of experiences and pursuing of cohesive policies not only in economic policies but also in education and labor market. The Albanian regional expert, Mr. Turdiu considers that regional cooperation between Albania and Serbia could facilitate cooperation in most of the

sectors and increases mutual trust between countries that have had difficult relations in the past¹⁴.

However, despite the shared network of regional mechanisms the working practice of the Regional Cooperation Council and other additional networks stemming from the SEE2020 strategy remains predominantly tied to national governmental policies. “This implies that national governments and their administrations are at the center of the process and bear primary responsibility for developing and implementing the respective objectives and measures”¹⁵. The rationale of working practice of the SEE2020 is translated in more concrete terms as: “While the targets and instruments contained in the strategy outline a joint regional approach, these targets and instruments have been defined on the basis of national priorities put forward by each SEE country”¹⁶. Henceforth, the existing regional networks and mechanisms provide necessary for continuous processes of socialization and shared practices in devising regional policies. Nonetheless, the current practices of policy formation emerge out of national and local strategies to coalesce as much as it could within intra-regional mechanisms and

networks. Albanian and Serbian experts of the economy and of the region share the same concern that the existing regional initiatives and cooperation in the Western Balkan lack common shared institutions of the region. “The Western Balkans have not yet established similar institutions [to the ones of the EU since its establishment], hence the process is prone to spontaneity”¹⁷. Another expert of the region draws the attention to the fact that: “Also, regional cooperation could be encouraged if there were a joint regional institution that could lobby for, guide and represent the Western Balkans before the Union on behalf of all countries in the region”¹⁸. Incremental changes in this direction could, as this policy brief argues, lead to a larger role of existing regional networks and institutions.

Particular sectors of the economy are considered as useful for embarking on regional cooperation among the countries of the region including Albania and Serbia. The Albanian government’s strategy of regional cooperation envisages: “cooperation with specialized international institutions, and other countries in the region for common projects in economy, energy and transport”¹⁹. Other sectors of interest could be culture and education. The

¹⁴ Turdiu, Gazmend . October 2016 , interview with the author

¹⁵ SEE2020: Jobs and Prosperity in a European Perspective 2013, p.7

¹⁶ SEE2020: Jobs and Prosperity in a European Perspective 2013, p.10

¹⁷ Malaj Arben. 2014 FES “Bashkëpunimi rajonal si forcë shtytëse për Rritje Ekonomike dhe stabilitet”, p. 41

¹⁸ Teokarević, Jovan. 2015 FES “Challenges of Serbia’s Foreign Policy”, p.46

¹⁹ <http://www.integrimi.gov.al/al/prioritete/kriteri-politik/ceshtjet-rajonale-dhe-detyrimet-nderkombetare>

Serbian government considers as priorities of regional cooperation the sectors of trade and tourism²⁰. Regional Cooperation Council and its network together with SEECP and its mechanisms provides a good ground for devising common regional policies that have repercussions beyond individual countries. One of the Albanian diplomats with regional expertise, Mr. Bashkim Rama has considered SEECP “as the most important political forum in the region²¹” that is based on regional initiative and regional ownership.

One of the initial networks and regional mechanisms of cooperation in the Western Balkan is CEFTA, which aims to expand free trade of goods, capital and services in the region and remove physical and non-physical barriers to trade and investments. Despite the fact that certain progress has been made towards achieving the CEFTA goals, this particular agreement, contrary to other existing institutional mechanisms of RCC and SEE2020 has limited effects on establishing common policy aims and regional strategies or functioning as a leverage of regional ownership towards EU institutions. One of the existing mechanisms and part of the RCC network, which can be quite useful in devising common regional

policies is SEEIC- Investment Commission for South East Europe- whose goal is to encourage foreign investments in the region and it has a role in shaping the policy agenda. Quite recently this institutional mechanism has been involved in the working groups of the EU institutions: “to galvanize pertinent political support for the activities of the RCC”²². The inclusion of regional institutional initiatives on the process of EU enlargement and the Berlin Process reaffirms the importance of policies and strategies developed by local and regional stakeholders on the ground with regard to European Union institutions and their strategies. Other sectors and fields of cooperation include human capital development, mobility of professions, and narrowing of the digital divide. The existing networks provide the useful venues for the socialization of national representatives and other local stakeholders in conceiving what is usually called in strategic documents of SEE2020 as new development pathways. In the next section, the policy brief discusses the concrete novel steps of common institutions of the Western Balkan region that emerged as a consequence of the initiatives of the Berlin Process.

²⁰ http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/vest.php?id=117094&change_lang=en

²¹ Rama, Bashkim , SEECP Press Release February 2015

²² Report on the Activities of the Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat 2016, p. 4

Cultural dialogue, youth and Western Balkans Fund

One of the main goals of the Berlin Process and the recent EU enlargement strategy with regard to the Western Balkans is that of the normalization of relations between countries of the region and reconciliation. Initially, such processes, if at all, have been part of the bilateral relations between countries. The Vienna Summit of 2015 reinvigorated this dimension of connectivity agenda in the Western Balkans by promoting the establishment of shared common institution in the Western Balkan known as Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). Western Balkans has experienced long decades of ethnic conflict, wars, displacements of populations, non-democratic governments and the perpetuation by the media of cultural prejudices. The Albanian and the Serbian government policies and public statements have expressed the willingness to get involved in dialogue and to normalize the relations between the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia. Other processes of normalizations and dialogue have been going between other countries of the Western Balkans.

The establishment of RYCO was

construed as a step forward in attaining a better understanding, recognition between young generations in the Western Balkans on the premise of overcoming past animosities through cultural dialogue. All the country members of the Western Balkans have committed themselves to this regional structure which is based in Tirana. Initially conceived as a regional center of youth cooperation according to the French-German model of youth cooperation, RYCO could be transformed through time into a shared venue of cultural dialogue involving not only young representatives but also other stakeholders in the process and not only Albanian and Serbian representatives. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that RYCO constitutes one of the initial networks emerging from the Berlin Process that aims to have a regional scope.

A second mechanism or platform of regional cooperation that have originated from the Berlin Process initiative is the Western Balkans Fund, whose headquarters are in Tirana. The Western Balkans Fund has emulated the Visegrad Fund and is considered to be a regional

organization²³ and a platform of cooperation among all Western Balkan countries. The main aims of this regional organization include the support of education, youth cooperation, culture and human rights²⁴. On the other hand, the scope of the stakeholders involved

is more inclusive comprised of civil society organizations, governmental institutions and individual citizens. It could be argued that these two mechanisms such as RYCO and WBF could encourage and sustain cultural dialogue that could be directed by Albania and Serbia.

²³ <http://www.punetejashtme.gov.al/en/press-office/news/agreement-on-the-establishment-in-tirana-of-western-balkans-fund>

²⁴ Ibid

Conclusions

The Berlin Process and the shift in the EU enlargement policy have propelled a new political dynamic in the Western Balkan region. The context of economic crisis in Europe, the swift accession of Romania and Bulgaria in the EU, which necessitated a post-accession monitoring policy and the establishment of the Connectivity Agenda of the EU demanded a different type of cooperation and strategy within the Western Balkan region. The individual and let's say insular type of foreign policy with regard to EU accession and the fostering of bilateral relation is not sufficient enough to trigger a process of regional sustainable development and economic growth in the Western Balkan that approximates the EU standards.

Both Albania and Serbia have reconfirmed their commitment towards EU integration and have become aware of the necessity and utility of sustaining regional cooperation and thinking in terms of regional policies that go beyond local or national boundaries. The SEE2020 strategy and the RCC network have evolved in such a way as to be considered a crucial part of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkan by voicing regional concerns in EU summits. On the other hand, the start of the process of regional cooperation has made individual countries aware of the shared problems as well as best practices that they can learn from in fostering a common strategy of a regional development and regional identity.

Policy Recommendations

- Transform regional networks such as RCC from loci of convergence of national policies into loci of articulation and formation of shared regional policies
- Increase the scope of other stakeholders in the process of regional cooperation such as local think tanks, civil society advocacy groups and local experts apart from national administrations representatives from Albania and Serbia
- Aim towards the establishment of common regional institutions that represent the Western Balkan region in relation to the EU
- Utilize the recent regional organizations stemming from the Berlin Process such as RYCO and WBF to enhance cultural dialogue between Albania and Serbia as well as other countries of the region
- Galvanize through regional institutions a new development path for the region to overcome the limitation of local economies