

## **Regional Cooperation In Western Balkans : A View From Inside The European Union. The Premises And Obstacles**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Joining the European Union has been the common goal of the Western Balkan countries for almost two decades. Since they have small economies and low level of economic development, it is necessary for them to act together through various forms of regional networking and cooperation. The historical legacy, of both far and recent past, often represents an enormous obstacle to the development of mutual cooperation within this group of countries. It also constrains the use of the existing opportunities for their faster economic growth.

The article focuses on the current impasse of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, due to political and economic uncertainty. Special attention has been devoted on problems affecting the role of the European Union as an “external actor” supporting regional cooperation. On the other hand EU membership aspiration can bear significant transformations in the Balkan domestic scenes. It represents, for all the countries in the region, a good motive to correct the existing shortcomings; and creates new prospects for the future regional role of the EU and what's more allows for new considerations concerning the region's place in the European geopolitical sphere.

**Keywords:** *Western Balkan, Southeast Europe, European Union, Regional Cooperation Council*

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Multilateral cooperation between countries of the Southeast Europe, developing since the cessation of the Yugoslav conflicts in late 90s, meets active support from the European Union (EU) where it is viewed as an important aid to the peaceful stabilization of the entire region. It is also regarded as an integral part of the Western Balkan countries' programmes to become members of the Community. Linking with the notion of regional stability of the EU-access preparations of the aforementioned countries has been exposed shortly after the end of armed conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was then that the current term “Western Balkans” appeared in the EU administrative vocabulary. It has come to denote the mostly post-Yugoslav countries with an intention to be integrated into the EU structures and sharing a common set of socio-political and economic challenges. Most of these impediments are strictly related to the ongoing (since the mid 90s.) transformation of the political system, deficient democratization, economic hindrance and yet to be resolved issues, concerning the past armed conflicts<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the terminology approved by the European Union, the following countries are considered Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – FYROM), Serbia and Kosovo. Beside the Western Balkan countries, the Southeast Europe (sometimes called the Balkans) consists also of Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey; see: Milica Delević, ‘Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans’, *Institute for Security Studies. Chaillot paper*, No 104, 2007, pp. 13–15.

Since the late 90s, the EU has been working to persuade the membership-aspiring countries to join their efforts in the creation of equal rank, peaceful solutions in the areas of politics and economy, aimed at regional consolidation, as a vital part of their respective pre-access activities. The foundation of this policy lies in the concern to lift the security level in Europe as a whole, and in particular to avoid the migration of the issues concerning the complicated relationships between the post-Yugoslav countries into the EU<sup>2</sup>.

Without doubt the general atmosphere of the post-Yugoslav political relationships in the second half of the 90s was hardly an encouragement to the creation of lasting forms of cooperation among the states concerned that would override the dominant feelings of anxiety. The lack of political stability in the region had it is devastating influence on the security of the newly-formed countries. Unresolved territorial claims contributed to the political bodies in the whole region devoting themselves to activities of the particular nature, aimed mostly at establishing some forms of counterweight to the claims of the opposed, neighboring countries. Even though this state of affairs in the Western Balkans gradually gave a way to bilateral negotiations over the second half of the decade, one cannot omit the fact that these changes have been mostly forced by the superpowers<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand the adoption of Euro-Atlantic oriented attitudes in the foreign affairs by the political elites of the Balkan region has proved to be a valuable vantage point for the creation of multilateral operations. It thanks to these, that the particular countries can adopt greater responsibility for the regional stabilization and further link this issue to the question of European security.

In the relations between the EU and the Balkan countries regarding the notion of international security is strictly related to the idea of multilateral cooperation which, according its creators, is aimed at the balanced socio-political and economic development of the region's countries. The initiative in question met with support in the form of *the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe* (SPSEE), coined by the European Union in June 1999, which obliged the so-called post-Yugoslav states as well as Albania, the membership-aspiring countries, to forge and develop regional cooperation programmes, to further improve the internal Balkan relations<sup>4</sup>. Initially the introduction of *the Stability Pact* was based on the four already existing economic and political initiatives concerning the South Eastern Europe<sup>5</sup>. Among them *the South East Europe Cooperation Process* (SEEC) which contains a wide range of cooperation areas as security, political dialogue EU, broadening the circulation of goods, the advancement of democracy, law-abiding attitudes, building human resources and fighting the organized crime<sup>6</sup>. *The Central European Free Trade Agreement* (CEFTA) in

<sup>2</sup> Sandro Knezović, 'Postkonfliktni Okviri Regionalne Sigurnosti i Suradnje u Jugoistočnoj Europi – Inicijative Europske Unije', *Politička Misao*, Vol. 43, No 2, 2006, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Denisa Kostovicova, 'Slabost Države na Zapadnom Balkanu kao Pretnja Bezbednosti: Pristup Evropske Unije i Perspektiva Globalne Politike', *Bezbednost Zapadnog Balkana*, No 7–8 2007–2008, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, *From Stabilisation to Integration. The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe* (Wien: Böhlau, 2010), pp. 11–23.

<sup>5</sup> Milica Delević, pp. 23–25.

<sup>6</sup> To SEEC (*The Southeast Europe Cooperation Process*) have joined the following states: Albania, BiH, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, FYROM, Romania, the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (currently Serbia

turn, introduced in 1992 and revised in 2006, replaced the overly complicated system of 32 bilateral commercial agreements between the countries of the Southeast Europe<sup>7</sup>. *The Central European Initiative* (CEI, 1989) and *Adriatic Ionian Initiative* (AII, 2000), established with major effort on the side of the Italian diplomacy are important factors supporting the Balkan multilateral cooperation as well. Initially they were meant to provide consulting for the international affairs issues, but came to encompass cooperation in other fields, such as borders, the scientific and cultural exchange as well as ecology<sup>8</sup>.

The need to establish mechanisms for international cooperation that would favour economic growth and enhancement the democratic structures in all the region's countries was the foundation of *the Stability Pact*. Its creators attempted to have a comprehensive approach to the Balkan situation and to believe that the state of affairs at the turn of the centuries was still determined by what served to disintegrate any socio-political or economic relations.

Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova were included along with the Western Balkan countries, and within the said initiative three Task Groups were created and employed to support and evaluate the activities by the particular governments in various areas of socio-economic life<sup>9</sup>. The first was to deal with the issues of democratization and human rights, the second was with legal and commercial cooperation, economic growth and restoring whatever fell to the war attrition. The third group was concerned with security. *The Stability Pact* was to gather all the participants of the process at a common table and sharing equal rights. These were the Western Balkan and neighboring countries, the EU member states, the most prominent international

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and Montenegro), Turkey and Moldova as an observer. Annual SEECF meetings are held by the Prime Minister or head of state as a coordinator. Consulting meetings take place at ministerial level also. Preparation of the SEECF meetings lies within the competence of the Secretary's Office, and with the objective of enabling more efficient contrivance of conjoint actions a so-called *Trio* has been convened, consisting of the representatives of the SEECF, European Commission and *Regional Cooperation Council* (RCC); Milica Delević, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Initially (up to 2004) among the signatories of the agreement were Czechoslovakia (since 1993 The Czech Republic and Slovakia), Poland and Hungary. In 1996 CEFTA was joined by Slovenia (until 2004), in 1997 by Romania (until 2007 r.), in 1999 by Bulgaria (until 2007 r.), in 2003 by Croatia, 2006 FYROM, 2007 Albania, BiH, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo, represented by *the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo* (UNMIK). Particular countries have been withdrawing from the agreement with their access in the EU. The only body of the CEFTA is the Joint Committee, which gathers the ministers responsible for the affairs involved in the scope of the agreement. The leaders of the participating countries hold yearly meetings; Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, pp. 191–233.

<sup>8</sup> *The Central European Initiative* (CEI) has been working under its current name since 1992. Its predecessors were the initiatives under the names of *Quadrangone* (1988), *Pentagonale* (1990) and *Hexagonale* (1991). 18 countries (10 EU member states as well as 8 countries from outside the Union) are involved in the activity of the CEI. The main body of the CEI is the Executive Secretariat based in Trieste. Meetings of the Heads of Governments and their respective Foreign Affairs Ministers are held annually. CEI co-finances three so-called supportive funds, used to develop the projects with diversified funding; Milica Delević, pp. 21–22; Dalibor Kekić, 'Jadransko-Jonska Inicijativa', *Međunarodni Problemi*, Vol. 55, No 3–4, 2004, pp. 413–433.

<sup>9</sup> Together with *European Commission* and many international organizations (NATO, UN, *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* – OSCE, *Council of Europe*, *the World Bank*, *International Monetary Fund*), Switzerland, Norway, Russia, U.S.A., Japan took part as supporting states and Ukraine as an observer; Sandro Knezović, p. 105.

organizations and financial institutions. The main means of cooperation were the regularly-held conferences dealing with the matters of importance to the idea of regional cooperation<sup>10</sup>.

The process has been orchestrated by the EU on the basis of *the Stability Pact* that was aimed at re-establishing the bonds between the neighboring states and nations, and well as the common historical and cultural heritage of the entire region. The bonds which had been drastically weakened during the period dominated by ethnic and religious particularities. Without question, the eagerness towards European integration has been shown by most of the social bodies of the Western Balkan region, has been a considerable help in furthering the EU-inspired process of re-establishing the regional relations. In the meantime the attitude was adopted by the Union concerning the methods of regional cooperation has been the object of frequent criticism by the governments of the particular countries, which deemed them as arbitrary and lacking the concern for the complicated and multi-layered reality of politics and commerce in the region. The critical minds pointed out that the Pact often forces the governments into show-off activity, aims at receiving a positive note in the evaluation by the European Commission while being contradictory to the national interests. Consequently it had not been working to solve existing problems in international relations but only serving to aggravate the competition among the EU-access aspiring countries.

The initiatives were mostly based on *the Stability Pact*. In 2001 the region's countries signed the intentional pact concerning the development of regional transport network, which contained duty facilitations and introduction of infrastructure projects, aimed at creating a unified communication system in the region. Among the activities, now lasting over two decades, the established system of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has been considered successful. The greatest success has been achieved in the areas of transport and energy as well as in specific fields of socio-economic policies and police forces cooperation.

An outline of an integrated land-and-river transport network, containing the post-Yugoslav countries as well as Albania, has also been created under the EU supervision<sup>11</sup>. In 2002 targets were established for *the Danube Cooperation Process* (DCP), concerning the needed uniformity of the Danube River navigation regulations, and *the International Sava Basin Commission*, which was to balance the exploitation of natural resources of the river-basin of Sava River<sup>12</sup>. The cooperation in the field of power industry is in turn based on the *Energy Community Treaty* between the EU and the Balkan countries, introduced in 2006. The said act has created legal basis for the

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<sup>10</sup> The affiliation agreements between the countries of the Western Balkans and the European Union (2001–2008) have been linked with the process of stabilization and affiliation, developed upon the foundation of *the Stability pact*. The documentation of the regional task groups activities from the 1999–2008 period: Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> E. Busek, B. Kühne, pp. 255–272. See also: Nenad Nikolic, *SEE Core Regional Transport Network Development, Southeast Europe Transport Observatory* (Brussels, SEETO, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, pp. 273–296; Simona Mamei, 'Regional cooperation in Western Balkans in times of political and economic uncertainty', *PECOB's Papers Series*, No 8, 2011, pp. 10–11.

integration of particular energy markets and unification of the regulations for the exploitation of petroleum gas resources<sup>13</sup>.

Another cooperation category contains the activity to further the economic reforms and is strongly related with a specialized expert body under the name of *Investment Compact for Southeast Europe*, working under the supervision of *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD) and the European Commission. It is to provide the governments with support in preparation of the economic reforms and evaluate their realization<sup>14</sup>. A similar role in the social field is performed by the so-called *Bucharest Process*, initiated in October 2003<sup>15</sup>. The goal of the *Electronic South-Eastern Europe Initiative* (ESEE), has been working since January 2001, on the other hand it provides help with the introduction of modern communication technologies in the government administrative structures, economic institutions and public schools<sup>16</sup>.

Border security and fighting the organized crime scene comprise an important area of regional cooperation among the Balkan countries. Their shared efforts fitting within the framework provided since 1999 by *the Regional Centre for Combating Transborder Crime* under the supervision of *the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative* (SECI)<sup>17</sup>. Fighting the corruption was in turn regulated by *the Stability Pact Anticorruption Initiative* (SPAI) in 2000. It is especially meant to facilitate the reforms of the police forces and support the anti-corruption measures on various levels in all the region's countries. To control the arms trafficking *the Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Center* (RACVIAC) was introduced in 2000. It receives support from *the South-Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons* (SEESAC), an agency created in 2002 to gather information on the application of small arms<sup>18</sup>.

*The Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative* (MARRI), since 2004, has been tasked with the creation of an integrated system of border traffic control in the region. In 2006 signing of the *Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe* by the Balkan countries was witnessed with the long-term aim of unifying the regulations for the

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<sup>13</sup> See: [www.eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:198:0018:0018:EN:PDF](http://www.eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:198:0018:0018:EN:PDF) (12.06. 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, pp. 237–242. See also: <http://www.investmentcompact.org> (12.06.2012).

<sup>15</sup> Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, pp. 383–389. From among the initiatives undertaken in the duration of *the Stability pact* and concerning the Western Balkans it is worth to enumerate e.g. the initiative aimed at augmenting the political and vocational chances for women (*Gender Task Force*, 1999) and at balancing the educational levels (*Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe*, ERI SEE, 2004). Another important initiative concerned the harmonization of the labour markets (*Centre of Public Employment Services of South East European countries*, CPESSEC, 2007). In the same time a set of programmes aimed at cooperation among labour markets in the countries in the Adriatic Sea region has been launched (SVILMA, 2004–2006; DILMA 2007–2009). In 2008–2010 a programme for the promotion of reforms in the social welfare spending in all the countries of the region was being developed under the supervision of the European Commission and The Council of Europe; Hermine Vidovic, Vladimir Gligorov, Renate Hauptfleisch, Mario Holzner, Katja Korolkova, Monika Natter, 'Developing Efficient Activation Approaches and Identifying Elements for Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans', *Research Reports. The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies*, no 374, 2011, pp. 146–147.

<sup>16</sup> Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, p. 296.

<sup>17</sup> The *Southeast European Cooperative Initiative* (SECI) was created in 1996 as a forum for international cooperation in the fight against organized crime.

<sup>18</sup> Milica Delević, pp. 60–93.

border control and creating a management system for wanted persons and objects, based on the Schengen Information System (SIS)<sup>19</sup>.

The aforementioned initiatives all deal with substantial areas of activity and are supposed to comprise a more general cooperation programme, intended to encompass the region as a whole. They also work well within the existing terms of the EU cooperation. All are being developed with the benefits of theoretical, logistic and financial support from given structures of the EU.

In order to streamline the information and funds flow between the international organizations and the Balkan countries *the Stability Pact* was replaced by *the Regional Cooperation Council* (RCC) in 2007<sup>20</sup>. Its main goal is to support, coordinate and consolidate the main fields of regional cooperation in the Southeastern Europe. Five fields, corresponding to the ones distinguished earlier by *the Stability Pact*, were attributed the highest priority by the creators of the Council. These are: economic and social growth, infrastructure and energy, justice and internal affair, cooperation for greater security and improving the quality of the human resources. The main task of the Council is to support development in all the aforementioned areas as well as providing the regional cooperation with possibly the most unified organizational framework. The RCC is meant to be an operative of the political cooperation process (SEECF), forwarded by the region's countries since 1996. Among its tasks is the intermediation in the information exchange between the Balkan countries and the financial organizations as well as the support in substantiating the cooperation projects<sup>21</sup>. According to the EU, the RCC is meant to play a vital part in establishing apt space for international cooperation, serving to diminish the influence of still-living divisions, inherited mostly from the Yugoslav conflicts, on the general picture of the Balkan affairs. The workings of the RCC are of utmost importance to the region's countries, since it is in the Council's competence to distribute the funds, provided for multilateral projects e.g. within *Multi-Beneficiary Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance* (MBIPA), under way since 2010<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> RCC works since February 2008 with the main seat in Sarajevo. The first Secretary General was Hido Bišćević, the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration within the government of Croatia. 46 countries are involved, including all the countries of the Western Balkan region. Representatives of the EU, SEECF, The European Commission, the EBOiR, European Investment Bank (EIB), NATO, OECD, OSCE, *the World Bank* and two UN agendas – *The Development Programme* and *the Economic Commission for Europe* have also taken part in its activities. The European Union is represented in the Council by the European Commission, the Presidency and the Secretariat of *the Council of Europe*. The yearly budget for RCC's own activity comprises approximately EUR 3.000.000. An EUR 1.000.000 is provided each by the EU, the international organizations together with the countries from outside the Balkans but represented in the Council (Canada, Norway, Switzerland, U.S.A.) and the region's countries; Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, pp. 680–686.

<sup>21</sup> During the two years of the Council's activity a number of task groups have been created in order to deal with the research-and-education exchange (*Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital*, TF FBHC, June 2008), the cooperation in the area of employment and social welfare (*Employment and Social Policy Network Fostering and Building Human*; ESPN, 2009) as well as the educational support for private entrepreneurs (*South East European Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning*; SEE CEL, October 2008); Hermine Vidovic, pp. 146–147.

<sup>22</sup> IPA. *Multi-annual indicative planning document 2011–2013*, p. 10; [www.ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/mipd\\_multibeneficiary\\_2011\\_2013\\_en.pdf](http://www.ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/mipd_multibeneficiary_2011_2013_en.pdf) (11.06.2012). In

The European Commission has been underlining that the RCC is the preferred forum for the development and integration of the cooperation sparked by *the Stability Pact*<sup>23</sup>. It is a common opinion in Brussels that the regional cooperation process in Western Balkans is as yet developing in an uneven way and in too great a dispersion. Although a relatively low degree of institutionalization and high dispersion are typical features of the most political initiatives. It is also characteristic that many problems concerning the whole Western Balkans are either still held in the area of bilateral relations or only mentioned marginally, along with issues discussed in the forum, which gathers the countries of the Southeast and East-Central Europe. The governments of the post-Yugoslav republics are not overly concerned with cooperation of a more limited scope, containing solely the Western Balkan region, being occupied by political and financial struggles concerning the past armed conflicts as well as the pursuit of divergent national interests. Many controversial issues have also been excluded from the multilateral discourse because of a lack of political courage. It is believed that bringing certain questions up in a multilateral forum might be ill-perceived by the particular societies. These in turn do not yield their leaders the legitimization, to engage in a substantial discussion on the topic of the resented in the past<sup>24</sup>.

The majority of these countries in the Balkans' politics hold the most sensitive issues that could be threatening the mutual relations should be resolved directly by the parties in question. Therefore, they do not hinder the painstaking process of political stabilization in the region. This attitude is in itself a hindrance though creating dialog EU-oriented projects in areas such as historical education. In the meantime, an issue in which the strict cooperation should be more diligently pursued is the tracking of the suspected or incriminated of perpetrating war crimes during the Yugoslav conflicts. This is a multinational concern, since the perpetrators, victims and witnesses all live now in the different countries<sup>25</sup>. Furthering the cooperation between police forces could contribute to the shortening of the post-war reconciliation period and facilitate the campaign against the organized crime at the same time. This has being

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December 2009 *the Western Balkans Investment Framework* (WBIF), with its total value estimated at 180.000.000 EUR, was created. The financial commitment of the EU reaches 130.000.000 EUR. The EBI, *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development* (EBRD) and *Council of Europe Development Bank* (CEB) have supported the programme with a sum of 30.000.000 EUR. The involved countries of the region are assigned to supply a total of 20.000.000 EUR. The funds are mostly directed to the energy and transportation section, with the social issues, ecology and the private enterprises section close behind; see: <http://www.wbif.eu> (12.06.2012).

<sup>23</sup> *Komunikat Komisji Europejskiej do parlamentu Europejskiego i Rady. Strategia rozszerzenia i najważniejsze wyzwania na lata 2011–2012* *Komunikat Komisji Europejskiej do parlamentu Europejskiego i Rady. Strategia rozszerzenia i najważniejsze wyzwania na lata 2011–2012* (Brussels, European Commission, 2011), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Dragan Đukanović, 'Zapadni Balkan: od Sukoba do Evrointegracija', *Godišnjak Fakulteta Političkih Nauka. Univerzitet u Beogradu*, Vol. 3, No 3, 2009, pp. 502–504.

<sup>25</sup> Real legal basis for the development of regional cooperation in criminal prosecutions have been only recently established e.g. by the bilateral extradition agreements. In 2006 BiH signed such an act with FYROM, in 2009 Montenegro and Croatia while in 2010 BiH – Croatia, Serbia – Croatia, Montenegro – Croatia. In 2011 the bilateral extradition agreements with Croatia and Serbia have been signed by FYROM. May 2012 saw the successful conclusion to such negotiations between Serbia and BiH, while a similar negotiation process between Serbia and Albania is already under way; *IPA. Multi-annual indicative planning document 2011–2013*, p. 6.

said but until 2011 only a few bilateral agreements concerning the deportation of regular and war crime suspects have been signed. Moreover, a closer cooperation between the Western Balkan countries needs to facilitate the problems of concerning the displaced persons. This requires a special attention to arranging opportunities for returning people who have been displaced during the conflicts. The countries have signed a regional declaration on this issue in Sarajevo in 2005 however it is important to know that there is no substantial effort has been followed though<sup>26</sup>. The high level of sensitivity, present in the countries and societies of the Balkans with whatever concerns the ethnic or religious issues, as well as the impact of politics of memory both in internal and foreign affairs, create attitudes that are highly resentful towards discussing troublesome matters on a multilateral forum. These are considerable hindrances to cooperation that would ignore the borders. Not only do they limit its scope but they also weaken the chances for a lasting improvement in the international relations in the region<sup>27</sup>.

As a consequence, what the most prominent in the process of substantiating the forms of international cooperation in the Western Balkans is the abundance of initiatives varying in character and range, starting from inter-government forums and round tables, and finishing with typical grass roots initiatives despite all these aimed at the integration among communities living in ethnically heterogeneous or trans border territories. Their aim is the so-called “small integration”, concerning given areas of socio-political and economic life. It is also hard not to notice a large number of projects with overlapping work areas. On the one hand this weakens the effectiveness of particular initiatives, which are often forced to compete for the external funds. On the other hand a touch of “democratization” in the particular fields of cooperation can serve to strengthen the dialog EU between the involved parties. A monolithic organization, however, with specified competence, stable funds and a broad spectrum of influence would obviously be better able to manage the whole process of regional cooperation and whatever parties are participating. In spite of this, attempts at establishing a multinational body that would deal with the unpleasant past, dating back to the communist Yugoslav federation, meets with resistance in the Western Balkans. Since any effort aimed at a political reintegration of the region is firmly rejected by virtually all participants, dividing the regional cooperation among a variety of institutions can be viewed as favourable to the pluralisation of relations and strengthening the mutual partnership<sup>28</sup>.

According to many of the observers, who direct their attention at the Balkans, the economic and political cooperation process in the Western Balkans has been as yet unable to change the local relations based on traditional distrust or, even worse, mutual hostility. From the local point of view, the prime political objective is to achieve maximal compliance with the EU terms with minimal involvement in the cooperation process with the neighboring states. In a general overview of the foreign affairs of the Balkan countries the cooperation with their neighbors seems to occupy

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<sup>26</sup> *Declaration of Regional Ministerial Conference on Refugee Returns (Sarajevo Declaration)*, Jan. 31<sup>st</sup>, 2005; <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/451a5acc4.html> (12.06.2012).

<sup>27</sup> Roberto Belloni, ‘European Integration and the Western Balkans: Lessons, Prospects and Obstacles’, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 11, No 3, 2009, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Sandro Knezović, p. 94.

the background only. In most cases what is lacking is the involvement of political elites in the painstaking and socially controversial process of resolving the pressing ethnic complications, what in the case of Serbia and Croatia would have to mean e.g. a definitive cessation of supporting the irredentism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is on the brink of partition because of the ethnic disagreements. Without doubt the situation also lacks sufficiently strong stimuli, which would encourage the specification of a common attitude of the Balkan countries towards foreign affairs, including the EU activity. What lies at the foundation of this resentment towards strengthening the regional cooperation outside the reach of the EU is the fear that this would summon the tendencies towards hegemony back into the mutual relations as well as the conviction that on their path to integration with the EU structures every country should act in their own interest, without much concern for their neighbors<sup>29</sup>. There is also some substance to the notion, that multilateral cooperation is further hindered by the touch of competition between the membership-aspiring countries. The exchange of experiences in this field would be advantageous to the general politic atmosphere and the coordination of a number of political activities. In reality though, such a process would require especially the countries, which are the most advanced on their path to the EU, to share their achievements with their Balkan partners. Measures like the above are hindered because of the imbalance in the degree of compliance with the EU entry conditions among the countries in question. Croatia for instance, which has up to the present moment sustained the greatest costs in the act of translating the *acquis communautaire* and modification of its legal system to match the EU standards is far from eager to share this knowledge with its neighbors<sup>30</sup>.

Linking the issue of the membership with a question of stabilization and regional cooperation in the EU strategy for the Western Balkans has led to a general anxiety, regarding the European integration, in the local societies. In the 90s there was still some debate, whether the EU access was a real target or a political mirage, fashioned to settle the warlike spirit in the region's politics. Concerning the activity of the RCC, the uneasiness concerning the fact that the EU might correct its strategy for the region, assuming that the regional cooperation processes be the substitute for the broadening of the EU structures, have been continuously raised especially in the 2008 and 2009. It seems that the possibility of the EU turning to the notion of slowing the pace of the access processes until the bilateral political controversies be resolved by the involved parties, was considered as an absolutely real course of events by the governments of the Balkan countries. Their respective representatives have been stressing that what should be considered vital to the evaluation of the EU access procedures were the individual efforts of the candidates, and not the degree of involvement in the mutual cooperation within a broad regional structure, encompassing countries which differed greatly in their advancement on the path to European integration<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Vladimir Gligorov, 'Southeast Europe: Regional Cooperation with Multiple Equilibria', *IBEU Research Project. Working Papers*, No 4.1, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Simona Mameli, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Manchin, 'Balkan Public Opinion and EU Accession', *Institute for Security Studies. Chaillot Paper*, No 126, 2011, pp. 163–168.

The development of the regional cooperation in the Balkans under the supervision of the RCC has also encountered considerable obstacles concerning the international status of Kosovo, which had unilaterally proclaimed independence in 2008. A heated debate erupted between the countries represented in the Council, whether or not Kosovo can be regarded as an equal rank participant in the regional programmes supported by the EU. Since the establishment of the Council Kosovo, which is still considered a "rebellious province" by the Serbian government, has been represented by international administration executives, created in 1999 by the UN with the No 1244 Resolution of the Security Council<sup>32</sup>. The RCC's authority has also suffered because of the troubles had had with providing sufficient funds for all areas of the multilateral cooperation. Resulting from the 2008–2010 economic crises, the European Union has cut the funds for the support of the local development programmes, which met with criticism in the Balkans and further weakened the influence of the Council on the general appearance of the region's political scene. In spite of these difficulties, the attempts at establishing a key role regarding the many various manifestations of multilateral cooperation in the Western Balkans are among the other objectives formulated for the Council for the 2011–2014 periods. It is indispensable, however, strongly emphasizing the regional needs, to be discovered by both careful research and consultations with the involved parties, in establishing a strategy for the creation of a coherent system of regional cooperation. Aside from this, the Council should earn wider approval from the public; therefore it is advisable to supplement former political actions with the initiatives involving the local societies to a higher extent. It is possible that a chance to strengthen international position of the Council would be lying in concentration rather on the technical side of the cooperation, developing not only in the area of the official, intergovernmental relations, but also on various levels of the public life<sup>33</sup>.

Without any doubt, the prerequisite for dynamic growth of the regional cooperation would be making it a priority in a strive for integration of the region's countries with the EU. The cooperation has to be deeply rooted in a local socio-political and economic practice, at the same time convincing political elites as well as the society that is indeed a prospective method for relieving the tensions and reaching agreement in the most thorny issues, without any necessity for appealing to the external authorities. No sooner shall the cooperation between Western Balkan countries become indispensable part of the political stability, or consolidate proper neighbourly relations and help to overcome nationalisms and intolerance<sup>34</sup>.

For the time being, it is hard to expect, after over a dozen years since *the Stability Pact*, that a multilateral cooperation would form a new political value or eliminate the influence of the factors disintegrating the regional relations. Nevertheless the number of the resolutions on the regional cooperation, their shape and their formation process are of invaluable merit<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Simona Mamei, pp. 21–25. UNMiK is also the representative of Kosovo in the other forums concerning the regional cooperation in the Southeastern Europe.

<sup>33</sup> Simona Mamei, pp. 11–14.

<sup>34</sup> Sandro Knezović, pp. 114.

<sup>35</sup> See: Cvete Koneska, 'Regionalni Identitet: Faktor Koji Nedostaje u Saradnji u Oblasni Bezbednosti na Zapadnom Balkanu', *Bezbednost Zapadnog Balkana*, No 7–8, 2007–2008, pp. 117–118.

They surely converge with the necessity of creating communication channels, ongoing information exchange and also with conducting a dialog EU with consideration for interests of all the parties involved. Such cooperation is without any precedence in a region of communist heritage, where not far from now the neighbors would engage in armed conflicts. Certainly, for the Western Balkan countries it is the foretaste of the functioning inside the European Union, even if there is still a lot of an unsolved issue on the way to the full cooperation.

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