

# **Regional Co-operation in South East Europe post-Riga: Capacity and Coherence for Change**

Amadeo Watkins

No single state or international organisation can tackle the very many challenges facing SE Europe today. Consequently, regional and international cooperation, as a fundamental part of the ongoing integration processes, is indispensable to addressing these challenges. Most regional initiatives, including the NATO SE European Initiative was launched with this in mind. However, to date this cooperation has been slow, with very limited positive output for the region concerned. While NATO's Riga summit in 2006 formally established a new working environment for the region, this paper will suggest improving regional cooperation may not be as straightforward as some imagine.<sup>1</sup>

## **Post-Riga: a possible new horizon**

After much unfortunate speculation and debate, in November 2006 NATO reluctantly agreed to accept Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro into the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that for the countries concerned this formal move was a watershed decision which, although several years late, should positively impact the whole Euro-Atlantic process. For the first time it brings together all the Western Balkans states under a common security umbrella geared towards eventual Euro-Atlantic integration.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the question of this paper implies regional cooperation under the auspices of NATO integration, the EU framework is an indispensable part of the process and must be taken into account.

<sup>2</sup> Considering little fundamental change in the region (with regards conditionality) since the Istanbul Summit, the Riga decision (which was rightly imposed by the US) can be seen as recognition of previous failed policy.

This common security umbrella is important for a variety of reasons, most directly with regard to the ongoing Kosovo status process which will continue to remain a key issue for regional security and stability until Belgrade and Pristina reach a compromise solution. On the domestic front it should strengthen ‘democratic’ values and help promote a brighter future as opposed to the depressing recent past. In terms of regional cooperation, the Riga decision has formally added new possibilities to regional cooperation. However, the success of all these will require an appropriate interplay between domestic forces at all levels, something that has to date not been the case.

There has certainly been an increase in the number of regional activities among all SE European states over the past 5 or so years, which has undeniably helped overcome the basic hurdles to cooperation and open up some new avenues. Most of these meetings took place under the auspices of regional incentives, which are certainly not lacking in number. Most regional initiatives were promoted by international actors, especially the United States, and a few have been set up by the region itself, such as the SEE Cooperation Process (SEECp). These indigenous initiatives have become more important over the years as the region attempts to move away from post-conflict transformation into closer Euro-Atlantic integration, where local ownership should take over from international assistance. However, for this shift to be ‘recognised’ – as it needs to be at this present time - it is important to distinguish between an increased level of regional meetings and an increased level of regional cooperation, as the latter presumes a greater output, which has been lacking to date. Furthermore, the countries of the region need to be less focussed on military-security issues, which only highlight their self-perceived positions of vulnerability.

This paper will argue that over the short to medium term this much needed substantive shift in attitudes will not take place, primarily because the most important legacies from the past have not been addressed.<sup>3</sup> To quote the Serbian ‘Strategic Defence Review: “*relations*

---

<sup>3</sup> ICTY conditionality must not be neglected or put aside and is best applied within the EU process.

*among the former Yugoslav countries are burdened with the lack of trust, the slow resolution of the refugee return issue and compensation for their property, as well as slow confirmation of responsibility for war crimes and unresolved territorial and other disputes”.*<sup>4</sup> The burden of responsibility for such a shift clearly rests on the shoulders of the political elites, especially among the larger countries within the region, which should have a higher level of capacity to activate and support the above processes. It is important to note that capacity relates not only to the institutions’ ability to complete a certain course of desired action, but also to the political elite’s capacity to allow the action to take place under all circumstances, especially with regard to legislative (judicial) matters.

## **Domestically Politicised Obstacles**

Obstacles preventing the advancement of regional cooperation from the domestic aspect are complex. At one side of the spectrum lie the negative legacies from the past, while on the other lies the desire towards closer Euro-Atlantic integration. Considering the political pathology, it is the political elites at the highest level that are the executors, and as such they are responsible for any progress or lack of progress made. In other words, if there is will – often meaning interest – to advance reform there is the possibility to address the capacity issue, and even the most stubborn resistance becomes negligible. This argument is clearly demonstrated by the ‘wave’ phenomenon, which is characterised not by a continuous stream of gradual ‘reform’ measures supporting declared policy objectives, but rather by the sudden occurrence of ‘measures’ at politically opportune moments in time.

Croatia has made important advancements in several respects during the past year or so and even though these are still marginal and are still led TOP-down (NATO & EU) the country is now genuinely one step ahead of the rest of its neighbours further south. As such there are signs that it is trying to advance its regional position, albeit in the ‘shadow’ of Slovenia. The main driver however, is recognition of the value regional

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.yu>

cooperation can add to its Euro-Atlantic bid. In policy terms, for Croatia it means balancing between playing the 'regional actor' and 'regional leader' role. While these two options seem similar, they are in fact distinct, especially when viewed from the other side of the fence. Many thought the Croatian leap would influence the rest of the Western Balkan region. However, this has largely not happened for a number of reasons, all of which are internal in nature.

Furthermore, in terms of perceptions the country is still very much divided between its geographical location on the one side and its historical, cultural and religious linkages to Central Europe on the other, not to mention economic development which clearly differentiates it from its southern neighbours. This discourse, whilst being strongest amongst the public at large, is also present among the political elites. While understanding and accepting the regional cooperation argument, especially in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration, there is pressure towards an active European orientation, which in turn limits regional policies even in the sphere of economic activity.<sup>5</sup>

Serbia also continues to be consumed with internal problems, politically unstable and thus in several key factors the least advanced in the region. Kosovo remains a major problem, as do several other aspects of security sector reform. Recent internal political events in Serbia following elections in January 2007 show the depth of the problem and the depth of division within the country. In policy terms Serbia has most to gain from increased regional cooperation, but the political problems are set to remain at least for one more electoral term. Reform will continue, most optimistically at a pace just slightly faster than to date, resting mostly on the Kosovo status issue. Furthermore, regional cooperation plays a special part in Serbian politics and society at large, which are still characterised by a lack of realism.<sup>6</sup> In its most extreme form is noticeable by a sense of Serbia's 'leadership' role within the region, inherent from the past. However, while this is possible in some practical aspects simply as

---

<sup>5</sup> An example would be Croatia's participation in the Central European Initiative (CEI). See <http://www.mfa.hr>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.mfa.gov.yu>

a matter of potential, because of the past turbulent history it will be difficult in the short term for neighbours to accept Serbia in such a role.

At a strategic level, competition between these two regional players, while logical, is unlikely in the short term, primarily as Croatia looks westwards and Serbia has its hands tied by the complex set of factors noted above. Moreover, although bilateral trade between these two countries has reached almost 500 million Euros per annum, there are still open issues to be resolved, notably the issue of missing persons. It remains to be seen how the recently signed CEFTA agreement helps advance this issue. For example, Croatia was especially anxious in case the EU was abandoning its “individual approach” to countries in the region in favour of a regional “package”.

It can be argued that all this has created almost a sense of ‘desperation’ with the smaller countries trying to pick up and take advantage of the leadership vacuum but not having sufficient power or the capacity to make the strategic pull themselves. An example is the initiative launched by Bosnia & Herzegovina in 2006, SEESTAFF II, aimed at an exchange of junior ministry personnel, which is no doubt a very useful and constructive initiative. However, this initiative will need support from other major players if it is to gain any real momentum.

## **Coherence at the international level?**

For all these reasons, there is no doubt that for changes to occur more quickly than natural momentum might allow NATO (and the EU) will have to make a more pro-active effort to advance reform processes in the Western Balkans. This effort will have to be carefully balanced and directed. While capacity building should continue where lacking with the state institutions across the region, especially with regards to creating strategic management capacity, primary effort should be directed towards the political leaderships who have mostly failed to deliver on pol-

icy.<sup>7</sup> In the context of this paper, the NATO DRG initiative in Serbia is a very useful move, while the PfP programme should increase efforts to include more self-generated regional activities, perhaps within the A3+3 framework.

Although not desirable in itself, the presence of international actors in the region will remain important in the short to medium term, supporting the above mentioned TOP-down change process. However, this presence has not been without problems and has failed to implement the very ‘lessons learned’ policy which it preaches to the region. One of the major weaknesses is the lack of policy cohesion and consistency towards the region. To make matters worse, the whole Euro-Atlantic process has been politicised just as the last enlargement was. The end result is a negative ‘qualitative’ impact on the current domestic reform programme in several countries. For example, within the A3 block there is an obvious disparity in approaches to reform between Croatia on the one side and Macedonia and Albania on the other, as the former was given a clear hint of NATO membership in 2008-09.<sup>8</sup> Serbia has also learnt the lesson that survival of the ‘democratic’ block is more important than anything else on the political-reform horizon.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the international presence must change into ‘partnership’ mode, especially in terms of methodology, if the region itself is to accept Euro-Atlantic structures and values as attractive, something which is a major problem in many SE European countries. As the former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson clearly said: “*The region must be given a perspective of re-joining the European mainstream.*”<sup>10</sup> This perspective must include the prospect of this ‘different’ approach, which

---

<sup>7</sup> In the majority of cases, emphasis is on improving capacity, not re-inventing it. In most countries, it is in fact the Ministries of Defence that are leading reform efforts, including Croatia and Serbia.

<sup>8</sup> No doubt, elections in Croatia this winter will in also freeze the reform process for at least 6 months.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting how there is a divergence in thinking on behalf of the international community regarding Euro-Atlantic integration and the Kosovo status issue.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nato.int/seei/home.htm>

should on the one side by a true partnership while on the other firm on conditionality.

In terms of advancing regional cooperation, while the various international actors have been the primary drivers in setting up initiatives (especially the United States), the lack of in-depth sustainable engagement has resulted in a lack of capacity within the target organisations, which have simply been too weak to advance the desired effects, especially when objectives have been broad, numerous and even at times conflicting.

There is no doubt that all these factors, if left un-checked, will provide negative long-term problems and instability. However, there is scope for tackling these issues given a more pro-active approach from the international community, which should in policy terms focus more on the political elites, as suggested above. The 'politicised' nature of the entire process, while negative, should at least aid the international community, while the local elites should pay particular attention towards improving domestic capacity levels, especially changing value-judgements. An example of the dangers of persisting with current styles of engagement is Montenegro, where the conventional premise that small size and limited requirement would mean easily managed reform is proving exactly the opposite of the truth.

## **Conclusion**

Although increased cooperation based on local ownership is fundamental to long-term security and prosperity in the region, this paper has argued that ultimately it will be international community that will decide on the tempo and depth of its realisation. Thus, any hope of advancing regional cooperation in the short term has limited potential, especially if one understands that regional cooperation should not be conducted simply for the sake of being able to demonstrate activity.

Processes related to Euro-Atlantic integration need to be less politicised and more coherent in their application at both the domestic level and among the international community if quality is of the essence. Otherwise any benchmarking exercise is futile, and may even be counterproductive in terms of public relations.

A more coherent and consistent EU-NATO strategy, based on positive experiences in the Balkans to date, would greatly aid the overall process of integration and thus regional cooperation. After all, this region is still a post-conflict region with strong historical legacies, and this experience is a fundamental factor differentiating it from Central and Eastern Europe.

Efforts by countries which sit within the EU-NATO and regional framework, such as Slovenia, Hungary, Rumania and Greece could play a more proactive role with this process, although in terms of *realpolitik* continued support by members such as US, UK, Norway and Germany will be vital. The local ownership concept must not be interpreted as the withdrawal of the international community's interest from SE Europe, but rather a change in focus and methodology.

The logic of regional cooperation is simple. Economically it allows for economies of scale and the acquisition of capabilities that would otherwise not be possible, especially relevant in terms of force interoperability. Politically, cooperation is the ultimate confidence and security building process, as it requires and builds trust and transparency among governments and individuals. There is no doubt that both are directly related. Although ultimately healthy economic development is an absolute pre-requisite to ensure the long-term stability of SE Europe, without 'healthy' and politically mature political elite, little will move forward.

Ultimately, the future of regional cooperation must be local ownership. It is reinforced by an often neglected reason – especially at a policy level: the current and growing security threat, which falls in the domain of serious cross-border crime, affecting not only regional but also European economies and societies. Successful and in-depth security sector reform will be fundamental to achieving this. The Stability Pact's Re-

gional Co-operation Council is a move in the right direction, but it will have to move quickly if the rocky start in 2007 is not to colour the whole process. However, as this paper has made clear, in the short-term this is not likely to happen unless there is radical shift in policy, both within the region and beyond.