

Complementarity or Competition? – EU and NATO Enlargement Processes and their Effects on Regional Co-operation

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Introduction

Regional cooperation in Southeast Europe has been a well known and thoroughly discussed and continuously improved process with no shortage of action for the past six years. Consequently, international relations between countries of the region have advanced through various cooperation schemes. Having in mind the fact that SEE was a scene of major conflicts not so long ago, success regarding not only the stabilization of the region but a comprehensive cooperation, implies an immense progress not to be underestimated.

Today, Southeast Europe seems as an emerging region in transition, from which economic news come followed by increasing co-operation. By the end of 2006, various achievements regarding regional cooperation have been undertaken, accentuated by the signing of the new CEFTA, which will establish a free trade zone in the region. Also, the European Energy Community, creating a legal framework for a regionally integrated energy market for electricity and natural gas network as well as its integration into the EU market, has been created. The European Common Aviation Area, that will become the framework for the extension of the Single European Sky in the region, was signed, and fighting organised crime, introducing integrated border management, facing environmental challenges also have a regional dimension.

Still, a number of problems and questions remain present, such as social problems, delayed integration and violent political conflicts that followed the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, etc. The issues mentioned

above have been aggravated by outstanding constitutional and political issues in some countries of the region that need to be resolved for uncertainty amplifies existing problems rather than creates a favourable climate for the resolution. To make things even worse, the process of EU integration seems to have been plagued with “absorption” and “integration capacity” as well as “enlargement fatigue” thus making citizens of the countries in the region question whether the membership perspective promised to them is a credible one.

Having in mind that co-operation is the way to overcome the discrepancies among nations of the region, and also maintaining it as an integral part of the preparation for EU membership, the EU made regional co-operation a prerequisite for progress towards the accession. EU membership perspective has been the main stimulus for regional co-operation so far, and it will remain for the future as well.

NATO and South East Europe after the Riga Summit

It is important to underline that, owing to improvements on the ground and consolidation of the EU in the field of CFSP/ESDP and to NATO’s focus having shifted to fight against terrorism after the 9/11, the EU has taken over in BiH. Hopefully, the same scenario will follow in the Kosovo soon.

So, the most important thing is that this region is becoming more and more a security provider (through participation of the forces from some countries in peace-keeping missions) instead of being security consumer. So there is a good reason to believe it is more appropriate to discuss the NATO-SEE policy in terms of its enlargement than in terms of the presence of its forces in the region. Therefore, it is important to mention the process of restructuring of NATO and its Open Doors policy, because we have finally reached the stage when it is more than relevant for the region, especially for some countries, to discuss about NATO in that way.

Moreover, we can see some concrete initiatives that are taken in order to help the NATO membership bid of the countries from the region, such as the Adriatic Charter, signed between the US, Albania, Croatia and Macedonia, that reflects the US support for the efforts of those countries and acknowledges the success of reforms conducted by them. Apart from this, some countries from the region are participating in some advanced programmes of assistance for NATO membership, such as the Membership Action Plan (MAP). All of these countries are still under the PfP umbrella.

So definitely, there is proof that the countries from the region, some faster and some slower, are moving towards the NATO membership and that there is a significant difference since now and ten years ago. Despite the fact that the recent NATO Summit in Riga was not an enlargement summit, it has given some clear signs that NATO plans to continue its “Open Door policy”, encouraging all aspirant countries, especially for those part of the Adriatic Charter, to continue with the reform process on their way to the full-fledged membership.

When speaking about the EU and NATO accession in a comparative manner, it seems obvious and broadly accepted that most of the countries first join NATO and then the EU owing to set of different reasons. This was a praxis that followed the countries of EU’s 5th enlargement, and according to the message from Riga, this praxis will continue with the countries of the Adriatic Charter.

On the other hand, different interpretations of inter-connectivity between the two processes have emerged. If we just turn a little bit to the recent past and recall the example of Bulgaria and Romania, this issue becomes much clearer. The accession of the two countries to the EU was postponed owing to problems in the reform process, so the 5th EU enlargement included 10 instead of 12 countries as planned.

On the other hand, Bulgaria and Romania were admitted to NATO together with countries that joined the EU in the 5th enlargement. Significant interpretations argued that this was done to amortize the negative effects of an unsuccessful EU integration process. There were also some

interpretations that supposed it to be a form of supplementation for EU membership, having in mind that the countries were under-prepared and, despite obligations taken by the EU side, not expected to join for some time. *Au contraire*, events from January 2007 have proved all these theories wrong. Although there are still some comments suggesting that happened because EU could not disregard its obligations, the fact is that it happened and Bulgaria and Romania are now full-fledged members.

The same discourse develops with countries of the Adriatic Charter and one may conclude that it seems reasonable to expect that the outcome will be the same. Of course, we must not forget the crucial difference between two groups – the first one managed to fit into the Nice EU 27 administrative framework. However, we should not disregard that there is a number of interpretations questioning the broadly advocated argument that it is legally difficult to imagine further enlargement of the EU without an agreement on new EU's administrative framework, but this topic requires another paper of this size and it is better not to insist on details here. So, one may conclude that it is legitimate to argue that the EU has to develop its administrative, decision-making framework, i.e. enlargement capacity, but this fact should not be an obstacle for the implementation of the commitments made in Thessaloniki 2003, and this will be elaborated further in the text.

Regarding the importance of NATO and the US in the region, it is more than obvious that it should never be underestimated. It is a fact that foreign policy focus of the US has shifted to fight against terrorism after 9/11 and that the EU is taking over in the region while building its ESDP policy and identity (ALTHEA, future mission in Kosovo, etc.). But, on the other hand it is also a fact that the memory about its unsuccessful role in the early 1990s and relatively successful one from the US and NATO is still present. Also, however it is not popular to say it, but the ESDP is still merely a project. There are number of cases that show how ESDP is really developing well, but we should not underestimate the fact that when it is up to “big issues”, US global domination is still visible.

Countries from the region are devoted to democratic values of Euro-Atlantic Community and we can agree, at least to certain extent, that the

EU and NATO can be regarded as the two sides of the same coin. The only question that seems to be raised frequently in the region is how when you toss this coin, especially when speaking about hard security and enlargement in Southeast Europe, it always falls on the NATO side?!

The EU and the Region

As mentioned above, one of the crucial preconditions for the EU accession of countries from the region is regional co-operation. Having in mind the character of the region, the evident lack of regional self-identification and the fact that the region has been formed from outside, it is no wonder that the main stimulus for regional co-operation is EU integration rather than regional co-operation itself.

After all, we can all agree that the regional co-operation does not end in itself. It is a preparatory stage for the more complicated arena of co-operation which is the EU.¹ Also, it is important to underline that even EU integration is not an end in itself – a country does not join the EU just for the sake of it – there are numerous responsibilities as well as benefits of becoming a member of EU – especially when we speak about countries of limited size and capability like the ones within the region.

Making the regional co-operation compulsory for the region, the EU approached the region much differently compared to the relation between the EU and the Central European countries to whom co-operation was merely recommended and encouraged, and there are understandable reasons for this. On the other hand, the EU committed itself at the Zagreb Summit to guarantee EU membership for the countries from the region once they meet all criteria, and this was clearly reinforced at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003.

¹ It is very illustrating to recall the statement of Croatian Chief Negotiator with the EU arguing in favour of regional co-operation but warning that the market itself should be left to determine which co-operation pays of and which does not.

Several recent attempts by the EU to reinforce this obligation were deemed insufficient in the region – the European perspective was not perceived, at least for some countries, to be as clear as the one offered at the Thessaloniki Summit and it was questioned whether the benefits it offered were adequate to meet the challenges awaiting the region in the forthcoming period. So, apart from the already known problem of lack of initiative in the region for improvement of the reform processes, there is a question regarding the credibility of the EU membership promise, at least from the regional point of view. If we put aside the declarative stance, it seems that the political will from the EU side to act in this direction is obviously declining.

After the referenda on the EU constitution in France and Netherlands it became popular to talk about ‘enlargement fatigue’. Although only 3% of the French who voted against the constitution claimed they did it because they oppose to further enlargement, it somehow triggered a discussion about enlargement, which exposed a widespread scepticism about accepting any future members. By calling for a slowdown or even a permanent stop of the enlargement some EU member state officials gave the impression of trying to avoid the discussion about issues closer to home that really contributed to the failure of referenda, such as high unemployment, inefficient welfare systems, etc.

Voices opposing further enlargement were regularly in the focus of the media, creating the impression in the region that the EU accession perspective is really in jeopardy, especially after some alternative ideas, such as ‘strategic or privileged partnership’ became an issue of debate. Although one may conclude that these proposals were mainly directed to Turkey, this was not usually explicitly stressed, and it triggered uncertainty in the region. So it was reasonable to conclude that the issue of ‘enlargement fatigue’ or ‘absorption capacity’ became a reality and that the EU would be less willing to compromise on the enlargement issue in the forthcoming period, while trying to wrap-up its administrative construction beyond the Nice 27 framework.

The EU, on the other hand, being aware of the importance of the membership promise, but also of the discourse in the member states, is trying

to find a creative way of confirming the European perspective for the countries in the region, without committing itself in terms of concrete actions and dates which means introducing a number of 'intermediary' steps that create an impression of movement and progress. The best example for this is awarding a candidate status to Macedonia without setting a clear date for the start of negotiations.

However, there seems to be an undeniable fact that credibility of EU membership promise has declined from the perspective of some countries in the region, despite the attempts of EU officials to declaratively support the idea. And for EU conditionality to work, credibility is essential. If there is a lack of credibility from the EU side, especially bearing in mind the recent debate over 'enlargement fatigue', its insistence on regional co-operation can be regarded as a tool of postponing membership, or even as an alternative to one. This seems to be especially alarming for the frontrunners in the EU integration process, for which regional co-operation of that kind could trap them in an undesirable framework. So, apart from the fact that there is no EU integration without regional co-operation, it is also difficult to imagine any functional regional co-operation without a clear perspective for EU integration. Of course, we must not forget the fact that the EU is in a position to set conditions, but still it is important to have this in mind, otherwise we will be in the undesirable situation that can be illustrated with the following banter: *We are pretending that we are co-operating and they are pretending to be serious about our integration perspective.*

On the other hand, there seems to be a tendency, especially visible in texts of the authors from the countries that are lagging behind in democratisation and reform, to purposely misunderstand the nature of the EU integration process and argue that the different pace of reform processes and EU and NATO accession caused by 'own merits' principle is producing fragmentation of the region. They argue that the region is constantly a subject to fracture as certain countries progress faster towards the EU and NATO and that the heterogeneity of national transition processes and level of bilateral relations with the EU, creates asymmetries and tensions that threaten regional cohesion. Of course, they have forgotten to mention the positive implications of the issue, such as positive

spill-over effect, a proof to the EU and to the region that SAA really works, the fact that advanced countries are doing many things to help those who are not, as well as the essential fact that accession to the EU, unlike regional stabilisation, is an individual exercise.

Conclusion

It can hardly be disputed that considerable progress has been made within the region, and that it is now on the path towards the EU and NATO full-fledged membership and associated with major EU policies. The EU, whose membership all of the countries aspire and whose conditionality hence they follow, undoubtedly deserves lots of credit for this positive development. Basic stabilisation has been achieved, giving way to development and EU integration process. Some countries are more advanced and some are less, and reveals the crucial difference between the process of stabilisation of the region and its integration in the EU. While stabilisation required a regional context, integration is essentially a bilateral exercise.

On the other hand, the further a country progresses towards the EU, the less penalised it feels by its regional ties and feels more ready to devote attention to engagement in the region as a matter of self-interest and as a good example to show to the EU that it can significantly contribute to its overall goal of regional stabilisation – Croatia is the best example for this.

The lesson for the EU is rather clear – its regional approach will continue to deliver the expected results if the EU itself shows that it remains serious about the EU membership perspective of the countries from the region. So, to stress it again – for conditionality to work, credibility is crucial. This is the best way to avoid different interpretations about regional co-operation being a tool for postponing or even as an alternative to full membership.

In a situation like this, especially for those who have serious doubts about the further enlargement of the EU, NATO membership can look like a 'solid Solomon's solution'. Since the author of this text is definitely not one of those, the final argument would be that this should not be regarded as any form of competition between the two processes and surely not complementarity, but just one step ahead on the path towards the membership in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Of course, having said that, it is important to warn that time is running out irreversibly and that additional efforts within the region are needed to achieve these goals.