
AN AUSTRIAN INITIATIVE: THE REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP¹

JOSEF OBERGER

On regional partnership in general there are three aspects which I will try to cover: first attempts in regional co-operation in Europe in the past, second the Austrian initiative *Regional Partnership* and third some considerations of the future of the Regional Partnership. At the end I try to draw some conclusions.

ATTEMPTS IN REGIONAL CO-OPERATION IN THE PAST

Regional co-operation seems to be such a “natural” thing that it has been attempted in different ways many times and by nearly all regional nations in Europe. So co-operation on the regional level in Central and Eastern Europe is neither a new nor an exclusively Austrian way of working together. I shall try to illustrate this by some examples through the history:

Already in the 13th century, King Premysl Ottokar II of Bohemia had tried to create a kind of “dynastic regional partnership” reaching from Kaliningrad to the Mediterranean Sea.

Afterwards the French House of Anjou-Naples united Hungary and Poland and did something similar to a “dynastic regional partnership”. Later the House of Luxemburg succeeded in creating a “partnership” including the Holy Roman Empire and more closely Hungary, Bohemia and Brandenburg.

The German King Albert II did it the “Austrian Way” by marrying the daughter of Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg. By doing this he initiated the first Austrian “regional partnership” between Bohemia, Hungary and Austria in 1438.

The famous Matthias Corvinus Hunyadi created a Hungarian type of “regional partnership” by uniting his kingdom of Hungary with Bohemia and large parts of Austria.

¹ Ehrlich W., Cf. Regional Partnership: An Austrian Initiative. In: Luif P. (Ed.), Regional Partnership and the future of the European Union, Vienna 2002. cf. speeches and interviews of Foreign Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner about the Regional Partnership on www.bmaa.gv.at/.

Then, it was the turn of the Jagiellons, the House of the Grand Princes of Lithuania. They created maybe the largest “regional partnership” by uniting Bohemia and Hungary as well as Poland, large parts of today’s Ukraine and Belarus with Lithuania.

Finally, the House of Habsburgs did it again the “Austrian Way.” Archduke Ferdinand, the later emperor Ferdinand I married the sister of the king of Bohemia and Hungary. This king died in the battle of Mohács in 1526 and because of this Ferdinand inherited Bohemia and Hungary. Later generations of the Habsburger enlarged the “partnership” temporarily by other domains such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Galicia, Lombardy and Venice.

But possibly the most durable informal “regional partnership” can be seen in the common efforts to defend “Europe” against the expansion of the Ottoman Empire over the centuries. This created a strong regional solidarity among a lot of regions in Europe.

The examples above show that regional partnership and co-operation is a kind of “common heritage” belonging to all regional nations, regions and partners.

In the 20th century after the Second World War many attempts were made to bridge the new divide between Western and Eastern Europe and to re-establish co-operation and regional partnership. In Austria, for example, farsighted statesmen like Alois Mock and Erhard Busek took several initiatives to create institutions such as the “Commission of the Danube.” Besides this scientific foundations and organisations also contributed in building the basis for a new free and democratic partnership on the continent like the “Austrian Institute of East and South-East European Studies” and the “Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe.” The “Central European Initiative” comprising Central, Eastern and South Eastern European countries is one of the most developed organisations for regional partnership and co-operation. There has also been a proliferation of regional initiatives such as organisations like the “Stability Pact for South-East Europe”. Of course there can never be too much support for improving regional political understanding but there is however a danger of confusion and of parallel and as a result of this wasted efforts, which should be avoided.

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This initiative was launched from the Austrian Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Benita Ferrero-Waldner. Her proposal to create a *Regional Partnership* is a specific one and a step to overcome Europe's borders, as she stated in her speech at the first meeting with the Foreign Ministers of the five partner countries at the Wiener Hofburg in Vienna on 6 June 2001. This partnership is directed at four of Austria's immediate neighbours, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia, and Poland which is considered to be a "cultural neighbour" of Austria. At the time of their establishment in 2001 these states were first-line candidates for European Union (EU) membership. This Austrian initiative was conceived as a forum for political dialogue with the aim of intensifying cross-border co-operation, notably in areas of particular significance for the approaching entrance of the five countries into the EU. In general, the *Regional Partnership* has two phases: in the first one the regional co-operation had to be intensified under the perspective of the ongoing negotiations of the five EU accession candidates with the Union. In the second, new, and decisive phase a contributing process takes place to define common goals within the EU, to safeguard shared interests, and to implement these shared interests inside the Union.

As major challenges have to be met the *Regional Partnership* is a crucial one; in the perspective from 2001 this especially meant that:

- The populations of all the six countries had to be prepared for the dramatic changes after EU-membership and for the new quality of neighbourliness inside the Union.
- Austria should help to clear the way of the first-line candidates towards negotiating, adopting and implementing the Acquis of the EU.
- Common roots have to be rediscovered and common interests have to be defined because decades of isolation have led to separation.

The *Regional Partnership* was seen as a very timely in 2001 because:

- Not much time was left to finish the difficult negotiations with the EU.
- Not much time is left either to eliminate some unsolved historical heritage through friendly co-operation as well as mutual misconceptions and misunderstandings.

To conclude, the main aims of the initiative were and are:

- To facilitate the ongoing negotiations between the EU and the candidate states.
- To create a basis for a permanent regional co-operation and for synchronisation of joint procedures in the EU similar to the Benelux states, in order to safeguard shared interests inside the Union if sufficient support by other partner countries can be reached.
- To create a partnership based on the targeted deepening of co-operation in those areas which are of particular relevance to the partner countries without creating additional and new structures.
- To contribute to the definition of common goals within the EU. Specific areas of shared interests include internal security, border control, asylum and consular matters, co-operation in the fields of culture, high tech and infrastructure, as well as the future development of the European institutions.
- To increase the mutual understanding and friendship among these six countries.
- To strengthen the awareness about the common interests of the partners.

At their first conference in Vienna on 6 June 2001 the Foreign Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia agreed on the usefulness of the Regional Partnership as well as on the necessity to develop this co-operation and to expand it to other ministries and eventually to other relevant administrations.

That was the basis for conferences on which other ministers followed the initiative: The Ministers of Economy and Labour met in Salzburg on 27 and 28 August 2001 and signed several initiatives on improving economic relations, on implementation of the Acquis of the EU as well as on labour and employment policy. Also the Ministers of the Interior met there on 27 August 2001 and adopted the “Salzburg Declaration” on security partnership to combat international crime, prevent illegal migration, protect borders, and to improve information on the security policy of the EU. The Ministers of Transport met in Vienna on 3 September 2001 as well as the Ministers of Agriculture in Ried (Upper-Austria) on 4 September 2001. It can be concluded that the idea of the *Regional Partnership* has widened from the Foreign Ministers to other Ministers.

A second meeting of the Foreign Ministers has been chaired by Slovakia and took place in Bratislava in November 2001. There, as a first symbolic step, a “Central European Cultural Platform” was created as all members of the *Regional Partnership* have deep common cultural roots which are key elements of their mutual understanding as Central European countries.

At the third meeting, held in Portoroz (Slovenia) on 14 October 2002 the Foreign Ministers of the partner states agreed to stimulate their activities launched by means of a joint action plan and by the establishment of “focal points” in their respective ministries.

At the fourth conference of the Foreign Ministers of the *Regional Partnership* countries in Buchlovice in the Czech Republic on 4 July 2003 the Ministers discussed topical European policy issues and perspectives, cross-border security issues as well as issues regarding the “Platform for Central European International Cultural Policy”.

THE FUTURE OF THE REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

The future of the logical and useful instrument of the Regional Partnership seems to be assured. However, its final success depends on several points:

The most important criterion is enduring usefulness for all partners during the negotiations with the EU as well as after the entrance into the EU. So the Regional Partnership will prosper as long as all participating countries are convinced that this co-operation was not only a useful instrument to ease the way into the EU but is also important to improve mutual relations on the basis for creating a permanent regional caucus of co-operation inside the Union. From a realistic and professional point of view the countries would check carefully what kind of advantages they get from co-operating among each other, including after entrance into the EU. The success of this initiative is by no means granted but will need a lot of effort and the co-operation on all sides.

On the Austrian side one difficulty of the task becomes evident when we are thinking about some key issues such as “Beneš”, “Temelin”, “Avnoy” and road signs in Carinthia. A constructive solution to these problems would boost the chances of success of the Regional Partnership.

Also from an Austrian perspective it is clear that Austria is not the only country to be interested in good co-operation and friendship with the other

partners. For example, Germany is certainly a very attractive partner for some countries like the Czech Republic and Poland. There are also other options for the countries such as a co-operation between the Visegrád countries.

A final strategic aim of the Regional Partnership can be the creation of understanding, sympathy and community of interests to such a degree that the solidarity is strong enough to defend interests of the partners in Brussels even in cases where no proper national interests are involved. This kind of solidarity requires very strong foundations anchored in political constellations and -maybe even more importantly—has to be deeply rooted in the majority of the people of all the countries involved.

To bring this Austrian initiative to success and to make it strong enough to achieve its final aim some measures have to be considered, such as the *Regional Partnership* having to be an official and permanent priority of Austrian foreign, economic and infrastructure policies. In addition, budgetary means are needed to organise political, cultural, historical and economical symposia and for projects of high symbolic value (e.g. exchange programmes, bridges, highway connections, railway connections etc.). Co-operation on the level of regional and local authorities should be intensified by enhancing existing and creating new co-operations between the regions using funds of the EU. In general, several meetings of specialised Ministers should be organised in a systematic way and therefore meetings of officials should be used to prepare and to implement the decisions of the Ministers. The meetings of the Foreign Ministers should be intensively prepared in close co-operation with the presiding country as they decide on general policy and on actions to be taken. The basis of these should be a general concept to develop the co-operation in all essential issues.

After the entrance of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland into the EU other Central, South Eastern and Eastern European countries are standing at the border of the Union. These countries are now the regional partners as they will participate in the next rounds of joining the EU. Now it is time to help them to build bridges to the Union, otherwise a new split will emerge in Europe. To prevent such a development there an excellent instrument has been created: the “Central European Initiative” which comprises all Central, South-Eastern and Eastern European countries.

CONCLUSIONS

All the above shows that the Austrian initiative *Regional Partnership* has so far been a very successful. Of course there never can be too much help and support for improving mutual understanding, friendship and sympathy between regions as well as regional political and economical standards. As it can be seen at the beginning of this article, regional co-operation has been a very natural and necessary thing and will continue to be in the future as well. It can be concluded that it is part of the historic and geographic heritage, where every country had its place in the past and will have its part in the future. Because of this the launching of a successful Regional Partnership is however not only a logical necessity but also a demanding task. The reach of its strategic aim would require enduring and substantial efforts to all member countries. Even if such massive efforts would not be the result this initiative they will still have a very useful role to play, because the certain benefit of all will be concerned by co-operation, improving knowledge and understanding, and sympathy between six regional countries. Regional co-operation is visible and tangible for the people in this region.