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# REGIONAL CO-OPERATION— PAVING THE WAY FOR ACCESSION. ROMANIA'S POINT OF VIEW

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Romania has been undergoing a difficult process of transition, remaining one of the region's poorest economies with traditionally limited political and economic links with its Southeast European neighbours [4, 2004]. From the start of the transition Romania made membership of the EU and NATO the main goal of its foreign policy, which resulted initially in a desire to extract itself from the region and to neglect the regional co-operation aspect on its foreign policy. As a result of the EU's insistence on good neighbourly relations—an important criterion in assessing any potential candidate's readiness to join the EU—the issue of developing relations with neighbours gradually captured the attention of officialdom. However, the notion of region as understood by the Romanian elites focuses on relations with neighbouring countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, Moldova and the Ukraine (with which bilateral issues have been raised) or with countries like Greece or Turkey. Romania took a proactive role in settling important disputes over minority rights and borders with Hungary and the Ukraine, which had burdened political relations with these two countries in the past. This paved the way for greater co-operation, making Hungary one of its most important trade partners outside the EU until its accession last year. It has proceeded in signing bilateral and trilateral<sup>1</sup> agreements with the countries in the region and joined all the major regional initiatives like the Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC), the Central European Initiative (CEI), CEFTA, the South East Europe Co-operation Process (SEECP) or the Lower Danube Co-operation.

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<sup>1</sup> Trilateral co-operation was initiated with Moldova and the Ukraine in July 1997, with Bulgaria and Turkey in October 1997, with Poland and Ukraine in November 1997, with Bulgaria and Greece in October 1998.

### **Membership of the Stability Pact for South East Europe**

In spite of its difficult transition Romania has been able to maintain political stability, an asset which it has tried to use to strengthen its international standing and to gain a more prominent role in the region. Romania's primary concern is security and economic development, and contributing to progress in these areas is its main motive for promoting regional co-operation. Regional co-operation in trade, infrastructure and communications are deemed beneficial for Romania's economy, which is by far the country's most pressing problem. Significant scope for co-operation exists in infrastructure, energy and political relations among the countries. Regional co-operation is also seen as important in addressing problems which are regional in character, such as organised crime and the environment. The main obstacle to co-operation is low security in the region and a weak and diverse legal framework in individual countries.

Romania has taken an active interest in the Stability Pact and sees itself as both a recipient and a donor. The Stability Pact is mostly perceived as a framework for addressing the problems of the Western Balkan countries and the reconstruction of war- damaged societies in the region of former Yugoslavia. Apart from providing the opportunity to benefit economically from cooperating with its neighbours and to contribute to improved security and infrastructure in the region, Romania perceives the Stability Pact framework as yet another channel it can use as a support for its European integration efforts.

### **Membership of the Black Sea Co-operation Process**

Among the different initiatives for regional co-operation in Central and Eastern Europe launched after 1989, the Black Sea Economic Co-operation Process represents a different type of co-operation because it includes a Member State of the EU [6, 2001], states that are associated with the EU, and states that have signed a Partnership on Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement with the EU. The co-operation is focused on trade and economic matters but also includes areas such as environment and infrastructure as potential areas for co-operation. Although the BSEC is very much oriented towards economic co-operation, unlike, for example CEFTA, it does not aim at establishing a free trade zone between the participating states, but it is only geared to develop comprehensive multilateral and bilateral Black Sea economic co-operation [4,

2003]. At first glance, the name of this co-operation agreement suggests that one precondition for joining the BSEC is to be a state which borders on the Black Sea. However, since not even all the founding states of BSEC themselves border on the Black Sea, the reference to the Black Sea seems to refer to a rather loosely defined geographical area.

Although Romania declared from the very beginning that it sees this regional co-operation as a step towards Euro-Atlantic integration, not an alternative to it, Romania has proved to be an active participant in bilateral, trilateral, and sub-regional co-operation. For Romania, participation in the BSEC is complementary to the EU pre-accession process [7, 2004]. As a candidate state to the EU, Romania will continue to support and promote the adoption of the relevant components of the EU *acquis communautaire* as a basis for implementing the BSCE objective. As Romania assumes a more dominant place in the region, her integration with Europe gains impetus, and as her integration becomes more certain, the role she plays in her region will become even greater.

### **Membership of the SEECP**

Beginning in April last year, Romania has taken over the Chairmanship of the South East Europe Co-operation Process. During its mandate Romania intends to promote thorough SEECP mechanisms and a coherent policy aiming at giving new impetus to regional co-operation towards stimulating economic growth, while carrying on the record of fruitful co-operation in promoting democracy and respect of human rights and ensuring security and lasting stability in the region.

Romania's progress towards European accession in 2007 has required, among other things, profound structural social and economic reforms, adaptation to the *acquis communautaire* and a preparation of the economy to meet the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy of economic growth, competitiveness, employment and sustainable development. During this process Romania has gained valuable experience, and it is its goal to disseminate this experience across the region, as many problems different participating countries face are similar to those that Romania has had to overcome.

For this purpose the role of the SEECP as a platform for European integration should be enhanced. The key targets of the Platform for European

Integration in South East Europe (as presented by Romania during the Belgrade SEECP Summit, 2003) are:

- to consolidate and coordinate efforts towards European integration of the Western Balkan countries, in accordance with the guidelines established in the Thessaloniki Agenda;
- to make best use of the opportunities offered by the differences in status and experiences between SEE countries in the process of European integration.
- to stimulate an increased solidarity of Western Balkan countries with neighbouring countries that are more advanced in the integration process in order to allow a more efficient transfer of know-how to WB countries, through initiatives originating in the SEECP.

Regional co-operation activities should be better organized so as to provide Stabilization and Association Process countries with more focused assistance with and expertise in EU integration. The European Partnerships for the Western Balkans countries, recently endorsed by the European Commission, represent a new step forward in implementing the Thessaloniki Agenda by providing significant opportunities to deepen regional co-operation in SEE under a European umbrella.

In this respect, the SEECP could make a valuable contribution and be an excellent framework for acquiring experience in the EU integration process.

There is a need for further consolidating and developing a real regional agenda through efforts coming from the region, in application of the concepts of regional ownership and regional leadership. The Romanian Chairmanship in Office envisages a concrete undertaking of responsibility for implementing these concepts by assuming the task of shaping strategies and implementing actions according to the specific needs of the countries in the region.

Regional strategies of reconstruction and development are reaching a point where they can become self-sustainable and self-enhancing, as initiatives like the creation of a regional market for energy and gas enlarge the scope for further regional co-operation.

Moreover, there is a need for promoting the SEECP position as the regional voice par excellence within multilateral fora. Romania will pay special attention

to this objective in the multilateral frameworks by virtue of its new international status (Security Council non permanent membership for 2004-2005, NATO membership and EU candidanship).

Romania pays special attention to co-operation with other regional initiatives. Romania is willing to initiate an institutional process of consolidating the SEECP as a forum for dialogue and political consultations on the common concerns of the region and of co-ordination and enhancing synergy among various regional initiatives (Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, Southeast European Cooperative Initiative, Black Sea Economic Co-operation, Danube Co-operation Process).

In order to achieve these objectives Romania has set the agenda for the time it holds the SEECP Chairmanship:

### ***1. Political objectives and ways of action***

- Enhancing the role of the SEECP as a platform for European integration by making best use of the existing institutional mechanisms: EU-Western Balkans Forum, Informal Consultative Committee -ICC- (comprising the Stability Pact, the EU Presidency and the SEECP Chairmanship), European Partnerships launched by EU.
- Consolidating the parliamentary dimension of the SEECP, in accordance with the guidelines of the Thessaloniki EU-Western Balkans Summit of June 2003, by organising a Regional Parliamentary Conference for South Eastern Europe (at the level of presidents of the Committees for Foreign Affairs/ European Integration from the parliaments of the SEECP countries).
- Initiating a reflection process at expert/think-tank level on the developments and perspectives in Kosovo.
- Sustaining the aspirations of Republic of Moldova regarding its participation in the SEECP.

### ***2. Economic objectives and ways of action***

- Enhancing regional energy co-operation by developing a regional energy market and promoting the Regional Electricity Stock Exchange in Bucharest, complementary and in close co-ordination with the Athens process.
- Sustaining small and medium-sized enterprises.

- Strengthening local democracy and cross-border co-operation.

### ***3. Objectives and ways of action envisaged in the area of security issues and Justice and Home Affairs***

- Launching a “Joint campaign on combating organized crime and corruption in South Eastern Europe” by organising in close collaboration with SPSEE the first conference in the region of both Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs of the SEECP countries. Launching an initiative of adopting an “Anti-Corruption Charter” for the States in the region.
- Bringing the activities of the Regional Centre for Combating Trans-border Crime in Bucharest closer to the work of the SEECP.
- Creating a Task Force on visa regimes in South Eastern Europe, aiming at supporting, at technical level, the countries in the area to bring their legislation and institutions in line with the EU acquis. This approach will be to the benefit of the Western Balkans countries with the view to better prepare their dialogue on a bilateral basis with EU Member States and institutions.
- Combating terrorism by promoting the initiative of adopting a Charter of Anti-terrorism Solidarity among the States in South Eastern Europe. Developing the military dimension of regional co-operation in South East Europe
- Promoting NATO candidateship of the Adriatic Charter countries while continuing the “open doors” policy of the Alliance in the Western Balkans
- Sustaining within SEECP the projects regarding transfer of experience in the military reforms field
- Engaging South East Europe, through the SEECP voice, in improving the transatlantic dialogue, by sustaining the convergences of NATO and EU objectives regarding consolidation of stability and reforms in the Western Balkans countries.

As the current Ministry of Foreign Affaires has recently stated in a press conference on Romania's foreign policy [5, 2005], all partnerships to the East, including partnership with the Ukraine are built on any opportunity offered by any democratic process already launched or under way. Romania considers

that, by offering European solutions, it can develop, and build a European neighbourhood.

### **Cross-Border Co-operation Programme 2004-2006**

As the European Union has stated, it aims to develop a zone of prosperity and friendly neighbourhood with its Eastern and Southern neighbours. In order to achieve this, the Commission envisages the creation of a new Neighbourhood Instrument “which builds on the experience of promoting cross-border co-operation within the PHARE, TACIS and INTERREG programmes” and which could focus “on ensuring the smooth functioning and secure management of the future Eastern and Mediterranean borders, promoting sustainable economic and social development of the border regions and pursuing regional and trans-national co-operation. This project has taken on the form of a Cross-border Co-operation Programme [2, 2004], trilaterally elaborated for the Hungarian-Romanian and Hungarian-Serbian border areas using funds from INTERREG III, PHARE CBC and CARDS.

The overall aim of the programme is to bring people, communities and economic actors of the border area closer to each other in order to establish a sound basis for balanced economic and social development, assuring optimal development opportunities for all three countries. This approach is in harmony with the idea of the European integration, thus the famous phrase of Jean Monnet is also a motto for this strategy: “we are not forming coalitions between States, but union among people”.

On these grounds, the main elements of the joint cross-border development strategy shall be based on the identification of the topics where common interests can be established and developed. These core elements could be formulated as follows:

- The physical and infrastructural barriers hindering co-operation shall be further eliminated.
- Establishing common business interests shall drive the improvement of the level of economic co-operation and prevent the economic divergence of the border regions of the three countries.
- The natural features of the area represent valuable assets that may only be safeguarded through joint interventions.

- Knowing each other is the basic requirement for both economic and social connections, which shall be reflected in the priorities given to social and cultural links.

From this overall aim of the programme the following specific objectives could be formulated:

- To establish and develop the physical and infrastructural systems supporting co-operation.
- To establish and develop a joint system to protect and capitalise on common natural resources promoting sustainable development.
- To reinforce economic connections between the border regions in order to boost sustainable economic development building on joint assets.
- To develop social and cultural coherence among people and communities.

These objectives would be achieved by implementing a set of specific measures:

- Improving cross-border infrastructure.
- Addressing common challenges in the field of environmental protection and flood prevention.
- Development of business infrastructure and joint business services.
- Supporting co-operation of enterprises.
- Encouraging co-operation between institutions and communities
- Promotion of co-operation in the field of RTD and human resource development.

## CONCLUSION

Romania's regional policy in South-Eastern Europe will be governed by three necessities: Romania's offensive assertion, as an interested party in the promotion and pursuit of its own direct, economic and political interests; the policy of good-neighbourly relations; and regional co-operation, having at stake Euro-Atlantic integration of the south-eastern European states.

Romania has the opportunity in its capacity as chairman-in-office of the South-Eastern European Co-operation process to become involved so much as to make its presence in the regional processes indispensable, and not



optional. Romania has the chance to be present with all it can offer, politically, economically or culturally. And it deserves to be.

Romania intends to contribute to the stability of the neighbouring regions. It intends to signal the necessity of border security and the necessity of good administration of illegal migration, to participate in combating organised crime and trafficking in persons. It is our contribution to the making of European policy that is going to define us for the next two years.

Romania intends to add a new focus on the Danube Co-operation Process, perhaps the best pretext to be in Central Europe, although, geographically we belong to South-Eastern Europe.

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