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**REGIONAL APPROACH - AN OBSTACLE OR
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AN EARLY
INTEGRATION OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC
OF YUGOSLAVIA INTO THE EUROPEAN
STRUCTURES**

Introductory Remark

I would have to start this presentation with a disclaimer. When I was kindly invited to give a perspective from Serbia on the issue we are discussing at this seminar, I told the organisers that my contribution could not be regarded as a representative one, since I work for an international organisation - the OSCE - in Belgrade. At the same time, I cannot claim that my views represent the views of the organisation I work for. So, what I am going to say are my personal views, based of course on my experience and research on Southeast European politics, especially in the countries of former Yugoslavia. Therefore, while apologising for not being in a position to give a more authoritative presentation, I will try to give a meaningful contribution on the subject, especially from a perspective of someone coming from Belgrade.

The Evolution of the International Policy towards South East Europe

Before addressing the main issue of the conference - the relevance of a regional approach to SEE, especially the one contained in the Stability Pact, it seems appropriate to examine, in historical retrospect, how the international approach to the SEE crisis evolved and how the situation in the region changed in the meantime.

First, by way of introduction, I would like to say a few words on the evolution of the EU strategy for the SEE. Is there such a strategy and if so, how did it emerge?

One cannot deny that in the last decade, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and especially since the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, which started in 1991, the European Union (until 1992 known as the European Community) has been actively involved in the events in the Balkans. Sometimes this involvement was not that successful, especially at the beginning, but, on the whole, it was continuously on the rise, leading to the situation that today, the EU is probably the most important international actor in the region, primarily economically, but also politically (in the military sphere, NATO still has the lead).

However, one could also claim that the EU, until recently, has not developed a fully coherent elaborate strategy for SEE. This was due mainly to three factors - insufficient development of the EU instruments and institutions at the early years of the crisis, different priorities (internal reform and expansion strategy as main agenda items) and differences in the situation and status of the Balkan countries which required a differentiated approach.

At the beginning, the EU policy was mainly re-active and preventive, only at rather a late stage (efforts to prevent the Yugoslav crisis in 1991 and to act as mediator between the conflicting parties) and based on economic instruments (sanctions for parties that do not co-operate and incentives for those that are co-operative). Only after the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the conclusion of the Dayton accords in November 1995, the EU policy became more assertive and future-oriented, culminating in the initiative for the conclusion of the Stability Pact for SEE, which was adopted in the summer of 1999, after the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the process of disintegration of former Yugoslavia, the European Community (predecessor of the EU) did not have either an elaborated strategy or particular interests in the Balkans. The reasons were two-fold: firstly, the

EC still did not have a coherent or co-ordinated common foreign policy in general, and secondly, the Balkans as a region did not have a particularly prominent economic or strategic importance for the EC, because it was economically undeveloped and politically divided between the East and the West.

At that time, only two Balkan countries were of more immediate importance for the EC - Greece, via the fact that it was an EC member state, and former Yugoslavia, which had a quite developed economic co-operation with the EC (FRG and Italy were its major economic partners).

Nevertheless, the EC, in spite of the lack of a wholesale strategy and hampered by internal differences, showed great activism and viewed the Yugoslav crisis as a challenge to prove itself as a new and emerging power, not only in economic field, but also in foreign policy matters. Although all the legal and political instruments were still not prepared (the Maastrich Treaty was still in the making) the "EC rushed into the Balkans, hoping it would acquire the necessary security and foreign policy as it went along; the EC promised it would rise to the occasion." (British commentator Jonathan Eyal).

The EC managed to undertake a diplomatic mission at the outbreak of hostilities in Slovenia in June 1991. The EC diplomatic mission (so-called EC "Troika") mediated a cease-fire and dispatched EC observers to monitor it. This success was not only to the credit of the EC, but also a reflection of the fact that Milosevic-led Serbia, and the Yugoslav Army, which was under his domination, did not have the ambition or plan to keep Slovenia within the federal state. Instead, they were set to keep the Serb-populated territories in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Faced with this strategy, the efforts of the international community, including the EC, in controlling the ensuing wars in these two republics, especially in its early years, were much less successful.

Forms of EU involvement in the Yugoslav crisis were manifold. They were:

- Political (statements, declarations);
- Diplomatic (mediation, convening of the Conference on Yugoslavia in The Hague in 1991, later forming of the so-called Contact Group with the USA and Russia to deal with the crisis);
- Legal (findings of the so-called Badinter commission which concluded that the former Yugoslavia had dissolved, and that all its Republics had the right to self-determination and independence);
- Economic (sanctions against unco-operative republics of former Yugoslavia and incentives for co-operative republics);
- Security related (observer missions to monitor a cease-fire, discussions on sending peace-keepers);
- Humanitarian (relief missions and aid).

The effects of this manifold and, at the beginning, intense involvement of the EC in the Yugoslav crisis were, as mentioned, at best mixed.

The EC proved unable to prevent the violent disintegration of the country (this was probably impossible because of the irreconcilable differences between the main Yugoslav republics), but it did establish some principles which were the basis for later deliberations on the crisis in the UN and the OSCE (Organisation on Security and Co-operation in Europe), and which formed the basis for the recognition of the new states emerging from former Yugoslavia.

These principles were: non-recognition of unilateral changes of borders between the republics by force, non-recognition of forced population transfers, protection of the rights of minorities, respect of the rule of law, individual responsibility for the war crimes, equal rights of all the successor states of former Yugoslavia.

The EU involvement probably would have been more successful if it had been in the position to use also military force, but the EC did not have any joint military capability, although there were suggestions to form special forces for this occasion.

As a result of these EU constitutional limitations and internal political differences, a more prominent role in the later stages of the crisis was assumed by the UN and, especially, by NATO, and in that framework, by the US.

Especially after the escalation of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the EU involvement became less prominent, and the role of the UN peacekeepers and, increasingly, NATO rose substantially. It was clear that the reputation of the EU suffered because of its modest results and because of the initial stage of the crisis, and, even more importantly, it became clear that an organisation like the EU lacked the coherence and the instruments to deal with a war situation.

Although the EU member states (primarily Britain and France) did provide the bulk of the UNPROFOR units in Bosnia, these forces were co-ordinated by NATO, with increasing American political and military leadership. At the end, it was NATO bombing which brought the conflict in Bosnia to an end in 1995 and forced the Bosnian Serbs to make compromises. The US sponsored the diplomatic talks and negotiated the peace agreement in Dayton in November 1995. Thus, it was Washington, and not Europe, which emerged after the first five years of conflict as the main peacemaker in the Balkans. Although this was interpreted as a setback for the EU, one has to mention, to its credit, that the main elements of the peace agreement were based on the principles earlier formulated by the EU, and on the elements of peace plans earlier proposed by the European mediators (such as the so-called Owen-Stoltenberg peace plan for Bosnia). Still, it was clear that the US-led “coercive diplomacy” had proven to be a more adequate instrument for ending a war in the Balkans than the EU sponsored “soft” economic diplomacy. However, as soon as peace prevailed in Bosnia, the EU undertook again a more prominent role in peace-building and post-conflict rehabilitation.

After the Dayton Agreement, the EU was able not only to take the main responsibility for the economic and political post-war reconstruction of the Bosnian State, but also to re-emerge as the main international actor in the region as a whole. The influence of the EU was the result of its economic power, its proximity to the region, but also due to the fact that all the Balkan countries were eager to co-operate with the EU since they aspired to an EU membership.

As far as Bosnia is concerned, the EU provided not only economic help, but also assumed some functions in the security field (police control) and the administration of the country, which was divided into two entities. The EU administered for a few years the city of Mostar (divided between Croats and Muslims), and the Western European Union (defense organisation which is the security arm of the EU) provided the police forces for the city. The city of Brcko (also contested between the Serbs, Croats and Muslims) was also put somewhat later under similar international control. Regarding Bosnia as a whole, the function of the Office of the High Representative for that country is also undertaken by an EU official. He has the power to overrule the laws and decisions of the Bosnian Parliament if they are in contravention with the Dayton Agreement and to make decisions if the local government is unable to reach a consensus, which makes him the highest authority in the country, putting it under a sort of an international protectorate.

The EU and the WEU, as its affiliate, have also intervened and acted in some other countries of the region, in connection with security and stability problems.

In 1997, after nation-wide anarchy and chaos in Albania (which resulted from the collapse of so-called pyramid saving schemes), the EU backed the dispatch of troops (mostly Italian units numbering 6,000 men) to restore order in Albania. The WEU also organised international police operations to assist the Albanian authorities to stabilise law and order in the country.

The WEU organised a de-mining operation in Croatia, and helped to monitor the situation in Kosovo as from 1998 through the imagery provided by the WEU Satellite Centre.

The most important dimension of the EU approach towards the Balkans were, however, the conclusion of the association agreements with some of these countries (so-called Europe agreements), which are regarded as the first step towards eventual EU membership. These agreements were conditioned by the tangible progress of individual countries in two main spheres: the development of a stable market economy and the progress in liberal democracy.

While such different treatment of the SEE countries through the association agreements was primarily the result of different internal situations in each of them, it also illustrated the fact that the EU, until recently, did not have a wholesale strategy towards the region, instead acting on a country-by-country basis and putting them in different categories. This was not conducive to the stability in the region and it also introduced friction and competition between the individual Balkan countries, which were competing for closer ties with the EU. They were not encouraged to co-operate among themselves, but to direct their efforts out of the region, towards Western Europe.

The EU become aware of this deficiency and introduced at the end of 1996 the so-called “regional approach”, which in a way conditioned the EU co-operation with the Balkan countries by their mutual co-operation. The EU commissioner for foreign policy, Hans van Den Broek, expressed this in a simple way: “We cannot co-operate with you, unless you do not co-operate among yourselves”. In other words, the EU asked the Balkan countries to adopt Western European standards for their mutual behaviour (to behave as Europeans). However, this strategy remained largely on a political and declaratory level, and it was not substantiated by concrete economic programmes and incentives. Also, the more developed Balkan countries did not want to be put as hostages of those lagging behind and to wait for them to enter the EU. Therefore, the EU later moderated its strategy and combined it with an individual treatment of the Balkan countries.

Significantly, almost at the same time when the “regional approach” was launched, the USA launched its own initiative towards the Balkans: the so-called South-East European Co-operative Initiative (SECI), aimed at promoting concrete projects and supporting the development of market economy in the region. This shows that both the EU and the USA had strong interests in the region and that they were in that respect not only acting as partners, but also as competitors, or political rivals. Unfortunately, both initiatives did not operate with large funds and they were a far cry from the much-needed sort of a “Marshall Plan” for the Balkans.

During the escalation of hostilities in Kosovo (1998-99) and in particular during the NATO intervention against Yugoslavia, the EU role in the Balkans again diminished and gave way to NATO dominance and US leadership.

However, in the ending phase of the Kosovo conflict and the NATO bombardments, the EU again re-appeared and took credit for the peace deal. It was the EU envoy, the Finnish President Mahti Ahtisaari (together with former Russian PM Victor Chernomyrdin) who presented the peace deal to Milosevic at the beginning of June 1999, and who convinced (of course, with the backing of NATO and US political and military power) the Yugoslav president to give in.

At the same time, even during the bombing campaign, leading EU members advocated the need to develop a more effective post-war EU strategy aimed towards the reconstruction and economic revival of the Balkan region. The German Foreign Minister Joska Fischer, as the chairman-in-office of the EU during that period, proposed in May 1999 an initiative for a “Pact on Stability in Southeastern Europe”, aimed at overcoming a situation of permanent instability and potential conflicts in the region. This was immediately supported by the EU Council of Ministers. According to their conclusions of May 17, 1999, the main goals of the Pact were meant to be the achievement of a long-term stabilisation, security and democratisation and economic reconstruction of the region. Significantly, the “perspective of full integration of these countries into the EU structures -- aiming at the EU membership..” was

also mentioned. The Declaration on the Stability Pact was adopted at a ministerial conference in Cologne (Germany) on June 10, 1999, while the Pact was ceremonially proclaimed at the summit of the members states in Sarajevo.

The Pact on Stability is so far the most comprehensive and most substantial initiative for the Balkans, with much wider aims and a more integral approach than earlier initiatives. Its main political goals are: maintenance of peace in the region, and promotion of its stability and prosperity on the basis of the development of good-neighbourliness, and respect of democracy, human rights and minority rights. It has three main fields of specific projects and activities, grouped in three so-called regional Working Tables. (WT 1 on democratisation and human rights, WT 2 on economic reconstruction, development and co-operation, and WT 3 on defense and security matters).

In addition to the SP, the EU has introduced for the region of the so-called Western Balkans the SAA agreements as another element of its regional strategy, which could best be described as a combination of a regional and an individual approach.

In sum, one should re-emphasise that the EU role in the Balkans has undergone different stages during the past decade. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and especially during the initial phase of Yugoslavia's break-up, the EU (EC at the time) aimed to act almost alone and with great ambition, set to emerge as the main European peacemaker. It largely failed, due to internal institutional limitations and political differences, and during the later stages of the crisis and the escalation of the war, it had to give the military and political leadership to NATO and to the USA, especially during the conflicts in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Kosovo. The US overshadowed the EU not only as the NATO leader, but also as the negotiator of the peace accord in Dayton. However, after Dayton, the role of the EU was steadily on the rise, not only in economic but also in the political and security field, and the EU was also instrumental in reaching the peace deal on Kosovo. At this stage, after democratic changes embracing the whole region, and with a decreasing probability of further conflicts, it is to be expected that the EU will

remain the leading external political actor in SEE (especially as the initiator and co-ordinator of the Stability Pact). It is evident that today it does have a strategy for the region - whether it is the most effective and appropriate one time will tell.

The Changing Situation in the Region of SEE

Parallel with the efforts of the international community to stabilise the region and formulate the best approach to it, the situation in SEE had its own dynamics, which were also relevant for the implementation of the international strategy. During most of the nineties the situation was not encouraging. The region, especially its Western part, engulfed in conflict and, until recently, even a relatively modest goal of basic stability seemed distant and difficult to achieve. However, from the beginning of the year 2000 a wave of changes took place, which opened new perspectives. Without entering into the developments in individual countries, one could conclude that, while in the preceding years the nationalist regimes in the region were reinforcing each other, the political changes that occurred in 2000, almost simultaneously, or within a small time span, in important countries of the region, like Croatia and the FRY, confirmed also that positive processes have synergetic effects. The war leaders and the parties that identified with the war option, which has thrown this region into a cycle of mutual destruction and isolation from civilised Europe, are irrevocably leaving the political scene.

This has lead the Balkans to a new, historical situation: For the first time in history conditions exist to test in practice - also in this region - the validity of the axiom that “democracies do not wage war on one another”. For the first time in their recent history, the Balkan countries share the same “ideology” – a commitment, and not only a declaratory one, for the values of liberal parliamentary democracy, represented by a multi-party political system, market economy, rule of law, and the full respect for individual and collective human rights. For the first time all Balkan countries have the same strategic goal, the entry into the European integration structures, first of all to the European Union.

Although it is evident that not all of them would be able to reach this goal at the same speed, in the meantime they will be forced to uphold in their mutual relations those same European norms and standards and to remove the barriers towards closer co-operation, especially in the economic field.

This new development gives ground to challenge, or to revise two assumptions, or better, two misconceptions, which have fairly often characterised the discussion on Balkan issues. One is the assumption that the Balkans are peaceful only when dominated or ruled by great powers, be it the past Ottoman Empire or the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, or by a bipolar bloc structure emerged from the Second World War. Another assumption is that the Balkans can achieve durable peace and prosperity only if their destiny is left entirely to the Balkan peoples, which was a frequent propagandistic slogan connected with the initiatives (most of them totally unrealistic) for the Balkan co-operation in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century. The history, and especially the most recent one, after the collapse of the bloc structures, and the wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia, and the ensuing intervention of the international community, initially indecisive, but afterwards more and more resolute, have amply shown that the stability of the Balkans requires both these aspects - respect for the legitimate right of the Balkan peoples to decide upon their affairs and their mutual relations, but also the necessity that this is done in full accordance with the accepted international norms and with the help, and, why not, the close scrutiny of the international community, as long as it is needed.

The Balkan democracies are still too young and too fragile to be left alone to the perils of not fully defeated nationalism and authoritarian tendencies. Therefore, it is necessary, especially in those countries where the instability and aggressive policies were most pronounced and where democracy came the last, to keep a longer-term monitoring and engagement of the international community and its institutions at a number of levels.

One should not overlook that the Balkans remain to be the only region of Europe whose stability is faced, if not with open threats, but then

certainly with numerous challenges, which could lead to the renewal and the escalation of tensions and conflicts. For example, this is the only region in Europe where there are still open or latent, border or territorial disputes.

Particularly complex and even more difficult are the unresolved ethnic problems, especially the still open Albanian national question, with potentially serious implications on the stability and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and indirectly also on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The consolidation of the status of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the strengthening of its integrity, as a sovereign state with two entities, are also challenges for the region and for the international community as a whole.

Finally, the FR of Yugoslavia, in spite of democratic changes, or some would argue, because of them, is facing a problem of re-defining the relations between the two federal units. It is important that there is an EU-brokered framework for the definition. Whatever the final outcome, it is of crucial importance that both sides remain committed to the democratic procedures and the negotiated solution of the issue.

While the situation differs from state to state, the region as a whole suffers from structural problems, such as economic inefficiency, high unemployment, uneducated population, the absence of the strong institutions of civil society, lack of respect for the law, and, generally speaking, the absence of democratic culture. These problems require action by the indigenous political forces, but also outside assistance.

What is needed is a long term engagement of the international community, and it would seem that it is assuming such an approach, since the forms and the scope of its activity in the region are widening. This was reflected, inter alia, by the establishment in early 2001, on the basis of the agreement with the Yugoslav government, of the OSCE Mission in the FRY, as well as by the enlargement of the OSCE Mission in Skopje.

There is also a need for a continued international military presence in the region. This is needed not only for the preservation of peace and the prevention of possible threats, but also as a support for diplomacy which still has a lot of work to do in the region. The experiences in the crisis management in the region on the territory of former Yugoslavia show that the combination of these two elements - diplomacy and force - was present in all its stages. It is argued, not without ground, that it was the combination of force and diplomacy that eventually pacified the region.

Significantly, the countries that participated in the conflicts in former Yugoslavia are subjected to the specific measures on the basis of Dayton Peace Agreement, stemming from Article 2 on confidence and security building measures, and Article 4 on arms limitations and reductions. The recently concluded agreement based on Article 5 provides for voluntary measures by the countries of the region and in the neighbouring areas.

In addition to that, the Stability Pacts has its “military” component, too, since the so-called Working Table III contains priorities such as the promotion of civilian control over the army, social reintegration of demobilised military personnel, arms destruction, de-mining etc. This is another illustration of a comprehensive and complex approach of the international community to the establishment of stability in the region, which implies a thorough and complex monitoring of the military component.

However, the assessment of the situation in SEE would not be complete without mentioning the growing degree of multilateral co-operation based on the initiatives coming from the region itself. The SEE countries, after the interruption caused by the war in former Yugoslavia, have renewed their multi-lateral process of regional co-operation, which dated back from the end of the eighties. This process got an impetus after the Dayton Peace Agreement and resulted in the first summit of the Balkan leaders in Greece at the beginning of 1997. After the conflict in Kosovo, the process continued without the participation of Yugoslavia, but it lead to further steps such as its institutionalisation, the adoption of the Charter of Good-neighbourly Relations in the Region in Bucharest,

and the acceptance of the idea of the formation of the Balkan “peace-keeping forces”. Finally, after the democratic change in Belgrade, Yugoslavia rejoined the process and participated in a Balkan summit in Skopje in 2000. At a recent summit in Tirana it assumed the role of the chairman of the process.

Therefore, one could say that the process of profiling the comprehensive approach by the external actors and the process of reprochement and increased co-operation among the internal actors of the region have led to the achievement of basic stability (if not yet a security community) in the area of South Eastern Europe. This relatively improved situation is a proper framework to discuss the achievements and potentials of the regional approach and the Stability Pact.

Stability Pact Assessment

No doubt, the most important new initiative for a long-term regulation of the relations in the region was the adoption of the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe in June 1999. This initiative brought many hopes and expectations, and the results so far are positive, but perhaps still too modest. However, what is important is the fact that the international community treats by this initiative the region as a whole and that it is comprehensive in its scope (e.g. contains a political, an economic and a security dimension). Also mutual co-operation among the countries of the region is here set out as a step towards their integration into Europe, but not as a strict precondition which would discourage the participation of those countries who are wary that their participation in the Pact might slow down their individual path to Europe.

The adoption of the Stability Pact, which was followed also by the holding of the summit of the countries of the region and the EU countries in Zagreb in November 2000, also seemed to indicate that the prevailing part of the international community, as well as the Balkan states themselves, have come to the conclusion that the process of fragmentation in the region should be brought to an end. Other steps that

followed, such as the EU -brokered principles for the redefinition of FRY, seem to convey the same message.

However, while its aims are far reaching, it remains to be seen what the real effects of the Pact will be in practice. The funds that were given to its disposal so far do not give ground to the claim that it is a “mini-Marshall plan for the Balkans”. Initially, the donors have pledged most money for economic reconstruction (1.8 billion US\$), and smaller sums for democratic and institutional development (260 million US\$) and for security and defense related matters (78 million \$).

At a recently held Second Regional SP conference in Bucharest in October 2001 it was reported that the pledges for assistance so far reached 3 billion Euro, indicating a growing trend of contributions, although not yet sufficient to address all the needs of the region. However, while important, the mere volume of financial aid is not the only criterion for the assessment of the SP performance. What is needed is an adequate direction of aid - for relevant projects and involving the growing participation of local stakeholders and actors. Also, the Stability Pact should support projects that stimulate regional co-operation and not autarchy or rivalry. The feedback between the SP strategy and the approach of other international institutions is also important. It has for example, been noted that there is a link between the SP and the regional strategies of the World Bank, The European Investment Bank, and the EBRD.

It is also evident that the SP has stimulated regional co-operation in a number of domains in SEE. This has been the case with the infrastructure and economic projects, but also with the projects in other areas, where co-operation requires very close governmental interaction (police, border control, organised crime, human trafficking, SALW)

The relationship between the SP and the OSCE also remains important. The SP has been launched under the OSCE auspices, and its structure resembles the structure of the OSCE. The OSCE puts the SP in its proper all-European dimension and underlines that European security and co-operation are indivisible - that there can be no lasting stability in Europe

as a whole if there is instability in some of its regions. This message from the FA of 1975 remains relevant today. On the other hand, the OSCE activities in different SEE countries have also acquired the a regional dimension. There are already regular meetings of the heads of the Missions, as well as co-ordination meetings at a working level. It is also worth mentioning that in FRY a memorandum establishing regular consultation between the OSCE Mission and the National Stability Pact Office has been signed and implemented in practice.

Also, the link between the Stability Pact and the Process of Stabilisation and Association with the EU remains of crucial importance. The main driving force and appeal of the Stability Pact was its contribution to the prospect of an EU membership. If the SP is conceived as a surrogate for EU membership than its appeal would be least, irrespective of the economic advantages. This needs to be kept in mind.

While criticism of the SP remains in some aspects valid, it remains to be seen what would be an alternative to such a regional EU-sponsored project, in the absence of a speedy integration of the countries of the region into the EU (which is not realistic). Therefore, the SP deserves support and its potentials should not only be kept in mind, but also developed creatively. After all, was it a mere coincidence that the period after the launching of the SP was also the period in which the democratic processes finally embraced the whole region? Probably not, although the input of the Stability Pact to such a development should not be exaggerated, either. Still, this is an indication that the regional approach, as embodied in the SP, does work.

Conclusions - Importance of the Regional Approach for South East Europe Countries, especially the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

The regional approach is not a panacea or an answer to all the issues and problems, but it is a logical approach, since the SEE countries cannot get a green light for the integration into Europe unless they apply European standards in their mutual relations. Having in mind their intention and

probability to enter Europe sooner or later, it is better that they apply these standards at an early, and not at a late stage.

Of course, the process of association of each individual country with Europe can be done only on a country-by-country basis, judging its own performance and democratic and economic achievements. On its road to Europe no state should be tied or slowed down by other less successful or less co-operative states in its neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, it is unrealistic that the admission of the SEE states into the Union will be done "one by one". Experience with the EU expansion, especially "Eastward one" shows that the EU expanded by taking groups of geographically close or in other ways "similar countries" - for example, the admittance of Nordic and neutral States, the forthcoming acceptance of Central European States, Baltic states and two Mediterranean island states. Why should then the region of the SEE be an exception when eventually its turn comes up? It is hard to imagine that just one of the countries from the region would be accepted.

Such a combination of a regional approach with the achieved degree of political consolidation and economic stabilisation of each individual country as a model and criterion for their accession to Europe is recognisable in the different elements of the EU strategy - in the Stability pact, in the earlier Royamont Initiative, in the regional policy of 1996, as well as in the approach to dealing with the issue of redefining of the FRY. It is also noticeable in the policies of individual SEE countries who have combined their efforts to get closer to Europe with the efforts to improve bilateral relations with neighbours (like the breakthrough achieved between the two key countries in the region - the FRY and the Republic of Croatia - achieved at the recent meeting of the two foreign ministers in Belgrade).

However, it is noticeable that the regional approach does not enjoy the same political support in all the SEE countries. Not surprisingly, it is more favoured in those countries that are further from the integration into Europe, than in those that are closer to this perspective. This is natural since the former would have to spend a prolonged span of time in

the regional framework before getting closer to the desired aim of European integration.

In Belgrade, there is no doubt about the advantages of a regional approach and regional co-operation, including projects such as the Stability pact. After all, the Stability Pact was the first international institution to which the FRY was admitted after the democratic changes (on October 24, 2002). Last week, at the Council of Europe Ministerial meeting in Vilnius, the foreign minister of the FRY, speaking in his capacity as the current chairman of the Process of Co-operation in the SEE, has pleaded for a greater co-operation between and harmonisation of different regional initiatives in order to define priorities and fields of co-operation.

At the same time, it is clear that the support of the regional co-operation by authorities from the FRY is closely linked to the process of achieving stabilisation and an association agreement with the EU. As long as regional co-operation and a regional approach serve this purpose, there will enjoy a high degree of support. Also, if regional co-operation is an opportunity to prove the democratic credentials of the country in the regional framework and its readiness to reconcile and establish partnership relations with the neighbours, the regional approach will be perceived as an advantage and not as a burden.

Generally speaking, it would seem that the advocacy of the regional approach, both by external sponsors and regional actors, in order to be effective, and not counterproductive, should take into account two considerations. Firstly, the uncritical and unconditional insistence on the regional approach as the *conditio sine qua non* for a European perspective is bound to create apprehension and perception of designs of creating or re-creating regional associations dominated by local powers or kept as an international quasi-protectorate for a prolonged period. Secondly, the rejection or disqualification of any regional approach and regional co-operation can be perceived as an attempt to isolate other countries of the region and to leave them at the margins of Europe.

Therefore, the most appropriate approach would be the combination of a regional approach and the European perspective, thus avoiding to give ground for selective interpretations. It is also vital that the regional approach and regional co-operation maintain the support of the EU - without such a support no regional initiative can be expected to advance.

It is fair to assume that the role of the EU will increase, as the prospects of the EU membership grow closer for the Balkan countries (this process has already started with the conclusion of the association agreements). As was said before, all Balkan countries are for the first time united in the single aim to integrate into Europe, and all of them share for the first time in recent history the same ideology (liberal democracy and market economy). Therefore, the geopolitical meaning of the term "Balkan" will gradually lose its original (mainly negative) connotation, and the region will eventually simply become the Southeastern part of a united Europe. Still, even then it will remain, for a considerable time, the least developed region of Europe, and the EU will probably have to retain a special policy towards the region even after it has been integrated into its ranks.

It is also likely that the strategy of the USA and the EU towards the Balkans, while relying during the period of peace predominantly on economic and political means, will also keep a military component, namely the reliance on a long term presence of Western military forces in the region, in various forms, but as guarantor of peace and a deterrent to the renewal of conflicts. This will be combined by putting under strict control local military forces (inter alia, by integrating them into structures like "Partnership for Peace") and by measures to prevent any disturbing of a regional military balance. In that vain, the armies of the Balkan states, especially those that participated in the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, are being put under multidimensional international surveillance and subjected to concrete limitations and reductions.

In this context, the membership in the "Partnership for Peace" is of particular importance for the security of all states in the region of South Eastern Europe, and for the establishment of durable stability in the region. Although one should not overestimate the scope of this initiative,

because it is, after all, only a first step or a “waiting room” for a NATO membership, it nevertheless contains important elements, such as joint military exercises, assistance in military training, and, in particular, the promotion of democratic control over the army, which is of special importance for until recently warring parries in the conflicts in the Balkans. Stability presupposes predictability, and belonging to the same military organisation introduces a certainty that possible disputes among its members would not escalate into an open rift or a military confrontation. Belonging to the same organisation is also an additional guarantee for the territorial integrity of member states, and it eliminates mistrust or antagonistic attitudes towards the only military alliance in Europe – NATO. Because of all these factors, the entry of all SEE countries, including the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, into the Partnership for Peace would be a useful and logical step, which should dispel possible doubts by its neighbours with respect to its long-term military-political orientation. For the sake of stability in Southeastern Europe, it is of vital importance that all the countries of the region belong to the same military organisation.

For the future of the Balkans, it is encouraging that all Balkans states share the same aim - an integration into Europe. If some time ago it was considered in some of those countries that a formation of national states is a ticket to get more rapidly into Europe, now it is clear that the entry into European integration requires giving up certain elements of sovereignty and transferring them to Brussels. This can also be positive for the de-escalation of the tensions in the regions itself, because national sovereignty is not any more a supreme aim. However, the stabilisation of the situation in the Balkans requires that the cessation of fragmentation on a wider scale is accompanied by the processes of regionalisation and de-centralisation within the societies and states, because only such a combination can deal with and absorb internal economic, political and ethnic contradictions, which are characteristic of the majority of the countries in the region.

It is, however, indicative, that practically all Balkan states proclaim their belonging to a European identity, and not to some specific or common Balkan identity. This points out that there is not much ground for the

thought that the Balkans could be constituted into as a distinct European region in the economic, political or cultural sense (some common elements are identifiable, but they are not sufficient for forming a separate identity). However, European orientation and the acceptance of European norms would inevitably straighten integrative links in the region. Whether they will be strong enough to create a regional identity remains doubtful. It seems that the process of forming a Balkan as a distinct European region is overcome and encompassed by the wider process of all-European integration, towards which all the states of the region are striving. And this is most important: It is not crucial that the region as such enters Europe, but that Europe embraces the region and “Europeanise” it.

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