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## SOME ASPECTS OF THE REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE BALKANS

*Mariya Grozeva*<sup>\*1</sup>

\* National Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Department of Geography, Sofia, Bulgaria

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**Abstract:** Since the beginning of the 21st century, the political role of the state borders in the Balkans has changed. Gradually they began to transform from barriers into zones of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The common European integration includes the creation and development of Euro-regions. Within the context of reorganization of the new European space, geopolitical importance of South-East Europe has significantly upgraded. This fact reflects on the interests of the international community in security and development of this region. Despite that the Balkans constitute an indispensable part of the European continent, their incorporation into the new European architecture has been particularly difficult and problematic. They emerge as the most volatile and least integrated European region. There are significant variations among the countries concerning their territory, number of population, as well as the rate of the economic changes. The main forms of regional cooperation should be concentrated on the domains of transport, energy and communication infrastructure, trade and economic cooperation, environment and security. From this point of view, the economic growth and increase of living standard are the most important problems for all Balkan countries.

**Key words:** European integration, cross-border cooperation, economic changes

### Introduction

The Balkans are an integral part of the European area, but their entire inclusion into the European structures is still quite problematic. However, it is a strongly expressed desire of all countries in the region already. The declared desire for cooperation and mutual assistance of the countries is one of the first and fundamental steps in this regard, although the adjustment of Southeast Europe to EU standards will take a lot of time and resources and it would be naive to expect that the region will reach in 15–20 years and with limited potentials, results that Western Europe has achieved for centuries and with huge material and human resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: [mariya\\_grozeva@abv.bg](mailto:mariya_grozeva@abv.bg)

### **Cross-border cooperation (CBC) through the creation of Euro-regions**

Since most direct connections and relationships of a single country are carried out with its first-rank neighbors, so one of the successful examples of European integration is the creation of Euro-regions whose main objectives are:

- Border cooperation leading to overcome the spacing between adjacent areas and communities with similar interests and problems and their accelerated development in all spheres of social, economic and cultural life;
- Increase entrepreneurial cooperation, leading to the free movement of goods, capital and services, and hence connectivity with the larger European market for goods and services and the labor market;
- Gradual adoption of European standards for environmental protection and combating natural disasters;
- Expansion of regional cooperation in transport, communications, energy and related infrastructure;
- Promoting priority of highly efficient agriculture and small and medium enterprises in the manufacturing sector;
- Promoting the development of high technologies and creation of information societies;
- Regional cooperation in tourism, education, health, sports and so on.

The Balkan region is far from the greatest contemporary urban and economic centers of Europe overall, which is an obstacle in its economic development. And despite its important political, economic and cultural significance as a bridge and hub between East and West, today it is the least integrated region with an area of approximately 800,000 km<sup>2</sup> and about 60 million inhabitants.

### **Major common economic difficulties facing the Balkan countries**

For all Balkan countries, it will be particularly difficult to create a competitive economy with modern infrastructure and advanced technologies. Their main and most important economic and infrastructural problems are listed briefly below. Economies of all countries are heavily dependent on the primary sector, which is mainly developed by agriculture. The secondary sector is relatively developed and the tertiary has limited advance. There are significant differences not only between countries, but also between their regions. The main problems in transport are: lack of appropriate transport axes; relief, which significantly raises the cost of creating adequate infrastructure; elements for regional and cross-

border cooperation are the construction and modernization of the trans-European corridors No. 4, 8, 10 and 9 sections; and the construction of envisaged priority pipelines. The main disadvantages in the field of electricity transmission network are: obsolete moral and technical facilities with sufficient capacity; and problems associated with the distribution of the energy market. In telecommunications, there are regional disparities and outdated network. The adaptation of the institutional framework to modern European standards also delays. These are some of the most important common difficulties that could only be addressed based on good neighborliness and mutually beneficial cooperation, such as the implementation of joint investment projects and financing.

The Balkans could be in the enviable position of the door for trade, economic, cultural and other relations between the developed industrial countries of Western Europe and the countries of the Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East and South Asia. That is why in the field of transport, communications and infrastructure European structures (mainly EU and European Central Bank) and other international financial organizations would support projects and opening borders. And that means that we must take vigorous steps for collaboration. Gradually, in the countries of the peninsula processes that promise political and economic development begin to appear along the lines of the model in Western Europe. For this purpose, apart from its own resources, the region also needs fresh direct investments. They come from various funding sources — pre-accession programs for the candidate countries and structural funds for EU members.

Allowing the general political and economic problems will increase stability and investment attractiveness of the whole region. Action in this direction is signed in Brussels, a Memorandum of creating a common free trade zone between Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, FYR Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on this document the countries started bilateral negotiations on liberalization of trade between them. According to it, tariffs on some goods are eliminated on bilateral basis, while others will have a transitional period. As one of the most important steps in this regard is the opening of borders and transformation of them from barriers into areas of cooperation. Attempts to accelerate cross-border cooperation were still at the end of the 90s of the 20th century through the participation of scientists from all Balkan countries — geographers, economists, regionalists, etc. — in programs financed by the European Union — ITERREG II and INTERREG II C. A number of publications and reports in proceedings are devoted to the

implementation of these programs (European Space and Territorial Integration Alternatives [ESTIA], 1998; 1999; 2000).

### **Opening of the borders of the Republic of Bulgaria with the neighboring countries**

In connection with the above, six border check-points (BCPs) have already been established on the border with Serbia: Bregovo, Vrashka chuka, Kalotina, Strezimirovtsi and Oltomantsi. Yet another is to be opened at Salash–Novo Korito near Belogradchik. On the border with FYR Macedonia border checkpoints are at Gueshevo, Lagodazh (Stanke Lisichkovo) and Zlatarevo. Three new crossings will be opened: Strumiani–Berovo, Simitli–Pehchevo and Nevestino–Delchevo.

For their realization some more things need to be done on the Bulgarian side: the reconstruction and expansion of the E-871 (1–6) road in the section Radomir–Kyustendil–Gyueshevo, railway connection with a length of 2.5 km from the station to Gyueshevo border and railway connection Radomir–Gueshevo, with a length of 88 km. It is essential to intensify further activities under the project “Transit Roads IV”, which is monitored by the European Commission.

The largest number of checkpoints operate at our Southern border with Greece: Kulata–Promahon, Gotse Delchev–Drama, Rudozem–Xanthi, Zlatograd–Komotini, Ivaylovgrad–Dimotika and Novo Selo–Ormenion. In the Southeastern border with Turkey three checkpoints operate: in Kapitan, Andreevo, Lesovo and Malko Tarnovo. The agreement is signed for opening another one in Rezovo.

At this stage, transport links with Romania across the Danube River are carried out through bridges at Ruse–Giurgiu and Vidin–Calafat and by ferry complexes: Silistra–Calarasi, Ruse–Giurgiu, Svishtov–Zimnicea, Nikopol–Turnu Magurele and Oryahovo–Beckett (the busiest line). The use of land connections through checkpoints in Silistra, Yovkovo and Durankulak due to lack of transport infrastructure of international importance over the past two decades has decreased. One of the projects of the EC was the rehabilitation of the 14 km stretch of road II 29 Kardam–General Toshevo. It is one of the three projects agreed by the Bulgarian-Romanian Committee on planning for cross-border cooperation for the municipality of Dobrich. Effective cross-border and interregional cooperation depends very much on the construction of facilities for crossing the Danube. They are important for linking transport network in Bulgaria with those of Central and Western Europe. The second bridge over the river at Vidin–Calafat is a new connection with Romania. Part of this project is

the reconstruction of the road E-79 from Montana to Vidin. The intersection of Corridors No. 7 and No. 4 at the Danube Bridge will push forward the development of two border areas and will help to create the planned Euroregion Vidin–Dolj (Grimm, 1998).

### **Examples of cross-border cooperation between the Balkan countries**

The establishment of Balkan Euro-regions will contribute much to the establishment of permanent bilateral and trilateral relations. This is a sure way to attract investment from the EU and other funding sources. In Skopje, in 2000 the Forum of Cities and Regions of South-East Europe was held. In terms of cross-border cooperation with the Republic of FYR Macedonia main potentials for development of the territory can be outlined as follows: natural environment with preserved ecologically pure component; existence of significant thermal-mineral water resources; very good conditions for winter tourism and sports; preserved cultural, historical and architectural sites; development of agriculture, mainly of early and medium early vegetables and fruits and the development of wine production; opportunities for development of infrastructure and creation of new border checkpoints (Kolev, 2004).

An agreement between Bulgaria and Greece was signed and the Euro-region “Nestos–Mesta” was established. Regular meetings are held between the local authorities of Haskovo district in Bulgaria and Evros district in Greece. Exchange of goods and transport services is carried out between Haskovo district and Edirne province in Turkey. Nearly 30 mayors of the border municipalities of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey became associated in Euro-region “Maritsa”. The beginning of formation of the Euro-region “Rodopi” is launched by signing a cooperation agreement between the Association of Rhodope municipalities (ARM) in Bulgaria and the Greek Association “Delta-Rodopi”. Experts from two countries have developed a system of Bulgarian enterprises and markets within the program INTERREG II-C and introduced the INTERREG III B, concerning the Greek regions of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

Twin municipalities of Zlatograd and Hrisopuli began collaboration with a contract signed to supply lead-zinc ore from Greece for enrichment in Zlatograd. In terms of cross-border cooperation with FYR Macedonia main potentials for development of the territory can be outlined as follows: natural environment with preserved ecologically pure component; existence of significant thermal-mineral water resources; very good conditions for winter tourism and sports; preserved cultural, historical and architectural sites; development of agriculture,

mainly of early and medium early vegetables and fruits and the development of wine production; opportunities for development of infrastructure and creation of new border checkpoints. The development of the eighth transport corridor could also provide ample opportunities for convergence of the region. Integration processes have also dimension in mutual use of national air spaces (NAS) of the member states of the European Union. In order to lower the costs of their use, to improve the management of air navigation and to reduce the pollution from a large amount of consumed fuel, already concrete measures have already been taken. In the opinion of experts and from geographical position it is logical, such functional consolidation of the NAS to start from countries which are neighbors. Bulgaria also joined this important work. The beginning was a negotiation between the Bulgarian and Romanian national body responsible for air navigation. Therefore, among the authorities for air traffic management in Bulgaria and Romania a common functional block has already been created, which guides the use of the NAS for air traffic in both countries. To achieve this goal, several consultative meetings were previously held between Air Traffic Services of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Romanian National Authority for the management of aviation (Romatsa), experts of IATA and experts from the chosen consultant on this project Danish company “Integra”. With the establishment of this joint Bulgarian-Romanian functional block called “Danube FAB” (Danube functional aviation block), both countries are preparing for accession to the Schengen airspace of the European Union.

### **Cross-border cooperation in the sphere of tourism**

Good prospects for the regional cooperation of the Balkans exist in the field of tourism too. One of the most important potential guidelines for cooperation between Bulgaria and other, mainly neighboring countries is the development, financing and implementation of joint projects. Cross-border tourist relations, cultural and historical routes and products can and should be formed with neighboring countries. For example, to preserve the natural and cultural-historical heritage in border areas in 2000 and 2001 in the Serbian city of Kladovo two workshops were held between experts from Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania, establishing a Euro-region “Iron Gates” around the relevant section of the river Danube. It was suggested to create an interregional park Djerdap — Iron Gate. Such an opportunity by creating a cross-border integrated natural and historical park or area covering the vicinity of Kladovo (Serbia), Vidin (Bulgaria) and Turnu Severin (Romania) analyzed and justified Stojkov and Stojkov-Sutilovic (2000). For this purpose, Kolev and Grozeva (2000) proposed a set of cultural and historical antiquities located in Vidin region. The authors argued the existence of a unique landscape and rich cultural heritage in the

Bulgarian area and in the border areas of two other countries. On this occasion, a meeting was held between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria and his colleagues from Serbia and Romania. Bulgaria was presented to the international tourist Fair Philoxenia in Greece and tourism market in Albania. The countries of the region proposed an initiative to participate with a total package of tourist services on the Western European market, which will make each of them more competitive. For example, if your holiday starts from the Adriatic coast of Albania, it could continue to Dubrovnik, Montenegro, Bulgaria, FYR Macedonia, Turkey and others, offering the most interesting places from the Balkans. A step in this direction was approved by a memorandum of cooperation for the development of a joint project entitled “Cultural tourist route — On the Road of Roman Emperors” in 2012 by the Bulgarian government. The document envisages regulations exchange, exchange of experts in archeology, conservation and preservation of the Roman heritage, conducting coordinated activities to stimulate cultural tourism, joint representation in international tourism fairs and markets.

Besides the geographical proximity there are other solid facts and arguments that can serve as proof of the possibilities for more intensive cooperation in the cultural and historical tourist sphere with neighboring countries. For example, with respect to Greece, similar prehistoric monuments can also be referred; objects from Ancient Greece and Ancient Thrace (proper Thracian, as well as ones created under Greek cultural influence, dominant in IV–III century BC); same religion to Eastern Orthodoxy (similarity in religious rituals, temple architecture, iconography, etc.); reserved in one degree or another medieval Byzantine and Bulgarian monuments in both countries and others. Such opportunities exist with other Balkan Orthodox countries like Romania, Serbia, FYR Macedonia and Montenegro. The International Scientific Conference of this kind, “Cultural Corridor Sofia–Ohrid–Cultural tourism without boundaries” was held in 2011, whose meetings were held in Kyustendil and Ohrid. After two years, the initiative was extended to next such international conference entitled “Via Diagonalis–Cultural tourism without boundaries”, whose meetings were held in October 2013 in Sofia and Belgrade.

A loud argument with respect to the discussed topic is the awareness of the need to deliver joint presentation and marketing of tourism products, rather than suffering losses from competition (Grozeva, 2009). Naturally, competition cannot be avoided entirely, and it is not necessary, but could be reduced where it is more profitable for the parties. A good example is the initiative of the Ministers of Tourism of Bulgaria and Greece to create joint tourist product (program) “Rhodope mountains — the native land of Orpheus”. In order to

promote broad tourism potential and cultural heritage of the entire Balkan region other ideas can be realized too. With good organization and combining the interests of different countries, the launching of common satellite may be agreed, which will provisionally be called BALKANTOURSAT and among its other functions can be used for tourist promotion and advertisement of cross-border cultural and historical axes (routes) (Grozeva, 2014).

### Conclusion

In the conclusion, we can say that people inhabiting the Balkan Peninsula possess many common problems in economic development, as well as analogue features in psychology, traditions, customs, folklore, etc., which is mainly the result of their common historical past and destiny in previous epochs. Accordingly, their common aspiration to join the European structures and similar interests require the establishment of general principles in carrying out their regional policies. The directives enshrined in the Charter for regional development in the EU are the basis for this, adopted in 1983 in the Spanish city of Torremolinos. Past experiences and practices in the world clearly show that integration into international structures is impossible without successful regional cooperation.

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