Regionalism and regional integration have emerged as growing factors in global politics. However, there is an on-going debate over the nature of and distinctions between regional and sub-regional cooperation. Definitions of regions and/or sub-regions are problematic and often contentious. According to a leading expert on European regionalism, sub-regions are “geographical political spaces which are sub-sets of a larger regional space”, i.e. a continent (Cottey 2009: 5). However, the bulk of analysts prefer the term of regional cooperation. That is why the present paper has embraced the latter terminology.

Regional Initiatives: Weaknesses and Strengths, Rationales and Roles

The regional cooperation initiatives in Europe emerged by the end of the Cold War, but their potential has been fully developed and come to fruition only in the post-Cold War era.

The regional groups established in the 1990s were both a response to the freeing up of the political space and the sense of security vacuum in the immediate post-Cold War environment as well as to the various new policy and security challenges facing governments in the region.

A second phase in the evolution of post-Cold War European regionalism was triggered in the late 1990s and early 2000s by the eastward enlargement of NATO and EU and the end of major wars in former Yugoslavia. Back in 1999, when the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (SP) was launched, the concept of regional cooperation was not exceptionally welcome in South Eastern Europe (SEE). At that time, some countries feared that regional coop-
eration was proposed to them as an antechamber or an alternative to European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Moreover, by and large, the SP was led by the international community, which set priorities and put pressure on SEE countries to make them work together.

By the late 2000s, the landscape has changed once more. Not being anymore “the Cinderellas of European security” as in the 1990s (Bailes 1997: 27), the various regional cooperation initiatives have become recognized features of the European economic, political, diplomatic and security landscape, although not always particularly outstanding ones. Today the concept of regional cooperation is widely accepted and the mainstream message is that regional cooperation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration are two processes inextricably intertwined and cooperating with neighbours is both a mandatory element of the path to the EU and NATO as well as a valuable reinforcement to domestic economic, political and social reforms. Moreover, with the transformation, on 27 February 2008, in Sarajevo, of the internationally sponsored SP into a regionally owned and led framework, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the transition from the top-down to the bottom-up regionalism was completed.

Currently, almost all regional cooperation initiatives exist on the periphery of or outside the EU/NATO zone of integration and, to a large extent, they function as mechanisms for managing relation between that zone of integration and the countries and areas beyond it.

Any assessment of regional groups’ roles should begin by recognizing their in-built limits. They are lightweight compared to major international organizations, poorly institutionalized, high on rhetoric and with little impact, marked by institutional inertia and cannot completely overcome national, ethnic, territorial, and cultural cleavages. Moreover, their overall effectiveness seldom depends on the less developed member countries, due to the principle of convoy and to the fact that the more developed participating states are not usually as interested in regional arrangements as the less developed ones (Pop 1999: 33).

In contrast, their strengths are far more numerous. They can act as a bridge over a multifaceted diversity related to religious, cultural, and political traditions and orientations, as well as dissimilar levels of economic development and military strength, improving inter-state relations and opening communication channels, ability which is particular important for the dissipation of the new potential fault lines resulting from NATO and EU enlargement. This is particularly valuable for cases in which in cooperative efforts are involved countries whose bilateral relationships are affected by “bad” legacies.
of the past and resentment - arising from the perception in one state that it was “falling behind” others - is present (Greenfeld 1992: 15-16). Moreover, they have a positive impact upon the energy and the environmental security, market economy development, democracy promotion and civil society development, as well as on combating the new transnational security threats, like terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, the traffic in human beings, drugs, small and light weapons (SALW) and fissionable nuclear material, and irregular migration. There is also a strong, yet intricate, link between the EU/NATO enlargement and regional cooperation as the two processes have proved to be largely complementary, although at times part of the logic of EU and NATO membership has worked against regional cooperation. Furthermore, they involve state-to-state, region-to-region, and people-to-people cooperation, state and non-state actors, “top-down” (formal contacts between states) and “bottom-up” (local authorities, social and professional groups and non-governmental organizations) participation. Last but not least, they may decrease the centre-periphery tensions and the sense of relative economic and political deprivation (Katz 1999: 75-99), provided that adjoining regions belonging to neighbouring states with dissimilar levels of economic and political development and statuses vis-à-vis NATO/EU are involved, and minorities, which are majorities in other states involved in cooperation, reside in them.

In sum, regional groups have multifarious roles to play: Firstly, they have a bridging role. Their bridging function is essentially political as they allow NATO and EU members, aspirants, and non-candidates to continue meeting and talking to each other and are able to cross geopolitical boundaries, bridge varied divides, overcome friction and misunderstanding between adjoining civilizations, cultures and ethnic groups, and heal historical wounds. Secondly, they are means of helping states to integrate into EU and NATO. Thirdly, they are means of addressing specific transnational challenges. Fourthly, they are facilitators of internal reforms in the post-communist states.

However, the prevailing opinion is that there is an over-proliferation of such initiatives, often not only with overlapping membership, but domains of cooperation as well, with the end result of dispersing resources and blurring the distinction between them. From the latter point of view, South Eastern Europe (SEE) regionalism already presents itself as a jungle of initiatives and acronyms.

Furthermore, there are still some unsolved inconsistencies related to the regional integration and cooperation processes. First, there is a certain disparity between the EU conditionality accession criteria and the need for enhanced
regional cooperation. Second, the current significant drive for state formation in the region hampers the regional integration imperative. Third, putting aside the subjective issue of some countries’ rejection of their belonging to the Balkans, more difficulties on the way of regional cooperation arise from the fact that the SEE area is hardly a region at all. There is also the perception that the Eastern Balkans generate stability and have a record of integration and region-building activities, whereas the Western Balkans are characterized mainly by wars, disintegration, various conflicts, hatreds and instabilities. Further divisions arise because different SEE countries are at different stages in the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes; they encompass different economic, demographic, and military potentials; they are different in their ethnic and religious outlook; they have different historical experiences and political traditions; and they perceive regional cooperation differently.

The present paper starts from the premise that stabilising the SEE area is a joint international community and regional endeavour. Neither regional integration by itself nor Euro-Atlantic and European integration alone can stabilize the region. Consequently, deciphering which initiatives – international, Euro-Atlantic, European, regional, sub-regional or a combination of them – have been effective in improving the security climate and on what level, is a prerequisite for a robust security strategy in the region. A tentative best practices approach could offer some hints about improving coordination between Euro-Atlantic and European integration and regional cooperation. This would overcome the current tension between the principles of bilateral conditionality as the essential basis of both EU’s Accession Process and Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), on the one hand, and regionalism on the other.

Regional Top-Down Initiatives

One possible model of top-down regional security cooperation is NATO’s South East Europe Initiative (SEEI). A prime contribution of SEEI has been the South East Europe Common Assessment Paper (SEECAP) on regional security challenges and opportunities. With the aim to evaluate security challenges in SEE and to identify some opportunities for international cooperation, SEECAP was designed as a general, flexible index for the regional priorities, thus promoting the principle of regional ownership. Its significance is that SEECAP is the first comprehensive common document on security perceptions and priorities of the countries of the region. SEECAP is based on the idea that common perceptions of the security challenges facing the region would promote common action to address these challenges and ultimately lead to security strategies and defence planning based on these common perceptions.
A second major contribution of NATO’s SEEI to the long-term stability of the region has been the South East Europe Security Cooperation Steering Group (SEEGROUP), an advisory forum on security issues developed in the SEEI framework, which has benefited from the NATO International Secretariat’s expertise. Comprising 32 members, representing 20 NATO countries and 12 Partner nations, the SEEGROUP has several aims. First, it contributes to the support of NATO clearinghouse mechanism. Second, it identifies the existing shortcomings in the international assistance for regional security. Third, it promotes expert cooperation, and finally, it harmonizes and coordinates the relevant regional projects.

SEEGROUP has closely followed the drafting and adoption of SEECAP and the group was involved in the process of periodically screening and implementation of it. SEECAP follow-ups coherently enlarged the issue areas its members addressed to cover a large spectrum of military and non-military threats, including terrorism.

Another success story is the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative Regional Centre for Combating Transborder Crime (SECI Centre) in Bucharest. The SECI Centre is the only international law enforcement organisation that brings together police and customs representatives from 12 SEE states. Some of its various task forces, such as the ones on trafficking in human beings, drug trafficking and commercial fraud, were more active than other. Last but not least, in the area of fighting organised crime, due to its trustworthiness and regional impact, the SECI Centre has already got vital international partners such as Europol and Interpol.

If the SEE interior ministers were to form a Southeast European Homeland Defense Ministerial (SEHDM), the new body could be linked with the SECI Centre in order for the SEHDM-SECI nexus to become the organizational locus for implementing a coordinated EU–NATO strategy in the Western Balkans to combat the trafficking of drugs, SALW and human beings. Furthermore, by setting up a regional civil protection coordination centre under SEHDM’s umbrella, the new forum could also be linked with the Southeast European Brigade (SEEBRIG) to deal with issues of civil protection.

The Multinational Peace Force South Eastern Europe (MPFSEE) is another case in point. It has a promising potential for regional crises management as it is meant for possible deployment in UN or OSCE-mandated NATO or EU-led peace support operations. Efforts of providing SEEBRIG with capabilities of participating in disaster relief operations are now evolving within the SEEBRIG Employment in Disaster Relief Operations (SEDRO) frame-
work. However, in order to fulfil this potential, there are challenges to be met, including issues of interoperability, varying levels of engagement, differing capabilities, procurement co-ordination, strained resources and possibilities for full connectivity and complementarity with broader arrangements.

Unfortunately, the most comprehensive framework of regional cooperation, the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe (SP), brought the least tangible results, at least in the security domain. The SP has developed an impressive number of security-related initiatives under Working Table III, including the Stability Pact Anti-Corruption Initiative (SPAI), the Stability Pact Initiative against Organised Crime in South Eastern Europe (SPOC), the Migration and Asylum Initiative (MAI), the Regional Return Initiative (RRI), the Task Force on Trafficking in Human Beings, the Task Force for the Cooperation and Development of Border Management, a Working Group on Regional Civilian Police Training, a Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative (DPPI), an initiative for support of the defence reform and diminishing the human costs of defence downsizing, as well as various initiatives in the area of arms control and non-proliferation, including a Regional Mine Action Group (the Reay Group), a Regional Implementation Plan for dealing with the uncontrolled diffusion of SALW, and a Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre (RACVIAC) near Zagreb, Croatia.

However, overall, these SP initiatives managed to only partially live up to expectations. There are at least six reasons for that. The first one refers to the fact that the Special Coordinator’s Office acted as a mere intermediary, without having operative means of its own and it without being able to recruit and hire people with relevant experience in the region and to get secondments from organisations with expertise in the security areas of concentration. The second one is that being basically inter-governmental and inter-organisational arrangements with no legal status, without significant resources, much planning or implementation capacity of their own, their impact relied on the varying resources, authority, dynamism and seriousness of the designated national representatives. The third reason is related to the fact that the action plans launched under their aegis have been too general, not taking into consideration other existing national or international initiatives in the area or the specifics of local circumstances, which led to lack of efficiency, duplication and no clear-cut division of competences. The fourth reason is that some of the most significant international endeavours in the field continued to bypass the Stability Pact. The fifth reason refers to the fact that the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) became the “voice” of the region within the
Stability Pact rather late, thus materializing the principle of regional ownership. Last but not least, the sixth reason concerns the fact that for the countries that performed better and more effectively in accomplishing their major foreign and security policies goals, the Stability Pact meant the least (Pop, 2003: 138).

More recently, the European Commission has committed itself to support the involvement of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Turkey in the Union for the Mediterranean, and in particular in Euro-Mediterranean events as well as a number of flagship projects (European Commission 2010: 25).

**Regional Bottom-Up Initiatives**

The Southeast Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) Process, as a forum for political dialogue and military co-operation in the region, has reached a certain level of maturity. Its programmes have started to present themselves as an effective whole rather than disconnected parts and to bring tangible results. Moreover, some analysts have suggested that the SEDM could be broadened to include civil emergency planning.

By contrast, the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), bringing together the six Black Sea riparian countries, out of which 3 belong also to the SEE area, is an example of a sub-regional military grouping which remains for now more like a promise rather an accomplishment. However, its significance should not be underestimated as it engages Russia and it is the only naval military structure that has been set up in SEE and Black Sea area in post-Cold War era for search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, de-mining and environment protection operations. Against the background of the implementation of both the concept of the wider Black Sea region and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and in view of the Black Sea harbours’ location along the Eurasian energy transportation corridor, at the crossroads of two key geopolitical axes, namely the Baltic Sea-Black Sea and the Black Sea-Caspian Sea, BLACKSEAFOR’s contribution to the security and stability of the area might increase in future.

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capabilities, procurement co-ordination, strained resources and possibilities for full connectivity and complementarity with broader arrangements.

Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSECO) brings together, besides the 6 littoral states, other 7 South East European states, East European and Caucasus ones – Albania, Armenia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Greece and Serbia and Montenegro. Moreover, other 13 states enjoy observer status, among which 7 are EU Member States (Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Slovakia), and 6 are third countries in relation to the EU (Belarus, Croatia, Egypt, Israel, Tunisia and USA). The observer status has been extended even to a few intergovernmental (The Energy Charter Conference, The Commission for Protecting the Black Sea from Pollution) and non-governmental (The International Club of the Black Sea) organizations. Due to its large membership and high degree of institutionalization, BSECO has imposed itself as the most significant framework for multilateral collaboration within the region.

The initial plan stipulated in the BSECO economic agenda, to set up a free trade area has turned to be unrealistic and has obtained a limited political support. The diversity of the international engagements and the observance by several BSECO Member States of the EU legislation and regulations, have made the establishing of an economic regional regime to become an almost impossible task. The second initial goal, to create a cooperation process based on business interests, remained also unaccomplished, especially because of the fact that the private sector has remained to a large extent outside the decision-making process of the organization. Despite all these, the local elites consider that the organization has the highest impact on the security environment in the Black Sea Region. Indeed, besides the traditional concerns in the economic field, the organization has added to its agenda security concerns. Thus, in 1998, it established a working group to combat organized crime and deal with natural disasters. In 2002 it established working groups to deal with border controls, crisis management, and counterterrorism. In 2004 a network of liaison officers between the interior ministries of the member states was created. Thus, it can be stated that if not by de jure, at least de facto, BSECO has already exceeded its official status as a regional economic organization, undertaking tasks in the security field.

Among the factors which have a negative impact upon the development of BSECO one could mention: the lack of a benevolent leader or sponsor state for the organization, which can take upon itself a good part of its costs (Greece and Turkey playing just partially this role); the existence of some unresolved hard security problems among some of its members; the tendency to avoid
tackling sensitive economic issues; the excessive bureaucratization; and the consensual decision-making mechanism.

The diversity of affiliation to different international organizations of BSECO member states (EU, NATO, World Trade Organization, and so on) remains perhaps the most attractive characteristic of the organization. This diversity will shape the guidelines of the BSECO agenda and the purpose of its activities in the future, including its capacity to play a significant role on the European and international stage and to offer an example of a constructive dialogue between states with different official statutes and asymmetrical developments.

For the Black Sea regionalism is vital BSECO to develop a constructive and structured relationship with other regional and international actors, especially with the EU, which holds not just the resources, but also the expertise of involving in regional projects. The relationship with EU has become a central element of the BSECO agenda, together with the distinct financial instrument which was included in the new financial arrangement for 2007-2013. However, there is an objective limit for the development of this relationship: while the EU objectives are centred on the cross border cooperation, BSECO is and will remain an intergovernmental organization.

As far as the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) is concerned, its defining feature as a non-institutionalized regional cooperation structure grouping 9 SEE states, is the fact that it represents the sole European forum exclusively established and managed by the participant states according to the regional ownership principle, meant to encourage the political dialogue and the consultation in the accession process of the area to the European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Its first major achievement in the security area could be considered the signing in February 2000, in Bucharest, of the first political document to be added to the Stability Pact – the Charter on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation. In recent years, SEECP has given a more prominent profile to the co-operation in fighting terrorism, corruption and illicit trafficking. Moreover, the presence at various SEECP summits of high-level EU representatives testifies for the interest EU is devoting to the grouping’s evolution.

**Regional Cooperation Council – the Flagship Cooperation Organization in SEE**

The RCC inherited from the SP a set of consistent and self-sustainable task forces and initiatives dealing with education, media, parliamentary cooperation, trade liberalization, energy, disaster response and prevention, migra-
tion, defence conversion and so on. Core priorities of the RCC include energy and trade. The regional energy market is now being completely integrated with the EU via the Energy Community Treaty. By the entry into force of CEFTA 2006 SEE is gradually becoming one large free trade area. Moreover, the new CEFTA has got its own secretariat in the premises of EFTA in Brussels. However, a key issue for effectively implementing it remains the establishment of effective dispute settlement mechanisms.

Other crucial elements for the RCC economic cooperation agenda include the SEE Investment Committee and the promotion of information and communication technology through the establishment of a regional Centre for eGovernance Development that will accelerate the pace of eEconomy and eBusiness in the region. The RCC was given an important role in development of Danube Region Strategy, too.

The RCC has also initiated the Western Balkans in 2020 project, a foresight project which intends to develop a scenario for a concerted regional approach of the Western Balkans economies to help face up to most important development challenges of the next century.

In comparison to the former SP, the greatest achievements has been recorded in the Building Human Capital and Justice and Home Affairs areas with three flagship initiatives: Institutionalization of Novi Sad Initiative on monitoring reforms in higher education in the region; Regional Strategy for Research and Development for Innovation for the Western Balkans; and Regional Strategy on Justice and Home Affairs. In the latter domain one should note that a new open sky agreement was signed in April 2008.

In the field of disaster preparedness and prevention the key challenge remains the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Institutional Framework of the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for SEE (DPPI-SEE).

The RCC plugs-in not only the SP legacy, but the SEECP, agenda priorities and the EU strategic policies in SEE, too. Consequently, its ambitions are rather big: main interlocutor of European Commission (EC) on all regional cooperation matters in SEE, the RCC intends to be also a generator of projects, a curator of a culture of mutual understanding and delivery process, as well as a facilitator of European and Euro-Atlantic integration by assisting SEE countries to fulfil conditions for EU and NATO accession and communicating in Brussels that the region is changing.

In order to carry out such an ambitious and multi-faceted role, there are a number of key lessons and suggestions drawn from the SP’s experience
which the RCC might take into consideration: First, the strong interdependence which exists between security and the political, economic and social development of the region. Second, the fact that a certain tension exists between the processes of regional cooperation and European integration and the regional approach is in many ways opposed to the bilateral conditionality imposed by the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Third, the RCC should decide if it is going to be a “hypermarket” or a “specialized shop” as well as if it is going to invest in new initiatives or in the already existent ones. In the past, the SP witnessed an institutional over-proliferation of cooperation frameworks and concluded agreements which proved to be counter-productive for its overall efficiency. Consequently, the RCC support for various regional cooperation initiatives should be strictly prioritized. Fourth, the RCC needs to ensure the coordination and harmonization of various initiatives through linkages in order to avoid their overlapping and duplication. Fifth, the RCC should identify ways and means to eliminate delays in implementing the already concluded cooperation agreements. Sixth, the efficiency and accountability of all parties involved in different projects should be strengthened. Seventh, the RCC needs to secure strong links with the civil society through better contacts within the RCC Secretariat, permanent representatives of civil structures in Brussels and best practices dissemination of civil society projects. Eighth, working to promote a more positive image of the region in Brussels will be crucial for its input (Pop 2008).

For the European Commission (EC) it will matter what is the added value of various regional cooperation initiatives and what kind of stimuli will occur from them. The EC would like to see decisive moves beyond the signing of various Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and amended MoU. What the EC expects from the RCC is to find in it the most important interlocutor for projects of a regional character, involving especially those SEE countries embarked on their way towards EU integration.

That is why perception among some former high ranking representatives of the SP that time will solve things is profoundly wrong. Time only won’t do the job. Patience might well be one of the lessons learnt of the SP, but, contrary to the other lessons, it should not become legal tender with the RCC. SEE has to catch up decades lost in fragmentation and ethnic strife. Both the international community and the region can’t afford for long the current status quo. Therefore, the region doesn’t have much of an option. It has to move fast and act proactive.

The proclamation of Kosovo’s independence has created a new strategic situation on the ground not necessarily supportive to the aim of fast track inte-
igration of the Western Balkans into the EU and NATO. Remarkably enough, though, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement, FYROM expects the opening of its negotiations with the EU, although it was rebuffed on its NATO aspirations due to its dispute with Greece regarding its name, Croatia is advancing on its way towards both EU and NATO accession, Albania is moving ahead towards NATO membership. Croatia and Slovenia have mended their relations by agreeing on the model and mechanism to resolve the border problem that was effecting the EU negotiations of Croatia. There is also an encouraging upward trend in Croatian and Serbian relations as well as fresh impetus in the relations between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina emanating from the recent contacts between the highest state officials (Regional Cooperation Council, 2010: 4).

The regional cooperation’s role as a training ground for EU accession by building institutional capacity remains crucial. Against this background, it would be worth exploring in which way the lessons of the SP could inspire other EU regional strategies and frameworks of regional cooperation – in the Black Sea region, for instance.

To put it in perspective, it is obvious that the RCC tasks are much more demanding than those of the SP. To be sure, the transition from the outside ownership to the genuine regional ownership is a positive move in itself. Theoretically, it opens up the possibility of guiding the regional cooperation process in SEE in accordance with the region’s own priorities, not donors’ preferences. However, paraphrasing Alexander Wendt, a founding father of constructivism in International Relations, one might say that cooperation is what states make of it. In order not to have mere new wine in old vessels and fulfill the great expectations put into it, the new regionally owned and led structure should integrate the lessons learnt in SEE regional cooperation into a process of coherent hands-on strategic planning built on a best practices approach.

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Regional Cooperation for Public Health. The South Eastern Europe Health Network: the past, the present and the future. Briefing Note 13 September 2010. Address requests about publications of the WHO Regional Office for Europe to: Publications WHO Regional Office for Europe Scherfigsvej 8 DK-2100 Copenhagen Å¬, Denmark. The WHO Regional Office for Europe has been the driving force of the cooperation in health in the SEE, through the SEEHN, by providing political, managerial and technical support since early 2001. Together with the CoE, it has also provided secretarial support to the network on two levels, both political and regional. South-South cooperation refers to the technical cooperation among developing countries in the Global South. It is a tool used by the states, international organizations, academics, civil society and the private sector to collaborate and share knowledge, skills and successful initiatives in specific areas such as agricultural development, human rights, urbanization, health, climate change etc. Technical cooperation among these Southern States started as a pioneering associative effort to strengthen their diplomatic and international negotiating power through political dialogue. What is now known as South-South cooperation, derives from the adoption UNODC promotes international and regional cooperation to address foreign terrorist fighters in South Eastern Europe (SEE). 14-16 February 2017, Vienna, Austria: UNODC organized a SEE regional workshop on strengthening international and regional cooperation in criminal matters related to terrorism, with a focus on FTFs. Participants exchanged experiences, challenges, lessons learned and good practices on strengthening international and regional cooperation in criminal matters related to terrorism, with a focus on FTFs. (For info on this and last: Maria Lorenzo Sobrado). UNODC supports national capacities of Serbia to address challenges related to foreign terrorist fighters.