FUNCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF BALKAN BORDERS IN THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN COOPERATION AND INTEGRATION

Potentials, constraints and preconditions of integrated development of the Balkan region

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In the recent past, huge parts of the Balkans were overcast with conflicts and destruction activities, which had harmful consequences upon the entire Southeast Europe, deepening the already existing negative undertone linked with the Balkans. This area’s peripheral position, not only in geographic, but also economic and political terms makes it rather difficult to join in the European integration process. In the paper, some considerations were made to the altering functions of the still inflexible borders, as to how to intensify cross-border cooperation and enable a more freely flow of people, goods and information. Furthermore, the potentials and the importance of culture are being explored in respect to the possible integration of the Balkans. Several cultural axes have been stressed, along which similar cultural identification patterns occur. To illustrate the benefits of a regional association, based on common development interests, goals and regional identity, the case of the Baltic Sea Region was presented as a possible way of how to promote a macroregion.

Key Words: peripheral position, border functions, cross-border cooperation, institutionalised Balkan Region, integration potentials of culture, cultural axes, example of the Baltic Sea Region

INTRODUCTION

The outlines of the global economy, global communication systems, standardised behaviour, cultural and thinking patterns slowly, but inevitably start to pervade the Balkans. In the overall race to follow and adapt to the new global political and economic milieu, Balkans and Southeast European states more often consider themselves envious, than nearest neighbours. The integration and a close relationship with the EU are considered much more desirable than intensive, diverse and dynamic relations with surrounding countries. This is, however, a specific paradox, since the intended essence of the united Europe consists precisely in establishing close and intrinsic relations with neighbours and the articulation and realisation of mutual interests. This is aimed at preventing conflicts, which in not so distant past have caused immeasurable damages to the entire Europe. To be ready for Europe i.e. the EU means not only economic qualifications, but also a sound, reliable and advanced atmosphere in all activity domains of the overall macro-region.

In the last decade, in ex-Yugoslavia, dreadful conflicts and war destruction prevailed to the detriment of sensible behaviour, thus bringing about unforeseen impairment to the overall Southeast European area. In emphasising the discords we have forgotten what unites us and what for its idiosyncrasies adds value to the diversity and richness of the European continent. It is time to reinstitute common values, common cultural and historic heritage and to invert the negative connotations linked to the notion of the Balkan identity.

Nowadays peripherality of the Balkan countries has its historical, political and economic reasons (Strategies, 2000, p. 18). The history had been generating cultures and traditions quite different from the West European. The Iron Curtain has isolated most of those countries for decades, effecting a disintegrating economy and a lagging development in terms of technology, quality and productivity, consequently widening the gap between East and West of the continent. Once this region had been a vivid spring and a conflux of European cultures, but for the reasons of mighty forces and an unfathomable doom it has become periphery. Nonetheless, it holds ample opportunities and hidden reserves for the future. One of them is inherent to the tradition of Balkan societies: living together at the periphery. The practice offers many proofs that individuals and
families in urban peripheries stick much more together and rely on each other, than to central parts. The same spirit might prove true for Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania or Greece.

Overwhelmingly dominant political powers in the modern era, most of them unaware or simply ignorant of local traditions, produced new behaviour and thinking patterns of the nations involved, inducing conflicts and contradictions among them by imposing different ideologies and consequently different political, social and economic systems. On the other hand, for the truth's sake, we did not respond as a close-knit crew but as immature and irrational societies. As a result, particularly in the 20th century, from the Balkan wars in 1912-1913 to the most recent ones during the nineties, many new borders have emerged dividing people, economic markets and money flows, thus also fading valuable cultural, scientific and artistic links.

NEW BORDER FUNCTIONS

Borders have two principal functions—the barrier and the contact function. They are strong marks of the group unity, symbols of the national identity. Borders and the geographic silhouettes of a space perceived as one's own are not emotionally neutral. Therefore, the national identity is inconceivable without the symbolism of the state's territory. However, the fatherland's spatial form might invoke an immense emotional charge, and very often, as in the case of ex-Yugoslavia this emotional charge was misused to mystify the "sacred" fatherland, inciting armed conflicts and aggression. Consequently, the borders were divided into "good" and "bad," together with a genetic division into natural and artificial (Mirko Grlic, p.54).

On the other hand the formula divide et impera, was used by powers to control and influence Southeast Europe. The same is true for the so-called internal peripherality, where more than 50% of the CADSES countries' territories might be regarded as border regions (VISION PLANET - Strategies for Integrated Spatial Development of the Central European Danubian and Adriatic Area, p.118). The new era, at the turn of the century, is marked by new political attempts for uniting and developing Balkan countries, as a future component of the growing European family. This whole area of Europe is regarded as one of most notable, but also most fragile subjects of the European integration process (VISION PLANET, 2000, p.57). Accordingly to the Strategy for Integrated Spatial Development of CADSES, the spatial integration of these countries means bringing closer different geographic sites, regions and mental maps, facilitating fast, frequent and non-bureaucratic movement of people, goods and information by making borders as permeable and as "ethereal" as possible (VISION PLANET, 2000, p.57). Therefore, priority should be given to cross-border co-operation and the establishment of Euroregions. Finally, opening new border crossings and border bridges, together with the reinforcement of maritime links should also be one of the priorities for this area. Living together in such a turbulent region means re-establishing and fostering the trusting and reliance between Balkan countries. This also implies an intensive and exhaustive discussion of institutions and administrations. Last but not least, the intellectuals, who repeatedly beguiled people to draw lines of differences thus galvanising conflicts and confrontations, are expected to play a redefined role in the process of the reconciliation. Learning to live together involves a profound dialogue of partner countries from the CADSES area and the European Union supporting efforts to overcome the centre/periphery dichotomy and to establish a new multicentric matrix of united Europe.

The Balkan countries (Bosnia&Herzegovina, parts of Croatia, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, FYR Macedonia and Albania) are surrounded by four Seas, as maritime borders, and two big rivers on the North: the Danube and Sava, figuring as geographic, but only partially administrative borders. The area of the Balkans is internally divided by many thousands kilometres of land borders of different transparency levels. The most stringent, "opaque" border is the Schengen border cutting off Greece from other Balkan countries, except for Romania and Bulgaria. A similar rigid visa regime exists between Albania and Yugoslavia. A third level of transparency or border permeability is the non-visa regime between Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Macedonia. Finally, the fourth and most transparent regime operates between Yugoslavia and Bosnia&Herzegovina (the Republic of Srpska) where only ID cards are used. Such a complicated treatment of the borders is partly a legacy from the past, when the governments in the eastern half of the region, except for Yugoslavia, had endeavoured to isolate their countries from the outside world as hermetically as possible. Nowadays it is the European Union, which draws the Iron Curtain, in fear of an uncontrollable immigration influx. From the 1960s on, the regimes on the borders had somewhat loosened, but border crossing remained a difficult and tiresome venture for people and goods. The number of border crossings despite of contrary intentions continues to be inadequate, with very restricted capacities.

Several options can take place now in order to soften barriers and frontiers in this region but the most prominent one is the cultural option.

THE MULTIFACETED INTEGRATION POTENTIALS OF CULTURE

Culture encompasses the horizontal (geographical) and vertical (historical) dimension; it spreads indefinite in space and time, regardless of political and administrative limitations. The Balkans is an ample example of this. In spite of numerous borders and conflicts around those borders to gain territory, regardless of religious, anthropological and ethnic distinctions, or the variety of traditions and mentalities, it is possible to determine common cultural denominators, symbols and codes. They point out the paths of future integration and cultural and economic cooperation. This was also established in European Spatial Development Perspectives by supporting the idea with a clear statement: "It is important to spread cultural life... in particular by supporting the development of cultural facilities, upgrading public spaces and reviving commemorative sites, which are important for the identity of the population."

The most prominent role in the process of spatial, economic and political integration ought to be given to culture. Due to its spiritual powers, either as the outgrowth of history and tradition or as the subject of existing spiritual forces, cultural strivings are dedicated to the common purpose, yet insisting on the regional expression and regional identity contribution. The existing countries on the Balkan Peninsula (Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, FYR Macedonia, and Albania) have too much in common to be easily overlooked. Such an abundance of diversities should not be neglected in consideration of the future integrative scenario (B. Stoïkow, "Culture and Regional Development in the Balkans Post-war Era"). "The Levantine world of Balkan towns...had its manner of thinking and of singing, its particular way of everyday life, its virtues and sins, and a strange closeness in relations between people, despite their affiliation to different religions and
The cultural co-operation along these axes is tightly connected with a collective feeling of territorial belonging to Middle and South Europe in historic and geographic sense, where multiple historic processes and ethnic assimilation resulted in the ascent of similar identification patterns. The awareness of specific landscapes, idiosyncratic urbomorphology and cultural and natural heritage is a sensible starting point for establishing stable relations among neighboring countries, stimulating their co-operation and future integration. It is the cultural co-operation based on the cultural diversity and regional identity, based on the historical cultural paths, which do not recognize today's borders, and which represents the first and incontestable step towards spatial integration of Balkan countries.

It is the task of spatial planners to point to such development potentials but also constraints. Then, spatial cohesion and an integrative and sustainable development are inconceivable, unless the barrier border function is transformed into semi-filtering, contact or integrating function, as is the case in the European Union. Furthermore, the general objectives of integrated sustainable development, freedom and solidarity in the Balkans are best served by establishing solid economic and cultural links in the framework of an efficient regional association.

To accomplish such an idea it is wise to take a close look on some concrete examples of European regional association, where the affirmation in the alliance of European regions has been successful. Promoting common interests and creating a regional climate, which supports the overall development but simultaneously respects the regional idiosyncrasies and the regional identity, procured such a position. One of best examples, and most seemingly conception, bearing in mind the initial development level, is the Framework for Spatial Development in the Baltic Sea Region.  

**WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE EXAMPLE OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION**

It is not our intention to recommend the application of the comprehensive vision and strategies elaborated for the Baltic Sea region upon the case of the Balkans, but to emphasise those goals and issues which could be of major importance for Southeast Europe. The Baltic Sea region has geographically, historically and otherwise hardly anything in common with the Balkans, still the approach they chose and the methods they adopted might be very useful for working out ways to promote our macroregion internationally.

First of all, it is of pivotal significance to provoke the involvement of national and regional representatives to meet and jointly formulate a common framework for the promotion and reinforcement of the Balkans/Southeast Europe as an institutionalised regional association. This encompasses bilateral agreements and special contracts to be drawn up and realised, so as to encourage and mitigate the free flow of goods, population, and a free exchange of knowledge, scientific and artistic efforts together with various common actions to the benefit of all participating regions and countries.

What could be the key rationale in forming such a macroregion? Foremost, it should be in compliance with objectives formulated in the ESDP, namely to increase, and in the case of the Balkans to incite a better spatial cohesion, after a very long period of strong political and economic divisions and animosities. This also means that a new function and a new interpretation of borders must be considered. Furthermore, the Southeast European regional association must develop a strong identity, based on multifarious similarities. We certainly had comparable development experiences, a closely related historical and cultural background, comparable mythology with equal ethnological and religious elements, and similar mentality. To enhance the attractiveness of the whole macroregion, a reliable planning framework and subsequent planning policies ought to be devised so as to create an investing atmosphere with a sound perspective.

The postulated rationales might be seen and understood as a colossal challenge, especially for spatial planners, who share the important task to establish a common platform to help strengthen the spatial dimension and spatial development prerequisites, which would enable sectoral programs to be carried out at national and international level. Such a platform should not be seen as a restriction for local initiatives, on the contrary, it gives a reference for local and cross-border development on an institutionalised basis.

We deem this especially important, since there are already some cross-border co-operation incentives, such as the DKMT region (Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia), or the Iron Gate action area (Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia) and others, which need a stronger national and international support to gain more significance and effectiveness. The CADSES area has 24 nodal points where three national borders meet. This fact opens numerous possibilities for the trilateral cross-border co-operation.

The approach for the Baltic Sea region concentrated on three important spatial structures, which could be employed for the Balkan region as well. These structures refer to the“pears” (the urban network), the“strings” (mobility network) and the“patches” (specific types of areas) (Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea 2010, p.55). This is an exemplary model, which in the case of the Balkans points to existent weaknesses and deficiencies in respect to spatial structures. We are still in want of an efficient mobility infrastructure, both the basic and the secondary networks, our cities and towns do not act as proficient urban networks, as a matter of fact no attempts have been made yet to establish such networks. A trivial example shows how hampered our communication is: there are no regular flight

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2. See section 1.
3. See Section 3.
links between Sofia and Belgrade and Bucharest and Belgrade.

The rural hinterlands, especially those peripherally located, as is the case of most border areas are lagging behind, with hardly any development perspective unless dynamic cross-border areas are established. Many challenges and questions regarding planning responses to support the integration of the Balkans come into view. Some of these questions emerged also in other cases of regional associations, though the answers might be different. A few pivotal ones are:

- How can we overcome inadequate urban networks and infrastructure weaknesses?
- Where and how can cross-border integration improve peoples’ accessibility to service provision and infrastructure networks (Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea 2010, p.17-19)?
- How can endogenous potentials and spatial qualities (often of a cross-border character) be improved and used more efficiently?
- What can we do to encourage, or create better economic conditions in economic environments traditionally full of uncertainties, making them more competitive?
- What common actions might we undertake to evoke and strengthen the Balkans’ identity in a positive sense?

There are many more questions coupled with numerous mutual problems, which call for united responses. All cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary efforts should be bundled within an institutionalised co-operation network with an elaborated action programme and correlated financial funds and arrangements. Consequently, some kind of organisation body is required to co-ordinate ministers meetings, articulate action proposals and regularly up-dates information on undertaken steps.

**CONCLUSION**

Balkan countries may doubtless be considered as significant but also most fragile European development periphery. Intricate historic turns and capricious destinies are inherent for the peoples of the Balkans. Throughout the history, discords, rather than unity marked this area. Subjects of internal wars and objects of external interests, Balkan countries have yet not managed to establish a stable, advantageous and thriving spirit for an integrative development. One of the reasons for such an unfavourable status and one of major development and co-operation constraints are seen in the rigidity of borders and consequently the isolation of Balkan countries and regions. There are many alternatives to soften these physical and mental barriers. One we propose here is the cultural option with miscellaneous integration potentials. Despite local diversities, Balkan countries have enough similitude in different domains of activities, which could form a sound basis for a future integrative scenario.

The most seemly way to meet the rationales of sustainable integrative development, freedom and solidarity is to achieve the consensus on the urgency to constitute an institutionalised regional association of Balkan countries or regions. In the framework of such a regional association, the conjoint attempt to upgrade existent spatial structures and create co-operation networks would prove more efficient.

**References**


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