

VISEGRAD IN THE BALKANS, OR WHY WE NEED A B5 GROUP

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The unthinkable yesterday proves a necessity today. History is full of such paradoxes.

A region-wide cooperation in the Balkans - some 20 years ago this idea was considered utopian. Today the region enjoys a sufficiently large networks of structures - ranging from those at state level (Southeast European Cooperation Process, Regional Cooperation Council, a number of sectoral organizations), to business, media, academic and NGO ones. The radical change that took place, however, is the appearance of a sense for regional identity and a clear-cut understanding about the importance of regionalism. All this happened against the background of numerous historical contradictions, current conflicts and even recent armed clashes in Southeast Europe.

Meanwhile, most of the countries in the region joined the European Union and NATO. This brings the next step to the agenda – establishing a new field for cooperation similar to the Visegrad 4. It is not for the first time that such an idea is launched in public. It even seems to be a rather natural one, but still far away from reality.

Regional cooperation has strong roots and a long history in Europe, reaching its climax with the creation of the European Union. Benelux (since 1944), numerous formats of Nordic and Baltic cooperation, the Central European Initiative, Mediterranean cooperation - the list is endless. Globalisation further enhanced the role of regional cooperation, including within the EU.

The establishment of a B5 Group (Balkans 5) seems a natural step at a stage, when Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania and Slovenia have already joined the EU. It will be logical if these five countries lay the basis for such cooperation - political will and national interest being the only necessary prerequisites.

The example of Visegrad 4 is convincing enough – from the point of view of the results of and perspectives for such cooperation, but also with regard to its role in overcoming existing fears and prejudices. V4 is a model for equitable participation without leadership or domination.

There is only one and a very clear criterion for joining B5 – membership in both the EU and NATO. Participation in B5 does not imply membership – it should rather be designed as a process for cooperation of mutual interest. Both V4 action history and traditions of regional cooperation in the Balkans within SEECP prove that such a light unbinding institutional framework could be workable and efficient. The Atlantic Club of Bulgaria is proud to be one of the initiators of the creation of the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG) by giving the idea to the then Secretary-General of NATO Willy Claes in 1995. The Brigade itself was established in August 1999 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

B5 should be an open process. Normally each country from the region, joining the EU and NATO should find its place in the group. The mere accession to the Euro-Atlantic institutions should serve as a necessary and sufficient condition for each Balkan country to join B5 – solely on the basis of a clearly stated political wish, without any additional preconditions or accession procedures and with no vetoing power to other B5 participating states.

B5 should serve as a platform for consultations, coordination and cooperation – within the EU framework, on the basis of the EU principles, in the interests of the B5 participating states, but also in the interests of all countries from Southeast Europe and of the EU as a whole. Effective solutions on regional level could be sought by joining efforts in such spheres as energy, infrastructure, environmental protection, communication, culture, etc., where problems go well beyond state borders.

B5 is not conceived as a precluding format. It is not designed to create new division lines in the region. Quite the opposite – it is an inclusive effort, based on the common experience of those, who have already accomplished their Euro-Atlantic integration and in support to the others, who have not yet met the membership criteria.

B5 does not undermine existing regional cooperation. It should build upon regional achievements and could serve as a key element in the concept of creating a network of networks as a stable basis for Balkan cooperation.

The debate on the future of Europe, on deepening the integration processes and continuation of enlargement with the Western Balkan countries also requires more active, more coordinated regional positions. With the establishment of B5 the Southeast European countries would take another important step in their joint activities – a transition from “cooperation in the region” to “cooperation for the region”. B5 could be the representative of the Balkans in Brussels, upholding regional interests in the Euro-Atlantic formats.

Bulgaria has played a pioneering role in 1996 by launching the idea of regional cooperation that gave birth to SEECP. It seems that the time has come to propose, discuss and eventually make the next move in building up the architecture of multilateral cooperation in the region – the establishment of a Visegrad in the Balkans. Thus shaping a new, positive image of the Balkans – as an area of dialogue and mutual understanding.