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**FROM THE QUADRANGOLARE TO THE CENTRAL
EUROPEAN INITIATIVE**

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1. The Quadrangolare

On November 11, 1989, a million East Germans streamed into West Berlin and West Germany on foot, and by car, subway and train, joyfully marking the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of a more than forty-year division between the two Germanies.

On the same day, in Budapest, the Foreign Ministers of Austria, Hungary, Italy and Yugoslavia signed the act of foundation of the "Quadrangolare", a pragmatic attempt at developing multifaceted cooperation among their countries.

The coincidence of the dates, though obviously unintended and certainly unexpected, was nevertheless unique and symbolic of the beginning of two parallel processes: the dissolution of the old communist order in Central-Eastern Europe and the development of new cooperative ties among countries politically, economically and socially still very different.

In fact, the quadrilateral initiative linked the following: Austria, a neutral country and a member of the EFTA; Hungary, a Warsaw Pact and Comecon member, where the Communist Party was still in power; Italy, a member of NATO and the European Community; and Yugoslavia, a non aligned federation of communist republics with special forms of centralized government and economic self-management.

The Budapest meeting was the outcome of a farsighted Italian diplomatic scheme initiated in the spring of 1989 with bilateral talks with Austrian and Hungarian deputy prime ministers, followed in June with talks with Yugoslav deputy prime minister in the course of a seminar organized by the Aspen Institute Italia at Castelporziano.

It would be easy to find analogies between the 1989 Italian diplomatic initiative, energetically pursued throughout its subsequent developments, and the foreign policy conducted by Italy towards the Balkans and the Danubian region during the 1920's. But the analogies relate mainly to the geographical projection and less to the actual scope and goals of that policy.

In that period, Italy's foreign policy was aimed at creating an alliance system in the region capable of undermining the dominance of France and blocking the emergence of Germany's influence. In the 80's, even though the aspiration of conducting an autonomous foreign policy, counterbalancing the weight of the Franco-German axis, was evident in Italian foreign policy, the "Quadrangolare" was firmly anchored to a specific goal: to prevent the marginalization of the states of the

Danubian-Adriatic region in a moment of rapid transformation of the European political and social landscape. Moreover, Italy intended this cooperation as a means of strengthening the economic, social and cultural cohesion of the region, and as a contribution to stability and the process of future integration of the Central-Eastern European countries in the European Community. Both goals were certainly different from Mussolini's policy of power projection in the region seen as the logical and natural area of Italy's political influence. The considerations at the basis of Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis' policy were simple and straightforward.

(i) The radical political changes in the East were opening a difficult period of transition.

(ii) It was clearly an Italian responsibility helping to manage this transition, and an Italian interest in establishing a political counterweight to German economic influence in Central-Eastern Europe.

(iii) The strategy to be adopted would be that of using regional cooperation as a bloc-transcending element, a flexible and pragmatic tool for the realization of specific projects in well defined areas of common interests.

(iv) The initiative was not supposed to constitute a means of abandoning those partnerships and alliances in which the countries of the Quadrangolare participated.

(v) Finally, the initiative was not supposed to be a substitute for other existing or projected frameworks of European political and security systems.

The three other European countries had good reasons for accepting the Italian proposal. In fact, the Quadrilateral Initiative was born at the time when:

(i) Austria was eager to continue its role of neutral broker between East and West, but at the same time it was aware that it could not respond alone to the new political and economic needs of Central-Eastern countries. Furthermore, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact enhanced Vienna's awareness that its old functions of strategic buffer between the two blocs were obsolete, as was its specific profile of a country that was a source of good offices, or a place to hold meetings and conferences. Finally, Austria had applied for EC membership on July 7, 1989 and participation in the Quadrangolare was seen as a means to facilitate, if not accelerate, its accession through the homogenizing effects of coordination with Italy -- a fullfledged EC member -- in specific economic and technical sectors .

(ii) Yugoslavia was struggling to maintain its political pluralism and national unity, while going through a very serious economic crisis. Belgrade considered the participation in the Quadrangolare as a way to maintain, and possibly strengthen, its links with the Western world, over and above those already established within the context of the Alps-Adria Working Community, or bilaterally with Italy through the Adriatic Initiative (formally introduced in September 1989).

(iii) Hungary was mainly looking for external support for its peaceful political revolution which was expected to culminate in 1990 with the first free general elections in Central-Eastern Europe.

2. The Evolution of the Quadrangolare

In twenty months, the Quadrangolare became the Pentagonale with the accession of Czechoslovakia -- its request of participation was accepted by the

Foreign Ministers of the four founding countries in their meeting in Vienna, May 20, 1990 -- and then the Hexagonale with the accession of Poland, which was approved during the Prime Ministers' summit of July 27, 1991 in Dubrovnik. Finally, in January 1992, because of the disintegration of Yugoslavia the name of the Hexagonale was formally changed into "Central European Initiative".

The enlargement was within the spirit of the initiative. In fact, the founding chart of the Quadrangolare had established the principle that the initiative would be open to additional participants in the future.

The joining of Czechoslovakia expanded the cooperation scheme of the Quadrangolare to the center of Europe, while the accession of Poland enlarged it to the north, linking the initial West-East axis along the Danubian regions to the North-South axis along the Oder and Vistula rivers.

The accession of Poland took longer than the membership of Czechoslovakia. Warsaw submitted its request to be part of the Pentagonale on July 1990. At the Venice summit of August 1990, the Polish request was discussed and the Italian proposal to allow Poland to take part in working groups of specific Polish interest, such as those of Transport and Environment, was eventually approved. This solution was in line with the criteria of pragmatism and flexibility of the Initiative's activity whereby cooperation could be open to external partners on specific subjects. On November 1990, Warsaw's government asked the Pentagonale countries for authorization to extend Polish participation to all operating working groups and have Polish representatives at the National Coordinator meetings. The request was examined by the Foreign Ministers of the Pentagonale in their summit in Rome, November 30, 1990. The following year, Poland was admitted as observer to the Bologna meeting on May 18, but its accession was granted only in July when the Hexagonale was finally born in Dubrovnik.

There were concerns about the Pentagonale expansion to the North, since it was bound to change its original concept. But there were also evident political and economic motivations for accepting the participation of Poland, which were more important than the issue of geographical delimitation, or an optimal pentagonal dimension of the cooperation scheme. Because of its geostrategic position, made more delicate by German unification, it was necessary to prevent Poland from feeling marginalized. On the one hand, it would have been odd to include Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and exclude Poland, at a time when the three countries had started a triangular process of cooperation formalized during the heads of state's summit of Visegrad (15 February 1991), and with the signature of bilateral military agreements. Poland, on the other hand, had a specific interest in inserting its democratic process and economic reform in a framework that was larger than the trilateral one -- none of the three countries could become the driving force of such a system because of a lack economic and technological resources -- or in the one established by the Nordic countries. Moreover, Poland, like Hungary and Czechoslovakia, saw the Hexagonale as a helpful tool for bringing the country closer to the EC, in particular through those working group activities which would merit attention from the Community.

The key principle of the Hexagonale may be summarized by the definition given by Flora Lewis: "To aggregate the capacity for dealing with issues that are insoluble on a single nation basis, and not yet feasible for a Europe-wide solution." In other words, the key principle is subsidiarity, and the Initiative is intended as a transitory exercise toward more institutionalized organizations. The solution of those problems which cannot be solved by the sub-regional working communities such as Alps-Adria, or bilaterally between member states, and which do not have a pan-European dimension, would be the logical task of the Initiative. At the same time, the Initiative was not seen as an end in itself and, as already said, was not envisioned as a substitute for other organizations. As a matter of fact, it was supposed to operate within the framework of the wide-ranging principles and objectives of the CSCE and the EC.

The basic strategy was characterized by the carrying out of joint projects in various areas of "low politics". This was expected to generate parallel national action processes, which, in turn, would gradually provide for the progressive social and economic homogenization of all involved countries.

The institutional and bureaucratic infrastructure was kept to a minimum. Not even a secretariat was created and the Hexagonale worked through (i) a rotating Presidency, mainly responsible for general coordination; (ii) yearly summits at Prime Minister level (while the Foreign Affairs Ministers met regularly twice a year); (iv) the National Coordinators' Group; and (v) the Working Groups, directly responsible for the joint projects.

The first phase of the Quadrangolare ended with the summit in Venice, August 1, 1990, which also marked the first meeting of the Initiative in its Pentagonal form. The later accession of Poland did not change the goals, functioning mechanism, or working agenda of the Initiative that had been established in Venice.

3. The Unique Elements of the Initiative

The passage of the Initiative from the Quadrangolare to the Hexagonale was characterized by several unique elements.

(i) While the 1989 Budapest declaration had not specifically foreseen a coordination in the political field, the Policy Document approved in Venice in 1990 explicitly stated: "The Initiative also foresees a regular exchange of views between the five member States on matters of political nature and of common interest. Wherever possible, joint initiatives will be carried out within the latitude permitted by the international obligations of each member State in this respect." Political cooperation dealt with joint attitudes to be taken in the context of the CSCE process, relations with the EC and the European Council, as well as security, particularly disarmament and confidence building measures. On July 1991, in Dubrovnik, the Prime Ministers agreed on the growing importance of the exchanges of views on European security issues and decided that they would be an essential part of the future Hexagonal political consultations.

(ii) The countries of the Initiative began to submit common proposals and joint documents to the CSCE meetings. This happened at the CSCE Conference on the Human Dimension held in Copenhagen in June 1990, at the CSCE Symposium on the Cultural Heritage held in Kracovia, May-June 1991, and at the Meeting of Expert on National Minorities held in Geneva, July 1991.

(iii) Members of the Parliaments of the Hexagonale participated in the meetings of the Initiative, gradually stepping-up parliamentary cooperation, while Trade Union representatives met within and outside the Initiative framework, thus promoting the development of the Hexagonale's social dimension. At the same time, involvement in the activities of the Initiative was anticipated for the existing sub-regional organizations (Alps-Adria, ARGE-Alps, Danubian Community and Adriatic Community).

(iv) Representatives of major European organizations (such as the EC Commission, the Council of Europe, and the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)), the United Nations and important financial institutions (such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the World Bank, and the European Investment Bank (EIB)) were invited to serve as observers at the summits of the Initiative and contributed to the debate. The readiness of the EC to cooperate was openly expressed, together with the willingness of the financial institutions to support specific national and trans-national projects in sectors of special interest.

(v) Romania and Bulgaria expressed their interest to take part in the initiative, perhaps initially with an observer status. It was decided that they could be associated to specific projects with the typical approach of the "variable geometry" organizations.

(vi) Germany became indirectly involved in the Initiative through the participation of two Länders -- Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria -- in the Transportation Working Group. In May 1991, the Ministers expressed their agreement on an expanded role of the two Länders to cover other sectors of cooperation.

(vii) The creation of four new Working Groups (Scientific and Technological Research, Information, Energy and Migrations) was approved in the course of the May and August, 1990 meetings. They were added to the initial five (Transport, Environment, Small and Medium-Size Enterprises, Telecommunications, and Culture). By mid-1991, the cooperation under the Hexagonale included three additional Working Groups: Tourism, Statistics, and Disaster Relief and Protection.

4. Limits and Problems of the Initiative

The dramatic crisis in Yugoslavia and the disintegration of the Federation has dealt a significant blow to the Initiative, particularly because Belgrade assumed the annual presidency in July 1991 when it was already clear that it could not perform its expected role. With the loss of Yugoslavia, the Initiative lost its full Adriatic dimension. At the same time, the break-up of the federation had opened the delicate

issue of what to do about the two now independent Republics of Slovenia and Croatia, which are actually geographically more important for the territorial cohesion of the Initiative, and for the viability of several joint projects. Last March, the Foreign Ministers of Slovenia and Croatia were accepted as observers to the spring Foreign Minister's meeting in Klagenfurt. It is expected that the two Yugoslav republics will be accepted as full members at the next summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Central European Initiative to be held in Vienna in July. It is also expected that the CEI approach will be that of gradually including all independent Yugoslav republics. This approach, though, is bound to be conditioned by the evolution of the civil war still raging in Yugoslavia.

Among the issues the following are worth mentioning.

(i) There is a striking dicotomy between the cooperative intent of the Initiative and the political and ethnic tensions both within the member countries -- as in Czechoslovakia -- and in their bilateral relations -- such as those between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. There seem to be three different levels of perceptions and expectations: the first is the institutional level where cooperation policy is formulated and put forward; the second is the level of officials and civil servants with organizational and functional vested interests in the success of cooperation; the third is the national level where the information on the developments of the cooperation hardly arrive, and where the political, economic and social debate is concentrated on issues more significant than those discussed in the Working Groups. On the one hand, there is an effort of inter-state and inter-regional integration on the basis of common needs and interests, and on the shared belief that the future of Central-Eastern Europe lay not only on the continuation of the two processes toward democracy and market economy, but also on the related process of national unity and stronger links with the EC. On the other hand, strong national and ethnic pressures seam to push the opposite direction, raising doubts on the future viability of the Initiative.

(ii) The spill-over of the Hexagonale's political consultation and cooperation into the field of security was significant, even though it risked being nothing more than a superfluous duplication of talks held more effectively elsewhere. In any case, it is interesting to note that the Polish, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian National Coordinators consistently stressed the importance of establishing adequate forms of cooperation with NATO and the WEU.

(iii) Even though there were 82 projects at various stages of progress by mid-1991, very few of them could be considered completed. The majority was still in the planning phase, or waiting for funds to proceed with feasibility studies and subsequent implementation. Part of the relative failure to move with greater speed toward cooperation was the consequence of the progressive proliferation of the Working Groups, partly the effect of the difficulties characteristic of all projects involving different and sometimes conflicting interests, and partly the result of the lack of financial support.

(iv) The problem of financing is far from being solved, The declarations of good intentions and the asserted readiness to be involved in and supportive of the activities

of the Initiative on the part of many European and international organizations (including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank) appear insufficient to cover the wide-ranging requirements of many projects. And it is difficult to say whether the proposal of creating direct operational links between the Initiative and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development - - by establishing a permanent technical secretary of the Initiative within the bank -- would facilitate the financing of the Working Groups' projects.

The first Italian disbursement of 200 million Lire was allocated to the International Institute for Applied System of Analysis for a complete report on the polluting emissions in Central Eastern Europe. Then in 1991 the Italian Parliament approved a Lt 1400 billion financial law specifically designated for the "frontier areas", though the funds could also be used for Initiative projects. Another law allocating Lt 300 billion for technical assistance cooperation with the Initiative countries is expected to be discussed by the new Parliament.

The other countries of the Initiative, however, were less willing and ready to put money on the several joint projects discussed in the Working Groups, mainly because of their dramatic economic situation.

(v) The impression is that the scarcity of funds forced the Initiative to concentrate on low-profile projects such as seminars, round tables, exchange of reseachers and scientists, specialization courses on marketing and planning, financial contributions to universities and small-sized enterprises, etc., because their costs could be usually covered by the organizers and sponsoring institutions.

(vi) In the long term, it would appear odd to exclude Germany from participation, in forms to be determined, in the Initiative, considering its wide-ranging political and economic relations with the Central-Eastern countries. It remains to be seen if, how and to what extent the opening to Bonn would eventually change the face and the philosophy of the Initiative.

5. Conclusions

Let me conclude with a few final considerations.

The idea of a "bottom up" approach to the construction of Europe, while preserving its diversity by emphasizing both the regionalist structure and the possibilities of cooperation, was good, particularly in this transition phase in Central-Eastern Europe.

Italy has been by the driving force behind the Initiative, and was seen by the other states of the Initiative as the best interlocutor for political and geographic reasons, and as the preferred bridge to EC membership.

Now, three different elements may slow down the process of cooperation of the Initiative.

First, the disintegration of Yugoslavia has modified the Hexagonale structure

of the Initiative. A further deepening of the Yugoslav crisis is bound to cut out part of the Adriatic region from the cooperation efforts.

Second, the result of last April's general elections have profoundly modified the traditional Italian political landscape. This has opened a period of political instability which could continue even after the new government is formed. If Gianni De Michelis will not direct the future Italian diplomacy this is bound to lead to a somewhat less intense interest in the Initiative, considering how much the former Italian Foreign Minister had been personally the driving force behind that process.

Finally, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary are going through a difficult period of domestic political instability and economic crisis which is generating an inward looking attitude, a tight economic policy and a foreign policy projected toward "high-policy" issues more than "low-policy" problems which are the main subjects of the Initiative's activities.

It is difficult to predict whether these elements, and the consequent lack of political and financial support, will eventually lead to an impasse, not only of the Initiative's structure in the way it has progressively evolved in the last two and half years, but also of its basic goals.

I think that even this possible outcome will not change the reality of the regional cooperation efforts conducted by the various organizations such as the Alps-Adria, the Baltic Group, the Danubian and Adriatic Initiatives, the ARGE-Alps, all in different stages of development. While they do not have the ambitious program of the Central European Initiative, these organizations nevertheless represent the only attempt of small regional entities to build a pragmatic set of cooperation schemes capable of having significant political meaning and scope.