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**COOPERATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF REGIONAL ARRANGEMENTS**

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## **1. Main motivations and purposes of regional arrangements**

The revitalization of existing regional cooperation initiatives as well as the birth of new ones can be considered one of the most interesting phenomena of the post-Cold War situation in Europe. What were the main motivations behind it?

Generally speaking, the regional cooperation initiatives largely reflected the desire of the participating states to face with greater efficacy the security risks arising from the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

In many cases these initiatives were designed to create new cooperation links between states which had long belonged to different economic and political systems as part of a broader effort to integrate the Western and Eastern parts of the continent (Meier, 1994; Golemski, 1994).

Eastern countries, in particular, saw them as intermediary steps towards the integration into Western institutions. Indeed, the stability of the various regions of Central and Eastern Europe was widely seen as a key condition for this integration. This remains one of the pillars of the current Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU.

Some Western countries, in turn, saw their participation in regional cooperation arrangements with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as part of an eastward re-orientation of their own foreign policies (Pozzi, 1994). This was also the case of Italy, as I will be illustrated later.

The European institutions have followed a general policy of encouraging regional cooperation. The EU, in particular, has made a steady effort - albeit so far not very successful - to encourage a coordination of foreign and security policies of Central and East European countries. By mid-1990 European community leaders began suggesting that the future EC membership of the Visegrad states depended to a large extent to their ability to cooperate with each other. The OSCE recent documents also call for a growing regionalization of economic and security cooperation.

It must be added that an important feature of this type of arrangements is the effort to integrate political and economic aspects of security. This is in tune with the broader concept of security adopted by all Euro-Atlantic institutions.

## **2. Major political dilemmas connected with regional arrangements**

The evolution of regional arrangements will probably continue to be strongly influenced, as happened in the past, by the answers that will be given to four major political dilemmas.

The first crucial problem is the functional relationship to be established between the regional arrangements and such more structured and proven cooperation structures as the Euro-Atlantic organizations. There is the need to avoid a possible tendency towards a fragmentation and dispersion of cooperation initiatives. Indeed, an essential task of the

cooperation regimes characterized by a wider membership and by a truly institutional structure is to develop a capacity to coordinate the various cooperation structures ensuring an effective complementarity among them. In this respect, of particular importance are both the OSCE's role in promoting various types of agreements at the regional level and the coordination between regional initiatives and the EU policies.

However, as a matter of fact, the process of enlargement of Euro-Atlantic institutions leaves an increasingly smaller room for the development of regional arrangements. In the economic field the preponderant role is clearly played by the EU and by the bilateral relations which are being established between the EU and the associated states or other states willing to join the Union. In the security field various forms of association with Central and East European countries have been promoted by NATO and the WEU. Furthermore, regionalization is a declared goal of the OSCE; the Pact of Stability itself, which is articulated in two regional tables, is a sign of the growing effort to develop a regional dimension of security cooperation in the framework of the existing Euro-Atlantic institutions (in the case of the Stability Pact, the EU and the OSCE).

A second major dilemma is the exclusive versus inclusive character of the regional arrangements, i.e. the problem of their geographical scope.

On the one hand, it is clearly advisable that they be not of an exclusive character or resemble any type of alliance towards third countries. This means that they should be in principle open to the countries that are willing and ready to become members. On the other hand, the effectiveness of the regional arrangements is to a large extent dependent on their capacity to remain focused on a restricted and homogeneous area as they are designed to generate projects that can be beneficial for all or most of the countries involved.

This can give rise to divisions among the participating states on the prospect of an enlargement to other states. This enlargement dilemma has been for example very evident, from the very beginning, in the regional arrangement now called Central European Initiative (CEI) as it will be illustrated later.

Third, it must be stressed that some forms of cooperation that take place at the regional level, instead of contributing to strengthening the mutual security, can, in some circumstances, provoke new tensions, especially when the main actors are not the states but smaller administrative units. This is the case of some forms of transfrontier cooperation which can be seen as concealing or favouring secessionist drives of minority groups (Gottlieb, 1994; Luverà, 1996; Weydenthal, 1994). For example, the project of Euroregion Istria advocated by some leaders of the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia has become an irritant in the relations between it and the governments of the two republics and could, in the longer term, have negative repercussions on the relationship between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. The same applies to the project of the Euroregion Tirolo (Barozzi, 1996). The fear is that the neo-regionalism could have a disrupting potential damaging the relations between neighbouring countries. Indeed in some cases the projects aimed at creating Euroregions have been promoted - or are strongly supported - by nationalist or revanchist groups. In any case, a difficult balance would have to be struck between the powers of the states and the competences of the new transborder political entities.

However, according to another school of thought, cross-border cooperation, especially in the form of Euro-regions, can be an important instrument for enhancing cooperation in areas that could be affected by inter-communal strifes which, in turn, could give rise to tensions among states (Vedovato, 1995). This is the main reason behind the Council of Europe's support of cross-border cooperation initiatives. Some scholars emphasize the contribution these initiatives can make for an «institutionalization» of minority rights (de Vergottini, 1995). Of great interest are in particular the forms of cooperation with neighbouring countries promoted by Poland at the local level, such

as the so-called Carpathian Euroregion which are widely considered to have been successful (Kuzniar, 1994; Skrzydło, 1994; Vedovato, 1996; Weydenthal, 1994)

Finally, a general objection to the attempts aimed at building regional cooperation arrangements is that regional cooperation will automatically intensify during the process of integration of Central and Eastern European countries into the institutional structures of Western Europe. It would be a by-product of the integration between the two parts of the European continent. Hence, there would not be a need for specific arrangements. This is, in particular, the point of view often expressed by the representatives of Central European countries. As a matter of fact, those countries continue to elaborate and carry out their transformation policies with limited mutual consultation. This view however is clearly in open contrast with the official policy of the Euro-Atlantic institutions that considers the strengthening of regional cooperation links as a pre-condition for the granting of the full membership.

These political dilemmas will be now briefly analyzed with regard to two regional arrangements which have been established in Central Europe: the Visegrad Group and the Central European Initiative (CEI).

### **3. The Visegrad Group**

The original goal of the Visegrad Group, composed of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic, was two-fold. First, the participating countries had a common interest in cooperating for the dismantlement of the institutional structures of the Eastern bloc; indeed, the coordination of their policies definitely contributed to the smooth dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Second, those countries were trying to get closer to Western security institutions - NATO, in particular - and they were aware that developing a concerted policy could be a way of strengthening their bargaining power vis-à-vis the Western countries (Dunay, 1994).

In general, the most urgent problem for the Central European countries was how to sort out of the vacuum created by the end of the Warsaw Pact. In this sense, the idea of creating a specific regional cooperation arrangement among the Central European countries was closely connected with the problems of the initial period (1989-1991) of their transition towards democracy and market economy. It is therefore hardly surprising that, once they entered a more advanced stage of their transition, benefitting from closer relations with the Western countries, the actual aim of the Visegrad group became a controversial issue.

Indeed, it has to be recognized that some, if not most, of the original motivations underlying the launching of the Visegrad group seem to have lost their relevance.

First, the Western countries have decided to introduce a growing differentiation in their relations with individual countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This makes less obvious and also less necessary for those countries to seek a concerted policy towards transatlantic institutions.

Furthermore, one should not underestimate the diversity of the interests and the concerns between the countries of the group. This is particularly evident in the security field. For example, Poland's concerns regarding potential threats arising from its surrounding environment (instabilities in Ukraine and Belarus; repercussions of tensions between Moscow and the other CIS European states or the Baltic states) are hardly shared - or are not felt so strongly - by the other members of the group. In other words, the different geopolitical positions are a factor that inhibits a closer and more binding regional integration. It is increasingly evident that the security situation of the Visegrad area is affected by a large spectrum of multifaceted risks that affect the individual countries of the group in very different ways.

Third, it must be added that, from the very beginning, the participating states have expressed different views on the nature of the initiative; in particular, whether it should give birth to a truly institutional structure or not (Barany, 1995). Hungary has never been very enthusiastic about the idea of institutionalization. The feeling was that the institutionalization of the Visegrad group might impede or slow integration into Western European political and economic structures. An even more sceptical attitude was adopted by the Czech Republic especially after the separation from Slovakia.

In particular, Prague seems to have lost any actual interest in the Visegrad process as instrument of political cooperation. Rather, the Czech government is seeking a loosening of its ties with the other Central and Eastern European countries under the assumption that the better conditions of its economy and its greater political stability allows it to pursue an independent course of action. The Czech Republic has also refused to create new forms of integration with the Slovak Republic. It clearly assigns the highest priority to relations with the Western countries, especially the neighbouring ones, Austria and Germany.

Several prominent Polish politicians have instead pressed for institutionalizing the Visegrad relationship. Slovakia has also repeatedly insisted on the importance of the exercise. Indeed, the complete dissolution of the Group - which is a distinct possibility - would deprive it of an important instrument for developing its ties to Central Europe, which are important for Slovakia to avoid the risk, among other things, of becoming hostage to the uncertain evolution of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia.

The most important result of the Visegrad process has been to date the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) which entered into force in March 1993. It is expected to eliminate import duties among the member states by 2000 (2002 in the case of Poland) (Polackova, 1994; Vukadinovic, 1995). The CEFTA group is currently undergoing a process of enlargement. Slovenia has already been let in; the other EU associate states - Bulgaria, Romania and, at a later stage, the Baltic states - will also become members. In theory, a free trade zone of 100 million people will be created by the end of the century (Goruppi, 1995).

However, the intra-regional trade is not substantially benefitting from the CEFTA and one may doubt that this will do so in the future. Indeed, inter-CEFTA trade has only marginal significance for any member state (except for the special case of trade between the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic). By contrast, trade with the EU states accounts for about half of each CEFTA member state's total trade. The Czech Republic favours an acceleration of the process of reduction of customs duties, but continues to oppose any idea of transforming the CEFTA club into anything more than a free-trade area as advocated by other countries. It must be noted that Warsaw has proposed that the CEFTA should be extended to services as well as be used to introduce freedom of movement in the capital and the labour markets.

Finally, even in Central Europe there is a clear tendency towards bilateralism. Bilateral agreements on a number of issues have been signed between the member states of the Visegrad group outside the framework of the group. For instance, during the lengthy process that led to the conclusion of the basic state treaty between Hungary and Slovakia, no reference was made to the Visegrad group. This is far from being considered as an effective instrument to reinforce the political cooperation among the participating states. But an analogous emphasis on bilateralism is increasingly evident in the sphere of the economic relations. Again, this trend has to be seen as the result of the growing differentiation in the national interests and concerns among the countries of the area.

These difficulties notwithstanding, the Visegrad process continues to be seen widely in the Western countries as a useful instrument to prepare the associate states to their future accession

to the EU (Royen, 1994).

#### **4. The Central European dimension of Italy's foreign policy and the Central European Initiative**

Does Italy's foreign policy have a Central European dimension? After the fall of the Berlin Wall Italy's government held the view that the new situation offered Italy, for the first time since 1945, the opportunity to add a Central European dimension to its foreign policy, which had concentrated, during the Cold War, almost exclusively on the cooperation with the North Atlantic and the West European partners. But one can doubt whether Italy actually has the capabilities needed to develop an effective policy towards the Central European area that goes beyond the EU initiatives. Some basic Italy's weaknesses such as the persistent internal instability and the reduced economic resources - mainly due to the high level of state indebtedness - clearly limit its political influence and economic presence in the area. In general, one of the consequences of the Italy's political crisis was the reduction of its capacity to conduct external action, making it more difficult for it to be an active promoter of regional cooperation arrangements.

At the political level an additional stumbling block are the current difficulties in the bilateral relations with both Slovenia and Croatia. Overcoming these difficulties is a fundamental pre-requisite for strengthened links between Italy and the whole Central European area (Incisa di Camerana, 1994). In particular, the economic cooperation between the North-Eastern part of the country - the very engine of the growth of the Italian economy in the last two years - and the two republics is hindered by the difficult political climate that characterizes the bilateral relations. The two main political problems involved are highly sensitive: the rights of the Italian minority in both republics and those of the Slovenians in Italy and the compensation for the properties the Italian refugees were forced to abandon during and after the Second World War. But the need is also felt for new economic agreements replacing the new ones; they are considered an essential step for the relaunching of the Trieste area which has suffered from a steady economic decline in the last decades. Regrettably, the Italian government has so far given priority to the solution of the problem of the compensation for the refugees' properties. This has thus become a major obstacle to the solution of the other pending problems (Greco, 1994). The hope is that the Italian government which will be appointed by the new Parliament elected in April 1996 will be able to pursue a more farsighted policy by advancing the various national interests that are at stake in the relations with Slovenia and Croatia in a more balanced way.

Italy's support and active promotion of the development of regional cooperation frameworks in Central Europe has been based on the conviction that they can contribute, in parallel with Euro-Atlantic institutions, to the stability of the areas of major national concern. In 1991 what was then the Exagonale (now the CEI) was presented by the Italian government as an instrument that could be used for coping with the Yugoslav problem, by contributing to prevent the secessionist drives from disintegrating the Yugoslav state. At the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis Italy's government, like other Western countries, gave the highest priority to the goal of preserving the Yugoslav unity.

It must also be recalled that Italy was - and indeed still is - among the European countries that are most reluctant to accept a rapid enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions (NATO, EU, WEU). Favouring a relatively slow enlargement process, it emphasizes quite naturally the importance of the participation of Central European countries in regional cooperation arrangements as part of their pre-accession strategy.

Italy's declared ambition was to play a specific and to some extent autonomous role in pursuing the goal of a gradual strengthening of the cooperation with Central European countries. The EC context was obviously considered fundamental for the achievement of this goal, but it was perceived that there was some room for the action of the individual EC states. Indeed, countries like France and Germany were intensifying the efforts to enhance their cooperation links with Central and Eastern European countries. In this context, what was then the *Esagonale*, in particular, was seen by Italy as a possible counterbalance to the increasing political and economic influence of the united Germany in Central Europe.

Finally, Italy has placed a special emphasis on the need to construct the new security cooperation in Europe on a mix of economic and political instruments, being traditionally less interested in the strictly military component. Regional arrangements have received a special attention from the Italian government also because they are characterized by the attempt to put into practice this "soft" idea of security cooperation.

Italy was one of the original and most ardent promoters of the Central European Initiative (CEI) (previously called by the names *Quadrangolare*, *Pentagonale* and *Esagonale* reflecting its subsequent enlargements). It remains, indeed, one of the most interesting examples of regional cooperation in Central Europe.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia, one of the four original members of the initiative, was a serious blow for it. As a matter of fact, the initiative remained moribund for two years. Its revitalization began only with the Hungarian and Italian presidencies in 1993-1994.

More recently, during the Polish presidency two major decisions were taken. First, a new step in the enlargement process is scheduled for May 1996: the members will increase from the current 10 to 15 with the inclusion of Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania and the Ukraine. The wish of these states to become members of the group is undoubtedly a promising sign since it demonstrates the attractiveness of the exercise. It must be recalled that the memberships of other regional arrangements with similar features such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Baltic Sea Cooperation Council have also been progressively expanded. Particularly important is the insistence of Ukraine, which clearly sees its entry into the CEI - now it is an associate state like the other four countries - as an element of its policy aimed at ensuring a balance between its cooperation links with Western Europe and those with Russia. The CEI could be for Ukraine a sort of bridge towards the EU, especially if the relationship between the CEI and the EU becomes more effective. Equally important, the Ukraine's candidature was convincingly supported and even promoted by Poland as part of its long-term search for a special relationship with Kiev. In general, the CEI can be used by Poland as an additional instrument for improving the relations with its Eastern neighbours.

However, following the decision to admit Ukraine, the problem of the relations between the CEI and Russia has come to the fore. The participating states are convinced that it is important to avoid conveying the impression that they seek to isolate Moscow. For this reason it was decided that there will be two annual meetings between the CEI's Troika and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Italy has been far from enthusiastic about the enlargement process of the CEI. It would probably have preferred a CEI with a more restricted membership. The first concern is that the gravitation centre of the CEI could shift too much towards the East, far from the areas of immediate Italy's political and economic interest. The second concern is that the enlargement could prevent the CEI from consolidating by the establishment of more structured instruments. Thus, a typical enlargement-vs-deepening dilemma has emerged. However, the decision to create a CEI's coordination centre in Trieste - the second major development which took place during

the Polish presidency - has to some degree eased this second concern. Indeed, the establishment of the Centre in Trieste, which began to work in January 1996, was a move strongly advocated by Italy. As its name indicates - Centre for Information and Documentation - it is not a Secretariat, which would have amounted to a beginning of an actual institutionalization of the CEI. Its primary task is to circulate information and to maintain an archive of the CEI documentation. It could however provide a minimal administrative structure. At the request of Italy, it was also decided that the Centre could be entrusted with additional tasks in the future. The most obvious one would be organizational support for the activities of the CEI Chairman-in-Office. Clearly Italy sees the Centre of Trieste as an embryo of a future body capable of performing the tasks of a Secretariat. Other countries such as the Czech Republic continue instead to express their scepticism about a possible institutionalization of the CEI.

Italy considers the establishment of the Centre as a success also because the choice of Trieste as receiving city was convincingly supported by all four republics of the former Yugoslavia, including Croatia and Slovenia. Their attitude was highly appreciated in Trieste whose economic recovery requires the development of closer ties to the Eastern neighbouring countries.

By the same token, the CEI working group for the reconstruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia - which was transformed into a permanent working group - has a particular importance for Italy. It is essentially designed to serve two purposes: to implement limited but immediate measures and to elaborate projects to be implemented by other organizations. The major problem remains the coordination between the group and the international bodies and funds created for the same purpose. Italy is insisting, even within the CEI, on the inclusion of Serbia and Albania as target countries of the reconstruction plans.

The possible utilization of the CEI as a tool to deal with the political problems of the area of the former Yugoslavia - in view of the launching of an initiative that could contribute to a process of conciliation and normalization - also remains a controversial question. A key condition would be the decision to re-admit Serbia whose participation was suspended at the outbreak of the conflict. But this requires a stabilization of the situation in the Yugoslav area through a full implementation of the Dayton agreement.

More generally, unlike other regional arrangements, the CEI has continued to develop a political dimension whose importance should not be underestimated. It provides the forum for the discussion of some relevant issues, especially bilateral ones. For instance, some bilateral talks between Italy and Slovenia that took place on the occasion of CEI meetings proved to be instrumental in clarifying some questions or helping the overall diplomatic process. In fact, the CEI activities in the political field has been developing along both the bilateral and the multilateral tracks. The most important meetings are organized in such a way to allow both types of exercises.

In the minority field, following the approval of a committing document on the issue in May 1994, the effort is now aimed at establishing increasingly closer relations between the CEI - in particular, its working group on minorities - and the Council of Europe. It must be recalled that the CEI document provided an important stimulus for the elaboration of the «Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities» adopted by the Council of Europe in November 1994. Some CSCE documents on minority issues had also been stimulated by the CEI's work and proposals in the field.

An analysis of the other activities of the CEI is beyond the scope of this paper. It must be stressed, however, that only a very small number of the projects elaborated by the various working groups have been implemented. Remarkable - albeit small-scale - initiatives have been undertaken, in particular, in the field of scientific cooperation, civil defence, environment and cultural exchange (Franchetti



Pardo, 1995). But, especially in the economic field the results lag far behind the expectations. The various projects need the financial support of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which is, however, reluctant to provide additional funds. In any case, Italy remains keenly interested in some major transnational infrastructure projects such as the transportation axis Trieste-Lubiana-Budapest-Kiev that could help substantially the integration of Italy's North Eastern regions with the Central European area.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

As stressed at the beginning of this paper, the major regional cooperation arrangements were launched or rivitalized in the initial period of the transition of the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe as a response to their desire to prepare for the full integration in the Western institutions. Now, after several steps have been taken in the process of enlargement of Western institutional framework, there is the need to rethink the actual aims and possible future developments of the various forms of regional cooperation which have been established. Central Europe, in particular, continues to have a high potential for the development of advanced forms of regional cooperation. Both the states and the sub-state entities as well as some communities and ethnic groups are interested in this particular form of cooperation which are often designed to promote local or cross-border interests.

However, to be successful, the regional cooperation arrangements should meet a set of basic criteria. First, they have to establish a functional relationship with the main Euro-Atlantic and pan-European institutions, which, in turn, have to take over a growing coordinating role among the various cooperation initiatives. Second, the participating states should refrain from any move that could transform the regional arrangements into some kinds of alliances against others. Third, particular attention should be paid to the need to avoid that some forms of cooperation involving sub-state entities could provoke tensions among the states, thus jeopardizing the general aim of enhancing European stability. Finally, it is essential that regional arrangements do not represent, at any stage, an obstacle for the full integration of Central and East European countries in the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

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