

Common Foreign Policy for the Western Balkans?



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Summary

Traditionally, international relations were studied as relations and positioning of the large states in the international arena, leaving small states and their foreign policy on the margins of research and political interest. However, the 20th century international realities challenged this rather limited view of international relations and the role of foreign policy in general. In this period the number of states increased to over 200 in the world and 40 only in Europe. Seven of them emerged through the breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY): Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo.

Fraught by wars and conflicts, post-conflict transition and mutual regional ties that have been spilling over each other's internal and external affairs, the question is in what ways these newly established and fairly small countries can position themselves regionally and internationally, to what extent they can affect regional and international relations, and do they possess enough skills and energy to define their own foreign policy priorities.

This brief review aims to explain main factors driving the foreign policies of the new states in the region, aiming to identify the common traits which can give rise to greater and more meaningful regional cooperation on common foreign policy issues, regardless of their differences and disparate dynamics of the implementation of their foreign policy priorities.

New States, New Policies

1990's in the Balkans were marked by the breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) that resulted in wars and eventually the rise of new small states¹. In the context of foreign policy, seen through the traditional prism, new countries could not achieve a significant impact in the international arena: large countries create and maintain coalitions, while small countries are treated as objects of international relations². The analysis of the foreign policy of small countries has been reduced to their positioning in relation to the larger states.³ After the Second World War, things have started changing and *"small states today enjoy more international prestige and visibility than at any other time in history."*⁴ Political alliances, such as the European Union (EU) have provided some legal and diplomatic space for small countries.⁵

And for the Balkan countries, this was also an inevitable new course. Similar in

¹ Much of the literature on small states largely deals with defining the small states. But, there is no widely accepted definition of a small state, after all. Definitions included geographical size, population size, and country's degree of influence in the international affairs. But it has been also argued that "a small population or geographical size does not necessarily coincide with a 'small-scale political system'" (Sutton). Small does not necessarily implies weakness. The idea of small states is also based on of perception. Robert Rothstein argued that "a small power is a state which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities, and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of others." Robert Keohane offered a perception-based conceptualization as well: "A small power is a state whose leaders consider that it can never, acting alone, or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system." They both emphasized that the psychological dimension should be included in the definition along with any objective criteria, such as size, economic parameters etc. Laurent Goetschel wrote that "in traditional political thought ... "small" in the context of foreign and security policy meant that such a state was perceived as no danger to neighboring state." These and a number of other definitions are present in the discussion about the issue, but perhaps the least erroneous definition of the country is the one that country articulates itself.

² Walt, Stephen M. 1990. *The Origin of Alliances*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

³ Literature on foreign relations reflects the predominance of the large states in Europe in 19th century. The large states were creating the international law and international relations. Only after the World War I, and the establishment of the League of Nations, the involvement of smaller countries and their strengthening was enabled. But the World War II interrupted this initial interest for the small states. In 1970's the interest for the small states increased under the influence of decolonization and the birth of many "small states."

⁴ "Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior" edited by Jeanne A.K. Hey, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.

⁵ There is disparity in the size, wealth and political system of member states, but all have equal rights. While in some areas majority voting takes place where larger states have more votes than smaller ones, smaller states have disproportional representation compared to their population. The larger states still carry more weight in negotiations, but smaller countries can, together with the disproportionate representation in terms of votes and seats in parliament, give greater space to move and exercise more influence.

many regards, war and post-war realities have left the Balkan countries with different circumstances which have determined dynamics of foreign policy implementation. However, one thing was a common thread: to make a clear breakup with the SFRY tradition of non-alignment and turn to the West.

Since the 1990s onwards, Balkans foreign policies can be seen in three loosely divided, but common, phases:

1. International recognition,
2. Europeanization, and
3. EU and NATO membership.

The first two phases have largely overlapped in almost all countries that have passed or are still going through the process. The emerging countries have not officially articulated and defined their foreign policy priorities immediately after declaring independence, which has created additional space for acquiring broad international recognition as well as external legitimacy that has been in service of nation- and state-building. In this regard, the newly established countries needed support from all sides.

International Recognition

All former Yugoslav states, except Kosovo, achieved their full international recognition shortly after the declaration of their independence. It took former Yugoslav countries between one, in Montenegro, and 18 months, in Macedonia, from declaration of independence to international recognition by the EU and the United Nations (UN). But from that point onwards, these countries went very much different ways as the cost of the independence was diverse.

Under the slogan “return to Europe,” and after the 10-day war, Slovenia based its entire foreign policy efforts on *re-branding* the state as purely European using historical narratives in the process of policy-making. Immediately after the international recognition, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) were involved in wars forced upon them, and their foreign policy initiatives focused exclusively on stopping and overcoming the conflict, as well as developing and strengthening international relations and state building, another common trait of all countries. Macedonia’s foreign policy evolved around the dispute with Greece over the name “Macedonia.” It was admitted to the UN under the provisional description of the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)”⁶ and that external factor

⁶ Macedonia declared independence in 1991. Greece reacted strongly, accusing Macedonia of counterfeiting of history and usurpation of Greece’s national, historical and cultural heritage. The

heavily wakened Macedonian foreign policy and its positioning in the international arena. Finally, Montenegro declared independence from Serbia and gained international recognition in 2006, largely thanks to external mediation and the so called “Belgrade Agreement”⁷ that envisaged the ‘exit option’ for the union’s members in the section titled “Provision on Reconsideration:” *“Upon the expiration of a three-year period, the member states shall be entitled to instituting proceedings for a change of the state status, that is, withdrawal from the state union.”*⁸

In an entirely opposite way, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008, with the strong support from the USA, but until today 43.5% UN member states have not yet recognize it. Kosovo’s main foreign policy priority was focused around an increased number of countries that recognize the independence of this state.⁹ The author of “Small States Foreign Policy: The Case of Kosovo,” Alfred Marleku, argues that the *“Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as a leading institution of Kosovo’s foreign policy, has achieved minimal results since its establishment in 2008. None of the declared short-term objectives of the MFA has been accomplished within this period.”*¹⁰ While the reason for stalemate in Kosovo’s foreign policy has been largely caused by external and regional factors, providing Kosovo a limited space to maneuver, it is worth pointing out that Kosovo in this respect is quite resourceful – in 2013, Kosovo National Strategy for the Digital Diplomacy¹¹ was hailed as fourth best in the world,¹² while Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs digital diplomatic mission was listed as one of the top ten

issue came before the UN Security Council, which in two resolutions recommended a peaceful settlement to be found quickly. In 1993, following the recommendations, Macedonia was accepted in the UN under the provisional name “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.”

⁷ “Agreement on Principles of Relations between Serbia and Montenegro within the State Union” (Belgrade Agreement) signed on 14 March 2002 in Belgrade by Presidents of the Federal Republic Yugoslavia, and the Republic of Montenegro, Prime Ministers of the Republic of Serbia, and the Republic of Montenegro, and witnessed by EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Republic of Kosovo’s First Foreign Policy Priority: “Recognition of Kosovo’s independence by an absolute majority of the states in the international community and establishment of diplomatic relations with these countries.” Ministry of Foreign Policy Website: www.mfa-ks.net

¹⁰ Alfred Marleku, “Small States Foreign Policy: The Case of Kosovo,” Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, Published by MCSER-CEMAS-Sapienza, University of Rome, Vol 4, No 2; May 2013.

¹¹ Digital Kosovo is an initiative being delivered by IPKO Foundation, with the support of the Republic of Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Council and the Norwegian Embassy, aiming and working to improve Kosovo’s inclusion in the global internet infrastructure, as well as using online communication channels to improve perceptions of Kosovo and support of the country’s economic, cultural and political developments: www.digitalkosovo.org

¹² The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kosovo has been selected as the author of the best National Strategy for the Digital Diplomacy by Turkish Journal on Public Diplomacy, Yeni Diplomasi, in 2013: www.yenidiplomasi.com

moments¹³ of public diplomacy by the U.S. Institute for Public Diplomacy. Such initiatives can certainly help Kosovo achieve its goals in the long run, but Kosovo still struggles with the legitimacy of its existence and depends on cooperation with Serbia in achieving steps towards its foreign policy goals.

Serbia's foreign policy has been affected by its 1990 leading role in the conflicts in the Balkans following the breakup of SFRY, resulting in international isolation during 1990's as well as internal and external struggles to preserve Yugoslavia in any form – first, as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and then as a State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Since 2008, again faced with internal political problems, and the lack of internal legitimacy, its foreign policy initiatives and diplomatic efforts have been largely used to protect its territorial sovereignty, strongly opposing the Kosovo declaration of independence. Due to the internal struggles, and the need of external support in its endeavors to keep Montenegro, and in particular Kosovo, within its borders, the predominant characteristics of Serbia's foreign policy was indecisiveness in regards to what direction it would take.

Immediately after restoring peace in the region, a common thread has appeared in all of these countries. It was their commitment to the EU, and with the exception of Serbia, NATO integrations. Judging by their official documents¹⁴, all countries, have defined at least three identical foreign policy priorities: ***EU integrations, NATO integrations and regional cooperation.***

What it meant in practice, is that all the countries had to undertake the very same steps of reforms and transformation of their respective societies in order to meet conditions set by the EU and NATO. While this was potentially a platform for common objectives implementation, the ex-Yugoslavia countries have taken somewhat different paths.

¹³ The 10 Biggest Public Diplomacy Stories of 2013, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 14 January 2015.

¹⁴ To this day, only Serbia does not have an official document defining Serbia's foreign policy priorities.

Europeanization

Often misinterpreted, Europeanization simply means the assistance in preparing the country to join NATO and the EU. It begins a moment, the EU declared its commitment to support these countries on their way to the EU.¹⁵

Slovenia went through this phase relatively quickly compared to the rest of the Balkan states. However it did not go without some problems with its Western neighbor – first, Italy raised the issues of the Italian minority in Slovenia, and then, an issue regarding the purchase of land by foreigners. This blocked Slovenia on the way to the EU, as the purchase of land became a condition set by the EU to be met if Slovenia was to sign The European Agreement.¹⁶ With the changed political climate in Italy, the Agreement was finally signed in 1996; Slovenia became an EU candidate country in 1997, and started accession negotiations. Eight years after, Slovenia has achieved its most important foreign policy priority.

The painful Europeanization process in Croatia started with the application for the EU membership in 2003. It became the EU candidate country in 2004, but the accession negotiations lasted until the end of 2011. Conditions such as full cooperation with the International Tribunal for War Crimes and relations with Slovenia, including Piran Bay, for example¹⁷, the rights of national minorities, etc. prolonged the process significantly, but after a decade of negotiations, it finally joined the EU while for NATO integrations it took Croatia one year less – nine years.

¹⁵ The conditions for establishing contractual relations with these countries were first laid down in the Council Conclusions of April 1997. In 1999, the Council established the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). It was confirmed that the countries of the Western Balkans would be eligible for EU membership if they met the criteria established at the Copenhagen European Council in June 1993. The European Council's determination to fully and effectively support the Western Balkans on their path towards European integration was reiterated by the Thessaloniki European Council of 19-20 June 2003, which endorsed the 'Thessaloniki Declaration' and the 'Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: moving towards European integration.' These documents were adopted at the EU-Western Balkans Summit held on 21 June 2003 in Thessaloniki.

¹⁶ The Europe agreements were association agreements between the EU and its Member States and the Central and Eastern European countries, including Slovenia that joined the EU in 2004/2007. The Agreement formed the legal framework for the accession process of these countries to the EU. Same agreements were signed with other Balkan countries only under the different name: Stabilization and Accession Agreements (SAAs).

¹⁷ Piran Bay is located in the northern part of the Adriatic Sea and its shores are shared by Croatia and Slovenia. The area has been a subject of maritime and land border dispute between two countries. The situation became more complex when the dispute nearly derailed Croatia's application to join NATO. It escalated further with Slovenia's blockade of Croatia's EU accession from December 2008 until September–October 2009, when Slovenia (an EU member state) blocked the negotiation progress of Croatia.

Although far from joining the EU and NATO in the near future, Montenegro quickly progressed in the EU accession process, since it applied for the EU membership in 2008. Already in 2010 the EU granted the Montenegro candidacy status and opened the ongoing negotiations, while one year before, NATO granted Montenegro Membership Action Plan. Although critics point out that reforms and Europeanization is essentially done only on paper,¹⁸ many termed Montenegro a Balkan “success story” in this phase.¹⁹

The three countries have one thing in common: political consensus and a single voice in foreign policy matters. Regardless of internal political turmoil in each of these countries and internal and external crisis affecting the countries at different times, there was a common political will to internally overcome differences and speak in one voice before the EU and the international community.

Unlike Slovenia, Croatia and Montenegro, internal political cacophony in Serbia has been reflected heavily onto their foreign policy. Even though, according to the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *“EU membership is the strategic and foreign policy of Serbia,”*²⁰ it demonstrates in practice that as an EU candidate member, it is not always aligned with the EU foreign policy for which it has been criticized inside and outside of Serbia. In March 2014, Serbia abstained in a UN vote reaffirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, contrary to the EU policy on this matter. Trying to balance, Serbia finds itself between Russia and the EU.²¹ This is motivated by internal ideological factors which are also in play in Serbia when it comes to the issue of NATO integration.

The most illustrative representation of this three party relation of the Serbian foreign policy position has been depicted by a Serbian cartoonist Predrag Koraksić Koraks, showing Serbia’s Prime Minister, playing two pianos at once, with the EU, embodied in Angela Merkel, Germany’s Chancellor, and Russia, embodied in Vladimir Putin, Russia’s president.

¹⁸ Opposition criticizes the current Montenegro Government for having no tangible results in fight against corruption and organized crime, and lack of political will to implement existing laws and action plans in this area.

¹⁹ Recently, German Foreign Minister praised Montenegro’s strategic foreign policy goals of EU and NATO membership hailing the country a “success story in the region.”;Balkan Insight Web Portal www.balkaninsight.com, 7 May 2015.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Web portal www.mfa.gov.rs

²¹ Guy De Launey, “Serbia’s balancing act between Russia and EU,” BBC News, 17 October 2014



Figure 1: Serbian foreign policy position by Koraks
Source: Radio Free Europe Web Portal, 21 May 2014

Nevertheless, Serbia is an EU candidate country since 2012 and in 2014 has opened accession negotiations, but it still has not opened any of the 35 chapters of negotiations even though it is expected to do so in 2015. For Serbia two mayor things will play a decisive role: the Kosovo issue and the implementation of the Brussels Agreement²². Serbia fears additional EU conditions related to Kosovo, such as full recognition and normalization of the Serbia—Kosovo relations. In regard to opening negotiations, such conditions could significantly jeopardize and block its path to negotiations, taking into account Serbia's official position that *"it has not and will not recognize the independence of Kosovo."*²³

The stalemates in the accession process Serbia now fears have been witnessed in Macedonia and BiH. These countries started their process of Europeanization in early 2000's but froze in time: Macedonia, still dealing with the dispute over name with Greece, which has become an EU condition to opening negotiations, and BiH being captured both internally and externally from any progress. Lack of any political will in the country coupled with number of "new" conditions by the EU created no way out.

²² The Brussels Agreement was signed between the governments of Serbia and Kosovo on the normalization of their relations. It was negotiated and signed in Brussels under the auspices of the EU. The negotiations were led by Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić and Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi, and mediated by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton. The agreement was formally signed on 19 April 2013.

²³ Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister of Serbia, "Steinmeier: No new conditions for Serbia accession," EurActiv, www.euractiv.com 30 April 2015.

Not Quite There

Political situation in Macedonia deteriorate since 2005 when the country was granted a status of the EU candidate country. A decade later, Macedonia still has not opened negotiations due to Greece's veto on negotiations opening until the name dispute is resolved. The stalemate and the failed initiatives by the EU²⁴ to resolve the issue reflected on the internal political situation giving rise to stronger nationalistic narrative, weakening rather than building upon the country's democratic foundation. This also further affected relations with other neighboring countries, including, apart from Greece, Bulgaria and recently, Albania as well, and did not mitigate increasing inter-ethnic tensions in this country. In 2012, Bulgaria joined Greece in vetoing the opening of negotiations, claiming that *"Bulgaria cannot grant an EU certificate to the actions of the government in Skopje which is systematically employing an ideology of hate towards Bulgaria."*²⁵ Recently, Albania has threatened it would use veto to Macedonia's request to join NATO, even though all technical conditions were met.²⁶

Even though Albania was never a part of Yugoslavia, in EU view today, this country belongs to so-called Western Balkan – a political rather than geographic neologism describing the South-East European area that includes countries of *"ex-Yugoslavia (minus Slovenia) and Albania."*²⁷ Unlike newly established countries in 1990's, Albania was not in need of international recognition. It was rather focused on the desire to join international organizations after the long-term isolation by the majority of the international community. The orientation towards the West, EU and NATO in particular, shared with its ex-Yugoslavia neighbors determined its foreign policy, and made Albania a part of the shared Europeanization process.

With the EU Albania established first relations in 1992, but along with other Western Balkan countries – it was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during the Thessaloniki European Council Summit in 2003. On 12 June 2006 the SAA was signed, which entered into force three years later. In 28 April 2009, Albania formally applied for membership in the EU.

²⁴ In 2012, 7 years after Macedonia was granted a status of an EU candidate country, the then Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle launched a high level accession dialogue with Macedonia. Despite Füle's efforts, the dialogue has not delivered and has gradually lost importance.

²⁵ "Bulgaria vetoes Macedonia's EU accession talks," EurActiv, www.wuractiv.com 5 November 2012.

²⁶ Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, said in his speech at the Regional Ministerial Meeting on Counter-Terrorism held in Albania's capital, Tirana, on 20 May, 2015.

²⁷ Pond, Elizabeth, "Endgame in the Balkans: Regime Change, European Style," Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2006.

At the same time, Albania has led a constructive foreign policy especially towards its neighbors²⁸ "European Albania as a model of inspiration in the region: improving relations and deepening economic cooperation with neighboring countries."

Because of its political specifics BiH, in practice does not follow its own direction and priorities, namely, Euro-Atlantic integrations, defined in *"General directions and priorities for implementing foreign policy of BiH"* adopted in 2004. Two entities have very different priorities and views on the foreign policy that can be seen in an international arena. The vote on the Resolution on Syria in 2012²⁹ or non-recognition of Kosovo are just some examples of how BiH is struggling internally.

Although there is a strong nominal political commitment to consensus across the country that the priority needs to be fulfilled as soon as possible, the lack of a single voice and political will in BiH coupled with inefficient international community mechanisms applied so far, left BiH the last one in the region.

What Now?

Last, third phase, still remains an ambition for all the countries except Slovenia and Croatia, that are full members of the EU and NATO. Only these two former Yugoslav republics reached the third stage and have been since trying to find their position within this greater coalition whose members' foreign policies must be coordinated with the one of the EU.

After almost a decade of one-dimensional and one-directional foreign policy whose sole aim was to join the EU (and NATO), after 2004, Slovenia largely relied on the EU to take a lead taking almost a decade to re-design its foreign policy. But, even to this day, *"it prefers to stay silent; waiting for a consensus to be formed."*³⁰

Lacking an initiative and missing a window of opportunity to impose itself as a leader in the Balkan region, with the aim to facilitate the EU accession process for the rest of the Balkan states, given the shared geographical, political, economic, and historical realities, Slovenia has left this niche unoccupied granting Croatia, the newest EU member state, plenty of room to do that.

²⁸ Ulrike Stern and Sarah Wohlfeld, "Albania's Long Road into the European Union: Internal political power struggle blocks central reforms," DGAP Analysis, no. 11, September 2012.

²⁹ In 2012, BiH representative at the UN General Assembly voted in support to the Resolution on Syria, although, due to the lack of consensus in the Presidency of BiH, BiH should have restrained from voting. Even though by voting for the resolution BiH joined EU statement, the Serb Member of Presidency, Nebojša Radmanović, opposed the voting for the resolution.

³⁰ "Letter from Ljubljana," Saša Vidmajer, Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe, 24 April 2015.

As for Croatia, although still adjusting to its new position and role in the EU, just like Slovenia, Croatian Government in its program for the mandate 2011 – 2015, put high on the agenda its neighbors, as one of its priorities.³¹ It further explains that its national interest is the membership of all countries of the region in the EU for which Croatia would offer its unequivocal support. Croatia did exercise the claimed support on several occasions, the recent one being through the 2014 British-German initiative for BiH, launched on Croatia's incentive, but just like Slovenia, it has yet not offered concrete policy initiatives that will include the entire former Yugoslavia region.

This was also underlined in 2013, by Jose Manuel Barroso: *"As an EU Member State you have made clear that you will help others follow your path. I welcome this commitment as our Union is open to those who share our European values"*³²

As small states, with exceptionally reduced capacities to implement complex foreign policy relations, the foreign policy of Macedonia and BiH, but to a certain extent the foreign policy of the rest of the former SFRY countries, has been largely ad hoc in nature reflecting current internal problems or insufficiently informed policies.

On the margins of global developments, without being able to influence them, and with the same objectives and priorities, the former SFRY countries should apply the lesson that can be learned from Yugoslavia, their once common state, – that the influence of one country does not necessarily depend on its size and power, but the ability to exploit circumstances and position they occupy in the international arena in order to advance their interests, i.e. the priorities and foreign policy objectives.

In this respect, Yugoslavia was a master of foreign policy pragmatism. It used all means, including Tito's figure and image, to affect and improve its position in the international community. A good illustration is the image of "the largest state funeral in history"³³ at the time, when 4 kings, 6 princes, 31 presidents, 22 prime ministers and 47 ministers of foreign affairs from 128 different countries from both sides of the Iron Curtain came to Belgrade, then the capital of the SFRY, to pay their last respect to the lifelong President of Yugoslavia. Since 1967 Yugoslavia signed over a hundred mutual agreements on visa-free entry with non-

³¹ Croatian Government Program 2011—2015, Foreign Policy, Policy Towards Neighbours, 2011.

³² Speech by President of European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, at the ceremony to mark the accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union: Welcome to the European Union, Zagreb, 30 June 2013.

³³ Vidmar, Josip; Rajko Bobot; Miodrag Vartabedijan; Branibor Debeljaković; Živojin Janković; Ksenija Dolinar (1981). Josip Broz Tito – Ilustrirani življenjepis. Jugoslovenska revija. p. 166.

aligned and almost all European states. Visa free travel was followed by employment agreements that enabled unemployed Yugoslavs to look for jobs outside Yugoslavia legally but also to ensure the rights of Yugoslav workers abroad and their eventual return to the country. Until 1971, Yugoslavia had eight such agreements with Austria, France, Sweden, Germany, Australia, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Belgium regardless of their ideological differences.

New Agenda?

All former Yugoslav countries discussed in this paper have identical foreign policy priorities and objectives: the EU and NATO integrations as well as good neighborly relations. Some of them share the same or similar internal political problem; some are burdened by external influences. And even though the dynamics and progress of implementation of foreign policy in these countries differ, there is no particular obstacle in initiating joint efforts in helping the stagnating countries to speed up the steps that need to be taken by all. In practice, this kind of cooperation already successfully exists in Europe and the rest of the world.

Within the EU, the Visegrád Group is well known as an alliance of four Central European states – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – aiming to *“work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration.”*³⁴ One among many cooperation models between countries and on foreign policy matters is the **Nordic-Baltic Eight or NB8**. This is the flexible co-operation network involving the three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – and five Nordic countries – Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark. The rationale for such coalitions or network is simple: *“In a situation where the interests of large states still play an important role in the developments that are taking place in Europe and the rest of the world, the coordinated activities of small countries that are similar both geographically and in core values provides an opportunity to act as an equal partner.”*³⁵

This loose cooperation format enables individual countries to speak in the EU and globally with more powerful voice advocating common agenda and stimulating greater visibility. This does not require institutions or common visual identity, but simply joint values, shared concerns and interests.³⁶ These do not have to be

³⁴ Visegrad Group Website. About the Visegrad Group.

³⁵ Mikk Rebane and Merle Pajula, “Nordic-Baltic Co-operation – Unity across borders,” Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Yearbook, 2008/2009.

³⁶ Ibid.

identical though. The countries that make up the NB8 vary widely:

Country	NATO members	EU members
Estonia	✓	✓
Latvia	✓	✓
Lithuania	✓	✓
Sweden		✓
Finland		✓
Norway	✓	
Denmark	✓	✓
Iceland	✓	

Sweden and Finland have chosen neutrality over the membership in NATO, while Norway and Island are not even part of the EU. Still, neither these nor the other political and strategic differences influence this cooperation, because predispositions for such cooperation are geopolitical and economic, rather than ideological.

One of the examples of this cooperation is Nordic support of the Baltic countries independence. *"The Nordic countries were among the strongest supporters of the Baltic countries' independence and their public support considerably influenced public opinion worldwide."*³⁷ They were also the first countries to open their borders, introducing visa-free regimes with the Baltic countries. Support of the Baltic countries during their accession to the EU naturally followed. They were the true advocates of the Baltic countries accession. *"They operated persuasively and actively within the EU and NATO to defend the Baltic countries' integration interests."*³⁸

After the Baltic countries joined the EU, the cooperation continued. Relatively recently, in 2011, the Nordic and Baltic countries have signed a Memorandum of understanding on the posting of diplomats at each other's missions abroad. It makes easier for the Nordic and Baltic countries to maintain a diplomatic presence around the world by enabling flexible and cost-effective solutions. *"This memorandum of understanding signed by our eight countries is a concrete evidence of our solidarity and our strengthened diplomatic cooperation,"*³⁹ said the foreign ministers of the Nordic and Baltic countries in a joint statement. But even before this memorandum, both the Nordic countries and the Baltic ones already

³⁷ NB8 wise men report, August 2010.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ From the Joint Statement of the foreign ministers of the Nordic and Baltic countries in regard to signing the Memorandum of understanding on the posting of diplomats at each other's missions abroad, 30 August 2011.

cooperated in some parts of the world either by housing each other's diplomats or by having some joint facilities adjacent to the embassies like in Berlin.

Such models of cooperation without serious obstacles and financial burdens could be achieved among the former Yugoslav states, where the different position of countries in regard to EU accession process should be used as an advantage rather than an obstacle. Once, all former Yugoslavia's states join the EU, such regional cooperation might be a strong tool in putting forward common foreign policy priorities and initiatives. In other words, it could be easier to influence the EU and the international community for their own good.

* * *

Practical lessons that can be learned from own history, missed opportunities from past, but also already existing models of regional cooperation, especially in Europe, should not be ignored. Moreover the latter need to be analyzed in detail, and then designed according to desires and needs of individual states, but in a way to work in practice and produce tangible results.

The purpose of this short review aims to draw attention to the fact that the former Yugoslav republics, plus Albania, although independent and different in their political setups all have the same foreign policy priorities, namely the EU and NATO integration, but struggle separately to achieve them. Under the umbrella of their third common foreign policy priority – **regional cooperation** – joining the forces based on practical rather than the ideological needs can be mutually beneficial as suggested by the NB8 example. The paper also aims to motivate and invite regional policy makers, academia and civil society to more closely evaluate the possibilities of cooperation, based on common foreign policy priorities, extending beyond political know-how into the realm of practical benefits.

Most elements required for a common foreign policy or close cooperation around some defined common issues among these countries already exist.

No infrastructure is necessary, no offices, additional employees, and special budget allocations are needed– for all of it already exists. What is crucial is the understanding that *“the regional cooperation between countries in the Western Balkans is equally important as their European path”*⁴⁰ and political will to advance and move from the particular and ideological to the common and practical in words and acts.

⁴⁰ “McAllister: WB Countries not likely to join EU at same time,” European Western Balkans, www.europeanwesternbalkans.com, 8 June 2015.

And while it, it remains to be seen how these countries frame their own policies, it is also up to the EU to rethink its own approach towards the Western Balkans. Having all these countries aiming for the same goals, sharing very similar if not identical background poses an opportunity for Brussels that should not be missed. Building up a foreign policy framework for the Western Balkans countries as a whole, might be well worth approach.



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