Central Europe: Regional Cooperation and Beyond

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Introduction

The process of disintegration of political and economic relations among Central and East European countries*[1], which started in late 1980s, is fully understandable for many reasons. The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA or Comecon) was created in the 'cold war' era for predominantly political motives and since the very beginning it lacked the proper economic mechanisms to enable it to work efficiently. So, as soon as the weakening international position of the former Soviet Union allowed COMECON member countries to leave the institution promoting artificial integration, which was forcefully created and politically and economically dominated by the former Soviet Union, they eagerly did so and rushed towards the West (Western Europe and the European Community, in particular). The forty-sixth session of CMEA, held on 28 June 1991 in Budapest, decided to disband the organization within 90 days. Irrespective of the official date of its dissolution, the CMEA practically ceased to function in early 1990, a consequence of the failure of bilateral and multilateral efforts to reform it and the decision of individual countries to go their own way.

At the same time, however, the pace and even more the extent of this runaway process were not fully justified on purely economic terms. It took place against the pattern of often historically established natural ties among Central and East European countries (CEECs), usually further strengthened during the forty plus years of that inefficient, but anyway existing economic cooperation. This process was also entirely unique in the recent international environment. It ran precisely against the growing world-wide trends toward increased regional cooperation and integration, already embracing practically the entire Western Europe (with the creation of the European Economic Area (EEA), i.e., common market for industrial products covering EU and EFTA countries), North America (with the North American Free Trade Association, including the United States, Canada, and Mexico), large parts of South-East Asia, and even - after so many disappointments with previous efforts - South America and Africa.

Therefore, it was quite reasonable to argue that the process of quick disintegration of political and economic ties among at least some Central and East European countries would be rather short-lived. In entirely different political and economic conditions, the process has been gradually reversed as soon as the understanding of those countries' economic (and political) interests dominates over their short-term political (and national) emotions.

Sub-Regional Initiatives

Since the failed attempts at reforming the CMEA in the late 1980s, there have not been any serious plans to revive economic cooperation among the Central and East European countries on a regional basis, i.e., covering all the countries of the region (besides, of course, a few unrealistic Russian offers which were not treated with any enthusiasm in Central and Eastern Europe). Political factors played a decisive role in rejecting or even contemplating any such steps.

However, pre-existing differences in the economic and political developments of individual countries in the region were not the most crucial factor distinguishing the countries. More important were both the timing of bold political and economic reforms and each country's resolve in and pace of implementing those reforms. Differences in these respects resulted in initially identifying a group of first-tier reformers (Czechoslovakia, (and, after the split, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary, and Poland) and those belonging to the second-tier group (Bulgaria and Romania, but also Albania). Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania created a new group of reformers after re-gaining their independence in late 1991. Slovenia joined the group of CEECs in 1992, after escaping from the chaos of former Yugoslavia. Lately, the picture has become more complicated as the reforms by some of those newcomers have moved much faster (in Estonia or Slovenia, for example) than in the others, while some of the first-tier countries (Slovakia, in particular) have slowed down their reform drive (primarily in political terms). Anyway, it is impossible to reject the notion that the most important factor behind all initiatives towards integration on the sub-regional basis has so far been the geographical proximity of the countries involved.

Practically every country in the region is involved in at least one of sub-regional groupings created after the revolutionary changes in Central and Eastern Europe of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some of them (Poland, in particular) belong to almost all of the newly established entities in the region. Those groupings range from the Council of Baltic Sea States in the North, through the Visegrad Group and Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), to the Central European Initiative (CEI), and finally to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in the South. Most of them have as their main goal the strengthening of mutual economic cooperation with the partners, but not necessarily as the only one (democratization or security issues are also present in some of them). All these organizations / institutions have contributed to a relatively new phenomenon in the Central and Eastern Europe of the early 1990s - the creation of a multi-layered integration network in this part of Europe. Though still relatively weak and not effective enough, it contributes to the deepening of inter-state and cross-border cooperation.

In some of those groupings, countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not the only members and sometimes not even the dominant ones (first of all in the Council of Baltic See States and in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation). In others, they either dominate the agenda (Central European Initiative) or are their exclusive members (Visegrad Group and CEFTA).

The Council of Baltic Sea States was created in 1992 and includes eleven countries of the region. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (also Russia) are very active members of that relatively loose institution. The most recent (May 1996) summit of the Council (at the heads of government level) in Visby, Sweden gave a new and interesting impetus to its functioning. 'Via Baltica', investments in infrastructure to transport energy and gas, as well as fighting with international organized crime dominated the agenda of the summit. All participants supported the aspirations of the Baltic states and Poland to join the European Union.

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation was established on June 25, 1992 at the meeting of the heads of states in Istanbul (it was initiated by Turkey in 1990). Among eleven co-founders were: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine (Poland, Israel, Egypt, Slovakia, Tunisia, Italy, and Austria later got the status of observers). It was defined not as an organization, but rather as a forum (or a movement) with a rotating chairmanship exercised by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the participating countries. The highest decision-making organ of the BSEC is the Meeting of the MFAs, Seven such meetings have taken place so far, the last one in Bucharest in April 1996. In 1993 a Parliamentary Assembly of the BSEC was established. The main purpose of the BSEC is the promotion of economic cooperation in the Black Sea region, and on this basis the consolidation of peace and stability in the region. The priority has been given to cooperation in such areas as transport and communication, energy, banks and financing, trade and industrial development, exchange of economic and commercial information, agriculture, ecology, health care, science and technology, and tourism. Specific branch programs were developed and eighteen permanent Working Groups created to deal with those issues. The contribution of the BSEC to regional cooperation and security is enhanced by the practice of involvement in the cooperation of local authorities, NGOs and professional groups.

Though both of the above-mentioned integrational efforts have already achieved some successes, the most important integration groupings from the point of view of strengthening cooperation among the Central and East European countries, are: the Central European Initiative, the Visegrad Group, and CEFTA.

Central European Initiative

The Central European Initiative is a regional organization made up of fifteen member-states with a total population of 239 million. The member-states are: Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine. Five of those countries (Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine) became full members on June 1, 1996 (previously they had the status of Associate Members). Moldova is expected to join the CEI in November. Bavaria participates in several Working Groups, but there are no known plans for it to become a member.

The CEI grew out of a more modest body - a sub-regional organization called the Alpe-Adria Working Group which was set up in Venice at Italy's initiative in 1987 to deal with the problems in the frontier regions of Austria, Italy and Yugoslavia. In the early 1990s Hungary's two western regions joined Alpe-Adria At a meeting in Budapest in November 1989 Alpe-Adria ceased to be a loose grouping of border regions and became an association of states aiming to play a political role in a dramatically changing Europe. Each country agreed to take responsibility for one area of cooperation: Austria for environment, Italy for roads and railways, Yugoslavia for communications and the media, and Hungary for culture. In May 1990, at a meeting of foreign ministers of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Italy and Yugoslavia in Vienna, Czechoslovakia was officially accepted as a member of the Quadrilaterale, which thereupon became known as the Pentagonale Group. Participants agreed to hold the first summit in Venice in August 1990. Poland joined in July 1991, bringing the number up to six.

In November 1991 the group was renamed the Central European Initiative. Yugoslavia's membership was suspended in January 1992, following its breakup and the diplomatic recognition by the European Union and other governments of Croatia and Slovenia as independent states. Bosnia-Hercegovina, Croatia and Slovenia became members in July 1992, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (following Czechoslovakia's dissolution) in January 1993 and Macedonia in July 1993. Extension of membership to other countries was discussed at the summit meeting in Trieste in July 1994 and as a result of that Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine became members of the CEI in 1996.

A regular pattern of high-level meetings has been established, with annual summit meetings and meetings of foreign ministers at least twice a year. Regular meetings of officials take place in 16 Working Groups. Each Working Group is coordinated by a different country(s), for example transport WG is coordinated by Italy, energy and culture by the Czech Republic and Slovakia, science and technology, civil protection and disaster management by Italy, environment, statistics, tourism as well as information by Austria, small and medium-size enterprises as well as migration by Hungary, agriculture by Poland, telecommunications by Austria (pro tempore for Yugoslavia).

In contrast to the Alpe-Adria, the emphasis in the CEI is on practical cooperation. The organization is regarded as a forum for identifying the needs of its member-states, organizing political dialogue, formulating joint decisions and exchanging experiences. Its primary objective is to promote cooperation in, for example, infrastructure projects and in science and technology, but working within a number of international bodies.

Representatives from the Council of Europe, the European Union, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the Danube Commission, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Council of Baltic Sea States, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) attended a CEI summit for the first time in July 1992. This meeting decided that the CEI would establish a secretariat at EBRD headquarters in London. That secretariat became operational in January 1993.

A total of 115 CEI projects were in progress in 1992 founded by the EBRD to the tune of ECU 1 billion. At the July 1994 summit in Trieste it was announced that the bank had underwritten guarantees for CEI projects to the value of ECU 400 million and was ready to finance further projects. The same summit also agreed to create in future a free trade zone within the CEI to be coordinated with the work of the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA).

Visegrad Group

Though this partially contradicted their long yearning for full independence and sovereignty, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland had acknowledged very early in their mutual relationships that their chances for quicker integration with Western Europe and the world economy as a whole could only be enhanced through a progress of mutual cooperation. Pretty soon it became obvious that they could be more attractive to foreign investors through the creation of a larger (65 million consumers) open market for Western firms. They could and should gain stronger support from international financial institutions, and they should also be able to count on additional Western assistance for their common economic, ecological, infrastructure and other projects. Working together they can much faster and more easily adjust their economies, especially their industries, to European standards and regulations, and generally prepare themselves for participation in the West European integration process, which, of course, remains their primary strategic goal. Such cooperation may also help these countries to strengthen their emerging democracies and to overcome their ethnic or national antagonisms (witness the relations between Hungary and Slovakia).

In the case of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, the initially very difficult process of their political cooperation and economic re-integration on new political and economic principles had already started in 1990. The initial summit meeting of their leaders took place in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia in April 1990.

The next one (regarded as a milestone in the rapprochement between the three countries) occurred in Visegrad, Hungary in February 1991, hence the initial name of the group the 'Visegrad Triangle.'

Initially their cooperation concentrated mainly on political and security aspects, especially concerning their external relations (in view of the then dangerously disintegrating former Soviet Union). It was the Cracow declaration of October 1991 that opened the way for closer cooperation in economic terms by starting negotiations on the creation of a free trade area between the three and finally, after the split of Czechoslovakia, four of them. However, at the same time, other aspects of cooperation within the 'Visegrad Group' have almost ceased to exist, so much so that in practice many experts express their doubts if the Visegrad process is still alive.

Nonetheless, there are some new factors which might help to revive the concept of 'Visegrad' as a framework for sub-regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. First of all, Slovakia has recently become the strongest promoter of such cooperation reaching beyond purely trade or economic relations. Facing growing isolation by the West, as a result of its questionable internal politics, the Slovak government has been trying (though rather unsuccessfully) to encourage its partners to extend their mutual cooperation to political and security fields. This might be explained as an attempt by Slovak leaders to develop alternative structures of cooperation in case Slovakia is not included in the first wave of EU (and NATO) enlargement. On the other hand, possible increase of the area of sub-regional cooperation on such countries as Ukraine might provide an additional impetus to other than economic forms of cooperation.

CEFTA

On December 21, 1992 the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary and Poland signed in Cracow, Poland a free trade area agreement which constituted the climax of over a year of difficult negotiations within the 'Visegrad Triangle.' Symbolically, it was the first international agreement signed separately by the two newly independent states - the Czech Republic and Slovakia -which emerged officially on January 1, 1993 from the former Czechoslovakia. This all happened not long after final dissolution of CMEA and the Warsaw Pact (mid-1991) which had forcibly tied together these and other countries of Eastern Europe for most of the post-WW II period. All these apparently contradictory developments, disintegration and re-integration activities undertaken almost at the same time, exemplify the often divergent and very complicated political and economic processes going on in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of communism in 1989.

The December 1992 agreement among the four countries, officially called the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), was modeled after the Association Agreements signed in December 1991 by Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland with the European Community (the Czech Republic and Slovakia signed separately re-negotiated agreements with the EC in October 1993). However, while the Association Agreements are asymmetric in terms of their mutual liberalization steps (favoring the Central European countries) CEFTA is an agreement among a group of equal partners. It originally provided for a gradual elimination of tariffs in trade of most industrial goods among the four countries over the next eight years, starting on March 1, 1993. In the spring of 1994 the shortening of that period in principal to five years (to go along with similar liberalization moves in their trade with the European Union) was negotiated in Prague. Customs duties for a range of less processed industrial products (which comprise roughly one-third of their mutual trade) were eliminated entirely on March 1, 1993. Duties for most other industrial goods will be gradually reduced from 1995 by one-third and will completely disappear in 1997. Duties for some sensitive products (beginning with automobiles) are being gradually phased out between 1995 and 2001 and only agricultural trade was initially to remain almost untouched. Nonetheless, even in this most sensitive area commitments were made in 1995 to lower tariffs from the beginning of 1996 and make further efforts to liberalize trade in that area as soon as possible. According to Polish experts, these moves have decreased the level of effective protection of trade in the area of agricultural products by fifty percent.

In general, the present tariffs in trade on most industrial products among the four countries match those in their trade with the European Union, as envisioned in their Association Agreements. Nonetheless, as tariff levels have gone down, non-tariff barriers have grown in importance both in relative and nominal terms. CEFTA member countries have not only tried to keep their existing non-tariff restrictions on trade, but sometimes even impose new ones (i.e., import surcharges, additional border duties and taxes, etc.) Recent negotiations among CEFTA members and the number of exceptions show that at least some of them want to keep those restrictions as long as possible. It is especially difficult to accept this in case of countries like Poland, which has almost permanent trade deficit with most of its partners. The mechanism of more active balancing of mutual trade among CEFTA members has not yet been worked out.

CEFTA agreement brings tangible benefits to all of its member countries. First of all, it gradually reversed the trend to reduce mutual trade, which began after the collapse of CMEA, and was further pronounced by the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and, ironically, by the signing of the Association Agreements, which gave Central European countries easier access to EC markets. These expectations were not confirmed until 1994 and 1995 when mutual trade among those countries was growing fairly quickly (as a result of this the share of their mutual trade in their total trade turnover has recently slightly increased, after a sudden drop in the early 1990s, to a level of 5-8 percent, depending on the country).

According to most analysts, including those from the West, the signing of the trade deal is also an essential step on Central Europe's way toward membership in the European Union. This is being more and more strongly pointed out by the European Commission, not always to the liking of all CEFTA countries.

There are real fears among politicians and experts in Central and Eastern Europe that the EU, while delaying the process of bringing Central Europeans into West European integration, may be using mutual cooperation among those countries to further that goal (by preoccupying them with mutual cooperation and diverting their attention away from the EU).

CEFTA is not a closed grouping. On September 11, 1995 ministers of foreign affairs gathered at the summit in Brno signed an additional protocol amending the original CEFTA agreement and allowing other countries of the region to join it only if they succeed in their drive towards market-oriented economic reforms and fulfill a few other conditions. First of all, they have to be members of the World Trade Organization what in fact means that they have to abide by all the internationally accepted standards of trade. The second condition is for all potential members to have signed Association Agreements with the European Union. This is so as not to complicate future negotiations of CEFTA members with the EU on accession. The third condition is to sign bilateral trade agreements with all CEFTA members and consequently - the fourth and a very formal condition - to sign a multilateral free trade area agreement. Slovenia was the first non-Visegrad country to join CEFTA on January 1, 1996. Informal applications to join CEFTA have already been received from Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Romania.

Whatever the positive consequences the creation of a free trade area among the Central European countries will have for facilitating their transition to a market economy and to a common Europe, it is obvious that CEFTA alone will not be sufficient to significantly increase the level of their economic cooperation. To achieve that goal, which does not as yet seem to be accepted by the Central European countries, the process should be supplemented by other elements as has been the case with the integration of the European Community since the late 1950s. Even in that case, however, the initial phase of the integration process has proved to be very complex, full of conflicts and has taken longer than originally expected. The scope and intensity of those conflicts are usually directly proportional to the number of integrating countries, differences in the initial degree of economic development among them and its average level. As the first aspect is less relevant here, the second one may have become more meaningful since January 1, 1993 (at least temporarily) as the breakdown of Czechoslovakia increased the disparity between the most and the least developed countries of the region. And, needless to say, on the whole Central Europe is not yet a highly developed area.

First of all, it is worth stating that liberalization of trade among the four countries does not yet mean, and, at least until the end of this century, will not mean real free trade among them. It will be gradually liberalized and, considering the experience of the European Community, especially with agriculture, it may not be fully in place by 2000. Even before that, however, one can expect various difficulties with the implementation of the CEFTA agreement.

One of them is the intrinsic problem of free trade areas, i.e., the cumbersome process of the practical implementation of the rules of origin to differentiate products originating in member countries (and thus traded without restrictions) from those imported irom the third countries, xt is not a L»ig proulem in a customs union where all the member countries have the same external trade policy, but it creates a lot of difficulties and administrative work in the case of a free trade area, where each country sets its own trade policy in relation to outsiders. Discussion on the rules of origin constituted a large part of all negotiations leading to CEFTA (as well as Association Agreements with the EC and free trade agreements with EFTA) and they form dominant portions of the negotiated agreement. The application of those regulations also requires a lot of work and is time-consuming in the implementation phase.

A more specific problem concerns free trade in raw materials, especially in the energy sector. Government subsidies to this sector are still in place in most of our countries and this complicates the process of freeing mutual trade. In order to eliminate or at least lessen that burden, the countries of the region should develop a common energy system. However, to achieve that goal a common energy policy should be worked out. But so far, even their national policies in that respect are not fully in place. An alternative and preferable solution would be, of course, their faster integration into the West European energy system, which may come in the not so distant future.

The question of continued subsidies to state-owned enterprises further complicates the liberalization of trade as each country in the region experiences a different pace and scope of the privatization process. Continued differences in economic structures (between private and state-owned sectors), combined with freer trade, can lead to subsidizing consumption in other countries. Therefore, the diversity of privatization mixes in different countries will probably cause tensions through different long term approaches to subsidies.

Another important difference among the CEFTA countries concerns their monetary and fiscal policies. All countries are at various stages of their economic reforms in that respect and we can expect some asymmetry to continue in the foreseeable future. It is possible that while inflation rates in some countries will gradually decrease, in others they may just begin to rise, threatening their exports. In such a case, any coordination of their exchange rate policies may be impossible and excessive fluctuations of mutual exchange rates may exacerbate trade problems. In the case of a serious devaluation of one of the currencies and without tariffs in mutual trade, there may be no way to prevent an inflow of cheap imports other than to introduce additional non-tariff restrictions. That would mean, however, creating additional tensions on the road to closer economic integration among the CEFTA countries.

One has also to remember that future integration of the Central European countries into the European economy will have also a monetary aspect. This will probably mean a lengthy transition period in view of substantial differences in economic structure and the inflationary environment in the Central European countries. They simply require a relatively long period of adjustment and the need to secure realistic exchange rates and a solidly based convertibility of their currencies.

Nevertheless, in comparison to the West, structural differences and differences in price structure among the CEFTA group are not so big. Thus, some elements of mutual convertibility of their currencies can be arranged more easily and it might support the successful implementation of the CEFTA agreement and even attract more foreign investment. At the same time it would enable capital flow among the CEFTA countries, thus mutually strengthening their restructuring process and economic growth. This should also be accompanied by the gradual liberalization of the labor movement (so far, it is very limited and exists only in bordering regions).

The lack of sufficient coordination of their external economic policies may be yet another source of complication in the smooth functioning of the CEFTA agreement. The creation of a fully-fledged customs union is, of course, not a goal of CEFTA, but some kind of cooperation in formulating their external economic policy seems desirable. It will probably take place more naturally in case of their relations with the EU (and EFT A) as they proceed with the process of gradual economic integration with Western Europe.

In this context, one can argue that the creation of a small secretariat to coordinate those and other efforts of CEFTA countries would be desirable and helpful. This is, however, what most of CEFTA countries do not want to do. From the very beginning of that cooperation, the issue of not institutionalizing in any way the cooperation among countries of the region has been very high on the agenda and, irrespective of recent efforts to change that (especially on the side of Slovakia), it will rather stay this way. Various working committees consisting of respective countries' ministries seem to be able to cope with most of the problems arising in the process.

Addressing some of the above-mentioned problems, CEFTA countries conducted in 1995 a discussion on the enlargement of CEFTA cooperation to other economic areas, practically in line with the decisions of their Association Agreements with the

European Union. It was decided that the Czech Republic would lead in preparation for the liberalization of trade in services and Poland would address the issue of the transfer of capital. At the summit in Brno, Poland also suggested starting work on freeing the movement of labor force. However, this last proposal has not yet been accepted by other partners.

The question about the future of CEFTA is a genuine one. If all its members have as their primary goal joining the European Union, it is obvious that they treat CEFTA only as a 'transitory' institution to something better. However, if the number of members grows over time and, in a few years time covers most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which have Association Agreements with the EU, CEFTA may last for quite a while. It is obvious that not all Associated Countries will join the EU at the same time and for some of them it may take many years. In such a case CEFTA may remain a viable option for them, as is still the case with EFTA for those countries which decided not to join the EU. There is no doubt, however, that as soon as first-tier CEFTA members start leaving it for the EU, the importance of CEFTA will begin to diminish (as it is with EFTA today). This is especially likely, as practically all current members of CEFTA are the primary candidates to join the EU in the first wave in a few years time.

Conclusions

The multi-layered integration process in Central and Eastern Europe started in the early 1990s has been a new and interesting phenomenon in the region. The many sub-regional integration groupings, and we have not discussed the numerous instances of cross-border cooperation, create a network of ties that already benefit their members or will do that in the near future. These benefits reach far beyond purely economic (still limited in scope) aspects and gradually increase the political and security stability in the region.

Thus, this new trend has already brought fairly positive results, even though most countries of the region look towards the European

Union and engage themselves in mutual cooperation only to the extent which does not complicate their current or future relations with the EU. On the other hand, there is also a growing conviction among them that successful cooperation within the region may not thwart the process of their integration into the European and world economic, political and security structures; on the contrary it may make it easier.

Note

1 There exist some differences in defining Central or Central East European countries (CEECs). For the purpose of this paper the term CEECs includes ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe associated with the European Union (EU). It means Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Nonetheless, it is becoming more and more often to treat them as Central Europe (for example, in European Commission's terminology).

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