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The Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea Initiative as the revival of “Intermarium”

Janko Bekić and Marina Funduk

On 29 September 2015, representatives of twelve Central and Eastern European countries held the first exploratory meeting of the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea (ABB) Initiative, aimed at strengthening the political and economic cooperation of EU member states located between the three seas. The meeting was held in New York, on the sidelines of the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, under the initiative of Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. The other heads of state attending the meeting were Polish president Andrzej Duda, Romanian president Klaus Iohannis and Bulgarian president Rosen Plevneliev. Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia dispatched ministers of foreign affairs, whereas Austria, Slovenia and the Czech Republic were represented on a lower level. The meeting was also attended by representatives of the Atlantic Council think tank.

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Bolstering cooperation between Central European states on the north-south axis has been the declared foreign policy goal of Croatian president Grabar-Kitarović ever since she assumed office in February 2015. Since then, she has found a staunch ally in Polish president Duda, who took office in August of that same year and stressed that he was striving for the creation of a partner bloc between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas. This development is noteworthy for two

reasons: firstly, it represents a widening of the foreign policies of their predecessors – Ivo Josipović of Croatia and Bronislaw Komorowski of Poland. In his five-year term, Josipović focused mainly on reinvigorating the ties among former Yugoslav republics, whereas Komorowski concentrated on aligning Warsaw's interests with those of the European Union's leading capitals, Berlin and London.

A historical precedent

Secondly, the ABB Initiative is a revival of the originally Polish project of *Miedzymorze*, or Intermarium, from the period between the two world wars. Intermarium was Jozef Pilsudski's and later Wladyslaw Sikorski's plan of creating a Central European federation stretching from the Baltic region to the Balkans, which would serve as a buffer zone against the German *Drang nach Osten*, but also against Soviet intentions to spread communism westward. It was likewise supposed to increase the clout of middle-sized and small European countries ringed by two powerful neighbours. This policy was termed Jagiellonian, since it reposed on the historical period (15th-16th century) in which the famous Polish-Lithuanian House of Jagiello had ruled over the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia and Hungary-Croatia.

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Pilsudski's and Sikorski's plans have been largely snubbed by the politicians of smaller Central European nations, primarily out of fear of a latent Polish ambition to dominate this area. However, the nonchalance with which Nazi Germany and later Soviet Russia subjugated the region revived the interest in a Central European association of states. The first such association to be created after the end of the Cold War was the Visegrad Group, an alliance including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Ever since its inception there have existed plans to expand the V4 to other post-communist countries in the region. Among the most likely candidates was Croatia – a participant at the initial Visegrad meeting of the Polish, Bohemian and Hungaro-Croatian kings in 1335 and the natural exit point for Central European countries to the Adriatic Sea.

The enlargement of the V4 to a V5 (including Croatia) would already represent a small Adriatic-Baltic union. However, the recently elected Croatian and Polish presidents have – so far – concentrated their efforts on the establishment of a larger, yet more informal coalition including the three Baltic states, the V4, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia, as well as Romania and Bulgaria. All twelve countries are EU member states, and all, apart from neutral Austria, are part of NATO. Again with the exception of Austria, they all share a communist past and have recently experienced the laborious transition from planned to free market economies and from one-party systems to multiparty democracies.

But what unites these countries the most are their shared economic interests, primarily in the field of energy and transport. The linking of

gas and oil pipelines, the construction of power plants, the expansion of energy storage facilities and the integration of markets are all crucial for improving energy security in the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea area. The initiators of the new cooperation believe that these objectives can be reached without institutionalization, i.e. without the creation of additional political bodies on a transnational level.

The Intermarium – a space of great economic potential

The Initiative is conceived as an informal platform that will secure political support for specific projects of interest to the countries involved, as well as for the EU in general. For its part, Croatia proposed projects that would, among other things, encourage closer cooperation in the field of energy security, like the construction of the Adriatic-Ionian gas pipeline and its connection to the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, as well as the construction of the LNG terminal in Omišalj on the island of Krk or the floating LNG terminal.

Construction of the LNG terminal on Krk opens the possibility of transporting gas to Central Europe, and is essential for the diversification of supply in the EU. After its completion, Croatian and Polish LNG terminals will represent the starting points of the Adriatic-Baltic corridor that will reduce EU dependence on Russian gas, ensure a stable and secure supply of gas across Central Europe, and enable delivery of this strategically important energy source from around the world.

The next important economic interest is in the

field of transportation. Some improvements in Central European connectivity have already been made, but more remains to be done. Developing intermodal freight and passenger transport from the Baltic region to the Adriatic and the Black Sea by combining road, rail and river transport would speed up economic growth in these countries. Therefore, Croatia offered its geographical position as one of the important links of this connectivity. The construction of the Rijeka-Budapest high-speed railway line is particularly important. The port of Rijeka, in addition to its location in the TEN-T Mediterranean Corridor, potentially represents the most cost-effective import/export traffic point in this part of Europe, especially in view of the opening of the new part of the Suez Canal.

Potential foreign investors have already shown great interest in the maritime dimension of the ABB Initiative. On 25 November 2015, Chinese premier Li Keqiang underlined this at the Fourth Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries in Suzhou, China: “A number of CEECs including Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, Latvia and Bulgaria have proposed strengthening cooperation on port development. China has put forward the cooperation initiative involving the ports of the Adriatic, Baltic and Black seas, which will focus on production capacity cooperation among the ports and industrial parks of the coastal areas of the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. In ports where conditions are readily available, efforts will be made to build industrial clusters, so that in addition to increased cargo-handling capacity, these ports and port areas will also become the basis of industrial development. We expect our companies to be the main players in these projects.”

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The ABB Initiative enables involved countries to focus on developing joint projects that can be funded by EU programmes and funds, like the CEF (Connecting Europe Facility), which supports trans-European networks and infrastructure projects in the transport, telecommunications and energy sectors, or programmes of energy security and clean and efficient energy. Stronger economic exchange in this area can also raise the competitiveness of Central European countries in the EU and in global markets.

As expected, the Initiative has received strong support from the countries represented at the exploratory meeting in New York. The next meeting, announced for spring 2016, will be held in Croatia and is supposed to bring together government leaders, experts and the business community interested in possible joint projects. The ABB format can be used as a regular forum for “new” EU member states, i.e. those who acceded in the enlargement waves of 2004, 2007 and 2013, with the addition of Austria, which has a traditional bond with other Central European countries.

Stumbling blocks on the way

However, certain obstacles in the realization of the Croato-Polish Initiative are already discernible. The dispatching of diplomats

instead of foreign affairs ministers to the exploratory meeting can be interpreted as a sign that Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia may have reservations regarding the Initiative. One should keep in mind that Prague is traditionally cautious in regard to Warsaw’s foreign policy; most recently this came to the fore with the creation of the Austro-Czecho-Slovak Austerlitz (Slavkov) Triangle, yet another Central European platform viewed by some as a competitor to the Visegrad Group, which includes Poland.

One more discrepancy in New York was Austria’s suggestion to keep the doors of the Initiative open for countries of the so-called Western Balkans, which are aiming at EU membership (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia). This proposal could be seen as colliding with Grabar-Kitarović’s underlying intention to partly reorient Croatia’s foreign policy by giving more space to the relations with Central Europe than the ex-Yugoslav countries. It should also be noted that Romania and Slovakia are among the five EU member states who don’t recognize the independence of Kosovo, which would greatly complicate its inclusion in the Initiative.

Another issue is the disagreement within the region concerning the handling of the refugee crisis. Croatia, Slovenia and Austria are situated on the Balkan route which runs from Greece to Germany and are, so far, allowing refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan to cross EU territory and apply for asylum in Germany. In contrast to that, the V4 countries abide by Viktor Orban’s maximum security approach of strictly prohibiting illegal migrations. The gravity of this issue was

clearly demonstrated at the “New Europe: Europe of ideas” conference, organized by the iDEMO Institute on 23 and 24 October 2015 in Zagreb, during which young politicians from “new” EU member states dealt almost exclusively with the migration wave from the Middle East to Europe.

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A fourth possible problem is the lack of we-ness (a sense of shared identity) among the countries of the proposed Intermarium. Apart from the already mentioned historical experience of communist rule between 1945 and 1990, there is little in the way of relating Alpine Slovenia to Balkanic Bulgaria, or Baltic Estonia. The cultural and linguistic differences between the three seas are as vast as in the EU on the whole, raising the question of whether the ABB concept is stretched beyond its capacities.

A positive raison d'être

It remains to be seen if these and other differences will trump the obvious pros of closer cooperation within the Initiative. Possible opt-outs should not be regarded as a failure of the Initiative in general, but rather as an opportunity to build tighter bonds among countries that choose to go ahead with the

Intermarium project. Should it gain momentum, one of the most pressing issues of the political leaders involved will be to assure their constituencies, as well as outside observers, that, unlike its predecessor, the Intermarium of the 21st century is not directed against anyone, but rather is devised for the further amelioration of living conditions of citizens in “new” EU member states.

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On a smaller scale, Croatia – one of the two engines behind the Initiative – should use the time until the meeting scheduled for spring 2016 to decide whether the Intermarium will remain a solo project of President Grabar-Kitarović or a concerted effort by all political actors invested with the power to create Croatia’s foreign policy. The first statements given by the new foreign affairs minister, Miro Kovač, from the conservative Croatian Democratic Union, suggest a move in this direction, however concrete actions are still pending. Needless to say, the credibility of the Initiative would be doubled, both at home and abroad, if it was supported by the Croatian government as well as by the Office of the President of the Republic.

Dr. Janko Bekić, Senior Research Assistant at the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO).

Dr. Marina Funduk, Senior Research Assistant at the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO).

IRMO

Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations

Institute for Development and International

Relations - IRMO

Lj. F. Vukotinovića 2, Zagreb, Croatia

www.irmo.hr



Hanns Seidel Stiftung

Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia

www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr