

# HOW TO INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS?

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I had the honor to participate in the prestigious Antalya Diplomacy Forum (ADF) as a speaker in a panel entitled “How to increase the effectiveness of Regional Organizations?”

I herewith wish to share some of the background thoughts which helped formulate my brief intervention during this event; these thoughts do not necessarily refer to the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and its Permanent International Secretariat (BSEC PERMIS), the Secretary General of which I had the pleasure and honor to be for the last six years. More than that, these thoughts are the result of the valuable experience I gained by liaising and cooperating with the heads and members of various regional and international organizations, in an effort to better coordinate and adapt our efforts while pursuing common objectives.

One could initially ask if we actually need regional organizations nowadays, if they really offer any concrete and fathomable services. I believe that as the foremost vehicles for implementing regional cooperation, the existence and activity of similar entities is imperative.

It is another issue, of course, that today we have perhaps too many regional organizations, sometimes with overlapping and repetitive activities, creating confusion, opacity, duplication of efforts and wasting time and resources.

But why is regional cooperation so important, especially today? I believe for 3 main reasons: a) As the Covid pandemic proved beyond any doubt - and despite the initial introvert and “selfish” behavior of most States – in order to address issues of similar proportions effectively, regional cooperation is a *sine qua non* condition; b) Innovation and globalization – whatever the latter term means – have radically changed the importance of two significant factors: time and distance, thus rendering regional cooperation an easier, faster and more comprehensive form of development and progress;

c) The global issues of today, like climate change, environmental pollution, etc. do not recognize or respect national borders, they ‘oblige’ states to tackle them jointly, if they wish to be efficient.

So, if regional cooperation is imperative, how could we improve the performance and relevancy of regional organizations in charge of and responsible for this cooperation? I believe that in this context some of the main factors we should be paying greater attention to are the following:

1. **Political will and commitment:** this means that member states of a regional organization should not only verbally express their commitment, but also get actively involved and contribute to the organization’s activity. This is a major factor, because on many occasions states tend to participate in an organization just “for the sake of participation”,





mostly because an “x” or “y” neighbor is - or is not - a member of the entity in question. Any international or regional organization can only be as effective as its member states will it to be.

2. **Sense of ownership:** members of a regional organization should believe in the aims and objectives of the latter, offer the necessary means for achieving them and have trust in the potential of the organization to actually do so.
3. **Readiness to adapt to the new challenges:** regional organizations should be flexible and ready to adapt to the ever-faster change that occurs on the international scene, especially in the confusing and confused times of today. The geopolitical reality that we faced yesterday is completely different than the one they will be called to face tomorrow; lack of readiness to adapt to the so-called “new normal” will most probably render irrelevant an organization that proves unable or unwilling to do so.
4. **Acceptance and endorsement of innovation:** the way people and states live and do business in today’s world depends increasingly on networks, communications and IT applications. ICT and AI became a vital dimension of the economic development, providing new opportunities to strengthen governance, financial management, or

delivery of goods and services; the introduction of the above innovation has immense effects on cost reduction, improved transparency and increased efficiency on the public and private sector. It is obvious that regional organizations cannot continue ignoring the above facts, especially when the evolutionary process of innovation gains in pace almost every day.

5. **The human factor:** regional cooperation should be entrusted to prepared and qualified experts willing and able to concretely promote the implementation of the organization’s aims and objectives. Representatives of member states should focus on the essentials and not get carried away or distracted by personal or other expediencies.
6. **Avoidance of double talk, of double standards:** promoting regional cooperation means engaging in a sincere and trustworthy dialogue; I have the impression that many times this sincerity is painfully missing and that, instead, a “dialogue among deaf” is dominating discussions during meetings; words seem to have lost their meaning and their “weight”, unable to serve change.
7. **A strong and capable Secretariat:** today the activity of every successful regional or other international organization is managed by a well-staffed and qualified Secretariat, which leads the way and en-

courages member states to contribute and get involved in projects and initiatives reflecting the policies and plans of action endorsed by the members of the organization. The efficiency and effectiveness of a regional entity directly depend on a strong, competent and responsible Secretariat.

The above factors I enumerated are of course not new, just like the ways and means for addressing most of the pressing issues our small world faces today: we know them very well, they are being spelled out almost in every relevant conference or meeting – many of them were also repeated by the distinguished participants of the recent Antalya Diplomacy Forum.

So why are we unable or unwilling to start applying the concrete solutions already known that could serve as the remedy to today's urgent and serious global issues?

In my personal view, for three very distinct reasons:

- (a) **The persistent inequalities among states:** we hear so often about them, especially during events dedicated to the development of Africa or other neglected regions of our globe; we usually denounce them vehemently, yet we “forget” to redress the situation; on the contrary, the finite resources of our planet continue to be used - or abused - by the few powerful, while single companies or individuals manage or possess properties and fortunes that are far greater than the annual GDP of many countries recognized by the UN. State or individual “philanthropy” towards the weaker and less privileged cannot hide the pressing and urgent need for the fair re-distribution of the above-mentioned finite resources of our planet.
- (b) **The lack of inspired leadership:** the unruly and unpredictable “new reality” period we have gone through during the last years can be mainly attributed to the lack of inspired leaders and pragmatic leadership; true, the challenges have been immense and, to a certain degree, novel, yet this cannot obfuscate the fact that the reaction by world leaders has been painfully short of what the circumstances demand. The complexity of today's international scene calls for leaders able and willing to grasp the true, global dimension of issues and take the right decisions, however painful politically they sometimes might be; after all, the overestimation of the “political cost” has never been the right advisor for sound and comprehensive decisions and policies.
- (c) **The double talk and double standards** prevailing on the international scene today: I have briefly elaborated above on the regional dimension of this

serious issue that afflicts cooperation and understanding, we only have to shift the whole problematic to the broader, global context; the main difference is that, on this level, the stakes are far greater and more serious for all concerned.

I wish to close this brief description of personal thoughts with a reference to the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.

The BSEC Organization was founded in the distant 1992 as a platform for dialogue and exchange of views on the highest level: a stroke of genius, given the particular circumstances and the prevailing, at that time, enthusiasm and optimism for a better World with less division and conflicts. This initial confidence led in 1999 to the transformation of BSEC into a full-fledged international organization in the region, with HQs of its *Permanent International Secretariat* (BSEC PERMIS) instituted in hospitable Istanbul.

With time this initial platform for dialogue, in a region of geostrategic importance, slowly matured into a concrete, dynamic vehicle for the promotion of economic cooperation among its Members and beyond. In fact, it evolved into a family of entities: apart from the inter-governmental branch (the BSEC Organization), the Parliamentary Assembly (PABSEC) was established, as well as the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (BSTDB), the BSEC Business Council (BSEC BC) and its think-tank, the International Center for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS).

What is perhaps more important is that this precious vehicle for dialogue and continuous, institutionalized cooperation and exchange of views on almost all sectors of governmental activity, gave also birth to a whole series of other, state or private, entities, thus involving in the broader picture professional associations or other unions; the latter's positive impact on the overall picture in the Black Sea region cannot be praised enough.

Yet, the initial enthusiasm and optimism of the early '90ties eventually faded away; today, especially in the broader Black Sea region, the overall picture is unfortunately very distant from the vision that inspired BSEC's founding fathers. The various political / territorial differences among some of the Organization's Member States undoubtedly cast their shadow on the effectiveness and performance of BSEC and one has the impression that the Black Sea region is becoming the focal point of new divisions and tension.

Of course, in today's complex and multipolar world, with so much unpredictability, uncertainty and instability, many of the issues facing the BSEC organization are problems afflicting other international entities as well.



One typical example of the lack of trust by member states in the capabilities of an organization, in this case of the BSEC organization, occurred when the covid pandemic hit global Tourism so hard, with devastating results for the people involved in the sector and for the overall economies of the BSEC member states.

The BSEC international secretariat tried immediately to promote, with the expert support of the UNWTO, a road map for discussing, formulating and endorsing a set of health and safety measures among the interested member states, so that they could allow even in limited numbers the flow of tourists among them, all neighboring to each other countries. BSEC PERMIS is still engaged in these talks that advance with a very slow pace; at the same time many member states preferred to embark on a campaign of ensuring similar agreements on a bilateral basis, forgetting the obvious advantages of the multilateral approach promoted by the BSEC Secretariat.

Of course, the above cannot obfuscate the tremendous work and concrete achievements of the BSEC organization which will commemorate its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary next year: apart from establishing a culture of dialogue and understanding in a difficult environment, apart from serving as an institutionalized platform of continuous contact among governments and state or private institutions, apart from implementing projects of regional im-

portance and promoting the collective picture of its Member States, the BSEC organization has also served as a precious, first-level confidence-building mechanism – not a minor feat, indeed, given the instability and lack of security in the wider Black Sea region.

It is today widely acknowledged that BSEC functions and performs as a regional entity promoting in a tangible way economic cooperation among its Member States and beyond; it is also dynamically active, present and, mainly, it is appreciated for its role on the international scene. BSEC is formulating or participating in real projects which produce tangible deliverables to its Member States and the region. Entities like various UN Agencies, the EU or the World Bank have sought the BSEC PERMIS as their partner or implementing agency for concrete projects in the Black Sea region. Today many projects of the EU for the region are formulated and/or implemented with the active participation of BSEC Member States and PERMIS, while the latter takes part as lead partner in EU projects worth millions of Euros. The first ever Meeting between Ministers of Foreign Affairs of BSEC and EU States took place in Brussels in 2019.

In conclusion I cannot escape the temptation to repeat the *cliché* phrase: if the BSEC organization did not exist in this geostrategic region of our small globe, then we should have invented it.