

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: THE HISTORICAL ACQUIS ON COOPERATION IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE BLACK SEA AS A CORNERSTONE FOR A PROGRESSIVE-EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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### Abstract

The vision for a democratic, socially just and environmentally balanced Europe, the modern cradle of humanitarianism and peace, a vision that moved European people and spread the mood for European integration through the enlargement of the European Union (EU), fades away. The unfortunate coincidence of aggressive neoliberalism with neo-fascist socio-political retrogression, along with the gradual sharpening of the international systemic crisis in the sphere of the economy, requests a reorientation of the progressive vision for cooperation and prosperity. The historic acquis on socioeconomic cooperation and cultural linkages in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea could become the foundation for re-establishing the prospects of European Integration. The core-periphery approach has run its course, especially when the “core” is deteriorating. In the present paper, rather than arguing in favour of “Eastern enlargement”, i.e., a structure with visible signs of relapse and breakdown, we discuss the usage of a regionally developed, effective and progressive “Eastern partnership” that may become the cornerstone for a European restart.

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## 1. Introduction

The vision for a democratic, socially just and environmentally sustainable Europe, the modern cradle of humanitarianism and peace, a vision that moved European people and spread the mood for European integration through the enlargement of EU, is fading away.

In the place of the European dream an unpleasant reality has emerged: (i) cross-regional disparities have been getting deeper over the last three decades since the 1980s. Standard deviation of GDP per capita for the 15 EU core member-countries started growing from the lowest level of 0.41 up to 0.52, back to the levels of the early 1960s. At the same time, (ii) labour average remuneration has lost almost 30% against per capita income in the same area (EU-15): from being more than 1.65 of per capita GDP in the late 1970s, it fell to almost 1.35 in the following three decades (Zarotiadis and Gkagka, 2013). In the political scene, (iii) technocratic legitimisation is gradually taking over, replacing the democratic tradition of the north-western part of the Old World. The unfortunate coincidence (iv) of aggressive neoliberalism with neo-fascist socio-political retrogression, along with the gradual sharpening of the international systemic crisis in the sphere of the economy, has generated a rather discouraging socioeconomic environment that has proved incapable of dealing with major, peripheral crises.

In order to succeed in having a progressive way-out, it is necessary for the European vision for cooperation and prosperity to change orientation. The present paper balances an academic and a political approach. It combines the inevitably limited objectivity of scientific arguments with daringly honest, unveiled political positions. Thereby, the paper seeks to provide answers for the future of Europe, having, on the one hand, the “neo-liberalisation of Europeanisation” and, on the other, the prospect for a renewed, modernised progressive vision.

In that sense, the historic *acquis* on socioeconomic cultural co-existence in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea could become the foundation for re-establishing the prospects of European Integration. The core-periphery approach has run its course, especially when the “core” is deteriorating. In the present paper, rather than arguing in favour of the “Eastern enlargement” of a structure with visible signs of relapse and breakdown, we discuss the usage of a regionally developed, effective and progressive “Eastern partnership” that may become the cornerstone for a European restart. In a past paper, Zarotiadis and Lyratzopoulou (2014) analysed the prospects of an inter-regional, cross-national cooperation in South and Eastern Europe by reintroducing the historical ideas of Rigas Feraios and other thinkers of this region (Dandashly, 2012).

South, Eastern Europe and the Black Sea provide an area where, despite the broad mixture of national and cultural identities and the resulting intense diversity, enhanced cultural, business and socioeconomic interrelations generate a fertile environment

for collaboration. In our days, the emergence of new countries and, consequently, the establishment of new frontiers has led to fundamental changes in economic, political, social, and cultural patterns, as well as to more pronounced heterogeneity and complexity in transnational cooperation. Nevertheless, it has been shown that there are ways to reorganise existing institutions for transnational collaboration in the area, co-integrated in a mutual context of democratically legitimised, social, and environmental sustainability, taking into consideration local and ethnic specificities.

In the present paper we go one step further in this direction. We first conceptualise the main problems existing in contemporary Europe – the “neo-liberalisation of the Europeanisation” and the “stretching out” case. Next, we proceed with our “stepping back to progress” proposal, rebuilding a regenerated, progressive European integration on pre-existing regional linkages and the currently emerging socioeconomic and environmental necessities. For this, we take into consideration the emerging polarisation in contemporary global economy and the resulting socio-political tendencies. The paper concludes on the prospects of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea in a rapidly changing world of worryingly intensified risks but also-promising opportunities.

## 2. Neo-liberalisation of Europeanisation and the “stretching out” case

As we mentioned in the introductory remarks, there are two main transformations that dominate contemporary Europe. The first one is a result of the conservative response to the generalised systemic crisis, initiated by severe disturbances in global financial markets in the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century first decade. Neo-liberalisation is a well-documented political trend based on ideological and theoretical foundations since the late 1970s that became gradually hegemonic, especially after the global changes of the 1990s<sup>1</sup>.

The EU was rooted in the Economic Cooperation Act of 1948 (Marshall Plan): a Keynesian strategy of international orientation laid the foundations for the eventual unification of European countries. In the meantime, Keynesian economics was grafted with the “continental” tradition of bourgeois liberalism, leading to what literature calls “Europeanisation”. All this changed around the 1980s. The recent transformation into a neo-liberal monetary union is in absolute accordance with the overall evolution of the pro-capitalistic political scene of our times.

Neo-liberalism is the necessary response to post-imperialistic capitalism, given the rapid deterioration of systemic bottlenecks. Depressed and restricted by the spatial limitations and the excessive credit expansion, modern bourgeois policy adopted the necessarily modernised<sup>2</sup> “self-destruction of production means «as the only way-out. As geographical and credit expansion ran their course, as technological evolution restricts marginal costs and counter-acts commercialisation, there is nothing else

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1. See Zarotiadis, 2012, as well as Duman, 2014.

2. The last historical experiences along with the tremendous evolution of military forces makes it imperative that we should be more careful.

but to sacrifice small and medium sized businesses, deregulate the necessary socio-political interventions and abolish the achievements of bourgeois social state, privatise social goods and branches of the public sector (Zarotiadis, 2013). Neo-liberalism is simply nothing more than an attempt to form new prospects of rewarding re-investments for the internationally over-accumulated capital that keeps being spoiled by the excessive profits of financial speculations. Thereby it recreates a new “El-Dorado”, which is very much needed at a time of deepening inequality, overproduction, and over-accumulation of capital.

In the framework of the European Union, this political conversion should not be perceived as a simple switch of political parties in the governments of member-states. It is, rather, of a ‘horizontal’ political nature, transcending the different political identities that governed Europe (and the world) till that point. This conversion can be summarised in the notion of **transforming the historical European Acquis into a “Community Acquis”**:

- First, the notion of “Freedom” is being converted in the request for “Market Liberalisation”, which is by no means the same thing. This results in aggressive deregulations and abolishes the structures of the European welfare state, which resulted from historical, systemic compromises.
- Second, the other foundation of the European Acquis, namely democratic legitimisation is being gradually substituted by Technocracy: political power moves towards those we have the right to decide and implement due to their assumed technocratic and cognitive supremacy.

The case of Central Bank sovereignty and independence, as well as the institutionalisation of automatic mechanisms and independent authorities to control fiscal policy is a change in this direction.

BBC celebrated the change in Italian and Greek government in November 2011 as an indication for the new era where technocrats take over: “Goodbye, Berlusconi and Papandreou. Hello, Monti and Papademos... According to Marco Incerti of the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels, *technocrats, by reputation, competence, and experience, can persuade the markets and eurozone leaders that they represent change*”<sup>3</sup>.

In the EU-summit of December 2011 another major episode in this direction was fulfilled: decision making in the newly established European Stability Mechanism (ESM) required a majority of 85% of contributing funds. A similar political indication can be found in the statement by the German Chancellor in the same period: “we have achieved a breakthrough to a Stability Union. A fiscal union, or stability union as I call it...” Nevertheless, in the BBC article mentioned above, Kevin Featherstone (London School of Economics) recalls the major concerns with respect

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3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-15720438>

to technocratisation: “technocrats bring a reputational advantage both in terms of knowledge and a sense of putting national interests above party political interests... but there are disadvantages too and sooner rather than later the democratic process will need to be restarted”. Indeed, this is because we need to draw our attention back to the tradition of political philosophy (Bangura, 2004): political questions do not have a single correct answer – therefore, such issues cannot be simply a subject of a superior wisdom or experience. They must be decided in a socially justified, effective manner.

Neo-liberalism, albeit consistent with the fundamental foundations of capitalist ethic and seemingly palliative, did not prove to be effective, not even in terms of rebalancing the system. Social and interregional contrasts were accentuated, much more and much faster than forecast, long before the financial capital had been sufficiently persuaded to invest in real economy. At the same time, induced self-destruction concerns-had already jumbled and upset holders of financial derivatives, there by inducing aggressive competitive behaviour. They were-engaged in a race to be first in transforming their redundant financial means into control of the scarce means of production. A race that has resulted in regional (for the time being) conflicts.

This leads us to the second main transformation that dominates contemporary Europe. Allow us to proceed with an allegorical approach to explain this development: a ‘small’-size sweater can never fit a heavyweight boxer. If you try it, the result will be to damage the sweater – any pre-existing tiny imperfections will turn into unmanageable holes. This is the case of the hasty regional enlargement of a unification process – the (Eastern) enlargement of EU, which had some defects or, at least susceptible to having several imperfections that proved to be unmanageable after the “**stretching-out**”:

- it was and still is a far too much economy-biased unification process, during which the dimension of socio-political integration has remained undeveloped;
- issues of state and national safety, common foreign policy, but also transnational coordination in terms of health, education and research, are still lagging behind (despite the evolving normative framework);
- furthermore, especially in the framework of the European Monetary Union, it is a financially biased process, in that the issues of fiscal policy, synchronisation of taxation, or aspects of socially and environmentally sustainable re-industrialisation are held back, due to absence of political legitimisation of relevant decision making;
- finally, any steps of political coordination have a clear neoliberal character – think, for instance, of the content in the “Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe”.

The interesting and, at the same time, worrying thing is that this politically defective process of unification resulted in an inability to deal with peripheral emergencies – the refugee crisis being the latest incidence – which, in turn, degrades even more the prospects of successful, spatial, and sectoral Europeanisation.

### 3. Possibilities for South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea

Anastasakis & Bojicic-Dzelilovic (2002, p. 2) provide a definition of the term (cross- or inter-) regional cooperation: “a more flexible type of interaction, accommodating diverse groups of states, economies and cultures dominated by ideas of opening and promoting mutual interdependence”. Regional cooperation is a process that allows governments, local authorities, social partners, producers, and civic society to implement initiatives for “common action” and “networks of independence” to be achieved. Thereby, the regions outstrip physical and/or political borders. The resulting interaction in issues related to production, administration, security, culture, education etc. provokes local economic prosperity, socio-cultural understanding, and respect, while it strengthens citizens’ participatory attitude and mentality for cooperation. In this sense, regional cooperation also acts as an effective democracy-building process.

Nevertheless, the cooperation process for countries in the same region may entail various difficulties. Over time, neighbouring involves not only co-operation but also competition, confrontation, and conflicts, which, in turn, generate immaterial counter-attitudes such as “national pride, political tensions, lack of trust, high coordination costs and asymmetric distribution of costs and benefits”. These behavioural patterns along with the lack of well-recognised, cross-national administrative and political procedures generate obstacles for conducting and realising regional agreements (Shiffand Winters 2002).

Anastasakis and Bojicic-Dzelilovic (2002) moved on to distinguish two groups of factors playing an important role in achieving cross-national, regional cooperation agreements between countries. On the one hand, there are external forces resulting from concentrated political and economic interests for the specific region but generated in other regions and/or in a global context. External factors may have a pro- or anti-cooperation effect, which, however, depends on what serves extraterritorial interests. Therefore, even when these factors facilitate cross-regional agreements, cautiousness is necessary to succeed in serving local benefits. On the other, internal factors refer both to the historically evolving socio-cultural, political, and economic linkages, either with a positive or a negative sign, as well as the currently rising requirements for the wider region, identifying common interests among the countries being integrated that will lead to common initiatives and projects.

In this context, we can move on and define the factors that motivate and those that hinder regional cooperation, specifically in South-East Europe. Geographical proximity and the regional nature of problems (organised crime, border control, environmental issues, underdeveloped infrastructure are cases that should be handled in a cooperative manner by all countries in the same region) constitute factors of an urgent character. Moreover, the idea for regional cooperation is also promoted by structural arguments of deeper relevance, such as the insignificant size of each individual market and its expansion potentials, historical links, cultural similarities, and internal socioeconomic pressures. Though these factors may not be considered urgent by “local elites”, Zarotiadis and Lyratzopoulou, (2014) anticipate that these are

to become the main objectively motivating factors.

Concerning the factors hampering regional cooperation among countries in South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, following the methodology described above, we can first focus on the hetero-determination of local stake holders' aspirations and their dependence on extraterritorial interests, which in turn hinder the emergence of region-specific requirements and necessities. Relevant literature emphasizes the lack of consensus regarding the benefits of regional cooperation, mostly because this is very often considered to be insignificant by "local elites"; given their already mentioned inter-dependence, they regard this as an unnecessary political preciousness with little impact for their actual interests (Anastasakis & Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002).

In addition to complications resulting from the specific profiles of local stakeholders, the non-complimentary economic structure, ethnic and cultural differences, a lack of security, peoples' lack of trust, weak legal frameworks (e.g., widespread corruption), the different level of bilateral relations with the EU, the absence of political vision and, finally, inadequate infrastructure in the region constitute additional obstacles. According to Petrakis (2014) and other scholars, those spatial irregularities constitute the main cause for the economic problems the EU is experiencing today. Nevertheless, all countries in the region that are part of the Union and all those planning their accession, must bear in mind that their integration will reinforce the process of convergence and will also improve the prospects of cooperation with their neighbours, thereby, constituting a way towards stability and prosperity.

Unfortunately, these expectations have been discouraged. The procrustean financial benchmarks – e.g., the "Maastricht" Criteria, wages and prices flexibility, increased labour mobility and fiscal equalisation – have not had the intended effect of alleviating preceding asymmetries between countries (Bergs 2001). Instead, given that those benchmarks were applied in economic areas not yet homogenous enough, pre-existing divergences became even deeper, causing further shocks to the process of Europeanisation. Less developed economies lacking competitiveness felt even 'lower' (at least in relative terms) (Zarotiadis and Gkagka, 2013) – becoming a member of a dissimilar socioeconomic environment, with different needs for sustaining one's position against the intensified competition from abroad, was not helpful in bridging the gap between those lagging and the most prosperous ones (Ascani *et al.*, 2012). The 28 countries that were already EU-members introduced a rather distinctive character, with different rates of economic, political, and social growth and development, which hindered the symbiosis of these countries within the European Union and prevented their full integration.

The decade-long convergence policy has proved to be ineffective. This is because the transfer of resources was not accompanied by policies for boosting local productive development but were limited to the sphere of consumption. This consumption boost to local, supportive societies was distributed among local classes in a provocatively unequal manner.

Here lies one of the main arguments of this paper: before integrating, for instance, Sweden with Malta, to avoid continuous troubles, attention should be first paid on regional cooperation and integration, so that countries belonging to the same macro-region (a term that has been presented for the first time in EU slang because of the so-called “macro-regional strategies”) and sharing analogous levels of development, closer historical links and similar socioeconomic, cultural and political frameworks, will be able to co-create and implement an appropriate strategy for interrelated co-development. Aydin (2005) argues that regional cooperation constitutes a tool promoting “regional and global security and stability”. Collaborating countries within the same region can facilitate organised action against issues that set humanity in danger, such as organised crime, terrorism, drugs, weapons, and human trafficking, promoting, thereby, stability and security regionally and globally. Furthermore, through regional cooperation countries can establish behaviours to deal with economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural issues and in doing so build a “shared identity”.

Examining the sub regions of South Eastern Europe separately<sup>4</sup>, the region surrounding the Black Sea is characterised by ethnic diversities, religious heterogeneity, cultural and language differences. One could also mention differences in the size of the countries, their economic structures and political orientation. The region’s weak background created favourable conditions for external players to penetrate, competing to promote their own products in the new open markets. The area is quite favoured geographically and strategically: being connected to the Mediterranean constitutes a convenient bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa with increasing military-strategic and geo-economic importance (Homorozean, 2010).

Despite the volatile and uncertain economic and political environment, the Black Sea region has entered the world economy, since two of its countries, namely, Russia and Turkey, are in the G20group, while the presence of the European Union in the region is apparent after the accession of Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania (Manoli, 2014). Consequently, given the long-lasting intercultural, business, and socioeconomic relations historically generated, the region constitutes a fertile environment for promoting regional cooperation and integration (Zarotiadis & Lyratzopoulou, 2014).

Since the 1990’s, the Black Sea region has been undergoing a long period of transition, during which a series of strengthening reforms have taken place and economic networks have been created, mainly in terms of trade links among its countries, financial transactions, labour mobility, technology transfer and tourism relationships. Apart from the efforts made by Black Sea countries on their own, there are also several cooperation initiatives undertaken by external actors (Homorozean, 2010). Indicatively, we can mention the Organisation for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) and Eastern Partnership (EaP), both EU initiatives familiarising Western Black Sea countries with the “Europeanisation Process”,

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4. The following presentation of the main characteristics of the region repeats a similar analysis in Zarotiadis and Lyratzopoulou 2015.

the international organisation Community of Democratic Choice (CDC), initiated by Georgia and Ukraine, and the EU-led schemes of the so-called Baku Initiative and Energy Community aiming at promoting energy production, transport and transit.

Regarding the Balkan region, things are kind of different, since “the states in this region are on a path toward membership in the EU”, even if this process evolves at a time when the EU experiences internal turmoil. Similarly, there are common features among Balkan countries, which facilitate their regional cooperation and integration. Apart from geography and proximity, they share common history that has shaped cultural, political, and economic bonds among the states, enabling better understanding among people as well as economic/political elites. Since almost all Balkan countries experience a transition period, leading to underdevelopment and lack of security, there are common regional problems that could be dealt with only via joint action. Additionally, most of these states have already become members of groups like the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA) or the Danube Commission, denoting, thereby, a common basis of political and economic interests (Anastasakis and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002).

However, the same features that enable cooperation also constitute an impediment. For example, history and geographic proximity is one of the factors that either promotes or hampers cooperation between countries, since each country is differently impacted. Other factors hindering cooperation are stunted inter-regional trade, due to similar economic structures and production of almost the same products, the ongoing efforts for democratisation, the lack of human, social and institutional capital, and, finally, the presence of ethnic nationalism.

The above lead to the conclusion that South-Eastern Europe is an advantageous field for exploiting historical links -both positive and negative- that spread beyond present-day spatial boundaries of state entities. Ironically, at the same time, the Balkans and the Black Sea create trouble and challenges that do not promote the idea of Europeanisation. Kempe & Klotzle (2006), having a rather unjustified denunciatory attitude, argue that full integration and realising the vision for a “whole and free” Union seems rather distant, since Balkan and Black Sea countries lack coherence and threaten stability and security in their regions, thus preventing Europe from achieving its goal. Even if it is rather unacceptable to blame countries lagging for the weaknesses of the process of European unification, we can conclude that while persisting with the “stretching-out” strategy is ineffective, the same regions within which this strategy failed, can become the basis of a new process that initiates integration first at local/regional level.

#### **4. Stepping back to proceed?**

Even though many may wonder whether the accession of South-Eastern countries during the great enlargement in 2004 and the EU expansionary intentions to the Balkans and the Black Sea could halt European integration, there is an unquestionable opportunity and need for emphasising the socioeconomic cooperation in South-

Eastern Europe and the Black Sea; this, however, should take place in the framework of a process that will be sufficiently different than the “stretching-out” strategy. The key to resolving the issue is the idea of regional cooperation and integration within the two regions before proceeding towards a wider amalgamation.

Let us recall the arguments mentioned in the previous section: regional cooperation can establish the necessary behavioural standards and build a “shared identity”. That way, the countries of the region can get themselves prepared for their accession to larger organisations, such as the EU, where deeper social and economic integration and adoption of certain norms and standards will be needed. Considering what was previously addressed, i.e., the two main transformations in contemporary Europe – the neo-liberalisation of Europeanisation and the “stretching out” case – that led to specific dysfunctions and weaknesses of the spatial expansion and the sectoral deepening of the EU, along with the possibilities discussed, which exist because of pre-existing historical, cultural, political and socio-economic linkages in several peripheries of Europe (South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region are examples of this), one can be led to the proposal of “stepping back to proceed”; this can be summarised as follows:

- The EU core-periphery approach has run its course, especially since the “core” is deteriorating. The structural transformation of the historical European Acquis in the Community Acquis of neo-liberal content described above speaks for that.
- The historic legacy of socioeconomic cooperation and cultural linkages in South-Eastern Europe, (Eastern) Mediterranean, the Black Sea and even the Caspian Sea could become the foundation for re-establishing prospects for progressive integration. Even from a European perspective, rather than arguing for the “Eastern enlargement” of a structure with visible signs of relapse and breakdown, we should discuss the usage of a “Mediterranean, Black Sea and Caspian Partnership” that will function as one of the cornerstones for an eventual restart.
- Think for instance of a Seas of Cooperation and Sustainability (SCS) Project, in perfect harmony with the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN 2030 strategy, developed along the following dimensions: Blue Growth; Social and Environmental Sustainability; Peace, Security and Safety; Freedom and Respect; Preservation of Diversity/Enhancement of Communication; Quality over Quantity in production and the related trend for de-Commercialisation<sup>5</sup>

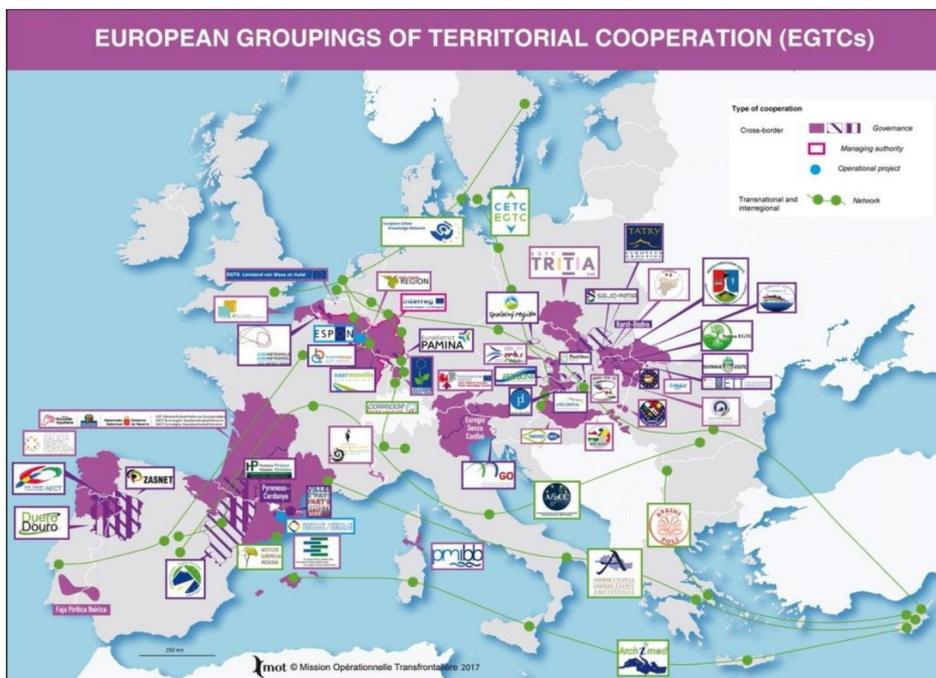
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5. Zarotiadis (2016) argues in more details about this: “Evolution of competition and, thereby, market structure, on the one hand, and of technology, on the other, generate an endogenous socialisation process. Capitalist competition itself is the driving force of a counter-systemic technical change...” as it “leads to de-commercialisation” by inducing vast decreases in the marginal costs over fix costs ratio. Next to the theoretical analysis, Zarotiadis continues with a relevant policy remark: (i) this endogenous process of de-commercialisation places barriers in the usage of “technological revolution” as a way-out of the systemic crisis; (ii) there is an alternative to artificial excludability: structural reforms that enhance the efficiency of the public sector, while broadening the socialised sector of the economy.

- towards a new era of democratically legitimised socioeconomic processes.
- Finally, consider the existing frameworks and institutional/financing instruments that can be used in this direction, for instance the macro-regional strategies, the Euro-region projects (e.g., Euroregion Carpathia), the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), the Sustainable Development Solutions Networks (SDSNs) in the framework of the UN, etc.

Specifically for the case of EGTCs, not only is it a truly useful institutional instrument, but the way these corporations are spread in the European continent highlights the possibilities of promoting progressive partnerships that go beyond the frontiers of modern European countries and replicate pre-existing socio-economic and state regimes (see the following map) in (i) the Franco-Roman area and the Iberian Peninsula, Benelux and the Austro-Hungarian space<sup>6</sup>.

**Diagram 1.** Map of EGTCs and their Logos in Oct. 2017



Source: Réseau de la Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT) / Network of the Transfrontier Operational Mission

6. Despite existing possibilities for cross-regional cooperation in the Balkans and the north-western Black Sea shore, EGTCs were completely absent there, with the exception of the relatively new EGTC Helicas ([https://portal.cor.europa.eu/egtc/CoRActivities/Pages/EGTC\\_HELICAS.aspx](https://portal.cor.europa.eu/egtc/CoRActivities/Pages/EGTC_HELICAS.aspx)). This absence has to do with the meagre progress of EU-integration in the specific area.

Instead of being a belt of antagonism and casualties, South Eastern Europe and even the wider area of (Eastern) Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Caspian could become a bridge of understanding, co-creation, and cooperation. Regional cooperation and ultimately, integration are gradual, long-term, complex, and slow processes that presuppose strong basis. Since global institutions are unable to deal with the needs of each region (in relation to environmental, social, fiscal, and similar issues), in time neighbouring states and societies can take the initiative to cooperate and deal with such challenges.

Even if the process of regional integration is laborious and difficult, it is still a useful prerequisite condition for the creation of wider unifications – and especially so for the European one, where the intensity and the density of historical processes create socio-cultural and economic disparities that cannot be simply overcome by hasty financial amalgamations. When political procedures prove to be desperately cursory, due to existing contemporary socioeconomic pressures, stepping back and trying to resolve resulting shortages is necessary and effective. In that sense, reorientation towards regional cross-national integration should not be perceived as being antagonistic to the process of European unification; on the contrary, it is an indispensable prerequisite condition.

## **5. Europe in a changing world**

The special characteristic of our time is not the changes that happen, but the continuously intensifying pace of change (Zarotiadis, 2017). On the bright side, one could support that this rapidly evolving reality, -exponentially increasing labour productivity and consequent restoration of the significance of use value, as economies of quality replace economies of scale. On the contrary, we need to consider (i) the disturbances that result from the continuously growing financial over-accumulation, which, in turn, is the outcome of globalised crises of over-production, as well as (ii) the newly arising bipolarity and imperialism of supranational corporations.

Europe must redefine its position between the Atlantic political, military and newly economic alliance, on the one hand (consider CETA and TTIP), and the Sino-Russian composition, on the other, between the traditional, compromised, and neo-liberalised western Bourgeoisie and the newly arising, contesting, and demanding authoritarian neo-capitalisms of the East. In this rapidly evolving socioeconomic and political environment, Europe should (and can) find its new, contemporary, special role. For this, South Eastern Europe and the Black Sea can become a cornerstone:

- due to the importance of the region in the framework of the newly arising bipolarity,
- the strong historical, contemporary socio-economic and environmental linkages, and
- the necessities that arise from the high severity of environmental and socioeconomic issues in the specific region.

- The above promote progressive ideas and strong prospects of alternative solutions – for instance Blue Economy and No-Drilling-Zone in Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Contemporary global evolution verifies that sustainability cannot be achieved spontaneously. Intervention is necessary, whether intergovernmental or cross-regional (districts and municipalities); so are social partners, universities, and R&D institutions. In other words, history never stops, yet progress is not guaranteed. Either we will shape history, or we will suffer the lack of Progress. With respect to this dilemma, South Eastern Europe and the Black Sea can be extremely important.

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