

# Comment on “Regional and Sub-Regional Integration in Central and Eastern Europe: An Overview,” by Zdeněk Drábek

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The paper is divided into three sections. The first is a retrospective on Central and Eastern European integration. The second part focuses on the European Union, and the third part examines CEFTA. It is noteworthy that in the past (CMEA) as well as at present, the pressure for Central and Eastern European integration did not develop within the region itself, but was and is externally driven. Again, the region is orienting itself toward an integration scheme from outside, but instead of Moscow steering the course, it is now Brussels. This comparison may not be entirely appropriate, but it highlights the tendency toward Central and Eastern Europe's integration based on outside influence instead of forces from within. At the same time, it shows that a desire for integration exists.

The relationship between Central and Eastern Europe and the European Union is viewed rather critically in the main part of the paper, and the remaining obstacles receive substantial attention. After describing some positive effects, the author concludes that integration is profitable for Central and Eastern Europe, but not for the European Union. I would not be so pessimistic because the European Union is gaining quite a lot – if not in the short term, then in the medium or long term. The European Union is not only benefitting in the security and political arena, but should also benefit from harmonisation in environmental protection, for example. Even in pure trade and economics terms, the European Union would profit from intensified trade and intensified division of labour – a current trend that is likely to continue. This is particularly the case if we consider the future competitive position of the current EU vis-à-vis other economic blocs such as ASEAN or NAFTA. So in my view, economic gains for the European Union do exist, even though I agree with Ricardo Lago that economic figures are not the only measure of gain. In absolute terms, the increase of GDP is not much, but in relative terms it is a substantial gain given the little weight that trade with Central and East European countries currently has in total foreign trade of the European Union.

The paper is very cautious in assessing the potential of sub-regional integration. It suggests that CEFTA could lead to more trade diversion, but this is not a strong argument. It is more likely that Central and Eastern European politicians are focusing on other areas and are sceptical of sub-regional integration.

It would be interesting to examine other integration attempts as well, such as the Central European Initiative which was one of the first. At a recent conference in Munich on economic cooperation in Southeastern Europe, high-ranking officials outlined their programmes. It was interesting to hear how these programmes are full of intentions but empty of reality or achievement. This is primarily due to political barriers. There are some positive developments, but not at the level of trade. My question therefore is: should integration only be seen as trade integration, or can we look at other areas such as the environment, infrastructure or the promotion of SMEs (small and medium-size enterprises)? In Northern Bohemia, the trilateral Polish, German and Bohemian integration attempt is working quite well and has the support of the European Union. One possibility in Central and Eastern Europe would be to extend sub-regional integration ideas from the state level down to other levels. For this to happen, regional administrative levels would first have to be established in Central and Eastern European countries to enable them to cooperate at a lower level across the borders.

Let me conclude with the finding that, for obvious reasons, sub-regional cooperation is still a very low-key issue in Central and Eastern European countries. Seen from outside, however, it seems that such cooperation could be intensified – also in collaboration with European Union countries – and this could be a helpful instrument for further European Union integration.