Shaping the Post-Soviet Space? The EU, Region-building and Interregionalism in CIS Countries

Abstract

Over the last fifty years, support to regional integration has been one of the key foreign policy objectives promoted by the European Community/European Union. The proposed paper argues that in this respect the former Soviet Union stands for an exception in European Foreign Policy. In the early 1990’s, the deep disintegration process affecting the post-Soviet space and the lack of operant regional institutions prevented the EU from resorting to its traditional inter-regional approach and led to a focus on bilateral relations. However, EU 2004 enlargement was instrumental in renovating EU strategies in the former USSR. It is argued that security issues have played a crucial role in sub-regionalising EU policies, with the emergence of three sub-regions: Western NIS/Caucasus defined as neighbours, Russia being considered as a strategic partner and finally Central Asia. As a result, while support to regional cooperation still ranks low on the EU’s agenda in the former Soviet space and is limited to a few initiatives (e.g. the recent Black Sea Synergy), the current security-driven policies implemented by the Union have major consequences in terms of region-building across the area as far as they accelerate its fragmentation.
Over the last fifty years, the encouragement of regional co-operation and integration has ranked high among European Union (EU) foreign policy priorities. While a significant share of European Community (EC) external assistance funds is earmarked to regional cooperation projects, region-building (defined, for the purpose of our analysis, as the attempts to foster cooperation or integration at a regional level) lies at the core of key EU-pushed initiatives, the most famous being the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Additionally, the EU has institutionalized a regular dialogue with a number of other regional organizations (e.g. Mercosur) or developed less formal mechanisms (e.g. ASEM) to strengthen relations with other regions.

Actions (e.g. initiatives supporting region-building) and interactions (e.g. interregionalism, defined here as institutionalised relations with other regional groupings) at a regional level are therefore salient features of the European Union’s foreign policy. Support to regional cooperation has been identified by scholars as one of the five objectives pursued by the EU on the international arena (Karen Smith 2003: 2). At the same time, such an objective is tightly interconnected with the EU’s own experience of integration and regional co-operation is constitutive both of the EU’s internal and external identities. As a result, EU policies and initiatives to foster regional links in the world offer a fruitful ground to study the EU’s self-perceptions, its instruments and its influence on the international arena.

The current paper will analyze the EU’s record in region-building, sub-regionalism and interregionalism in the post-Soviet space through raising the following questions:

- How has the EU developed in the post-Soviet area a regional vision, either corresponding to its traditional foreign policy objectives or reflecting the existence of shared issues and features among NIS (New Independent States)?
- How do existing EU strategies and instruments contribute to region-building in the post-Soviet space?
- How far does the growing differentiation between sub-regions (e.g. Western NIS, Caucasus, Central Asia) reflect a new mode of territorial organisation in the former URSS and how far does it correspond to EU interests?
- How is the EU support to regional cooperation combined with relations with other regional organisations/groupings (e.g. GUAM, Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation)?

Through developing (in the first section) an analytical framework inspired mainly (although not only) by constructivist approaches, the paper will argue that the post-Soviet area stands as an exception in EU foreign policy with respect to region-building. The second section will show how EU regional strategy vis-à-vis NIS was deeply affected by the disintegration process in the former USSR, which led to developing a bilateral approach. The third section will argue that the rise of security concerns in the early 2000’s was instrumental in reappraising EU strategy in the post-Soviet area and in framing sub-regional policies, which are also increasingly compartmentalised.
Framework for analysis

To address the research questions raised in introduction, the first part of this paper will define research variables, discuss the academic literature already available on the topic, and justify the theoretical framework used for analysis. This discussion should be seen as a preliminary to the design of a more detailed model, as well as to broader empirical investigations.

Research questions

The central objective of this paper is to analyse the way in which the European Union has participated in developing regionalism and/or interregionalism in the former Soviet Union. The dependent variable of the research is thus identified as the contribution of EU/EC policies to the region-building process in the post-Soviet area. This contribution can be commented upon using three different explanations.

The first set of explanations is based on the assumption that the EU seeks to increase its influence on the international arena. Region-building is thus to be analysed through a grid privileging power, in line with realist approaches. Regions are seen either as a means of domination or as an alliance aimed at increasing the power of the region-builder. For instance, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership has been described as a means for the EC to exert direct influence on partner countries (Attina 2003). Such explanation grants large rationality to EU institutions, which are deemed to pursue policy objectives based upon an assessment of their effects and of their benefits.

A second explanation focuses on the institutional framework and arrangements within the EU decision-making system (Nugent and Saurugger, 2002; Bicchi, 2006; Natorski, 2007). The underlying assumption is that the EU is a specific international actor, whose behaviour may be better explained through understanding the articulation between different levels of governance. Focusing on the institutional conditions of EU foreign policy has allowed scholars to emphasize the role of specific institutions or Member states that open windows of opportunity to act as policy entrepreneurs for defining solutions. For instance, EC support to region-building can be favoured by Member States to answer specific national interests, e.g. either to avoid a marginal situation on the continent, or to increase their role in the EU policy process. Among others, such arguments have been used to study the role played by some Member States in the design of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Natorski 2007). Other institutionalist researches explain the EU’s preferences for regionalism through its tendency to reproduce its own solutions and to “export institutional isomorphism as a default option” (Bicchi, 2006: 287).

A third set of explanations pays specific attention to the processes leading to the construction of European foreign policy. It emphasizes the need to take into account the interactions between the EU and external actors, as far as “actorness is constructed through the interplay of internal political factors and the perceptions and expectations of outsiders” (Bretherton and Vogler, 1999:1). According to this explanation, EU support to region-building would thus reflect the interactions with the actors of the region concerned, including the existence of other region-builders potentially competing or co-operating with the EU, as well as the perceptions of the EU against those of other region-builders. Using a social constructivist approach is well suited to grasp the dynamics of regionalism, as far as regions are social constructs as much as territories (Adler, 1997; Adler and Crawford, 2002; Engelen, 2004). The hypothesis here is that social, political, cultural, and economic interaction among players (i.e. states, local entities, NGOs, private businesses) located in contiguous geographical space help creating a common regional identity.
Overview of the literature on EU policies in the post-Soviet space

Except a few publications\(^1\), EU policies in the post-Soviet area were largely neglected by academics in the 1990s. Over the past five years however, research on EU policies in NIS countries has considerably developed, in parallel to the expansion of the European Union’s external responsibilities and to the design of new policies and instruments vis-à-vis the CIS. The ambition here is not to provide the reader with an exhaustive review of this literature. This section aims rather at getting an insight into the literature to highlight the main analysis grids which have been used.

A review of the literature available on European foreign policy (EFP) in the former USSR highlights several analytical gaps, especially when it comes to region-building.

Interestingly, the literature has concentrated on two specific EU policies, leaving aside other initiatives. Among EU policies, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2003-2004 has received an unprecedented interest from the academic community, starting from its very beginning. The number of conferences, papers, seminars, books and articles dedicated to the neighbourhood policy over the past five years make it the first external EU policy to attract such large attention from scholars within a very short timeframe\(^2\). The EU’s strategic partnership with Russia has also widely been analysed, quite often with a view to pointing out the diverging natures of these two international actors\(^3\). However, less attention has been paid to the EU’s policies and instruments in Central Asia, which is also linked to the recent impetus given to that partnership\(^4\).

As far as theoretical approaches are concerned, several publications studying EU policies in the former USSR have used a framework inspired by institutionalism to grasp (among others) the role of the European Commission and its attempts to develop its capabilities, or the behaviour of Member States and the coherence of EU policy (Haukkala, 2006). Scholars also increasingly refer to theories of Europeanisation, particularly with respect to the ENP (Cremona and Meloni, 2007). These theories have allowed to shed considerable light on the instruments and the outcomes of European Foreign Policy in the former USSR. More specifically, they are useful to analyse the instruments through which the EU exerts influence and to assess this influence. However, it can be argued that the “how” question, i.e. the processes through which EFP is constructed in the former USSR, is still missed.

Furthermore, even though they have been touched upon, issues pertaining to regionalism and interregionalism between the EU and CIS countries have not been at the core of academic research. Exceptions include regional cooperation involving Russia and the EU (or its member states) which has been studied in-depth, with case studies ranging from Kaliningrad or Karelia to the Baltic Sea region (e.g. Engelen, 2004). More specifically, the Northern Dimension launched by the European Union in 1997 has triggered a wide interest for EU

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\(^4\) Cf. the endorsement of a “New Partnership with Central Asia”, European Council, June 2007.
region-building initiatives involving former Soviet countries (e.g. Haukkala, 2005). Regional cooperation in the other sea basin shared with the former USSR (the Black Sea) has also been widely analysed; nevertheless, until the EU enlarged to Romania and Bulgaria and launched the Black Sea Synergy in 2007, academic research did not focus on the CIS countries concerned, but rather on the Balkans or EU candidate countries (e.g. Andreev, 2004; Bechev, 2006).

To sum up, scholars have concentrated either on EU-NIS bilateral relations or on specific EU initiatives. They have little questioned the EU vision of the whole post-Soviet space, in particular the presence (or the absence) of a coherent EU regional vision for what was once a country. As a consequence, issues such as EU regional initiatives involving a number of NIS (e.g. programmes like Traceca) or interactions with post-Soviet regional or sub-regional organizations remain largely unexplored. Whereas some academics seem to have taken for granted, as a basis for their analysis, the fragmentation of the post-Soviet space, other scholars have often treated EU and CIS region-building processes as parallel, without paying much attention to the influence EU policies may have on regionalism in the former USSR (Malfliet, Verpoest and Vinokurov, 2007). EU recent waves of enlargement, however, have triggered a new interest for region-building through assessing the functions performed by the new Eastern EU borders and the increasing blurring of boundaries between EU external and internal governance (Lavenex, 2004; Zielonka, 2006 and 2007). Such analyses are promising at a time when new patterns of regional cooperation around borders are emerging.

The present paper will thus try to connect EU policy objectives and the domestic context in the former USSR and to study their interrelationship to explain the EU’s record in region-building in the area.

The EU and the Post-Soviet Area After the Collapse of the USSR: the Shadow of Integration

Throughout the 1990’s, while it designed and developed one of its major region-building initiatives for the Southern Mediterranean countries (i.e. the Barcelona process), the EU seems to have barely promoted regionalism in the former USSR. As a matter of fact, the overall policy framework and policy discourse focussed largely on bilateral relations with NIS and remained void of any regional “grand dessein”, even though the EU developed two noteworthy initiatives to support region-building. This section will explore these policy measures and propose explanations for the limited place of the regional level in the EU policy mix.

Quite paradoxically, the EU’s initial policy following the collapse of the USSR was embedded in the vision of the post-Soviet area as still having a common identity and thus requiring a regional approach. A detailed analysis of policy documents shows that such a position, while reproducing the patterns experienced by the EC in its relations with third countries, was also partly inspired by a realist analysis of the situation prevailing in the former Soviet Union.

On December 8th, 1991, leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine stated that the USSR does not longer exist as a subject of international right and as a geopolitical reality. At the same time, they signed an agreement creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which was
endorsed two weeks later by leaders of other Republics\(^5\) meeting in Almaty. As clearly expressed in the Statements under the European Political Cooperation following the USSR’s collapse (Delcour, 2002), EC initial reactions focussed on the need for preserving a degree of regional cooperation among the new countries.

Approaches pointing out the EC specificity as an international actor help understanding this vision. EC reactions are deeply rooted in its self-perception as a model of integration. Interestingly, the meeting near Minsk took place exactly when the European Council meeting in Maastricht discussed the launch of two inter-governmental conferences, with a view to giving a new impetus to European integration. The coincidence between disintegration processes in the East of the continent and further integration in the West was immediately pointed out by several European leaders (Delcour, 2002). It was interpreted, both within the EC and in the former USSR, as an opportunity for the EC to transfer its experience of regional integration to the other part of the continent. As soon as 1992, the EC was depicted by several ex-Soviet academics or leaders as the road to follow for the new sovereign countries\(^6\); it was a direct source of inspiration for the first project promoting regional integration among Central Asian Republics, the Centrasiatic Union initiated in 1994 by Kazakh President Nazarbaev to create a common economic space (Delcour and Ternova, 2007).

According to the ‘EU-as-actor’ (White, 2004: 16) approach, EC insistence on the need to preserve regional links among the new sovereign countries also confirms its tendency to “reproduce itself” (Bretherton and Vogler, 1999:249) through “making it regional” (Bicchi, 2006: 287) in its relations with third countries. Such an approach grants little reflexivity to the EC. Its willingness to promote regional cooperation among post-Soviet states should be analysed in the light of the policy patterns which prevailed with the communist bloc. Indeed, when it finally decided to establish relations with the Eastern bloc at the end of the 1980’s, the EC did so on an inter-regional basis. It first set up a dialogue in 1988 with the COMECON (Delcour, 2002). If one follows these arguments, EC discursive support to regional cooperation should be interpreted as a reproduction for the post-Soviet space of the scheme initially created for the communist bloc. EC initial reactions to the collapse of the USSR should thus be seen as part of a routine-based behaviour, even more so as the EU at that time had a poor knowledge of CIS countries stemming from several decades of mutual ignorance with the USSR. With hardly any specialists of the FSU staffing its external service, the EU experienced difficulties in building up a strategy for each country and thus initially relied upon well-known recipes.

It can be argued, however, that EC initial approach was also grounded on a realist analysis which acknowledged both the need for regional cooperation and its limits. As the European Commission put it as early as January 1992\(^7\), centrifugal trends were likely to prevail in the former Soviet space. A few weeks only after the USSR collapsed, the Commission evaluated the CIS as ineffective. Such an analysis led the EC to promote a bilateral approach vis-à-vis the NIS (albeit under a similar framework provided by the Agreements on Partnership and Cooperation, PCA). Differentiation was explicitly invoked as a core principle of the policies developed throughout the 1990’s.

Regionalism, however, was also still present in EC policies, but only for specific purposes. First, the EC backed regional co-operation in the former USSR as far as the regional level proved the most appropriate to tackle common problems. Nuclear safety- a key EC concern

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\(^5\) Except Georgia.

\(^6\) Cf. V. Korovkin, “Opyt ES dlâ ekonomičeskogo soobšestva suverennyh respublik” [EC experience for the Economic Community of Sovereign Republics], MEiMO, n°1, 1992, pp.95-105.

\(^7\) European Commission, Communications to the Council, SEC (92) 39 final, 9/01/1992, and SEC (92) 373 final, 26/02/1992.
after the USSR collapse\textsuperscript{8} - is one of the best examples: EC support was channelled through programmes specifically designed at a regional level, which accounted for nearly 20\% of the funds committed by the EC through the TACIS programme in the 1990’s\textsuperscript{9}. Second, fostering regional cooperation was justified through the need for ensuring political stability and avoiding conflicts – a justification which reminds of the EU’s own experience. These arguments lie at the roots of the Northern Dimension, proposed by Finland at the Luxemburg European Council in December 1997 and launched during the Finnish Presidency in 1999. The Northern Dimension, which covers countries bordering the Baltic Sea, aims at strengthening security and increasing prosperity in the region, especially through creating favourable preconditions for private investment in sectors of strategic importance. Its design is noteworthy: rather than creating additional regional structures, the Northern Dimension relies on synergies between existing EU and Member States programmes in the region and on existing bilateral arrangements with third countries, i.e. association agreements for Baltic States before 2004 and PCA for Russia. The Northern Dimension thus aims at promoting a bottom-up approach to develop a “positive interdependence”\textsuperscript{10} between countries which is also a basis for constructing a regional identity.

The limited scope of EU initiatives taken to support regional co-operation throughout the 1990’s can be better explained through taking into account the role of internal and intra-regional developments within the new sovereign States. The construction of new States and sometimes of national identities indeed seemed hardly compatible with regional cooperation, not to mention integration. Many among the former Republics (Georgia above all) were reluctant, or simply rejected, the idea of regionalism after the collapse of the USSR. A few others, e.g. Kazakhstan, tried to develop new patterns of regional cooperation which all proved ineffective. The organisation launched in December 1991 to “replace” the USSR and to promote a new kind of regional cooperation, the CIS, remained an empty shell. Two elements explain its failure. First, the lack of cementing principles or common objectives which would replace ideology. Second, the lack of a leader: Russia in the early 1990’s was neither strong enough nor willing to promote regional cooperation. At the same time, it kept sufficient control on the area which was then conceptualised as the “near abroad” to prevent any competing region-building project. EU policies were thus strongly affected by the disintegration dynamics taking place in the 1990’s. While the EU still considered these countries as part of a single area (as shown by the adoption of a similar assistance and legal framework), these dynamics prevented the deployment of traditional ingredients supporting regional cooperation (e.g. region-to-region agreements) and called for turning to more concrete or specific initiatives, such as the Northern Dimension.


\textsuperscript{9} These figures include support to nuclear safety and to environment, which were merged in one priority sector. Cf. European Commission, TACIS Annual report 1999, COM (2000) 835 final, Brussels, 20/12/2000.

\textsuperscript{10} Peter Stenlund and Marja Nissinen, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, \url{http://virtual.finland.fi/finfo/english/northdim2.html}
The EU, constructing or deconstructing the post-Soviet regional space?

The 2004 and 2007 waves of enlargement have had far-reaching implications on the interactions between the EU and its neighbourhood. Combined with major political changes in several NIS, these led to a thorough renovation of EU policies in the post-Soviet area. This third section argues that security issues have played a crucial role in reframing and sub-regionalising EU strategies. As a result, while support to regional cooperation still ranks low on the EU’s agenda in the former Soviet space and is limited to a few initiatives, the current policies implemented by the Union have major consequences in terms of region-building across the area as far as they accelerate its fragmentation.

Towards “Mutual” Dependence

The recent waves of enlargement have deeply changed the nature of the relationship between the enlarged EU and its Eastern neighbours from the former Soviet Union. It is argued here that this relationship is now largely driven by security factors. Consequently, whereas interactions with NIS and inclusion of their preferences have led the EU to split its policies between three distinct sub-regions, the major dividing line in EU strategy indeed stands between those CIS countries sharing a border with the enlarged Union and those former Soviet Republics which are farther away from the Union.

The concept of “mutual dependence” helps understanding these new interactions between the EU and its Eastern neighbourhood. It is defined (De Lombaerde, 2005:10) as “a situation whereby two entities (countries) have two-way economic relations and whereby an economic cost would occur if these relations would cease to exist”. This definition entails two main criteria, which are closely inter-related: first, the volume of transactions between the two entities concerned; second, the penalty to be borne by both actors should their relations stop. These two elements are crucial to grasp the changing nature of the relationship between the EU and the post-Soviet area since the early 2000’s. EU enlargement has markedly increased trade between the EU and neighbouring NIS countries, most of which had close economic links with the new EU members. The EU has become a – and quite often the - major trading partner for most CIS countries. It accounts for over 54,8% of Russian external trade, while Russia is now the EU’s third trading partner. The EU is also Moldova’s and the Ukraine’s main trading partner, representing 35,5% of Moldova’s trade and 35,7% of the Ukraine’s in 2006. The striking feature is the impetus given to trade relations by EU enlargement, e.g. a trade increase of 63% with the Ukraine in 2006 when compared to 2005. At the same time, security issues have become central in the EU-Eastern neighbours relationship, as far as the Eastern periphery of the enlarged EU concentrates a number of threats, including the so-called “frozen conflicts” in Moldova and in the South Caucasus, various traffics and illegal immigration. Such a centrality is explicitly acknowledged in the 2003 European Security Strategy:

“Even in an era of globalisation, geography is still important. It is in the European interest that countries on our borders are well-governed. Neighbours who are engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organised crime flourishes, dysfunctional societies or exploding population growth on its borders all pose problems for Europe” (Solana, 2003).

For the purpose of this paper, the concept of “mutual dependence” is therefore refined to include political and security relations. It is assumed that the cost of breaking relations is not
only economic, but also entails paying a political or a security price (e.g. loss of influence, instability etc). While such a cost was low in the 1990’s, it is estimated to be particularly high for the enlarged EU and thus provides a strong incentive for the Union to shape its environment and frame the new mutual dependence with its new neighbours.

Security interests, diverging paths and sub-regionalization

Over the last few years, EU policy in the former Soviet Union has thus been completely reframed to take into account the changing relationship with the new neighbours, which is nowadays increasingly security-driven. When compared to the 1990’s, the striking feature is that EU policy in the post-Soviet area has become increasingly differentiated and is now clearly split into three main policies:

- The European Neighbourhood Policy developed in 2003-2004 for Western NIS and Caucasus countries. Its objective is to bring neighbours closer to the EU through legal approximation and a stake in specific EU policies (among which the Internal Market), in order to “avoid new dividing lines in Europe” and to “promote stability and prosperity” across the continent (European Commission 2003);
- The strategic partnership developed with Russia from 2003, structured around four common spaces (Common Economic Space, aimed at creating a Free Trade Area; Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice; Common Space of External Security; Common Space of Education and Culture) and a single package of road maps adopted in 2005;
- The “new partnership” with Central Asia, designed more recently (during the 2007 German Presidency) with a view to enhancing stability through promoting the development of transparent, democratic political structures as well as economic development, trade and investment and energy and transport links.

Such sub-regionalisation of the post-Soviet space in EU policies seems to be growing together with the negotiation of specific agreements and plans, as well as the implementation of new differentiated assistance tools. For instance, in the 1990’s all former Soviet Republics were included in a single assistance programme, whose abbreviation (TACIS - Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) reflected EU vision of the post-Soviet space as a single area. However, since 2007 CIS countries have been split into two different programmes, whose appellations reflect the differentiation in EU strategies: ENPI (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument) for the new Eastern neighbours and Russia, and DCI (Development Co-operation Instrument) for Central Asian Republics which are thus brought together with developing countries. The methods used by the EU also deeply differ between CIS countries: only the five countries included in the European Neighbourhood Policy have signed Action Plans including a political conditionality which is absent, for instance, in EU-Russia relations (Delcour, 2007). Finally, the forthcoming negotiations on future agreements to replace the current PCAs are likely to differentiate further EU policies. Whereas new neighbours – first of all Ukraine – will most probably be offered the prospect of free-trade agreements, such a perspective remains unlikely for Central Asian countries.

Domestic developments within the NIS have certainly played a role in shaping the EU’s current regional vision and in strengthening the differences between three sub-regional blocks. The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia gave further incentives for the inclusion of Caucasus countries in the Neighbourhood Policy, just as political developments in the Ukraine following the Orange Revolution called for negotiating a more ambitious Action Plan
and later on for granting the country an advanced status within the ENP. Russia’s new assertiveness on the international arena is also a paramount factor for explaining the design ex nihilo of a specific status around four common spaces; as early as 2003, Russia rejected the EC proposal of being included in the ENP on the ground of its being a global player, and not only a neighbour to the European Union (Delcour, 2006). These examples show that to some extent, the EU’s regional approach is inclusive of both neighbours’ preferences and evolutions.

However, two examples confirm the prevalence of the EU’s security agenda over other factors in shaping its vision of the post-Soviet space. First, whereas Caucasus countries were left out of the first draft of the Neighbourhood policy by the European Commission (European Commission, 2003), all three of them were included in 2004. This happened not only after the Rose revolution, but also a few months after the European Security Strategy pointed out the connections between political evolution and conflicts in the Caucasus, on the one hand, and stability of the whole continent, on the other hand. Second, even though Russia rejected the European Neighbourhood Policy, it is subject to a European policy toolbox quite similar to the one used with countries formally included in the ENP, e.g. possibility of negotiating a free-trade agreement or conclusion of visa facilitation and readmission agreements, provision of assistance under the ENPI. This is linked to the fact that Russia is also a neighbour and that it confronts the Union with roughly the same security challenges as the other Western NIS, even though its relationship with the EU is much broader due to its being a global player.

These examples show that the reframing of EU strategies has been mainly (although not only) inspired by the desire to create a buffer zone around the enlarged Union, composed of stable countries getting closer to the EU in key areas such as issues linked to the Internal Market as well as Justice and Home Affairs. As early as 2003, the European Security Strategy emphasized the need to ensure security beyond EU borders, thus paving the way for the extension of EU policies to new neighbours. To that extent, it represents a major turning point both in EU’s vision of its own security and in its policy in the Eastern part of the continent, as highlighted hereafter:

Our traditional concept of self-defence – up to and including the Cold War – was based on the threat of invasion. With the new threats, the first line of defence will often be abroad. (Solana 2003)

The vision developed by the EU in the post-Soviet area after 2003-2004 is therefore composed of two distinct regional circles, a first one consisting of countries –the neighbours – crucial for the Union’s security, and a second one composed of Central Asian Republics which are seen as forming a region increasingly important, though presenting different challenges to the EU.

In search of new regionalism(s)?

EU support to regional cooperation has been completely reshaped in the light of the above-described new strategies. While the regional and interregional dimension of EU policies are still weak when compared to other regions, they are now embedded in new instruments and benefit from new initiatives aiming at strengthening the links at a sub-regional level. The two examples analysed hereafter, Central Asia and the Black Sea synergy, reflect however different logics and roles for the EU.

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Regional cooperation is an important component of the EU policy vis-à-vis Central Asia. This is linked to the fact that the key topics and challenges in the relationship with the EU (e.g. energy and transport, water and environmental sustainability, trafficking and illegal migrations) are common to all five Republics, or at least to several of them. Moreover, even if they disagree upon the methods, Central Asian countries are aware of the need to ensure a degree of regional cooperation. Since the 1990’s, Kazakhstan has been at the forefront of regional integration efforts and pushed forward a number of initiatives, the most recent of which called for creating an economic block after the EU model. The EU, which considers Kazakhstan as its main interlocutor in the region\(^{12}\), supports these initiatives and channels its own instruments at a regional level. For instance, the EC assistance strategy 2007-2013, including priority sectors, has been designed at a regional level. The Strategy for a new partnership with Central Asia also envisages the establishment of a regular regional political dialogue at Foreign Minister level (with a first meeting in April 2008 in Ashgabad\(^{13}\)) and other regional initiatives, e.g. a regular energy dialogue in the wake of the Baku initiative, an "European Education Initiative" or an “EU Rule of Law Initiative”.

The regional dimension of EU policy in Central Asia thus provides a classical example of EU foreign policy, where the Union acts as region-supporter, facilitating or backing initiatives by local leaders to enhance both stability in the area and effectiveness in its dialogue with the countries concerned. At the same time, as a region-supporter the EU faces strong competition in Central Asia. Russia and China, in particular, have been very active in promoting regional organisations in Central Asia since the mid-1990’s. The two major regional organisations which have emerged – the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) and the Centrasia Economic Community (CEE) – are obviously dominated by these two great powers\(^{14}\) (Delcour and Ternova, 2007) which consider regional fora as a means to preserve or to increase their influence in the area. Against that background, even though Brussels is keen on getting an observer status within the SCO\(^{15}\), there is little room for an institutionalised dialogue with the SCO or the CEE where the EU may be seen as a competitor. Thus, the EU’s acting as a region-supporter for initiatives promoted by Kazakhstan can also be explained through the limited current possibilities of inter-regionalism and the desire to foster new region-building attempts which could later on form the basis for a strengthened interregional dialogue.

It is argued that the 2007 Black Sea synergy (the most recent, but also undoubtedly the most visible regional initiative launched by the EU in the FSU) reflects a different logic. Like Central Asia, the Black Sea area faces common challenges, first and foremost energy, but also environment, bottlenecks in transport links and poor development of infrastructures, “frozen conflicts” and poor governance. However, the Black Sea area presents two striking differences with Central Asia. First, the degree of institutionalisation is much stronger. To tackle regional challenges, a number of organisations and mechanisms have emerged since the 1990’s, either with a regional (e.g. Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation) or a thematic (e.g. Commission for the Protection of the Black Sea) dimension. Second, the Black Sea area is much more fragmented, with considerable political, economic and cultural differences between coastal states and, if one takes into account a broad definition of the Black Sea region, deeply-rooted antagonisms (e.g. Turkey-Armenia or Armenia-Azerbaijan). As a result, EU regional policy in the Black Sea area is not meant to replace neither the existing institutions, nor the bilateral policies designed by the EU for each coastal country.

\(^{12}\) Interview with an EC official, DG Relex, Brussels, October 2007.
\(^{14}\) China is not part of the CEE.
\(^{15}\) Interview with Kazakh officials, Astana, July 2007.
Rather, the Black Sea Synergy is to be seen as an umbrella policy bringing together various policies (e.g. neighbourhood for Ukraine, Georgia and the two other Caucasus countries, strategic partnership for Russia or accession for Turkey) and initiatives (e.g. the Baku initiative designed in 2004 with a view to facilitating the progressive integration of the energy markets of this region in the EU market and the transportation of the extensive Caspian oil and gas resources towards Europe). It also offers a framework for enhanced cooperation with existing regional institutions, such as the BSEC where the EU has an observer status. Such a co-operation does not only take the form of regular meetings (e.g. the first one in Kyiv on February 14th), but also of co-financing under the ENPI.

If the Black Sea Synergy is not about replacing existing initiatives but rather about bringing them together, what is its added value? The Synergy is still a policy in the making (the first policy assessment will be delivered by the EC this year). However, it can be argued that it will mainly work – and is already working - on confidence-building measures (Tassinari, 2006), or in the European Parliament’s words, in creating gradually a feeling among the Black Sea countries of shared responsibility for the region’s common challenges. To that extent, and with respect to its operating modalities, the Black Sea Synergy can be compared to the Northern Dimension: both are umbrella policies aiming at creating a positive interdependence among coastal countries. As a result, unlike Central Asia the EC does not act around the Black Sea as a region-supporter, encouraging local efforts of regional integration, but rather as region-builder: the Black Sea synergy is meant to become one of the three regional policies of the Union, together with the Barcelona process and the Northern Dimension (European Parliament, 2008).

Compartmentalisation of EU policies: disrupting regional links?

While the EU has promoted various inter-State initiatives involving a number of NIS (e.g. TRACECA or INOGATE) to tackle common challenges in the former Soviet Union, it may be argued that its current toolbox lacks bridges between the sub-regional areas concerned. The EU misses an important dimension, namely the persistence of strong links (either economic, political or cultural) between CIS countries. As a result, the EU’s recent, security-driven policies are currently having disruptive effects on regional cooperation. This section will analyse the consequences of EU JHA policy on region-building, namely the effects of the Schengen area extension and those of visa facilitation and re-admission agreements, which are the cornerstone of EU migration policy in Eastern neighbouring countries.

The recent accession of 9 EU New Member States (of which 8 from Central Europe) to the Schengen area (21 December 2007) has led to a split between the new EU Member States and their Eastern neighbours. For the Eastern part of the continent, this accession has more concrete consequences than the EU 2004 enlargement itself. With Schengen rules now applying, visa deliverance has become tougher. In particular, the EU requires from would-be visitors an insurance contract and an invitation from European institutions/citizens. Such an evolution has major consequences on regions close to the border which have historical or economic links, e.g. the Polish-Ukrainian border or the Romania-Moldova border. Visa facilitation agreements bring some degree of flexibility, but only for specific categories of population (students, businessmen, researchers) who can benefit from multi-entry visa. Harsher visa rules are expected to prevent illegal immigration but also to cut down social and economic links across Eastern EU borders and thus to let Ukrainian or Moldovan border areas lagging behind, which also contradicts the ENP’s deepened economic integration objectives.
Against that background, three policy instruments seem promising to mitigate disruptive effects of Schengen rules and to foster regional relations. First, Euroregions (e.g. Bug between Poland and Ukraine, Lower Danube between Ukraine, Romania and Moldova, Upper Prut, Siret-Prut-Nistru between Romania and Moldova) that already contribute to strengthening regional links across Eastern borders and benefit from funding under Interreg/ENPI. Second, possible agreements on local border traffic to be concluded by EU Member States bordering the Schengen area with their neighbours; the EU Council recently called to a rapid conclusion of such agreements. Third, the possible extension to all neighbouring countries of flexibility measures already introduced for the Southern Mediterranean in issuing visas (Council of the European Union, 2008).

Whereas the EU envisages socialisation tools and ad hoc flexible instruments to mitigate the effects Schengen rules may have on its neighbours, it has not yet considered the consequences of its JHA policies within the former Soviet Union. In other words, EU instruments draw new lines between CIS countries bordering the Union and their former fellow Soviet Republics. Since the USSR collapsed in 1991, the post-Soviet area has indeed widely remained a visa-free area. Exceptions are linked to the assertion of national sovereignty combined with political tensions with other former Soviet Republics, quite often with Russia; for instance, the Baltic States set up a visa system nearly immediately after their independence, in the wake of their strict citizenship and language policies; Georgia also introduced a visa for Russian citizens, which can easily be explained by a long record of disputes since 1991. Nevertheless, visa-free movement remained largely a reality in a post-Soviet space where borders are recent and not always tangible or fixed. Moreover, migration policies in that area were – and still are - largely disconnected from visa issues. For instance, the key instrument for controlling migrations in Russia is not the visa system, but the registration process, which is compulsory both for Russian and foreigners.

Against that background, the conclusion of visa facilitation & readmission agreements with the EU is a political challenge to Western CIS in their relations with other former-Soviet Republics. Readmission agreements that have been signed with Russia, Ukraine and Moldova as a return for visa facilitation set out clear obligations and procedures for the authorities of partner countries as to when and how to take back people who are illegally residing on the EU territory. Similar obligations apply to EU members but these remain theoretical, since the EU is neither a source of emigration to NIS countries nor, because of the Schengen controls, a transit zone to Western CIS. A key element of such agreements is their scope. They include nationals of the contracting parties and non-nationals (encompassing stateless persons as well as persons who are not citizens of the EU or the other contracting party. As a result, partner countries – for instance Russia or Ukraine – bear the financial and administrative burden for taking back illegal immigrants from the EU border to their homeland.

Even though it is still too early to assess possible disruptive effects, readmission agreements may not only be difficult to manage, but also induce tough arbitration between the EU and countries with which a common history and culture have been shared for decades, if not centuries. The question of incentives provided by the EU and that of the obligations imposed will be crucial in determining the outcome of such trade-offs.

Two examples highlight possible disruptive effects. First, the EU has not yet signed visa facilitation and readmission agreements with all its neighbours, which creates a discrepancy among them and distorts EU strategy. For instance, entry into the EU is made easier and cheaper for citizens of separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetya holding a Russian passport than for other Georgian citizens. This contradicts the EU’s official policy backing Tbilisi’s national sovereignty. Such a contradiction should be solved when Georgia finally
signs a visa facilitation & readmission agreement with the EU, which is not the case for
Central Asia countries such as Kazakhstan. In order to mitigate the disruptive effects induced
in its relationship with Russia (and to a lesser extent with Ukraine), Kazakhstan intends to
conclude a similar readmission/visa facilitation agreement with the EU over the long term. It
has already introduced procedures for the simplification of the visa regime under the PCA. In
June 2006, the Kazakh Parliament adopted amendments to migration legislation, which will to
determine conditions that will allow foreigners and stateless persons to do business in
Kazakhstan. A side-effect of EU policy is therefore to create incentives for countries which
are not directly targeted. The Georgian and Kazakh examples highlight a spill-over process
for adopting EU rules which is not only linked to the EU’s attraction power but also to the
strong interdependence among former Soviet countries.

To conclude, at a time when the European Union promotes a new comprehensive policy for
its relationship with the Southern Mediterranean region, it seems to lack an Eastern vision.
Both realist and institutionalist explanations are useful to account for the EU region-building
initiatives, either in the 1990’s or those designed since the early 2000’s. Institutionalist
explanations are well placed to highlight the role played by the EC in focusing on regional
problems in the 1990’s, thus reproducing its own experience; or by some Member States in
pushing forward regional initiatives (for instance, the “new Ostpolitik” promoted by Germany
during its 2007 Presidency, with the Black Sea Synergy and the new partnership for Central
Asia). Realist arguments also show how these new initiatives are to be seen as part of the
assertion of the EU as a major player in this area and how they allow the EU to defend its
own security interests.

However, constructivist arguments are best suited to account for the limits of EU contribution
to region-building, as far as they take into account the interaction with other players. EU
increasingly distinct sub-regional policies do not seem sufficiently articulated nor included in
a strategic framework which would take into account the existing relations between CIS
countries. In particular, while the development of a specific relationship with Russia is
grounded on this country’s position as a global player, the EU has not found an appropriate
way to integrate Moscow in its regional policies. Moreover, while the EU has succeeded in
promoting intra-regional cooperation in other areas (e.g. South-South cooperation for
Southern Mediterranean or ACP countries), it fails to build bridges between its current
Eastern policies; those even result in disrupting regional links. The EU picture in the former
Soviet Union thus confirms its shifting away from traditional foreign policy objectives (such
as encouraging regional cooperation) towards more security-oriented objectives.

Nevertheless, in order to shed more light on the EU’s role as region-builder, the research
agenda is still open to explore the implementation phase of recent EU initiatives (support to
regional cooperation in Central Asia, Black Sea Synergy), in particular to lead empirical
investigation upon the articulation and bridges between various sub-regional policies.

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16 Source: EU-Kazakhstan Inter-ministerial working group, Astana, July 2007.
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