

Sub-regional Cooperation in Europe: An Assessment

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About the Author

Andrew Cottey is Senior Lecturer and Jean Monnet Chair in European Political Integration, Department of Government, University College Cork, Ireland. He has been a NATO Research Fellow, a Research Associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and a Visiting Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). His publications include *Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe: Building Security, Prosperity and Solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea* (Macmillan, 1999), *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance* (Oxford University Press/The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004) and *Security in the New Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Editorial Team:

Sieglinde Gstöhl, Luk Van Langenhove, Dieter Mahncke, Xinning Song

College of Europe | Dijver 11 | 8000 Bruges, Belgium | Tel. +32 (0)50 477 251 | Fax +32 (0)50 477 250 | E-mail info.ird@coleurope.eu | www.coleurope.eu/ird

UNU-CRIS | Grootseminarie Potterierei 72 | 8000 Bruges, Belgium | Tel. +32 (0)50 471 100 | Fax +32 (0)50 471 309 | E-mail ivanlangenhove@cris.unu.edu | www.cris.unu.edu

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Abstract¹

Since the 1990s a wide range of new sub-regional groups have emerged in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Mediterranean and the former Soviet Union. This paper provides an assessment of the new European sub-regional groups, exploring why and how sub-regionalism has proliferated in Europe since the 1990s, analysing what functions sub-regional groups perform and evaluating their significance. The paper argues that European sub-regional groups have developed in three distinct phases: a formative, post-Cold War phase in the early 1990s when many of these groups were established; a second phase in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO and the ending of the Yugoslav wars re-shaped the dynamics of sub-regionalism; and a third post-enlargement phase in the late 2000s where attention has shifted to the role of sub-regionalism in a strategic environment where further enlargement of the EU and NATO (at least beyond the Balkans) appears unlikely and Russo-Western relations are more problematic. Moreover, the paper argues that the European sub-regional groups have four distinct roles: a bridge-building function across the 'dividing lines' between EU/NATO and their non-member neighbours and the geo-cultural divide between Europe and North Africa and the Middle East; an integrative function helping some member states to integrate into the EU and/or NATO; a role as frameworks for addressing transnational policy challenges; and a role as facilitators of political, economic and institutional reform in participating states. The paper concludes that although the European sub-regional groups lack the economic, military and institutional power of the EU and NATO, these groups have nevertheless played a positive role in fostering security and cooperation in their respective sub-regions and in the wider Europe as a whole.

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Introduction

Sub-regional cooperation has emerged as a new, if not always widely recognised, feature of Europe's international politics in the last two decades. Alongside the larger and better known European international organisations – the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – sits a plethora of sub-regional groups. Table 1 below summarises the main European sub-regional groups that have emerged since the end of the Cold War. These groups exist primarily in the geo-political space bordering and beyond the now enlarged EU and NATO: Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Mediterranean and the former Soviet Union. Most of these groups were created in the early and mid-1990s and by the late 2000s they have become relatively established bodies, with a diplomatic and institutional momentum of their own reflected in regular meetings of their member states at various levels and on-going programmes and activities (for earlier analyses of these groups see Cottey, 1999 and Cottey, 2000).

This paper provides an assessment of the European sub-regional groups, exploring why and how sub-regionalism has proliferated in Europe since the 1990s, analysing what functions sub-regional groups perform and evaluating their significance. I argue that European sub-regionalism has developed in three phases: a first, formative phase in the early 1990s when the end of the Cold War created both a new strategic context in which sub-regional cooperation became possible and new challenges to which sub-regional cooperation was one response; a second phase in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO resulted in new sub-regional initiatives designed to mitigate the inevitable 'dividing lines' created by enlargement and the ending of the Yugoslav wars triggered a period of intensive sub-regional institution-building in the Balkans; and a third post-enlargement phase in the late 2000s where attention has shifted to the role of sub-regionalism in a strategic environment where further enlargement of the EU and NATO (at least beyond the Balkans) appears unlikely and Russo-Western relations are more problematic. In terms of sub-regional groups' functions, I argue that these groups have four distinct roles: a bridge-building function across the 'dividing lines' between EU/NATO and their non-member neighbours and the geo-cultural divide between Europe and North Africa and the Middle East; an integrative function helping some member states to integrate into the EU and/or NATO; a role as frameworks for addressing transnational policy challenges (such as environmental

degradation and organised criminality); and a role as facilitators of political, economic and institutional reform in participating states. I also analyse the impact of the European sub-regional groups. While noting the inherent difficulties from a social scientific perspective of assessing the impact of international institutions and the reality that the European sub-regional groups are relatively lightweight compared to the larger European organisations (the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe and the OSCE), I argue that there is nevertheless, a good case that these groups have helped to overcome the Cold War division of the continent, facilitated the integration of some states into the EU and NATO, contributed to reform processes in post-communist Europe and North Africa, assisted in addressing transnational policy challenges in areas such as the environment, helped mitigate some potential negative consequences of NATO and EU enlargement and diminished 'civilisational' tensions across the Mediterranean.

Before examining the European sub-regional groups in detail, some brief observations should be made on the meaning and significance of the term sub-region. The term sub-region refers to geographical-political spaces which are subsets of a larger regional space. The definition of regions and sub-regions is problematic and often contentious, both in terms of abstraction/theory and in individual cases. Similarly, there is debate over the nature of and distinctions between regional (or sub-regional) cooperation, (sub-)regionalism, (sub-)regional identity-building and (sub-)regional integration as processes. Nevertheless, it is clear that over the last twenty years or so regions, regionalism and regional integration have emerged as growing factors in global politics. The existence of regions creates also the possibility of sub-regional cooperation – that is cooperation amongst states (and/or other actors) on the basis of a geographically defined sub-area of the larger region. In the European case this has particular significance: if the larger region here is the European continent, the defining political feature of the European continent today is the process of political, economic and security integration embodied in the EU and NATO and this context is the key to understanding the European sub-regional groups. Virtually all of the European sub-regional groups exist on the periphery of or outside the EU/NATO zone of integration and they largely function as mechanisms for managing relations between that zone of integration and the countries and sub-regions beyond it.

Table 1: European Sub-Regional Groups

Group	Established	Founding Members	Members 2009
Northern Europe			
<i>Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC)</i>	January 1993	Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, European Commission	Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, European Commission
<i>Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS)</i>	March 1992	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Sweden, European Commission	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Sweden, European Commission
<i>Baltic cooperation</i>	June 1994	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania
<i>Baltic Free Trade Area (BFTA)</i>	April 1994	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	BFTA ceased to exist in May 2004 when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the EU
<i>Nordic-Baltic cooperation ('5+3'; 'NB8')</i>	May 1992	Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania
Central Europe			
<i>Visegrad group</i>	February 1991	Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary	Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary
<i>Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)</i>	December 1992	Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia
<i>Central European Initiative (CEI)</i>	November 1989 Initiative of Four Integration Group/Quadrilaterale; became Central European Initiative in July 1992	Austria, Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia	Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine
Balkans/Black Sea			
<i>Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)</i>	June 1992	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine
<i>Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI)</i>	December 1996	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey, Yugoslavia	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Hungary, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey
<i>South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)</i>	July 1996	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Turkey, Yugoslavia	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey

<i>Stability Pact</i>	June 1999	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey, EU member states, USA, Russia, international donor states and organisations	The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in February 2008
<i>Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)</i>	February 2008	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, European Union, international donor states and organisations	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, European Union, international donor states and organisations
<i>Energy Community</i>	July 2006	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, European Union	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, European Union
Mediterranean			
<i>Union of Arab Maghreb</i>	February 1989	Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia	Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia
<i>Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean</i>	November 1995; from July 2008 the Barcelona Process became 'The Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean'	EU member states, Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Palestinian Territories, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey	EU member states, Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestinian Territories, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey
<i>Adriatic-Ionian Initiative</i>	March 2000	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia
Former Soviet Union			
<i>Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)</i>	December 1991	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan
<i>Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)</i>	Collective Security Treaty (CST) signed in May 1992; CSTO established in October 2002	Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan	Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan
<i>GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) Organization for Democracy and Economic Development</i>	October 1997	Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova	Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova
<i>Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)</i>	June 2001	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan

The Proliferation of European Sub-regional Groups in the Post-Cold War Era

Phase 1: The Post-Cold War Era

The European sub-regional groups which emerged in the 1990s were children of the end of the Cold War. European sub-regionalism is not an entirely new phenomenon: the Nordic Council and the Benelux union were established in the 1950s, while one could also look back to various formations in earlier historical periods. During the Cold War, however, European sub-regionalism did not really move beyond the Nordic and Benelux groups: although NATO, the Western European Union (WEU), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the Warsaw Pact all comprised sub-territories of the European continent none reflected the logic of a particular geographic sub-region of Europe; although the European integration process was initially limited to its six founding members, it was always grounded in the aspiration of establishing a larger European process rather than the logic of a particular sub-region of Europe; and although there were attempts to establish Balkan sub-regional cooperation across the East-West divide, these never made much progress. In Central Europe, the Baltic, the Balkans and the Black Sea, the East-West Cold War division of the continent largely precluded the possibility of sub-regional cooperation.

The political space freed up by end of the Cold War made possible the establishment of new sub-regional groups in the 1990s. It is no coincidence that the first of the new generation of sub-regional cooperation processes, the Central European Initiative (CEI), emerged in the context of East-West détente and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms: the Alpe-Adria Working Group, linking together border regions of Austria, Italy and Yugoslavia, was established in 1978 and expanded to include border regions of Hungary in the 1980s; in November 1989 (the month the Berlin Wall fell) the four countries agreed to establish the Initiative of Four Integration Group or Quadrilaterale; Czechoslovakia joined in 1990, followed by Poland in 1991 and in 1992 the body was re-named the CEI (Cviic, 1999, 113-16). The implicit if low-key political goal of the CEI and its predecessors was to facilitate the re-integration of its Eastern European members with Western Europe. The collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes and the end of the Cold War in 1989 resulted in the establishment of other similar sub-regional groups spanning the old East-West divide: the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in northern Europe and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in south-eastern Europe. Freed from Soviet hegemony, the Eastern European states also had the possibility to establish sub-regional groups to advance their

shared interests, resulting in the creation of the Visegrad group and the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA).

The sub-regional groups established in the 1990s were also a response to the various new, post-Cold War policy challenges facing governments. First, the states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union faced a wide array of challenges in terms of reforming political institutions and economies: sub-regional groups were one framework for helping to address these challenges by channelling expertise and resources and sharing experiences. Second, there was increasing recognition of a range of transnational, cross-border challenges facing governments: environmental problems; border management issues relating to the movement of people and goods; and transnational crime, such as the illegal trafficking of weapons and drugs. The transnational nature of these problems suggested that international cooperation was vital to addressing them and sub-regional groups emerged as one of the frameworks for policy action. The BEAC was set up, for example, in large part to deal with the dangerous environmental legacy of the Soviet Union's industrial and military development in the far north. These types of transnational issues are also a significant part of the agenda of other sub-regional groups such as the CBSS and the BSEC.

As can be observed from the discussion above, most of the European sub-regional groups which have emerged since the early 1990s have been focused around the eastern half of the continent – reflecting their genesis in the end of the Cold War and the many policy challenges facing the post-communist states. An additional feature of Europe's new sub-regionalism, however, has been a significant southern dimension centred on the Mediterranean. By the 1990s a number of trends relating to North Africa and the Middle East – illegal immigration, the rise of 'political Islam', terrorism, environmental degradation and economic underdevelopment – were generating growing concern in Europe, especially amongst Southern European states. In response, in 1995 the EU established the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or Barcelona Process, bringing together the EU member states and their neighbours on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. The Barcelona Process acts both as a multilateral sub-regional forum for dialogue and cooperation and a framework for the direction of EU financial and technical assistance to southern partners. Following an initiative from French President Nicolas Sarkozy, which caused some controversy because it proposed a new Mediterranean Union involving only those EU member states in the Mediterranean region, the Barcelona Process was re-launched in 2008 as the Union for the Mediterranean. The new Union for the Mediterranean, however, includes all EU member states and does not appear to be dramatically different in

practice from the preceding Barcelona Process (reflecting its hybrid new/old character the formal title of the process is now 'The Barcelona Process; Union for the Mediterranean').

Phase 2: The Enlargement Era

A second phase in the evolution of post-Cold War European sub-regionalism was observable in the late 1990s and early 2000s, reflecting two developments. First, the eastward enlargement of NATO and EU moved from the drawing board to political reality. This process began with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary joining NATO in 1997-99 and by the late 2000s a swathe of post-communist states, stretching from the Baltic states in the north, through Central Europe, to Bulgaria and Romania in the south had joined NATO and the EU as full members. In response to fears of undermining relations with (and reform efforts in) those countries remaining outside the EU and NATO, various initiatives were taken to promote sub-regional cooperation as a means of avoiding, or at least limiting the impact of, new 'dividing lines'. This included intensified Western, and in particular EU, involvement in and financial support for bodies such as the CBSS, the CEI and the BSEC. In 2004 the EU also launched its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which was designed to provide enhanced engagement with and financial and technical assistance to the Union's neighbours to the east and south. In the military sphere, efforts were made to develop multilateral peacekeeping, search and rescue and humanitarian exercises (both in the context of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and on an ad hoc basis) in the Baltic Sea, the Balkans and the Black Sea.

At the same time, the ending of the Yugoslav wars triggered a new round of sub-regional institution-building in the Balkans. The end of the Bosnian war in 1995 led to the Dayton peace agreement (which included various sub-regional elements in areas such as arms control and military confidence-building), the EU-led Royaumont Process, the US initiated South-Eastern European Cooperation Initiative (SECI) and the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEEC). The 1999 Kosovo war led to the creation of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe. The logic of these initiatives was that the countries of the region faced shared legacies of the Yugoslav wars and common political, economic and social challenges and that these could therefore be best addressed on a sub-regional basis. In addition, an implicit aim was to re-integrate Serbia, which had become a pariah as a result of its role in the Yugoslav wars, into the sub-regional and European community of states. The proliferation of so many overlapping cooperation initiatives within one sub-region,

however, raised questions about both their effectiveness and the division of roles between them. The establishment in 2008 of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), formally replacing the Stability Pact, was a rationalisation of several of the earlier initiatives.

Phase 3: The Post-Enlargement Era

By the late 2000s, the picture has moved on once again. The various sub-regional institutions established in the 1990s are now established features of the European diplomatic landscape, albeit not particularly prominent ones. Meetings and activities of various kinds and at various levels occur on an on-going basis. A range of actors are regularly involved in multi-lateral sub-regional cooperation: national governments (foreign ministries, other ministries and other state bodies), non-state actors (businesses and civil society organisations) and international administrative and policy-making/implementation structures (which many, though not all, of the sub-regional groups have established). From one perspective, this can be viewed as the consolidation of the sub-regional cooperation which emerged in the 1990s. A more critical assessment, however, might be that once institutions have been established, they have a tendency to perpetuate themselves, continuing along pre-set institutional paths, with those actors involved developing a self-interest in maintaining the institutions and their activities. From this perspective, one might ask whether much of contemporary European sub-regionalism amounts to more than institutional inertia - the natural tendency of institutions to maintain themselves - and what substantive impact sub-regional institutions and their activities actually have? Indeed, one might argue that, behind the institutional inertia of on-going meetings and activities, Europe's new sub-regionalism is a declining force. Answers to these questions, however, depend on one's assessment of the nature, impact and function of sub-regionalism in contemporary Europe and this question is returned to later in this paper.

Two larger developments also bear significantly on the current status of and future prospects for European sub-regional cooperation. First, we are entering a new phase in terms of the enlargement of the EU and NATO - what may be termed the 'post-enlargement era'. In the 1990s and early 2000s EU and NATO enlargement were on-going processes and European sub-regionalism was, in part, a response to this - both a means of facilitating integration into the EU and NATO for some states and a means of avoiding or minimising new 'dividing lines' between the 'ins' and the 'outs'. By the late 2000s, the limits of EU and NATO enlargement have become clearer: both

organisations have accepted the swathe of Central and Eastern European states from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea as full members and, although the process may take some time, the so-called Western Balkan states (the former Yugoslav states plus Albania) are likely to join both the EU and NATO (the first step occurring in April 2009 when Albania and Croatia became members of NATO). At the same time, it has become clear that the EU is unlikely to accept any of the former Soviet states, such as Ukraine, for the foreseeable future. Although NATO formally maintains an 'open door' policy and the Bush administration pressed NATO to recognise Georgia and Ukraine as candidates for membership of the Alliance, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war appears to have made it increasingly unlikely that NATO will offer membership to either state (Arel, 2008-09). At least in the medium term, therefore, the eastern borders of the EU and NATO are likely to be largely those with the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Second, the mid-to-late 2000s were marked by a significant downturn in Russo-Western relations, culminating in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and leading some to predict a new Cold War. The downturn in Russo-Western relations reflected a number of factors: Russian wariness of the enlargement of the EU and especially NATO; Western concerns over Russian efforts to re-establish an exclusive sphere of influence in the former Soviet space; Russia's back-tracking on democracy and human rights and shift towards authoritarianism (albeit of a 'soft' kind); and Moscow's opposition to the unilateralist strategy of the Bush administration (as well as specific policies such as the Iraq war and the planned deployment of missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic). On coming to power in early 2009 the Obama administration committed to 'pressing the reset button' on US-Russian relations and it may be that Washington (and the West more generally) will succeed in establishing more cooperative and stable relations with Moscow. Nevertheless, as of 2009, the future of Russo-Western relations remains uncertain.

Together, these two developments – the beginning of the post-enlargement era and the uncertain state of Russo-Western relations – have significant implications for European sub-regionalism. The European sub-regionalism of the 1990s emerged in an environment when prospective/on-going NATO and EU enlargement were central issues and there were still hopes for a strong partnership between Russia and the West. By the late 2000s Europe's strategic situation has changed, enlargement is reaching its limits and an element of geo-strategic competition between Russia and the West appears inevitable in the former Soviet space. Interestingly, one consequence of this changed geo-strategic context has been two new sub-regional

initiatives from the EU: the EU's Black Sea Synergy, launched in 2007-08, and the EU's Eastern Partnership, launched in 2008-09. The Black Sea Synergy aims both to increase the Union's engagement with the Black Sea region and to support cooperation amongst the states of the region. The Eastern Partnership brings together the EU and former Soviet republics (specifically the western former Soviet republics, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, and the Caucasian states, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and is designed to provide increased EU support to the former Soviet republics – *de facto* to counter-balance Russia influence.

Rationales and Roles of European Sub-regionalism

What rationales underpinned the various European sub-regional frameworks when they were established in the 1990s and what roles have they performed since then? Four rationales or roles for the new European sub-regionalism may be identified: a bridging role; as a means of helping states to integrate into the EU and NATO; as a means of addressing specific transnational problems; and as facilitators of internal reform in the post-communist states (for a similar analysis see Bailes, 1999).

The bridging function of sub-regionalism is essentially political, with sub-regional groups playing a role either in overcoming historical divisions and/or preventing, or at least mitigating, the emergence of new divisions. This role operates in a number of ways. In symbolic terms the creation and continued existence of sub-regional groups reflects the commitment of participating states to maintain cooperative relations. Diplomatically sub-regional groups act as frameworks for on-going dialogue between their members (multilaterally and often, in the margins of sub-regional discussions, bilaterally). The March 1992 founding statement of the CBSS, for example, "welcomed the revival of close cooperation among the Baltic Sea States and the strengthening of the ties between them" and defined the CBSS as "a regional undertaking to promote new ideas for cooperation" (Council of Baltic Sea States, 1992). Similarly, the Black Sea states established the BSEC in order to "better realize concrete schemes of cooperative action that would contribute directly to the well-being and prosperity of their peoples and the region" and "to develop comprehensive multilateral and bilateral Black Sea economic cooperation" (Black Sea Economic Cooperation, 1992a and 1992b). Sub-regional cooperation may also be viewed as a form of political confidence-building measure, helping to build trust between states. Sub-regional defence cooperation also sometimes acts as a form of military confidence-building, as with joint exercises that have been held in the Baltic and Black seas and the joint peacekeeping forces which have been developed in

the Balkans. These various bridging functions have had a number of different foci. In the 1990s in particular, sub-regional cooperation was one framework for helping to overcome in the Cold War East-West division of Europe. Since the late-1990s, sub-regional cooperation has been directed towards bridging the potential divides created by EU and NATO enlargement. In the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean has in significant part been an effort to bridge the geo-cultural divide between Christian Europe and Islamic North Africa and the Middle East. The July 2008 founding declaration of the Union for the Mediterranean thus refers to “a common ambition: to build together a future of peace, democracy, prosperity and human, social and cultural understanding” (Union for the Mediterranean, 2008).

A second function of (some) sub-regional groups has been to help their members to integrate into the EU and NATO. This was most obviously the case with the Visegrad group and CEFTA, which in the early and mid-1990s acted as a lobbying groups for their members' bids to join the EU and NATO. Similar functions were also performed by the tri-Baltic (Estonian-Latvian-Lithuanian) cooperation and by the Adriatic cooperation between Albania, Croatia and Macedonia. The willingness and ability of states to cooperate with one another sub-regionally has also to some extent been viewed in the West as an indicator of 'responsible', good-neighbourly behaviour and hence of states' readiness to join the EU and NATO. More concretely, since states often face common challenges in conforming to the *acquis* of the EU and NATO, sub-regional cooperation has to some extent also been a mechanism for states to share experiences as part of their pre-accession and accession processes. There have, however, been certain tensions between sub-regionalism and the pursuit of EU and NATO membership: states aspiring to EU and NATO membership have feared that sub-regional groups may be viewed as alternatives to full integration into the EU and NATO; although candidates for EU and NATO membership have proved willing to cooperate with one another sub-regionally, there has also been an element of competition between them in the race to join the EU and NATO; and although both the EU and NATO have sought to promote sub-regional cooperation, their primary relationships with aspirant members have been bilateral and membership credentials are assessed on candidate's national progress in reforms. As a consequence, while EU/NATO enlargement and sub-regional cooperation have proved to be largely complementary processes, part of the logic of EU and NATO membership has worked against sub-regional cooperation.

A third function of sub-regional groups has been to address functional, especially, transnational policy challenges facing states. Here the BEAC's role in addressing the environmental problems arising from the Soviet Union's Cold War military and industrial development is perhaps the archetypal example. Most of the other sub-regional groups – the CBSS, the CEI, the Visegrad group, the BSEC, the Stability Pact/RCC and the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean – also include functional and/or transnational policy areas such as economics, environment, borders and customs, energy, infrastructure, tourism and culture, within their remits. The implicit logic is twofold: first, many of these challenges are cross-border in nature and therefore require cross-border policy responses, including at the sub-regional level; second, states within sub-regions often face similar national policy challenges in these areas and the exchanging of experiences and coordination of policies can help in addressing these challenges.

Fourth, sub-regional frameworks can act as facilitators, to some extent even drivers, of political, economic and military reforms at the national level. When the CBSS was established, for example, two of its six priorities were to provide assistance to its post-communist members in developing new democratic institutions and in making the transition from a planned to a market economy (Council of Baltic Sea States, 1992). One of the implicit goals of the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean has been to encourage reforms in its North African/Middle Eastern members, not only in technical areas such as the economy and environmental protection, but also in the more sensitive areas of human rights and political institutions. Sub-regional institutions may facilitate or drive reforms in two particular ways: they may act as frameworks for policy transfer, with sub-regional meetings and exchanges providing the context for the transfer of ideas, practices and models; and they may act as frameworks for the provision of financial and technical assistance (with donors providing assistance through sub-regional institutions).

More Than Just Rhetorical (Sub)regionalism?

Critics sometimes charge that regional and sub-regional groups amount to little more than rhetorical (sub-)regionalism: they are high on the rhetoric of good neighbourly relations, common interests and cooperation, but in practice their impact on relations between their members or member's domestic policies is minimal at best, while (sub-)regional activities are often very limited in scope and substance. In the case of the European sub-regional groups there is some legitimacy to this criticism. The European sub-regional groups are relatively lightweight compared to the EU,

NATO and even, to some extent, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Council of Europe. The European sub-regional groups lack the economic resources, redistributive capacity and legal authority of the EU or the collective defence capacity and integrated military command structures of NATO. They also lack even the relatively weaker operational capacities of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, such as the OSCE's conflict prevention and resolution missions or the Council of Europe's election monitoring infrastructure. The European sub-regional groups can therefore easily be derided as little more than excuses for 'diplomatic tourism': they provide opportunities for diplomats (and other participants) to travel, but the substantive output of their many summits, meetings, working groups and the like may be viewed as distinctly limited. In addition, the European sub-regional groups may also be criticised as 'jacks of all trades, masters of none': most of the groups have broad agendas, with theoretical commitments to cooperate on a wide range of issues, but have not focused on or specialised in particular areas and arguably lack the capacity to deliver across the full range of issues within their formal remit. Indeed, there has been an implicit recognition of this weakness within many of the sub-regional groups, with efforts to narrow their agendas and focus on particular areas or concrete projects. Finally, it is easy to identify 'failures' of sub-regional groups: the BSEC has had little impact on resolving the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and could not prevent the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, despite these states shared membership of the group; Belarus's membership of the CEI has had little if any impact on the country's authoritarian regime; and the various Balkan cooperation initiatives have had little bearing on Kosovo's troubled transition to independent statehood. One should note here, however, that criticising sub-regional groups for these 'failures' ignores the fact that such problems are generally beyond the mandate of these groups and sets the bar for success particularly high and that the 'stronger' European institutions - the EU and NATO - have not been markedly more successful in addressing these problems.

Analysing the impact of sub-regional groups also reflects the larger social scientific problem of assessing the impact of international institutions. Cause-effect relationships are notoriously difficult to identify, let alone 'prove', in the social world and analyses of international institutions, such as sub-regional groups, inevitably suffer from this problem. It may be argued that sub-regional groups have an impact on international relations – the prospects for cooperation or conflict between their members – and on the domestic policies of members, but how far this is actually the case is inherently uncertain. Consider the following example: since the break-up of the Soviet Union, worst case scenarios of armed conflict between Russia and the

Baltic states over the rights of the Russian minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and/or borders have been avoided; it may be argued that sub-regional cooperation in the CBSS and other Baltic fora have contributed to such conflict avoidance (for example, by helping to build confidence and a sense of common identity within the region and by encouraging moderation and compromise between the Baltic states and their Russian minority populations); alternatively, it may be argued that fears of conflict between Russia and the Baltic states were exaggerated, that the avoidance of such conflict is attributable to other factors (such as EU and NATO pressure on the Baltic states) and that the impact of sub-regional cooperation has been at most minimal in relation to this issue. Another example illustrates the same point: the Central and Eastern European states which are now members of the EU and NATO have arguably made significant progress in reforming political institutions, public policies and economic structures since the 1990s; it may be argued that sub-regional institutions have contributed significantly to such reforms through the processes of policy transfer and technical and financial assistance noted above; alternatively, it may be countered that the central driver of reform has been EU and NATO enlargement (in particular, the powerful leverage provided to the EU and NATO by the 'carrot' of membership and the 'stick' of withholding membership) and that sub-regional institutions were marginal to this process. These examples illustrate the inherent difficulty of assessing the impact of sub-regional institutions: one may debate which of these interpretations is most convincing, but from a social scientific perspective it is difficult (if not impossible) to present decisive evidence one way or the other.

The problem of assessing the impact of sub-regional institutions is compounded by the absence of detailed evaluations or assessments of these institutions and their various policies and programmes. The concept and practice of policy/programme evaluations has been developed since the 1960s, with governments – and more recently international organisations such as the World Bank – employing detailed evaluations, with developed methodologies, to assess the impact of various social and economic policies and programmes (see Baker, 2000; Donaldson and Scriven, 2002; and Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman 2004). More recently, similar approaches have been used in the form of impact assessments (for example, Environmental Impact Assessments and Conflict Impact Assessments) to assess the likely impact of potential or proposed programmes or policies. Such evaluations and assessments cannot entirely overcome the fundamental social scientific problem of assessing cause-effect relationships in the complex social reality of human interaction, but they do at least provide more rigorous and developed mechanisms for assessing the impact of

institutions, policies and programmes. The European sub-regional groups and their member governments should consider undertaking such evaluations of sub-regional groups, policies and programmes in order to shed light on their impacts, successes and limitations.

If assessing the impact of the European sub-regional groups is difficult, two particular areas are worth some further analysis: the degree and nature of institutionalisation which has developed within these groups and the extent to which member governments and other institutions have been willing and able to make resources available to them. Institutionalisation may be defined in this context as (i) the establishment of frameworks and processes in which states and other actors meet on a regular basis and (ii) the allocation of capacities and power to supranational bureaucracies. Such institutionalisation matters because it can help to develop habits of cooperation amongst states (and other actors), contribute to the development of a sense of common identity and interests and facilitate the coordination of policies and/or the development of common policies. In the absence of institutionalisation cooperation is likely to be one off or ad hoc and easily vulnerable to disruption or loss of political support. The European sub-regional groups have all developed a degree of institutionalisation. In all these groups foreign ministers (and/or other ministers) meet on a regular basis (usually annually), there are on-going working contacts between lower level government officials in foreign ministries and other government departments and in many of the sub-regional groups there are also regular contacts involving other actors (businesses, scientists and other professionals and non-governmental/civil society groups). Such meetings, working contacts and the like are primarily examples of the first part of the definition of institutionalisation used above. In terms of the second element of institutionalisation – the allocation of capacities and power to supranational bureaucracies – the European sub-regional groups have taken more limited steps. Most of the sub-regional groups have developed some form of secretariat or similar supranational body for the coordination of activities: the powers of these secretariats are, however, rather limited, as are their size (in terms of staff numbers) and resources. The institutionalisation of the sub-regional groups has therefore been largely inter-governmental, with the supranational elements that have been established having little power to develop or implement policy and few, if any, centrally-controlled resources to allocate to programmes or activities. Nevertheless, although the degree of institutionalisation of the European sub-regional groups is significantly less than that which has occurred within the EU and NATO, it seems reasonable to assume that the institutionalisation of these groups has contributed to the development of habits of

cooperation, a sense of common identity and interests amongst their members and, albeit in limited forms, policy coordination and common policies.

The question of resources is also important in assessing the European sub-regional groups: the extent to which groups are able to have an impact depends, in part, on how far they have the financial resources to fund programmes, policies and activities. The sub-regional groups are essentially dependent on the voluntary financial support of their member states and international organisations such as the EU and the World Bank: none of the sub-regional groups has established a budgetary system involving significant and on-going resource transfers or a large centrally administered budget; programmes and activities are therefore largely funded on an ad hoc basis. In this context, there is a difference between some of the northern European groups (in particular, the BEAC and the CBSS) and some of their Central European and Balkan counterparts (the CEI and the BSEC, for example). The BEAC and the CBSS have a number of relatively wealthy members (the Nordic-Scandinavian states and Germany), which have been willing to provide substantial resources to support sub-regional cooperation processes. In contrast, the financial resources available to support the activities of the CEI and the BSEC have been more limited. The CEI has been supported financially by Austria and Italy, the groups' wealthiest members, but the majority of its members are relatively poor and Italy and Austria's capacity to support the CEI is not comparable to that of the Nordic-Scandinavian states and Germany in the CBSS and the BEAC. The financial constraints on the BSEC are even greater: it is composed primarily of relatively poor former Soviet and Balkan states and neither Russia and Turkey, BSEC's largest members, nor Greece, its wealthiest member in per capita terms, possess the economic resources to make very major financial contributions to Black Sea sub-regional projects. The EU (in the form of the European Commission) is a member of many of the sub-regional groups and provides financial support for them. The EU's 'Black Sea Synergy' policy, adopted in 2007-08, was in part an acknowledgement of the financial constraints facing BSEC and an attempt to increase EU financial and technical support for Black Sea sub-regional cooperation (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). Global financial and development organisations, such as the World Bank and the UN Development Programme, also provide financial support for cooperation activities in the various European sub-regions, but their inputs are also constrained by the many other calls on their limited resources.

The Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean operates under a different model, in which the EU has been much more centrally involved: the Barcelona

Process was essentially an EU initiative and the EU has been effectively the sole funder of the Process, with EU funds driving virtually all of its activities. Even in this case, however, critics argue that significantly higher levels of funding are required. Given the economic and budgetary challenges facing the EU and its member states, and the many other internal and global calls on the Union's limited resources, however, major increases in EU financial support for sub-regional cooperation are unrealistic. In short, while member states, the EU and international financial and development organisations do provide financial support to underpin European sub-regional cooperation, this support is not on a scale likely to fundamentally transform the sub-regions' economies or politics.

Overall, one should probably be cautious in assessing the impact and value of the European sub-regional groups which have emerged since the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, there is a good case that these groups have, in various ways, helped to overcome the Cold War division of the continent, facilitated the integration of some states into the EU and NATO, contributed to reform processes in post-communist Europe and North Africa, assisted in addressing transnational policy challenges in areas such as the environment, helped mitigate some potential negative consequences of NATO and EU enlargement and diminished 'civilisational' tensions across the Mediterranean. The impact of European sub-regionalism may not have been dramatic, but a balanced assessment suggests that it has been positive and not entirely insignificant.

Conclusion: Sub-regionalism in the Post-enlargement Era

The economic, political and military integration of European states, which takes place in the framework of the EU but also NATO, and the extension of this process to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, constitute the dominant political reality of contemporary Europe. The European sub-regional groups emerged at a particular juncture in this process marked by the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the extension of the integration process to Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, the sub-regional groups played a variety of roles. As was argued above, we are now entering the post-enlargement era: while it is possible, in the longer term, that some of the former Soviet states may join the EU and/or NATO, for the foreseeable future this seems unlikely. The analysis developed here suggests that sub-regional cooperation has a continuing role to play in this new environment. Sub-regional groups help to bridge the divide between the enlarged EU/NATO and their neighbours. For the former Soviet countries, sub-regional groups provide frameworks for supporting

reforms, linking them with the West and quietly counter-balancing Russian power. In terms of Russo-Western relations, sub-regional groups such as the BEAC, the CBSS and the BSEC provide useful frameworks for facilitating engagement, building a sense of common interests and drawing regions of Russia into cooperative networks with neighbouring states and the West. In the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean provides an important long-term institutional framework for avoiding a North-South 'clash of civilisations' and promoting reform in North Africa. Sub-regional frameworks, of course, will be only one of an array of policies and institutions, alongside the EU and NATO's larger neighbourhood policies, bilateral relations between the EU and NATO and individual neighbouring states, the wider strategic relationship between the West and pan-European institutions such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Sub-regional groups thus reinforce and supplement these wider efforts to build cooperative relations between the enlarged EU and NATO and their neighbours and to promote reform in countries on the EU and NATO's periphery. The sub-regional emphasis of these groups, however, also gives them a distinctive role: they are an implicit recognition that geography and history mean that states in particular sub-regions share certain common challenges and that it makes sense to try to respond to these also, if not only, at the sub-regional level.

The challenge for governments and policy-makers is to creatively make use of the potential of sub-regional frameworks. One area for particular attention may be the interface between the larger EU and NATO integration processes and sub-regional cooperation. We are already moving towards a Europe of flexible integration, with EU members participating in different elements of integration, such as the euro and the Schengen agreement, to different degrees, and non-EU members, such as Norway and Switzerland, participating in elements of EU integration. The ENP further extends elements of EU cooperation to neighbouring states and regions, although this in practice takes place largely on a bilateral basis between the Union and individual partners. The EU's Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean, Black Sea Synergy and Eastern Partnership are designed to build on the ENP, but also to give it a stronger sub-regional dimension, with policies tailored to particular sub-regions. Giving greater substance to these various EU-related sub-regional initiatives, however, remains a significant challenge for both the Union and the states of these sub-regions.

Alyson Bailes has described sub-regional groups as the 'Cinderellas of European security': the poorly dressed relatives, compared to the more expensively garbed EU

and NATO or even the OSCE and the Council of Europe (Bailes, 1997). In the fairytale, of course, Cinderella gets to wear the ball gown and marry the prince. Sub-regional groups are unlikely to find themselves wearing the most expensive haute couture or often being the guests of honour on the European diplomatic circuit. Nevertheless, they have a beauty and value of their own which should be recognised and encouraged.

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