

The European Union's Transformative Power in the Context of Regionalizing the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

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Introduction

THE PURPOSE of the paper is to assess the initiatives that the European Union has devised in the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus on the basis of regional integration. The author is bringing arguments with reference to the reasons for EU's decision to carry out these regional policies. At the same time, each instrument used by the EU to implement these policies is analyzed and, consequently, their strengths and weaknesses are pointed out, thereby explaining whether the EU succeeded or not to integrate the two sub-regions under the Eastern Partnership project. For developing this paper, the author resorted to a quantitative research method, using study techniques such as the analysis of official EU documents, political reports and research papers.

1. The Emergence of European Regional Policies Designed for the Former Soviet Countries

THE EUROPEAN Union's intentions to develop regional policies that would cover its neighboring countries came mainly for security reasons, but also because the EU is one of the most successful projects set up after World War II, where *authoritarian regimes changed into secure and stable democracies*, and the member states *are committed to dealing peacefully with disputes and to co-operating through common institutions* (European Security Strategy, 2003, p.1). Its main purpose to the East and South is to promote democracy and human rights and to foster political cooperation and economic integration with partner countries. As a normative power, it is acting to extend its norms into the international system and encourages other countries to follow the same path that the EU members have followed.

A year before the largest wave of EU enlargement, the European Security Strategy of 2003 was conceived, thereby emphasizing an important aspect, namely, that the *enlargement should not create new dividing lines in Europe* (European Security Strategy, 2003, p.7). On the contrary, the purpose of the EU was to create a ring of well-governed countries to the east and south of the Union. Because the integration of acceding states increased the EU security but also brought it closer to troubled areas, the European Union has been determined to take more responsibilities and act as a global and powerful actor (Strimbovschi, 2014 p.178). As a consequence, a proposal to create the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was advanced in 2004, thus aiming to achieve higher levels of integration among the EU neighbors (crucial for economic and social development) and to reinforce bilateral relations. The European Union sought in that framework to extend the benefits of economic and political cooperation to its neighbors through different agreements, nevertheless based on a ‘clear commitment to shared values that should be compatible with a coherent regional approach’ (Simao, 2013, p. 279).

Following the Georgian-Russian war of 2008, the EU suggested an upgrading of the engagement with the Eastern and Southern neighborhood states, a process that implies region building on the basis of integration (Report on the Implementation of the ESS, 2008, p. 10). Consequently, two regional policies have been developed: the Union for the Mediterranean (2008)—designed for the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, and the Eastern Partnership (2009)—created for New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus states.

The Eastern dimension of the ENP was conceived *to strengthen the prosperity and stability of these countries, and thus the security of the EU* (Report on the Implementation of the ESS, 2008, p. 10). The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was founded on mutual interests, responsibility and shared ownership, whereby partner countries agreed that the initiative would be based on commitments to the principles of market economy, international law and fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights (Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership 2009, p.5). Through this project the EU aimed to develop a shared community of practice, rooted in shared beliefs and norms. Furthermore, the creation of the EaP represented the first step towards a region-building process. The driving force for regional integration of the former six Soviet republics is the multilateral framework of the project, namely, the four thematic platforms, whose aim is to foster links among partner countries and develop a common understanding of shared challenges and the best ways to meet them. This last topic will be thoroughly approached in section four of the present paper.

2. The EU’s Transformative Power in Its Neighborhood: Regionalization through the Europeanization Process

THE EUROPEAN Union is perceived as a flourishing construction and an attractive model of integration, especially for non-EU actors. Even though it serves as a promoter of diffusion processes towards its immediate neighborhood and worldwide, its *efforts to diffuse values, norms, and rules have to cope with heterogeneity and*

diversity (Simao, 2013, p. 274). European ideas often face political contestation in the countries with authoritarian or corrupt regimes, widely spread in the eastern and southern vicinity of the EU. But European ideas are particularly influential when they resonate with the social, political, economic, cultural and historical conditions of the receiving countries (Simao, 2013, p. 274), and also when partner countries and their leaderships are open to structural changes and reforms, for the common wealth and the countries' progress.

The EU is manifesting its transformative power through policies/initiatives designed both for EU and non-EU states, changing the behavior, structures and even the identities of actors. The EU is exerting transformative power in its neighborhood, through the Union for the Mediterranean and Eastern Partnership, which could eventually boost the mechanism of regionalization by means of Europeanization. Because the Eastern neighborhood is dominated by a volatile political and security environment, the EU resorted to this peaceful formula aiming to secure its borders and ensure harmony, order and prosperity. In this sense, Europe and its vicinities should become a unique space where the key actor is not a nation-state, but a subnational component (Makovskyy, 2015, p.43) governed by a supranational structure (the European Union). Therefore, the major interest of the EU is to strengthen its neighborhood, *by bringing the whole region to converge on the EU's political values and economic structures, norms and standards—in short transformative Europeanization* (Emerson, 2008, p.4).

The EU policies in the neighborhood can be explained by two approaches. On the one hand, Brussels sought to regionalize these countries because it would involve the democratization of the nation-units, but also for the reason that the Europeanization process may spill over its frontiers into the wider neighborhood and, consequently, create a stable region on the same lines as EU. On the other hand, if the EU seeks to become a successful global actor, then it needs to secure/regionalize its vicinities.

However, the current situation in the neighborhood has demonstrated that the process of regionalization still has many contradictions and difficulties. Despite this, the EU is ready to use all of its tools in order to bring harmony and welfare in these regions. The most effective instrument of transformative Europeanization is *conditionality—imposing conditions on the partner countries for exchanging some benefits with them* (Agh, 2010, p. 1240). Conditionality is a key component for the spread of EU values into countries that receive EU aid. By putting conditions to recipients to improve democratic conditions, Europe can play its power effectively (Bourguignon, 2007). For all that, conditionality seems to be far less effective with neighboring countries in comparison with the candidate countries, which are confident that adopting European policies will bring them closer to the Euro-Atlantic family, and that eventually they will become part of the European Union. On the other hand, the biggest incentive for the neighboring countries would be the membership perspective. Even though the EaP doesn't imply that the concerned countries are on the way to joining the EU, it offers partner countries possibilities to integrate more deeply with the EU on the economic and political level, thus enhancing their chances for a potential future accession. Nevertheless, it is extremely important that this last incentive is offered to partner countries willing to follow the entire process of Europeanization because, together with the conditionality mecha-

nism, it would further stimulate the concerned states to implement reforms and adjust their policies in line with the EU standards, bringing them closer to the Europeanization/regionalization ideal of the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

3. The Two Distinct Sub-regions Subjects of the EU's Transformative Regionalism

DURING THE Soviet period, the South Caucasus and New Eastern Europe were two sub-regions separated by a geographical line, but integrated ideologically, economically, socially and politically in one space, within the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the USSR, the process of gradual disintegration started, despite Moscow's efforts to keep the former Soviet countries united under the Commonwealth of Independent States. For all that, it couldn't act as an integration policy, a phenomenon that facilitated the separation of the former Soviet states from Moscow. Consequently, three regions have emerged in the Soviet Union space: the New Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova); the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) and Central Asia or, more precisely, Kazakhstan and Middle Asia (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan) (Trenin, 2011, p. 40). Since the first two regions are strategically important for the European Union, the impact of the EU's transformative regionalism on these sub-regions shall be approached herein, under the Eastern Partnership initiative, aiming to argue that the EU seeks to gradually redirect the two sub-regions towards a new center, the European one. As a result, an uncertainty emerges: did the EU succeed to transform the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus into an integrated European region? This is the question which the author is trying to answer, bearing in mind that *region-building is an ideational process of constructing a shared sense of belonging and identification* (Neumann, 1994, p. 53).

3.1. South Caucasus—A "Broken Region"

South Caucasus had a brief experience of regional autonomy that lasted several months, from February 10 to May 26, 1918. The Transcaucasia Democratic Federative Republic was created after the October Revolution, mainly from the need to assure survival in a very insecure context (Simao, 2013, p. 276). The Anti-Bolshevik coalition of Transcaucasia leaders tried to maintain the unity of the region through political and economic cooperation within the Transcaucasia Republic. Four years after the disintegration of the Federation, in March 1922, Moscow established a Federation of Socialist Soviet Republics of Transcaucasia, which in December 1922 was transformed into a single federated republic. However, in 1936, Stalin decided to separate the union republics in Transcaucasia, when a number of national minorities were included in the autonomous republics. Thus, Azerbaijan included the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and the Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan, while Georgia incorporated three separate administrative units: the South Ossetia Autonomous Region and the Abkhazian and Ach'aran Autonomous republics (Stephen, 2004). Considering these circumstances, after the collapse of the

USSR, the Transcaucasia region was marked by instability, economic decline, ethnic violence, and war. The government of Georgia battled separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Armenians and Azerbaijanis fought over Nagorno-Karabakh (Howe). Because Armenia was excluded from developing formats of regional cooperation, the goals of building a coherent region have been highly undermined. Thus, the volatile geopolitical context determined each of the South Caucasus states to focus on its own domestic challenges, *embarking on bandwagon foreign policies with Russia and other external powers* (Simao, 2013, p. 276). All these events led to an unstable region, while the potential for intra-regional cooperation has been considerably reduced.

Because Russia had neither soft nor hard power at that time, in order to act as a unifying force, the Euro-Atlantic institutions have promoted a discourse of *gradual integration and transformation of regional identities beyond the post-Soviet paradigm*, aiming to foster regional peace, stability and prosperity (Simao, 2013, p. 277).

3.2. New Eastern Europe—A Buffer Zone

New Eastern Europe (NEE) is placed geographically between the Russian Federation and the European Union. Despite the fact that each of the three countries belongs to Europe in terms of culture and civilization, the main issue facing these countries is related to building a nation-state (Trenin, 2011, p. 40). These analogies brought them together as a region. However, their main problem is highly connected with the historical past within the Soviet Union. This is the fundamental reason for which the NEE countries are seeking to develop as independent entities, less dependent on Russia. Nevertheless, their geographical position and the geopolitical context forced them, to some extent, to remain neutral between the Russian Federation on the one hand and the EU and NATO, on the other hand, as a buffer zone.

Compared to the South Caucasus region, the NEE countries have never experienced an official regional autonomy. However, being in the proximity of the European Union, more intensive interaction could occur on the basis of the Europeanization process that would have led to the development of a shared regional space (Simao, 2013, p. 275), especially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Even though the geopolitical context was favorable for such a metamorphosis, the lay ruling elites and the lack of democratic institutions impeded the successful integration of European standards in the Belarusian, Moldavian or Ukrainian societies.

In recent years, the prospects for the New Eastern Europe to be integrated in the European Union have substantially increased, starting with 2004, through the European Neighborhood Policy and specifically five years later through the Eastern Partnership initiative. The impact of the latter is approached, in sections three of the present paper, from the perspective of regionalizing the two sub-regions (New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus) into a European and cohesive one.

4. EU Efforts to Regionalize the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus Sub-regions in the Context of the Eastern Partnership

THE EASTERN Partnership is perceived as the most specific EU policy designed to Europeanize/regionalize the New Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. This initiative is functioning within two dimensions: bilateral and multilateral. On the bilateral level of cooperation, two instruments are relevant: the Association Agenda and the Association Agreement. The Association Agenda is meant to *replace the Action Plan and to prepare for, and facilitate the entry into force of the Association Agreement* (Depo, 2011), while the Association Agreement (AA) defines the political and economic integration of the partner countries willing to join the Euro-Atlantic family. In comparison with the Association Agenda, the stipulations foreseen by the Association Agreement are legally binding for both parties. An important aspect and a significant incentive for partner countries is that AA includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA), which once implemented shall enable trade liberalization and access to the EU internal market.

The multilateral dimension of the EaP was aimed at strengthening the cooperation among EU institutions, EU member states and the six partner countries in order to better manage the perceived common challenges. In this context four important domains are approached: (1) Democracy, good governance and stability; (2) Economic integration and convergence with EU policies; (3) Energy security; (4) People-to-people contacts—deemed as common challenges shared by the EU and Eastern neighbors, which require collective cooperative actions (Simao, 2013, p. 273). Furthermore, the multilateral framework is considered a platform of regional cooperation and exchange of experience between partner countries, while the EU instruments used within the entire EaP are seen as specific means to carry out gradual Europeanization, which would result in region building, with the center in Brussels (Depo, 2011).

The EU's main tools of transformative power in the Eastern Partnership are conditionality and incentives. In the framework of the EaP, the EU is trying to project its own model of governance in the partner countries—based on democracy, rule of law and free trade that would eventually lead to regional integration—resorting both to conditionality and incentives. Conditionality is a direct mechanism of Europeanization, aiming to spread the EU's governance rules set as conditions that external actors should fulfill in order to gain EU rewards and avoid possible sanctions. The most relevant rewards offered by the EU are represented by the benefits arising from bilateral agreements, such as trade, association agreements, but also financial aid agreements, while EU sanctions consist of the suspension of these contracts (Schimmelfennig, 2010, pp. 8-9.). In the framework of the Eastern Partnership, the aim of the EU was to develop cooperative relationships, based on the cost-benefit calculation. Thereby, it has resorted to various incentives, such as access to the European market that guarantees the free movement of goods, capital, services and people, as well as financial assistance. The ultimate goal

of the EU is to drive partner countries to perform reforms and improve the quality of governance, rewarding only the partners who achieve progress and implement reforms.

Yet the impact of Europeanization of the partner countries is considerably influenced by the nature of their political regime and the will of the political elites to accept such an internal metamorphosis with direct effects on the political course and the economic evolution of the country. The Europeanization process becomes even more challenging in resource-rich countries, such as Azerbaijan, of major strategic importance for the EU.

The potential for the Europeanization of national policies is significant when government officials are open to adjust national policies in line with the EU standards. This openness and willingness to follow the Europeanization process has been proved by three of the six partner countries. The Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine signed the Association Agreements in 2014, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU. The Republic of Moldova and Georgia started to implement the AA/DCFTA, while Ukraine has applied the Agreement provisionally. AA and DCFTA have strengthened political and economic ties between signatory states and the EU, however significant reforms must be carried out further in key sectors: justice, public administration, financial and media sectors. In the short term, the Visa Liberalization Action Plan has proven to be an effective tool for promoting a range of reforms in Georgia and Ukraine (European Commission, 2016), but in the long term the author supports the idea that a membership perspective should be offered to those partner countries committed to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, since it is the greatest incentive for a transformative Europeanization of the neighboring countries, while the lack of it is a serious weakness.

Another important obstacle to reinforcing a sense of regional identity among Eastern Partnership countries and developing effective region-building continue to be the protracted conflicts (Simao, 2013, p. 273). Through greater involvement in the resolution of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, the EU could speed up regional integration and consolidate regional and European security (Alieva, 2011). In contrast, the situation has worsened as a result of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in Donbass, which is likely to evolve into another frozen conflict in the immediate vicinity of the European Union. Under these circumstances, the European Union considers creating special structures within the EU's security and defense architecture that could serve as a *forum for exchange of best practice, for cooperation on common objectives, and for capacity building* (European Commission, 2015, p.14.). But in the long run, ensuring the rule of law and independent and effective justice systems remain the most pressing matters for the EU in the neighborhood. They are crucial to social and economic stability, to create trust in state institutions but also to boost credibility among partner countries in the European Union. Through the promotion of reforms, resorting to conditionality and incentive mechanisms, the EU will provide itself with a belt of stable, democratic and prosperous states (Alieva, 2011). However, the EU presence in the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus regions determined Moscow to react to these initiatives by developing alternative projects for the former Soviet republics,

persuading them in some cases or even threatening them in order to join the Eurasian integration project.

5. The New Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus— Caught between Two Models of Regionalization

THE INCREASING presence of Western actors in the post-Soviet countries in the last few years has obviously provoked discontent among Russian official elites. The expansion of the European Union in the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus regions, which are still considered as being in Russia's sphere of influence, led to frictions and tensions between Moscow and the Western actors on the one hand, and between Moscow and the former Soviet republics willing to join Euro-Atlantic family, on the other hand.

The Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 represented the unofficial moment when the geopolitical competition between the Russian Federation and the European Union, in the common neighborhood, started. As a result, in 2009 the EU founded the Eastern Partnership project and a year later, in 2010 Russia, together with Belarus and Kazakhstan, launched the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), which was upgraded to a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, when other two countries, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, joined it.

The common aspect of the EaP and EAEU projects is that both of them are based on economic integration. However, the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and the Russia-driven Eurasian Economic Union are mutually exclusive (Delcour, 2015, p.16.), an important fact which highlights the competitive nature of these two regional projects. Thus, the win of one project represents the loss of the other, as a zero-sum game. In other words, the decision of Belarus and Armenia to join the EAEU could be seen as a loss for the EU's regional project, while the choice made by the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine to sign and implement the Association Agreements and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements is a huge loss for Russia's regional integration project.

Each regional project promotes different models of integration. The Eastern Partnership is based on shared values of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, providing support for the development of a sustainable market economy in partner countries. Moreover, the partners that perform important reforms in these areas are rewarded on the principle of 'more for more', which means that more funds and assistance are provided to EaP countries that deliver reforms. On the other hand, the Eurasian Economic Union states pretends that is an international organization for regional economic integration that promotes cooperation between national economies, for a stable development of its member states. Nevertheless, it argues that the EAEU is as much political as it is economic, even though officially this aspect is not declared. Through the EAEU Moscow is trying to regain its influence in the post-Soviet space, *using carrots (lower gas prices, loans, open labor markets for migrant workers) and sticks (trade sanc-*

tions and security threats) (Delcour, Kostanyan, Vandecasteele, 2015, p. 12) to attract or, in some cases, force reluctant countries into the EAEU. In this way, the Eurasian Economic Union is seen more as a foreign policy instrument serving Russia's objectives, without having a transparent agenda and clear policies. It is a vehicle for reintegrating the post-Soviet space, intended to offer a modernizing alternative to EaP countries (Dragneva, Wolczuk, 2012, p. 2). For a while this project could seem attractive for those countries with undemocratic regimes, which are against the structural reforms in line with European standards, and whose leaders are first and foremost concerned about their political survival and to achieve their own interests. But in the long run, this fragile construction with geopolitical ambitions could be unfeasible.

Due to the fact that Russia came with its own regional project aiming to deter the post-Soviet countries to join Euro-Atlantic structures, it is understandable that the EU's transformative engagement in the Eastern neighborhood was weighted. Its efforts to regionalize the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus have been mainly obstructed by vulnerabilities, such as the unstable and undemocratic political regimes, corruption, the frozen conflicts but also Russia's systematic interferences in the internal affairs of the former Soviet countries, both by means of soft power and hard power.

For this reason, the EU's endeavor to Europeanize the whole region based on its political values and economic structures succeeded only partially. The most important success of the European Union within the EaP project is represented by the decision of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to follow the path of political association and economic integration with the EU through AA and DCFTA. *If effectively implemented these agreements will bind Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine to the EU's rules, standards, and values, thus fostering a common legal and political referential between these countries and the EU* (Delcour, 2015, p.317). In this context, the European Commission argues that it would work with these partners to further develop their relations and to maximize the benefits for both parties to those agreements (European Commission, 2015, p.4). Accordingly, such an engagement reduces the chances for these countries to change their political/geopolitical vector in the near future and join the Eurasian Economic Union. However, Russia's proposal to develop a cooperation relationship with the EU on the level of two blocs, EAEU and EU, would have significant geopolitical implications and would be a signal that *the increasing bi-polarization of Europe is accepted* (Delcour, Kostanyan, 2015, p. 14). Essentially, these two projects, which overlap on the same region, would rather divide this space based on geopolitical preferences than regionalize the two sub-regions.

Concluding Remarks

TO CONCLUDE, the European Union's expectations to regionalize the New Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus were tangible in the context of 2009: As time has passed, the feasibility of the Eastern Partnership project became questionable. The most important phenomenon and factors that hampered the process of Europeanization in these two sub-regions include corruption, oligarchic and authoritarian regimes, as well

as the frozen conflicts. An important role in this respect was played by the Russian Federation, which from the beginning perceived the EU's policies in the common neighborhood as a threat to national security, owing to the fact that it could jeopardize its prospects of becoming a great power. This is the main reason that triggered the creation of a Customs Union and, further, of the Eurasian Economic Union. The last regional project and its founder created serious tensions and divergences in the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus countries, instead of bringing harmony, order and welfare, as the EU intended. The EU's failure to regionalize these sub-regions will undermine its ability to ensure peace and stability beyond its borders and eventually may compromise its credibility globally, but specifically in the Eastern neighborhood. However, if the EU will change its strategy in the region, taking into consideration all the vulnerabilities that put at risk the purpose of the EaP, then it will successfully integrate the two sub-regions through the Europeanization process or by other pragmatic means, adjusted to the needs of each partner country.



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Abstract

The European Union's Transformative Power in the Context of Regionalizing the New Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

The EU regional policy towards six former Soviet republics has been developed through the Eastern Partnership program. These countries are differentiated by their geographical location and are classified into two distinct sub-regions: (1) the New Eastern Europe: The Republic of Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine, and (2) the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. These sub-regions are caught between two models of regionalization, being required to choose either democracy and a market economy, or autocracy and a centralized economy. This article approaches the EU's transformative power in Europeanizing its neighbors. Since Europeanization may increase regionalization, the author resorts to Michael Emerson's concept of the transformative regionalism. Therefore, if the EU seeks to become a successful global actor, then it needs to regionalize its vicinities.

Keywords

Eastern Partnership, Eurasian Economic Union, transformative regionalism