

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT

The European Journal of Spatial Development is published by Nordregio, Nordic Centre for Spatial Development and OTB Research Institute, Delft University of Technology

ISSN 1650-9544

Publication details, including instructions for authors: www.nordregio.se/EJSD

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Online Publication Date: 2010-10-18

To cite this article: Gaubert, Nicolas & Yann, Richard, “European Cohesion Policy and Territorial Cooperation with Neighbouring Countries: Towards Deeper Coordination?” (Refereed Articles, October 2010, No. 41, *European Journal of Spatial Development*)

URL: <http://www.nordregio.se/EJSD/refereed41.pdf>

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European Cohesion Policy and Territorial Cooperation with Neighbouring Countries: Towards Deeper Coordination?

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Abstract

The European territory cannot remain isolated from what happens beyond its borders. Many interactions currently exist with neighbouring countries. However, European institutions have not yet successfully understood the consequences of this reality. It is clear from the official documents relating to cohesion policy reveal a closed vision and inward looking concept of the European territory. Into the 2000s, such a vision, combined with a lack of coordination between the various DGs of the European Commission, has hampered the development of many regions located on the external borders of the European Union. Recently, the Commission has tried to come up with a new modus operandi in terms of better coordination between the cohesion and neighbourhood policies, with new regulations in respect of the structural funds and the financial instruments pertaining to external cooperation. These new regulations introduce real improvements to the previous instruments. However the new instruments still suffer from significant shortcomings. This paper addresses the important issue of territorial cooperation with third countries by raising three main questions. What is the content of the new regulations released by the Commission in December 2006? What kind of improvements did they bring to the former regulations? And, what kind of obstacles to these reforms have emerged?

Keywords: European Union, territorial cooperation, external relations, European neighbourhood policy

1. Introduction

From an economic point of view the European Union is open and fully exposed to the emerging global economy. As such, the European territory cannot remain isolated from what happens beyond its borders. For instance, the major European metropolitan regions are deeply embedded in the so-called metropolitan archipelago and they take much profit, individually, from the process of globalisation. Indeed, they are clearly developing at a

faster pace than the European average. This is, moreover, reflected at the macro regional level where intense work is being carried out to foster enhanced and mutual relations between the European Union and its geographical neighbourhood (ESPON, 2007; Beckouche et al, 2008). In the short term, such interactions will certainly strengthen in the framework of what economists term economic regionalisation (Frankel, 1998; Mashayekhi & Ito, 2005; Siroën, 2000).

The argument forwarded here is that the European Union has not yet successfully understood – as an institution – the consequences of this new reality. Fairly soon after the development of the European cohesion policy at the end of the 1980s the initial work on regional development and spatial planning, in a European perspective, emerged. The major documents released in this particular context were mainly based on the vision of a closed European territory where European regions had no significant relations with those located in neighbouring countries. In spite of the efforts made subsequently to change this inward-looking focus however European cohesion policy remains, we argue, fundamentally wedded to this vision.

By stressing the growing differences between and autonomy of the various European institutional actors responsible for the cohesion and neighbourhood policies we seek to understand how the Commission sees and analyses the disparities between levels of development across the European territory. We also try to understand the extent to which such an approach impacts on the delivery of the European-level policies and instruments targeting such disparities.

Finding a better *modus operandi* in terms of coordination between the cohesion and neighbourhood policies is an explicit goal of the European Commission. That is why new regulations in respect of the structural funds and the financial instruments pertaining to external cooperation were released at the beginning of 2007. These new regulations bring real improvements to the previous instruments such as INTERREG III A and III B, TACIS Cross Border Cooperation (CBC) and PHARE CBC. The recent reforms confirm the process launched in 2003 and 2004 which was designed to enhance the quality of cooperation with neighbouring countries particularly at the local level. In spite of the efforts made by the European Commission and the member states however the new instruments still suffer from significant shortcomings. This paper addresses the important issue of territorial cooperation with third countries by raising three main questions. What is the content of the new regulations released by the Commission in December 2006? What kind of improvements did they bring to the former regulations? And, what kind of obstacles to these reforms have emerged?

2.The European ‘island’: A closed representation of the European territory

European cohesion policy aims to reduce development disparities between regions. During the 1990s growing interest emerged in the need for a broad definition of spatial policy and planning (Williams, 1996). The European Commission, in connection with the Member States, thus produced a number of key documents on this topic. They revealed

the existence of a closed representation of the European space where, it seemed, no relations existed between the territory of the Member States and those of the neighbouring countries.

The first section of this paper focuses on an analysis of the basic texts pertaining to European cohesion policy and to the issue of spatial planning in the EU. These texts such as the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and the reports on cohesion are not legally binding. Nevertheless, these documents do provide us with valuable information. They deliver more than just simple slogans. They represent the outcome of common reflections and practices in the field of spatial planning and regional development (Albrechts et al, 2003). They help to sketch out a range of strategic axes which have an influence on the choices made by the member states in spatial planning. European cohesion policy is the second largest budget item in the European Union receiving more than 40 billion euros per year. This financial muscle is important and lends a certain puissance to the Commission's role in the promotion of these documents. Requests for European funds must then be in line with the priorities formulated in documents such as the ESDP and more recently the Territorial Agenda. Moreover, their content must be coherent with the regulations of the European Structural Funds. In this respect they have an almost binding dimension.

Strategic spatial plans have also been developed at the European scale (Healey, 2004). The need for better coordination of public policies, the search for a way to reinforce "territorial competitiveness" (Camagni, 2006), the sustainable development objective or the importance of ensuring better accessibility all appear as priorities at different scales.

At the European level however the discourse about space has been fostered by the Directorate General for Regional Policy (DG REGIO) and the role of the Commission has changed: its aims have been extended in order to reinforce the strategic dimension of spatial planning (Richardson & Jensen, 2003).

2.1 The external borders: not a Commission priority

The development of European cohesion policy tools gradually led the Commission to intervene in the domain of spatial planning. While there is no formal competence in spatial planning at the EU level a form of European spatial planning has nevertheless progressively emerged. Article 10 of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) regulation enabled the Commission to support studies or pilot schemes concerning regional development at the EU level. In this framework the reports "Europe 2000" (1991) and "Europe 2000+" (1994) were released. These reports highlighted the need to implement a balanced development of the European territory. They prefigured the application of the ESDP at the intergovernmental level but with little consideration given to the external borders of the Union.

At the same time the European Commission identified new priorities in terms of structural policies through the reports on cohesion. These reports are real inventories of the main territorial trends taking place in the European Union. These documents are also primarily focused on the European space. For instance, the First Report on Cohesion

(CEC, 1996) deals with the cross-border issue but only at the European scale, i.e. only between Member States:

“Community initiatives have had a particular role in emphasising the trans-border, trans-national and inter-regional dimension. There can be few more important priorities in the process of European integration than the removal of the traditional barriers between Member States which have distorted economic structures and reduced opportunities, especially for border communities” (CEC, 1996: 109).

For geopolitical reasons linked to the need to include several Central and Eastern European Countries as soon as possible (see for instance: Fritsch, 2009), the period preceding enlargement to include ten new Member States lent added importance to the need to think beyond the external borders of the EU. The Second Report on Cohesion highlighted this issue:

“With enlargement, there will be a renewed need for cross-border measures to promote cooperation between the candidate countries and the Union, as well as to assist the regions within the candidate countries that share common frontiers with third countries to the east and to the south, including the Mediterranean rim” (CEC, 2001a: 4).

The principle of cohesion here is however only expressed from the regional policy point of view. The Second Report on Cohesion thus proposed a broader definition of European Regional Policy independently of, and standing alone from, the reduction of the interregional disparities issue within the Member States (Davezies, 2002). This approach did not however lead to the implementation of particular instruments for border regions and cross-border territories (European Union – neighbouring countries). Moreover, it also concealed the importance of the deeper coordination of all sectoral policies with a spatial dimension, with such coordination being officially addressed by the Commission (CEC, 2001b).

External borders are addressed by the Third Report on Cohesion in the paragraphs dedicated to the INTERREG initiative, presented as a means to develop cross-border trade within the European Union and with the neighbouring countries:

“Part of the added value of INTERREG IIA programmes is their contribution to establishing and strengthening a culture of cross-border cooperation both inside the EU and between the EU and neighbouring countries” (CEC, 2004: 157).

This programme allowed for the emergence of a new form of transnational governance fostered by a bottom-up process, i.e. involving local policy-makers (Christiansen & Jorgensen, 2000). The issue of cross-border spatial development beyond the EU’s borders is again however only sketchily addressed in terms of objectives and means. In the Fourth Cohesion Report cross-border cooperation in the European Union and in the regions located along the external borders of the EU is also mentioned without significant further development having taken place:

“Many years of cross-border programmes have improved co-operation between border regions within the EU-15 (...). The new internal borders are not as permeable yet and traffic flows are much lower. Increasing the permeability of these borders, both physically and

administratively, will facilitate the flow of people and goods between these regions and lead to the levels of economic exchange matching the economic potential of these regions. This type of cooperation activity is even more important for the border regions located along the external border” (CEC, 2007a: XIV).

If European discourse now recognises the importance of the external borders, precise methods to implement cooperation between the European Union and the neighbouring countries in the field of spatial planning remain to be developed. These difficulties refer to a basic idea: internal cooperation within the European Union should promote intra-European exchanges. Cross-border cooperation within the European space implies the need for a difficult homogenisation process in respect of national legal, administrative and policy systems (O’Dowd, 2002). Besides, the creation of new cooperation spaces (Perkmann, 1999), the intention to simply bypass the traditional link between borders and national identities (Paasi, 1998), is quite recent. The internal dimension of cross-border cooperation is also enhanced by the priority given to the intergovernmental approach.

At the intergovernmental level, ministers in charge of spatial planning decided to introduce the territorial dimension into the Lisbon process during the informal meeting on territorial cohesion in 2004 (Faludi & Waterhout, 2005). In the Territorial Agenda process, concretised by the document dealing with the main challenges of territorial development, an explicit dimension dealing with the neighbouring countries is once again absent. Moreover, the background paper on the Territorial Agenda process – The Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union – (Territorial State, 2007: 22) hardly dealt with the neighbourhood issue at all. Future prospects are perhaps a little brighter however with the expressed desire of EU spatial planning ministers to fully take account of the European neighbourhood policy in the implementation of the Territorial Agenda. This subject is considered to be one of the “key dossiers from a territorial point of view” (Territorial Agenda, 2007: 10), confirmed in the 2007 First Action Programme. This trend reflects the growing importance of cooperation at different scales for improving territorial development.

2.1 European planning and the neighbourhood beyond: the increasing importance of cooperation

If the European Union does not have any legal authority in the field of spatial planning the Member States in connection with the European Commission have progressively raised the need for better cooperation and coordination of sectoral policies in order to address the needs of territorial development.

The main outcome of a process launched under the French EU Presidency in 1989 (Faludi & Waterhout, 2002), the ESDP aimed at fostering the well balanced development of the European territory. The document - approved by an Informal Council of Ministers in 1999 - was based on three key principles: the development of a balanced and polycentric urban system and the establishment of new relationship between cities and rural areas; assurance of equal access to knowledge infrastructures; and sustainable development, intelligent management and the conservation of nature and cultural assets.

The ESDP had no restricting dimension. In the context of enlargement the ESDP mentioned the external borders in paragraphs dedicated to major roads:

“Strengthening of the cities and regions at the external borders of the EU: policies for the development of “Gateway Cities”, multi-modal infrastructure for the European corridors, equal access to telecommunication facilities and intercontinental accessibility could strengthen the role of the regions and their cities at the external borders. This applies both to the enlargement process and to the development of more intensive relations with non-Member States, towards the South and with other world economic regions” (CEC, 1999: 36).

In concrete terms however the definition, never mind the realisation, of Trans-European Networks proved a rather difficult task (Rees & Deblanc, 2004). Moreover the 30 priority projects defined in April 2004 only focused on the European Union, including the new member states. The report of the high level group chaired by former Commission vice president Layola de Palacio (CEC, 2005) did however recommend improvements in transport connections with the neighbouring countries. This report had a significant influence on the subsequent European Commission communication on the enlargement of Trans-European networks to neighbouring countries (CEC, 2007b). Finally, it is clear that recent enlargements of the European Union, in 2004 and 2007, have compelled the European Commission to re-evaluate the concept of European corridors both inside and outside the European territory (CEC, 2008a).

Moreover, a territorial cooperation objective has finally been drawn up in the context of European cohesion policy, i.e. the need for enhanced coherence in the domain of cross-border cooperation in the strategic guidelines (CEC, 2006a). By fixing priority objectives, these guidelines are inserted into the new framework of European cohesion policy through the collective negotiation of national development strategies with the European Commission. External borders are mentioned in the following way:

“Particular attention needs to be paid to the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing external borders of the Union following enlargement. Here, there is a need to promote coherent cross-border actions that encourage economic activity on both sides, and remove obstacles to development. To this end, Cohesion Policy and the new European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument and, where appropriate, the new Instrument for Pre-Accession, need to create a coherent framework for such actions.” (CEC, 2006b).

More broadly, the focus on cooperation is confirmed in the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion which mentioned the need to have a policy response to tackle connectivity, concentration and environmental problems on a variable geographical scale, involving in some cases the EU and neighbouring countries (CEC, 2008b: 7). The ‘EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region’ presented by the European Commission in June 2009 added some concrete elements on deeper cooperation between some member states and Russia (CEC, 2009). Following the European Council Conclusions of 14 December 2007 (Council of the European Union, 2008), the Commission for instance recommended the strengthening of the Northern Dimension, i.e. a common policy encompassing the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland, which provided the basis for the external aspects of the strategy.

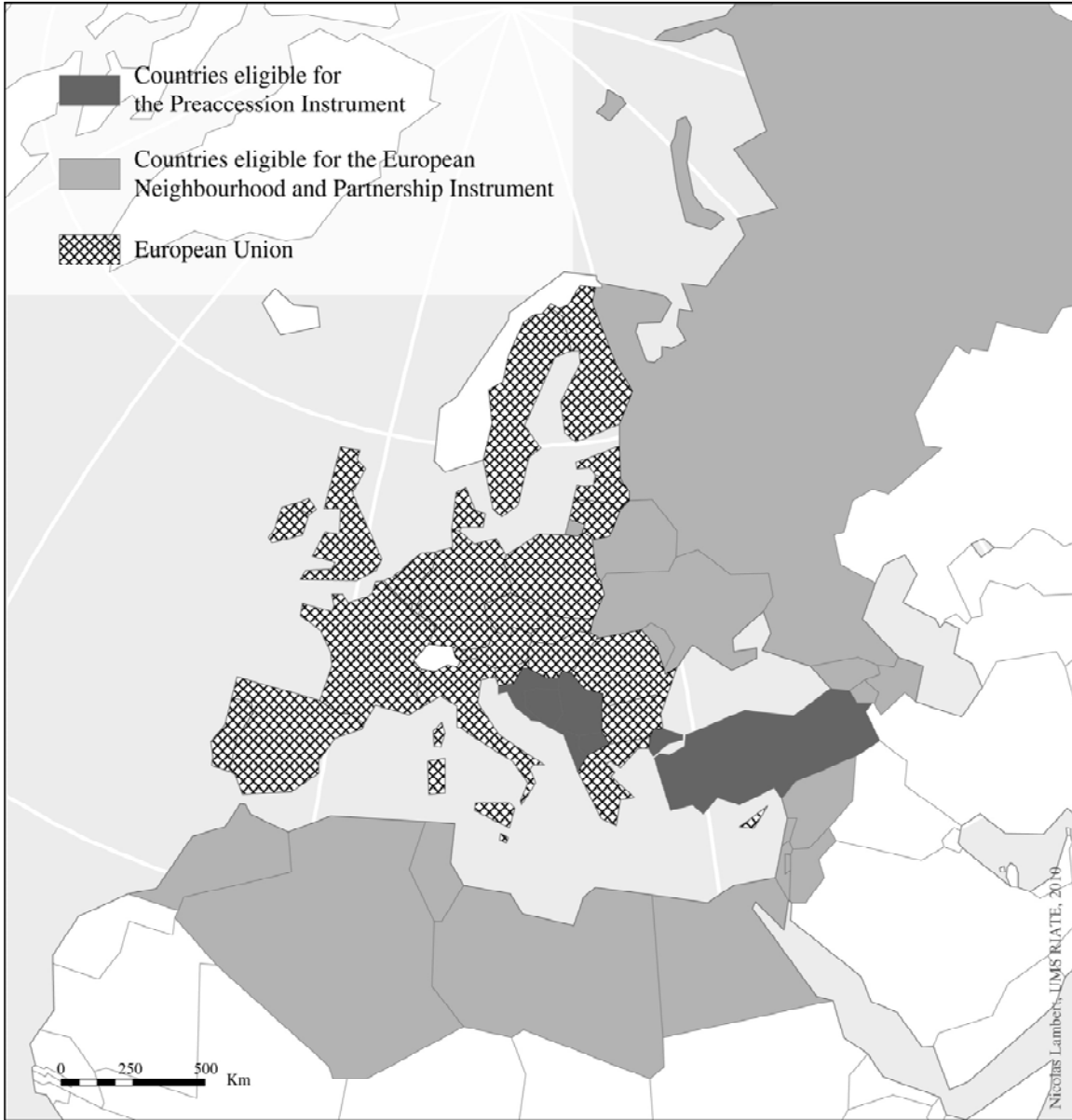


Figure 1: Neighbouring countries eligible for financial assistance from the EU
 (Source: Nicolas Lambert, UMS RIATE, 2010)

In conclusion, one can say that the focus here remains firmly on Member State potentials perpetrating the notion of a closed representation of the European territory as outlined above. The increasing focus on cooperation – especially around the territorial cohesion debates – is however linked to the idea that the relevant geographic scale can move according to the sectoral problem in focus.

3. The new structural funds and the new European Neighbourhood Policy. Do they bring substantial improvements?

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the European Union has striven to improve various institutional instruments in order to facilitate cooperation with its immediate neighbours. The European Commission implemented the Neighbourhood Policy in 2004 the goals of which had been previously defined by Romano Prodi in a communication released in 2003 (CEC, 2003a; see also CEC, 2003b). Since January 2007, reformed versions of the Neighbourhood Policy and of the Cohesion Policy have been put in place, based on new regulations. This does not mean however that the EU has finally and effectively dealt with the issue of the basis for its interactions with neighbouring countries and their effects on the European territory.

3.1 The new structural funds are more flexible

The efficiency of cross-border cooperation with third countries was already being hampered by inconsistencies and conflicts between various financial instruments in the 1990s. It was generally seen to be almost impossible to combine these instruments i.e. INTERREG, PHARE and TACIS. This problem was, moreover, fully recognised by the European Commission and the other institutions involved (European Court of Auditors, 2001). In order to tackle it the Commission took several decisions. A “handbook for the coordination of the financing of TACIS and INTERREG” was released in 2001 to provide assistance in respect of the financing of common cooperation projects along the border between the EU and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries. This handbook was signed by the Commissioners in charge of external relations and regional policy which confirmed the rising level of awareness of a simple fact, namely, that some of the financial instruments related to cross-border cooperation can only function efficiently when they can be more easily combined. There is, however, nothing in this manual that shows that the two DG’s concerned decided to better coordinate their action at different territorial scales. In fact, the handbook proposed various improvements in the cooperation procedures only at the local and regional levels (cross-border and transnational cooperation) but not at a higher level over larger territories.

In 2004 the Neighbourhood Programmes were launched. This particular instrument had been proposed in several previous communications. The framework it put in place set the conditions for real cooperation between the countries involved in transnational and cross-border programmes (both EU member states and neighbouring third countries). In this new context all cooperation projects should be both conceived and developed in common by actors from both sides of the border. New joint institutions were established: Joint Selection Committees, which chose the projects, Joint Technical Secretariats and Joint Monitoring Committees. According to the members of the Joint Technical Secretariat in Riga (interviewed in 2005 and 2006) these neighbourhood programmes have undoubtedly paved the way for stronger cooperation. Although some of the problems highlighted previously (bad articulation of the instruments and regulations) were not yet effectively

addressed the Neighbourhood Programme nevertheless provided a real measure of ‘value added’ by supporting common projects having an impact on both sides of the external EU border.

3.2 New regulations: the recent evolution of the ERDF and of the Neighbourhood Policy

The new regulations implemented since January 2007 are in line with these efforts undoubtedly providing greater flexibility. It is easier to disburse ERDF credits to third countries, provided they are eligible to participate in the Neighbourhood Policy and, additionally, on the condition that the financed project is deemed to have a positive impact on the European territory. Previous to this using ERDF credits outside the borders of the Union was almost impossible (European Parliament, 2006a,b). In addition, the geographical definition of eligible areas in respect of ERDF funds is now larger than before in order to reinforce the impact of cooperation in the zones directly targeted by a given project (European Parliament, 2006c).

The new European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and the new Pre-Accession Instrument (IPA) replace the former instruments for the financing of all the territorial cooperation projects carried out at the external borders. Besides, these new instruments are more flexible. The IPA is targeted at official candidate countries but can also, under certain conditions, be implemented on the territory of other countries. Potential candidates are also allowed to receive funds from this instrument, in the framework of its “territorial cooperation” strand, so as not to hamper regional development projects through having an overly restrictive eligibility definition.

As far as the ENPI is concerned movement towards greater geographical flexibility is also discernable. The notion of common maritime basins, previously defined in the new general regulation of the structural funds (2006) is also included in the ENPI and has been enlarged. The NUTS 2 regions are now eligible but also the adjoining territorial units (European Parliament, 2006c).

Last but not least, under certain conditions some third countries not previously included in the geographical annexes of these instruments, are now allowed to receive funds (European Council, 2006a). In pushing this through the European Commission clearly indicates movement toward a situation which exhibits greater coherence between the various instruments of its aid policy.

3.3 Simplification of the rules in respect of cross-border cooperation

The Commission has actively sought to end the artificial difficulties relating to the combination of various financial instruments implemented inside and outside the European territory (i.e. INTERREG, TACIS and PHARE). For every cross-border cooperation project carried out over the external borders of the EU only ERDF regulations are now applied (European Council, 2006a).

The IPA regulation (European Council, 2006a, point 19 of the preamble and Title II, article 10) even sets out the possibility for candidate countries to manage the structural funds used on their territory. This decentralisation trend is of course seen as a useful way to prepare these countries for future full member status. This is also however an efficient way to better harmonise the procedures used on both sides of the EU's external border.

Finally, in addition to confirmation of the joint status of operational programmes (cf. European Council, 2006b, Title III, Article 9), the financing of every cross-border project with neighbouring countries is also better facilitated. Before 2007, such projects were financed by wholly incompatible instruments: INTERREG and TACIS CBC for example. From now on, only one financial instrument will be used.

4. Numerous problems still need to be addressed despite the new regulations

The EU's Cohesion Policy is eminently scalable (Leclerc, 2003). The objectives have been regularly reformed and their number has changed several times over the last two decades. To adapt these objectives to a continually changing reality is a major task for the Commission. The new regulations are in line with this concern. Nevertheless, much has still to be done in order to increase the efficiency of the new financial instruments and to strengthen the relevance of the areas of cooperation delimited by them. In this section we highlight the four main kinds of problems likely to emerge despite the reform of the structural funds and the Neighbourhood Policy.

4.1 Is the delimitation of the 'neighbourhood' still relevant?

The notion of the 'neighbourhood' was first delimited by Romano Prodi in a communication released in 2003 (CEC, 2003a). Its definition is based on the criterion of the geographical proximity of these countries to the Union and, primarily, on the existence of a common border. There are a small number of exceptions here namely the countries of the Caucasus (for instance Azerbaijan and Armenia) plus Jordan. Despite the existence of these exceptions, it is clear that the delimitation of the "neighbourhood" is too narrow. Perhaps a functional definition of this area would be more relevant? Such a definition, based on functionality more than on spatial proximity, would include other third countries such as those of central Asia. These countries are substantial providers of energy resources and are increasingly dependent on the EU for their exports (especially Kazakhstan). Former Soviet Central Asia was eligible for TACIS funds until 2006 but not the funds allocated to the Neighbourhood Policy. Involving such countries, strongly linked to the EU from a functional point of view (economic relations and so on), would be one way to better institutionalise the existing interactions between "the inside and the outside".

Besides, ENPI can finance cooperation projects in only relatively small territories, especially on the external side of the EU border. The geographical delimitation of the eligible areas is larger and more flexible on the territory of EU members than outside the Union. This choice however reveals a lack of awareness on the part of the European

Commission. Obviously some regions of the European Union maintain strong relations with numerous regions located at too far a distance from the external border to be eligible for European funds. For instance, strong interrelations exist between the border regions of the Baltic States and Russian or Belarusian regions outside the eligibility zone of the “Territorial Cooperation” strand of ENPI.

This overly restrictive definition is partly due to the fact that the current state of relations between the EU territory and third countries are generally not well known nor taken into consideration by European officials and policy makers. Indeed a recently produced ESPON report (ESPON, 2007) showed that such ‘thick’ or embedded sets of relations do exist. They imply the existence of transnational territories whose size depends on the subject matter or field addressed (economy, transport, development, culture, energy etc). Such interrelationships can, on occasion, also involve remote territories located in third countries but not in the neighbourhood as it is currently defined by the European Neighbourhood Policy. This problem was highlighted in an official communication of the Commission which suggests that there is recognition now of the need to pay far greater attention “to the neighbours of our neighbours” (CEC, 2006b).

In brief, the new regulation and instruments of the Neighbourhood Policy will undoubtedly improve cooperation procedures at the local level (only one instrument for both sides of the border) but this will not be enough for cooperation arrangements which take place at a larger scale. An objection could be raised here by noting that the Neighbourhood Policy does not aim to continually enlarge its territorial base. Nevertheless, the problems underlined above should be taken into consideration in order to overcome future obstacles and to strengthen the development of those European regions with strong ties and connections to the neighbourhood and indeed to territories beyond what is currently defined as ‘the neighbourhood’.

Moreover, from a geographical point of view, the IPA it is not as flexible as it seems. In theory, it is also oriented to the potential candidate countries (those already give an ‘entry perspective’ but no firm timetable for accession) located in the Western Balkans. Article 20 specifies that these countries should be allowed to benefit from all the possibilities offered by the IPA. However, the concrete application modes of this instrument remain somewhat fuzzy because these countries are not allowed to take a part in the decentralised management structure of European funds. Moreover, Article 10 notes that only official candidates can benefit from the “regional development” strand of the IPA for instance. As such this restriction remains a major obstacle on the way to stronger cooperation between the countries in this part of southern Europe. Such a decision draws a kind of boundary between two kinds of countries: official and potential future members. Such a strategy does not of course fit well with the official objective of stronger integration at the macro-regional level across the Balkans expressed at the Zagreb summit in 2000 (European Council, 2006a, Preamble, § 19 and 20 and Title II, Article 10, § 1). Actually, only Croatia, Macedonia and Turkey are eligible for all the strands of the pre-accession instrument: transition assistance and institution building, cross border cooperation, regional development, human resources development, and rural development. The potential candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro

and Serbia) are eligible for only two of them: transition assistance and institution building and cross border cooperation.

Finally, the ERDF rules must be followed in the implementation of cooperation projects between EU members and IPA countries. But regrettably this substantial simplification concerns only the local level (financial support to cross-border cooperation) and not the regional level (no support for transnational cooperation) (European Council, 2006a, Title II, Article 9, § 3).

4.2 A lack of coordination exists between instruments and between institutions

ENPI and IPA are financial instruments oriented towards official development assistance in third countries. Consequently, they must be managed and implemented under the control and supervision of DG RELEX. A new problem will undoubtedly however arise here as these instruments include a section devoted to regional development and DG RELEX has absolutely no experience or competence in this field. Having already noted above that ERDF funds can be disbursed on the territory of third countries this again begs the question of DG RELEX's role in respect of the management of the structural funds, an instrument traditionally managed by DG REGIO.

A further problem within the European Commission concerns the lack of coordination between the DGs involved in the implementation of these financial instruments. Theoretically, ENPI and the IPA are managed by DG RELEX. What happens however in the case of the financing of cross-border and transnational projects which concern not only third countries but also territories which belong to the EU? Which administration structure will take precedence in cases of conflict? Such a problem is not likely to arise along the eastern border of the EU because the joint committees created in the framework of the neighbourhood programmes (with CIS countries for example) are still in force. But this is not the case with the IPA countries where such joint committees do not exist. An IPA committee can be established via the IPA regulation (article 14) but even so is composed exclusively of representatives of EU member states.

To ensure efficiency the various instruments should be fully compatible. This is already partly the case since the ERDF regulation will be the main basis for the financing of cooperation projects on both sides of the EU's external border. But this alone is not sufficient. It is necessary also to ensure that the objectives of the fundamental documents of EU-neighbourhood relations (action plans, stabilisation and association agreements, partnership and cooperation agreements, roadmap of the four EU-Russia common spaces etc..) are at least functionally consistent. In addition the objectives presented in these documents should also be coherent with the underlying strategies of the cross-border and transnational projects financed by IPA and ENPI. Last but by no means least, the objectives of these two instruments in respect of regional development should be compatible with the spatial planning and regional development strategies of the EU regions themselves. The adoption of such an approach would undoubtedly generate and/or facilitate further positive interactions and synergies between ENPI and IPA, on the one hand, and with the goals of EU regional policy, on the other.

The European Commission has already officially expressed its will to move ahead towards stronger “inter-institution” and “inter-instrument” coordination in the framework of cooperation with third countries. Notwithstanding this expressed desire a long road still remains to be travelled here. This is confirmed by the content of the strategic documents and action plans signed by the EU and the partner countries. The paragraphs explicitly dedicated to territorial cooperation and to regional development were ‘detail-lite’ to say the least. For instance, incoherencies remain in the strategic document in respect of Ukraine which is in force for the period 2007-2013. Officially, the Commission puts the stress on the necessity to better coordinate the different policies of the EU regarding this country:

“Relations with Ukraine are affected by a number of other Community policies which is why it is so important to choose the right “policy mix”. This concerns, in particular, Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), border management and migration, trade, energy, transport and environment protection. Information and communication technology issues are also highly relevant. See Annex 5 for a detailed discussion of “policy mix” considerations” (CEC, 2006c).

“Further elaborate a concept for a national sustainable transport policy for the development of all transport modes, coherent with the EU’s White Paper on transport. Develop an infrastructure policy in order to identify and evaluate the priority infrastructure projects in various sectors and continue participation in the joint development of the Pan-European Corridors and Areas as well as in the TRACECA programme” (European Council, 2005)

An in-depth analysis of the documents supposed to set the priorities for EU-Ukraine relations shows that territorial cooperation and regional development are completely absent from the strategic discussion. The document underlines the impact of some common European policies but the other side of the coin is simply not addressed, namely, the potential impact of Ukrainian internal social, political and economic developments on the EU territory. In the EU-Moldova action plan the same problem occurs. Regional development appears as one of the main topics in the presentation of the perspectives of the partnership but it does not appear in the list of priorities mentioned in the first part of this paper. The only cooperation projects referred to here are in the field of international migration flows and the monitoring of borders in order to tackle problems such as the trafficking of illegal goods. These objectives are more oriented to the global question of security on an international level and, as such, have little or nothing to do with regional development per se.

A final problem here concerns the issue of the coherence of the instruments and documents. The Commission recently asked the EU member states to take into account the Practical Guide regarding the contractual procedures for the implementation of external cooperation programmes (the so called PraG). This long and complex document concerns cooperation projects on the external borders of EU (CEC, 2007c). Unfortunately, some of its prescriptions are simply not compatible with the ENPI regulation.¹ PraG was initially conceived as a means to set out the basis for cross-border

¹ For instance, read the paragraphs relating to the payment of subventions to non-commercial organisations and agencies (article 6.1.1, page 99). These paragraphs set out several contradictions to the regulation of the ENPI. In addition, a contradiction remains between articles 13 and 15 of the ENPI concerning

cooperation between Member States, as such, it does not do a particularly good job of regulating cooperation with third countries.

4.3 Persistent problems in the financing procedure of joint projects

Although the procedures in relation to external cooperation have been fine-tuned in recent years many of the old problems remain. One such problem is the degree of responsibility of the EU member states. According to the general regulation of the structural funds, member states are responsible for the way funds are disbursed on the territory of any partner neighbour country, i.e. not only on their own territory but also on the territory of third countries in the framework of cross-border or trans-national projects.

The Estonian authorities were particularly alarmed at this notion officially declaring on numerous occasions that they categorically refused to be responsible for potential ‘mistakes’ and wrongdoings in the disbursements of European funds on Russian territory.² The new regulations in respect of ENPI introduce greater precision on this point but do not solve the problem completely. The Commission has the right to check the way in which European funds are disbursed in third countries, but the Member States are obliged to check the legality of all financing procedures relating to projects carried out in the territory of partner countries. In addition to this, questions have to be raised about the likely reaction of the authorities of a country such as the Russian Federation to suggestions of wrongdoing or impropriety. Are they likely to lightly accept the imposition of administrative and financial audits undertaken by European officials in accordance with ENPI regulations?

It is not yet clear whether the multi-annual financing procedure which was in place before 2007 will really be reformed. The former procedure regularly caused long delays in the release of the credits dedicated to the partner regions. In order to receive TACIS funding the recipient countries had to sign an annual memorandum. This was the easiest way for the European Union to preserve its financial stake, but it severely impeded the actual financing process in terms of the cooperation projects.

This issue is quite sensitive because the new financial instrument for territorial cooperation is a joint instrument. It strengthens the solidarity of member and partner countries in respect of the financing of their projects, even if political relations are strained, as is the case between the Baltic States and Russia for example, or between Poland and Belarus. In an official letter sent to the European Commission the Estonian authorities raised a number of important issues. What happens if the partner country does not sign the financing memorandum before the time limit? Is the release of the credits stopped even for the eligible territory on the European side? Such a problem did not

procedures in relation to the evaluation of the cooperation projects and section 6.4.8.6 of the practical guide, on page 117. We would like to thank Margarita Jefimova, Ministry of the Internal Affairs (Republic of Estonia) for bringing this to our attention.

² Letter from the Ministry in charge of Regional Development in the Republic of Estonia, 2005 January 7th, sent to Mrs Hübner and Mrs Ferrero-Waldner: “Estonian proposals on implementing cross-border cooperation at the EU external border under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI)”.

really exist before 2007 because the cooperation projects were financed by two different instruments (INTERREG and TACIS-CBC). Russia always signed the memoranda late but the ERDF funds were always finally disbursed on the EU side. Before receiving the TACIS funds, the Russian partners were bound to finance the projects from their own funds, which were generally rather small. This slowed the execution of many ongoing projects. The Commission remains keen however to push ahead with a new system of global financial provision before the beginning of the project period even if its execution actually runs over a period of several years.

4.4 Budget shortage: an ongoing problem

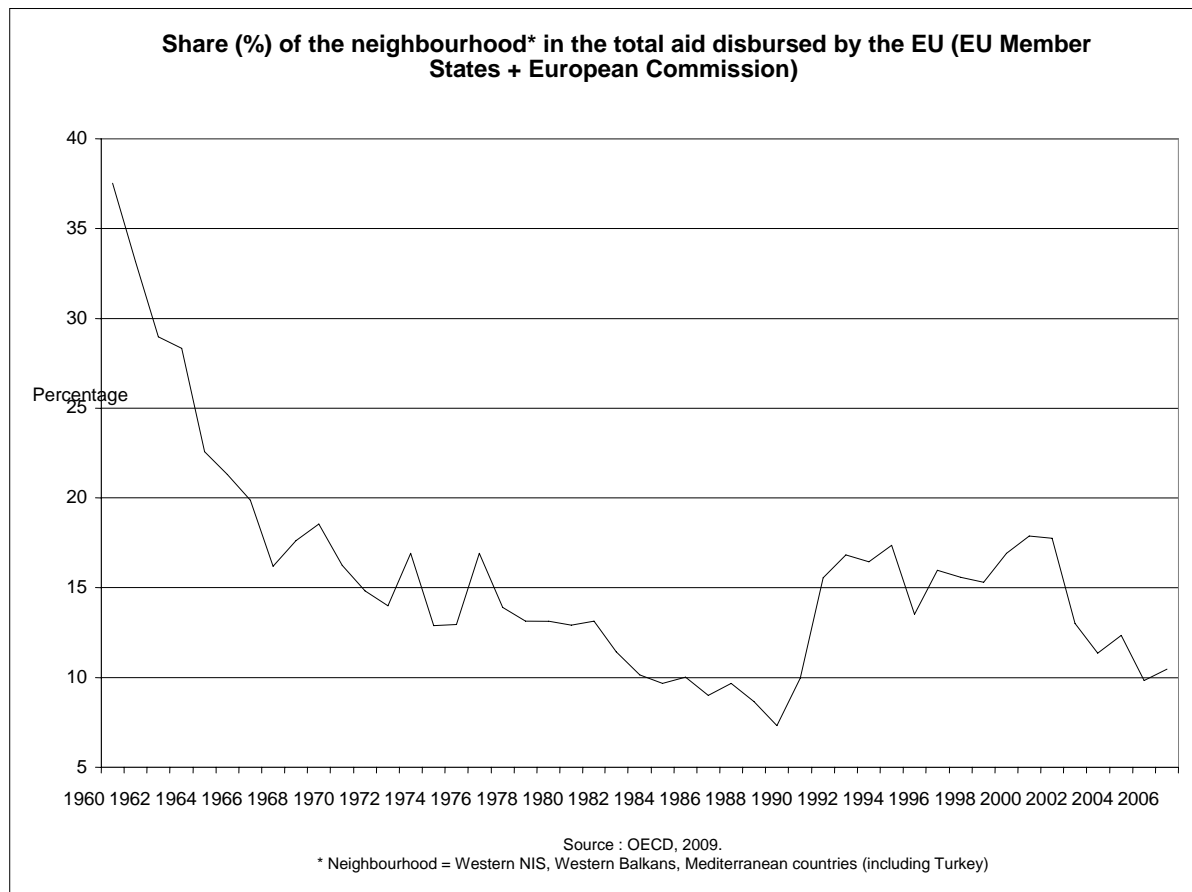
Ultimately the European Union simply cannot seek to substitute itself for all the local cooperation actors existing across various fields including the economy, spatial planning, regional development, and so on. However, to enhance cooperation with third countries and to diminish the negative effect of the external borders, the European Commission and the European Council should increase the funds dedicated to relations with neighbouring and candidate countries. In this context, however, the stagnation of the European budget is anything but an incentive for project holders.

Officially, the budget dedicated to Cohesion Policy has increased since 2007. But territorial cooperation receives the smallest tranche only 7.75 billion € for the period 2007-2013. Within this provision, the bulk goes to the “cross-border cooperation” strand (73.86%) along the internal and external borders of the Union. These funds are fairly insubstantial in relation to the total population in border regions of the EU which numbers around 181 million people, or more than 37% of the total population of the EU. Of this sum, moreover, some 73.86% is oriented to cross-border cooperation across the external borders of the Union, or only €814 million from ERDF funds. One must however add to this an additional amount of €814 million from ENPI and IPA (actually, the provision in the framework of ENPI and IPA does not exceed €813 million; an additional €813 million comes from the structural funds. Taken as a whole though, the final figure remains insufficient given the substantial nature of the task in hand. In addition the “transnational cooperation” strand, with complementary goals to those of cross-border cooperation, receives only 20.95% of the budget. Such an allocation is certainly questionable because these two kinds of territorial cooperation are equally important.

The budget issue is, moreover, not something new as far as EU development assistance in the neighbourhood is concerned. The countries which compose the neighbourhood of the EU 27 (neighbour and candidate countries) received more than 37.5% of the total assistance disbursed by the European Community (i.e. the Commission and the bilateral aid of the Member States of the former EU 15) in the world in the 1960s. The bulk of this was oriented to the Mediterranean developing countries (graph n°1). In the 2000s the neighbouring countries received only 10.4% of the total assistance budget. The assistance disbursed by the Commission, which includes ENPI and IPA budgets, has regularly increased in value terms since 1960 (graph n°2), with a priority given to Mediterranean countries (graph n°3), but much less than that given to the rest of the world (namely Sub-

Saharan Africa, the Western Balkans, the Central and East European Countries, etc). This decreasing relative effort would not be that worrying if it was compensated by the bilateral development aid disbursed by EU member states. However, their official assistance, which was more oriented towards the neighbourhood at the beginning of the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has gradually declined (graph n°4). It is now stabilised at a low level. Yet, their bilateral financial assistance would be most welcome in the border regions of the third countries which are generally poor and often unable to finance cooperation projects from their own resources.

Graph n°1: Share of the neighbourhood of the EU 27 in the total global aid disbursed by the EU

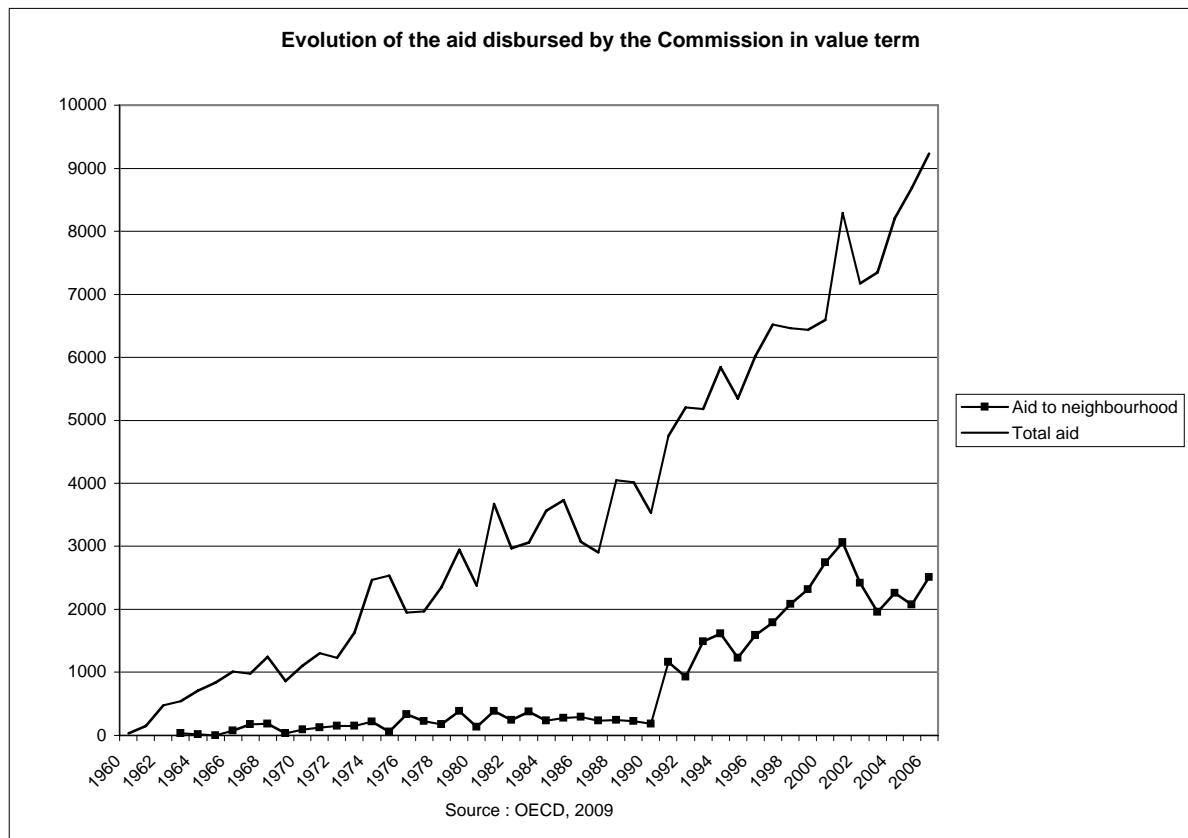


4.5 Are there too many different kinds of neighbourhoods?

Significant differences exist in relation to the varying ‘status arrangements’ of the partner and neighbouring countries particularly in respect of the legal definition of their contractual relationship with the EU. This basic fact undoubtedly hampers the territorial cooperation effort between each group and the EU and between themselves when their projects require the financial support of the Commission. In some cases, it will be necessary to combine IPA and ENPI although these regulations are not quite the same. An example is illustrative of the problem here: the potential candidate countries (annex B of the IPA regulation) are not eligible for the “territorial cooperation” strand of this

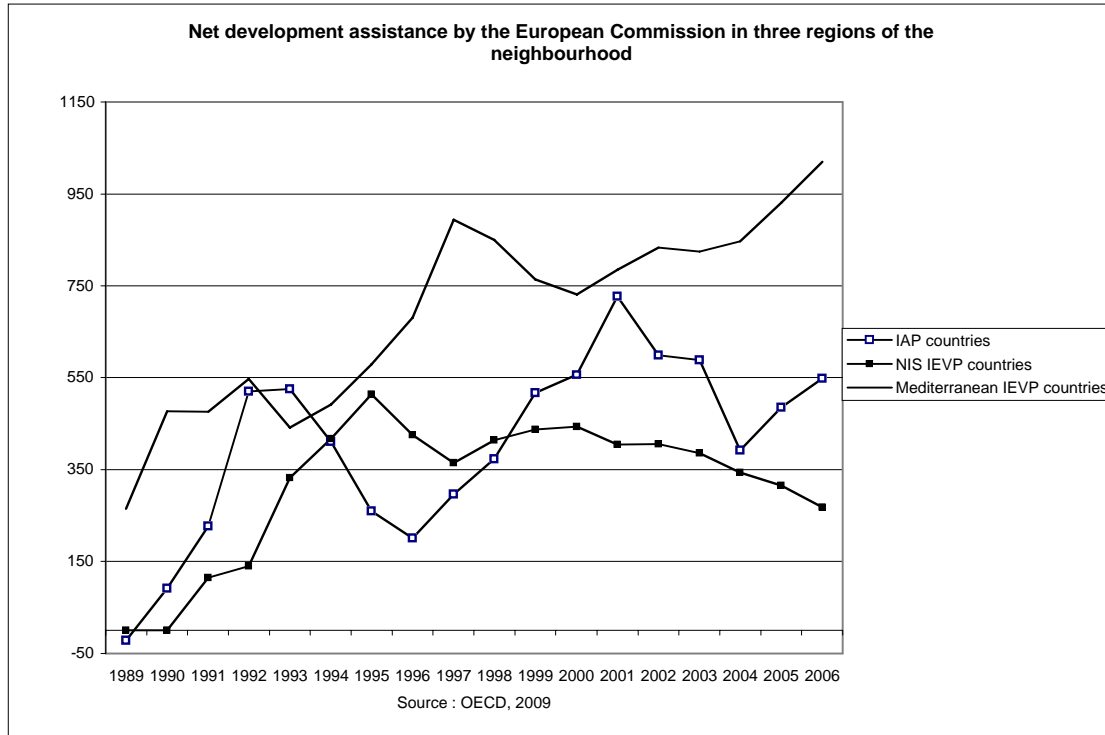
instrument. This shows that the neighbourhood still does not exist as a unique category. Because each country has a tailor-made relationship with the EU compatibility and comparability become problematic. Moreover, the various instruments (action plans, stabilisation plans, ENPI, IPA) often tend to divide the neighbourhood into smaller pieces which may not be so easily reassembled when conformity and a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is desired for efficiency reasons.

Graph n°2: Evolution of the aid disbursed by the Commission

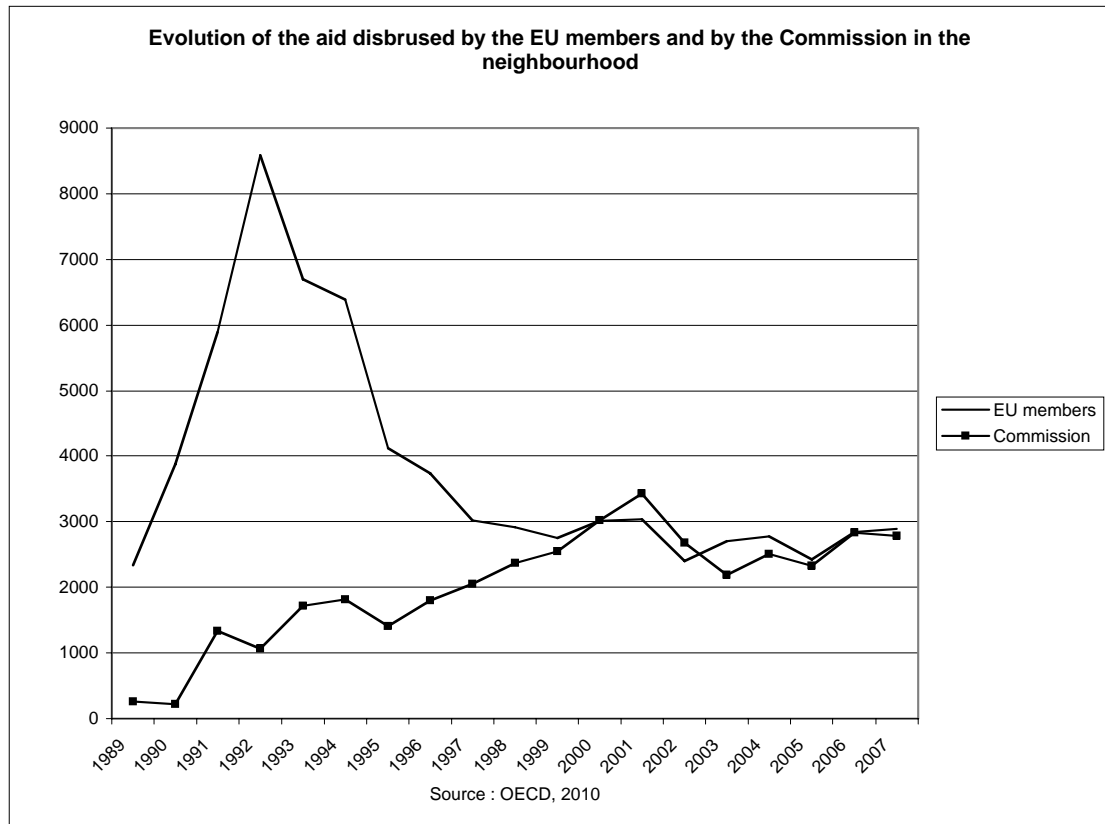


Finally, although the EU tries to support new kinds of macro-regional cooperation processes (involving several adjacent countries; see CEC, 2006b) it would be fair to say that the concrete political outcomes of the process are still to materialise. Historically, external relations with the EU's neighbouring countries have mainly been based on bilateral treaties. Action plans are the cornerstone of the Neighbourhood Policy; the association and stabilisation plans are the cornerstone of the relations with the Western Balkans. There is of course a regional method in external relations: the Mediterranean process is one such example here but this method remains rather less of a reality than the Commission would like to believe simply because the Commission has not signed any treaty dealing with neighbouring blocks of states in the field of territorial cooperation. The predominance of the bilateral method is not bad in itself but it is no longer sufficient in the face of the raft of transnational issues now confronted.

Graph n°3: Aid disbursed by the Commission in three regions of the neighbourhood



Graph n°4: Evolution of the aid disbursed by the EU members and by the Commission in the neighbourhood



5. Conclusion

The new regulations bring real improvements to the procedures for territorial cooperation. The use of ERDF funds outside the European territory is a useful advance and the definition of eligible areas is now more flexible than ever. This shows that the economic and social interactions between the EU and the neighbouring countries will perhaps be taken more seriously. Nevertheless cohesion policy is still conceived and implemented in what amounts to a closed territorial framework. For this reason numerous obstacles will undoubtedly arise in the short run especially in relation to cooperation at the regional and national levels.

Dramatic efforts have been made to take these interactions, some quite traditional, into the framework of the cross-border cooperation. En revanche, the new regulations do not really address the issue of territorial cooperation at other levels (especially at the transnational level). This problem shows how difficult it is to coordinate the actions of DG REGIO and of DG RELEX, and to increase the coherence of the various instruments used in territorial cooperation. It is directly linked to the classical question of coordination, developed in political science and organisational sociology (Simon, 1957; Allison, Zelikow 1999): in a plurality of institutional actors, each can act by means of its own set criteria and rationality which do not necessarily match those of the other actors in the system. As such, each individual organisation within the European Commission tends to follow its own logic and its own methods, in order to achieve its own stated goals (Smith, 2002). Various opposing or indeed incompatible territorial representations are thus allowed to coexist simultaneously in a “multi-organisation” (Coombes, 1970; Cram 1994) - composed of several departments which do not necessarily share the same visions and objectives - enabling different types of practices to be carried out ‘on the ground’ in terms of EU spatial planning and regional development.

The persistence of these problems and the various obstacles they give rise to shows that the European Union has not yet proved able to build a new type of external border regime functioning more as a hinge than a barrier. The EU's continuing reticence in respect of this particular question proves that a multiform frontier is step by step emerging around the EU, mixing openness and closure, cross-border and transnational cooperation and bilateral and regional methods. That is the kind of border ‘regime’ towards which the EU and its neighbours are certainly proceeding: a supple and territorially variable one. To reach this goal, it will certainly be necessary to continue with the reform of the instruments of territorial cooperation, to find a better approach to inter-sectoral (between various policies) and inter-institutional (various DGs) coordination and, of course, to put more money on the table. The new context created by the Lisbon Treaty may perhaps help in the attainment of such goals by providing a real institutional status to the issue of territorial cohesion. The inclusion of this objective in the Lisbon Treaty (article 2) demonstrates, moreover, that two things are being taken into consideration, namely, the importance of geographical proximity (Vignon, 2000) and the stronger coordination of those policies which have a territorial impact. In this direction, the 2009 Barca Report proposed some interesting innovations by promoting strategic interventions with a verifiable impact in order to promote the political commitment and resources of Member State authorities at national, regional and local levels (Barca, 2009). More recently, the

Europe 2020 Strategy (CEC, 2010) put forward the need to deploy external policy instruments because it would create new opportunities for both the EU and its neighbours.

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