

# **SHORT AND LONG- TERM DYNAMICS IN THE EU'S NORTHERN DIMENSION**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade the process of European integration has been characterised by an increased capacity of the European Union (EU) to develop a certain subjectivity on the international arena. In particular, the EU has been able to elaborate multifaceted approaches towards most of its neighbouring areas.

In the framework of the external relations of the Union the actors involved developed different sensibilities towards the politics of the neighbouring areas. In other words, there seems to be a rather clear-cut difference within the logic standing behind the approach that the EU as a system is developing towards the neighbouring areas, especially in the North. On the one hand, some of these actors, tend to see the politics of the “near-abroad” as something relatively set, that pertains to a large extent to a short-term view and that is made through traditional political tools. Other actors instead seem to perceive the politics of the “near-abroad” as something dynamic, not pre-given and unfolding over long periods of time in a flexible manner.

This paper will claim that these two distinct sensibilities emerge clearly in the framework of the Northern Dimension (ND). There seems to be a duality in the essence of the political dynamics unfolding in Northern Europe. On the one hand member states stress the importance of the substance attached to the initiative. Local projects, national interests, policies, priorities, resources allocation seem to pertain to a rather static vision of politics that has its natural environment in the short-medium term. On the other hand, the EU institutions, and in particular the Commission, seem to have developed sensibilities conducive to a more dynamic understanding of the “near-abroad” politics. The stress also put upon elements like policy frameworks, visions and multilevel governance pertain to the long-term vision that does not compete with the short-term understanding but rather complements it.

The main objective of this paper is to propose a distinction between the short-term<sup>1</sup> essence of the initiative and the long-term one. This

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<sup>1</sup> The short-medium term of the initiative is, for the purpose of this paper, identified with a period of three to six years reflecting both the institutional process that led to the creation of the ND as a concept of the EU and the first part of the implementation phase as a result of the Action Plan endorsed by the EU Council in 2000.

distinction will hopefully help analysing some EU dynamics and will shed light on the essence as well as the potential of the initiative.

So what does emerge from such a two-level analysis? And who is the actor that can lead politically the ND process in the long term?

The paper will underline that while in the short-medium run the Northern Dimension process has been led by member states, in the long-term they do not seem to be as well placed to develop the ND as a strategy as the Commission. This does not imply in the long-run an exclusion of member states from the process but certainly the success of the ND potential can fully unfold only if the EU increases its actorhood.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first provides ground for the argument that there are two levels in the ND initiative and that there seems to be a difference in the way member states and the Commission perceive the process.

The second section will focus on the short-term picture, highlighting the different roles played by four main groups of actors. Finally, the third section will focus on the long-term aspect of the initiative. Here the issues at stake will be the links with the regional bodies and the role of the ND in the EU-Russia relations: the two visionary elements the initiative incorporates and the contribution they could bring in the context of the challenges related to the future governance of the EU and to the way the Union will interact with the neighbours.

## **2. THE CONTEXT**

The Northern Dimension initiative has attracted a great deal of attention in the four years that divide the Finnish proposal of 1997 and the beginning of the implementation phase.

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When referring to long-term, the focus will be instead on a seven to fifteen years time-span. This timeframe seems to reasonably reflect the possibility for the visionary elements incorporated by the ND to unfold. However, The figures taken here should not be approached rigidly as they tend to be rather arbitrary especially as far as the long-term is concerned.

Hardly fitting into any traditional categorisation of the EU instruments, the ND has raised the most various questions among scholars and policy makers about its essence and its future.

Among the many questions raised by the ND process the one concerning “what is it about” has gained centrality as the initiative developed during the EU institutional process. The inclusive character of the Finnish proposal made it possible to identify the ND with several key themes of the EU agenda. Indeed, the establishment of an additional channel to conduct dialogue with Russia can be seen as the dominant aspect of the initiative. At the same time, however, the ND is an instrument that should facilitate the accession of some candidate countries, involve non candidate countries, read Norway and Iceland, and last but not least foster regional and subregional links in the Baltic Sea area and in Europe’s North more generally.

It can be argued that such multidimensionality has been an important asset of the ND since it has allowed virtually each actor involved to deliver an own distinct interpretation of the initiative adding dynamics to the process by enriching the debate surrounding it.

Little attention has been paid to two faces the ND shows if approached from the time frame perspective. There seems to be a wide agreement among scholars and policy makers on the fact that the ND is a short-medium initiative whose main political tempo is the one dictated by the Action Plan (AP). But is the ND only about short (3 years) or even medium (3-6 years) term actions?

The answer is clearly no. The ND initiative has two faces a short term one, reflected in the AP, as well as a long-term one still to be fully developed. For the time being, and largely as a result of the EU political process, the ND appears a mono-faced initiative clearly defined by the time frame of the AP.

The Northern Dimension initiative has been subject to transformation once it entered the EU political and institutional process that turned it from a national proposal into an EU instrument. It was the fluid shape of the ND at its launch that allowed the coexistence of both long-term and short-term aspects of it with an equal footing as the long-term elements were merged to the short-term priorities highlighted by the Finnish proposal. The EU

process that culminated with the AP<sup>2</sup> resulted the marginalisation of the long-term aspects of the initiative in favour of the short-term priorities.

The long-term essence of the ND faded away as the actors, Finland included, began pushing for more substance to be attached to the initiative. The outcome we have in front of us today reflects the urgent need of the Nordic members to give concrete visibility to the initiative. This has strengthened the short-term vision of the Northern Dimension as a member-states directed initiative.

A difference though has emerged in the way the ND has been approached by the actors involved. From the outset member states have tended to stress the policy aspects of the ND and approached it like another external policy of the EU while the EU Commission has always considered the ND rather as a wide policy framework.

The growing political pressure aiming at making the ND more visible and concrete has resulted in a list of projects mainly in the field of the environment.<sup>3</sup> The Kaliningrad sewage treatment plant and some other projects financed through the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) constitute, at present, the core outcome of the ND.<sup>4</sup> Other projects like the Northern e-Dimension are in the pipeline, but it is evident that these outcomes, though important, are still far from making the ND “an important line of action in making the Union a more effective global actor”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union 2000, *EU Northern Dimension's Action Plan*, 2271st Council Meeting - General Affairs, Brussels, 13 June 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See Foreign Ministers' Conference on the Northern Dimension, *Conclusions of the Chair*, Luxembourg, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2001, . <http://www.baltinfo.org/Docs/eu>

<sup>4</sup> The Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership is an initiative developed under the Northern Dimension that brings together the European Bank for Reconstruction and development (EBRD), the Nordic Investment Bank and the European Investment Bank and its main aim is to identify and finance jointly local projects linked to the environmental priorities set out in the Action Plan.

<sup>5</sup> P. Lipponen (1997), *The European Union needs a policy for the Northern Dimension*, speech delivered at the conference “Barents region today”, Rovaniemi, 15 September 1997.

The strongest advocates of visible results have been member states. Finland and Sweden have been in the forefront in terms of efforts, but Russia and the candidate countries have also been pushing, to the extent they have been allowed to, for the implementation of projects. At the same time the long-term political elements of the ND that, as will be shown below, contain potential innovations in terms of future governance of the EU and relations between the EU and Russia have been marginalised.

The Commission, being the institution with the main responsibilities in the context of the ND's implementation, has of course expressed attention towards the importance of adding substance to the initiative and implementing local projects, but interestingly it has somehow played down this aspect while stressing during the process the centrality of the co-ordination of the various EU instruments like TACIS, PHARE, INTERREG etc.

Both in its discourse as well as in its actions the Commission has focused primarily on the co-ordination of the instruments, in other words a large-scale rationalisation of its policies and the derived policy tools, with the aim of injecting coherence in its actions. As the Commissioner for External relations Chris Patten put it, the ND will produce added value "by ensuring coherence and exploiting synergies between existing Union policies"<sup>6</sup> and not, predominantly, by implementing new projects.

Despite the fact that such a difference in the approaches adopted by the member states and the Commission might look superficial, it indicates a different interpretation of the essence of the ND as a tool. Somehow, and perhaps involuntarily, the Commission is stressing a more far-reaching aspect, that is to give more coherence to the EU as an actor vis-à-vis its neighbours<sup>7</sup>, while member states tend to focus on more pragmatic dialogue made out of projects that keep Russia involved in short-medium term co-operative processes.

In a similar fashion the question of the financial support of the ND is also indicative of the interpretative differences among the actors involved. The issue has first of all to be framed in the context of a

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<sup>6</sup> See. C. Patten and A. Lind (2000), The Northern Dimension of EU's foreign policy, in the Financial Times 20<sup>th</sup> December 2000, London, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See C.S. Browning (2001), *The Construction of Europe in the Northern Dimension*, Copri Working paper, 39/2001, COPRI, Copenhagen.

North-South competition for the Union's resources as a consequence of a larger distributive game among the members of the costs of European enlargement and cohesion.<sup>8</sup>

To a different degree, the Southern members of the Union have put as a condition for their approval of the initiative no redirection of resources away from the Mediterranean.

Because of this initial obstacle the Northern Dimension has turned into an exercise aimed at pulling together resources from joint actions of non-EU financial institutions. The exercise has so far proved rather successful and could provide a good example in the realm of the Union's external relations to be followed by other member states. The ND, just by the very fact of existing, has been able, as a short-medium term concept, to attract extra funds to Northern Europe.

From this perspective the Northern Dimension is serving effectively one of its purposes that is to push the state actors and financial institutions that are already active in the region to pull forces together in order to focus resources on certain priorities. On top of this the more co-ordination among the instruments the more likely it is that the funds allocated today to the region will be spent effectively and will therefore increase in the future.

Again, to a large extent, this has to do with the interpretation of the ND as another external policy of the EU.

The centrality of the issue springs out of the need of member states to frame the ND into more traditional categorisations. Historically the external relations of the Union have been shaped to a large extent, and with limited results, by pouring funds towards neighbours as a way to keep good relations based on an aid-like dynamics. In the context of the external relations of the Union the concept of a long-term effective policy-framework is for member states a tricky concept to develop and especially to put into practice since it transcends the short-term logic that has been followed throughout most of the external relation's history.

In a way it is not surprising that Lipponen wondered "whether the Commission's resources are suitably distributed in relation to the objectives of the Union" and in the same spirit suggested that Northern Europe should learn more from how the EU deals with

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<sup>8</sup> See E. Barbé (1997), *Balancing Europe's eastern and southern dimensions*. Florence, European University Institute, Florence.



Southern neighbours i.e. through a traditional format of external policy, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, with dedicated funds through the MEDA program.<sup>9</sup>

The absence of a dedicated budget line, however, seems to fit well into the policy-framework-like approach the Commission seems to have developed towards the ND. Since the origin of the initiative the Commission has not considered the issue as central. Actually it made clear that the question of financing was a “non-issue” as it was never on the table for discussion. Funding has therefore not been considered a central issue because the Commission’s interpretation of the ND, even as a medium-term tool, was substantially focused on co-ordination rather than on project financing.

Summing up the difference existing in the way actors perceive the ND is crucial as it leads to different political outcomes, but most importantly it provides ground for claiming that there are two levels of analysis that should be considered when looking at the ND. The first one is the short-medium term level related to the implementation of the AP, characterised by the central role played by the member states and their ambitions to shape the agenda according to national interests and priorities. In such a context the ND’s essence gets closer to a traditional external policy of the EU. The second level of analysis focuses on the long-term objectives and the elements of a vision implicitly and explicitly embodied by the ND. In this context, the ND assumes the connotation of a policy framework, a substantially new tool with innovative aspects concerning the future shape of the EU and its relations with its neighbouring countries.

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<sup>9</sup> P. Lipponen (2001), *Speech of Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen at the national Northern Dimension forum in Oulu* (Finland), 15<sup>th</sup> January 2001. See also P. Lipponen (2001a), *Speech at the Northern Dimension Forum in Lappeenranta*, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2001. See also P. Lipponen (2001b), *The future of the European Union after Nice*, *Speech at the European University Institute in Florence*, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2001.

### 3. VISIONS OF THE ND

The differences existing in the way the initiative is perceived indicate that the Northern Dimension can and should be approached considering the two overlapping components: the short-medium term perspective and the long-term perspective.

Looking at the Northern Dimension and the two overlapping levels of the initiative a key element emerging is that actors which are central in the policy level, linked to short-medium term interests and objectives, do not necessarily remain so in the policy framework level, tied to long-term visions.

In other words while member states have (had) a key role in driving relations with the neighbours and implementing the short /medium term objectives and priorities<sup>10</sup>, they seem to have been less successful in elaborating successful long-term grand-strategies for the European Union as proven by the history of the external relations of the EU.

The other dimension that the Union has reshaped intensively during the nineties, the Southern Dimension (the Barcelona process), was launched by Spain and its agenda has been largely driven by the Iberian country together with not-so-disguised ambition of becoming a privileged referent in the dialogue with the Southern shore of the Mediterranean. In a similar fashion, the failed attempts made by Italy and France in the late eighties/early nineties were aimed at launching a euro-mediterranean initiative that could grant them centrality in the regional dynamics and the possibility of customising, or better shaping, the Union's short-medium term agenda according to their own national priorities. True, each of the initiative launched in the past ten years in the Mediterranean had some visionary potential, however both the regional dynamics and, especially, the competition among the three member states for regional leadership has led the attempts to a failure or, at the very best, to a stagnation of the initiative.

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<sup>10</sup> See T. Christiansen (1997), *A European Meso-Region? European Union Perspectives on the Baltic Sea Region*, in "Neo-nationalism or regionality – the restructuring of political space around the Baltic Rim", P. Joenniemi (ed.), Nordrefo, 1997:5, Stockholm.

In a way the Northern Dimension is not an exception. The political process that has led to its creation resembles somehow the experience of the Southern Dimension. Both have been strongly advocated and promoted by a member state - Finland and Spain - and have then turned into regional processes to which other member states of the region have contributed to different extents. However, contrary to the Southern Dimension the ND contains more solid long-term potential that, if developed, can be potentially incorporated into a vision of Europe in tune with the contemporary international landscape the EU is trying to adapt to.

## **2.1.THE SHORT TERM DYNAMICS**

When looking at the Northern Dimension as a short/medium instrument what emerges is that the key role has been played by members states. The ND as a tool for dealing with the neighbours and Russia has assumed some traits typical of the other policies of the EU directed at the neighbouring areas, like the soft competition among member states for regional leadership in its different facets, the constraints from other regional interests expressed through the Council and, last but not least, the limited say granted to outsiders. Here the focus will be on four actors or groups of actors that have shaped the short -medium term objectives and more generally the dynamics of the political process that culminated with the Action Plan.

### **NORTHERN EUROPE**

The member states of Northern Europe Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Germany were all involved to a different degree in pushing forward the Northern Dimension in the EU agenda. Interestingly among the Northern members Germany has kept on the EU scene a somehow marginal role in the whole Northern Dimension process. An explanation could be identified in the fact that its main interests and efforts converged towards the elaboration of a Common Strategy (CS) on Russia. However, the country has been more active on a regional basis in promoting the role of the organisations

working in the Baltic Sea area but in a rather short-term interpretation of their potential contribution to the ND process.

Finland, being the promoter of the Northern Dimension, has had a pivotal role in shaping the initiative's content. The ND agenda has been, throughout the process, a largely Finnish oriented agenda. If one compares the priorities outlined by Lipponen in his Rovaniemi speech of 1997 with the ones the Commission has elaborated in the so-called interim report<sup>11</sup>, it is striking how Finnish and EU interests, "surprisingly coincided" as Chris Patten put it.<sup>12</sup>

Whether it has been Finland that has adapted its own short-medium term priorities to those of the EU or, as Hanna Ojanen has argued, it has been the EU that has adapted to those of Finland still remains an open question. There are elements that play in favour of both hypotheses.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, the EU, and in particular the Commission, had already in 1994 elaborated guidelines and set out priorities for the Baltic Sea area with an eye to the 1995 enlargement. Some of the elements outlined in the Commission documents, like the no-dedicated-funding issue and the centrality of priorities like energy, transport and environmental protection, including problems deriving from nuclear wastes, were literally moved to the ND agenda in a way that leave little doubt about the involvement of Finland in the process.

On the other hand, Finland managed to add priorities to the agenda of the Commission and certainly succeeded in stretching the elements of the approach the EU had elaborated for the Baltic to other areas like North-West Russia, the Barents region and also the Arctic. Particularly for the far-North Finland has intensely shaped and even set the agenda of the EU since there was, de facto, no specific EU approach to the far North.

It should be recognised that the original Finnish proposal contained some important elements pertaining to the long-term level of the Northern Dimension. In April 1997, four months before the initiative

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<sup>11</sup> EU Commission (1998), *Communication from the Commission – A Northern Dimension for the Policies of the Union*, Brussels, COM 98/0589.

<sup>12</sup> P. Lipponen (1997), see note 5, C. Patten (2000), see note 6.

<sup>13</sup> See. H. Ojanen (1999), *How to Customize Your Union: Finland and the "Northern Dimension of the EU"*, in *Northern Dimensions*, Finnish Institute for International Affairs, Helsinki, pp. 13-27.

was formally launched, Lipponen underlined in a letter to Mr. Santer, President of the EU Commission, the need for “a strategy” for Europe’s North that “should define which are the economic, political and security interests of the Union in this area, especially in the **long-term**”.<sup>14</sup> This indicates clearly that Finland was somehow trying to produce more than a short term EU policy for the neighbouring areas.

The role of Finland has been central in promoting the initiative. Despite, in the very early stages of the initiative, the attitude of Finland was rather different from those of other member states in the way of approaching the interaction with neighbouring areas of the EU, the EU institutional process on the one hand and certain vagueness transpiring from the structure of the initiative itself on the other, led the Finnish government to adopt a short-term approach more in tune with other EU initiatives towards the “near-abroad”.

Another EU member that has contributed directly and indirectly to the development of the Northern Dimension, both in the framework of the very ND process and more in generally in the context of the European Union, is Sweden.

In both contexts the country has been adopting a substantially different approach from Finland. In fact it could be argued that Sweden even in the larger framework of the EU has principally, if not only, focused on its “near abroad”, i.e. the Baltic Sea area. In a similar way as Finland has done with the High North, Sweden managed to involve the EU in the area and at the same time to direct the efforts of the Commission towards its own short/medium term priorities. In particular, Sweden managed to have the Commission actively involved in the process of re-launching the Council of the Baltic Sea States, under its Presidency of the CBSS, that culminated with the Visby summit in 1996.

Sweden’s approach to the external relations of the EU had a different nature when compared to Finland’s. It was, first of all, less ambitious as it did not aim at shaping the overall approach of the Union to the North but just to draw the EU’s attention towards the

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<sup>14</sup> P. Lipponen (1994), Letter from Paavo Lipponen to the President of the EU Commission J. Santer, Helsinki, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1997, Prime Minister Office, Ref. 97/1510. Emphasis added by the author.

Baltic Sea area. Secondly it was not aimed at gaining political centrality in the European integration process.

The results of Sweden's efforts were positive as the Commission's "Baltic Sea Region Initiative" committed the EU to a vigorous involvement in the region and granted the CBSS a possible role of co-ordination of the EU activities in the area.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, it established two principles that have re-emerged again as central in the ND: the absence of dedicated budget lines and the need for enhanced co-ordination among the instruments of the EU at work in the Baltic Sea area.

In the framework of its EU presidency, Sweden followed a similar line of action by supporting a regionalist approach in the context of the Northern Dimension. Sweden attempted to re-launch the role of the regional bodies in the initiative as demonstrated by both the conclusions of the Ministerial Conference that took place in Luxembourg during the Swedish presidency and the stress given by Sweden to the environment as a ND key priority.<sup>16</sup> In sum the Swedish attempt to play a role in defining the agenda of the EU towards the North was therefore limited in its aim and scope but turned out to be rather successful.

If we compare the role played by Sweden and Finland in shaping the agenda of the ND, the former has perhaps been more successful in turning priorities into implemented action. This could also have been due to the very limited number of priorities - the environment and the fight against organised crime- that the country focused on, however, despite Finland having been less effective in obtaining visible results on some of its priorities, like energy and transports, it nevertheless managed to shape the ND agenda in a more permanent fashion than Sweden and above all achieved important political gains at EU level.

In other words Finland has understood faster than Sweden and, surprisingly, Denmark, the rules of the EU external relations game. In particular the Finns realised that being identified as a political referent of a wide initiative like the ND has three main strategic

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<sup>15</sup> EU Commission (1996), *Communication of the Commission - Baltic Sea Region Initiative*, Brussels, 10.04.1996, SEC(96) 608 Final.

<sup>16</sup> Foreign Ministers' Conference on the Northern Dimension (2001), *Conclusions of the Chair*, see note 3.

benefits. The first one is that once the initiative has been launched Finland will continue to be a long-term reference point among the members as far as Northern issues are concerned; secondly, it allows the country to gain centrality in the wider process of European integration; thirdly, by launching the ND Finland has managed to carve out some political space between Russia and the EU where it can play a role as an interface in the overall EU-Russia relations.

## RUSSIA AND THE OUTSIDERS

One of the innovative aspects of the Northern Dimension implied the active involvement of the partners in the political process that led to the AP: the so-called partner-oriented approach.<sup>17</sup>

Despite some formal involvement of Russia and the candidates through the Ministerial Conferences, the role played by the non-EU actors in shaping the ND has been limited.

This has been largely due to the nature of the EU itself, which does not allow outsiders to play a role in its matters. To allow a real say in matters like the ND would cause problems to the way the Union identifies itself as an actor.<sup>18</sup>

Russia, for obvious reasons, has been the outsider that has tried the hardest to play at least some role in the process. The Russian approach towards the EU's Northern Dimension has focused mainly if not uniquely, on the issue of the funds attached to the initiative. From the outset Russia has seen the initiative as an opportunity to obtain extra funds from the EU.<sup>19</sup> Some Russian actors perceived the ND as a new tool the EU developed to exploit their natural resources. In other words it has been argued that the Russians complaints about the initiative should be seen as a demand for

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<sup>17</sup> Vienna European Council (1998), *Presidency Conclusion*, 11/12<sup>th</sup> December 1998, [http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/daily/12\\_98/doc\\_98\\_12.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/daily/12_98/doc_98_12.htm).

<sup>18</sup> See C. S. Browning (2001), *The construction of Europe in the Northern Dimension*, see note 7.

<sup>19</sup> I. Leshukov (2001), *Can the Northern Dimension break the vicious circle of Russia-EU relations*, in "The Northern Dimension: new fuel for the EU", H. Ojanen (ed.), Finnish Institute for International Affairs, Helsinki, pp. 142-188.

some form of financial compensation the exploitation of the natural resources<sup>20</sup>

The failed attempt of January 2001 following the Commission's Communication on Kaliningrad in which Russia asked to the EU Council to be involved in the Working Groups' decision making process concerning Kaliningrad<sup>21</sup>, together with the hard, but vain, critiques expressed in October 2001 by the Russian Deputy Prime Minister in Finland, are both indicative of the reluctance of the Union to let the partners influence significantly the ND process.

Again, the policy like approach that member states seem to apply to the ND is reflected in this context. The partner-oriented approach where partners were supposed to be equal, and with a constructive voice never really materialised. On the contrary, what it considers place is a one-way interaction in which the EU decides what it is best for the partners. Therefore there seems little difference between the way the ND is implemented and the rather distinct top-down approach permeating most of the EU's policies.

It is difficult to predict whether this trend of exclusion will continue in the short medium term. Certainly much will depend on the overall direction the ND process will take in the run-up to the reforms of the EU institutions. Perhaps it is possible that the outsiders will be allowed to play a limited role on specific issues like for example the key question of energy. Here, in light of the new international situation that is emerging following September 2001, Russia, but perhaps also Norway, could have an increasingly strong bargaining power vis-à-vis the Union in terms of medium-term agenda setting and therefore could contribute to some kind of change in the dynamics of the ND process.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See for example S. Hoko, head of the St. Petersburg International Cooperation Centre, quoted in *Demari* and cited at <http://virtual.finland.fi/news/> on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Element emerged from an interview with members of the Policy Planning Unit at the EU Council Secretariat, April 2001.

<sup>22</sup> M. Chillaud and C. Bayou (2001), *l'Europe à la recherche de sa frontière septentrionale*, in *Géoéconomie*, n°19, Autumn 2001, pp. 117-158.



## SOUTHERN EUROPE

Lipponen's call that the ND should not be only a matter for Northern EU members apparently gained acceptance as the Southern members of the EU did focus on the issue and turned out to be decisive, especially in making sure that no extra funding would be allocated to the initiative.

In general the Southern members of the Union have played a rather unconstructive role in the ND process mainly by drawing delimiting lines and by attaching some sort of conditionality to several key points of the initiative, like funding and the participation of non-European allies.

As we saw above, the competition for the resources allocated to the various Dimensions of the EU's relations with its neighbours is the wide political context in which peripheral member states tend to forge their role within to the EU. For example, in the framework of the Working Groups of the Council, Spain blocked any possibility for funding being attached to the ND initiative. Italy and France have kept a slightly more neutral position but they do not view with favour a future budget line for the ND.

Indeed France also played a decisive role in delimiting the scope of the initiative by keeping the US and Canada at a distance despite the fact that they had demonstrated great interest in the ND initiative.<sup>23</sup>

Southern member states have certainly understood little of the added value that some of the elements of the ND could bring to the whole Union. What seems to be clear is that they seem to be in favour of the initiative to the extent that it does not directly or indirectly affect their sphere of interest i.e. the Mediterranean. Despite the Nordics having shown interest in the Southern Dimension and have in several occasions stressed their willingness to contribute constructively to the process, the Southern members seem to have kept a pretty different attitude. In the framework of the first ND Ministerial Conference in Helsinki the positive interest shown in the process by Spain and by France on issues like the fight against organised crime, energy and nuclear safety was rather rhetoric as demonstrated by the total absence of the ND from the French, and probably Spanish, Presidency's agenda.

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<sup>23</sup> Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs(2000), *Foreign Ministers' Conference on the Northern Dimension*, 11-12 November 1999, Helsinki.

Summing up, a key reason behind the disinterest of the Southern members of the Union in the ND initiative could be found in the tacit non-interference agreement that seems to be existing between the Northern and Southern members of the EU when it comes to what kind of approach the EU should be adopting for its neighbouring areas.

## THE EU COMMISSION

The role that the Commission has had in shaping the content of the Northern Dimension initiative has been ambiguous. If we look at the initiative itself the way in which the Finnish proposal was sold to the EU, at least in terms of priorities to focus on, can lead us to believe that the Commission took the shopping list of priorities prepared by Finland and bought it all, or almost all.

A comparison between the priorities indicated by Lipponen in 1997 and the priorities outlined by the Commission and the Parliament in the Interim report, and in the Commission's Communication<sup>24</sup> that followed, largely supports the argument. Issues like energy, nuclear safety, transport and infrastructures, CBC etc. to which Finland had paid particular attention since its membership have literally been transferred on the agenda of the EU.

However, the picture starts changing if we put the Northern Dimensions in the context of a longer "learning process" that the Commission started in 1994.<sup>25</sup> Such a process was aimed at setting out the interests of the Union in Northern Europe and intended to find a way to deal with the cooperative reality of the region that was very different from what the EU has been used to dealing with. This does not imply that the Commission had understood in full the potentials offered by the regional organisations but it seemed to be ready to test innovative approaches towards the neighbouring areas. From this perspective the Commission attitude appears to be more active, and in the Northern Dimension process it appears to have

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<sup>24</sup> EU Commission (1998), *Communication from the Commission – A Northern Dimension for the Policies of the Union*, see note 11.

<sup>25</sup> EU Commission (1994), Orientations for a Union approach towards the Baltic Sea region, Communication to the EU Council of Ministers, adopted by the European Commission on October 25, 1994.

been an actor attempting to defend the previous line of action that it established for the Baltic Sea area.

This explains the scepticism with which the Commission welcomed the ND initiative, and its relative passivity in the 1997-1999 phase, as it probably did not see the need for a new approach of the Union towards the North. In sum it seems that the proposal of Finland was at first interpreted by the Santer Commission as a sort of implicit critique of the work made in the previous years.

In this respect the consequences of the launch of the ND were destructive in terms of the efforts made by the Commission in the ongoing Baltic Sea Region Initiative. Suddenly the Commission lost interest in being active in the region and in particular in the framework of the CBSS, the regional organisation that was supposed to “complement” the work of the Union in the Baltic Sea region.<sup>26</sup>

The Prodi Commission, established in 1999, being more distant politically and emotionally from what was done earlier in the region, adopted a more proactive stand towards the ND initiative thanks also to the interest in the area developed by Chris Patten, Commissioner for External Relations. Of course, this has not meant that there has been a radical change in the attitude of the Commission, mainly because the institution itself is everything but monolithic, especially when it comes to expressing political views towards horizontal initiatives like the ND.

The Commission can, therefore, be recognised as a relevant but not pivotal player in the short-medium term. This has been due partly to the priority it attached to the question of the coordination of its instrument; and not to the implementation of projects like member states did, and partly because of its ambiguous position vis-à-vis the regional dynamics.

In sum the analysis of the Northern Dimension as a short-medium term process indicates that the distinct role played by national interests and priorities has fundamentally been the key driving force of the process. Despite the fact that the Northern Dimension from the outset appeared to have a vague shape in terms of content, member states, as well as outsiders, have tended to interpret and treat the initiative as a policy rather than as a policy framework. The

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<sup>26</sup> EU Commission (1996), see note 14. Elements emerged from written correspondence with L. Gronbjerg, Senior Advisor at the CBSS Secretariat 1998-2001.

constant calls for the implementation of projects and the rush to have some projects implemented before the end of the Danish Presidency, and therefore of the real chances for the Nordics to influence the EU agenda, have somehow contributed to marginalising the long-term potential of the initiative.

## **2.2. LONG-TERM POLITICAL OBJECTIVES: TWO CHALLENGES FOR THE EU**

The second level of analysis focuses on the Northern Dimension as a long-term policy framework. The two main issues on which the analysis will concentrate transcend the short-medium term dynamics as they belong to a potential vision of Europe that so far has not emerged from the actions that the state actors have developed in the context of the ND process.

The two elements that will be considered here are the potential deriving from the links with the regional networks and the regional dimension of relations with Russia. Each of those have difficulties fitting the short-medium term picture simply because they pertain to another essence of the ND. The ND as a policy can hardly encompass such elements, as its main objective seems to be the creation of a concrete dialogue made of projects aimed at substantiating the weak political side of the present relationship with Russia. If we look instead at the ND as a policy framework the elements can find space for development since a long-term framework should be the container for a political strategy or vision about the area as whole both in its internal and external implications.

### **THE LINKS WITH THE REGIONAL NETWORKS**

The first long-term element of the Northern Dimension that requires particular attention is the potential deriving from the recognition of the role of the regional organisations and networks operating in the Europe's North.

The issue is certainly controversial as it can be approached from many points of view often with contradictory results.

So far the role of the regional organisations and networks has been substantially marginal in the whole process, but there are indications that in the future they will play a more central role in the process.

A first sign comes from the fact that while in a short-term perspective the ND process is considered largely as an external matter, in the long-run it is also going to have important internal implications. Today there are elements indicating that the ND can and will be a useful tool for dealing with what are normally identified as “internal” EU issues. First of all the multi-sectoral agenda that member states have been pushing forward could be considered as an attempt to export policies that are traditionally considered by the EU as internal, like the environment, infrastructure, to those areas that will soon become part of the Union. This shows that to a certain extent the EU is increasingly approaching some parts of the BSR as if they were already a part of the Union. Therefore when the enlargement is completed it is likely that this approach will be extended.

Secondly, among the instruments the Union has developed the INTERREG initiative has been acquiring centrality in Northern Europe. It has in fact revealed itself the best-suited tool for tackling the challenges of the ND area. Interestingly however, INTERREG is an instrument that has been introduced for promoting cohesion within the EU and not to manage external relations. This means that the traditional demarcation between internal and external policies of the Union is growing somehow more obsolete as the EU is seeking to export its own internal policies towards those areas beyond the actual EU border.

In sum, in the long-term the balance between the internal and the external character of the ND might shift as enlargement will give more centrality to the candidate countries. This is likely to make the ND a less clear-cut initiative than it is at present, a tool focused on Russia, but also aimed at facing the challenges related to the future institutional architecture of Europe.

The involvement of the regional bodies and networks existing in Northern Europe can therefore play a role in the internal development of the Union and not only in the equally important external relations that it will establish with its neighbours.

In particular the regional organisations and networks operating in Northern Europe could assume a strategic role in the implementation of policies and, at the same time, they could use

their capacity to express innovative forms of cooperation that transcend national boundaries.

As a matter of fact the Northern Dimension has been one of the few EU contexts where their potential, at least in principle, has been recognised. The regional organisations and networks, if actively involved in the process, which means granting them the possibility to influence the decision-making process, could bring genuine added value to the EU and its policy processes through the bottom-up element they incorporate. They also have developed in these past years a certain subjectivity of their own as they seem to be more and more sensible towards the issues that pertains to the long term. Despite their origins and their essence are still predominantly anchored to the short-term perception of politics, they are more and more in tune with a long-term vision of Northern Europe that the Northern Dimension embodies.

A distinction, however, has to be made between the regional organisations like the CBSS, BEAC<sup>27</sup> and AC and the networks working predominantly at the subregional level. While the former are established institutions operating in a strict intergovernmental environment in the area they cover, the latter are more loosely defined and are often constituted by actors, like cities and subnational administrative units, that are considered new-comers the realm of international relations.

With the exception of the BEAC, which includes subnational actors in its structures and represents a different kind of model, regional organisations could be developed as interfaces between the Commission and the subregional networks existing in the area. Partly due to their intergovernmental nature, their capacity to implement and follow projects up to their realisation has been limited, while they seem to be better equipped for selecting areas of priority and co-ordinating the many subregional actors and networks. Institutional networks operating in Northern Europe can contribute to a future European Union that is more decentralised and closer to its citizens. As the Commission recently recognised in its White Paper on governance “networks can be an effective confidence building mechanism suited for developing new common policies or bringing in new members as it is foreseen in the enlargement of the

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<sup>27</sup> CBSS stands for Council of the Baltic Sea States, BEAC stands for Barents Euro-Arctic Council, AC stands for Arctic Council.

European Union. (...) [Furthermore] networks are better suited for functions like information, consultation, implementation, monitoring.”<sup>28</sup>

In Northern Europe, subregional actors are acquiring importance as they are leading a process of region building based on the creation, of trans-regional links, bring together not only actors like companies but also institutions. Today, not only business is made regionally but politics is increasingly participated in the region by a wide variety of actors ranging from NGOs, cities, provinces ext. The EU at present has difficulties in recognising this process for two reasons: the first one is that the Commission is not used to dealing with subregional actors in a logic transcending the traditional top-down approach. Secondly, the EU institutions are reluctant to allow the subregional actors to play a role since this could lead to a loss of power and centrality of Brussels.

Last but not least, the inclusion of the regional networks would exploit their capacity to develop territorial actions going beyond the more traditional functional policy making approach. The involvement of the regional and the subregional actors will facilitate the introduction of territorial elements in the implementation of policies of the EU. This is to say that territory, a notion that in geographic terms goes beyond administrative borders, is put at the centre of the implementation of policies regardless of the national boundaries that might be dividing it.<sup>29</sup>

From the perspective of relations between the European Union and its neighbours this would imply that the borders of the future EU would not be so clearly defined as they are now but would instead become rather fuzzy<sup>30</sup> and less limiting to the “export” of EU policies to neighbouring areas. In this respect the inside/outside logic that the EU is developing through initiatives like the Schengen-

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<sup>28</sup> EU Commission (2001), *Report of the Working Group “Networking people for a good governance in Europe”*, White Paper on Governance – Work area N. 4 – Coherence and cooperation, Brussels, May 2001.

<sup>29</sup> See more on this approach [www.spatial.baltic.net/](http://www.spatial.baltic.net/). See also N. Catellani (2001), *The multilevel implementation of the Northern Dimension*, in “The Northern Dimension: new fuel for the EU, H. Ojanen(ed.), see note 18, pp. 54-78.

<sup>30</sup> T. Christiansen et al.(2000), *Fuzzy politics around fuzzy borders: The European Union’s Near Abroad*”, in *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 35/4, pp. 389-417.

agreement aiming at establishing a clear-cut border certainly must be seen as constituting a major constraining element to the development of this kind of approach as demonstrated by the case of Kaliningrad.

#### THE NORTHERN DIMENSION IN THE EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

A second long-term element of the Northern Dimension is linked to the role the ND can play in future relations with Russia. At first sight this element might not sound tremendously new, however, a closer look reveals that the issue is often approached in static terms, with EU-Russia relations developing to a slow pace.

The main innovative element that the ND has introduced in the EU relations with Russia is a more regionalised dialogue that until 1997 had been as a matter of fact non-existing.

Today the role of the Northern Dimension in the complex relations with Russia is clearly defined in hierarchical terms. The two instruments the Union has developed to deal with Russia as a whole are the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and the Common Strategy (CS), which entered into force in 1997 and 1999 respectively. The Northern Dimension entered the picture *de facto* at a later stage and from the EU perspective it should be seen as a subordinate component of the overall relations with Russia that does not challenge the centrality of the existing instruments, but rather complements them by adding a regional dimension.

If we approach EU-Russia relations in a more dynamic attitude and we consider them as a continuum along which the relationship is moving and where the extremes are constituted by a “subordinated” partnership<sup>31</sup> on the one hand and “equal” partnership on the other, the Northern Dimension does assume a different connotation the more the relationship gets closer to the “equal partnership” end of the continuum.

The relative marginality of the ND in the short medium-run can be explained by looking at the political relations between Europe and Russia which, as a matter of fact, over the last decade have been cultivated and managed within EU national capitals in competition

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<sup>31</sup> H. Haukkula (2001), *Russia and the EU: two reluctant regionalizers*, UPI Working Paper, N.7, Helsinki.



for Russian attention.<sup>32</sup> Through the establishment of the Common Strategy, the EU has been given the task of supporting Russia's efforts to consolidate democracy, and more generally to facilitate "Russia's transition towards Western models of society and economy".<sup>33</sup> In other words EU member states have delegated, like in many other occasions<sup>34</sup>, the most effort-taking and difficult part of the "subordinate" partnership while retaining for themselves the most politically appealing part of the relationship which was to compete for the position of Russia's prime referent. In this context the ND, as a policy, aims at providing substance to the efforts of the EU by focusing on projects that have as specific aims the improvement of the regional socio-economic standards and the socialisation of Russian authorities to Western, and in particular Nordic, co-operative methods.

The long-term prospects of relations between the EU and Russia are surely still open to debate. However, the development of the "common economic space"<sup>35</sup> in the context of a genuinely equal partnership, as foreseen by the CS, between Russia and an enlarged EU would ultimately charge the Northern Dimension with a new political meaning.

In this context the territory covered by the Northern Dimension, and in particular the BSR, would become in EU-Russia relations a sort of core area with a certain political subjectivity of its own where the demarcation between the inside and outside of the two actors is fuzzier and in principle less divided according to state borders. The long-term effects of the ND, in terms of co-ordination, will eventually lead to more coherence injected into EU policies.

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<sup>32</sup> W. Wallace (2001), *Does the EU have an Ostpolitik*, in A. Lieven (ed.), forthcoming.

<sup>33</sup> H. Haukkula (2001), *Russia and the EU: two reluctant regionalizers*, see note 29.

<sup>34</sup> See S. Nuttal (1997) in E. Regelsberger, et al.(eds), *The Foreign Policy of the European Union: From EPC to CFSP and beyond*. London, Lynne Rienner.

<sup>35</sup> C. Patten (2001), *Investing in Russia*, Speech delivered at European Business Club Investing in Russia Conference, Brussels, 2 October 2001, 01/428.

A future comprehensive economic and political partnership between Russia and the EU would certainly contribute to the enhancement of the actorness of the European Union. And a more distinct profile of the EU would consequently lead the Northern Dimension to gain centrality in the framework of the overall relation. Of course centrality does not mean that the ND will replace the PCA or the Common Strategy, on the contrary it will constitute an essential element of them.

Increased EU actorness and a regional dimension in EU-Russia relations through the Northern Dimension as a framework fostering region-building could therefore be compatible and, possibly, complementary. This, despite the fact that in the current phase they seem excluding each-other negatively as the EU is using the Northern Dimension to enhance its coherence and its actorness rather than for developing the regional aspect of the initiative. The case of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, and in particular the problem deriving from the post-enlargement visa-regime, represents the clearest example of this either/or approach where the creation of stronger EU actorness does exclude the emergence of a region with some post-modern traits.

Summing up, the increased actorness of the EU in the framework of the relations with Russia will provide ground, and open up political space, for the actors that have been developing sensibilities needed to unfold the long-run potential of the Northern Dimension.

### **2.3.THE EU AND THE ROLE OF THE COMMISSION**

The future of the Northern Dimension depends to large extent on the capacity of the Union to develop a more distinct profile vis-à-vis its neighbours. Such a long-term process requires a change in the actors leading the game. As was shown above, member states seem not to be in a position to lead the process because of their limited capacity to express a more dynamic and long-term interpretation of the politics of the “near-abroad”. Attempts to do so have resulted in failures as the history of European integration shows.

The EU Commission instead is the player that is potentially best suited to lead the long-term process of giving the EU a more distinct coherence vis-à-vis the neighbours and in particular Russia.

The Commission is best placed because of its independence, potential capacity to express a synthesis among the views of the member states and because it has developed within its structures important sensibilities towards the long-term potentials of the Northern Dimension mentioned above. In other words, it is the actor that can develop an effective EU approach aimed at consolidating relations with Russia into a wider economic and possibly political partnership at whose core stand the ND as a policy framework, for a Northern EU periphery with some subjectivity of its own.

The short-term perspective has shown that the Commission has interpreted the ND in a different way from member states stressing more the more strategic aspects of the initiative. In other words, it has underlined those aspects that might contribute to enhance the coherence of its actions and ultimately the actorness of the EU. Certainly, it is difficult to speak of a vision existing in what the Commission has been producing so far. In fact long-term objectives like security, stability and sustainable development are only a reference to a set of values the ND aims to achieve rather than elements of a long-term vision.

The Commission, however, will hardly play a leading role if the present institutional situation, characterised by a weak and unbalanced structure, persists. The key decision-making role played by the Council, the ambiguous role of Mr. CFSP and the system of rotating Presidencies are only three elements among many others that prevent the EU from acquiring a more coherent presence and an enhanced actorness in the international arena.

Of course, the current problems are not derived only from constraints produced by the EU as a system. The Commission itself needs to improve its capability to act by solving the serious problems it has had in dealing with horizontal actions as a result of its internal structure that tends to be rigid and characterised by severe difficulties in allowing external actors to play some kind of role in the implementation of the EU policies. In other words, the Commission has often applied a strict top-down approach to policy formulation and implementation. At the same time, more has to be

done in terms of co-ordinated efforts towards more coherent stands especially in the field of external relations. The case of the early implementation phase of the ND highlights the still very established habit of each DG to jealously guard its own “space” with the result of delivering contradictory signals to the external actors.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has tried to look upon the Northern Dimension as an innovative tool in the realm of the EU’s external relations. The approach that has been offered here was based on the assumption that the picture of the ND emerging in the long-run perspective is substantially different from the one that is appearing in the short/medium term dimension. The latter being normally taken as “the” dimension by most of the scholars that have been dealing with the issue.

Particularly in terms of agenda-setting the short-term picture has been, and still is to a large extent, dominated, in different ways, by the member states of the EU. As a result, the Northern Dimension has assumed some traits common to the other external policies of the EU, like competition among members for regional leadership and the limited space left for outsiders to influence the process. In sum, if we look at the ND in the short-term the picture does not look particularly promising as there seems to be little space for change and for the unfolding of long-term visions in the framework of the initiative.

If we look at the ND in a long run perspective, on the condition that the two elements highlighted above are recognised and developed coherently, the initiative might be elevated to an higher status in the future EU-Russia relations.

The Commission seems to be better equipped than member states in bringing forward long-term elements of the ND especially if these

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<sup>36</sup> N. Catellani (2001), *The multilevel implementation of the Northern Dimension*, see note 27.

elements are framed in the context of the debate about the shape of the post-enlargement EU and its future relations with the neighbours. Still the position of the Commission is somehow awkward. On the one hand, it incorporates the sensibilities needed, but, on the other, its currently weak position in the balance of power among the institutions and especially its incoherent approach towards the dynamics at work in the neighbouring areas leave to a large extent the fate of the initiative in the hands of the future developments.

So far the ND has been approached in a rather strict short-term fashion by the actors involved. The ND however, offers the opportunity of testing a new approach to political relations vis-à-vis the neighbours that is not only shaped by concrete short-term priorities but also by a vision about the future Northern EU. A vision that constitutes a response to the challenges posed by globalisation and that does not exclude neighbours but tends to soften the dividing lines by creating a positive interdependence. The need of thinking "long-term" and develop a far-reaching perspective alongside the short-term one is in sum an essential step to make the EU a politically more solid actor in the international arena.

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