Introduction

This chapter examines connections between the EU and the various multilateral, intergovernmental, subregional groupings that operate in and around it, with particular emphasis on groupings that surfaced after the end of the Cold War. These include, for example, the Central European Initiative (CEI), Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Visegrad Group (VG), Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and others. Most of these ‘children of the post-Cold war era’ (Bjumer 1999: 8) remain active today. The interactions between EU integration and subregional co-operation have mainly been due to the process and problems of EU enlargement and the main focus of this chapter will be on those post-1989 groupings which have had more direct involvement in the EU’s eastward expansion. Some of the questions to be considered are: What exactly is subregional co-operation and where has it manifested itself in Europe? What factors have determined the extent and type of interaction with the EU, particularly concerning subregional groupings’ roles in the pre-accession phase of the recent eastern enlargement of the EU? How did the 2004 enlargement of the EU impact on subregional co-operation in Europe?

Subregional co-operation in Europe

Subregional co-operation has been defined as ‘a process of regularised, significant political and economic interaction among a group of neighbouring states … between national governments, local authorities, private business and civil society actors across a wide range of issues’ (Dwan 2000: 81). Many new subregional initiatives emerged onto the European scene after 1989, located around the north, east/central and south-east peripheries of the pre-2004 European Union (EU). Some incorporated EU member and non-member states, others were exclusively groups for future EU members. Their agendas and activities concern mainly practical cross-border co-operation in various spheres including economic development, education, transport, tourism, culture, science and technology, environment, organized crime, border management and so on. Yet despite their ‘low politics’ agendas and tendency of the new elites in post-communist countries to be at first rather dismissive of subregional projects, it was noticeable that their structures always included regular meetings at the highest government level.
The question of which organizations come under the ‘subregional’ umbrella is clearly settled. Nevertheless, there is a perennial terminological issue due to the frequent tendency for these European groupings to be referred to alternatively as both subregional and regional co-operation. Clearly there is a case for flexibility and for viewing these terms as legitimately interchangeable, but for entities under scrutiny here ‘subregional’ does appear the most apt term. As Petritsch and Solioz point out, ‘while some authors treat “regional co-operation” and “subregional cooperation” as synonymous, others distinguish between (broad) regional and subregional cooperation: the first referring to wider regional processes (at the level of the EU or at the pan-European level of the Council of Europe and the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe]); the latter to cooperative schemes in a distinct and limited area’ (Petritsch and Solioz 2008: 19–20). Similarly, but also acknowledging that territorial contiguity is not the only criterion, Cottey took the line that ‘Europe is a “region” of the world […] and] subregional refers to a geographically and/or historically reasonably coherent area within the OSCE space as a whole. The term is not exact, since it is clear that the definition of any subregion (like that of a region) reflects not only geography, but also history and politics—often making the issue contentious. Nevertheless the BEAC, the CBSS, the Visegrad Group, CEFTA, the CEI and the BSEC may reasonably be defined as subregional groups’ (Cottey 1999: 5–6).

Making the distinction between regional and subregional entities also clarifies the latter’s status in the hierarchy of European international organizations. The ‘larger’ pan-European/Euro-Atlantic entities—EU, the North Atlantic Treaty organization (NATO) and the OSCE—are of a completely different magnitude due to scale in terms of mission, geographic reach, resources, depth of political commitment invested, global as well as regional resonance, etc. Indeed, the attractiveness and/or expediency of participation in certain subregional formations have been strongly connected to perceptions that it assists eventual entry into the EU and NATO, both practically and politically. Thus the role and significance of subregional groupings must not be likened to organizations such as the EU or NATO and they have never been, nor probably ever will be, candidates to develop as alternatives/functional equivalents to the latter. As Cottey observed, ‘subregional groups have received relatively little attention and are often perceived as weak. They lack the economic power of the EU, the military power of NATO or the normative standard-setting role of the pan-European OSCE’ (Cottey 1999: 3). Moreover, as the early studies of these groupings warned, any attempts to introduce larger security issues or ‘deep’ integration agendas could have threatened the already fragile existence of many of these organizations, for example by bringing areas of dispute/tension between participants into play or giving reluctant EU/NATO aspirants excuses to withdraw. Thus a key point seems to be that sustainability and success of subregional co-operation has depended on avoiding EU- or NATO-like agendas and focusing on shared challenges and opportunities within the subregion which the larger regional bodies did not address.

Further categorization is necessitated by the fact that subregional co-operation is certainly not just a recent European phenomenon. Post-Cold War groupings can be termed ‘new’ subregionalism in order to distinguish them from the ‘older’ subregional groupings which appeared much earlier. The new groupings ‘share the experience of having been developed along the old “East–West” dividing line’ (Bjurner 1999: 10). Benelux Economic Union (BEU, dating back to 1944) and the Nordic Council (NC, formed in 1952), are, however, exclusively Western European formations established in the Cold War context.³ Due to this, the ‘old’ groupings have had a significantly different relationship with the EU in that they exist within the EU or European Economic Area (EEA) and their existence is independent from a desire to join the EU or the consequences of being excluded from it.⁴ Moreover, both the BEU and NC practice integration and co-operation beyond that found in the EU in order to more effectively manage the above-average
levels of cross-border connectivity in those subregions. In fact, their history also shows that they have both acted as what Inotai (1997) called ‘pioneers’, having undertaken certain forms of deeper integration (customs union, economic union, passport-free movement of people) in advance of the EU.\(^5\) Even today this process is at work. In February 2009 it was announced that the NC countries ‘could pool military forces, maritime monitoring and satellite surveillance’.\(^6\) New subregional groupings, in contrast, have at most achieved (and are limited to) very basic forms of integration and are (Inotai 1997) ‘followers’ rather than pioneers.

Finally, as well as their numerous generic features (post-Cold War identity, location around the 1989 EU borderlands, common security-building capabilities and similar fields of practical co-operation), key variations within the ‘new’ subregionalism exist. Some of the more important ways in which the various groupings differ are as follows: the European Commission has direct participation in some (BEAC, the CBSS), but not others; some groupings combine EU members and non-members (BEAC, the CBSS, CEI, BSEC); other groupings consist of exclusively non-EU members or of states that joined the EU in 2004 (CEFTA, VG); whereas most groupings have rather broad-based, ‘loose’ portfolios of co-operation, a few have had much narrower agendas, usually connected directly to EU pre-accession preparations (CEFTA and the BFTA, which were both rather restricted to subregional economic integration in the form of trade liberalization); some groupings have permanent institutions such as a Secretariat, others manage without any; and some groupings (BEAC, the CBSS, BSEC) are arguably ‘more “natural” subregions than those defined by the Visegrad Group, CEFTA or the CEI, with deeper and more sustainable subregional identities. This geography in turn creates substantial interdependence, particularly in terms of the environment, which means that the countries of the subregion face certain shared problems (environmental degradation, infrastructure and transport) which can only be resolved through cooperation\(^\text{(Cottey 1999: 247).}\) Less ‘natural’ subregions therefore have to be ‘created’ and perhaps sustained with external pressure, especially where there is strong initial reluctance and a residual commitment deficit;\(^7\) lastly, the distinction between first generation groupings, which include all those mentioned so far, and the second generation groupings that appeared in the mid-to-late 1990s in South-Eastern Europe (SEE). The South European Cooperation Initiative (SECI) and the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) are mainly focused on the former Yugoslavia, which explains why they were slower to evolve and only really became seriously active after 2000.

The ‘new’ European subregionalism and EU integration

The more prominent early studies (Cottey 1996, 1999; Bailes 1997) tended to focus on subregional groupings’ contributions to security. This was not in the traditional realm of security co-operation (military alliances, peace-keeping forces, arms control agreements and so on), but rather more subtle, less ‘hard’ security functions. According to Bailes the ‘largest contribution all these groups make to security is probably at the unexpressed, existential level: the mere fact that their members belong somewhere, that they understand each other, that they can talk about their worries in the corridors, that they have telephone numbers to dial in a crisis. Beyond this, all the groupings under study have made some strides (whether they recognise it or not) in soft security, by easing human and economic exchanges across frontiers and thus helping to build wider social foundations for stability and understanding’ (Bailes 1997: 30). It was no coincidence that this interest in subregional co-operation grew at the very time of serious moves forward in EU and NATO eastward expansion, involving new dividing lines which were a serious worry to many observers. There was ‘growing political and institutional recognition in Europe of the value of these existing sub-regional groups, fuelled by interest in their capacity to cushion or
mediate the tensions of NATO/EU enlargement’ (Bremner and Bailes 1998: 133). At the same time, more direct contributions to post-communist states’ EU integration efforts were anticipated, should suitably cognate groupings agree to adopt a joint pre-accession strategy and work together to try out, or approach by stages, the standards and mechanisms of the target integrated group’ (Bailes 1997: 30).

Whether they intended it or not all subregional entities contributed to the EU pre-accession process in a general way in that they helped achieve the ‘baseline’ conditions for engagement with the EU in the form of the security-building effects identified by Cottey, Bailes, etc. Additionally, some groupings (e.g. the CBSS, CEI) were able to include transfer of accession-related know-how from the EU members to non-members. Only groupings consisting of EU aspirants at the same stage in their EU relations could, however, become dedicated pre-accession instruments. CEFTA and BFTA, already tied to EU pre-accession preparations by concentrating on subregional trade and market integration, fell into this category, as did the VG, which focused on political co-operation to support EU and NATO ambitions. The VG had, however, been dormant (and generally assumed to be beyond revival) since 1993, while the BFTA was small-scale and restricted to the Baltic states. Such interest as there was, therefore, focused mainly on CEFTA. By 1997 it was being noticed that CEFTA was evolving in a fashion that was going way beyond initial expectations. Though originally limited to the Visegrad states, CEFTA had acquired an ongoing enlargement programme. Slovenia and Romania had both joined, Bulgaria was engaged in the accession process and even non-EU associate countries such as Croatia and Ukraine looked like they were being set up to join. Furthermore, along with an acceleration of the trade liberalization schedule, a deepening agenda with Single Market-type proposals came to the table in 1995 and 1996. All this raised quite important questions. How far could CEFTA further develop, in both deepening and widening, and given the uncertainty that then surrounded the EU enlargement, could certain types of subregional co-operation actually evolve into alternatives to EU membership? As Machowski put it, was ‘CEFTA developing in the direction of a higher level of international economic integration? Is a new (sub)regional “common market” emerging in Central and Eastern Europe modelled on the EC? What are the possibilities and limits connected with this? What will be the probable economic and political consequences for the participating countries or, as the case may be, for the development of Europe as a whole?’ (Machowski 1997: 7).

Inotai’s influential 1997 study recognized that CEFTA and any other subregional free trade areas involving EU associates were useful practical support and preparation for EU membership. However, ‘small’ integration exercises in countries with much lower levels of economic development did not in themselves have the size of market, nor the technological level needed for economic modernization and ‘catch-up’ with Western Europe. They needed, therefore, to be anchored to much larger, more advanced regional integration exercises (i.e. the EU). Moreover, Inotai pointed out that the main impulses to form or attempt to deepen integration at the subregional level emanated from the outside. In CEFTA’s case the pressure to initiate subregional economic integration was external, in the form of complying with the European Commission wishes to do so in order to progress with Europe Agreements. The lessons of these and later (Dangerfield 2000, 2004) studies of the role of CEFTA and subregional economic co-operation generally in the EU pre-accession process was that a range of useful practical and political inputs to the EU entry endeavour were indeed generated. These included market integration and mutual trade growth, gathering experience of intergovernmental co-operation, an opportunity to explore other avenues of EU pre-accession co-operation and so on. Ultimately, however, as the CEFTA case clearly showed, these exercises were limited to supporting roles and the level of economic integration which could be achieved was to remain at the rather basic
level of trade liberalization with deeper integration to be achieved only in the context of EU membership. Yet the CEFTA experience clearly represented a model of subregional co-operation that genuinely assisted the EU accession preparations and did not hinder EU membership prospects in any way. Also, it was a model that could accommodate states at different stages in their EU accession endeavour.

The EU’s attitude towards subregional co-operation has been generally supportive. When it comes to active participation, this has varied according to the subregions concerned. So far, the European Commission has been a member of only two groupings, the BEAC and the CBSS. This could be explained by various factors including the pre-dominance of EU members in these groupings, the connection with major EU initiatives, in particular the ‘Northern Dimension’, and the availability and importance of EU programmes such as Interreg, TACIS, etc. to promote integration and tackle acute problems of interdependence. The presence of Russia in the CBSS and BEAC was also a factor. Though the CEI and BSEC, like the CBSS and BEAC, had quite large and diverse memberships, there has been no direct involvement of the EU, maybe because of the slow evolution of concrete project-based activity. Also, in the case of the CEI, it is less of a coherent geographic subregion and therefore has had less by way of a natural cross-border co-operation agenda in soft security.

The EU has had a different type of relationship with subregional organizations consisting exclusively of prospective EU entrants. Certain sets of countries have been subjects of EU ‘subregion-building’ activities, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and SEE. In CEE the EU’s relatively low-profile role in promoting subregional co-operation involved low-key political pressure for the Visegrad states to co-operate among themselves, first and foremost in the realm of economic integration. Here the EU’s ‘subregional approach’ was barely visible. In SEE, EU engagement, which took off fully after 1999, featured a much more comprehensive, ‘hands-on’ approach. Western Balkan states came under strong pressure to co-operate intensively across several themes, ranging from trade liberalization, return of refugees, border management, combating organized crime, energy security, transport infrastructure, etc. This co-operation requirement has been firmly embedded in EU conditionality and implemented not only via EU agreements and financial and technical assistance instruments, but also in tandem with other bodies sponsored by the broader international community, most notably the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (SP). Despite differing intensities of the EU’s ‘subregion-building’ role in CEE and SEE, both cases represent examples of the more explicit links between subregional co-operation and EU integration. This is, in turn, part of a triangulated relationship between subregional co-operation, EU enlargement and the EU security policy, especially in SEE where subregional co-operation was ‘engineered from outside and approached as a peace project from a neofunctionalist viewpoint. Firstly, cooperation had to be established through the promotion of cross-border activities such as transport, trade, production and welfare; and secondly, this cooperation process was supposed to guarantee security and stability’ (Petritsch and Solioz 2008: 18).

Subregional co-operation in the expanded European Union

The ‘eastern’ enlargement of the EU raised obvious questions about the future relevance of the subregional groupings which had the closest links to the EU pre-accession. Rather than scaling back the extent of subregional co-operation, the EU enlargement released some new interesting dynamics. So far, none of the entities that were seen to be in most danger of losing relevance have yet disappeared and they seem to have ongoing viability. Changing functions and configurations of subregional groupings have come about partly because many ex-communist states
which were founding parties in the ‘new’ subregionalism’ are now established EU and NATO members themselves and are no longer in need of the functions the subregional groupings formerly provided, or have even withdrawn from them in fact. Post-enlargement dynamics have included reconfiguration or revitalization in the case of certain groupings, the stimulation of new initiatives, a new phenomenon of co-operation between subregional groupings, and signs of a more proactive involvement of the European Commission.15

CEFTA provides the prime example of reconfiguration. After the withdrawal of the VG states and Slovenia in May 2004, it already looked like a South-Eastern rather than Central European entity. The main question was whether these departures would now allow an expansion or mark the ‘withering away’ of CEFTA. Following a significant relaxation of the CEFTA entry criteria, further reconfiguration ensued. In 2006 a ‘big-bang’ enlargement to the whole of the SP area took place in order to multilateralize trade liberalization processes of SP countries. Now known as ‘CEFTA 2006’, it includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia. CEFTA 2006 entered into force in May 2007. It aims to establish free trade in industrial goods by 2010, to reduce/abolish restrictions on a range of agricultural goods, and to update CEFTA by modernizing its rules and including new sectors (e.g. services).

Revitalization has been a second theme of the post-enlargement dynamics in subregional co-operation. The VG, despite doubts about its post-enlargement viability, has clearly flourished in the post-accession era.16 It has achieved a substantial and growing programme of political co-operation, particularly around EU affairs (regular VG summits prior to EU summits; common positions on budget negotiations, labour mobility issues, etc.). There has also been functional co-operation around adaptation to existing EU policies (e.g. Schengen entry, structural funds), and collective practical and political inputs to the EU’s policy towards the eastern neighbours. Finally, a steady increase of funding to the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) has expanded VG internal co-operation activity. The SEECP has also undergone revitalization and significant upgrading of its role in the context of the shift to ‘regional ownership’ of co-operation processes in the Western Balkans. In early 2008 the SP’s regional co-operation role was assumed by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) headed by a Secretary-General from within the region (Hido Biščević) and based in Sarajevo. As Minić and Kronja explain, the main task of the SEECP is to the main political forum for facilitating subregional co-operation while the RCC provides ‘the SEECP with operational capacities through its Secretariat and task forces’ (Minić and Kronja 2007: 55).17

Third, and something that went virtually unnoticed, as well as giving rise to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the eastward EU enlargement also stimulated new subregional co-operation agendas in the eastern neighbourhood. Part of the Russian response to ENP was to sponsor a ‘rival’ integration project under the name of Single Economic Space (SES). The agreement to create the SES was signed by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine at a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Yalta on 19 September 2003. The original Russian agenda envisaged a customs union progressing to a single market type of integration project with significant institutionalization and even supranational governance. Various factors prevented the SES from realization, including Ukraine’s cooler stance after the Orange Revolution and willingness to contemplate trade liberalization only, dependent on all SES signatories having completed WTO accession. By 2006 Russia seemed to have dropped the idea, concluding that it would have been insignificant without Ukraine, leaving the SES as the latest chapter in ongoing failure to intra-CIS re-integration projects. Significantly, neither the SES nor specific subregional integration projects for eastern neighbours were even mentioned in the ‘regional co-operation’ section of the European Commission’s December 2006 communiqué on strengthening ENP.
Fourth, co-operation between subregional groupings. The most visible example has involved VG and the BEU group, with four main dimensions of co-operation so far: political dialogue at top level in ‘Visegrad Four + Benelux Three’ format, including regular consultation meetings prior to EU summits; transfer of know-how/experience to help the VG post-accession process, notably in Schengen preparations; transfer of know-how/experience in fields of ‘enhanced co-operation’ that could be relevant for the VG space (police co-operation, the Benelux patent office, hosting of joint sports tournaments, etc.); finally, incorporation of the VG states into established extra-EU cross-border programmes (e.g. the ‘Euro Controle Route’). Other cases of co-operation between groupings include the ‘Coalition for Visa Equality’ established by the VG and Baltic Three, and ongoing discussions on co-operation possibilities between the NC and the VG. Contacts have also been established between the VG and GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova).

Finally, the European Commission’s involvement with subregional groupings seems to have become noticeably more visible and pro-active. For example, the Commission was an important player in the process of expanding CEFTA into SEE, and is also maintaining close involvement in the RCC through the latter’s Brussels ‘Liaison Office’. Commission President José Manuel Barroso has also held several individual meetings with the VG (e.g. for discussions prior to the 2007–13 budget negotiations). A formal relationship with BSEC was incorporated into the 2006 ENP strengthening proposals, to include BSEC observer status for the Commission and regular Commission-BSEC dialogue at foreign minister level. More recently, the unveiling of the European Commission’s planned ‘Baltic Sea Strategy’, which will ‘create a new club for the eight Baltic coastal countries … supported by a new cell in the commissions regions department’, is another sign of the EU’s more proactive involvement. Finally, the Commission has on occasions openly interfered in intra-CIS subregional integration processes. The priority given to BSEC as the key subregional forum for the Eastern wing of the ENP is one example and another was the warning issued to Ukraine in September 2006 that joining a customs union with Russia would be at a cost of signing a free trade agreement with the EU.

Conclusions

‘New’ subregional groupings have been both products of and modest influences on the post-Cold War European order. Interplay with the EU has mainly been a consequence of the EU enlargement process. Studies of subregional co-operation have attributed various kinds of roles ranging from stabilization and security-building functions which contribute to EU eligibility and also mediating the effects of uneven expansion of Euro-Atlantic integration across post-communist Europe. Certain groupings have supported the process of ‘integration’ proper in both political (i.e. meeting EU conditionality) and practical (i.e. via subregional economic integration, mechanisms for experience-sharing) ways. Some groupings have also been able to operate as vehicles via which EU members can transfer know-how and experience to candidate and would-be members.

The recent EU enlargements had important implications for many subregional groupings, and many new, important questions about their future development and role have yet to be answered. Will CEFTA succeed in developing a more effectively (re-)integrated economic space in SEE and perhaps even beyond? How sustainable will the broader subregional co-operation process in the Western Balkans be in the context of a long wait for the ‘prize’ of EU membership faced by most countries there and alternative expectations of subregional co-operation (see Delević 2008)? Will the proposed ‘Eastern Partnership’ require subregional co-operation processes and will this be based on existing entities (BSEC, GUUAM, perhaps a further expanded
Table 30.1 Subregional groupings in the new Europe

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<th>Central European Initiative (CEI), established 1989</th>
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(continued on next page)
CEFTA?) or new ones? Will the VG further develop as an actor in Common Foreign and Security Policy/European Security and Defence Policy (CFSP/ESDP), particular in the EU’s eastern dimension? How will the northern European subregional initiatives develop in the context of the changed relationship between Russia and the rest of Europe? All these issues will merit close attention to subregional dimensions of the challenges the EU and the broader Europe face at the current time.

Notes

1 A full list of currently active European subregional groupings is provided in Table 30.1 at the end of this chapter.
2 Subregional groupings have received relatively little attention in studies of the process of incorporating post-communist states into the mainstream European integration and security structures. The tendency of political elites in the post-communist countries to be negative about them in public was due in part to an instinctively neurotic reaction against any grouping that could be even remotely perceived as an excuse to reconsider or postpone the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO, or at least tie faster reformers into the timetable of laggards.
This, of course, follows the lead of the literature on comparative regionalism which distinguishes between, say, the EU as ‘old regionalism’ and the numerous examples of ‘new regionalism’ which flowered in the post-Cold War/globalization context.

Benelux, of course, pre-dates the EEC.

For more examples of ‘pioneer’ developments see the respective websites of the Benelux and Nordic Council, which are www.benelux.be and www.norden.org.

See ‘Nordic countries to pool troops and intelligence’, euobserver, 10 February 2009. Available at: euobserver.com/9/27574/?rk=1.

Western Balkans subregional co-operation is a clear example of ‘a process that is mostly defined from abroad and increasingly led by the EU, with very limited regional ownership’ (Anastasakis 2008: 35).

A major project of the East-West Institute and Carnegie Corporation of New York, entitled ‘Multi-Layered Integration—The Subregional Dimension’, played a key role in putting a spotlight on subregional groupings and establishing that they had more than a token role in the unfolding ‘new Europe’. The comprehensive volume yielded by the project, edited by Andrew Cottee (1999), became and remains the standard reference point for those studying and researching in the field.

At this time the BFTA in fact looked somewhat precarious as Lithuania, for example, was keen on joining CEFTA. The VG, of course, revived in 1998 and played an important part in helping Slovakia ‘catch up’ in its EU and NATO entry preparations. It is now firmly established as a subregional grouping within the EU. See Dangerfield (2008).

In this analysis the EU was seen as a vital security anchor also.

Also, it could be argued that CEFTA’s deepening agenda was largely down to the European Commission’s White Paper of May 1995 (Preparation of the Associated Countries of Central and Eastern Europe for Integration into the Internal Market of the Union), which stated that the next step in their pathway to EU membership would be to begin adopting the Single Market acquis. See Dangerfield (2000).

As Dangerfield (2004) showed, even the ‘single market’-type objectives which had been included in the original CEFTA Treaty—such as harmonizing state aid rules and opening public procurement markets—were never achieved in the CEFTA framework.

An EU voice (G. Bertrand, representing the Planning Cell, DG1A of the European Commission) at an event organized within the aforementioned ‘Multi-Layered Integration’ project listed their strengths as follows (Cottee 1996: 21): ‘they were a very practical means of integration, creating interdependence and solidarity; they fostered cooperative behaviour and reduced tensions; trans-border cooperation fostered homogeneous economic development within states, making good use of NGO and private sector development; these groups strengthened economic ties between the EU members and their neighbours and among non-member states; they offered practical experience of the modalities of voluntary multilateral cooperation; they helped create a political/economic continuum throughout Europe, warding off any new two-way divide’.

Of course, the CEI is different also because it is sponsored and financially resourced by the Italian state and is well known as an attempt by Italy and, to a lesser extent, Austria to support their own interests in the CEI area and particularly in the Western Balkans.

Since space limitations prevent covering all subregional organizations’ post-2004 trajectories, this section focuses on selected developments concerning those entities of which the original roles were most closely tied to the EU pre-accession process.

The VG’s durability and subregional pre-eminence was also affirmed by the failure of the 2001 Austria-instigated ‘Regional Partnership’ (comprising the VG states, Austria and Slovenia) to make any serious progress as an alternative subregional alliance.

It could just be mentioned that the CEI also underwent a revitalization, albeit a little earlier, as a reaction to the creation of the SP, which threatened to marginalize the CEI’s role in the Western Balkans.

VG-Benetlux co-operation has waned in the last couple of years, perhaps having exhausted its agenda.

The ‘Coalition for Visa Equality’ was formed to push for visa-free travel to the USA for citizens of the new CEE and EU members.

The Financial Times (15 September 2006, p. 8) reported that that ‘while Kiev would like a trade deal with Brussels, EU officials warn this will be impossible if Kiev joins a customs union with Russia. Moscow is promoting such a customs union with several former Soviet neighbours’.