

# *Role of International Educational Programmes in Regional Integration Processes: Focus on European Union and Post-Soviet Space*

Mario De Martino

Department of Comparative Politics  
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia  
Moscow, Russia  
de-martino-m@rudn.ru

Alfia Ibragimova

Department of Foreign languages  
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia  
Moscow, Russia  
ibragimova-an@rudn.ru

**Abstract**—A regional integration process is a growing trend in many areas of the world. Economic and security cooperation activities are central points of the agenda of international regional organizations, but in the last few years, education also is playing a significant role. Some of the most prevalent trends are the creation of common areas of higher education (European Higher Education Area, MERCOSUR- Educativo in Latin America, East African Community Common Higher Education Area, Common educational space of the Commonwealth of Independent States) and the establishment of academic exchange programmes. This paper analyses the impact of international educational programmes in regional integration processes, focusing on two regions: the European Union (Erasmus programme) and the Post-Soviet space (CIS University Network and SCO University). The international educational programme can have a double dimension: first of all, they foster the regional integration processes (internal dimension), but they also contribute to strengthening of the position of regional organizations on a global scale (external dimension). This research demonstrates that the Erasmus programme contributes to the European integration process in both dimensions, while CIS university network and SCO University are operating mostly in the internal dimension.

**Keywords**—*CIS University Network, Educational policy, Erasmus programme, European Union, Regional integration processes, Post-Soviet space, SCO University*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, regional integration has been a path followed by many countries as a response to the challenges of globalization and increasing competition in world market. The European Union has achieved an advanced stage of integration and it represents a model of comparison for many other regions of the world. Nowadays, many regions of the world have launched their own integration processes, such as MERCOSUR in Latin America, NAFTA in North America, ASEAN in Southeast Asia, Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in the Eurasian region. A common feature among such regional integration processes is that they start as political and economic cooperation projects in very diverse areas such as trade, security and diplomacy. However, the scope of cooperation in several regional integration processes has expanded comprising nowadays many other spheres of collaboration like

environment, tourism, scientific and technological cooperation. In the area of education, Europe has been a pioneer region to develop a system to facilitate the compatibility and comparability of different educational systems creating a European area of higher education through the Bologna process. In the last few years, other regions of the world have increased their involvement in intra-regional cooperation in the field of education and this article analyses how education contributes to strengthening regional integration processes at both internal and external levels.

This paper explores three educational programmes: the Erasmus programme, managed by the European Union, the CIS University Network, implemented among some of the countries members of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and SCO University, which involves higher education institutions of member countries participating in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). While the Erasmus programme is mostly developed at the level of European Union countries, but with a considerable external dimension opening such programme to all the regions of the world, the CIS University Network and SCO University involve countries located in the post-soviet space and Eurasian region.

## II. EDUCATION AS FIELD OF COOPERATION IN REGIONAL INTEGRATION PROCESSES: THE EU AND POST-SOVIET SPACE

Education is a sphere of cooperation rather recent in regional integration processes. For instance, the founding countries of the European Union in 50s, when the European integration process started, focused their cooperation on economic matters. Gradually, the European countries participating the process of construction of the European Union transferred more and more competences to the European institutions and new policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy (1962), the EU Regional Policy (1975), Common Foreign and Security Policy (1992) were launched. The creation of a Single European Market (1993), based on the “four freedoms” (free movement of goods, capital, services, and labour), had an impact not only at the economic level (enhanced economic cooperation among European countries), but also in the field of higher education. The four freedoms facilitated the free movement not only of workers and goods, but also of students and professors. The first joint initiatives of European countries in the field of education were

project of collaboration contributing to establishing a European Single market. For instance, Comett programme (1986) aimed at enhancing university–enterprise cooperation [1], while PETRA (1987), Eurotecnet (1989) and FORCE (1990) programmes were more focused on vocational training and including innovative practices in the educational process [2-4]. Despite the European programmes in the field of higher education were launched already in the 80s, only in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, education was recognized formally as an area of competence of the European Union [5]. Together with the Maastricht Treaty other milestones in the development of a European common policy in the field of education are the establishment of Erasmus programme in 1987 [6] and the Bologna process [7], which has as its starting point the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998 [8]. The EU educational programme Erasmus, aimed at fostering academic exchanges of students and university staff, has been defined by the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker “one of the Union’s most visible success stories” [9]. In 2017, the Erasmus programme has celebrated its 30 years of existence reaching 9 million people, who participated in such programme [11], and the European Union is planning to invest more resources to increase considerably the budget for the Erasmus programme in the next multiannual financial period of 2021-27 [11]. The Bologna process is an intergovernmental initiative of European countries, which pushed for an enhanced cooperation in the field of higher education aiming at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The European Union has been fully supportive of the Bologna process as demonstrated by the fact that in 1999 the European Commission became a full member of the Bologna Process and that a considerable part of the EU initiatives in the field of education are aimed at fostering the achievement the Bologna process goals [12].

As in the case of the European Union, education was not one of the main policy areas in the regional integration processes taking place in the Post-Soviet space, which are object of research in this paper (Commonwealth of Independent States and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). For instance, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was not focused on education matters when it was established in 2001. “Countering terrorism, extremism and separatism”, as indicated in the Statement by the heads of government of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [13], are the main task of cooperation of such organization. Despite the main focus on security matters, education is listed among the policy area of collaboration in the Declaration establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Few years after such declaration, which was signed on 15 June 2001, SCO expanded its sphere of action and its first specific initiative in the field of education is the “Agreement between the governments of the SCO member states on cooperation in the field of education”, signed on June 15, 2006 [14]. Another milestone in the development of cooperation in the field of higher education between SCO countries is the establishment SCO University, which was approved during the inter-ministerial meetings of SCO countries on October 23, 2008 in Astana and that came into force in 2010 [15]. SCO University is a consortium of leading universities based in SCO member countries, which work together developing joint educational

programmes and that foster academic mobility as in the Erasmus programme.

Similarly to SCO and to the EU, when the Commonwealth of Independent States was established in 1991, education was not one of the core spheres of cooperation of such organization. Gradually, *ad hoc* agreements between CIS countries were signed to create a common educational space among post-soviet countries, like the Agreements on cooperation in the field of education (May 1992) and the Concept of formation of United (Common) educational space of CIS (January 17, 1997). Differently from the EU and SCO, CIS countries were part of a single educational space during the Soviet period and all the agreements signed among CIS countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union were aimed at keeping a common ground of cooperation in an area, in which each nation was taking opposite directions. Almost in parallel with SCO, some CIS countries established in July 11, 2009 the CIS University Network, a consortium of leading universities developing joint educational programmes and promoting academic mobility among them [16].

### III. INTERNAL (OR INTRA-REGIONAL) DIMENSION

Erasmus, SCO University and CIS University Network, the three educational programmes object of this analysis, are closely linked with regional integration processes taking place in Europe and in the Eurasian region. If we consider the impact at the intra-regional level, it is possible to identify three rationales explaining the role of joint regional educational programmes: an economic (or professional), a civic (or political) and a cross-cultural (or personal growth) rationale.

According to the economic rationale, academic exchanges and joint educational programmes contribute to the economic development at different levels (local, national and international). The economic ties among the countries members of the EU, CIS and SCO are rather strong at the regional level [17-18] and in line with the economic rationale, educational programmes are an important driver for the economic growth for the countries part of the regional integration process. For instance, in the Council Decision of 15 June 1987 adopting the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS), it is mentioned that training students with a first-hand experience of European cooperation, the Erasmus programme will contribute to the economic development of the European Community [19]. Also, for SCO University and CIS University Network, it is possible to identify an economic rationale. Both educational programmes are based in the principle of strategic common areas of cooperation. This means that higher education institutions participating in those university networks define the disciplines of cooperation among them, taking into account the relevance of a specific subject area at the economic level [20].

The civic rationale considers the impact of educational programmes at the level of society and they serve as tool to broaden knowledge and values in citizens, creating a common identity. For instance, a part of the scientific literature debates if the Erasmus programme could be a catalyst to create a European identity and European demos [21-23]. Regarding the

educational programmes developed in the Post-Soviet space, the Finnish scholar Markku Jokisipilä has underlined that Russia, differently, from the EU, does not aim to create a Eurasian identity in developing joint educational programmes at the regional level, but it has the objective of keeping Russian language and culture in a position of leadership in the region [24]. In SCO University, the civic rationale is even weaker in comparison with Erasmus and CIS University Network. The main reason explaining it is that in such programme, the composition of member countries is more heterogeneous than in the EU and CIS. More specifically, CIS countries were part of a single political entity for almost 70 years during the Soviet Union period and the European Union is united by common values as stated in article 1a of the general provisions of the Lisbon Treaty [25]. The participation of China in the SCO, which involves mostly countries of the former USSR makes this organization more composite from the cultural point of view and it is harder to identify in SCO University the civic rationale.

According to the cross-cultural (or personal growth) rationale, international educational programmes are instruments to reduce barriers among cultures. In this case, the impact is both at individual and broader level. At the individual level, international education programme can affect positively participants of exchange programmes abroad through an enhancement of certain skills (language skills, better understanding of the host country and culture, in which the exchange programme was carried out, improved intercultural competencies) as demonstrated by several studies [26-28]. At broader level, educational programmes can help in “creating a better world community” through “investing in people” [29]. This means that academic exchange practice and mobility facilitate people to be more tolerant and understand better other cultures, and at a wider level they favour the peaceful collaboration between countries. The scholar Papatsiba has stressed that the Erasmus programme supports European young people to acquire a wide range of skills such as intercultural competence, language and personal skills like initiative, autonomy, resilience, etc. [30]. The cross-cultural rationale is present in all the educational programmes object of this study, as all of them foresee academic mobility and experiencing life in another country for few months.

#### IV. EXTERNAL (OR EXTRA-REGIONAL) DIMENSION

The external dimension of educational programmes refers to the impact that they have at the extra-regional level. In other words, such dimension is related with the influence that educational programmes have out of the boundaries of the region, in which they operate and according to this logic, educational programmes can be considered as instruments of public diplomacy. It is possible to identify two main rationales of external dimension of educational programmes: a geopolitical and a cooperation development rationale.

According to the geopolitical rationale, educational programmes are instruments to support the national security interests or to disseminate ideals and values of a nation to other countries of the world. This logic was actively supported during the cold war by the United States and by the Soviet Union, which utilised education as a tool to strengthen

relations with affiliated countries and promote their political ideologies [31]. For instance, after the Second World War, the U.S. government adopted the Fulbright Act (1946), a bill to support academic exchanges between the United States and other regions of the world. The Fulbright program aimed at creating friendly contacts between different countries and hundreds of thousands of students from Europe and other nations carried out training and study in America. This programme facilitated the dissemination of democratic ideals and was an important instrument to foster a broader and deeper understanding of the United States to other regions of the world. The current context is different to the one of the Cold War, but education is still an important tool to guarantee peace, political and economic stability in neighbor regions or in partner countries. For instance, in 2016 the European Union invested extra resources (including in the area of education) to support the democratic and socioeconomic reforms in Tunisia [32], a neighbor country of the EU, which is facing a difficult political transition after the Revolution in 2011.

The cooperation development rationale is based on the assumption that educational programmes are instruments to promote cooperation activities with lower-income nations. According to this rationale, international projects of collaboration in the field of education can enhance the living conditions of less developed countries. As for the geopolitical rationale, this practice was used during the cold war and nowadays as well. For instance in 1950, the Foreign Ministers of seven Commonwealth countries, Australia, Canada, India, Pakistan, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom agreed to create the Colombo Plan, a technical assistance programme through which industrialized nations of Commonwealth agreed in supporting the less developed country of such organization through cooperation activities in the field of education. The European Union also has elaborated technical assistance programmes in the field of Higher education such as Tempus programme, which launched in May 1990 to facilitate the transition to democracy and market economy of central-eastern European countries and potential future members of the EU [33]. Such programme expanded to other countries, and since 2014 it has been embedded in the Erasmus+ programme and renamed Capacity Building in the field of Higher education, involving all regions of the globe.

Of the three educational programmes object of this study, the Erasmus programme is the one that has a fully-fledged external dimension. This is due to several factors. First of all, the European Union is an international organization that in the last few years has developed considerably its role as global actor. This is confirmed by the fact that it has its diplomatic representations in many countries of the world (European External Action Service) and that in certain policy area (for instance trade) the European Commission is empowered to negotiate agreements with non-EU members states representing the European Union as a single entity. Moreover, besides the above-mentioned technical assistance programme Tempus, in 90s and 2000s the EU developed other educational programmes oriented to various regions of the world. Some of the most prominent programmes are Alfa Programme (1994) and ALBAN programme (2002), covering the region of Latin

America, Asia-Link programme (2002) addressed to the Asian continent and EDULINK programme (2006) involving African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) States. A more global approach is the one of the Jean Monnet programme, launched (from 2001 open to all countries of the world) and Erasmus Mundus (2004). Within 2014-2020, the European Union is carrying out Erasmus+, an umbrella programme including the entire educational programme, which existed before 2014 and covering all the regions of the world. This global trend in the field of education will be followed after 2020 by the EU as confirmed by the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') [34].

If in the case of the European Union, educational programmes can be considered as a form of public diplomacy, for the other regional integration processes object of this research it is not possible to say the same. The main reason explaining this is that the European Union, differently from SCO and CIS, is a supranational entity and during the years the EU has tried to develop a European common foreign policy. Despite foreign policy still preserves an intergovernmental character, the EU has tried in the last reforms to strengthen its role as a global actor in the international stage. Some of the main steps are the establishment of the above-mentioned European External Action Service (EEAS) and the post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, intended as a coordination position of the EU foreign policy.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the educational programmes and policies developed by international organizations operating at the regional level shows that education is an area of cooperation, which has gained a growing importance in regional integration processes. This is demonstrated by the fact that each regional organization has developed its own programme fostering joint educational programmes and academic mobility.

If we look at the intra-regional dimension, it is possible to notice that educational programmes are justified by an economic rationale. In the case of the European Union, education supports not only the economic growth (new skills and competences for young graduates), but it also helps reducing the barriers in the European Union single market (facilitation in recognition of diploma, for instance, foster intra-regional mobility of workers). Also in the case of SCO University and CIS University Network, education is a tool contributing to preparing specialists needed in strategic sectors for the economy of the member countries of SCO and CIS. A civic rationale is also present in the educational programmes object of this study. The Erasmus programmes can contribute to a creation of a European identity, while Russia, thanks to its hegemonic position especially in the CIS University Network, can use the educational programmes to promote its language and culture to countries, which in the past were part of the Soviet Union.

The external dimension is more prominent in the EU educational programmes than in the Post-soviet space ones. This can be partly explained by the fact that the EU has started developing such programmes earlier than the other

international organization object of this research. In addition, the European Union has developed a growing global dimension in the last few years, which affects different policies of the EU, and education is one of them.

SCO and CIS are intergovernmental organizations and, in contrast to the EU, they do not have strong supranational institutions pushing common regional policies managed at the supranational level. In terms of external relations, each of SCO and CIS member states preserves full sovereignty implying a limited action of the international organizations in the field of education. However, for Russia and China, which are two leading players in the global market of education, their participation in SCO University and CIS University Network contribute to strengthening of their pivotal position at the regional level attracting students from neighbour countries participating in those educational programmes.

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