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ASEM: Interregionalism In Evidence of Normative Power Europe?*

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Abstract

Starting from 1990s the European Union has explicitly declared its interest in supporting regional integration in different parts of the world and has included this interest into its external policy under the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In the same period the European Commission published a document untitled "Towards a New Asia Strategy" which was interpreted as the European "rediscovery" of Asian region. It was based on one of the foreign policy goals of protecting the EU's interests and values. This sudden attention paid by the EU to Asia resulted later on in the establishment of the Asia-Europe Meeting, the so-called ASEM. Subsequently, the 2001 Commission's communication on Europe and Asia explicitly mentioned human rights, democracy, good governance and rule of law among its objectives which all constitute some of the core values characteristic for Ian Manners' concept of normative power Europe. This paper will analyse the EU's motivations behind the cooperation with Asia within the ASEM framework. By doing so, it will try to find out whether the EU uses its normative power proclaimed by Ian Manners in the context of its engagement within the ASEM. Finally, it will represent a sort of assessment to what extent the employment of the normative power by the EU can enhance or undermine its ability to be a global power.

Keywords

ASEM, Interregionalism, Normative Power Europe

From 1990s the European Union has explicitly declared its interest in supporting regional integration in different parts of the world by including it into the European external policy (Commission of the European Communities 1995). In the same period the European Commission published a document untitled "Towards a New Asia Strategy" which was interpreted at that time as the European "rediscovery" of Asia (Farrell 2009, 1173) and which led in 1996 to the establishment of the Asia – Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996.

Following this transition in the European approach towards Asia one can wonder why the EU has become interested in the cooperation with Asian countries in the framework of ASEM. This paper will analyse the EU's motivations in this field in order to find out whether it uses its normative power in this case to build its role as a global actor. The theory of Vinod Aggarwal and Edward Fogarty will be used to evaluate the EU's motives to get involved within ASEM as it provides four possible explanations for current situation. Consequently, this paper makes a comparison between all the reasons in the context of influence that exercising the normative power by the EU has on its role as a global actor.

Normative power Europe and Interregionalism

The Commission's document from 1994 formulated the European strategy towards Asia by including it in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. This strategy was based on the foreign policy goal not only "to enable EU to protect its interests and values as well as to play a constructive role in international security" (Lee 2008, 241), but also to maintain peace and stability in Asia. It defined three following objectives of the strategy: strengthening the EU's economic presence, contributing to stability and finally, the economic development of the least developed countries in the region.

The Commission's communication on Europe and Asia under a title "A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships" from 2001 provided further elaboration of the Strategy from 1994 (Commission of the European Communities 2001). It not only maintained the EU's economic interests in the centre, but also significantly developed the political and security dimension. This change was interpreted as a passage from "aid and trade" policy to the broad strategy aiming at balancing the economic, political, social and cultural aspects (Lee 2008, 243). One of its six objectives included some of the core values characteristic for Ian Manners' concept of normative power Europe: human rights, democracy, good governance and rule of law (Manners 2002, 242-243).

Following these bases for the cooperation, the Asia – Europe Meeting was established in March 1996. It was launched as a forum of informal dialogue on a broad spectrum of topics bringing together the European Commission, all EU member states, ASEAN Secretariat and Asian countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, India,

Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam (Islam 2010, 4). Mary Farrell argues that such EU's involvement in the external promotion of regional integration has three main goals: to export the European model of regional integration abroad, to influence the international environment by spreading European values and to strengthen EU's identity (Farrell 2009, 1171-1173). What is worth noticing, especially the second aim is parallel with Ian Manners' concept of normative power Europe which maintains that EU exercises its normative power by promoting its core and minor norms and values internationally and as a result the EU changes the global perceptions of what is perceived as acceptable or "normal" (Manners 2002, 235-258). ASEM, according to different authors, is classified as pure or heterogeneous interregionalism which has as its objective the cooperation through socialization and diffusion of norms and good practices (Farrell 2009, 1170 and Ponjaert 2008, 187). As a result, we might have stated that logically it is an instrument of EU's normative power, but we should still find the "normative" proof in the EU's motivations behind its involvement within ASEM.

EU's motivations behind ASEM cooperation

As claimed by Aggarwal and Fogarty, "EU is motivated to negotiate interregional agreements for four reasons of varying importance: bureaucratic interests; pluralist domestic pressure; ideational interest; and geopolitical motives" (Aggarwal and Fogarty 2004). Analysis of these four possible motives will provide us with an answer to the main question of this paper.

First, the "Commission (...) may use interregionalism to boost its bureaucratic power within the EU" (Aggarwal and Fogarty 2004). Mary Farrell argues that promotion of regional integration suffers from little or even no opposition at national or European level due to few reasons (Farrell 2009, 1169). It does not create a threat neither to sovereignty, nor to common interests shared by member states. Furthermore, as it comprises a variety of instruments and conditionalities rather than "common approach", it is perceived within the EU as a "common interest [...] [of] supranational bureaucracy" (Farrell 2009, 1169). This is the case of ASEM which, besides some critics about its functioning, gains the general support of the Council and the European Parliament. It is recognised by them "as a valuable potential instrument for practical cooperation" and they urge "the EU to strengthen and support existing and emerging regional groupings or bodies (...) not only because they will become an important structuring element in the international order but also because of our positive experience of European integration itself" (European Parliament 2002). Therefore, little evidence for the EU's bureaucratic motive could be found.

Second, interest groups and "societal actors are attempting to shape European [...] [policies] by lobbying the Commission or the EU member states" (Antkiewicz and Momani 2009, 224). Within ASEM the interest group pressure is focused on economic dimension of this cooperation. Crucial role is played by trade officials and business representatives involved in ASEM by means of the Asia – Europe Business Forum, Trade Facilitation Action Plan and Investment Promotion Action Plan (Dent 1999, 242-243).

Third, by "desire to export its regional model to other parts of the world" EU tries to achieve two goals when negotiating the regional agreements: "to foster EU identity and strengthen internal cohesion" as well as to project "a European model of regional integration" that others can adopt (Antkiewicz and Momani 2009, 227). Starting from the second ASEM summit in 1998 the EU has expressed its interests in such values as democracy and human rights (Ponjaert 2008, 184). Someone can argue that the EU's point of view on regional integration as a "way of promoting peace and political stability" and its expressed "hope for spill over to other regions" is rather an evidence for civilian power Europe (Antkiewicz and Momani 2009, 228), but on the other hand, the fact of shaping identity of others actors and "teaching" them what is "normal" is a clear evidence of normative power Europe.

Finally, the EU might establish the cooperation in certain areas in order "to foster its geopolitical interest" in "geographical regions of perceived importance" or to "counterbalance the presence [of hegemonies such as the United States]" (Antkiewicz and Momani 2009, 229-230). On the one hand, ASEM was perceived as a European reaction to the "economic miracle of Pacific Asia" (Ruland 2007, 113). On the other hand, the European Security Strategy from 2003, the main European document in this field, recognised that "[r]egional organisations also strengthen global governance" (even if without indicating how the EU can help developing regional integration processes in other regions), but it did not mention Asia as a region of the EU's strategic interest as it focused only on some countries of the region (Ortega 2004, 125 and A Secure Europe... 2003, 9, 14). Due to this ambiguity, the geopolitical considerations cannot be perceived as a main motive of the EU's involvement and cooperation within ASEM.

Normative power Europe within ASEM?

According to ASEM we found little evidence for the EU's bureaucratic motive, proof for strong interest groups' motive but only in the economic dimension and ambiguous evidences for some ideational and geopolitical motives.

Concerning these results, we can conclude that the EU's normative power influence within ASEM is poor, even if some progress within the years is visible. This failure of exercising its normative power when faced with Asian countries might be explained in different ways. First, as stated by Mary Farrell, the Asian countries are strongly attached to the principle of domestic non-intervention and for this reason they are not eager to extend the area of ASEM cooperation beyond the economic issues (Farrell 2009, 1171). Second, regional integration processes in Asia are results of "rational economic calculations" of Asian countries, so they resist the EU's pressures and attempts to export European regional integration model (Farrell 2009, 1179). Third, there is less significant power asymmetry between Asian countries and Europe than for example between Europe and Africa and as a result the EU's normative goals are not easily accepted and conditionality cannot be used as often as in the other regions of the world (Farrell 2009, 1171).

The success of promoting the EU's norms and values in the international arena, which is a central part of normative power concept, strongly depends on the willingness of its partners to identify themselves with these norms and values and apply them accordingly to their own relations with different international actors (Farrell 2009, 1180). In order to effectively exercise its normative power the EU as a global actor needs to convince its partners to apply these norms and values which is an effort- and time-consuming process. With regards to current development of ASEM we could at least argue that the EU's attempt to exercise its normative power does not interfere exercising other types of its power such as, among others, the economic one. However, being a global actor should not and in fact is not limited to one single dimension.

Roza Smolinska holds M.A. in European Studies from the University of Warsaw, Poland and postgraduate Master in EU International Relations and Diplomacy from the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium. She was also an exchange student in the field of Political Science at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Rennes, France. Simultaneously to her studies at the College of Europe she conducted research within the United Nations University - Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies. Her research interests covers topics such as EU external relations and diplomacy, EU as an interregional actor with special focus on its relations with Asia and partnerships with emerging powers such as China and India, mutual perceptions in international relations.

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