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Introduction: Regionalism under stress

Detlef Nolte and Brigitte Weiffen

In Europe and Latin America, regionalism is under stress. While the European Union (EU) is still coping with the Eurozone crisis and its aftermath, it has faced multiple challenges, including conflicts in its neighborhood, a massive influx of refugees, increasingly frequent terrorist attacks, regionalist and secessionist movements, government participation or takeover by nationalist-populist forces in several Central and East European countries, and the electoral success of Eurosceptic and anti-EU parties throughout the continent. At the time of writing, negotiations over the British exit from the EU (Brexit) are consuming immense amounts of political energy and are intermingled with discussions about the future structure of the EU. In Latin America, regional cooperation is stagnating, or even in decline. This is due to several reasons: economic problems in major countries, a lack of regional leadership, ideological conflicts fueled by the “pink tide” in the 2000s and the resurgence of the right in recent years, and regional actors’ limitations in responding to political crises in general and to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela in particular. This has led to a standoff in the main regional organizations, bringing the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) close to disappearing.

This volume addresses challenges for regionalism from a comparative perspective. It looks at the EU within a broader framework and engages with current diagnoses of the EU crisis, and of a pushback against regional integration and cooperation processes more generally. We investigate the extent to which there are commonalities, parallel developments (which may respond to the same causes), and (negative) diffusion or contagion effects among regionalisms around the world.
The book contributes to comparative regionalism, a field of research that draws on various disciplines and sub-fields, including international relations (IR), EU studies, area studies, political science, comparative politics, international political economy (IPE), and international law. It picks up current IR debates about the role and importance of regions in global politics. From an IPE perspective, it discusses whether regions have become politically more fragmented and economically less integrated in the current global economic constellation. Covering different regions as well as inter-regional relations, the intention of this volume is to provide a balanced view of the current challenges and constraints facing regional governance.

**Studying regionalism**

Regions (understood as entities located in between the national and the global) and regionalism have become important features of world politics, specifically in a multipolar international system constituted of several regional cores or “regional worlds.” For the purposes of this volume, it is important to understand how regions are politically organized and governed, because the concept of region is closely linked to the institutional architecture of a given region. As Herz indicated, “the term ‘region’ in fact originates from the idea of rule, as in regere, command, and we shall be looking into regions as the locus for the production of norms, public policy, and dispute mechanisms as a result of the choices by governing elites in the countries that form the region.”

Regionalism generally refers to “the formation of interstate associations or groupings on the basis of regions; and in the doctrinal sense, the advocacy of such formations” and to “the policies and practices of state-based permanent organizations with membership confined to a limited geographical area.” In other words, regionalism is a primarily top-down, state-led process of building and sustaining formal regional institutions and organizations among at least three
geographically proximate states. Regional organizations delimit the region as a subsystem within the overarching international one, and serve to structure the relations between states within the region. In turn, regionalization denotes processes of increasing economic, political, social, or cultural interaction among geographically contiguous states and societies. Thus, the term emphasizes the importance of trans-national relations between non-state actors such as interest groups, non-governmental organizations, and private companies in the construction of a region.5

While there is a basic consensus on the concept of regionalism, debate continues regarding how to conceptualize different forms of it.6 For example, Börzel and Risse distinguished between scope and level of cooperation. Concerning scope, regional organizations vary on a continuum between task-specific, focusing on just one policy area, and multi- or general purpose. Concerning the level of coordination and collaboration, Börzel and Risse argued for a clear distinction between regional cooperation and regional integration. Cooperation refers to the joint exercise of state-based political authority in intergovernmental institutions, whereas integration begins when states set up supranational institutions on the regional level and transfer at least some authority and sovereignty rights to them.7 Thus, regional integration is a narrower sub-category of regionalism that is principally based on the European post-World War II experience. Regional (intergovernmental) cooperation and (supranational) integration can be understood as two opposite ends of a continuum of regionalism.

One might ask whether research on regionalism has placed too much emphasis on only one end of the continuum—that is, regional integration—, considering that the EU is the only item in this category. Moreover, the terrain between cooperation and integration remains largely unexplored, even though it appears to be more populated than the integration corral. Additionally, given that the concepts of regional integration and cooperation refer to the level of coordination within an individual regional organization, they are difficult to apply to a scenario of multiple overlapping organizations inhabiting the same regional space.8

In search of alternative concepts that could be used to chart the field of regionalism and to
classify different forms of regional interaction, one option is “regional architecture,” a term that is often used but rarely defined. Another concept used to capture the variations of regionalism within a particular region is regional governance. Regional governance is essentially, but not exclusively, based on intergovernmental regional organizations. It is not restricted to a single organization, but rather refers to the entire set of relevant regional organizations and their patterns of interaction. The concept is broad and flexible enough to adequately grasp the variable interaction patterns between regional organizations. Regional governance can be defined as the overall configuration of the (intergovernmental) regional organizations that frame the regional discourse of member states and generate the norms and rules for the region in different policy areas, thereby contributing to the solution of collective problems and/or to the realization of common benefits.  

Comparing regionalisms

In what could be called a first wave of comparative regionalism, early neo-functionalism tried to apply European integration theory to Latin America. However, this idea had to be dismissed due to the absence of the benevolent background conditions fostering regional integration in Europe. International relations theories still find it difficult to explain varieties of regionalism in different world regions, and the academic field continues to be divided between EU studies and scholars of comparative regionalism. As a result, there is no general theory of regional integration that is applicable to Europe and other world regions alike, and the theoretical debate remains very heterogeneous.

While analyses of Latin American regionalism are becoming plentiful, most have looked exclusively at Latin America without comparison to other regions and, so far, none have addressed the current crisis of regionalism. While numerous books have studied the crisis of the
European Union, they have not offered a comparative perspective either. A number of volumes published over the past decade have offered cross-regional comparisons of the emergence and performance of regional organizations in policy fields such as economic integration, security, and the protection of human rights and democracy, or with a focus on institutional design and specific aspects of governance such as summitry. However, these have tended to concentrate on what has been achieved and have not dealt with crisis symptoms. While the *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* and Söderbaum’s *Rethinking regionalism*, both published in 2016, have delineated the field of comparative regionalism, neither includes crisis of regionalism as a major topic.

In a certain way, the current crisis may constitute a tailwind for the comparative analysis of regionalism. The Eurozone crisis and Brexit broadened European integration studies by adding the study of regional disintegration to the study of regional integration. Europe is no longer the uncontested model of regional integration, and regional integration is no longer perceived to be a linear process: there may be stagnation, the threat of disintegration, and there may even be exits. The fact that the EU suffers from similar setbacks as other regional organizations and is no longer exceptional facilitates a comparison with regional organizations elsewhere with a much lighter institutional structure (that is, with weak or non-existing supranational institutions), especially in times of crisis. The crisis of regional projects in Europe and Latin America also reopens the debate on the role of regions in the future world order. Are the forces of globalization and the emergence of multipolarity creating a “world of regions,” or is the centrifugal pull of extra-regional actors leading to more cross-regional patterns of cooperation?

Our book complements previous comparative studies of regionalism and regional organizations and ties in with emerging research on the crisis of regionalism. The books that have explored the impact of crisis on regionalism in a comparative manner have focused almost exclusively on economic and financial crises. For example, a 2012 volume edited by Fioramonti
looked at the global financial crisis as well as the Arab Spring and painted a mixed picture regarding their impact on regionalism. While some trends identified in that volume have continued or deepened, others have become irrelevant or even reversed. For instance, the 2007–2008 financial crisis already tarnished the image of the United States and the EU as economic heavyweights. The June 2016 British referendum that resulted in the decision to withdraw from the EU, as well as the election of Donald Trump as US president in November 2016, have further challenged the dominance of the Global North. In light of Brexit, the EU’s singularity as a model for regional integration processes in other parts of the world is being questioned to an unprecedented extent. Trump’s decisions to challenge, renegotiate, or pull out of trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and NAFTA, as well as military alliances such as NATO, represent an assault on multilateralism in general.

With regard to the Arab Spring, its expected positive benefits on regionalism in the Middle East and Africa have not materialized. The ascent and leadership aspirations of emerging powers such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa have mostly petered out, as a consequence of economic stagnation in most of those countries, domestic crises, involvement in conflicts and/or diverging regional policies. On one hand, Brazil and India were reluctant to become regional leaders and paymasters for regional projects. The former has lost its protagonist role in the region, and the latter pursues a kind of ‘dancing at every wedding’ foreign policy strategy and is now participating in regional organizations in all Asian sub-regions, namely the South Asian Association of Cooperation (SAARC), the Southeast Asian ASEAN Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Central Asian Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). On the other hand, Russia has become increasingly assertive and aggressive, with its annexation of Crimea and meddling in the conflicts in eastern Ukraine and Syria. China is a potential aggressor in the South China Sea, but has at the same time proclaimed to be open for cooperation in the economic sphere and willing to take the United States’ place as a leader in the area of free trade in the trans-Pacific space.
The volumes edited by Haastrup and Eun and by Saurugger and Terpan focus exclusively on the impact of the economic and financial crisis on regional institutional change across different regions. By combining ‘new regionalism’ with a ‘new institutionalism’ approach, Saurugger and Terpan took both exogenous variables (the crisis) and endogenous variables (actors’ response and use of the crisis) into account to explain the transformation of regional integration schemes in Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia. Specifically, they addressed institutional change in regional integration, power relations between member states and the institutions in different policy domains, and change in individual or collective citizens’ attitudes towards regional integration. While the impact of economic and financial crisis on regional institutions varies in the analyzed regions, all three feature a strong resilience of regional institutions. While offering a theoretically sophisticated and differentiated view on the effects on regionalism, Saurugger and Terpan’s volume eschews other origins of crisis apart from economic and financial turbulences.

Our volume engages with those earlier books in several ways. We do not aim to explain disintegration, but instead consider the resilience of regional organizations as equally plausible outcome of crises. Yet, in contrast to Saurugger and Terpan, we concentrate on the fate of regional organizations as the dependent variable (and less on state actors and public opinion/support). We update the empirical trends identified by the earlier volumes, grappling with the fact that the prospects for regionalism have worsened since the publication of Fioramonti’s volume. Actors and dynamics that, just a few years ago, seemed to favor regionalism, such as the rise of regional powers, have become insignificant or even operate in reverse direction. Regarding the independent variables, our book is not focused on manifest crises (whose onset and thresholds are difficult to identify), but instead takes a broader look at stress factors that may (potentially) trigger a crisis. In addition to economic and financial turbulences, these stress factors include security challenges, socio-cultural and political issues, as well as regional and global power shifts.
Analytical framework

This book analyzes European and Latin American experiences within a broader comparative framework. Its individual chapters explore what kind of stress factors have had an impact on regionalism and the extent to which the crisis of the EU (and Brexit, in particular) has repercussions for regionalisms around the world (thus addressing the question of whether the EU has ceased to be a model). Furthermore, they investigate how regionalism is affected by those stress factors. In contrast to ongoing attempts in EU studies to grapple with the crisis, the aim of this book is not to develop a theory of disintegration, considering that regionalism outside of Europe usually takes the shape of regional cooperation instead of integration. Rather, our (more modest) aim is to capture and map stress factors and their potential impact on regionalism in order to provide an analytical framework that is applicable to different regions.

The multifaceted nature of the current EU crisis served as the starting point for developing a taxonomy of stress factors. While the specific combination of challenges is unique to the European region, several of the stress factors affecting the EU are relevant for other parts of the world, as they were caused by events with trans-regional repercussions or represent global trends. In a condensed fashion, the stress factors identified in this book include economic and financial crises, security challenges, socio-cultural issues (such as identity questions, that often come to the fore in the face of immigration and refugee flows), political transformations (such as the rise of populism across the world), and shifting power dynamics on the regional and global level. Additionally, due to the long-time status of the EU as a model, the crisis of the EU could itself be a stress factor that has negative repercussions on regional cooperation and integration projects in other parts of the world. Thus, several of the chapters explicitly or implicitly address the question of whether the crises of regionalism around the world today are parallel responses to similar conditions, or whether what we can observe is a diffusion of disintegration from the EU to other
regions.

While it is intuitively plausible to assume that stress factors may challenge regional organizations, cause a crisis, or even lead to processes of disintegration, the impact of those stressors is mediated by characteristics of the region that may provide elements of resilience. First, regions differ in their extent of economic and social interconnectedness (that is, regionalization) and the depth of regional fault lines due to inter-regional heterogeneity and unresolved conflicts. A high level of regionalization usually buttresses regionalism, whereas fault lines tend to be divisive. Second, resilience might result from the strength and density of pre-existing regional institutions (that is, regionalism) that are capable of coping with a crisis and responding to new challenges, and from the political will of regional leaders to resort to regional institutions as a problem-solving mechanism and to propel regionalism forward. Third, the strength of regional identities among elites and citizens matters and can either promote or hinder region-building. These characteristics of the region act as a filter through which the impact of stress factors is either attenuated or increased, as depicted in Figure 0.1.

A comparison of the EU and the Latin American organizations suggests that elements of resilience are much stronger in the European case than in Latin America. Security interdependencies as well as intra-regional trade and economic cooperation (including internal monetary transfers) are important elements of resilience of European integration. The same is true for institutional density and the institutional stakeholders (such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, or the European Court of Justice), which give continuity to the integration project in times of discord between the member states. Furthermore, despite the ascent of nationalism, the pro-European identity discourse of political elites still resonates with citizens’ identities. The situation in Latin America is different, with fewer elements of resilience counterbalancing centrifugal tendencies of disintegration.
Outline of the volume

Following this introduction, the volume consists of a theoretical-comparative part as well as case studies covering Europe, Latin America, European-Latin American inter-regionalism, and Africa and Southeast Asia. The theoretical-comparative part is opened by Brigitte Weiffen’s chapter that further develops the analytical framework. It presents a taxonomy of stress factors to facilitate a comparative analysis across world regions, and explores the potential impact of those stress factors on regionalism. The subsequent chapters by Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse, as well as that of Andrés Malamud and Eduardo Viola, introduce comparative regionalism as an analytical tool and expose a central controversy by presenting divergent assessments of the contemporary significance of regionalism around the world. Börzel and Risse argue that the number of regional organizations and the number of policy areas subject to regional governance have grown. In line with constructivism, they focus on the role of identity as main explanatory factor for regional cohesion. In contrast, Malamud and Viola argue that regional organizations suffer from a lack of advanced integration and are (especially in Africa and Latin America) constricted by the inefficiencies of overlapping memberships and mandates. Instead, states increasingly put their stakes in so-called “minilateralism”; that is, informal, trans- and cross-regional forms of governance.

All of the chapters in Parts II and III, on Europe and Latin America, respectively, examine stress factors for regionalism and the resulting trends of either disintegration or resilience. Covering different policy fields, the three chapters on the EU show that the multiple crises have exposed some weaknesses of the European integration process. Nevertheless, they
are quite optimistic regarding the resilience of the EU in the face of stress. Analyzing the EU’s responses to the Eurozone crisis, the migratory crisis, and the disintegrative tendencies culminating in the Brexit referendum, Ana Paula Tostes finds considerable institutional and social evidence of the EU’s resilience. Carlos Closa exposes the institutional pathologies responsible for the limited success of the EU’s mechanisms to protect the rule of law against populist governments with an agenda of illiberal constitutional reforms. At the same time, the existence and actual attempts to apply these mechanisms is an expression of an advanced level of integration and a strong commitment to shared values. Focusing on the external dimension, Laura Ferreira-Pereira demonstrates the rising relevance of the Common Security and Defense Policy as part of a resilience-building strategy to cope with the new realities such as the prospective withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU and the Trump administration’s erratic foreign policy.

In turn, the three chapters on Latin America analyze the state of various regional organizations and paint a more dismal picture. As Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann shows, the Common Market of the South (Mercosur) has largely failed to reach its original goal of establishing a common market; instead, it has advanced regional cooperation in other policy areas, such as social policies, human rights, security, and protection of democracy. UNASUR, which from the start positioned itself as a new form of regionalism that did not aim at deeper integration, reflected a moment of convergence in the region, but is currently suffering severe setbacks. Nicolás Comini and Alejandro Frenkel analyze the global, regional, and domestic stress factors that have almost caused UNASUR to disappear, and highlight how different characteristics of the region have exacerbated the impact of those stress factors, making UNASUR less resilient to disintegrative tendencies. In contrast, the Pacific Alliance is one of the few Latin American regional organizations not currently under stress. Detlef Nolte shows that the Pacific Alliance, characterized by a restriction of its goals to the expansion of trade and a lean institutional structure, has learnt from the mistakes of earlier regional integration projects. Still, problems
might come to cloud the horizon due to newly emerging stress factors in combination with the structural constraints of Latin American regionalism.

Part IV on European-Latin American inter-regionalism studies the repercussions of Brexit and the EU crisis for Latin American regionalism. As Susanne Gratius argues in her chapter, in practical terms, following the EU crisis, Latin America no longer emulates the EU model and traditional patterns of North-South inter-regionalism have lost their appeal. At the same time, Brexit and the crisis of European integration have created a new balance of power between the two regions and opened a window of opportunity for a more pragmatic and equal dialogue over common challenges. Regarding theoretical implications, Detlef Nolte argues that the EU crisis has exposed the limitations and potential of applying European integration theories to the study of Latin American regionalism. While a focus on the EU as the gold standard for regional integration has led into a blind alley, the EU crisis might improve the possibility of comparing European regionalism (and regional integration) with regionalism in other regions by adding the study of disintegrative dynamics to the study of regional integration.

According to Risse and Börzel, regionalism seems to be “alive and kicking” in other world regions. Part V therefore contrasts the European and Latin American experiences with findings from Africa and Asia to answer the question of whether regionalism is generally under stress, or whether this is only a European and Latin American trend. In fact, as the chapters by Christof Hartmann and Maria-Gabriela Manea suggest, following phases of stagnation, regionalism has experienced a revitalization in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s, and in Southeast Asia since 2007. Nevertheless, both regions exhibit a set of structural constraints that might limit the capacity of regional organizations to cope with newly arising stress factors in their global, regional and domestic environments.

This volume’s findings suggest that Latin American, African, and Southeast Asian regionalism have all been shaped by a set of variables that are quite different from conditions in Europe. Although the EU actively promoted regionalism around the world and the EU’s
institutional architecture has undoubtedly inspired some elements of institutional design elsewhere, regionalisms outside of Europe have not gone so far as to emulate the EU’s supranational institutional structure. Accordingly, there does not seem to be a diffusion of disintegration either: the recent EU crisis has not been a significant stress factor affecting regionalism in other parts of the world. However, there still seem to be some similarities between the stress factors that challenge regionalism around the world. These include global and regional power contestations, transnational security threats, economic and political crises, and the ascent of nationalism, populism, and authoritarianism.

Admittedly, most of the chapters in our collection look at individual regional organizations in the context of their respective region. Truly comparative regionalism would require a more rigorous comparison between several organizations within and across regions, and of their similarities and differences in responding to stress factors. However, by presenting a common framework for the analysis of stress factors and their impact on regionalism, and by fostering an intense dialogue between evidence from Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, our volume represents a first step in this direction.

Notes


5 Börzel and Risse, “Introduction,” 7–8.


7 Ibid.; and Tanja A. Börzel, “Comparative Regionalism: European Integration and Beyond,” in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage, 2013), 503–530.


9 Ibid.


16 Finn Laursen, ed., *Comparative Regional Integration. Europe and Beyond* (London/New York:


25 Fioramonti, *Regions and Crises*.

26 Ibid.

27 Haastrup and Eun, *Regionalizing Global Crises*; and Saurugger and Terpan, *Crisis and Institutional Change*.

28 Saurugger and Terpan, *Crisis and Institutional Change*.

29 For more details, see Chapter 1 by Weiffen in this volume.

30 See Chapter 2 by Börzel and Risse in this volume.