

Rebuilding regions in times of crises: the future of Europe and the 'voice' of citizens

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[Lorenzo Fioramonti](#) [1] 18 July 2012

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Crises, like those gripping Europe, tend to expose the process and practice of regional governance as technocratic and elite-driven. But citizens and civil society may well demand more voice and power, in a 'politicisation' of regions.

In a globalizing world, where old and new evolutions challenge traditional decision making and (nation) states find it increasingly difficult to govern political processes and economic transactions that are ever more cross-boundary in nature, supranational regional governance has proven a powerful tool to address such growing complexity.

As a meso-level between the state and a hypothetical global government, regional organizations have been purposefully created with a view to providing more effective management structures to deal with phenomena and processes transcending the borders of national communities. Traditionally, trans-frontier natural resources were the first common goods to be placed under the administration of regional organizations. For instance, the oldest existing regional organization in the world is the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, an authority established in Europe during the 1815 Congress of Vienna. Its purpose was to manage cross-boundary transports along the river Rhine, which cuts across France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and – in spite of its limited political clout – it set an important precedent for the future evolutions of European integration. The forerunner of the European Economic Community, which then transformed into the European Union, was the European Coal and Steel Community, a supranational authority created to provide common jurisdiction over the most fundamental natural resources of the continent, whose direct control had historically been the main source of conflict in the region.

Nowadays, there is a virtually endless list of regional organizations operating in divers sectors, entrusted with varying degrees of power and decision-making authority. Although most of them only perform specific functions (e.g. natural resources management, conflict prevention, legal advice, customs control, policing, etc.), there has been an increase in the establishment of 'general purpose' regional organizations, of which the EU is the most well-known and developed example. Some of them have evolved out of specific trade agreements (e.g. free trade areas), such as the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), while others have been created with a view to guaranteeing security and development, such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU). As famously remarked by P. Katzenstein, the contemporary international arena may very well develop into a 'world of regions', where openness and cooperation are reinforced by growth in

cross-border exchanges and global transformations in interstate relations.

Regions and crises

According to Karl Deutsch, one of the forefathers of regional studies, the most fundamental example of region-building is constituted by so-called 'security communities', groupings of countries that share institutional systems to avoid internal conflicts and address common external threats. In this vein, the existence of certain threats (often in the form of fully-fledged conflicts) has been instrumental to the creation of regional organizations. The European integration project emerged out of the ashes of World War II. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) was created after the end of colonialism while its successor, the AU, was established to guarantee peace and development in a traditionally troubled continent. Similarly, ASEAN was founded to oppose the advancement of communism in South East Asia and strengthen the small countries of the region vis-à-vis their strong and powerful neighbours.

Supranational regionalism and crises have always been intimately connected, both empirically and theoretically. Yet, although most theoretical approaches appear to discuss crises as potential springboards for more and better regional cooperation/integration, the opposite is equally true. For instance, De Gaulle's critical stance vis-à-vis the process of European integration (which led to a prolonged institutional crisis in the 1960s) prompted Ernst Haas, the founder of the neo-functionalist approach, to conclude that regional integration theory was 'obsolete'. The current sovereign-debt crisis (often dubbed as the Euro-crisis) is raising a lot of doubts about the capacity of the EU to weather the storm and re-launch integration of the European continent. Public discourse not only in Europe, but also in the rest of the world, hints at the fact that regional cooperation/ integration does not deal well with 'rainy days', when member states tend to become more inward looking and seek refuge in short-sighted nationalism.

The word 'crisis' derives from the ancient Greek verb *krinein*, which means to 'separate, decide and judge'. As such, it therefore describes events or phenomena that produce change and lead to decisions. Looking at most current events, it is not easy to gauge the extent to which these crises may lead to more regional cooperation/integration or, conversely, to gradual/abrupt disintegration. However, there is little doubt that they present fundamental turning points in the evolution of regional cooperation/integration and pose significant challenges to all stakeholders involved. At the same time, they may very well become opportunities to reassess the usefulness of supranational regions and prospectively re-design a world of *new* regions.

Euro-crisis and the weakening of the European model

Crises are revelatory moments. They break the repetitive continuity of ordinary processes and present us with unexpected threats and opportunities. As disruptive events, they force us to rethink conventional wisdom and become imaginative. In the evolution of political institutions, crises have been fundamental turning points opening up new space for governance innovations or, by contrast, reducing the spectrum of available options. They have ushered in phases of progress and prosperity or plummeted our societies into the darkness of parochialism and backwardness.

The current Euro-crisis may have a significant long-term impact on the 'acceptability' of regional integration as an end-goal for regionalism not only in Europe, but also in other regions. If the European project fails to deliver the expected outcomes of stability, well-being and solidarity, then it is likely that other regions will refrain from pushing for full-blown integration, perhaps privileging less demanding forms of cooperation. It also appears as if the EU 'model' of integration has been severely eroded by the global financial crisis and the turmoil in the Eurozone. There is indeed growing criticism of Eurocentric approaches to regionalism, not only among scholars, but also among leading policy makers. Especially, emerging powers in Africa, Asia and South America are becoming more assertive about the need to find different ways to promote regional governance in a world in which traditional power distributions are being fundamentally called into question. Moreover, the recent popular revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East are likely to reshape geostrategic equilibria in the Mediterranean and possibly usher in a new phase of regional cooperation within the Arab world and also with Europe.

Citizens and regional governance

Citizens have been the underdogs of regionalism. From Europe, to Africa, Asia and Latin America, civil society has largely been on the receiving end of region-building processes. More often than not, civil society has been intentionally sidelined, while some sympathetic non-governmental organisations have been given the instrumental task of supporting institutions in their efforts at building a regional 'identity'. In spite of rhetorical references to the importance of civic participation, regionalism has largely developed 'without the citizens'.

Yet contemporary crises seem to bring 'the people' back into the picture, at least insofar as various attempts at regional cooperation and integration stumble upon the ideas, values and expectations of the citizens. The Euro-crisis is not just a matter of scarce liquidity and overexposure of a few national governments and most private banks. It is first and foremost a legitimacy crisis, which is revealing the fundamental limitations of an elite-driven regionalism model. Not disputing the pivotal role that European political elites played in setting the integration process in motion, there is little doubt that 'deep integration' will only be achieved when European citizens will have a say over the type of developmental trajectory that the EU should adopt as well as its ultimate goals. Looking at the astonishing amount of public resources channelled to rescue private banks in comparison to the harsh austerity plans enforced on allegedly profligate Member States, one cannot help but ask the question: what actual interests drive regionalism in the world?

Most observers have been traditionally looking at regionalization processes as politically neutral phenomena in international affairs. Research in this field has been generally restricted to the 'quantity' of regionalism, rather than its 'quality'. Whether it is to explain the gradual devolution of authority from nation states to supranational institutions (as is the case with neo-functionalism) or whether it is to demonstrate the continuous bargaining process involving national governments (as is the case with intergovernmentalism), mainstream approaches to regional cooperation and integration have refrained from looking at the quality of regionalization processes. Will there be more or fewer regions in the world? Will regional institutions replace the nation state? Will regional governance become predominant in the years to come? Granted, these are very important questions and deserve to be examined in depth, especially in academic circles. Yet, the current crises force us to assess the state of regionalism in the world not only in terms of its predominance and diffusion, but also – and more importantly – in terms of how it contributes, if any, towards the well-being of our societies.

Most 'models' and 'practices' of regionalism have tended to exclude the diversity of voices and roles in society. They have often served the specific interests of ruling elites (as in Latin America and Africa), the ambitions of hegemonic actors (as in Europe and Asia) or the agendas of industrial and financial powers. Moreover, through their apparently neutral technocratic character, most attempts at regional cooperation and integration have aimed to obscure the fact that there are always winners and losers in regionalism processes.

This top-down model is being increasingly challenged. Overlapping crises and the redistribution of power at the global level call into question the capacity of regions to deliver on their promises, thus unveiling the unavoidable political character of any model of regionalism. In response to the growing cost of regionalism, citizens want to have more say over future regional trajectories and exercise their democratic powers. As a consequence, regionalism is evolving from a 'closed' process, designed and packaged by a small circle of political and economic elites, to an 'open' process, in which democratic participation and accountability are playing an ever more important role. Borrowing from the jargon of Internet users, one may say that regions are transitioning from a 1.0 phase dominated by technocrats to a 2.0 stage characterised by horizontal networks, alternative models and citizens' contestations.

The EU, undoubtedly the most advanced and successful example of regionalism in the world, is now experiencing the direst consequences of such a transition. Amid rising unemployment, social malaise and growing discontent for the lack of accountability of national and regional politics, millions of citizens have been protesting against the Union and its political and economic agenda. Contrary to

what eurosceptics would have us believe, [these citizens do not call for less Europe: they want a different Europe](#) [9]. They would like regional integration to be more about connecting cultures and individuals and less about supporting capital. They would like their regional institutions to focus on helping the unemployed rather than bailing out bankrupt banks. They would like to see more solidarity across classes and generations, rather than less. They would like cooperation to be about building a different future instead of reshuffling old ideas. The future of regionalism may very well entail a growing 'politicisation' of regions, whereby citizens and civil society demand more voice and power in influencing not just general principles and values, but also the long-term political trajectories of their regions.

This article is largely based on Lorenzo Fioramonti's recent book ['Regions and Crises: New Challenges for Contemporary Regionalisms'](#) [10] (June 2012).

Topics: Civil society

Democracy and government

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