


Edited by  
Mario Telò

2013



# **Globalisation, Multilateralism, Europe**

## **Towards a Better Global Governance?**

  
The  
**Globalisation,  
Europe, Multilateralism**  
Series

## Chapter 9

# Comparative Regionalist Studies

LUK VAN LANGENHOVE and LÉONIE MAES

### CONTENTS

1. Regions as a Topic of Comparative Research
  - 1.1 The Conceptual Problem
  - 1.2 The Theoretical Problem
  - 1.3 The Methodological Problem
  - 1.4 Conclusion
2. The Place of EU Studies in Comparative Regional Integration Studies
  - 2.1 Overcoming the 'n=1' Challenge
  - 2.2 The European Experience and Regionalism
  - 2.3 The New Regionalism Approach (NRA)
  - 2.4 Towards a More Advanced Debate on Comparative Regionalism
3. Conclusion: Thinking About the Future of Regions

### SUMMARY

Regionalism: a worldwide phenomenon. Regional projects have developed with various aims and taken different forms. Defining and comparing regions are therefore not simple tasks. This chapter is organised in three sections. First, it emphasises three essential and interrelated challenges to comparative research in regionalism that relate to the conceptualisation, the theorisation and the methodology. The approach aims to address these issues with a view to providing stronger bases to comparative analyses of regional integration. Secondly, the chapter presents the European Union's case of regional integration and the theoretical and conceptual bias towards the European enterprise. It suggests developing innovative theories to compare regions, based on increased interactions among the different conceptions worldwide. Thirdly, the chapter concludes by underlying four global trends that are likely to affect the future of regionalism: globalisation, fragmentation, economic integration, and security challenges.

### 1. REGIONS AS A TOPIC OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Since the end of the Cold War, regional integration has considerably proliferated worldwide. The European Union (EU), which achieved a single market and introduced a common currency, has been characterised as 'the most advanced instance of regionalism in world politics' (Warleigh

and Rosamond 2006: 2). But the proliferation of regionalism is by far circumscribed to Europe. In Africa, a number of regional and sub-regional organisations have flourished, such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Regional projects have also developed on the American continent, as witnessed by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) for instance. Asia is finally not an exception and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is just one example of regional initiative.

If it clearly appears that the existing regional projects operate in different geographical and contextual conditions, it is worth mentioning that there are numerous extents to which they differ. To quote but several elements, they vary in terms of scope and membership, area of activity, and purpose, but also on the level of integration and institutionalisation. The resulting distinctiveness that characterises regionalism raises a series of questions related to the reasons that account for the disparity in integration schemes and the factors that promote and contribute to deeper integration.

With a view to addressing these questions, a relevant approach to adopt an exercise of comparison of different experiences of regional integration around the world. The last decade has witnessed a significant interest in comparing projects of regional integration, and comparative regionalism as a field of study has entered a phase of dynamism and expansion (Shaw, Grant, and Cornelissen 2011). However, the attractiveness of comparative research in regional integration studies has not generated a systematic debate about the foundations of the discipline. As a result, the field of comparative regionalism is still ill-defined and characterised by several weaknesses and concerns in terms of analysis (Achayra 2012).

The present section highlights three essential and interrelated problems inherent to comparative research in regionalism under its present form. The emphasis is placed on the challenges related to the conceptualisation, the theorisation, and the methodology of comparative regionalism. The approach aims to contribute to the neglected debate on how to address these issues with a view to providing stronger bases to comparative analyses of regional integration.

### 1.1 The Conceptual Problem

The field of regionalism and regional integration in general, and the notion of region in particular, are characterised by conceptual vagueness. As a result, there is a manifest need for conceptual clarification. Dealing with the conceptual issue is of utmost importance in comparative research. Indeed, the definition of core concepts will affect the cases considered as comparable and the ability to generalise the findings of comparative research.

The concept of region refers to a territorial unit of governance that can be found above, across, or beneath the level of States. Regions are mainly created by States as tools to better cope with the forces of globalisation and localisation. As a consequence, there are different driving forces pushing toward regional governance (Van Langenhove 2010). In the case of regional governance above the State level, the driving force is regional integration. Regional governance below the State level is driven by devolution forces. As for regions across States, they are the result of cross-border cooperation. In all these cases, regions take over some of the

classical functions of States. Therefore, they can be defined as spaces of governance that are not States, but can to some extent behave *as if* they are States due to their statehood properties.

There exists a wide range of definitions of region and the thereof derived concepts owing to the plurality and multidimensionality of regional projects worldwide and to the different perspectives from which regional phenomena are studied. Historically, an important distinction has been made between *micro-regions* and *macro-regions*. The concept of micro-regions has been used to refer to subnational entities that play an intermediary role between the national and local level. As for the macro-regions, they can be defined as larger territorial areas between the national and the global level. This distinction holds implications for the study of regions as macro-regions are commonly analysed as a topic of world politics, whereas micro-regions fall under the interest of domestic politics and economics. The tendency to place the emphasis on macro-regions has, to some extent, concealed the heterogeneity of regionalism. Introducing micro-regions as a relevant issue of world politics has enabled to broaden the scope of research in regionalism. Indeed, while macro-regions are typically formal and State-led projects, regional integration at the micro-level can be a rather informal process. This new focus on informal region-building enables to take into account the wide range of non-State geopolitical actors who have the potential to initiate processes of regionalisation within and beyond the State-level. These namely include civil society, the private sector, and multinationals.

A sharp distinction between micro- and macro-regions can however not be sustained, for two main reasons. First, regions come in different sizes, and this also applies to micro- and macro-regions. Indeed, a macro-region (for example Benelux) can be smaller than a micro-region (for example Indian State of Uttar Pradesh), be it in terms of territorial area, demographic weight, or economic power. Secondly, the distinction is challenged by the evolving international environment and the increasing permeability of boundaries between the domestic and the international level. Indeed, micro-regions have increasingly been established across national borders. As a result, the relationship between micro- and macro-regions has become blurred. In order to overcome these issues, it can refer to regions as a global concept encompassing both micro- and macro-regions and emphasising the commonality of regions as constructed entities. Focusing on the key features of regions in defining the concept is critically required since a minimal agreement on the fundamentals is essential for comparative research (De Lombaerde et al. 2010).

The concept of *regionhood*, allowing the distinguishing of regions from non-regions along a series of criteria,<sup>1</sup> can help provide an insight in this regard. It defines regions as non-sovereign entities with some statehood properties. The process whereby a geographical area acquires regionhood is referred to as *regionness*. This concept was introduced by Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) in the context of the new regionalism approach (NRA). It comprehends regionalisation as a long-term process composed of five main phases:

1. *Regional social space or 'proto-region'*. A regional social space is a geographical area delimited by natural physical barriers within which people develop a kind of translocal relationship. A proto-region, while contiguous, can transcend national borders.
2. *Regional social system or regional complex*. This level is considered as the real starting point of the regionalisation process. A regional social system results from intensified social and trade exchanges between groups that were previously rather isolated. This

leads to an increased (inter)dependency among the constituent units and towards the regional system.

3. *Regional international society*. A regional international society arises from the apparition of a set of non-State actors (for example markets, transnational companies) that, in their relations, move towards transcending the national space. In cases of more institutionalised cooperation, the constituent units of the region are the members of the regional organisation.
4. *Regional community*. A regional community is a dynamic unit that has its own regional collective identity, resulting from intensified social connections and a progressive convergence of values. It is facilitated by the presence of a well-established organisational framework that promotes exchanges. As a result of the so-called mutuality, the relationship between the formal region – that is, the community of States – and the real region is reinforced.
5. *Regional institutionalised polity or 'region-state'*. A regional institutionalised polity is the result of a group of sovereign national communities voluntarily evolving into a new form of political entity. It has its own decision-making structure. The ultimate stage of a regional institutionalised polity is reached when the transfer of sovereignty to the region is total. The region therefore becomes a State as such.

This five-level process illustrates the point according to which regional organisations and arrangements that exist around the world come in different forms and under various degrees of integration and institutionalisation. It allows one to grasp the dynamic dimension of region-building and contrasts with the existing unidimensional and static definitions of regions. Identifying comparable cases based on a logical, rather than a historical, sequencing would allow comparing regions whose degree of regionhood is analogous.

As a conclusion, the diversity and multidimensionality of regionalism render *conceptual pluralism* ineluctable. However, a minimal common understanding of region and its related concepts is essential for comparative research to be grounded on firm bases. Therefore, it is recommended to formulate definitions that concentrate on the core characteristics and on the constructed dimension. The conceptualisation is key as it holds significant implications for the identification of the indicators considered as relevant in comparative research (De Lombaerde et al. 2010).

## 1.2 The Theoretical Problem

The study of regions and regional integration is also impeded by theoretical concerns. Many theories exist that explain regional phenomena. Indeed, there has been very little communication among the various theoretical perspectives, namely between realists, rationalists, constructivists, and reflectivists. In addition, scholars from different disciplines have focused their attention on specific aspects of regions and studied these entities from an exclusively geographic, economic, institutional, or legal point of view. As a result, research in the field of regionalism is highly fragmented over the various disciplines.

Therefore, there is a manifest need to develop a theoretical framework for thinking about regions based on both existing theoretical understandings and new theoretical insights.

Overcoming the barriers erected between the various disciplines and engaging in a genuine theoretical debate is essential in this regard. The ultimate objective is to bring about a cross-fertilisation of different perspectives. Based on the assumption that conceptual definitions of regionalism and related phenomena are rigorous and capture core elements, theories that are seemingly competing can be reconciled. Indeed, conceptualising regions as non-sovereign governmental systems with some statehood properties allows the study of regions of different types and scales within one single theoretical framework. On top of it, theories of regional integration can complement each other in the sense that they study the same phenomena, but the aspects they focus on are diverse and they therefore explain regional phenomena from different insights (for example historical developments, spill-over approach, cost-benefit analysis). A cross-fertilising debate and exchange of viewpoint holds enormous potential in terms of enrichment of research in regionalism. The field of comparison should be taken as an opportunity to foster such interdisciplinary discussions.

In sum, *theoretical eclecticism* follows as a logical implication of conceptual pluralism. The existing fragmentation among theories of regional integration must be overcome through the establishment of a strong and coherent interdisciplinary framework for the study of regions and related phenomena (De Lombaerde et al. 2010).

Another theoretical problem, central in comparative regionalism, is related to the so-called 'Eurocentrism'. Most theories of regionalism tend to be biased in favour of the European experience of regional integration. This point is thoroughly considered in the next section devoted to 'the place of the EU studies in comparative regional integration studies'.

### 1.3 The Methodological Problem

In the social sciences, there exist two main methodological paradigms of research. On the one hand, the *idiographic* approach focuses on single cases. The analysis aims at understanding the historical development of the case studied and is based upon qualitative tools. On the other hand, *nomothetic* research studies multiple cases in an attempt to formulate general explanations of the phenomenon addressed. Along the same line as the positivist paradigm, it relies exclusively on techniques that are acknowledged by natural sciences and on quantitative research methods. Both approaches can be applied to the study of regions. The present subsection briefly discusses their application to regional integration studies. Then, it considers the debate that opposes qualitative and quantitative methods. Finally, it argues a combination of both case study and comparative approaches would be beneficial to comparative research in regionalism and regional integration.

Idiographic	Nomothetic
Case studies	Multiple cases
Specification	Generalisation
Qualitative	Quantitative

*Idiographic and nomothetic methods applied to regions*

Scholars in the field of regionalism tend to apply the idiographic approach and focus on single case studies for a number of reasons. First, there is a perceived lack of comparable cases. This is partly due to the Eurocentric bias that considerably constrains the study of regionalisms outside Europe. A second reason is the complexity and plurality of regionalisation phenomena. Placing the emphasis on a single case allows researchers to study it thoroughly and to understand the specificities of the regionalisation process at hand. On top of that, research in the disciplines of political science and international relations is often characterised by a lack of rigour in terms of empirical testing of theoretical hypotheses by means of standardised techniques. This represents a major weakness of these disciplines that is not limited to (comparative) regionalism (De Lombaerde et al. 2010).

The predominance of the idiographic method in regionalism studies has both positive and negative implications. The focus of the approach on individual cases of regionalism enables capturing the singularity of the regionalisation process studied, taking into account a number of variables such as the historical background and the economic and political context of the case addressed. As a result, it can for instance render a detailed account of the adjustments of relevant agents to institutional transformations. In addition, scholars who conduct case studies are generally driven by their interest for the region of concern, regardless their discipline. This allows the generation of multidisciplinary knowledge about that region, its specific context, and people. Nevertheless, single cases are contextualised and constitute a weak foundation for the formulation of new generalisations or the invalidation of existing ones. Indeed, regional and area academics, exclusively focusing on their case study, tend to use a contextual language to account for phenomena and processes that are similar and could be related to each other.

Conversely, the very aim of nomothetic research, and the resulting stance adopted in comparative analysis, is to generate general concepts, questions, and hypotheses that can in turn be applied to various cases of regionalism. Embracing a comparative approach has the advantage to hedge against ethnocentric judgments that can arise when single cases are too contextualised or focus on isolated regions. However, comparative analyses have been criticised for not taking due account of cultural relativism and of the worth of generating multidisciplinary knowledge focusing on specific contexts and people. Comparative studies of regional schemes, while not prevailing, are conducted. Most of them investigate the economic implications of regional trade agreements. These assessments of impact are conducted on the basis of a series of specific indicators.

In view of the above, it becomes clear that the idiographic–nomothetic antagonism is reflected within the field of regionalism, which is consequently characterised by a tension between regional specialisation and comparative research. The existing division and the need to engage in a fruitful dialogue aimed at overcoming it are addressed in the following subsections.

*Overcoming the qualitative–quantitative debate*

The distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods can, to a great extent, be paralleled to the differences that characterise idiographic and nomothetic approaches. As already mentioned, research in the field of regionalism and regional integration has predominantly been

focused on case studies. The resulting emphasis on qualitative methods has concealed relevant aspects of processes of regionalism. Therefore, it is argued that research in the field would benefit from a more comprehensive methodological framework embracing both qualitative and quantitative practices. Integrating quantitative aspects in research has the potential to generate more robust findings. Besides its aptitude to formulate new generalisations and invalidate existing hypotheses, quantitative research contributes to fuelling conceptual, theoretical, and methodological debates by bringing new, sometimes contradicting, information. However, quantitative measures in the study of regionalism are still underdeveloped or suboptimal and, in view of their potential, due attention should be devoted to further developing them (De Lombaerde et al. 2010).

The idea of combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches as an approach that has the potential to improve the quality of research in the field of regionalism is not new. This was namely introduced by Lieberman, who designed a 'mixed-method strategy for comparative research' referred to as 'nested analysis' (Lieberman 2005). In order to frame a research strategy that overcomes the weaknesses of the existing approaches, three recommendations are formulated.

First, in order to make it possible to carry out relevant comparisons, there is a need to increase the number of comparative cases. This requires a preliminary clarification of what constitutes a 'case' in empirical research terms. A single regional organisation can be studied from different perspectives and according to the research question at hand, it will be considered as a particular case. For instance, regionalisation processes can be studied either as logical or as historical moments or lapses in time. For each of these research questions, regions studied constitute different cases. As regard the selection of comparative cases, it needs to be a purposive and theoretically framed process. In other words, the cases are selected for their relevance with regard to the research project at stake and according to criteria based on the chosen conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Case selection in comparative regionalism has often been neglected. As a result, cases for comparison have been picked for convenience reasons or according to opportunities and available options. The issue of *case selection* should therefore be taken seriously into account in order to ensure that judicious comparisons are generated.

Secondly, it is recommended to restrict the number of variables used for comparison. Besides the choice of variables, a considerable problem directly linked thereof is their translation into indicators. Indicators are too often selected with regard to data availability, which should obviously be avoided. This caveat clearly underlines the necessity to determine generally applicable criteria for the selection of indicators. As previously mentioned, the conceptualisation of the phenomenon addressed considerably influences the comparators that will be considered as relevant. The conceptualisation is to a great extent determined by the research question at hand. Therefore, the more open and flexible the conceptual framework, the wider its applicability. An example of indicators derived from the conceptual framework is provided by the proposal of the European Central Bank to measure economic integration based on the optimum currency area theory (Dorrucci et al. 2002). The identification process is described as exogenous when indicators proceed from its conceptualisation. It can however also take an endogenous form. For instance, comparators can be identified through the analysis of interregional interactions. This identification strategy is based on the assumption that regions engage in interactions if they have some characteristics in common (for example common interest). Commonality determines the indicators that are therefore set by the regions themselves, even if unintentionally. The choice of



comparators is not corroborated by a theoretical basis here. As the *selection of indicators* is always subject to some degree of subjectivity and error, the limitation of the number of comparators must be accompanied by control of a series of excluded variables.

Thirdly, increasing attention should be given to *cross-regional comparisons*. In terms of comparison, regional and area scholars focusing on single case studies have allowed for within case analyses. For instance, intraregional comparisons may focus on several cases of regional integration within Africa. Increasingly, scholars compare regionalisation processes across regions. This tendency has to be promoted as it holds great potential to improve the understanding of regional schemes evolving in different contexts. Indeed, cross-regional and intercontinental comparisons have the potential to prevent practitioners from falling into ethnocentric interpretations. There is much to learn from other experiences of regional integration around the world. One should seize this opportunity to question the foundations of our regional models and possibly increase their efficiency.

The suggested path to adopt is therefore to strike a right balance between contextualised case studies and laborious comparisons. This can be described as the 'eclectic center' perspective (Atul Kohli et al. 1995). It implies exploring a middle ground between qualitative and quantitative techniques for the study of regions in order to overcome the existing fragmentation.

An illustration of this obvious need for methodological complementarity was already provided by Nye (1968) who proposed two quantitative indicators to enable more systematic comparisons of different regional integration processes. The first indicator is based on intraregional trade and is calculated as the share of total trade by Member States of the regional organisation. It is usually understood as reflecting the success of a given integration scheme and is also used to assess its inclination to deepen integration. However, intraregional trade is directly correlated with the size of the region as large regional schemes tend to trade more within their region and less with the rest of the world and vice versa. A problem of comparability therefore arises, especially if the aim is to compare different regional integration projects in terms of success. Such scale bias can be corrected in various ways. Notwithstanding, different indicators of intraregional trade will reflect different realities and produce different rankings as a result of their design. Nye's second indicator is called service integration and reflects budgets mobilised at the regional level. Service integration is an often neglected but important variable. It provides information regarding the budgetary space for the financing of regional policy initiatives, but also as to the level of commitment of Member States. Moreover, it can contribute to assessing the sustainability of integration processes, which traditionally falls under qualitative research. Differences in sustainability or effectiveness are often interpreted as the result of different formal characteristics of the compared regional institutional frameworks and integration processes. However, assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of regional integration projects requires relating the outcomes of policies to the available resources, especially when it comes to comparisons. For instance, the European Union and the African Union were often compared owing to their institutional similarities and the AU was described as less efficient. Taking their respective budget into account is of particular relevance here as the financial resources of the EU are 10,000 times higher than those of the AU! Reflecting the availability of public funds in the analysis is therefore highly relevant and has the potential to generate more robust comparisons. This statement leads us to the already formulated conclusion according to which the key is to use both qualitative and quantitative methods in a complementary way (De Lombaerde et al. 2010).

#### 1.4 Conclusion

The field of regionalism and processes of regional integration are increasingly attracting the interest of scholars and practitioners nowadays. The adoption of a comparative perspective in studying these phenomena tends to be promoted. Comparative regionalism however remains an underdeveloped discipline. It inherited the fragmentation and the various deficiencies that characterise the field of regionalism. Dissensions among academics in comparative regionalism mostly arise from three interrelated problems. The challenges are conceptual (related to the definition of the concepts and phenomena studied), theoretical (linked to the theoretical framework to use), and methodological (regarding the choice of methods and their application). Further developments of comparative regionalism should be based on a positive dialogue between the diverging conceptual, theoretical, and methodological points of view. Owing to the multidimensional and heterogeneous nature of regional phenomena, eclecticism has to be embraced. Endorsing conceptual pluralism, theoretical interdisciplinarity, and methodological balance is the key to enable constructive studies and relevant findings with regards to regional phenomena and processes.

## 2. THE PLACE OF EU STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE REGIONAL INTEGRATION STUDIES

This section introduces the European case of integration. In view of the proliferation of regional integration initiatives worldwide, it argues that European concepts and theories have proved inadequate when transposed to other enterprises of integration occurring in different contexts, owing to their obvious bias towards European integration. Therefore, the section advances an alternative approach to studying regions today. As a conclusion, it suggests developing innovative theories to compare regions, drawing on the existing approaches and based on increased interactions among the diverging views.

### 2.1 Overcoming the 'n=1' Challenge

Since the end of the Second World War and even before, the project of European integration has attracted considerable interest among scholars and researchers. As a result, 'grand theories' of European integration were developed, whereas new theoretical insights comprehending the European phenomenon from alternative perspectives continued to emerge. Owing to the considerable theorisation of the European pattern of integration and the prevalence of theories aimed at explaining the EU phenomenon, the European model has established itself as a reference. This is referred to as the n=1 problem.

The n=1 problem relates to the perception of the European Union as a unique achievement worldwide, due to its high level of economic integration, institutionalisation, and its authority (Marks et al. 1997). Such an emphasis on the uniqueness of the European project may prove problematic in the field of comparative regionalism in cases where it regards the EU as not having any meaningful counterparts among the existing regional organisations worldwide. This

implies two fundamental problems, as raised by Pollack (1997). First, the focus on the European Union as a single case makes empirical testing of theories a difficult endeavour. And the absence of systematic testing of theoretical hypotheses in turn entails the infrequent invalidation of EU theories. Secondly, owing to the EU's *sui generis* character, theoretical propositions formulated regarding the European Union cannot be generalised to other cases of regional integration or political regimes.

Recognising the unique nature of the European Union does however not automatically lead to a deadlock and the  $n=1$  problem can potentially be circumvented. This implies regarding the EU as a regional integration scheme that in certain aspects is like *all* regional projects; like *some* or like *none*. The key is thus to strike the appropriate balance between specification and generalisation. The European Union has often been considered as a single case in view of its high level of integration. Nevertheless, there exist numerous other dependent variables (besides integration) from which the European project can be studied. A certain level of abstraction can be achieved in EU studies by disaggregating the European phenomenon into several dimensions. This would enable systematic comparisons with other cases of integration based on the decomposition of the *sui generis* EU into several cases, which constitute units for comparison. For instance, Marks (1997) suggested studying the European Union in terms of economic integration exclusively. This makes it an entity that is comparable to other free trade areas or customs unions worldwide such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), or Mercosur. Focusing on the economic dimension enables further analysis of the type, level, and depth of economic integration and investigates the potential for causal effects in this regard. The identification of cases that are comparable to the EU along specified dimensions would contribute to solving the first issue identified by Pollack (1997) – that is, the absence of empirical testing of theories. Indeed, conducting comparisons would provide new insights as to phenomena of regional integration, and experiences that differ from the European venture would help question the fundamentals and theoretical propositions on which our understanding of European integration is based. More systemic testing of hypotheses regarding the EU phenomenon on the basis of comparison findings would in turn prevent EU scholars from excessive specification. This partly answers Pollack's second issue related to the lack of generalisability of theoretical propositions applying to the EU to other comparable cases.

A remaining issue relates to the multidimensionality of the European adventure. Inevitably, the various dimensions into which the European case is artificially disaggregated for comparison purposes interact with each other. The effects of specific policies targeted towards a specific dimension (for example economic integration) may lead to unforeseen developments and affect other dimensions (for example political integration), as highlighted by the so-called spill-over effect. Therefore, the different dimensions of an RI enterprise are difficult to isolate. In extreme cases, completely different findings might stem from comparing the EU with another regional economic scheme on the basis of exactly the same set of economic policies.

## 2.2 The European Experience and Regionalism

As a consequence of the uniqueness of the European experience of integration and the considerable attention given to theorising it, early approaches to regional integration (RI) were predominantly focused on Europe. Phenomena of regional integration beyond

Europe were nevertheless not ignored. To quote but an example, Haas and Schmitter (1964) examined regional integration in Latin America by applying neofunctionalist concepts. This is considered as an early attempt at comparative regionalism (Börzel 2011). Progressively, the field of comparative regional integration studies developed, and analyses started approaching different experiences of regional integration in a comparative perspective. However, owing to the impressive theorisation and the perceived supremacy of European integration, phenomena of regional integration worldwide have tended to be considered through the European lens. Indeed, scholars – even when aware of their Eurocentrism – have applied concepts and processes that typically characterise the European phenomenon to other integration schemes (Söderbaum 2008). As a result, general hypotheses regarding RI phenomena have been formulated on the basis of the European experience (Breslin et al. 2002). Yet, integration in less developed countries has followed completely different patterns as it is based on different conditions, underlying motives, and purposes. Eurocentred approaches can thus be detrimental to the field of comparative regionalism if applied to phenomena of regional integration beyond Europe as they do not allow grasping the diversity and specificities of all RI schemes and processes, which results in a distorted understanding of regional integration outside Europe.

The 1970s marked a temporary period of stagnation in European integration – referred to as ‘eurosclerosis’ – that lasted until the mid-1980s. This trend was not confined to Europe as other projects of regional integration worldwide were mainly unsuccessful at that time. A new impetus to regionalism was given at the end of the Cold War which witnessed a considerable expansion, in number, scope, and diversity, of regional and sub-regional arrangements. This sudden revival of interest was driven by a number of factors, most of which arising from globalisation and the increased interdependence.

### 2.3 The New Regionalism Approach (NRA)

In view of the changing global context and the new aspects of regionalism, some scholars, including Hettne and Söderbaum, began arguing that a new theoretical framework would be needed to better grasp the reality in which regions are evolving. Their perception of regionalism today as a new phenomenon became embodied in the ‘new regionalism approach’. New regionalism applies to post-Cold War phenomena of regionalism. It is opposed to ‘old regionalism’, considered as a phenomenon that emerged in the 1950s and died out in the 1970s, mostly studied by EU scholars.

The main characteristics of ‘new regionalism’ are the following. Firstly, a major contribution of new regionalism lies in the account it takes of *globalisation* and the transformations it implies. The relationship between regionalism and globalisation is at the core of the new regionalist debate. Both processes are considered as interacting and mutually constitutive. The effects and direction of their relationship are however more controversial. Some scholars perceive



regionalism and globalisation as incompatible and conflicting, while others regard them as mutually reinforcing processes (Hettne and Söderbaum 2009). Secondly, *openness* is key in new regionalism. In contrast to the closure of old regionalism, today's regionalism can be described as *open, namely in terms* of membership. States – both developed and developing – are increasingly engaged in one or several regional arrangements. This choice for intensified interdependence is made by States in response to globalisation forces. A direct consequence of the increased participation in regional projects is overlapping membership, which seems to be a conscious strategy adopted on account of discriminating and protectionist policies applied to non-members (Tsardanidis 2005). Thirdly, regionalism today develops in a more *spontaneous* way. Contrary to the State-centred perspective adopted by old regionalism, new regionalism makes room for a wide range of new actors besides States. The building of regions becomes a spontaneous process influenced by societal and economic forces that emerge below, within, but also beyond regions themselves. Powerful political and economic actors, such as transnational businesses and corporations, non-governmental organisations, civil society and interest groups, are important drivers of regional integration (Hettne and Söderbaum 2009). New regionalism does however not perceive the role of States as diminished. States engage in processes of region-building in response to globalisation and the growing range of issues it entails. Regions, by undertaking a series of tasks traditionally falling under the States' responsibility, have to be understood as complementing and reinforcing – rather than threatening – the State with the aim of jointly achieving better governance. Fourthly, the emphasis on the level of institutionalisation has diminished in favour of more *flexibility*. Many regional groupings have opted for institutional architectures that are looser than the supranational and bureaucratic structures of the European Union for instance. Fifthly, regionalism has become a *multidimensional* phenomenon. Owing to the emergence of new issues, economic or political concerns are no longer the sole drivers behind regional integration. Global problems, such as environment or security, increasingly prompt countries to cooperate and find solutions at the regional level (Tsardanidis 2005). Sixthly, new regionalism is also characterised by an increase in *interregional relations*. Regions interact with each other in a mutually constitutive way. In other words, their behaviour is influenced and shapes the behaviour of other regions with which they interact. A relevant illustration in this regard is provided by the European Union that spares no effort in promoting regionalism worldwide. In Africa, the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) has also inspired other regional integration schemes.

Globalization

Openness

Spontaneity

Flexibility

Multidimensional-  
sionalityInter-  
Regionalism

#### 2.4 Towards a More Advanced Debate on Comparative Regionalism

It is important to mention that the new regionalism approach does not receive unanimous support in the academic community. Theories and concepts of European integration remain dominant in the field of regionalism. Summing up the above developments, two major attitudes towards European integration theories can be drawn up. On the one hand, and as highlighted in sub-section 2.2, some scholars tend to elevate European integration theories through

comparative analysis and produce generalisations based on the European experience taken as a standard. As a result, comparative analyses in regionalism have been hampered by supposed regional integration theories that were nothing more than 'the translation of a particular set of European experiences into a more abstract theoretical language' (Hurrell 2005: 49). On the other hand and in response to this criticism, several scholars have attempted to avoid Eurocentric interpretations by formulating alternative theories of regional integration, such as the NRA described in the previous sub-section.

None of these antithetical approaches are recommended. Indeed, overcoming Eurocentredness is undoubtedly required in order to advance the debate about comparative regionalism. However, overlooking the European experience and the richness of its theorisation would be short-sighted. Indeed, the field of comparative regionalism has much to gain from overcoming the existing barriers between studies of regionalism in Europe and in other parts of the world. The key challenge is to both integrate concepts that are peculiar to the European experience of integration and move beyond Eurocentric interpretations. This can potentially be achieved by promoting communication between EU studies and regionalism in other parts of the world. EU studies have indeed much to gain from taking up the ambitious challenge of developing concepts and theories of regional integration that are truly generalisable to other contexts and experiences. This approach would also imply taking stock of theories of regionalism and regional integration developed outside Europe. Concepts such as 'pan-Africanism', which mirrors African aspirations to create a highly integrated regional arrangement covering the whole African territory, or 'growth triangle', developed in Southeast Asia to describe phenomena of regional integration involving three countries, are just two interesting examples in this regard. They potentially constitute relevant (non-European) contributions to building a framework that would allow for the conduct of informed comparisons.

### 3. CONCLUSION: THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF REGIONS

The world today is facing considerable challenges. It is confronted with a wide range of complex and interlinked issues. Core concerns such as insecurity, conflicts and human rights violations, poverty and inequality, energy security and climate change, environmental and health issues can have a global impact and therefore call for global and jointly designed solutions. In this context, one can legitimately wonder what will be the future of regionalism and regional integration. The latter is likely to be affected by four current global trends. These trends encompass the global integration of the world order; the fragmentation of governance; the external forces to economic integration; and the opportunities in terms of peace and security governance.

Globalization

Fragmentation

Economic  
Integration

Peace and  
Security

Firstly, today's world can, to an increasing extent, be described as global. This phenomenon is however not new. As early as in 1964, McLuhan coined the concept of 'global village' as one grasping an increasingly linked and interconnected global community, resulting from new

electronic media of communication (McLuhan 1964). Globalisation, coupled with the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICT), the opening of frontiers, and the increased mobility, contributed to create a world where many possibilities to communicate efficiently and quickly are available and where global interactions and exchanges are growing as a result. This has a significant impact on global integration as it is first and foremost a process that involves and is led by people. The evolution and growing accessibility of information and communication technologies, such as the (mobile) phone, television, and internet, but also of means of transport, including trains, cars, ships, and aircraft, render communication among citizens from all around the world more likely. The resulting social and cultural exchanges contribute to creating a world moving towards a convergence of views and opinions across borders. Ideally, a fully integrated global arena would take the form of a worldwide community sharing common perceptions of present challenges and future directions.

Secondly, serious consideration must be given to the increased tendencies towards fragmentation on the one hand, and disintegration on the other. Governance has become multipolar, but also multi-levelled. Processes of devolution have increasingly been taking place where States delegate to subnational entities a series of tasks traditionally falling under their responsibility. Such processes, led by States, are driven by the willingness to promote a system of governance that better answers to local and regional expectations and needs. They have been witnessed in Europe – think of the decentralised organisation of countries such as Belgium, Germany, or Scotland, and Catalonia's autonomy claims – but also in India, Russia, and China. To an increasing extent, these subnational entities and governments aim at making their voice heard at the international level and at establishing themselves as global players. At the same time, existing regional organisations do not necessarily stay operational or effective. In some cases, there are calls for or even evidence of disintegration. Recently, the hypothesis of a disintegration of the European Union was even put forward. The financial and euro crises that put the European Union to a severe test indeed contributed to generate uncertainty regarding the future of the EU project, even amongst the most fervent supporters of European integration. Understanding the limits of integration and the costs of disintegration is therefore of high relevance today.

Thirdly, the drivers of economic integration are changing. For a long time, especially in Europe, integration was motivated by internal factors. It was namely based upon the desire to avoid wars and promote peaceful relations among Member States. Today's reality is different. The United States, China, and India alone account for 52 per cent of the world GDP. As for Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, and Mexico, they contribute 13.7 per cent to the total. Accordingly, 65 per cent of the world GDP is taken up by solely seven out of the 193 existing countries. The projection for 2050 even foresees that these 65 per cent will be attributed to three States only. This considerably underplays the importance of the vast majority of States across the world. Yet, they have the possibility to assert themselves at the international level by pooling their efforts and acting as regional bodies. Hence regional economic spaces are increasingly created as a result external pressures and economic competition. Considerable challenges arise today as a result of the interacting forces of globalisation, fragmentation, and competition, especially for developing and poor countries.

Fourthly, despite the determination of the United Nations to end the scourge of war and maintain international peace and security (UN Charter 1945, Preamble and Article 1.1), conflicts have continued proliferating worldwide since 1945. The ubiquity of conflicts makes it difficult

for the U  
and calls  
potentia  
the grou  
to deploy  
knowled  
compara  
which th  
more tha  
The Arab  
regional  
role in th

Together  
affect the  
forces of  
significan  
voice hea  
and secu  
years, en  
have to a  
World an  
orientati

#### TEST Q

1. W
2. Ex
3. W
4. W
5. C
6. C
7. Ex
8. W

#### FURTH

De Lomba  
Manu  
De Lomba  
De Lomba  
comp

for the UN to respond efficiently, or at all, to all threats to peace, security, and human rights, and calls for enterprising players to step in alongside the UN. Regional organisations have to potential to play such a role and their involvement in the field of peace and security is justified on the grounds of a couple of attributes. These include their geographical proximity and capacity to deploy troops swiftly, their particular interest in solving the conflict, and their comprehensive knowledge and experience in the region (Alagappa 1997: 422). Regional organisations' comparative advantage opens the path to an effective task-sharing with the United Nations, in which they would ease the burden on the UN by undertaking a number of interventions. Today, more than ever, regional governance of peace and security has gained new opportunities. The Arab Spring and the international intervention in Libya clearly illustrate the potential for regional organisations such as the League of Arab States and the African Union to play a major role in the field of peace and security.

Together, these four trends will be at the heart of geopolitics in the next years. They will also affect the future of regionalism. Regional integration will continue to be a process influenced by forces of globalisation and fragmentation. Drivers for regional economic integration will remain significant, given the willingness of the vast majority of relatively small States to make their voice heard against the few main international players. Finally, the regional dimension of peace and security governance is likely to be increasingly recognised as highly relevant. In the coming years, entities and actors with the ambition to play a role on the regional and global stage will have to adjust their strategy to today's globalising world and constantly changing environment. World and regional leaders are expected to take informed and responsible decisions and orientations. In shaping the policy agenda today, they shape our future.

## TEST QUESTIONS

1. What is regional integration and how does it relate to globalisation and multilateralism?
2. Explain the main challenges in setting up comparative research on regional integration.
3. What is a region?
4. What is the role of theories in comparing regions?
5. Compare the idiographic and nomothetic approaches in studying regions.
6. Compare the qualitative and quantitative methods in studying regions.
7. Explain what is the 'n=1' challenge in the study of regions.
8. What are the main characteristics of the NRA?

## FURTHER READING

- De Lombaerde, Philippe, Renato Flores, Lelio Iapadre, and Michael Schulz, eds, *The Regional Integration Manual: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- De Lombaerde, Philippe and Michael Schulz, eds, *The EU and World Regionalism*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.
- De Lombaerde, Philippe, Fredrik Söderbaum, Luk van Langenhove, and Francis Baert. 'The problem of comparison in comparative regionalism.' *Review of International Studies* 36(3) (2010): 731–53.



- Farrell, Mary, Björn Hettne, and Luk van Langenhove, eds, *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice*. London: Pluto Press, 2005.
- Laursen, Finn, *Comparative Regional Integration: Europe and Beyond*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.
- Shaw, Timothy M., J. Andrew Grant and Scarlett Cornelissen, eds, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- Telò, Mario, *European Union and New Regionalism*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- van Langenhove, Luk, *Building Regions: The Regionalization of the World Order*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- van Langenhove, Luk, Why We Need to 'Unpack' Regions to Compare Them More Effectively. *The International Spectator* 47(1) (2012): 16–29.
- Warleigh-Lack, Alex and Luk van Langenhove, 'Rethinking EU Studies: The Contribution of Comparative Regionalism'. *Journal of European Integration*, 32(6) (2010): Special issue.

### Websites

- Regional Integration Knowledge Platform (RIKS): <http://www.cris.unu.edu/riks/web/>.
- United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS): <http://www.cris.unu.edu/>.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These include: actorness, rationality, reciprocity, and identity. See van Langenhove, *Building Regions*, 81–6.