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Comparative Regionalism beyond Europe versus the rest

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Abstract

What is the current state of Comparative Regionalism (CR) as a field of research? Since its inception, CR has suffered from a chasm between those who take European integration as the model for conceptualising, theorising, comparing, and designing regionalism worldwide, and the critics, who reject EU-centrism in favour of more contextualised approaches focusing on the Global South. This paper challenges this characterisation by showing how CR has fundamentally changed in the last decade or so. We detail three 'silent' transformations: (i) *conceptually*, scholars disaggregate regionalism into specific components, rendering systematic comparison more tractable and less individual case-centric; (ii) *theoretically*, scholars develop frameworks that build on general social science theories and actively seek to move beyond EU-centrism; and (iii) *methodologically*, scholars use more rigorous comparative designs and a broader range of data. These changes, we suggest, indicate a 'mainstreaming' of CR, with attendant benefits and costs.

Keywords: comparative regionalism; EU-centrism; European Union; regional integration; regional organisation

Introduction

What is the current state of Comparative Regionalism (CR) as a field of research?[1] For more than 60 years, two perspectives have dominated. On one side, there is a long tradition of taking European integration as the foundation and model, even as the 'gold standard', for conceptual development, theory-building, comparison, and the design of regional institutions and policies. This has given rise to numerous hub-and-spoke comparisons centred on the European Union (EU)[2]. On the other side, scholars reject the EU as the key referent due to its alleged uniqueness and the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological problems of EU-centrism.[3] Consequently, scholars

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[1]We understand CR as an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the nature, drivers, dynamics, and consequences of processes of state-led regionalism and private actor-led regionalisation beyond the national state in comparative perspective. It draws on a range of academic disciplines including political science, International Relations, economics, law, and area studies.

[2]For the sake of simplicity, we use the acronym EU to refer to the European Union as well as its predecessors.

[3]José Briceño Ruiz, *Estudiando el regionalismo latinoamericano desde el pensamiento propio* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones sobre América Latina y el Caribe, 2021); Ulf Engel, Heidrun Zinecker, Frank Mattheis, Antje Dietze and Thomas Plötze (eds), *The New Politics of Regionalism: Perspectives from Africa, Latin America and Asia-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2018); Alex Warleigh-Lack, Nick Robinson, and Ben Rosamond (eds), *New Regionalism and the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2011); Sebastian Krapohl (ed.), *Regional Integration in the Global South: External Influence on Economic Cooperation in ASEAN, MERCOSUR and SADC* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

theorise and compare *non*-European cases. We refer to this chasm as that between the EU versus the rest.[4]

While most scholars view CR as 'a dynamic research field'[5] and one 'whose time has come',[6] dissatisfaction with its current state persists. The two sides criticise each other based on what each sees as its respective strength, reifying the divide. On one side, the field is criticised for continued EU-centrism. Acharya emphasises that 'regionalism is not a European or Western idea or approach, but has had world-wide heritage and multiple manifestations. But theories of regionalism barely reflect this fact. Its theoretical literature remains European Union (EU)-centric.'[7] Similarly, Katzenstein insists that even though 'in comparison to Europe, Asian regionalism is not well institutionalized', this should not lead to the 'unwarranted assumption that the European experience is setting the standards by which Asian regionalism should be measured'.[8] On the other side, scholars lament a lack of rigour in CR. They deride the field as underdeveloped due to a lack of agreement on common concepts[9] and a deficit of rigorous theory-building[10] as well as of systematic and methodologically sound comparisons.[11] What unites these critics, and their diverse calls for change, is the assumption that the research field is permeated by a chasm between the EU versus the rest.

This paper challenges the accuracy and continued relevance of this characterisation. We argue that the calls for change described above misconceive significant parts of ongoing research practice by describing three transformations: (1) *conceptually*, scholars increasingly disaggregate regionalism into specific components, such as individual policies, governance mechanisms, norms, or institutions, rendering systematic comparison more tractable and less individual case-centric; (2) *theoretically*, scholars develop frameworks that build on general social science theories and actively

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[4]Historically, the divide pitched scholars of European integration against scholars of regionalism in the developing world. Today, the divide is usually framed in terms of EU versus regionalism in the Global South. In our view, the 'rest' is a more adequate label because it encompasses regions, such as the post-Soviet space, that do not conventionally form part of the Global South.

[5]Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, 'Three cheers for comparative regionalism', in Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 621–48 (p. 639).

[6]Amitav Acharya, 'Comparative regionalism: A field whose time has come?', *The International Spectator*, 47:1 (2012), pp. 3–15.

[7]Amitava Acharya, 'Regionalism beyond EU-centrism', in Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 109–32 (p. 109); see also Lorenzo Fioramonti and Frank Mattheis, 'Is Africa really following Europe? An integrated framework for comparative regionalism', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54:3 (2016), pp. 674–90; Densua Mumford, 'Comparative regionalism's decolonial turn: A proposition', *E-International Relations* (blog) (2020), available at: {https://www.e-ir.info/2020/10/03/comparative-regionalisms-decolonial-turn-a-proposition}; Emmanuel Balogun, 'Comparative regionalism', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.554}.

[8]Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Regionalism in comparative perspective', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 31:2 (1996), pp. 123–59; see also Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[9]Alessandra Russo, 'Comparative regionalism: Still emerging, already to be reformed?', *International Politics Reviews*, 4:1 (2016), pp. 7–16; Alberta Sbragia, 'Comparative regionalism: What might it be?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 46:1 (2008), pp. 29–49; Gian Luca Gardini and Andrés Malamud, 'Debunking interregionalism: Concepts, types and critique – with a pan-Atlantic focus', in Frank Mattheis and Andréas Litsegård (eds), *Interregionalism across the Atlantic Space* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018), pp. 15–31.

[10]Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose & State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Shahar Hameiri, 'Theorising regions through changes in statehood: Rethinking the theory and method of comparative regionalism', *Review of International Studies*, 39:2 (2013), pp. 313–35; Krapohl, *Regional Integration in the Global South*.

[11]Carlos Closa, 'Mainstreaming regionalism', Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. 2015/12; Hameiri, 'Theorising regions'; Thomas J. Volgy, Paul Bezerra, Jacob Cramer and J. P. Rhamey, 'The case for comparative regional analysis in international politics', *International Studies Review*, 19:3 (2017), pp. 452–80 (p. 453). Also compare Philippe De Lombaerde, Fredrik Söderbaum, Luk Van Langenhove, and Francis Baert, 'The problem of comparison in comparative regionalism', *Review of International Studies*, 36:3 (2010), pp. 731–53.

question and seek to move beyond EU-centrism; and (3) *methodologically*, scholars employ more rigorous comparative designs feeding off of new empirical material derived from the recent 'data revolution'. These transformations entail the growing integration of the EU within a genuinely comparative research agenda, while suggesting that the chasm between the EU and regionalism in the rest of the world has ceased to be CR's defining characteristic.[12]

Having gone largely unnoticed, these transformations herald a significant 'mainstreaming' of research practice in line with other areas of political science, International Relations, and Comparative Area Studies.[13] By steering a middle ground between EU-centric 'integration snobbery'[14] and exaggerated 'area-centricity',[15] the threefold transformation has yielded net benefits. However, CR not only continues to have shortcomings in terms of its own transforming agenda, but there are also the more general costs of 'mainstreaming'.

We proceed in six sections. Setting the stage, the next two sections provide brief historical reviews of how the divide is reflected in, respectively, EU-centric and EU-critical scholarship.[16] The next three sections focus on the three transformations. The conclusion discusses continued shortcomings of the CR agenda and develops ideas on how to mitigate them.

'Integration snobbery': EU-centric regional integration scholarship

The study of regionalism in comparative perspective emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the keyword was 'regional integration', which reflected the dominance of European integration theory and practice. In this perspective, the EU was seen as the most 'advanced' instance of regional integration, and the analytical challenge for scholarship was to identify the conditions that made it such while using those conditions to understand (and predict) the trajectory of regionalism in other parts of the world. Dominated by International Relations scholars and Europeanists, this strand of literature has broadly generalised across diverse contexts on the basis of EU-centric concepts and theories as well as hub-and-spoke comparisons.

Even if early regional integration scholars were acutely aware of the complex character of the European Communities (EC) and of the problem of comparability, they promoted EU-centric comparisons with other regions. Neofunctionalists like Ernst Haas and Philippe Schmitter searched first and foremost for those 'background conditions', 'functional equivalents', and 'spill-over' effects that were derived from the study of European integration.[17] Indeed, the EC was considered the 'gold standard', and these scholars believed in imitating or learning from the European integration experience. Haas's own words are worth repeating:

> Integration among discrete political units is a historical fact in Europe, but disintegration seems to be the dominant *motif* elsewhere. Cannot the example of successful integration in Europe be imitated? Could not the techniques of international and supranational cooperation

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[12]While we are aware that there are significant non-English speaking literatures, especially on Latin America and Africa (French, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.), we primarily cite English-speaking sources since many of the regular contributors to the topic also publish in English, at least occasionally. We acknowledge that this may be seen to reinforce 'linguistic imperialism'. See Ersel Aydinli and Julie Aydinli, 'Exposing linguistic imperialism: Why global IR has to be multilingual', *Review of International Studies*, 50:6 (2024), pp. 943–64.

[13]Ariel Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil (eds), *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[14]Philomena Murray, 'Comparative regional integration in the EU and East Asia: Moving beyond integration snobbery', *International Politics*, 47 (2010), pp. 308–23.

[15]William R. Thompson, 'The regional subsystem: A conceptual explication and a propositional inventory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 17:1 (1973), pp. 89–117 (p. 89).

[16]Our distinction spans different time periods and thus moves beyond earlier temporal distinctions within Comparative Regionalism, such as that between old and new regionalism. While there is some affinity with our preferred distinction, this temporal distinction is closely tied to the changing character of regionalism after the Cold War and is thus rather time-specific.

[17]Ernst Haas and Philippe Schmitter, 'Economics and differential patterns of political integration: Projections about unity in Latin America', *International Organization*, 18:3 (1964), pp. 705–37.

developed in Luxembourg, Paris, and Brussels be put in use in Accra, Bangkok, and Cairo, as well as on the East River in New York?[18]

Haas explained that the lack of regional integration outside of Europe resulted from the fact that 'countries dominated by a non-pluralistic social structure are poor candidates for participation in the integration process'.[19] The same observation spurred Nye to develop a revised neofunctionalist model to accommodate the higher degree of politicisation in less-developed societies such as those in Africa.[20] Yet the neofunctionalist approach had difficulties in identifying comparable cases, and its proponents were regularly confronted with what was often referred to as 'failed' regional integration attempts elsewhere.

The emergence of 'European integration studies' from the 1970s considerably deepened the divide between the study of Europe and that of other regions because large parts of the scholarly community came to consider the EC as a nascent polity in its own right, with no appropriate comparators among regional integration projects. As Caporaso notes, 'as the European Community (EC) developed, thickened its institutional base, expanded the scope of its policy competences, and in general became more complex, it also came to be studied more narrowly, in isolation from other regional integration processes'.[21] Growing agreement on the EC's distinctiveness, even uniqueness, obviated the usefulness of cross-regional comparison – the N=1 problem.[22] Following another major boost of the newly-created EU's authority with the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s, scholars tried to escape the parochialism related to the N=1 problem by seeking comparisons with federal systems in advanced industrial states, such as the United States. As a result, established tools of political science and comparative politics could be used in studying the EU, while this move implied that International Relations was not equipped to deal with the complexities of the modern EU.[23] This enabled EU scholars to circumvent the N=1 problem but reinforced the gap between EU Studies and regionalism in the rest of the world.

After the end of the Cold War, regionalism proliferated and spurred a new literature on 'comparative regional integration', especially in the fields of International Relations, political science, and economics. Ironically, even though many EU scholars had come to perceive the EU as a state-in-the-making rather than a traditional international intergovernmental organisation, scholars in other fields often continued to compare other regional integration projects – implicitly or explicitly – against the backdrop of the EU's path.[24] From this perspective, European integration was usually considered multidimensional, highly institutionalised, and generally successful – both descriptive and prescriptive contentions – whereas regionalism in the rest of the world was often seen as informal, weakly institutionalised, or failed;[25] it did not constitute the 'real thing'.[26] Such assessments often derived from hub-and-spoke comparisons centred on the EU and/or the application of EU-centric integration theories, by the standards of which other regional projects appeared to

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[18] Ernst B. Haas, 'International integration: The European and the universal process', *International Organization*, 15:3 (1961), pp. 366–92 (p. 366).

[19] Haas, 'International integration', p. 375.

[20] Joseph S. Nye, *Peace in Parts: Integration and Conflict in Regional Organization* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).

[21] James A. Caporaso, Gary Marks, Andrew Moravcsik, and Mark A. Pollack, 'Does the European Union represent an n of 1?', *ECSA Review* X:3 (Fall 1997).

[22] Caporaso et al., 'Does the European Union represent an n of 1?'.

[23] Alberta Sbragia, *Euro-Politics: Institutions and Policymaking in the 'New' European Community* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1992); Simon Hix, 'The study of the European Community: The challenge to comparative politics', *West European Politics*, 17:1 (1994), pp. 1–30; see also Closa, 'Mainstreaming regionalism'.

[24] Finn Laursen, *Comparative Regional Integration: Theoretical Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Walter Mattli, 'Explaining regional integration outcomes', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 6:1 (1999), pp. 1–27.

[25] Mattli, 'Explaining regional integration outcomes'; Finn Laursen, *Comparative Regional Integration: Europe and Beyond* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).

[26] Sunhyuk Kim and Philippe C. Schmitter, 'The experience of European integration and potential for northeast Asian integration', *Asian Perspective*, 29:2 (2005), pp. 5–39.

be deficient. Murray refers to these practices as 'integration snobbery', positioning the EU on an 'unsteady pedestal' and reinforcing the polarisation between the EU and regionalism in the rest of the world.[27]

'Area-centricity': EU-critical regional cooperation scholarship

Discussions about regionalism in the developing world from the late 1950s onwards were heavily influenced by the structuralist tradition of economic development, especially in Latin America and Africa. This tradition shifted the focus away from the European concern with liberal economic integration as a means to avoid war towards regional economic cooperation as a means of economic development as well as autonomous state formation and nation building.[28] The underlying conditions for regionalism, and the goals pursued through it, were assumed to be so different in the developing world when compared to Europe that a different theory was called for and comparison was considered fruitless.[29] Scholars deliberately spoke of 'regional cooperation', in juxtaposition to the debates on 'regional integration' that were viewed to be EU-centric.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, many scholars and policymakers believed that there was a 'model' for regionalism that applied across the developing world, but it was not the EU. However, most scholars specialised in a particular region and neglected cross-regional comparisons – what Thompson[30] referred to as 'area-centricity'. It was widely assumed that the political and historical context of regionalism was of fundamental importance, and different regions were therefore believed to be too different to compare. The tendency of scholars to eschew comparison across regions led to the proliferation of new or the idiosyncratic use of existing concepts to gauge the specifics of particular regions. Rather than seeking to make concepts travel and to generalise insights, scholars in this area studies tradition were usually content with confining their claims to single cases of regional cooperation or, at the most, to individual world regions. This served as a breeding ground for parochialism, quite similar to the N=1 problem within EU Studies.[31]

This changed in the 1990s. The explosion of literature on the 'new regionalism' emphasised that regionalism was a global and multidimensional phenomenon, involving both state and non-state actors across a growing number of policy fields and in a variety of institutional forms.[32] This literature highlighted a divergence of regional tendencies in different parts of the world and in so doing offered alternative understandings of regional dynamics. While the EU-centric 'regional integration' approach often emphasised the failure of formal and state-led regionalism in much of the Global South, a comprehensive and quickly growing literature highlighted a range of both structural and context-specific drivers, processes, and effects that hitherto had received limited attention within the EU-centric literature, such as regionalism as a political response to neoliberal globalisation, regionalism versus regionalisation, and regime-boosting regionalism.[33] This literature was keener than its predecessor to compare across regions of the Global South, but the unsystematic usage of concepts and theoretical approaches hampered progress. In fact, some diagnosed a fragmentation of the research field into isolated

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[27] Murray, 'Comparative regional integration'.

[28] Acharya, 'Regionalism beyond EU-centrism'.

[29] Andrew Axline, 'Underdevelopment, dependence, and integration: The politics of regionalism in the Third World', *International Organization*, 31:1 (1977), pp. 83–105; also see Acharya, 'Regionalism beyond EU-centrism'.

[30] Thompson, 'The regional subsystem'.

[31] Alex Warleigh-Lack and Ben Rosamond, 'Across the EU Studies-new regionalism Frontier: Invitation to a Dialogue', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48:4 (September 2010), pp. 993–1013.

[32] Björn Hettne, Andreas Inotai, and Osvaldo Sunkel (eds), *Globalism and the New Regionalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Shaun Breslin and Richard Higgott, 'Studying regions: Learning from the old, constructing the new', *New Political Economy*, 5:3 (2000), pp. 333–52.

[33] Hettne et al., *Globalism and the New Regionalism*; Breslin and Higgott, 'Studying regions'; Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy Shaw, *Theories of New Regionalism: A Palgrave Reader* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

regional debates, 'producing studies of multiple regions that are in a fundamental way not comparative'.[34]

While Europe or the EU were sometimes included in cross-regional comparisons, scholars often did not see comparison with Europe as beneficial because they feared the intellectual hegemony of EU scholarship and sometimes even the EU as a case. Indeed, there seemed to be an underlying assumption in parts of this scholarship that it was not possible to compare other regions to the EU without falling back on EU-centrism, rationalism, and/or positivism.[35] Although a rich variety of constructivist, critical, and new regionalism approaches offered valuable insights and venues for comparison across different regions (sometimes including Europe), the split between the EU and the rest continued to shape the research field.[36] Several attempts in the 2000s that tried to promote a dialogue between EU studies and the New Regionalism tended to retain hub-and-spoke comparisons with the EU, implying that the EU maintained a dominant position.[37]

Since the mid-2010s, however, a fundamental transformation of CR has been underway, which we describe in the next three sections. This transformation, we argue, combines the EU-centric regional integration perspective's focus on general comparison with the EU-critical regional cooperation perspective's plea for eschewing EU-centrism.

Transforming conceptualisation: Disaggregating cooperation and integration

The first transformation of CR during the last decade concerns the way in which scholars conceptualise regionalism as an object of study. Much prior research sought to analyse processes of regionalism in their entirety, while core concepts were contested both analytically (how are they best defined and operationalised?) and normatively (what referents and normative ambitions do they invoke?). As shown above, the Europe-versus-the-rest divide was partially reflected in the use of concepts such as regional cooperation versus regional integration. The holistic conceptual perspective has today given way to a dominant style of analysis that disaggregates regionalism into more specific elements, such as individual policy fields, norms, governance mechanisms, or institutions. This conceptual transformation is closely related to the expansion of regionalism as an empirical phenomenon, specifically the growing scope and differentiation of regionalism in terms of policy fields[38] and the expanded authority of many regional organisations, which has entailed a growing complexity in institutional frameworks and a more diverse set of participating actors.[39] An essential result of these developments is not only that systematic comparison has

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[34]Young Choi and James Caporaso, 'Comparative regional integration', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 480–99 (p. 481); cf. Rick Fawn, '"Regions" and their study: Wherefrom, what for and whereto?', *Review of International Studies*, 35:S1 (2009), pp. 5–34 (p. 33).

[35]Morten Bøås, Marianne Marchand, and Timothy M. Shaw (eds), *The Political Economy of Regions and Regionalisms* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Timothy M. Shaw, J. Andrew Grant, and Scarlett Cornelissen (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms* (London: Routledge, 2016); Engel et al. (eds), *The New Politics of Regionalism*.

[36]Steffen Murau and Kilian Spandler, 'EU, US and ASEAN actorness in G20 financial policy-making: Bridging the EU studies–new regionalism divide', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54:4 (2016), pp. 928–43; Mario Telò (ed.), *European Union and New Regionalism: Regional Actors and Global Governance in a Post-Hegemonic Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 127–52; Warleigh-Lack, Robinson, and Rosamond (eds), *New Regionalism and the European Union*.

[37]Telò, *European Union and New Regionalism*; Warleigh-Lack, Robinson, and Rosamond (eds), *New Regionalism and the European Union*; Alex Warleigh-Lack and Luk Van Langenhove, 'Rethinking EU studies: The contribution of comparative regionalism', *Journal of European Integration*, 32:6 (2010), pp. 541–62.

[38]Börzel and Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*; Philippe De Lombaerde (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2024); Jürgen Rüland and Astrid Carrapatoso (eds), *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2022).

[39]Michael Zürn, Alexandros Tokhi, and Martin Binder, 'The international authority database', *Global Policy*, 12:4 (2021), pp. 430–42; Anja Jetschke, Sören Münch, Adriana R. Cardozo-Silva and Patrick Theiner, 'Patterns of (dis)similarity in the design of regional organizations: The Regional Organizations Similarity Index (ROSI)', *International Studies Perspectives*, 22:2

become more tractable and widespread but also that the EU is generally treated as one case within a larger universe of cases, without special status.

While the EU previously dominated the study of many policy fields, this has decreased dramatically in recent years. For instance, earlier studies of *regional economic integration and common markets* elevated the EU to the position of 'gold standard', and the highly institutionalised and allegedly successful EU framework was contrasted with 'informality' or 'underdeveloped' regionalism in Southeast Asia, and 'failed' economic regionalism in Africa and the Middle East. This bias, derived in part from the high level of aggregation in previous work, has been overcome through the more targeted and rigorous study of variation in the design and performance of regional economic institutions.[40] Variation tends to be more gradual than previous coarse categorisations suggest, and the EU is rarely as exceptional on a well-specified continuum as earlier research argued it was.

Similarly, even if European security frameworks (including NATO) remain core objects of study, the comparative study of *regional security governance* is not at all structured around the Europe-and-the-rest divide. In fact, the debate centres on general questions about the logic, performance, and effects of regional security architectures and the relationship between intersecting security governance mechanisms.[41] Even if the EU has played a prominent role in peace-building and conflict management in some regions, especially in Africa, few references are made to the design and performance of the EU's own security institutions. Furthermore, the broadening of the security concept and the emergence of non-traditional security threats have also resulted in research being spread across a range of regions, regional mechanisms, and broader security issues, such as crisis response,[42] disaster management,[43] and regional intervention in domestic affairs.[44] These debates are not structured around the EU-versus-the-rest divide, and they have become increasingly comparative over time.

Beyond these established policy fields that for a long time were closely associated with EU-centrism, scholars now study a plethora of 'new' policies that have never been plagued by conventional EU-centric thinking. For instance, *regional environmental governance* has become a thriving research field during the last decade.[45] It is generally treated as a sub-field of global environmental governance, which means that the links between global and regional governance become particularly important; in other cases, the issues are structured around regional and transboundary aspects, as seen in literature on transboundary waters, and maritime governance.[46] Here

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(2021), pp. 181–200; Thomas Sommerer and Jonas Tallberg, 'Diffusion across international organizations: Connectivity and convergence', *International Organization*, 73:2 (2019), pp. 399–433.

[40] Yoram Haftel, 'Commerce and institutions: Trade, scope, and the design of regional economic organizations', *Review of International Organizations*, 8:3 (2013), pp. 389–414; Julia Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organizations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:1 (2018), pp. 1–13; Christina J. Schneider, 'The political economy of regional integration', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20:1 (2017), pp. 229–48; Laurissa Mühlich, *Advancing Regional Monetary Cooperation: The Case of Fragile Financial Markets* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[41] Arie Kacowicz and Galia Press-Barnathan, 'Regional security governance', in Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 297–322; Amandine Gnanguénon and Stephanie C. Hofmann, 'Regional security cooperation', in Philippe De Lombaerde (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2024), pp. 164–81; Etel Solingen, *Comparative Regionalism: Economics and Security* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[42] Heidi Hardt, *Time to React: The Efficiency of International Organizations in Crisis Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[43] Simon Hollis, *The Role of Regional Organizations in Disaster Risk Management* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[44] Brooke Coe, *Sovereignty in the South: Intrusive Regionalism in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[45] Lorraine Elliott and Shaun Breslin, *Comparative Environmental Regionalism* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[46] Jörg Balsiger and Miriam Prys, 'Regional agreements in international environmental politics', *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, 16:2 (2016), pp. 239–60; Susanne Schmeier, *Governing International Watercourses* (London: Routledge, 2012); Sandra Schwindenhammer, 'The new regionalism in global organic agricultural governance through standards: A cross-regional comparison', *Global Environmental Politics*, 18:3 (2018), pp. 86–105.

too, the divide between the EU and the rest is insignificant for conceptualisation, theory-building, and empirical research.

Regional social policy rarely attracted much attention in regions outside the EU until the mid- or late 2000s. For a range of reasons, we are now witnessing a 'social turn' in most other regions, with intensified discussions in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America about issues such as income distribution, social protection, labour regulation, health, education, social and individual rights, migration, and so forth.[47] Although the EU has a longer history and tends to have more developed rules and policies, the research debate is not structured around the EU or its institutional solutions.

Besides individual policy fields, the study of regional *institutions and governance mechanisms* has also taken off during the last decade. Instead of focusing on the old question of whether regional organisations follow Europe's institutional path through sovereignty transfer, scholars increasingly turn to more abstract and general questions around core social science concepts related to authority, institutional design, and governance.[48] For example, a developed literature now exists on individual regional institutions rather than broader organisational frameworks, such as international courts and dispute settlement mechanisms (including regional ones),[49] regional legal and judicial architectures,[50] regional parliaments,[51] regional bureaucracies,[52] and regional summits.[53] Often, this literature conceptualises and seeks to measure the formal competences of these institutions, but work also addresses their agency, autonomy, or internal workings. Beyond institutions, there are also quickly growing bodies of literature on particular *norms and associated governance mechanisms*, such as on governance transfer and governance standards,[54] sovereignty and the intrusiveness of regional organisations,[55] law and norm enforcement,[56] democracy and democracy

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[47] Andrea C. Bianculli and Andrea Ribeiro-Hoffmann (eds), *Regional Organizations and Social Policy in Europe and Latin America: A Space for Social Citizenship?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016); Bob Deacon, Maria Cristina Macovei, Luk Van Langenhove, and Nicola Yeates (eds), *World-Regional Social Policy and Global Governance: New Research and Policy* (London: Routledge, 2010); Pia Riggirozzi, 'Regional integration and welfare: Framing and advocating pro-poor norms through southern regionalisms', *New Political Economy*, 22:6 (2017), pp. 661–75; Sonja Nita, Antoine Pécoud, Philippe De Lombaerde, Kate Neyts, Josh Garland, and Paul de Guchteneire (eds), *Migration, Free Movement and Regional Integration* (Paris: UNESCO and UNU-CRIS, 2017).

[48] Schneider, 'The political economy of regional integration'.

[49] Todd Allee and Manfred Elsig, 'Why do some international institutions contain strong dispute settlement provisions? New evidence from preferential trade agreements', *Review of International Organizations*, 11:1 (2016), pp. 89–120; Karen Alter, Laurence C. Helfer, and Mikael Rask Madsen (eds), *International Court Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[50] Carlos Closa and Lorenzo Casini, *Comparative Regional Integration: Governance and Legal Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Francesco Duina, 'Making sense of the legal and judicial architectures of regional trade agreements worldwide', *Regulation & Governance*, 10:4 (2016), pp. 368–83.

[51] Karina Pasquariello Mariano, Regiane Nitsch Bressan, and Bruno Theodoro Luciano, 'A comparative reassessment of regional parliaments in Latin America: Parlasur, Parlandino and Parlatino', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 60:1 (2017), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201600115}; Frank Schimmelfennig, Thomas Winzen, Tobias Lenz, Jofre Rocabert, Loriana Crasnic, Cristina Gherasimov, Jana Lipps and Densua Mumford, *The Rise of International Parliaments: Strategic Legitimation in International Organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Bruno Theodoro Luciano, *Parliamentary Agency and Regional Integration in Europe and Beyond: The Logic of Regional Parliaments* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[52] Jarle Trondal et al., *Unpacking International Organisations: The Dynamics of Compound Bureaucracies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Lukas M. Müller, *The Rise of a Regional Institution in Africa: Agency and Policy-Formation within the ECOWAS Commission* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[53] Gordon Mace, Jean-Philippe Thérien, Diana Tussie and Olivier Dabene (eds), *Summits & Regional Governance: The Americas in Comparative Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[54] Tanja A. Börzel and Vera van Hüllen (eds), *Governance Transfer by Regional Organizations: Patching Together a Global Script* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[55] Coe, *Sovereignty in the South*; Joel Ng, *Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[56] Daniela Donno, 'Who is punished? Regional intergovernmental organizations and the enforcement of democratic norms', *International Organization*, 64:4 (2010), pp. 593–625.

protection,[57] participatory and membership norms,[58] citizenship regimes,[59] and the international actorness of regional organisations.[60]

Whereas some of these studies code many regional institutions on a few quantifiable elements, others focus on a few instances of regionalism and provide more complex conceptual measures. What all of them have in common, however, is that they systematically compare regionalism across cases (and often across time) along clearly defined and analytically productive dimensions, sometimes including and sometimes excluding the EU. Even if the EU comes out of these comparisons as being located on the 'extreme' ends of the distribution, true in spirit to the original idea of CR, the Union is located on a continuous dimension of interest that is not derived from the European integration experience as a master frame. Whereas the Europe-versus-the-rest divide revolved centrally around the (non-)comparability of different forms of regionalism, disaggregation renders systematic comparison more tractable empirically and less EU-centric. While core concepts used in the past marked the opposing camps in the EU-versus-the-rest debate – regional cooperation, regional integration, sovereignty transfer, etc. – the concepts used in much contemporary research are less controversial, and they travel more easily across contexts.

Transforming theorising: General social science theories and self-reflexive criticism of EU-centrism

The second transformation in CR concerns theory: how do we explain regionalism? What are the drivers of variation? The EU-versus-the-rest divide was characterised by theory that either derived directly from the European integration experience and was generalised beyond it (EU-centric perspective) or was tailored to understanding specific instances of regionalism in the Global South, with little interest in broader generalisation (EU-critical perspective). As noted, the strand of literature that drew on more general social science theories was largely confined to explaining the EU. Today, novel theoretical perspectives deliberately question EU-centrism and have their origin or 'flagship' case in regions other than Europe. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to account for the many theoretical perspectives that have emerged during the last decade, we highlight three representative ones: (i) governance approaches, (ii) authoritarian regionalism, and (iii) the decentring agenda. The first 'game-changer' illustrates how CR has developed theoretically through broad influences from comparative politics, International Relations, and organisation studies; the second derives from the Global South and the non-Western world and is geared towards generalisation across cases; and the third shows the growing critical engagement with EU-centrism from within EU Studies.

Maybe the most obvious development showing that CR has moved beyond the EU-versus-the-rest divide is the growing prominence of various *governance approaches*.[61] The concept of governance denotes the practice of regulating societal relationships in the absence of centralised

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[57]Anna van der Vleuten and Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann, 'Explaining the enforcement of democracy by regional organizations: Comparing EU, Mercosur and SADC', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48:3 (2010), pp. 737–75; Carlos Closa and Stefano Palestini, 'Tutelage and regime survival in regional organizations' democracy protection: The case of MERCOSUR and UNASUR', *World Politics*, 70:3 (2018), pp. 443–76; Sören Stapel, *Regional Organizations and Democracy, Human Rights, and the Rule of Law: The African Union, Organization of American States, and the Diffusion of Institutions* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

[58]Daniel C. Thomas, 'Beyond identity: Membership norms and regional organization', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:1 (2017), pp. 217–40; Aarie Glas and Emmanuel Balogun, 'Norms in practice: People-centric governance in ASEAN and ECOWAS', *International Affairs*, 96:4 (2020), pp. 1015–32.

[59]Amalie Ravn Weinrich, 'Varieties of citizenship in regional organisations: A cross-regional comparison of rights, access, and belonging', *International Area Studies Review*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 255–73.

[60]Frank Mattheis and Uwe Wunderlich, 'Regional actorness and interregional relations: ASEAN, the EU and Mercosur', *Journal of European Integration*, 39:6 (2017), pp. 723–38; Murau and Spandler, 'EU, US and ASEAN actorness'.

[61]Börzel and Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*; Rüland and Carrapatoso (eds), *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism*; Brooke N. Coe and Kathryn Nash, *Regionalized Governance in the Global South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

government – a definition that is particularly suitable to international relations with the absence of a central authority and that has made inroads in the form of global governance. For all their diversity, governance approaches share that they seek to understand how actors adopt public rules to steer governance recipients in particular directions through processes other than traditional government. In parallel to the 'governance turn' in EU Studies,[62] scholars of other regions have similarly turned towards the governance concept.

This has brought several gains for CR.[63] First, governance approaches to regionalism emerged as a critique of conventional state-centric notions, and with it the parochialism in EU Studies and 'area-centricity' more generally started to fade, which has led to an explosion of productive comparisons between a wide range of regional governance mechanisms around the world. Importantly, these comparisons are often conducted along clearly specified dimensions and only rarely derived from the EU experience.[64] Second, the use of the governance concept has enabled scholars to transcend the old binary between regional integration and regional cooperation, which for decades reinforced the split between the EU and the rest.[65] Third, governance approaches have also helped to move beyond unproductive binary debates about whether regionalism is driven by state or non-state actors and whether it is primarily formal or informal.[66] By incorporating state and non-state actors without prioritising formal over informal institutions, regional governance provides a useful framework to systematically compare varieties of regionalism across time, space, and policy fields. Scholars certainly continue to disagree about the degree of formality and how to conceptualise and theorise the state, but it is no longer possible to question the multiplicities of state and non-state agencies within a variety of regional governance modes and institutional forms interacting within a multilayered global governance structure.[67] From this perspective, the EU is as much an expression of different modes of governance as are other instances of regionalism.

A second strand of theorising, which is usually referred to as *authoritarian regionalism*, builds upon experiences in the non-Western world. An established theme in the study of African regionalism,[68] recent work systematically studies when, why, and how regional organisations are used as smokescreens by governments for regime-survival, regime-boosting, and legitimacy-boosting purposes.[69] This literature is self-conscious about developing a theoretical perspective that generalises across regions and does not derive from the European integration experience. Although this literature often makes a sharp distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes, they have

[62] Beate Kohler-Koch and Berthold Rittberger, 'Review article: The "governance turn" in EU studies', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44:S1 (2006), pp. 27–49.

[63] Cf. Tanja A. Börzel, 'Theorizing regionalism: Cooperation, integration, and governance', in Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 41–63.

[64] Börzel and van Hüllen (eds), *Governance Transfer*; Rüland and Carrapatoso (eds), *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism*; Anna Triandafyllidou (ed.), *Global Governance from Regional Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[65] Acharya, 'Comparative regionalism'; Börzel, 'Theorizing regionalism'; De Lombaerde (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration*.

[66] Shaw, Grant, and Cornelissen (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms*; Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Old, new and comparative regionalism: The history and scholarly development of the field', in Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 16–37.

[67] Acharya, 'Regionalism beyond EU-centrism'; Rüland and Carrapatoso (eds), *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism*.

[68] Daniel C. Bach, *Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, Institutions and Trans-State Networks* (London: Routledge, 2016); Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Modes of regional governance in Africa: Neoliberalism, sovereignty boosting, and shadow networks', *Global Governance*, 10:1 (2004), pp. 419–36.

[69] Closa and Palestini, 'Tutelage and regime survival'; Christina Cottiero and Stephan Haggard, 'Stabilizing authoritarian rule: The role of international organizations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:2 (2023), pp. 1–15; Maria J. Debre, 'Clubs of autocrats: Regional organizations and authoritarian survival', *Review of International Organizations*, 17:3 (2022), pp. 485–511; Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie?'; Evgeny Vinokurov and Alexander Libman, *Re-evaluating Regional Organizations: Behind the Smokescreen of Official Mandates* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

started to develop general concepts that travel. Nevertheless, a divide persists between the quickly growing literature on authoritarian regionalism and the 'authoritarian turn' in EU Studies.[70] This is unfortunate since both debates are concerned with the dynamic interplay of regional institutions, domestic politics, and questions related to regime type and regime legitimacy.

By contrast, the growing literature on populism and regionalism explicitly transcends the split between the EU and the rest. This literature shows that populist governments – both right-wing and left-wing; from Europe and from the rest of the world – may criticise established global and regional institutions that form part of the liberal international order while actively engaging with and endorsing regional projects as an integral part of their populist strategies.[71] Despite contextual differences, a 'populist script' of regional cooperation is identifiable, and this literature bridges the divide between the EU and the rest of the world.[72]

Finally, theory has also been advancing explicitly problematising EU-centrism. One strand of this literature – the '*decentring agenda*' – undertakes a self-conscious attempt to decentre the study of Europe by highlighting the manifold ways in which the EU itself is influenced by and connected to regionalism in other parts of the world, not least through a critical engagement with Europe's colonial history. Moreover, the decentring agenda questions taking the European experience as a 'given' and actively challenges the view of Europe as the model, reference point, or gold standard for other regions.[73] This perspective changes the relationship between the EU and other regions within CR and matches calls by Global South scholars to 'take seriously the lived experiences and agencies of the peoples that actually shape their regions'.[74] This call manifests itself in many recent studies that put centre stage the agency of Global South actors in regionalism.[75] While these studies generally emphasise the specific contextual conditions under which regionalist projects develop, the best work is framed under the umbrella of CR instead of isolated regional debates.[76] Although context-specific tools may be important, scholarship is increasingly framed in terms of concepts and theories that have the potential to travel.[77] As will be further elaborated in the next section, this transformation is linked to more rigorous comparative research designs and an increasing creativity of criss-crossing comparisons.

Transforming methodology: Novel designs and the 'data revolution'

The third transformation concerns methodology: how do we generate valid and reliable knowledge about regionalism? For a long time, the comparative study of regionalism was characterised

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[70]Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, 'An authoritarian turn in Europe and European studies?', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25:3 (2018), pp. 452–64.

[71]Daniel F. Wajner, 'The populist way out: Why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 416–36.

[72]Fredrik Söderbaum, Kilian Spandler, and Agnese Pacciardi, *Contestations of the Liberal International Order: A Populist Script of Regional Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[73]Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, 'The decentring agenda: Europe as a post-colonial power', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48:2 (2013), pp. 283–303; Acharya, 'Regionalism beyond EU-centrism'; Tobias Lenz and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, 'EU-topia? A critique of the European Union as a model', *Culture, Practice & Europeanization*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 78–101.

[74]Mumford, 'Comparative regionalism's decolonial turn', p. 1.

[75]Kevin Parthenay, 'L'autonomie dans les bureaucraties régionales latinoaméricaines: le rôle et la place des secrétaires généraux', *Critique internationale*, 87:2 (2020), pp. 153–74; Thomas K. Tieku, 'Punching above weight: How the African Union Commission exercises agency in politics', *Africa Spectrum*, 56:3 (2021), pp. 254–73; Kennedy Mbeva, 'Green pan-Africanism: Normative power and the making of a regional sustainability order', *Review of International Studies* (2024), First View, available at: {https://10.1017/S0260210524000913}. This holds increasingly also for studies on diffusion processes between regional organisations, which have traditionally taken the EU 'as the "default" source of such diffusion. See Tobias Lenz and Mariel Reiss, 'Globalising the study of diffusion: Multiple sources and the East African community', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31:11 (2024), pp. 3703–31 (p. 3704).

[76]Coe, *Sovereignty in the South*; Emmanuel Balogun, 'Comparative regionalism', available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.554}.

[77]Börzel and Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*; Rüland and Carrapatoso (eds), *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism*; De Lombaerde (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration*.

by a strained relationship between the EU versus the rest, overlapping in methodological terms with the broader divide between disciplinary research versus area studies. This divide is gradually decreasing, and more sophisticated studies in terms of comparative methodology and case selection are on the rise. This is closely related to the aforementioned rise of studies on more disaggregated concepts such as individual policy fields and institutions. Since the purpose of such phenomena appears to be more uniform across contexts, and established theoretical tools are available for their analysis (e.g. governance approaches), systematic comparison has become more tractable. While there is a diversity of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comparison, it is no longer satisfactory to emphasise regional context and regional uniqueness without situating the case within a broader universe and general theoretical discussion.[78] Even area studies specialists now regularly advocate for a more comparative approach, building on the view that intensive regional research remains indispensable to the social sciences but that this research will be marginalised unless it situates its findings vis-a-vis other regions to demonstrate its broader relevance.[79] These methodological changes imply that the established criticism against CR that it is not genuinely comparative and predominantly privileges local, context-specific analyses no longer holds.[80]

The transformation of CR with regards to quantitative research methods is to a considerable extent triggered by what may be referred to as a 'data revolution', which is most evident in the comparative analysis of regional organisations and regional governance institutions (see section on 'Transforming conceptualisation' above). The best work in this vein grounds its data-collection effort in general concepts of social science that have concrete empirical referents, are minimally sensitive to contextual differences across cases, and are operationalised in clear and transparent ways. As Hooghe et al. describe their approach to measuring the international authority of regional and global international organisations (IOs):

> When one engages the particularities of individual cases, one asks 'Does the scoring make sense of the variation that we observe on the ground?' or more generally, 'Do the indicators have similar connotations across diverse contexts and do they capture the meaning of the overarching concept?' Each IO is, in certain respects, unique. We seek to evaluate them on a single set of indicators that can travel across diverse contexts while authentically grasping the overarching concept.[81]

Prominent data generation projects in the last decade have revolved around the concepts of institutional design,[82] institutional similarities/differences,[83] policy scope and output,[84] and the discursive legitimation of regional organisations.[85] A general ambition to escape EU-centrism in favour of general concepts and measures is often evident. In fact, several of the most comprehensive

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[78]Krapohl, *Regional Integration in the Global South*; Diana Panke, 'Compensating for limitations in domestic output performance? Member state delegation of policy competencies to regional international organizations', *International Relations*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 90–125.

[79]Ahram, Köllner, and Sil (eds), *Comparative Area Studies*; Fredrik Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism* (Bloomsbury: London, 2016).

[80]Closa, 'Mainstreaming regionalism'; Volgy et al., 'The case for comparative regional analysis', p. 453.

[81]Lisbeth Hooghe, Gary Marks, Tobias Lenz, Jeanine Bezuijen, Besir Ceka, and Svet Derderyan, *Measuring International Authority: A Postfunctionalist Theory of Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 5.

[82]Haftel, 'Commerce and institutions'.

[83]Jetschke et al., 'Patterns of (dis)similarity'.

[84]Diana Panke, Gurur Polat, and Franziska Hohlstein, 'Who performs better? A comparative analysis of problem-solving effectiveness and legitimacy attributions to international organizations', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 57:4 (2022), pp. 433–56.

[85]Henning Schmidtke, Swantje Schirmer, Niklas Krösche and Tobias Lenz, 'The legitimation of international organizations: Introducing a new dataset', *International Studies Perspectives*, 25:1 (2024), pp. 86–110.

databases are focused on IOs, with regional arrangements either as the main category[86] or as a subset.[87]

The 'data revolution' arises from the increased accessibility of data as well as more sophisticated methodological tools for their analysis. For instance, while many scholars still rely on traditional statistical methods, an increasing creativity is seen in developing measures beyond the degree of institutionalisation and using both quantitative and qualitative methods simultaneously.[88] Most of these data-collection efforts concentrate either on one or several policy fields and/or various types of institutional features discussed in the previous section. With regard to policy fields, there are comprehensive data-collection efforts related to trade agreements,[89] peace operations,[90] the environment[91] as well as water management.[92] With regard to institutional features, there are comprehensive data-collection efforts related to, for instance, diffusion of institutional design,[93] legal and judicial architecture,[94] policy scope and membership[95] as well as legitimacy and legitimation.[96] These extensive data-gathering efforts tend to prioritise formal structures and policy input and output (especially of regional organisations),[97] and quantitative data overwhelmingly derives from treaties and secondary legislation as the main sources.

Yet this methodological transformation is by no means confined to quantitative research methods and data, and there has been an equivalent shift in qualitative research. Compared to only one or two decades ago, today's qualitative research in CR is more self-conscious about designing systematic comparisons, including explicit conceptualisation, operationalisation, and measurement of key concepts. We see an emergence of systematic qualitative comparisons of a relatively small number of cases, which are often (but not always) based on the disaggregated conceptual approach to regionalism discussed above. There is, in particular, an expanding comparative literature on specific policy fields, such as security, trade governance, finance and monetary cooperation, migration, health, education, human rights, gender, democracy protection, energy, infrastructure, environment, and water management.[98] In contrast to earlier hub-and-spoke comparisons between the EU and other regions, today we see a much more diverse pattern of comparative studies which include a smaller number of carefully selected and clearly defined cases or rigorous, paired comparisons between regions or regional institutions in Africa and East Asia, or Latin America and Africa, and so forth. Differently expressed, we have seen a shift from unstructured and open-ended studies in the 1990s and 2000s, which often compared regional organisations in their entirety and moved freely across policy fields, towards increasingly systematic, structured, and focused comparisons and research designs, which focus on specific institutions or governance dimensions, such as

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[86]Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie?'.

[87]Hooghe et al., *Measuring International Authority*; Zürn, Tokhi, and Binder, 'The International Authority Database'; Thomas Sommerer and Jonas Tallberg, 'Transnational access to international organizations 1950–2010: A new data set', *International Studies Perspectives*, 18:3 (2017), pp. 247–66.

[88]Julia Gray and Jonathan Slapin, 'How effective are preferential trade agreements? Ask the experts', *Review of International Organizations*, 7:3 (2012), pp. 309–33; Ulf Engel and Frank Mattheis (eds), *The Finances of Regional Organisations in the Global South: Follow the Money* (London: Routledge, 2019); Schmidtke et al., 'The legitimation of international organizations'.

[89]Haftel, 'Commerce and institutions'.

[90]Anja Jetschke and Bernd Schlipphak, 'MILINDA: A new dataset on United Nations-led and non-United Nations-led peace operations', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 37:5 (2020), pp. 605–29.

[91]Balsiger and Prys, 'Regional agreements'.

[92]Schmeier, *Governing International Watercourses*.

[93]Jetschke et al., 'Patterns of (dis)similarity'; Tobias Lenz, *Interorganizational Diffusion in International Relations: Regional Institutions and the Role of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[94]Closa and Casini, *Comparative Regional Integration*.

[95]Panke, Polat, and Hohlstein, 'Who performs better?'.

[96]Schmidtke et al., 'The legitimation of international organizations'.

[97]For different priorities, see Felicity Vabulas and Duncan Snidal, 'Cooperation under autonomy: Building and analyzing the informal intergovernmental organizations 2.0 dataset', *Journal of Peace Research*, 58:4 (2021), pp. 859–69.

[98]De Lombaerde (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration*; Börzel and Risse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*; Rüland and Carrapatoso (eds), *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism*.

regional secretariats, parliaments, courts, etc., and more clearly defined policy fields and research issues.[99] Similar to quantitative research, considerable attention is also devoted to the interaction between regional and global governance mechanisms.[100] While it is widespread to analyse individual policy fields, it has become increasingly common also to compare between them, for instance, security and human rights, or trade, security, and health.[101]

Whereas quantitative comparisons tend to focus on formal rules coded based on official documents, the evidentiary base used in qualitative research is wider. Qualitative scholars often rely on diverse sources, such as official documents and texts (e.g. treaties, legal texts, annual reports, strategies), communications (e.g. speeches, press releases, official communication), news articles, interviews, participant observation, and secondary literature. However, compared to qualitative scholarship and area studies in the past, the increased specialisation through the disaggregation approach and new methodological standards have resulted in greater emphasis on transparent measurement of key concepts. While these changes have helped to delimit the data-collection process to more specific elements, the increased focus on several regions imposes new challenges, to which qualitative scholars often respond by collaborating, not least among scholars with complementary regional specialisations.

In sum, the transformation in methodology has moved debates in the field beyond the old EU-versus-the-rest divide. Most quantitative comparisons are not designed around the EU at all but focus on *general* questions and issues. Qualitative comparisons across diverse cases have also become much more common, while conventional hub-and-spoke comparisons between the EU and other regions have declined in relevance.

Conclusion: The price of 'mainstreaming' Comparative Regionalism and the road ahead

A struggle over the EU's role has dominated the field of CR for the past six decades. Whereas EU-centric scholarship has treated the EU as a model and even a 'gold standard' for conceptualising, theorising, comparing, and designing regionalism in the rest of the world, many critics of this position have gone parochial, exaggerating the uniqueness of their favourite region, and/or anti-EU-centric, disregarding the EU entirely. This paper shows that CR has entered a new phase, moving the field beyond the EU-versus-the-rest chasm. Increasingly, the EU is integrated into a more self-consciously comparative research agenda, built around general concepts and theoretical arguments as well as more rigorous comparative designs and research methods.

The benefits of the field's maturation are twofold: first, intellectual energy is freed to further improve existing research. Second, findings more easily link up with, and ultimately promise to shape, broader debates in political science, International Relations, and Comparative Area Studies; as a result, the field becomes less isolated and parochial. These two are, in short, the benefits of 'mainstreaming'.

'Mainstreaming' the research field, however, comes at a threefold price. First, even though (the most) overt forms of EU-centrism have come to an end, as we have argued, EU-centrism may survive in less overt forms that are harder to detect. This pertains particularly to the relationship between EU-centrism and continued 'Western' dominance in global knowledge production. For example, does a subtle form of EU-centrism survive in various governance approaches even if these are not derived from the EU's experience as such? Similarly, does the focus on formal institutionalisation in much contemporary research reveal a subtle form of EU-centrism, or 'Western bias' more broadly, in the generic assumptions that underpin research, in this case assumptions about

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[99] De Lombaerde (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration*; Börzel and Risse (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*.

[100] Rüland and Carrapatoso (eds), *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism*.

[101] Coe and Nash, *Regionalized Governance*; Ng, *Contesting Sovereignty*; Solingen, *Comparative Regionalism*.

what matters for the operation of political systems? These are potentially controversial questions to which contending answers can be legitimately given. But they ought to be discussed broadly.

Second, mainstreaming CR puts a premium on professional training in theory and methods that is to the structural disadvantage of scholars working in the Global South. Relatedly, mainstreaming may also raise the financial resources needed to produce scholarship that stands a chance of competing successfully over scarce publication space, especially in peer-reviewed journals. For example, compiling large datasets or conducting extensive fieldwork in several sites that underpins broad comparison are expensive and time-consuming. There is little doubt that knowledge production in CR remains skewed towards 'Western' scholars and those located in 'Western' academic institutions.[102] While more pluralism and diversity in terms of the sociological characteristics of the research field are clearly desirable, mainstreaming the field may make these harder to achieve since it may raise barriers to entry.

Third, mainstreaming CR may render the field less plural in its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological approaches. Mainstreaming often entails a stronger 'hierarchisation' and patrolling of boundaries that make it harder for heterodox approaches to be heard. This danger requires an active will by 'gatekeepers' to retain pluralism and heterogeneity, which we see as a distinct strength of CR. Similarly, pluralism requires that those identifying with non-mainstream approaches find it meaningful to engage in scientific dialogue with the mainstream.

In further consolidation of the research field, we wish to conclude on our assessment of how to fully exploit the ongoing transformations in CR and, therefore, urge more debate about essential research design features. We discuss conceptualisation, theorisation, and comparative methodology in turn.

Regarding *conceptualisation*, we believe that disaggregating regionalism into more specific and tractable elements such as policy fields or institutional features has been beneficial, and suggest that the problem of 're-aggregation' should attract more scholarly attention moving forward. On the institutional dimension, for example, do delegation to supranational courts, autonomous bureaucracies, and self-confident parliaments go together, or are there trade-offs between them? In the policy dimension, are governance mechanisms similar or different across different policy fields and regions and, if so, how? How do guiding normative frameworks vary across policy fields and regions? While there is incipient research that tries to characterise these elements from an overarching (quantitative) perspective,[103] there is little work that integrates across the distinct domains of institutions, norms, governance mechanisms, and policies.

This points to the potential usefulness of typological theorising[104] around groups of regionalisms that share distinct combinations of institutions, norms, governance mechanisms, and policies. Again, incipient work in this direction exists,[105] but opportunities to typologise across domains, regions, or classes of phenomena (e.g. formal versus informal regionalism) remain wide open, even if this is unlikely to lead to a single 'master' typology of regionalism. Typological theorising could also be useful in combining currently disjointed efforts to characterise contemporary instances of regionalism by seeking to capture their respective features through the addition of adjectives or adverbs, such as post-hegemonic regionalism in Latin America.[106] This would require scholars to clearly define the underlying dimensions of category-building and specify categories in mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive ways.

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[102]Arlene B. Tickner, 'Core, periphery and (neo)imperialist international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 627–46.

[103]Panke, Polat, and Hohlstein, 'Who performs better?'.

[104]Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, 'Qualitative research: Recent developments in case study methods', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9 (2006), pp. 455–76.

[105]Karina Pasquariello Mariano, Regiane Nitsch Bressan, and Bruno Theodoro Luciano, 'Liquid regionalism: A typology for regionalism in the Americas', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 64:2 (2021), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202100204}.

[106]Pía Riggirozzi and Diana Tussie (eds), *The Rise of Post-Hegemonic Regionalism: The Case of Latin America* (New York: Springer, 2012).

Regarding *theorisation*, in building a post-Western, global, and genuinely comparative research field, scholars should be much more forthright in (1) developing theoretical arguments from 'flagship' cases all over the world (instead of Europe only) and (2) generalising from them to other parts of the world – including to Europe. In line with the more disaggregated conceptualisation of regionalism, we believe that theorising usefully proceeds by generating mid-range theoretical arguments that can travel across different contexts. Foreign policy analysis, theories of international negotiation, or theories of (regional) hegemony may be useful here. While mid-range arguments may be confined to particular groups of cases – arguments about 'authoritarian regionalism', for example, primarily apply in authoritarian contexts – they should be formulated in ways that allow them to travel across regions. The emerging literature on regionalism and populism may serve as a guide here, both because this research agenda is theoretically advanced and because it covers basically all regions of the world, including Europe.[107]

Regarding *methodology*, although there are different views and preferences regarding how best to compare, CR as a research field cannot be biased in favour of a particular comparative method. It must allow for a range of different comparative approaches and methods: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed comparisons at different levels and with varying number of cases. Individual case studies must also have their place. However, the fundamental challenge is to escape 'area-centricity' and encourage scholars to think in more general and comparative terms. From this perspective, there is a need for area-centred debates on regionalism to think beyond regional particularities. Hence, single case studies have much more limited value and impact when they are framed and designed without any reference to comparative or general theoretical debates. Otherwise, why would comparativists or specialists of other regions pay attention to research that is biased in favour of a particular region? The future development and consolidation of CR depends at least partly on a more self-conscious case selection and efforts to counteract parochialism.

This brings us to our final point, namely that scholars of CR need to ask research questions that travel beyond a single region. Even if region-specific research questions are still legitimate, there is still a tendency for 'area specialists' to use contextualised language to capture rather similar phenomena that exist in other regions instead of applying general concepts and developing research questions and hypotheses that can be transferred to cross-regional comparisons. In fact, what at first glance may be thought of as a region-specific question can often be formulated in a more general and theoretically relevant way. For example, there is currently a rich debate on the role of symbols and rituals as well as rhetorical and discursive practices of regionalism in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe, but these literatures are still segmented and largely isolated from one another, which prevents the potential for comparison as well as theory-building. Formulating research questions in more general terms represents an important step towards a more genuine comparative debate about the patterns, sources, and consequences of regionalism in global politics.

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[107]Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner (eds), *Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Thorsten Wojczewski, *The Inter- and Transnational Politics of Populism: Foreign Policy, Identity and Popular Sovereignty* (Cham: Springer, 2023).

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