

Closing or Widening the Gap? Legitimacy and Democracy in Regional Integration Organisations

Edited by ANNA VAN DER VLEUTEN AND ANDREA RIBEIRO HOFFMAN
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Over the past two decades, the build up of synergies between regionalism and globalisation translated into a new wave of regional regimes and arrangements, often formally committed to the promotion of *integration*, that is transfers of sovereignty as opposed to mere *cooperation*. Considering the rise of self-labelled Regional Integration Organisations (RIOs) or Communities, what are the implications for issues previously considered as the exclusive preserve of the sovereign nation-state and, at best, the European Union (EU)? Reviewing this conundrum through the discussion of legitimacy and democratisation sets the overarching objective assigned to the 11 contributors to this volume.

The foreword of Philippe Schmitter points right away to the diverse and ambivalent nature of the assumptions that permeate the project. For comparative purposes, should the discussion of RIOs require inventing a distinctive theory of “trans-national integration”? Or, more flatly should one assume the putative rise of “trans-national regions”, or that of “sovereign national states at various early states in their formation”? Another and more down to earth option is the mere understanding of RIOs as functional intergovernmental Organisations (OIGs). Despite the title of the volume, regional cooperation, rather than integration is what numerous contributors to the volume undertake to review – Berry Tholen’s introductory caveat on “conceptual confusion” even points to the significance of regionalism and RIOs as cases of “scholarly interest ... developing even faster the regional *cooperation* [emphasis mine] itself”.

The editors’ introduction (Anna van der Vleuten and Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann) opens up the debate with a reminder of the diversity of players and arrangements subsumed under the notions of “new regionalism”, before concluding to the definition of RIOs as “an inter-state political system”. As a result, one may regret, bringing regionalism into the forefront somewhat falls short of its potentials – not much room is left for the discussion of congruent vs. paradoxical interactions between regionalism and regionalisation processes, the convergence vs. disentanglement of regionalism and regional integration.

Frequently addressed in the context of the EU, the issue of legitimacy and its deficit takes an entirely different form whenever “deficient” states belong to a RIO. In such cases, Tholen’s contribution argues, legitimacy should draw from the legitimising functions of democracy with respect to the participation of non-state actors, checks on the use of power within RIOs, and “the realisation of basic values like democracy and rule of law” in member-states. In practice, as Africa illustrates, such functions are more commonly associated with the policy packages carried out

under the aegis of donors, International financial institutions and UN post-conflict transitions. The relevance of discussing the interactions between regional and national democracy similarly amounts, Julianna Erthal argues, to a discussion of how to promote the former when domestic democracy is missing. In such a context, considerable expectations are attached to the empowerment of regional parliaments. Legitimacy, whenever economic integration is at stake, has its own twists, stresses Bob Reinalda whose taxonomy of different types of economic organisations represents a rare attempt to bring some order into the disparate group of so-called RIOs. The teleological problems addressed by Schmitter's foreword are very much present in the three appendices to the chapter – the Arab Maghreb Union, which has not managed to meet at Heads of State level over a decade, is euphemistically described as a “booster” organisation, the Economic Community of Central African States as a “malfunctioning” one, while other RIOs function “weakly” and even “informally”, etc. Referring to integration becomes an oxymoron in such cases.

Regional parliaments and sub-national state actors build considerable expectations with respect to the narrowing of democracy and legitimacy gaps both at regionally and within member-states. Andrés Malamud and Luis de Sousa offer a systematic and empirically based depiction of Latin America's four regional parliaments and the EU provides a firm basis for further comparisons. Mercosur, the focus of Marcelo A. Medeiros's discussion of sub-national actors, reveals a pattern that, albeit on a minor mode, is not altogether different from a number of those monitored within the EU. Civil society participation within Mercosur is also addressed by Michelle Ratton Sanchez, while Gerda van Roozendaal discusses the lack of involvement of non-state actors in Caricom.

The ability of regional groupings to promote democracy within their member-states is reviewed by Anna van der Vleuten through the cases of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and the Asian Association of South Eastern Nations. SADC, unlike what the author claims, has adopted its own Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections since 2004, a move that contrasts with a lingering approach to Mugabe's political transition through the lenses of regime stability enforcement. The EU and Mercosur, both marked by institutionalisation of democratic clauses, also reflect the limited effectiveness of political conditionality to “preserve democracy”, Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann finds. It would have been valuable to have an additional assessment of the democratic clauses inserted in the ACP or European Neighbourhood Policy packages.

The volume's final overview concludes with a reminder of the diversity of RIOs and the existence of a gap between legitimacy/democracy within the inter-governmental organisations discussed. From the standpoint of Cyprus studies, this discussion of RIOs might seem of limited application, beyond the references to the EU noted above. However, this volume does offer some good comparisons into the workings of regionalism in extra-European contexts where, unlike what is the case within the EU, ‘small’ states cannot depend on the balancing effects of consociational engineering.

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