European Regions
Perspectives, Trends and Developments in the 21st Century

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Introduction

In the early 21st century, Europe's regions find themselves on a continent that is facing deep political, social and economic change. The financial and economic crisis has left its mark all over Europe, the ongoing Brexit process is causing unprecedented uncertainty among citizens and in various economic sectors, and migration and climate change are just two examples of policy domains posing a challenge to the unity and cohesion of the EU and its member states.

These upheavals, however, also offer an opportunity to change the role played by regions in the EU's multilevel system of governance. Facing the political vacuum induced by member states' blocking of major decisions at EU level, there are even resurgent calls for a 'Europe of the Regions' – or, as Abels and Battke (2019) suggest it, 'Europe with the regions' –, in the hope that regions might be more rational and reliable partners in EU decision-making processes, as it is in cities and regions where the costs of political inaction will be felt first.

Hence, while sub-state entities could be viewed as declining in importance in an age of globalization and increasing rivalry between EU member states, regions nonetheless frequently have centre stage in European affairs, as was the case, for instance, for Wallonia on the issue of the EU's 'CETA' trade agreement with Canada in 2016. EU political leaders also increasingly acknowledge the importance of taking local and regional perspectives into account more systematically in the EU policy process, as exemplified by the follow-up activities to the 2018 report by the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and 'Doing Less More Efficiently'. Though the involvement of regions does not automatically guarantee more effective or better governance, there is a lot of expertise among regional actors in the implementation and application of EU legislation, which often takes place at the regional or local levels within member states – and this is increasingly recognized by EU institutions and member states.

Regions also serve as significant objects of identification to their inhabitants. Due to their (perceived) 'closeness' to the people, regions are often understood as

fulfilling an important linking function between citizens and 'upper' levels in the political decision-making process (c.f. Chacha 2013). In this regard, it is easy to understand why many consider regions and regional political actors to be well placed to overcome the EU's democratic deficit by bridging the gap between citizens and 'far-off Brussels'. This seems even more important at a time when citizens (and political elites!) are not easily convinced of the advantages of multilateralism, let alone EU supranational governance. It is not surprising that in recent years much of the political and public discourse on European integration was accompanied by reference to a crisis of legitimacy of the EU political project. It is in this context that regions have yet again received more attention as potential facilitators of European democracy. By strengthening the role of regions in the EU political process, the argument runs, 'higher' levels of governance could profit from the strong levels of identification as well as their expertise in policy implementation, thus boosting the overall legitimacy of the EU (cf., e.g., Panara 2019).

Region as a Fluid Concept

Compared to the rather static construct of 'the state', 'region' is a far more flexible, fluid concept. Rather than being composed of a number of largely undisputed defining features, *region* carries a broad range of different meanings in both scholarly literature and politics. It is used, for instance, to refer to whole continents in international or geopolitical contexts (e.g. Europe as a region) and to particular parts of the world map that cross state borders (e.g. the Balkan region or the EU macro regions) as well as to sub-national political units (e.g. the German *Bundesländer* or Spanish *Comunidades Autónomas*). In addition to these mainly territorial and geographical understandings of region, several recent approaches rearrange the classification of regions according to administrative and economic indicators, including the NUTS regions or regional typologies of what ESPON calls 'functional areas'.[1]

Regions can thus be defined using a range of criteria – territorial, functional, historical, and many others. While this can clearly lead to analytical ambiguity, it is also one of the term's strengths. Battke and Abels (2019: 236), for instance, argue that regions should be defined 'as "soft spaces" that are subject to continued rescaling processes'. By broadening the classical territorial perspective towards a functional understanding of regions, scholars account for the fact that the definition and boundaries of regions are socially constructed and, thus, not static (cf. ibid.)

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1   https://www.espon.eu/tools-maps/regional-typologies, 1 September 2019

While a broad understanding of the concept of regions certainly has its merits, the main empirical focus in this volume is very much on regions as *sub-national political units within Europe*. Because they are strongly related to the constitutional order of (EU member) states, the boundaries of regions in Europe as defined above seem to be clear and largely stable. However, European regions have obviously been affected – and continue to be so – by major political changes and 'experiments' in recent decades: The EU's external borders have changed considerably as a result of several rounds of enlargement; and internal borders are still shifting (consider, for example, Brexit or the shifts in the Balkans) or remain contested (e.g., Gibraltar or Piran Bay). Territorial shifts have also been witnessed *within* EU member states, often accompanied by decentralization and/or the re-organization of regional political units (cf. Keating 2013). Finally, regions are not only affected by such territorial dynamics, but often become decisive actors themselves: Some regions (or more precisely: regional political actors) strive for political independence while simultaneously desiring continuity in the form of ongoing EU membership; while some form new conglomerates with their neighbours to strengthen cross-border cooperation, as can be seen in the EUREGIOs, or split up into smaller units to reinforce local economies and culture.

Issues of territory and borders thus remain politically salient – as do questions of identity and 'belonging': Among citizens, there seems to be a steadily growing emotionality not only when it comes to the 'homeland' and its (imagined or desired) borders at state level, but likewise – and sometimes even more importantly – with regard to regional 'belonging'. In line with this, many of the contributions to this edited anthology deal with aspects of regional identity – either by explicitly making it the focus of inquiry or by acknowledging its importance as a contextual variable in political processes. According to this approach, the role of regional identity must not be neglected when analysing the role of regions in EU multilevel governance.

Regions and their role in EU multilevel governance have been subject to intense research in recent years, resulting in a vast body of literature, particularly in the field of political science. This is not least due to the changes that came into force with the Treaty of Lisbon, which rearranged the way regions participate in the EU's political system (e.g., Abels/Eppler 2015; Bursens/Högenauer 2017; CoR 2013; Högenauer/Abels 2017; Tatham 2015). Scholars have, for instance, dealt with regional activity in connection with the Early Warning System (EWS) (Borońska-Hryniewiecka 2015; 2017; Fromage 2016; 2017) and the Regional Authority Index (Hooghe et al. 2016) has become an important source for comparing the influence that regional channels have on the multilevel system both in Europe and worldwide.

This anthology takes a closer look at European regions by providing a multifaceted picture of their innovative abilities as well as the potential perils of 'regional closure'. The various chapters range across questions of regional identification and

feelings of belonging; institutional, political and legal structures that enhance or limit regional political endeavours; and questions of cross-border cooperation. Most of the contributions examine examples from various regions throughout Europe and focus on similarities and differences among them. Others take a horizontal perspective by focusing on regional political representation within EU multilevel governance or on EU programmes for regional economic development.

While the dream of a 'Europe of the regions' had clearly lost some of its appeal, the new millennium has so far witnessed a growth in relevance of the regional level – both as a layer of citizens' identity and as an increasingly important political player in EU multilevel governance. This is the underlying notion linking the various chapters in the four sections of this volume, as will be outlined briefly in the remainder of this introduction.

1.   Regional Identity – A Citizens' Perspective

While political scientists have recently been busy studying the role of regions in the context of EU multilevel governance, other disciplines in the social sciences seem to be lagging behind. While geographers' interest in spatial orders and their consequences for political, economic and social systems has generated a body of relevant work in the field of regional studies, sociologists have long neglected the role of regions in processes of collective identification.[2] There are still relatively few studies that focus on regional identity as a main dependent or independent variable in sociological analysis. This is rather astonishing, given the vast body of literature on collective identities that exists in the field of political sociology. Meanwhile, however, survey questions on collective identities have been improved, moving, first, from the classic 'Moreno question'[3] to more sophisticated measures and, second, recognizing the importance of 'multiple identities'. The latter is of particular importance in contexts of multilevel governance. On the one hand, the very notion of collective identity – including regional identity – is always Janus-faced, since it guarantees cohesion within social groups not least by defining 'external' boundaries in order to form clear-cut identities (Tajfel 1982). At the same time, concepts of nested and multiple identities (Medrano/Guitérrez 2001) highlight the potential synchronicity of various collective identities, thus integrating regional identities in a larger framework of social/territorial identities.

Several contributions in this volume focus on the tension between openness and closure that is immanent to collective identities. Are empirically observed re-

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2   Exceptions being the addition of 'identification with the region' as a default category in item batteries and the addition of NUTS regions as standard classifications in multilevel analyses.
3   'What is your national identity?'

gional identities more integrative or more exclusionary in nature? To what extent are sentiments of regional belonging not only exploited by populist movements, but also used by mainstream political actors? And how do regional identities tie in with a European identity that is becoming increasingly important, at least among younger and better educated cohorts within society? While multiple identities seem to be on the rise and are increasingly recognized in scholarly literature, it might be misleading to directly infer a pro-European stance – the existence of multiple identities perhaps only points us to the fact that the act of placement *per se* has become of high importance to some individuals.

The first section of this volume is dedicated to the fundamental question of regional identity. As such, it also sets the scene for many of the contributions in the following sections, given the high salience of questions related to collective identity in the context of both regional and European politics.

Elisabeth Donat gives an example of a very strong regional identity, in the case of Tyrol, with reference to survey data on regional identity. Following the classical approach of attitude theory in applying a tripartite definition of regional identity, she argues that 'Identity' is more than just 'identification'. Alongside the cognitive component of classification, the affective and the connotative components of regional identity are equally important, since they serve as sources of key political attitudes and behaviour.

In her chapter, Katrin Praprotnik focuses on the relationship between various identities. Surveys have long tended to operationalize collective identities as mutually exclusive. Praprotnik addresses an important research gap by dealing with the relationship between regional and European identity. Using Austrian data from the European Value Study, she demonstrates that support for the EU is nearly equal among those who consider themselves solely 'Europeans' and the mixed group of 'regional Europeans'. Her analysis also demonstrates once again the importance of education for such attitude patterns.

Camille Dobler draws a dense picture of the multiplexity of collective identities by using the example of the Strasbourg border region. Her qualitative interviews illustrate the coexistence of various identities but also reveal that European identity is not a particularly significant referent for her interview partners. European identity seems to be more functionally than emotionally integrated in people's stories at the border; it mainly comes to respondent's minds when addressing cross-border activities such as working or education. Her chapter again illustrates the importance of boundaries as a social fact and not merely a geographical matter (Simmel 1903).

2.   Regions in a Turbulent EU – Political and Legal Manifestations

While the first section of this volume focusses on regional identities at the individual level of citizens, the contributions in this section analyse their manifestation at the level of the polity and in the dynamics of party politics.

A strong regionalism or even regional nationalism as promoted by various political actors across European regions – rooted in or making use of a pronounced regional identity – always carries the risk of encouraging separatist tendencies. Yet at the same time, advocates of secession sometimes argue that if their region were to become politically independent, it should remain a member of the EU – this is the case in both Scotland and Catalonia. At first glance, this could be interpreted as a sign of genuine support for European integration or a generally pro-European stance. In fact, however, such positioning may simply be instrumental, as the European level together and the notion of a 'Europe of the regions' are seen as means of fostering the desire for political autonomy and independence. Meanwhile, Brexit has also finally brought the issue of 'recovering' political autonomy to the level of the European Union. The fact that the arguments used by Brexiteers and Scottish separatists in their respective referendums were quite similar (see Rahmatian in this volume) tells its own tale.

While separatism is clearly the most extreme political manifestation of regionalism, it is by no means the only one. Federalist arrangements often prove very effective in balancing regional interests and identities within a polity, even in the case of strong regional parties. This is for instance the case in Bavaria (cf. Sturm 2019 and in this volume). Whether and to what extent regionalism manifests in claims for separatism may be influenced by a number of factors, including specific historical events, constitutional arrangements and economic developments. The key significance of shifts in the dynamics of party politics, however, should not be disregarded in this respect: Cleavage theory (Lipset/Rokkan 1967) has already taught us that the existence of social grievances and the formation of a shared collective identity do not necessarily translate into collective political action (cf. Bartolini/Mair 1990). The latter requires organization, i.e. 'someone who can take advantage of political opportunities, develop organizations of some kind, and interpret grievances and mobilize consensus around them' (Tarrow 1992: 177).

The contributions in this section look at legal and political manifestations of regionalism in several EU member states. Though the empirical contexts and analytical settings are diverse, the issue of regional identity appears as an important point of reference in each of the three chapters.

Karl Kössler's contribution deals with manifestations of regional identity at the level of policy and the political system. Taking examples from regions within and beyond current EU territory, Kössler explores how references to regional identities are reflected in constitutional documents and welfare-state policies. When rooted

in self-perceptions of regional distinctiveness and identity, he argues, such references are to be understood as 'successful' instances of regions claiming (more) self-government. At the same time, however, they may also affect processes of identity formation at the regional level itself.

The next chapter touches upon the most far-reaching demands for political autonomy, i.e. separatist movements. Andreas Rahmatian discusses calls for Scottish independence in the United Kingdom and challenges the very notion of the concept of 'civic nationalism' as employed by the Scottish National Party. The chapter goes on to identify a number of ironic parallels between the referendums for Scottish independence and Brexit, respectively. Rahmatian further argues that both Brexit and the UK government's stance during the lengthy process of negotiations with the EU can only be understood by taking into account what he calls Britain's legal feudalism, which still serves as the framework for a state without a written constitution.

Roland Sturm takes a closer look at Bavaria, a special case in German politics compared to the other Länder. The population of Bavaria is characterized by a particularly strong regional identity. This is clearly reflected in the political behaviour of its main governing party, the CSU, which is often said to desire more autonomy for Bavaria or a greater decentralization of state powers in Germany. This, however, is not the case, as aptly demonstrated by Sturm. Rather, the CSU's anti-Berlin politics are to be understood mainly as a symbolic gesture and a matter of strategy. Hence, despite heavily relying on regional allegiance in its communications, the CSU clearly sees Bavaria's place as within Germany and the EU.

3. Intended and Unintended Consequences of EU Programmes for Regional Development

European regions held out great hopes for the EU, not only with regard to their desire for increased political influence. Economically disadvantaged regions also expected to catch up rapidly with stronger regions in terms of economic and social development. Such expectations seemed eminently reasonable, given that the EU treaties explicitly set out the goal of strengthening the EU's economic, social and (since the Treaty of Lisbon) territorial cohesion. Many of these hopes, however, have not been fulfilled. First, despite the strengthening of the role of regions in the EU governance system as a result of treaty change, regions have not become participants in the EU legislative process as a 'third level' alongside the Council and the European Parliament. Second, EU cohesion policy programmes by and large seem to show heterogeneous effects (Bachtrögler/Oberhofer 2018).

Against this background, the emergence of a new regional Euroscepticism and even calls for independence cannot be precluded, at least in some European regi-

ons and both among citizens as well as regional political actors. Conversely, the (perceived) effectiveness of EU cohesion policy in a given region seems to have at least the potential to reduce anti-EU voting (cf. ibid.).

EU regional investment programmes increasingly require cross-border cooperation between regions and member states. This has resulted in a number of successful projects fostering cross-border infrastructure, culture or educational links. Such cooperation points to an encouraging future for European regions as they manoeuvre beyond the 'national containers' of member states that have undoubtedly blocked many decisions at the EU level in recent years. Regional cross-border cooperation also contains promise in the form of the emergence of multiple collective identities across state borders. This is not limited to privileged social groups that regularly travel across the continent and benefit most from European integration. As things stand, however, this is of course all still up in the air.

The contributions in this section look at EU regional investment programmes from a range of angles, either as the dependent or the main independent variable. They focus on European identity, the question of policy shifts as a result of the global financial crisis, and cross-border cooperation, respectively.

Fabian Landes' contribution presents his research on the effects of territorial investment on European identity. By means of a multilevel analysis, Landes tests the assumption that attachment to the EU is a consequence, at least in part, of economic-utilitarian considerations on the part of citizens. The effects of such investment can be demonstrated for mixed identities (at once national and European) and vary among countries but surprisingly not within them, pointing to the fact that the 'national container' is still the dominant category in politics.

Moritz Neujeffski examines whether regional investment programmes in the EU have undergone a shift in their rationale from redistribution to competitiveness following the global financial crisis. He analyses major reforms within the European Structural and Investment Funds prior to and after the crisis and compares them to the Investment Plan for Europe, a.k.a. the 'Juncker Plan'. Employing the theory of 'discourse coalitions', he identifies a continuous strengthening of market-based instruments and the endorsement of more competitiveness already prior to the crisis, pushed by a stable coalition of a handful of member states.

Cross-border cooperation between regions in Europe are at the core of Urszula Roman-Kamphaus' contribution. Comparing the Polish-German and Polish-Slovak border regions, she highlights the importance of cultural factors for understanding differences in the effectiveness of EU-funded cross-border cooperation. While pre-existing networks and cultural similarities promote successful implementation across the Polish-Slovak border, Roman-Kamphaus argues that policy innovation is higher in the Polish-German case precisely because of the lack of such resources.

4. Still Dreaming of a 'Europe of the Regions'? On the Interplay of Regions in the EU

The concept of a 'Europe of the regions' has at times been popular in both European politics and the scholarly literature, particularly during the 1980s. It has been accompanied by various attempts to strengthen the role of regions within the EU's multilevel governance framework. While the role of regions has indeed been strengthened via EU treaty reforms – beginning with the establishment of the European Committee of the Regions in the Maastricht Treaty – regional political actors have since suffered a degree of disillusionment: EU member states still have the major say at nearly all levels of the EU decision-making process today. Nevertheless, there are gentle signs of a restructuring and re-empowering at the regional level: the Committee of Regions is a vivid example of constructive cooperation among regions within the EU and is greatly valued by its members and partners. Furthermore, several contributions to this volume also provide evidence of a rise in regional identification *together* with identification as European, which suggests a growing interest in European affairs among citizens with a strong regional identity. Some authors even go further in perceiving momentum at the European level towards again granting regions a major stake in the EU governance system: Ulrike Guérot (2016), for example, argues in favour of restructuring the EU political system as a European Republic. Gabriele Abels and Jan Battke (2019) also inquire into the role of regions in EU governance following the failure of a 'Europe of the regions' to emerge, concluding that what actually seems to be in the making nowadays is a 'Europe with the regions' (ibid.: 237).

The contributions in the final section of this volume look at the origins of and the drift away from the dream of a 'Europe of the regions'.

Justus Schönlau takes a closer look at the role of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) in reinforcing notions of multilevel governance in the EU. Though its institutional role is limited to an advisory function by the EU treaties, Schönlau shows how the CoR managed to expand its impact on EU policy making in various ways while aggregating and balancing the multitude of views and experiences of its heterogeneous member base. Taking the examples of CoR policy action in the field of climate change and the very recent RegHub initiative, he argues that the CoR has indeed become a significant agent in the institutionalization of multilevel governance, thus supporting not only the functioning but ultimately also the legitimacy of the European integration project.

In her contribution, Claire Wallace analyses the end of the 'European dream', which has led to a re-emergence of nationalism. For a long time it was hoped that growing Europeanization would lead to growing cosmopolitanism, but, at least at the beginning of the new millennium, these hopes had to be buried as nationalism and populism grew throughout Europe. Wallace's analysis of Eurobarometer data

provides evidence that, alongside growing national identification, regional identification has also increased among citizens. Her text presents examples of this trend in the cases of Latvia and Scotland and leads her to conclude that recent times have seen a growth in 'placism'– a tendency to identify with places in general.

Ulrike Guérot's chapter contains a brief history of the concept of 'Europe of the regions', in which she criticises the dominance of the member states at nearly all levels of EU decision making. Guérot diagnoses a lack of republicanism in the current political system of the EU and argues for both to be integrated in the near future: republicanism and a federal structure that would give more power to the regions. Her innovative approach is to call for a 'European Republic' that would create a common umbrella under which European regions could peacefully coexist and citizens' rights would be managed under the principle of equality before the law.

The field of Regional Studies is multifaceted, multidisciplinary and multilevel. Given the 'sui generis' nature of the EU, it is not surprising that we can observe increasing scholarly interest in the role of regions within the EU context. For regions in Europe, numerous political, economic and societal challenges have come along with the new millennium. The aim of this book is to contribute to the reflection and study of the various regional responses to these challenges across Europe. By collecting contributions from political science, sociology as well as legal studies, this volume reflects the diversity in the field and takes account of the complexity of European regions within a constantly changing environment.

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