

Panke, Diana; Grundsfield, Lukas; Tverskoi, Pawel

Article — Published Version

Between Crisis and Revival: Withdrawal Threats, State Exits, and Institutional Change of Regional International Organizations

Politische Vierteljahresschrift

Provided in Cooperation with:

Springer Nature

Suggested Citation: Panke, Diana; Grundsfield, Lukas; Tverskoi, Pawel (2024) : Between Crisis and Revival: Withdrawal Threats, State Exits, and Institutional Change of Regional International Organizations, Politische Vierteljahresschrift, ISSN 1862-2860, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, Wiesbaden, Vol. 66, Iss. 3, pp. 623-647, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00560-z>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/330430>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Between Crisis and Revival: Withdrawal Threats, State Exits, and Institutional Change of Regional International Organizations

Diana Panke  · Lukas Grundsfield · Pawel Tverskoi

Received: 8 January 2024 / Revised: 18 July 2024 / Accepted: 24 July 2024 / Published online: 23 August 2024

© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract Since 1945, there have been more than 120 instances of states threatening to withdraw from international organizations with regional membership criteria (RIOs) and over 50 cases in which states in fact left RIOs. Recent examples include withdrawal threats by Qatar toward the Gulf Cooperation Council and Brazil toward MERCOSUR, as well as the actual exits of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU) and of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States. Withdrawal threats and exits represent shocks with potentially significant implications for RIOs and their integration projects. While existing research has focused on the future of EU integration after Brexit, this paper is the first to analyze the effects of threats to leave and the realization thereof on RIOs and regional integration from a broader comparative perspective. RIOs can respond to exit-related challenges through institutional change, which can take the form of institutional strengthening or weakening. Having conducted a series of explo-

The paper is part of a research project, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? State Exits from Regional Organizations,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG; PA 1257/10-1), and the authors are grateful for the financial support. We also thank Léonie Berton, Antonia Damm, Lisa Hartmann, Luise Hartmann, Luise Kienel, Dagmar Kohlmeier, Fenna Kreuz, Hanne Oldenhof, Moritz Pohlner, Chira Walke, and Lukas Weißenberger for research support and literature management. For comments on earlier versions of this paper, we would like to thank Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Sebastian Haug, Alexander Libman, Andrea Liese, Mathis Lohaus, Johannes Muntschick, Friedrich Plank, and Georg Wenzelburger, as well as all participants of the DVPW-AKER Workshop 2023 and the anonymous reviewers.

✉ Diana Panke · Lukas Grundsfield · Pawel Tverskoi
Arbeitsstelle Internationale Beziehungen, Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany
E-Mail: diana.panke@fu-berlin.de

Lukas Grundsfield
E-Mail: lukas.grundsfield@fu-berlin.de

Pawel Tverskoi
E-Mail: p.tverskoi@fu-berlin.de

rative qualitative case studies, we find that while (1) the extent of problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges influences institutional change, (2) the materialization and directionality of these changes also depends on other factors, such as external windows of opportunity and the distribution of power and preferences within the RIO. Furthermore, (3) institutional change often takes the form of institutional strengthening, indicating the general resilience of international organizations in the context of exit-related challenges.

Keywords Regional International Organizations (RIOs) · Exit threats · Exits · Regional integration · Problem pressure

Zwischen Krise und Aufschwung: Rückzugsdrohungen, Staatsaustritte und institutioneller Wandel von regionalen internationalen Organisationen

Zusammenfassung Seit 1945 gab es mehr als 120 Fälle, in denen Staaten mit dem Austritt aus internationalen Organisationen mit regionalen Mitgliedschaftskriterien (RIOs) gedroht haben, und über 50 Fälle, in denen Staaten die RIOs tatsächlich verlassen haben. Zu den jüngsten Beispielen gehören die Austrittsdrohungen Katars gegenüber dem Golf-Kooperationsrat oder Brasiliens gegenüber dem MERCOSUR sowie die vollzogenen Austritte des Vereinigten Königreichs aus der Europäischen Union (EU) sowie von Burkina Faso, Mali und Niger aus der Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft Westafrikanischer Staaten (ECOWAS). Austrittsdrohungen und Austritte stellen Schocks mit potenziell erheblichen Auswirkungen auf RIOs und ihre Integrationsprojekte dar. Während sich die bisherige Forschung auf die Zukunft der EU-Integration nach dem Brexit konzentrierte, ist dieses Papier das erste, das die Auswirkungen eines drohenden Austritts und dessen Umsetzung auf RIOs und regionale Integration aus einer breiteren vergleichenden Perspektive analysiert. RIOs können auf die mit dem Austritt verbundenen Herausforderungen durch institutionelle Veränderungen reagieren, die die Form einer institutionellen Stärkung oder Schwächung annehmen können. Anhand einer Reihe explorativer qualitativer Fallstudien stellen wir fest, dass zwar (1) das Ausmaß des Problemdrucks, der durch die mit dem Ausstieg verbundenen Herausforderungen entsteht, den institutionellen Wandel beeinflusst, (2) das Zustandekommen und die Richtung dieser Veränderungen aber auch von anderen Faktoren abhängt, wie z. B. von externen Gelegenheiten und der Verteilung von Macht und Präferenzen innerhalb der RIO. Darüber hinaus (3) nimmt der institutionelle Wandel häufig die Form einer institutionellen Stärkung an, was auf die generelle Widerstandsfähigkeit von RIOs im Zusammenhang mit austrittsbezogenen Herausforderungen hindeutet.

Schlüsselwörter Regionalorganisation · Austrittsdrohung · Austritt · Regionale Integration · Problemdruck

1 Introduction

Member states frequently voice public criticism against regional international organizations (RIOs).¹ While these statements can represent significant challenges to the organization and harm its reputation, threatened and realized exits—as evident in the Brexit referendum and the United Kingdom’s eventual withdrawal from the European Union (EU)—pose more severe challenges to the RIOs in question because they endanger their future setup and composition or even their existence. We define exit threats as public statements by state officials indicating the state’s intention to terminate its membership in the RIO (see also von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2023). Exit threats link criticism of RIO institutions, policies, or fellow member states to the possibility of leaving the organization in question. Thus, they are distinct from notifications of withdrawal, which are mere matter-of-fact statements of a state’s already-taken decision. For instance, in 2014, Kazakhstan threatened to leave the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) by stating that “Kazakhstan has a right to withdraw from the [EAEU]” because it “will not be part of organizations that pose a threat to our independence” (BBC 2014). Withdrawal threats must be issued by representatives of the state’s incumbent government. Going far beyond mere threats, state withdrawals, i.e., realized exits, formally end membership in an organization, as Brexit and the withdrawal of Nicaragua from the Organization of American States (OAS) recently demonstrated. Exits differ from states’ merely putting their membership in a RIO on hold in that the state—if it ever sought to rejoin the organization—would be required to again go through a formal accession process. We subsume both exit threats and realized exits under the notion of exit-related challenges.

The United Kingdom’s threats to leave and its subsequent withdrawal from the EU are not the only instances of a RIO facing exit-related challenges. Looking at 73 RIOs between 1945 and 2022, there are over 120 instances of states threatening to withdraw from RIOs and over 50 cases in which states left RIOs. Such internal challenges can shock RIOs to their very core and might carry potentially significant implications for their future. If organizations face exit-related challenges, this signals internal dissent to the outside world and reduces their potential political influence. Also, a lower share of remaining (committed) members reduces an organization’s geopolitical importance and can restrict the budget available for its continued operation, which might even lead to institutional death. As a result, exit-related challenges inflict problem pressure on the affected organizations. We start from the deductive assumption that the materialization of institutional changes as a response to exit-related challenges depends on the problem pressure induced by them. However, while this assumption follows conventional wisdom, we argue that high problem pressure is not a sufficient condition for institutional change.

¹ Regional international organizations recruit their members on the basis of geography-related criteria and are general-purpose organizations, whereas membership in global international organizations (IOs) is potentially universal, and global IOs are usually task specific (Lenz et al. 2015; Hooghe et al. 2019). Our data are based on the ROCO 2.0 dataset (Panke et al. 2020), which covers 73 RIOs between 1945 and 2020 (c.f. <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/UBXZHC>). Predecessor and successor organizations are counted as one entity only (e.g., the AU entails its predecessor the Organization of African Unity as well).

Further, RIOs can respond to exit-related challenges through institutional changes concerning organizational structure, processes, or the policy dimension to prevent exit threats from being realized or to pave the way for reentries of previously exited states.²

These changes can take different directions, leading to further regional integration or disintegration and possibly also the decline of (R)IOs (Vollaard 2018; Kreuder-Sonnen and Rittberger 2023; Kreuder-Sonnen and Zangl 2024). More specifically, when studying institutional change, we distinguish between institutional strengthening, institutional weakening, and the absence of both (no change). We conceptualize institutional strengthening and weakening based on organizational structure (polity), processes (politics), and the policy dimension (policy). In the case of institutional strengthening, RIOs respond to exit-related challenges by solidifying the organizational structure (e.g., by strengthening institutional authority, increasing legalization, formalizing community-reinforcing norms and rules), strengthening processes (e.g., formalizing cooperation-inducing norms and rules), or strengthening the policy dimension (e.g., increasing the organization's policy scope or output). In contrast, institutional weakening entails the dismantling of institutional structures (e.g., reduction of the RIO's institutional authority or legalization), loosened procedural norms and rules (e.g., allowing opt-outs), or a weakened policy dimension (e.g., through reduced policy scope and limited policy outputs). Further, the absence of any such institutional changes in the context of withdrawal-related challenges is also possible. However, just as the extent of problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges does not determine the materialization of institutional changes, it also does not determine the direction of these challenges, which are dependent on other factors.

Accordingly, in this paper we address the following research question: *When do RIOs respond to exit-related challenges with institutional change, and when does the response take the form of institutional strengthening or weakening?*

While exit-related internal contestations represent serious challenges to all forms of international organizations (IOs), they represent more significant challenges to RIOs than to global IOs for two reasons. First, RIOs are multipurpose organizations whose members cooperate on a wide range of issues (Panke et al. 2020). Therefore, in contrast to withdrawals from single-issue global IOs, exits from RIOs have potential ripple effects, endangering cooperation on a wide range of issue areas. Second, unlike most global IOs, RIOs are community-based organizations oriented around a “common socio-cultural understanding of a region” (Goltermann et al. 2012, p. 4). In many RIOs, membership is explicitly connected to a set of norms defining the characteristics that community members must share (Thomas 2017). These norms constitute legitimate membership within the community and the community's iden-

² Reentries after exits are a relatively frequent phenomenon. Most recently, Kiribati, which left the Pacific Islands Forum in 2022, rejoined the organization in 2023. Other states that withdrew from RIOs and later rejoined include Eritrea (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2007–2011), Greece (Council of Europe, 1968–1973), Morocco (African Union, 1984–2017), Rwanda (Economic Community of Central African States, 2007–2015), Seychelles (Southern African Development Community, 2004–2007), the United Kingdom (Pacific Community, 1996–1998 and 2005–2021), and Uzbekistan (Collective Security Treaty Organization, 2000–2005).

tity (Spandler 2018). Such aspects are absent from most global IOs. Both exit threats and realized exits from RIOs confront these common understandings and thus have potentially destabilizing implications for member states' identities. As a result, RIOs should be more severely affected by exit-related challenges than would be the case for global IOs, and one could argue that this makes RIOs more likely to respond to withdrawal-related challenges with institutional change to either prevent exits from happening or to become attractive for the reentry of former member states. However, the basic point is that given the community character of RIOs, and the fact that states cannot geographically leave their region, withdrawal dynamics in RIOs differ from those in global IOs. This is the case for the occurrence of exit-related challenges. Because existing findings about the occurrence of state withdrawals in mostly global IOs (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019) seem not to travel to RIOs (Panke et al. [in press](#)), we regard it as worthwhile to also investigate RIOs' responses to exit-related challenges in separation from those of global IOs.

We contribute to several strands of research. Existing scholarship focused primarily on the future of EU integration after Brexit (Walter 2021; Laffan and Telle 2023). Moving beyond studies of high-profile cases such as Brexit, we focus on the effects of withdrawal-related challenges from a broader comparative perspective. Other studies analyzed the resilience of global IOs in the face of internal challenges (Hirschmann 2021, 2020; Dijkstra et al. 2022) and different forms of contestation of IOs (Kruck et al. 2022; Daßler et al. 2022). We add to this research by analyzing the effects of one specific, and the most severe, form of contestation. Further, in their pioneering study, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2023) analyzed the success of withdrawal threats to achieve institutional reforms in IOs. We contribute to their work in two ways. First, distinguishing clearly between regional and global IOs (and focusing on the former), we consider that due to the different characteristics of both types of IOs, the effects of exit-related challenges potentially play out very differently in both.³ Second, whereas von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2023) consider solely exit threats—and not realized exits—we argue that due to the possibility (and empirical frequency) of reentries, both threatened and realized exits have comparable effects on RIOs in that they increase problem pressure as challengers' demands accumulate. Third, whereas von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2023) focus only on the accommodation of exit threats in the form of the presence or absence of institutional reform, we are mindful of the different directions that institutional change can take.

Section 2 outlines our deductive assumption that withdrawals and threats thereof inflict problem pressure on RIOs, which they can respond to through institutional change. This institutional change can take the direction of institutional strengthening or weakening.⁴ Based on this assumption, Sect. 3 includes a series of explorative case studies to inductively identify factors influencing both the materialization of

³ Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas base their analysis on the COW IGO dataset, which includes mainly global IOs, while almost a third of all RIOs are not covered (compare the ROCO dataset from Panke et al. [2020], which represents the basis for our analysis).

⁴ Importantly, we are primarily interested in the member states' response in terms of institutional change and less so in the implementation and practical outcomes of these efforts, which depend on a wide variety of factors beyond the scope of this paper.

institutional changes in the face of exit-related challenges as well as the direction that these changes take. We thus focus on RIOs with high and low shares of exit-related challenges, as well as organizations from different geographic regions and challenges related to different substantive issues. On this basis, we study whether and how the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) responded to exit-related challenges.

Section 4 summarizes the main insights of the explorative case studies. First, the case studies suggest that problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges contributes to institutional change. Second, however, the empirical analysis also reveals a more complicated picture: Both the materialization and the directionality of institutional change are also influenced by factors other than exit-related challenges, namely exogenous shocks and the distribution of power and preferences within the organization. Third, while institutional change does not necessarily have to occur in the form of institutional strengthening after exit-related challenges, the case studies indicate that institutional strengthening is relatively likely. The paper consequently ties in with current studies emphasizing the general resilience of IOs (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Kruck and Zangl 2019).

2 Exit-Related Challenges and Institutional Change

In this section we outline our deductive assumption that the extent of problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges influences the likelihood that RIOs will respond to them with institutional changes. This provides the basis for the explorative analysis of further factors influencing the materialization and directionality of institutional change in the ensuing section.

Looking at the 73 RIOs in the ROCO 2.0 dataset (Panke et al. 2020; see footnote 1 above) between 1945 and 2022, there are over 120 instances of states threatening to withdraw from RIOs and over 50 cases in which states left RIOs.⁵ In this paper, one exit-related challenge refers to one instance of one state issuing an exit threat or withdrawing from an organization, whereas in the case of a state issuing several challenges at different points in time, these are counted as separate instances.⁶

States use exit threats and their eventual realization to express severe dissatisfaction with a RIO or a member state's conduct in the RIO context. In their analysis of a mix of global and regional IOs, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2023, p. 8) found that about 40% of withdrawal threats were linked to demands for IO reform, whereas the remaining exit threats were often tied to geopolitical conflicts between

⁵ We collected the data on exits and exit treats from RIOs based on research in the LexisNexis database. For each RIO and each year of its existence until 2022, we searched for the RIO name and its acronym together with the keywords “withdraw*” and “exit,” respectively. This process was carried out in English, French, Spanish, and Russian, thereby covering the majority of official languages as designated by the RIOs as well as the common languages across their member states. As a result, we identified a total of 56 exits and 123 exit threats (see Panke et al. *in press*).

⁶ In our dataset, for every given year, every state can issue a maximum of one exit threat against every RIO it is a member of. Similarly, in every given year, every state can exit each RIO only once.

Table 1 RIOs facing high and low shares of exit-related challenges

Share of challengers per member state	
High	Low
ANDEAN, CEFTA, EAC, EFTA, GCC, GUAM, G5S, MERCOSUR, NAFTA , SPC, UNASUR CIS, EAEU, PIF , CSTO	ALBA, CEI , ECOWAS, EU, NATO, SICA AU, CARICOM, CEEAC, CoE, COMESA , ICGLR, IGAD, LAS, OAS, OSCE, SADC, SEATO, WTO

IOs' member states. This is mirrored by our finding that of the 123 instances of exit threats against RIOs, 71 are directly related to the organization, and of the 56 instances of realized exits, 27 are directly related to the demands of challenger states against the RIO. Because we are interested in institutional change in response to exit-related challenges, our analysis focuses only on threats and withdrawals that relate to the RIO while leaving aside exit-related challenges primarily connected to conflicts between member states.

Exits and threats thereof reflect severe RIO-inherent cleavages, including perceived institutional shortcomings or injustices and the unwillingness to continue regional cooperation under these conditions (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2023). Due to the potential negative consequences, such as a lower share of remaining (committed) members and delimited geopolitical importance, slimmer budgets, the signaling of internal dissent to the outside world, and reduction of the RIO's potential political influence, exit-related challenges inflict problem pressure on RIOs. Public policy approaches have demonstrated that problem pressure is a strong impetus for change in political systems (Saurugger and Terpan 2016). This applies to policy adaptation in states (Sabatier and Weible 2014; Herweg et al. 2015) as well as in RIOs, as studies on the EU have demonstrated (Ackrill et al. 2013). Problem pressure can also call for institutional adaptations with respect to the organizational structure (polity) and processes (politics). Because withdrawal-related challenges can represent severe problem pressure harming the legitimacy and effectiveness of the organization in question, RIOs can respond with institutional change. This may, fully or partially, accommodate the contesting state's demands through adjustments to the RIO's organizational structure, processes, and policies. For two reasons, this is the case both for exit threats and realized exits. On the one hand, states that rejoin a RIO after previously having withdrawn from it are a relatively frequent phenomenon (see footnote 2 above). For example, Kiribati, which left PIF in 2022, rejoined the organization in 2023. Thus, RIOs are inclined to accommodate leaving states' demands to incentivize their return to the organization. In effect, realized exits—just as exit threats—contribute to the mounting problem pressure against a RIO and to eventual institutional change. On the other hand, even if exiting states do not intend to return to a RIO, functional requirements for cooperation persist, and states cannot leave their geographic region. As a result, RIOs face incentives to find a *modus vivendi* with the exiting state, which may include institutional changes.

However, we start from the deductive assumption that whether RIOs respond to members' exits and withdrawal threats with institutional change rather than maintaining the status quo ante is influenced by the extent of problem pressure. The severity of problem pressure that RIOs face due to exit-related challenges is influenced by several factors, including how frequently challenges occur, how many

states make similar claims, and which states engage in exit-related contestations. However, the severity of problem pressure is not an objective fact but depends on the perceptions of the RIO and its member states. Just as legitimacy crises do not objectively exist but are constructed as such through social interactions (Sommerer et al. 2022b), the perception of problem pressure due to exit-related challenges within a RIO can vary idiosyncratically. Given the large number of exit-related challenges and affected RIOs, systematically mapping the “actual” perception of problem pressure in all RIOs facing exit-related challenges exceeds the scope of this paper. Therefore, mapping the problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges requires the utilization of a proxy. In the case studies, we use primary sources, interviews, and secondary literature to reconstruct the actual perceptions of problem pressure in each case. However, for the purpose of case selection, we focus on one specific proxy to grasp the extent of problem pressure that RIOs face due to exit-related challenges (c.f. Sect. 3): the number of exit-related contestations relative to the RIO’s membership size. When an organization is targeted repeatedly and by a large share of its members with exit-related challenges, problem pressure is likely to build up (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2023). Withdrawal-related contestations by a greater proportion of members result in increasing problem pressure for the RIO in question. When RIOs are subject to challenges from a large proportion of their members, they are more likely to experience negative effects—if they cannot prevent exits or become attractive for reentries. A very low share of remaining members decreases a RIO’s remaining budget needed for its continued operation, negatively impacts economies of scale in trade or other sectors, and generally delimits its geopolitical reach and importance.

The share of exit-related challenges relative to the organization’s membership size differs considerably between RIOs.⁷ We divide RIOs into two groups according to the extent of problem pressure we expect them to face (Table 1). To capture the relative share of exit-related challenges, we identified the number of challenges relative to the overall number of RIO members and averaged it for all years in which a RIO was subject to exits or withdrawal threats. Data on RIO membership in a given year stem from the ROCO 2.0 dataset, which we extended up to the year 2022. Considering all affected RIOs, we use the respective median values to distinguish RIOs with high and low shares of exit-related challenges.

The RIOs exposed to *high problem pressure* should be more likely to respond to withdrawal-related contestations with institutional *change*. In contrast, RIOs confronted with *low problem pressure* should be less likely to respond to withdrawal-related contestations through *institutional change* and to continue the status quo.

This study focuses on institutional change as a response to problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges. Importantly, while we expect greater problem pressure to increase the likelihood of institutional change, the directionality that this change takes is not predetermined. In general, institutional change can take

⁷ Concerning the occurrence of exits from (R)IOs, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019) point toward a “contagion effect.” Although we do not examine the emergence of exit-related challenges but their effects, through the notion of problem pressure we take into account that such challenges do not necessarily occur in isolation.

different directions, ranging between greater regional integration and disintegration (Vollaard 2018; Kreuder-Sonnen and Rittberger 2023; Kreuder-Sonnen and Zangl 2024). Consequently, institutional changes could also lead a RIO closer to what existing research describes as a “zombie” status (Gray 2018) or even lead to its eventual dissolution and replacement (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020, 2021).

We distinguish between institutional strengthening, institutional weakening, and the absence of both (no change). We expect that exit-related challenges—through the problem pressure they induce on RIOs—can lead in both directions of institutional change. We conceptualize institutional strengthening and weakening based on organizational structure (polity), processes (politics), and the policy dimension (policy). Changes in the organizational structure include the creation of new bodies and organs, changes in institutional authority in terms of delegation and pooling (Hooghe et al. 2017), and adjustments concerning the extent of legalization in the form of the bindingness and enforceability of policies or the formalization of community- or sovereignty-reinforcing norms (Abbott et al. 2000). Thus, institutional strengthening occurs if member states create new RIO bodies or organs, delegate additional competencies to the RIOs’ secretariat, or pool decision-making among them in the form of majority voting or by increasing the legal bindingness of the organization’s policies. In contrast, institutional weakening is characterized by the dissolution of RIO bodies or organs, reductions in terms of delegation or pooling, and reduced formalization of rules and bindingness of policies. Institutional strengthening and weakening can also relate to processes that, for instance, include the creation or dissolution of cooperation-inducing or -inhibiting norms or rules between member states or between different RIOs. As multipurpose organizations, RIOs cover a broad but varying range of policy issues, including security, economy, trade, energy, agriculture, and health (Panke et al. 2020). Institutional change related to the policy dimension may entail adjustments concerning the scope and extent of a RIO’s policy output (Tallberg et al. 2016; Sommerer et al. 2022a). In this regard, increasing the scope and extent of a RIO’s policy output indicates institutional strengthening, whereas reducing it represents institutional weakening. Institutional strengthening can encompass RIOs strengthening their organizational structures (e.g., greater institutional authority, more legalization, formalization of community-reinforcing norms), processes (e.g., adding cooperation-inducing norms or rules), or the policy dimension (e.g., increasing the organization’s policy scope or output). In contrast, institutional weakening entails a weakening of institutional structures (e.g., reduction of the RIO’s institutional authority or legalization), procedural norms and rules (e.g., allowing opt-outs), or policy dimension (e.g., reducing the policy scope or limiting the policy output).

However, three caveats are in order. First, all of the dimensions constituting the directions of institutional adaptation refer to *relative* changes compared to the organizational structure, the processes, and the policy dimension prior to the exit-related challenge. Second, we focus primarily on institutional change in terms of RIOs’ output, while leaving aside its implementation and effects on the ground. This means that we evaluate how a RIO’s response to exit-related challenges affects the dimensions of institutional change outlined above but do not judge the positive

or negative effects of these measures, which would represent a distinct research question. Third, we also limit our analysis to the occurrence of different forms of institutional change but do not make any statement about the general resilience of RIOs when confronted with exit-related challenges.

In sum, while we expect exit-related challenges to induce problem pressure on RIOs dependent on their occurrence relative to the RIO's membership size, we regard them neither as a sufficient condition for institutional change to occur nor as a determinant of the directionality of change in terms of institutional strengthening or weakening. Instead, we assume that these are influenced by other factors, both concerning the structural context and the actors involved. In the next section, we seek to identify these factors through several explorative case studies.

3 Explorative Case Studies

In the previous section we outlined our deductive assumption that the problem pressure RIOs face due to exit-related challenges influences whether they respond with institutional change. In this section, we conduct an explorative analysis to identify further factors moderating whether and how RIOs respond to exit-related challenges by engaging in institutional change. We selected the cases based on several criteria. To begin with, we sought to vary the severity of the problem pressure RIOs face through exit-related challenges. Drawing on the relative share of exit-related challenges as a proxy of the induced problem pressure, we selected four RIOs, two from each side of Table 1 (see organizations in boldface). For each organization, we focus on one or several recent exit-related challenges. If a RIO faces several exit-related challenges, we consider those challenges within the organization that are thematically connected.

Both NAFTA and PIF are organizations with high relative shares of exit-related challenges and thus likely to experience high problem pressure (the perceived problem pressure is reconstructed in each case study). While NAFTA faced only one withdrawal threat, which was by the United States in 2017, this represents a high share of threats relative to the size of the RIO, which has three member states. Another organization subject to a large proportion of exit-related challenges relative to its size is PIF. The withdrawal threats were issued by the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, and Palau between 2020 and 2022. By contrast, CEI and COMESA are RIOs with relatively low shares of exit-related challenges and are hence likely to be subject to perceptions of low problem pressure. Whereas the former has faced one exit, by Austria in 2018, the latter experienced threatened and/or realized withdrawals by Angola, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe between 1997 and 2007. However, given COMESA's large membership, the share of challenges is low.

Further, our case selection covers variation both in terms of geographic location and the substantial issues around which exit-related challenges revolve. The RIOs are located in different regions, including Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and North America, and the exit-related challenges revolve around issues as diverse as or-

ganizational overlap (COMESA), RIO-internal distributions of leadership positions (PIF), the RIO's general (in)effectiveness (CEI), and trade conditions (NAFTA).

Another aspect of the case selection is that all of the RIOs we focus on are characterized by limited IO authority. This means that the RIOs' member states did not delegate significant powers to the organizations' secretariats. As a consequence, the RIO's bureaucratic bodies are not particularly powerful (Hooghe et al. 2017). Although previous research focused on the reactions of IOs' bureaucratic bodies in the context of member state challenges (Hirschmann 2021; Kruck and Zangl 2020; Eckhard et al. 2019), it left aside the question of how (R)IOs without significant levels of delegation react to internal challenges. However, for IOs in general—and also if focusing on RIOs beyond high-profile cases such as the EU—organizations with significant levels of delegation and powerful bureaucratic bodies are the exception rather than the norm. Thus, our analysis complements existing research analyzing institutional adaptation and change in the face of internal challenges by RIOs with low levels of delegation.

Although the cases are expected to differ regarding the extent of perceived problem pressure and the likelihood of institutional change to occur, we do not make *ex ante* assumptions about the direction of change in terms of institutional strengthening or weakening. We therefore underline that our analysis is explorative instead of hypotheses-testing.

3.1 North American Free Trade Agreement

In 1992, Canada, Mexico, and the United States established NAFTA. True to its name, the core of the organization was economic in nature (Panke et al. 2020), with the facilitation of investment opportunities constituting a major tenet (Flores-Macías and Sánchez-Talanquer 2019). Since entering into force in 1994, it has contributed to interregional trade by eliminating or reducing many tariffs on products traded among the three member states (Chase 2003; Francis and Zheng 2011). Despite its success in achieving trade liberalization in sectors such as agriculture and textiles across North America, the organization has been subject to public criticism, particularly in the United States, over its allegedly harmful impact on manufacturing jobs, especially in the automotive industry (Flores-Macías and Sánchez-Talanquer 2019), contributing to the “deindustrialization” of the country (MENAFN 2018). In addition to the existing dissatisfaction among swaths of the American population, the election campaign of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump was guided by a protectionist agenda that made NAFTA and its purported adverse effects on the working class a welcome target. Following Trump's ascent to the presidency, criticism culminated in 2017, when the U.S. government voiced an exit threat, as the incumbent president “ordered the renegotiation of NAFTA, which he has called the worst trade deal ever signed. He has threatened to exit the agreement if the U.S. does not get a better deal” (The Independent 2017). The threat was reiterated in 2018 (The Star 2018), placing NAFTA in a precarious situation because a withdrawal of the United States, the strongest economy and the most powerful member state of the organization, would have reduced it to a bilateral trade agreement between Canada and Mexico. Accordingly, the perceived problem pressure was high,

and the presidents of the two other member states persuaded President Trump to “give renegotiation a chance” (WSJ 2017), thereby demonstrating the significant relevance of the continuation of NAFTA for Canada and Mexico. While agreeing to enter into renegotiations in late 2017 (Ouellet and Messier 2017; Lester and Manak 2018), President Trump continued to frame NAFTA as an “unfair deal” (Council on Foreign Relations 2020), demanding better conditions for the American manufacturing industry to protect American jobs and aiming to “improve the U.S. trade balance and reduce the trade deficit with NAFTA countries” (Villarreal and Fergusson 2019, p. 11). The United States had a strong bargaining position, primarily because it is the world’s largest economy and possesses a domestic market that is critical for the exports of both its neighbors to the north and south. In the event of negotiation failure, a U.S. withdrawal from NAFTA would have left the smaller markets of the RIO worse off, as they would have had to negotiate bilateral trade deals under the cloud of needing to retain access to the U.S. market. Because bilateral negotiations tend to favor large states, which can use market access as a leverage instrument, this outcome would have been to the detriment of both Canada and Mexico (CNBC 2018). Apart from remaining unified in their stance on NAFTA, and thereby enhancing their strength as weaker parties allying in multiparty negotiations, there was both an understanding and readiness to make concessions “to buy peace” (Globe and Mail 2018).

While having voiced the exit threat, the United States had nonetheless a range of interests going beyond the immediate economic significance of the trade agreement, which was seen as only having a “modest impact” (USA Today 2017) on its economy. Most importantly, its insistence on the inclusion of a *de facto* ban on entering into bilateral free trade agreements by NAFTA members represented the intent to tie Canada and Mexico closer to the United States and prevent free trade agreements with rivaling states such as China. For both Canada and Mexico, the successful renegotiation therefore came at the expense of partially forgoing the ability to shape their trade preferences going forward (Haggart 2018).

Yet not all of Trump’s demands were accommodated. The other states as well as economic scholars—including those in the U.S. Congressional Research Service—pointed out that “it is not feasible to use trade agreement provisions as a tool to decrease the deficit because trade imbalances are determined by underlying macroeconomic fundamentals” (Villarreal and Fergusson 2019, p. 12). While the U.S.–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA)⁸ is regarded as a moderate reform of the NAFTA agreement and is labeled NAFTA 2.0 due to its similarities with the predecessor concerning institutional design and mandate (Labonté et al. 2019; Gagné and Rioux 2022), it does contain elements of reduction in legalization, such as the large-scale elimination of dispute-settlement mechanisms, in particular investor–state arbitration as well as the arrangements regarding the review (every 6 years) and termination (after 16 years) of the new agreement. This undoubtedly constitutes institutional weakening, as the RIO lost the ability of adjudicating it had previously possessed. At the same time, compared to NAFTA, the policy scope of

⁸ The USMCA is also referred to as the CUSMA (in Canada) and the T-MEC (in Mexico) since each country is allowed to put its own name first.

USMCA has been slightly expanded (see ROCO 2.0), as it includes new regulations concerning the automotive sector (Council on Foreign Relations 2020) as well as separate provisions on the clothing and textile industries, as well as digital trade (Panke and Stapel 2023). These changes represent institutional strengthening given that the RIO gained additional competencies. Hence, while there are elements of policy scope expansion, most provisions resemble minimum winning compromises. At the same time, no organizational strengthening occurred. On the contrary, when considering that delegation constitutes a dimension of legalization in the context of international organizations (Abbott et al. 2000), the removal of dispute-settlement mechanisms rather constitutes a circumscription of the delegation dimension and with that a reduction of legalization.

In the case of NAFTA, the high problem pressure, as a result of the U.S. exit threat, created a necessity for the RIO to seek and implement institutional changes. Overall, the case of NAFTA elucidates that the configuration of power and interests among the member states in the organization plays an important role for the directionality of institutional change and shows that institutional change can include elements that strengthen as well as elements that weaken the organization at the same time.

3.2 Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa

Founded in 1993, COMESA pursued the goal of successively creating a free trade area, a customs union, and eventually, an economic and monetary union. A large organization, COMESA had 21 members at the time of its creation. Over approximately one decade, between 1996 and 2007, it faced 12 withdrawals and exit threats. Although Mozambique and Lesotho realized their threats to leave COMESA in 1997, Eswatini, Namibia, and Zimbabwe did not follow through on their respective threats. In 2000, Tanzania exited COMESA after having threatened withdrawal the previous year. Thereafter, Namibia and Angola left the organization in 2004 and 2007, respectively.

Despite differences in the timing of the challenges, the demands connected to exits and threats thereof primarily focused on the issue of the unclear relationship between COMESA and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which were subject to significant overlaps in terms of policy functions and member states (interview #4, 10 May 2023; interview #5, 24 May 2023). As COMESA and SADC intended to develop into customs unions, membership in both organizations was about to become technically incompatible. Thus, in Namibia, there had already emerged “confusion” in several ministries due to the necessity to “choose between complying with COMESA or SADC stipulations” (Hahnsom et al. 2005, p. 11). As one official stated, “If you belong to two organizations with almost the same objective, how are you going to coordinate the policies?” (interview #4, 10 May 2023). This led Namibia’s Minister of Trade and Industry to state that “dual membership to the two regional bodies raise[s] the problems of loyalty, given that there was no clear direction as to which way the two organizations could avoid duplication of their programs” (Africa News 1997b). Additionally, Lesotho and Mozambique justified their withdrawals in 1997 by declaring that COMESA was “superfluous and duplicated the functions of the 12-nation [SADC]” (AssociatedPressInternational

1997), with Mozambique clarifying that it “will withdraw from [COMESA] until the organization makes clear its relationship with [SADC]” (XinhuaNewsAgency 1997). In 1999, Tanzania threatened to withdraw from COMESA because “[t]here is no use for us to pay a lot of money to three organizations [COMESA, SADC, and the East African Community (EAC)] doing the same thing” (IPS 1999).

Corresponding to the high number of member states, the relative share of exit-related challenges was limited early on. Accordingly, especially in relation to the early exit threats, COMESA did not perceive high problem pressure. In 1997, COMESA’s executive secretary stated that “Mozambique and Lesotho will go around the circle (...) and, later, after realizing their mistakes, will come back,” thereby dismissing “rumors that Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania were also planning to withdraw from Comesa” (Africa News 1997a). Hence, early on, COMESA did not respond with institutional change. However, contrary to COMESA’s expectations, in 2000 Tanzania put its threat into practice and left the organization, which increased perceptions of problem pressure:

“Tanzania’s departure was said to have ‘created a reaction akin to panic in some senior Comesa circles, (...) underlin[ing] the overlapping nature of SADC and Comesa and the perceived degree of costly duplication’” (Africa News 2000).

Accordingly, in December 2001, COMESA’s Council of Ministers requested the Secretariat to “report on the progress being made on the coordination and harmonization work it was undertaking with the SADC Secretariat” (COMESA 2001). Although COMESA agreed to harmonize its regional integration efforts with SADC in 2002, this was not followed up by actual institutional change (Lunogelo and Mbilinyi 2009).

Over time, the perception of high problem pressure increased further, based on the corresponding “growing awareness of the problems arising from the trade agreement ‘spaghetti bowl’ in Southern and Eastern Africa” (Othieno and Shinyekwa 2011, p. 2). In addition, the global financial crisis as an external shock further aggravated the perception of problem pressure faced by COMESA, with the organization calling “for a rapid deal to free up (...) trade” in order to facilitate economic recovery (COMESA 2008, p. 13). As the continuation of the status quo was regarded as unfitting by most of the member states, and given that strong COMESA members, including Egypt and Libya, did not have vested interests against reforms, institutional change became possible. At a meeting in Kampala in 2008, the leaders of COMESA, SADC, and EAC eventually agreed to create a tripartite free trade area, which ought to develop into a common customs union and eventually into an economic union (Othieno and Shinyekwa 2011). As a result, through the formalization and strengthening of cooperation norms within and between the RIOs as well as the expansion of organizational and procedural provisions, institutional strengthening occurred.

3.3 Central European Initiative

The CEI was founded in 1989 by Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Yugoslavia. Over time it increased in size to include 18 members from Central Eastern, Southeastern,

and Eastern Europe (CEI 2023a; Wästfelt and Pibernik 2017). In 2018, Austria was the first and so far only member to announce its withdrawal from the CEI (ORF 2018). The decision to leave the CEI was primarily the result of Austria's dissatisfaction with the RIO's limited effectiveness and political relevance, which led the country to pursue the goal of integration of the Western Balkan states into the EU through alternative structures (interview #3, 22 February 2023). The perceived problem pressure induced by Austria's withdrawal was limited: None of the remaining CEI members referred to Austria's exit as being problematic for the CEI or, even worse, igniting a crisis. Budgetary shortages due to the discontinuation of Austria's contributions—"not a huge amount, some thousands of Euros"—were quickly compensated by Hungary, and the organization "continued with [its] business as usual" (interview #2, 7 February 2023). The CEI also did not try to prevent Austria from withdrawing: "There was no discussion on this, (...) [i]t was like simply the letter [notifying Austria's withdrawal from the CEI] arrived to the Croatian presidency and that's it" (interview #2, 7 February 2023). Also, while the CEI repeatedly reaffirmed that "our doors are open" for Austria, it did not actively pursue institutional change to pave the way for Austria's reentry (interview #2, 7 February 2023).

Austria's withdrawal created an internal window of opportunity for institutional change that would not have been possible if Austria had remained in the CEI. Although it had been an "old idea to internationalize (...) the Secretariat," Austria's exit provided the possibility to realize it (interview #2, 7 February 2023). In 2021, the position of the alternate secretary general—which, along with the position of secretary general, had rotated between Italy and Austria—was eliminated and replaced by three equally ranked deputy secretaries-general with increased competencies. Notwithstanding the position of the secretary-general being still reserved for Italy, the deputy positions rotate among CEI members (CEI 2023b). In effect, the reform of the CEI's secretariat in the form of an increase in the number of deputy secretaries-general represents institutional strengthening through the creation of new RIO organs. This institutional change was the result of a more general trend of "some countries rais[ing] the interest to be more present" in the CEI (interview #2, 7 February 2023). Additionally, in the context of several exogenous shocks, the CEI increased its policy scope and output. For example, the CEI displayed a considerable degree of agency by strengthening its cooperation with the World Health Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic (CEI 2022a; interview #2, 7 February 2023). More importantly, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the CEI suspended its member state Belarus due to its support of Russia's actions and to prevent it from vetoing the organization's support for Ukraine (interview #17, 6 February 2024; interview #18, 15 February 2024), while also supporting Ukraine in various ways, e.g., by contributing to the construction of a field hospital (CEI 2022b).

In effect, between 2021 and 2023, the CEI underwent a process of institutional strengthening. However, while CEI members were "more united in (...) solidarity" (interview #2, 7 February 2023), this development was a consequence of emerging windows of opportunity due to exogenous shocks rather than to the problem pressure that Austria's exit had placed upon the organization: "It's how the period is, COVID,

and then Ukraine, so this is something that needs more cooperation among countries in the context of these crises” (interview #2, 7 February 2023).

3.4 Pacific Islands Forum

The PIF was formed in 1971 as the preeminent body of regional cooperation in Oceania. Its 18-member states comprise Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and small island developing states in the three geographic subregions of the Pacific Ocean: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The organization’s focus is on deepening economic integration and trade relations among member states (Tarte 2014). At the same time, it also engages in other matters, such as cooperation for the enhancement of regional security (McDougall 2007).

In 2020, several months before a summit of PIF leaders, the member states of the Micronesian region had emphatically stated that it was their turn to select the organization’s next secretary general (The Strait Times 2020). They referred to a reputed “gentlemen’s agreement” dating back to 1978, which foresaw that representatives from the three subregions would alternate in holding the position of PIF secretary general (Fry 2021). During the summit in February 2021, held virtually due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the states’ leaders were set to elect a new secretary-general for the organization, and eventually two candidates with reportedly good prospects lined up for the election: Gerald Zackios, as the preferred candidate of the Micronesian member states, and Henry Puna, who was supported by the Polynesian member states (Radio New Zealand 2021). After the Polynesian candidate received a majority of the votes, the five Micronesian states announced their intent to leave the organization (The Japan Times 2022).

As a consequence, the problem pressure was perceived as high, with the Micronesian President Panuelo referring to a “‘big dark, dark cloud [...] hanging over the Pacific’” (The Guardian 2022c). Accordingly, the traditionally consensus-oriented organization went into crisis management mode and initiated extensive diplomatic outreach to the Micronesian states. Australia, the hegemon of the organization, advocated for reforms to PIF to keep the unity of the organization intact (Loop Pacific 2021). Contributing to the high problem pressure resulting from the exit threats, China’s geopolitical maneuvers to advance its interests and role to establish itself as a viable force in the Pacific region (The Guardian 2022a) further increased perceptions of high problem pressure. For instance, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati ended their recognition of Taiwan in 2019, with the former subsequently signing a bilateral security agreement with China (The Guardian 2023). Because a weakened PIF would be less resilient against outside interference by a state as powerful as China, the other PIF member states supported Australia’s initiative of institutional change. After a year of negotiations, a compromise, the Suva Agreement, was reached between the Micronesian subgroup and the other Pacific leaders to formalize the gentlemen’s agreement (The Guardian 2022b) and have a Micronesian leader take up the position of secretary-general after the end of Puna’s term. Moreover, the Micronesian group was awarded greater representation through the establishment of a PIF subregional office and the transfer of a commissioner position (The Guardian 2022b). Overall, PIF increased its legalization by formalizing previously noncod-

ified norms to strengthen its community orientation and institutionally strengthen Micronesian representation. It thereby prevented a split among the regional groups, all while manifesting its unified voice in the region in the process.

Following this institutional strengthening, all Micronesian states except Kiribati ceased to act upon the exit threat. Kiribati, however, did not agree to the rapprochement and withdrew from PIF in July 2022 (The Guardian 2023), 1 month after the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (Reuters 2022). Kiribati's exit highlights the continuously growing Chinese influence in the region, which PIF sought to counteract with its institutional reforms in the first place. As a response to the withdrawal, the Pacific leaders agreed for the new PIF suboffice to be located in Kiribati (Islands Business 2023), which in turn helped to pave the way for Kiribati's reentry into PIF in 2023. With unity reestablished among the Pacific states, the potential to curb Chinese influence in the region has been strengthened, a development that can be ascribed to PIF's institutional reaction to problem pressure accelerated by the emergence of a window of opportunity and resulting in an expansion of its institutional authority.

4 Conclusions

Threatened and realized withdrawals represent significant challenges to RIOs and their regional cooperation efforts. Whereas previous research focused on the future of EU integration after Brexit (Walter 2021), the resilience of global IOs in the face of internal challenges (Hirschmann 2021, 2020; Dijkstra et al. 2022), different forms of contestation of IOs (Kruck et al. 2022; Daßler et al. 2022), and mostly global IOs' accommodation of withdrawal threats through the presence or absence of institutional reform (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2023), in this paper we studied the effects of exit threats and withdrawals on RIOs from a broader comparative perspective. More specifically, based on the deductive assumption that high problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges increases the likelihood for institutional change, we exploratively analyzed additional factors impacting whether RIOs respond to exit-related challenges through institutional change and when this change takes the form of institutional strengthening or weakening.

Based thereon, we draw three main conclusions. First, in our case studies, RIOs responded to exit-related challenges with institutional change the more prevalent the perceptions of high problem pressure became. This was the case for NAFTA and PIF as RIOs with high shares of exit-related challenges relative to their membership size and corresponding perceptions of high problem pressure. Both organizations faced potentially existential crises. While for NAFTA its future existence would have been at stake if the United States had left the organization, for PIF the rising influence of China was threatening to undermine the organization if it did not manage to restore unity. Regarding COMESA, it displays variation concerning the occurrence of institutional change over time. While the problem pressure was initially perceived as limited and did not trigger institutional change, over time, as additional states voiced exit-related threats linked to their dissatisfaction arising from costly policy overlaps with SADC and EAC, problem pressure perceptions heightened and trig-

gered institutional change. The CEI also experienced institutional change, which, however, was not directly related to the low problem pressure induced by Austria's withdrawal.

Second, the analysis indicates that beyond perceptions of high problem pressure induced through exit-related challenges, the materialization and directionality of institutional change also depend on additional factors. On the one hand, after exit-related challenges occurred, institutional change was also connected to external windows of opportunities. The case studies suggest that external crises can enhance or—in the case of the CEI—even substitute for the problem pressure that RIOs face due to exit-related challenges. In the case of PIF, China's increasing presence in the Pacific and intent to gain influence among PIF members and the associated potential for outside interference further increased the problem pressure and the requirement for institutional change. For the CEI, institutional strengthening has been facilitated by the exogenous shocks of COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the case of COMESA, the global financial crises contributed to perceptions of high problem pressure and facilitated the creation of the tripartite free trade area. Unpacking more systematically how RIOs respond to different forms of structural shifts, crises, and external shocks through institutional change represents a promising pathway for future research, further contributing to scholarship on external windows of opportunity in general (Herweg et al. 2015; Zohnhöfer et al. 2015) and, more particularly, in the form of major events such as wars, financial crises, or pandemics (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020) and structural shifts in international distributions of power (Kruck and Zangl 2019, 2020).

On the other hand, the materialization and directionality of institutional change in response to exit-related challenges were also dependent on the distribution of preferences and interests among the challenger and the remaining RIO members (Kruck and Zangl 2020; Martin 1992). This was most obvious in NAFTA in that the United States, by far the most powerful member state, was able to pressure for renegotiation and achieve significant accommodations. The fact that it did not achieve all its demands was mostly a result of the fact that some of them—such as a decrease of its trade deficit—can hardly be addressed via a trade agreement. In the case of COMESA, institutional change was long delayed because the demands linked to exit-related challenges had not been backed by powerful member states such as Libya and Egypt—which, however, due to the absence of their opposition, eventually facilitated the institutional change. In the CEI, on the one hand, while the smaller member states were able to achieve the creation of new RIO organs, Italy was also able to retain the powerful secretary-general position for itself. On the other hand, the unified stance of all remaining member states against the Russian invasion of Ukraine facilitated the increase of the CEI's policy output in this regard. Finally, in the case of PIF, Australia, as the most powerful member state, pressured the other member states for institutional changes in light of the experienced exit-related challenges. Hence, while the case studies explore how the substance of the challenger's demands and the distribution of power and preferences among the RIO's member states influence the directionality of institutional change, the nexus of member state power and directionality of institutional change opens up promising paths for further research.

Third, while institutional change in response to exit-related challenges can take different directions, in the case studies, change mostly took place in the form of institutional strengthening. Institutional strengthening after exit-related challenges may thus be more likely than one would expect. In the case of PIF, this was evident in a reform leading to greater legalization of norms relating to institutional representation. Considering the CEI, institutional strengthening occurred through the creation of new organizational bodies and increases in the organization's policy scope and output. In the COMESA case, the formalization and strengthening of cooperation norms within and between the RIOs as well as the creation of new organizational and procedural provisions represented institutional strengthening as well. Yet, as the example of NAFTA demonstrates, institutional strengthening is not a foregone conclusion in the wake of high problem pressure. Instead, change can also entail institutional weakening in the form of reduced legalization and the discontinuation of previously institutionalized mechanisms. However, institutional change must be analytically distinguished from outcome and impact. While our research remains limited to identifying specific institutional responses by RIOs in reaction to exit-related challenges, evaluating whether and how specific institutional changes are put into practice and impact the performance, stability, and resilience of RIOs opens up a promising avenue for future research. However, despite this differentiation, the manner in which RIOs responded to exit-related challenges indicates that RIOs and their member states, far from remaining passive, display agency in reacting to exit-related challenges (Panke and Grundsfeld 2024). Our research thus aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing the overall resilience of IOs (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Kruck and Zangl 2019). In general, our analysis suggests that studying the future of (R)IOs and regional integration in the face of internal challenges requires a more nuanced perspective on the emerging outcomes. In the context of recent debates on the (perceived) decline of the liberal international order (Hooghe et al. 2018; Börzel and Zürn 2021; Lake et al. 2021), the potential trajectories of regional multilateral cooperation are usually conceptualized through the dichotomy of increased regional integration and disintegration (e.g., Vollaard 2018). However, the effects of internal challenges on RIOs are much more refined and slip through existing broad-brushed dichotomies. Instead, further research should focus on developing a more fine-grained and processual understanding of the contingent, nuanced, and multidirectional nature of the effects of RIOs' responses to internal challenges (c.f. Walter 2021 for the EU after Brexit).

5 Appendix

Table 2 List of RIOs and their abbreviations

RIO	Full name	Start	End
AC	Arctic Council	1996	–
ACC	Arab Cooperation Council	1989	1990
ACD	Asia Cooperation Dialogue	2001	–
ACS	Association of Caribbean States	1994	–
ACTO	Amazonian Cooperation Treaty Organization	1995	–
AL	League of Arab States	1945	–
ALADI	Latin American Integration Association	1960	–
ALBA	Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas	2004	–
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union	1989	–
ANDEAN	Andean Community	1969	–
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation	1989	–
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	1967	–
AU	African Union	1963	–
BEU	Benelux Economic Union	1958	–
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation	1997	–
BSEC	Black Sea Economic Cooperation	1992	–
CACM	Central American Common Market	1960	–
CAEU	Council of Arab Economic Unity	1964	–
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation	1997	–
CARICOM	Caribbean Community	1965	–
CCTS	Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States	2009	–
CE	Conseil de l'Entente	1959	–
CEEAC	Communauté Economique des États de l'Afrique Centrale	1983	–
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement	1992	–
CEI	Central European Initiative	1989	–
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States	2011	–
CEMAC	Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique centrale	1991	–
CENSAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States	1998	–
CEPGL	Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries	1976	–
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia	1999	–
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States	1991	–
CoE	Council of Europe	1949	–
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	1993	–
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty (Organization)	1992	–
EAC	East African Community	1967	1977
		1999	–
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union	2000	–
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization	1985	–
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States	1975	–

Table 2 (Continued)

RIO	Full name	Start	End
EFTA	European Free Trade Association	1960	–
EU	European Union	1951	–
G5S	G5 Sahel	2014	–
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council	1981	–
GGC	Gulf of Guinea Commission	2001	–
GUAM	Organization for Democracy and Economic Development	1997	–
ICGLR	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region	2004	–
IG AD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development	1986	–
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission	1984	–
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association	1997	–
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission	1964	–
MERCOSUR	Mercado Común del Sur	1994	–
MGC	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation	2000	–
MRU	Mano River Union	1973	–
MSG	Melanesian Spearhead Group	2007	–
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Organization	1994	–
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization	1949	–
NC	Nordic Council	1952	–
OAS	Organization of American States	1948	–
ODECA	Organization of Central American States	1951	1973
OECS	Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States	1981	–
OS CE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe	1975	–
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum	1971	–
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	1985	–
SACU	Southern African Customs Union	1945	–
SADC	Southern African Development Community	1980	–
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization	2001	–
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization	1955	1977
SELA	Latin American Economic System	1975	–
SICA	Central American Integration System	1991	–
SPC	Pacific Community	1947	–
UEMOA	West African Economic and Monetary Union	1994	–
UNASUR	Union of South American Nations	2008	–
WEU	Western European Union	1955	2010
WTO	Warsaw Treaty Organisation	1955	1991

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not

permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Abbott, Kenneth W., Robert O. Keohane, Andrew Moravcsik, Anne Marie Slaughter, and Duncan Snidal. 2000. The concept of legalization. *International Organization* 54:401–419.
- Ackrill, Robert, Adrian Kay, and Nikolaos Zahariadis. 2013. Ambiguity, multiple streams, and Eu policy. *Journal of European Public Policy* 20:871–887.
- Africa News. 1997a. *Southern Africa: External Forces Accused of Promoting Split in Comesa*. 14.01.1997.
- Africa News. 1997b. *Southern Africa: Namibia decides to remain in Comesa*. Africa News, 08.04.1997.
- Africa News. 2000. *East Africa: Could Comesa Collapse after Tanzania Quits?* Africa News, 19.10.2000.
- AssociatedPressInternational. 1997. *Suspended Comesa chief says he was framed*. Associated Press International, 22.01.1997.
- BBC. 2014. *Moscow paper views reaction to Putin's comments on Kazakhstan's statehood*. BC Monitoring Former Soviet Union, 02.09.2014.
- Börzel, Tanja, and Michael Zürn. 2021. Contestations of the liberal international order: from liberal multilateralism to postnational liberalism. *International Organization* 75:282–305.
- von Borzyskowski, Inken, and Felicity Vabulas. 2019. Hello, goodbye: when do states withdraw from international organizations? *The Review of International Organizations* 14:335–366.
- von Borzyskowski, Inken, and Felicity Vabulas. 2023. When do withdrawal threats achieve reform in international organizations? *Global Perspectives* 4:1–18.
- CEI. 2022a. *Annual report of the secretary general 2021*. CEI Executive Secretariat.
- CEI. 2022b. *Contribution to set up a field hospital in the southern part of Ukraine*. Central European Initiative.
- CEI. 2023a. *History highlights*. Central European Initiative. <https://www.cei.int/history>.
- CEI. 2023b. *Executive Secretariat*. Central European Initiative. <https://www.cei.int/Secretariat>.
- Chase, Kerry A. 2003. Economic interests and regional trading arrangements: the case of Nafta. *International Organization* 57:137–174.
- CNBC. Canada and Us reach trade deal to replace Nafta. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/01/us-canada-nafta-trade-talks.html>.
- COMESA. 2001. *Official gazette: legal notice nos. 8 to 75 of 2001*. Vol. 6.
- COMESA. 2008. *Comesa annual report 2008*. Lusaka: Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa.
- Council on Foreign Relations. 2020. *Nafta and the Usmta: weighing the impact of North American trade*. Council on foreign relations, 01.07.2020.
- Daßler, Benjamin, Tim Heinkelmann-Wild, and Andreas Kruck. 2022. Wann Eskalieren Westliche Mächte Institutionelle Kontestation? Interne Kontrolle, Externe Effekte Und Modi Der Kontestation Internationaler Institutionen. *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 29:6–37.
- Debre, Maria Josepha, and Hylke Dijkstra. 2021. Institutional design for a post-liberal order: why some international organizations live longer than others. *European Journal of International Relations* 27:311–339.
- Dijkstra, Hylke, Laura von Allwörden, Leonard A. Schuette, and Giuseppe Zaccaria. 2022. Donald trump and the survival strategies of international organisations: when can institutional actors counter existential challenges? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*.
- Eckhard, Steffen, Ronny Patz, and Sylvia Schmidt. 2019. Reform efforts, synchronization failure, and international bureaucracy: the case of the unesco budget crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 26:1639–1656.
- Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Mette. 2020. Death of international organizations. The organizational ecology of intergovernmental organizations, 1815–2015. *The Review of International Organizations* 15:339–370.
- Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Mette. 2021. What kills international organisations? When and why international organisations terminate. *European Journal of International Relations* 27:281–310.
- Flores-Macias, Gustavo, and Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer. 2019. The political economy of Nafta/Usmta. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. Oxford: University Press.
- Francis, John, and Yuqing Zheng. 2011. Trade liberalization, unemployment and adjustment: evidence from Nafta using state level data. *Applied Economics* 43:1657–1671.
- Fry, Greg. 2021. The pacific islands forum split: possibilities for pacific diplomacy. Devpolicy Blog. <https://devpolicy.org/the-pacific-islands-forum-split-possibilities-for-pacific-diplomacy-20210223/>.

- Gagné, Gilbert, and Michèle Rioux. 2022. *Nafta 2.0: from the first Nafta to the United States-Mexico-Canada agreement*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Globe and Mail. 2018. *Canada made concessions on Nafta but new deal avoids major damage to economy*. The Globe and Mail, 30.09.2018.
- Goltermann, Lukas, Mathis Lohaus, Alexander Spielau, and Kai Striebing. 2012. Roads to regionalism: concepts, issues, and cases. In *Roads to regionalism. Genesis, design and effects of regional organizations*, ed. Tanja A. Börzel, Lukas Goltermann, Mathis Lohaus, and Kai Striebing, 3–21. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gray, Julia. 2018. Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organizations. *International Studies Quarterly* 62:1–13.
- Haggart, Blayne. 2018. Nafta has been replaced, but at what cost to Canada? The conversation. <https://theconversation.com/nafta-has-been-replaced-but-at-what-cost-to-canada-104174>.
- Hahnsom, Dirk, Jonathan Adongo, and Calicious Tatalife. 2005. Namibia's withdrawal from Comesa: a case study of successful policy research in Namibia. In *Secondary Namibia's withdrawal from Comesa: a case study of successful policy research in Namibia*, ed. Dirk Secondary Hahnsom, Jonathan Adongo, and Calicious Tatalife.
- Herweg, Nicole, Christian Huß, and Reimut Zohnhöfer. 2015. Straightening the three streams: theorising extensions of the multiple streams framework. *European Journal of Political Research* 54:435–449.
- Hirschmann, Gisela. 2020. To Be or Not to Be? Lebendynamiken Internationaler Organisationen Im Spannungsfeld Von Internationaler Autorität Und Nationalstaatlicher Souveränität. *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 27:69–93.
- Hirschmann, Gisela. 2021. International organizations' responses to member state contestation: from inertia to resilience. *International Affairs* 97:1963–1981.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, Gary Marks, Tobias Lenz, Jeanine Bezuijen, Besir Ceka, and Svet Derderyan. 2017. *Measuring international authority: a postfunctionalist theory of governance*. Vol. 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, Tobias Lenz, and Gary Marks. 2018. Contested world order: the delegitimation of international governance. *The Review of International Organizations* 14:731–743.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, Tobias Lenz, and Gary Marks. 2019. *A theory of international organization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- IPS. 1999. *Africa-economy: Tanzania urged to stay in regional bloc*. Inter Press Service, 17.08.1999.
- Islands Business. 2023. *Kiribati returns to forum, Nauru's Waqa next secretary general*. Islands business, (24.02.2023).
- Kreuder-Sonnen, Christian, and Berthold Rittberger. 2023. The Lio's growing democracy gap: an endogenous source of polity contestation. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26:61–85.
- Kreuder-Sonnen, Christian, and Bernard Zangl. 2024. The politics of Io authority transfers: explaining informal Internationalisation and unilateral renationalisation. *Journal of European Public Policy* 1–26.
- Kruck, Andreas, and Bernard Zangl. 2019. Trading privileges for support: the strategic co-optation of emerging powers into international institutions. *International Theory* 11:318–343.
- Kruck, Andreas, and Bernhard Zangl. 2020. The adjustment of international institutions to global power shifts: a framework for analysis. *Global Policy* 11:5–16.
- Kruck, Andreas, Tim Heinkelmann-Wild, Benjamin Daßler, and Raphaela Hobbach. 2022. Disentangling institutional contestation by established powers: types of contestation frames and varying opportunities for the re-legitimation of international institutions. *Global Constitutionalism* 11:344–368.
- Labonté, Ronald, Eric Crosbie, Deborah Gleeson, and Courtney McNamara. 2019. Usma (Nafta 2.0): tightening the constraints on the right to regulate for public health. *Globalization and Health* 15..
- Ladi, Stella, and Dimitris Tsarouhas. 2020. Eu economic governance and Covid-19: policy learning and windows of opportunity. *Journal of European Integration* 42:1041–1056.
- Laffan, Brigid, and Stefan Telle. 2023. *The Eu's response to Brexit*. Cham: Springer.
- Lake, David A., Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse. 2021. Challenges to the liberal order: reflections on international organization. *International Organization* 75:225–257.
- Lenz, Tobias, Jeanine Bezuijen, Liesbet Hooghe, and Gary Marks. 2015. Patterns of international organization: task specific vs. general purpose. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 49:107–132.
- Lester, Simon, and Inu Manak. 2018. The rise of populist nationalism and the renegotiation of Nafta. *Journal of International Economic Law* 21:151–169.
- Loop Pacific. 2021. *Pacific minister Seselja pleads with micronesians leaders not to leave the forum*. Loop.
- Lunogelo, B., and Apronius Mbilinyi. 2009. Convergence of Comesa-Sadc-Eac regional frameworks. In *Secondary convergence of Comesa-Sadc-Eac regional frameworks*, ed. B. Secondary Lunogelo, Apronius Mbilinyi 35. Dar es Salaam.

- Martin, Lisa L. 1992. Interests, power, and multilateralism. *International Organization* 44:765–792.
- McDougall, Derek. 2007. The (in)effectiveness of security regionalism: comparing Asean and the pacific islands forum. In *The Evolution of Regionalism in Asia*, ed. Heribert Dieter. London: Routledge.
- MENAFN. 2018. *Trade rules are deeply flawed but Trump's tariff fixation is hurting America and the rest of the world*. Middle East and North Africa financial network, 06.07.2018.
- ORF. 2018. Österreich Tritt Aus Zentraleuropäischer Initiative Aus. <https://orf.at/v2/stories/2442418/>. Accessed 23 Nov 2022.
- Othieno, Lawrence, and Isaac Shinyekwa. 2011. Prospects and challenges in the formation of the Comesa-Eac-Sadc tripartite free trade area. In *Secondary prospects and challenges in the formation of the Comesa-Eac-Sadc tripartite free trade area*, ed. Lawrence Secondary Othieno, Isaac Shinyekwa
- Ouellet, Richard, and Maxence Messier. 2017. Renegotiating Nafta under a Trump presidency: tweak, tear, or think again? A legal perspective from Québec. *Quebec Studies* 64:123–141.
- Panke, Diana, and Lukas Grundseld. 2024. Epilogue—Responses to Brexit: insights from small EU member states and lessons for exits from other regional organizations. In *Small states of the European Union and Brexit*, ed. Laura C. Ferreira-Pereira, 107–111. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Panke, Diana, and Sören Stapel. 2023. North america in comparative perspective: regional cooperation dynamics in the western hemisphere and the world. In *North American regionalism—Stagnation, decline, or renewal?*, ed. Eric Hershberg, Tom Long. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Panke, Diana, Lukas Grundseld, and Pawel Tverskoi. *Exit from regime complexity? Regional international organizations under scrutiny*. Global studies quarterly. forthcoming.
- Panke, Diana, Sören Stapel, and Anna Starkmann. 2020. *Comparing regional organizations: global dynamics and regional particularities*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Radio New Zealand. 2021. *Former cook islands pm is the new secretary general of the Pif*. Radio New Zealand, 04.02.2021.
- Reuters. 2022. *Chinese foreign minister to visit eight Pacific island countries*
- Sabatie, Paul A., and Christopher Weible (eds.). 2014. *Theories of the policy process*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Saurugger, Sabine, and Fabien Terpan. 2016. Do crises lead to policy change? The multiple streams framework and the European Union's economic governance instruments. *Policy Sciences* 49:35–53.
- Sommerer, Thomas, Theresa Squatrito, Jonas Tallberg, and Magnus Lundgren. 2022a. *Decision-making in international organizations: institutional design and performance*. Review of international organizations.
- Sommerer, Thomas, Hans Agné, Fariborz Zelli, and Bart Bes. 2022b. *Global legitimacy crises: decline and revival in multilateral governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spandler, Kilian. 2018. Regional standards of membership and enlargement in the EU and Asean. *Asia Europe Journal* 16:183–198.
- Tallberg, Jonas, Thomas Sommerer, Theresa Squatrito, and Magnus Lundgren. 2016. The performance of international organizations: a policy output approach. *Journal of European Public Policy* 23:1077–1096.
- Tarte, Sandra. 2014. Regionalism and changing regional order in the pacific islands. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 1:312–324.
- The Guardian. 2022a. *China influenced Kiribati exit from Pacific islands forum, Mp claims*
- The Guardian. 2022b. *Kiribati withdraws from Pacific islands forum in blow to regional body*. The Guardian, 10.07.2022.
- The Guardian. 2022c. *Pacific leaders reach crucial deal to restore political unity, as China's interest in region accelerates*. The Guardian, 08.06.2022.
- The Guardian. 2023. *Kiribati to return to Pacific islands forum at vital moment for regional diplomacy*. The Guardian, 30.01.2023.
- The Independent. 2017. *Us secretary Ross said Nafta exit still possible*. The Independent, 11.09.2017.
- The Japan Times. 2022. *Kiribati withdraws from Pacific island forum in blow to regional unity*. The Japan Times, 11.07.2022.
- The Star. 2018. *Trump's Nafta threat leaves Trudeau locked in high-stakes game of poker*. The Star, 29.09.2018.
- The Strait Times. 2020. *Micronesian leaders threaten to leave Pacific forum*. The Strait Times, 05.10.2020.
- Thomas, Daniel C. 2017. Beyond identity: membership norms and regional organization. *European Journal of International Relations* 23:217–240.
- Today, U.S.A. 2017. *Nafta scorecard: who gained, who was pained*. USA Today, 02.05.2017.
- Villarreal, M. Angeles, and Ian F. Fergusson. 2019. Nafta renegotiation and the proposed United States-Mexico-Canada agreement (Usmca). In *Secondary Nafta renegotiation and the proposed United*

- States-Mexico-Canada agreement (Usmca)*, ed. M. Angeles Secondary Villarreal, Ian F. Fergusson. U.S. Congressional Research Service.
- Vollaard, Hans. 2018. *European disintegration: a search for explanations*. London: Palgrave.
- Walter, Stefanie. 2021. Brexit domino? The political contagion effects of voter-endorsed withdrawals from international institutions. *Comparative Political Studies* 54:2382–2415.
- Wästfelt, Margit, and Tania Pibernik. 2017. Central European initiative: 25 years for central and south-eastern europe. In *Die Eu-Strategie Für Den Donauraum Auf Dem Prüfstand: Erfahrungen Und Perspektiven*, ed. Christina Ellen, Bos Griessler, and Christopher Walsch, 231–242. Wien: Nomos.
- WSJ. 2017. *Why Donald Trump decided to back off Nafta threat*. Wall Street Journal, 27.04.2017.
- XinhuaNewsAgency. 1997. *Mozambican president reiterates to recede from Comesa*. Xinhua News Agency, 17.02.1997.
- Zohlnhöfer, Reimut, Nicole Herweg, and Friedbert Rüb. 2015. Theoretically refining the multiple streams framework: an introduction. *European Journal of Political Research* 54:412–418.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.