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Crises, Adaptation, and Resilience—Exploring Crises Responses of Regional Organizations from the Perspective of EU Studies and Comparative Regionalism

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Abstract How do different types of regional organizations react to current challenges and crises? This special issue of the *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* explores this question by bringing together contributions from European Union studies and comparative regionalism. This introduction discusses the concepts of *crisis*, *adaptation*, and *resilience* as well as the value of the dialogue between the two subdisciplines, outlines the aims of the special issue, systematizes the main findings of the contributions, and reflects on their implications for future research.

Keywords European Union · EU studies · Comparative regionalism · Regional organizations · Crises

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Krisen, Anpassung und Resilienz – Untersuchung der Krisenreaktionen regionaler Organisationen aus der Perspektive von EU-Studien und vergleichendem Regionalismus

Zusammenfassung Wie reagieren regionale Organisationen auf aktuelle Herausforderungen und Krisen? Das vorliegende Sonderheft der *Politischen Vierteljahresschrift* widmet sich dieser Frage und vereint hierzu Beiträge aus den Bereichen EU-Forschung und vergleichende Regionalismusforschung. Diese Einleitung erläutert die Konzepte *Krise*, *Anpassung* und *Resilienz*, diskutiert den Nutzen des Dialogs zwischen den beiden Teildisziplinen, benennt die Ziele des Sonderheftes, systematisiert die zentralen Befunde der Beiträge und diskutiert Anregungen für die weitere Forschung.

Schlüsselwörter Europäische Union · EU-Forschung · Vergleichende Regionalismusforschung · Regionalorganisationen · Krisen

1 Introduction and Aims of the Special Issue

Regional organizations (ROs) are an integral component of the liberal international order (LIO). Their importance grew after the end of the Cold War, when regionalism was seen as part of the world's transition to the “postnational” liberal order (Börzel and Zürn 2021). The European Union (EU), as the most advanced case of regionalism, became a global actor and a source of emulation for ROs worldwide (Lenz 2013). In other parts of the world, the number of ROs increased, as did their ambitions and interconnectedness. Over the last several decades, regionalism has increasingly been perceived not as an alternative to global multilateralism but rather as an essential part of it, partially compensating for deficits in global governance (Pomfret 2021).

Currently, it has become commonplace to portray the LIO as facing multiple crises (Ikenberry 2018; Peoples 2024). This is driven by both the internal contradictions of the LIO and the challenges it faces due to unexpected shocks and actions of illiberal actors, such as large authoritarian countries (Lake et al. 2021; Börzel et al. 2024). Sometimes these crises facing the LIO are presented as part of the overall “polycrisis” the world is experiencing, i.e., an amalgamation of overlapping crises affecting each other (Tooze 2021; Henig and Knight 2023). These developments also influence ROs, and it is against this background that this special issue brings together perspectives from EU studies and comparative regionalism to explore how ROs respond to crises. By analyzing responses to a range of crises across different ROs, the contributions show how these organizations adapt to crises and how resilient they are. At the same time, the special issue creates opportunities for cross-fertilization between the two subdisciplines.

Crisis are extraordinary moments—periods of stress that call into question “the existence and viability of the political order” (Ikenberry 2008, p. 3). They are typically defined by the combination of three elements (Rosenthal et al. 2001, p. 7, Brinks and Ibert 2020; Lipsky 2020): uncertainty (unpredictable outcomes), urgency

(the need for decision-makers to respond within a very short period of time), and threat (potentially large damage to the affected institutions and societies). While there is certainly an “objective” component to each crisis, a real set of political, economic, and social developments, in the age of public opinion polls and social media affecting and accelerating the public debate, has resulted in crisis perceptions becoming increasingly relevant. These perceptions are socially constructed, with various political entrepreneurs either advancing the framing of a particular situation as a crisis or disputing it (Geisemann and Geiger 2004). Although the crisis-framing cannot be used arbitrarily—there are measurable underlying economic, social, and political challenges, which actors observe and interpret as crises—there is still enormous variation in how similar events are perceived and in what is framed as crisis in different parts of the world (for the case of the EU studies, see Davis Cross and Ma 2015).

In terms of regionalism, many observers conclude that the EU has found itself in a “long crisis decade” (Ferrera et al. 2024). Examples of phenomena typically subsumed under this concept are the euro crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While this list reflects the perception of particular phenomena as crises rather than the result of a systematic analysis of external shocks the EU is facing, all events mentioned above satisfy to a certain extent the three key crisis criteria outlined above. In addition to these external factors challenging the EU, the consolidation of Euroscepticism (Treib 2021; Usherwood and Startin 2013), the increasing lack of trust in EU institutions, and the ongoing rule-of-law crisis in some member states weaken the EU from within. While unfolding over a longer time period and being less urgent than the EU’s external crises, they can be described as “slow-burning crises” (see, for example, Seabrooke and Tsingou 2018).

Other ROs face different challenges and crises as well, driven by both region-specific dynamics and global challenges. Factors such as growing economic protectionism, deglobalization, and the increasing frequency of military confrontations (James 2018; Kornprobst and Paul 2021) play an important role in explaining why many ROs are perceived as facing multifaceted crises. Some ROs are split by new geopolitical lines of division, some have to adjust their mandates to deal with new challenges faced by their member states, and some have to change their decision-making procedures to account for the urgency and uncertainty of crises (Libman 2022).

The crises ROs face differ in their degree of urgency, threat, and uncertainty, which explains why their development and effects are strikingly different; some of them are latent and slow-burning, whereas others can be seen as acute, and some transition from one category to another (on the concepts of latent and acute crises, see, e.g., Studebaker 2023).¹ The very fact that multiple ROs face crises today is not historically unprecedented; there have been periods in the past when regionalism both in the EU and elsewhere was also seen as facing major interconnected crises.

¹ The war in Ukraine, for example, which originally was seen as a short-term crisis, is currently often perceived as part of a prolonged confrontation between Russia and the EU in Eastern Europe, and thus a latent crisis.

In the history of the EU, for example, the 1970s were a period of widespread perception of the crisis of regionalism (Jouan 2016). Still, the contemporary evolution of ROs in different parts of the world in the shadow of (perceived) crises offers us an opportunity to explore how these crises affect the dynamics of regionalism, in particular the *resilience* of ROs, and how the development of regionalism in previous decades affected this resilience.

2 Bridging Comparative Regionalism and EU Studies

The primary aim of this special issue is to bring together contributions that address the topic from the perspective of two distinct subdisciplines sharing the same subject, the study of ROs: EU studies and comparative regionalism. Scholars from EU studies typically analyze the origins, the development, and the functioning of the EU; the system of EU institutions and decision-making procedures; and EU policies—but also diverse challenges and crises of the EU, such as the increase of political conflict over the EU (i.e., the politicization of Europe), the rise and consolidation of Euroscepticism, and the rule-of-law crisis and the reactions of national and supranational actors, as well as their implications for the development of the EU. Comparative regionalism looks at a universe of ROs in various parts of the world, frequently changing their goals and membership composition, entering long periods of passivity and including countries with very different foreign policy agendas and political systems, accounting for different attitudes toward regionalism as such.

This special issue is, of course, not the first to attempt to connect these two strands of literature. Early theories of regionalism (e.g., neofunctionalism) explicitly looked at both the EU and other ROs (Haas and Schmitter 1964; see also Börzel 2024) and expanded the conceptual repertoire with concepts such as “spillover” and “spill-back” to capture their non-unidirectional development (Schmitter 1970). In previous years, several contributions have also linked these two subdisciplines together (Fort and Webber 2006; Murray 2010; Warleigh-Lack et al. 2011; Börzel and Risse 2016; Carbone 2021) in order to study the effect of crises on regionalism (Dosenrode 2016; Telo 2016; Nolte and Weiffen 2021). Notwithstanding, the possibilities for two subdisciplines to learn from each other have not been fully exhausted: For example, the emergence of new topics of study in EU research and in comparative regionalism (due to the internal logic of the subdisciplines or specific challenges the EU or other ROs are facing) calls for exploring new opportunities to link these disciplines. As we will discuss below, both subdisciplines offer their perspectives on the resilience of regionalism, thus rendering a dialogue between them particularly important.

Promoting the cross-disciplinary exchange holds a lot of promise. It allows us to explore the diverse patterns of resilience (or lack thereof) of international and European actors under the current crisis conditions. Integrating conceptual and theoretical approaches and insights from these subdisciplines also increases their visibility and helps to overcome the fragmentation of the discipline that might weaken its policy impact and influence on the public debate. European Union experts can benefit from a move beyond EU-centrism still present in many studies by considering conceptual

developments and insights from comparative regionalism. Conversely, comparative regionalism can also be inspired by the literature on EU studies.

3 Crises, Adaptation, and Resilience in EU Studies and Comparative Regionalism

The literature available on crises pertaining to ROs is rich. Concerning crises, we need to distinguish between the two related concepts of adaptation and resilience. The notion of resilience is frequently used in social sciences—though not without criticism—to describe the ability of organizations to cope with stress or, more specifically, to return to “some form of normal condition after a period of stress” (Olsson et al. 2015, p. 1). The concept therefore focuses on the outcome of crises, i.e., the return to normalcy, to capture how organizations cope with these. Trondal (2021) distinguishes between “static” and “dynamic” resilience, the first standing for the stabilization and maintenance of the status quo and the second for adaptation. Adaptation itself can be understood as the process by which order is maintained through the creation of new rules and arrangements alongside existing ones (Ikenberry 2008, p. 13).² Importantly, crisis adaptation can manifest itself in several dimensions: the polity dimension, which refers to the institutional features of the RO; the policy dimension, which involves new instruments and measures within different policy areas; or the behavioral dimension, reflecting how political actors respond and adjust their behavior.³ Moreover, adaptation can go in different directions. For example, polity adaptation can lead to institutional strengthening or weakening—that is to say, the creation of new institutions or the weakening of existing ones—and does not necessarily require formal institutional change. In addition to the adaptation ultimately serving their survival, ROs can also turn out to be nonresilient under conditions of crisis, leading to their breakdown through disintegration and even formal cancellation of an RO.

The concept of resilience has been applied to studying the international order as such (Risse et al. 2016; Bourbeau 2015), the EU (Riddervold et al. 2021; Bargues et al. 2023), and other ROs (Briceño-Ruiz and Puntigliano 2020), as well as occasionally for comparing the EU with other international institutions (Korosteleva and Flockhart 2020). The literature demonstrates substantial variation in the degree of resilience of individual ROs with respect to different crises and policy areas. While some studies show ROs surviving even under extreme pressure, adapting their roles and functions (Panke and Friedrichs 2024a) and going well beyond their original mandates and objectives (Vinokurov and Libman 2017), other studies look at how ROs turn into phantom phenomena (e.g., Gray 2018) or cease to exist altogether (Debre and Dijkstra 2021). Understanding this variation by means of different theoretical and empirical approaches remains an important research task, which our special issue aims to contribute to.

² Adaptation can be distinguished from transformation, which represents the more far-reaching process of a fundamental restructuring of the existing order and its rules and norms (Ikenberry 2008, p. 13).

³ Articles in this special issue will not focus on how policies have been adapted to recent crises.

In EU studies, there exists a significant recent literature examining the EU response to various crisis phenomena (Riddervold et al. 2021; Castels 2018; Matthijs 2020; Dinan et al. 2017; Davis Cross 2017; Habermas 2012; Tosun et al. 2014). Extant research has focused on the plethora of crises (Cotta and Isernia 2020) or the polycrisis (Zeitlin et al. 2019) that the EU has faced in the last two decades and which we have mentioned in the previous section. These works have explored the dynamics of the euro crisis (Jones et al. 2016), the migration crisis (Scipioni 2017; Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018), Brexit (Cini and Verdun 2018), the rule-of-law crisis (Priebus and Anders 2024), the rise and consolidation of Euroscepticism (Brack and Startin 2015; van Elsas et al. 2016; Treib 2021), the politicization of the EU (Hutter et al. 2016), the pandemic (Wolff and Ladi 2020), and, most recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Koval and Vachudova 2024). They analyzed policy reactions to these crises as well as the effect of these crises on the EU. A recurrent finding of these works is that the EU has been "surprisingly resilient" (Riddervold et al. 2021, p. 6, Nicoli and Zeitlin 2024). Even the most challenging crises "have not brought down the edifice" (Ferrera et al. 2024, p. 707). On the contrary, most of them propelled consolidation of the EU (Jones et al. 2021), prompted EU actors to adapt existing policies or develop new policies and instruments, and resulted in the strengthening of supranational institutions, even in areas of core state powers (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018).

At the same time, challenges such as Euroscepticism and low public support for the union persist and pose a challenge to the EU (as Brexit has clearly demonstrated) and to EU decision-making, as the prominent concept of the "constraining dissensus" suggests. So far, mainstream parties in different EU member states have in particular tried to address these issues and, for example, seek a way to regain Eurosceptic voters by using different strategies (Meijers 2017). However, the ultimate response to the Eurosceptic challenge has yet to be found, which could lead to an even broader challenge for European democracy: the rise of a genuine transnational cleavage dividing European societies and leading to the disintegration of the EU. Illiberal trends in EU member states and the rule-of-law crisis that have challenged the EU for several years (Anders and Lorenz 2021) are also far from being tackled, with the Hungarian prime minister consistently disregarding the EU's foundational values and the country now classified as an "electoral autocracy" (V-Dem 2024). Finally, economic crises can lower public support of the EU (e.g., Braun and Tausendpfund 2014; Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Hobolt and de Vries 2016), although so far in most EU member states, support has returned to precrisis levels (precisely, in the states that have had, from the perspective of the citizenry, appropriate policy responses by national governments and/or an increase in economic performance after the crises).

In the comparative regionalism literature, crises are frequently cited as reasons for the failure of ROs to achieve their goals or even turn into zombie institutions without actual policy relevance (on crises and regionalism, see Nolte and Weiffen 2021; Saurugger and Terpan 2016). Thus, as in the case of the EU, economic crises (and, more generally, poor economic performance) reduce the support for regionalism and cause countries to engage in more protectionist policies (frequently trying to outbid other countries in terms of protectionism; Park 2019). Crises increase redistributive conflicts, with national governments being tempted to solve them at the cost of

neighboring states. At the same time, there have always been examples of more nuanced responses to crises: In East Asia, for example, the global financial crisis of 1998 has stimulated the shift from a more informal economic interaction to the establishment of several regional institutions and a more intensive cooperation of countries (Katada 2012). In post-Soviet Eurasia, the economic crisis of 1998 put an end to the early attempts at regionalism, while the economic crisis of 2008 became the birth hour of more advanced regionalist initiatives (Vinokurov and Libman 2014). A fundamental problem arises if the crisis requires the RO to change its focus, for example, by moving toward a greater focus on common industrial policy or a large-scale redistribution of funds; under these conditions, the bureaucracies of many ROs and their member states see themselves as reaching their limits.

Similarly, military conflicts and confrontations have been among some of the major factors blocking the development of certain ROs (South Asia being among the most prominent examples; see Dash 2008). While, fundamentally, regionalism reduces the likelihood of wars among their members (Hadjiyiannis et al. 2016), among the ROs existing in different parts of the world, a non-negligible number have members that have engaged in militarized disputes against each other, rendering any progress past the mere rhetoric of regionalism hardly possible. What is interesting from this point of view is that there are quite a few ROs that have survived for decades although they include members engaged in more or less open confrontation with each other. While they obviously fail to achieve substantial progress in terms of economic and political cooperation, they can still be useful, e.g., as fora for dialogue and information exchange. Finally, ROs have been actively involved in peacekeeping and mediation of civil wars in their member states (with mixed success, though; see Gartner 2011; Lundgren 2016).

Ultimately, comparative regionalism does not provide a universal answer to the question of the resilience of regionalism. Many studies of ROs (e.g., in Latin America, see Jenne et al. 2017; for post-Soviet Eurasia, see Obydenkova 2011) are inherently skeptical of the ability of these ROs to deal with crises, considering them a sort of “good weather” phenomena, becoming increasingly fragile under the pressure of crises. Other studies, however, have come to the conclusion that non-European ROs can also show a high level of resilience, although this may refer more to the ability of the bureaucracy of ROs to adapt and persevere than to them actually contributing to public goods they were designed to provide.

A common theme in both EU studies and comparative regionalism is that the nature of the challenges facing ROs also changes over time. For instance, COVID-19 constituted an unprecedented shock for which hardly any country in the world was prepared (Nikitina and Arapova 2022; Yingi and Hlungwani 2022). In the same way, the current process of deglobalization constitutes a fundamental game changer, requiring adaptation and transformation on the side of ROs (Walter 2021; Libman 2022). Furthermore, Russia’s war against Ukraine represents an unparalleled challenge, giving rise to debates concerning the (lack of) “bellicist” integration in the EU⁴ and Russia’s involvement in and strengthened ties with Eurasian ROs. Though both EU studies and the comparative regionalism research are concerned

⁴ We use the term “integration” here because it is predominant in the respective discourse.

with analyzing the crises and challenges ROs face, the fundamental perspective of these two lines of research is a very different one.

While the European project has, of course, experienced crisis periods and stagnation before (e.g., the 1970s, as mentioned above) and has had to deal with major integration setbacks (like the failure of the EU Constitutional Treaty in 2005 or, more recently, Brexit), ultimately, the story of the EU is (still)⁵ predominantly narrated as one of success. Textbook evidence usually presents European integration as a progressive story (Gilbert 2008, 2020), i.e., as a “process whose forward march has been hampered by states and national leaders [...] irrationally attached to the principles of national sovereignty” (Gilbert 2020, p. 9). European integration is thus interpreted as unprecedented in many ways, reinventing itself and finding new ways of dealing with historical challenges through policy adaptation and innovation as well as further integration. In contrast to this, European disintegration—although its possibility is obviously on the public agenda—is an area that has been neglected by most EU scholars (due to the “normative bias” of European integration research, which places greater emphasis on successful deepening and enlargement, i.e., considers them worthier of study than crises and setbacks; see Faber and Wessels 2005). More recently, however, a number of important exceptions (cf. Vollaard 2014; Webber 2014, 2018) examine this disintegration prospect, as well as analyze the EU as an institution in a “state of permanent crisis.” Therefore, it may be beneficial to systematically confront the traditional scholarly literature of EU studies with its biased narrative (for a good overview, see Gilbert 2008), with different perspectives and strands of literature. As already suggested by Vollaard (2014), comparative approaches—such as comparative regionalism—are valuable in this regard.

Comparative regionalism holds a much more skeptical attitude about its object of study. A topic of paramount importance for comparative regionalism is the implementation gap: Many ROs seem to fall short of the official intentions of their designers (at least, in the form in which they were declared publicly; Vinokurov and Libman 2017). In many cases, these are examples of a high level of cooperation (e.g., the Economic Community of West African States, which manages to implement concerted military interventions in its member states [see Börzel and van Hüllen 2015], or the Eurasian Economic Union, which succeeded at creating a functioning economic RO in Eurasia after two decades of failed attempts [see Vinokurov 2018]), but these are perceived as deviations from the pattern of failures—it is not uncommon for observers to be highly skeptical about new ROs, with their preexisting beliefs being that these organizations are going to perform poorly rather than succeed.

While the difference between EU studies and the comparative regionalism perspectives has been explored before, further research on this topic is certainly needed.

⁵ This narrative, of course, may change over time and when European integration will be analyzed more through the lens of historians than by political scientists: “[H]istory, like the weather, is apt to play tricks on those who think they have figured out the long-range forecast” (Gilbert 2008, p. 656). So far—and therefore we have added the word “still” in the text—a progressive story of the EU is being told by most EU scholars, but different narratives of European integration are definitely also part of the research literature (see Gilbert 2008, 2020; Vollaard 2014; Webber 2014), and “these may come to predominate if the European project loses its aura of success” (Gilbert 2008, p. 641).

There are several questions one ought to ask. First, in terms of EU studies, is it the case that the EU is “immune” from the challenges⁶ that other ROs face? It is possible that our positive assessment of the EU—i.e., the correctly criticized progressive reading of European integration (Gilbert 2008)—is associated with the bias of projecting past experiences into the future (assuming that the EU will manage the challenges it faces because it managed certain challenges in the past) and with the perception of the EU (and Europe) as being unique within international comparison (again, we have to point out that there have been studies that looked at the possibility of the fragmentation or collapse of the EU and possible conditions leading to it, which create a natural point of connection to comparative regionalism). Second, from the point of view of comparative regionalism, the negative assessment can be associated with incorrect interpretation of the actual goals of ROs created in different parts of the world and with explicit reliance on the EU as the only yardstick against which the success or failure of an RO should be measured.

This special issue touches upon these questions and seeks to guide more in-depth scholarly thinking in this direction in future research. By bringing together works from EU studies and comparative regionalism, we hope to continue to promote this cross-disciplinary exchange of conceptual frameworks and insights.

4 Contributions of this Special Issue

The contributions to this special issue approach the patterns of resilience to the ongoing crises of different types of ROs from different perspectives. The special issue includes nine articles, with four articles approaching these challenges from the EU perspective and four from the comparative regionalism perspective.

Most articles analyze reactions (and some also analyze remedies) to phenomena that have been identified as major challenges or crises, such as the rise of politicization and Euroscepticism (Braun and Carteny 2024, Rapp 2024, Debus and Schweizer 2024); the sovereign debt crisis, Russia’s war against Ukraine, and the so-called migration crisis (Daßler et al. 2024); exit threats (Panke et al. 2024); and the dysfunctionality and de-institutionalization of ROs (Muntschick and Plank 2025). Other articles zoom into instances of surprising resilience despite recurrent crises (Nolte and Weiffen 2024) and forms of concealed adaptation to changing purposes and external environments (Libman 2024). Collectively, the articles of this special issue provide a nuanced picture of how different types of ROs respond and adapt to current challenges and crises.

In line with recent work, the contributions focusing on the EU confirm that the union has not been severely destabilized by the crises it is perceived to be facing. Rather, we can observe that political actors adapt to challenging situations such as the Eurosceptic challenge (Braun and Carteny 2024; Rapp 2024); i.e., the EU remains highly resilient. Moreover, measures of redistribution, when combined

⁶ To be specific here: Our argument is not that the EU is in fact “immune,” but it is usually considered “immune” by most EU researchers because “the progressive conception has led to the story of the EU being told in over-simplified and unhistorical ways” (Gilbert 2008, p. 641).

with an appropriate communication strategy (Debus and Schweizer 2024), seem to contribute to this resilience by generating public support. In addition, the EU responds to crises by increasing its interaction with other international organizations (Daßler et al. 2024).

Other ROs, too, show a higher level of resilience and are less prone to destabilization and failure than often assumed. For example, widespread exit threats and institutional withdrawals are usually countered by an institutional strengthening of ROs (Panke et al. 2024), i.e., by their dynamic resilience. Moreover, ROs can undergo hidden transformations that require us to look beyond their officially communicated mandates (Libman 2024), again showing their resilience to a changing external environment. Finally, the contributions show that the responses to crises in the non-EU world can differ substantially from the EU experience, in some cases requiring a different conceptual language (Muntschick and Plank 2024), while in other cases the responses of ROs to crises can be well-captured using the conceptual language of the EU studies (Nolte and Weiffen 2024).

Below we summarize their main arguments, starting with the EU studies.

In their contribution, **Braun and Carteny (2024)** show how the rise and consolidation of Eurosceptic parties as a development that could be described as a slow-burning crisis is transforming the party competition over the European polity and specific policy issues: While left-wing non-Eurosceptic parties react to the consolidation of Eurosceptic parties, particularly those on the right, by emphasizing the EU polity issues and becoming less Europhile, right-wing non-Eurosceptic parties respond to right-wing Eurosceptic challengers mainly by becoming more skeptical when it comes to cultural issues.

Rapp (2024) studies the implications of the increasing public conflict over the future path of European integration, focusing on pro-European actors. She shows that in party systems with a successful Eurosceptic party, even non-Eurosceptic voters seem to take into account the issue of European integration in their vote calculus, although the European integration issue is still most pronounced among Eurosceptic voters. Thus, over time, European integration matters not only to anti-European but also to pro-European voters. Taken together, these two studies illustrate that in the case of the EU, we can observe patterns of resilience to slow-burning crises such as Euroscepticism and the challenge of politicization. In a way, we can see that party competition does indeed seem to adjust over time, as predicted by Mair (2008, p. 164; see also Braun 2022), regulating the pattern described so far, where the rules of the game have helped Eurosceptics and nationalists gain (Lefkofridi 2020).

Debus and Schweizer (2024) study the implications of the EU's regional development program. Their empirical analysis shows that the perceived personal benefits of EU regional funding increase the support for European integration. Accordingly, redistribution—combined with a specific communication strategy—can increase support and thus can make ROs more resilient, but it is, of course, an instrument that depends on the resources of the ROs as well as the willingness of the member states to establish these kinds of policies.

Going beyond the predominant focus on the EU's internal responses to crises, **Daßler, Bandemer, Rittberger, and Weiß (2024)** examine the EU's crisis-induced external engagement with other international organizations (IOs). As they demon-

strate, crises induce incentives for IOs to interact with other IOs when there is an overlapping mandate or membership. In line with the objective of this special issue and previous work on the relationship between EU and regionalism studies (Acharya 2016), the article illustrates how EU studies can be advanced by moving beyond EU-centrism and drawing on questions and conceptual tools developed in the field of comparative regionalism. As the authors show, the EU, reacting to different challenges and crises, actively contributes to the densification of the network of interrelated organizations and the increasing regime complexity, which has been mostly discussed in comparative regionalism (Söderbaum 2016) but has been overlooked in EU studies and EU crisis studies in particular.

Turning to the comparative regionalism perspective, **Panke, Grundsfield, and Tverskoi (2024)** examine perhaps the most immediate and visible challenge an RO can face: the threat of a member state withdrawing from the organization, and the ways in which ROs respond to these challenges. Here again, the parallels and the potential for mutual dialogue for EU studies and comparative regionalism studies become visible. What was perceived as a unique and unprecedented shock for the EU (Brexit) is, in fact, something that many ROs worldwide have faced in the past. Panke et al. show that institutional change is the main response to exit threats and withdrawals. Depending on different factors, the scope of the institutional adaptation can span from institutional strengthening to institutional weakening. Overall, the article underscores both the benefit of moving beyond EU-centrism and addressing the alleged “*N*=1-problem” by situating findings from EU studies in research that consider the universe of ROs around the globe (Warleigh 2004) and the fact that adaptation is not a unidirectional process necessarily resulting in the strengthening of the RO’s institutions.

A significant concern from the comparative regionalism’s point of view is that the adaptation and transformation of ROs can be invisible to an external observer looking merely at the official mandates and formal governance. In particular, for a specific group of ROs—the so-called authoritarian regionalism (that is, ROs set up primarily by autocracies)—the deviation between formal goals and real objectives of an RO is seen by many as a rule rather than an exception. Examining the ecology of ROs in post-Soviet Eurasia, **Libman (2024)** addresses this problem and shows that the hidden transformation of authoritarian regionalism can be identified through a systematic analysis of biographies of key officials. Here again, an interesting parallel to EU studies emerges. While in EU studies there is extant research on the bureaucracy of the European Commission, the research on this topic for other ROs is extremely limited.

Muntschick and Plank (2025) turn to the universe of African ROs and investigate the factors driving the dysfunctionality, disintegration, and de-institutionalization of ROs. Looking at various threats (primarily within the security sphere) encountered by individual African ROs, the authors look at which forms of responses the organizations and the member countries provided and whether these responses were associated with de-institutionalization—that is, cooperation outside the formal scope of the RO—and the weakening of ROs and which factors accounted for these developments.

Directly following this line of reasoning, **Nolte and Weiffen (2024)** focus on the surprising resilience of Latin American regionalism and explore the extent to which the theoretical concepts developed in order to understand how European crises responses can be reasonably applied to non-European contexts. Their particular focus is on neofunctionalist approaches, according to which crises trigger different forms of RO responses. The key conclusion of the study is that the neofunctionalist concepts travel quite well to the Latin American context, again confirming the benefits of a dialogue between EU studies and comparative regionalism.

5 The Value of the Dialogue Between EU Studies and Comparative Regionalism

The articles included in the special issue, while providing a number of important empirical and theoretical insights, also support a main argument motivating the special issue: the need for and benefit of a fruitful dialogue between EU studies and comparative regionalism. In what follows, we exemplarily offer some potential areas for further dialogue that can be drawn from the articles and extend beyond the special issue and can serve as a foundation for future scholarly work.

Public Discourse and the Development of the ROs: When it comes to the EU, there is an extensive literature on the actors who challenge the regionalism project and the way in which they shape national discourses. A recurring finding, also confirmed by Braun and Carteny (2024), is that Eurosceptic challengers contribute to increasing the salience of EU issues, which can strengthen the EU's input legitimacy but also be challenging when it leads to the politicization of the polity as a whole. Comparative regionalism scholarship, in contrast, has paid little systematic attention to how regionalism and its development paths are affected by domestic political discourses. Indeed, many ROs outside the EU are less politicized and thus receive less public attention, being a topic of diplomatic and technocratic discussion. However, occasionally the general public pays enormous attention to regionalism, thus turning into a constraint for its adaptation and transformation. In this regard, EU studies can serve as an inspiration for studies in other regions. Conversely, comparative analyses of the politicization of ROs can be used to test existing explanations for the politicization of the EU, such as the competence transfer hypothesis.

Change of De Facto Mandates: There can be a wide gulf between the official mandate and the function that ROs perform. This implies that the adaptation of ROs can be hidden from the eyes of external observers. Here, both EU studies and comparative regionalism research can mutually enrich each other by offering insights on how to empirically analyze these changes and how to assess which changes are fundamentally possible. The comparative regionalism tradition is particularly rich in studying the possible deviations of the practices of ROs from their mandates: Many ROs ultimately implement functions substantially different from those they were created for. European Union studies have offered highly detailed analysis of

informal practices within a RO and its bureaucracy—here, the ease of access to the EU and the size of the community of EU scholars has played a key role.

Uniqueness of Challenges: Although several of the EU’s recent challenges, such as the exit of a member state or the need to deal with nondemocratic member states, are far from unique, studies focusing on these developments have hardly attempted to overcome EU-centrism by looking for parallels in other ROs. Here, as Panke et al. (2024) show, comparative regionalism can effectively contextualize findings from EU studies: For ROs in different parts of the world, illiberal members or withdrawals of individual states are significant challenges as well. At the same time, the way the European project has reacted to crises and challenges can to some extent inform some of the studies on comparative regionalism—here, it would be imprudent to exclude the EU as a case of comparison from the outset.

Disintegration: Finally, the articles in the special issue, while generally showing that ROs adapt to crises, also underscore the need to draw parallels between EU studies and the comparative regionalism research in analyzing the possible paths of the disintegration of ROs. As discussed in this introduction, the EU with its paramount importance for the member states and the world has often been portrayed as immune to the risks of disintegration, while, more recently, there have been insightful studies explicitly posing the question about the conditions and possible consequences of the disintegration of the EU. By contrast, many other ROs worldwide, including those modeled after the EU, are inherently short-lived and have been perceived and conceptualized as such from the very beginning. Therefore, looking at specific conditions for disintegration and how they differ between the European project and other ROs could be a scientifically—but also politically—highly relevant avenue of research.

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