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Sovereignty and Regionalism: A New Framework

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Abstract

National sovereignty may be the single most important variable for explaining the rather puzzling variation in levels of regional cooperation and institutionalisation across regions and policy fields. However, theorists and policymakers are often trapped in narrow discussions about whether national sovereignty has been delegated to and pooled within regional organisations. Instead of treating national sovereignty as a fixed and monolithic variable with distinct 'sovereignty costs', our constructivist perspective opens up for a wider set of ideas about how national sovereignty is related to and influences regionalism.

Our framework makes a core distinction between instrumental, principled and status-oriented national sovereignty narratives, which enables us to recast the relationship between national sovereignty and regionalism in a way that is sensitive to different spatial and functional contexts. It also helps us capture how the co-existence of different sovereignty narratives frame foreign policy choices about regionalism. The openness of this approach makes it particularly amenable to comparative work on the striking variation in regionalism across policy fields, regions, and time. The paper ends by outlining a research agenda to explore the role of national sovereignty in regionalisms around the world, which we argue can help move the field away from the largely instrumentalist (even essentialist) notions of national sovereignty in mainstream and Eurocentric regional integration theory.

Keywords

Comparative regionalism, regional organisation, regional integration, sovereignty, sovereignty costs, national interest, constructivism, autonomy-centred regionalism, symbolic regionalism, regime-boosting, sovereignty-boosting

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1. Introduction

States in all parts of the world are increasingly using regional cooperation and integration to address transboundary challenges. There is widespread agreement among both scholars and policy-makers that national sovereignty has a crucial influence on the evolution, design and performance of regional cooperation and integration (henceforth regionalism). National sovereignty may arguably be the single most important variable for explaining the puzzling variation between regions and across policy fields in terms of institutionalisation and levels of cooperation. Yet, theoretical debates are predominantly concerned with the extent of sovereignty ‘transfers’ to intergovernmental and supranational regional institutions in the form of institutional delegation and pooling, and the extent to which sovereignty norms may prevent such transfer (Hooghe & Marks, 2015; Hooghe et al. 2019). Underlying these perspectives is an ‘instrumental’ notion of national sovereignty, which sees it as a property that states choose to cede in exchange for cooperation gains. Different approaches mainly diverge in how they assess ‘sovereignty costs’ and the benefits of regionalism.

Although we agree with other theories that national sovereignty is crucial for explaining regionalism, we reject the way this relationship is theorised in these approaches. The central weakness of conventional theories, as we elaborate further in the next section, is that it treats national sovereignty as an ‘exogenous’ concept – that is, a variable with fixed properties defined a priori and a seemingly self-evident relation to regionalism. In most cases, sovereignty is seen either as an essential quality of the state or as a norm protecting such essential qualities. Both the emphasis on sovereignty ‘transfers’ in the form of institutional delegation/pooling and the intergovernmentalist belief that sovereignty norms prevent such transfer are indicative of a rather simplified and one-dimensional thinking. We also demonstrate in the next section that empirical cooperation patterns reveal that the existence of ‘supranational’ institutions or cooperation norms that supposedly mitigate sovereignty in and of themselves rarely explain functioning cooperation.

In our view, there is a need to unpack the relationship between national sovereignty and regionalism by ‘endogenizing’ it, that is: by asking how actors interpret and use national sovereignty as they debate and engage in regionalism (cf. Legler, 2013). Seen from this perspective, the way national sovereignty relates to regionalism cannot be theoretically inferred but depends on the empirical meanings that are affixed to it. There is a well-established body of work that approaches sovereignty by interrogating the discourses and practices through which it is interpreted and enacted in different contexts (Adler-Nissen, 2013; Bartelson, 1995; Biersteker & Weber, 1996; Reus-Smit, 1999; Ringmar, 1996). We build on this work by proposing a framework for analysing the relationship between national sovereignty and regionalism in a more open and pluralist way than dominant theories of regionalism.

Our main proposition is that regionalism is shaped by *different* national sovereignty narratives that state actors use to legitimate their authority. These narratives frame foreign policy choices about regionalism, as they carry divergent ideas about the sovereignty costs and cooperation benefits that may result from regionalism. National sovereignty may thus acquire different meanings in different regions and policy fields, and rather than being unambiguous and fixed, these meanings may overlap or be transformed. Other theories usually miss out on this dynamic and the context-specific nature of national sovereignty. This implies that regionalism is not simply determined by the functional, institutional or normative context because whether and how these context factors matter for the decisions of state actors depends on how they construct the relationship between their national sovereignty and regionalism.

Expanding on recent work by Lenz et al. (2019), we argue that state actors legitimate themselves by drawing on different ideas about the purpose of the state, which are organised in national sovereignty narratives. We distinguish between instrumental, principled and status-oriented national *sovereignty narratives*. Each of them carries peculiar ideas about how engagement and exchange with external partners may or may not be beneficial to the purpose of the state, and thus influence state actors’ foreign-policy decisions over regional cooperation. This conceptualisation allows us in a second step to develop an analytical framework consisting of three ideal-type forms of regionalism that correspond to the three national sovereignty narratives. Illustrating each type with an empirical cooperation initiative, we show how such an approach can explain the variation in terms of institutionalisation and cooperation levels both across regions and across policy fields.

The following section reviews the literature on the nexus between national sovereignty and regionalism and highlights some

shortcomings of existing approaches. Section 3 outlines the three narratives of national sovereignty, which form the basis of the ideal-types of regionalism introduced in Section 4. Our conclusion summarises the theoretical contribution of this approach to the study of regionalism and highlights avenues for further research.

2. The Limits of Existing Theory

Three schools dominate discussions about the role of national sovereignty in the theoretical landscape on regionalism: institutionalism-neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and diffusion theory (Börzel & Risse, 2016; 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2019). First, variants of *institutionalist and (neo)functionalist theories* posit that successful regionalism depends on the extent to which states respond to interdependences and pressure by interest groups by transferring national sovereignty to regional institutions and governance mechanisms (Lenz & Marks, 2016). Sovereignty appears as an obstacle that non-state actors lobby against in pursuit of their interests (Solingen, 2008). Once a certain amount of sovereignty is ceded, spillover effects across policy fields may create incentives to broaden the scope of regionalism, aided by policy-makers shifting their political loyalties from the state to the regional level. Regional institutions encourage more cooperation and integration over time by changing actor preferences and identities, while also weakening national sovereignty, understood here as the state's capability to act and command political obedience (Burley & Mattli, 1993; Haas, 1958; Sandholtz & Stone Sweet, 1998; Schmitter, 1969). In this strand of theory, national sovereignty thus mostly appears as the flipside to regional integration: any pooling and delegation in regional organisations is accompanied by a corresponding loss of national sovereignty of member states (Lenz & Marks, 2016).

In contrast to the first school, *classical intergovernmentalism* argues that state actors remain highly protective of their autonomy even as they engage in regionalism (Hoffman, 1982; Kahler, 2000; Moravcsik, 1998). Norms promoting international cooperation or community-building processes cannot fundamentally offset this concern, which was famously outlined by Alan Milward in *The European Rescue of the Nation State* (1992). However, governments will 'cede' or 'delegate and pool' formal sovereignty to regional institutions if it advances national (or elite) interests because the benefits of a collective solution outweighs the 'sovereignty costs' (Moravcsik, 1993; 2000). Although departing from a completely different theoretical standpoint, the *New Regionalism Approach* (NRA) arrives at similar conclusions regarding the role of national sovereignty. It claims that national elites can use regionalism to bolster regime interests, state legitimacy and national sovereignty through sovereignty- and regime-boosting regionalism (Söderbaum, 2004a, 2004b). Classical intergovernmentalism and NRA thus unpack sovereignty to a certain extent. They analytically separate a state's formal decision-making authority from its capability to maintain its identity and pursue its interests, and show that there are cases where giving up some of the former can bolster the latter. Yet they share with neofunctionalism and institutionalism a rationalist conception of sovereignty, as all these approaches consider it an essential property or capability of the state that can be guarded or ceded in exchange for regional cooperation or integration benefits (regardless of how these are assessed).

Third, in sharp contrast to the first two groups' preoccupation with intra-regional variables, several more recent theories embed regional organisations into broader social and normative structures. One particularly influential approach, *diffusion theory*, argues that globalisation has led to the spread of a set of norms that proscribe transboundary cooperation as an effective solution to many policy challenges (Börzel & van Hüllen, 2015b). Through diffusion, policy-makers adopt similar and mutually compatible ideas about the governance of different policy fields (human rights, democracy, governance, environment). Many of these norms are in tension with or openly challenge the historically more entrenched norms of national sovereignty (Acharya, 2004). As their normative import grows, state actors can become morally persuaded, rhetorically coerced or materially incentivised to cede national sovereignty, which explains the intensification of regional cooperation across the world (Risse, 2016; Lenz, 2021). However, the meaning of national sovereignty itself remains by and large unquestioned.

While these approaches have made invaluable contributions to the study of regionalism, their explanations of variation in cooperation across regions and policy fields have remained unsatisfactory. Functional-institutionalist approaches hypothesise that regionalism will be more successful in the presence of strong and high-authority regional institutions, while the 'diffusion' literature suggests that regionalism is positively correlated with the strength of global norms for cooperation that mitigate sovereignty concerns in the policy field in question. Regarding cross-regional variation, several comparative studies have

shown that neofunctionalism works very well in some regions but poorly in others (Acharya, 2016; Börzel, 2016; Lenz & Marks, 2016). Authors have also noted continuous resistance to diffusion processes (Acharya, 2009; Capie, 2008). When it comes to cross-sectoral variation, empirical evidence flatly contradicts the widely shared assumption that the diffusion of norms and creation of institutions will push states to give up and transfer sovereignty for the sake of collective action. For example, states in the developing world have built a large number of ambitious transboundary river basin organisations (RBOs) that commit themselves to widely shared international norms about ecologically sound river management (Mekong, Zambezi, the Nile, and so forth). Yet, despite norm acceptance and institutionalisation, we witness a pattern of largely nationalistic practices, or at best some fragile cooperation that is quickly abandoned when deeper conflicts arise (Söderbaum, 2016). Meanwhile, despite the absence of strong, dedicated regional health institutions, cooperation on communicable diseases has deepened quickly in response to outbreaks like the Ebola and Covid-19 crises (Bappah, 2015; Patterson & Balogun, 2021; Witt, 2020).

Intergovernmentalism, meanwhile, may provide partial explanations for these patterns by pointing to the role of national or regime interests. However, if states see little benefit in transboundary river management and want to shape the basin in accordance with their national interests, why would they bother setting up ambitious regional organisations in the first place? Furthermore, approaches like regime-boosting have a hard time explaining why cooperation is strong in some policy fields while being weak in others (Söderbaum, 2016). One argument might be that cooperation levels diverge because the expected costs and benefits of cooperation differ between policy fields. But these explanations are hardly more than ex-post rationalisations. Another issue with intergovernmentalism is its account of change. Why has there been such a rise in informal (i.e., weakly institutionalised) regional cooperation on communicable diseases during the last 20 years? The risk of diseases that defy national boundaries is well known since at least the HIV pandemic of the early 1980s. In sum, none of the major theories provide satisfying explanations of the puzzling development of regionalism across regions and policy areas.

Our diagnosis is that these explanatory shortcomings of conventional theories are largely attributable to the abovementioned ways of theorising national sovereignty. A fundamental problem is that they tend to essentialise sovereignty as a variable that rational actors factor into their cost-benefit calculations, but fail to specify theoretically how an abstract 'good' like sovereignty could be concretely priced by actors – even though this would be a prerequisite for actors to be able to calculate 'sovereignty costs' and weigh them against cooperation benefits.¹ Researchers have worked around this issue by making inferences about states' 'revealed preferences' based on ex-post observations of their behaviour (Herbst, 2007). Again, this is a plausible ex-post rationalisation but ultimately unsatisfactory from a methodological point of view.

In addition, it can be questioned whether regionalism necessarily incurs sovereignty costs for governments. The regime-boosting literature is more accommodating to the alternative that regionalism may reinforce sovereignty, but it has an equally hard time establishing how exactly state actors conclude that regionalism is either beneficial or detrimental to their national sovereignty. Established conceptions also struggle to explain variation across time and policy fields in this respect. While neofunctionalism with its notion of spill-over and the diffusion literature with its ideas about socialisation do specify mechanisms that explain why state actors may come to varying conclusions, they remain conceptually ambiguous and vague about the scope conditions under which sovereignty relates to regionalism one way or the other. In the diffusion literature, for example, national sovereignty appears variably as the target of norm entrepreneurship and innovation in institutional designs (Börzel & van Hüllen, 2015b), or as a reason why these ideas are not fully adopted and, consequently, as an obstacle to cooperation (Acharya, 2004; Jetschke & Murray, 2011). Apart from the assertion that direct influence by external actors seems to generate more nationalist resistance than indirect forms (Lenz & Burilkov, 2017; Risse, 2016, p. 96), scholars have not made much progress explaining which logic prevails under which circumstances. Postfunctionalist theory offers another avenue by linking governments' willingness to transfer sovereignty to constellations and dynamics in national identity politics (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). However, premised as it is on pluralist party competition, its applicability beyond European integration is rather limited. The tendency to retain an exogenous and essentialist conceptualisation of national sovereignty has kept researchers from systematically theorising these dynamics.

In short, existing theories mostly treat national sovereignty as an exogenous variable with fixed properties, which is defined

¹ This difficulty of measuring cooperation costs and benefits is already noted by Moravcsik (1993, p. 494).

ex-ante by the researcher and which is either positively (regime boosting) or negatively (all other approaches) correlated to regionalism. We argue that, in order to unpack this ambivalent standing, we need to develop a framework that enables us to systematically analyse how political elites endogenously interpret and use national sovereignty in concrete debates about regionalism.

3. National Sovereignty Narratives

Our theoretical framework is inspired by social constructivist and discursive approaches to national sovereignty in IR. In contrast to realist and institutionalist perspectives, which see national sovereignty as a structural feature of world politics, these approaches are concerned with the various interpretations of national sovereignty constructed and deployed by different actors (Bartelson, 1995; 2015; Biersteker & Weber, 1996; Jackson, 2007). As a social construct, national sovereignty can be interpreted based on *different* ideas about the purpose of the state that legitimate a regime or a government's authority domestically and abroad (Reus-Smit, 1999). Importantly, these understandings are not given and static, but constantly formed, reproduced and transformed in discourses that are principally open to different societal actors (but de facto dominated by political elites). National sovereignty thus does not have a single, inherent meaning but can express various ideas about the sources of state legitimacy. To a more limited extent, we also take cues from practice-theoretical thinking, in which sovereignty appears as a form of capital through which the state maintains its symbolic power. This claim to authority can be justified in different ways, which rely on shared, partially tacit understandings or scripts of what constitutes legitimate state action (Adler-Nissen, 2013; Spandler et al. 2023).

To unpack these ideas, we rely on the concept of *national sovereignty narratives*. These are structured storylines which constitute states' identities and justify their authority, thereby constructing the meaning of sovereignty (Ringmar, 1996; Steele, 2008). Rather than purely theoretical constructs, they are ways in which political actors make sense and promote certain interpretations of reality. While similar to 'national narratives' (Brandt, 2010), sovereignty narratives focus on the authority of a state's institutional apparatus, not on the identity of its popular constituency. By ascribing roles to state actors, they provide them with agency and define their relations to other actors (Bially Mattern, 2005). And by representing reality in the form of plots, they also formulate normative expectations about legitimate state practice (Berenskoetter 2014; Miskimmon et al., 2013; Spandler, 2022). To fulfil these functions, they do not need to be permanently told and re-told explicitly, but can "become entrenched in social institutions" (Ringmar, 1996, p. 455) and take on the form of tacit knowledge, perceptible merely in routines, symbolic practices and the mostly unreflective use of terminologies and tropes – a specific type of language – when talking about the state.

Expanding on a distinction by Lenz et al. (2019), our framework distinguishes between instrumental, principled and status-oriented narratives of national sovereignty.

- *Instrumental narratives of national sovereignty* see the main purpose of the state in delivering public goods to the people living under its rule. In line with a Lockean account of sovereignty, the legitimacy of the state is thus conditional on its ability to fulfil its function as a 'provider' (Deng et al., 1996; Tan, 2019). A typical trope linked to this narrative is the emergence of problems or challenges that need to be 'governed' by the state.
- In *principled narratives of national sovereignty*, the state appears as the natural representative of the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), and as the guarantor of its integrity and autonomy. As such, the state has an inherent and unconditional claim to authority within its territory by virtue of its existence and is seen as independent from external political units (Jackson, 2007, p. 10). This narrative resonates with the Hobbesian tradition of political philosophy, with its ideas of absolute state power. It often describes sovereignty as something to be defended against external threats. Closely associated with it are norms and ideas like national self-determination, non-intervention, and the national interest.
- *Status-oriented narratives of national sovereignty* seek to portray the state as a legitimate member of international society (Bull, 1977). This notion has its intellectual roots in international legal scholarship, especially in the Grotian tradition developed by scholars such as Lauterpacht (Kwiecien 2011). It emphasises that sovereignty is conditional

upon recognition by domestic and international audiences, who judge a state's authority against internationally shared legitimacy criteria like human rights (Bartelson, 1995; Reus-Smit, 2001; Zaum, 2007). Likewise, sovereignty in this perspective is predicated on the ability to entertain relations with other international actors. This can find expression in metaphors indicating transnational identities, like 'the international community'.

Because national sovereignty is at the very centre of state action, these narratives have a compelling influence on how actors view the role of their state in its international environment. By privileging certain interpretations of situations and highlighting potential solutions while excluding alternative points of view, they shape dispositions for action. Figure 1 summarises the three national sovereignty narratives and how they favour different cooperation logics.

| Narrative | Instrumental | Principled | Status-oriented |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|
| <i>Political philosophy</i> | Liberalism (Locke) | Absolutism (Hobbes) | International law (Grotius) |
| <i>State as...</i> | Provider for the people | Protector of the nation | Member of international society |
| <i>Tropes</i> | Governance of challenges, 'public goods' | Defence against external threats, 'national interest' | Alignment with international identities and norms, 'international community' |
| <i>Cooperation logic</i> | Solving transboundary problems, using economies of scale | Maintaining national integrity, buttressing the state apparatus | Promoting status and legitimacy vis-à-vis domestic and international audiences |

Figure 1. National sovereignty narratives and the cooperation logic.

Which sovereignty narratives dominate in a given case is important for regionalism because they frame foreign policies (Ringmar, 1996, p. 455; Spandler, 2022). Through their diverging plotlines that identify different problems, actors, relations, and predispositions, they provide competing templates for intentional action. For example, in the context of principled sovereignty narratives, a pandemic would primarily appear as a threat to the decision-making capacity of the state, suggesting a security-driven response focused on protecting the state apparatus as the most viable course of action. By contrast, against the backdrop of instrumental sovereignty narratives, state action is more likely to be shaped by attempts to promote regional problem-solving or international public goods, for instance, in order to protect the population against a particular disease.

Furthermore, sovereignty narratives carry certain ideas about how engagement and exchange with external partners may or may not be beneficial to the purpose of the state. They frame cooperation in a way that favours specific interpretations of sovereignty costs and cooperation benefits (cf. Hafner-Burton et al., 2015; Moravcsik, 1998). In *instrumental narratives*, cooperation may be seen as a way to address transboundary problems like externalities and collective resources, and to achieve economies of scale. Collective action is desirable if its benefits outweigh the cost of ceding national control over the provision and distribution of goods. *Principled narratives* may attach value to cooperation insofar as it contributes to maintaining the regime as a representative of the nation. International cooperation and institution-building will incur costs when it is seen as compromising state authority and undermining the integrity of its people, which suggests that state representatives are predominantly focused on preserving sovereignty and autonomy. In *status narratives*, international cooperation may be beneficial as a way of signalling the legitimacy of the state as a rightful member of the international

community to domestic and international audiences. Symbolism and discourse are just as important as material gains. On the other hand, cooperation can incur costs when the legitimacy of the regional organisation in which the state is a member faces legitimacy challenges.

It is important to note that state actors will rarely justify their authority by relying exclusively on either instrumental, principled or status-oriented narratives. Domestic discourses on national sovereignty are often broad and contested. Although dominated by political elites, participation in the discourses is principally open to active influence or subversion by different societal actors. Even in states with autocratic regimes, they are unlikely to be completely monopolised by the political leadership. In mobilising national sovereignty narratives, political elites respond to different and changing claims by a variety of societal actors, which is why they may strategically include cues that resonate with different conceptions, and enact specific aspects depending on concrete contexts. Representatives of the same government may emphasise instrumental sovereignty notions when negotiating with business representatives, principled notions when campaigning for voters, and state-oriented ones when speaking to international donors. While this may lead to some tensions, the narratives are not so mutually exclusive as to be outright contradictory.

4. Sovereignty Narratives and Ideal-Types of Regionalism

To understand how the national sovereignty narratives used by individual state actors translate into regionalism, it is necessary to shift the level of analysis from the individual state to the regional scale. The specific form of regionalism depends on which national sovereignty understandings are primarily mobilised by the political elites of the member states when taking decisions about whether to cooperate or not. The idea is thus that political elites make decisions over regionalism based on a particular interpretation of the cooperation benefits and cooperation costs that the framing of the dominant national sovereignty narratives favour.

In what follows, we identify how national sovereignty narratives translate into different forms of regionalism by way of ideal-type building. In Figure 2, each of the three narratives (represented by a circle) corresponds with an ideal type of regionalism characterised by that sovereignty type's dominant logic of cooperation as shown in Figure 1. We illustrate each ideal-type with concrete examples based on existing research literature. We do not claim to have systematic empirical evidence that relevant state elites explicitly and dominantly use the respective narratives. Within the scope of this working paper, the ambition is to show logical associations between different forms of regionalism and theorised understandings of sovereignty to make a case for the analytical purchase of our framework and in order to sketch the contours of a future research agenda on the topic. More detailed case studies are needed to empirically confirm these associations.

Where instrumental national sovereignty narratives are dominant, *problem-solving regionalism* is likely to materialise. This ideal type corresponds closely to a range of liberal theories of IR and regionalism, including neofunctionalism and to some extent intergovernmentalism. According to this logic, regionalism is driven by the aspiration to address transboundary policy problems, mobilise comparative advantages between member states and achieve economies of scale. Regionalism occurs where the expected benefits in terms of public goods provision outweigh the expected costs of having to cede governmental control over their distribution. Institution-building is not a necessary aspect of this type of regionalism, and therefore intergovernmentalists may endorse problem-solving regionalism under the right conditions. However, regional institutions often emerge as a way to catalyse and stabilise problem-solving cooperation. Empirical examples that approximate this ideal type of cooperation are the joint efforts of African states to manage the Covid-19 outbreak (Engel & Herpolsheimer, 2021; Witt, 2020) and the Chiang Mai Initiative for monetary cooperation to offset currency crises among the ASEAN+3 states (Sussangkarn, 2011). Many of the world's regional trade liberalisation and common market initiatives would also fall under this category.

Principled national sovereignty narratives favour *autonomy-oriented regionalism*. In this case, regionalism has the purpose of strengthening national autonomy (Acharya, 2016). Institution-building does not follow functional demands but is geared towards enabling the promotion of nationalist identities and norms or displaying mutual regime support. According to this ideal type, national sovereignty is linked to autonomy and integrity and therefore cannot be traded for problem-solving gains as stipulated in the instrumentalist narrative. Autonomy-oriented regionalism can also be used to contest regional or external

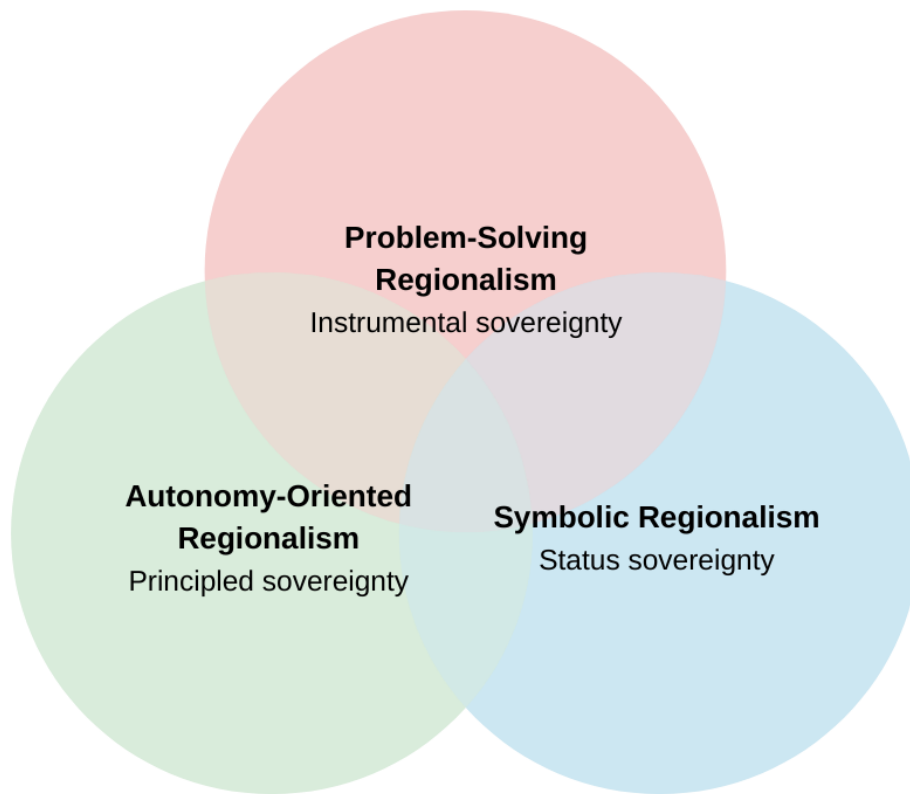


Figure 2: Ideal-types of regionalism and national sovereignty narratives

hegemons. Examples include ‘post-hegemonic’ regional projects in Latin America such as ALBA, launched by the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to counter US influence in Latin America (Legler, 2013; Riggiozzi & Tussie, 2012). However, actors in the Global North have also to some extent relied on this form of regionalism, e.g. the Visegrád Group through which populist leaders in Central and Eastern Europe have mobilised mutual support and contested what they perceive as excessive supranationalism in the EU (Söderbaum et al., 2021).

Where status-oriented narratives are dominant, we are likely to see *symbolic regionalism* emerging. The main purpose of this type of regionalism, regardless of whether it includes institution-building or remains purely rhetorical, is to build the status and legitimacy of the participating governments towards external or domestic audiences. In contrast to the concept of “declaratory regionalism” (Jenne et al., 2017), which focuses exclusively on the discursive dimensions, symbolic regionalism also includes more material and performative aspects, including institution-building for ceremonial purposes (Montecinos, 1996). Actual compliance with agreements and implementation of policies is of secondary importance, especially if it is costly to the involved states (Jetschke, 2009). State actors may deploy a rhetoric of regional identity, as long as it strengthens national legitimacy. An example of symbolic regionalism is the ASEAN mechanism of human rights, which follows the liberal ‘script’ of regional governance (Börzel & van Hüllen 2015b) on paper even as its actual effects remain marginal. The puzzle of why member states should establish a human rights body despite strong normative commitments to non-intervention can be explained by their efforts to satisfy international norms that predicate a state’s sovereignty on limits to its use of force (Doyle, 2013; Poole, 2015).

5. Conclusion

There is widespread agreement among scholars and policy-makers that national sovereignty is essential for explaining the evolution of international and regional cooperation and its ability to meet global and regional policy challenges such as communicable diseases or environmental degradation, and to provide international public goods such as security and development. Existing theories of regionalism argue that sovereignty transfer to regional institutions and a strengthening of global norms for multilateral cooperation will push governments to work together to meet these challenges. However, actual patterns of regionalism seldom show a clear correlation between the existence of strong norms and institutions on the one hand, and functioning cooperation on the other.

In this paper, we argued that the explanatory weakness of dominant theories stems from an approach to national sovereignty that treats it as an exogenous variable with an a priori defined relation to regionalism. As a result, theorists and policy-makers are often trapped in narrow discussions about whether or not national sovereignty has been delegated to or pooled within intergovernmental and supranational regional institutions in accordance with instrumentalist cost/benefit calculations. Most theorists ignore that national sovereignty may acquire different meanings in different regions and policy fields. Therefore, they miss out on the differentiated (re)interpretations of national sovereignty that have occurred across time and space. In response to these weaknesses in existing literature, especially the overreliance on instrumentalist notions of national sovereignty, our paper defined national sovereignty narratives as social constructs that contain ideas about the purpose of the state. This approach 'endogenises' national sovereignty instead of treating it as a fixed and monolithic variable.

Our framework distinguishes between instrumental, principled and status-oriented sovereignty narratives, and we show how they predispose state elites towards specific transboundary cooperation logics. Corresponding to the narratives, we identify three ideal-types of regionalism: problem-solving, autonomy-oriented, and symbolic regionalism. We illustrate the links between the narratives, and different forms of regionalism with examples drawn from existing research.

The paper thus highlights that the relation between national sovereignty and regionalism is not given but rather constructed and potentially transformed by powerful governance actors and stakeholders in response to specific policy challenges. It recasts the relationship between regionalism and national sovereignty in a way that is sensitive to different spatial and functional contexts and therefore goes beyond the largely instrumentalist notions of national sovereignty in classical regional integration theories. The openness of this approach makes it particularly amenable to comparative work on the striking variation in regionalism across policy fields, regions, and time. Instead of assuming that the same cooperation logic is at play across different cases, as most regionalism theories do, our framework acknowledges that regionalism does not work the same everywhere and that how it works may change over time due to external shocks or endogenous political dynamics. As such, it renders the question of why states cooperate an empirical one. It thus ties in with work in Comparative Regionalism that argues that national sovereignty plays different roles in different regions. However, this realisation should not lead to overgeneralising claims about a qualitative difference between post-sovereign regionalism in Europe and a staying power of national sovereignty elsewhere. Going beyond Eurocentrism in future research will crucially involve unpacking the relationship between national sovereignty and regionalism empirically, and the present paper should be read as providing a theoretical framework for such an agenda.

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