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The European Union as an emerging global actor

Björn Hettne

Introduction

This chapter deals with how the region of Europe has emerged and is emerging as a global actor. It is important to note that while some large political units operate as territorial states, the EU is a different kind of political animal: a regional institutionalized polity. The question is how such a polity can be an actor in world politics. Regional agency is a new and underresearched phenomenon, which has come to life due to the transformation of the EU from being mainly an instrument for economic co-operation to being a political actor trying to shape external conditions. It is argued that the need for regional agency comes from the many challenges of globalization, as most states are too weak to manage these problems on their own. This ability is created through identity formation and innovative institution building. The preconditions must be looked for both in developments within the region and in its external context. The relative cohesion of the regional actor shapes external action. This, in turn, impacts on regional identity and consciousness through the expectations and reactions of external actors vis-à-vis the region. The chapter gives an outline of European regionalization, regionalism and regional agency as a process in which internal and external factors interrelate.

As a summary concept for the ability to influence the external world I use ‘actorship’. This multidimensional concept is meant to include subjective, historical and structural dimensions in order to give a comprehensive view on regional agency. The approach is built around three interacting components: internal (objective) integration and (subjective) identity formation, or regionness, international presence in terms of size, economic strength, military power, etc., and capacity to act purposively to shape outcomes in the external world, or actorness.

External action thus depends on ‘identity’ as an important but hard-to-define component. Identity is, to put it simply, what brings people together to becoming a ‘we’. There are many historical sources claimed to have created a European identity. However, they differ in importance for different parts of Europe. Identity is not simply based on tradition, and tradition is not always reproduced in a simple way. Rather identity is being continuously recreated by new experiences and challenges for an enlargening population of ‘Europeans’, which to various extents are becoming rather than being Europeans.
If there is a consolidated internal actor identity, there should also follow some sort of external actorship, having more or less impact, depending on the strength of regionness, presence and actorness in various policy areas and in relation to various counterparts. The question is to what extent Europe’s strong international presence is actually transformed to a purposive capacity to shape the external environment by influencing other actors and ultimately world order. It is argued that the very meaning of ‘Europe’ is in fact the non-existence of a clear borderline between internal and external, which complicates the conceptualization. Europe is trying to shape world order by means of inclusiveness, by treating the external as if it were internal, a political innovation that marks a significant departure from traditional realist power politics.

The chapter deals, first, with the issue of global actorship: the mutually supportive relationship between regionness, presence and actorness, providing the theoretical framework for the analysis. Second, it outlines the historical development of European agency through processes of convergence and policies of cohesion. The conclusion discusses the future of European actorship against the backdrop of global economic crisis, and the general importance of regional actorship in international relations.

**Dimensions of regional actorship**

Actorship for a region does not normally imply a legal personality of the type characterizing nation-states. The question raised here is whether macro-regions or world regions can assume properties and qualities similar to larger nation-states, namely to pursue co-ordinated, coherent and consistent policies towards the outside world, having a significant impact on the external environment and the behaviour of other actors. This potential depends primarily upon our definition of region. Normally a region is not associated with actorship, but rather seen as an ‘arena’ or ‘level’ of action. Not so here. Regions are in the new regionalism approach (NRA) understood as processes; they are not geographical or administrative objects but potential subjects, and thereby actors in the making (or un-making); their boundaries are shifting, and so is their capacity as actors in different issue areas as well as geographical areas. This presupposes some kind of organization. However, it is important to distinguish regional formation from regional organization (Hettne 2003).

A region exhibits a similarity to a nation, in that even a region is an ‘imagined community’ and has a territorial base. But there are also differences, for instance the variety of interests and the extreme problem of co-ordination in a foreign policy complex like the one formed by the EU. Actorship for a region is thus a complex process. An increase in the level of regionness leads to a more distinct presence, which in turn actualizes the question of actorness, due to the need to respond to expectations and reactions flowing from various forms of external presence.

**Regionness**

Regionalism is the ideology and project of region-building, while the concept of regionalization is reserved for more spontaneous processes of region formation by different actors—state or non-state. When different processes of regionalization in various fields and at various levels of society intensify and converge within the same geographical area, the cohesion and thereby the distinctiveness of the region in the making increases. A potential regional actor takes shape. This process of regionalization can be described in terms of levels of regionness (Hettne 1993, 2003; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). Increasing regionness normally implies that a geographical area is transformed from a passive object (an arena or a strategic theatre) to an active subject—an actor—increasingly capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emerging region.
The concept of regionness defines the position of a particular region in terms of its cohesiveness. This can be seen as a long-term endogenous historical process, changing over time from coercion—the building of empires and nations in history—to voluntary co-operation—the current logic of regionalization. The political ambition of establishing regional cohesion and identity is of primary importance in the ideology of the regionalist project (regionalism), but a convergence of values may take place even if this is not the explicit purpose of the project itself, typically focusing on economic or security issues. Regionalization may in other words also evolve without the support of regionalism, that is, in the absence of a regionalist project. To a certain extent this coincides with the process of globalization.

In general and abstract terms one can speak of five levels of regionness:

- **Regional social space** is typically delimited by natural, physical barriers, and populated by local groups of people. The region is thus objectively rooted in territory; in social terms it is organized by human inhabitants, at first in relatively isolated communities and later constituting some kind of translocal relationship which can result from demographic change or changes in transport technology. The regional space is ultimately filled up and politically organized. Empires have tended to occupy the ‘natural region’, which over time has given some regions a distinct civilizational content.

- This increased density of contacts, implying more durable relations, is what creates a **regional social system**, or in security terms: an immature ‘regional security complex’ (Buzan and Wæver 2003). This precarious situation has often in history led to an empire, or even more often to pendulum movements between a centralized and a more or less decentralized order. European feudalism was an enduring form of the latter type, whereas the People’s Republic of China best exemplifies the former. Decolonization in the former colonial empires later created fragile states-systems. The centralized system achieved order by being coercive, which is different from today’s voluntary regionalism emerging from decentralized states-systems in need of some co-ordination.

- The region as **international society**, or in realist terms ‘anarchical society’ (Bull 1977) implies a set of rules that makes interstate relations more enduring and predictable and thus more peaceful, or at least less violent. It can be either organized (de jure) or more spontaneous (de facto). In the case of a more institutionalized co-operation, region is constituted by the members of the regional alliance or organization. States are still dominant actors, but the pattern of relations is becoming increasingly regulated, predictable and more and more ‘society-like’. There may even be an embryonic regional actorship.

- The region as **community** takes shape when an enduring organizational framework (formal or less formal) facilitates and promotes social communication and convergence of values, norms and behaviour throughout the region, which implies identity formation on the regional level. Thus emerges a transnational civil society characterized by social trust. The crucial test is whether the use of force in resolving conflicts is conceived as possible or not, creating a ‘security community’, first conceptualized by Karl Deutsch et al. (1957).

- Finally, region as **institutionalized polity** has a more fixed and permanent structure of decision-making and therefore stronger acting capability or actorship. Such regional polity cannot be characterized by the normal terminology used to describe political systems but can be sui generis. Only Europe can at present be described in these terms.

The approach of seeing region as process implies an evolution of deepening regionalism, not necessarily following the idealized model presented above. Since regionalism is a political project, created by human actors, it may not only move in different directions but indeed also fail, just
as a nation-state project. Seen from this perspective, decline would mean fragmentation, decreasing regionness and dilution of identity. Enlargement, or ‘widening’, also implies decreasing regionness and loss of actorship. Throughout the EU’s history this trend has been countered by reforms aimed at ‘deepening’, most recently the Lisbon Treaty 2009. Widening and deepening can thus be seen as a dialectic of loss and gain, with regard to regionness.

**Presence**

Europe as global actor is more than the EU’s foreign policy, and more even than the aggregate of the EU’s policies across all areas of its activity. Simply by existing, and due to its relative weight (demographically, economically and ideologically), the Union has an impact on the rest of the world. Its footprints are seen everywhere. This also provokes reactions and creates expectations from outside. Bretherton and Vogler (2006) use the concept ‘presence’ to signify this phenomenon, which constitutes the bridge between endogenous and exogenous factors, or between regionness and actorness. A stronger presence implies more capacity to act. The successful actor must be conscious of its presence and prepared to make use of it in order to achieve higher levels of actorness. In the ‘near abroad’ presence is particularly strong, and can develop into outright absorption of new territory (enlargement). To the extent that an enlarged region can retain the same level of actorness, its presence will increase because of sheer size. The original European Economic Community (EEC) contained 185m. people, compared with today’s number in excess of 450m. European integration has, in fact, become the unification, and even extension, of Europe.

As the EU grows as an institutionalized polity, its presence in the world naturally increases, since size is one of the dimensions of presence. Each enlargement implies a new neighbourhood, often defined in security terms and thus in need of stabilization. Enlargement does thus solve one particular security problem by internalizing it, at the same time as the security complex is transformed. The secret behind the EU’s success in this regard is its transformative power: to invite the other to become a partner, rather than imposing its own will. What is enlarged is not ‘Europe’ but a particular economic and political system, or even a community of values (Leonard 2005: 110). With continuous enlargement the internal cohesion and consistency may become compromised, creating a confidence crisis. The deepening process is supposed to prevent such crises, whereas the enlargement process should prevent security crises in the ‘near abroad’. Expansion means dilution, loss in regionness, but increased impact in terms of presence.

Presence is thus a complex and comprehensive variable, depending on the size of the actor, the scope of its external activities, the relative importance of different issue areas, and the relative dependence of various regions upon the European market. A stronger presence means more repercussions and reactions and thereby a pressure to act. In the absence of such action, presence itself will diminish, leaving a power vacuum.

**Actorness**

Actorness—usually referring to external behaviour—implies a scope of action and room for manoeuvre, in some cases even a legal personality. The idea of international actor capability (with respect to the EU’s external policies) was developed by Gunnar Sjöstedt (1977) and further elaborated by Bretherton and Vogler (1999, 2006) as ‘actorness’. Purposive ability to act is, of course, also relevant internally, for instance in the cases of security regionalism, development regionalism and environmental regionalism—three areas in which increased regional co-operation may make a difference in the region itself (Hettne 2001). In the EU actorness raises the
controversial issue of ‘competencies’ (who has the right to decide what?), ultimately determined by the member states. Actorness is thus a phenomenon closely related to regionness; not only a simple function of regionness, but also an outcome of a dialectic process between endogenous and exogenous forces (Hettne 2002).

Bretherton and Vogler (2006: 30) identify four requirements for actorness: (1) commitment to a set of overarching shared values and principles; (2) domestic legitimation of decision processes, and priorities, relating to external policy; (3) the ability to identify policy priorities and to formulate consistent and coherent policies; and (4) the availability of, and capacity to utilize, policy instruments (diplomacy, economic tools and military means).

Obviously, these requirements are fulfilled in different degrees in different Foreign Policy Relations (FPRs) and in different Foreign Policy Issue Areas (FPIAs); from the ‘near abroad’ to faraway regions; and from the areas of trade—in which the EU is a strong actor—to security—where the responsibility given to the EU is contested and highly controversial. In other words actorness is shifting over time, between issue areas and between regions. This has to do with the peculiar nature of the EU as an actor and the complexity of its foreign policy machinery. A strong national power, like the USA, of course possesses the four requirements of actorness and can use them to rule either by what is called hegemonic power (defined as accepted and thereby legitimate power), or by dominance (based on the use of coercion or open force). A weaker position necessitates more of a bargaining attitude. The most problematic requirement of actorness appears to be that of domestic legitimation. To this requirement should be added the requirement of justification to outsiders (Hill and Smith 2005).

The unique feature of regional (as compared to national great power) actorness is that it must be created by voluntary processes and therefore depends more on dialogue and consensus building than on coercion. This mode of operating is the model Europe holds out as the preferred world order, since this is the way the new Europe (as organized by the EU) has developed in its more recent peaceful evolution, in contrast with its historically more violent development. With increased levels of actorness in different fields of action and different parts of the world, Europe will be able to influence the world order towards its own preferred model of civilian power: dialogue, respect for different interests within an interregional, pluralist framework built on democracy, social justice and equality, multilateralism and international law (Telò 2006).

The shaping of a regional actor

The typical pre-modern political order in world history was the more or less centralized empire. However, the immediate pre-Westphalian experience of the Europeans was an extremely decentralized political order—essentially a collapsed empire. How this came to be a uniquely European world order, with Europe as a regional actor with a particular identity and a higher level of regionness is discussed below.

A regional social space: pre-Westphalia

In the regional social space that came to be called ‘Europe’, empire remained a distant memory but also an impelling political ideal of order, when the continental polity became fragmented and was replaced by micro-units such as tribes, feudatories and emerging small kingdoms. The first polity that showed some resemblance to classical empire was the territory under control of Charlemagne in the ninth century—still considered by many to be the core of ‘Europe’. Under the subsequent period of high medievalism, this space became a more consolidated cultural area,
based on Latin Christendom as the integrating ideology. In this process of identity formation there were two significant ‘others’: the Byzantine and the Islamic worlds.

An identity of ‘Europe’ as territory slowly became a secular alternative to the religious non-territorial identity. This alternative was marked by multiculturalism, resistance to centralized power, and eventually a civil society more or less distinct from state power. Peoples in this regional social space began to share a number of cultural practices, including a common elite experience of higher education, received from universities throughout the continent.

The pre-Westphalian order was a multilevel system with diffuse and constantly shifting authority structures without clear territorial borders and with no absolute authority, rather a bewildering mixture of often-incompatible elements: the Christian Church represented by the Pope, an empire project with the purpose of unifying Europe under one ruler, emerging kingdoms, feudal lords ruling over a subjugated peasantry, long-distance trading networks, local marketplaces, and an emerging bourgeoisie in semi-independent cities, which played a crucial part in the economic and political order.

A regional social system: Westphalia 1648–1815

The contradictory medieval structure exploded in the equally contradictory Thirty Years War, with many actors operating at different levels of the system and, ultimately, a new political order—Westphalia—was born. The time of its birth was a messy period, as one political order was in decay while a new one was about to emerge. It grew out of the power of the king (absolutism), and resulted in the sovereign, territorial state, which in turn implied the end of local power, as well as of continental political and economic structures. All power was monopolized by the state. There was thus no overarching power, a state of ‘anarchy’ as it was later termed by political theorists of the so-called realist school.

The swing of the pendulum between centralization and decentralization did not stop with this new order, in spite of the fact that its logic was based on anti-hegemonic principles and anti-hegemonic warfare. Throughout European history there have been several efforts to create hegemony or dominion (for instance Louis XIV, Napoleon and Hitler), provoking anti-hegemonic wars to re-establish the balance of power.

The absolute state also enjoyed absolute power over the economy, which was subordinated to the state interest (mercantilism) due to the functional relationship between a strong economy and a strong state. The strong state could also control territories overseas. The process of nation formation in Europe did not imply isolationism, as far as the rest of the world was concerned. The more successful nation-states competed not only in Europe but also took their struggle to other continents, which were run as colonial empires—appendices of Europe. Europe thereby came to rule the world, not as a single actor but through its major nation-states, dividing the world among themselves. The European regional system of states became a world-system (Bull and Watson 1984).

Governance functions were monopolized by the emerging kingdoms; a sort of compromise (absolutism) between centralization (imperial order) and decentralization (feudal order). There was, therefore, a certain loss of regionness on the continental level, as the new territorial states became economically introverted (through mercantilism) and later trapped in an assertive ethnic identity (through nationalism). Nationness successfully competed with regionness.

Through growing internal social and economic relations, Europe had become a regional social system. In security terms this system was mostly violent, but the complexity was reduced as ‘state’ became identical to ‘territory’, and wars became territorial rather than religious (Heffernan 1998: 17). The number of actors was reduced and the modern political map took form. The state-building process (that is, the carving out of political territories) in Europe was violent.
People gradually learnt to conceive of their ‘own’ state as protector, and the rest of the world as ‘anarchy’, a threat to their security. Eighteenth-century Europe was still a dangerous place—a violent system or (an immature) regional security complex.

**A regional international society: 1815—1945**

Throughout European modern history there have been several efforts to create geopolitical hegemony or dominion, provoking ‘anti-hegemonic’ wars. These attempts at continental control have come from the dominant nations: France and Germany (Prussia), whereas England and Holland have been ‘guardians’ of the principle of balance of power (Watson 1992). Progress was for military reasons identified with economic development, which in the 19th century meant industrialization. The state ultimately became responsible for what came to be called ‘development’, and the nation-state territory became the privileged space (container) in which development was to take place, security to be guaranteed and welfare to be created. The world order was a regional European system with non-European colonial satellites, stabilized by what became known as The Concert of Europe. The ‘anarchy’ thereby became an ‘anarchical society’ (Bull 1977). A regional actorship could emerge in spite of the lack of institutional base—apart from occasional congresses. This was also called the Congress System. The improvement of political order in the European region facilitated the breakthrough of market society and the spread of industrialization. The Concert of Europe provided relative stability in the 19th century, but in spite of economic integration facilitated by ‘the long peace’ the continent was plagued by increasing tensions towards the end of the century and by destructive wars in the first half of the 20th century.

The League of Nations was meant to reconstitute the Concert in a larger and more institutionalized form. It became a complete failure as the revisionist states Germany, Italy and Japan challenged the dominance of the prosperous liberal states (Carr 1984). The mood turned into pessimism, but there was also a temporary feeling of rejuvenation and a spirit of heroism, giving rise to political extremism of a kind not seen before. This de-globalized period also saw a return of territorial struggle and decline of regionness. This ended with the destruction of Europe. A new Europe had to be built on new more institutionalized and stable foundations that permitted increased actorness.

**A regional community: 1945–90**

The second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of an economic regional community: the EEC/EU. It was a peace project based on ‘internal economic’ integration among the six original member states and at first did not imply much presence. A distinction can be made between regionalization from below in the larger, ‘real’ region, and harmonization of the formal organized region, steered from above through a political/bureaucratic system (regionalism). However, the two processes are interlinked so a strict distinction cannot be maintained. The regionalization process was constituted by different forms of convergence: on the levels of political regimes, economic homogenization, and in the way security arrangements are organized.

The post-1957 process of political homogenization in Europe has gone through three phases: (1) in the south, the disappearance of fascist regimes in the mid-1970s; (2) in the west, the more widespread self-assertion of the European Atlantic partners in the field of security, beginning in the early 1980s; and (3) in the east, the fall of the communist regimes in the late 1980s.

The growing magnetism of the EU stimulated dramatic political changes in the neighbourhood through the encouragement of resistance against dictatorship and of democratic social and
political movements. The elimination of the southern dictatorships in the 1970s removed some embarrassing anomalies from the European scene and put the continent on the road towards political homogeneity—a basic precondition for substantial economic integration. The regional social space expanded, and so did the presence of the European community.

Another political change was a broad rejection of US hegemony when it involved deployment of new missiles on European territory. The great peace demonstrations in the early 1980s undermined the Atlantic bridge. There was Europeanness in the air and a beginning of European actorness.

The transformation in the post-communist countries formed part of the general homogenization process, or the Europeanization of Europe coming from below. The USSR’s withdrawal from dominance in Eastern Europe dramatically reinforced the ‘de-Eastern Europeanization’, which had been ongoing for some time, at varying speeds in different countries.

The process of economic homogenization, associated with uniform national adaptations to globalization, led to a state of liberal hegemony in Europe, although at the beginning the policy of state interventionism was widespread. Still European capitalism is referred to as ‘social capitalism’.

The military blocs manifestly expressed Europe’s political subordination to the superpowers. In other words the level of actorness was low. Since economics is commonly seen as belonging to the area of ‘low politics’, there tends to be more change and flexibility in the economic field. In periods of détente it became evident that economic contacts tended to follow a logic of their own. In periods of high tension, economic relations, in contrast, had to adapt to the political imperatives built into the security arrangement. All this underlines the predominance of the security factor.

**An institutionalized regional polity: post-Maastricht**

The EU is the only example of an institutionalized regional polity—at present hovering between intergovernmentalism and supranational governance—but with an uncertain future in terms of actornship, due to a new wave of Euroscepticism and decreased coherence and consistency following the inflow of new members. The controversies have primarily been in the fields of economic policy and security. As the EU started to become an institutionalized polity in the 1990s the economic foundation had become more liberal than earlier, due to domestic political changes in the member states. The economic regionalization of Europe arising out of the intensification of the internal market project has thus far been consistent with market-led economic globalization. Indeed, both processes have been founded on the same neoliberal paradigm. The economic convergences contributing to increasing regionness occurred in a context of liberalization, deregulation and orthodox anti-inflationary policies, which were built into the constitutional future of Europe, as spelled out in the Maastricht Treaty (1991).

In the subsequent years the European Monetary Union (EMU) became the main route to integration. The convergence criteria of the EMU illustrate a process of regionalization (or regionalism) directed from above (harmonization) and in accordance with a strict schedule, although occasionally and selectively generous in its application. Clearly, it is difficult to distinguish the politics from the economics of monetary integration. More recently the problems of the European Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) underlined the dangers of political divergence within a monetary bloc. With a single currency, fiscal indiscipline in one state clearly has implications for others. With the financial crisis that erupted in 2008 the EMU faces a more complicated situation in which there is genuine disagreement about the correct economic policy. Is financial orthodoxy dead; is some kind of neo-Keynesianism the need of the day? There is little consensus about which economic policy to pursue. The adaptation to a political
order, compatible with European values, has been and to some extent continues to be a major source of change in Greater Europe. This process is far from finished. It may even have an impact on the future world order, to the extent that the EU policy of interregionalism succeeds.

**Conclusion: the future significance of regional actorship**

The regional shape of Europe has changed a lot during its long history and we are still discussing where it begins and ends. The process has been far from linear. Actorship can thus rise and fall as reflections of changes in the underlying dimensions: regionness, presence and actorness. Presence is influenced by the number of member states, whereas regionness depends on their cohesiveness as a group. A number of countries are preparing themselves for membership, which will increase presence but reduce regionness and actorship. Actorness rests on the level of institutionalization and the coherence of member states’ policies, raising the problematic issue of the need for a European constitution, a problem solved by the Lisbon Treaty.

Hence the future of Europe as an institutionalized regional polity cannot be taken for granted. External challenges and internal crises can have both integrating and disintegrating consequences. US unilateralism and choice of methods fighting terrorism divided Europe into ‘old’ and ‘new’. The challenge of climate change has also led to internal differences with regard to possible remedies as shown in the Copenhagen Conference in December 2009. Finally, the current global financial crisis is, in spite of high-sounding collective statements, tackled by economic policies to be implemented largely on the national level. This will be a great test for European solidarity. The future thus looks a bit bleak at the moment, but it must also be kept in mind that, so far, the actorship of the EU has grown through crises: the paralysis in the 1960s, the Eurosclerosis of the 1980s and the deep divisions of 2003.

Finally, the concept of actorship is derived from the EU as a global actor, but meant to serve as an analytical framework in studying the transformation of any region from being an object to becoming a subject, that is with a certain actor capacity in its external relations. The concept may also be relevant in order to understand the preconditions for interregionalism (see the chapter by Fredrik Söderbaum). For two regions to establish a functioning interregional relationship it is essential that both have achieved a certain degree of actorship, that is internal cohesion, external presence and organized actorness. Otherwise there will merely be a subject-object relationship. Interregionalism can thus be described as a relationship between actors more or less well provided with the components of actorship.