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# REGIONALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Every discussion about regionalism in general should start by stating the fact that one third of the world's trade takes place in the framework of trading blocks called Regional Integration Agreements (RIA). Of course not all regional initiatives are of a purely economic nature. Their structure and characteristics vary hugely. Only the economic ones at the simplest stage just remove tariffs from intrablock trade, at their deepest they have the objective of an economic union, and construct shared executive, judicial and legislative institutions. Sometimes they also share ideas for common policies and a common future.

The renaissance of regionalism is one of the most important arguments, proving that globalisation is not the only tendency in the developments of today's world. At this point I would not like to pause at the discursive issue of whether regionalism is a part of the globalisation process or a form of opposition to it, but let me start with the notion that (by many authors) Europe is described as a continent of regional identities. Region has become a key part of the discussion about the European Union. Regionalism, whether within or across national borders is Europe's current and future dynamic.

Facing the complexity of the definition of the problematic terms region and regionalism we must be aware of the fact that there are estimated to be more than 100 definitions and even more typologies of those. My ambition is not to examine all of them, but just to touch the issue of different perspectives of understanding the region. (Not to mention the related terms like border, culture, ethnicity and many others.)

Regions are, for some, ethnic and cultural units, for others, economic or geographical ones, and for yet others nothing more than simple political subdivisions of the nation – state. A region can be described as a relatively defined area, characterised by the concentration of interrelated things and phenomena. Sometimes it can be heard that it is satisfactory to say that regions are spatially defined and historically developed social worlds. All of the definitions share

a common denominator. It can be stated in conclusion that places are not automatic contexts for collective life.

Usually, in everyday communication, when we use the word ‘region’ we mean a part of our country that is close to our experience, sometimes in comparison/ opposition to the state/country. But in the language of international relations there is also other understanding of the word region, which is a grouping of countries that can be characterised by sharing similar historical, ethnical and religious experiences, or cultural heritages-sometimes language similarities-or aiming for the same goal.

After “struggling” with the definition of the word region it is much easier to understand the term of regionalism. Regionalism is a tendency in international relations characterised by the intensification of co-operation through the increase of institutional and non-institutional, formal and informal interrelations among countries belonging to some geographical area.

Before World War II, the terms “region” and “regionalism” were associated with separatist movements. They had negative connotations, especially in comparison with the term “state,” which was having its renaissance then. And “region,” with all its ambitions, was perceived then as a potential source of conflict and weakness of the state. Today – after the experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – region and regionalism have taken contrary positions as elements constituting civic society and a more participative concept of democracy.

Processes of regionalism have different dynamics and characteristics. Researchers have identified some features that are the most common stages, being criticised by others for being too idealistic and not sticking to reality. The stages are the following:

- regional identity among societies (or at least the elite)
- appearance of visions of future co-operation
- increasing relations, contacts and influences
- adoption of legal or institutional norms (e.g. periodical consultations, legal regulations binding for the members, common secretariat)
- integration of the region

In the discussion of the sources of regionalism and its place in the context of other significant processes, one should consider putting this regional solidarity as a part of globalisation in general. Some claim that it stays in opposition

to global processes, some claim it is just a phase of globalisation. Here the question of perspective reveals different approaches. If you perceive regional formation as a final stage of integration in some sectoral policy, you may say it stays in opposition to the concept of a world as one place. Seeing things in a wider perspective, it is difficult to ignore the fact that shifting the accent to the supranational level is a step forward. This may or may not be in accordance with localism – this depends largely on state attitudes and the nature and ambitions of regional organisation.

Hyper-localism is tied with hyper-globalism. Let me cite Umberto Eco (at the Venetian Film Festival in 1973): “Transmitted by radio or television, information about the facts and figures coming from the other part of the town are equal (in perception) to those coming from the other part of the globe.” This phenomenon shows a good context of regional development and its place in wider processes. A growing co-operation among the wealthiest and strongest regions is one of the well-established phenomena. Toffler describes this as a process of “creating new centres of influence and power.” “Region” (together with international private companies, expansive religions, NGOs) forms a new form where concentration of power equals with sovereignty.

Does today’s regionalism stay in opposition to the nation-state? In the era of political correctness you will never hear an explicit answer from the political elite. But at some phase of its development the answer is ‘yes’.

Regionalism has also been perceived as a form of opposition towards “internal colonisation”. The example of such a relation in the literature is characterised by the UK and within it, Scotland and Wales. But an awareness of inequality or degradation was not the only building factor for regional identity. There was also an awareness of more developed (and prosperous) regions being afraid of losing their position, or of exploitation by the state, distributing its prosperity among weaker, poorer parts of one state’s organism. A kind of opposition to playing the role of the good uncle is the example of Catalonia in Spain or Lombardy in Italy. The issue is not so much that nations have been bigger and stronger, but that written history established itself as making legitimacy for nation-states. Historians wrote about the past of their nations, unity of their nations, etc., consequently devaluating the regions.

This brings us to a very important question of sovereignty and its distribution. The context – especially in the phase of EU enlargement – was clear for, with the historical experience (of the newcomers) it was one of the discussion points when debating accession. But we affiliate sovereignty with the national state and therefore argue on losing it, or at least sharing it. Whereas the approach towards this question should be how we, the voters (who are the holders of sovereignty) are going to distribute it. Different countries have different experiences and systems, but usually in Central Europe we were used to a monopoly national state sovereignty. It is a strange phenomenon that in the era in which state institutions (and public policies) are under crushing criticism, in Poland for instance, the public opinion on state institutions is extremely negative.

According to democratic rules the power belongs to the people/voters/tax payers, (in constitutions: the people, *Bevölkerung*, citizens) just because for purely technical reasons they cannot govern themselves. Maybe in the future the representative concept of democracy will develop into the participative one. But we, the people can share our power with the self-government at a local level, regional authorities, state's administration, and last but not least international or supranational organisation.

Somehow, psychologically (for historical, emotional and many other reasons) we are tied to understanding sovereignty as the state's attribute. This is why the argument of losing sovereignty to Brussels was so much present in the pre-accession debate.

The greatest part of sovereignty is still being in charge of the state. And what is even more important, the state holds the monopoly on decisions regarding how to distribute it. It is the national parliament and government who decide on the organisational structures of regional and self-government on a local scale. It is the state that participates to the largest extent in policy-making at a supranational level. My point is not that sovereignty should be taken from the state. There are a number of policies that should effectively be carried on by the state and no one else (police, judiciary, etc.). When we talk about the Galileo navigation system, let's do it at the continental level, but when we talk about decisions on house renovation, then the local structures are appropriate. But when it comes to issues that could be better coped with at the lower than the

upper level, the state usually gets “jealous”. According to the subsidiarity rule it should go exactly like this. The practice is sometimes extremely different.

*Europe's* nation-states are being challenged from above by the growing powers of the supranational European Union, but also from below by increasingly assertive *regions*. Some theorists talk of a new layering of power in *Europe*. Where does the EU fit into this back-and-forth struggle? Many European regionalists have long seen it as a natural ally against the centralism of nation-states. But the Commission dare not overtly encourage regionalist ambitions, for fear of antagonising powerful member governments. The political debate is about whether Europe should take the one step forward and become a federation of states, or stay at the present stage (a Europe of mother- and fatherlands). On the semantic level these two concepts are very close.

Many claim that the answer to the challenges of the future is a Europe of federalised regions. In 1967 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing proposed the formation of a European senate, which would consist of every nation's representatives in the first phase and then, in the second, of regions' representative. This initiative was undertaken later on (at the beginning of the 1990) by Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor, who at the Maastricht summit proposed again a senate in the form of the German Bundesrat, but as we know it ended up as the Committee of the Regions.

During 1970 we observed the increasing process of reforming the organisational structures of the countries. Let's just mention the most significant ones, i.e. Belgium and Spain. Edmund Stoiber (CSU) is convinced that bringing more competence to the regions would be a positive element in fighting the “discouragement of Europe” as this would bring Europe closer to its citizens.

Some claim that a “Europe of Regions” is a great model for the future in which a tolerant, cosmopolitan and warm, personal localism emerge gradually in a stable complementarity, a view that is confronted with pessimists' visions of separatists, disintegration and decline. Apparently there is still a lot of conceptual work to be done.

Regionalists' movements are a positive element in building a civic society; they articulate group interests, usually in the pattern of decentralisation and strengthening local governments. Of course such an approach is rather visionary, but beginning from the times of the great French Revolution, we do not need

to think about the central unit (no matter whether it is a king, authoritarian regime or democratically chosen government) as the one and only exclusive holder of sovereignty. Some authors even claim that the “Europe of Regions” is unrealistic. A Europe with Regions is a more adequate term. Regions are the third level of European integration but so far with the least power.