

## COMPARATIVE REGIONALISM: A FIELD WHOSE FRAMEWORK HAS COME?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*As the literature on Comparative Regionalism studies increases, more and more scholars take a chance at creating a new or better tool to explain how regions have become more integrated, and what has caused them to want to come together in the first place. As one of the new researchers, I have seen a huge fragmentation in my attempts to find a suitable methodology for my case of comparing two regions (through pure interregionalism<sup>2</sup>). As such, this research brings together a collection of scholars who have extensively exchanged knowledge and papers, with some who belong to other research fields, in an attempt to settle this need. This is how the ecological framework, a tool that aims to be both extensive and flexible, has been created. While limited, for the moment, by a strong political lens, and with a focus on EU and AU literature, it can provide a reliable analysis of various integration processes.*

**Keywords:** *Comparative Regionalism, Ecological Framework, Regional Integration, Member-types, Governance, Non-eurocentrism.*

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrasing Acharya's well-known ovation-question "A field whose time has come?" (Acharya, 2012)

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<sup>2</sup> Amitav Acharya, "Comparative Regionalism: A Field Whose Time Has Come?," in *The International Spectator*, no. 1, vol. 47, 2012, pp. 3–15.



## INTRODUCTION

Comparative Regionalism (CR) is a recent scientific endeavour in comparative studies, currently establishing itself as a new field of research within regional studies. Most scholars agree that the first contemporary academic to initiate a wave of interest in this field was Amitav Acharya, who, through his early work<sup>3</sup>, set the basis for what is to become one of the most used methods to survey regions around the world. The growing interest in CR studies has been attributed by scholars<sup>4</sup> to (1) a new multipolar, multiplex global order, characterized by (a) terrorism and the war(s) on terror, (b) crises, particularly hard-hitting financial ones, and (c) the ascension of BRICS and other emergent powers, (2) regional governance becomes the new very important component of the global governance system<sup>5</sup> and (3) the growing of formal and informal institutionalization of state and non-state actors across various fields. Outside of North Atlantic reasons, other scholars<sup>6</sup> argue that more causes can be found in (1) the empowerment of identities and growing cultural autonomy of the world, alongside (2) new measures to oppose colonialism and neocolonialism through a common (3) resistance against the great powers.

Although the literature on Comparative Regionalism is not short of new methodologies to try<sup>7</sup>, they get very specific, to the point where some of them

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<sup>3</sup> Amitav Acharya, „The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics”, *World Politics*, vol. 59, no. 04, 2007”

<sup>4</sup> Fredrik Söderbaum, “Old, New, and Comparative Regionalism,” in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Zürn, “Global Governance as a Multi-Level Governance,” in Levi-Faur David (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 736–739.

<sup>6</sup> Amitav Acharya, “Regionalism Beyond EU-Centrism,” in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Risse, “The Diffusion of Regionalism,” in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; Tobias Lenz and Alexander Burilkov, “Institutional pioneers in world politics: Regional institution building and the influence of the European Union,” in *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 23, 2017, pp. 654–680; Tania Börzel and Thomas Risse, “Grand theories of integration and the challenges of comparative regionalism,” in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2019, pp. 1231–1252;

remain good only at the theoretical level, and others are rather too normative. In this regard, other scholars have noted that specific traits of regionalism are either too well-researched<sup>8</sup>, generally excluded or rarely taken into consideration<sup>9</sup>, or outright only used to further European mimicry and excellence in terms of integration<sup>10</sup>.

This paper accounts for most of these recent changes and challenges in the field, as it tries to propose a new comprehensive tool to assist in describing CR(s). While recent similar attempts have called this endeavour an "integrated framework", I propose the term "ecological framework". This term is better suited conceptually, as it allows (1) to choose between only some of its elements, thus increasing the validity of the measurement, and (2) to account for the fact that the elements cannot and should not be measured individually but by embracing the influences that happen between them, as well.

## METHODOLOGY

The framework is a two-dimensional table, where the x-axis (horizontal) is made of *themes* and the y-axis (vertical) is composed of *topics*, with each cell containing *elements*. The themes correspond to chronological recommendations

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Tobias Lenz and M. Reiss, "Globalising the study of diffusion: multiple sources and the East African Community," in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2023, pp. 1–29; Diana Panke and Sören Stapel, "Multi-level governance," in Philippe de Lombaerde (ed.), *Handbook of Regional Cooperation and Integration*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Lorenzo Fioramonti and Fredrik Mattheis, "Is Africa Really Following Europe? An Integrated Framework for Comparative Regionalism," in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2015, pp. 674–690.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond," in *Comparative Political Studies*, 2010, pp. 931–968; Tania Börzel, "Theorizing Regionalism: Cooperation, Integration, and Governance," in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; Helen Nesadurai, "The politics of developmental regionalism," in Melisa Deciancio; Pablo Nemiña and Diana Tussie (eds.) *Handbook on the Politics of International Development*, Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Amitav Acharya, "Regionalism Beyond EU-Centrism," in in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; D. Mumford, "Comparative Regionalism's Decolonial Turn: A Proposition", in *E-International Relations*, 2020.

from scholars, of areas that should be considered when comparing regions, whereas the topics are inextricable elements that make sense in any comparison, linked with political analysis. While themes are more likely to be author-specific, topics are more general, yet themes are broader in definition, and topics are more concrete; and at their intersection, we find the framework's elements.

The decision to include an element in a certain cell comes primarily from a chronological match, then by being directly mentioned, and finally, if it fits the theory conceptually. Thus, for some of the themes, the author never mentioned specifically some elements, but because they fit at the intersection with that element, they are added.

The limitations of this framework are that it has a thicker political lens applied to it, and that the conceptual foundations rest in the comparison literature between Europe and Africa. Nevertheless, the flexibility of the framework should allow itself to both grow and be criticized, the more it is used and disassembled.

### **RAISING HORIZONTAL BARS: WELDING THE FRAME**

One of the first comparative scholars was Joseph Nye, whom I will award the base theme of this framework, as his work has also inspired the topics that I use. The tool that he designed had three directions: (1) political, skewed towards institutions and supranational modes of analysis, (2) economic, limited to trade and services, and (3) social, which had a modest effect in his model<sup>11</sup>. However, the bigger value of his paper, which unfortunately is not highlighted enough in his final model, is him citing Haas about how "[a]spects of integration and disintegration can both occur at the same time"<sup>12</sup>, which is a blind spot that the current literature on CR is spectacularly excelling at avoiding.

Although CR is currently regarded as the latter phase of a process<sup>13</sup>, a lot of scholars seem to avoid including a processual approach in their studies,

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Nye, "Comparative Regional Integration: Concept and Measurement," in *International Organization*, 1968, pp. 855–880.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Nye, "Comparative Regional Integration: Concept and Measurement," in *International Organization*, 1968, pp. 855–880.

<sup>13</sup> Fredrik Söderbaum, "Old, New, and Comparative Regionalism," in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

rather preferring to take a picture of the two regions at a very specific time and call it a day. In their studies of democracies, Capoccia and Ziblatt recommend that we emulate a historical perspective when we want to do comparative studies<sup>14</sup>. Leaving aside the euro-centricity of their study, which we are going to counter later, and their democratic specificity, I believe that our field could benefit by including the historical perspective in all comparisons, which not only adds a temporal dimension to each region, but to the relations between regions, as well.

Another dimension that has been longstanding in the study of regionalism(s), which plagues most of the theories, is that it is driven by high-level interests or elites, who are organized at a national, transnational, supranational, or regional level, and always have a top-down approach. As societies, organizations, companies, and other actors become more relevant, not only do inter-regional comparisons change face<sup>15</sup>, but they also allow for a multi-layered or bottom-up approach, in the form of governance<sup>16</sup>.

Being over-represented in the field of CR<sup>17</sup>, the European Union has recently had a critical comeback from the scholars of this field. As they argue, some of the proposed theories and even comparisons praise the exclusiveness of integration following an "EU Model". In a reverse attempt, this critical approach has also come under criticism, as scholars try to account for minimizing area-centric methodologies and theories, while focusing more on topic-driven comparative regionalism<sup>18</sup>. Yet, for as long as the EU still has

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<sup>14</sup> Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond," in *Comparative Political Studies*, 2010, pp. 931–968.

<sup>15</sup> Elisa Lopez-Lucia and Fredrik Mattheis, "New concepts for understanding the entanglements of regionalisms," in Elisa Lopez-Lucia and Fredrik Mattheis (eds.) *The Unintended Consequences of Interregionalism*, Routledge, 2020, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Tania Börzel, "Theorizing Regionalism: Cooperation, Integration, and Governance," in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Saad Chiekh El Maaly, "What the Analysis of 136 Studies from 1960 to 2020 Tells Us About Comparative Regionalism Studies," in *Economic Issues*, vol. 2, 2022, pp. 31–85.

<sup>18</sup> Tobias Lenz and F. Söderbaum, "Comparative Regionalism beyond Europe versus the rest," in *Review of International Studies*, 2025, pp. 1–17.

influence over Africa, no present or future framework should exclude this element as part of its analysis.

The final theme of my framework is seldom approached in the literature<sup>19</sup> and has to do with the membership criteria. As regions become more diverse, with some non-state actors gaining power that can affect several countries at once, governments changing loyalties from one party to another, and new types of passive memberships emerging, I believe it provides fruitful ground as a theme in itself. For this, I propose the concept of *member-types*<sup>20</sup>.

### VERTICAL CUTS: FILLING THE FRAME

From the beginning of the field<sup>21</sup> until now<sup>22</sup>, the three main topics of analysis for CR are the (1) political, (2) economic, and (3) social ones, also in this order. In line with recent changes in developmental IR studies<sup>23</sup>, which I think also better suit my conceptual goal, the topic of social analysis becomes socio-developmental. This new topic is then enlarged in its definition, so that it better captures shifts in power and levels of intervention, at the same time allowing for the inclusion of social actors who lack an outright obvious political or economic reason to pursue integration, to be accounted for as a motive that is development-driven.

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<sup>19</sup> Christof Hartmann, "Sub-Saharan Africa," in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; Elisa Lopez-Lucia and Fredrik Mattheis, "New concepts for understanding the entanglements of regionalisms," in *The Unintended Consequences of Interregionalism* (Elisa Lopez-Lucia and Fredrik Mattheis (eds.)), Routledge, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> A member-type, similar to an ideal-type, is a concept that describes the breadth of association of a state or non-state actor to a regional organization of any kind. It can start from informal and formal bilateral ties, to the process of joining, being a member, then a suspended member, and even a member-in-exit. This suggests that regional integration is disproportionately driven by some of its constituents, which can clearly be seen in the Franco-German(-British) leadership in the EU and the Kenyan-Tanzanian dominance in the EAC

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Nye, "Comparative Regional Integration: Concept and Measurement," in *International Organization, 1968*, pp. 855–880.

<sup>22</sup> Saad Chiekh El Maaly, "What the Analysis of 136 Studies from 1960 to 2020 Tells Us About Comparative Regionalism Studies," in *Economic Issues*, vol. 2, 2022, pp. 31–85.

<sup>23</sup> Helen Nesadurai, "The politics of developmental regionalism," in Melisa Deciancio; Pablo Nemiña and Diana Tussie (eds.) *Handbook on the Politics of International Development*, Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022.

The framework is detailed in Table F, comprised of (again) themes as columns (horizontal distribution) and topics as rows (vertical distribution). The first additions in this table are those who directly derive from the themes. Theme 1 (Baseline) brings forth six elements to our framework: (a) Trade, (b) Elites, Loyalties, and the interaction with Masses, (c) Institutional Design. Policy Convergence, (d) Regional Identity, (e) Security, and the pinnacle - (f) Disintegration Processes. Next, the second theme (historical) supports the inclusion of (g) the *Regionalization* Process, while the fourth theme (*anti-eurocentrism*) supports regional identity and brings forth discussions about (h) Regional approaches towards Sovereignty.

While her chapter<sup>24</sup> does not directly name the elements that compose regional governance, the book she has edited<sup>25</sup> contributes to theme 3 (governance) by supporting the elements of trade and security, and adding (i) Monetary and Financial Governance, (j) Regional Development Governance, (k) Gender Governance, (l) Environmental Governance, (m) Migration (and Border) Governance, and Human Rights and Democracy Governance, which, for this framework, I will call (n) Regional Law Governance. Finally, as theme 5 (member-types) does not have any particular supporting author(s), the elements I extracted are empirical: (o) Joining and Exiting Criteria, and (p) Passiveship<sup>26</sup>.

For the political topics, I will cite Fioramonti and Mattheis' framework<sup>27</sup> and borrow two elements (q) Integration Drivers, which best fit the second theme, and (r) Regional Leadership, which I will place under the third theme. For the former element, some authors find a distinction between drivers, which are the actual elements that move integration forward (e.g. people per se, companies, governments, trust etc.), and scopes, which are end-goals

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<sup>24</sup> Tania Börzel, "Theorizing Regionalism: Cooperation, Integration, and Governance," in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Passiveship is a member-type in which the member, based on some pre-defined criteria, could be considered inactive or passive, yet not being suspended or wanting to exit.

<sup>27</sup> Lorenzo Fioramonti and Fredrik Mattheis, "Is Africa Really Following Europe? An Integrated Framework for Comparative Regionalism," in *Journal of common Market Studies*, 2015, pp. 674-690.

(e.g. economic union, regional peace etc.) for the process<sup>28</sup>; hence our 20<sup>th</sup> element is (s) Integration Scopes. The same authors suggest, albeit unilaterally, that regions could impact the regionalization process of other regions, an element that I will call (t) Inter-influence. Finally, I would like to expand on the fourth element: regional identity and add to it the concept of regional branding<sup>29</sup>.

Some authors would frown upon the introduction of economics as a topic, as they agree that economics generally do a poor job at explaining regional integration<sup>30</sup>. However, as our framework recommends that we treat each of the elements as interacting, this fits perfectly within its limits. As such, since the beginning of the study of regional economic integration<sup>31</sup> up until the present day<sup>32</sup>, the beginning of integration is always a preferential free trade agreement and ends (is expected to end) in total economic integration; this creates a scale that fits as our 22nd element. Equally as useful, as nowadays America has embarked on a tariff war, not long after a lot of countries joined sanctions on Russia, to add the 23rd element (v) of Sanctions<sup>33</sup> and Stimuli<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Tobias Lenz and Alexander Burilkov, "Institutional pioneers in world politics: Regional institution building and the influence of the European Union," in *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 23, 2017, pp. 654–680.

<sup>29</sup> Which is how the AU presents itself as an organization built by Africans for Africans, i.e. to fight colonialism and neo-colonialism, and the EU as a safe haven for human rights, i.e. to attract migration, but maybe to also redeem itself of a murkier past

<sup>30</sup> A. Wiener and T. Diez, "Introducing the Mosaic of Integration Theory," in Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (eds.), *European Integration Theory* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. pp. 19–21; M. Pradhan and A. Scott, "Economic and Financial Integration in Europe: Recent Stresses and Policy Challenge," in Hamid Davoodi (ed.) *The East African Community After Ten Years: Deepening Integration*, 2012, p. 54; E. Balogun, *Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford Research Encyclopedias, International Studies, 2021, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> B. Balassa, *The Theory of Economic Integration*, Routledge, 1962.

<sup>32</sup> Hasan Tuluy, "Regional Economic Integration in Africa," in *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies*, 2016, pp. 334–354; Farhad Taghizadeh-Hesary et al., "Regional Economic Integration in Asia: Challenges and Recommended Policies," in *Journal of Economic Integration*, 2020, pp. 1–9.

<sup>33</sup> Who could also work as intra-regional, with EU suspending funds to members who 'misbehave', as well as how the AU outright suspends them over coups.



The final topic – socio-developmentalism is brimming with elements brought forth by previous mentions. Still, for making the framework evermore lively, this element of this topic seem to be never-ending, as many more micro, meso, and macro areas of interest arise, such as (I) education<sup>35</sup>, (II) infrastructure, (III) health, (IV) agriculture<sup>36</sup>, and (V) artificial intelligence<sup>37</sup>. I have also identified another fruitful topic, the final one to be included in the framework, namely overlapping memberships<sup>38</sup>, which could explain why regions with a seemingly similar institutional-building journey have had different regionalization processes.

## CONCLUSION

This framework aims to fulfil the need, in the field of comparative regionalism, for a flexible tool that would allow for comparable comparisons between different scholars, and across time. It is also the perfect mesh where several field representatives, such as, for example, political analysts, IR students, lawyers, environmental activists, cheerful economists, and so on, work together; to bring various explanations of the regionalization process of the same regions, or different ones.

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<sup>34</sup> With examples as early as the Marshall Plan to nowadays the EU's Global Gateway and China's Belt & Road Initiative

<sup>35</sup> Meng-Hsuan Chou and Pauline Ravinet, "The emergent terrains of 'higher education regionalism': how and why higher education is an interesting case for comparative regionalism," in *European Journal of Higher Education*, 2016, pp. 271–287.

<sup>36</sup> Saad Chiekh El Maaly, "What the Analysis of 136 Studies from 1960 to 2020 Tells Us About Comparative Regionalism Studies," in *Economic Issues*, vol. 2, 2022, pp. 31–85.

<sup>37</sup> Florin Salajan; Theodore Barnes and Anna Becker, "Comparative regionalism cases of artificial intelligence governance in education: the Caribbean Community and the European Union," in *The Round Table*, 2024, pp. 71–85.

<sup>38</sup> Christof Hartmann, "Sub-Saharan Africa," in Thomas Risse and Tania Börzel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 274. <sup>38</sup> For a more detailed map of overlapping regionalism in Africa, see Tuluy 2016, 348

**Table F** – The ecological framework of Comparative Regionalism as an invaluable element of comparing regions.

	Theme 1: Baseline	Theme 2: Historical	Theme 3: Governance	Theme 4: Non- eurocentrism	Theme 5: Member-types
	Foundational elements	Allows for longitudinal comparisons	Adds non-state actors at non-state levels	Refutes European exceptionalism in CR Studies	For the research on different degrees of participation
Topic 1: Political	Institutional Design & Policy Convergence  Regional Identity & Branding  Disintegration Processes	Integration Process  Integration Drivers  Integration Scopes	Regional Leadership	Sovereignty  Inter-influence	Joining and Exiting criteria  Passiveship
Topic 2: Economic	Trade	Economic Integration Scale	Monetary & Financial Governance		Stimuli & Sanctions
Topic 3: Socio-developmental	Elites, Loyalties, and the interaction with the Masses  Security and Peace	<sup>39</sup>	Regional Development. Law  Migration & Border  Gender Environmental		Overlapping memberships

<sup>39</sup> Infrastructure Development could be placed here

Because most of the research for this framework has been done by researching literature that has been limited to the processes of the EU and the EAC, I encourage criticism from scholars of different regions and types of comparative regionalisms, which could truly help forge the framework into an even more valid tool. Besides the tool itself, some of the gaps that I have identified in the CR literature could provide fertile ground for new research, especially the new turn of regional management to include member-types of varying power, responsibilities, and benefits.

More work remains to be done in the field, as several new methods and elements are brought forth in recent CR research, yet it is my firm belief that the ecological framework could be the trend-setter of a new wave for a more integrated yet living approach.

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