



Editorial Note: “REGIONS AS ACTORS”

by Johanna Schnabel and Maria Bertel

Johanna Schnabel, Institut d’Etudes Politiques, Historiques et Internationales (IEPHI),
Université de Lausanne, Switzerland
Email: JohannaMaria.Schnabel@unil.ch

Maria Bertel, Elise-Richter senior fellowship (FWF), University of Innsbruck, Austria
Email: maria.bertel@uibk.ac.at

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Introduction

This special issue of “Federal Governance” is the outcome of a mini-symposium held at the 22nd Conference of Europeanists, organized by the Council for European Studies in 2015. Paper givers were asked to reflect on two concepts that were purposely not specified further in the call for papers: ‘regions’ and ‘actors’. With multi-layered systems in mind, their task was to link these two concepts and consider regions to be actors in the sense that they participate in various ways in the making of political decisions and/or the administration of a given territory. Given that it was left to the paper givers to select their definitions of ‘regions’ and ‘actors’, the outcome has been a variety of different conceptualizations and observations of regions as actors. These different approaches and observations speak to each other in a way that has enabled the participants of the mini-symposium to gain a quite comprehensive picture on regions as actors. As the papers published in this special issue show, regions use a number of channels on various levels of government (subnational, national, supranational and international) in order to ‘act’. In the remainder of this editorial, we bring together the numerous definitions of regions and the diverse strategies and interests of actors in multi-layered systems that the contributors to this special issue have identified. The editorial is structured in the following way: it first provides an overview of the different definitions of ‘regions’ before summarizing the different kinds of actors that the authors have identified that make regions ‘act’. The third section focuses on strategies that regions pursue to defend or advocate their interests.

Definition of regions

Generally speaking, regions are spatial entities. But, the various papers of this special issue show that the concept of region can be defined and applied in quite diverse ways. The regions analyzed in the papers of this issue reflect this diversity. Leaving the various definitions and conceptualization aside for a brief moment, we can conclude that in rather abstract terms, regions differ in their legal status, size, populations, resources and power. This finding is independent from more precise definitions of specific types of regions.

Going back to types of regions, a definition that appears frequently in the papers, whether implicitly or explicitly, is a concept of regions that defines them as subnational entities of the nation-state. In this concept, regions can be members of a federal system that enjoy at least some autonomy (the powers to levy certain taxes and to spend in certain policy areas) allocated to them by a federal constitution (such as German Länder in Yvonne Hegele’s paper). As subnational entities of the nation-state regions can also be administrative entities in unitary systems in which the execution of legislation is decentralized. The distinction of federal units or administrative entities points to differences in the legal status and the (de jure) autonomy of regions. Independent of their legal status, regions can be designed along geographical, linguistic, cultural, or administrative lines. But, regions can also be groups of these subnational entities, as Peter Ulrich shows in his paper. Portuguese regions are administrative entities of the Portuguese nation-state that have engaged in cross-border cooperation with Spanish regions – enjoying a different status in the Spanish federal system compared to the unitary state of Portugal – in order to form a European Grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC). EGTC point to the existence of types of regions that go beyond the nation-state. This type of regions has a different legal status than subnational entities and it can consist of subnational entities but also of nation-states that cooperate within a supranational or international framework. Bringing these different legal statuses of regions into a broader definition, Charlotte Unger (p. 87) in her paper defines a region as “a geographic entity that enjoys some autonomy on a subnational or supranational level, with the capacity to develop – at least to a certain degree – and enact domestic policies”. In this

sense, regions have at least some “regulating authority” (p. 90), which gives us a first impression of how regions can be actors.

Given the various types of regions, comparing them can be a fruitful approach in order to identify differences and similarities. To compare in a systematic way Schnabel and Wirths advocate the use of Cluster Analysis in comparative politics. Using Cluster Analysis to classify intergovernmental councils (institutions regions use to coordinate) and evaluation clauses in Swiss laws, the authors not only provide insights on differences within and across federation regarding these two research topics but they also use these illustrations to guide scholars in applying Clusters Analysis to other concepts. Thinking a little further, Cluster Analysis could enable scholars to compare subnational entities within a given nation-state and across nation-states but also to compare the different types of regions listed above (for example, subnational entities and supranational entities).

Which actors

Before taking a closer look at how regions act as political actors, it is noteworthy that regions are not monolithic entities but that the actual actor one refers to depends on the context and the issue one is interested in. Regions can be defined as corporate actors consisting of different departments and units, for example.

Yvonne Hegele’s paper in this issue illustrates this finding quite nicely. Whereas members of the regional government seem to come first to one’s mind when thinking about actors that represent a region, Hegele focuses on bureaucrats working in so-called central coordination units within Länder governments and their involvement in coordination. Hegele chooses a multifaceted approach to the question of how regions are involved in domestic EU policy coordination in Germany, taking not only the federal but also the sectoral coordination into account. From a theoretical point of view Hegele uses the concept of governance institutions; from an analytical point of view, coordination is defined as a process. This approach allows to analyze coordination in its different dimensions. Lastly, Hegele combines these two approaches with an empirical analysis, showing that the process of coordination is organized as a network. Hegeles approach shows therefore that regions do not act in a vacuum, but are interacting in different ways with other players, such as the federal government and other regions. The sectoral perspective suggests that regions consist of actors that work in different “departments” within the government of the region. In this sense, Hegele’s paper illustrates that regions indeed are not monolithic entities. Even though Hegele does not address the issue itself, her paper points to a variety of types of actors within regions, of which bureaucrats are one type. Other possible types of actors are citizens, interest groups and political parties.

Indeed, other papers in this special issue provide evidence that bureaucrats or ministers are not the only ‘regional’ actors. Further instances are the population of a region (Peter Ulrich in this issue), interest groups (Romana Salageanu) as well as various types of political and societal institutions (Ulrich, Schnabel/Wirths, Hegele). In some cases, these actors define themselves according through elements related to identity or culture (Ulrich in this issue).

Regions as actors: governance

It has been pointed out above that regions are political actors in the sense that they participate in collective decision-making. One consequence of the definition of regions as actors is that regions have their own specific interests. Given that a region consists of various individual and collective actors it is important to notice that regions often have diverse interests. Yet, independently of the type of region or the specific actors and the configuration of interests and preferences, the papers in this issue all show that regions use mechanisms of governance in order to do so. Whereas regions engage in domestic policy making (especially if they have the power to do so as in the case of subnational entities in federal

states), the papers in this issue all point to important finding related to the complexity of the modern world. This finding is that regions cannot act alone. This is why they engage in coordination in order to exchange information and other resources, develop joint projects or make joint decisions with other regions at the national (Hegele's paper), supranational (Salageanu, Ulrich) or international level (Unger). Whereas Hegele's paper focuses on networks of German bureaucrats that foster horizontal coordination, Ulrich and Unger investigate conditions of successful horizontal interaction across borders within the European Union and on the international level, respectively.

In her paper, Unger emphasizes the challenges that arise when regions with different statuses such as California (subnational entity in a federal state) and the European Union (supranational entity) cooperate. Due to the climate change and the problems linked with it, states introduced different systems of emission trading systems. As different regions have developed different emission trading systems, up until now those systems are not linked. Unger proposes that cooperation or linkage between these systems should be realized for the purpose of efficiency. Unger therefore investigates the reasons for the lacking cooperation with the example of the EU and California and emphasizes the problems arising for regions that do not have the status and mandate of a nation state. Her contribution not only identifies challenges related to different statuses of regions that cooperate but also emphasizes that interactions between regions often aim at efficiency and economies of scale.

Salageanu's paper nicely illustrates the eagerness of regions to be active actors and not just "agents" or administrative units. Salageanu chooses the example of Saxony-Anhalt in order to illustrate the active mobilization of a region within the multi-level governance framework of the European Union. The departing point of Salageanu's study is the active presence of regions in Brussels which allowed and allows for the further acknowledging of regions as political spaces and active actors within the EU.

All papers show that regions can act on various levels simultaneously. Hegele, for example, explains how Länder engage in horizontal coordination in order to prepare decisions at a higher level of government, namely at the European level. The papers also show that regions are constrained by institutions or set up institutions in order to channel their actions.

Lastly, developments of recent years, such as the separation movements in the UK or Spain show that identity plays an important role for regions. The identity aspect in regionalism is approached by Peter Ulrich, for example. In his paper he elaborates forms and channels of transborder participatory governance and examines pre-conditions for a cross-border citizenship. Ulrich chooses a normative-participatory approach and is focusing on European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Ulrich is not only doing a theoretical analysis but uses the case of the EGTC Galicia-Norte de Portugal to examine the above mentioned research questions.

This overview shows that regions not only have different interests and pursue different strategies but that the very same strategy can serve quite different aims as the example of coordination illustrates. In Hegele's contribution, the German Länder coordinate to prepare federal decision-making while Unger's paper points to efficiency and Ulrich's paper emphasizes identity.

Concluding remarks

This special issue provides a variety of case studies, which all approach the topic from a different point of view. They also show that despite of the existing literature the topic of regions is still in need of further research.

Regions are more than entities that delimit a certain territory. They are actors with specific historical backgrounds that have different interests and pursue different strategies. The study of regions and how they act involves not only political science and sociology but also law, as the possibilities of regions to act also depends on their legal status. Interactions of regions

and coordination in particular seem to become more and more important as regions interact not only with other regions, but with local, national and eventually also international entities. As the contributions show it is above all the need to solve pressing questions that push regions to interact in this multidimensional way. Interaction and cooperation goes beyond the cooperation of regions that share borders or pertain to the same geographical area. The variety of forms of interaction and cooperation is e.g. reflected in the cooperation between the EU (understood as a region in a broad sense) and California. This case shows that very different regions in terms of geography, size, status and diversity can still interact. The trend of regions perceiving themselves as actors is probably also due to an emerging self-consciousness of regions as actors; it is to see if recent European developments of regions threatening with secession has an impact of the interaction of regions. The concept of "region" has been, on purpose, very broadly defined as a common framework of the contributions to this special issue. This has enabled us to assemble a variety of perspectives on regions as actors. However, this broad definition implies that the different case studies provide illustrations instead of conducting systematic comparison. Any generalization on regions as actors, for example regarding interactions between regions, requires a conceptualization that is more precise and straightforward. While this is not the purpose of this special issue, we hope that the different illustrations of regions as actors provide input to researchers that pursue this aim. Furthermore, this special issue also leaves much possibility for further research: Regional military cooperation is left out completely, and so are non-Western regions, leaving the question open if and to which extent regions in other parts of the world act differently. Democratic implications and implications for governance are merit further research.