

GARNET NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE
GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, REGIONALISATION & REGULATION: THE ROLE OF THE EU
JERP 5.1.1 “Europe as a Model of Regional Governance”
JERP 5.1.3 “The EU and Africa”

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Parliamentary cooperation networks in the new regionalism

The aim of this mobility is to develop a systematic approach to parliamentary cooperation networks in regional integrations. The study focuses primarily on interactions among elected representatives from key countries taking part in regional arrangements; it also considers contacts between parliamentarians and other social actors such as governments, international organizations' officials, civil society, etc. The empirical part of the study is based on selected parliaments and parliamentary committees of the African Union's member countries. The first objective is to identify individual and institutional factors explaining participation in cooperation networks and the outcomes in terms of regional integration. A second, complementary, objective is to assess the role of the EU in disseminating its model of democratic governance through the support it gives to regional institutions such as the Pan-African Parliament.

Many of the regional arrangements, which were agreed upon (or reactivated) since the end of the Cold War, include some form of participation by parliamentary actors. Obvious instances of parliamentary involvement in regional organizations are, on the one hand, the standing committees of the national parliaments, and, on the other hand, the regional parliamentary assemblies, such as the Pan-African Parliament of the African Union, the Joint Parliamentary Committee of the MERCOSUR, the Andean Parliament, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. Because they are usually seen as rather powerless (if not completely ineffective), their existence is sometimes deemed to be more formal than real.

Despite the obvious limitations associated to parliaments and parliamentarians as international actors, parliamentary cooperation forums and networks are a relevant entry to the study of regionalization processes if we consider them, not from the perspective of their formal structures and competences, but as indicators of the actual level of integration at the regional level. By defining regional integration processes as an intensification of communications networks, we may see that parliamentarians – because of their functions in national chambers and/or their membership in regional assemblies – are at the core of these processes. By definition, parliamentarians have a function of linkage between civil society at large and governmental authorities. In practise, they travel, communicate, interact, meet each others, and take part in international summits. In other words, they are embedded – with a variable intensity – into communication networks and international forums, which to my knowledge have not been investigated this far.

Actually, in the regional integration literature, parliamentary institutions and actors are hardly taken into account and the rare exceptions concentrate mostly on institutional features. The perceived weakness of parliaments in the regionalization process is not the only reason why they are neglected in the literature. Theoretically, they are difficult to fit into the study of regional integration: traditional international relation theorists emphasise the role of the state as a unitary actor and are therefore more interested by governmental actors than by legislators. As for new regionalism students, their focus is more on non-state actors (especially, economic interests) than on lawmakers.

In the perspective of new regionalism, parliamentary actors are interesting to study because they are at the crossroads between the state (since they belong to the institutional apparatus) and non-state actors (since they are directly elected representatives). Also, they are active at the different tiers of the multi-level governance: local (electoral constituencies), national (lawmaking, executive scrutiny) and supranational (international cooperation). In the context of the EU, it is now acknowledged that national parliaments and the European Parliament should not be seen as opposed but as complementary actors. This is even truer in the context of African and Latin American regionalism where regional parliamentarians are not (yet) directly elected. Besides, parliamentarians are engaged in a multiplicity of overlapping networks which cross-cut officially defined national boundaries: parliamentary networks spill over geographically (through inter-regional parliamentary cooperation such as EU-MERCOSUR agreement, the ACP parliamentary assembly or the project of Euro-Mediterranean Parliament). Parliamentarians contribute to blur the line between different sectors of social life: as individuals, they are implicated in all kinds of activities including business and cultural exchanges.

The aim of the research project is to identify the networks and forums in which parliamentarians are engaged, to determine the intensity of exchanges which they take part in, to ask which are the factors (including the parliamentarians' social background, language skills, international experience) facilitating participation in these networks. Two intertwined issues need particularly to be addressed. First, the factors explaining participation into parliamentary cooperation networks must be identified. Who are the actors involved in regional parliamentary committees? What are the selection criteria? Second, the research should concentrate on the expected outcomes. Participation in parliamentary networks might contribute the socialization of MPs who become more aware of the functioning of international relations and of the issues at stake. Also it may give more resources to political actors at home.

The theoretical interest of such an approach is that it allows us to avoid a purely institutional analysis of regional integrations (which was sometimes blamed on "traditional" regional studies) without opting for a purely economic understanding of regionalization. Generally speaking, EU integration studies and International Political Economy regionalism are large separated discourses, which my research might contribute to link. If it is true that trade and business interests are decisive factors in the new trend of regionalism, political aspects should not be overlooked. The study of parliamentary networks could benefit the theoretical debate on new regionalism insofar as it puts forward pluralistic interests. Parliaments are not unitary actors and we might see competing interests and networks appear on the regional stage. Besides, it could create the possibility of developing indicators of the level of integration ("regioness") and of comparing across regions. At a larger scale, by assessing the level of parliamentary communication, we will be able to analyse the relationship between the level of political integration and other kinds of integration (economic integration to start with).