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How to ‘connect’ micro-regions with macro-regions? A

Note

by

Philippe De Lombaerde

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Abstract

Sub-national regions (micro-regions) and supra-national regions (macro-regions) appear as disconnected concepts in the academic literature. They are studied by distinct academic communities between which there is very little communication. In this Note, three ways are suggested to ‘connect’ the two phenomena and it is argued that a dialogue between the two communities could open new avenues for research and lead to a better understanding of inter-polity and inter-economy relations, in a more general sense. In this exploratory Note it is suggested that micro- and macro-regions can be connected (i) at the conceptual level, (ii) through their similar roles as emerging international actors, and (iii) through the interplay between macro-regions and cross-border micro-regions

Key-words:

Regions, micro-regions, macro-regions, international actor



1. Introduction

Regions come in different shapes and sizes. Compared to the population of cases (i.e. states) which is usually considered in comparative politics, the regional category is much more heterogeneous and open-ended (Genna and De Lombaerde, 2010). The fact that regions are often overlapping further complicates their analysis. This overlap is both horizontal (i.e. partial or complete overlap between regions on the same level) and vertical (i.e. overlap between hierarchically structured regions). But as regions –from a governance point of view- tend to specialize in particular functions, overlapping membership should be distinguished from overlapping competences.

Many typologies can and have been proposed to describe regions. Two distinct broad sub-categories are generally considered: supra-national regions, on the one hand, and sub-national or sub-state regions, on the other. These will be called ‘macro-regions’ and ‘micro-regions’, respectively.^I This is a conceptual distinction, not necessarily referring to their actual relative size. Micro-regions such as Chinese provinces or Indian states, for example, are obviously often geographically, economically and/or demographically larger than macro-regions such as the East African Community, CARICOM or BENELUX. It should further be recognized that hybrid regions also exist. ‘Cross-border micro-regions’ (such as the Euregions, the Southeast Asian growth triangles, or the Southern African Development Corridors) involve sub-national entities on either sides of national borders, and are therefore international at the same time.^{II}

In spite of their common etymology, micro-regions and macro-regions are by-and-large disconnected concepts in the literature. Söderbaum (2005) is a notable exception. Micro- and macro-regions are treated by distinct academic and epistemic communities, thereby using different theoretical frameworks and disciplinary angles. Micro-regions are typically dealt with by academics working on, either regional development or social and economic geography (the region seen as a system and a clustering of activities around a centre or pole of development), or on (fiscal) federalism (focusing on the role played by regions vis-à-vis local and national authorities from an administrative, fiscal or political



point of view). Macro-regions, on the other hand, are typically studied by scholars with an (international) economics or political science/IR background focusing on processes of regional cooperation and integration, with inter-governmental and/or supra-national features.

In this note, I will present some ideas about how these two concepts (and discourses) could be (re-)connected. I distinguish three ways to connect micro-regions with macro-regions: (i) the merger of micro-regions and macro-regions into one conceptual category; (ii) the consideration of micro-regions and macro-regions as similar emerging international actors; and (iii) the consideration of (cross-border) micro-regions and macro-regions as related processes.

2. Micro-regions and macro-regions as elements of one conceptual category

At the centre of conceptual debates in regionalism or regional integration studies during the last decades is the transition from the old regionalist concept to the new regionalist concept(s). Nye's definition ("a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence") exemplifies well the 'old' understanding of regional integration (Nye, 1971:vii). Regions are thereby either assimilated with regional organizations or are considered as a mainly geographical concept. The regional organizations are supposed to be functionally specialized in either economic integration or security cooperation. By contrast, new regionalism tends to refer to a multi-dimensional and multi-actor phenomenon that should be seen in the context of globalization.^{III} By emphasizing more the process characteristics of regionalization, less attention went initially to the underlying concept of 'region', although there was and is a growing understanding that there is a plurality of regions, including more informal versions.^{IV} It has therefore been argued that the definitional question should be seen in combination with the research problem at stake rather than to be settled *ex ante* (De Lombaerde et al., 2010). In other words, definitions, it is argued, should be problem-based.

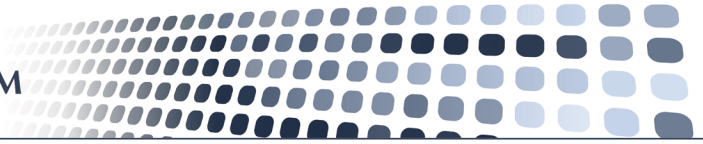


And it is thereby obvious that the conceptual problem is linked to the problem of comparability.

Following the discussion on the uniqueness of the EU (the so-called $N = 1$ problem), it has been suggested that regions, while maintaining their geographical and spatial expression, could be considered as governance levels or social systems with certain statehood properties. The region is thereby explicitly defined by contrasting it with the State, and seen as having some, but not all (!), statehood properties.^V This kind of definition opens the door to more general understandings of the region and allows including supra-national regions and sub-national regions in one conceptual category. In turn, this opens enormous opportunities to connect two distinct academic communities and literatures. Finally, this broader regional concept is also able to deal with the previously mentioned hybrid forms such as the Asian growth triangles, Southern African Development Corridors and other cross-border micro-regions, and with 'double-hybrid' forms such as the new Benelux linking up with Nordrhein-Westfalen and Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

3. Micro-regions and macro-regions as similar international actors

It is self-evident to say that macro-regions are international actors. Independently of their architecture (i.e. relying predominantly on inter-governmental mechanisms or rather on supra-national mechanisms), macro-regions are by definition an instance of international action. What is of growing importance, however, is their extra-regional actorness through coordinated or joint action. This is not limited to inter-regional relations and negotiations but includes also region-to-state relations and interactions between macro-regions and global institutions (UN, G-20, etc). These interactions take different forms: financing projects and programs, partnering, voting coordination, seeking some form of formal representation, etc. Micro-regions, subject to national authority and constitution, are less likely candidates for international action. However, there is also a clear trend here towards increasing international actorness as shown in the literature on sub-national diplomacy.^{VI}



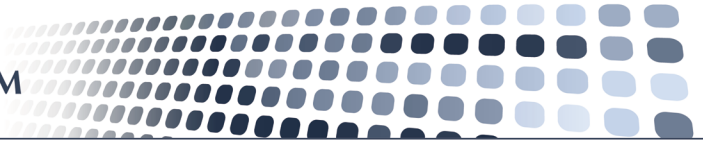
According to Durán et al (2009), in this evolution towards more international actorness, three ‘waves’ can be distinguished. In a first wave, starting in the 1980s, certain micro-regions started to get involved in the promotion of foreign direct investment (FDI) and tourism, and the affirmation of their culture and identity.

A second wave started in the 1990s when certain micro-regions were provided with certain legally or constitutionally grounded diplomatic instruments. In some cases, micro-regions started to build a foreign-policy apparatus (i.e. an administration), mainly consisting of horizontal coordination between the different functional departments. The authors currently see a third wave, which is characterized by a verticalization of the organizational structure^{VII}, a strategic re-orientation of the geo-political and/or functional priorities (e.g. more emphasis on multilateralism and inter-regionalism), the integration of external instruments of sub-state foreign policy into a well-performing whole, and the enmeshment of diplomacy and para-diplomacy.

For the purpose of our short article, it is important to highlight the similarity and/or convergence between both phenomena. Not only can one find coinciding objectives (commercial interest, political objectives, affirmation of identity), but macro-regions and micro-regions are also faced with common issues and obstacles when pursuing these objectives. These issues include their unclear diplomatic status and the issue of representation in multilateral scenarios. Macro-regions and micro-regions can thus be seen as similar emerging international actors.

4. Cross-border micro-regions and macro-regions as related phenomena

Besides their possible definitional connection (see point two), and their coinciding extra-regional and international actorness (point three), I distinguish a third way to connect micro –and macro-regions. I focus thereby on a sub-set of micro-regions, namely the hybrid cross-border micro-regions. I am referring to cases such as the Euro-regions in the European Union (EU), the US-Mexican border, the growth triangles in Southeast Asia, the Development Corridors in Southern Africa, the *zonas fronterizas* in the Andean region, etc. It can be shown, both empirically and theoretically, that the development of both types of regions is not necessarily disconnected.



Three types of connections can thereby be distinguished. A first type is ‘complementarity’, where both developments go hand-in-hand (i.e. they have the same sign). There can be one-way or two-way causality. Macro-regions, can, for example, promote cross-border micro-regionalism in a ‘top-down’ fashion through particular policies and incentives that target the border areas, as in the cases of the EU and the Andean Community (CAN). Another example of top-down complementarity, of neo-institutionalist inspiration, is a case where macro-regionalism leads to more ‘trust’ among the parties on both sides of the borders so that cross-border cooperation to address common policy challenges or to manage shared resources becomes more likely (Schiff and Winters, 2002). Macro-regionalism can also lead to more cross-border micro-regionalism when border zones become ‘more central’ in the new regional context. This argument is supported by the new economic geography.^{VIII} Bottom-up complementarity is also possible when, for example, intense *de facto* cross-border interaction calls for a regulatory framework and thus induces a demand for macro-regional institutions.

Under a second type of connection both regionalisms also move in the same direction but causalities are less clear; the relationship is of a systemic nature. In other words, they are determined by a common set of variables of historical, cultural, institutional, political or economic nature. An example could be the East Asian case where the ‘Asian way’ is reflected both at the macro-regional (ASEAN, ASEAN+3, etc) and the micro-regional level (growth triangles).^{IX}

Finally, a third type of connection refers to situations in which macro-regional and cross-border micro-regionalism are competitors or substitutes of each other. One regionalism fills the governance gaps left by the (malfunctioning) other regionalism, or the two regionalisms follow incompatible and competing development models, driven by opposed political agendas and interests. The new regionalism approach, very much conscious of the variety of regionalisms and varying degrees of regionness, might be compatible with this type of connection. However, this approach also emphasizes that both regionalisms respond to similar logics and sets of variables related to globalization, so that the systemic connection might also apply.



5. Conclusions

Micro-regions (i.e. sub-national regions) and macro-regions (i.e. supra-national regions) are usually seen as very distinct phenomena that have only their etymological origin in common. They are studied by-and-large by distinct and unconnected academic communities. In this note I have suggested that there are at least three ways to ‘connect’ the two phenomena and that a dialogue between the two communities could open new avenues for research and lead to a better understanding of inter-polity and inter-economy relations, in a more general sense. The three ways that were suggested are: (i) their conceptual connection, (ii) their similar roles as emerging international actors, and (iii) (focusing on cross-border micro-regions) the objective connection between their respective developments.

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^I For a typology of micro-regions see, for example, Jönsson et al. (2000).

^{II} Keating (2011) uses the term ‘transnational’ region.

^{III} See for example, Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel (2000, 2001); Söderbaum and Shaw (2003); Breslin et al. (2002); De Lombaerde (2003); and Telò (2007).

^{IV} ‘Regionness’ was also proposed as a fluid or continuous concept, as opposed to the ‘old’ static definitions. See, Hettne and Söderbaum (2004). See also, Warleigh-Lack and Van Langenhove (2010: 547).

^V Contrasting the region with the state should not be confused with associating the region with the state. In other words, in the new understanding the relation between the region and the state “is not given *a priori* and is often problematic” (Keating, 2011: 4). Regions are seen as relatively autonomous systems, not as merely aggregations or subdivisions of states.

^{VI} Also called para-diplomacy or multi-layered diplomacy. See, for example, Soldatos (1990); Duchacek (1990); Hocking (1993); Aldecoa and Keating (1999); and Crikemans (2010).

^{VII} Meaning that foreign policy becomes a separate policy domain and department.

^{VIII} See for example, Krugman and Elizondo (1996) on the case of NAFTA; Schiff and Winters (2003: 137-145); and Blatter (2004: 532).

^{IX} On the ‘Asian way’ in regional cooperation and integration, see for example, ADB (2008, 2010).