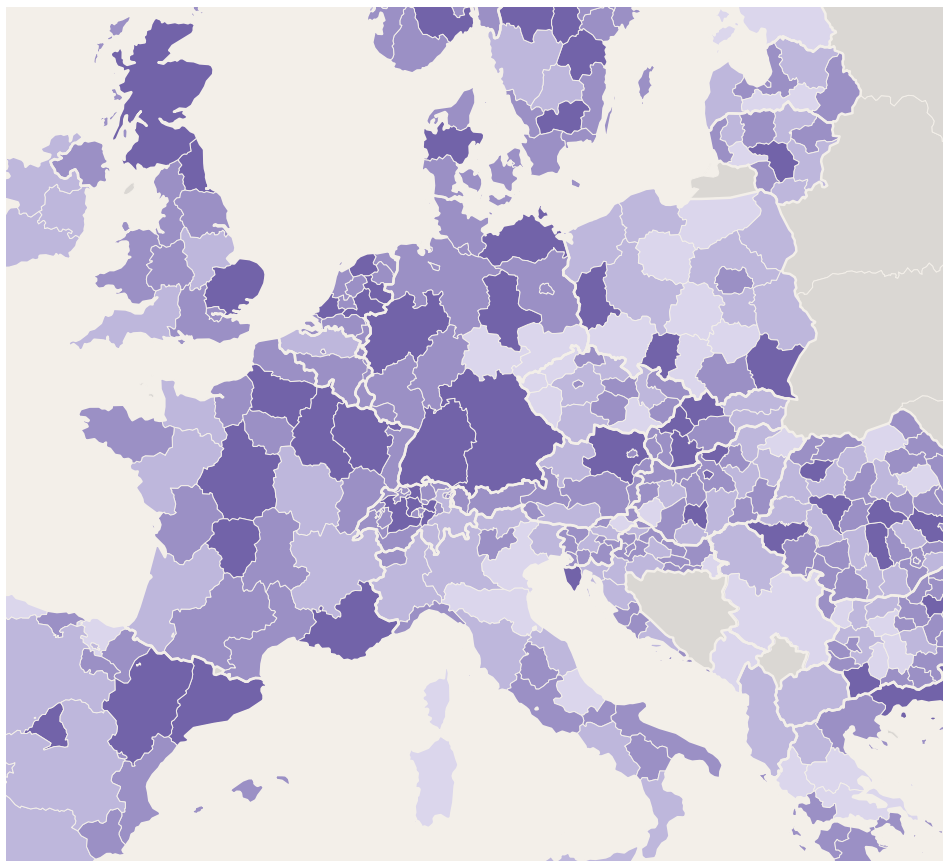

Conference report

Mapping regional involvement in EU affairs



Academic conference ▪ 20-21 October 2022
University for Continuing Education Krems

Conference report

Mapping regional involvement in EU affairs

The conference sought to address recent developments and open questions in the field of regional studies as well as regional politics with regards to their involvement on EU level: How and why do regional level political actors actually engage in EU affairs? Are they currently just bystanders or do they actively get involved in shaping European policy? What form of participation would they like to see in a newly constituted Europe? And could they act as a link between EU citizens and institutions within the multi-level polity? Scholars and representatives from politics and public administration discussed these questions during the two-days conference in three academic panels, an expert roundtable, during a workshop, and in various Q&A sessions.

About the organizers

[REGIOPARL \(Regional Parliaments Lab\)](#) is a multi-annual (2018–2022) international research project on the role of regional parliaments in the EU multilevel system of governance. It is hosted at the University for Continuing Education Krems and funded by Forum Morgen (Austria) and cooperates with the following partner organizations: the European School of Governance in Berlin, the Jagiellonian University Kraków, the University of Tübingen, and the WZB Berlin Social Science Centre.



Program overview

Conference opening and welcome

- Rector Mag. [Friedrich Faulhammer](#) (Danube University Krems)
 - [Sarah Meyer](#) (Danube University Krems)
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Introduction of the European Regional Democracy Map (ERDM)

Speakers:

- [Sarah Meyer](#) (Danube University Krems)
 - [Arjan Schakel](#) (University of Bergen)
-

Keynote lecture: Regional voices in the European multilevel polity - towards a multilevel democracy?

- [Simona Piattoni](#), Professor of Political Science at the University of Trento
-

Panel 1: Regional actors engaging in EU affairs?

- Chair: [Arjan Schakel](#) (University of Bergen)
- Discussant: [Anna-Lena Högenauer](#) (University of Luxembourg)

Presenters:

- [Annegret Eppler](#) (University of Applied Sciences, Kehl), [Martin Große Hüttmann](#) (University of Tübingen) & [Carolyn Rowe](#) (Aston University)
 - [Carlo Panara](#) (Liverpool John Moores University)
 - [Sarah Meyer](#) (Danube University Krems), [Mario Wolf](#) (REGIOPARL), & [Paul Reimers](#) (REGIOPARL)
-

Expert roundtable: The role of regions in the EU: Sharing expertise between politics and science

- Chair: [Gabriele Abels](#) (University of Tübingen)

Speakers:

- [Antje Grotheer](#) (Bremen Parliament)
- [Justus Schönlau](#) (European Committee of the Regions)
- [Yianis Koutsikidis](#) (European Commission)
- [Harald Bürger](#) (Representation of Vienna at the EU)
- [Benjamin Hurard](#) (Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies, CALRE)
- [Katrin Auel](#) (Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna, IHS)

Panel 2: What role for regions in the multi-level EU polity?

- Chair: [Katrín Auel](#) (IHS, Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna)
- Discussant: [Eric Miklin](#) (University of Salzburg)

Presenters:

- [Sandrina Antunes](#) (Universidade do Minho) & [John Loughlin](#) (University of Oxford)
- [Simon Lenhart](#) (Danube University Krems)
- [Aron Buzogány](#) (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU) Vienna), & [Jens Häsing](#) (Freie Universität Berlin)
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Panel 3: Regional actors connecting EU citizens and institutions?

- Chair: [Katrín Praprotnik](#) (University of Graz)
- Discussants: [Paul Kindermann](#) (REGIOPARL), [Sarah Meyer](#) (Danube University Krems), & [Simon Lenhart](#) (Danube University Krems)

Presenters:

- [Alexander Verdoes](#) (University of Bergen) & [Arjan Schakel](#) (University of Bergen)
- [Andreja Pegan](#) (University of Primorska)
- [Anna Brigevidch](#) (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)
- [Elisabeth Donat](#) (Danube University Krems) & [Gunnar Placzek](#) (REGIOPARL)

Scholarly workshop: Challenges and prospects in the comparative study of regions and the EU

- Moderator: [Marcin Zubek](#) (Jagiellonian University Kraków)

Introduction of the European Regional Democracy Map (ERDM)

Speakers: Sarah Meyer (Danube University Krems) & Arjan Schakel (University of Bergen)

The European Regional Democracy Map (ERDM) is a novel digital platform and datahub and was developed by REGIOPARL at the University for Continuing Education Krems in cooperation with Arjan Schakel from the University of Bergen. The map visualizes comparative information on regional elections, the electoral systems, regional governments, and regional involvement in EU affairs. Core objectives of this joint project are to close existing gaps in the accessibility of reliable comparative data on regional democracy & EU involvement and to visualize regional diversity on these issues. Against the background of parallel trends in contemporary Europe of both increasing regionalization and Europeanization, **Sarah Meyer** and **Arjan Schakel** presented different indicators based on data from their research and included in the ERDM: Schakel showed indications for the variety in regional democracy across Europe, arguing that this was still largely overlooked by scholars; Meyer turned to regional differences in the potential to shape EU policies and invited the audience to explore the various features on the map at: europeanregionaldemocracy.eu.

Keynote lecture: Regional voices in the European multilevel polity - towards a multilevel democracy?

Simona Piattoni (University of Trento)

In her keynote speech **Simona Piattoni** started by addressing the territorial aspect to representation. The key chains of representation – delegation and accountability – link the sovereign ('the people') to the executors of its will. While stressing that "place matters" as it determines our life, representation would not work this way, Piattoni argued. Following Michael Saward and his argument that "representation is claim-making", she highlighted that a representative claim only existed when it was acknowledged by an audience and was therefore open for debate. A demos, she continued, was therefore not to be defined exclusively by territory but by ideals, orientations, and sufferings.

Turning to the EU perspective, Piattoni stressed the importance of defining what multilevel representative democracy was and what regional involvement in the EU could tell us about this kind of democracy. In her view, representation can no longer be conceived as the matching chains of delegation and accountability because the heads of the chains, the demoi, are undefined due to the disconnect of territorial jurisdiction and the relevant political communities. Piattoni proposed a "notion of democracy more centered on the conferral of ideas, solutions and intelligence on the ground than a democracy understood as autonomous

self-rule”, with citizens participating independent of their territorial or institutional belonging. Understood this way, she argued, we could redefine representation within the existing EU architecture. Piattoni concluded her speech with the prospect that the European Committee of the Regions could be a template for such a forum of dialogue that gives room to a different, deliberative notion of democracy and the transformation of parliamentary work.

Piattoni’s keynote speech was followed by a lively debate on the virtues and drawbacks of deliberative approaches to democracy in a multilevel context, questions of (a lack of) responsiveness of policymakers, and existing obstacles to further developing local and regional participation formats in European politics.

Panel 1: Regional actors engaging in EU affairs?

The first conference panel addressed new research findings on the activities of regional executives and legislatures to influence EU policies. Chaired by Arjan Schakel, it included paper presentations by Annegret Eppler, Carlo Panara, and Paul Reimers. Anna-Lena Högenauer discussed the various contributions.

In her opening presentation, **Annegret Eppler** gave insights into new findings on strategic engagement of two German regions, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, towards the EU. Eppler and her co-authors’ (Martin Große Hußtmann and Carolyn Rowe) analysis pointed to substantial shifts in strategic culture regarding the EU at the regional level over the past 10-15 years. Eppler attributed these shifts primarily to the constitutional framework of German federalism and the role of the German Federal Constitutional Court as a European political actor, which, in a series of landmark judgements throughout the 2010s, has reshaped both the thinking on and the practice of German “Länder” engagement in EU affairs.

Carlo Panara presented research on Brussels-based EU liaison offices of regions from the United Kingdom, highlighting that these offices remained relevant post-Brexit given the EU’s continuing regulatory power and political and economic partnership with the UK. Although the number of these offices has dropped and their fund-seeking function faded, offices’ networking and political functions (“being in Brussels”) are still considered essential by some UK regions to scan EU politics relevant to them. Panara stressed the different regional incentives within the UK to maintain representative offices in Brussels, pointing to Northern Ireland (which de facto continued to be part of the single market) and Scotland (with its independence movement and strive for independent relations with the EU) as prominent examples.

Paul Reimers concluded the panel with a presentation on regional parliaments' use of the Early Warning System on subsidiarity control (EWS) since 2010. Based on a novel data set, Reimers and his co-authors (Mario Wolf, Sarah Meyer) provided a comparative analysis of regional subsidiarity complaints issued against EU draft legislative acts, covering all regional parliaments eligible for subsidiarity monitoring according to the Lisbon treaty. He stressed that most complaints came from a total of four regions, two in Germany and two in Austria ("regional champions"), whereas most other regional parliaments remained largely or completely inactive. Referring to existing literature on the EWS, Reimers concluded that scholars so far seemed to overestimate the importance of institutional characteristics in explaining variation in EWS activity across regions.

Expert roundtable

The role of regions in the EU: Sharing expertise between politics and science

Although opportunities for subnational actors to participate in EU affairs have improved, obstacles and inter-institutional conflicts continue to create a sense of marginalization among regional officials. The expert roundtable aimed at linking perspectives of scholars as well as practitioners on regional engagement in European politics. It was moderated by Gabriele Abels (University of Tübingen).

Asked about the greatest challenges that regions face when dealing with the EU, **Antje Grotheer** (Bremen Parliament) stressed that regions still struggled to be heard, seen, and recognized as experts on the ground for the implementation of EU legislation. She argued that regions depended on utilizing both direct and indirect channels (i.e. at the EU level and going through their national governments) to forward regional perspectives to the EU level. She highlighted that regional representatives from across the EU were often much faster in reaching consensus over policy positions compared to their intergovernmental counterparts in the European Council.

Harald Bürger (Representation of the City of Vienna at the EU) referred to many regions' scarce resources, meaning that they needed to focus their advocacy efforts on national channels. In his view, the higher levels of consensus among regional actors, as emphasized by Antje Grotheer, were due to their limited formal powers that facilitated agreement, since political action had less policy impact.

Representing the EU Commission on the podium, **Yanis Koutsikidis** (EC General Secretariat) expressed his gratitude towards regional executives and parliaments for providing expertise on how implementation of European legislation could be improved. The feedback and

initiatives from local and regional authorities, he continued, was highly welcomed by the Commission and increasingly recognized by all stakeholders involved in EU policy making.

Benjamin Hurard, Secretary General of the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), pointed to CALRE's various activities to foster regional participation in instruments such as the Early Warning Mechanism on subsidiarity control but also to foster communication and coordination between assemblies. He further picked up on an idea that was also discussed in the Conference on the Future of Europe, namely a "green card" granting regional parliaments with legislative powers a joint right of initiative in the EU's legislative process.

Representing the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), **Justus Schönlaue** (CoR's CIVEX Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs) characterized its activities as a permanent attempt "to make unity out of diversity". He considered the CoR most important for smaller and less powerful entities that – unlike power houses such as Bavaria or North Rhine-Westphalia – could not "simply pick up the phone themselves" to get their voices heard in EU affairs.

Adding the social science perspective to the conversation, **Katrin Auel** (Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna/IHS) confirmed that the challenges expressed by regional and local authorities were mirrored in the academic literature and on the agenda of European Studies research. However, there was still a lack of best practice strategies for regional impact on EU decision-making—a challenge difficult to address given the difficulties in identifying and measuring such influence properly.

The following debate on the podium and with the audience approached the multilevel nature of the EU polity and discussed tendencies towards further centralization and executive dominance as a corollary of crisis management in times of multifaced challenges. A second strand of the debate focused on communication between academia and politics. Discussing diverging expectations and sharing views from the respective perspectives on politics, participants agreed on the importance of interlevel exchange and expressed their hope for improving mutual understanding and cooperation to the advantage of EU democracy and regional involvement therein.

Panel 2: What role for regions in the multi-level EU polity?

The second panel was dedicated to the broader political context of regions within the EU polity. It focused on institutional and normative claims regarding a better involvement of regional actors in the EU multi-level structures and processes, including research on the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and EU cohesion policy. Chaired by Katrin Auel,

the panel included paper presentations by Sandrina Antunes, Simon Lenhart, Aron Buzogány and Moritz Neujeffski. Contributions were discussed by Eric Miklin.

Sandrina Antunes' presentation focused on how the Committee of the Regions (CoR) can contribute to enhancing deliberative European democracy whilst improving its influence in EU policy making. She argued that the EU's deliberative democratic features could be strengthened through the greater participation of subnational authorities and the CoR. Based on Dryzek's (2000) concept of transnational deliberative democracy, Antunes claimed that European transnational democracy was to be found not just in voting or representation but more fully through deliberation. Deliberative transnational democracy, she continued, would very well suit the European multilevel system of governance and not necessarily require substantive treaty change, if, for instance, the CoR's role were to be strengthened.

The role of the CoR was also discussed by **Simon Lenhart**, who explored whether the CoR succeeded in fulfilling its claims to represent regional parliaments in the EU. Based on a combination of different data sources (ERDM, survey, and interview data) collected in the framework of REGIOPARL, he challenged the CoR's representative claims concerning regional parliaments in EU policy-making: First, empirical data showed a dominance of regional executives in the CoR's composition and a subordinate role of regional MPs in the CoR. Second, the CoR was only of limited importance in contacts on EU affairs reported by regional MPs in a survey among regional parliamentarians from seven EU member states. Finally, however, interview data with regional MPs revealed a networking function of the CoR for MPs from EU regions. In concluding, Lenhart stressed the need for future research on patterns of decision-making within the CoR and on the effects of executive/legislative representation in the CoR on the latter's decision-making.

Aron Buzogány presented insights on EU related activities of the German Landtage. Together with his co-author Jens Häsing, Buzogány introduced a novel measurement of "parliamentary activism" and proceeded by testing the explanatory power of various independent variables for the differences observed between regional parliaments. He underlined the importance of formal and administrative prerogatives and the role of cost-benefit calculations made at the regional level in explaining EU-related activities such as subsidiarity scrutiny and parliamentary questions regarding the EU.

Finally, **Moritz Neujeffski** offered a comparative analysis of regional strategies in implementing EU cohesion policy under the conditions of austerity policy, exploring potential shifts after the allocation of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) was linked closer to the European Semester in 2013. Studying the regions of Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia

(Germany) as well as Centro and Norte (Portugal), Neujeffski found that increased fiscal pressure did in fact lead to a partial subordination of EU fund implementation to regionally specific fiscal consolidation strategies. For instance, regional policy-makers tried to compensate social groups facing disproportionately large adverse effects due to the intended consolidation course by increasing their relative share of EU structural funds.

Panel 3: Regional actors connecting EU citizens and institutions?

The third and final panel took a closer look at the supposed linkage function of regional political actors in the EU context, turning towards a citizen perspective by examining public opinion and election data. With paper presentations by Alexander Verdoes, Andreja Pegan, Anna Brigevich, and Gunnar Placzek, the panel was chaired by Katrin Praprotnik.

Alexander Verdoes discussed whether elections to the European Parliament (EP) were not only “second-order” to general elections at the national level—as suggested in the literature—but also to regional elections at the subnational level. The analysis was based on a rich data set including election results from regional, national, and EP elections in more than 300 regions from thirteen Western EU member states between 1945 and 2020 (Regional Electoral Democracy Elections datasets, RED). Verdoes and Arjan Schakel, co-author of the paper, identified clear second-order election effects in their comparison of EP with regional election results (e.g. lower turnout rates and vote share swings at the cost of the main regional governing parties in EP elections compared to regional elections) and discussed the notion of EP elections as even “third-order” due to empirical evidence not only for national but also regional spillover into the European electoral arena.

Addressing deliberative features in the context of EU cohesion policy, **Andreja Pegan** relied on public value theory in public administration research. Pegan started her presentation with an introduction of public value theory and asked how the public perceive public values in EU cohesion policy. The empirical data, based on 47 focus groups with citizens in 16 regions within the EU, revealed four values and several value dimensions across all focus groups, albeit with different intensity and valence across regions. Pegan argued that responsiveness to citizen needs could contribute to democratic and socio-political public value creation. Promoting different public values inconsistently, however, could confuse the public or at worst reduce public support, she concluded.

Anna Brigevich explored the impact of regional identity on support for European integration and radical right parties in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Based on data

from the European Values Study survey, she evaluated two different conceptions of regional identity in CEE states: modern regionalism (associated with attitudes like forward-looking, inclusiveness and EU-support), and parochial regionalism (associated with attitudes like backward-looking, exclusiveness and Euroscepticism). Different from assumptions in the literature, Brigevich highlighted that regional attachments was not particularly low in CEE countries, as CEE citizens were at least somewhat attached to their regions. While she did not find a significant impact of regional attachment on EU support on its own, results showed interaction effects with support for radical right parties.

Finally **Gunnar Placzek** presented survey findings on the concept of “closeness to citizens”, exploring the prominent claim found in politics and academia that local and regional level politics was “closer” to citizens. Placzek, together with co-author Elisabeth Donat, introduced a four-dimensional conception of “closeness to citizens”, including attitudinal congruence between representatives and the represented, trust by the latter in the former, citizens’ views on the concept of political mandating, and, finally, their interaction with members of parliament at different territorial levels. The empirical analysis was based on REGIOPARL’s public opinion survey that included respondents from 12 regions in six EU member states. It revealed that with a narrow understanding of “closeness” (based only on the fourth dimension, i.e. interaction), the subnational political level indeed outperformed the national and European level in its closeness to citizens. However, interactions did not determine the other dimensions of closeness to citizens. More direct contacts with citizens, Placzek concluded, did not necessarily lead to more trust in politics and its representatives, as it was often assumed in debates about reforming multilevel EU democracy.

The conference organisers from the University for Continuing Education Krems and REGIOPARL would like to thank all speakers and participants for joining the conference and sharing their expertise and knowledge with the audience.

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