

COMPARATIVE REGIONALISM AND THE CONCEPT OF COGNITIVE REGIONNESS: THE CASE OF THE VISEGRÁD GROUP

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Abstract: The concept of cognitive regionness is a theoretical tool that was put forward by the Visegrád project of Political Regionalization of Visegrád Countries (2015-2018). The main objective of the project was to verify the nature and perspectives for cooperation of the V4 countries – Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland – during a period when the system of international relations was undergoing profound changes. Initially, this research endeavor sought to determine whether the integration efforts of small and medium-sized states make sense in the contemporary framework of international relations. The theory of comparative regionalism provided a series of answers in this regard. Another line of inquiry attempted to ascertain whether V4 states enjoy a deep cohesiveness. If so, a follow-up question sought to understand the roots of this “deep cohesiveness”. Was it based on long-term cooperation, or was it, rather a product of a temporary “utilitarian” cooperation, entirely dependent on the will of the politicians? Answers to this question are provided in the second and, especially, in the third section. The concept of cognitive regionness helped answer the aforementioned inquiries. The theory of comparative regionalism provides the methodological basis for our study. This theory was developed in the last three decades by the Institute of Global Studies at the University of Göteborg in Sweden. The concept of “cognitive regionness” represents an original contribution that compliments the concept of regionness introduced by this theory.

Keywords: Central Europe, cognitive regionness, comparative regionalism, international relations, political culture, political history, processual regionness, V4



Rezumat: Conceptul de regionalism cognitiv este rezultatul căutării unui instrument teoretic în cadrul proiectului Visegrád Regionalizarea Politică a Statelor Grupului de la Visegrád (2015-2018). Principalul obiectiv al proiectului a fost să verifice natura și perspectivele de cooperare ale țărilor V4 – Republica Cehă, Slovacia, Ungaria și Polonia – într-o perioadă în care sistemul relațiilor internaționale trecea printr-o serie de transformări. O primă întrebare a căutat să afle dacă în relațiile internaționale contemporane eforturile de integrare ale statelor de dimensiuni mici și mijlocii au sens. Răspunsurile sunt oferite în prima secțiune prin raportarea la teoria regionalismului comparativ. În privința celei de-a doua întrebări, cercetarea și-a propus să examineze

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dacă între statele V4 există o coeziune mai profundă, și dacă, prin urmare, ne putem aștepta la cooperarea acestora pe termen lung sau mai degrabă dacă această cooperare este una temporară, cu caracter „utilitarist”, reprezentând doar un simplu act de voință al politicianilor. Cea de-a doua secțiune și, în principal, cea de-a treia vin cu răspunsuri la această întrebare. Conceptul de regionalism cognitiv a oferit cadrul prin care să putem răspunde la întrebările mai sus menționate. Teoria regionalismului comparativ a stat la baza construirii aparatului metodologic. Această teorie a fost dezvoltată în ultimele trei decenii de Institutul de Studii Globale al Universității din Göteborg, Suedia. Conceptul de regionalism cognitiv reprezintă o contribuție originală care vine și extinde conceptul de regionalism dezvoltat de această teorie.

Cuvinte cheie: cultură politică, Europa Centrală, istorie politică, regionalism cognitiv, regionalism comparativ, regionalism procesual, relații internaționale, V4

I. Theoretical Approaches to the Concept of (Processual) Regionness in the Wider Context of Comparative Regionalism

In the last 25-30 years, Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum have advanced the concept of “regionness” in the context of the theory of comparative regionalism. This concept helps us understand how and why the integration efforts of small and medium-sized states make sense.

The marginalization of small and medium-sized states in international relations is one of the side-effects of today’s global acceleration. In the context of a world increasingly more interconnected, the need for a state to assert itself in international relations becomes, therefore, the logical step in promoting its interests in politics. However, this is often hampered by shortsighted policies. Nevertheless, the source for the macro-regions’ functionality is dependent—both internally and externally—on their internal ability to act in a given geopolitical situation as well as on their historical development. Although regionalization tends to be the result of a political vision, it does not depend solely on political decision-making. It is often difficult to separate between what are the utilitarian short-term interests of states fast-tracked by politicians and what is the long-term potential. The first section of this paper provides answers to this question by looking at how stable regional organizations are formed.

Theories are systems of statements that advance scientific knowledge after being satisfactorily vetted. Abstraction is a notion that has the ability to design numeric-like content so that it can be accurately compared. Combinations of notions based on specific contents allow for better descriptions of phenomena or processes that we investigate. Of course, we also have to take into account the fact that the determinacy of the terms is subjective given the focus placed on the researchers as well as on the state of research in

the field at a particular time. The content of concepts is susceptible to change especially when their development appears gradually, over time. It is a never-ending process. Some notions are *sui generis* if we consider, for example, situations where the researcher needs to describe new phenomena or processes. This especially applies when describing social phenomena as social science notions often have a high degree of variability and a potentially significant subjective factor.

The aforementioned observations concern to a large extent the concept of regionness. The concept itself has narrower scope; it is a comprehensive part of the theory. For international relations, it is a highly important component in the theory of regionalisms due to the fact that competition between different international relations actors is still accelerating. The impact of states has reduced significantly as a result of the shift from the industrial society to the information society and this uneven transition caused internal instability for many states and regions alike. In turn, this has led to the loss of old certainties, on one hand, and the endless easy misuse of technical capabilities on the other. The polarization of international relations is created not only within relations between states (traditional international system element), but also between the other actors (elements) of international relations: multinational corporations, international organizations and regional groups¹.

The current system of international relations is vulnerable to conflicts and violence on a scale we have not experienced for a long time. This is due to its entropic and multipolar character, which renders it highly unstable at various levels. In this situation, the political role of regional organizations can prove to have a stabilizing effect. In turn, such organizations can act as platforms for the protection of national interests of small and medium-sized states². In Europe, the most important organization of this type is without a doubt the European Union.

Regionalism is not limited only to the EU and has manifested itself in various shapes and sizes across all continents where we have seen an ever increasing number of different regional groups taking up various roles. The reason for is rests with the fact that regionalization is one of the few effective tools that empower individual states in foreign relations: paradoxically, the partial loss of national sovereignty in exchange for becoming part of an integrative supranational organization can strengthen the state and its national interests abroad due to the stronger position provided by being part of a collective. Nevertheless, even in an integrative structure like the EU, small and medium states can develop common short-term or long-term platforms like in the case of the Visegrád, Nordic-Baltic, or Mediterranean platforms.

¹ Olga Gubová, “Several Remarks on the Theory of Regionalism and Interregionalism”, in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on European Integration* (2014): 182-192.

² Olga Gubová, “Regionness in Political Regionalization of Visegrad Countries”, in *Proceedings of the Scientific Conference SGEM, Book 2, Volume II* (Albena: 2016), 325-333.

Currently, there are two main effective ways in which states promote their national interest in the international environment.

The first pathway consists in the attachment to big international organizations with either an integrative (EU, NATO) or cooperative (UN, CE) character where the voice of small states promotes equality of member states or enables some mechanism that produces similar effects (see, for example, qualified majority voting (QMV) in the EU)³. This direction has two main shortcomings: usually, the interests of member states are fragmented thus the interests of larger powerful states prevail. In other words, small states in large organizations usually have very little room for maneuver. Additionally, in big organizations, states must contend with certain limitations of their sovereignty.

If the first direction does not lend itself to favorable outcomes for the smaller states, the second way is better tuned to their needs and it revolves around setting up smaller operative groups that lack a fixed institutional structure. The common interests, mutual benefits, and ability for rapid operational agreements guarantee their functionality. Both the macro and micro endeavor presented work simultaneously. The condition for small cooperative groups to be successful lies in the existence of cultural proximities of interest (political cultural, national) which creates an opportunity to have common opinions and, on this basis, to advance common agendas like in the case, for example, of the Visegrad Group (V4)'s foreign policy.

The theory of regionalism occupies an important place in the contemporary theory of international relations ever since macro-regions started to play an increasingly important role in international politics over the last century. They represent a new type of actor and have changed the face of system of international relations.

Given that the theory of regionalism is multidisciplinary in nature, it is not surprise that there are multiple diverse definitions out there. Therefore, it is important to clarify the methodological dimension of the regionalist theoretical approach particularly since even the scientists still continue to often switch arbitrarily between the concepts of regionalism and regionalization. In the international environment, regions are entities of different sizes (micro, meso, and macro) which can have their share of cultural differences. Regionalization, therefore, appears to be the natural process of regional interaction between different actors of the region. On the other hand, regionalism represents the idea, identities, political projects, ideology, and political strategy pursued by the states that find themselves in such a position.

Since the 90s, the theory of contemporary regionalism has been comprehensively developing at the University of Göteborg, in Sweden. Björn Hettne and, later, Fredric Söderbaum introduced within the theory of

³Council of the European Union, “Qualified Majority”, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority/>.

comparative regionalism, the concept of *regionness* which refers to the internal capacity to create regions based on certain levels of regionalization. Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum are authors and co-authors of numerous articles and monographs in this field of research. Their theory is – as far as possible – a comprehensive one, characterized by elements of social constructivism and focused primarily on the role played by regionalization in international relations. Fredrik Söderbaum’s latest book *Rethinking Regionalism*⁴ represents the culmination of a quarter century of scientific collaboration with Björn Hettne. The book is an outstanding methodological tool and covers various aspects of the contemporary theory of regionalism.

The concept of regionness developed initially by Björn Hettne and later on, expanded upon in cooperation with Fredrik Söderbaum, can help us understand the perspective of regional development. Regionness tries to answer the question of whether regionalization actors (at various levels) have sufficient internal capacity to generate regions.

First, it must be noted that the concept of regionness itself has both a cognitive and processual dimension. The processual aspect refers to the gradual levels of regionalization and their differences, having been comprehensively described in the articles published by Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum.

As mentioned above, the original concept of regionness appeared in the early 90s, and it was mentioned for the first time in Björn Hettne’s article on neo-mercantilism as a new regionalism. In his book, *Rethinking Regionalism*, Söderbaum writes that “the concept of regionness was coined by Björn Hettne in the 1990s”⁵. In the second section of the article “Neo-Mercantilism as the Pursuit of “Regionness”⁶, regionness is introduced by establishing five levels of regional complexity:

- region as a geographical and ecological unit;
- region as social system;
- region as organized cooperation;
- region as regional civil society;
- and region as acting political subject.

Each level is carefully described and the differences between them are carefully outlined⁷.

Five years later, in an article from 1998, “The New Regionalism Approach”, Hettne and Söderbaum propose slightly different levels of regionness: instead of five there are, now, three levels. The process of regionalization is described in terms of increasing levels of “regionness”, i.e.

⁴ Fredrik Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ In the title of this article, the notion “regionness” was still enclosed in quotation marks.

⁷ Björn Hettne, “Neo-Mercantilism: The Pursuit of Regionness”, *Cooperation and Conflict* 28, no. 3 (1993): 21-32.

“the process whereby a geographical region is transformed from a passive object to an active subject, capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emerging region”⁸. The concept of regionness, which is a central component of the new regionalist approach, is intended to help one understand the logic behind the contemporary processes of regionalization, being designed as a framework for comparing emerging regions. The concept of regionness represents for region, what “stateness” and “nationness” represent for state and nation, respectively, referring in this case to a capability to create regions.

Hettne and Söderbaum argue that:

“When different processes of regionalization in various fields converge within the same area, the distinctiveness of the region in question — i.e. the level of regionness — increases. Regionness means that a region can be a region ‘more or less’ and the level of regionness can both increase and decrease. [...] Since a ‘region’ is a social construct, constantly created and recreated in the process of global transformation, it can only be identified post factum. It is therefore only potential in the first stage. The actual regionalization process takes place in stage two, whereas stage three shows the outcome in terms of actually existing regional formations, such as the EU”⁹.

In this article, the authors identified “three generalized levels or stages of regionness” which can help pin down conceptually “a particular region in terms of regional coherence”¹⁰. The first level of regionness is the “pre-regional stage” or zone, “the proto-region”, characterized as “the potential region [which] constitutes a geographical and social unit, with natural physical barriers and marked by ecological characteristics” (the Indian subcontinent, Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains, the Balkans). It completely lacks in cooperation, being seen, rather as a potential region, with a “low level of regionness”¹¹.

The second level of regionness refers to moment when the processes of regionalization start to be initiated in different fields – cultural, economic, political or military¹². Relations take the form of formal “intergovernmental regional cooperation / state promoted regional integration”¹³. In this case, what Hettne and Söderbaum identify as “formal regions” differ from “real regions”: which are more spontaneous forms of “market- and society-based regionalization, regional convergences and regional identity”¹⁴.

⁸ Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, “The New Regionalism Approach”, *Politeia* 17, no. 3 (1998): 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11. EU remains so far the only one displaying this high level of regionness.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

The third level of regionness is when the region is acting externally as a subject “with a distinct identity, institutionalised actor capability”¹⁵. With a spontaneously developed “regional civil society”, a type of “security community” emerges in which internal conflicts are absent¹⁶. At this level, the authors point out that “decision-making [is] not centralized but layered and decentralized to the local, micro-regional, national and supranational levels”¹⁷.

This evolution is all the more impressive since regions are not natural, but social constructions. In the article, Hettne and Söderbaum underlined that “increased interdependence may very well be the source of conflict”:

“As the European experience shows, integration and disintegration go hand in hand. The result may very well be reduced levels of regionness, and a situation dominated by conflict rather than cooperation and where other dynamics dominate, such as globalisation, nation-building and fragmentation”¹⁸.

What we have to understand when dealing with a concept such as that of “regionness”, is that for all intents and purposes, “all regions are “imagined”, subjectively defined and cognitive constructions”¹⁹.

Another frequently cited article by Hettne and Söderbaum, called “Theorizing the Rise of Regionness”²⁰, was published in 2000. In it, the authors readdress the concept of regionness²¹. They stress that:

“There are no ‘natural’ or ‘given’ regions, but these are created and recreated in the process of global transformation. Regionness can be understood in analogy with concepts such as ‘stateness’ and ‘nationness’. The regionalization process can be intentional or non-intentional and may proceed unevenly along the various dimensions of the ‘new regionalism’ (i.e. economics, politics, culture, security and so on)”²².

Once again, the authors advanced “five generalized levels of regionness” which they defined as “a particular region in terms of regional coherence and community”²³. The five levels mapped out were:

- regional space;

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. This is basically the idea of the EU as outlined in the Maastricht Treaty.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Another version of this article will be published in chapter form in Samuel Breslin, Charles Hughes, and Nora Rosamond, ed., *New Regionalisms in the Global Political Economy: Theories and Cases* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 33-47.

²¹ See more in Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, “Theorizing the Rise of Regionness”, *New Political Economy* 5, no. 3 (2000): 457-472.

²² Ibid., 461-462.

²³ Ibid., 462.

- regional complex;
- regional society;
- regional community;
- region-state.

In a footnote, Hettne and Söderbaum specify that due to the effort to move towards what they refer to as “a more coherent theoretical construct”, the version of regionness analyzed in this article differs slightly compared with the previous iterations advanced by them²⁴. In this article, the authors return to the five levels of regionness proposed originally by Björn Hettne in 1993.

In Björn Hettne’s article from 2005, “Beyond the ‘New’ Regionalism”²⁵, we again encounter the aforementioned five levels of regionness. However, by this point, while the core ideas remained almost the same, we see that the concept of regionness has become more comprehensive, its formulation more clear. According to Hettne:

“States and intergovernmental organizations are often taken as crucial actors and objects of analysis in the process of regionalization” [...] [...] regions must be at the same time understood as endogenous processes, emerging from within the geographical area in question. They are not simply geographical or administrative objects, but subjects in the making (or un-making); their boundaries are shifting, and so are their capacities as actors, which can be referred to as their level of regionness”²⁶.

Returning to the five levels theorized before, the author adds that:

“Regionness defines the position of a particular region in terms of regional cohesion, which can be seen as a long-term historical process, changing over time from coercion, the building of empires and nations, to voluntary cooperation. In general terms one can speak of five levels of regionness: a regional space, a translocal social system, an international society, a regional community and a regionally institutionalised polity”²⁷.

When defining the first level, regional space needs to be understood as:

“a geographic area, more or less delimited by natural physical barriers. In social terms human inhabitants organize the region, at first in relatively isolated communities, but more and more creating some kind of trans-local relationship”²⁸.

²⁴ Ibid., 472.

²⁵ Björn Hettne, “Beyond the ‘New’ Regionalism”, *New Political Economy* 10, no. 4 (December 2005): 543-571.

²⁶ Ibid., 554, 548.

²⁷ Ibid., 548.

²⁸ Ibid., 548.

In terms of the second level, Hettne explains that:

“The region as a social system implies ever widening trans-local relations, in which the constituent units are dependent on each other, as well as on the overall stability of the system. The region as international society is characterized by norms and rules, which increase the level of predictability in the system”²⁹.

Thirdly, regionness framed in terms of regional community presupposes: “an enduring organizational framework [that] facilitates and promotes social communication and convergence of values and behavior throughout the region”. Meanwhile, at the fourth level, “[the] region as international society is characterised by norms and rules which increase the level of predictability in the system”³⁰. Last but not least, at the level of institutionalized polity, the region “has a more fixed structure of decision-making and a stronger actor capability”³¹.

In light of this, Hettne points out that:

“The five levels must not be interpreted in a deterministic fashion as a necessary sequence. Since regionalism is a political project, created by human actors, it may, just like a nation-state project, fail. In this perspective, the decline could mean decreasing regionness; ultimately a dissolution of the region itself”³².

Instead of determinism or necessity, the author considers that it is more relevant to think in terms of “endogenous (levels of regionness) and exogenous (the challenges of globalization) factors”³³.

In 2013, a four-volume set titled *Regionalism* was published. Edited by Fredrik Söderbaum and Philippe de Lombaerde, it is an extremely helpful resource for researchers in the field, since it contains a multiperspectivist collection of essential articles by representative authors dealing with the issue of regionalism from the end of World War II³⁴ to 2010³⁵. Björn Hettne’s article on

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. On the topic of “decreasing regionness” or region dissolution, Hettne draws attention to the idea that “Europe’s contemporary crisis can be compared to that of a ‘failed state’, based on too fragmented a *demos* or several *demoi*, which have no feeling of belonging to the same polity” (Ibid., 568).

³³ Ibid., 548.

³⁴ For example, Karl Polanyi, “Universal Capitalism or Regional Planning?”, *The London Quarterly of World Affairs* 10, no. 3 (1945): 86-91.

³⁵ Among the authors that have written on this topic, we can mention Björn Hettne, Fredrik Söderbaum, Barry Buzan, Ernst B. Haas, Karl W. Deutsch, Helge Hveem, Paul Krugman, Andrew Moravcsik, Jagdish Bhagwati, Peter Katzenstein, Richard E. Baldwin, or Emanuel Adler, etc.

the topic of regionness (“Beyond the ‘New’ Regionalism”) that we have analyzed above, was also published in this book³⁶.

Next up, Fredrik Söderbaum’s fundamental work from 2016, *Rethinking Regionalism*, represents a distillation of his research in the field of regionalism, spanning more than twenty years. The title of Chapter 10 is called “Regionness: The Solidification of Regions”³⁷. In summarizing the content of this chapter, Söderbaum proposes a ““regionness” framework as a comparative heuristic tool for understanding the construction and solidification of regions in term of regional coherence and community”³⁸. According to him, regionness “ranges from regional social space, regional social complex, regional society and regional community to regional institutionalized polity”³⁹.

Additionally, the concept of regionness is understood as “the capacity to act in the outside world” which manifests itself through “regional actorness”⁴⁰. The concept of “regional actorness”, argues Söderbaum, “helps us understand a region’s ability to influence the external world and its role in global transformation”⁴¹. In another book, *The Political Economy of Regionalism. The Case of Southern Africa*, Söderbaum explains how the framework of regionness rejects “pre-given or pre-scientific regional delimitations”⁴². Instead, the framework opts to concentrate on how different types of “actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of regionness”⁴³. Additionally, the author argues that:

“Since regions are social constructions, there are no ‘natural’, ‘organic’ or ‘given’ regions, and no given regionalist interests either, but the interests and identities are shaped by a variety of state and non-state actors in the process of interaction and intersubjective understanding”⁴⁴.

In a previous article, I had already remarked upon Hettne and Söderbaum’s thesis on regionness, framing in terms of an analogy to concepts referring to “subjective phenomena, created and recreated through discourse, identity and cognitive resources”⁴⁵. For example, “[a] consolidated region

³⁶ Hettne, “Beyond the ‘New’ Regionalism”, 543-570.

³⁷ Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 161-173.

³⁸ Fredrik Söderbaum, “Chapter 10 – Regionness: The Solidification of Regions” (abstract), in *Ibid.*, <https://www.macmillanexplorers.com/regionness-the-solidification-of-regions/15485404>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Fredrik Söderbaum, *The Political Economy of Regionalism. The Case of Southern Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 47.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁵ Olga Gubová, “Theoretical Approach to the Concept of Regionness (The Reflection of Göteborg’s School)”, in *4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts SGEM 2017 Conference Proceedings* (Bulgaria: 2017), 1046, <https://www.sgemsocial.org/inde>

exhibits similarity to a nation, in that a region too is an ‘imagined community’ with [a] territorial exten[sion]⁴⁶. In Söderbaum’s view, a core idea of the regionness framework is that regions are “made and unmade” by both state actors and “a wide range of non-state, transnational actors, [such as] private businesses and firms, transnational corporations (TNCs), NGOs, social movements and other types of social networks”⁴⁷. Söderbaum stresses that: “Sometimes economic, social and cultural networks can be more active at the regional level than states-led and policy-driven processes”⁴⁸.

The five levels identified, reflect what Hettne considers to be “a certain evolutionary logic”, though he underlines that “the idea is not to suggest a stage theory, but to provide a framework for comparative analysis”⁴⁹. As we have seen, in Söderbaum’s theory, the concept of regionness is interconnected with the concept of regional actorness – an aspect that has also been examined by Björn Hettne. According to Söderbaum, when regional actorness is analyzed in relation to the notion of regionness, it reflects: “a region’s ability to influence the external world and its role in global transformation”⁵⁰. He continues by noting that in the current system, “[i]t has become clear that external action depends on internal cohesiveness and identity (i.e. regionness), meaning that if there is a consolidated internal actor identity, some sort of external actorness may follow”⁵¹.

This section sought to explain why the integration efforts of small (or medium) states make sense. It has also mapped the genesis and evolution of the concept of regionness within the theory of comparative regionalism during the last 25-30 years by examining the fruitful collaborative effort of Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum. The concept of regionness is essential in understanding the perspective of regions in the current system of multipolar international relations.

II. The Visegrád Group and Its Regionalization Underpinnings

The first section of this article appraised the originality and complexity of comparative regionalism by focusing on the concept of regionness. Björn

x.php/elibrary?view=publication&task=show&id=3405.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 167. See also Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁹ Björn Hettne, “The Double Movement: global market versus regionalism”, in *The New Realism. Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order*, ed. Robert W. Cox (Tokyo, New York, Paris: United Nations University Press, 1997), 227.

⁵⁰ Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 171.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Hettne and, later, Fredric Söderbaum developed within the theory of comparative regionalism, the concept of regionness. Regionness refers to the internal capacity to create regions as well as to the levels of regionalization⁵². Regionalization is, first, the result of the will of politicians and of other actors, and regionness refers to the processual dimension. Developed primarily by Björn Hettne, and later in cooperation with Fredrik Söderbaum, the concept of regionness helps us understand the levels of regional development. The theory of regionness does not focus on the idea of the regions' internal capabilities to cooperate. The concept of regionness contains both cognitive and processual elements. The processual content refers to the gradual levels of regionalization and their differences. The articles of Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum study the concept of regionness from this perspective⁵³.

The second chapter focuses mainly on the process of political regionalization in the V4 states and the concept of cognitive regionness. The role of the region in global transformation reflects regional actorness – the region's visibility in international relations. According to Hettne, Söderbaum, and Stålgren, the external action undertaken by a region depends on its internal cohesiveness and identity (i.e. regionness). In other words, if a consolidated internal actor identity exists, then some sort of external actorness may follow⁵⁴.

However, the most important question is whether the process of regionalization – at various levels – has the necessary capacity to develop? What happens if the politicians are not strong enough? Can we predict whether states have the internal cohesion needed for long-term cooperation irrespective of the will of politicians?⁵⁵ The question is whether states have enough internal common capacity to generate long-term regionalization or what is known as having “high cognitive regionness”.

The concept of cognitive regionness⁵⁶ originated from the need to create an instrument which could be used to predict whether states (as part of regions) can maintain relations based on long-term cooperation. At first glance, neighboring states may appear very similar, but in-depth analysis of their history and culture, may reveal substantial differences. The cognitive content of regionness represents an original theoretical approach that is the product of a particular type of comparative analysis. These analyses study the different

⁵² Gubová, “Theoretical Approach to the Concept of Regionness”, 1041.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Björn Hettne, Fredrik Söderbaum, and Patrik Stålgren, “The EU as a Global Actor in the South”, *SIEPS (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies)* 8 (2008): 15, <https://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2008/the-eu-as-a-global-actor-in-the-south-20088/>.

⁵⁵ Olga Gubová, “Koncepte procesuální regionnosti v teorii komparativního regionalismu”, in *Společnost a poznání* (Ostrava: VŠB, 2017).

⁵⁶ Gubová, “Theoretical Approach to the Concept of Regionness”, 1041-1048. See also: Gubová, “Regionness in Political Regionalization of Visegrad Countries“, 325-333.

preconditions that enable regionalization on the basis of the states' political culture.

According to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, political culture has objective (i.e. forms of power organization, political system, relations of political institutions, party systems, ideologies, and programs) and subjective components (feelings, emotions, values, norms, knowledge, behavior, stereotypes, imbalances in the relationship between political institutions and political personalities, etc.)⁵⁷. These two types of components are interconnected and determine the character of the political culture in a country.

Where our case-study is concerned, it is necessary to establish from the beginning, the nature of the regionalization process that has taken place between the V4 countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland) during a period when the international system was undergoing changes. After the Visegrád Group was established, its initial mission and purpose was mainly a pragmatic one: it represented an attempt on the part of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland to separate from the rest of the group of post-communist states. Back then, these states wanted to return to where they thought they naturally and historically belonged: a Europe of liberal democracies. At its very beginning, the formation of the Visegrád Group was motivated by the following factors:

- need to overcome the historical animosities between Central European countries;
- need to eliminate the remnants of the communist bloc;
- need to achieve set goals by participating to joint efforts; this way, they would become more likely to be achieved (namely, successful democratic transformation and accession to the European integration process);
- proximity of ideas of the then ruling political elites⁵⁸.

The Visegrád Group (V4) was established during the summit meetings which took place in the Hungarian town of Visegrád, on February 15th, 1991. Since then, its membership has remained the same though Czechoslovakia split into two independent states on January 1st, 1993. With an area of 533,615 km², the Visegrád Group is more than one-third larger than Germany though not as populated (83,783,942 versus 63,845,789). The official language is English. According to the international relations theory classification of international organizations, the Visegrád Group can be classified as a governmental (its members are states), regional (operates in Central Europe, Balkans), universal (does not have a niche agenda), open (does not have strong entry criteria), and

⁵⁷ Gabriel A. Almond, "The Intellectual History of the Civic Culture Concept", in *The Civic Culture Revisited*, ed. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1980), 1-37.

^{58***}, "History of the Visegrád Group", *Visegrád Group*, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412>.

cooperative / consensual (V4 has no institutions which have their own supranational competences) organization. Two criteria differentiate it from the EU: the latter is closed (has strong entry criteria) and integrative (has supranational institutions, qualified majority vote – QMV, etc.). While this article is not focused on providing an in-depth history of the Visegrád Group, it should be noted that after these states' shared initial democratic enthusiasm, they were integrated into the Euro-Atlantic structures together. The path to security had been opened by the NATO accession in 1999 (with Slovakia acceding in 2004) while the 2004 EU enlargement wave signaled that the countries could more easily achieve their prosperity goals. Throughout its history, the Visegrád Group continued to develop, both in positive and in negative terms. In this sense, we can identify several distinct periods:

- Active and optimistic beginning (1991-1993);
- Slowdown in activity (1994-1998);
- Triumphant entry to the Euro-Atlantic structures (1999 -2004);
- Good pupils of the EU (2005-2009);
- Learning of the possibilities, gaining more confidence, growing activity inside and outside EU (2010-2015);
- Limits of democracy (Hungary, Poland) and rebellion and opportunism phase (from 2016 to the present).

After joining the EU, these states gradually moved from the role of a model pupils to the role of critics united under the Visegrád Group brand, which gradually became more and more toxic. Despite the criticism that some of its members attracted over time, the Group managed to push forward its agenda, for example, on the issue of the migration quotas, the V4 states were successful, and, today, the quotas are outdated⁵⁹.

International organizations theory provides various types of classifications that help us evaluate regional groups according to: the type of membership, geographic scope, institutional agenda, membership criteria, and the level of decision-making. As mentioned earlier, this kind of open regionalization differs substantially from large integration groupings (i.e. EU). However, being an international organization, V4 shares some characteristics with the EU as both are: governmental (their members are states), regional (they operate especially in Europe) and universal (do not have a strongly specialized agenda).

Where V4 is concerned, we are witnessing a form of inner regionalization (a group within a group). Among the advantages of inner regionalization, we can mention that since the Visegrád Group is part of the European Union, it has no strong need to address the economic agenda, which

⁵⁹ Olga Gubová, “Theory of Regionalism and Potential of V4 Countries for Common Platform in Foreign Policy”, *SGEM Scientific Conference Proceedings, Book 2, Volume I* (Vienna: 2016), 737-745.

is implemented through the EU, and no strong need to adopt common laws, because most laws and guidelines are issued by the EU. The decision-making process tends to be fast while the negotiation process can be rigid because it is supposed to defend the shared interests of the bloc. Having shared interests helps enhance the legitimacy of the claims and makes the bloc's interests more visible. As a result, in the international environment, external negotiations conducted by the regional group may be easier for small and medium states. However, V4 is not an institutionalized agreement but a declaration of intention; it has neither a fixed structure, nor common institutions. Furthermore, the leaders play a crucial role. Most of the commitments are not legally binding. Moreover, in situations of inner regionalization, the activities of the internal group should not be contrary to the activities of external regional group. In other words, it should not become “a center of resistance” that could potentially put it in conflict with larger group.

Regionness itself has limits because the states are different and their differences can become barriers that prevent close cooperation. The analysis of the Visegrád states starts with a system analysis of current international initiatives with regard to regionalization and interregionalization. In accounting for the changed role of states, a particular attention must be paid to the history, areas of cooperation, and objectives of the Visegrád Group, as well as to the comparison between the V4 and other regional groups within the European Union – Benelux, the Mediterranean group, the Scandinavian group, the Athens's Declaration. Where the V4 is concerned, it represents a special form of internal regionalization (regionalization within regionalization, inner-regionalization) because most of its activities take place within the EU and it has a rather limited external activity. The Visegrád Group is not the first grouping of its kind. Before the European Communities had even been formed, there had been the Benelux Union (1944); later on, the Nordic-Baltic initiative NB 8 (1992) that focused on Russia; or the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) (1995, 2008) with its focus on Africa and the Middle East. The Visegrád Group is quite similar to the Nordic-Baltic 8, but unlike the former, NB8 also comprises of non-EU countries (Iceland, Norway) and countries without a communist past (Denmark, Sweden and Finland). By comparison, V4 was created exclusively from former communist states. A common feature of both V4 and NB8 is their relationship with the EU given that most member states of these groups are also simultaneously Member States of the EU and both regional groups operate mostly inside the European Union.

Political regionalization and interregional political dialogue – interregionalism – present themselves as another possible political vision and strategy for international relations. Interregionalism, a new phenomenon in international relations, can be one of the answers to globalization where a supranational globalized economy overrides state politics and changes the center

of gravity of international politics⁶⁰. Common regional economy can facilitate the harmonization of foreign policy. Meanwhile, regional integrations projects – with the ability to coordinate the foreign policies of their member states – can become influential players in international relations that can successfully advocate the position of small states.

Today's principal contradiction⁶¹ within the EU is represented by the imbalance between the levels of economic integration and political integration, which is the result of the Member States' unwillingness to compromise. That is why the political regionalization of the EU has been overshadowed and why, by extension, a fragmented foreign policy will continue to undercut the global standing of the EU. The imbalance mentioned above is reflected in EU's fragmented foreign policy which, time and time again, has failed to respond to the conflicts near its borders and has not been able to adequately address the challenges posed by hybrid warfare either. This state of affairs is all the more concerning given that it is representative of situations when political developments inside and outside the EU have made possible for states to compromise on fundamental matters, such as the respect for democracy and human rights. Consequently, the attitude of the EU with regard to a common foreign policy as well as to the foreign policy of medium and small states should be amended so as to take into account these developments. V4 countries have with the exception, to a certain degree, of Czech Republic, turbulent and fragile democracies that have documented authoritarian inclinations and high social needs. When a country lacks a deep democratic tradition, the quality of its democracy can be negatively impacted by a difficult social situation and increased international tensions, which, in turn, can lead to human rights abuses and a reduction in democratic freedoms⁶². Democratic requirements may need to be strengthened if the EU's political integration continues to underperform where these issues are concerned.

In recent years, V4 has become increasingly visible in the field of coordinated foreign policy and defence. Several factors have made this possible: V4 states share common interests; the processes of economic and politic integration in the EU are unbalanced; EU has changed its position in international relations.

In the following section we will compare the objective components of the V4 political culture. High regionness is a prerequisite for long-term cooperation and political regionalization, and it is also a tool for advancing the position of the V4 states outside EU's borders.

⁶⁰ Gubová, "Several Remarks on the Theory of Regionalism and Interregionalism", 182-192.

⁶¹ Olga Gubová, "Current Contradictions of European Union and Response within Visegrad Countries", in *SGEM Conference Proceedings, Book 2, Volume II* (Albena: 2016), 24-30.

⁶² Olga Gubová, "Limits of Liberal Democracy in V4 Countries in Context of EU Imbalance between Economic and Politic Integration", in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on European Integration* (Ostrava: 2016), 282-290.

III. The Process of Political Regionalization V4 and the Concept of Cognitive Regionness

In the previous sections, we advanced the concept of cognitive regionness and described the process of political regionalization of the Visegrád countries. The third section examines the objective components of the political culture – especially the political history, the political systems, the prevailing social values, the paradigms and ideologies – as a source of national interests. High cognitive regionness is the result of similar historical developments and of similar political cultures⁶³. Where long-term regionalization is concerned, several aspects need to be considered: proximity; knowledge of the environment due to the frequency of contacts; cultural affinity; institutional environments' degree of similarity. Other determinants that can be taken into consideration are: the comparative benefits of natural conditions, and the different levels of technological advancement or specialization. The current high cognitive regionness of the Visegrád group is the result of a shared recent history. At present, it is also reflective of the limits of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy as a long-term political project is not as widely accepted in Central European countries as one might come to expect given their shared communist past⁶⁴. Furthermore, as noted in a previous article, the current imbalance between EU's processes of “economic and political integration not only weakens Europe's position in international relations, but also affects the enforcement of democracy in the V4 countries”⁶⁵.

Central European states have a discontinuous history of statehood and during different periods, they were part of various empires (Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman). Their cultures have also been interspersed with other national influences, mainly German and Jewish. In states which have had a discontinuous history of statehood, the role of political institutions is usually undervalued due to their perceived inability to defend the statehood and national values. That said, the institutionalization of politics is one of the essential guarantees of democracy. A high institutionalization is a prerequisite for a high political

⁶³ Gabriel A. Almond, “The Intellectual History of the Civic Culture Concept”.

⁶⁴ Faared Zakaria's concept of illiberal democracy (1997) misquoted by Viktor Órbán. Viktor Órbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp”, *Magyarország Kormánya*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp> 22.5.2019; Viktor Órbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's presentation at the 26th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp”, *Magyarország Kormánya*, July 2015, <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-presentation-at-the-26th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp> 22.5.2019.

⁶⁵ Gubová, “Limits of Liberal Democracy”.

culture. In contrast, a low institutionalization is the main feature of non-democratic regimes and is reflective of a weak political culture. When using the high-low rating to denote the level of a political culture, not only the state of the political institutions, but the quality of the politician-citizen relationship should also be considered. After all, this constitutes the core of the political culture⁶⁶. A very important element that denotes the presence of a high political culture is the respect showed by politicians and citizens to the political institutions. Conversely, a low political culture is denoted by a low trust in the political institutions, which are treated with disrespect and contempt.

Political culture is based on long-term value orientation⁶⁷ rather than just on people's reactions to specific policy measures and problems. Trust in institutions (rational perception of politics) is often directly proportional with the trust in leaders, political personalities, and politics (emotional perception of politics). The low credibility of institutions often leads people to put their faith in leaders. The predominance of emotions in individual politics is also indicative of low levels of political culture. Consequently, a country where people have a low confidence in political institutions and high faith in leaders usually tends to veer into authoritarianism, or even dictatorship.

The complicated history of Central Europe can also be a cause for the different national evaluations of nationalism, religion, leadership that have taken root in these countries; it might also explain their predisposition toward authoritarianism. After all, the history of Visegrád countries in the second half of the 20th century was closely linked to that of the USSR, given that they ended up under the Soviet sphere of influence as a result of the way post-war Europe was divided between winners. However, prior to this shared history, the previous political orientation had been not so uniform.

Czech Republic has a modern history that has ties to the Habsburgs, Germany and Russia (USSR). The country has a democratic tradition as well as an industrial tradition – unlike other V4 countries, and also some anti-Catholic traditions. These are probably the reasons behind the lackluster political nationalism and clericalism – going back to Masaryk, its leadership tradition has had a rather ethical content. Its current politics are partially populist with prevailing pro-European orientation albeit critical at times.

Slovakia's modern history is closely connected with Hungary and Czech Republic given their history of shared statehood as Czechoslovakia. Slovaks still

⁶⁶ Olga Gubová, “The Share of Political Institutions and Social Values on Creation of Political Culture”, in *Proceedings from SGEM 2014 International Conference on Social Sciences and Art* (Albena: 2014), 467-475. For more, see also: Olga Gubová, “V4 Countries – Comparative Analysis of Political Culture”, in *Proceedings of SGEM International Conference on Social Sciences and Art* (Albena: 2015), 443 – 449.

⁶⁷ William Mishler and Richard Rose, “What Are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post-communist Societies”, *Comparative Political Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 30-62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414001034001002>.

search for a way to distinguish themselves from the historically more dominant Hungary and Czech Republic⁶⁸. Initially, this path led it from nationalism to an attempt at clericalism with strong leadership tendencies. In Slovakia, there are great urban-rural disparities that reflect a rather agricultural tradition. What this means is that the prevailing political approach frequently reflects the mood of the rural past. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that Slovakia is a “winner” among the post-communist states of Central Europe: obtained a new statehood; adopted the euro currency; and managed to sustain a growing economy that improved social conditions.

Hungary’s modern history is linked both to the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires and later to USSR. After World War I, Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and because of this, people continue to be nostalgic after “Great” Hungary. This explains why nationalism still exerts a strong influence on politics. Hungarian public opinion tends to lean towards authoritarianism, a fact which is reflected in a strong “cult” of leadership⁶⁹. When the FIDESZ party won and Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister presiding over a constitutional majority in 2010, a process of fundamental political changes started⁷⁰. First, the staff of the state-controlled media was replaced. Afterwards, the role of the Constitutional Court was modified and the number of parliamentary seats was reduced. Other measures that followed concerned: the reform of the electoral system; the revision of the Central Bank charter; and the limitations imposed on non-governmental organizations. The ruling party also became the deciding subject in the economy. The space for opposition was reduced by imposing limits on the financial support they would receive from the government. Distrust and self-censorship are widespread in society to this day.

Poland has a modern history that is linked with Russia (later USSR) and Germany. It had less to do with the Habsburgs and has never been only an organic part of Central Europe. Polish Catholicism has had a great influence on politics, on the formation of social values and public opinion. While Poland is similar in many ways to its counterparts, we can add that the intellectual minority has played an important role in the development of politics. Poland has its own geopolitical ambitions. Similar to Hungary, the Polish public opinion

⁶⁸ Slovakia and Czech Republic represent a unique historical example when, after the division, the successor states have had excellent relations as compared, for example, with the complicated relations between the states of former Yugoslavia. The heritage of the interwar Czechoslovak democracy has also had a positive impact on the relations between Czechs and Slovaks.

⁶⁹ Pál Lendvai, *Between democracy and authoritarianism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 7.

⁷⁰ See more in: János Kórnai, *Látélet: Tanulmányok a Magyar állapotokról*, 2017, <http://www.kornai-janos.hu/Kornai2017-Latelet.html> 22.5.2019. See also: János Kórnai, *U-Kanyar Magyarországon*, 2015, http://www.kornai-janos.hu/Kornai_Hungary's%20U-Turn%20-%20full.pdf.

seemingly tolerates the abuses of power, the violation of democratic rules⁷¹, and the authoritarian style of leadership. Another element that Poland has in common with Hungary is that a pro-European liberal party has turned into conservative nationalist party (MSZP in Hungary and *Platforma Obywatelska* in Poland). These parties focus on domestic policy rather than on foreign or European policy and in doing so, they have sought to make changes that go against “the spirit and the letter” of liberal democracy.

A better understanding of the similarities shared by various political cultures could further strengthen the regionalization efforts in Central Europe given that their differences could be a source of misunderstanding and an obstacle on the path of regionalization and interregionalization. Some common tensions and animosities have been resolved, but others may emerge at any time. For example, at present, the imbalances between the social values and the political institutions in the V4 countries represent an issue that should be closely monitored.

IV. Conclusion

Regarding our first line of inquiry, we have seen that the integration efforts of medium and small states are a net positive. Globalization marginalized the role of states, but while economics is global, politics is local, borders notwithstanding. In light of this, given that states lose control over their economic and social processes, regionalization followed by interregionalization should be an effective tool toward mitigating this trend. Paradoxically, the partial loss of national sovereignty inside an integrative supranational organization can strengthen the state and its national interests in this changed international environment. The answer to the second research question – whether cooperation of V4 countries will be long-term or whether it is rather a temporary form of “utilitarian” cooperation – is more complicated.

The political developments in the V4 countries evoke many questions with regard to the quality of the political culture and democracy. While the four countries have many things in common, at the same time, there are also plenty of differences when it comes to their social and political life. For the last two decades, their post-communist past was the strongest connecting link between the Visegrád countries. Other common aspects that also marked the last two decades were: a fragmented political structure; low levels of trust in political institutions; an inclination towards populism and authoritarianism. Due to the asymmetry between large and small as well as old and new Member States, a certain distrust persists with regard to the EU. Current Hungarian nationalism,

⁷¹ Jacek Kucharczyk and Jaroslav Zbieranek, *Democracy in Poland 1989-2009. (Challenges for the future)* (Warsaw: Fundacja Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2010).

Polish Catholic conservatism, Slovak efforts to separate from older Hungarian and newer Czech nepotist influences, and the Czech state's historical roots in the industrial tradition and practices of democratic egalitarianism are all roots of cognitive regionness. The latent tendencies in these countries' political culture – nationalism, clericalism, a preference for strong leadership and authoritarianism – challenge the limits of liberal democracy and can dampen the perspectives for even closer forms of cooperation.

Considering that regionalization processes are the result of the will of politicians, a close and fair cooperation will only be possible if the leaders are willing to see beyond their country's self-interests. History teaches us that close cooperation in Central Europe is easier when a common enemy exists given that this leads to increased cohesion. On the other hand, centrifugal tendencies may arise from different developments in international relations (i.e. relation to Russia) and maybe also from the existence of different paradigms, social values or different understandings of political freedom. Such developments could result in significant transformations of the political regimes and should not be overlooked.

This study has mainly provided a comparison of the political culture's objective components. However, further analyses that focus on the subjective components of the V4 political culture (feelings, emotions, values, norms, knowledge, behavioral stereotypes, or imbalances in how political institution and political personalities are perceived, etc.) are needed since both components determine the character of a political culture.

With regard to the concept of cognitive regionness, we need to consider the appropriateness of using this term. In this article, we have seen that it can be used in both the processual and cognitive dimensions of regionness. Having said this, other options also need to be considered: for example, the term “regionness” should be used solely for describing the levels of regionalization (as per Hettne and Söderbaum's theorization) and another term in place of “cognitive regionness” should be identified to explain this phenomenon. Another possibility is to stop using the term of (cognitive) regionness and find a more appropriate term for (processual) regionness – for example: “levels of regionalization”.

Regionness is a central concept in the theory of comparative regionalism and any development of the concept of regionness will benefit the theory as well. To this end, the concept of cognitive regionness should be comprehensively analyzed and provided with the necessary theoretical underpinnings. The current question of what EU citizens have in common, apart from redistributed subsidies, is an example of how the concept of cognitive regionness could make it easier for us to find an answer to this query.

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