The rise of regionalism in Europe

by Nico Groenendijk

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Regionalism in Europe has been on the rise since the mid-1980s. Prior to that European integration was driven by and mainly concerned nation states; regional and local authorities were not really in the picture. This has changed considerably over the last 30 years, for a number of reasons. First, both the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE) have enlarged considerably, especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which had also an impact on the nature of their policies. In the case of the EU, the southern and northern enlargements in the 1980s and 1990s, but especially the eastern enlargements in 2004 and 2007, have led to an expansion of the EU Cohesion Policy in which regions play a crucial part. Secondly, supranational institutions such as the European Commission have deliberately developed close cooperation with regional and local actors, and with their associations, to some extent “by-passing the nation state”. Thirdly, the kind of problems European cooperation addresses, and thereby the nature of European integration, has changed a lot over the last 30 years. With the “completion” of the Single European Market (SEM) and the establishment of the Economic Monetary Union (EMU), the need for European cooperation has spilled-over to a large variety of policy areas in which all kinds of interdependencies between Member States occur. These increased internal interdependencies (within a large and increasingly heterogeneous group of nation states) are complemented by huge changes in the external environment, such as increased economic competition on the global level and numerous armed conflicts at Europe’s doorstep.

In this article, a historical overview is given of the rise of regionalism, first for the CoE, then for the EU, with a focus on the institutional role of regions and on their lobbying activities. This development is then placed within the wider context of the dynamics of the European integration process. The article concludes with a future outlook on the role of regions in Europe.

Regions and the Council of Europe: a historical overview

The Council of Europe, founded in 1949, was the first to incorporate representation by sub-national authorities into its institutional fabric, by means of the establishment of the Conference of Local Authorities of Europe (CEPL) in 1957, which was succeeded by the Conference of Local and Regional Authorities in 1975 (CEPLR). The CEPLR brought together representatives from regional authorities and local authorities and it became a more permanent institution (a Standing Conference) in 1979. In 1985 it adopted the European Charter of Local Self-Government, to which all (currently 47) CoE Member States are parties. The Charter commits the Member States to guarantee political, financial and administrative independence of sub-national authorities, to be laid down in (constitutional) legislation.

In the mid-1980s a more comprehensive role of the CEPLR (i.e. as an autonomous CoE “senate” made up of regional representatives) was debated but did not materialise. Regions reacted to this by establishing—in 1985—the Council of Regions of Europe (CRE) which in 1987 became the Assembly of European Regions (AER). AER successfully fought for a true representation of regions in the CoE; eventually, in 1994, the status of the CEPLR was upgraded to that of the present Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE. This Congress consists of two chambers, one of which is the Chamber of Regions, with 318 members. The Congress adopts recommendations and opinions which are presented to the CoE Committee of Ministers and/or Parliamentary Assembly. In 2010-2011 the Congress reformed its own structures and activities in order to make its work more effective and relevant to European citizens. Its general role in CoE decision-making is consultative. In terms of local democracy and the guarding of the Charter it has an important monitoring role (by means of regular inspections of Member States and observations of elections). Increasingly, and as result of prioritisation of its activities, the Congress is involved in cooperation programmes and projects, and in networking activities.

As regions have a direct channel of influence in the CoE, they are less involved in lobbying the CoE. Lobbying generally is less well-developed in the CoE context, compared to the EU, and is done mostly by NGOs in the field of human rights and democracy.

Regions and the EU: a historical overview

The involvement of regions in the decision-making processes of the EU started later than in the CoE case, but it has evolved rapidly. The Maastricht Treaty, which entered into force in 1993, gave regional authorities from federal Member States the right of representation in the Council of Ministers. It also established the Committee of the Regions (CoR), which started in 1994. As with the upgrading of the CoE CEPLR to a true Congress, AER was crucial to the establishment of this EU assembly of regional and local representatives. The Maastricht Treaty furthermore put forward the subsidiarity principle (which also is part of the CoE European Charter) as a fundamental principle for delineating competencies within the EU. The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in December 2009, has further strengthened the institutional role of regions in the EU, by giving more substance to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. By means of the Early Warning System (EWS) national parliaments have a right to scrutinise EU legislation at an early stage, and can invite regional parliaments to give their opinion on subsidiarity compliance. This involvement of regional parliaments can be supported and coordinated by the CoR.

The CoR itself, although still in an advisory capacity, is now involved in the entire legislative process and must be consulted by the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and European Parliament. The CoR also has been given the right to take action before the Court of Justice in case of infringement of the subsidiarity principle. Its mandate has been changed from four to five years, in order to bring it into line with that of European Parliament. The CoR currently has 350 members (and the same number of alternate members), who are locally and regionally elected politicians.

This institutional development links in with what is often called increased “regional mobilisation” within the EU. As far as influencing EU policies is concerned, regions have two main channels. First, they can contribute to the Member State’s position by providing the regional perspective on EU policy proposals. In some countries, formal (and sometimes rather elaborate) consultation procedures (new EU legislation exist in which regional authorities and their associations participate. Secondly, they can act directly as interest groups and lobby the EU institutions. Often both the indirect (intra-state) and direct (extra-state) channels are used. If there is no formal role for regional authorities direct lobbying is the only option. From the mid-1980s onwards we can witness a huge growth in regional representations in Brussels, run by cities, municipalities, regions and their associations. It is estimated that more than 250 of such liaison offices are now present in Brussels, with an average budget of 350,000. They vary in size, from one staff member to...
over 30, with 6 on average, meaning that Brussels now hosts more than 1,500 sub-national lobbyists. Liaison offices are however just one form of regional representation. Increasingly, regions often in addition to individual representation by means of liaison offices get engaged in more hybrid forms of mobilisation, by establishing joint offices with some regions of the same country, by participating in national associations which include all regions of their country, or by involvement in transnational associations or networks, sometimes beyond EU borders. In 30 years’ time a dense network of regional representation has been built in Brussels.

The logic of regionalism

The increasing institutional involvement of regions in both the CoE and the EU and especially the huge steps over the last 30 years in regional mobilisation at the European level follow from the logic of European integration. As mentioned before, the widening of European integration by means of enlargement has had a direct effect on the contents of CoE and EU policies, especially on EU Cohesion Policy. In further developing these policies, the institutions of the CoE and the EU have found natural allies in regional and local authorities. European integration is favourable to regions, as being part of the EU provides regions with various advantages (being part of the SEM, access to funding, access to networks, possibility to learn from peers and best practices). Regions increasingly do not need nation states to perform successfully. While EU legislation and Cohesion Policy have a huge impact on and provide great opportunities to regional authorities, at the same time the EU increasingly needs regions to successfully implement its policies. The SEM and EMU consist of policies that are shaped by nation states and require implementation mainly on the national state level. The Lisbon Agenda and its successor, the Europe 2020 Strategy, which focuses by intensified cooperation between the EU and the CoE. In that respect, the EU’s macro-regional strategies are important, not only for closer economic or environmental cooperation but also to prevent conflicts and mitigate security risks in the wider European neighbourhood.

Another possible line of reasoning is that in the current context of governance, in which public actors from all levels cooperate with private actors in order to coproduce and implement policies, the subsidiarity principle is difficult to apply, as such coproduction is at odds with strict delineation of tasks between levels of government. In practice proportionality (i.e. in what way should the EU be involved?) is more often an issue than subsidiarity as such. Regional authorities and EU institutions may have common policy objectives, but policy implementation may bring about excessive administrative burdens on the regional and local level. A proportionality check on new EU legislation (for instance as part of the regular Impact Assessments) may be worth considering.

Another challenge that regions face is their role in the external dimension of the EU. With ongoing enlargement the external borders of the EU have become larger and larger, thereby increasing the number of internal border regions in the EU. With EU membership often not being feasible for neighbouring countries, the EU needs to facilitate new cooperation schemes for EU/non-EU cross-border cooperation, if possible by intensified cooperation between the EU and the CoE. In that respect, the EU’s macro-regional strategies are important, not only for closer economic or environmental cooperation but also to prevent conflicts and mitigate security risks in the wider European neighbourhood.

Finally, the flexibility and variety of regions, which is a great advantage, poses a challenge in terms of political representation. Representation, both in intra-state formal procedures, and in the CoR and in the CoE Congress, follows the administrative set-up of Member States. For example, in the case of the Netherlands, such representation is done exclusively from the municipal and provincial level. However, de facto there are regions that are in between these levels, or in between the provincial and nation-state level. In extra-state lobbying this kind of stratification and nestedness of regions can easily be met. For example, the region of Twente (in the eastern part of the Netherlands) has a liaison office in Brussels. The region is part of various European regional networks and is also engaged in cross-border cooperation with regional and local authorities in Northrhine Westfalia, Germany. It is part of the province of Overijssel, which cooperates in a regional Brussels office with another eastern province (Gelderland). This cooperation is embedded in the larger scheme of the House of the Dutch Provinces in Brussels. While such hybridity of cooperation schemes matches the variety in functional scales of regions, this variety should also by some means be reflected in the way political representation is arranged in the EU and in the CoE. AER, which is currently discussing opening up its membership to reflect such variety, can well be used as a laboratory to find new ways of representation of regions in Europe.