

Editorial Note

Supranational regions have become important players in global affairs. They coordinate trade flows, often regulate the inflow and outflow of capital, people and goods, hold international summits and directly (or indirectly) participate in the key forums of global governance. While the European Union (EU) has traditionally been the only significant regional actor in international politics, in the past few years old and new regional groupings have developed capacities, instruments and policies allowing them to have a voice in the running of global affairs. From the African Union (AU), to the various evolutions of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Latin American Southern Common Market (Mercosur), not to mention new entries such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the kaleidoscope of regional 'politics' has become increasingly diverse.

This special issue of *The International Spectator* draws on an international conference that took place at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) in February 2011, thanks to generous funding from the European Union (through its Jean Monnet Research and Information Activities, Agreement no. 175987-LLP-1-2010-1-ZA-Am-IC) and the South African Department of Science and Technology. It provides a state-of-the-art analysis of the past and present developments in regionalism across the world and attempts to identify potential trends for the future. It is divided into four sections. The first articles discuss the theoretical implications of the increasing diversity within the 'world of regions' with a view to expanding the boundaries of comparative analysis in the scholarly field of regional studies. The central sections are devoted, in order, to Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. The contributions on Europe discuss how the increasing complexity of international governance, especially in the field of finance, security and justice, has forced the EU to reinvent itself. While the current financial crisis (particularly its implications on sovereign debt) appears to be bringing Europe to its knees and forcing austerity reforms throughout the Union, the fight against organised crime and terrorism has allowed European countries to reach a deeper level of cooperation in the judicial field, with an important impact on the creation of a common judicial culture. The articles on Africa reflect on the need for this continent to find its own way to integration, breaking free from the 'European model' and carving out a space for innovative thinking, not only in the field of institution building, but also in economic and judicial cooperation in a region still marred by underdevelopment and conflict. Finally, the contributions on Asia and Latin America provide a thorough account of recent developments in these regions and identify the potential gap between the ambitious rhetoric and the actual achievements of two fundamental areas of the world, ever more dominated by emerging powers such as China, India and Brazil.

The special issue concludes by reviewing the key topics discussed by the various contributors and charting potential developments and trends for the future, particularly against the backdrop of the current crises. References are made to the European project and its sovereign debt debacle, to the African 'experiment' and its grand plans as well as considerable shortfalls, and to the diverse Asian and Latin American expectations and types of regionalism.

The aim of this publication is to look at regionalism with a critical eye, pointing out that region building is not a neutral, technocratic process, but rather a profoundly political endeavour with winners and losers. In times of global crisis, it appears as though the classical top-down elite-driven process chosen by the EU founding fathers has run out of steam, due to increasing contestation from within (for example, the euro crisis) and limited adaptability to other areas of the world. In this situation, it may be worth asking whether the EU integration process has relevance in a world increasingly dominated by emerging powers in the so-called global South, from China, to India, Brazil and South Africa. As the current crises are demonstrating, regionalism can only be successful if it manages to convince all countries (and their citizens) that they can benefit from it, reducing the risk of a new international system dominated by runaway polarity.

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