

**“Real Existing Democracies”
and
“Real Existing Autocracies”
Their Relation to Regional Integration and Regional Cooperation**

Anastassia V. Obydenkova and Philippe C. Schmitter

Abstract

What determines the choice of a nation-state to form, to join, or to remain in a transnational regional organization (TRO), and how and why does the nature of its political regime matter? This theoretical essay analyzes the relationship between different types of national regimes and their likely strategies regarding regionalism in the post-Cold War period. “Real existing democracies” and “real existing autocracies” are confronted by the prospects of entering into and supporting arrangements for regional integration and/or regional cooperation. The study attempts to answer two theoretical questions: What determines such a choice? How much does the difference in regime type contribute to it? The essay aims to contribute to the literature on regionalism and the importance of the political regime in the formation, nature, and consequences of TROs.

Keywords: Autocracies, democracies, Eurasia, international organizations, political regimes, regionalism, theory of integration, theory of regional cooperation.

Anastassia V. Obydenkova is a Visiting Professor at the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEL), Barcelona; a Leading Research Fellow at the Center for Institutional Studies of the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia; a Research Affiliate at the Institute for Economic Analysis of the Spanish Council for Scientific Research (IAE-CSIC) Barcelona; and a co-director of the research project, “Regionalism and Regional International Organizations in a Fragmented World,” at Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. Previously, she was a Fox Fellow at Yale University (1999–2000), Kathryn W. and Shelby Cullom Davis Senior Research Scholar at Harvard University (2015–2016), and a Fung Global Fellow at Princeton University (2016–2017). <Anastassia.Obydenkova@eui.eu>

Philippe C. Schmitter is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy. He formerly was a professor at the University of Chicago (1971–1975), Stanford University (1986–1996), and the European University Institute (1982–1986 and 1996–2004). <Philippe.Schmitter@eui.eu>

The authors of this project are listed alphabetically; they contributed equally to this essay.

Armenia's Choice

On April 9, 2018, the newly elected president of Armenia, Armen Sarkissian, stated in his inaugural speech: “Armenia’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union and the Comprehensive and Enhanced Cooperation Agreement as signed with the EU open up new prospects and opportunities for our country’s development.”¹ In the aftermath of the subsequent Velvet Revolution,² the prime-minister-to-be, Nikol Pashinyan, surprisingly echoed the speech of the deposed president. He stated:

If I am elected, Armenia will not make changes in the foreign policy domain; it will remain a member of the EAEU [Eurasian Economic Union] and the CSTO [Collective Security Treaty Organization] led by Russia. This position does not stem from a person’s taste, but the logic of the movement that brought victory to the people. Demanding numerous changes in domestic life, the people did not and do not demand any change in [the] foreign policy domain. We considered and consider Russia the strategic ally of Armenia...³

Pashinyan also stated that his intention to remain in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union was incompatible with signing an association agreement on a free trade area with the European Union (EU).⁴ The stance of Armenia’s president and new prime minister is in line with all of their predecessors: former presidents Levon Hakobi Ter-Petrosyan (1991–1998), Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008), and Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018). The political leaders of Armenia consistently have chosen to retain the country’s membership in the two Russian-led regional organizations, rather than signing an association

¹ The Portal of the President of the Republic of Armenia, “Statements and Messages of the RA” (April 9, 2018), <https://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2018/04/09/President-Armen-Sargsyans-speech-during-inauguration-ceremony/> (accessed April 2, 2019).

² The Velvet Revolution in Armenia took place throughout April 2018 in the form of mass protests against the previous president of Armenia, Sargsyan (in power from 2008 to 2018), who had stated his intention to become prime minister in 2018. As a result of the revolution, Prime Minister Sargsyan resigned and the National Assembly elected Pashinyan as a new prime minister. See Mirim Lansky and Elspeth Suthers, “Armenia’s Velvet Revolution,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (2019): 85–99.

³ News.am, “Main Arguments of Armenia PM Candidate’s Address at Parliament” (May 1, 2018), <https://news.am/eng/news/449135.html> (accessed April 3, 2019).

⁴ Ibid. There is no mystery regarding the motivation of Armenia: Russia is the only security ally for Armenia in the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. See Alexander Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, “Regional International Organizations as a Strategy of Autocracy: The Eurasian Economic Union and Russian Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018): 1037–1058.

agreement with the European Union. Armenia's choice between these options is illustrative of two different paths to regionalism: toward the slow process of *integration* with the Club of Democracies (EU) versus more immediate *cooperation* within the Two Clubs of Autocracies (the CSTO and the EAEU).

The case of Russia-led transnational regional organizations stands out in the family of modern autocracies worldwide due to the profound and prolonged historical legacies of their former status in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Unlike Western Europe, the beginning of the journey toward regionalism started with a high level of prior integration and interdependence among former Soviet republics. They were deeply interconnected by oil and gas infrastructure, trade links embedded in the centralized economy of the USSR, and even a common language.⁵ Despite this inheritance, all the efforts of Russia to establish functioning regional integration have failed, while regional *cooperation* can be considered relatively successful. This leads to the plausible assumption that it has been the autocratic nature of the political regimes of these former states of the USSR that has been the primary reason for the failure of such efforts at integration.

This brings us to a broader theoretical question: How much and why do national political regimes matter for regional integration and cooperation in the twenty-first century? According to orthodox theories of international relations, they should be irrelevant (or at least, much less important) than the configuration of power relations among member states and their location in the broader international relations system. Recent studies, however, partially addressed this question by studying the formation of antidemocratic alliances, diffusion effects associated with regional organizations, non-democratic international cooperation and regime survival, and international and national security policy choices, among other issues.⁶ Others addressed this question

⁵ On historical legacies in post-Soviet space, see Tomila Lankina, Alexander Libman, and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, "Appropriation and Subversion: Pre-Communist Literacy, Communist Party Saturation, Post-Communist Democratic Outcomes," *World Politics* 68, no. 2 (2016): 229-274; Alexander Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, "CPSU Legacies and Regional Democracy in Contemporary Russia," *Political Studies* 63, no. S1 (2015): 173-190; id., "Inequality and Historical Legacies: Evidence from Post-Communist Regions," *Post-Communist Economies* 31, no. 6 (2019): 699-724; id., "Proletarian Internationalism in Action? Communist Legacies and Attitudes Towards Migrants in Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism*, DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2019.1640068 (2019); Anastassia Obydenkova and Alexander Libman, "The Survival of Post-Communist Corruption in Contemporary Russia: The Influence of Historical Legacies," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2015): 304-338; and Zafar Nazarov and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, "Democratization and Firm Innovation: Evidence from the European and Central Asian Post-Communist States," *Post-Communist Economies*, DOI: 10.1080/14631377.2020.1745565 (2020).

⁶ Fredrik Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Laurence Whitehead, "Antidemocracy Promotion: Four Strategies in Search of a Framework," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (2014): 1-24; and id., "Three Angles on the Alliance Options of Authoritarian Regimes," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2018): 1-24.

by singling out non-democratic TROs worldwide and studying the differences in their memberships and their effects on national regimes.⁷ In contrast, a different set of studies focused on TROs, in general, and on the EU, in particular, including the democratic external impact and the consequences of the recent economic crisis on this nexus.⁸ Within these very recent debates, this essay focuses on a different, but related, puzzle: the relationship between the type of regime and the potential for engaging in regionalism among voluntarily consenting national politicians. The essay excludes from the analysis a consideration of the “imperial” possibility that both types of regime seek to simply impose a regional order by ideological hegemony or physical coercion. In purely historical terms, involuntary imperialism has been much more successful in defining and sustaining regions than either of the voluntary strategies, but in the contemporary world, peaceful and consensual strategies seem more productive and frequent.

The Basic Concepts

We must begin with a conceptual clarification of two dichotomous notions that distinguish first between political regimes—real existing democracy (RED) and real existing autocracy (REA)—and, then, between the options that exist for regional integration (RI) and regional cooperation (RC).

RED (liberal, representative, constitutional, private capitalist) and REA⁹ (illiberal, delegative, a- or un-constitutional and usually state capitalist) represent the ideal-type antimonies of regime that, in fact, are practiced in Europe and elsewhere. Both can be further broken down into hybrids and sub-

⁷ Alexander Libman and Anastassia Obydenkova, “Informal Governance and Participation in Non-Democratic International Organizations,” *Review of International Organizations* 8, no. 2 (2013): 221-245, and id., “Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 151-165.

⁸ Carlos Closa, *Secession from a Member State and Withdrawal from the European Union: Troubled Membership* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Anastassia V. Obydenkova, “Democratization at the Grassroots: The European Union’s External Impact,” *Democratization* 19, no. 2 (2012): 230-257; and Leonardo Morlino and Mario Quaranta, “What Is the Impact of Economic Crisis on Democracy? Evidence from Europe,” *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 5 (2016): 1-16.

⁹ There is a good deal of confusion concerning the nomenclature of “non-democracies,” partly generated by the obvious fact that there is much more internal variety within this group than among “real existing” democracies. We have preferred to use “autocracy” as the logical antonym to “democracy”—not because all non-democracies are ruled by a single individual but because they all are characterized by autonomy from accountability to their respective subjects-cum-citizens. “Authoritarian” will not do because all political regimes are based upon authority—whether legitimate or not. About democracies, also see Terry Karl and Philippe Schmitter, “What Democracy Is ... and Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 75-88.

¹⁰ For example, Vivian Schmidt argued that national democratic regimes that already have an internal institutional order of federalism or decentralization are more likely to enter into and subsequently support the expansion of regional integration. Vivian Schmidt, *Democracy*

types and these may be relevant for explaining outcomes at the regional level.¹⁰ For example, one could argue that autocratic regimes whose governments are composed of a stable coalition of locally dominant elites would be more likely to enter into and support arrangements for RC than autocracies based on a single individual, party, or military hierarchy. Among real existing contemporary regimes, at least half of them are hybrids. These semi-democracies and semi-autocracies belong to a so-called “gray” zone between REDs and REAs and have been mushrooming since the 1990s.¹¹ Hybrids can be described metaphorically as examples of Erwin Schrödinger’s cat paradox: whether seemingly democratic or autocratic, they can be *simultaneously* alive or dead as long as they are not exposed to the daylight of world politics. This phenomenon is especially important for our topic since they can potentially become either REDs or REAs, depending on their membership in TROs, which could be a crucial factor for consolidating one type of regime or the other. The case of Armenia as a semi-autocracy is illustrative in this context. If Armenia had signed an association agreement with the EU, as was initially foreseen, its democratic consolidation might have come faster and been more secure. By contrast, closer cooperation with an REA, such as Russia, inevitably implies increased communication and value diffusion, which is more likely to contribute to the consolidation of a non-democratic regime.¹² Despite the critical importance of hybrids, we will focus primarily on the distinction between REDs and REAs, since dealing with hybrid regimes would take us into multiple and possibly endless combinations of both of these ideal-types.

Our second conceptual distinction is between regional integration (RI), which creates some degree of supra-national political authority at the regional level, and regional cooperation (RC), which does not depend on supra-nationalist institutions but rests on voluntary (and usually unanimous) agreement and can be relatively easily abrogated. Further distinctions beyond this dichotomy may be useful when defining the range and extent of regional outcomes. Not only do both RI and RC arrangements cover a wide range of different functional tasks and levels of authority (with the EU currently being the most developed in both regards), but also they may be combined

in Europe: The EU and National Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and id., *Democratizing France: The Political and Administrative History of Decentralization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Steven Levitsky and Lucas Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹² Previous studies convincingly demonstrated the autocracy diffusion taking place through the foreign trade and communication with autocracies. See Alexander Libman and Anastassia Obydenkova, “International Trade as a Limiting Factor in Democratization: An Analysis of Subnational Regions in Post-Communist Russia,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 49, no. 2 (2014): 168-196, and Tomila Lankina, Alexander Libman, and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, “Authoritarian and Democratic Diffusion in Post-Communist Regions,” *Comparative Political Studies* 49, no. 12 (2016): 1599-1629.

in various ways. For example, the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) is predominantly an instrument of RC, but it does have an appeals procedure, the verdicts of which presumably carry some authoritative supra-national legitimacy.¹³

Our working hypothesis is that REDs have the potential to enter into and successfully promote RI *and/or* RC, while REAs are capable of engaging in *only* RC. *Nota bene* that regionalism in both cases is problematic and contingent. The countries involved may enter into such larger-scale (but territorially limited) commitments, but they are not compelled to do so. They also may proclaim their support for more integrative or cooperative policies, only to refuse to implement them subsequently (MERCOSUR, the Southern Common Market, seems to be the champion in this regard). Just to confuse matters further, under conditions of “open regionalism,” the same national regime may join various regional organizations of differing memberships and levels of commitment, and then behave in a contradictory fashion within any or all of them. Alternatively, regional memberships can be incompatible and a nation-state (e.g., Armenia) may face a “dichotomous destiny,” having to commit to either a TRO of autocracies or to a TRO composed of democracies. The choice can be even more crucial if that state’s regime is hybrid at the point of origin, since its future destiny could be democratized through involvement in RI or slide toward autocracy through RC.¹⁴

In what follows, we consider first why REDs and RI are potentially related to each other in a more positive way:

1. REDs do not pose a security threat to each other. They may have many, even highly salient, conflicts of interest, but they are not expected to resolve them with the use of armed force—and do not engage in contingency planning for this eventuality. This means that, in the absence of a mutually recognized “security dilemma,” REDs can afford to be relatively indifferent to the inevitable inequalities of the benefit generated by regional integration or cooperation, since they are not likely to be translated into a relevant shift in the capacity to exercise international coercion.

¹³ Under Donald Trump’s presidency, NAFTA will be substituted by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA): “United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement,” *Office of the United States Trade Representative: Executive Office of the President* (2020), <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/united-states-mexico-canada-agreement> (accessed March 9, 2020).

¹⁴ In 2013, Armenia stated for the first time its decision to prioritize membership in a Customs Union led by Russia instead of signing a free trade pact with the EU. See Andrew Rettman, “Armenia to Join Russia’s Union, Surprises EU,” *EUobserver* (September 3, 2013), <https://euobserver.com/foreign/121304> (accessed January 12, 2019).

2. REDs are liberal in nature (i.e., they respect the property rights of their citizens). This presumption of a reliable and fair rule of law at the national level provides assurance that REDs will also treat each other's nationals reliably and fairly. This, in turn, lowers the perception of risk and, thereby, encourages foreign trade and foreign direct investment among member states. Liberal democracies also are associated with greater transparency in policy-making and lower levels of corruption—both of which contribute to increasing mutual trust among them and their respective TROs—a factor highly important for successful RI.¹⁵ A shared conception of the rule of law across nation-states also implies that decisions of a supra-national regional court (if one exists) will be implemented accurately and regularly—even routinely.
3. REDs accord and should guarantee the rights of their citizens to form, join, and use political parties, interest associations, and social movements, and they can be expected to at least tolerate the same forms of collective action across their borders with respect to citizens from other member states. These public activities serve as an additional “check” on arbitrary governmental action and on their fulfillment of commitments to RI. The interconnection is quite intuitive: freedom of mass media associated with RED makes the politics transparent. That is, if a government fails in its commitment, the public will be informed by the mass media, which will be followed by eventual punishment by the electorate, which will become more likely to vote for the existing political opposition.
4. Typically, REDs are institutionally rooted in some form of horizontal accountability—although these systems of checks and balances are likely to vary considerably among them. Under such arrangements of authority, other member states have a greater guarantee than REAs against radical changes in policy and are less likely to be preoccupied by the eventual changes of the party in power.

¹⁵ Kenneth A. Schultz, “Frontmatter,” in *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy, Cambridge Studies in International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), i-viii, and James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577-592.

5. REDs typically (but not inevitably) have party systems that are centripetal (i.e., they compete for the affiliation/compliance of citizens with moderate “centrist” preferences—which provides an additional assurance against radical shifts in policy due to rotations of the party in power).¹⁶
6. REDs in an RI arrangement are more likely to create or be forced to accept some degree of internal democracy in their transnational institutions, which provides yet another mechanism of reassurance, this time against the hegemonic pretensions of any one or group of member states. This is especially the case if (as is likely) the system of representation for a regional parliament or executive systematically over-represents the smaller member states.
7. Finally, REDs tolerate and even encourage the freedom of the mass media to monitor their performance. This often has been described as “the fourth power” in the liberal system of checks and balances. This tends to be associated with greater transparency in policy-making and lower corruption of public officials. These three aspects—mass media, transparency, and low corruption—together provide an additional foundation for transnational trust that is crucial for the successful development of RI.

Now, we will simply turn each of these affirmations around and see hypothetically why REAs are much less likely to enter into and respect the supra-national commitments intrinsic to RIs.

1. REAs certainly do not inevitably go to war with each other, even less so in the twenty-first century. Regional cooperation serves as a platform for communication among non-democratic states, where democracies are also occasionally welcome (e.g., the case of the Southern African Development Community [SADC], the African Union [AU], or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO]). REAs often can enter into alliances to go to war together against REDs. The alliance of China and Russia

¹⁶ Although, since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the mechanism of partisan competition has become more centrifugal, shifting toward preferences for right- and left-wing extremists, both in Europe and the United States.

is very illustrative in this context: both states perceive the United States and NATO as an enemy and follow the principle “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Allying with each other within the framework of a regional organization such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a demonstration to the West of the existence of security allies. Yet, despite this, the two states distrust each other (e.g., China tried to launch a number of military-security initiatives within the SCO across former Soviet Central Asian states that Russia considers its “near abroad,” and Russia blocked this initiative. When Russia, instead, launched the Collective Security Treaty Organization, China wanted to be a member and Russia rejected its request. So, threat of violence, lack of trust, and keeping *undivided* control over satellite states (the so-called “near abroad”) are always present in the relations between REAs. This means that the gains from regionalism, if they are asymmetrically distributed (as they usually are), can translate into an enhancement of the persistent “security dilemma” that affects their relations to the extent that, by increasing the relative power of the dominant member state, it may become sufficient to increase the threat of subordination or conquest of those that are less benefited. RIs composed of REAs will rarely, if ever, have resolved this security dilemma before their beginning and not be able to rely upon it in order to make subsequent progress.

2. REAs are illiberal in nature (i.e., they do not have national judicial institutions that ensure respect for the property rights and contractual obligations of their own citizens, even less for foreigners). An excellent example of this would be Venezuela’s keeping its funds in the UK and in other democratic states. Although Putin’s government is one of the few to support his regime, Maduro consistently has stored his financial resources elsewhere and not in Russia. Despite Venezuela’s having “nationalized” enterprises founded and funded by Western companies, its government has preferred the relative safety of their banks.¹⁷

¹⁷ Tass News, “Венесуэла должна выплатить ConocoPhillips \$8 млрд по спору вокруг национализации” [Venezuela is expected to pay back to ConocoPhillips \$8 milliards on the dispute on nationalization] (March 8, 2018), <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/6200337> (accessed December 21, 2018). Chavez nationalized the company ConocoPhillips (Netherlands)

3. REAs are not likely to agree to submit disputes with regional partners to a court with supra-national authority or, where such a court exists, to respect its judgments. To the extent that RI requires some mechanism for dispute resolution to be effective, this alone may preclude the membership of REAs. RC arrangements presumably do not require such arrangements and can rely exclusively on national or sub-national level dispute procedures.
4. REAs are governed by rulers, some of whom may be elected—but only in constituencies in which they are the only likely winners. These rulers are organized into a single hierarchy of offices according to partisan, military, ideological, or normative principles that are exclusive to a specific nation-state—not based upon principles that are shared by regional partners—even if they are also nominally based on the same generic principles of authority. Without such an effective agreement on the basis of legitimacy—and the subsequent possibility of arbitrary decision-making—the creation of a regional polity is not likely—only a cooperative arrangement that can be abrogated at a low cost.
5. REAs do not accord to their subjects/citizens an unrestricted right to form parties, associations, or movements. Some of these units of collective action may be tolerated, but only under conditions that restrict their autonomy, including their right to enter into agreements with foreign counterparts. Some REAs sponsor the creation of elaborate “corporatist” hierarchies of representative groups, but these remain strictly confined to national borders.

in 2007. See World Bank, <https://icsid.worldbank.org/en/Pages/cases/casedetail.aspx?CaseNo=ARB%2f07%2f30> (accessed February 19, 2020), and International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes, World Bank Group, *Conoco Phillips Petrozuata B.V., ConocoPhillips Hamaca B.V. and ConocoPhillips Gulf of Paria B.V. v. Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela* (Case No. ARB/07/30), <https://icsid.worldbank.org/en/Pages/cases/casedetail.aspx?CaseNo=ARB%2f07%2f30> (accessed March 30, 2020). Venezuela owes over 8 milliards USD compensation to this company. Among autocracies, the failure to respect investment is just as bad: Venezuela owes Russia 17 milliards USD for Russian investment. Yet, it is clear that Putin will never ask for this debt to be repaid and Maduro will most certainly not even consider the repayment of this investment to Russia. Similar trends are exhibited by other REAs, such as Tajikistan (anthropological notes with entrepreneur who investigated the investment climate in Tajikistan). The CCP leaders still debate how to respond to states which cannot repay loans provided by China.

6. REAs typically have no *de jure* institutions of horizontal accountability, although *de facto* practices may exist in the competitive relations among ideological factions, military and security services, local notables, and so on. The unpredictability of these arrangements, especially in the context of leadership succession, and their confinement to national contexts, renders uncertain the continuity of regime commitment to the institutions of RI.
7. REAs vary considerably in the configuration of political parties—from none at all, to a proliferation of regime-loyal ones. Usually, however, there is a single dominant party with informally competing factions and no guarantee that these factions will compete centripetally. Therefore, presuming that support for RI is strongest among those in the center of the political spectrum, REAs are more likely than REDs to vary considerably from one government to another in their support for RI.
8. REAs are not likely to be under strong pressure from their constituent units or their rulers to introduce internally democratic practices within RI institutions. Where such things as parliaments, elections, consultative bodies, decentralization, and so on, exist, they are usually only symbolic, decorative, imitative, and irrelevant for the process of regionalism, which remains exclusively dependent upon on-going (and often, *ad hoc*) negotiations among national executives.¹⁸ An example would be the references to human rights, rule of law, and democracy in some constitutions of non-democracy but also their recognition within RC, such as in the SADC Treaty.¹⁹ Most recent studies referred to this phenomenon as “techniques

¹⁸ Andres Malamud, “Presidentialism and Mercosur: A Hidden Cause for a Successful Experience,” in *Comparative Regional Integration: Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Finn Laursen (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 53-73, has coined the term “inter-presidentialism” to describe it. Also, on decentralization in hybrid regimes, autocracies, and democracies, see Leonardo Morlino and Wojciech Sadurski, eds., *Democratization and the EU: Comparing Central and Eastern European Post-Communist Countries* (London: Routledge, 2010), and Anastassia Obydenkova and Wilfried Swenden, “Autocracy-Sustaining Versus Democratic Federalism: Explaining the Divergent Trajectories of Territorial Politics in Russia and Western Europe,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1, no. 1 (2013): 86-112.

¹⁹ Laurie Nathan, *Community of Insecurity: SADC's Struggle for Peace and Security in Southern Africa* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012).

intended to cultivate the pretense of accountability without permitting the actual practice of it” (e.g., Southeast Asian autocracies demonstrated “mock compliance to human rights agreements, public relations firms, think tanks and zombie monitors.”²⁰

9. REAs, though not dependent upon the electorate, understand the power of public opinion to generate social unrest, rebellion, and even revolution. Therefore, they expend considerable state resources in controlling the ownership and content of the mass media. Government decisions with regard to membership in or sponsorship of TROs are invariably portrayed as beneficial for everyone.²¹ This can guarantee to government officials an ample margin for corruption, given the absence of transparency and, hence, accountability. These factors result in a generalized distrust among both democratic and autocratic potential partners in the process of regionalism.

In addition to the above-listed differences, another difference between REDs and REAs concerns the motives for creating or joining regional organizations. As argued above, REAs are not only or even primarily interested in intrinsic economic benefits, but also and mainly they are interested in extrinsic political objectives. With some simplification, it is safe to state that REDs are motivated mainly by *internal* benefits (e.g., public support and economic gains). In contrast, REAs are driven mainly by *external* factors: economic benefits, the desire and necessity to demonstrate to their people and to the world the existence of security allies, and an alternative to membership in exclusively democratic “regional clubs.”²² Also, a non-democracy finds it easier to cooperate with another non-democracy, as long as cooperation within a region provides pragmatic benefits.²³ In line with recent literature

²⁰ Lee Morgenbesser, “The Menu of Autocratic Innovation,” *Democratization*, Online first: DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1746275 (accessed March 29, 2020).

²¹ This is even more so, when Russia is deeply involved in the mass media of other former Soviet states to such an extent that it can organize a revolution against the government of one of its regional “partners.” The case of Kyrgyzstan is especially illustrative in this context. The People’s Revolution (also known as the April Revolution) of 2010 was staged by Russian mass media. Paradoxically, the revolution ended with the establishment of a new government, yet pro-Russian in foreign policy choices (as a result, the NATO base in Manas was closed by this new government).

²² James Buchanan and Roger L. Faith, “Secession and the Limits of Taxation: Towards a Theory of Internal Exit,” *American Economic Review* 77, no. 5 (1987): 1023-1031. This article introduced the notion of “clubs” to the discussion of TROs.

²³ A number of studies are dedicated to explaining the puzzle of the Chinese involvement in Africa through the purely economic and pragmatic lenses of resource-seeking. See Cullen S. Hendrix, “What US Strategy Gets Wrong about China in Africa,” Petersen Institute for International

on the driving factors of membership in international organizations with or without a regional dimension, it seems to be a safe assumption that security interests are dominant factors in REAs' search for membership in TROs. In the words of Christina Davis and Tyler Pratt, the "geopolitical origins of IGO [intergovernmental organization] membership constitute a key mechanism linking economic cooperation to security interests."²⁴ The general assumption that autocracy supports autocracies, while true when support is rhetorical, is not sustained when security issues come along. Putin's regime rhetorically supports Maduro's regime in Venezuela as well as Communist China in Russian official mass media. Despite this, China was not welcome to join the Russia-led security TRO (the CSTO). More importantly, an REA may support and even lobby for the membership of hybrid regimes or democracies in its own TRO. Russia welcomed semi-democratic Armenia and Kyrgyzstan to join the Eurasian Economic Union to secure its geopolitical security interests in these two states, as well as to eliminate the American connections (in the case of Kyrgyzstan) and EU influence (in the case of Armenia). Moreover, Russia seems to have been involved in staging democratic revolutions in both Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, using its mass media in these states. Further, Russia even supported the leader of the democratic opposition in Ukraine back in 2011—Yulia Tymoshenko—to secure the negotiated gas contracts between Russia and Ukraine.²⁵ Thus, admittedly, security-geopolitical motivations and economic benefits seem to be placed unconditionally above the importance of political regimes when seeking membership in TROs. Yet, this does not imply that the political regimes of member states do not matter. The heterogeneity of political regimes across membership (presence of autocracies and hybrid regimes) creates an unprecedented challenge to the development of RC and makes RI impossible.

The Contending Theories

Understanding these two paths to regionalism—cooperation versus integration—requires different theoretical points of departure, as does explaining the differences in subsequent performance between REDs and REAs. There are two cornerstones of these different approaches: (1) whether the intent of the

Economics Policy Brief 20—23 (March 2020), <https://www.piie.com/publications/policy-briefs/what-us-strategy-gets-wrong-about-china-africa> (accessed March 27, 2020).

²⁴ Christina L. Davis and Tyler Pratt, "The Forces of Attraction: How Security Interests Shape Membership in Economic Institutions" (July 31, 2018), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/cldavis/files/davispratt_forces_july2018.pdf (accessed August 3, 2019). This study further developed the idea of geopolitical alignment and security concerns as driving forces of membership in regional clubs.

²⁵ Anastassia Obydenkova and Alexander Libman, "Understanding the Foreign Policy of Autocratic Actors: Ideology or Pragmatism? Russia and the Tymoshenko Trial as a Case Study," *Contemporary Politics* 20, no. 3 (2014): 347-364.

actors involved is transformative or reproductive, and (2) whether the expected process is gradual and continuous or erratic and episodic.²⁶

Theories of RI presume that the intent is transformative and that the trajectory is gradual; those of RC presume that the intent is reproductive and that the trajectory is episodic. Needless to say, in the real world of politics, not only may it be difficult to discern what the “real” intent of actors may be as well as their “real” expectations about performance, but also within any given TRO, the actors involved may have different intents and expectations. If those reasons for “fuzziness” were not enough, there is also the possibility of unintended outcomes and “learning from doing.” The national states that initiate a given regionalist project may discover that emerging problems and opportunities change their perceptions of what is possible, and even of what is desirable.²⁷

Theorizing about RI and RC has proven difficult. The experience of peacefully and consensually constructing something as artificial as a transnational, supra-state region is both relatively rare and recent—so recent that all such efforts remain manifestly unfinished.²⁸ They are still “works in process” whose eventual success or failure is unknown.

As far as RI is concerned, the “number one” (so far) is the EU, although there are many other self-proclaimed, analogous, regionally-based experiences elsewhere.²⁹ And, even in this one case, analysts have diverged radically in

²⁶ For the initial theorizing on regional international integration and cooperation, also see Philippe Schmitter, “A Revised Theory of Regional Integration,” *International Organization* 24, no. 4 (1970): 836-868, and id., “The ‘Organizational Development’ of International Organizations,” *International Organization* 25, no. 4 (1971): 917-937.

²⁷ The role of Great Britain in the EU is emblematic of this ambiguity. It joined the RI process in Europe assuming that it was just a free trade area, slightly more comprehensive than the one it was leaving (the European Economic Area), only to discover that the process was potentially much more transformative and that it was gradually (almost surreptitiously) embedding itself in Britain’s public policy and judicial system. Its current travail in exiting the EU is a near perfect illustration of how unintended consequences and differential expectations affect regionalism. The contrast with President Trump’s threatened exit from NAFTA—purely an instrument of RC—by stroke of the executive pen could hardly have been more dramatic.

²⁸ Cross-national, supra-state regions do not exist, any more than did contemporary national states, at their moment of origin. They must be created either by integration or cooperation. Once the effort has been made, it is usually followed by a retrospective process of “discovering” their common features—their heritage, their symbols, their goals. Moreover, many of these artefacts have highly ambiguous (and opportunistic) borders. Old members may leave or suspend their participation; new members join when it is mutually convenient—and immediately are incorporated into the common identity.

²⁹ If we remember correctly, the African Union’s founding treaty is a virtual copy of the EU’s re-founding one—which does not mean that its subsequent accomplishments have been remotely similar—even granted the time lapse between the two experiences. The Consolidated Text of the Treaty of the Southern African Development Community makes decorative references to the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. See Consolidated Text of the Treaty of the Southern African Development Community (2015), https://www.sadc.int/files/5314/4559/5701/Consolidated_Text_of_the_SADC_Treaty_-_scanned_21_October_2015.pdf (accessed March 12, 2020).

their basic assumptions. The dominant line of cleavage has been between so-called “inter-governmentalists” and “neo-functionalists.” The former deny that the EU is transformative, and emphasize exclusively the episodic bargaining among national executives in the creation of successive treaties defining (and usually expanding) its institutions and formal competences, in a mutual effort to protect their respective national interests and the viability of the existing international system.³⁰ The latter (we are among them) insist that the EU is transformative (often despite the publicly expressed preferences of the political elites of its member states) and focus attention on the growing and less visible functional interdependence among policy arenas, the subsequent role of unintended outcomes, the interaction of political parties, interest associations, and social movements across national borders, and the sequential resolution of crises generated by increased interdependence and uneven outcomes.

These two “approaches,” inter-governmentalist and neo-functionalist (neither is a full-blown theory of the entire process), have been supplemented (but not replaced) by a third: constructivism. Like neo-functionalism, it is not limited to state actors, but incorporates larger publics affected in their values and identities by the integration process.³¹ Presumably, the individuals who come to assume these regional values—those national politicians and administrators who participate directly in it, in the first place, but also the wider publics that are indirectly affected by it—will provide a broadening basis of potential support for extending the supra-national process. This approach seems to presume that member states are democracies, since only under conditions of accountable government can rulers be compelled to change their regional policies. Under REAs, not only would they not be induced to change their policies, but also they should be capable of limiting their subjects’/citizens’ access to novel and potentially threatening supra-national values and identities.

While the number of efforts at RC is much larger than at RI, their institutional variety and geographic dispersion has made it difficult even to attempt to explain systematically the significance of their similarities and differences. The standard approach has been to apply the orthodox “realist” theory of international relations, sometimes modified to incorporate a more “liberal” approach that recognizes the potential contribution of national and sub-national organizations of civil society. If some group of more-or-less geographically contiguous national states is threatened by a common enemy, they will join together and form a region.³²

³⁰ Philippe Schmitter, “Twenty-Five Years, Fifteen Findings,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010): 17-28.

³¹ Long before the appearance of constructivists, Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Boston: M.I.T. Press, 1953) made the changing patterns of social communication due to the lowering of barriers to trans-national exchanges by states and regional organizations the central feature of his theory of integration. He thought that such a shift in the pattern of communication across borders would lead to a shift in collective identities—a new nationality, if you wish.

³² This impeccable rationale led one of its most dedicated proponents, John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983).

Table 1. The Theoretical Contrast Between Ideal-Types of Voluntary Regionalism

	RI	RC
Theory	Neo-functional	Realism
Actors	States plus civil societies	States alone
Regimes	Pluralist, multi-layered democracies	Unified, single-layered democracies and/or autocracies
Exchanges	Monotonic increase affecting firms, state agencies, interest groups, consuming publics	Erratic and selective increase affecting primarily state agencies and preferred firms and interests
Calculations	Imperfect rationality due to conflicting interests and experimental basis	Perfect rationality based on national interests and omnicompetent state actors
Motives	Commercial gain; national survival; international influence	Regime survival; international prestige; commercial gain
Gains	Absolute (but with unequal distribution)	Relative (and more consequential uneven) distribution
Outcomes	Increased functional interdependence + crises due to unintended, asymmetric gains	Increased political interdependence + crises due to external shocks
Decision-making process	Consensus + qualified majority; gradual, continuous, surreptitious	Unanimity + hegemonic imposition; episodic, discontinuous, strictly monitored
Product	Regional organizations with legitimate authority over selected policy domains	Regional organizations with coordinating power over narrow range of policy domains

The Choice between Regionalisms

What determines the choice of an individual national state to form, to join, or to remain in a regional organization? As we have argued, democracies can choose between the two generic paths of integration or cooperation (or not join at all); perhaps autocracies have been less likely to join voluntarily any regional organization (that they do not unilaterally control, i.e., a regional empire), but if and when they do, it will be only a cooperative one. The extreme case of the most closed regime in the world—North Korea—is perhaps the most illustrative. Even during its 1990s famine when a million people died, North Korea remained isolated from the outside world and blocked humanitarian aid.³³ Apparently, having learned its lesson, it joined the G77 and the ASEAN Regional Forum. In contrast, another isolated extreme autocracy,

³³ Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Turkmenistan, has a relatively strong economy (due to large gas resources and oil) and a favorable geopolitical location on the Caspian Sea. Therefore, it is able to afford itself the luxury of isolation: from the long list of TROs, Turkmenistan joined only a non-regional Organization of Islamic Cooperation. It is also *the only* Central Asian state that has resisted the temptation to join the SCO founded by China (despite the fact that membership in the SCO is associated with vast financial benefits coming from China, in the form of subsidies, generous loans, and investment in infrastructure). Opposite from Turkmenistan, the economically weak autocracy of Tajikistan was desperate to join the SCO, as were all other Central Asian states. The case of Turkmenistan stands out in the family of Central Asian states. Turkmenistan is the most autocratic state among all former Soviet republics. Human Rights Watch described Turkmenistan as “virtually closed to independent scrutiny, media and religious freedoms are subject to draconian restrictions, and human rights defenders and other activists face the constant threat of government reprisal.”³⁴ Not only has Turkmenistan abstained from joining the lucrative SCO, but also it has managed to escape membership in the very first TRO launched by Russia—the Commonwealth of Independent States (1993), which emerged in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR.³⁵ It is important to highlight in this context, however, that consolidated REAs do not join RC arrangements if they cannot control them. In contrast, if a TRO is actually launched by an REA and controlled by it (e.g., China launched the SCO and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [AIIB]), then the nexus of the involvement of the REA in its own RC is different.³⁶

The economic strength of a potential member state—whether its regime is an REA or an RED—thus seems to be an important factor affecting its choice to join or not, but the logic is quite opposite for REAs and REDs. The case of Turkmenistan above demonstrates that an economically self-sufficient autocracy with a favorable geopolitical location tends to abstain from engaging in any RC to secure its total control over national and foreign policy. In contrast, an *economically strong democracy* is likely to join an RC arrangement led by,

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2014: Turkmenistan” (2014), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/turkmenistan> (accessed July 25, 2019).

³⁵ The only membership option picked by Turkmenistan from the large menu of existing options was the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

³⁶ Within this essay, we do not consider development regional governance, such as AIIB or Regional Development Banks, for a simple reason: these TROs with regional dimension are initially and only aimed at economic development, unlike regional TROs that aspire (at least on paper) for bigger and more ambitious agenda of regional integration. On Regional Development Banks, see Anastassia V. Obydenkova and Vinicius G. Rodrigues Vieira, “The Limits of Collective Financial Statecraft: Regional Development Banks and Voting Alignment with the United States at the United Nations General Assembly,” *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2020): 13-25, and Ruth Ben-Artzi, *Regional Development Banks in Comparison: Banking Strategies versus Development Goals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

or composed of, autocracies or mixed political regimes, as long as it perceives the membership to be beneficial (economically or geopolitically: e.g., India and the SCO). However, an *economically weak democracy* will tend to abstain from joining such an RC arrangement for security reasons (e.g., Mongolia and the SCO).

For REDs, an economically strong state may join a TRO led by autocracies if it perceives this membership as beneficial for security or economic reasons. India, for example, joined the SCO in 2015—when all the other member states were (and still are) autocracies.³⁷ In contrast, Mongolia is an economically weak democracy and is landlocked and surrounded by the SCO member states. It would seem that it would benefit economically from joining the SCO, but it has firmly chosen not to do so for security reasons (i.e., its deep distrust regarding the objectives of China as well as the consequences of its seemingly generous investments and loans). The following table summarizes the interplay of political regime and economic strength in determining the strategy of states with regard to RC.

Table 2. The Role of Political Regimes and Economy in RC

Economy of a state	RED	REA
Strong	Join RC arrangement led by REA and RED (e.g., India in the SCO)	Abstain from RC arrangement (e.g., rich Turkmenistan opts against membership in <i>all</i> RC arrangements)
Weak	Abstain from RC arrangement led by REA (e.g., Mongolia vs. the SCO)	Join the RC arrangement whenever they have a chance (all Central Asian <i>poor</i> autocracies, e.g., Uzbekistan, Tajikistan)

To the above should be added an important caveat: the association works only for consolidated regimes—for “*extreme*” autocracies and for *consolidated* democracies.³⁸ Those in the “gray hybrid zone” exhibit a very different pattern. For example, autocratic and economically strong Kazakhstan participates actively in the TRO led by Russia and China, just as such semi-autocracies as Armenia and Kyrgyzstan participate in the EAEU led by Russia—Armenia for security reasons³⁹ and Kyrgyzstan for purely economic benefits.

³⁷ The SCO was founded by China, supported by Russia, and all its members were Central Asian states (except Turkmenistan) before the enlargement in 2015, when India and Pakistan joined it.
³⁸ This phenomenon was also discovered in Anastassia V. Obydenkova and Alexander Libman, *Authoritarian Regionalism in the World of International Organizations: Global Perspective and Eurasian Enigma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
³⁹ Armenia needs the support of Russia in its ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In this conflict, the protection of Armenia’s security can be provided only by Russia.

It is also often presumed that RC or RI arrangements that are composed of similar types of regimes (e.g., the EU is a regional club for democracies only and exclusively) are more likely to attract and to keep member states, but this is unlikely to apply to TROs with only autocratic and mixed-regime participants, since the basis of authority, institutional format, and policy objectives in such regimes is much more varied. Obviously, this choice is a complicated matter as experience increases with both types of regionalism. Today, it has become almost impossible *not* to be a member of some regional organization—any more than a real-existing national state would refuse (if offered) to join the United Nations. Regionalism has become part of the “furniture” of contemporary international relations.

Security or Economic Benefits?

With the case of Armenia in mind, let us consider another powerful, parsimonious, and apparently credible (to some) hypothesis: *National states form or join regional organizations because it is in their national security interest to do so.* This is actually not very enlightening since it seems to involve four assumptions that are important in this context. First, global international relations form a more-or-less permanent system based on the relative distribution of power in member states and their geographic locations. The stability of global international relations is best described as the state of homeostasis—when a system maintains the same set of conditions permanently.⁴⁰ This dynamic equilibrium of the international system is maintained by multiple variables (such as power of state and economic strength, especially if it relates to such more-or-less permanent sources as oil and gas, geopolitical conditions, climate, and so on). The homeostasis of world politics also conditions the image of the enemy as a historical legacy, a factor that is difficult to change in the short-run. The classic example is the Israeli-Palestine conflict, which dates back to the 1960s or even to intercommunal conflict in Mandatory Palestine in the 1920s. Not to mention the centuries-long mutual perception of Jews and Arabs of each other as enemies and the worst possible threat in the world. Among the more recent yet stable historical perceptions of a threat is Russia’s vision of NATO as its natural enemy, which dates back to the bipolar world of the Cold War, and remains until now unchanged. On the other hand, a similar argument can be made for the American perception of Russia as a modified version of the USSR—as a threat that must be eliminated. Thus, global international relations are a more-or-less *permanent* system.

Second and related to the above, the security situation of all national states in this system is sufficiently compelling that it overrides all other policy preferences and competing interests. The case of Armenia is especially

⁴⁰ The theory of homeostasis originally comes from biology, but it regularly has been applied to other sciences (e.g., it was also used in sociology and psychology).

illustrative in this context. Armenia had to choose between a lucrative and prestigious opportunity to embark on the journey toward the slow integration process within the EU through the signing of a beneficial association agreement with the EU or membership in the Russia-led EAEU. The negotiation over the association agreement with the EU included a free trade area and dates back to 2010. However, when the preparation of the association agreement was almost finalized in 2013, Armenia claimed its intention to join the Eurasian Custom Union (currently the EAEU)—membership in which is incompatible with signing an association agreement and joining a free trade area with the EU, known as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). DCFTA included a number of economic benefits, such as lower tariffs and other barriers with the EU, and access to the EU's market:

*Although Armenia's trade with EU states far exceeds that with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan combined [italics added] it remains heavily dependent on Moscow for security. Russia still has a military presence in the country, and the alliance is seen as a counterbalance to Azerbaijan's heavy spending on arms purchases, given that the Nagorny Karabakh remains unresolved.*⁴¹

Indeed, Armenia values its security guarantee provided by Russia more than the economic benefits associated with integration within the EU, and more than its international image as a result of getting closer to a democratic regional club, such as the EU.

The third and fourth issues presumed by our hypothesis above build on the previous discussion, in general, and the Armenian case, in particular. Third, all participating national states have the same internal political capacity to reach and sustain agreement on what these security interests are. Fourth, whatever the apparent agreement, it is predicated exclusively on the survival of the national state as such, not just on the survival of the specific regime or even the government in power.

The Importance of Trust

Two more modest assumptions are: (1) national states engage in *RC* for one or a combination of three reasons: because they fear a common enemy (security benefits); and/or because they perceive a common material advantage (economic benefits); and/or because they believe that they can improve their

⁴¹ Yekaterina Poghosyan, "Armenia's Receding European Ambitions: Long-Awaited EU Trade Deal Seems to Have Been Upended by Need to Stay Close to Moscow," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)* (October 18, 2013), <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/armenias-receding-european-ambitions> (accessed April 19, 2019).

international standing (demonstration effects); and (2) national states engage in *RI* not only because they have a common enemy or opportunity, but also because they have learned to trust each other and, therefore, can safely (and profitably) engage in a wider range of functional commitments that require some form and degree of authoritative regulation or (re)distribution at the regional level. The logic and motivation are summarized in table 3.

Table 3. Motivations for RC and RI

Regimes	RC	RI
Only REDs	Security and geopolitical reasons; pragmatic (economic) benefits; mutual trust	
Only REAs and mixed: REAs with REDs	Security and geopolitical reasons; pragmatic benefits; mimicking RI of “only REDs”	Not possible: lack of mutual trust

Put together, the two above assumptions imply that RC can lead to RI—provided that (1) a functionally appropriate learning process encourages them to “spill over” into further policy areas, and (2) they are all REDs, because only under this type of regime can sovereign states learn to trust each other.⁴² Autocracies, even if evenly distributed across the prospective region, cannot imitate this “spill-over” dynamic because (1) they have (usually) not resolved the “security dilemma” among them before engaging in RC, and (2) the internal political characteristics of this form of domination, however legitimate it may appear in specific cases, does not encourage the formation of trust—internally or externally. As a subsidiary hypothesis, one also can speculate that TROs engaged in RC with a mixed set of domestic regimes—democracies, autocracies and, probably, hybrids—will, at best, remain merely cooperative (*vide* the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Southern African Development Community, the EAEU, and the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation [FOCAC]). Thus, it seems possible to infer that RC will be more intensive and successful among mixed regimes (democracies and autocracies) than RC among autocracies and hybrids.⁴³ Mutual trust seems to be the crucial dividing line that predetermines the behavior of REDs and REAs within regional organizations.

⁴² And, even then, subsequent changes in person and party in power can rapidly erode this patina of inter-democratic, supra-national trust, as we have seen so dramatically with the erratic and discontinuous behavior of the Trump government.

⁴³ This assumption is in line with the study by Edward D. Mansfield, Helen V. Milner, and B. Peter Rosendorff, “Why Democracies Cooperate More: Electoral Control and International Trade Agreements,” *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (2002): 477-513. This study identified that most economic cooperation takes place between “only [two] democracies,” followed by “mixed *dyads*,” and that least successful cooperation is between two autocracies. We extrapolate this finding from bilateral to multilateral cooperation among REDs and REAs within RC versus RI.

Research on trust in international political institutions is limited almost only to members of the EU, and thus deserves special attention in the context of our essay, although its member states are all (more or less) REDs. Institutional trust is influenced by such factors as national identity, individual utilitarianism, economic performance, corruption, political culture, and the enormous importance of mass media.⁴⁴ Additionally, in line with constructivism, social communication seems a natural pre-condition for developing trust.⁴⁵ It also is associated with shared information and knowledge—two other key ingredients.⁴⁶ The *accuracy* of this information comes from the quality of independent mass media and can be found only in REDs. REAs control mass media and attempt to manipulate public opinion, but currently are less successful in controlling access to and use of new social media. Yet, even within young democracies (e.g., Central European new member states, such as Poland and Bulgaria) the trust in the EU is noticeably higher than trust in their own national governments—this effect is explained by public awareness of corruption in their respective national governments versus the greater transparency of the EU. However, the *consolidated* EU democracies, such as Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, Norway, and the Netherlands, have a higher level of trust in national institutions and lower trust in the EU.⁴⁷ The message is that, even within REDs, there can be significant variation in the level of trust in international institutions. Somethings similar happens to REAs regarding their national regimes and international trust. Autocracies are associated with a higher level of corruption and a lower level of well-being than REDs. The populations of REAs, though manipulated by state-controlled propaganda of mass media, are exposed to corruption in everyday life and tend to have a deep distrust in regard to national institutions, and perceive international ones as transparent.⁴⁸ Thus, the role of political regimes in the development

⁴⁴ Mariano Torcal, “The Decline of Political Trust in Spain and Portugal: Economic Performance or Political Responsiveness,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 58, no. 12 (2014): 1-26; Anastassia V. Obydenkova and Bruno Arpino, “Corruption and Trust in the European Union and National Institutions: Changes over the Great Recession across European States,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. 3 (2018): 594-611; and Robert Rohrschneider, “The Democracy Deficit and Mass Support for an EU-Wide Government,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2002): 463-475.

⁴⁵ This idea dates back to Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Boston: M.I.T. Press, 1953).

⁴⁶ Klaus Armingeon and Besir Ceka, “The Loss of Trust in the European Union during the Great Recession since 2007: The Role of Heuristics from the National Political System,” *European Union Politics* 15, no. 1 (2013): 82-107.

⁴⁷ Bruno Arpino and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, “Democracy and Political Trust Before and After the Great Recession 2008: The European Union and the United Nations,” *Social Indicators Research* 148, no. 2 (2020): 395-415.

⁴⁸ The population of Russia, at least before the EU sanctions, had deep distrust in national politicians and a high level of trust in the EU. The EU has been perceived as a superior regional organization and the populations of REAs have a high regard for and trust in the EU.

of international trust—the crucial component of successful RI—is not always unidirectional and requires special consideration.

Concluding Remarks

REAs lack trust, both nationally and regionally, which seems enough to prevent them from engaging in RI. Nevertheless, political autocracies are still interested in trying to imitate the regionalism that emerged among REDs, in order to have economic benefits or to provide fellow autocracies with rhetorical support endorsing non-democratic practices and to demonstrate to the world that they are not disadvantaged in allies because of their regime type. Mimicking the TROs of REDs has become a repeated pattern of behavior for REAs. For example, the Treaty of the SADC has references to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.⁴⁹ After the negotiation of Turkish membership in the EU was deadlocked, Turkey switched to an effort toward closer cooperation with the SCO. The examples of this behavior are multiple and suggest that REAs are motivated to demonstrate to the world the existence of regional alternatives for them, even when there are no clear economic benefits or security concerns associated with the effort.

In any specific instance, many other factors are likely to play a role. Regionalism is not an imperative; it is a conscious (and potentially costly) policy choice. Granted, it has become so widespread in contemporary international relations that “everyone seems to be doing it.” Nevertheless, it seems possible to distinguish between not only the choice to join, but also whether those who do are genuinely committed to working with it and, hence, whether the subsequent unit RC or RI is likely to become effectual. In what follows, we outline some further considerations concerning what these more specific factors might be, yet their detailed analysis must stay on our agenda for future investigation.

We end with a consideration of the most obvious factors leading to integration and demonstrate how they can all fail because of one single issue—the political regime of the national state.

1. *Prior density of intra-regional trade and investment.*⁵⁰ This is one of the most important prerequisites for successful RI. We will consider this and following issues within the context of post-Soviet Eurasia. All former Soviet republics were (and still are) deeply interconnected in terms of inter-

⁴⁹ Article 4 (c) Principles, *Consolidated Text of the Treaty of the Southern African Development Community* (October 21, 2015), p. 9, https://www.sadc.int/files/5314/4559/5701/Consolidated_Text_of_the_SADC_Treaty_-_scanned_21_October_2015.pdf (accessed March 12, 2020).

⁵⁰ Compare to the Relative Acceptance Ratio of Karl Deutsch. See Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*.

regional trade and infrastructure, especially, but not only, regarding gas and oil pipelines, which contributes to the high interdependence of these states—a single supply chain and high density of prior intra-regional trade turned into an obstacle for democratization of the region and declined chances for RI.

2. *Geographic proximity.*⁵¹ The Soviet government invested tremendous effort in fostering transport interconnection across the vast Soviet republics: Eastern European republics were closely connected through one of the largest train systems to have existed in the twentieth century, to Central Asian states as well as to the Caucasus. All Soviet republics were linked through shared borders and geographic proximity. Beyond the former USSR, democratic Mongolia is surrounded by autocratic China and Russia. Therefore, despite geographic proximity and continuity, it firmly abstains from involvement in multiple TROs launched by them.
3. *Shared historical experiences* (especially war and its aftermath but remembering that these can be recalibrated in the course of RC or RI). Being republics of the USSR, all the former Soviet states share a century of history (e.g., all were involved in World War II as one united front). This apart, a century of shared history meant that their populations were heavily influenced by the same powerful ideology of Marxism–Leninism that penetrated every single day of their lives, from their formative years starting from pre-school to the universities, affecting them in work places, as well their leisure time, through well-developed mass media and cinematography. Shared historical experiences otherwise should be a significant driving factor for RI if democratization were more advanced in the region.
4. *Agreement concerning international policy objectives.*
Related to the above, the convergence of general

⁵¹ Zipf's law and the advantage of internal lines of communication. For Siph's law, see David M. W. Powers, "Applications and Explanations of Zipf's Law," in *NeMLaP3/CoNLL98: New Methods in Language Processing and Computational Natural Language Learning*, ACL, ed. David M. W. Powers (1998), pp. 151-160, <https://www.aclweb.org/anthology/W98-1218.pdf> (accessed March 29, 2020).

international policy objectives was transmitted by government-controlled mass media that presented a particular image of the enemy (traditionally, the West, in general, and the United States, specifically).

5. *Presence/absence of a hegemon* (willingness to pay the initial costs, and to provide a disproportionate share of the benefits) is another feature of successful modern integration, and also can be found in post-Soviet Eurasia. Russia enthusiastically launched various regional organizations, paying their costs (followed by only one TRO launched by China in the post-Soviet space—the SCO).
6. *Cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious homogeneity* are only relatively important, yet they are present in post-Soviet states due to the legacy of the USSR. *Religions were successfully rooted out by the Soviet government and substituted by the ideology of Marxism—Leninism.* One single language (Russian) was obligatory across Soviet republics and until this day remains a *lingua franca* in its TROs, and is sustained in post-Soviet republics through Russian mass media (that admittedly has a higher quality and is more entertaining than local mass media, especially across Central Asian states). As a result, Russian is widely spoken across many post-Soviet states. On paper, the next most naturally harmonious region in the world would seem to be the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and it has one of the weakest records of RC (to say nothing of RI).

While scoring excellently on all the above factors traditionally associated with successful RI, the former Soviet republics all lack one important ingredient—a consolidated national democratic regime. The importance of a national political regime in the studies of comparative regionalism is often taken for granted within the studies of the theory of regional integration and cooperation in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Though it is often automatically present as an empirical control variable, its theoretical dimension requires further scrutiny and attention. This study aspired to contribute to further theoretical considerations of the nexus of political regimes and regional cooperation and integration. This nexus is arguably important in the context of studies of democracies, autocracies, and hybrids that should stay on the agenda for future theoretical debate and consideration.