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Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,
Comparative Designs (REGov)

Regional institutions and the environment in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This contribution is based on a set of reflections presented at the REGov Workshop. These reflections were offered as part of a panel discussion around the topic “Environmental regions in multilevel governance.” Additional presentations provided in the context of this panel discussion include those of Ron Witt, United Nations Environment Programme, and Olivier Graefe, University of Fribourg (this volume). Webcasts of all presentations are available at <http://www.reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>. © 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Keywords: Environmental regionalism; Central and Eastern Europe; LRTAP; Environment for Europe Process; Regional seas; EU accession.

1. Environmental Regionalism in Europe

The comparative study of regionalism draws on multiple disciplines and subfields, among them comparative politics and the emerging subfield of comparative environmental politics, and the rapidly expanding literature on multilevel governance (Andonova, 2004; Steinberg & VanDeveer, forthcoming; Selin & VanDeveer, 2009; Schreurs, Selin & VanDeveer, 2009). To begin, one must accept that there are multiple environmental regionalisms in Europe – multiple regionalisms and multiple forms of environmental regionalism (Balsiger & VanDeveer, 2010). These regionalisms are institutionalized in highly contested political processes, the analysis of which engages power and rational interest perspectives as well as norm-based perspectives in the study of politics. In fact, by way of example, even the region invoked in the title of the paper – Central and Eastern Europe – is, at the same time, situated within a broader conception and set of institutions at the larger “European level” even as it includes numerous, geographically smaller but no less contested regionalisms (VanDeveer, 2004).

Environmental regionalisms in Europe have histories that embed them in larger institutions and discourses. For example, “Europe”, despite how deeply divided politically it was during the Cold War period, had state actors and scientific and technical actors that sought to build spaces in which to cooperate. Environmental issues and

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challenges emerged as one such space for cooperation by the late 1950s, as illustrated by the founding and construction of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Austria. We see, over the course of the Cold War period, the creation of ‘safe spaces’ for East-West cooperation around environmental issues such as acid rain and other long-range transboundary air pollution concerns and/or the efforts to reduce pollution inputs into the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas (Haas, 1989; Levy, 1995; VanDeveer, 2000). Such “regional commons” – air sheds and watersheds – framed politically acceptable environmental cooperation during this period. The arrival of the 1990s democratization and Europeanization processes across much of Europe, particularly with reference to Central and Eastern Europe, witnessed the regular framing of regional environmental cooperation in these terms (Andonova, 2005). That is, regional environmental cooperation was put into service for democratization and Europeanization goals, and it has benefited tremendously from these overarching political, economic and social processes.

Over the course of the last five-plus decades, Europe has come to play host to an extremely dense set of interstate and transnational environmental institutions, which together serve to internationalize and Europeanize states and societies across Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, the environmental content of CEE environmental policies, implementation efforts and discourses have all been substantially impacted by this dense institutionalization (Andonova, 2004, 2006; Carmin & VanDeveer, 2005). Our research posits three mechanisms of international influence within this densely institutionalized set of regional cooperation arrangements: normative action and knowledge diffusion; regulatory commitments; and capacity building programs (Andonova & VanDeveer, forthcoming). These mechanisms of influence are explored via analysis of four cases of regionally framed environmental cooperation: the Conventional on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution (LRTAP) and its associated agreements and programs; the Environment for Europe process; regional seas cooperation regimes; and the EU Accession process. All four cases have been the subject of substantial scholarly literatures and several years of research by the authors.

2. Four Cases of European Environmental Regionalism

The four cases discussed briefly here – LRTAP, the Environment for Europe Process, regional seas cooperation and EU accession – illustrate the multilayered regionalisms at work in Europe. LRTAP cooperation was launched during the Cold War in the late 1970s. By this time, extensive discussions of air and water pollution challenges had been ongoing in Western countries (and some others) for several years. However, the notion that such pollution traveled long distances and damaged environments far from its sources was relatively new, contested and not yet well demonstrated. The challenge, therefore, for countries such as those in Scandinavia, was to define and construct regionally framed scientific and technical research and regional policymaking cooperation. As such, EMEP was founded to gather and assess standard air pollution data across European countries and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe was chosen as an institutional home for cooperation between scientists and state actors from across the East-West divide. In fact, UNECE was chosen precisely because it was among the few intergovernmental organizations in Europe that included wide membership across Cold War competitors. Regionally framed scientific and technical research helped to establish that air pollution does, indeed, travel long distances, across borders and cause ecological, physical and human harm where it is deposited. Early researchers created “blame matrices” – tables and charts listing how much of particular pollutants each country exported (and to whom) and how much (and from whom) each country imported emissions. Such work, and the policy discussions around it, helped to construct and frame regional (European) air pollution, as well as to justify further research and political action. As scientific and technical research and policymaking developed together within LRTAP, blame matrices were left to history and critical loads mapping and differing risks and damage from transboundary pollution came to dominate discussions. The ratcheting up of regional air pollution regulation under LRTAP involved a complex interplay of regional influence on both domestic politics and international collaboration (Andonova 2004 and 2006; Levy 1995; Wettstad 2002)

In contrast to LRTAP, the Environment for Europe process was launched at the end of the Cold War era, upon the initiative of the Czechoslovak environment minister in the newly democratic, post communist Central and Eastern Europe. In this instance, an initiative to address regionally shared environmental challenges was framed

explicitly in democratization terms – that environmental protection requires democracy, access to information and democratic participation within civil society (Andonova 2005). The Environment for Europe process brought together state and civil society actors from across Europe, attempting to energize democratic governance even as it is pushed for planning and action to engender environmental protection. This process helped to justify the creation of the European Environmental Agency (EEA) and the Aarhus Convention on access to information.

Two other forums of regional cooperation which illustrate the multiple environmental regionalisms at work in Europe included a set of regional seas cooperation arrangements, such as those around the Baltic and Mediterranean seas (cooperation that began in earnest in the 1970s) and the process of EU accession from the 1990s to the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the EU. Regional seas cooperation, like LRTAP, demonstrates that changes in discursive framing can occur over time and that constructing basic institutions for scientific and for policy cooperation are justified by constructing regionality (VanDeveer, 2004). For example, Baltic cooperation was heavily technocratic from the 1970s through the 1990s, carefully building consensus among Baltic States on very narrowly framed joint, highly technical guidelines for policy. Since the early 1990s, however, much more expansive cooperation has occurred, including renegotiations of a regional treaty and the inclusion of more civil society actors, more local government actors and a broader set of issues including sustainable development and historical protection and shared regional heritage under the umbrella of regional environmental protection. Furthermore, Baltic cooperation has become, in part, a vehicle for the implementation of EU policies among the Baltic sea states which are also EU members (all but Russia, in fact) (Selin & VanDeveer, 2004).

As the process of the accession of the Central and East European countries to the EU accelerated, much more of the regional political activity was premised on harmonizing the environmental policies of candidate states with those of the EU (Andonova 2004). Of particular importance here, were a plethora of programs designed to enhance state and civil society sector capacity to translate, understand, enact and implement EU policies in the post-communist states in the region. The accession process also involved an extensive, iterated review of harmonization and implementation progress around the Baltic and larger CEE region, some of which reveals that newer member states increasingly face a set of environmental governance challenges similar to those faced by older EU member states (Carmin & VanDeveer, 2005).

3. Multiple European Environmental Regionalisms

In closing, it is clear that multiple environmental regionalisms exist in Europe and that a dense, multilayered regional institutionalization of environmental science and policymaking institutions has developed over time. This dense institutionalization, and the many mechanisms of transnational influence that are embedded in it, have had significant impacts on the environmental content of state policies, organizational structures and societal debates across CEE. The four fora discussed briefly here illustrate that European regional environmental cooperation is both a product and a producer of regionality – in scientific research and policymaking and political cooperation. Yet, a final caution remains in these discussions of complex, multilayered regionalisms across Europe. Namely, that regional politics remains highly contested and that, despite significant transnational influence, much local, state/national and regional level difference remains. Our focus on the “regional” cannot be mistaken for a claim of consistent or symmetrical institutional or policy convergence in each region, or across regions.

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