**Regionalization Reimagined:**

**Institutional and Legal Dimensions in an Era of Global Transformation**

**Abstract**

It is widely believed that globalization is receding, as evidenced by the loud political statements that "globalization is over." This shift, along with the broader transition to a multipolar world order, forms the basis for this study, which examines a new wave of regionalization as a reaction to the fragmentation of international law and the weakening of universal international norms. This trend is compounded by a decrease in the effectiveness of universal international organizations and a corresponding increase in the role of regional institutions. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the legal and institutional foundations of regionalization, identifies the key characteristics of this phenomenon, and evaluates its impact on national legal systems and international relations. It examines the theoretical approaches, institutional mechanisms and legal frameworks underlying the sustainable development of regional associations, as well as the phenomenon of legal regionalization and related problems in specific regional contexts. The results of the study show that the success of regionalism requires reliable institutional structures, harmonization of legal norms and consideration of socio-cultural factors. Special attention is paid to the Eurasian space as a clear example of the institutional transition to a more structured form of regionalism. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to understanding the dynamics and complexities of the new wave of regionalization, offering timely information on its implications for international relations, international law, and the evolving architecture of global governance.

**Key words:** Eurasian integration, international law, international relations, Legal unification, Regionalization, Supranational structures.

**Introduction**

Reports describing the decline of the globalization era are accompanied by the claim that the world is increasingly shifting toward regional blocs and alliances. Observers note that the regionalization of global politics effectively signifies its fragmentation into multiple regional segments, as major powers and blocs seek regionally driven solutions to local challenges, thereby reducing the influence of distant external actors. With older global alliances receding, regional cooperation and integration processes have become more relevant than ever. This reorientation is closely associated with the rise of multipolarity and the diminishing trust in globalist models.

Regionalism is therefore emerging more prominently as an alternative: new trade blocs are forming, and security alliances and partnerships are being strengthened. Even in the economic sphere, the trend is clear: governments and corporations are “looking closer to home and to trusted partners” in pursuit of more resilient development models. Recent research provides strong indications that the era of globalization may be ending (Paul, 2023; Popa & Chistruga, 2023), giving way to an era of regional supply chains, friend-shoring, and localized production.

It is important to note, however, that not all experts consider globalization to be entirely obsolete—some refer to “slowbalisation” (a slowing of globalization) rather than a complete rupture of global ties (Brugora, 2023). Nonetheless, in geopolitical discourse, the narrative of globalism’s end has gained momentum, reinforced by concrete measures such as trade wars, sanctions, and the reshaping of spheres of influence. Taken together, these developments lay the groundwork for a new wave of policy-driven regionalization within global politics.

At the current stage of global development, the world is experiencing an intensification of regionalization processes. This trend is emphasized in several authoritative studies (Scott & Storper, 2003; Karpovich, 2022; Grugel & Hout, 2003; Lechner, 2009; Hirata et al., 2013; Kim & Shin, 2002; Wang & Sun, 2021). Since the second half of the twentieth century, increasing regional activity has contributed to the emergence and evolution of interstate cooperation. This global movement, known as "new regionalism" (Ethier, 1998; Hettne, 2003; Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003; Mittelman, 2011), represents the development of regional relations in response to modern global challenges and threats. Countries are shifting from traditional interstate structures to more complex and multi-level development models.

The mid-1980s witnessed a significant increase in the number of integration projects in different regions worldwide, transforming regionalism into a global phenomenon with a substantial impact on the global economic architecture and security systems (Radziyevska & Us, 2020). Currently, over 150 regional organizations are functioning, holding summits and forums that vary in both areas of interaction and the nature of the legal acts they adopt (Kurbanov, 2022). In our view, new regionalism differs from traditional forms of regional cooperation in several key characteristics that reflect the dynamic and complex nature of modern international relations.

First, the increasing intensity and proliferation of regional organizations. In recent decades, the number of regional organizations has grown significantly, highlighting the rising importance and demand for regional cooperation. These organizations operate across diverse domains, ranging from economic and political integration to security and cultural collaboration.

Second, multidimensionality, characterized by the diversity of cooperation spheres. New regionalism encompasses all aspects of public life, including economics, politics, culture, security, science, technology, logistics, and beyond. Participating states engage in multilateral agreements designed to foster comprehensive development and strengthen intergovernmental and transnational ties.

Third, a defining characteristic is multi-vector engagement, which entails the simultaneous participation of states in multiple regional organizations. Across various regions, countries frequently hold memberships in multiple international regional alliances, enabling them to adopt a more flexible and effective approach to addressing challenges and capitalizing on opportunities across a wide spectrum of cooperation areas. This strategic positioning allows states to optimize their foreign policy and economic strategies while adapting to the rapidly evolving global landscape.

Fourth, multi-format governance, reflected in the existence of various levels and mechanisms of interaction. Regional organizations encompass intergovernmental structures as well as sectoral governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations, facilitating cooperation between state and non-state actors in pursuit of shared objectives.

Fifth, the concept of a "region" is undergoing a profound transformation within the framework of new regionalism. The traditional geographic definition is giving way to a more flexible interpretation, emphasizing shared interests and common objectives that unite states and territories regardless of their geographic proximity. Modern regions often exhibit a transboundary nature, emerging from strategic considerations that enhance their ability to respond effectively to global challenges and opportunities. This shift, in turn, stimulates the development of new forms and mechanisms of international cooperation.

For example, a contemporary interpretation of regionalism may encompass entities such as the Euro-Atlantic region, which integrates North America and Europe, or the Eurasian region, which connects countries from the post-Soviet space and Asia, akin to organizations such as BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Similarly, the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) unites member states based on linguistic and cultural identity, illustrating how regionalization processes are increasingly shaped by strategic, cultural, and identity-driven factors rather than strict geographic boundaries.

In our view, one of the most significant trends in global development is the consolidation of new centers of power, including global regions that are becoming fundamental components of the 21st-century international system. This phenomenon is not merely a geopolitical shift but rather a profound and structural transformation of the global order, encompassing all levels of international relations.

The aim of this study is to examine the legal and institutional frameworks of regionalization as a process of regional interaction, which involves the integration of states to foster cooperation in various spheres of public life that are of mutual interest and contribute to the formation of a distinct regional space or governance structure. This research seeks to identify the key characteristics and defining features of this phenomenon and assess its implications for national legal systems and international relations.

**Methodological Approach**

The specificity and complexity of this research topic necessitate the application of a comprehensive set of general and specialized scientific methods of inquiry, including analysis, synthesis, comparison, analogy, deduction, induction, abstraction, as well as the comparative legal method, the formal legal method, and the method of political and legal modeling.

Grounded in the principle of comprehensiveness, this study examines both the political and socio-economic dimensions of the formation and development of international regional law. The analysis of international legal regulation concerning the subject of this study is conducted in a systematic correlation with the examination of the organization and functioning of international institutional systems.

A secondary data analysis was performed, incorporating existing sociological studies, reports, and publications on the development of regional integration associations. A comparative analysis was employed to assess various international practices and regionalization strategies. The integration of data from multiple sources—including sociological research, international case studies, statistical data, and empirical findings—enabled the construction of a holistic perspective on the dynamics and transformation of the new wave of regionalism.

Forecasting future trends and evaluating the impact of legal developments support the formulation of recommendations for the establishment of a distinct branch of international law—regional law—as well as the codification of Eurasian legal frameworks. The application of document analysis methods, including the review of official documents and policymakers' statements, facilitated an in-depth examination of the formation and evolution of Eurasian integration and the prospects for further cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and external actors in global governance.

**Literature Review**

Regionalization as a scientific concept has gained broad recognition through the works of scholars such as Van Langenhove (2016), Kacowicz (1999), and Storper (1997). In their studies, they conceptualize regionalization as the process of forming economic and political blocs that seek deeper integration and coordination at the regional level. Hveem (2000) further interprets regionalization as a response to the challenges of globalization, providing states with an opportunity to engage more effectively in an evolving global economic landscape. In essence, regionalization involves countries organizing into closer regional economic and political units in order to better navigate and influence the global system. This phenomenon is inherently multidimensional, encompassing not only economics and politics but also legal, institutional, and socio-cultural facets, all of which have been explored in an extensive body of literature.

Classical theories of regionalization establish the foundational understanding of contemporary regionalization processes. Key theoretical contributions by Söderbaum (2012), Warleigh-Lack (2006), Hirata et al. (2013), and Väyrynen (2003) underscore the significance of supranational structures and intergovernmental cooperation in the context of a globalizing world. These scholars argue that regionalization functions as a strategic response to global challenges, aimed at reinforcing regional ties to enhance the competitiveness of regions in the global arena. From this theoretical perspective, the surge of regionalism since the late 20th century—often termed the “new regionalism” (Ethier 1998; Hettne 2003; Söderbaum & Shaw 2003; Mittelman 2011)—represents a qualitative shift in how states organize themselves. Unlike earlier, state-centric models of international cooperation, new regionalism is marked by increasing complexity and multi-level governance, reflecting the dynamic and complex nature of modern international relations. Importantly, the new wave of regionalization is distinguished by several characteristics. Scholars note an intensification and proliferation of regional organizations worldwide, as evidenced by the dramatic increase in the number of regional groups since the 1980s (Radziyevska & Us 2020). These organizations span diverse domains—from trade pacts and security alliances to cultural and technological cooperation—illustrating the multidimensionality of regionalization (Kim & Shin 2002; Wang & Sun 2021). States often engage in multi-vector regionalism, simultaneously participating in multiple regional organizations to pursue flexible strategies across different issue areas. This reflects a more complex, overlapping understanding of what constitutes a “region.” Indeed, modern regional constructs are no longer confined strictly to geographic proximity; they increasingly emphasize shared interests, identities, or strategic objectives that unite states and communities (e.g., the notion of a Euro-Atlantic region bridging North America and Europe, or a broader Eurasian region including post-Soviet and Asian states). Such reimagined regional spaces demonstrate that regionalization is as much a socio-political construct as a geographic one, shaped by strategic considerations, cultural and identity linkages, and common goals (Karpovich 2022). In short, the theoretical literature paints regionalization as an adaptive phenomenon—one that evolves in tandem with global transformations, enabling states to collectively address challenges and opportunities that transcend national boundaries.

While the literature on regionalization is rich and spans multiple dimensions, notable gaps remain in our understanding. Most existing studies have focused on the broad political and economic aspects of regional integration, or on high-level legal and normative debates, but relatively few have delved into the nuts-and-bolts legal and institutional mechanisms that underpin regional legal orders. Scholars like Martineau (2009) and Shongwe (2015) acknowledge the phenomenon of regional legal fragmentation, yet the field has paid insufficient attention to how unified regional legal spaces are actually constructed, maintained, and made to interact with domestic legal systems. Questions such as the legal techniques for reconciling regional norms with national constitutions, the role of regional courts in shaping national jurisprudence, or the use of soft law guidelines to incrementally harmonize laws, have not been fully answered in the comparative regionalism literature. There is also a paucity of empirical studies on newer or less formal regional projects’ legal dimensions, beyond the well-trodden example of the EU. The current manuscript seeks to address these gaps by concentrating on the treaty-based legal integration processes and associated institutional models that facilitate regional legal unification. In particular, our study examines how international treaties and agreements serve as the legal foundation for regional organizations, and how these treaties are implemented through regional institutions (such as commissions, courts, and secretariats) to create an operative legal order at the regional level. A key aspect of this inquiry is the interplay of “hard law” and “soft law” within regionalization. Hard law instruments – formal treaties, binding resolutions, and enforceable regulations – provide clear obligations and can directly alter state behavior by creating rights and duties under international law. Soft law, on the other hand, includes non-binding accords, guidelines, declarations, and standards which, while not legally enforceable, can influence state conduct and lay the groundwork for future hard law commitments. Our analysis pays special attention to how soft law is often used within regional organizations to advance integration in politically sensitive areas where binding law is initially unattainable. Over time, these soft commitments can harden into binding agreements, a dynamic observed in various regional contexts (for example, ASEAN’s evolution from consensus-based norms to a charter with legal personality, or the gradual juridification of Mercosur). Additionally, this study explores different institutional models of regional integration – comparing, for instance, more supranational structures (as in the EU, where institutions can override national laws in certain fields) with more intergovernmental models (as in ASEAN or the African Union, which operate on consensus and respect for sovereignty). By analyzing a range of case studies, the manuscript sheds light on how institutional choices impact the development of a regional legal space and its relationship with member states’ domestic law. We investigate mechanisms such as the primacy of regional law, direct effect (whether individuals and companies can invoke regional law in national courts), and mutual recognition agreements, as tools that knit together national legal systems within a region. Through this focus, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the legal-institutional underpinnings of regionalization – an understanding that is crucial for assessing the future of regional blocs in the emerging multipolar world order. In conclusion, the literature review reveals that regionalization has been studied from numerous angles – theoretical, economic, political, legal, institutional, and socio-cultural – reflecting its multidimensional impact on the international system. There is a clear trend in both scholarship and global politics toward recognizing regional blocs as key units of the world order, particularly in light of recent crises that have tested the limits of globalization and underscored the value of regional cooperation. The academic debate continues over how these regional developments fit into the international legal system, with competing visions of a unified global constitutional order versus a pluralistic patchwork of legal regimes. Against this backdrop, the present study carves out a niche by examining the concrete legal and institutional mechanisms that drive regional integration. By doing so, it aims to enrich the academic discussion of regionalization and provide insights into how regional legal spaces can be effectively and legitimately constructed, how they interact with national sovereignty, and what implications they hold for the future governance of an increasingly regionalized world.

Начало формы

Конец формы

**Institutional Foundations of Regionalization**

The institutional foundations of regionalization have been extensively examined in scholarly works, reflecting a consensus that robust institutions are crucial for successful integration. Lagendijk (2005), Fawcett (2003), and Acharya (2014) each highlight the concept of complex interdependence, wherein regional institutions serve as key pillars of the evolving international system (Acharya & Johnston 2007). These studies emphasize that sustainable regionalization necessitates strong institutional structures capable of managing cooperation and ensuring compliance among member states. Institutions—ranging from formal regional organizations to an array of councils, courts, and secretariats—provide the governance infrastructure that underpins regional cooperation. For example, the European Union (EU) is frequently cited as a model of effective institutionalized regional integration, with its intricate architecture of commissions, parliaments, and courts enabling deep supranational governance. In contrast, less institutionalized projects such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) have sometimes struggled to achieve comparable depth in integration (Telò 2013). Such comparisons underscore how variations in institutional design and strength can lead to divergent outcomes in regionalization processes.

Recent scholarship has sought to dissect the specific features of institutions that facilitate or hinder regional cooperation. Costa Buranelli (2019) and Koremenos et al. (2001) identify several key institutional characteristics that shape the success of regional arrangements—namely membership rules, the scope of issues covered, the degree of centralization, mechanisms of control, and the flexibility of arrangements. By analyzing variations in these features, they link institutional design to the particular cooperation challenges regions face (such as how to distribute benefits, manage a large number of participants, enforce agreements, or handle uncertainty). For instance, highly centralized and rule-based institutions may better enforce compliance but could demand greater sovereignty concessions, whereas more flexible, intergovernmental designs might preserve state autonomy at the cost of weaker enforcement. The literature thus suggests that institutional design is a careful balancing act: successful regional organizations must be strong enough to coordinate and bind members to common rules, yet viewed as legitimate and acceptable by sovereign states. Overall, the institutional perspective in regionalization studies reinforces that behind any effective regional bloc lies a foundation of organizations and legal-institutional mechanisms that orchestrate cooperation, resolve disputes, and gradually build a sense of shared regional governance.

Regional institutions have gained increasing prominence in global politics. Their characteristics and effectiveness vary considerably—some are highly bureaucratic, while others are informal and flexible. They also differ in terms of inclusivity, decision-making procedures, and adherence to the principle of non-interference (Acharya & Johnston, 2007). Like international organizations, regional bodies also possess supranational and intergovernmental attributes, which enable them to formulate binding decisions for member states and monitor their implementation. These characteristics are widely acknowledged in academic literature (Sadurski, 2015; Pasechnyk, 2023 Abikenov et al., 2019; Luzina & Khamzin, 2022; Hirst & Thompson, 1995).

The institutionalization of regionalization involves the creation of effective mechanisms for interaction and decision-making. This process includes the development of legal frameworks, the establishment of common standards and norms, and the promotion of institutional transparency and accountability. The legal foundations for regional institutions are established through international treaties, agreements, and conventions, which define the rights and obligations of member states, dispute resolution mechanisms, and decision-making procedures.

A key component of the institutionalization of regionalization is the establishment of common standards and norms across various sectors. These may include standards in trade, environmental protection, education, healthcare, energy, pharmaceuticals, logistics, and technical regulations, all of which facilitate policy harmonization and enhance intergovernmental cooperation among states.

The institutionalization of regionalization, in our view, is based on several theoretical approaches, including neofunctionalism, the intergovernmental approach, and the theory of regional dominance. These theories provide distinct explanations for the formation of regional blocs and the legal mechanisms that ensure their stability and development.

1. The core principle of neofunctionalism is that economic cooperation among states gradually fosters political integration, necessitating new governance structures at the supranational level. This phenomenon, known as "spillover," suggests that integration in one domain (e.g., deepening trade relations) creates pressure for further integration in other areas (e.g., the harmonization of rules and regulations). Supranational institutions, such as the European Commission within the EU, advance this process by proposing policy measures that prioritize the collective interests of the union over those of individual member states.

Supranational institutions serve as fundamental mechanisms for the implementation and sustainability of integration processes. They exercise functions that extend beyond national jurisdictions, including legislative authority, regulatory oversight, and judicial competence. The EU exemplifies the effective application of neofunctionalist principles. The establishment and consolidation of institutions such as the European Commission and the European Court of Justice have significantly advanced integration in key policy domains, including trade, agriculture, competition law, and environmental regulation.

While neofunctionalism has been criticized for its overly optimistic assumptions regarding the ability of supranational institutions to override national interests (Niemann, 2021), its theoretical contributions remain fundamental to understanding regional integration dynamics. Events such as the Eurozone debt crisis and Brexit illustrate that national sovereignty and cultural differences can slow down or even reverse integration processes.

2. The intergovernmental approach is founded on the premise that national governments are the principal and most influential actors in international politics. These actors engage in cooperation to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes while simultaneously striving to avoid any diminution of their national sovereignty. The key principles of the intergovernmental approach include: voluntary agreements based on consensus and the right to veto; diplomatic negotiations as the primary mechanism of decision-making; restrictions on the authority of international organizations.

In practice, the intergovernmental approach is evident in the operations of organizations such as the Council of Europe, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). These organizations adhere to principles of consensus and non-interference in domestic affairs to promote regional cooperation and integration.

3. 3. The theory of regional dominance argues that leading states are the primary actors in creating and sustaining regional integration structures. These dominant states leverage their economic, political, military, and cultural resources to shape regional governance frameworks that align with their strategic interests. This theory differs from more traditional approaches, such as neofunctionalism or the intergovernmental approach, in that it emphasizes the asymmetric nature of power in regional systems.

In the contemporary world, regional integration serves as a significant catalyst for development. While the European model remains the most prominent example, comparable institutional structures exist in other regions, fostering integration and cooperation at the international level.

On the African continent, three major regional intergovernmental organizations play a pivotal role in integration: the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – which maintains a joint regional military force – and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which operates a common currency. These organizations contribute to the development of legal frameworks through international legal harmonization and unification.

A particularly notable institution is the African Union (AU), which functions as the primary integration mechanism for the continent. Notably, the AU has modeled its development on the European Union (EU). Its institutional architecture includes the Pan-African Parliament, which is envisioned as the future legislative body of the continent, the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the Peace and Security Council, as well as various technical committees and sectoral bodies that shape legal regulation and reinforce regional integration. According to the Agenda 2063 framework, the AU plans to establish key financial institutions, including the African Central Bank, the African Monetary Fund, and the African Investment Bank. These institutions are expected to facilitate regional integration and socio-economic development by playing a central role in resource mobilization and financial sector governance.

Integration processes are also ongoing in North and South America, albeit at varying levels of intensity. The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) – which replaced NAFTA – provides for the harmonization of technical standards, sanitary and phytosanitary regulations, as well as dispute resolution mechanisms, including recourse to international trade arbitration. While North American integration operates without supranational regulatory institutions, South American regional organizations remain in the early stages of development. In the Asia-Pacific region, the most influential and strategically significant regional organization is the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Meanwhile, on the Eurasian continent, the Eurasian Economic Union plays a key role in regional integration, promoting economic cooperation among its member states.

The institutional bodies of the EAEU hold the greatest scientific and practical relevance for this study.

Across Eurasia, approximately twenty regional structures operate, encompassing a broad spectrum of organizations, forums, and programs. The integration processes in this region exhibit distinct characteristics, shaped by historically established ties and a shared historical heritage among participating states. Cultural, social, educational, and linguistic commonalities provide favorable conditions for the deepening of integration processes. For the purposes of this study, the "Eurasian space" refers to the geopolitical and institutional boundaries of organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union EAEU, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), as well as other subregional international organizations within the Eurasian continent.

These organizations differ in membership composition and primary areas of activity. Within their respective frameworks, member states seek to offset slowdowns in integration within certain sectors by advancing cooperation in others. Frequently, states joining one regional organization incorporate provisions in their founding documents that encourage collaboration with other similar regional structures. In this context, states affiliated with one regional organization may simultaneously participate in others, including those operating within a competitive dynamic in the same geographical region.

The EAEU is evolving as an international legal entity, possessing a legal foundation that aligns with international norms and standards. Its institutional framework is designed to continuously support integration processes across diverse sectors among its member states. The institutional architecture of the EAEU comprises key governing bodies, including the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, the Eurasian Economic Commission, and the Court of the EAEU. These institutions form the cornerstone for the effective coordination and regulation of international relations among member states.

It remains premature to assert that EAEU institutions operate under a supranational model. Although Article 6 of the Treaty on the EAEU stipulates that decisions and directives issued by the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council and the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council are binding on member states, their implementation remains subject to national legislative procedures. This indicates that EAEU member states remain dependent on their national governments, and in certain cases – particularly concerning acts of the Eurasian Economic Commission – member states may propose amendments or annulments if such acts conflict with national priorities.

The primary challenges facing the EAEU institutional framework stem from disparities in socio-economic development and variations in resource potential among member states. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that the EAEU was established primarily as an economic union, with the objective of enhancing the development and competitiveness of its members’ national economies. As outlined in the Treaty on the EAEU, the institutions of the union primarily address economic issues, whereas political matters remain secondary and are likely to evolve in accordance with the deepening of integration over time.

The key objective in strengthening the EAEU's institutional framework is the harmonization and unification of member states’ legislation in priority areas of integration. To establish an efficient institutional environment, the EAEU must align legislative and regulatory frameworks in the economic, political, and social spheres, as well as implement mechanisms grounded in market principles and fair competition. Expanding the competencies of the Eurasian Economic Commission or establishing additional EAEU bodies designed to address the challenges of deeper integration would enable the union to transition to a more advanced stage of development, benefiting both the EAEU as a whole and its individual member states.Thus, the institutional framework of regionalization plays a critical role in establishing stable and effective regional organizations. Theoretical approaches, institutional structures, and practical implementation mechanisms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, creating the necessary conditions for advancing integration processes. The examination and development of institutional mechanisms within regionalization allow for the accommodation of national specificities and contribute to the effective implementation of joint initiatives and projects.

The institutional system operates as an organizational infrastructure, ensuring the regulation of interactions between international and national legal systems and identifying discrepancies in their application within domestic legislation. This system encompasses a range of institutions that not only ensure state compliance with international obligations but also facilitate the development and adoption of internationally recognized legal standards through normative processes. Among the primary external manifestations of such institutions are international organizations and entities vested with supranational authority.

**Legal Foundations of Regionalization**

The legal dimension of regionalization has become an increasingly important area of study, especially as regions develop their own norms and regulations. Burke-White (2003) and Preston et al. (2016) analyze the role of legal norms and institutions in the formation of regional associations, finding that the evolution of regional legal frameworks often parallels deeper integration. Klučka (2017) argues that any regional legal order must incorporate clear mechanisms for conflict resolution and compliance enforcement to ensure stability and predictability in integration processes. Indeed, many regional organizations have established judicial or quasi-judicial bodies (such as the European Court of Justice or the East African Court of Justice) and arbitration mechanisms to interpret regional treaties and settle disputes. The legal attributes of regionalization—treaties, agreements, regulatory standards, and even nascent regional jurisprudence—have been widely discussed in the context of well-developed cases like the EU and in emerging contexts such as ASEAN or the African Union. Jayasuriya (2010), Nakamura (2009), and Riegner (2022) each emphasize the importance of legal institutions and regulatory frameworks in shaping the governance of regional structures. They note that the efficacy of a regional bloc often hinges on the sophistication of its legal architecture, including the extent to which regional laws are adopted and implemented by member states.

Furthermore, scholars such as De Lombaerde & Rodriguez (2014) and Davidson (2009) explore the legal mechanisms that ensure the effective functioning of regional integration associations. Their studies underscore the role of international law and formal legal norms in regulating cross-border cooperation—ranging from trade and investment regulations to human rights protections within a region. Kembayev (2016) illustrates how legal harmonization and standardization across member states contribute to deepening regional integration, by reducing legal incompatibilities and building mutual trust among participants. For example, aligning national laws with region-wide standards (in areas like commercial law, environmental law, or migration policy) can significantly enhance the cohesion of a regional project. This strand of literature reveals a continuum of legal integration mechanisms, from “hard” law (binding treaties, common legislation, and enforceable directives) to “soft” law (non-binding guidelines, model laws, or best practice standards). Both hard and soft law instruments play complementary roles: hard law provides clarity and enforceability, while soft law offers flexibility and inclusiveness, often paving the way for later hard law agreements.

Within the legal scholarship on regionalization, a key debate has emerged concerning the nature of the international legal order in an age of regions: namely, the tension between global constitutionalism and legal pluralism. Proponents of a global constitutionalism perspective argue that despite regional fragmentation, international law should be viewed as a unified hierarchical system, with regional legal orders nested within or subordinate to overarching universal principles and institutions. This view seeks coherence and universal legal values, envisioning something akin to a constitutional framework at the global level that can guide and restrain regional arrangements (Sadurski 2015). By contrast, advocates of legal pluralism contend that the proliferation of regional legal regimes signifies a more decentralized and heterogenous global legal landscape. Rather than one universal order, multiple coexisting legal orders are evolving – some global, some regional, some functional – without a clear hierarchy among them (Koskenniemi 2007; Martineau 2009). From this pluralist viewpoint, the regionalization of law is not merely an extension of globalization but rather an alternative path: it creates multiple unified legal spaces at the regional level, which may operate alongside, or even independently from, universal international law. Martineau (2009) describes the discourse of fragmentation versus unity in international law as oscillating between “fear and faith” – fear that fragmentation (into regional or specialized regimes) undermines the coherence of international law, and faith that it allows more relevant and effective rules tailored to diverse contexts. This debate remains vibrant in current scholarship. On one hand, the emergence of regional courts, regional human rights regimes, and region-specific norms is seen as a challenge to the idea of one single, coherent international legal system (Hafner 2004). On the other hand, mechanisms like inter-regional dialogue and the referencing of universal norms in regional treaties indicate that regional legal orders often still situate themselves within a broader global normative framework. The global constitutionalism vs. pluralism debate thus centers on whether the trend toward regional legal integration ultimately strengthens the international rule of law through layered governance, or whether it risks creating self-contained legal silos that could erode the unity of international law.

Notably, the fragmentation of international law via regionalization has been examined by Martineau (2009), Shongwe (2015), and Hafner (2004) among others. These works acknowledge the growing importance of regional legal orders and their distinctiveness in specific fields (for instance, Europe’s legal regime for human rights or trade vs. Africa’s or Asia’s). Yet, they also point out that scholarly attention has only recently begun to grapple with the implications of these developments. In particular, there has been insufficient focus on the concrete legal and institutional mechanisms that facilitate the formation of unified regional legal spaces and on how these regional legal systems interface with national legal orders.

The development of international law within the context of regional international integration inevitably results in its fragmentation, arising from the adaptation of general international legal norms to specific regional needs based on regional particularities. In contemporary international legal doctrine, the concept of "autonomous regimes" has gained prominence, reflecting the tendency of regions to diverge from established global standards in the application of international law. This phenomenon underscores the inevitability of the evolution of regional international law, which contributes to legal fragmentation and may pose a challenge to the unity and coherence of the broader international legal order (United Nations, International Law Commission, Study Group & Koskenniemi, 2007).

However, both the regionalization and fragmentation of international law are intrinsically linked to the level and depth of regional integration, which, in this context, serves as a primary consideration for states, while international law functions as an essential regulatory instrument for integration processes. This is particularly evident in the European Union, where the unification of integration law closely resembles the harmonization of federal legislation within the competencies of a federal state (Koslowski, 1999).

The fragmentation of international law in regional contexts is a direct consequence of autonomous integration processes that adapt international legal norms to regional developmental needs. Furthermore, regional treaty-based legal unification is often regarded, both in legal scholarship and practice, as a more effective mechanism for regulating legal relations than universal treaty-based international unification (Schwenzer, 2016).

Regional law constitutes a body of legal norms applicable within a specific geographical region, governing interstate relations among member states. The theoretical foundations of regional law are based on key legal principles such as sovereignty, integration, and subsidiarity. Legal scholarship has extensively examined the formation of "integration law" (Azoulai, 2016) and "regional integration law" (Kembayev, 2016). Additionally, academic perspectives have emerged suggesting that distinct regional international legal systems (Kurbanov, 2016) and regional legal orders (Shelton, 2008) are developing within the broader framework of international law. These perspectives reflect the evolution of legal principles at the regional level, emphasizing their significance and distinctiveness in the context of globalization and the deepening of international integration.

In our view, the commonality of socio-economic relations, as a key factor in regional integration, is also a fundamental determinant in the process of regional legal unification. in conceptualizing "international legal space," scholars emphasize the significance of socio-cultural ties among the members of an integration entity, as well as the recognition of law as a fundamental value within these societies (Meyer, 2016). A legal space is premised on a shared understanding among participants of an international association regarding the importance of law as a unified and universally accepted regulatory framework for common integration processes. Consequently, at the regional level, the existence of socio-cultural unity is considered an essential precondition for legal unification, potentially surpassing economic factors in significance. Notably, one of the key drivers behind the political and economic integration of European states was their shared socio-cultural foundation.

A critical consideration in the development of a unified legal space is the preservation of the distinct legal identity of each participating entity, a concern frequently r ised by legal scholars. While this issue may not be of primary relevance in the context of universal (global) legal unification, it is far from peripheral in the context of regional legal unification. The extent to which this issue is politically and legally sensitive can have a substantial impact on the prospects for deepening integration processes. At the same time, underdeveloped intergovernmental socio-economic ties are unlikely to foster a cohesive international legal space, thereby reducing the necessity for extensive legal unification procedures. The so-called flexible models of legal unification largely preserve national legal identity, yet they fail to facilitate deeper international legal integration. This aspect is critically significant not only for the future trajectory of international legal unification but also for the harmonization of domestic legal frameworks in conformity with international law.

Traditionally, the implementation of international legal norms requires states to adapt their national legislation and regulatory frameworks in accordance with international agreements. This process entails the incorporation of international obligations into domestic legal systems, thereby facilitating the harmonization and standardization of legislative and administrative norms at the international level. The process comprises several key stages: incorporation of international norms into national legislation, harmonization of existing national laws with international standards, and the adoption of administrative procedures and mechanisms to ensure compliance with international obligations. However, this approach faces several limitations, including national priorities, divergences in legal systems, and the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms.

The establishment of an institutional and legal framework for unified international legal regional spaces necessitates the creation of specialized compliance bodies or international judicial institutions within the structures of relevant international organizations. These institutions serve as key mechanisms for the unification and harmonization of both international and national legal systems.

A distinguishing feature of such regional legal spaces is the extensive use of "soft law" instruments, which enhance the effectiveness of international treaties. This is achieved through the application of the "living law" doctrine, allowing legal norms to be adapted to evolving conditions.

To ensure compliance with international law, regional organizations must establish mechanisms for international legal accountability in cases of non-compliance. Although international organizations and courts possess limited enforcement powers to compel states to adhere to international standards, they play a critical role in monitoring and promoting compliance. To facilitate the implementation of treaty obligations by member states, regional integration organizations establish specialized compliance bodies endowed with monitoring and oversight functions. Such compliance mechanisms operate within both regional and universal international organizations and generally do not exhibit significant structural differences. Notable examples include monitoring bodies overseeing compliance with universal international treaties in the fields of human rights protection and transnational crime prevention.

Among the most prominent judicial institutions within regional integration frameworks are the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), the Court of Justice of the Andean Community, the Permanent Review Tribunal of MERCOSUR, the Caribbean Court of Justice, the Central American Court of Justice, and the Court of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA Court). Additionally, judicial bodies operate within regional organizations such as COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa), ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States), and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States).

Legal regionalization represents the formation of regional legal systems, which reflect the unique legal, cultural, and economic characteristics of the states involved. This process varies across regions and is influenced by geographical, cultural, and economic factors. For instance, the European Union (EU) exhibits a high level of legal integration, supported by a robust judicial framework and a comprehensive body of legislation governing relations between member states and EU institutions. The African Union (AU) aspires to legal integration but faces significant challenges due to political instability and economic disparities among its member states. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopts a flexible approach to legal integration, emphasizing state sovereignty and non-interference, which slows the process of legal unification.

The process of legal integration presents several key challenges, including: tensions between national sovereignty and international obligations, requiring a delicate balance between state autonomy and compliance with international legal norms; reconciling universal legal principles with regional specificities, ensuring that international norms are effectively adapted to national legal frameworks; institutional and legal divergences among states, which complicate the harmonization of regional legal systems; weak or underdeveloped regional institutions, which hinder the enforcement and implementation of regional legal norms; conflicts of interest between national and regional priorities, particularly in matters of economic cooperation, security, and governance; a lack of political will and reluctance to compromise, obstructing the development of regional legal frameworks.

The development of regional law encompasses several fundamental areas:

1) Regulation of trade, commercial relations, investment activities, and competition. These domains represent the core pillars of a stable and well-functioning regional legal system. The creation of a unified economic space requires the harmonization of legal norms and procedures to ensure consistency, predictability, and legal certainty across the region.

2) Development of social law, including labor relations, social security, migration, and education. The primary objective is to establish uniform legal standards and equal conditions throughout the region, thereby promoting social cohesion and economic mobility.

3) Regulation of environmental protection and sustainable resource management. This necessitates the adoption of common legal frameworks and regional environmental standards aimed at preserving ecosystems and fostering sustainable development.

4) Incorporation of human rights norms into regional legal systems. This process strengthens democratic institutions, enhances the protection of fundamental freedoms, and facilitates the harmonization of legal systems based on universally recognized principles, including human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The convergence of legal frameworks through shared normative values contributes to the long-term sustainability of regional legal systems.

Building on an analysis of these areas, it can be asserted that international regional law constitutes a distinct and specialized branch of international law. This field encompasses the regulation of various legal relations, including the establishment and dissolution of regional organizations, as well as the governance of interactions between such entities and their member states. A defining characteristic of international regional law is its role in coordinating intergovernmental cooperation within established regional structures, which operate across various sectors as defined in their founding treaties. Within this framework, the interaction of institutional structures plays a pivotal role in facilitating deeper legal and political integration, thereby enhancing regional governance and the achievement of common objectives.

The establishment of the EAEU has served as a catalyst for the development of a distinct body of regional and national legal acts, marking the emergence of a new legal domain – Eurasian law. This development underscores the necessity of adapting and harmonizing legal frameworks to ensure coordination and coherence within regional integration processes. This evolving legal field comprises a system of legal principles and norms that regulate economic, social, and other intergovernmental relations among EAEU member states. A distinctive feature of Eurasian law is its capacity to integrate diverse national legal systems into a unified legal order, thereby fostering deeper economic integration and enhancing the effectiveness of intergovernmental cooperation within the Union. As of today, more than 7,500 legal instruments have been adopted within the EAEU framework, encompassing both binding legal acts, such as decisions, directives, and international treaties, as well as soft law instruments, including recommendations, which collectively constitute the legal foundation of the Union. The significant volume of normative acts within the EAEU legal system confirms the structured consolidation of Eurasian law within the broader framework of international regional law.

The evolution of Eurasian law – both towards its recognition as an independent legal order and its continued function as a regional subsystem of international law—is shaped by the interplay of political, economic, and social factors within the integration process. Given that Eurasian integration remains an evolving legal framework, its conceptual model may take various forms, leading to multiple theoretical interpretations of its nature. At this stage, Eurasian integration represents a developing body of regional international legal norms aimed at the creation of a unified economic space among EAEU member states. This reality necessitates the consolidation of legal norms regulating Eurasian integration into a coherent legislative system and the establishment of a new legal discipline – Eurasian law. This concept has been supported by various scholars who have examined different aspects of Eurasian integration (Abikenov et al., 2019; Karliuk, 2016; Buribayev et al., 2024; Tkatova, 2010). The development of theoretical and methodological foundations for the further advancement of Eurasian law remains a pertinent and promising area of legal research.

A comparative study of regional interactions between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions reveals that the latter lags behind in several critically important aspects. In the Euro-Atlantic region, well-developed legal institutions actively promote the dissemination of democratic values. Organizations such as the Venice Commission and the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) operate not only in Europe but also in the Americas through the Inter-American Juridical Committee (CJI). Regional judicial bodies play a crucial role in this domain, including the European Court of Human Rights, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, whose jurisdiction extends across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. However, proposals for the establishment of an Asian or Eurasian Human Rights Court, as well as a Eurasian Human Rights Charter, remain at the developmental stage. This underscores the critical need to strengthen legal mechanisms for human rights protection in the Eurasian region to bridge existing gaps compared to more advanced legal systems.

**Conclusions**

This study has shown that, in the current environment marked by the weakening of universal international institutions, a new wave of regionalization is emerging. Against the backdrop of a crisis in global governance regimes, states are increasingly turning to regional formats to compensate for the declining effectiveness of universal mechanisms. The erosion of the post–World War II institutional framework has catalyzed a shift toward regional modes of cooperation, which are now viewed as viable alternatives for achieving collective goals amid a transforming global order.

A central conclusion of this study is that the sustainable development of regional organizations depends directly on the effectiveness of their institutional and legal frameworks. The long-term success of integration projects requires not only political will but also the creation of functional supranational institutions and coherent legal frameworks capable of ensuring the implementation of shared obligations. The findings emphasize that, without well-developed governance structures and a harmonized normative base, integration risks remaining fragmented and inconsistent. In the Eurasian context specifically, the completeness of the institutional and legal architecture of the EAEU is identified as a necessary condition for the effective operation of the “four freedoms” and for the deepening of intergovernmental linkages. Thus, institutional maturity and legal harmonization emerge as foundational factors in the long-term resilience of regional integration initiatives.

The study pays particular attention to the Eurasian region, which serves as an illustrative example of the dynamics identified above. On one hand, Eurasia has taken notable steps toward normative convergence and the establishment of supranational structures modeled on the European Union, including the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Court of the EAEU. These efforts indicate a deliberate commitment to constructing a robust legal foundation for integration. On the other hand, significant institutional and economic asymmetries persist, impeding the effective functioning of the regional legal order. These asymmetries are reflected in the disproportionate influence of a single member state and the limited jurisdictional scope of supranational bodies, which together constrain enforcement mechanisms. The Eurasian case thereby affirms the broader conclusion that regional integration projects require gradual institutional development and a balance of power among members in order to realize their potential within a reconfigured global legal landscape.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the conceptual clarification and systematization of regional law. The study refines the definition and interrelationship of key legal categories used to describe the law of integration groupings, thereby offering a more precise understanding of the place of regional law within the broader legal framework connecting national and international systems. The analysis engages critically with existing debates on the legal nature of integration regimes, drawing on examples such as the European Union and comparable structures. It considers various perspectives—ranging from those that regard regional law as a subset of international (interstate) law to those that view it as constituting a distinct supranational legal order. This theoretical engagement enables a structured synthesis of competing views and supports the conceptualization of regional law as an autonomous legal phenomenon that combines features of both international law and rules developed within institutional frameworks of integration.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study offers significant practical value through its analysis of legal harmonization mechanisms and the interaction between national and supranational legal systems. The research explores how regional organizations achieve legal coherence among their member states, ranging from the direct application of binding legal acts to the gradual alignment of legal norms through model laws, recommendations, and other instruments of soft law. Particular attention is given to the relationship between regional and domestic legal orders, including the resolution of normative conflicts and the establishment of legal primacy. The findings demonstrate that the success of integration efforts is largely contingent upon the degree to which harmonized norms are incorporated into national legal systems. For example, insufficient legitimization and inconsistent implementation of EAEU legal instruments in certain member states have substantially hindered the operationalization of a cohesive Eurasian legal order. In this regard, the study sheds light on the delicate balance between state sovereignty and supranational legal commitments. Successful integration requires legal mechanisms that facilitate harmonization while preserving the core structures of national legal systems.

Synthesizing these findings, the study proposes an original conceptual framework that understands regional law as a flexible, multilayered normative system. Such a system operates within a context of legal pluralism and institutional asymmetry—two defining characteristics of contemporary integration regimes. In this framework, regional law is not conceived as a single, monolithic order, but as a dynamic structure composed of multiple interacting normative layers. These include treaty-based international legal foundations, the acts of supranational bodies (such as regulations, directives, and decisions), and national legislation adapted to meet regional obligations. The simultaneous coexistence of these various normative layers produces a condition of legal pluralism in which no single level holds automatic primacy. To ensure coherence in such a legal environment, dedicated mechanisms for coordination and conflict resolution are required to manage divergences between legal systems.

The proposed framework also incorporates the factor of institutional asymmetry, which manifests in the unequal distribution of power and resources within regional groupings. In practice, integration rarely evolves in a perfectly symmetrical manner: some states or institutions often assume dominant roles, while others play more marginal parts. The analysis reveals that failure to address these imbalances undermines the coherence of the legal order as a whole. For example, the disproportionate influence of the leading state within the EAEU has produced a “hub-and-spoke” model in which decision-making is disproportionately centralized. Such asymmetries demand that regional legal systems remain adaptive and responsive to shifting internal dynamics. The proposed framework thus conceptualizes regional law as a dynamic and evolving legal system, one that matures in parallel with the deepening of integration processes.

This conception is consistent with the current status of EAEU law, which may be described as a developing body of subregional international law that is acquiring supranational characteristics. Accordingly, regional law should not be viewed as a static collection of rules, but rather as a “living” legal system—one capable of evolving in response to the demands of legal pluralism and institutional asymmetry in the changing architecture of global governance.

To advance scholarly inquiry into regional legal integration, several research directions arising from this study warrant further exploration.

There is a need for deeper investigation into how soft law—such as nonbinding agreements, recommendations, and declarations—interacts with binding treaty-based norms in regional integration frameworks. It is essential to determine whether soft law can effectively complement hard law mechanisms, facilitate consensus-building, and under what conditions it transitions into legally binding commitments. Empirical evidence suggests that informal norms often reflect shared values and, over time, may influence the formation of binding legal instruments. Accordingly, the role of soft law in regional integration processes merits sustained scholarly attention.

The effectiveness of legal accountability structures within regional legal systems is another key area of research. Scholars should assess the capacity of existing instruments—such as supranational courts, compliance bodies, and sanction mechanisms—to ensure state adherence to obligations. Current practice reveals significant deficiencies in many integration frameworks. For instance, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) lacks supranational authority empowered to compel member states to judicial proceedings, resulting in bilateral resolution of disputes that bypass common institutions. Identifying and addressing these institutional gaps is crucial for enhancing the legitimacy, coherence, and enforceability of regional legal regimes.

A promising research avenue lies in analyzing the dynamic evolution of lawmaking and legal implementation within integration regimes—what may be referred to as the development of “living” regional law. This includes examining how real-world practices, judicial precedents from regional courts, and informal intergovernmental arrangements enrich and reshape formal legal norms. Studying this evolving dimension of law will illuminate how regional legal orders respond to emerging challenges—such as economic crises, technological disruptions, and social transformations—and how they sustain long-term relevance and adaptability.

Based on these findings, a set of practical policy recommendations is proposed for policymakers and legislators engaged in shaping regional integration processes.

There is a critical need to strengthen the institutional architecture of regional organizations, including their executive bodies, secretariats, adjudicative institutions, and regulatory commissions. Effective decision-making and implementation depend on empowered supranational institutions endowed with adequate authority and resources. In the absence of such institutions, even the most sophisticated legal agreements risk remaining unfulfilled. For example, the incomplete internal market and underdeveloped administrative capacity of the EAEU have thus far hindered the realization of its stated integration objectives. Enhancing institutional capacity will improve both the resilience of regional frameworks and their responsiveness to external shocks.

Legislatures in member states should prioritize the timely alignment of national legal systems with supranational legal instruments. Developing effective mechanisms for incorporating regional norms into domestic law is essential to ensure that legal commitments are operationalized rather than remaining nominal. Legislative harmonization reduces regulatory fragmentation, facilitates administrative cooperation across borders, and creates a more predictable legal environment for economic actors and citizens. Ultimately, the convergence of legal systems fosters consistency in the application of norms, strengthens mutual trust among member states, and supports the effective realization of integration goals.

Robust systems of compliance monitoring and legal accountability must be established or reinforced. Transparent procedures for tracking states’ fulfillment of their obligations, regular reporting requirements, and proportionate enforcement tools at the regional level are critical to ensuring rule adherence. For example, granting supranational bodies the authority to initiate proceedings or issue binding decisions could significantly improve compliance. In contrast, the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms allows states to circumvent collective institutions, resolve conflicts informally, and thereby erode the legitimacy of the regional legal order. A credible and impartial system of oversight will reinforce common legal standards and uphold the rule of law within regional frameworks.

The development and implementation of regional legal norms must be informed by the socio-cultural specificities of the participating states. Legal instruments should reflect the values, traditions, and public expectations of the societies they affect. Ignoring cultural context risks undermining the efficacy and legitimacy of even well-crafted legal initiatives. Comparative experience underscores the significance of cultural sensitivity. For instance, the “ASEAN Way” emphasizes consensus and respect for sovereignty, reflecting Southeast Asia’s distinct political and legal culture. In contrast, the European Union developed through more formalized, legalistic models consistent with Western European legal traditions. Policymakers should thus tailor integration models to local institutional cultures, levels of legal consciousness, and trust in public institutions. A culturally attuned approach can increase the legitimacy of legal reforms and improve their societal acceptance.

This research affirms the growing significance of regional legal systems amid the transformation of the international legal order. The institutional and legal dimensions of regionalization explored in this study reflect a fundamental shift away from a universalist model centered on global institutions toward a more complex, pluralistic legal architecture in which regional entities are central nodes. The findings demonstrate that well-designed and robust regional regimes not only address the limitations of multilateralism but also offer constructive pathways toward a more decentralized and adaptable global order.

The practical implications of this research offer a roadmap for enhancing regional institutions and deepening legal integration. The implementation of these recommendations—from institutional reform and legal harmonization to culturally responsive governance—will enable regional organizations to become more effective, legitimate, and accountable actors within the global legal system. In doing so, international law in the twenty-first century may evolve into a more resilient and context-sensitive order, in which global norms are realized through the dynamics of strong and adaptive regional partnerships.

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