

The EU and Regional and Sub-Regional Cooperation¹

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The EU (European Union) is an expression of very special regional cooperation. But how does the Union relate itself to other forms of regional cooperation taking place entirely or partly in its legal and institutional framework? Regionalism, in general, takes very different forms as a phenomenon linked with European integration. Various forms of regionalism can – to start with – be found within the EU in a more or less institutionalised shape. The EU seems to be supportive of regional and sub-regional cooperation as long as it remains compatible with the general principles and objectives of EU law. Taking into account the diversity of existing examples of regional cooperation within the EU, the Union can be considered to have found its *modus operandi* in accommodating the phenomenon within its own framework. This chapter focuses on this *modus operandi* by analysing forms of regional cooperation in the EU from different perspectives. First, it studies the key normative framework and the key parts of EU law affecting the role of regional cooperation. As all internal cooperation in the EU taking place among a smaller group of Member States is not necessarily ‘regional’, a key normative framework to be carefully studied here is the one of ‘differentiated integration’.

The second dimension of regional cooperation to be discussed concerns its political legitimacy as a part of European politics. How strong and legitimate is regionalism in the EU with respect to the identities or interests that it represents? This part of the chapter studies to what extent regional cooperation within the EU builds on a bottom-up approach, which is firmly anchored in the civil societies of the countries in question, including their political cultures and values. The EU has very different roles and forms of engagement in regional cooperation involving non-Member States, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Arctic Council (AC) and the Nordic Council (NC). A brief discussion on these forms as examples of regionalism in the Union’s context will take place at the end of this chapter.

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