

HOW MANY BUILDING BLOCKS DOES REGIONAL INTEGRATION REQUIRE? THERE IS NO READY-MADE BLUEPRINT, BUT THERE IS ONE FUNDAMENTAL TOOL: TRANSNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

This article examines the recurring crises of legitimacy, institutional stagnation, and waves of disintegration affecting contemporary regional integration processes. It begins from the premise that both the technocratic insulation posited by neofunctionalism and the top-down diplomacy theorized by liberal intergovernmentalism share the same blind spot: the marginalization of popular participation and civil society in community-building. As a theoretical and analytical alternative, the article argues that the resilience and sustainability of regional blocs depend on the incorporation of transnational democracy and multilevel governance. Through a Weberian-inspired comparative analysis of the European Union, characterized by legal-rational domination and a chronic democratic deficit, and the South American experiences of Mercosur and UNASUR, characterized by personalistic hyper-intergovernmentalism and the weakness of bodies such as Parlasur, the FCES, and social forums, it demonstrates that neither regulatory efficiency alone nor ideological affinity among political leaders can guarantee regional cohesion in the face of systemic crises. It concludes that the emergence of a cross-border public sphere capable of subjecting the decisions of regional blocs to civic scrutiny and inclusive deliberation is the indispensable structural requirement for assessing the legitimacy and survival of community institutions in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Intergovernmentalism, Multilevel governance, Neofunctionalism, Regional integration, Transnational democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, regional integration initiatives around the world have faced profound crises of legitimacy, institutional stagnation, and waves of disintegration. Whereas, at the end of the twentieth century, the European community paradigm and open regionalism initiatives in Latin America fostered the illusion of linear progress toward overcoming the rigidity of the nation-state, the contemporary landscape exposes the fragility of regional arrangements in the face of the rise of sovereigntist nationalism and ideological polarization. Against this backdrop, the literature on International Relations and Political Science is repeatedly called upon to answer a fundamental question: what and how many building blocks are required to construct resilient and lasting regional integration?

Historically, theoretical answers to this question have oscillated between at least two major paradigms. On the one hand, functionalist and neofunctionalist approaches (Mitrany, 1943; Haas, 1958) posited that integration would become consolidated through technocratic insulation and spillover from specific economic sectors into the political sphere. On the other hand, liberal intergovernmentalism (Hoffmann, 1966; Moravcsik, 1998) argued that regional blocs are nothing more than arenas for top-down negotiation in which national Executives retain a monopoly over bargaining and preference formation. In both models, however, direct popular participation and civil society involvement were relegated to a secondary position or treated as a late by-product of the institutionalization process.

The central argument of this article is that the recurring crisis affecting integration projects, visible both in the European Union's "democratic deficit" and Eurosceptic resistance and in the volatility of "regional coalition presidentialism" within Mercosur and UNASUR, stems precisely from this structural neglect. It is argued here that there is no predetermined institutional design or universal architectural formula for regional construction, particularly when the specificities of the Global South are considered. Nevertheless, there is one essential tool without which any regional arrangement becomes vulnerable to short-term changes in government: transnational democracy.

Conceptualized on the basis of contributions from contemporary political theory (Habermas, 2001; Held, 1995; Bohman, 2007), transnational democracy transcends mere intergovernmental cooperation and the creation of formal parliaments without deliberative powers. It involves the emergence of a cross-border public sphere capable of subjecting the decisions of regional blocs to public scrutiny, inclusive deliberation, and the exercise of postnational citizenship. Without effective mechanisms of democratic legitimation, integration processes remain trapped either in bureaucratic isolation or in dependence on fleeting and circumstantial ideological affinities among heads of state.

This article is conceived as a theoretical-conceptual essay supported by specific examples that substantiate its argument. To this end, it examines the trajectory of the European Union, where institutionalization has reached advanced levels but nonetheless faces popular skepticism, alongside ongoing and failed integration projects in Latin America, with an emphasis on Mercosur and UNASUR. These projects are marked by excessive intergovernmentalism and the instability of channels for citizen participation, as well as by an additional concern with preserving national democracies in view of the region's own history.

The article is divided into four sections. The first critically revisits the canonical contributions of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, highlighting the theoretical limitations of integration without a social foundation. The second section develops the conceptual framework of transnational democracy and multilevel governance. The third offers a comparative analysis of institutional dilemmas in Europe and Latin America. Finally, the concluding remarks return to the research problem and synthesize the theoretical and empirical implications of transnational democracy for the contemporary regionalism agenda.

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FROM TECHNOCRATIC ISOLATION TO THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL MERRY-GO-ROUND: THE THEORETICAL GAP OF INTEGRATION WITHOUT THE PEOPLE

An examination of the development of thought on regional integration makes clear how classical International Relations theories attempted to decipher union among states as though they were assembling an intricate institutional puzzle. Neofunctionalism, strongly inspired by postwar technical cooperation (Mitrany, 1943) and the European model (Haas, 1958), held that integration would occur through a process of progressive and inescapable interaction, advancing from economic interdependence into the political sphere. This dynamic, conceptualized as spillover^[1] (Lindberg, 1963; Schmitter, 1970), suggested that the resolution of technical problems by experts would create irresistible functional pressures for further stages of institutional development. By placing excessive confidence in technocratic efficiency and insulating bureaucratic elites from the electorate, this model ultimately fostered the dangerous illusion of linear automatism. It was expected that the convergence of interests in specific sectors would be sufficient to cement union among peoples, often disregarding the need for direct political support and adherence. By overlooking popular passions and contestation, neofunctionalism treated ordinary citizens not as active and sovereign agents of their own will, but as passive spectators of the economic benefits generated by elite sectors.

It was precisely in an attempt to formalize this mechanism of progressive expansion that Ernst Haas (1958) summarized the essence of neofunctionalist thought. In analyzing the dynamics of political unification in Western Europe, he defined the phenomenon in the following terms:

[...] the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new center, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing nation-states (Haas, 1958, p. 16).

This theoretical construction reveals the assumption that citizens' loyalties would gradually migrate to supranational bodies as the bloc's functional bureaucracies delivered practical results. Recent history has exposed the gaps in this fundamental assumption. The transfer of decision-making powers to

community bodies without a corresponding expansion of channels for popular participation and accountability generated profound distrust and a significant gap in political legitimacy (Habermas, 2001). Technocratic isolation, designed to shield strategic decisions from short-term electoral fluctuations, became an obstacle to an authentic sense of community belonging. National populations came to view regional institutions not as promoters and guarantors of stability, but as detached structures whose decisions were opaque and whose coercive power was troubling. This divorce between presumed technical effectiveness and popular validation created fertile ground for the emergence of sociopolitical resentment that accumulated over the decades. Thus, neofunctionalism's failure to incorporate popular participation into its explanatory architecture left regional blocs defenseless against the inevitable short-term crises that would require electoral support.

At the opposite end of this conceptual framework, intergovernmentalism emerged to restore the centrality of the nation-state to regional bargaining. Opposing supranational optimism, Stanley Hoffmann (1966) argued that unification encountered severe limits whenever it touched on matters of "high politics," in which state sovereignty took precedence over economic efficiency: "Nations prefer the uncertainty of autonomy to the certainty of imprisonment, even if the prison is gilded" (Hoffmann, 1966, p. 892).

From the perspective of liberal intergovernmentalism, advanced by Andrew Moravcsik (1993, 1998) on the basis of the premises of neoliberalism and complex interdependence (Keohane; Nye, 1977), regional integration operates fundamentally according to the logic of the "two-level game" formulated by Robert Putnam (1988). From this perspective, community-building amounts to the temporary alignment of the economic preferences of national Executives, structured around two interrelated stages: at Level II, the domestic level, pressure from interest groups is managed in order to consolidate the state's position; at Level I, the international level, top-down diplomatic bargaining takes place in pursuit of a possible zone of agreement. Although this interpretation has the unquestionable merit of dispelling the illusion of an inevitable superstate, it also confines regional politics to the closed rooms of presidential offices.

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Sovereignty remains monopolized by national elites, which instrumentalize diplomatic blocs according to circumstantial interests. Ordinary citizens reappear in this equation only indirectly and in fragmented form, filtered through domestic electoral institutions that rarely debate the course of regional integration transparently and systematically. By reducing civil society to the status of a secondary agent or merely a passive domestic electorate, liberal intergovernmentalism proved incapable of shielding regional blocs from extreme political volatility. When the cohesion of a regional project depends primarily on ideological affinity among the incumbents of the moment, any change in the national party-political landscape can paralyze or dismantle decades of accumulated cooperation. This structural vulnerability is precisely what marks the recent trajectory of integration initiatives in the Global South, where changes in government frequently result in the abrupt abandonment of strategic commitments (Malamud, 2005; Dabène, 2009; Pinto, 2019). Without an organized transnational social base demanding the continuation of the community project regardless of the prevailing ideology, diplomatic agreements become houses of cards, easily destroyed by nationalism and electoral populism. Moreover, the absence of a transnational public arena deprives these blocs of the deliberative dynamism needed to negotiate the complex redistributive conflicts that inevitably emerge over the course of integration.

The unintended convergence between neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism therefore lies in their shared fundamental blind spot: their disregard for popular democratic legitimacy as a driving force behind regionalism and integration founded on more solid ground. The former places its trust in the technical, and opaque, wisdom of the bureaucracy and in the congruence of economic interests; the latter confines integration to a zero-sum game played by governments intent on preserving their sovereign prerogatives. Both theoretical perspectives operated on the false premise that the sustainability of a regional union could dispense with the creation of a community of affect or a sense of cross-border belonging (Deutsch et al., 1957). They ignored the fact that any substantial transfer of political authority or economic regulation requires a corresponding increase in oversight, transparency, and accountability before national civil societies. This theoretical neglect was directly reflected in the

institutional practice of regional blocs, which grew and became more complex without establishing robust channels for popular scrutiny and active citizenship.

It is clear that integration without the people cannot withstand the forces of polarization. Without democratic support, any community arrangement remains vulnerable to crises of disintegration.

This fragility becomes unmistakable when we observe how popular dissatisfaction with the deliberations of bureaucratic summits is easily captured and manipulated by nationalist and reactionary rhetoric. In the absence of a regional public sphere in which the effects of integration can be openly debated, corrected, and redirected (Bohman, 2007), citizens and voters tend to perceive community institutions as alien forces that threaten national sovereignty and identity. Resentment toward distant elites provided ideal fuel for populist leaders to instrumentalize social discontent, presenting the fragmentation of regional blocs as the only means through which national populations could reclaim democratic control. This phenomenon, visible both in Europe through the rise of Eurosceptic currents (Taggart; Szczerbiak, 2004) and in Latin America through the persistent dismantling of intergovernmental arrangements², exposes the historical limitations of traditional explanatory models. Political Science and International Relations urgently need to reconceive integration, no longer as top-down diplomatic engineering but as a living democratic construction.

To clarify the limitation inherent in the purely state-centered and bureaucratic view that dominated theoretical debate, Moravcsik (1998) clearly articulated the premise that kept citizenship removed from the core of international cooperation:

European integration did not weaken the nation-state; rather, it strengthened the ability of national governments to achieve their public policy objectives more effectively than they could have done independently (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 4).

² UNASUR being the clearest example.

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If integration effectively serves to shield the power of governments and secure the pragmatic efficiency of elites, transnational democracy becomes an inconvenient variable, frequently postponed to suit immediate political interests. This utilitarian and instrumental conception has consequently exhausted much of its explanatory potential in the contemporary international landscape. The relentless pursuit of economic efficiency without social legitimacy has produced vast regional structures with feet of clay, incapable of mobilizing citizens' solidarity in times of severe adversity. In the face of systemic shocks, economic crises, or public health emergencies, the absence of a bond of transnational citizenship (Held, 1995) leads states to retreat immediately into unilateral isolation, undoing years of collective progress within days. Reversing this trajectory requires overcoming the limitations of neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism and recognizing that the stability of regional blocs will not come from greater opacity in decision-making. It requires the courage to open the windows of regional governance to the fresh air of inclusive public deliberation, transforming citizens into co-authors of the course of integration.

Overcoming this conceptual impasse is the indispensable first step toward reestablishing the foundations of regionalism studies. It is therefore imperative to introduce transnational democracy as a structural element of community governance.

CITIZENSHIP BEYOND BORDERS: RETHINKING INTEGRATION THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL DEMOCRACY AND PLURAL GOVERNANCE

In light of the exhaustion of technocratic isolation and intergovernmental elite games, the search for a theoretical and practical alternative requires rebuilding the foundations of contemporary regionalism. The proposal for transnational democracy represents precisely this fundamental and essential change of course (Bohman, 2007; Habermas, 2001). It shifts the axis of regional construction away from bureaucracy and toward active citizenship and the creation of plural and deliberative public spaces.

Drawing on contemporary political theory, transnational democracy rejects the idea that the nation-state is the only possible container for the exercise of popular self-government. The advance of productive, financial, and informational interdependence, among other forms of interdependence, and the emergence of problems that disregard geographical boundaries, such as climate change, pandemics, and migration, require decision-making arrangements capable of responding to those affected by international decisions (Held, 1995; Dryzek, 2006). This does not entail designing a utopian world state or mechanically replicating national representative models at the community level, but rather democratizing the flows of authority that already operate beyond state borders. Addressing the need to expand the horizons of democratic representation beyond conventional territorial boundaries, David Held (1995) argued:

Democracy must transcend the borders of the nation-state if it is to remain valid in an era in which decisions made in one place routinely affect the well-being and fate of entire populations located in other territories (Held, 1995, p. 225).

Without this foundation and deliberative nexus, regional power becomes a mere exercise in remote regulation, devoid of the civic bond that gives meaning and stability to political belonging.

This expansion of the public sphere is organically connected to the model of multilevel governance, which maps the dispersion of political authority. Rather than being concentrated in a single sovereign center, power is distributed in a coordinated manner across multiple levels of governance (Hooghe; Marks, 2001; Panke; Stapel, 2024).

Multilevel governance recognizes that the complexity of contemporary regional challenges requires continuous cooperation among local, subnational, state, and supranational actors. Nevertheless, if this network of interactions is not to become merely another opaque bureaucratic web, it must be infused with a democratic essence. Linking multilevel governance theory to the paradigm of transnational democracy makes it possible to construct a system in which power flows in both directions, ensuring that the demands of organized civil society are effectively channeled (Bohman, 2007; Sandholtz, 2024).

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Regarding the importance of moving beyond a monocentric and static view of political power toward overlapping networks of authority, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2001) stated:

The nation-state is no longer the sole locus of decision-making or interest representation; instead, authority is dispersed and shared among interconnected jurisdictions at multiple territorial levels (Hooghe; Marks, 2001, p. 3).

It is through the coordinated convergence of these multiple levels that active citizenship acquires practical characteristics, allowing the voices of subnational actors and local communities to resonate within the central decision-making bodies of regional blocs.

To prevent multilevel governance from being instrumentalized by major corporate groups, it must be supported by a genuine cross-border public sphere. As James Bohman (2007) argues, the democratization of transnational governance depends on the capacity to establish inclusive public arenas in which citizens and social movements can exercise direct public scrutiny. Establishing formal regional parliaments without legislative powers or binding deliberations is not enough; summit-level decisions must be permanently subjected to the scrutiny of deliberative public reason (Habermas, 2001; Chalmers, 2024). Transnational democracy therefore acts as the most effective antidote to the isolation of technocratic elites, calling into question decisions that do not carry the legitimating force of active, informed, and critical citizenship.

The aim, therefore, is to overcome the democratic deficit through the gradual construction of postnational citizenship, in which individuals share rights, duties, and political solidarity regardless of their state of origin. Jürgen Habermas (2001) understood this historical transition when analyzing the emergence of the European public sphere and its implications for the legitimacy of community institutions, emphasizing the following diagnosis:

The construction of a postnational democracy requires a transition from solidarity among peoples based on blood or national belonging to an abstract solidarity among citizens of the union, mediated by a shared political public sphere (Habermas, 2001, p. 98).

The possibility of such a public arrangement becomes even more pressing when considered in light of recent comparative literature, which demonstrates how the overlap and interaction among regional organizations require innovative forms of democratic coordination (Panke; Stapel, 2024). The consolidation of interconnected multilevel networks reduces institutional asymmetries and strengthens the rights to information, transparency, and direct participation in strategic decision-making processes. Summarizing the central argument that should guide this restructuring, Bohman (2007) clearly articulated the normative principle underlying the democratization of regionalism:

Transnational democracy does not seek to replace the sovereignty of the people with the sovereignty of global institutions, but rather to extend to citizens the effective power to control the cross-border agents and structures that dominate their lives (Bohman, 2007, p. 23).

By placing citizens at the center of regional governance, transnational democracy provides the civic foundations needed to sustain community cohesion in times of crisis. Far from constituting an academic utopia detached from reality, multilevel democratic embeddedness is the only pragmatic path capable of transforming fragile institutional arrangements into resilient regional structures that are genuinely popular and grounded in clear and inclusive democratic principles.

BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND LATIN AMERICAN HYPER-INTERGOVERNMENTALISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

When the trajectories of the European Union and Latin American initiatives such as Mercosur and the now-defunct UNASUR are placed side by side, Max Weber's interpretive sociology offers valuable analytical lenses through which to decipher the nature of authority and institutional domination in each bloc. Analysis through ideal types makes it possible to contrast the rational-legal and highly bureaucratized domination of the European paradigm with the patrimonial-charismatic and personalistic pattern of domination that has historically marked regionalism in the Global South (Weber, 1978). The European model consolidated a complex structure of formal rules and technical predictability, whereas

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Latin America invested in institutional architectures heavily dependent on the political will and ideological affinity of the executive leaders in office at a given time³.

In the European Union, the institutionalization process produced an ideal type of supranational bureaucracy that seeks to ground its legitimacy in regulatory efficiency and the neutrality of technical expertise. The European Parliament, which evolved from a consultative assembly into a powerful co-legislator alongside the European Council, represents the most advanced attempt to provide representative foundations for a community bloc. This architecture of formal rules nevertheless coexists with a chronic “democratic deficit,” in which the perception of distant and insulated bureaucratic domination fuels popular skepticism. As Jürgen Habermas (2012) observes in his critique of European governance, the transition to genuine transnational democracy requires overcoming the isolation of decision-making elites in favor of inclusive public deliberation:

The process of European integration, conducted incrementally by elites and bureaucracies, has created a dangerous divorce between the systemic progress of the institutions and their democratic validation by the electorate, reducing citizens to mere spectators of a regulatory project devoid of living political substance (Habermas, 2012, p. 45).

In addition to parliamentary channels, the European architecture has sought to channel the voice of civil society through the European Economic and Social Committee (Comitê Econômico e Social Europeu – CESE) and instruments of direct democracy such as European Citizens’ Initiatives and occasional national plebiscites and referendums (Chalmers, 2024; Panke; Stapel, 2024).

The use of referendums and plebiscites in the European Union has proven to be an ambivalent instrument of popular legitimation. On the one hand, these mechanisms of direct consultation offer rare opportunities for public scrutiny and mass deliberation. On the other, they are frequently transformed into arenas for punitive votes against incumbent national governments or into vehicles for Euroscepticism. The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by voters in France and the Netherlands in 2005, as well as the

³ Particularly among left-wing leaders during the so-called “pink tide” of the early 2000s.

traumatic experience of Brexit in 2016, demonstrated that popular participation without the proper support of a structured transnational public sphere can trigger waves of regional disintegration. Direct consultation exposed the vulnerability of a regulatory bloc that had relied on the premise of the population's silent "permissive consensus," which collapsed in the face of increasingly powerful narratives advocating the restoration of national sovereignty (Taggart; Szczerbiak, 2004). European legal-rational bureaucracy thus revealed its structural limitations when confronted with identity-based contestation and political polarization.

In Latin America, by contrast, the dynamics of integration followed the opposite trajectory, structured around what the literature has conventionally termed "diplomatic presidentialism" or "hyper-intergovernmentalism" (Malamud, 2005).

Through the lens of Weberian typology, Latin American regionalism approximates the ideal type of charismatic domination and personalistic leadership, in which the cohesion of regional institutions depends primarily on political alignment and personal rapport among heads of state. Mercosur and UNASUR were established on the premise that the sovereign will of national Executives would be sufficient to guide cross-border cooperation, marginalizing the creation of autonomous bureaucratic structures endowed with genuine supranational authority. As Olivier Dabène (2009) noted in his analysis of the persistent instability of organizational arrangements in the region, this excessive dependence on presidential summits generates a continuous cycle of the creation, paralysis, and rebuilding of regional blocs:

Latin American regionalism is characterized by a recurring paradox: the remarkable resilience of the idea of integration accompanied by extreme institutional fragility, in which regional blocs operate as extensions of the political and ideological agendas of incumbent presidents (Dabène, 2009, p. 12).

This structural vulnerability was directly reflected in the performance of Mercosur's and UNASUR's mechanisms for popular participation. The Mercosur Parliament (Parlamento do Mercosul –

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Parlasur), created with the ambition of representing the bloc's citizenry and intended to be elected through direct and universal suffrage in all member states, had its effectiveness severely constrained by the absence of binding legislative powers and repeated delays in consolidating a uniform electoral system. Similarly, the Mercosur Economic and Social Consultative Forum (Foro Consultivo Econômico e Social – FCES), conceived as an arena for cross-sectoral dialogue among trade unions, the business community, and organized civil society, remained confined to a merely consultative role, without any genuine capacity to influence the deliberations of the Common Market Council. Crucial decisions continued to be monopolized by summit-level diplomatic bargaining, relegating civic participation to the periphery of the decision-making process (Pinto, 2016).

The UNASUR experience reflected similar institutional dilemmas. Despite progress on sectoral infrastructure and defense agendas, its Citizen Participation Forum suffered from a lack of institutionalization and dependence on intergovernmental governance (Malamud; Gardini, 2012).

UNASUR's inability to institutionalize stable and autonomous channels for citizen participation facilitated its rapid dismantling when the region's ideological tide shifted in the late 2010s. Lacking the support of an organized regional citizenry and an autonomous bureaucracy capable of maintaining the ordinary operation of cooperation agendas, the bloc succumbed to mass withdrawals led by governments whose political and ideological orientations opposed those of its founders. This extreme volatility exposes a fundamental difference from the European model: whereas the European Union suffers from the insulation of a rigid legal-rational bureaucracy that struggles to absorb popular demands, Latin American blocs suffer from the volatility of a charismatic and personalistic model that prevents the consolidation of lasting formal rules. Ultimately, both weaknesses result from the absence of genuine foundations in transnational democracy (Pinto, 2019).

On both continents, therefore, the lack of consolidated channels for civic deliberation produces incomplete institutional arrangements incapable of combining technical efficiency with popular legitimacy.

Applying a Weberian-inspired comparative analysis to contemporary interpretations of integration reveals that the similarities between Europe and Latin America lie in their shared inability to place citizens at the center of the decision-making process. Whereas the European Union sought legitimacy through the delivery of economic results and technical regulation, or output legitimacy, Latin America sought legitimacy through the rhetoric of political solidarity among summit-level leaders. Andrés Malamud (2005) summarizes this limitation of South American regionalism by highlighting the exclusionary nature of summit-level presidentialism:

Integration in the Southern Cone was not designed to limit state sovereignty or promote transnational citizenship, but rather as a strategy for preserving the power of national Executives, which use summit diplomacy to reinforce their own domestic authority (Malamud, 2005, p. 139).

The differences between the two models therefore lie in the degree to which authority has been institutionalized. The European model has attained an unprecedented level of routinized bureaucratic and legal authority, under which community rules prevail over the individual will of member states across a broad range of public policies. In Latin America, authority has only incipiently become impersonal, with domination based on informal agreements and party-political affinities among heads of state continuing to prevail. The result of this sociological asymmetry is that, in times of crisis, the European bloc faces paralysis caused by excessive regulation and electoral resistance, whereas Latin American blocs face paralysis through institutional dismantling and abandonment.

Overcoming these constitutive dilemmas requires recognizing that neither European legal-rational bureaucracy nor Latin American diplomatic presidentialism is sufficient to ensure the long-term survival of regional cooperation (Hooghe; Marks, 2001; Sandholtz, 2024).

The construction of resilient regionalism requires the coordination of bureaucratic efficiency with direct democratic participation across multiple levels of governance. For Latin American blocs, the primary challenge is to depersonalize community institutions by granting decision-making autonomy and effective resources to bodies such as Parlasur and the Economic and Social Consultative Forum,

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transforming them into genuine spaces for cross-border public deliberation. For the European Union, the challenge is to open up its highly technocratic structure, enabling direct consultations and the European Parliament to serve as vehicles for genuine postnational citizenship rather than merely as pressure-release valves for domestic discontent. As James Bohman (2007) observes in advocating transnational democratization, the legitimacy of regional institutions fundamentally depends on the inclusion of citizens as subjects of rights and deliberation:

No supranational or intergovernmental governance structure can achieve lasting stability unless it is capable of transforming the individuals affected by its decisions into active participants in the formulation of the very rules that govern them (Bohman, 2007, p. 104).

Ultimately, the comparative analysis demonstrates that, without the tool of transnational democracy, any model of regional integration will remain vulnerable to institutional instability and popular rejection.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Returning to the provocative question in the title of this study, it is evident that the construction of a resilient regional integration project cannot be reduced to a static formula of institutional engineering or a simple arrangement based on summit-level and behind-the-scenes diplomacy. The theoretical and empirical answer consolidated throughout this discussion identifies transnational democracy as the indispensable tool for providing community blocs with longevity and civic sustainability.

The critical reassessment of the contributions presented here has demonstrated that both the technocratic insulation posited by neofunctionalism and the top-down diplomatic bargaining theorized by liberal intergovernmentalism erred in relegating civil society and popular participation to the peripheral position of a merely passive audience. The recurring crisis of legitimacy affecting international cooperation processes stems precisely from this foundational neglect, which treated citizenship as a mere economic by-product or a passive domestic electorate (Habermas, 2001; Moravcsik, 1998).

The comparative analysis of the European Union and the South American experiences of Mercosur and UNASUR clearly illustrated the concrete manifestations of this structural gap. Whereas the European bloc constructed a solid legal-rational bureaucracy that ultimately generated an unsettling “democratic deficit” and the subsequent exhaustion of permissive consensus (Taggart; Szczerbiak, 2004), South American regionalism remained hostage to personalistic hyper-intergovernmentalism, in which representative and consultative bodies were systematically hollowed out (Malamud, 2005; Pinto, 2014; Pinto, 2019). Both trajectories demonstrate that neither regulatory efficiency alone nor fleeting ideological alignment among heads of state can guarantee the stability of a common project in times of crisis.

It is precisely in overcoming these institutional pathologies that the framework of transnational democracy and multilevel governance reveals its full analytical and normative strength. By proposing the emergence of a cross-border public sphere capable of coordinating inclusive channels of deliberation from the local to the supranational level, this paradigm restores the fundamental civic bond without which no political authority can endure over time (Bohman, 2007; Hooghe; Marks, 2001). The democratization of regional decision-making ceases to be perceived as a threat to governability and comes to be recognized as the true antidote to polarization and the persistent temptation of nationalist dismantling.

The theoretical and practical implications developed here indicate that the future direction of contemporary regionalism depends on the courage to open decision-making arenas to active citizenship. Far from being a normative embellishment or a distant utopia, the inclusion of citizens as co-authors of community rules is the only pragmatic path toward transforming fragile and unstable structures into genuine communities of shared destiny endowed with popular legitimacy.

Ultimately, the future of regionalism will depend on the ability of regional blocs to adapt their structures to the growing complexity of cross-border social demands. Transnational democracy ceases to be merely a normative ideal and becomes the central analytical requirement for assessing the sustainability and resilience of community institutions in the twenty-first century. In this regard, the

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present study was limited to a critical analysis grounded in the literature and emblematic cases as a means of elucidating current limitations. A future research agenda should therefore pursue a broader and more in-depth qualitative study to objectively assess social agendas that cross borders through international actors and that are able, in some manner, to establish an active corpus of political influence and, consequently, decision-making and binding authority.

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