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# The Role of Regional Cooperation in Contemporary International Relations

## Uloga regionalne saradnje u savremenim međunarodnim odnosima

By Sanja Jelisavac Trošić and Mitko Arnaudov (Authors)
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In the book "The Role of Regional Cooperation in Contemporary International Relations", Sanja Jelisavac Trošić and Mitko Arnaudov examine various models of regionalism both in the theory and practice of international relations. Their analysis is grounded in the premise that regional cooperation shapes and reflects global dynamics through its impact on political, economic, and security processes. As the primary method, the authors adopt a comparative approach to models of regional economic, political, and security integration, as well as their institutional frameworks.

This approach allows them to address the following research questions: 1) Do all models of regional integration have equal capacity? 2) If not, what determinants explain differences in their efficiency and effectiveness? 3) Why are some models of regional integration more suitable to economic cooperation, others to security arrangements, and still others to political coordination? 4) Is it possible to implement these models independently of each other? 5) Finally, to what extent is each form of regional cooperation determined by further and deeper political, economic, and security integration?

The book is divided into eight chapters, followed by a concluding section offering recommendations from political, security, and economic perspectives. The first three chapters develop the theoretical and methodological framework, disciplinarily situating regionalism within the field of International Relations, and further analyzing it through the subfields of international politics, international security, and international economic relations. A critical literature review traces the shift from old to new regionalism. It clarifies that concepts such as region, regionalism, and regionalization are context-dependent and increasingly understood as dynamic. These concepts involve both state and non-state actors, going beyond mere geographic proximity.

In the fifth chapter, the authors provide a description, classification, and typology of various forms of regional economic integration in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, ranging from free trade areas and customs unions to common markets and economic unions. This analytical framework is then expanded through selected case studies of the European Union (EU), the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (formerly NAFTA, now USMCA), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and BRICS. Each of these integration models pursues distinct objectives: the EU represents the deepest form of integration; the USMCA is primarily focused on free trade; the RCEP similarly centers on free trade within the Asian region; while the BRICS connects developing economies across various regions of the world. The authors conclude that the deepening of economic integration, as exemplified by the EU, has often led to subsequent political and, to some extent, security cooperation. In contrast, other models exhibit varying degrees of success, depending on the depth of political coordination and the complexity of institutional infrastructure.

Building upon the previous chapter, the authors, in the sixth chapter, address models of political and security regional integration. Once again, the EU is taken as an example, given that it represents the most advanced form of economic union, encompassing full political and partial security integration. Additional cases examined include the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Visegrád Group, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The EU is presented as a model that has evolved from an economic to a political union. However, in the security domain, the EU has not achieved the same level of integration due to the Member States' refusal to transfer aspects of their sovereignty in this field. The CSTO and NATO are analyzed as military alliances with differing objectives. NATO is characterized as a global actor, whereas the CSTO is limited to the post-Soviet space. The Visegrád Group serves as an example of regional political cooperation within the EU. The authors explain that geopolitical interests and historical alliances often shape security alliances. Their central challenge lies in political coordination among Member States and the preservation of sovereignty within the framework of common policies.

In the seventh chapter, the authors examine the practical dimensions of regionalism in contemporary international relations, with a particular focus on the Western Balkans (WB). The chapter is structured into three parts: economic initiatives (with emphasis on the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the Berlin Process, and the Open Balkan initiative), political-security initiatives with an economic orientation, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as indicators of regional cooperation in the WB. The authors emphasize that external actors frequently drive regional initiatives in the Western Balkans, while internal obstacles—political tensions, the unresolved status of Kosovo*, and different stages of democratic consolidation—limit their reach. Despite encouraging signals, the chapter highlights the lack of concrete institutional mechanisms to sustain regional cooperation. The authors underline the importance of an integrated approach that unites politics, economics, and security, arguing that sustainable development could serve as a new foundation for regional cohesion. Without the development of coordinated regional efforts aimed at achieving the SDGs, all political entities in the region risk not only economic and social stagnation but also achieving political well-being. The chapter concludes that regional cooperation is a strategic imperative for the stability and modernization of the Western Balkans.

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From the regional level, the analysis narrows to the level of the nation-state. The eighth chapter of the book examines Serbia's role in regional cooperation and integration from 2014 to 2024. Serbia actively participates in over 50 regional initiatives, utilizing them as mechanisms for economic growth and preparation for EU membership. Regional cooperation is portrayed as strategically significant within Serbia's foreign policy, particularly in the context of European integration and in response to global challenges such as geopolitical tensions and economic crises. Regional mechanisms strengthen political stability in Serbia, improve relations with neighboring countries, and help realize national interests, both directly and indirectly. Notable among these are the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and the Adriatic-Ionian Region. The authors conclude that for Serbia, regional cooperation serves not only as an instrument for EU accession preparation but has also become a platform through which it has emerged as one of the most active participants.

In the ninth chapter, the authors emphasize the multidimensional nature of regional integration in contemporary international relations. It is no longer merely a matter of trade arrangements. Now, it encompasses issues such as labor, environmental protection, inclusivity, and standardization, frequently overlapping with the normative frameworks that have traditionally belonged to multilateral organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). In this context, political coordination emerges as a central factor, particularly for small and microstates, which, despite formal equality, operate within systems fundamentally shaped by economic and geopolitical power. The authors illustrate how regional integration serves as a mechanism through which these states seek to consolidate their positions and reduce their vulnerability. The example of North Macedonia illustrates the complexity of choices faced by small or microstates. Internal and external pressures have further complicated its European integration trajectory, revealing the limitations of small actors in making autonomous strategic decisions. Conversely, the coordinated approach of the Visegrád Group demonstrates that synchronized regional policy can serve as an effective model for positioning within broader integration frameworks, such as the EU. The chapter concludes that regionalism is deeply embedded in the global structure of power and interdependence, linking politics, economics, and security through integration processes that both reflect and shape the international order.

The concluding chapter of the book "The Role of Regional Cooperation in Contemporary International Relations" is devoted to the authors' final reflections and recommendations from political, security, and economic perspectives. From a political standpoint, regional cooperation primarily depends on political will. Neither geographical proximity nor shared interests can guarantee successful cooperation if political actors do not demonstrate a readiness for compromise and coordination. Using the Western Balkans as a case in point, the authors emphasize that common interests are often subordinated to national calculations and the instrumentalization of regional integration processes. Without a clear political commitment, any integrative effort remains superficial. The security perspective highlights that challenges like terrorism, migration, and cyber threats cross borders and demand regional solutions. However, cooperation is limited by traditional views of sovereignty, highlighting the need to reconceptualize security as a regional good and a precondition for the stability of each state. Finally, the economic dimension underscores the dual character of integration: while it fosters trade, investment, and reform, it can also deepen disparities between developed and underdeveloped states and regions.

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Trošić and Arnaudov present a comprehensive and interdisciplinary study of regional cooperation, marked by an extensive array of empirical case studies. While the breadth of the analysis is a notable strength, it occasionally sacrifices analytical depth. This is particularly evident in cases where more rigorous institutional analysis would have enhanced the argument.

The inclusion of BRICS and NATO—entities whose transregional nature complicates their classification as regional formations—raises important questions about the conceptual boundaries of regionalism.

The book's original and policy-relevant contribution is its treatment of the Western Balkans. By aligning regional cooperation with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the authors advance a forward-looking and inclusive model of integration, moving beyond EU-centric and transactional paradigms.

Overall, "The Role of Regional Cooperation in Contemporary International Relations" offers a valuable contribution to the study of regionalism. It will be of particular interest to scholars, policymakers, and students concerned with regions and regionalisms in contemporary international relations.

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