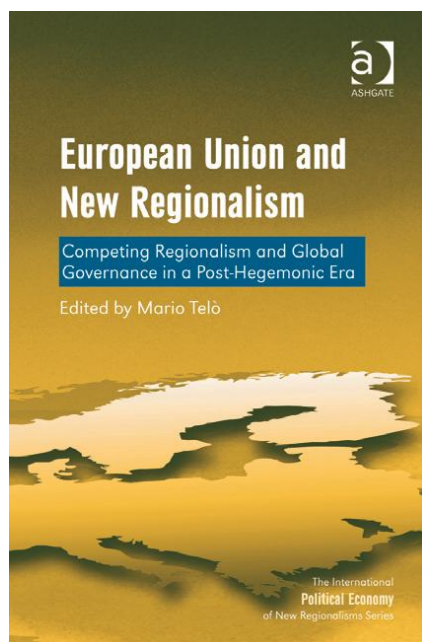


Professor Mario Telò of the Free University of Brussels on new regionalism

The interview with Professor Mario Telò, Emeritus President of the Institute for European Studies of the Free University of Brussels, ULB, and Member of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Belgium took place in Queens' College Cambridge. The interview succeeded the publication on the 14th of July 2014 of the third edition of the book 'European Union and New Regionalism', edited by Prof. Telò.



Interviewer: Prof. Telò, thank you very much for agreeing to give this interview on your academic visit to Cambridge. We have seen in the last decades increasing interest in creating regional blocks, regional organizations in Latin America, in Asia, etc. Do you think that this trend is going to continue in the future?

Prof. Mario Telò: Yes, we work on this issue since 1998 and we promoted several international research networks on this issue with the best centres of studies on comparative regionalism and our common conclusion was that we will have much more regional cooperation in the XXI century than in the XX century, that regional cooperation is a structural feature of global governance and international relations. However, regional cooperation will go on according to alternative paths, there is not only one way of organizing regional cooperation, for instance based on the Eurocentric model. There are alternative paths: you have an Asian way, you have Latin American ways and African ways, however the European Union remains a reference, is not a model, but is a relevant reference for the others because the European Union has been a sophisticated institutional setting for sixty years.

Interviewer: You published the first edition of the book 'European Union and New Regionalism' in 2001. Has the European Union type of regionalism changed in any way since 2001?

Prof. Mario Telò: Yes, this is the second argument in favour of reviving the new regionalist research agenda: the evolution of the European Union. European Union is in a moment of dilemma because of the economic crisis, however, after ten years of debate on the European Treaties concluded by the Lisbon Treaty, we have clear evidence that the European Union will not be a super-state. The EU

is not a state in the making, even if EU is going on towards more integration, for instance in the Eurozone in the last three years, is not going towards a federal state system. This evidence is making it more, not less comparable with regional groupings of neighbouring states abroad.

Interviewer: While contrasted with the previous two editions of your book, what is the latest edition of your book bringing new?

Prof. Mario Telò: One of the innovative feature of the new edition, particularly explicit in the chapters about Latin America and Eastern Europe is the concept of competitive regionalisms: we have a general trend towards more regional cooperation, but this trend is not only characterized by alternative paths, but also by competing paths that can provoke conflicts. I will give you three examples. The most actual example is the conflict between the Eurasian project of Putin and the European Union project, where Ukraine is in the middle, and it explains the conflict in Ukraine. In Latin America we have MERCOSUR creating UNASUR as a political dimension of MERCOSUR on the one end and on the opposite we have the Pacific Free Trade Area project, a soft regional cooperation project only based on free trade, based on the NAFTA model. In Asia, we have a very strong competition between the new American project called Trans-Pacific Partnership, excluding China, and the new China regional project called Regional Cooperation Economic Partnership, which is excluding United States, so these are competing regional projects.

Interviewer: Part three of your book deals with Europe as a new civilian power and I wanted to ask you, based on the latest evolutions in Ukraine, is the EU an effective civilian power?

Prof. Mario Telò: First of all, there is a huge difference between the debate around the concept of civilian power taking place during the Cold War and the recent, contemporary debate. My concept of civilian power is less idealistic and less Eurocentric, it is an analytical concept where I underline that whatever we like it or not, European Union is unable to be a military power and, secondly, the normative dimension is only one of the dimensions. The other one is the trade dimension, including arrangements, economic sanctions and also the standard setting dimension—developing global or regional regulations of several issues – this is my concept of civilian power, which is more material and less normative. This is confirmed by the Ukrainian crisis because the presence of Europe in Ukraine is based on economic and trade agreements, as well as economic sanctions against Russia. Europe proved totally unable to stop Russia by military means. Latest evidence indicates that the EU sanctions are not ineffective. First of all, the standard of life of Russians is declining, the growth rate and the stock market are breaking down, the foreign direct investments are leaving Russia, the ruble is devaluated: so, the Russian population can be in short term enthusiastic about conquering Crimea, but in the middle term they will be increasingly worried about the worsening of their living standards. We had, for instance, the first demonstration for peace in Moscow some days ago. The Russian regional priority is in radical opposition with twenty years of Russian policy aiming at membership of multilateral organizations. Regionalism cannot longer be captured by the rational choice approach: political and ideational factors play an increasing role in the context of competing regionalism.

Interviewer: What are the main challenges that you identify for the EU as an external actor in the future?

Prof. Mario Telò: I would say three challenges. First, the most important, is promoting peace and democracy in the Near Abroad, particularly the Mediterranean. Second is combining the western alliance with the 'Rest', China and Brazil particularly, but also India and the third, the reform of international organizations, by enhancing their efficiency and legitimacy. The most challenging is the Near Abroad, particularly because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which makes it difficult to stabilise the rest of the region and we have a very poor record of the so called Barcelona Process.

Interviewer: As you are probably well aware, when it comes to the citizens of the UK they are quite sceptical of the European Union. What can we possibly do to bring regional integration projects like the EU closer to the citizens?

Prof. Mario Telò: In the mid to long term, Britain will always be a part of the European regionalism, the issue is only how. Surpassing the traditional debate on the EU as a super-state is possible by adopting the regionalist approach. UK is and will be part of the European regionalism: either is part of the hard core, this was the project of Tony Blair, or it will be part of a second larger circle surrounding the hard core, which includes the Eurozone inevitably. If UK prefers to stay in the second circle that is possible, but will always be part of the European regional organization, like EEA or other ad hoc arrangements with EU. So if you take this long term regional approach, you are less dramatic about alternatives because the regional literature takes into account the geographical dimension as well as the historical dimension. You cannot change the fact that the UK is part of the European history and geography, is selling 50% of its products on the European market, this means taking a regionalist approach.

Interviewer: When it comes to regional identity or citizens identifying themselves with the European Union, can that identity become in the future stronger than the national identity?

Prof. Mario Telò: competing regionalism may mean also competing ideational factors, norms and identities. These factors are already very strong in the European Union, if you take the point of view of the comparative regionalism literature and compare the EU with MERCOSUR and ASEAN. However, even MERCOSUR and ASEAN are developing regional identities. It is a kind of multifaceted identity: local, national and regional, but this exists also in MERCOSUR and in ASEAN, in Europe it is even more developed. Habermas argues that, in spite of the economic crisis, we have a more developed public sphere in Europe now than ten years ago. So everyone is interested in what is happening in the neighbouring countries. For instance, Italians are interested in Nigel Farage and similarities with the Grillo movement, in the UK they are interested in developments in France and Italy etc; this circulation of perceptions is provoking convergences and divergences. This interplay in the European global sphere may be very critical and eurosceptical, but is increasing the feeling of a shared future within the globalized world. Maybe we do not like it, but we feel part of the same destiny, more than before the crisis. So of course regional identity is weaker compared to the national identity, but is relevant, in Europe, South East Asia, South America.

Interviewer: Prof. Telo, one last question. What is the way forward for the regionalism research agenda?

Prof. Mario Telò: The regional research agenda is to some extent alternative to the global liberalisation agenda based on mere cost-benefit calculation. What I mean is that, in spite of diversities and variations, the regional competing trends include several regulatory projects, where

the global liberalisation projects only implies deregulation. That is very relevant because it is difficult to identify by the same word 'economic liberalism' both the European project and the global deregulation agenda, there is a tension which is particularly evident if you look at the United Kingdom approach. The idea of a European free trade area used to be in the 50s and remains conflicting from a common market and multidimensional integration approach. As a consequence, if we look at TTIP, we cannot ignore that this transatlantic negotiation agenda is not a pure deregulation agenda, but includes NTB and regulatory models affecting values, principles and ways of life. This is another reason for the comparative study of regionalism, maybe the only way to revive the global multilateralist agenda.

Interviewer: Prof Mario Telò, thank you for your time. I wish you a pleasant rest of stay in Cambridge.

Interview by Alexandra-Maria Bocse, Doctoral researcher affiliated with the European Centre, Department of Politics and International Studies.