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Exit from Regime Complexity? Regional International Organizations under Scrutiny

Diana Panke, Lukas Grundsfeld, and Pawel Tverskoi
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Regional regime complexity has long been on the rise and carries a series of potential negative effects, such as waste of resources or reduced effectiveness of regional governance. This article investigates a specific strategy of how states cope with regime complexity, namely by exiting regional international organizations (RIOs). We develop hypotheses on how different types of regional regime complexity influence the chances for exits to occur and theorize interaction effects. The analysis reveals that higher levels of membership- and competency-based regime complexity as well as RIO incompatibility increase the likelihood of state withdrawals. In addition, state characteristics moderate this effect and influence who leaves which organization. Most importantly, smaller rather are less able to shape RIO policies and activities and have fewer capacities to implement them and are thus more likely to exit one of the organizations when being member in many overlapping RIOs. By contrast, powerful states can better navigate regime complexity and avoid negative side-effects and are therefore less inclined to withdraw from RIOs in situations of high regional regime complexity.

La complejidad de los regímenes regionales ha ido en aumento desde hace mucho tiempo y conlleva una serie de posibles efectos negativos, tales como el despilfarro de recursos o la reducción de la eficacia de la gobernanza regional. Este artículo investiga una estrategia específica con relación a cómo los Estados hacen frente a la complejidad de un régimen. En concreto, nos referimos al abandono de las organizaciones internacionales regionales (RIO, por sus siglas en inglés). Desarrollamos varias hipótesis con respecto a cómo los diferentes tipos de complejidad de un régimen regional influyen sobre las posibilidades de que haya abandonos y teorizamos sobre los efectos de esta interacción. El análisis revela que el hecho de que existan unos niveles más altos de complejidad en aquellos regímenes basados en la membresía y las competencias, así como la incompatibilidad con las RIO, aumentan la probabilidad de que los Estados las abandonen. Además, las características del Estado moderan este efecto e influyen sobre qué Estado abandona qué organización. Es importante señalar que los Estados más pequeños son menos capaces de dar forma a las políticas y actividades de las RIO y, en consecuencia, tienen menos capacidades para implementarlas. Por lo tanto, resulta más probable que estos Estados abandonen una de las organizaciones cuando son miembros de muchas RIO que se superponen. Por el contrario, los Estados más poderosos pueden sortear mejor la complejidad del régimen y evitar, así, los efectos secundarios negativos. Por lo tanto, son menos propensos a retirarse de las RIO en situaciones de alta complejidad del régimen regional.

La complexité des régimes régionaux s'accroît depuis longtemps et s'accompagne d'une palette de potentiels effets négatifs, comme le gaspillage de ressources ou la réduction de l'efficacité de la gouvernance régionale. Cet article s'intéresse à une stratégie spécifique adoptée par les États face à cette complexité de régimes : la sortie d'organisations internationales régionales (OIR). Nous formulons des hypothèses sur l'influence de différents types de complexités de régimes régionaux sur la survenance de chances de sortie et théorisons des effets d'interaction. D'après l'analyse, des niveaux plus élevés de complexité de régimes fondée sur l'appartenance et la compétence ainsi que l'incompatibilité avec les OIR augmentent la probabilité d'un retrait des États. En outre, les caractéristiques de l'État viennent modérer cet effet et influencent quel État quitte quelle organisation. Plus important encore, les plus petits États sont moins en mesure de façonner les politiques et les activités des OIR, ils ont moins de capacités pour les mettre en œuvre et donc, ont plus de chances de quitter l'une des organisations quand ils appartiennent à beaucoup d'OIR dont les compétences se chevauchent. En revanche, les États puissants sont plus à même de gérer la complexité des régimes et d'éviter les effets indirects négatifs. Ils sont donc moins enclins à se retirer des OIR en cas de complexité élevée des régimes régionaux.

Introduction

Regime complexity has increased over time, not only in functional regime complexes, e.g., in the climate change realm (Keohane and Victor 2011, Abbott 2012) but also with respect to territorially defined regional regime complexes (Gómez-Mera 2015, Alter and Raustiala 2018). The latter are formed by overlapping regional international organizations (RIOs), which are arenas of institutionalized cooperation of three or more states located in a geographically defined region and which are characterized by having headquarters and/or secretariats.[1] A large number of RIOs was created in two waves between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s and again after the 2000s, leading to the formation of more than 70 RIOs worldwide (Panke, Stapel and Starkmann 2020). Over time, most of these organizations went through processes of enlargement. In

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[1] While membership in global international organizations (IOs) can potentially be of global reach, the membership criteria for joining RIOs is linked to geography.

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addition, while the policy scope was often limited in the early years of regional cooperation and RIOs tended to focus predominantly on economy and trade or security issues, subsequently the range of policy competencies was often broadened through treaty revisions, protocols, or annexes. Thus, in 1950, the average RIO had 8.5 mandates, while by 2020, RIOs covered on average 57 policy competencies in fields such as agriculture, development, economy and trade, energy, environment, finance, good governance, health, migration, security, and defense, as well as technology and infrastructure. These developments have culminated in increasing *regional regime complexity* defined as states being members of several RIOs at the same time, whereby the organizations are equipped with at least one identical policy competency (Panke and Stapel 2023a).

Organizational redundancy in the context of regional regime complexity may provide opportunities for the continuation of regional cooperation in one RIO in case of the failure of cooperation in another outlet (Pratt 2018). Additionally, states may benefit from regime complexity through forum shopping, regime shifting, and the exploitation of fuzzy and incoherent regulations (Alter and Meunier 2009, Alter and Raustiala 2018). However, duplicating memberships and policy competencies in RIOs can bring about negative side effects for the states in question as they have to pay membership fees in several organizations and devote diplomatic and attaché-level staff to active participation in the RIOs. Thus, through membership in several overlapping RIOs, states risk wasting scarce resources. Also, should RIOs act upon their identical policy mandates, implementation and policy costs for states that are members of both organizations can double when the two organizations focus on different but compatible aspects. This increases the investment a state affected by regime complexity has to make, which can cause capacity shortages, leading to selective implementation and non-compliance. Even worse, when two RIOs with overlapping policy competencies pass incompatible, or even outright competing policies and decisions, states that are members of both organizations can only comply with one set of policies while violating the other (Haftel and Hofmann 2019, Hofmann 2019), which also harms the effectiveness of regional governance (Alter and Meunier 2009, Gómez-Mera 2015).

This article contributes to regime complexity scholarship by examining one specific strategy of states to cope with high regional regime complexity, namely by withdrawing from organizations they are members of. By investigating whether states that are subject to a higher level of regional regime complexity are increasingly likely to exit RIOs, the article adds to regime complexity research, which has studied how and why complexity emerged, as well as its consequences, but has not examined how complexity could be reduced again. Additionally, while von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019) analyze state exits from international organizations, they do not take into account in how far states' withdrawal decisions are influenced by the level of regime complexity they are subject to. Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019) use the COW dataset that entails global and some of the regional IOs between 1945 and 2014 and show that withdrawals primarily result from preference divergence between IO members as well as from a contagion effect, whereby the withdrawal of powerful states triggers subsequent exits. Yet, these findings do not hold for regional IOs as such.[2] RIOs recruit their members based on geographic proximity and are—in contrast to most global IOs—community organizations based on shared history, culture, and language (Thomas 2017). In many RIOs, membership is explicitly connected to normative principles that constitute legitimate membership within the community and the community's identity (Spandler 2018). This suggests that it is worthwhile to study this sub-group of IOs separately. Thus, contributing to both research on regime complexity and withdrawals, this article investigates the following *x-centered research question*: Does the extent and the type of regime complexity influence the likelihood of state exits from RIOs?

To answer this question, the article proceeds in the following steps. The subsequent section (II) discusses the development of regional regime complexity. It differentiates among three different types of regional regime complexity. These are, first, membership-based regime complexity, as the number of RIO memberships a state holds, second, competency-based regional regime complexity, as the number of policy competencies a state covers in more than one of its RIOs, and, third, RIO incompatibility due to organizations being regarded as mutually exclusive in the economic and trade or security realm. On this basis, the article theorizes how the different types of regional regime complexity can trigger state withdrawals from RIOs and how the effect of regional regime complexity on the likelihood of exits is moderated by state-level characteristics. The empirical analysis combines quantitative and qualitative methods and shows that the exposure to membership-based and competency-based regional regime complexity individually, as well as combined, increases the likelihood of state withdrawals from RIOs. In addition, under conditions of RIO incompatibility exits become more likely. Moreover, state features moderate how states react to being exposed to regional regime complexity and influence who leaves an organization. Most notably, the less power a country has, the less likely it can successfully navigate regional regime complexity, and the higher the negative effect of increasing regional regime complexity on the propensity of exiting a RIO. Hence, states that are unlikely to have a voice due to power limitations are the ones most likely to react to increasing regime complexity by exits (Hirschman 1970). The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings and outlines avenues for future research on regime complexity.

The Development of Regime Complexity and Its Implications for Exits

Since 1945, cooperation among states within RIOs has been experiencing a continuous expansion.[3] Founded in 1910, SACU[4] is the oldest RIO, followed by the AL in 1945, with regional cooperation taking off in the first decade after the end of WWII, especially in Europe with the creation of the CoE in 1949, NATO in 1949, the EU's predecessors in 1951,

[2]Using the ROCO dataset (c.f. footnote 3) to analyze 73 RIOs between 1945 and 2022 reveals that the contagion effect is not significant, while preference divergence leads to losing two-thirds of observations and is not systematically significant (c.f. table A4).

[3]RIOs are as organizations with geographically defined membership criteria and a set of primary rules, headquarters or a secretariat, consisting of at least three states. Based on this definition, 73 organizations qualify as RIOs and are included in the new version of the Regional Organizations Competencies (ROCO) dataset (Panke, Stapel and Starkmann 2020, version 2.0, c.f. table A1). The extended dataset covers the period between 1945 and 2022 and provides information on state membership in RIOs along with 344 different policy competencies in 11 different policy fields states have equipped those organizations with (agriculture, development, economy and trade, energy, environment, finance, good governance, health, migration, security and defence, as well as technology and infrastructure).

[4]All acronyms are listed in table A1.

the NC in 1952, the WEU in 1954, and the WTO in 1955. By contrast, the Americas and Asia-Pacific initially lagged behind with two RIOs established in this early phase, respectively, namely the OAS in 1948 and the ODECA in 1951 in the Americas, and the SPC in 1947 and the SEATO in 1954 in Asia. The number of newly created RIOs increased incrementally until the 1980s and again during the first decade of the 2000s (Panke, Stapel and Starkmann 2020). In a second wave of regional cooperation after the end of the Cold War, another 35 RIOs were formed. As five organizations were disbanded, namely ODECA in 1973, SEATO in 1977, the ACC in 1990, WTO in 1991, and WEU in 2010,[5] as of 2022, there are 68 RIOs in existence.

Over time, the membership of RIOs increased, mainly due to enlargements of already existing organizations (e.g., ASEAN doubled in size to ten members today). The smallest RIOs have only three (CEPGL and BEU) or four members (GUAM, MRU, ANDEAN), whereas today's largest RIOs include the AU (54 members), the OAS (34 states), and the OSCE (56 members).

The scope of policy competencies with which RIOs are equipped through their treaties and other primary law sources (annexes, protocols), forming the basis for an organization's day-to-day operations and activities, increased as well. Often, the organizations created in the first decades after the end of WWII entailed relatively few different competencies, most often related to security (NATO, SEATO, WEU, and WTO) or economy and trade as well as energy (EU, SPC, NC). Due to treaty revisions, additional appendixes, or protocols, many RIOs were equipped with additional policy competencies over time (e.g., the OECS increased its competencies from 20 to 65, or the AU from originally 11 policy mandates in 1963 to a total of 203 different competencies by 2015). The range of policy competencies was thereby expanded to include issue areas such as agriculture, development, environment, finance, good governance, health, migration as well as technology and infrastructure. In addition, several of the RIOs created after the end of WWII had broad policy scopes from the start covering more than 100 specific mandates across the eleven policy fields (e.g., CIS or SICA).

All three developments—the increase in the number of RIOs, their increasing number of member states, and their broadened policy scopes—contribute to *regional regime complexity*, defined as the non-hierarchical overlap between RIOs that share some of their member states and are at the same time equipped with one or more identical policy competencies. Alter and Raustiala differentiate between functional and territorial regime complexes (2018). The former is characterized by overlapping regional and international organizations in a specific policy field, e.g., the climate change regime (Keohane and Victor 2011, Abbott 2012). In contrast, the latter is defined by overlapping regional organizations in particular geographical spaces (see also Nolte 2018). When adopting a dyadic approach on the RIO level, the number of organizations that share at least one member state and have at least one specific policy competency in common has increased considerably over time (Panke and Stapel 2023b). The first overlapping pair of RIOs was the OAS and the SPC in 1948, as they both had competencies in agriculture, commerce, economy, industry, and education, while the US was a member of both organizations. From then onward, regional regime complexity increased, albeit at a slower pace until the end of the Cold War (e.g., by 1980, only 55 pairs of RIO overlapped concerning at least one member and at the same time at least one policy competency). After the end of the Cold War, regional regime complexity became prevalent in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. In 2000, already 236 pairs of RIOs overlapped concerning states and competencies. By 2020, this figure increased to 399 pairs of overlapping RIOs (Panke and Stapel 2023b).

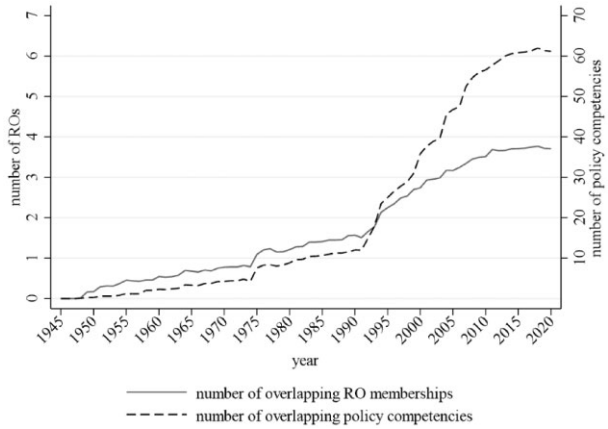

Figure 1. Regional regime complexity over time.

These developments indicate the success of the ideas of regional cooperation and regional governance (Triandafyllidou 2017). Yet, they also led to rising regional regime complexity over time, as RIOs increasingly share member states whilst being equipped with identical policy competencies.[6] The exposure of a state to regional regime complexity can be captured by its number of overlapping memberships in RIOs (*membership-based regime complexity*) and its number of duplicated policy competencies in RIOs (*competency-based regime complexity*) (Panke and Stapel 2023a, c.f. figure 1).

Membership-based regime complexity considers the number of RIO memberships a state holds at a given point in time for those organizations that have at least one competency in common. While the variable would be 72 if a state were a member of all 73 RIOs and all of these would have been equipped with at least one common policy competency, it would be zero if a state in a given year has no overlapping memberships, i.e., it has not joined two or more RIOs that also have one or more competencies in common. Due to the geographic membership criterion, not all states can join all RIOs. Hence, membership-based regime complexity varies empirically between ten (Russia since 2005) and zero (Israel, North Korea, and Timor-Leste), whereas states such as the United States (6 since 1996), Nigeria (4 since 2001), or China (4 since 2006) range in between.

Competency-based regime complexity captures how many of the 344 different policy competencies that a RIO can potentially be equipped with, a state covers more than once in the RIOs it is a member of in a given year (Panke and Stapel 2023a,b). On the one end of the spectrum is Russia, which since 2014 has 180 different policy competencies covered by at least two of the RIOs it is a member of. The United States, Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Rwanda, and Thailand will have more than 100 different overlapping competencies in 2020. With only 15 duplicated competencies from 2020 onwards, the United Kingdom is located at the lower end of the spectrum, followed by several states, including Switzerland,

[5] In addition, the EAC was dissolved in 1977 and re-created in 1999.

[6] This phenomenon is also referred to as "overlapping regionalism" (Weiffen, Wehner and Nolte 2013, Nolte and Comini 2016, Nolte 2018).

South Africa, Nepal, or Paraguay, with less than 40 competencies covered in more than one RIO at a given point in time.

In addition, there is a special constellation of regional regime complexity, namely the incompatibility of two RIOs (*RIO incompatibility*). It arises when the membership in one RIO is regarded as being, de facto (but not legally), not compatible with simultaneous membership in a second organization. De facto incompatibilities exist between RIOs with security alliance character. For instance, during the Cold War, it was impossible to be a member of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and NATO or the WEU at the same time or to be simultaneously in the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the SEATO. Similarly, after the end of the Cold War, a country cannot have CSTO and NATO membership at the same time. Hence, a state in the process of becoming a member in one of these organizations can, in principle, not maintain membership in the other RIO but should exit one before acceding the other. Furthermore, membership in RIOs with customs unions, common markets, and monetary unions is de facto incompatible, as states can neither deploy two divergent common external tariffs, abide by two sets of market rules, or have two different currencies at the same time. For example, when COMESA launched its customs union in 2009, membership in the organization became de facto incompatible with the EAC, which had established a customs union already in 2004. Likewise, due to different external tariffs and other rules, simultaneous membership in ANDEAN and MERCOSUR was de facto incompatible from 1995 until 2004, when ANDEAN suspended its common external tariff, which, however, was never fully implemented (for example, in the case of Peru) (CENF 2022). In contrast, we regard the lower-level threshold of two RIOs' having free trade agreements as insufficient to cause de facto incompatibility since states regularly accede to various bi- and multilateral free trade agreements that regulate imports and exports of goods to their respective markets without, in practice, causing frictions due to different sets of agreements. However, incompatibilities can also exist between two RIOs if one of them declares membership in both organizations to be incompatible, irrespective of whether one or both are only free trade zones. Thus, while both EFTA and CEFTA are free trade agreements—and not customs unions or even common markets—states joining the EU have to exit these RIOs.

The literature on functionally defined regime complexity also shows that overlaps increase over time (Alter and Meunier 2009, Alter and Raustiala 2018, Pratt 2018) and discusses the potential positive consequences of this development (Gómez-Mera 2015, Nolte 2018, Brosig 2020). For one, as states might generally be interested in institutional complementarity underpinning international order (Panke and Stapel 2023a), regime complexity should facilitate institutional adaptation and division of labor (Gehring and Faude 2014, Panke and Stapel 2024). From a functionalist perspective, regional regime complexity may be beneficial for states as—in the case of the failure of cooperation in one RIO—organizational redundancies may ensure the continuation of regional cooperation in another outlet (Faude 2020, 2021). In this regard, regime complexity can contribute to further international cooperation, either because competency overlaps between organizations increase the propensity that novel issues or emerging problems get addressed in at least one outlet of multilateral cooperation (Orsini, Morin and Young 2013), accelerate the need for discourse and justification, which adds to the legitimacy of global governance (Faude and Groβe-Kreul 2020), increase its problem-solving capacity (Keohane and Victor 2011), or enhance compliance due to reputational effects across several venues (Davis 2009). Thus, in terms of organizational ecology, regional regime complexity may be positive as it ensures that different RIOs fill different "niches" in the regional organizational population (Abbott, Green and Keohane 2016, Lake 2021).

However, regional regime complexity also comes with strings attached and can carry negative side effects for the member states and affected organizations. Regional regime complexity places high capacity demands on states, such as multiple membership fees and the requirement for well-educated, equipped, and prepared diplomatic and supporting staff to participate in the day-to-day operation of RIOs and make their voices heard in negotiations over RIO policies and activities (Panke 2010, Pouliot 2016). Thus, duplicated memberships in multiple RIOs risk wasting resources (Hofmann 2019). Moreover, covering the same policy competencies in several RIOs a state is a member of risks the duplication of tasks, policies, and activities, which also does not represent efficient usage of scarce capacities. In addition, policy-related costs that states have to invest, e.g., for the implementation of RIO policies, duplicate when the two organizations focus on different but compatible aspects, triggering capacity shortages on the side of member states and leading to selective implementation and non-compliance. Even worse, when two RIOs with overlapping policy competencies pass incompatible, or even outright competing policies and decisions, states that are members of both organizations can only comply with one set of policies, while being forced to ignore and violate the other (Haftel and Hofmann 2019, Hofmann 2019). In addition, membership in several overlapping organizations may induce states to engage in forum shopping, regime shifting, and the exploitation of strategic inconsistencies (Busch 2007, Alter and Meunier 2009, Alter and Raustiala 2018, Nolte 2018, Hofmann 2019, Henneberg and Plank 2020). These strategies are disproportionally beneficial for powerful states and can cause a race to the bottom concerning policy outcomes, non-compliance, or instability (Drezner 2009). Thus, while the exploitation of regime complexity may be beneficial from the perspective of some individual states, it may negatively impact the remaining member states and thereby harm the overall effectiveness of multilateral governance. Yet, studies also point toward the negative consequences of regime complexity for states due to inefficient usage of capacities and finances of the overlapping RIOs (Haftel and Hofmann 2019, Hofmann 2019). Additionally, under conditions of constant competition for resources and concerns for organizational autonomy (Brosig 2011), rivalries between organizations that are equipped with identical competencies while also sharing some member states are likely to occur (Biermann 2008, 2015, Nolte 2018, Kranke 2020). This is especially the case if the geopolitical preferences of organizations' member states are not aligned (Clark 2021), or if organizations' institutional identities are incompatible (Weiffen, Wehner and Nolte 2013). All this indicates that regional regime complexity diminishes states' prospects for effective regional governance (Gebhard and Galbreath 2013, Gómez-Mera 2015).

Hence, while the proliferation of RIOs signifies the promise of effective regional cooperation, the increase in overlaps between RIOs concerning member states as well as policy competencies may harm the prospects for effective regional governance. Accordingly, we now theorize whether and how states opt for exits from RIOs as a means to reduce their exposure to regional regime complexity and its potential negative side effects.

Positive effects of regional cooperation in RIOs notwithstanding (Börzel and Van Hüllen 2015), as outlined above, the rise of regional regime complexity poses a threat to effective regional governance. Besides these general effects, from a state perspective, exposure to regional regime complexity requires investing considerable resources to simultaneously engage in overlapping RIOs but also to comply with the high number of RIO policies and decisions. Consequently, even if outputs of overlapping organizations are compatible, states subject to regional regime complexity might run into capacity shortages and involuntary noncompliance (Chayes and Handler-Chayes 1993). One strategy to avoid this pitfall of high regional regime complexity is to exit from one or several of the overlapping RIOs. By doing so, states ease the capacity requirements placed upon them in the form of membership fees, participation costs (diplomats, embassies, policy units in Ministries of Foreign Affairs, etc.), and policy costs (transposition, implementation of RIO policies, and participation in RIO activities).

As RIOs are community organizations in which member states often share historical legacies, culture, or socioeconomic challenges and opportunities and therefore exhibit common identities (Thomas 2017), states should generally be inclined toward continuing their membership within RIOs. Nevertheless, when a state is subject to considerable regional regime complexity, which is the case the greater the membership-based and the competency-based complexity or the combination of both, a withdrawal from one of the organizations might become an attractive strategy to save costs and avoid potential negative side-effects associated with overlapping memberships and duplicated competencies. This leads to three expectations: the more exposed a state is to membership-based regional regime complexity, the greater the propensity of an exit from one of these RIOs (*hypothesis 1a*); the higher the competency-based regional regime complexity a state is confronted with, the greater the chances that it withdraws from an RIO (*hypothesis 1b*); and the greater the combined membership and competency regime complexity, the more likely it is that a state in question exits a RIO (*hypothesis 1c*). Moreover, RIO incompatibility, as another type of regional regime complexity, should also trigger state withdrawals, either because states cannot be members of competing security alliances or because they cannot adhere to the rules governing two different RIOs' customs unions, common markets, or common currencies at the same time. To avoid material or social costs resulting from memberships in incompatible organizations, states confronted with RIO incompatibility are expected to withdraw from one of the organizations concerned. Thus, *hypothesis 1d* expects: states are more likely to exit RIOs when they encounter incompatibility.

Concerning functionally defined regime complexity, research has demonstrated that states can cope with complexity to their benefit through forum shopping (Busch 2007, Murphy and Kellow 2013, Hofmann 2019) and chess-board politics (Alter and Meunier 2009, Alter and Raustiala 2018). This presupposes that the state in question has the necessary power to actively engage in several of the overlapping organizations at the same time and successfully push the agenda in the organization it regards as most promising for the realization of its interests. It further suggests that state power has a moderating effect on how both dimensions of regional regime complexity (membership-based and competency-based regime complexity as well as a combination thereof) impact the propensity of a withdrawal. To put it with Hirschman, states that have less power to voice their preferences and shape their organizations accordingly, are more likely to opt for exits (1970). Hence, the *first interaction hypothesis* (*HI-a*) states: the more powerful a state is, the more likely it benefits from membership-based and competency-based regime complexity or the combination thereof, and the lower the negative effect of regional regime complexity on the propensity of exits from a RIO. By contrast, one could also expect power to not systematically increase or decrease the effect of RIO incompatibility on the likelihood of a withdrawal to occur. Powerful states could at best prevent one organization from becoming active. This, however, would prevent the state in question from benefiting from the second RIO, rendering exits more likely. Therefore, the *second interaction hypothesis (HI-b)* expects that state power should not moderate the effect of RIO incompatibility on the propensity of a state to exit from an organization.

Empirical Analysis and Discussion

This section empirically investigates the plausibility of the hypotheses on the relationship between regional regime complexity and the propensity of state exits from RIOs. After the operationalization of the independent (H1a–d) and modifying variables (interaction hypotheses HIa and HIb), the model selection is discussed, followed by the empirical analysis and the discussion of the findings.

The independent variable of hypothesis 1a is membership-based regime complexity. As discussed in the previous section, time-series cross-sectional data on membership-based and competency-based regional regime complexity stems from the ROCO 2.0 dataset, which has been extended to cover data up until the year 2022. Membership-based regime complexity is operationalized by a count variable on the number of memberships a state holds at a given point in time for those RIOs that have at least one competency in common (H1a). Competency-based regime complexity (hypothesis 1b) is also measured by a count variable. It captures the number of policy competencies that a state covers in more than one of the RIOs that it has joined (Panke and Stapel 2023a). As much research on overlaps does not distinguish between membership and competency-based complexity but regards overlaps as being the product of both (Haftel and Lenz 2022), we also include an overlap variable into the quantitative analysis (combined regime complexity, hypothesis 1c), which is the product of competency- and membership-based complexity per state and year.

Hypothesis 1d focuses on the (in)compatibility of RIOs. This variable is binary in nature, as, at a given point in time, membership in two RIOs is either regarded as being in principle compatible (coded with 0) or incompatible (coded with 1). This approach reflects that membership in some RIOs is de facto (but not legally) exclusive and a state should therefore not be a member of a competing RIO at the same time. In the security realm, collective security and defense alliances are deemed mutually exclusive between US-led and Russia-led groupings. In this policy field, incompatibilities encompass NATO-WTO, SEATO-WTO, WEU-WTO, NATO-CSTO, and WEU-CSTO for all years of their existence.[7] In the economic realm, de facto incompatibilities exist if two RIOs both established customs unions, common markets, or monetary unions. To identify economic incompatibilities between RIOs, we proceeded in a three-step process. First, we identified all RIOs in the ROCO dataset which in

[7]However, neither of these dyads has any shared member states at any point in time.

their legal documents outlined the intention of establishing a free trade area, customs union, common market, or monetary union. Second, we conducted in-depth research on each of these RIOs based on secondary literature, primary sources, and newspaper articles to identify the point in time when the organization had in fact begun to implement the respective goal. Thus, while we code as incompatible RIOs with imperfectly implemented customs unions, common markets, or monetary unions, such as COMESA and EAC, we do not code as incompatible RIOs for which these instruments exist merely on paper, such as CIS and ECO. Third, we also identified RIOs, in which membership was declared as incompatible by the organizations concerned, irrespective of the level of economic integration. This is the case, for example, for the EU's relationship with EFTA and CEFTA. When a state is a member of two RIOs regarded as incompatible in a given year, the variable takes the value 1, while it is 0 otherwise. In some instances, incompatibilities do persist for several years, while in others they are followed by the immediate withdrawal of a state from one of the organizations.

The interaction hypotheses (HIa, HIb) expect that the effect of regime complexity on the propensity of state exits is moderated by state power. Power is operationalized on the basis of gross domestic product (GDP) of a state (as real prizes of 2005). The cross-sectional, time-series data stems from Gleditsch (2002).

In addition, we also included the age of RIOs in years since their respective foundation (data stemming from RIO homepages and secondary literature) as well as a proxy for legalization (the dummy variable RIO courts)—with the data emanating from the extended ROCO 2.0 dataset—as controls into the regression models in addition to the regime type of states and heterogeneity of RIO members (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019). The extent to which a state is democratic is measured by a score from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest), and the imputed data originates from the Freedom House and Polity IV datasets (c.f. Dahlberg et al. 2022). As RIOs are general-purpose organizations that cover a high number of different policy fields, member-state heterogeneity is measured by the standard deviation of a state's regime type from the RIO mean for each year of the RIO's existence. Moreover, we follow von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019) in measuring heterogeneity by country deviation from the RIO mean with respect to UN General Assembly (UNGA) voting in line with the United States, utilizing data on UNGA voting alignment from Bailey et al. (2017). Yet, as the number of observations drops considerably once this variable is included, we see this measure as a robustness check only (also as "preference divergence RIO average," c.f. table A4). For the robustness check of table A4, we also capture the contagion effect. In most RIOs, there is a one- or two-year time period between a state giving notice of its intention to leave and the actual withdrawal. Based on this procedural rule, we code whether a state exit is contagious and triggers other states' withdrawals from the same RIO during the three following years. We use the notation 1 if an important member state (measured by being in the top 25 percent of strong economic states within the RIO in question based on cumulative GDP) left during the three previous years and with 0 otherwise. As an additional robustness check, we include changes in relative economic power of member states in a RIO (table A5). To this end, for each state, we calculate the mean GDP per organization and year for each RIO the state is a member of, and subtract it from the annual power of the state in question (for descriptive statistics, see tables A2 and A3).

The dependent variable captures state exits from 73 RIOs between 1945 and 2022. Exits, as the formal withdrawal of membership, are definite in the sense that states seeking to rejoin the RIO at a later point in time need to undergo accession proceedings as outlined in the RIO treaties or other official sources. Unlike membership suspensions, which are only temporary in character, exits mark the formal end of RIO membership for the state concerned. We cross-checked all exit RIO websites, secondary literature, and newspaper articles. The dependent variable is binary and coded with "0" when the state in question was a member of an organization during a full given year, whereas "1" signifies that a specific member state exits the RIO in a given year.[8] The unit of analysis is state-RIO-year, as we are interested in the membership or exit of a given state in a given RIO in a given year, which amounts to a total of 34,784 observations. In the period of observation, there are a total of 56 exits of states from RIOs, including well-researched cases such as BREXIT, as well as others, including Chile withdrawing from ANDEAN in 1977, Lesotho leaving COMESA in 1997, or Pakistan exiting from SEATO in 1973. Some exits are dated—the earliest being the withdrawal of the Netherlands from SPC in 1962—while others are more recent, such as the withdrawal of Mali from G5S in 2022 (see table A7). Also, some organizations are subject to one instance of a member leaving (e.g., GUAM or IGAD), while other RIOs experience multiple exits (e.g., COMESA or ALBA).

As states are nested in RIOs, the data structure is hierarchical in nature. This calls for a multilevel analysis, which is specified as a logistic regression due to the binary nature of the dependent variable (1–exit; 0–membership of an existing state in an existing RIO). To avoid multicollinearity, the models are constructed in a manner not entailing correlating independent variables, most notably the membership- and competency-based as well as the combined regime complexity and incompatibility. The independent variables are lagged by two years, except for the incompatibility variable as incompatibility calls for immediate exits.

We also conducted a rare event analysis as a robustness check, in which all findings remain robust, while the significance of the regime complexity variables increases (see table A6). Moreover, we further sustain the quantitative analysis with qualitative narrative evidence to shed light on the underlying dynamics in addition to the broader patterns. To this end, we use official RIO documentation and a newspaper analysis based on the LexisNexis database. Additionally, we conducted interviews with representatives of RIOs and member states.

The first two hypotheses (H1a, H1b) expect that membership- and competency-based regional regime complexity have a positive effect on the likelihood of state exits from RIOs. The signs for both types of regional regime complexity are robustly positive throughout all model specifications, and the findings are significant as well (table 1, Models 1–2 and 5–6) The same applies to the product of both elements, the combined regime complexity (H1c, table 1, Models 3 and 7). Overall, increasing regime complexity, as well as complexity in terms of duplications of membership and policy competencies, individually drive state exits from RIOs. The qualitative analysis also points to a positive link between regional regime complexity and RIO withdrawals.

[8]When a state has not been a member of a RIO in a particular year or when either the state or the organization does not yet or no longer exist, this is coded as a missing value. Hence, when an organization gets dissolved, such as ODECA in 1973 (for other cases, c.f. table A1), this is not counted as state withdrawals but coded as a missing value from the year of dissolution onwards.

Table 1. Multi-Level Regressions with Time-Lagged Independent Variables—Hypotheses 1a–d

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*
Membership-based regime complexity	0.267***				0.392***			
	(0.062)				(0.092)			
Competency-based regime complexity		0.014**				0.019**		
		(0.004)				(0.007)		
Combined regime complexity			0.001**				0.002**	
			(0.000)				(0.001)	
RIO incompatibility				4.356*				6.874**
				(1.916)				(2.569)
State power	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
State regime type	0.007	0.013	0.010	−0.023	−0.163	−0.163	−0.150	−0.305*
	(0.105)	(0.106)	(0.105)	(0.121)	(0.134)	(0.134)	(0.135)	(0.132)
RIO courts	1.084	1.097	1.108	0.685	0.585	0.537	0.586	−0.252
	(0.658)	(0.659)	(0.638)	(0.797)	(0.675)	(0.657)	(0.654)	(0.834)
RIO age	−0.028	−0.030	−0.023	−0.034	−0.034	−0.033	−0.029	−0.015
	(0.019)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.030)	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.022)
RIO heterogenity (regime type)	0.019	0.015	0.008	0.008				
	(0.150)	(0.143)	(0.145)	(0.143)				
RIO heterogeneity (UNGA voting)					1.588	1.846	1.774	−0.680
					(8.206)	(7.577)	(7.519)	(9.518)
Constant	−9.011***	−8.753***	−8.443***	−8.578***	−7.840***	−7.593***	−7.168***	−8.925**
	(0.951)	(0.919)	(0.903)	(1.261)	(1.206)	(1.100)	(1.106)	(3.060)
var(_cons[RO_code])	5.535**	5.953**	5.942*	7.784	4.303	5.099	4.814	13.148
	(2.121)	(2.283)	(2.361)	(4.433)	(2.955)	(3.141)	(3.077)	(9.754)
Observations	20,586	20,586	20,586	20,586	9051	9051	9051	9051
AIC	408.563	409.890	411.907	357.565	173.600	174.751	175.461	154.352
BIC	472.022	473.349	475.366	421.024	230.485	231.636	232.346	211.237

Note:Clustered standard errors in parentheses with * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Some states stress the costs of membership in several RIOs at the same time. Tanzania, through its membership in COMESA, the EAC, and SADC, all of which overlap concerning a broad range of policy competencies, was subject to a multiplication of membership fees, leading Tanzanian officials to note that there "'is no use for us to pay a lot of money to three organizations doing the same thing'"(IPS 1999). Accordingly, in 2000, Tanzania reduced the regional regime complexity to which it was exposed, and thereby the membership fees it had to pay, by exiting COMESA. Similarly, when Mozambique withdrew from COMESA in 1997, it referred to "'question[s] of staffing and other resources' and wondered whether Mozambique had the human and material means to belong to COMESA and SADC" (Africa News 1996). These examples are representative of a series of five exits from COMESA in favor of SADC between 1997 and 2007.

Beyond duplications of membership fees, the duplication of policy competencies in COMESA and SADC also produced problems for the affected countries. In this regard, in several ministries, there had already emerged "confusion" due to the necessity to "choose between complying with COMESA or SADC stipulations" (Hahnsom, Adongo and Tutalife 2005: 11). An official stated that

> when you have membership in almost the same things, and they overlap … even the [World Trade Organization] was making comments about the "spaghetti bowl effect". If you belong to two organizations with almost the same objective, how are you going to coordinate the policies? (Interview #4, May 10, 2023).

This thought process was also evident in Rwanda's decision to withdraw from the CEEAC in favor of membership in EAC in 2007, as "[t]he regional economic communities are in the process of creating free trade zones, a common market, monetary unions and eventually political federations that are evolving at different speeds, and puts [*sic*] us in a very difficult situation of being tugged in separate directions" (AFP 2007).

Regional regime complexity can further function as a facilitating condition for specific exit decisions of states. For instance, in the case of Venezuela with eight overlapping RIOs and 67 duplicated competencies, regional regime complexity was high and induced costs on Venezuela (IPS 2003). Thus, when Venezuela became severely dissatisfied with ANDEAN's rapprochement towards the United States (NF 2007), it decided to withdraw from this organization in favor of joining MERCSOUR. While this allowed Venezuela to avoid duplicated competencies and potential incompatibilities, MERCOSUR's left-leaning orientation was also more in line with Venezuela's ideological preferences (Oelsner 2013).

Hypothesis 1d focuses on a special constellation of regional regime complexity, namely RIO incompatibility. It is supported by empirical evidence as the covariates are robustly positive and highly significant (table 2, Models 4 and 8). As expected, incompatibility is a driver for state exits from one of the concerned RIOs. This is also backed up by qualitative insights. While some states withdrew from one RIO to join an incompatible one, in other instances, incompatibility persisted for a very short period only before the state in question left one of the two incompatible organizations. Examples of the former include Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, all of which over time exited CEFTA to become a member of the EU. As the EU demanded aspiring member

Table 2. Regression Table—Interaction Effects

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*
Membership-based regime complexity	0.309***				0.438***			
	(0.063)				(0.102)			
Competency-based regime complexity		0.015***				0.023**		
		(0.005)				(0.007)		
Combined regime complexity			0.001***				0.003***	
			(0.000)				(0.001)	
RIO incompatibility				3.366*				4.753*
				(1.591)				(1.951)
State power	0.000**	0.000*	0.000	−0.000	0.000	0.000	−0.000	−0.000*
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
State regime type	0.008	0.011	0.011	−0.041	−0.165	−0.164	−0.150	−0.317*
	(0.104)	(0.106)	(0.104)	(0.110)	(0.133)	(0.133)	(0.134)	(0.143)
RIO courts	1.086	1.090	1.113	0.787	0.613	0.528	0.607	0.191
	(0.664)	(0.664)	(0.644)	(0.781)	(0.684)	(0.665)	(0.663)	(0.650)
RIO age	−0.029	−0.030	−0.023	−0.039	−0.035*	−0.033	−0.030	−0.025
	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.033)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.032)
RIO heterogenity (UNGA voting)					1.528	1.822	1.739	0.464
					(8.357)	(7.609)	(7.658)	(8.244)
RIO heterogeneity (regime type)	0.024	0.018	0.013	0.051				
	(0.151)	(0.143)	(0.146)	(0.131)				
memb.compl##state.power	−0.000*				−0.000**			
	(0.000)				(0.000)			
competency.compl##state.power		−0.000				−0.000*		
		(0.000)				(0.000)		
combined.complexity##state.power			−0.000*				−0.000	
			(0.000)				(0.000)	
incompatibility##state.power				0.000**				0.000**
				(0.000)				(0.000)
Constant	−9.174***	−8.842***	−8.535***	−8.881***	−8.034***	−7.778***	−7.323***	−7.762***
	(0.954)	(0.920)	(0.908)	(1.227)	(1.273)	(1.127)	(1.134)	(2.357)
var(_cons[RO_code])	5.532**	5.966**	5.931*	10.230*	4.267	5.105	4.733	8.747
	(2.123)	(2.304)	(2.364)	(5.217)	(2.947)	(3.109)	(3.020)	(6.717)
Observations	20,586	20,586	20,586	20,586	9051	9051	9051	9051
AIC	409.884	411.370	411.069	352.602	175.190	176.174	176.767	153.111
BIC	481.275	482.762	474.528	423.993	239.185	240.169	240.762	217.107

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses with * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

states to withdraw from CEFTA before their accession, it de facto declared membership in both organizations incompatible. In this regard, CEFTA was sometimes referred to as a "waiting room for Europe" (Dangerfield 2004). An example of the latter is Namibia, which was a member of SACU and COMESA. While SACU already had a customs union in place, COMESA launched its customs union in 2009. Yet, membership in the two organizations became incompatible already in 2003, when COMESA denounced the possibility of simultaneous membership with SACU. Initially, Namibia as a SACU member had been granted a derogation to suspend the implementation of intra-COMESA tariff reductions. This was important, as Namibia was bound by SACU's Common External Tariff, and could therefore not unilaterally reduce its tariffs to the level required by COMESA. However, in 2003, COMESA terminated the derogation of tariff reductions for SACU members (Hahnsom, Adongo and Tutalife 2005: 6). This situation rendered membership in the two organizations de facto incompatible for Namibia. In this regard, one interviewee stated that as SACU

> is a customs union to which Namibia is a party(..), if anything must be negotiated within the COMESA framework or with COMESA, then you cannot do it alone because you have the set common external tariff (..). Now you cannot stand and go and negotiate anything alone with COMESA (Interview #5, May 24, 2023).

In effect, in the early 2000s, it became

> increasingly clear that (..) Namibia's membership in COMESA (..) was in conflict with SACU membership (..). And the more that went on, it became clear: so, we can't do both. (..) We have to make compromises, and especially with SACU, that's where we come into conflict. The thing is, you can only be part of one customs union (Interview #6, June 13, 2023).

As a result, in 2003, Namibia announced its withdrawal from COMESA, which came into effect the following year. The case of Namibia's withdrawal from COMESA in favor of SACU underlines the relevance of incompatibilities between different economically oriented RIOs for states' exit decisions. However, the example of Eswatini, which until today remains a member of both SACU and COMESA, illustrates that RIO incompatibility does not determine state behavior and always leads to exits. In fact, even when being subject to declared and de facto incompatibilities, there is room for agency of the affected governments.

In sum, states strive to avoid being exposed to RIO incompatibility and therefore tend to exit from one of the organizations that they regard as being incompatible. In

addition, membership-based and competency-based regime complexity place capacity- and financial demands on member states concerning participation in the RIOs and its activities as well as the implementation of and compliance with policy outputs (Börzel 2020). This increases the chances for state exits to happen. The qualitative analysis further suggests that regional regime complexity plays an important role in conjunction with state-related features. This finding calls for the empirical investigation of the interaction effects, with the expectation that the effects of membership-based, competency-based, and combined regional regime complexity on the likelihood of exits to occur are moderated by state power, while this should not be the case concerning RIO incompatibility.

As there are four specifications of regime complexity (membership-based and competency-based complexity, combined regime complexity, and RIO incompatibility), table 2 entails four different interaction terms. The *first interaction hypothesis* (*HI-a*) expects that the more powerful a country is, the more likely it is to successfully navigate membership-based and competency-based complexity and combined regional regime complexity, thereby reducing the chances of a withdrawal to occur. The signs of the covariates for the interaction terms are—as expected—negative in Models 1–3 and 5–7 featuring membership-based, competency-based, and combined regime complexity. Yet, the interaction term is systematically significant concerning membership-based regime complexity only (table 2, Models 1 and 5), while competency-based and combined regime complexity is only significant in models 3 and 6, respectively.

According to the *second interaction hypothesis* (*HI-b*), state power should not moderate the positive effect of organizational incompatibility on the propensity of a withdrawal from an organization. The covariate in table 2 displays a positive sign whilst also being significant (table 2, Models 4 and 8). The empirical finding that powerful states are increasingly likely to exit when being faced with incompatibilities could indicate that they are better able to cope with costs associated with withdrawals, for instance by using their leverage to pursue their interests unilaterally or bilaterally, and are consequently more likely to walk away from situations of RIO incompatibility.

To further investigate the moderating effect of power, figure 2 presents the margins plot of the two models with systematically statistically significant interaction terms in line with the expectations (Models 1 and 5, table 2). This illustrates that power differentials play out differently depending on state power and the extent to which a state is exposed to regime complexity. With an increase in membership-based regime complexity, states with limited power are more likely to leave a RIO compared to more powerful countries. For more powerful countries, an increase in regional regime complexity tends to reduce the chances for an exit to occur, but this effect is not significant. This could indicate that while some powerful states shape RIO policies and activities in line with their positions and thus reduce negative effects of regime complexity and the chances for exits, other powerful states faced with regime complexity are well positioned to act unilaterally or use their leverage in bilateral alternatives.

Power moderates the effect of increasing regime complexity on the chances to leave or remain in a RIO, but does so especially for less powerful states that are exposed to high levels of membership-based regime complexity. This suggests that weaker states are not only at a disadvantage concerning their influence on the policies and decisions of

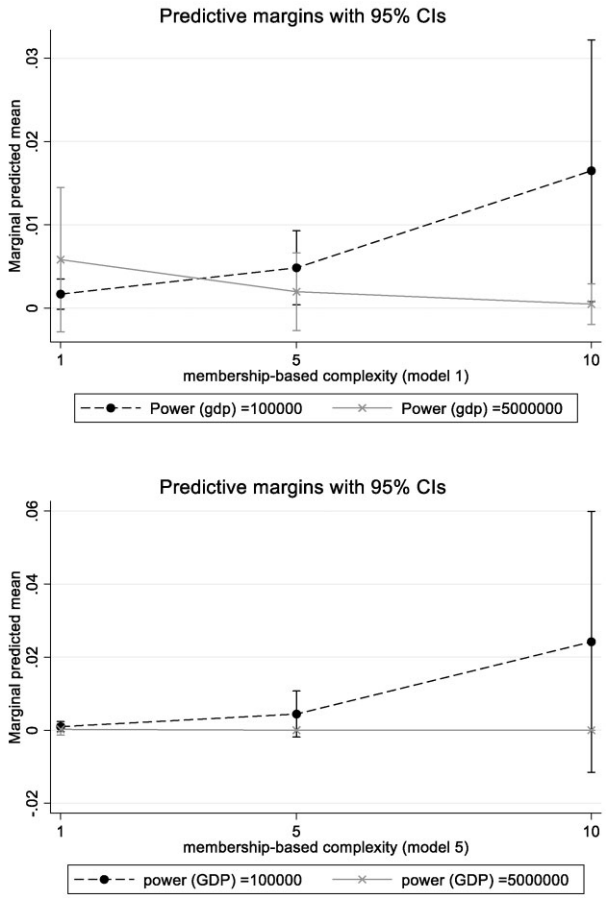

Figure 2. Interaction effects.

the RIOs they are a member of (and with respect to limiting the mismatch between policies in place domestically and the ones passed by the RIO, c.f. Börzel et al. 2010), but also have often fewer means to implement the enacted RIO policies subsequently (Börzel 2020). In this regard, an official attributed Austria's 2018 decision to withdraw from the Central European Initiative to "the limited capacities that we have as a country, we can't get involved in every forum" (Interview #3, February 22, 2023). Less powerful states subject to high regional regime complexity are more likely to leave an organization and thereby save their scarce resources. For example, in 2004, Seychelles withdrew from SADC due to their inability to pay membership fees, as the country's "commitment to several international organisations (..) cost between three million and four million euros annually, which is almost a quarter of the country's annual budget" (AFP 2003). Yet, less powerful states are not only more severely affected by the duplication of membership payments to several RIOs, but they are also constrained in their ability to influence RIO policies according to their preferences. A case in point is Mauritania. In 2000, the country terminated its membership due to "the decisions adopted by the organization in its last summit," which referred to the establishment of a region-wide common currency to which Mauritania was opposed (Africa News 2000).

To put it with Hirschman: Under high regional regime complexity, less powerful states are more inclined to opt for exits, while powerful states can use their voice to shape the RIOs to their liking (Hirschman 1970). By the same token, high regional regime complexity in tendency reduces the propensity for exits of powerful states. In line with the

literature, this implies that regime complexity offers advantages to powerful states, who can use arena selection and forum shopping to maximize the chances to successfully pursue their interests by focusing negotiation and diplomatic efforts on the organization in which they expect the greatest pay-off (Busch 2007, Murphy and Kellow 2013). Also, financially well-off states are in a position to negotiate in multiple arenas at the same time, owing to staffing at the negotiation table (diplomats, attachés) as well as in the ministries back home. Hence, powerful states might even benefit from high regime complexity and are thus less inclined to leave. Small states, on the other hand, are increasingly inclined to exit RIOs under conditions of high regime complexity as a result of absent capacities.

Conclusions

Given the success of integration projects throughout all regions of the world, it is no surprise that the number of RIOs has increased over time, attracting an increasing number of member states and getting endowed with more and more policy competencies (Panke, Stapel and Starkmann 2020). This has resulted in increased regional regime complexity. When states are exposed to regional regime complexity, they risk encountering negative side effects, ranging from multiple membership fees to the duplication of efforts and the waste of resources over high capacity demands and incompatible or even competing policy outputs, the latter of which is likely to result in member state non-compliance and reduced effectiveness of regional governance (Alter and Meunier 2009, Hofmann 2019).

This article investigated how states cope with regional regime complexity, shedding light on one specific strategy to reduce regional regime complexity: exiting RIOs. Do the extent and the type of regime complexity influence the likelihood of states' withdrawals from RIOs? Compared to global IOs, exits from regional IOs as community organizations in which states often share cultures, legacies, socio-economic challenges, and opportunities as well as common identities (Thomas 2017) follow different trajectories (see footnote 2). Against this background, the article utilized the regime complexity literature to develop hypotheses on how various types of regional regime complexity affect the chances for RIO exits to occur and hypotheses on interaction effects between the different regional regime complexity types and states as well as RIO features, which influence who is leaving which organizations when encountering high levels of regime complexity. Based on the empirical investigation of the theoretical expectations, three main insights emerge.

First, membership-based and competency-based regional regime complexity, as well as the product of both, systematically increase the likelihood of state withdrawals from RIOs. High exposure to regime complexity can become costly for the state concerned, with respect to capacities and membership payments as well as policy requirements and implementation costs. In addition, the qualitative analysis illustrates that both types of regional regime complexity can also operate as background conditions for withdrawals, which are likely to be moderated by domestic factors.

Second, RIO incompatibility is a driver for state withdrawals. When two organizations with overlapping member states establish customs unions, common markets, monetary unions, or represent ideologically divergent security alliances, incompatibilities can be expected. To avoid being exposed to incompatibilities, states exit one of the RIOs in question. Empirically, incompatibilities are observed in the economic realm. In the security realm, they do not exist, as no state was pondering becoming or being simultaneously a member of NATO and WTO or CSTO.

Third, regime complexity and state power also interact. Especially when membership-based regime complexity increases, weaker states are more likely to leave a RIO compared to powerful countries. With this finding, the article speaks to the regime complexity literature on forum-shopping and arena selection (e.g., Busch 2007, Murphy and Kellow 2013), which points out that resourceful states can particularly benefit from complexity by strategically engaging in the arenas in which they have the best chances to successfully pursue their interests. The more financial power a country has, the more likely it can successfully navigate regional regime complexity and the lower the negative effect of regional regime complexity on the propensity of an exit from a RIO. While powerful states have a strong voice and can shape organizations to limit their costs associated with regional regime complexity, less powerful states lack this voice option and are particularly inclined to opt for exits in the wake of high regional regime complexity (Hirschman 1970). In short, limited power increases the chances that affected states react to being exposed to high levels of regional regime complexity by withdrawing from some of the community organizations they are members of.

Overall, increased regional regime complexity as well as de facto RIO incompatibility raises the likelihood of state exits. Additionally, the analysis of interaction effects suggests that power, as a state feature, influences which countries are most likely to act upon the pressures of high regime complexity. Thus, it is the smaller rather than the more powerful states that leave organizations in the wake of considerable membership-based and combined regime complexity.

These findings complement the growing body of regime complexity research. First, by providing additional insights into regional regime complexity: while the bulk of regime complexity research has studied functional regime complexes in specific policy fields, territorial regime complexes have not yet received extensive attention (Alter and Raustiala 2018, exceptions include Gómez-Mera 2015, Haftel and Hofmann 2017, Haftel and Hofmann 2019). Second, while regime complexity affects the ability to pass regulative policies that do not fall into the trap of lowest common denominator standards (Faude and Groβe-Kreul 2020) or the ability of individual states to benefit from overlapping negotiation arenas have been considered (Alter and Meunier 2009, Drezner 2009, Hofmann 2019), so far it has not been studied how regime complexity triggers exits from overlapping RIOs (see von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019). Third, research on functional as well as territorial regime complexes has thus far not studied how and under what conditions this complexity can decrease. Apart from emphasizing state exits, regime complexity research could also fruitfully engage with scholarship on IO death (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020, Debre and Dijkstra 2021). The dissolution of IOs or RIOs is another—arguably the most extreme—instrument to tackle increasing regime complexity, yet has not been explored in that manner. Fourth, the existence of functional or membership overlap or security- and economic incompatibilities between RIOs does not determine the relationship between the two organizations. More precisely, inter-organizational relations can tilt more towards competition or cooperation (Aris and Snetkov 2018, Clark 2021), and RIOs can engage in different forms

of collaboration, e.g., through inter-organizational agreements, to mitigate the negative effects of overlaps or outline divisions of labor. Further research should investigate in more detail how the relationship between overlapping organizations plays out in practice. Fifth, there is a growing literature on the contestation of the liberal script and on IOs in crises (e.g., Börzel and Zürn 2021, Lake, Martin and Risse 2021, Kruck et al. 2022). In this respect, another avenue for further research would be to study under what conditions withdrawals from organizations are a manifestation of the liberal-script crises, leading to disintegration and limited regional or global ordering, and under what conditions organizations benefit from exits via increased homogeneity and vitality (e.g., Chopin and Lequesne 2021). Finally, the current international system is characterized by high regime complexity and, as this article demonstrates, weak and powerful states differing in their response to the challenges of complexity, with less powerful states being much more adversely affected by regional regime complexity and therefore more likely to exit organizations. Hence, organizational resilience also depends on member states' characteristics, especially their material capacities. This suggests that beyond focusing on organizational characteristics (c.f. Treshchenkov 2019, Hoffmann 2020), research on the resilience of (regional) IOs would benefit from taking such state-level factors into account.

Our findings carry important policy implications. Regime complexity contributes to states withdrawing from IOs. IO representatives and states seeking to safeguard the functioning of a specific IO should thus be aware of the potential harmful effects of regime complexity. Under conditions of regional regime complexity, less powerful states are more inclined to opt for exits the more overlapping memberships they hold. By contrast, powerful states do not only possess the capacities needed to actively participate and are in a good position to shape the IO to their liking but are also well-resourced to implement IO policies and activities. Hence, IO officials and member states that want to reduce the risk of smaller states leaving could engage in capacity-building efforts to ease the resource demands of states operating under conditions of high regime complexity. Another strategy to avoid withdrawals is the management of regime complexity through the IOs themselves, for instance through coordination and cooperation between IOs in order to avoid the passing of competing or incompatible policies or by engaging in a division of labor between overlapping organizations (Panke and Stapel 2024).

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Appendix

Table A1. List of RIOs

RIO	*Full Name*	*Start*	*End*	*Region*
AC	Arctic Council	1996		Europe
ACC	Arab Cooperation Council	1989	1990	Asia
ACD	Asia Cooperation Dialogue	2001		Asia
ACS	Association of Caribbean States	1994		Americas
ACTO	Amazonian Cooperation Treaty Organization	1995		Americas
AL	League of Arab States	1945		Africa
ALADI	Latin American Integration Association	1960		Americas
ALBA	Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas	2004		Americas
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union	1989		Africa
ANDEAN	Andean Community	1969		Americas
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation	1989		Asia
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	1967		Asia
AU	African Union	1963		Africa
BEU	Benelux Economic Union	1958		Europe
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation	1997		Asia
BSEC	Black Sea Economic Cooperation	1992		Asia
CACM	Central American Common Market	1960		Americas
CAEU	Council of Arab Economic Unity	1964		Africa
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation	1997		Asia
CARICOM	Caribbean Community	1965		Americas
CCTS	Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States	2009		Asia
CE	Conseil de l'Entente	1959		Africa
CEEAC	Communauté Economique des États de l'Afrique Centrale	1983		Africa
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement	1992		Europe
CEI	Central European Initiative	1989		Europe
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States	2011		Americas
CEMAC	Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique centrale	1991		Africa
CENSAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States	1998		Africa
CEPGL	Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries	1976		Africa
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia	1999		Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States	1991		Europe
CoE	Council of Europe	1949		Europe
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	1993		Africa
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty (Organization)	1992		Europe
EAC	East African Community	1967 1999	1977	Africa
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union	2000		Europe
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization	1985		Asia
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States	1975		Africa
EFTA	European Free Trade Association	1960		Europe
EU	European Union	1951		Europe
G5S	G5 du Sahel	2014		Africa
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council	1981		Asia
GGC	Gulf of Guinea Commission	2001		Africa
GUAM	Organization for Democracy and Economic Development	1997		Europe
ICGLR	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region	2004		Africa
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development	1986		Africa
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission	1984		Africa
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association	1997		Africa
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission	1964		Africa
MERCOSUR	Mercado Comun del Sur	1994		Americas
MGC	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation	2000		Asia
MRU	Mano River Union	1973		Africa

Table A1. Continued

RIO	Full Name	Start	End	Region
MSG	Melanesian Spearhead Group	2007		Asia
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Organization	1994		Americas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization	1949		Europe
NC	Nordic Council	1952		Europe
OAS	Organization of American States	1948		Americas
ODECA	Organization of Central American States	1951	1973	Americas
OECS	Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States	1981		Americas
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe	1975		Europe
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum	1971		Asia
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	1985		Asia
SACU	Southern African Customs Union	1945		Africa
SADC	Southern African Development Community	1980		Africa
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization	2001		Asia
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization	1954	1977	Asia
SELA	Latin American Economic System	1975		Americas
SICA	Central American Integration System	1991		Americas
SPC	Pacific Community	1947		Asia
UEMOA	West African Economic and Monetary Union	1994		Africa
UNASUR	Union of South American Nations	2008		Americas
WEU	Western European Union	1954	2010	Europe
WTO	Warsaw Treaty Organisation	1955	1991	Europe

Table A2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	*Obs*	*Mean*	*Std. dev.*	*Min*	*Max*
RIO ExitDummy	34,732	0.0016123	0.0401222	0	1
Membership-based regime complexity	502,329	2.529265	1.854171	0	10
Competency-based regime complexity	502,329	34.76388	31.6536	0	180
Combined regime complexity	841,763	95.5095	162.4748	0	1800
RIO incompatibility	509,209	0.0021366	0.0461745	0	1
State power (GDP)	672,184	189,324.4	762,915.1	19	1.32E + 07
State regime type	615,171	5.852943	3.411359	0	10
RIO courts	546,876	0.2653874	0.4415397	0	1
RIO age	548,262	25.90069	20.34378	1	114
RIO heterogenity (regime type)	28,865	1.511714	1.377929	0	8.132333
RIO heterogenity (UNGA voting)	12,242	0.0685465	0.1043958	0	0.8504065
RIO avg. democracy score	436,277	6.093846	2.666722	0.8774988	10
RIO issue area economics	486,490	9.171841	6.654188	0	28
RIO issue area security	486,490	4.213386	5.69492	0	24
Preference divergence RIO avg.	12,242	0.0685465	0.1043958	0	0.8504065
Relative state power	24,036	348,627.5	936,957.6	0	1.26E + 07
Contagion effect	486,302	0.0246082	0.1549279	0	1
Duration of membership	32,909	21.14753	16.47703	0	75
RIO size	547,470	11.90127	10.63844	1	56

Table A3. Correlation Matrix (Models from tables 1 and A6)

	Memb.compl.	*Policy compl.*	*Combined c*	*Incomp.*	*Power*	*Regime*	*RIO courts*	*RIO age*	*Hetg. regime*	*Hetg. voting*
Membership-based regime complexity	1									
Competency-based regime complexity	0.8269	1								
Combined regime complexity	0.863	0.9042	1							
RIO incompatibility	0.1163	0.1639	0.1128	1						
State power (GDP)	0.2351	0.2411	0.2597	−0.032	1					
State regime type	0.2329	0.196	0.1147	0.0685	0.1614	1				
RIO courts	0.0965	0.1525	0.0643	0.1579	−0.0644	0.1323	1			
RIO age	0.047	0.0997	0.0308	0.0147	0.0129	0.1688	0.1882	1		
RIO heterogenity (regime type)	−0.1003	−0.0383	−0.0203	−0.0534	0.0168	−0.2118	−0.0642	−0.1706	1	
RIO heterogenity (UNGA voting)	0.1047	0.1287	0.1571	−0.0724	0.6784	0.1765	−0.0611	0.0305	0.1652	1
L2_MS_~b	L2_MS~mp	L2_Ms_~b	MS_inc~s	L2_MS_g~	L2_MS_f~	L2_RO_~t	L2_RO~ge	L2_MS_..	L2_MS_~S	
L2_MS_dupl~b	1									
L2_MS_dupl~p	0.8023	1								
L2_Ms_over~b	0.855	0.8989	1							
MS_incomp_~s	0.092	0.1704	0.0978	1						
L2_MS_gle_~p	0.2508	0.2709	0.2945	−0.0525	1					
L2_MS_fh_i~2	0.2493	0.1802	0.1094	0.0968	0.1552	1				
L2_RO_reg_~t	0.0625	0.1288	0.0477	0.1762	−0.0907	0.1325	1			
L2_RO_age	0.034	0.0846	0.0249	0.0325	−0.0205	0.1451	0.232	1		
L2_MS_divg..	−0.0412	0.0272	0.0422	−0.0632	0.0493	−0.3038	−0.1008	−0.1734	1	
L2_MS_divg~S	0.1047	0.1287	0.1571	−0.0724	0.6784	0.1765	−0.0611	0.0305	0.1652	1

Table A4. Rare Event Logit Regressions, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019 for RIOs Based on the Extended ROCO Dataset, 1945–2022

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*
Membership-based regime complexity	0.300***				0.383***			
	(0.062)				(0.093)			
Competency-based regime complexity		0.013**				0.018**		
		(0.004)				(0.007)		
Combined regime complexity			0.001**				0.002***	
			(0.000)				(0.001)	
RIO incompatibility				3.475***				3.749**
				(0.693)				(1.434)
State power (GDP)	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	0.000	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	0.000**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
State regime type	0.069	0.071	0.080	0.017	−0.130	−0.120	−0.099	−0.218*
	(0.073)	(0.073)	(0.070)	(0.066)	(0.108)	(0.106)	(0.101)	(0.094)
RIO courts	0.673	0.622	0.677	−0.312	0.496	0.297	0.431	−0.702
	(0.404)	(0.403)	(0.399)	(0.698)	(0.589)	(0.605)	(0.577)	(1.403)
RIO age	−0.048**	−0.050***	−0.049**	−0.050*	−0.037*	−0.038*	−0.038*	−0.038
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.025)
RIO heterogenity (regime type)					−0.593	−0.089	−0.078	0.031
					(5.996)	(5.440)	(5.513)	(4.521)
RIO heterogeneity (UNGA voting)	−0.162	−0.197	−0.189	−0.123				
	(0.166)	(0.171)	(0.169)	(0.147)				
Constant	−6.719***	−6.172***	−5.984***	−5.677***	−6.095***	−5.620***	−5.386***	−4.810***
	(0.458)	(0.416)	(0.417)	(0.528)	(0.752)	(0.543)	(0.609)	(0.763)
Observations	20,586	20,586	20,586	20,586	9051	9051	9051	9051
AIC	463.48	467.59	469.42	423.35	179.98	182.19	182.77	171.33
BIC	519	523.12	524.94	478.88	229.76	231.96	232.55	221.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses with * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A5. Alternative Power Measure

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*
Membership-based regime complexity	0.258***				0.249***			
	(0.066)				(0.064)			
Competency-based regime complexity		0.014**				0.014*		
		(0.005)				(0.005)		
Combined regime complexity				0.001**				0.001*
				(0.000)				(0.000)
RIO incompatibility				4.349*				6.938**
				(1.917)				(2.548)
Relative state power	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000*	−0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
State regime type	0.007	0.014	0.013	−0.016	−0.222	−0.208	−0.211	−0.310*
	(0.104)	(0.105)	(0.104)	(0.116)	(0.153)	(0.147)	(0.152)	(0.140)
RIO courts	1.150	1.154	1.165	0.709	0.744	0.697	0.728	−0.218
	(0.679)	(0.680)	(0.662)	(0.822)	(0.711)	(0.700)	(0.700)	(0.842)
RIO age	−0.027	−0.029	−0.022	−0.033	−0.027	−0.028	−0.022	−0.017
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.031)	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.022)
RIO heterogenity (regime type)	0.023	0.018	0.012	0.018				
	(0.149)	(0.142)	(0.145)	(0.145)				
RIO heterogeneity (UNGA voting)					−0.043	0.385	0.304	−1.122
					(8.421)	(8.009)	(7.824)	(10.639)
Constant	−9.169***	−8.914***	−8.627***	−8.708***	−7.691***	−7.574***	−7.247***	−9.024**
	(0.976)	(0.945)	(0.930)	(1.309)	(1.248)	(1.137)	(1.182)	(3.191)
var(_cons[RO_code])	5.864*	6.254**	6.245*	7.968	5.202	5.610	5.590	13.128
	(2.301)	(2.425)	(2.512)	(4.568)	(3.689)	(3.604)	(3.719)	(10.261)
Observations	20,586	20,586	20,586	20,586	9051	9051	9051	9051
AIC	407.385	408.676	410.521	356.569	175.740	176.108	177.077	154.187
BIC	470.844	472.135	473.980	420.028	232.626	232.993	233.962	211.072

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses with * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table A6. Robustness Check with Rare Event Logit Regressions

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*
Membership-based regime complexity	0.300***				0.383***			
	(0.062)				(0.093)			
Competency-based regime complexity		0.013**				0.018**		
		(0.004)				(0.007)		
Combined regime complexity			0.001**				0.002***	
			(0.000)				(0.001)	
RIO incompatibility				3.475***				3.749**
				(0.693)				(1.434)
State power (GDP)	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	0.000	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	0.000**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
State regime type	0.069	0.071	0.080	0.017	−0.130	−0.120	−0.099	−0.218*
	(0.073)	(0.073)	(0.070)	(0.066)	(0.108)	(0.106)	(0.101)	(0.094)
RIO courts	0.673	0.622	0.677	−0.312	0.496	0.297	0.431	−0.702
	(0.404)	(0.403)	(0.399)	(0.698)	(0.589)	(0.605)	(0.577)	(1.403)
RIO age	−0.048**	−0.050***	−0.049**	−0.050*	−0.037*	−0.038*	−0.038*	−0.038
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.025)
RIO heterogeneity (UNGA voting)					−0.593	−0.089	−0.078	0.031
					(5.996)	(5.440)	(5.513)	(4.521)
RIO heterogenity (regime type)	−0.162	−0.197	−0.189	−0.123				
	(0.166)	(0.171)	(0.169)	(0.147)				
Constant	−6.719***	−6.172***	−5.984***	−5.677***	−6.095***	−5.620***	−5.386***	−4.810***
	(0.458)	(0.416)	(0.417)	(0.528)	(0.752)	(0.543)	(0.609)	(0.763)
Observations	20,586	20,586	20,586	20,586	9051	9051	9051	9051
AIC	463.48	467.59	469.42	423.35	179.98	182.19	182.77	171.33
BIC	519	523.12	524.94	478.88	229.76	231.96	232.55	221.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses with * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table A7. Exits from RIOs

Country	*Year*	*Organization*	*Abbreviation*	*Exit*
Albania	1968	Warsaw Treaty Organisation	WTO	1
Angola	2007	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	COMESA	1
Argentina	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Austria	1995	European Free Trade Association	EFTA	1
Austria	2018	Central European Initiative	CEI	1
Azerbaijan	1999	Collective Security Treaty (Organization)	CSTO	1
Bolivia	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Bolivia	2019	Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas	ALBA	1
Brazil	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Bulgaria	2007	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Chile	1977	Andean Community	ANDEAN	1
Chile	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Colombia	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Costa Rica	2018	Latin American Economic System	SELA	1
Croatia	2013	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Czech Republic	2004	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Denmark	1973	European Free Trade Association	EFTA	1
Ecuador	2018	Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas	ALBA	1
Ecuador	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Eritrea	2007	Intergovernmental Authority on Develeopment	IGAD	1
Finland	1995	European Free Trade Association	EFTA	1
Georgia	1999	Collective Security Treaty (Organization)	CSTO	1
Georgia	2009	Commonwealth of Independent States	CIS	1
Greece	1970	Council of Europe	CoE	1
Honduras	2010	Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas	ALBA	1
Hungary	2004	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Kiribati	2022	Pacific Islands Forum	PIF	1
Lesotho	1997	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	COMESA	1
Mali	2022	G5 du Sahel	G5S	1
Mauritania	2000	Economic Community of West African States	ECOWAS	1
Morocco	1984	African Union	AU	1
Mozambique	1997	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	COMESA	1
Namibia	2004	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	COMESA	1
Netherlands	1962	Pacific Community	SPC	1
Pakistan	1973	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization	SEATO	1
Paraguay	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Peru	2018	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Poland	2004	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Portugal	1986	European Free Trade Association	EFTA	1
Romania	2007	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Russia	2022	Council of Europe	CoE	1
Rwanda	2008	Communauté Économique des États d'Afrique Centrale	CEEAC	1
Seychelles	2004	Southern African Development Community	SADC	1
Slovakia	2004	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Slovenia	2004	Cental European Free Trade Agreement	CEFTA	1
Sweden	1995	European Free Trade Association	EFTA	1
Tanzania	2000	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	COMESA	1
United Kingdom	1973	European Free Trade Association	EFTA	1
United Kingdom	1996	Pacific Community	SPC	1
United Kingdom	2005	Pacific Community	SPC	1
United Kingdom	2020	European Union	EU	1
Uruguay	2020	Union of South American Nations	UNASUR	1
Uzbekistan	1999	Collective Security Treaty (Organization)	CSTO	1
Uzbekistan	2005	Organization for Democracy and Economic Development	GUAM	1
Uzbekistan	2012	Collective Security Treaty (Organization)	CSTO	1
Venezuela	2006	Andean Community	ANDEAN	1

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