1 Introduction

1.1 Research puzzle

A recurring argument in both the political and academic discourse on the current state of the European Union (EU) and intra-European politics is that sub-regional groupings and minilateral coalitions on the meso-level of EU governance – between the national and EU level – have been on the rise (e.g., Bajarūnas 2013, p. 111; Cottey 2009, p. 20; Dangerfield 2008, p. 630; Gebhard 2013; Groszkowski 2013; Inotai 1998, p. 5; Iso-Markku, Innola & Tiilikainen 2018; Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003; Lang & von Ondarza 2018; Pop 2001; Schweiger 2014; Stalvant 2003; Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014).

Katharina Koch, for instance, goes as far as to claim that processes of 're-bordering' have taken place within the EU (Koch 2015, p. 535). Törö, Butler and Gruber (2014, p. 364) state that '[m]ultilateral, subregional partnerships are one of the key features of contemporary European politics' and 'are here to stay in the enlarged EU' (Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014, p. 367). Eitvydas Bajarūnas (2013, p. 111) stresses in an article on Nordic-Baltic cooperation that, 'the tendencies of regional grouping are inevitable in both Europe and the entire world'. With regard to the Visegrád 4 (V4) (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), Carmen Gebhard argues that sub-regional groupings are no longer the 'cinderellas of European security', but that they 'have been more and more acknowledged as highly influential elements in the multi-level setting of European security actors' (Gebhard 2013, p. 26). Adrian Pop equally refers to sub-regional groupings in Central-Eastern Europe, stressing that 'throughout the last couple of years, there has been a growing awareness, both politically and institutionally, of the value of these groupings', especially related to security policy (Pop 2001, p. 132).

More concretely, authors touch upon sub-regional defence cooperation efforts by the Nordics[1] and Baltics[2], the Benelux[3] or the V4. Recent examples for sub-regional action in the 2010s include the resistance by the Visegrád states to binding refugee relocation quotas in the context of the refugee crisis, Baltic lobbying efforts towards the presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Baltic Sea region, and the Benelux positioning in favour of a two-speed Europe (Biscop et al. 2013; Daniška 2018, pp. 49-50; Garai 2018; Jankowski & Grzegrzólka 2014, p. 3; Koch 2015; Lang & von Ondarza 2018; Pomorska & Vanhoonacker 2016).

[1] The Nordic group consists of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. In the EU context, the term 'Nordics' covers the group of Denmark, Finland and Sweden.
[2] The Baltic group consists of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.
[3] The Benelux group consists of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

The Visegrád Group in particular has received broad attention within the political discourse of Europe and beyond; especially since the refugee crisis in 2015 when the V4 jointly mobilised opposition to binding relocation quotas, but also in the years before. Anita Sobják (2012, p. 138), for instance, references the concern by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009 that regular Visegrád meetings prior to EU summits might become 'a threat to the then-common Franco-German voice' (see also Fawn 2013, p. 345; Fawn 2014, pp. 7-8). Another example was presented by Michal Onderco (2014, p. 65) who emphasises that '[e]ven the U.S.-based analysts have recently called to give more attention to the Visegrád countries as a future important player'. Along the same lines, Nikolett Garai argues that 'recent developments in European politics have aroused global interest in the [Visegrád] group' (Garai 2018, p. 25). Looking ahead, Kai-Olaf Lang and Nicolai von Ondarza suggested in 2018 that Brexit would give further impetus to sub-regionalisation and therefore advised German policy-makers to engage with sub-regional actors in order to identify those entities that share interests with Germany and might make good allies (Lang & von Ondarza 2018, pp. 7-8).

According to secondary literature, the increased activity, visibility and acknowledgement of sub-regional groupings within the EU has been seemingly reinforced by two related and underlying medium- to long-term trends. First, the big Central-Eastern European EU enlargement round in 2004 affected EU governance and the different modes of decision-making. With the number of EU member states growing from 15 to 25, interests became more heterogeneous and political fragmentation increased due to greater geographical, historical and political diversity. As a result, 'one size fits all'-solutions and political compromise were harder to achieve. Political deadlock became more likely (Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000, p. 161; De Gruyter 2018; Dyson & Sepos 2010a; Garai 2018, p. 30; Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003, p. 59; Kneipp & Stratenschulte 2003a; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, pp. 1-3; Vanhoonacker 2003b, pp. 33, 37). Differentiated integration, flexible cooperation and controversial discussions around concepts like two-speed or multi-speed Europe became more pronounced (Andersen & Sitter 2006; De Neve 2007; Dyson & Sepos 2010b; Möller 2019, p. 90; Vanhoonacker 2003b, p. 34).

Second, the ongoing crises in the EU since the mid-2000s have fuelled intergovernmentalism or, as Almut Möller puts it, 'the breathtaking return of the capitals of the EU member states' (Möller 2019, p. 87). When the 2008-2009 financial crisis spilled over to Europe and the economic and sovereign debt crisis erupted in 2013-2014, the decision-making process shifted more and more from the Community method to an intergovernmental approach. The inter-governmental crisis-management mode persisted through such critical moments as the Ukrainian and refugee crises, to name just two examples (De Gruyter 2018; Iso-Markku, Innola & Tiilikainen 2018, p. 5; Möller

2019). Due to the predominance of intergovernmental decision-making and crisis-management, the EU responses and policies were primarily shaped by big states and the Franco-German tandem in particular. Small states, on the other hand, arguably had a limited impact on decisions and were policy-takers in most crises, including that of the Eurozone. As a consequence, small states have had to pursue alternative strategies to gain more leverage and increase their influence on the EU level (Bulmer & Paterson 2013; Demesmay & Stark 2015; Gros 2013; Hosli 1999, p. 375; Krotz & Schild 2018; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 3; Lehne 2012; Möller 2019, p. 88; Pastore 2013, p. 68; Peterson 2017).

The above-mentioned aspects – multiple crises within the EU, strong intergovernmentalism, 'big state' leadership, differentiated integration, diverging political priorities – provide a plausible meta-level explanation for the engagement of sub-regional groups in EU politics and for their increased visibility on the EU level (Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000, p. 161; Iso-Markku, Innola & Tiilikainen 2018, p. 5; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 3). At the same time, these factors do not sufficiently account for the more nuanced group-related dimensions of sub-regional alliances, namely the actors involved, policy areas covered, goals pursued or tools applied.

In fact, assessments and predictions have been very mixed with regard to the goals, the resilience, and especially the impact of sub-regional groupings on EU politics and policies. This also applies to the interaction between the sub-regional and EU level more broadly. While several authors share the prediction in the 2000s and 2010s that sub-regionalism in the EU and wider Europe has been on the rise, their outlook on the actual impact and success of sub-regional cooperation is often rather sober (Cottey 2009; Dangerfield 2008, 2011; Garai 2018; Gebhard 2013). Andrew Cottey, for instance, concludes that, 'the impact of European sub-regionalism may not have been dramatic, but a balanced assessment suggests that it has been […] not entirely insignificant' (Cottey 2009, p. 20). Martin Dangerfield presents a similar observation when he claims that 'subregional groupings […] have to varying extents played useful, albeit lowprofile, roles in the interrelated processes of constructing the post–cold war security order' (Dangerfield 2008, p. 630), and that 'the role and significance of subregional groupings must not be likened to organisations such as the EU or NATO' (Dangerfield 2011, p. 314). More pessimistically, Jacek Wieclawski argues that he does not expect sub-regionalism to grow in importance or to remain a feature of EU governance per se. Referring to Central Europe, he notes that 'the disintegrating tendencies within the sub-regional cooperation in East-Central Europe prevail over the integrating impulses' (Wieclawski 2016, p. 2). Other commentators like Caroline De Gruyter conclude that 'it is impossible to predict whether these new groupings and regroupings have any future at all' (De Gruyter 2018).

As can be expected, academics and policy analysts also present differing assessments and hypotheses on the question whether sub-regional formats strengthen the EU's cohesion and benefit EU integration, or if they rather accelerate differentiated integration or even disintegrative tendencies in the EU (e.g., Cottey 2000; Dyson & Sepos 2010a; Etzold 2009; Jakobsen 2009; Merkel 1996 on the threat of block-building and fragmentation; Cottey 2009; Dangerfield 2008, 2012, 2014; Inotai 1998; Jankowski & Grzegrzólka 2014; Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003, p. 59; Lang & von Ondarza 2018; Scharbert 2004; Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014 on the assumption that sub-regional cooperation has the potential to facilitate EU level decision-making and problem-solving).

The range of positive assessments and expectations is broad. Several authors have argued that sub-regional formats can facilitate compromise and thereby reduce the level of complexity in decision-making (Fawn 2014, p. 6; Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003, p. 59; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 5; Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014, p. 373). Another positive aspect that authors have repeatedly emphasised is the stabilising and bridging function of sub-regional groupings via intensive cross-border dialogue and cooperation; for instance, by involving EU neighbouring countries from the Western Balkans or the Eastern Partnership (Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003, p. 62; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 6). A third example is the characterisation of sub-regional entities as innovation hubs and laboratories for new, joint initiatives (Dangerfield 2011; Inotai 1998, p. 5; Kern & Gänzle 2013, p. 7; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 6).

Next to these positive aspects, other authors express concern for the possible fragmentation and disintegration that sub-regionalism could trigger (e.g., Dyson & Sepos 2010a, p. 347). They argue that sub-regional groups could undermine constructive compromise by pursuing their own interests outside of the EU mainstream (Jakobsen 2009, p. 85) or warn of the increased marginalisation of supranational institutions and the threat of bloc-building within the EU (Lang & von Ondarza 2018, pp. 1, 6).

Altogether, the discourse on EU sub-regionalism – defined in this study as clear-cut groupings of at least three EU member states on the meso-level between the national and EU level[4] – has, so far, lacked analytical nuance, empirical groundwork and theoretical underpinnings. Too often, different empirical phenomena are implicitly subsumed under the same labels without outlining the applied definitional and case selection criteria (e.g., De Gruyter 2018; Inotai 1998; Kneipp & Stratenschulte 2003b; Lang & von Ondarza 2018). This practice often results in superficial and descriptive discussions and analyses. Bilateral frameworks like the Franco-German cooperation are

[4] A more detailed definition follows in Chapter 1.2.2.

at times referenced in line with loose coalitions like the New Hanseatic League[5] and Club Med[6], as well as long-term, more or less institutionalised groupings like the Benelux or the Nordic countries. Such analyses lack transparent, clear-cut selection criteria and clearly defined terminology. They often fail to acknowledge, for example, that unlike Benelux, the Nordic states include non-EU countries, that bilateral relations follow different cooperation dynamics than minilateral formats, or that some cooperation formats have already existed for decades and have their own institutions while others are purely intergovernmental and follow a strict ad-hoc logic. This reveals a clear shortcoming in terms of the comparability of cases.

Given, however, that the phenomenon of EU sub-regionalism is likely here to stay and might even gain importance in the context of an increasingly fragmented, politicised and differentiated EU, a better understanding is required with regard to the shape, functions and activities of sub-regional entities within the EU. A structured comparison of existing EU sub-regional entities based on precise definitional criteria would allow for a better understanding of their differences and similarities. Only then will it be possible to provide more nuanced and clear-cut responses on the effect that sub-regionalism has on EU decision-making and the interactions between the two governance levels more broadly.

Moreover, as outlined above, the majority of articles on EU sub-regionalism – consisting mainly of policy papers – primarily refer to meta-level drivers like EU enlargement, the dominance of big EU member states and a state of ongoing crisis in the EU to account for the emergence and persistence of EU sub-regionalism. Others add drivers like shared history, culture or geographical proximity; often without presenting empirical findings that go beyond anecdotal evidence. A focus on variables that drive or inhibit sub-regional activity on the EU level – agenda-setting, lobbying, consultation or networking – is, however, very rare (e.g., Garai 2018; Inotai 1998). The subject of sub-regional engagement in EU politics has, so far, often been covered in a descriptive and anecdotal manner (if at all), lacking theoretical assumptions and underpinnings as well as a transparent methodology.

In conclusion, the creation of better, more substantial knowledge on the phenomenon of EU sub-regionalism and drivers of sub-regional activity on the EU level should be a pressing priority for EU, regionalism and small state researchers. It is not only relevant for academics but also for decision-makers and officials on the national, sub-regional and EU level. From a national and sub-

[5] The New Hanseatic League is a Dutch-led alliance which also includes the three Baltics, Denmark, Finland, Ireland and Sweden.
[6] Club Med is a coalition of EU member states from Southern Europe including Cyprus, France, Italy, Greece, Malta, Portugal and Spain (Schlamp 2016).

regional perspective, it is, for example, relevant to learn more about how other sub-regional entities work within the EU and how they are perceived on the EU level. From an EU actors' perspective, it is relevant to understand how, and under which circumstances, sub-regional groupings engage in EU policy-making or crisis-management: Do they tend to engage in proactive agenda-setting or reactive lobbying? What kind of output do they produce? Do they act on the working level or on the highest political level? If certain sub-regional entities are found to have a positive impact on EU governance in one way or the other, it would be worthwhile to identify the exact circumstances under which favourable effects and results were being produced. This in turn would allow policy-makers to work on strategies to encourage and strengthen these kinds of sub-regionalisms going forward. If a more negative assessment should prevail in the sense that EU sub-regionalism in its current form leads to more EU-internal fragmentation and contestation of the EU as a whole, decision-makers equally need to channel this result into their thinking on the future of EU integration and cooperation.

Summary of the research puzzle:

Looking ahead, it will thus be crucial to better understand (1) which shape, status and functions sub-regional entities have within the EU – how they perceive themselves, how they function, what they aim for and how they are perceived by others – and (2) how and under which circumstances sub-regional entities interact with the EU level and try to influence EU politics and policies. Only with a solid understanding of these groupings and their approach to EU politics and policies will it be possible to assess the extent of their impact on EU governance and to predict their potential influence on the EU going forward. Therefore, this study focuses on sub-regional entities within the EU – specifically the V4, Baltic and Benelux groupings – in order to add to the still unsatisfying level of research.

1.2 Status quo of scholarship

1.2.1 Research gap

The current state of research in Political Science – be it on regionalism, EU studies or small-state studies – greatly lacks conceptual work on EU sub-regionalism. There is an insufficient number of scientifically sound, empirically valid and especially comparative analyses on the phenomenon of EU sub-regionalism and on the interaction of sub-regional entities with the EU. To some extent, the volume of policy analysis and research on sub-regional groupings has increased since the 2000s. However, authors dealing with sub-regional groupings and initiatives have often done so very descriptively, without a clear-cut research design. A very common type of academic contribution is the historical case study: The respective authors sketch the initiation and evolution of sub-regional cooperation and outline cooperation patterns of single groups of nation states within the EU (e.g., Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Cottey 2009; Dangerfield 2014; Gebhard 2013; Hirsch 2003; Povejsil & Svárovský 2003; Sobják 2012). Another type of publication is the case study that focuses on specific policy areas and sub-regional engagement in those areas without referring to sub-regional activities in other policy areas (e.g., Bajarūnas 2013 and Opitz 2015 on the Baltic and Nordic states in security and defence; Biscop et al. 2013 on Benelux and defence; Cottey 2000 and Dangerfield 2012 on the V4 and foreign policy on Russia; Dudzińska 2013, 2015 on the Baltics and economic / energy policy; Michelot 2018 on the V4 and the rule of law; Pop 2001 on European security). In many articles, sub-regional formats are used as reference points and contextual frameworks for single country studies (e.g., Cottey 1999b; Dostál 2014; Hegedüs 2014; Jankowski & Grzegrzolka 2014; Kufcák 2014; Nič, Slobodnik & Simecka 2014; Ogrodnik 2016; Stuchliková 2018).

The lack of conceptual approaches to the analysis of sub-regional groupings may be ascribed to the fact that many articles on this subject were written within think tanks rather than academic institutions (Lang & von Ondarza 2018; see, for instance, Bajarūnas 2016; Dudzińska 2013, 2015; Grigas et al. 2013; Opitz 2015 on the Baltic countries; Chromiec 2017; Dostál 2015; Michelot 2018; Nič & Kudzko 2016 on V4 cooperation). Moreover, authors and policy analysts from the respective sub-regional member states have, so far, dominated the discourse, which increases the risk of strengthening and reproducing normative or simply very narrow research lenses and perspectives. Altogether, groupings from Central and Eastern Europe (V4 and Baltics) have received more attention and coverage than the Benelux countries (e.g., Ágh 2018; Bajarūnas 2016; Chromiec 2017; Copeland 2014; Cottey 1999a, 1999b; Dangerfield 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Daniška 2018; Dudzińska 2013, 2015; Dunay 2003; Farkas 2018; Fawn 2001, 2013, 2014; Gebhard 2013; Grigas

et al. 2013; Groszkowski 2013; Jakobsen 2009; Jankowski & Grzegrzólka 2014, p. 3; Janulewicz 2018; Józwiak 2018; Kalan 2013; Kuusik 2018; Lehti 2010; Merheim-Eyre 2018; Onderco 2014; Opitz 2015; Pop 2001; Povejsil & Svárovský 2003; Rotaru 2018; Sikk & Cianetti 2015; Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014; Végh 2018a, 2018b; Vilpišauskas 2011; Walsch 2014 on the Baltics and V4; Biscop et al. 2013; Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000; Casier 2011; Hirsch 2003; Vanhoonacker 2003a, 2003b on Benelux). As a result, many studies that focus on EU sub-regional groupings are not linkable to other strands of research and the academic discourse more broadly. They often lack analytical substance, conceptual clarity and theoretical underpinnings.

Moreover, since the big EU-enlargement round in 2004, no systematic comparative analyses have been conducted that include the Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád countries and that could serve as a basis for predicting the medium- to long-term development of EU sub-regionalism. Prior to 2004, András Inotai covered all three groupings in a working paper on the links between the sub-regional and the EU level, mostly from an economic perspective. He concluded, among other things, that the Benelux countries had the strongest record of cooperation at the time (Inotai 1998, pp. 20, 27). There were, however, some contributions covering the phenomenon of EU sub-regionalism in a more general manner by looking at different sub-regional groups and their functions (e.g., Cihelková & Hnát 2006; Cogen 2015; Cottey 2000, 2009; Dangerfield 2011; Lang & von Ondarza 2018). Andrew Cottey (2009), for instance, elaborated on the different functions that sub-regional groups – particularly in Central-Eastern Europe – fulfilled at different stages of their existence. Lang and von Ondarza (2018) listed all the different groups that exist within the EU, but did not further elaborate on their scope of cooperation and on differences between the groups. Moreover, some edited volumes bring together articles on single intra-EU groupings and draw general conclusions about similarities and differences in a more superficial, non-systematic way (e.g., Dyson & Sepos 2010a; Kneipp & Stratenschulte 2003a). Altogether, the authors did not have the ambition to compare sub-regionalisms along transparently defined dimensions and criteria. Most contributions therefore lack research designs that fulfil the criteria of reliability and validity.

Overall, when looking systematically at Political Science literature – and the sub-fields of regionalism research, EU studies and small-state studies in particular – it becomes apparent that there is not only a shortage of well-designed research on EU sub-regionalism as a stand-alone issue and of comparative studies identifying similarities and differences between sub-regional entities, but also on the link between the sub-regional and the EU level. While there is plenty of research on EU governance and national politics, EU sub-regionalism at the meso-level between the nation state and the EU has been a rather underexplored empirical phenomenon (Garai 2018; Inotai 1998). It can thus be concluded that the increased political relevance of the empirical phenomenon of EU

sub-regionalism as outlined above has, so far, not been sufficiently matched by academic research efforts. Existing research will be outlined in more detail in the following sub-chapters, touching upon terminology and conceptual thinking (Chapter 1.2.2), findings on drivers and functions of EU sub-regionalism (Chapter 1.2.3) as well as the interaction and interlinkages between the sub-regional and the EU level (Chapter 1.2.4).

1.2.2 Terminology and definition of EU sub-regionalism

When evaluating research on sub-regional groupings like the Baltics, Benelux or the V4, the first problem that arises is the lack of a broadly accepted, systematic terminology to apply to them. In the Political Science literature many different collective terms are used to describe these entities. Some authors refer to them as 'connected coalitions' (Hosli 1999), 'formal coalitions' (Schweiger 2014, p. 396), 'state clusters' (Dyson & Sepos 2010a, b), 'minilateralisms'[7] (Lang & von Ondarza 2018), 'inter-state formations' (Fawn 2013), or 'trans-national spaces' (Dyson & Sepos 2010a, b). More often, however, they are labelled as regions or region-like compositions: 'intra-regional integrations' (Van Langenhove 2012, p. 27), 'supra-national European regions' (Keating 2010), 'macro-regions' (Söderbaum 2003), 'meso-regions' (Söderbaum 2003, p. 6), 'cross-border regions' (Van Langenhove 2012, p. 18), 'subregions' (Dangerfield 2011, p. 315; Inotai 1998; Jurkynas 2004, p. 3) or simply 'regions' (Jankowski & Grzegrzólka 2014, p. 3). The great number of labels and characterisations showcases the heterogeneity of understandings regarding the substance and functions of those groups. More importantly, authors often do not define or specify what they mean by the labels they use and assign to empirical cases. For the present study, the term 'EU sub-regionalism' is used to conceptually bundle the three cases of the V4, the Benelux and the Baltics as will be elaborated on in the remainder of the sub-chapter.

Adding to the complexity, the term 'sub-regionalism' is not used consistently in the Political Science and regionalism discourse. There are a multitude of coexisting definitions of sub-regionalism in the EU context, and a total lack thereof in some policy papers and studies (Bremmer & Bailes 1998; Hubel & Gänzle 2002; Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003; Scharbert 2004; Schmitt-Egner 2002, p. 179). Sometimes, the term refers to sub-national units on the municipal or federal state level (see, for instance, Fawn 2009, p. 11; Jurkynas 2004, p. 3; Van Langenhove 2012, p. 16), and sometimes to different kinds of trans-nationalism, be it in a narrow geographical sense (as in the case of the Baltic, Benelux, Nordic or Visegrád groupings) or in a broader geographical sense (like in the case

[7] Translation from the German word 'Minilateralismen'.

of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) or the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)) (Cottey 1999a, 1999b; Fawn 2009, p. 11).

Conceptual ambiguity also exists with regard to the question how sub-regionalism and regionalism are related. Unlike with sub-regionalism, there is a huge body of theoretical groundwork and empirical research on regions and region-building around the globe with an overall bias towards research on Europe. The sheer quantity of academic contributions on regions and regionalism comes with broadly varying definitions on what makes a region a region. As Söderbaum notes, '[r]egionalism means different things to different people in different contexts and time-periods' (Söderbaum 2015, p. 5; see also Söderbaum 2016).[8] Björn Hettne's diagnosis is the same: 'In spite of the enormous literature to date, there is little consensus on the appropriate terminology of regionalism when it appears on different levels or scales, constituting a multitude of forms in complex interrelationship to each other' (Hettne 2005, p. 556). Giving an overview about the different conceptualisations and theoretical underpinnings would therefore exceed the scope of this study (for an overview see, for example, Fawcett 2013; Fawn 2009; Gochhayat 2014; Paasi 2009; Schmitt-Egner 2002).

However, one central observation worth mentioning is the trend towards more dynamic definitions of regions that recognise the 'inherent flexibility and evolving nature of the concept [of regionalism]' (Fawcett 2013, p. 5). Paasi (2009, p. 133) states that 'regions are institutional structures and processes that are perpetually "becoming" instead of just "being"'. Along those lines, many authors emphasise the process of regionalisation over static definitions of regions (De Lombaerde 2011; Doidge 2011, p. 19; Fawcett 2013, p. 5; Hameiri 2013; Jurkynas 2004, p. 3; Manoli 2012, p. 9; Söderbaum 2016; Van Langenhove 2012, p. 18). In order to explicitly differentiate between processes, on the one hand, and policy output or institutionalised entities, on the other, authors like Breslin and Higgott (2000), Fawcett (2013) or Gochhayat (2014) have used the terms 'regionalisation' and 'regionalism'. According to Fawcett (2013, p. 5), 'regionalism refers to policies and projects, regionalisation refers to processes.' Breslin and Higgott state that 'regionalism connotes those state-led projects of cooperation that emerge as a result of intergovernmental dialogues and treaties' while 'regionalisation refers to those processes of integration which […] derive their driving force "from markets, from private trade and investment flows, and from the policies and decisions of companies" rather than the predetermined plans of national or local governments' (Breslin & Higgott 2000, p. 344).

[8] For an overview over definitions of 'region', 'regionalism' and 'regionalisation' see, for instance, Fawcett 2013 or Schmitt-Egner 2002.

As will be elaborated in the next paragraphs, the conceptual and empirical focus of the present study is on sub-regionalism as the sub-regional equivalent to regionalism – and thus primarily on policies, projects and institutions instead of processes. Nevertheless, it is assumed that sub-regionalisms are no static but dynamic empirical phenomena that develop over time and manifest in different ways depending on the respective context, political or otherwise. Sub-regionalisation as a process will, however, not be systematically measured as part of the present study.

Definition of EU sub-regionalism

The goal of this study is to deliver an added value to New and Comparative Regionalism and to contribute to the conceptual discourse on EU sub-regionalism, while acknowledging existing definitions and conceptualisations. Therefore, the collective term of 'EU sub-regionalism' is used in the present study and a 'lowest common denominator'-definition is applied, which reflects the early stage of research and conceptual thinking on the empirical phenomenon. By focusing on only a few basic definitional requirements that were extracted from existing academic contributions, the subsequent case selection remains flexible enough to include and compare different sub-regional entities – without much prior knowledge about the shape, quality and mechanisms behind the respective EU sub-regionalisms. As a result, the selected sub-regionalisms might represent different stages of EU sub-regionness – defined as the extent to which an EU sub-regionalism has the qualities of a sub-regional polity with high actorness on the EU level, as opposed to a sub-regional space with no actorness on the EU level (definition inspired by Hettne & Söderbaum 2000; Söderbaum 2005) (see Chapter 2 on the concept of EU sub-regionness).

The definition of sub-regionalism that is used as the point of departure for the 'lowest common denominator'-approach stipulates that sub-regionalisms 'consist of several states that are also part of larger macro-regional units' (Behr & Jokela 2011). The central feature is thus the meso-level position between the nation state and a superior reference region (see also Fawn 2009, p. 11; Jurkynas 2004, p. 3). Sub-regional entities can theoretically exist on all continents and within all macro-regional organisations (see, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN, the Economic Community of West African States – ECOWAS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – SCO) (Cottey 1999a, p. 252). The present study, however, focuses exclusively on sub-regional entities within the EU. To be precise, it is therefore about 'EU sub-regionalisms'.

Building on the definition by Behr and Jokela (2011) and taking into consideration the academic contributions on sub-regionalism by other authors (e.g., Cihelková & Hnát 2006; Cottey 1999b, 2009; Dangerfield 2012; Dwan 2000; Hettne 2005; Hubel & Gänzle 2002; Jurkynas 2004; Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003; Pop 2001; Scharbert 2004), this study's 'lowest common denominator'-

definition of EU sub-regionalism comprises five criteria that will be elaborated in the following paragraphs: (1) geographic proximity and the existence of clear-cut geographical boundaries, (2) membership of at least three countries, (3) EU membership of all participating countries, (4) an exclusive membership structure and continuity of existence, and (5) a multi-sectoral approach to cooperation.

On Criterion 1: There is a broad consensus among political scientists that a region requires territoriality in order to be called a region (e.g., Bjurner 1999, p. 11; Cottey 2009, p. 5; Dwan 2000, p. 81; Fawn 2009, pp. 12, 16; Gebhard 2013, p. 26; Haftendorn 2000, p. 545; Hettne & Söderbaum 2000, p. 458; Hubel & Gänzle 2002, p. 4; Inotai 1998, p. 9; Jurkynas 2004; Kiss, Königova & Luif 2003; Pop 2001; Scharbert 2004, p. 276; Vanhoonacker 2003a, pp. 7-8; Vilpišauskas 2011, p. 27). The overwhelming majority of authors writing about and publishing on EU sub-regionalism define sub-regionalism as a phenomenon that takes place among neighbouring countries within a clear-cut geographical area. Only some post-structuralists argue that regions do not depend on geographical proximity and can also be constructed 'ex nihil' (e.g., Neumann 1994, p. 73; Paasi 2009).

On Criterion 2: The requirement for a minimum of three sub-regional member states is in line with the basic definition of 'groups' (e.g., Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 2). Bilateral diplomatic relationships which follow different logics and exist between all EU member states are thereby excluded.

On Criterion 3: The requirement for all sub-regional member states to be EU members is equivalent to what Eva Cihelková and Pavel Hnát (2006) call a 'purely subregional integration' – as opposed to 'peripheral subregional integration in the region' and 'peripheral subregional processes transcending the borders of [the] macro-region' (Cihelková & Hnát 2006, p. 51). By focusing on EU sub-regionalisms and thus excluding mixed groupings that also include non-EU members (for instance the CBSS, BEAC, Nordic cooperation or the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative), distortions are avoided that might otherwise limit case comparability. Such distortions might emerge due to differing cooperation logics and legal or political constraints that non-EU members might face in the EU context (Dangerfield 2011, p. 317).

On Criterion 4: By stressing the criteria of exclusiveness and continuity, the concept of sub-regionalism is differentiated from fluid cooperation formats with varying members, as well as ad-hoc coalitions that emerge in the context of day-to-day policy-making or crisis

management (Cottey 2009, p. 8; Fawn 2001, p. 49; Fawn 2009, p. 33; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 2). This distinction is similar to the one by Madeleine Hosli (1999, p. 373) who differentiates between 'connected coalitions' and 'coalitions formed at random'. The criterion allows for varying degrees of institutionalisation (see also Fawn 2009, p. 19).

On Criterion 5: By emphasising the requirement for multi-sectorial cooperation, monothematic coalitions are excluded, as well as free trade areas or growth polygons (e.g., De Lombaerde 2011, p. 33; Fawn 2009, pp. 13, 16; Hettne & Söderbaum 2000, p. 460).

The definition guides the present study's case selection and allows for a structured comparison of three, potentially quite different EU sub-regionalisms to generate an added value to the theoretical and conceptual regionalism and EU studies discourse (Hettne & Söderbaum 2000, p. 462; De Lombaerde 2011, p. 32). The 'lowest common denominator'-definition does not, for instance, exclude sub-regional entities without joint institutions or groupings without a joint identity. It also does not touch upon aspects like the effectiveness of collaboration or the delegation of competences to the supranational level. A bias towards the most-developed sub-regional groupings is therefore avoided.

1.2.3 Drivers and functions of EU sub-regionalism

Closely related to the definitional pluralism in academic research so far, there have also been varying assessments of the origins and the quality of EU sub-regionalism. There exist several articles that focus on the post-Cold War context that produced a range of 'new' sub-regionalisms (e.g., Bremmer & Bailes 1998; Cottey 2000, 2009; Inotai 1998; Jurkynas 2004; Pop 2001). Historical case studies in particular often argue that the post-Cold War context was conducive to the emergence of sub-regionalisms – including bottom-up and top-down drivers. This observation especially applies to sub-regionalisms in Central-Eastern Europe (Bjurner 1999; Cottey 2009; Dangerfield 2011; Fawn 2009; Jurkynas 2004; Pop 2001; Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014; Wieclawski 2016). Anders Bjurner, for instance, speaks of new sub-regionalisms as the 'children of the post-Cold war era' (Bjurner 1999, p. 8). Joint security interests and threat perceptions as well as the shared Communist experience drove cooperation – striving towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Exchanges on best practices and consultations on democratic and liberal reforms in the post-communist states were further facilitated by external incentives from NATO and EU institutions as well as EU member states (Cihelková & Hnát 2006, pp. 51-52; Kasekamp 2010, pp. 189, 195; Lehti 2010). Wieclawski argues that sub-regional cooperation in Central-Eastern Europe flourished in the post-Cold War context of the 1990s because the dominant joint Communist experience

covered other historical and cultural differences (Wieclawski 2016, pp. 7-8). In this context, sub-regionalism has been ascribed a variety of functions.

In the cases of the Visegrád Group, the Baltic states and other sub-regional groups in Central-Eastern Europe, a transformative function was attributed to sub-regionalism. Sub-regional cooperation did not only help the respective countries to prepare for EU and NATO accession in the 1990s and early 2000s, but it also served as a bridge towards non-EU member states once the V4 and Baltics had joined the EU. Examples of this bridge-building function include the joint consultation formats with EU neighbours, including a transfer of knowledge (Cottey 1999a, pp. 243-244, 246; Cottey 1999b, p. 4; Dangerfield 2011, p. 316; Etzold 2009; Fawn 2001; Inotai 1998, p. 10; Pop 2001). Andrew Cottey argues accordingly that subregional groups 'contribute to overcoming the Cold War, East-West division of the continent' (Cottey 1999b, p. 3) and prevent new dividing lines between EU and non-EU from emerging (Cottey 1999b, p. 4; see also Pop 2001, p. 134). Other functions discussed in the literature refer more explicitly to the 'security-enhancing properties' of sub-regional cooperation (Dangerfield 2008, p. 632; see also Fawn 2009, pp. 22-23; Jurkynas 2004; Pop 2001). Sub-regional cooperation is argued to have a stabilising and security building function by facilitating dialogue within and beyond sub-regions as well as cooperating on mainly soft security but also hard security matters (Cottey 1999a, p. 244; Cottey 1999b, p. 3; Dangerfield 2008, p. 632; Pop 2001). Altogether, the existing literature thus focuses very much on the founding context of sub-regionalisms in Central-Eastern Europe and outlines sub-regional drivers and functions in that specific context.

Drivers and functions of sub-regionalisms in contemporary Europe have, however, received less academic attention. Assessments vary regarding the circumstances under which sub-regionalisms are particularly active and dynamic as well as regarding the functions they fulfil (Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014, p. 366). Some authors characterise EU sub-regionalism as a manifestation of functional differentiation (e.g., Ágh 2018, p. 186; Dyson & Sepos 2010b; Garai 2018; Inotai 1998; Keating 2010; Kneipp & Stratenschulte 2003b; Onderco 2014, p. 65; Vanhoonacker 2003b, p. 34; Warleigh-Lack 2015, p. 871), while others primarily see it as the result of a small state strategy (e.g., Bailes & Thorhallsson 2013, p. 100; Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000; Hirsch 2003, pp. 43-44; Lang & von Ondarza 2018, p. 5; Panke 2010a, pp. 23-24; Panke 2010b, pp. 802-803; Panke 2012, p. 396; Pastore 2013, pp. 78-79; Sobják 2012, p. 122; Van Langenhove 2012, pp. 17-18) – most of the time without elaborating on the theoretical and methodological basis of their respective categorisations. These assessments were often the result of ad-hoc empirical observations, normative thinking or the description and repetition of declaratory political statements by decision-makers in the respective countries.

EU sub-regionalism – a functional phenomenon

As mentioned above, several authors take the position that EU sub-regionalism is often the result of functional differentiation. Michael Keating speaks of 'territorial differentiation at trans-national level' as one form of differentiated integration and a 'tendency for the emergence of new, intermediate or meso levels of government' (Keating 2010, p. 64). Moreover, Kenneth Dyson and Angelos Sepos (2010a, p. 350; 2010b, pp. 5, 14) suggest that differentiated integration on the EU level is closely interlinked with sub-regionalism without further elaborating on the detailed mechanisms at play.

Generally, it has often been argued that EU sub-regional collaboration serves to provide joint responses to shared practical problems and policy-related needs – often in a cross-border or economic context but also politically (Cottey 1999b, p. 3; Fawn 2009, p. 25; Garai 2018, p. 24; Hirsch 2003; Pop 2001, p. 133; Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014, p. 365; Wieclawski 2016, p. 10). Inotai, for instance, argues in his study from 1998 that 'a similarity of political and economic priorities in trying to answer the basic global and regional challenges seems to enhance the level of sub-regional cooperation more than a [shared] heritage' (Inotai 1998, p. 4). This characterisation of EU sub-regionalisms as formats of functional differentiation was often applied to older sub-regionalisms like Benelux or Nordic cooperation which have existed since the 1940s and 1950s respectively (Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000; Törö, Butler & Gruber 2014, pp. 364-365). The potential range of shared challenges and interests triggering sub-regional responses is broad, including transnational infrastructure projects, environmental problems, migration or transnational crime, to name just some examples. Cottey summarises them as the 'localized dimension of global problems' (Cottey 1999a, p. 253; see also Garai 2018, p. 24).

EU sub-regionalism – a small-state strategy

Another recurring characterisation is that of sub-regionalism as a small state strategy. This characterisation is in line with the fact that most sub-regional entities in the EU consist of small and some medium-sized states. The Visegrád Group which includes Poland is the exception. 'Small state'-scholars argue that there are systemic differences between small and large states when it comes to domestic preferences and challenges, political strategies, policy-making, bargaining and impact (Archer & Nugent 2006, p. 4; Katzenstein 1985; Nasra 2011, p. 168; Sobják 2012; Steinmetz & Wivel 2010; Thorhallsson 2000; Thorhallsson & Steinsson 2018; Toje 2008). Compared to big states, small states are more exposed to external security threats since they have limited military and diplomatic resources. Because their administrations are smaller, they can also provide and produce less expertise. Moreover, compared to big states, they are more dependent on trade and the

free movement of goods and people, due to their smaller markets. Among other things, this makes them more vulnerable in the wake of economic crises and military conflicts (Archer & Nugent 2006, p. 4; Bailes & Thorhallsson 2013, p. 99; Crandall & Allan 2015; Katzenstein 1985; Nasra 2011, p. 168; Panke 2012; Thorhallsson & Steinsson 2018). In the EU context, some authors argue that, due to the dominant position of big states like France, Germany or the United Kingdom (before Brexit), 'small states are not left much choice other than to follow "the rules of the game" of large states' (Pastore 2013, p. 68; see also Grøn & Wivel 2011; Steinmetz & Wivel 2010, p. 7). They are confronted with structural disadvantages in EU decision-making in the European Parliament or the Council, due to smaller delegations and less voting power (Archer & Nugent 2006, p. 4; Bailes & Thorhallsson 2013, p. 108). Next to strategies involving norm entrepreneurship, policy pioneering and honest broker roles, they therefore aim to build coalitions in order to gain more leverage in EU decision-making and agenda-setting (Arter 2000; Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000, pp. 168-169; Bunse 2009; Crandall & Allan 2015; Hey 2012; Lethi 2010; Jakobsen 2009; Panke & Gurol 2018; Pastore 2013, p. 68; Wivel 2005).

Altogether, the vast majority of authors do not include a theoretical lens to their analyses and if they do, it is unclear which one. In many cases, drivers of and impediments to sub-regionalism are outlined in an ad-hoc, non-theoretical manner. In some cases, historical context, shared traditions and cultures or path dependency are stressed; in others crisis-related pressure. Sometimes drivers are described to follow a bottom-up logic; sometimes a top-down logic (Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000; Fawn 2009; Inotai 1998; Jurkynas 2004, p. 5; Pop 2001).

1.2.4 Link between the sub-regional and the EU level

As stated at the beginning of the introduction, it is crucial to have a better understanding of the links and interactions between the sub-regional and the EU level going forward. There is thus a strong need for comparative research on the interplay of the two governance levels, following the example of András Inotai. In 1998, Inotai published a 'comparative analysis of the interactions between European integration and sub-regional cooperation', which focused on economic implications from a historical perspective and included the Baltic, Benelux and V4 countries as well as Portugal and Spain. He shed light on the impact of the EU on sub-regional cooperation and vice versa (Inotai 1998, pp. 3, 10). There is, however, a shortage of more recent comparative studies that provide empirical insights on the links and interdependencies between the EU and EU-sub-regionalisms (Bossaert & Vanhoonacker 2000; Etzold 2009; Garai 2018; Gebhard 2013; Inotai 1998).

Furthermore, a conceptual contribution on the link between EU sub-regionalisms and the EU was presented by Martin Dangerfield. Referring to the post-war experience, he suggests that the 'interplay between EU integration and subregional cooperation' can be characterised along four categories: Sub-regional entities can act as (1) pioneers, (2) substitutes, (3) complementary pre-accession instruments and (4) involuntary alternatives and substitutes (Dangerfield 2008, p. 633).

- Pioneer: If sub-regional groupings act as pioneers, they do not only achieve a more advanced level of integration than other larger regional integration projects. They also exert influence on the integration agenda of the latter. As an example, Dangerfield mentions the Benelux Economic Union.
- Substitute: Substitutes develop when states establish the sub-regional cooperation project as an alternative to other cooperative frameworks or regional organisations. As an example, Dangerfield mentions the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) or the European Economic Area (EEA).
- Pre-accession instrument: The model of the pre-accession instrument is specific to the post-Cold War context and to post-communist countries aspiring to EU membership. In this specific case, sub-regional cooperation exists primarily in order to support and assist this process. As an example, Dangerfield mentions the Visegrád Group in its early form.
- Involuntary alternative: The 'involuntary alternative'-scenario concerns European states that will likely not achieve EU membership and are thus 'condemned to a "limbo" of at best semi-permanent association with the EU'. As examples he mentions the European Neighbourhood Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (Dangerfield 2008, p. 634).

Dangerfield's typology was a crucial contribution to the academic literature, as it presents a proposal on how to structure and characterise different possible layers and dimensions of linking the sub-regional and the EU level. However, it is very specific to the post-Cold War era and eclectic in the sense that it includes very different empirical phenomena, which for the most part, do not fall under the definition of EU sub-regionalism as applied in this study. In a later article, Dangerfield claims that the interplay with the EU very much varies between old and new sub-regional groups (Dangerfield 2011, p. 314). He argues that 'the "old" groupings [like Benelux] have had a significantly different relationship with the EU in that they exist *within* the EU or European Economic Area (EEA) and their existence is independent from a desire to join the EU' (Dangerfield 2011, p. 314).

Moreover, there are some articles that focus on single EU sub-regionalisms and shed light on their respective attempts to influence EU decision-making and to interact with the EU level.[9] Danielle Bossaert and Sophie Vanhoonacker, for instance, sketched the efforts by the Benelux countries to shape the EU discourse between the 1950s and 2000s. Nikolett Garai outlined and evaluated V4 advocacy efforts on the EU level in 2017 and 2018, concluding that the effectiveness of proactive V4 advocacy was limited due to a weak EU coalition potential and weak EU embeddedness (Garai 2018, p. 26).

Research on the EU perspective to sub-regionalism – the approach by EU actors to sub-regionalisms as well as EU perceptions and interpretations of sub-reginal agenda-setting or lobbying efforts – has been equally limited (e.g., Cihelková & Hnát 2006; Dangerfield 2011; Inotai 1998). As for the EU's perspective on sub-regionalism, some statements can be found that the EU strongly promoted the 'creation of both formal and informal regional groupings' within the framework of its stabilisation efforts which eventually resulted in eastern enlargement (Cihelková & Hnát 2006, p. 53; see also Inotai 1998, p. 14). In the cases that refer to the previously mentioned post-Cold War context, the EU played a role as sub-region builder instead of being neutral in the process (Börzel & Risse 2015, p. 56; Dangerfield 2011, pp. 316-317; Inotai 1998, p. 14). As for the more recent time period beyond the immediate post-Cold War context, Cihelková and Hnát stated that the EU has refrained from actively supporting or officially engaging with EU sub-regionalisms (Cihelková & Hnát 2006, p. 61). Along the same line, Inotai argued that 'it is not the EU's task to deepen cooperation among countries building a sub-regional group' (Inotai 1998, p. 6). EU financial instruments like INTERREG or EU macro-regional strategies do, however, also target sub-regional spaces, but primarily on the basis of sector-specific projects (Etzold 2009, p. 232).

With regard to expectations and perceptions of sub-regionalism, Andrew Cottey accentuates that sub-regionalism is not considered to be an alternative to larger Euro-Atlantic organisations or bilateral relationships with other states, 'but rather as a complement to these organizations and relationships' (Cottey 1999a, p. 251; see also Dangerfield 2011, p. 314; Inotai 1998, p. 16; Wieclawski 2016). The EU is characterised as the dominant integration framework that defines how much scope and leeway sub-regional entities have within the EU. Eva Cihelková and Pavel Hnát state that, '[d]ue to the deepness, scope and institutional characteristics of the leading European integration, it is fully relevant to qualify the EU as an integration, which gives the direction to the development of the whole European area and even more to all subregional integrations within

[9] Findings related to the single country and policy area cases are not elaborated here. Instead, they are being channelled into the chapters 5 and 6 as part of the secondary literature analysis.

its area.' (Cihelková & Hnát 2006, p. 60). In other words, sub-regional entities are mainly seen as 'policy-takers of the institutional framework of the EU' (Cihelková & Hnát 2006, pp. 60-61).

It can thus be concluded that there is a strong need for structured and comparative research on the interaction between the sub-regional and the EU level, focusing both on the sub-regional and the EU perspective. From a sub-regional perspective, there is a particular need for research that reflects the more recent EU context. Sub-regional activity and motives by member states were sufficiently covered for the post-Cold War and pre-EU accession context. Valid empirical findings, however, are lacking for the more recent time frame since 2004: for instance, on sub-regional agenda-setting or lobbying activities within the EU and in different policy areas. The same applies to the EU perspective. Findings are missing, for instance, on the question if and how the EU has been collaborating with sub-regional entities in different policy contexts and under different circumstances, or on the questions how visible sub-regional activities have been on the EU level and how EU actors have perceived the role of sub-regionalisms within the EU.

1.3 Research questions

Altogether, it can be concluded that more conceptual and comparative groundwork on EU sub-regionalism is needed to provide answers to the research puzzle sketched out above. This includes research on the phenomenon of EU sub-regionalism as a standalone issue and research on different modes and drivers of interaction between the sub-regional and the EU level. So far, there have been no studies that systematically disentangle, describe and categorise different EU sub-regionalisms to be selected according to the definitional criteria presented in Chapter 1.2.2.

In order to contribute to this groundwork and move the discourse on EU sub-regionalism forward, two major research questions – both of which include a set of respective sub-questions – are therefore addressed in the present study:

1. What are the similarities and differences between existing EU sub-regionalisms?
2. How, to what extent and under which circumstances do EU sub-regionalisms interact with the EU level?

On Research Question 1:

The first overarching research question about the similarities and differences between EU sub-regionalisms as defined in the present study aims at creating a comprehensive mapping of the selected EU sub-regionalisms: the Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád sub-regionalisms (see Chapter 1.6.1 on the case selection criteria).

The mapping will address the following sub-questions for each of the three sub-regional entities in order to afford comparability. The sub-questions are inspired by existing research on New and Comparative Regionalism as well as actorness research. They are structured across four categories, which form a combination of intra-sub-regional categories (Category 1 and Category 2) and extra-sub-regional categories (Category 3 and Category 4). In an aggregated form, the four categories constitute the comparative framework of EU sub-regionness which serves to analytically disentangle the three EU sub-regionalisms, to structure their comparison and to assess the status quo and quality of EU sub-regionalisms (for more details see Chapter 1.4 and Chapter 2):

Category 1 – Intra-sub-regional interaction and institutionalisation:

- How does the EU sub-regionalism function?
- How institutionalised is the EU sub-regionalism?
- What is the scope of sub-regional collaboration?
- Which output does the EU sub-regionalism produce?

Category 2 – Sub-regional self-understanding and political identity:

- What is the EU sub-regionalism's self-understanding?
- Do the countries constituting the EU sub-regionalism share a political identity?

Category 3 – Sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level:

- To what extent and with which tools does the EU sub-regionalism exert agenda-setting and lobbying on the EU level?
- What are additional sub-regional foreign policy activities on the EU level?

Category 4 – External recognition on the EU level:

- To what extent do EU actors recognise the EU sub-regionalism as an entity?

To be properly addressed, the first research question requires two steps: In a first step, the manifestation of EU sub-regionness across the four categories is measured for all three sub-regionalisms separately. In a second step, the findings for the three sub-regionalisms across the four distinctive categories will be compared in order to detect similarities and differences.

On Research Question 2:

The second research question focuses on the interaction between the sub-regional and the EU level or, in other words, the extra-sub-regional dimension of EU sub-regionness. It therefore has a narrower focus from an empirical standpoint than the first research question. At the same time, it moves beyond a pure mapping and comparative exercise by aiming to identify the variables that contribute to driving or impeding sub-regional actorness which is operationalised as the aggregate of sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level (Category 3) and external recognition by EU actors (Category 4).

The respective sub-questions are the following:

- Under which circumstances do EU sub-regionalisms engage in agenda-setting, lobbying and additional foreign policy activities on the EU level? What are drivers and impeding factors to sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level?
- How are EU sub-regionalisms and their actions perceived by EU actors and third countries within the EU? Under which circumstances do EU actors and third countries within the EU perceive EU sub-regionalisms as collective entities?

1.4 Comparative and analytical framework – the concept of EU sub-regionness

As stated in Chapter 1.3, the concept of EU sub-regionness is utilised in the present study to structure the comparison between EU sub-regionalisms and to provide a tool to assess the quality of EU sub-regionalisms. EU sub-regionness can be understood as a merger between regionness, which covers the intra-sub-regional dimension of EU sub-regionness (e.g., Fawn 2009, pp. 13-14; Hettne 2005; Hettne & Söderbaum 2000; Söderbaum 2013; Warleigh-Lack 2015, p. 875) and actorness, which covers the extra-sub-regional dimension of EU sub-regionness or, in other words, the interaction between the sub-regional and the EU level (e.g., Drieskens 2017; Hulse 2014; Jupille & Caporaso 1998; Murau & Spandler 2016; Wunderlich 2012b) (for more information on regionness and actorness see Chapter 2.1 and Chapter 2.2).

Regionness

Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum have used the concept of regionness primarily to do justice to the dynamic nature of regionalisation (Hettne & Söderbaum 2000). According to Söderbaum, '[r]egionness means that a region can be a region "more or less", and the level of regionness can both increase and decrease' (Söderbaum 2013, p. 6). An increase in regionness reflects a 'process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject, capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emerging region' (Söderbaum 2013, p. 6). While this study does not systematically analyse processes, the goal is still to detect differences between the Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád sub-regionalisms with regard to their level of advancement and strength, e.g., in terms of the degree of institutionalisation, the policy scope of collaboration or the existence of a joint political identity.

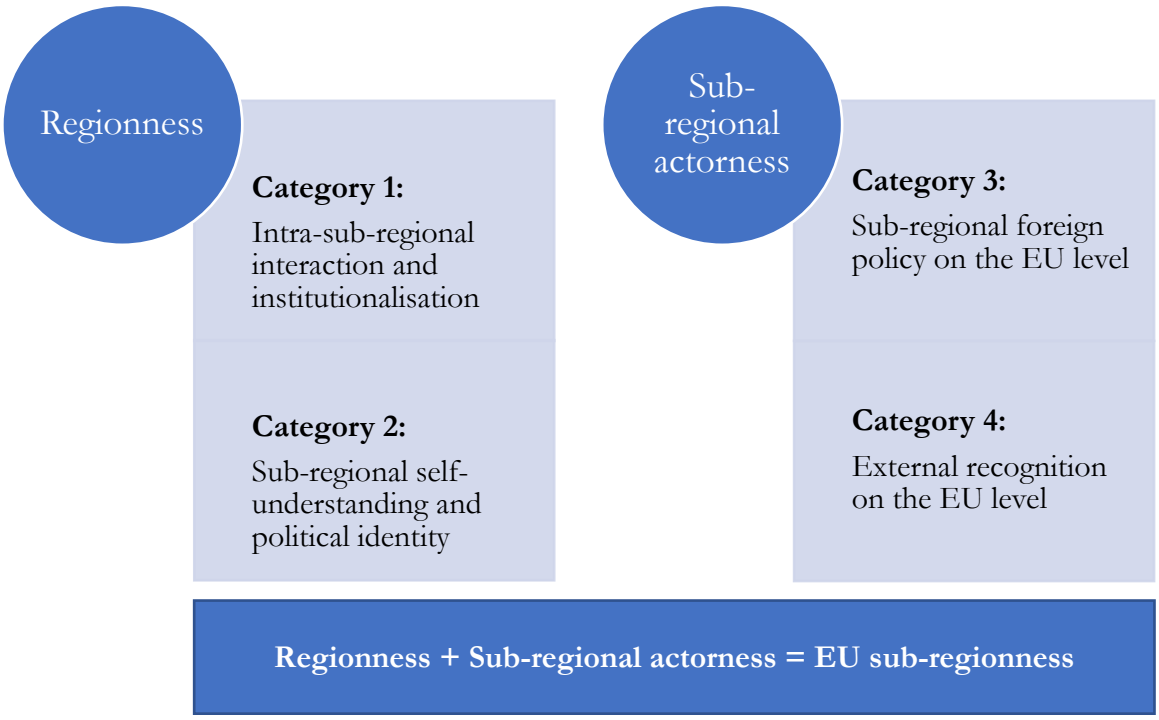
Actorness

Next to academic contributions on regionness, valuable impulses can also be derived from actorness research. This strand of research originally focused on external relations by regions and regional organisations. More specifically, most authors focused on different nuances and angles of the EU's performance as a foreign policy actor (see, for example, Brattberg & Rhinard 2012; Bretherton & Vogler 2006; da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier 2014; Drieskens 2017; Jorgensen, Oberthür & Shahin 2011; Jupille & Caporaso 1998; Laursen 2009a, 2009b; Kratochvíl et al. 2011; Pieper et al. 2011; Sjöstedt 1977; Toje 2008).

EU sub-regionness

Considering the existing research and theoretical groundwork on regionness and actorness, the present study merges these concepts into the new concept of EU sub-regionness. In doing so, it provides a new angle to the regionalism literature and EU studies that is particularly well suited to analyse and compare EU sub-regionalisms and their distinctive features and functions. As stated above, sub-regionness is conceptualised as a function of four categories: (1) intra-sub-regional interaction and institutionalisation, (2) a sub-regional self-understanding and political identity, (3) sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level, and (4) external recognition on the EU level.

Figure 1: Categories of EU sub-regionness



Source: Own illustration

The intra-sub-regional dimension, conceptualised as regionness (Categories 1 and 2), focuses on EU sub-regionalisms as stand-alone phenomena in their own right, meaning that their EU embeddedness is not the main lens for measuring the first and second category. To give an example, the policy scope of sub-regional collaboration, which is one indicator channelled into Category 1, or the political identity in Category 2 can have EU references but do not require them. This is different for the extra-sub-regional dimension of actorness, which specifically measures the degree to which a sub-regionalism interacts with and tries to influence EU politics and EU policies, and to what extent EU actors recognise a sub-regionalism as a collective entity.

In an aggregated form, the four categories thus provide information on the degree of EU sub-regionness that a sub-regional entity displays in a certain situation. Inspired by Hettne and Söderbaum's thinking that there are different stages of regionness imaginable, the measured level of sub-regionness expresses the degree to which a sub-regionalism has the qualities of a sub-regional polity with high actorness on the EU level, as opposed to a sub-regional space with no actorness on the EU level (Hettne & Söderbaum 2000; Söderbaum 2005). As stated above, the present study does not aim to measure processes but focuses on the status quo at a given time or limited period.

When applying the concept of EU sub-regionness, the first overarching research question guiding the empirical analysis is therefore the following: Which similarities and differences do EU sub-regionalisms display across the four categories constituting EU sub-regionness? The second research question focuses solely on the extra-sub-regional dimension of EU sub-regionness and asks for drivers and impeding variables that have an impact on sub-regional actorness.

1.5 Hypotheses – driving and impeding factors with an impact on sub-regional actorness

Taking into account existing findings from EU studies, small-state studies, actorness research and to some extent New and Comparative Regionalism more broadly, EU sub-regional actorness – as the combination of sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level (Category 3) and external recognition on the EU level (Category 4) – is expected to be affected by a broad variety and complex combination of factors on different governance levels and across different dimensions (Bretherton & Vogler 1999, p. 29; Inotai 1998, p. 18). It is therefore unrealistic to look for independent variables that are by themselves sufficient to explain or predict the degree of Baltic, Benelux or V4 sub-regional actorness. Moreover, qualitative studies like the present one are not methodologically equipped to present a ranking of drivers and impeding factors. This would require a different research design, e.g., one that includes regression analysis. However, it is worthwhile to identify variables that are expected to contribute to an explanation and prediction of the level of sub-regional actorness, to measure their empirical relevance and plausibility, and thereby to gain insights on their applicability to EU sub-regionalisms.

In total, three clusters of independent variables are expected to have an impact on the likelihood and degree of sub-regional actorness: 1) sub-regional group structure, 2) geographical location, and 3) policy-related factors. Based on these three clusters, six hypotheses are deduced. The respective hypotheses are of a probabilistic, not a universal-deterministic nature, and serve to predict and explain the conditions under which high sub-regional actorness is likely (Gschwend & Schimmelfennig 2007, p. 12).

Cluster 1: Sub-regional group structure

Within the cluster of sub-regional group structure, three variables are included: the degree of group homogeneity regarding state size (Variable 1), the length of EU membership (Variable 2), and the degree of EU embeddedness (Variable 3). For 'state size' the expectation is that small states are more likely to cooperate and to form sub-regional coalitions than big states. At the same time, it is hypothesised that mixed groupings, which also include big states, are more likely to be active agenda-setters and lobbyists on the EU level and be recognised as entities by EU level actors and third countries. The central underlying argument from small-state research is that small states tend to have limited resources at their disposal, which forces them to act within bigger coalitions and to pursue very narrow policy agendas. If bigger states with more clout are involved, the range of agenda-setting and lobbying is therefore likely to be broader. Moreover, bigger states tend to be

more powerful and visible stand-alone actors, but whose actions are expected to spill-over to the sub-regionalisms in which they are embedded.

Regarding the 'length of EU membership' it is hypothesised that sub-regional actorness is higher for sub-regionalisms consisting of 'old' EU members than for those consisting of 'new' EU members. The thinking behind this hypothesis is that long-time EU members are more familiar with EU decision-making, have more reliable networks and are therefore better equipped to actively engage in EU agenda-setting and lobbying.

Regarding the 'degree of EU embeddedness' it is hypothesised that sub-regional actorness is higher for sub-regionalisms with converging patterns of EU embeddedness than for sub-regionalisms with diverging patterns of EU embeddedness. The reasoning behind this assumption is that groups with homogeneous patterns of EU embeddedness are faced with similar EU-related challenges and opportunities so that the scope for possible sub-regional collaboration on the EU level is maximised. Moreover, it is to be expected that groups of fully integrated 'EU insiders' have a greater potential for active agenda-setting and lobbying on the EU level and for external recognition than groups of partial EU outsiders where member states hold opt-outs or do not participate in single EU structures and projects.

Cluster 2: Geographical location

Regarding Variable 4, 'geographical location', it is hypothesised that sub-regional actorness is higher for sub-regionalisms at the EU periphery than for sub-regionalisms at the centre of the EU. The reasoning behind this assumption is that peripheral countries tend to share security-related interests – especially when they border unstable, conflict-ridden EU neighbouring countries, which makes them natural allies. On that basis, they are expected to be more likely to jointly pursue agenda-setting or lobbying on the EU level than countries without shared, geography-based interests. Next to security and foreign policy, infrastructure-related policies might be equally prone to sub-regional agenda-setting by peripheral countries with shared connectivity challenges. Adding to this argument, it is expected that countries at the centre of the EU have a higher number of natural allies within the EU than peripheral countries, making their cooperation patterns more fluid and resulting in a lower level of sub-regional activity compared to peripheral countries.

Cluster 3: Policy-related factors

Within the cluster of policy-related factors, two variables are included: the level of competence (Variable 5) and the functional logic of a given policy area (Variable 6). Regarding the 'level of

competence' it is hypothesised that sub-regional actorness is higher in EU policy areas with exclusive or shared member state competences than in policy areas with exclusive EU competences. The underlying argument is that sub-regionalisms have more leeway, more potential impact and therefore more incentives to cooperate on policy areas with national competences (e.g., security and defence, social policy) or shared competences (e.g., justice and home affairs) because of the intergovernmental bargaining logic that often prevails in the respective negotiations, compared to policy areas with exclusive EU competences.

Regarding the 'functional policy logic' it is hypothesised that sub-regional actorness is by tendency higher in cooperative policies with a collective good character than in competitive policy areas – defined as redistributive policies and / or policies following a zero-sum logic.

1.6 Research design and case selection

As outlined above, the present study (1) provides a mapping of the Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád sub-regionalisms and compares them across the four categories of EU sub-regionness and (2) tests six hypotheses on drivers and impeding factors (independent variables) to sub-regional actorness in the EU context (dependent variable).

In order to deliver on this research agenda, a comparative, qualitative case study design was chosen to fulfil the following four functions:

- Description: Measure and sketch the four categories of EU sub-regionness
- Comparison: Compare EU sub-regionalisms across the four categories of EU sub-regionness
- Validation: Test the relevance of six independent variables and the plausibility of six hypotheses
- Exploration: Adapt and extend conceptual thinking on EU sub-regionalism; refine and add hypotheses on drivers and impeding factors that impact sub-regional actorness

1.6.1 Research process and analytical structure

Both the research process and the empirical analysis in the present study consist of two steps, corresponding with the two overarching research questions: The first step of the research process, which also forms the first empirical part of this study, takes the form of a comparative, comprehensive mapping exercise of the three selected EU sub-regionalisms. The comparison is semi-structured: the Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád sub-regionalisms are compared across the four categories of EU sub-regionness – (1) intra sub-regional interaction and institutionalisation, (2) sub-regional self-understanding and political identity, (3) sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level, (4) external recognition on the EU level – in order to guide the structure of the case studies and grant comparability. Still, corresponding with the goal of qualitative research designs in the context of uncharted research areas, the respective categories are modelled and operationalised to be open enough to leave some room for context-specific interpretation and to account for unforeseen empirical nuances that seem worth emphasising. In other words: The overall framework of the comparison is previously established, but not all possible manifestations of the comparative categories are operationalised in a detailed fashion prior to the evaluation and analysis of empirical findings. This first analytical step eventually results in an aggregate, meta-level mapping of the three

EU sub-regionalisms without detailed information on single policies, negotiations or the reasoning behind sub-regional approaches.

The second step of the research process and study focuses on testing the pre-stated hypotheses on drivers and impeding factors to sub-regional actorness in order to evaluate their plausibility and relevance. The focus is therefore narrower and targets the link between the sub-regional and the EU level. This second analytical step requires a higher degree of detail than the general mapping of sub-regionalisms in the first step. Consequently, six additional policy case studies are conducted, which cover different EU policy negotiations, strategy processes and incidents of crisis management. They serve to reveal and explicitly showcase the reasoning behind sub-regional collaboration and external recognition, as well as to outline processes of sub-regional activity leading to or preventing sub-regional actorness in more detail. The second part of the analysis, which corresponds by and large with the second research question, is therefore primarily of a deductive nature; in the sense that the selection of variables and the formulation of hypotheses is driven and informed by existing research. At the same time, the research design allows for a certain degree of exploration in order to make full use of the empirical data that is generated based on qualitative semi-structured expert interviews and document analysis. Therefore, the goal is not only to validate pre-stated assumptions and hypotheses, but also to refine hypotheses in cases where research is lacking, or findings are inconclusive. The case studies thus produce additional empirical knowledge which can serve as the basis of future research and hypothesis-testing (see Chapter 6).

In conclusion, a qualitative research approach was chosen for the present study in order to add as much conceptual and theoretical input as possible on the so far rather uncharted research area of EU sub-regionalism and on the link between the sub-regional and EU level in particular.

1.6.2 Qualitative methodology

The qualitative research design combines different qualitative methods of data collection. In order to measure the four categories of EU sub-regionness, data were collected through semi-structured expert interviews with open-ended questions in combination with the analysis of primary documents and secondary literature (see Chapter 4 for more details).

Between May 2016 and November 2019 a total number of 129 expert interviews were conducted with different groups of experts. In order to measure the two categories along the intra-sub-regional dimension of sub-regionness (regionness), decision-makers and policy experts on the national and sub-regional level were interviewed. For the two categories along the extra-sub-

regional dimension (sub-regional actorness in the EU context), additional experts from different EU institutions and third EU member states were interviewed. The list of experts thus comprises the following groups:

- Representatives from the Permanent Representations to the EU in Brussels
- Representatives from different ministries in the national capitals
- Representatives from sub-regional institutions
- Representatives from EU institutions
- Representatives from other EU member states
- Policy experts from think tanks and universities

Primary documents, which serve as the second major data source, include sub-regional treaties and other constitutive documents, rules of procedure, presidency programmes and multiannual working plans, annual reports, parliamentary protocols and position papers (see list of primary sources in Appendix 2). Input from these documents is mostly used to measure the intra-sub-regional categories of EU sub-regionness.

1.6.3 Case selection

Selection of EU sub-regional entities: Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád sub-regionalisms

The present study includes all cases that fulfil the five conditions outlined in the 'lowest common denominator'-definition of EU sub-regionalism: (1) geographic proximity and the existence of clear-cut geographical boundaries, (2) membership of at least three countries, (3) EU membership of all participating countries, (4) an exclusive membership structure and continuity of existence, and (5) a multi-sectoral approach to cooperation. These consist of the Baltic, Benelux and Visegrád sub-regionalisms.

As a positive side effect, the case selection allows for empirical variance across the three variables subsumed under the cluster of 'sub-regional group structure'.

1. With regard to 'state size', the Baltic (and to a lesser extent Benelux) sub-regionalism qualifies as a homogeneous entity of only small states whereas the V4 qualifies as a heterogeneous group due to Poland's status as a big state.
2. With regard to the 'length of EU membership', EU founding members (Benelux countries) are represented, as well as member states that were part of the big Central and Eastern European enlargement in 2004 (Baltics and V4).

3. With regard to the 'degree of EU embeddedness', both the Baltic and Benelux sub-regionalisms qualify as homogeneous groups because all of the countries are fully integrated in the EU and none of them hold any opt-outs. The Visegrád sub-regionalism, on the other hand, qualifies as a heterogeneous group because only Slovakia is a Eurozone member.

Moreover, the case selection is geographically balanced by covering Central- and North-Eastern Europe (Baltics and V4) as well as Western Europe (Benelux). While the Baltics are clearly located at the Eastern periphery of the EU, the picture is more nuanced with regard to the Benelux and Visegrád sub-regionalisms. The Benelux countries, or more specifically Belgium and the Netherlands, are located at the seaside and are therefore also on periphery. They do not, however, directly border any EU neighbouring countries. The Visegrád sub-regionalism, on the other hand, is largely located at the Eastern EU periphery while being at the centre of wider Europe at the same time. Thus, the variable 'geographical location' has sufficient variance.

Selection of the time frame

To make this study feasible, data collection (document analysis, expert interviews) was limited to the period between 2009 and 2018. This exact time frame was selected for two main reasons:

1. First, all countries had been EU members for at least five years by 2009. All sub-regional entities therefore had the chance to get accustomed to the rules of EU policy-making and to conduct agenda-setting and lobbying on the EU level. Case comparability is thus relatively high.
2. Second, this time frame facilitates case comparability because it is marked by an ongoing crisis-context. In 2009, the sovereign debt crisis hit the EU, followed by armed conflicts in the European neighbourhood, the refugee crisis, Brexit and a crisis of political trust on the domestic and EU levels.

Selection of policy cases

As already announced, it is assumed that the shape and degree of sub-regional actorness varies across policy areas and policy contexts. In order to provide sufficient empirical material to test this hypothesis, six concrete, demarcated policy cases in the form of negotiations, strategy processes and incidents of crisis-management are identified: (1) negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020, (2) negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), (3) the drafting process of the EU Global Strategy, (4) the discussion on relocation

quotas in the context of the refugee crisis, (5) the revision of the posted workers directive, and (6) negotiations on permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) in the area of security and defence.

Those six policy cases were selected for a number of reasons:

1. First, they grant variance along the policy-related variable 'level of competence'. The six policy sub-cases cover all three former pillars under the Maastricht treaty and therefore display different variations of competence distributed between the national and the EU level. For example, TTIP negotiations were led by the European Commission (exclusive EU competence), negotiations on the posted workers directive fell under the ordinary legislative procedure (mixed competence), and PESCO was set up by member states (exclusive member state competence).
2. Second, the policy cases follow different 'functional policy logics'. Some policy cases like negotiations on the MFF or relocation quotas follow a competitive logic due to their redistributive character and perceived zero-sum logic. Other policy cases like the EU Global Strategy or PESCO have a cooperative nature and are perceived as a public good.
3. Third, the policy cases are evenly distributed along the overall time frame in order to avoid a time-related bias. MFF and TTIP negotiations, for example, took place or started in the first half of the chosen time frame, whereas the negotiations related to the refugee crisis, discussions on the revision of the posted workers directive and PESCO took place towards the end of the time frame.
4. Finally, all six cases ranged high on the EU agenda and therefore received a large amount of attention in policy analysis and academic circles. This facilitates the research process and allows for a comprehensive level of analysis.

1.7 Structure of the remainder of the study

The remainder of the study is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides an overview of the status quo of research on New and Comparative Regionalism as well as actorness research (Chapters 2.1 and 2.2). Referring to the existing literature, EU sub-regionness is presented as a conceptual merger of regionness and actorness within the EU. In Chapter 2.3 the new concept of EU sub-regionness is outlined in detail by shedding light on its four constitutive categories.

In Chapter 3, the three clusters of independent variables that are expected to affect sub-regional actorness are identified and the respective six hypotheses are formulated. Next to New and Comparative Regionalism and mostly EU-centred actorness research, findings from small-states research and International Relations scholarship are taken into account.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the research design and process. In a first step, the decision in favour of a qualitative, comparative case study design is explained (Chapter 4.1), followed by a sub-chapter outlining the criteria for case selection (Chapter 4.2). Additional sub-chapters touch upon sources, methods and the process of data collection via semi-structured expert interviews and document analysis (Chapter 4.3) as well as the tools of data processing (Chapter 4.4). In the last sub-chapter, the analytical process and structure are elaborated on, including the operationalisation of the four categories of EU sub-regionness as well as the criteria of data aggregation (Chapter 4.5).

The following, Chapter 5, provides a mapping of the three EU sub-regionalisms by measuring and elaborating on the four categories of EU sub-regionness: (1) intra sub-regional interaction and institutionalisation, (2) sub-regional self-understanding and political identity, (3) sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level, (4) external recognition on the EU level. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the overall collaboration and cooperation of the three groupings as well as the general, not policy-specific self-understanding and outside perception of the groupings between 2009 and 2018. More specifically, the structure of the chapter is such that one sub-chapter is dedicated to one sub-regionalism at a time, measuring the four categories of sub-regionness respectively (Chapters 5.1 to 5.3). In the last sub-chapter, the three sub-regionalisms are compared along the four categories as well as with regard to the aggregated level of EU sub-regionness. As the present study aims to contribute to the research agenda of Comparative Regionalism by adding to the scholarship on EU sub-regionalism, the main similarities and differences between the three sub-regional entities are highlighted.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the six policy cases, which focus specifically on sub-regional actorness and thus the link between the sub-regional and the EU level: (1) MFF 2014-2020 negotiations,

(2) TTIP negotiations, (3) the drafting process of the EU Global Strategy, (4) the discussion on relocation quotas in the context of the refugee crisis, (5) the revision of the posted workers directive and (6) PESCO negotiations. Compared to the comprehensive mapping exercise in the previous chapter, Chapter 6 provides more detailed, policy- and context specific empirical input. This not only touches on the scope of sub-regional activity on the EU level and on external recognition, but also on drivers and impeding factors to sub-regional actorness, which were raised in expert interviews or addressed in secondary literature. While the first six sub-chapters are dedicated to the six respective policy cases (Chapters 6.1 to 6.6), the last sub-chapter shortly outlines similarities and differences with regard to sub-regional actorness between the three sub-regionalisms (Chapter 6.7).

In Chapter 7, the findings from the two empirical chapters are aggregated in order to provide responses to the two overarching research questions and to identify possible future research endeavours based on the present study's empirical findings. The overall levels of EU sub-regionness are discussed against the backdrop of Hettne and Söderbaum's thinking on the five stages of regionness (Chapter 7.1). Due to the weak applicability of Hettne and Söderbaum's stage typology to EU sub-regionalisms, Chapter 7.2 discusses two ideal types of sub-regionalisms instead, which can be identified based on the present study's empirical findings. It is argued that sub-regionalisms can either lean towards a 'functional hub'-type, like in the Benelux example, or towards a 'political tool'-type, like in the case of the Visegrád Group. The second part of the chapter addresses the extent to which the six pre-stated hypotheses on drivers and impeding factors to sub-regional actorness (as the aggregate of 'sub-regional foreign policy on the EU level' and 'external recognition on the EU level') could be confirmed or falsified. Moreover, possible additional drivers and impeding factors to be included in future research endeavours are discussed, which could be identified based on expert interviews (Chapter 7.3).

In the final Chapter 8, the results of the analysis are summarised and implications for future research are outlined. It is argued that the results of this study will be relevant for future academic approaches to sub-regionalism as a meta-phenomenon as well as for case studies on individual sub-regional groups. The systematic conceptualisation and typology of different sub-regional groupings provides a useful starting point for future comparative studies in a European context and beyond. The findings also give further impetus to theory-building efforts that focus on the future development of sub-regionalism and interaction patterns between the sub-regional and EU level.

2 Theoretical framework

As outlined in the introduction, research on EU sub-regionalism as a stand-alone phenomenon and on interactions between the sub-regional and the EU levels has been limited so far. However, the areas of New and Comparative Regionalism and actorness have been examined more in recent years (e.g., Börzel 2011; Brattberg & Rhinard 2012; Bretherton & Vogler 2006; da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier 2014; Fioramonti & Mattheis 2016; Hulse 2014; Jorgensen, Oberthür & Shahin 2011; Jupille & Caporaso 1998; Kratochvíl et al. 2011; Laursen 2009a, 2009b; Pieper et al. 2011; Sbragia 2008; Sjöstedt 1977; Söderbaum 2015; Tavares 2004; Toje 2008; Van Langenhove 2012). As Artatrana Gochhayat states, '[r]egionalism has gained prominence in the 21st century, not only as a form of economic, political and social organization, but also as a field of study' (Gochhayat 2014, p. 10). With EU sub-regionalism being one possible variation of regionalism, it is worth exploring these sub-divisions of scholarship in order to identify and extract relevant tools, concepts and empirical findings, which can then be used to structure comparative approaches, map different manifestations of EU sub-regionalism and identify drivers of sub-regional actorness in the EU context.

So far, New Regionalism, Comparative Regionalism and actorness research have not systematically incorporated EU sub-regionalisms in conceptual pieces or comparative studies. There are therefore no concepts or tools which could be applied to this study without further adaptation. As will be shown in the following two sub-chapters, however, both New and Comparative Regionalism and actorness research are promising points of departure for categorising, comparing and analysing EU sub-regionalisms. Authors like Björn Hettne, Fredrik Söderbaum, Luk Van Langenhove, Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, Merran Hulse, Steffen Murau and Kilian Spandler or Jens-Uwe Wunderlich – to name just a few – served as sources of inspiration for the new concept of EU sub-regionness. They provided conceptual thinking and valuable tools flexible enough to deconstruct, categorise and compare different kinds of regionalisms. Conceptual input from these bodies of literature is therefore manifest in the concept of EU sub-regionness used in the present study to map and compare different EU sub-regionalisms.

Before elaborating on the concept of EU sub-regionness, the above-mentioned strands of research will first be contextualised. More specifically, the next sub-chapter briefly elaborates on the main approaches and observations made by New and Comparative Regionalism and actorness researchers – especially with regard to categorisation and comparison.

2.1 New and Comparative Regionalism

2.1.1 State of the art and research gaps

New Regionalism is, by definition, based on the idea that since the late 1980s and 90s the world has been facing new types of regions and region-building all over the globe, which manifest on different governance levels – ranging from the sub-national to the macro-regional level – and which thus require more flexible and less static methods and theoretical approaches (e.g., Behr & Jokela 2011; Breslin & Higgott 2000; Emerson 2014; Fawcett 2013; Hettne 2001: xiii; Keating 2010; Paasi 2009). This empirical development triggered the generation of an immense body of literature (e.g., Fawcett & Hurrell 1995; Mansfield & Milner 1999; Palmer 1991; Söderbaum & Shaw 2003; Telò 2001). The term 'New' Regionalism was chosen in order to differentiate it from earlier waves of regionalism that could be observed in the 1950s to 1980s and were characteristic of the Cold War era.

In total, Fredrik Söderbaum (2015) identifies four phases of empirical regionalism and subsequent scholarly development: Early Regionalism, Old Regionalism, New Regionalism and Comparative Regionalism.[10]

Early Regionalism refers to the time period between the late 1800s and the first half of the 1900s. The term does not relate to states as they are known today, but to their precursors (Söderbaum 2015, pp. 6-10). Old Regionalism started with the end of World War II and strongly focused on regional integration in a European context, in particular trade agreements and security alliances (e.g., Haas 1958, 1970; Hoffmann 1966; Mitrany 1965). The main purpose of regional integration was rooted in the goal of achieving stability and peace in Europe. The global context played only a marginal role in those Eurocentric studies, which treated the EU as 'the marker, model and paradigm from which to theorize, compare and design institution as well as policy in the rest of the word' (Söderbaum 2013, p. 1; see also Hettne 2001, pp. xiii-xiv). However, there was also an Old Regionalism that looked beyond Europe, albeit on a smaller scale, with a focus on Latin America, Asia and Africa (Söderbaum 2003, p. 4; Söderbaum 2015, pp. 10-16). As a result of the Eurocentrism of Old Regionalism, supranationalism was treated by many authors as the ideal type of regionalism, whereas looser forms of regionalism were considered 'failed' versions of the European model (Breslin & Higgott 2000, p. 343; Castle 2018, p. 152; Söderbaum 2013, p. 2).

The phase of New Regionalism started roughly in the mid-to-late 1980s in a multipolar, post-Cold War context, when new regional organisations and other regional formations emerged all over the

[10] Other authors like Cihelková and Hnát (2006), Gochhayat (2014), Hettne (2003) or Tavares (2004) came up with slightly diverging waves or cycles of regionalism.