

## **THE EU MACRO-REGIONS: APPROACHES AND PATTERNS**

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### **A b s t r a c t**

With the decline of the nation state and the increasing importance of regionalisation, the EU has launched macro-regions, i.e., areas, including territories from several countries, that share common goals and operating under multi-level governance.

This paper focuses on the EU territorial cooperation strategy, utilising the concept of „macro-region” and the perspective of the macro-regional approach.

Following the first macro-regions (such as the Baltic Sea Region and the Danube Region), the EU recently launched the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-regional Strategy, which was seen as an additional tool for cooperation between local and regional authorities that overlooks the Adriatic Sea. Nevertheless, future developments in the region appear at the present to be quite uncertain, owing to structural industrial decline, rural marginalisation and a lack of infrastructure adequate to support the entire cooperation area.

To overcome these constraints, the concept of macro-region must be strengthened by creating alternative ways to engage in cross-border cooperation between areas subject to similar conditions. Matching among regions that belong to different Euro-countries within the framework of a macro-region may be the best way to forge a consistent path towards territorial, economic and social integration. This will help to create a common pole of cooperation characterized by various strategies that can act as accelerators in creating territorial capital.

## **MAKROREGIONY UE – STRATEGIE I FORMY**

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**A b s t r a k t**

W obliczu malejącej roli państwa narodowego i coraz większego znaczenia regionalizacji UE zaproponowała koncepcję makroregionów, czyli obszarów obejmujących terytoria wielu różnych państw, które łączą wspólne cele i które funkcjonują w warunkach wielopoziomowego sprawowania rządów. W artykule główną uwagę zwrócono na unijną strategię współpracy terytorialnej, z wykorzystaniem koncepcji makroregionu i perspektywy podejścia makroregionalnego.

Po utworzeniu pierwszych makroregionów (jak region Morza Bałtyckiego i region Dunaju) UE niedawno przyjęła makroregionalną strategię dla regionu adriatycko-jońskiego, którą postrzegano jako dodatkowe narzędzie współpracy między władzami lokalnymi i regionalnymi obszarów nad Morzem Adriatyckim. Przyszły rozwój regionu wydaje się jednak obecnie niepewny na skutek strukturalnego upadku przemysłu, marginalizacji terenów wiejskich i braku infrastruktury, która mogłaby wesprzeć współpracę w regionie.

Aby przezwyciężyć te ograniczenia, należy wzmacnić koncepcję makroregionu przez stworzenie alternatywnych metod angażowania we współpracy transgraniczna regionów, które funkcjonują w podobnych warunkach. Dopasowanie regionów, które należą do różnych państw europejskich w ramach koncepcji makroregionu, może się okazać najlepszym sposobem na wytyczenie drogi ku integracji terytorialnej, gospodarczej i społecznej. Pomoże to stworzyć wspólną płaszczyznę współpracy na podstawie rozmaitych strategii, które mogą znacząco przyspieszyć tworzenie kapitału terytorialnego.

## **Introduction**

The process of regionalisation in the EU is continuously changing: each time a new EU Region is introduced, the impact is very difficult to measure and quantify.

Certainly, the increasing roles and competencies of regional actors inside and outside cooperation areas are enabled by territorial cooperation processes and related tools (SVENSSON, OSTHOL 2001) that have given regions additional abilities to implement policy (KELLEHER et al. 1999). In the past, this model was based on the decision making process, and the EU autonomously determined which countries would form regions within the framework of regional cooperation policy (see Alps, Baltic South-East or Mediterranean Euro-regions). Conversely, macro-regionalisation is territorially embedded and limited, and each bordering region can enter into an enhanced international region because macro-regions are formed by choice within larger regions.

The modern approach to macro-regions has gained attention, as it had increased focus on inter-regional integration based on the assumption that the macro-regional strategy can enhance territorial cohesion and existing cooperation in performing tasks at a supranational level and increase other forms of cooperation at subnational levels.

Examples of macro-regions are the Baltic Sea Region, the Danube Region and the Adriatic-Ionic Initiative, to name a few. The purpose of macro-regions is to improve territorial cooperation and increase EU competitiveness and integration.

Neither inter-regional integration nor regional networking to implement transnational economic networks are new topics. Nevertheless, difficulties in overcoming administrative divisions remain. Moreover, territorial cooperation spaces are often overlapping because of fuzzy boundaries and the presence of intricate sets of actors and institutions characterized by different goals and interests.

In this paper, some preliminary issues related to macro-regional strategy are discussed. First, the extent to which the new idea of macro-regionalisation within the EU is innovative and different from previous processes of regionalisation is addressed.

This consideration is suggested by the fact that geographical belonging and proximity remain the main criteria of aggregation among regions. Furthermore, a better understanding on whether the overlapping of several macro-regions at the territorial level is the right strategy and whether there may exist other methods of macro-regionalisation within the EU is sought. Finally, a preliminary assessment of policies is formulated, intended to further the current process of regionalisation in Europe.

## **EU Macro-regions in the past, present (and future)**

The current socio-economic outlook is characterized by greater level of uncertainty than in the past. Within this framework, the weakness of political, financial and economic assets in the EU has become increasingly evident. In the recent crisis, European Regions have been stressed by new social challenges and deepening economic disparities that cannot be managed through individual actions within administrative boundaries.

The importance of cross-border and inter-regional cooperation arises because of the increasing economic exchange of goods and services among states with different cultures, and different social, economic and political organisations (such as the former central planning socialist countries).

Thus, to pursue this goal, a territorial cooperation policy is needed to reduce economic divergences and barriers between national and regional levels (KEATING 2004, ARGUELLES et al. 2011) and increase the role of regional and local actors in driving development among regions.

During the 1990s, the idea of macro-regions spread to political and economic issues in response to the emerging concept of „Euro-regions”. The first EU macro-region (the NUTS system) was based on a three-level hierarchical classification. The NUTS classification (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) is a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the EU for the purpose of the collection and harmonisation of European regional

statistics and for the socio-economic analyses of the regions. Currently, EU territories are clustered into NUTS 1, which included major socio-economic regions; NUTS 2, formed by basic regions for the application of regional policies and NUTS 3 characterised by small regions for specific diagnoses. For approximately 30 years, the NUTS system was managed exclusively on the basis of an agreement between member states.

At the same time, many cooperative efforts between member states, regions and municipalities took place through informal intergovernmental committees (DÜHR et al. 2007), and several cooperative activities between (border) regions have been subsequently replicated by specific interregional cooperation programmes. A stronger notion of macro-regions arose at the end of the 1990s with Transnational Cooperation Programmes (INTERREG IIC 1996–1999, INTERREG IIIB 2000–2006 and INTERREG IVC 2007–2013), which promoted trans-national cooperation among local, regional and national actors. Whereas in the NUTS system macro-regions were regional units that cooperated within the borders of one member state, INTERREG includes areas from non-member states, enabling asinter-regional, inter-national and cross-border cooperation.

Beginning in 2000, due to the forthcoming enlargement to Eastern European countries, territorial cooperation suddenly became a goal of EU policy, reflecting the larger goal of „territorial cohesion” (CAMAGNI 2006). Within the framework of territorial cohesion, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGCT) may be considered the first manifestation of the underlying principle. The EGCT aims to form a type of partnership in the governance and management of public and private entities; it is the first experience of the macro-regionalisation process within the EU and the forerunner of modern macro-regions.

Nevertheless, the EGCT has had limited success, due to the large number and complexity of the procedures adopted. However, thanks to the INTERREG and Espon Programmes, territorial cooperation is one of the milestones of the territorial cohesion policy to date.

The 2004 EU enlargement amplified the challenges of cooperation for both new member states within the EU and neighbouring regions outside the EU, triggering a transition from a model based mainly on partnership to a model based on cooperation.

Thus, EU cooperation has become a goal of territorial cohesion, leading to the formation of social and institutional capital among various actors involved (NADIN, STEAD 2008).

The concept of „macro-region” involves a debate similar to debates over issues such as the „Global City Region”, „Euro-region” and the above mentioned „INTERREG programmes”. First, the concept of a Global City Region

relates to metropolitan areas in which cities manifest physical and demographic characteristics that affect polarisation over a wider regional area and, at the same time, become part of a socio-economic network.

Second, Euro-regions indicate a more institutionalised approach in terms of cooperation, using the tools of the EGTC to promote and spread interests beyond administrative boundaries. In this context, the meaning of macro-region resembles that of Euro-region. However, in contrast to Euro-regions, macro-regions do not have an institutional structure but foreshadow the need to use existing structures to push cooperation to a larger territorial scale.

Finally, INTERREG is a programme that specialises in specific projects, while the macro-regional approach is a policy scheme for the achievement of the goals of Horizon 2020. In fact, macro-regions display different characteristics from *other territorial cooperation forms* (NACCHIA 2011) because they are characterised by a multi-sectoral, multi-instrumental and multi-actor approach and are formed to coordinate cooperative tasks through the concept of „functional regions”, that are territorial configurations suitable to the development of transnational cooperation within the EU and aimed at strengthening common cross-border cooperative initiatives.

## **Territorial belonging and the boundaries of interaction**

With the Baltic Sea and the Danube strategies, the European notion of macro-region is becoming increasingly important in the academic debate (GROENENDIJK 2013).

In fact, by combining old member states, new member states and non-member states, the EU macro-regional strategies can contribute to improving the territorial and geographical cohesion process in Europe (SCHYMIK 2011). More specifically, in the case of the Baltic Sea and the Danube Basin, EU enlargement has altered geopolitical configuration in terms of centre and periphery.

Given the first experiences of macro-regions, territorial belonging and geographical proximity appear to be the main prerequisites for implementation of a macro-regional strategy. Indeed, both the Baltic Sea Region and the Danube Region were established around natural entities (a sea and a river) that favour linkages between areas within macro-regions. Thus, when considering geographical boundaries for possible collaboration (CAPELLO 1999, BOSCHMA 2005), proximity may be an important factor, as it stimulates learning and spillovers through direct communication and knowledge transfer.

However, due to continuous economic and social change, territorial boundaries of cooperation cannot be static and fixed but must be dynamic in relation

to different regional features and policy measures (*Regions and Innovation...* 2013). Indeed, some authors (LUNDQUIST, TRIPPL 2013) note emerging dissimilarities between different cross-border areas, located in more populated economic areas, and peripheral areas characterised by discontinuous and poorly populated territories.

Thus, it can be suggested that geographical proximity and territorial belonging are not the only requirements that justify the establishment of a macro-region.

Conversely, different forms of proximity may also be useful. For example, the „functional proximity” can *increase the probability of collaboration and cooperation* (MAGGIONI, UBERTI 2009). According to the OECD (*Regions and Innovation.* 2013), a functional region is a more appropriate configuration because it displays a high density of internal interaction in economic activities such as innovation. Furthermore, a type of „functional belonging” other than „functional proximity” is suggested since it enhances the more restrictive hypothesis of geographical proximity. For this purpose, CAPPELLIN (1998) notes that cooperation can potentially spread its relational power beyond territorial interdependence to cooperation based on mutual knowledge exchange. Thus, „a macro-region may also be built on heterogeneous units”.

The formation of a macro-region requires time because integration through cooperation depends on the intensity and frequency of the socio-economic relationships that generate permanent cross-border and transnational spaces (STEAD 2014). This is also the obvious consequence of central level management failure, indicating a need for a more dynamic vision of regionalisation (PERKMANN, SUM 2002).

Table 1  
Old regionalism and macro-regional approach

Specification	Old vision to regionalism <i>territorial approach</i>	Macro-regions <i>functional view</i>
Interaction	hierarchic	networks
Sectoral approach	public vs. private	inter-sectoral-policy integration
Collaboration	many tasks	specific asset
Geographical dimension	specific boundaries	no pre-defined boundaries

Source: adapted from BLATTER (2004).

It is clear that the transition phase of a macro-region is characterized by dynamic patterns within regions in the same cooperation areas. In addition, this change will occur at different scales and in varying degrees within specific cross-border regions.

However, both territorial and functional approaches have increased our knowledge of the path to cooperation, although the intensity of the inter-regional scale could play a more important role in applying this new form of territorial cooperation.

## Overlapping functions within the EU macro-regional strategy

Territorial cooperation among EU countries and regions is viewed as temporary and insufficient. Moreover, the emergence of European macro-regions indicates that the EU planning space and governance should be implemented according to different spatial dimensions. Nevertheless, the different scale of macro-regional collaboration may trigger some overlapping due to the different characteristics of member and non-member states, governance models and institutional organisations at the regional level (STEAD 2011).

DEAS and LORD (2006) refer to the existence of a natural overlapping of European cooperation areas and strategies, which in turn depend on the characteristics of connections established over time and the maturity of cooperation (*Baltic Sea Region...* 2009). However, the authors note that the mismatch between territorial boundaries with regard to cooperation may represent a push factor, increasing inter-regional labour mobility within the same cooperation space.

To date, the EU has not set a limit on Euro-regions. Thus, a region can belong to more than one Euro-region and may be a candidate for entry into additional macro-regions as well, as is the case with Germany, a member of both the Central Europe Euro-region of the Baltic Sea Macro-region and the Danube Macro-region (*Communication concerning...* 2012).

Nevertheless, overlap is a foregone result of macro-geographical aggregation. In fact, if the INTERREG Programmes could focus on several goals simultaneously, the large number of issues considered would lead to significant overlap of actors and membership in regional institutions. PERKMANN (2005) argues that the success of regional institutions is affected by an environment of policy entrepreneurship, in which actors develop strategies that fit their policy backgrounds.

Other authors (MIRWALDT et al. 2010) note similarities between the macro-regional approach and transnational projects such as the Baltic Sea Region, where a transnational Baltic Sea Programme 2007–2013 overlaps geographically with the Baltic Sea Strategy.

Among EU macro-regions, the Baltic Sea region focuses on the environment and the role of Russia as a massive energy supplier to the cooperation area. These organisations created greater visibility for the macro-region and

the economic opportunities afforded by local industry. Starting from 80's up today the Baltic Sea macro-region has been characterized by several cooperation schemes, various INTERREG programmes (including Baltic Sea Region Programme) and projects.

Although all EU Programmes contribute to the implementation of the Baltic Sea Region Strategy, the Baltic Sea Region Programme is the only one able to cover the entire macro-region (while the Baltic Sea Strategy is, conversely, a strategic document on issues that are of particular importance for the region). However, both the Baltic Sea Region Programme for 2007–2013 (INTERREG IV B Programme for the Baltic Sea region) and new Baltic Sea Programme for 2014–2020 (Interreg Baltic Sea Region) cover eleven countries.

Also during the current EU planning phase (2014–2020) INTERREG Baltic Sea Region shows geographic overlaps with the Programme areas of some cross-border Programmes. A big part of cross-border programmes has a very limited programme area and supports bilateral character. Furthermore, the INTERREG Baltic Sea Region programme area overlaps with three transnational cooperation programmes (such as the North Sea Programme and the Central Europe Programme).

In general, the likelihood of overlaps between national and transnational programmes is mitigated by the fact that, whereas transnational programmes are based on supporting territorial integration, national programmes focus on concrete implementation measures and investments. For the 2014–2020 the linkages between the Baltic Sea Programme and the Baltic Sea Region Strategy will be strengthened. In fact, the Programme has been better aligned with the goal of the strategy to maximise the synergies on other financing sources in the programme areas. Further tensions concern relations between macro-regions and other forms of transnational and trans-border cooperation such as Euro-regions and the EGTC.

## **The EU Macro-regions. Experiences and perspectives**

The emergence of new EU macro-regions depends on the specific characteristics of the regions involved: although territorial proximity and similar physical features are important determinants, the degree of cooperation at the macro-regional level depends on the types of economic interdependencies that exist among territories within a macro-regional area and the involvement of subnational actors within the region over time.

GIFFINGER and SUITNER (2010) assume that the Danube basin is formed by countries with divergent approaches to cooperation and is characterised by a less macro-regional experience, as the region was formed only at the end of

the previous EU planning phase. Nevertheless, the region alongside the Danube River is also an important example of a European macro-region and encompasses 14 countries to date. Among these countries eight are EU member states which have to face similar infrastructural problems and socio-economic disparities.

Despite differences (for example, while the North-German federal provinces assume a crucial role within the Baltic Sea Strategy, in the Danube Strategy a more important political and economic role is covered by Baden Württemberg and Bavaria, located in southern and historically more important in that area), Baltic sea regional strategy and Danube region strategy also exhibit similarities.

Which of these similarities are most notable? Both strategies focus on the place-based approach, as strictly connected to EU Member States and non-EU countries located within the same geographical area. The two macro-regions share the same strategy in terms of coordination among policies and are both financed by EU, national and regional funds as well as based on a more integrated approach through cross-sectoral coordination actions and interlinks among several stakeholders.

Finally, they are facing similar challenges mostly on energy sector. In fact, the lack of a strong energy networks weakens market integration and, then, represents a priority for implementing their strategies, though both regions made massive efforts in this respect. More specifically, in the case of the Baltic Sea Region Strategy, the main issue is the isolation of the three Baltic States from other states of the EU; and this situation slows down a more dynamic networking process in the above mentioned energy and transport sectors as well.

Furthermore, the new Adriatic-Ionian Macro-regional Cooperation Strategy, recently launched by the EU, may be an additional tool for countries to reach European standards with neighbouring countries and cross-border regions. The goal of this strategy is to enhance links between the Adriatic area, the EU and the Balkans, through the intervention of different territorial actors. The main EU tool to support the Macro-regional Strategy is the Adriatic-Ionian Cooperation Programme (ADRION), that is a new European transnational cooperation programme for the 2014–2020 planning phase.

The Programme involves four EU Member States (part of Italy, Slovenia, Greece and Croatia), four non member states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) and focuses mostly on R&D and innovation issues. This macro-region is an area defined by the Adriatic and Ionian Sea basin and populated by more than 60 million inhabitants, that make it a strategic bridge for eastern and western european territories.

Motivations for engaging in the macro-regionalisation process in the Adriatic-Ionian cooperation area vary among countries. For example, some countries, such as Albania, are particularly interested in the formulation of the macro-region's goals and guidelines to formalise standards that are closer to EU standards.

Despite having shared economic difficulties, countries belonging to Adriatic-Ionian initiative (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) exhibit wide gaps among them. In this regard, a strong constraint is represented by EU Commission decisions, which impede new opportunities, new institutions and additional resources. Such decisions should be replaced by strong political initiatives to implement European Programmes, such as structural funds, IPA and other initiatives.

Expectations towards the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region are significantly increasing, as it could represent a new „techno-tool” for coordination policy at the EU and regional levels and stimulate the integration of different regional policies in that area. Certainly, the result of this new cooperation process would lead to a reconfiguration of the EU, which will be different than the current one. To the achievement of a wider integration process among regions, the political integration also plays a key role, although a number different components slows down this complex process (such as the location of the macro regional area among eastern Asia and eastern Mediterranean; the increasing localism and nationalism in some areas of the Balkans region; the emerging political divisions and the deterioration of the security in the southern and eastern Mediterranean area and the role of Russia after the independence of Kosovo).

Thus, we can see that there is the existence of two different development dimensions: the internal dimension exhibit an integration around the centre of the Europe and from the Baltic to the Adriatic-Ionian; and the external dimension looking at a stronger cooperation with the Danube region and Black Sea region. The Adriatic-Ionian Macro-region takes place in an extremely uncertain historical context, characterized by a wide instability inside and outside the macro-region. The overall Adriatic-Ionian space is clearly compressed between the incomplete transition path of the candidate members, the decreasing attractiveness of the European Union and the simultaneous emergence of new instabilities outside the Union.

This new form of territorial cooperation may be a useful tool to strengthen and accelerate the process of stabilisation in this area, although the application of maritime and sustainable development policies (that are priority goals for EUSAIR macro-region) requires the participation of all political institutions overlooking the Adriatic Sea which, consequently, need to draw and share common rules.

In this framework, forecasts of the future of the region are quite uncertain owing to industrial decline, rural marginalisation and a lack of adequate infrastructures to support an economic turnaround in the cooperation area. Such decisions should be replaced by strong political initiatives to implement European Programmes, such as structural funds, IPA and other initiatives and a better consistency between European policy and regional strategy. Otherwise, the risk is that the macro-region may implement only projects within circumscribed areas, neglecting the increasing infrastructural gap and environmental problems in the region. Thus, the so called „bottom-up complementarity” is possible when intense cross-border interaction induces demand for macro-regional institutions as a result of a common set of historical, cultural, institutional, political or economic variables. As far as the EUSAIR is concerned, it is important that the macro-regional strategy operates as a tool to facilitate matching between political choices and governance actors and institutions.

## **Conclusions**

This paper observes that cooperation and cross-border actions through macro-regional strategies are crucial. In the past, this process could only be achieved through direct coordination with the EU and the central State of each country. To date, sustainable macro-regionalisation among cross-border cooperation regions has not been easy to achieve.

However, to achieve regionalisation, it is necessary to create suitable ways for territories subject to similar conditions beyond geographical belonging and proximity to engage in cross-border cooperation. This requires the creation of innovative forms of collaboration because macro-regional cooperation could be viewed as a strong accelerator for local resources and actors. For example, improvement in mutual collaboration in the Balkans region will improve local specialisation, speed up the innovation process and enhance the benefits of comparative advantage (cross-border interaction with the neighbouring European space). This process is important to the EU Cohesion Policy and the role of territorial cooperation in the 2014–2020 period.

Nevertheless, the coordination of macro-regional strategies and EU policies, including funding under the INTERREG programmes, probably needs to be further improved.

Some goals must be achieved in the near future, as it will be important to understand whether macro-regions can function as an effective new level of governance or are a „project entity”. Instead of forming a „self-referring project” – a type of project often characterized by low quality and widespread

overlapping areas – a possible way could be to implement a complex networking system, characterized by variable aggregation of regions/countries as they pursue a cooperative path.

Probably, interactions and matching among regions belonging to different macro-regions may be a way to forge a diversified path towards territorial, economic and social integration, that is the main goal of cooperation at different levels.

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