

# Positioning EU Macro-regions – When Sectoral Policies Meet Cohesion Policy

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*Ten years of macro-regional cooperation and the contemporary post-2020 discussions are the impetus for the authors to question the role and position of macro-regions, and to examine the potential and challenges for their future. In order to position macro-regions in the context of Cohesion policy and sectoral policies we explore the current state of play of macro-regional strategies (MRS) by analysing their implementation processes through a case study analysis, and an analysis of existing studies on the approach and added-value of MRS. This two-fold approach includes an institutional mapping of Priority Area 1a “Waterway Mobilities” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, as well as conclusions drawn from studies conducted by the Interact programme. The assessment of challenges and potentials positions MRS within the institutional landscape of EU Cohesion policy and sectoral policies, especially with regard to its territorial dimension. The article outlines different options for the future of MRS, which are primarily seen as tools to increase coherence between sectoral policies and regional policies and also among the different layers of the latter.*

## I. Introduction

In June 2017 the concept of macro-regional strategies (MRS) reached its tenth anniversary, following the adoption of the Baltic Sea Region MRS in mid-2007.<sup>1</sup> Initially through Interim Commissioner Samecki, and later through a Communication,<sup>2</sup> the European Commission offered a broad definition of MRS. Macro-regions aim to benefit from “strengthened cooperation for economic, social and territorial cohesion” and offer “an integrated framework to Member States and third countries in the same geographical area” to ad-

dress “common challenges”.<sup>3</sup> The four MRS developed to date, Baltic Sea (endorsed in 2009), Danube (2011), Adriatic and Ionian (2014) and Alpine Region (2015), have received considerable attention in both the political and academic fields. Macro-regional cooperation has raised political commitment, influenced decision-making and triggered numerous activities both at the European and national level. For example, they have led to redrawing the boundaries of some transnational European territorial cooperation programmes, and the development of significant strategic projects such as the FAIRway<sup>4</sup> and the BalticTRAM projects<sup>5</sup>.

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1 European Council, *Conclusions of the Council 116616/1/07REV1* (Brussels 14 December 2007), p. 17.

2 European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. COM(2009) 248 final* (Brussels 2009).

3 European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning*

*the added value of macro-regional strategies COM (2013) 468 final* (Brussels, 2013); Samecki, P., *Macro-regional strategies in the European Union* (A Discussion Paper presented in Stockholm on the 18th of September 2009, Brussels); available online at <[http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/archive/cooperation/baltic/pdf/macoregional\\_strategies\\_2009.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/cooperation/baltic/pdf/macoregional_strategies_2009.pdf)> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

4 View website FAIRWAY project at <<http://www.fairwaydanube.eu>> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

5 For an overview of Baltic Sea Region Flagship projects see <[http://www.interreg-baltic.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/about\\_programme/EUSBSR/EUSBSR\\_flagships\\_in\\_Interreg\\_BSR.pdf](http://www.interreg-baltic.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/about_programme/EUSBSR/EUSBSR_flagships_in_Interreg_BSR.pdf)> (last accessed on 4 August 2017); for Baltic TRAM see: <[http://www.interreg-baltic.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/about\\_programme/Cooperation\\_priorities/P1\\_Innovation/R002\\_Transnational\\_research\\_access\\_in\\_macro\\_region.pdf](http://www.interreg-baltic.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/about_programme/Cooperation_priorities/P1_Innovation/R002_Transnational_research_access_in_macro_region.pdf)> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

Following their initial adoption, the MRS concept and their relationship with existing EU and national policies, notably as well as with European territorial cooperation (ETC), has evolved over time. The potential role of macro-regional strategies and their embeddedness/role in regional policy is regularly questioned, particularly in the context of forthcoming Cohesion policy reform. At this stage, after 10 years and in the lead up to major policy reforms, it is important to ask what has been the contribution of the MRS to existing EU policies and programmes, and to EU multi-level governance? In particular, what changes has macro-regional cooperation brought to Cohesion policy and more specifically its European Territorial Cooperation goal?

It is acknowledged that due to the specific nature of macro-regions answering these questions is a challenge. The MRS were developed on the basis of the so-called “three no’s” (no new EU institutions, legislation and funds).<sup>6</sup> They combine a general strategic, cross-sectoral and integrative approach in a wide range of policy fields, including for example transport, environment or education, with the ambition to build a bridge to existing European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), and support the development of projects in territorial cooperation programmes and elsewhere.

For the purpose of this article to position macro-regions in the context of Cohesion policy and sectoral policies, first, a literature review offers an overview of the development of the macro-regional idea. Second, a case study example on experiences from the Danube Region, and conclusions from studies commissioned by Interact are analysed.<sup>7</sup> The case study work draws on ca. 80 interviews and was conducted as part of wider research carried out as part of a diploma and doctoral thesis.<sup>8,9</sup> The analysis illustrates experiences from a robust case and also offers the opportunity to examine developments in the context of sectoral policies. In doing so, this analysis identifies the diverse perspectives on MRS. A third section of the article discusses the challenges of contemporary implementation, and embedding of MRS in existing policies. This section draws upon practical involvement in the coordination of two Priority Areas of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EU-SDR). Taking into account the preceding analysis, the fourth section of the article discusses the current and possible future role of MRS, considering the macro-regional concept, its application, and the overall

framework of EU Cohesion policy. In the final section, it is concluded that further macro-regional development depends either on further embedding with, and use of, EU policies with relevance to spatial governance, in particular sectoral policies, or an enhanced institutionalisation of MRS at the supra-national level. The dynamics, support, and use of MRS at the national level, as well as within each thematic area, can differ considerably, depending on whether macro-regions develop to bridge sectoral policies with (macro) regional implementation processes, or whether they work towards being a facilitator for accessing funds in Cohesion and regional policy.

## II. The Concept of Macro-regional Strategies and Its Development

Within the increasing number of academic literature, policy studies,<sup>10</sup> and policy documents, the concept of macro-regional strategies can be rather vague. Following the European Commission’s definition of macro-regions as an integrated framework allowing Member States and third states to address common challenges in an area with common functional challenges (see above), Gänzle describes macro-regions as aiming to “improve functional cooperation and co-

6 see fn. 3.

7 Interact, *Cooperation methods and tools applied by European Structural and Investment Funds programmes for 2014-2020 to support implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region* (Final Report June 2015); Interact, *Embedding Macro-regional strategies. Summary analysis – Cooperation methods and tools to embed of the EUSDR and EUSAIR into 23 EU funding programmes from the ESIF, IPA II and ENI* (May 2017); Interact, *Added Value of Macro-regional strategies. Project and programme perspective* (Final report of the study, February 2017).

8 Sielker, F., *Makroregionale Strategien der EU und Soft Spaces. Perspektiven an der Donau*. (Diploma Thesis, TU Dortmund, Fakultät Raumplanung, 2012); available online at <<http://hdl.handle.net/2003/29755>> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

9 Sielker, F., *Macro-regional integration – new scales, spaces and governance for Europe?* (Dissertation, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Institut für Geographie, 2017); available online at <<https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-fau/frontdoor/index/index/docId/8517>> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

10 For an overview see (1) Gänzle, S., Kern, K. (eds), *A Macro-regional Europe in the Making. Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Evidence* (Basingstoke, New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2015); (2) Chilla, T., Gänzle, S., Sielker, F., Stead D., ‘Macro-regional Strategies of the European Union – A new research agenda’ in Trondal, J., *The Rise of Common Political Order – Institutions, Public Administration and Transnational Space* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2017); (3) see fn. 9.

herence across policy sectors at different levels of governance, involving both member and partner states, as well as public and private actors”.<sup>11</sup> Macro-regional cooperation is characterised by its multi-lateral, “multi-sectoral, multi-level and multi-stakeholder” approach.<sup>12</sup> More concretely, it entails the development of a strategy with an accompanying Action Plan.<sup>13</sup>

The four strategies that are currently in place organise their governance following the logic of thematic priorities such as transport, mobility, energy, education, security, biodiversity, navigation or institutional capacity. The specific goals and priorities of each strategy vary, but the governance setting is sector-led. The Baltic Sea Region and the Danube Region identified so-called Priority Areas, the Adriatic and Ionian Region identified Thematic Groups and the Alpine Region identified Action Groups.<sup>14</sup> For each of these themes a steering committee and an inter-governmental committee is set-up, and invites further stakeholders to contribute. These committees represent the core link between national activities and the macro-regional and the EU levels. The European Commission attends most of the Steering Committee (or Action Group) meetings and takes a moderating and advisory role, with some coordinative tasks in particular in regard to other sectoral policies and communication. However, within the Commis-

sion relatively few staff are specifically dedicated to MRS. National Coordinators act as links between the national and the supranational level.

In order to place in context the current debates around macro-regions and the stakeholders shaping these debates, it is important to examine the background to the development of MRS. Based on an analysis of the literature, we identify five underlying rationales that facilitated the development of MRS. First, the idea of macro-regional cooperation arose in the Baltic Sea Region in a period where European Eastern enlargement led to substantial geopolitical changes. Consequently, international organisations that focussed their cooperation primarily on EU enlargement (such as the Helsinki Convention) refocussed their activities.<sup>15</sup> It is especially the Northern Dimension, a joint policy between EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland, that laid down the foundation for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). The idea of developing a macro-region for the Danube Region can also be viewed as partly resulting from Eastern enlargement. EU Eastern enlargement changed opportunities for cooperation, with Bulgaria and Romania joining the EU, although Serbia, covering the middle part of the Danube region is not part of the EU.<sup>16</sup> Against this background, a more institutionalised cooperation bridging the EU and non-EU areas was a logical development. The EUSDR has the capacity to mediate between the often diverging interests of Cohesion and Enlargement policies. Many of the fora for the Western Balkans, such as the Regional Cooperation Council, the Central European Initiative, and the Berlin process, refer to the EUSDR and also the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian (EUSAIR).

Second, the initiation of macro-regions was not purely a geopolitical development. Concrete territorial matters have also triggered debates on the need for better coordination. In the Baltic Sea Region, eutrophication<sup>17</sup> is deemed an important rationale.<sup>18</sup> In the Danube Region, the blockage of the Danube due to low-water levels was a major issue, initiating a call for new cooperation by the Austrian and Romanian government.<sup>19</sup> This incident led to support by private and governmental stakeholders both at the national and the EU level.

Third, and particularly relevant for the discussions in the Danube, Adriatic and Ionian and Alpine Region, national stakeholders noted the relationship with the ESIF programmes as a rationale to support

11 Gänzle, S., *Macro-regional strategies of the European Union (EU) and experimental design of multi-level governance: the case of the EU strategy for the Danube region* [2017] *Regional & Federal Studies*, Vol. 27, Iss. 1, p. 1.

12 See fn. 9, p. 12 and p. 50.

13 View the website of the European Commission at <[http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/)> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

14 INTERACT, *Macro-regional strategies glossary*, available online at <[http://www.interact-eu.net/library?field\\_fields\\_of\\_expertise\\_tid=33#819-overview-macro-regional-strategies-common-themes](http://www.interact-eu.net/library?field_fields_of_expertise_tid=33#819-overview-macro-regional-strategies-common-themes)> (last accessed on 14 August 2017); see fn 12, p. 177

15 Schymik, C., *Blueprint for a Macro-region - EU Strategies for the Baltic and the Danube Regions* (SWP Research Paper 10, 2011).

16 Görmar, W., ‘Makroregionale Strategien: eine neue Dimension europäischer Zusammenarbeit’ [2010] *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung* 8.2010, pp. 577–589.

17 Excessive richness of nutrients in a lake or other body of water, frequently due to run-off from the land, which causes a dense growth of plant life.

18 Dubois, A., Hedin, S., Schmitt, S. and Sterlin, J., *EU macro-regions and macro-regional strategies – A scoping study* (Nordregio Electronic Working Paper 4, Nordregio Stockholm 2009); and see fn. 20.

19 Based on interviews with Austrian governmental and private actors, see fn. 8 and 9.

macro-regional developments. This includes, on the one hand, the wish to influence the spending of funding within the Interreg programmes, e.g. in the Alpine Region, or, on the other hand, the idea of increasing absorption rates, e.g. in Romania and Bulgaria in the Danube Region.

Fourth, one rationale, presented by stakeholders acting primarily at the European level, was the idea to better align pan-European strategies, in particular the Europe 2020 Strategy with the more project-driven EU programmes and grassroots programmes, and thereby providing the pan-European strategies with a territorial, regionalised dimension. This rationale became particularly relevant in the drafting of the strategies themselves. Some national stakeholders perceived MRS as a way to connect regional activities with the overall European rationale.<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, an important factor encouraging take up of the concept in the Alpine, Danube and Adriatic and Ionian regions was the informal, flexible and soft approach espoused through the three “nos”. Some argue that it is this informal setting that allows macro-regional governance structures to amend and involve the networks needed, and thereby respond to constantly evolving issues. This is supported by interview evidence; the dynamics and drive to accept MRS was linked to the non-binding and informal characteristics of the strategies. For example, Sielker stated in a presentation to DG Regio that the ‘beauty of macro-regional cooperation lies in its fuzziness’<sup>21</sup> which allows for very different developments and activities in the four regions, and for networks to get involved. Mirtl has argued that MRS can also be seen as an institutional learning process.<sup>22</sup> However, this informal approach is considered as a weakness by some, in particular by stakeholders’ structures related to the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) goal. In addition, the calls of some stakeholders for a better alignment and embedding in existing or new regulatory frameworks as part of the post-2020 discussions are becoming more prominent.

The following sections now turn to focus on some of the activities taking place in macro-regions. Based on these empirical results, and further studies questioning MRS and their implementation, the analysis then discusses the challenges and opportunities for the potential role of MRS in future EU Cohesion policy, drawing upon the experiences from the current multi-annual financial framework.

### III. Macro-regional Strategies – Entangled Between EU Frameworks for Sectoral Policies and Cohesion Policies?

One of the arguments put forward in this article is that macro-regional strategies, with their particular thematic organization, and their informal setting alongside national or EU regulations, are at the crossroads between supporting the implementation of sectoral, spatial policies, and existing ESI Funds. In interviews, various stakeholders from the strategies, ETC programmes and project partners called for the strategies to become more closely integrated with INTERREG. Other interviewees, however, have argued, that macro-regional strategies can only trigger substantial efforts when their narrative remains open and builds on all potential funding sources (an approach which the European Commission has so far also favoured). This approach is also evident when looking at the alignment of ESIF to the Europe 2020 strategy. Empirical results revealed that major opportunities open up as MRS facilitate sectoral policies in spatially relevant policy fields to be better aligned in their implementation in the (macro-) regional contexts of Europe. The macro-regional aspiration serves as an integrated framework, leading to scholars, such as Stead, Sielker and Faludi<sup>23</sup> to note its potential to develop into a new phase of spatial governance in Europe.

With their governance arrangements involving both national coordination and thematic coordination boards involving all participating countries, MRS as new initiatives attempt to facilitate joint activities towards joint objectives, such as increasing

20 See foreword by Dirk Ahner in Gänzle, S., Kern, K. (eds), *A Macro-regional Europe in the Making. Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Evidence* (Basingstoke, New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2015); Chilla, T., Sielker, F., *Measuring the added-value of the EUSDR – challenges and opportunities* (Input Paper for DG Regio and Danube Strategy Point, Brussels); Online, and Roggeri 2015, see fn. 29.

21 The presentation was held in the context of a Lunch Conference as a European Commission training. The documentation of the conference can be retrieved through the authors.

22 Mirtl, J., ‘Sechs Jahre EU-Strategie für den Donauraum – ein Plädoyer für nüchternen Optimismus’ [2017] *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 2/2017, p. 61.

23 See (1) Faludi, A., *Cohesion, coherence, cooperation. European spatial planning coming of age?* (London: Routledge 2010); (2) Stead, D., ‘European macro-regional strategies: indications of spatial rescaling?’ [2011] *Planning Theory and Practice* 12 (1), pp. 163-167; and (3) Sielker, F., ‘A stakeholder-based EU Territorial Cooperation: the example of European macro-regions’ [2016] *European Planning Studies* 24 (11), pp. 1995-2013.

navigation on the Danube River. Working towards these goals implies the need to cooperate and coordinate with existing policy frameworks, programmes, networks and projects. These often address different geographic areas, e.g. the whole EU, the Danube Region, or parts of it. Therefore, a major challenge is the need to take into account these 'settings', in order to develop concrete activities, and position activities within these policy related framings, while at the same time also taking a role in the context of European territorial cooperation and Cohesion policy. However, as Roggeri has pointed out in an earlier contribution to this journal,<sup>24</sup> Managing Authorities are reluctant "to integrate the ETC programmes into a wider strategic context and in the programming at regional, national and macro-regional levels where the objectives are more related to macro socio-economic development issues"<sup>25</sup>.

Given the complexity and individuality of these institutional settings, as well as the diverging ambitions imposed on MRS, the following section of this article goes on to illustrate the complexities and opportunities further by examining one active policy field from the Danube Region and assess the results of Interact studies on the issue. In doing so, the following section illustrates the role MRS can have in support of implementing spatial policies, regionally.

Also noted is the potential role of MRS in the context of the diverse EU regulations and territorial cooperation initiatives under ESIF and ERDF.

## 1. Experiences from Sectoral Policies in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Following an extensive consultation process, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) documents, including the accompanying Action Plan, were drafted by the European Commission between 2009 and 2011 after a consultation procedure.<sup>26</sup> The Priority Area 1a "Waterway Mobilities" (PA 1a) addresses one of the core challenges that led to the development of the EUSDR, a better developed Danube waterway. Following the idea of addressing functional regions through macro-regional cooperation, the Danube as a navigable and healthy river is an important rationale for the Strategy. As illustrated in figure 1, the development of the Danube Region, and in particular the development of the Danube waterway, is also a goal of a well-resourced EU sectoral policy, the Trans-European Networks for Transport (TEN-T). Thus, the macro-regional activities potentially serve as interlocutors for facilitating regional implementation processes of TEN-T policies in the Danube Region. This leads to the following questions: Against the background of the different activities, stakeholders, policies, projects and programmes in the EUSDR region, what does the general setting for cooperation in the context of the Danube waterway development look like? What is the role of the macro-regional activities in these contexts? In what ways is the macro-regional level needed to carry out joint projects as showcased in the PA 1a?

Drawing on empirical research, the following discussion illustrates the frameworks involved through institutional mapping. The empirical data collection is based on three main methods of interviews, participatory observation, and documentary analysis carried out over a five-year period.<sup>27</sup> In an institutional mapping, Sielker presents the framework of EUSDR PA1a activities. The institutional mapping technique served to identify the relevant formal and informal institutions, including changes over time.<sup>28</sup> In this case an important goal was to identify relevant activities in the Danube Region and changes in decision-making processes in existing committees, linked to macro-regional influences. This mapping

24 See reference to kick-off meeting of Interact and DG Regio of ETC Programmes 2014-2020 in Roggeri, A., 'Could Macro-regional Strategies be more Successful?' [2015] *European Structural and Investment Funds Journal*, Vol. 3, Iss. 3, p. 5.

25 Ibid.

26 For a detailed overview on the consultation process, see fn. 8 or European Commission, *the Scoping Paper for the public consultation REGIO/E1/EN/NV/OB D(2010)* (2010).

27 See fn.9: The data collection and analysis was part of Sielker's PhD thesis including for the EUSDR case study participatory observation the participation at 24 events, incl. Steering Committee meetings and Annual Forum and 13 out of 80 interviews dedicated to PA1a. Document analysis included meeting minutes, political declarations, appeals to policy makers. The data was analysed through a content analysis, and then examined by making use of different 'mapping activities'.

28 Institutional mapping may show policy arenas and power topographies are identified and mapped. The institutions involved may include government agencies, or ministries, intergovernmental or international organisations, parties, trade unions, associations, companies, interest groups or scientific organisations. The mapping may also include different regulations, rules, projects and programmes that form the framework for the policy network identified via this exercise. For further reading see Chilla, T., Evrard, E., Schulz, C., 'On the Territoriality of Cross-Border Cooperation: "Institutional Mapping" in a Multi-Level Context' [2012] *European Planning Studies* 20 (6), pp. 961-980; and McFadden, L., Priest, S. and Green, C., *Introducing institutional mapping: A guide for SPICOSA scientists, Spicosa Project Report* (London, Flood Hazard Research Centre, Middlesex University 2010).

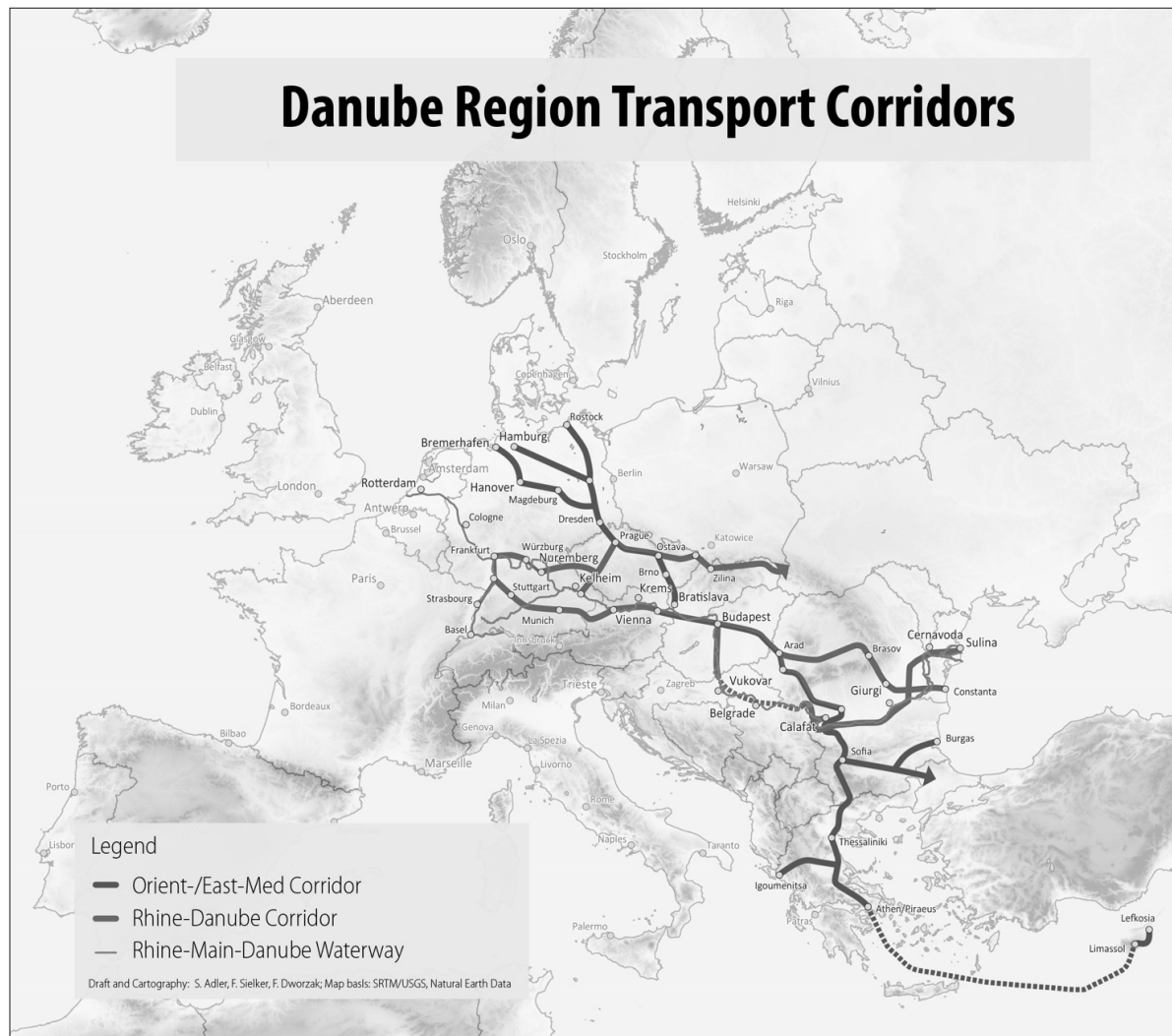


Figure 1: Danube Region Transport Corridors.  
Source: Sielker 2017, cf. fn. 9.

exercise shows the wider institutional and policy frameworks of the EU and the Danube regions in regards to navigation. Thereby the mapping situates the EUSDR-related activities in the wider EU frameworks, and indicates the geographical perimeter addressed by policies and stakeholders.<sup>29</sup>

More concretely, the mapping combines geographic information of the EUSDR countries and of those countries located at the Danube banks, the riparian countries, with institutional information on relevant EU policies, waterway infrastructure and the territorial perimeters addressed by transnational stakeholders relevant for EUSDR river activities and policies (cf. figure 2). It thereby illustrates the existing regu-

latory framework, pre-dating the projects and cooperation and often covering different parts of the area.

In this area, at the EU level, the relevant and important policies are the TEN Guidelines.<sup>30</sup> The Danube River is part of the Rhine-Danube Corridor. The promotion of inland waterway transport in Europe is covered by the so-called NAIADES Action Pro-

29 For further elaboration see Annex III “Danube Macro-regional Profile”, see fn. 9.

30 Regulation (EU) No 1315/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on Union guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network and repealing Decision No 661/2010/EU Text with EEA relevance.

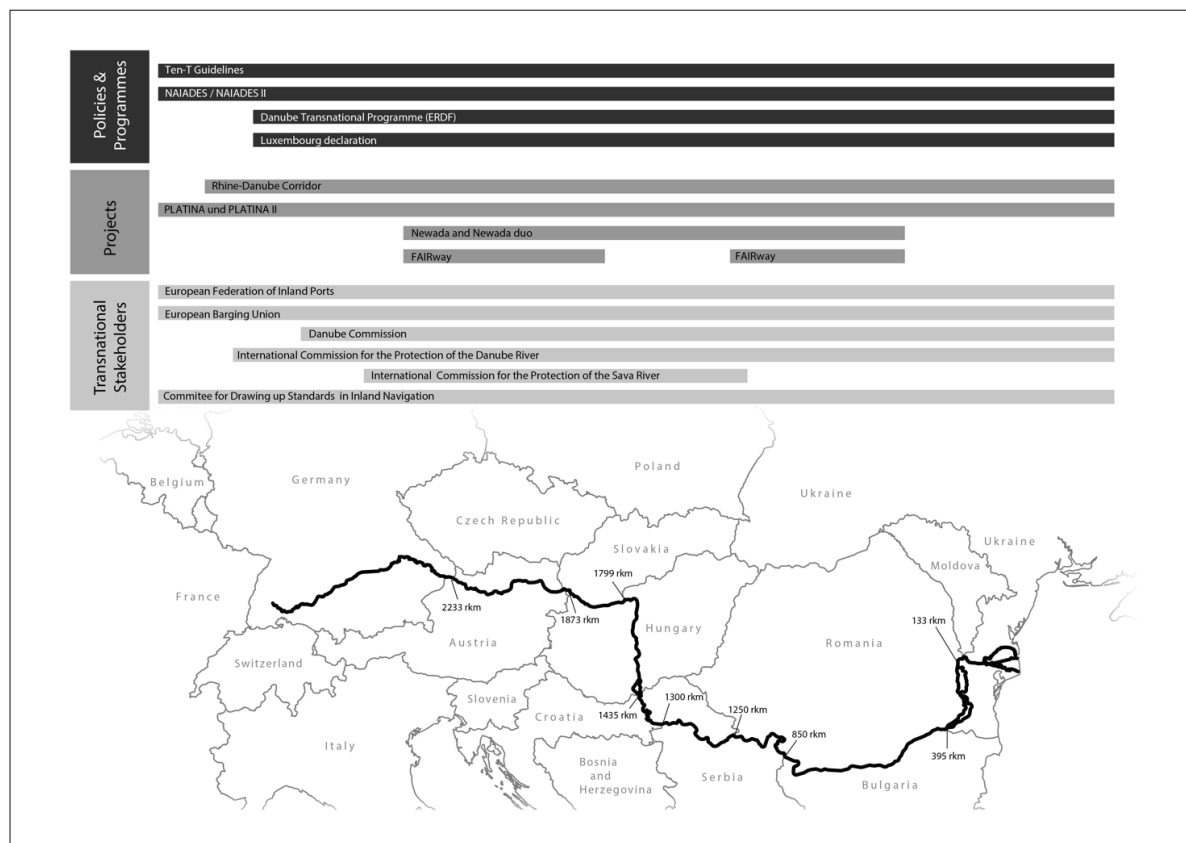


Figure 2: Institutional and Policy Mapping Priority Area 1a. Source: Sielker 2017, cf. fn. 8.

gramme. In 2013, the Commission updated the NAIADES programme (NAIADES II) and set out specific objectives up to 2020 under the aim of creating the conditions for inland navigation to become a quality form of transport. The implementation of NAIADES is supported by the platforms PLATINA and PLATINA II funded under the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. The European Commission also promotes inland waterway transport through the Connecting Europe Facility, Horizon 2020, and European Fund for Strategic Investment as well as Cohesion policy.

As well as the EU frameworks, International Commissions also play an important role. For PA 1a related activities, the most important are the Danube Commission implementing the Belgrade Conven-

tion, and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, as well as the International Commission for the Protection for the Sava River. All three of these organisations are also observers to the Steering Group of the PA.

At the Danube Region level, the Conclusions of the Danube Transport Ministers are crucial policy documents. These are the only policy documents of this kind mentioned on the European Commission’s website regarding the promotion of inland waterways.<sup>31</sup> They represent a unique approach within the Danube region to supporting the implementation of the EUSDR on the policy level. While the PLATINA projects provide a European-wide platform to implement the NAIADES action, the most important projects in relation to waterway infrastructure on the Danube river are the NEWADA and the NEWADA duo project. All of these policies, projects and institutions (or conventions) cover varying parts of the Danube region perimeter.

31 European Commission, *Promotion of inland waterway transport* (2016), available online at <<http://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/inland/promotion/>> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

At the project level, projects may not cover the Danube continuously (e.g. Serbia is not part of the FAIRway project). This is partly caused by the varying funding schemes, and the different opportunities for non-EU countries. The projects are funded by the Danube Transnational Programme, particularly in the initial phase, and through the sectoral funding schemes, such as the Connecting Europe Facility, at the stage of implementing concrete activities. The FAIRway project has highlighted the need to consider dredging activities as fundable, a major change under the current Connecting Europe Facility policy. On the political level, the coverage depends on country particularities. The Danube Commission does not cover the whole Danube area within Germany, only the navigable parts. These variable geographies reveal the complexity of promoting transport policies.

The institutional and policy mapping, see figure 2, shows that through the introduction of the EUSDR a new governance level has been set up. This level implements projects and develops political support (though not binding) which covers the Danube region. In addition, the strategic character of the EUSDR cooperation and the governance of the PA, reveal that this cooperation differs in character from the Commissions, which have so far been the most important forms of transnational cooperation, and remain important jurisdictional background due to their task of implementing conventions. The policies and programmes mapped provide the background for projects implemented in the Danube Region. The activities within the EUSDR have, for example, led to the FAIRway project, funded under the 'Danube Transnational' programme.

The role of the EUSDR in the development of these projects, funded under TEN-T frameworks, involved the development of the idea/concept, providing the link to the political level for support and change in activities that can be carried out under the Connecting Europe Facility. For example, initially dredging activities could not be carried out under the existing regulations. However, knowledge provided through the Danube River FAIRway Maintenance Plan, developed in the course of activities of the coordination of the 'navigation' priority of the EUSDR and funded by the Danube Transnational Programme, led to a change in navigation policies allowing for investments in river maintenance activities itself. The EUSDR essentially provided the network to bring these

different stakeholders, activities and funding sources together, and fed the information towards the relevant political decision makers. This area subsumes activities and offers a new geographical scale at which stakeholders may cooperate.

## 2. Experiences from Interact's Involvement in Macro-regional Strategies

Following on from this specific case study example, it is also useful to look at the wider context. For this purpose, the Interact programme is a good starting point. Interact is an interregional programme of the ERDF that supports the capacity building of other Interreg programmes. In this context, it also fosters the exchange of experience among macro-regional strategies and supports their governance, inter alia by conducting studies in order to assess the added value of MRS and the degree to which the implementation of MRS is proceeding, i.e. how the MRS are considered and operate within the existing institutional landscape.

In a first step, in 2015, cooperation methods and tools applied by the ESIF were assessed in the framework of the first MRS, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR).<sup>32</sup> Seventeen operational programmes were analysed. The study, which was conducted in 2015, states that the EUSBSR is perceived as a topic primarily for ETC programmes. It addressed several critical issues, e.g. a lack of coordination between the countries and programmes, an exaggerated reliance on bottom-up initiatives, and too narrow a focus on project generation, where rather than translating the Europe 2020 targets into a territorial framework of a functional region, the strategy would replicate a programme structure. Many of the challenges that were highlighted by the study have been addressed in the EUSBSR and there are promising initiatives stemming from the macro-regional cooperation. For instance, networks of the Managing Authorities have been built not only for the ERDF, but also for the European Social Fund (ESF), the Eu-

32 Interact, *Cooperation methods and tools applied by European Structural and Investment Funds programmes for 2014-2020 to support implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region* (Final Report June 2015), available online at <[http://www.interact-eu.net/library?field\\_fields\\_of\\_expertise\\_tid=33#809-study-cooperation-methods-and-tools-support-eusbsr](http://www.interact-eu.net/library?field_fields_of_expertise_tid=33#809-study-cooperation-methods-and-tools-support-eusbsr)> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).



ropean Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). There are promising initiatives such as joint calls and concrete projects, a tendency that would ultimately lead to the 'macro-regionalization' of national programmes.

Interact repeated a similar endeavour in 2016/17 in the Danube Region,<sup>33</sup> when the multiannual financial framework and hence the programme implementation had reached a more mature stage, albeit with a 'younger' strategy, the EUSDR.<sup>34</sup> With 23 operational programmes assessed, the study also had a wider scope, in terms of countries. The study came to similar conclusions when it came to identifying the challenge of bridging the two 'worlds' of MRS and the ESIF. It should also be borne in mind that many of the thematic coordinators of MRS deal with topics where other funds are also relevant, be it Horizon2020, COSME, LIFE, Erasmus+, etc.<sup>35</sup> Unlike in the EUSBSR, in the EUSDR a network of Managing Authorities was only established for the ESF. Both EUSBSR and to an even greater extent for the EUSDR, the lack of coherence with the legislative framework for the ESIF is noted, which leads to an inadequate intervention logic and 'lip service' when it comes to a concrete support for the strategies. The study's conclusions reflect the gaps between the macro-regional and the ESIF 'worlds', the former a political/strategic without legislation, institutions and funding, the latter based very strongly on legis-

lation, institutions and funding. While there was a wide range of actions to support the EUSDR that have been pursued (e.g. earmarking of funding, communication activities, and strategy-related calls) it should be noted that every institutional change requires time.<sup>36</sup>

With respect to this and within this context, Interact has issued a third study dealing with MRS and particularly focused on their added value from a programme and project perspective.<sup>37</sup> The study shows cases to what extent MRS can be drivers when it comes to pushing policy processes forward. Unlike projects and programmes, these strategies go beyond a project or programme period, and thereby greatly contribute to capitalization processes. Within topics such as transport or even 'softer' areas of activity, they ultimately lead to 'loops' and links between projects, policies and politics. They thereby foster not only the vertical coherence within a thematic field, but also horizontal coherence among several policy sectors – an issue that was addressed at several occasions in the General Affairs Council when dealing with MRS.<sup>38</sup>

### 3. Potentials and challenges for Macro-regional Implementation

The preceding sections assess discussions around and experiences of macro-regional strategies and their institutional embeddedness in different contexts. This analysis highlights two crucial aspects: the first,<sup>39</sup> sheds light on what macro-regional cooperation means to a sectoral policy in the framework of the EUSDR. The second examined, using existing insights from the studies conducted by Interact, addresses to what extent MRS were considered and embedded into the existing governance scheme of ESIF, mainly by making use of targeted calls, additional points for projects with macro-regional added value and a wide range of communication activities.

The example of the Priority Area 1a of the EUSDR dealing with navigation showed how the activities depend on the one hand on the TEN-T policy and the respective CEF funds, whereas the Interact studies reveal how the general EU logic and Cohesion policy are bound by regulatory thinking. The narratives for stakeholders to get involved, highlighted in section two, relate to these diverging arguments to get involved. Both stakeholders who aim to influence

33 Interact, *Embedding Macro-regional strategies. Summary analysis – Cooperation methods and tools to embed of the EUSDR and EUSAIR into 23 EU funding programmes from the ESIF, IPA II and ENI* (May 2017), available online at <<http://www.interact-eu.net/library#1301-study-embedding-macro-regional-strategies>> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

34 Where the EUSDR countries were overlapping with the EUSAIR (i.e. Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina), the EUSAIR was assessed as well.

35 For instance, the Erasmus+ programme launched a call in October 2016 referring directly to MRS.

36 See i.a. North, D.C., *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance* (Political economy of institutions and decisions, 27. print, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press 2009).

37 Interact *Added Value of Macro-regional strategies. Project and programme perspective. Final report of the study* (February 2017), available online at <[http://www.interact-eu.net/library?field\\_fields\\_of\\_expertise\\_tid=33#1194-report-added-value-macro-regional-strategies-projects-and-programmes](http://www.interact-eu.net/library?field_fields_of_expertise_tid=33#1194-report-added-value-macro-regional-strategies-projects-and-programmes)> (last accessed on 4 August 2017).

38 Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies* (25 April 2017, 8461/17), p. 4.

39 Based on the PhD thesis recently published by Sielker, See fn. 9.

project developments under EU funds and stakeholders who aim to solve a particular issue of common interest are involved in macro-region making.

This analysis demonstrates the challenges of MRS implementation, but also reveals their potential, especially when it comes to building interfaces in terms of:

1. horizontal coherence: sectoral policies and regional policy/enlargement and neighbourhood policy;
2. internal coherence: the European Territorial Cooperation goal and mainstream funds;
3. vertical coherence: the political, policy, programme, and project level; and
4. multi-level governance: the EU and other actors (international and regional/local organisations, civil society, etc.).

Initially, the three “no’s” of MRS (absence of EU institutions, specific new EU legislation and funding) seemed to restrict their potential. It has to be acknowledged, however, that the three “no’s” have been at least partly overcome: the macro-regional committees are new structures (informal institutions) by themselves, with rules of procedure. At the time of writing, the European Parliament launched budget lines for macro-regional pilot activities for the Alpine Region. The macro-regional strategies, though without their own regulation, are mentioned in the regulatory framework of 2014-2020, albeit in a rather weak manner.

The analysis of the Priority Area dealing with inland navigation demonstrates how MRS can work as additional/supporting instruments for sectoral policies. With respect to this, MRS can be seen as breaking down the policy ‘silos’ between different policies and administrative units. At the same time, MRS involve local and regional institutions, as well as civil society actors. They thereby work as a catalyst for multi-level governance in the respective macro-region. They build trust and work as informal and inclusive ‘institutions’.

However, the hope for the strategies to be catalysts for the better use of existing EU legislation, institutions and funding creates pressure for improving their integration/embeddedness in the ESIF and other funding sources. Macro-regions entail diverging expectations, processes, and opinions across the stakeholder landscape. To embed MRS into the existing programmes and/or future legislation, would potentially come alongside a more distinct definition

of MRS. If greater integration/embeddedness is not going to take place in the upcoming multi-annual financial framework, a second scenario may emerge where stakeholders call for the abandonment of the three “no’s” and the establishment of specific macro-regional formal institutions and funding schemes. This is a development that is already taking shape under article 7b) of the ETC regulation<sup>40</sup> which lays down the foundation for transnational programmes to support MRS. In the future, such support may also be centralised, inter alia in order to be able to support also potential new MRS.

Despite their shortcomings and partial misalignments, as mentioned previously, MRS have the capacity to break down the Europe 2020 targets into territorial frameworks, a feature that is not fully considered in the Europe 2020 Strategy, although territorial cohesion was newly introduced into the Lisbon Treaty. These territorial frameworks seem even more justified in an enlarged EU, following enlargement rounds of 2004, 2007 and 2013, and considering the increasing urbanisation in Europe. Moreover, MRS can be seen in line with a number of attempts (e.g. the European Spatial Development Perspective, Leipzig charter) to establish spatial planning on the EU level, with their thematically-centred governance.

However, an integrated territorial vision through macro-regions remains a challenge. The lack of appropriate resources for MRS remains a critical concern, and may lead to a more formal character for MRS in the future. It has to be noted that an identified strength of the MRS lies primarily in their informal character (their ‘fuzziness’), creating both vertical coherence (in terms of multi-level governance and from the project level to the political level) and horizontal coherence. In this way, MRS function as ‘software’ for ‘hard’ policies as was demonstrated in this analysis. Related to this, it has been argued that “stakeholders regarded macro-regional frameworks to offer opportunities to achieve their institutions goals, e.g., administrative institutions can simultaneously gain political support and reflect on implementation practicalities.”<sup>41</sup>

40 Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal.

41 Sielker, F., ‘New approaches in European governance? Perspectives of stakeholders in the Danube macro-region’ [2015] *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 3/1, pp. 88–95, p. 93.

## IV. Outlook

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the first MRS and contemporary debates on the future of EU Cohesion policy provides a timely opportunity to consider the position macro-regions have acquired and future potentials and challenges.

Macro-regional strategies are about multi-lateral, multi-sectoral, multi-level and multi-stakeholder cooperation, which, with their thematic organisation and governance, are at the crossroads of sectoral, spatial policies and existing ESIF. While this particular setting offers a range of potentials and opportunities, it also poses a number of challenges. Despite the shortcomings of MRS, which can be attributed to their diversity but also to the reluctance of relevant stakeholders' to take over responsibility, it is argued here that macro-regional cooperation can provide added-value and create coherence and interesting interfaces among different policies and their different layers of implementation. Macro-regions offer a new layer to territorial cooperation and can offer strategic guidance to territorial development seeking to contribute to territorial cohesion.

Yet given the wide range of perspectives and expectations, and – as a result – critiques, the question remains, how this could be achieved? Macro-regional strategies are not programmes, and therefore have no regulation, and they are not a project. However, similar to the Europe 2020 Strategy, funds can be aligned to a Strategy via a legislative framework.<sup>42</sup> The fundamentally different logics and mind-set of stakeholders involved, either in the context of sectoral policies or from e.g. ESIF Managing Authorities, poses a challenge. These different perspectives are fundamentally related to the idea of the three “no’s”. Macro-regional cooperation at the moment is described by scholars as a ‘soft space’, a cooperation which exists alongside an existing, more institutionalised framework<sup>43</sup>.

In the light of the points raised, and the particular challenges of embedding the activities and the macro-regional objectives as a strategic guidance for other regional settings, a key question is whether macro-regional strategies will be more institutionalised in the future. Two opposing scenarios are (1) that macro-regions remain with the three “no’s” as the guiding principle, or (2) that macro-regions are given a regulatory framework with financial resources in the new multiannual financial framework.

The first scenario would correspond to a continuation of the ongoing implementation with its challenges when it comes to embedding the strategies and aligning funding and human resources with them. The second scenario would fit with a more realistic approach regarding implementation, however with the danger of jeopardizing the specific nature of the strategies, effectively transforming them into programmes. The increasing overlap with the transnational strand of the Interreg programmes points towards this direction, even if the funding available within this strand does not align with the greater resource needs of a strategy, and assuming that the intention of MRS is not only to increase the levels of cooperation, but also to have socio-economic effects.

Based on the preceding analysis, it is concluded that in practice the most likely outcome will be in between these two scenarios, i.e. between a more realistic and a more idealistic approach. With regards to the challenges MRS are facing, it may be beneficial to refocus the strategies where necessary, and also – for the sake of better internal and external communication – to increase the coherence among the four MRS. This includes a clarification of the concept, which means that the discussion on governance of MRS should increasingly include what MRS mean to the existing governance of the EU and especially its regional policy. Furthermore, the top-down capacity of MRS could be increased, which would require a more substantial consideration of MRS in the upcoming legislative framework. MRS are long-term endeavours aimed at incremental change and institutional transformation. MRS with their governance and newly developed networks are a unique opportunity to initiate and engage in discussions on spatial development, and potentially provide leeway for a further integrated policy discussion within different parts of Europe. This requires coordination between the different approaches. MRS are one of the

42 See i.a. article 4 of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006.

43 For an overview see fn. 9.

few examples where e.g. at the European level itself coordination within the Commission goes a step beyond the inter-service consultation.

However, given the narrative of a place-based approach to development within the EU, macro-regions may well develop differently. MRS and their functions do not only differ between the regions, they also differ across the different thematic cooperation areas. It will remain interesting to follow how the dif-

ferent rationales for stakeholders to be involved in MRS can be satisfied in their future development. As MRS are inclusive and an innovative combination of bottom-up and top-down processes, they may also provide a forum for criticism referring to the shortcomings of the existing regional and urban policy of the EU – in this respect, further research could assess their capacities for reform and perceive them as laboratories for innovative approaches.