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Chapter 3

Macro-regions and the European Union: The Role of Cohesion Policy

Irene McMaster and Arno van der Zwet

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Introduction

‘Macro-regions’ are an established concept in economic and political geography, as well as in spatial planning (Smith et al., 2002; Pain and van Hamme, 2014). As such, they are widely applied in a range of contexts. However, following the adoption of EU macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the Danube Region (EUSDR) and the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), as well as an agreement in the European Council for a strategy to be developed for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), the concept of macro-regions has gained increased prominence in contemporary policy practice and debates. Under EU Cohesion Policy, a ‘macro-regional strategy’ is defined as ‘an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council, which may be supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds among others, to address common challenges faced by a defined geographical area relating to Member States and third countries located in the same geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion’ (CEC DG Regio, 2014). In theory, EU macro-regional strategies are a new multilevel governance instrument providing an opportunity for new thinking about territorial spaces, the opportunities and challenges in these spaces and new thinking on forms of intervention. However, in practice, there have been difficulties in reconciling the different visions and interests of stakeholders, and the breadth of strategic objectives and priorities in relation to the available resources. Conceptually, macro-regional strategies have also been criticized for their incoherence, questionable legitimacy and effectiveness (Bengtsson, 2009; Mirwaldt et al., 2010; Stocchiero, 2010). This chapter will review the development and role of macro-regional strategies as an instrument of EU Cohesion Policy, their design and implementation to date and the theoretical and policy issues surrounding their use.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the overall concept of macro-regions and how this fits in with evolving thinking on EU Cohesion Policy. The following section examines key characteristics of the macro-regions currently in place and how these align with Cohesion Policy programmes, noting areas of complementarity and areas and issues where cooperation has proven more contentious or challenging. The conclusion notes that the relationship between macro-regional strategies and Cohesion Policy programmes is still comparatively new and subject to change. Thus, while macro-regions are an increasingly embedded part of Cohesion Policy, looking to the future, the learning and adaptation process will be ongoing and evolutionary.

Policy background

Historically, the term ‘macro-region’ has mainly been applied descriptively to a geopolitical subdivision that encompasses several traditionally or politically defined regions. However, in the EU context, this concept has developed into something more concrete and operational. As identified by Mirwaldt, McMaster and Bachtler (2010), a number of factors are driving this development.

Theoretical debates

Since the 1990s, there has been a surge in interest in territorial cooperation (Perkmann, 2007; Scott, 2002). Greater freedom of trade and integration of markets and major development challenges, such as climate change, are reshaping how borders are viewed. Rather than barriers, borders are increasingly being redefined as bridges, communication channels and areas for joint action and collaboration (OECD, 2009).

Associated with these shifts are the concepts of functional regions, with interdependent territories spanning political–administrative boundaries and place-based policymaking, grounded in an awareness of the specific resource endowments, growth potentials and vulnerabilities of different regions. Working across borders is viewed as a way to create synergies and to stimulate development by encouraging mutual assistance between stakeholders. Related, place-based policy approaches put emphasis on regions identifying and exploiting their territorial capital, that is to say, the comparative advantages that allow them to grow (Davoudi, 2003).

Policy debates and approaches

Since the late 1980s, the need for a greater commitment to balancing regional disparities was recognized, reflecting a growing sense that ‘some sort of spatial justice’ should be promoted at the European level of governance (Doucet, 2007; Jouen, 2008, 2). The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), agreed in May 1999, was a non-binding framework aiming to streamline those policies that have a differential spatial impact in European cities and regions. Related, territorial cooperation was seen as a useful tool to coordinate sectoral policies and to ensure consistency. Thus, spatial planning coordination in such areas as the Baltic Sea or North Sea Regions was praised as ways of reaching this goal. However, the intergovernmental process stalled not long after completion of the ESDP linked to a range of competence issues (Schön, 2005; Zonneveld et al., 2012). In contrast, when the Commission published its Second Cohesion Report, this heralded a period of much greater Commission activism in promoting and encouraging territorial cooperation.

Increasingly, territorial cooperation across various regional scales became central to addressing the European Commission’s objective of territorial cohesion. Based on a large-scale Member State consultation, the Commission’s (2008) Green Paper defined territorial cohesion as three interrelated goals: achieving balanced and harmonious development, overcoming divisions and territorial inequalities, and assisting regions with specific geographical features (CEC, 2008).

These goals were to be achieved through investments in infrastructure, horizontal policy coordination and, above all, territorial cooperation at all geographical scales and across borders, also involving neighbouring countries and larger regions. ‘While the macro-regional approach is not an alias for territorial cohesion it is clear that there are significant synergies between the two concepts. Each is place-based, inclusive and, in principle, prepared and implemented on a multi-level basis’ (Samecki, 2009, 3). Thus, the macro-regional concept is part of an emerging trend towards place-based approaches, which include Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Community-led Local Development (CLLD), which, despite operating at different levels of the multilevel governance system, aim to coordinate and integrate funding streams and claim bottom-up approaches.

Development and evolution of policy interventions

As well as being informed by academic and policy debate, the macro-regions need to be understood against a background of evolving policy practice. In the EU context, Cohesion Policy is the key driver behind territorial cooperation (CEC DG Regio, 2007). Mainstream Cohesion Policy programmes are required to integrate the theme of territorial cooperation. However, the interregional cooperation programme (INTERREG) has had the greatest impact by providing dedicated resources to territorial cooperation initiatives and embedding institutionalized networks of cooperation involving public administration from local, regional, national and EU levels (OECD, 2009). Cooperation in macro-regions shares many of the aims of territorial cooperation in the EU. Having such close links means valuable lessons can be drawn from past and current experiences of implementing INTERREG programmes. However, it also poses questions and challenges in terms of coordination of resources, scope for collaboration and avoiding overlapping activities, as will be discussed in the following sections.

The potential development gain from territorial cooperation within macro-regions is an important element of recent policy debates, for example, in relation to reducing barriers to economic growth, pursuing the EU objective territorial cohesion and developing effective policy instruments to maximize the impact of territorial cooperation at this level.

The EU macro-regions and Cohesion Policy

The EU macro-regional strategies offer a ‘new way of supporting territorial cooperation, representing a joint response to common environmental, economic or security related challenges in a particular area’ (CEC, 2014a, 185). The macro-regions are developed based on three policy principles: the so-called ‘three No’s’.

- (1) *No new institutions*: Before the establishment of the Baltic Sea Region as a macro-region under the EU umbrella, a plethora of institutions have already existed in the Baltic Sea Region, including the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Helsinki Commission, the EU’s Northern Dimension and the Nordic Council. None of these institutions took an integrated approach to coordinating all the sectoral policies that are relevant to the Baltic Sea Region. Nevertheless, it was felt that adding another administrative layer would not succeed in integrating this institutional network. Instead, it was decided to build the Baltic Sea Strategy using only pre-existing institutions, notably those of the EU and the Northern Dimension, for cooperation

with the external partners such as Russia or Norway. Similarly, the proposed Alpine Strategy would also operate in a dense institutional environment (see Balsiger, chapter 9 in this volume). In principle, all macro-regional strategies must therefore rely upon pre-existing institutions.

Crucially, the European Commission made it clear that they did not want to manage the strategy directly, due to a lack of resources on their part and sufficient resources and local knowledge available at the macro-regional level. Instead, a governance model involving institutions and organizations from the participating regions should be applied. Such an approach may be more challenging in regions where institutional density is less thick, or where there is a lack of institutionalization at particular levels. For example, in the North Sea Region and the Atlantic Region, there is no body in which state-level actors meet regularly (see the contributions by Dangerfield [chapter 2]; Danson [chapter 10]; Wise [chapter 11] in this volume).

- (2) *No new legislation*: The macro-regional strategies have taken the form of ‘communications’ issued by the European Commission and endorsed by the European Council. The Member States decided to implement the strategies, but no binding regulations have been issued.
- (3) *No new funding*: On the one hand, it was recognized that achieving concrete goals requires funds to match policy priorities. On the other hand, it was felt that better coordination of the considerable existing resources was more important. These include, above all, EU Structural Funds, Member State resources and funds from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and other international and regional financial institutions, such as the Nordic Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Thus, no new funding has been allocated to the EU macro-regional strategies. However, the strategies may well encourage stakeholders to identify and employ additional resources, for example, from International Financing Institutions. The key emphasis is on aligning existing resources available at the EU, national, subnational and/or local level, using both public and/or private resources – established under diverse policy themes and territories to develop jointly agreed actions and projects.

The ‘three No’s’ mean the macro-regions lack a distinct institutional, legislative and financial presence, arguably making the strategies more difficult to engage with. However, these principles also had their benefits, as the negotiations were ‘unencumbered’ by complex

negotiations on funding, regulations and structures, thus allowing the focus to fall on areas of agreement, such as the benefits of coherence and coordination. The principles also set the macro-regions apart from pre-existing forms of cooperation and development programmes; key amongst these are the Cohesion Policy programmes. As will be detailed, unlike the macro-regional strategies, the Cohesion Policy programmes do have institutional frameworks attached to them; they do have specific legislation and regulations shaping their management and implementation; and they do have funding. These factors set the two systems apart, yet they also bind the fortunes of Cohesion Policy programmes and the macro-regions.

EU Cohesion Policy has its origins in the Treaty of Rome (1957) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which was established in 1975. An overarching Cohesion Policy, including the ‘Structural Funds’ (ERDF and European Social Fund), was developed based on key principles, including multi-annual (seven-year) programming, strategic orientation of investments and involvement of regional and local partners.

EU Cohesion Policy programmes

Cohesion Policy supports job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life and sustainable development. It is the EU’s principal investment tool for delivering its Europe 2020 goals: creating growth and jobs, tackling climate change and energy dependence and reducing poverty and social exclusion. More than one-third of the EU’s budget is devoted to regional and Cohesion Policy. Assistance is provided through seven-year programmes using a multilevel, partnership-based approach. In the 2014–20 period, up to €351.8 billion will be made available from the ERDF, European Social Fund and Cohesion Fund.

A key element of Cohesion Policy is to encourage regions and cities from different EU Member States to work together and learn from each other through joint programmes, projects and networks (CEC, 2014b). The European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective of Cohesion Policy covers three types of ‘INTERREG’ programmes: cross-border cooperation programmes along internal EU borders; transnational cooperation programmes covering larger areas of cooperation such as the Baltic Sea, Alpine and Mediterranean Regions; and the interregional cooperation programme and three networking programmes covering all Member States of the EU and providing a framework for exchanging experiences between regional and local bodies in different countries.

As Cohesion Policy evolved, territorial cooperation increasingly became a core aspect of the policy. Building on a basis of established cross-border cooperation,¹ INTERREG I was

introduced in 1990. INTERREG introduced an international dimension to Structural Fund programming and, in the context of the Single Market, was a tangible expression of the objective of European integration. The initiative was both expanded and diversified for the 1994–99 programming period. INTERREG retained a high level of political importance in the 2000–06 and 2007–14 periods, providing an instrument which promotes the deepening of European integration in tangible ways, at different scales and in different fields. In 2007, a number of changes were introduced which have been reinforced for the 2014–20 period: a fundamental change is a shift in the status of INTERREG from a Community Initiative to the ‘European Territorial Cooperation’ objective, which gives the cooperation element ‘higher visibility’ and a ‘firmer legal base’ than in the past, as well as a more strategic approach to programming.

The evolution of INTERREG has been accompanied by a number of other developments and initiatives. In contrast to the macro-region concept and INTERREG, the European regulation on the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), introduced in 2006, is important for having put territorial cooperation on a legal footing and personality. The EGTC was developed to make territorial cooperation more strategic but simultaneously more flexible and simple as well. In theory, the EGTC regulation should reduce the difficulties encountered by Member States and, in particular, by regional and local authorities when implementing and managing cooperation activities in the context of differing national laws and procedures.

Although not formally part of Cohesion Policy, also of note are the instruments available to the EU to support regional development along its external borders with countries that are either candidates for EU membership or potential candidates and also with so-called third countries (i.e. non-EU members) (CEC, 2014c). The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) is based on partnerships with the EU candidate countries. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) promotes cooperation and economic integration between the EU and partner countries. Included are 14 cross-border cooperation programmes which operate along EU external borders.

EU macro-regional strategies are distinct from this policy background. Yet, they are operating within an already complex and congested policy arena. The strategies cover large geographic areas and many individual countries. As a consequence, there are an enormous number of relevant EU territorial frameworks, strategies and policies for them to consider. The current macro-regional strategies cover areas relevant to a significant number of

Cohesion Policy programmes. The Danube Strategy, for example, covers an area with 91 Cohesion Policy programmes.

Links to Cohesion Policy programmes, especially INTERREG, are of particular importance. Cohesion Policy programmes are required to complement and be ‘coherent’ with relevant ‘external’ strategies, such as macro-regional strategies. The expectation is that linkages and engagement between the programmes and strategies should become strong and, crucially, productive. For the macro-regional strategies, the programmes are a potential source of funding. For the programmes, the expectation is that the relationship and engagement with macro-regional strategies should create added value. In some instances, some programmes are so closely linked to the strategies that they have an emerging role in terms of governance.

The remainder of this section examines these relationships and how they have evolved into the 2014–20 programming period for Cohesion Policy programmes. The analysis focuses on key characteristics of the macro-regional strategies, how they ‘fit’ with Cohesion Policy programmes and how the relationship between Cohesion Policy programmes and the macro-regions is evolving.

Strategic and thematic focus

The macro-regions have at their heart a ‘Strategy’, backed by action plans. The Strategy documents explain and justify the selection, prioritization and sequencing of selected actions. Action plans, structured around pillars, and priority areas help to convey high-level strategies into action and, ultimately, results. So-called flagship projects are distributed over the identified actions in order to implement them. By focusing on specific issues, the expectation is that not only will the strategies deliver results but also value will be added to existing interventions through coordination and cooperation to the benefit of the region. However, it is also possible that by resolving or addressing a concern within a smaller group of countries, solutions will be applied elsewhere, or that working practices will be extended to other fields of activity, with working together becoming a ‘habit and skill’ (CEC, 2009a). In particular, this new, innovative and integrated way of working across a wide number of sectors may offer significant opportunities for specialization, cooperation and greater efficiencies (e.g. through networking) (ibid.).

In terms of strategic and thematic links to Cohesion Policy programmes, in the case of the established macro-regions, these are entering a new phase. The Baltic and Danube macro-

regional strategies were launched midway through the life cycle of the 2007–13 Cohesion Policy programmes in the regions. The aims of territorial cooperation programmes, and especially transnational cooperation, were close to the actions envisaged in the strategy; for example, see Figure 3. On this basis, the relevant programmes were requested to report on their contribution to the macro-regional strategies (Table 3.1).

<COMP: INSERT TABLE 3.1 HERE>

Yet, for such closely planned, structured programmes, working with projects running over a number of years, accommodating a new approach at a strategic level was challenging and will be an issue that new macro-regional strategies have to take into account. The Commission and programming authorities proved generally willing to fine-tune aspects of the programmes to make them more compatible with the strategy, for example, by modifying the programme, changing allocation criteria and facilitating selection of relevant projects through targeted calls, proactive project stimulation or giving preference to certain types of projects (CEC, 2009a; Schwartz, 2010). However, not all programmes were willing to ‘divert’ funds to the macro-regions. For example, some transnational territorial cooperation programmes are only partly covered by the macro-region and some partners remain reluctant to tie already comparatively limited resources to a small part of their programme area.

For the forthcoming round of Cohesion Policy programmes in areas where macro-regional strategies are in place, strategic and thematic links were something that had to be built in from the outset and which will consequently be embedded to a greater extent than in the past. A number of inclusions in the regulations for the 2014–20 Cohesion Policy programming period also facilitate such links. First, the Common Strategic Framework (CSF), which establishes strategic guiding principles to facilitate the development of the 2014–20 Cohesion Policy programmes process and the sectoral and territorial coordination of interventions, involved establishing priority areas for cooperation activities under Cohesion Policy funds, ‘where appropriate, taking account of macro-regional and sea basin strategies’ (CEC, 2014b). Second, partnership agreements between the European Commission and individual EU countries set out national authorities’ plans on how to use funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds. A key focus is the main priority areas for cooperation, taking account, where appropriate, of macro-regional strategies and sea basin strategies (CEC, 2014b). Third, where Member States and regions participate in macro-regional strategies, the relevant programme is required to set out the contribution of the planned interventions to those strategies (CEC, 2014b). Implementation reports should identify the contribution to macro-regional and sea basin strategies. Fourth, particular

references are made to macro-regional strategies in the specific regulations covering territorial cooperation programmes, acknowledging the key role for territorial cooperation played by the development and coordination of macro-regional and sea basin strategies under transnational cooperation (CEC, 2014c). Finally, provisions were made for transnational territorial cooperation programmes to specifically devote resources to ‘enhancing [the] institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration by developing and coordinating macro-regional [. . .] strategies’ (CEC, 2014c).

The very strong emphasis of the EU regulations for the 2014–20 period – regarding clear actions, outputs and results – also complements the ‘action orientation’ aimed for in the macro-regional strategies. Thus, through the macro-regional strategies, there is scope for Cohesion Policy programmes to deliver larger-scale projects with greater impact, link to new and additional sources of co-funding, upscale and extend projects, and engage more actively in the wider policy environment. For example, as well as thematic links in terms ‘capacity for innovation’, ‘efficient management of natural resources’ and ‘sustainable transport’, the Baltic Sea Region Programme for 2014–20 has a specific ‘priority axis’ devoted to the macro-regional strategy. One of its four main priority axes is ‘Institutional Capacity Building for Macro-regional Cooperation’ which offers support to the stakeholders of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, Assistance to the Priority Area Coordinators and Horizontal Action Leaders, seed money projects of the EU Strategy, organization of Strategy Forums and other implementation tasks (BSRP, 2014). National Partnership Agreements are being established between the European Commission and EU countries and set out the national authorities’ plans on how to use Cohesion Policy funding between 2014 and 2020. As part of this process, Member States involved in the Danube Strategy aimed to identify priorities that require cooperation and to link these to the aims of the EUSDR, including them in the partnership agreements and accompanying programmes (Agerpress, 2014). However, how to relate to/engage with the macro-regional strategies is still an issue of debate for some programmes, especially those with only part of the programme area covered. On a practical level, the programmes may undertake a range of initiatives which link well to the strategies’ goals. However, committing at a strategic level, setting targets in Programming Documents and planning explicit links are something that some programmes have been cautious about for a number of reasons. First, there is a reluctance to take on any additional administrative burdens involved in monitoring links to macro-regions. Second, some programmes perceive macro-regional strategies as being of limited relevance to the programme area as a whole.

Third, the increasingly narrow focus required of Cohesion Policy programmes may constrain their capacity to build thematic links and contribute to macro-regional strategies.

Financial resources

Funding is one of the issues that have triggered the most animated debate. The obvious question was of how macro-regional strategies could achieve any of their goals without any designated funding. However, a range of funds is usually available from the member countries, the EU and other supranational or international organizations. Macro-regional strategies partly seek to coordinate policy activities and thus simply allocate existing funds more effectively than before.

However, EU Cohesion Policy has been a key source of funding for the macro-regional strategies. Cohesion Policy contributed more than €50 million to the Baltic Sea Region between 2007 and 2012 (Bengtsson, 2009). The text of the EUSDR stresses the ‘funding already available via numerous EU programmes (for example € 100 billion from Structural Funds 2007–13, as well as significant IPA and ENPI funds)’ (CEC, 2010a, 11). As Cohesion Policy is a key source of funding, the 2014–20 budget negotiations can have a significant impact on Strategies.

Given the obvious strategic and financial overlaps, macro-regional approaches featured prominently in debates on the future of EU Cohesion Policy after 2013. Paweł Samecki, the then European Commissioner for Regional Policy, suggested that a share of Cohesion Policy funds could be allocated to macro-regions (CEC, 2009b). An early indication of the European Commission’s thinking on the funding of macro-regional strategies was gained from the Fifth Cohesion Report, which states: ‘Macro-regional strategies should be [. . .] supported by a reinforced transnational strand, although the bulk of funding should come from the national and regional programmes co-financed by Cohesion Policy and from other national resources’ (CEC, 2010b, xvi).

Despite these statements and even though territorial cooperation is universally accepted as adding value to Cohesion Policy, there has been a general trend for cooperation funds to be reduced in relative terms whenever the budget is decided. Moreover, the lion’s share of territorial cooperation funding is reserved for cross-border rather than transnational

cooperation. This raised question marks over the feasibility of funding macro-regions using INTERREG/territorial cooperation funds.

The February 2013 European Council Agreement on the EU's Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2014–20 and the subsequent agreement with the European Parliament in July 2013 ended a lengthy period of intense negotiations on the size and shape of the long-term budget of the EU, the Cohesion Policy budget for 2014–20 declined by 8.4 per cent (Mendez et al., 2013). Most countries have seen a decrease in their budget, and for some Member States that are part of a macro-regional strategy, the decrease has been considerable. For example, in Germany (which is part of EUSBSR, EUSDR and EUSALP), the budget is estimated to have decreased by 39 per cent (Wishlade, 2013). The overall implications of budget reductions on macro-regional strategies are not yet clear. In relative terms, the ETC budget lost out the most from the negotiations, with almost a quarter being cut from the Commission's plans. However, the overall budget remained at comparable levels to 2007–13. On the one hand, this implies little, if any, increase in Cohesion Policy resources available for the macro-regional strategies. On the other hand, the increased familiarity with the strategies and how they work, the reference made to the strategies during programme, and ongoing project developments, all imply that a greater proportion of funding could end up going to the strategies.

Coherence and coordination

Better coordination and a more strategic use of resources are identified as key ingredients to the success of the macro-regional strategies. In particular, the European Commission stressed the importance of the strategic use of Community programmes. In the case of the Baltic Sea Strategy, the Commission has even put in place requirements for relevant EU programmes (such as INTERREG) to report on how they are responding to the Strategy and helping to meet its objectives. Sensitivity to the territorial impact of policies and the need for improved coordination were also stressed in the European Commission's Fifth Cohesion Report. Yet at the same time, the large number of different cooperation arrangements as well as links between and across regions, and the potentially diverse institutional, economic and political priorities in place, all indicate that the distinct 'drive' and 'rationale' behind macro-regions need to be clear. It is important that efforts are not duplicated and that existing programmes of support are not inappropriately undermined.

The 2010 Annual Report from the European Commission on the implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy highlights examples of this more territorially coordinated approach to the application of Community policies. The report identifies significant progress in gaining a new momentum for existing projects, the creation of new macro-regional networks in areas previously dominated by national approaches, the extension of networks in otherwise established areas and the establishment of macro-regional dialogues (CEC, 2010c). In addition, key flagship projects were launched, in line with the Strategy's action plan.

From the point of view of Cohesion Policy programmes, there have also been notable gains. For example, the Baltic Sea Region Programme notes that in the programming period between 2007 and 2014 'the Strategy and the Programme have mutually benefitted. The Baltic Sea Region Programme offered a functioning instrument to finance flagship projects of the Strategy and to get the Strategy's implementation started. At the same time the Strategy offered new platforms to increase the visibility and relevance of the Baltic Sea Region Programme projects' (BSRP, 2014). In line with the new requirements for Cohesion Policy for the 2014–20 period, 'within the limits of the ERDF, the programme has been thematically even more aligned with the objectives of the Strategy to maximize the synergies and leverage effects on other financing sources in the programme areas' (BSRP, 2014, 5). Even programmes with only peripheral geographical connections to the macro-regions have taken the strategies into consideration during their planning and preparation. For example, the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme transnational cooperation programme is noted as having monitored the development and progress of macro-regional strategies (McMaster et al., 2014). Possibilities to identify and report on its links to existing macro-regional strategies were noted by evaluators. However, it was also stressed that in this case the programme has to keep in mind its own goals, objectives and the specific needs (McMaster et al., 2014).

There have also been challenges in building and maintaining policy coordination and coherence. Cooperation in the macro-regions does not always fit neatly with other forms of policy coordination in the EU. In practice, the Commission has found that the alignment of Structural Funds programmes with the implementation of the Strategy has 'generally proven to be more challenging than expected' (CEC, 2010c). While there have been notable exceptions, 'the readiness to engage in dialogue on how to focus future funding in line with the Strategy's objectives varies, and there is insufficient discussion among the different programme authorities on finding complementarities with respect to their funding decisions' (CEC, 2010c). As previously mentioned, from the point of view of established programmes,

requirements to 'adapt' to a 'new' Strategy midway through their own programming period and undertake an additional form of reporting have not always been welcome.

For the 2014–20 Cohesion Policy programming period, policy 'coherence' is something that should be at the heart of developing the new programmes. Programmes are expected to consider potential links and overlaps with existing policies, frameworks and strategies, with macro-regions being key among these. This process reveals that transnational and macro-regional cooperation have as much potential to complement each other as they do to cause clashes, since overlaps exist between their core concerns such as innovation, environmental protection and sustainable transport. The focus of the macro-regional strategies fit neatly with the EU's Europe 2020 objectives of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth which inform Cohesion Policy programmes. The focus of the strategies on concrete actions and scope to extend and amplify the results of interventions over larger areas fits well with the demands being placed on Cohesion Policy programmes, as well as meeting the objectives of the strategies themselves.

Inclusive and flexible framework

It is argued that the strengths of the EU macro-regional strategies are the high level of political commitment and the wide involvement of EU and national institutions in their development and implementation. From the start, the need for a consensual approach was a key driver in the preparation of the strategies. In order to ensure that the result would gain the full commitment of the widest possible range of actors, open consultation processes were launched. Particularly through stakeholder conferences and Internet consultations, virtually all institutions and organizations active in the region, and a number of individuals, were able to contribute to the processes at an early stage. Regions and communities such as cities and associations of municipalities were particularly encouraged to contribute.

The approaches to inclusion being pursued also have an inherent flexibility in them. For example, while the macro-region will maintain a consistency, thanks to the common features or challenges, it is not essential that the limits of the region be precisely defined (CEC, 2009c). It is recognized that a definition should not be rigid but rather functional, so that the proposed policies and projects can be applied to the areas for which they are most applicable. In other words, the strategy should be place based rather than administratively organized, so that it addresses the real needs of the identified locations.

This has led to the principle of flexible membership: ‘the frontiers of a macro-region do not have to be precisely defined. Moreover, there is no requirement that any given territory be part of only one macro-region’ (CEC, 2009c). Thus, the physical boundaries of the target area may vary according to the relevance of the policy area in question (CEC, 2009c), so that some policy areas may take the macro-region in its loosest sense, involving all peripheral and core territories alike, while other policy areas might be applied with far more geographic specificity, in some cases even centring on the local level. In this sense, macro-regional strategies encourage policy to focus more on functional regions based upon added value, rather than the traditional divides of political geography.

In terms of links to Cohesion Policy programmes, the inclusive, consultative, partnership-based approach taken in formulating and developing the macro-regional strategies is highly compatible with their systems and approaches. Indeed, Cohesion Policy programmes were themselves able to contribute to the process. However, the flexible membership and sectorally variable participation in the macro-regions add complexity to efforts to plan links with the strategies, such as in terms of eligible areas, partners and activities.

Governance

Macro-regional strategies are ‘built around a multilevel governance approach involving a huge number of stakeholders’ (Reinholde, 2010, 51). The key elements of the governance of macro-regional strategies consist of three levels: in terms of strategic leadership, the Member States (through the High-level group) and Commission provide the necessary political commitment; National Contact Points coordinate work at the senior administrative level; and experts responsible for thematic or horizontal priorities normally form steering groups (CEC, 2014d). Laboratory Groups have been established in order to facilitate coordination and provide advice. INTERACT contact points in Turku, Vienna and Valencia provide support roles and are involved in the implementation of the strategy. It should be noted that the governance approaches across the different strategies are not uniform. Table 3.2 provides an overview of key roles and responsibilities of different actors in the governance set-up of macro-regional strategies.

<COMP: INSERT TABLE 3.2 HERE>

The current system relies heavily on the Commission for strategic leadership. This facilitates coordination through existing structures. Moreover, supranational – as opposed to

merely intergovernmental – governance has been commended as a way to safeguard the common interest. In this view, the Commission acts as an independent supervisory authority and an ‘honest broker’ of the European interest (CEC, 2009c).

In terms of initiating the strategy, regional and Member State actors are a crucial driving force as shown by authors in this volume: For example, Cugasi and Stocchiero (chapter 8) note how the Marche Region is a key driving force of the Ionian–Adriatic Region. Ágh demonstrates that Baden-Württemberg, Austria and Romania assumed a decisive role in the case of the set-up of the EUSBSR. Gänzle and Kern (chapter 6 in this volume) determine that Poland and, in particular, Sweden provided an important macro-regional ‘push’. However, Cohesion Policy programmes, and in particular transnational programmes, can also play an important role in the initiation process. For example, the Alpine Space Programme is one of the major protagonists of the EUSALP (Balsiger, chapter 9 in this volume). On the other hand, the North Sea Region Programme has demonstrated a certain reluctance to support a macro-regional strategy in the region (see Danson, chapter 10 in this volume). All in all, Cohesion Policy programmes can be considered key actors in shaping and implementing macro-regional strategies.

In practice, this means the European Commission is responsible for coordinating, monitoring, reporting and facilitating the implementation and follow-up of the strategy. In partnership with stakeholders, it prepares regular progress reports and uses its power of initiative to make proposals for adaptations of the strategy or action plan when these are required (CEC, 2009a). Meanwhile, implementation on the ground is the responsibility of partners already active in the region, with organizations from the various Member States taking responsibility for different priority areas. By adopting this implementation approach, an additional and potentially unnecessary layer of administration and institutions has been avoided.

However, the approach to governance and implementation structures has also thrown up a number of questions and challenges (van der Zwet, McMaster, and Bachtler., 2012). Effectively managing links with non-EU Member States has been challenging. Externally, existing frameworks are used to cooperate with third countries. In the case of the Baltic Sea Region, this includes above all Russia and also Belarus and Norway. The Northern Dimension is foremost among these, but the Council of Baltic Sea States may also be used (CEC, 2009a). This institutional arrangement ensured that macro-regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea would take place under the EU umbrella. Cooperation with Russia then takes a bilateral, rather than regional, form. In other words, the decision to make Baltic Sea

cooperation an internal EU matter effectively led to a ‘decoupling of internal and external policy spheres’ (Bengtsson, 2009). Other macro-regions, notably the Danube and Adriatic–Ionian Regions, are bound to include a greater number of non-EU member countries and will face related challenges, while the Alpine, North Sea and Atlantic Regions would largely lack this external dimension.

The strategies have been criticized as lacking clear ownership and leadership, and the need for new institutions to more effectively administer and implement the strategy has been highlighted (Antola, 2010). A recent report on the governance structures of macro-regional strategies identifies EU transnational cooperation programmes as key resources to support the strategies. An identified weakness of the strategies is that they ‘lack professionalism and durable support on a day-to-day basis’ (CEC, 2014d). A possibility is that key transnational programmes could assist with the implementation and coordination of the strategy. To an extent, the programmes already have an important role in the governance framework, as is, for example, the case with the Baltic Sea Region Programme. The establishment of a new Danube Region transnational INTERREG programme in the 2014–20 period appears to be partly driven by a desire to have a single transnational programme that covers most of the strategy geographically in order to assist with day-to-day implementation. Similarly, the Alpine Strategy largely overlaps with the already existing Alpine Space Programme, and also in the case of the Ionian–Adriatic Strategy, a new transnational INTERREG programme is proposed. In practical terms, this means that transnational programmes can assist in supporting the work of key implementers, both in terms of practical ways and in terms of data collection; offering analysis and advice; providing a platform for the involvement of civil society, and regional and multi-governance levels, as well as fostering parliamentary debate; and facilitating the Annual Forum (CEC, 2014d).

Complementing a clear leadership, it is equally important to have bottom-up initiatives and ideas, especially for an organization that focuses on the specific needs of the territory. Building awareness and dissemination activities amongst key actors in the region is also something that has to be continually revised and updated, taking into account changing policy frameworks and objectives. To facilitate this process, it is necessary to build in lesson-learning, follow-up strategies for projects and events and to monitor and evaluate activities. Such processes will provide evidence about the results, impact and influence of cooperation in the region, which can be disseminated and used to develop new ideas in the future and perpetuate productive cooperation. However, for a strategy that as of yet possesses no dedicated financial resources, a balance needs to be struck between monitoring/regulation and

keeping the administrative burdens of cooperation in check. Also, in this case, transnational territorial cooperation programmes can be a valuable resource. However, further integrating transnational programmes in the governance structures of macro-regional strategies poses some important challenges. For instance, it does not resolve the issue of full integration of non-EU members; indeed in some cases, it may make it more difficult. Furthermore, governance frameworks for macro-regional strategies and transnational programmes differ in terms of approach and stakeholders. Macro-regional strategies are organized largely in a top-down fashion and high-level central state actors are heavily involved. Transnational cooperation programmes operate at a regional level and tend to have a more bottom-up approach. Integrating these two different approaches into a single governance framework may prove challenging (van der Zwet et al., 2012).

Conclusion: macro-regions as an embedded element of EU Cohesion Policy?

Various EU institutions assume a strong role in the macro-regions, and the strategies are endorsed by the European Council. The European Commission plays a supportive role and acts as a facilitator of the evaluation process, ensuring coherence with EU policies and positions. The concept of macro-regional cooperation is also becoming an embedded aspect of EU Cohesion Policy.

The financial relationship between macro-regions and Cohesion Policy funds has been a widely debated issue (EUObserver, 2010). Nevertheless, in practice, the EU Structural Funds are a key funding source for macro-regional cooperation. Quite apart from the funding question, macro-regions are increasingly discussed as important tools of Cohesion Policy delivery. For example, the Fifth and Sixth Cohesion Reports published by the European Commission establish a link between the goal of territorial cohesion and macro-regions. Thus, 'further work on new macro-regional strategies should be based on a thorough review of existing strategies and the availability of resources. Macro-regional strategies should be broad-based integrated instruments with support from a reinforced transnational strand, although the bulk of funding should come from the national and regional programmes co-financed by Cohesion Policy, and other national sources' (CEC, 2010b).

Significant additional resources for transnational territorial cooperation did not materialize, due to challenges faced in EU budget negotiations. Nevertheless, Cohesion

Policy programmes, in particular territorial cooperation programmes, have experience as active partners in cooperation and have a key role to play in the success of the macro-regional strategies. In particular, macro-regions are place-based policies that seek to promote development in functional regions, based on the strengths of these regions and involving policy coordination at multiple levels. As such, they fit neatly with the EU's Europe 2020 objectives of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth, while recognizing the objectives of social, economic and territorial cohesion, as well as the specific focus of individual Cohesion Policy programmes. The focus of the strategies on concrete actions and creating the scope to extend and amplify the results of interventions over larger areas fits well with the demands being placed on Cohesion Policy programmes, as well as meeting the objectives of the strategies themselves.

However, the relationship between macro-regional strategies and Cohesion Policy programmes is still comparatively new and subject to change, most notably linked to new Cohesion Policy regulations and the launch of new programmes and projects. Cohesion Policy programmes in areas covered by macro-regional strategies have to adapt to a new policy environment and new demands in what were already complex programmes. Looking to the future, the likely extension of the macro-regions concept to new spaces means that this learning and adaptation process will inevitably be ongoing and evolutionary.

The experiences across macro-regions have inevitably been, and will continue to be, varied, due to the different challenges that they aim to address and the different institutional environments in which they operate. However, a number of shared challenges in relation to Cohesion Policy can be anticipated. First, budget constraints and fiscal consolidation can be anticipated to have a Janus-like effect on Cohesion Policy programmes. On the one hand, co-financing has become more difficult, making implementation of Cohesion Policy programmes (and macro-regional strategies) more challenging. On the other hand, macro-regional strategies may potentially become increasingly reliant on Cohesion Policy funding as other resources dry up. Second, the involvement of external partners in macro-regional strategies can be difficult from a Cohesion Policy perspective. As programme objectives need to be closely linked to the overall Community strategy (Europe 2020), external partners can get the impression that the macro-regional strategies, which rely on cohesion strategy, are too EU-centric. Particularly, in the context of increasing geopolitical tensions (as is the case with Ukraine crisis), this may put external partners' willingness to actively engage and contribute to the strategy under pressure. Third, one of the key weaknesses of macro-regional strategies has been a perceived lack of professionalism and consistency in day-to-day implementation.

Transnational programmes that cover the whole of the macro-region can assist in this process. However, considering they are often already stretched to capacity, this raises challenges. Furthermore, only the Baltic Sea Region and proposed Alpine Region have established transnational programmes that cover the whole macro-region.² New transnational programmes are planned in the Danube and Ionian–Adriatic Regions, and although these programmes can build on the experiences of their predecessors, it will take time for them to become established, potentially delaying or limiting the role they can fulfil in their respective macro-regions. Nevertheless, it is clear that Cohesion Policy programmes do and will continue to have a key role to play in the future development and implementation of macro-regional strategies.

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Table 3.1 EUSBSR links to selected territorial cooperation programmes

	I Environmental sustainability					II Prosperity				III Accessibility and attractiveness			VI Safety and security		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
European Territorial Cooperation Programmes – transnational programme															
Baltic Sea Region Programme 2007–13	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
European Territorial Cooperation Programmes – cross-border cooperation programmes															
Central Baltic INTERREG IV A Programme 2007–13	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Latvia–Lithuania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13				x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Estonia–Latvia Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13							x	x	x		x	x			
Lithuania–Poland Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13								x			x	x			
South Baltic Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13	x		x		x		x	x			x	x		x	
Cross-border Cooperation Programme ‘North’ 2007–13							x	x				x			
Cross-border Cooperation Programme ‘Botnia–		x					x	x				x			

Atlantica' 2007–13																			
Cross-border Cooperation Programme 'Sweden–Norway' 2007–13		x						x						x					
Cross-border Cooperation Programme 'Öresund–Kattegatt–Skagerrak' 2007–13								x	x					x					x
Cross-border Cooperation Programme 'Poland– Germany (Saxony)' 2007–13		x						x						x	x				
Cross-border Cooperation Programme 'Poland (Lubuskie)–Germany (Brandenburg)' 2007–13		x						x	x					x					x
Cross-border Cooperation Programme 'Poland (Zachodniopomorskie)–Germany (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg)' 2007–13		x						x	x					x	x				
Cross-border Cooperation Programme 'Syddanmark–Schleswig–K.E.R.N.' 2007–13		x						x	x		x	x	x						
Cross-border Cooperation Programme 'Denmark–Germany' 2007–13 (Fehmarnbelt Region Sjælland–Ostholstein–Lübeck–Plön)		x						x	x			x	x						
External border cooperation programmes within European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument																			
Estonia–Latvia–Russia Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13 within European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument		x									x	x	x						
Latvia–Lithuania–Belarus Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13 within European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument	x	x							x					x	x				x
Lithuania–Poland–Russia Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13 within European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument	x	x	x						x			x	x	x					
Kolarctic–Russia Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13 within European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument								x	x	x				x					x
Karelia–Russia Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13 within European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument		x							x	x				x					
South East Finland–Russia Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007–13 within		x							x	x	x			x	x				x

	Engaging in some operational aspects Supporting coordination with Commission
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Source: Authors' own compilation.

Endnotes

¹ Looking beyond Cohesion policy, ETC has a lengthy history and has involved a wide range of policy initiatives. In 1958, the first 'Euroregion', EUREGIO, at the German–Dutch border was established. Unlike the macro-regions, Euroregions' work is generally limited to the competencies of the local and regional authorities which constitute them. They do not correspond to any legislative or governmental institution or have direct political power. Nevertheless, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, institutional cross-border cooperation continued to develop, in particular along the Rhine in the west and northern Europe (INTERACT, 2010). A cross-border cooperation development strategy in EUREGIO received financial support from the European Economic Community as early as 1972

² The North Sea and Atlantic Regions have also established transnational programmes, but in these cases, the adoption of macro-regional strategies is more doubtful (see Wise [chapter 11] as well as Danson [chapter 10] in this volume)