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Research Report

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Participation as an Added Value of Macro-regions

The Potential for Developing Macro-regional Cooperation in Europe

Tobias Etzold

A new format for regional cooperation within the EU was created from 2007 onwards with the European macro-regions and associated EU strategies. The concept offers useful approaches to closer regional cooperation and integration. However, to date macro-regional cooperation has offered only limited added value in the regional and European context, and there is an absence of substantive results. It is nevertheless worthwhile reflecting on the extent to which effective macro-regional cooperation can contribute to strengthening European integration at the regional level. One of the advantages of the format is its participatory approach, which might help successfully integrate regional, local and civil-society structures more closely in shaping regional and European integration.

As a construct, the European macro-regions are located between the EU supranational and national levels. It aims to complement the European subsidiarity system and enhance cooperation within country groups in selected policy areas. Macro-regions are defined by geographical characteristics shared between several countries and by region-specific challenges. In turn, macro-regional strategies provide an integrated overarching framework for EU member states and third states located in the same geographical area – the Baltic Sea Region (2009), Danube Region (2011), Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014) and Alpine Region (2015) – enabling them to meet cross-border challenges and tasks. These are too complex

for the national level and, due to their regional character, too specific for the EU-28. The region-specific approach is embedded in a programmatic pan-European framework, with the involvement and active participation of the EU institutions. Projects are conducted using action plans in previously agreed priority areas, particularly the environment, energy, economic growth and infrastructure.

The objective of macro-regional strategies is to complement existing forms of regional cooperation and facilitate better coordination and the interlinking of institutions at various levels: EU-related, regional (regional organisations), national (central governments), subnational (e.g.

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Länder, cantons), local (towns and municipalities) and civil society (NGOs). Moreover, macro-regions offer interest groups a new framework for exerting strategic influence on political discourse and decision-making processes. In Germany, the Foreign Ministry acts as general coordinator for the Baltic Sea strategy, while the Länder trio Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Hamburg plays a particularly active role and coordinates individual areas of cooperation. The Länder Baden-Wuerttemberg and Bavaria are in charge of the strategies for the Danube and Alpine Regions.

Successes and Results

According to the European Commission, macro-regional strategies have become an integral part of the EU's political framework and cohesion policy. The European Committee of the Regions believes that the strategies contribute to realising the EU's strategic targets and have become a central component of its multilevel governance.

The EU strategies do indeed create synergies between different EU policies and instruments, and contribute to shaping policy at various levels. In the Baltic Sea and Danube Regions, they have improved both the coordination between actors at various levels and the coordination of their manifold activities. To that end, new cooperation networks have been founded and existing ones developed.

In the Danube strategy, this includes master plans for navigability and for rehabilitating and maintaining the shipping channel; a network for improving security in shipping; and new environmental-protection networks. The EU's Baltic Sea strategy has inter alia contributed to implementing the EU initiative for the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan in a regionally coordinated manner. It has also helped implement existing EU legislation, such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the strategy on adaptation to climate change. Many projects involve a variety of partners, who have so far primarily been

representatives of national and subnational governments as well as of business and academia.

Whilst the EU strategies do not receive their own funding – or no newly approved funding – it has been suggested that more efficient use be made of resources from the EU's regional funds and other EU programmes available to strategy projects. However, financing opportunities need to be greatly improved.

Challenges

Developing an effective governance model that includes all actors without slowing down the implementation process is without doubt one of the greatest challenges for each strategy. The three-tier governance system of the Baltic Sea and Danube strategies consists of political, coordinating and operational levels. The multitude of actors on the operational level, in particular, carries a risk of losing focus and leaving individual responsibilities unspecified. This aspect of the strategies' governance systems should be simplified. However, without an overall revision of the macro-regional concept this will be hard to achieve. Conversely, the fact that a multitude of actors participate at various levels is one of the concept's core elements and part of its added value.

The performance record of the oldest strategies – in the Baltic Sea and Danube Regions – has been mixed. Numerous projects were created within the strategies: for the Baltic Sea, they currently number around 100; for the Danube, 150 of the 400 planned projects were already being implemented as of 2016. However, a large quantity of projects does not in itself reveal anything about the strategies' actual success. Since many are longer-term projects, it is not yet possible to report on the tangible success of individual projects, and thus of the strategies as a whole.

One major problem is a lack of political and strategic leadership as well as accountability associated with implementing the macro-regional strategies. Levels of interest

in, and commitment to, the strategies vary from member state to member state. The current system leans heavily on the strategic leadership of the European Commission, whose tasks include supporting actors, reporting and evaluating.

However, the Commission argues that participating countries and regions should be more involved: leadership roles should be equally divided. It even believes that the added value of the strategies would be enhanced and their potential better realised if the relevant member states assumed more responsibility. The Commission therefore plans to make the strategies more independent of its own role as catalyst, while continuing to shoulder part of the political responsibility.

An additional problem, especially in the Danube region, are the discrepancies – some of them serious – in the foundations of the involved countries, for instance as regards their potential for economic development. These result in different initial positions, interests and needs, complicating efforts to thematically design and construct governance structures and especially to implement the strategies uniformly. There is also a risk that individual countries or parts might start to compete for attention and the distribution of resources within a macro-region.

Finally, public awareness of macro-regional strategies is limited: their activities and results are barely visible. The issue rarely appears in the partner countries' national media. Consequently, few people are sufficiently informed about the strategies' existence, potential and results to date. This makes it difficult to get civil society involved.

Potential for Improvement

Solving these problems will above all require constant long-term enthusiasm and commitment from all participating actors. Only then will it be possible to implement the macro-regional strategies successfully and to tap their full potential.

All macro-regional EU strategies need an effective division of labour and responsibilities between the Union, its member states and their various levels of government, and regional actors. In 2014 the European Commission had already made proposals for improving coordination mechanisms. It recommended creating a rotating presidency for each macro-region (since implemented), appointing a special envoy, and improving the inclusion of line ministries. Overall, the coordination level should be strengthened to improve the interlinking of the various actor levels.

It would also be beneficial to narrow the strategies' focus onto a smaller number of priority or policy areas and fewer projects; simultaneously, priorities need to be more clearly defined. This would avoid achieving only a few concrete and lasting results due to excessive scope and reduce the risk of dissipation and haphazard contents. Furthermore, projects in policy areas need to be better harmonised with the EU's sector-specific strategies to attain greater efficiency and coherence.

The monitoring systems of individual strategies should be improved so that their objectives and results can be verified regularly. To this end, clear indicators need to be developed that make it possible to judge whether the set objectives have been met. This is the only way to establish meaningful performance records. The principle that no new macro-region-specific institutions are to be created remains in place. However, it is important that each strategy has its own institutional support in the shape of contact and coordination points for national, regional and local actors. One example is the newly-created Danube Strategy Point at the Representation of the State of Baden-Wuerttemberg to the EU.

To increase the profile of the respective macro-regions and raise public awareness of their activities, effective communications strategies are needed. With additional support from the media, local and civil-society actors could be shown how they might benefit from macro-regional cooperation and,

when appropriate, become involved. Concrete examples of what the strategies have accomplished so far would demonstrate their added value.

A Participation Day was introduced as part of the Danube strategy in 2014 and as part of the Baltic Sea strategy in 2017. This offers local and civil-society actors a platform to participate in developing and implementing project ideas within the respective strategy. This example shows how macro-regions can learn from each other's experiences. More exchanges, shared committees and tighter connections between the four regions would be helpful to anchor the concept of macro-regions firmly in the overall EU framework. The strategies must also be embedded in the new European financial and legal frameworks for the post-2020 period.

The Participatory Approach: An Advantage

The macro-regions can significantly strengthen Europe's greater regions as well as regional and European integration overall. Currently, however, they struggle with problems and shortcomings familiar to the EU as a whole. The macro-regions nevertheless remain valid primarily due to their participatory and open structure, which offers actors the opportunity to proactively participate and co-create projects within the strategies on an equal footing. In some countries, the strategies are met with more interest and commitment on the subnational level than by the central government. It would therefore be logical to shift decision-making powers more systematically from top to bottom. For instance, a country could be represented on macro-regional bodies by subnational actors (a practice already established by the Alpine Region strategy). Opportunities for civil-society actors to participate should also be defined and expanded.

The strategies will nevertheless need to be firmly established at the level of central-government line ministries so that macro-

regional issues can be introduced and efficiently promoted in the relevant EU ministerial councils. Ultimately, a balanced and effective combination of top-down and bottom-up processes will be a decisive criterion for the success of macro-regions.

If attempts to shift the participatory approach more systematically from theory to practice are successful, then the macro-regions will reinforce the European principle of subsidiarity. They could thus contribute to reaching the goal of an open citizen-orientated Europe that emphasises and promotes the constructive role of regional and local structures.

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