EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract

This study provides a critical analysis of the future role of macro-regions in the implementation of European Territorial Cooperation. On the basis of a literature review and case studies, the study offers an assessment of potential benefits in the development of new macro-regional strategies as well as the most common risks and difficulties in their implementation. Recommendations are derived to inform the position of the European Parliament on how it can efficiently support the creation and implementation of new macro-regional strategies.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Macro-regional strategies (MRS) have become a crucial element in the design of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) for post-2013 Cohesion Policy. Currently, the European Union (EU) is implementing two MRS, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). The EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Sea has been adopted in October 2014. In addition there are proposals and debates on the creation of strategies for other macro-regions, in particular for the Alpine Region, the Carpathian Region, the North Sea, the Black Sea, the Western and Eastern parts of the Mediterranean Sea and the coastal region of the Atlantic Arc.

The objective of this study has been to analyse the new role of macro-regions in ETC, based on a comparison of case studies on MRS in consideration, preparation and implementation and a review of policy documents. Chapter 1 sets out the objectives, design and methodology in more detail. Based on case study analysis, the aim of the research design is to get a holistic picture of the different proposals for macro-regional cooperation, best practices, but also opportunities and risks for the future. The methodology draws on a literature review and interviews with selected stakeholders.

Chapter 2 provides the reader with a general introduction into the evolution of conceptions and regulations related to macro-regional cooperation. The chapter begins with a conceptual definition of macro-regions and MRS as major emerging sites of governance in ETC. The literature analysis reveals that MRS are instruments both of Regional Policy, as well as a tool of Foreign Policy. The debate around the future of MRS is then situated in the context of the contrasting views around Cohesion Policy post-2013 and the changing regulatory framework. In this context, questions related to the governance of future MRS will become all the more crucial. The contributions of the European Parliament (EP) clearly suggest that it advocates a place-based, contractual approach to macro-regional cooperation in line with the EU2020 Agenda. The added value is perceived in MRS being a vehicle for involving neighbouring countries, creating territorial synergies and reducing regional disparities.

Macro-regional profiles on strategies considered, prepared and implemented are presented in Chapter 3. The contrasting territorial contexts of the 9 MRS are illustrated in a map. The profiles describe process, actors or issues related to macro-regional cooperation in the different areas. These assemble where it is possible, information on time horizon and geographical coverage, actors and principal issues covered. These tables serve as a short introduction to the more detailed analysis of the case studies in chapters Error! Reference source not found., Error! Reference source not found. and Error! Reference source not found..

Strengths and weaknesses of the strategies for the Baltic Sea and Danube Region are analysed in Chapter 4. The European Commission (EC) has been the main driving force behind MRS, in spite of the many well-established pre-existing organisations in the Baltic and Danube Region. The EUSBSR was the first strategy to be adopted and it has been a source of inspiration for the other MRS. The EUSBSR and the EUSDR function as an umbrella for cooperation initiatives, most of which existed before the strategies were established. It is difficult to assess whether the strategies have influenced the nature or extent of these initiatives. The lack of involvement of some Member States (in both strategies), and the limited commitment at operational level, are identified as key challenges by interviewed stakeholders. The need for stronger and more reliable Steering Committees for each Priority Area has been recognized as an instrument to encourage improved commitment of relevant bodies in each Member State.
Chapter 5 illustrates the findings of our case study analysis for the strategies in preparation, Adriatic Ionian and Alpine. EUSAIR and EUSALP, the MRS currently in preparation 1, demonstrate indeed how macro-regional cooperation is applied in very different historical, political and socio-economic contexts. In socio-economic terms, the dramatic disparities among the EUSAIR countries are well known, whereas EUSALP is one of the European areas featuring the highest cohesion. If the feasibility of the strategies is considered, the possibility for the EUSALP territories to access a series of complementary financing tools has to be emphasized. On the other side, where the necessity of the strategy is concerned, the historical opportunity to increase the coordination of the existing cooperation instruments in the Adriatic and Ionian areas is easily recognizable. In case of EUSALP, a sort of continuity between the existing territorial policies and the Strategy can be seen, with some risks of overlapping with the transnational cooperation tools.

**MRS under consideration: the strategies for the Carpathian Region, the North Sea, the Black Sea, the Atlantic Arc, the Western and Eastern parts of the Mediterranean Sea** are analysed in Chapter 6. The chapter begins by briefly describing the development of the strategies under consideration, before delineating emerging issues, risks and difficulties for the future. This analysis clearly shows the wealth of different territorial contexts in which macro-regional cooperation is applied. At the present stage, the concept of some of these strategies is not clearly related to definite needs or identified actors/sub-territories, while for others there remains considerable doubt about the need of macro-regional cooperation due to the high degree of socio-economic cohesion. In others the feasibility of macro-regional cooperation due to existing socio-economic inequalities and political instability needs to be questioned.

From the vantage point of post-2013 Cohesion Policy, a classification of MRS has been built around a close evaluation of cohesion need as well as the ability to implement ETC as an instrument of social, economic and territorial cohesion on the level of the macro-region. The analysis suggests three different sets of MRS; (1) MRS as potential instruments of EU Foreign Policy (Mediterranean; Black Sea); (2) MRS as potential instruments for tackling uneven development (EUSDR; EUSBSR; Adriatic-Ionian; Carpathian); and finally, (3) MRS as potential instruments for the exploitation of territorial synergies (EUSALP; Atlantic Arc; North Sea).

Based on this classification and the detailed results of the case study analyses this final chapter brings together the conclusions of the study and provides policy recommendations to inform the position of the EP:

- **Added value:** Added value of MRS to ETC/Cohesion Policy should be closely evaluated in terms of the type of macro-region considered. The three approaches mapped out suggest different types of added value for different categories of macro-regional cooperation;
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** A pre-assessment of political and financial needs and abilities should play an important role in assessing feasibility of future strategies;
- **Technical assistance:** The European Parliament should continue its financial support for transnational activities, but closely assess how and what it can deliver in the upcoming years;
- **Regulatory framework:** The notion of conditionality in macro-regional cooperation as well as the usefulness of EGTC to MRS should be studied in closer detail by the European Parliament in the coming years.

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1 The preparation phase starts with the EC’s Communication calling for the development of a macro-regional strategy for a defined area. The main aim of this phase is to create the groundwork for the establishment of a strategy, the main pillars, choice of objectives, in a vertically and horizontally coordinated consultation process. The European Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region (EUSAIR) has been formally adopted in October 2014. In the context of the study period the strategy has been considered as being in preparation. Two pragmatic reasons can be mobilized to justify this choice: (1) it is too early to evaluate the main implementation steps which still lie ahead (2) it is better compared to the Alpine strategy than to the pilot MRS Baltic and Danube.