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on the evolution of EU macro-regional strategies: present practice and future prospects, especially in the Mediterranean

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United in diversity

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1. Emergence of macro-regions

Launched in 2009, the Baltic Sea macro-region brings together a coherent set of territories that want to cooperate in order to find better solutions to the economic and environmental problems facing them. This cooperation has taken the form of a ‘macro-regional strategy’, designed to coordinate the existing extensive sectoral cooperation and based on four pillars – environment, prosperity, accessibility and security – and an action plan setting out 15 priority areas and 80 flagship projects.

This experience has inspired other projects. One of these – the Danube macro-region – has taken its first steps. Further projects are envisaged. The institutions concerned, Member States, regions and local authorities are working together to define similar frameworks for other European macro-regions that share common traits: same maritime area, same mountain range, same river basin, etc.

Macro-regional strategies offer new prospects for territorial cooperation projects supported by Objective 3 of the Cohesion Policy. They can assist the broad EU strategies, such as trans-European transport networks or integrated maritime policy. They can ensure better coordination between regional programmes and the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy.

2. State of play and initial lessons learned

The macro-region concept has motivated stakeholders, and the passion observed indicates a definite intention to invest in this new area of public policy in Europe, with the goal being territorial-based development. The reasons for this are not only objective – interaction between neighbouring regions – but also historical and cultural, as these regional areas have for centuries shared a common history. These age-old links, which must be strengthened or, in some cases, restored, provide a basis for shared cooperation. Adoption of the macro-region concept is also evidence that the European idea is spreading.

The Commission report on the Implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, published on 26 June 2011, underlines ‘the value of [this] new way of cooperating’ and recommends aligning ‘Cohesion Policy and other funding sources in the Region with the objectives of the Strategy’¹.

The Commission has become involved in implementing the Baltic Sea strategy. In its conclusions of 13 April 2011 on the Danube macro-region, the Council again invited the Commission ‘to play a leading role in the strategic coordination’. *In concrete terms, the governance of such a mechanism is complex and requires extensive technical assistance. In the current circumstances, DG REGIO cannot assume any more responsibility.*

Once the announcement effect has faded, there is a real risk of a high-spending, ineffective and ‘vast contraption’. As a result, a ‘three noes rule’ has been suggested: no more money, no more institutions, no more regulation. This constraint has been adapted by the Council, which on 13 April proposed a ‘three yeses rule’: more complementary funding, more institutional coordination and more new projects. This dialectic seeks to find a balance that

¹ COM(2011)381 final.

must be defined before the regulations for the next territorial cohesion policy 2014-2020 are decided.

3. Benefits of macro-regional strategy

Looking at the Baltic Sea example, the implementation of a macro-regional strategy offers many opportunities, principally by providing a reference framework relevant to cohesion policies and encouraging inter-sectoral cooperation in a regional area. This framework can steer investment towards more complementarity and can influence the respective priorities of each regional development plan for a European macro-region, ensuring an overview and genuine synergies within an integrated approach.

This strategy also ensures greater involvement and better cooperation between the EU's various intervention mechanisms, going beyond the appropriations allocated to Cohesion Policy. This is particularly the case with the European Investment Bank (EIB). It also pools the resources of regions and Member States through multi-level governance. This represents a 'win-win' strategy for each stakeholder.

Finally, macro-regional strategy frames the EU's neighbourhood policies in a way that encourages renewed dialogue as well as profitable and concrete relations.

4. Difficulties to be overcome

Every macro-regional strategy has a dual dimension: territorial, through the definition of a relevant territory in which the strategy is applied; and functional, through the determination of priorities. The respective communities must be on board at the time when such a strategy is launched. As a result, a pre-development phase is needed, lasting between one and two years, before a macro-region can effectively be established.

The operation of macro-regions must avoid the trap of intergovernmental governance, even where their cross-border nature necessitates the involvement of the Member States concerned. Only multi-level governance, particularly involving the regional level, can guarantee the European vocation of such strategies and ensure complementarity with the European Union's regional development policy.

Creating future macro-regions by 'spontaneous generation' cannot be a plan for the future as this results in a random approach, which will prevent coherent strategies from being developed. However, each creation must be a 'bottom-up' process, based on the genuine motivation of stakeholders on the ground.

Neighbouring regions must be involved so that numerous projects can be developed within the macro-regional strategies. This involvement must stem from territorial policies, and not from a foreign policy dimension.

5. Measures to be envisaged

Macro-regional strategies must be developed through wide-ranging consultations that can define the problems on the ground in order to avoid projects that are vague or simply based on

immediate political considerations. A ‘roadmap for European macro-regions’ must be defined, although this will not be binding and could change depending on local dynamics.

A ‘pre-development phase’ is essential for each macro-region. During this phase, a round table will be organised between the partners involved, the main strategic areas will be identified, and the bases for future governance will also be defined. In line with the Council’s decision, the Commission is the natural authority to steer such a pre-development approach. It must have the necessary human and financial resources for such an investment.

The funding to support the macro-regional cooperation approach must come from Objective 3 of the Cohesion Policy. This is in line with the desire to significantly increase the budget, as already expressed by the European Parliament for the next programming period. For its part, the Commission has proposed that these appropriations should be increased for 2014/2020 (+30%)¹, while recommending a ‘reinforced transnational strand’.

This financial support must take the form of technical assistance appropriations, both for the pre-development phase conducted by the Commission itself, and for the implementation phase conducted by the governance authority selected at the end of the pre-development phase.

For priority projects, as has occurred within the Baltic Sea strategy, complementary funding can be ensured by linking the selection criteria with the priorities of the macro-regional strategy during calls for projects in the context of Cohesion Policy operational programmes.

6. Importance of a macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean

The entire Mediterranean basin shares the same natural environment, and its shores are connected by the same history and culture. Significant opportunities exist in southern Europe, which cannot be seized without the coordination and overview permitted by the definition of a macro-regional strategy.

The Mediterranean area is vast, which leads to questions about which macro-regional mechanism will be most appropriate. In the eastern Mediterranean, stakeholders are working towards an Adriatic-Ionian macro-region project. Further consultations must be held before deciding between a single macro-region or two separate macro-regions: one in the western Mediterranean, and the other in the eastern Mediterranean, which is also known as the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region.

Due to their ‘Mediterranean climate’, the Mediterranean regions have similar ecotypes. The same types of agricultural product are produced from north to south and from east to west, and form a single, albeit diverse, range of products. The environmental problems (for example, fires) are the same all over. As the world’s top tourist destination, the Mediterranean territories are keen to cooperate in order to maintain and improve the prospects of this economic sector, which is vital to most of them.

In terms of developing the potential, maritime traffic must be placed at the heart of a transport strategy for the whole area, particularly for goods. Many diverse sea routes must be

¹ COM(2011)611 final.

established. The Mediterranean offers optimum conditions for the development of renewable energy, particularly solar energy. A macro-regional strategy can provide tailored responses to these objectives, with the involvement of partners such as the EIB.

Mediterranean biodiversity is particularly abundant, but also seriously threatened. Overfishing is a threat to fish stocks. The Mediterranean Sea is a closed sea, with heavy sea traffic. Its shores are experiencing some of the highest population growth, which is accentuated by tourism. As a result, the sea and shore environment is a major concern for this whole area. A coordinated policy on how to handle discards, with general 'north-south' cooperation between local authorities, must be encouraged, with the support of neighbourhood policies.

For 2020 and beyond, the Mediterranean represents the main 'neighbourhood prospect' for Europe, due to its 500 million inhabitants, less than one-third of whom live within the European Union. A development dynamic based around the Mediterranean could drive forward the whole European economy.

Within the EU, the Mediterranean area is unstructured. Its performance in terms of cooperation and interconnection is very poor. The challenges that must be tackled by the Mediterranean's political authorities could be better identified within a comprehensive plan and consultation.

Outside the EU, those populations living in the Mediterranean region have very low standards of living at all levels: economic, social, environmental and political. The development of these societies is an essential requirement for them, and an opportunity for Europe as it could capitalise on greater security, more 'sustainable' control of immigration flows, and direct participation in this growth area. This would positively impact on the performance of its own economy. As a result, the events of last spring along the southern shores of the Mediterranean are a powerful incentive to develop new and active neighbourhood policies. By linking these, at least in part, with a macro-regional strategy, they could take on a concrete territorial dimension ensuring greater effectiveness.

The EU Member States and regions in the Mediterranean area must commit to a reinforced cooperation approach. This must be opened up to all partners in this area which is essential to the future of Europe. Macro-regional strategy is the best way of achieving this goal.