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# What could the future role of macro-regional strategies in the EU be? – Four scenarios

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# What could the future role of macro-regional strategies in the EU be? – Four scenarios

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*by Franziska Sielker*

The EU faces a substantial identity crisis, following the recent Brexit vote and given a new form of North-South divide after the Euro crisis earlier in this decade. Media and politicians harshly criticize Brussels, a view that appears to reflect the public opinion. Following these major changes, and being interested in the EU's development through my research on macro-regions, it is a good time to ask what role macro-regional cooperation can play in the future.

In 2016, a new dynamic in macro-regional cooperation seemed to unfold: at the launch of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region in Brdo, MEP Mercedes Bresso suggested that a new role will be given to macro-regional strategies in future. Recently, the EU Commission launched studies and a series of workshops to investigate the added value of macro-regions, called for an in-depth analysis of the four existing EU macro-regions in the Danube, Baltic, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine Regions, and questioned their potential role within the EU cohesion policies.

In this blog, I briefly outline four scenarios of how macro-regional cooperation could contribute to the European project. In the first two scenarios, I interpret my observations of current developments with regards to possible changes in cohesion policies and territorial cooperation in macro-regions. In the last two scenarios, I place macro-regions in the broader EU context under a more fundamental role.

## **Scenario 1: Macro-regions to take over INTERREG?**

I see strong voices calling for a closer alignment between INTERREG and EU macro-regions. Macro-regional strategies, which are the newer, more innovative and comprehensive initiative, could represent a stronger and politically more relevant type of European territorial cooperation than INTERREG. INTERREG, which was primarily developed to fund cooperation and projects, has not developed its own spatial strategy for the respective regions. While INTERREG is one of the success stories of the EU in facilitating daily cross-border cooperation, after more than 20 years the dynamics seemed to have slowed down. Some even argue that there is nowadays a certain type of "INTERREG family", and new impetuses for cooperation have become rare.

In the meantime, the EU integration processes has forged ahead considerably, both in terms of size and thematic scope. The relevant EU-wide high-level policies are somewhat detached from the needs of both cross-border and transnational cooperation. Macro-regional strategies now present new opportunities for DG Regio, who have to justify their activities within EU institutions to the Union's overall goal. Whilst the INTERREG programs represent purely funding initiatives, macro-regional strategies now offer the opportunity for a more coordinative role for the diversity of funding schemes launched by different DGs.

All in all, there are some indications that the two initiatives could be merged. One possible scenario could be that a political strategy, such as a macro-regional strategy, becomes a compulsory guidance

for each INTERREG program area, to ensure money is dedicated to political activities that are widely supported. The logic behind this scenario would be threefold. First, the INTERREG programs would have a new meaning and be relaunched with considerable changes. Second, the macro-regional strategies would get more means and overcome the obstacle of the three no's. Third, the macro-regional strategies have been more successful than many other activities to gain political support and hence to enhance awareness for EU cooperation in national and regional politics.

### **Scenario 2: A sectoralized territorial development?**

This scenario considers using macro-regions to strengthen the EU sectoral policies and their communities. The four existing macro-regional strategies are organized in thematic areas including climate change, education, navigation and, security. The governance structure brings national representatives from these policy areas together, which is certainly a strength of macro-regional cooperation, as it increases the relevance for policymaking. Macro-regional strategies are therefore a tool to bring national interests together and use EU money to achieve the goals set within these macro-regional committees.

Macro-regional strategies strengthen a sectoralised approach towards territorial development with their policy field oriented governance structure. In general, I see a tendency towards increased importance of strong, money loaded sectoral policies through this tool. The sectoralisation leads to an increased importance of somewhat spatially relevant policies and helps "to get things done". The strong financial arguments could, however, also undermine discussions on different political possibilities at the national level.

In practice, I estimate the priority areas to work to a large extent independently from each other. At the same time, while acknowledging that I come from planning studies taught from a European (spatial planning) development perspective, I see also a need for an integrated approach to spatial development.

### **Scenario 3: Politicization of Cohesion Policies: MRS breaking down EU policies?**

This third scenario questions the macro-regional platforms to implement and measure cohesion policies. The EU's goal to achieve cohesion is noble, but difficult to achieve. Following the Lisbon Agenda, all EU policies should contribute to this goal. One of the indicators used to measure cohesion is the BIP. Despite various efforts to measure social and economic cohesion in the EU, it remains a challenge to implement this goal through the existing policies and activities. To my estimation, spatial development and policies implemented through better-aligned funding offer great potential for enriching European integration. Indicator-based policy and development seem to serve as an important narrative. Yet, the translation of these indicators into concrete, place-based activities remains a challenge.

Situated between the EU and the Nation States in the multi-level governance system, macro-regions could contribute to the implementation of cohesion policies in the long run. One scenario would be that through regional discussions, the debates around cohesion add more details. The indicators could be concretized depending on the regional situation and interests.

#### **Scenario 4: MRS as a new political platform: A contributor to a peacefully united EU?**

My fourth, and admittedly most visionary, scenario sees macro-regions as way to contribute to a more peacefully united EU. They could offer one way to react to the aloofness of the EU and the EU-wide shift to the (extreme) right. In general, one can interpret many of the recent public statements as an increased recognition of the Nation State as the primary way of organizing Europe. Some commentators in the media even see the EU on its way to decomposition.

This fourth scenario envisions macro-regions as a new political platform for high politics. Many political questions must be addressed by more than one state, but not necessarily by the whole EU. In this case, macro-regions could offer political platforms for different levels of cooperation.

This scenario gives macro-regions a highly politically relevant voice and, in the long run, “macro-regional voices” could develop. While this possibility might seem unlikely to some, I argue that the initial discussion in the Baltic Sea Region for a joint strategy against the eutrophication of the sea gained momentum from geopolitical implications. The antecedents of the Baltic Sea Region can be traced back as well to broader geopolitical debates and still includes diplomatic involvements and foreign policies. International cooperation (e.g. Helcom) actively promoted European integration in this region after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and after the EU enlargement in 2004, this goal was achieved. The EU strategy offers the opportunity to cooperate firmly in the region and take Russia and Belarus as important partners in the region on board.

To my estimation, political cooperation in macro-regional contexts can contribute to a more peacefully united Europe. One example was the Danube Regions Annual Forum in 2015 where the plenary speakers from the Danube countries used this opportunity for political statements about the refugee flows in 2015. While this question needs to be addressed at the EU level as well, the refugee flows more concretely affected the Danube Region and passed through much of this area. Concrete actions against human trafficking could be addressed in cooperation with the Danube Region’s Priority Areas of security, navigation and transport. Another example was the war in Ukraine in 2014 where the neighbouring countries affected by these developments could have used this platform for political statements, as Ukraine is part of a macro-regional strategy.

Europe is diverse in all aspects and, with its high disparities, not easy to navigate politically. The return to national-centered solutions is one reaction. Considering recent developments, macro-regional cooperation could offer an alternative way for collaboration that addresses the concrete needs of people, politics and partnership. Maybe this intermediate form of integration is what is needed in these turbulent times?

#### **Some concluding remarks**

It is certainly not yet clear what the future of macro-regions will be. The four scenarios presented here reflect on different elements that could be developed further. It has to be acknowledged that there are currently only four macro-regions in the EU, covering mostly the eastern but not western parts. The North Sea Region has formerly discussed the development of a macro-region, with a strong opposition of the UK. Following the Brexit discussions, a North Sea Region strategy might become more topical than ever.

Most likely, macro-regions will be integrated more closely into the framework of European territorial cooperation, as I touched upon in the first two scenarios. Whether they develop into a politically relevant type of cooperation remains to be seen. My estimation is that this development will be very different in each of the regions. For example, in the Danube Region the chances are higher that this tool will be used as a political platform to develop joint positions, however within the Alpine Region current developments indicate a more project-driven type of cooperation seeking to influence the spending of EU money.

Over the coming year, I expect that we will see more clarity on the future of macro-regions. It will be interesting to see whether the states and the EU are bold enough to give this type of cooperation the chance that it deserves.

### Further Reading:

Gänzle, Stefan; Kern, Kristine (Eds) (2016): [A Macro-regional Europe in the Making. Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Evidence](#). Palgrave Macmillan.

Sielker, Franziska (2016): A stakeholder-based EU territorial cooperation: the example of European macro-regions, *European Planning Studies*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2016.1221383>