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The role of environmental issues in the adoption processes of European Union macro-regional strategies

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Abstract

European macro-regional strategies (MRSs) are established around physical features such as seas, mountain ranges and river basins. They focus on a new type of policy-making area (the ‘macro-regions’) while seeking to design and implement innovative governance approaches. They are therefore considered innovative both in their geographical focus (in the context of EU policies) and in their approach to policy design, adoption and implementation. The present article argues that the analysis of this development can usefully be informed by different theories referring to the notion of ‘functions’, drawn from political science on the one hand, and from geography and planning on the other. On this basis, it applies a multi-disciplinary perspective to the analysis of the role environmental issues have played in the emergence and adoption of macro-regional strategies. This allows for a comprehensive assessment of the role of environmental issues in the adoption of macro-regional strategies, as well as some of their inherent weaknesses.

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1. Introduction

In the latter half of the 2000s, Member States and the EU introduced macro-regional strategies (MRS) – i.e. the EU Strategies for the Baltic Sea, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine Regions – as a new form of transnational cooperation to address critical issues across national boundaries and to trigger a renewed sense of collaborative action. To date, all MRS have been built around physical features such as sea basins, river basins and mountain ranges. They are primarily designed and implemented within the framework of European regional policy, and include at least one pillar containing several environmental objectives. Additionally, the European Union (EU) Strategies for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) make reference to the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, while the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is linked to the Water Framework and Floods Directives. Given these features, an external observer may expect environmental issues to occupy a prominent position within these strategies even if they are mainly anchored in regional policy and focus on coordination across sectoral and geographic boundaries.

Transnational cooperation, including in the environmental domain, is not new. Many existing cooperation initiatives with an environmental dimension were initiated in large transnational areas covering multiple countries between the 1950s and the 1970s and the EU has funded such cooperation since 1997 (Dühr, 2011) as part of the so-called ‘Strand B’ of INTERREG. In addition, European countries concluded several transnational agreements to address specific issues, including the 1974 Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (HELCOM), the 1976 Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea Against Pollution and the 1985 Bucharest Declaration of the Danube Countries to Cooperate on Questions Concerning the Water Management of the Danube.

The adoption of MRS is a multilevel policy-making process with variable levels of involvement of EU member and partner states, the European Commission (EC) and regional authorities (Piattoni, 2016). It builds on more or less extensive pre-existing international agreements and transnational networks. The present article describes the adoption processes from an environmental perspective for three macro-regional strategies: three MRS, namely the EUSBSR, the EUSDR and the EUSAIR. The more recent EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), adopted in July 2015, is not considered as its design and...
implementation are less advanced\textsuperscript{1}. It identifies whether macro-regions were initiated primarily to compensate for observed insufficiencies of established transnational agreements, or to target issues for which no coordination mechanisms were in place. It evaluates the importance given to environmental issues at different stages of MRS elaboration, and the ways in which environmental issues are addressed in initial action plans. This provides an indication of how MRS were initially intended to be of added-value, namely by providing possibilities that existing inter- and transnational cooperation mechanisms could not offer.

MRS focus on a new type of policy-making areas (the ‘macro-regions’) while seeking to design and implement innovative governance approaches. To reflect this two-fold ambition in the analysis, we have mobilised different theories referring to the notion of ‘function’. From a political science perspective, functions are understood as the positive and negative consequences of policy-making instruments such as an MRS. Geographers and planners approach them as social, economic and ecological processes whose spatial organisation, taken individually or in combination, sometimes make it possible to identify so-called ‘functional areas’. The underlying hypothesis is that an integrated approach combining both approaches of ‘functions’ may help to overcome the dichotomy between ‘spaces of policy making’ (i.e. networks of actors, each of which has a specific territorial embeddedness and a geographic focus) and ‘spaces of processes’ (i.e. social, economic and ecological processes, and their respective spatial organisation).

Recent reviews of literature dealing with macro-regional strategies noted the limited number and scope of political science analyses approaching MRS from a comparative and comprehensive perspective (Chilla et al., 2017; Gänzle et al., 2018). However, some promising research perspectives are identified. MRS may be approached as instances of lean and flexible multilevel governance (MLG) promoted by the European Union, i.e. ‘type II MLG’ in the categorisation introduced by Hooghe and Mark’s (2003; 2001). They can also be considered as instances of ‘experimentalist governance’, i.e. as processes with “provision goal setting and revision based on learning” (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2010). This is illustrated by the regular adjustments and revisions of macro-regional action plans and policy frameworks. Gänzle (2017) and Gänzle and Mirtl (2017) combine these notions of ‘multilevel’ and ‘experimentalist’ governance in their accounts of MRS. A similar type approach prevails in Plangger’s descriptions of parallel empowerment and institutional reconfiguration processes in the EUSALP (2016, 2017). Piattoni (2016) provides a wide

\textsuperscript{1} Admittedly, implementation of the EUSAIR is also at an early stage.
theoretical backdrop for these accounts. She sketches narratives of MRS inspired by functionalist, intergovernmentalist, neo-institutionalist and constructivist approaches. The present article’s reflections on the roles of ‘functions’ builds on these conceptual tools and theoretical perspectives.

When they did not make use of a vocabulary drawn from political science such as the one described above, geographers and planners have structured their accounts of MRS around three main notions: soft spaces, rescaling and Europeanisation. The concept of ‘soft spaces’ (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009) has proved particularly well-suited (Chilla and Sielker, 2015; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Stead, 2014). Soft spaces are characterised by relatively flexible governance arrangements, fuzzy boundaries and pragmatic and a result-oriented selection of thematic foci. Gänzle and Kern (2016; 2013) also describe the process of macro-regionalisation as a shift from territorial to functional regions. They consider that macro-regional spaces of policy-making are not shaped by administrative and political criteria, but on the basis of functional relations. This implies that their boundaries can change over time and that delineations may be adapted depending on the issue (leading to a certain ‘fuzziness’). Chilla et al. (2017) observe that ‘soft spaces’ can be a component of ‘reterritorialization’, as part of the ‘constant struggle for appropriate boundaries, institutions and resources which “fit” a specific territory’. A key driver of rescaling in macro-regional soft spaces are actors that look beyond administrative boundaries in order to address specific challenges (Dühr, 2018). At the same time, Stead et al. (2016), observe that, in the case of HELCOM, the EU has “co-opted a macro-regional body to implement EU legislation” (p. 113). Both ‘upscaling’ and ‘downscaling’ therefore occurs in relation to MRS. Sielker (2018) considers these changes as components of ‘Europeanisation’. She shows that, because they partly result from the increasing importance of EU regulations and financial incentives, e.g. in the fields of environmental policy and transport, they also lead to a sectoralisation of spatial planning. Europeanisation can therefore further enhance transnational cooperation initiatives’ focus on ‘functional spaces’ corresponding to these sectoral concerns. However, this ‘pragmatic’, ‘problem-solving’ approach has some major blind spots with respect to its relation to state territoriality, and more generally, to the ‘territorial administrative complex’ (Faludi, 2015) in which the legitimacy and accountability of policy measures are grounded. These issues have been described in detail by Bialasiewicz et al. (2013), who note that the “spaces described in the macroregional literature [...] are [...] defined by a multiplicity of visible and invisible functions, materialities, imaginations, fantasies, formal and informal strategies at a number of scales, fragmented individual and collective spatialities” (p. 72). They consider that the lightness with which European institutions and commentators invoke the
notion of ‘region’ when trying to account for these complex ‘spaces’ make it difficult to engage in a sound discussion of how MRS could be firmly grounded in democratic decision-making at different level and help to address geopolitical challenges along the EU’s external borders.

As shown by the above review, the notion of ‘functions’ therefore recurrently occurs in the literature on macro-regional strategies. These different observations incite us to explore whether ‘functions’ could be a pivotal notion for critical analyses of MRS, making it possible to better bridge current perspectives on macro-regional processes by political scientists, on the one hand, and geographers and planners, on the other. For this purpose, we first introduce different theories of ‘functions’ and ‘functional interaction’, and the ways in which they relate to macro-regional cooperation processes. Second, we describe the roles of environmental issues in the elaboration of the EUSBSR, the EUSD smaller and the EUSAIR. This allows for a synthetic assessment of the role of environmental issues in the adoption of macro-regional strategies, as well as some of their inherent weaknesses.

The article draws on extensive reviews of documents linked to the design and implementation of the three macro-regional strategies. In addition, 16 interviews were carried out with stakeholders and groups of stakeholders involved in activities with a strong environmental dimension within the different macro-regional strategies.

2. ‘Functions’ and ‘functional Interdependencies’ in macro-regional narratives

This section introduces two types of approaches to ‘functions’. First, it is shown that neo-functionalist-inspired European integration theories may selectively be applied to macro-regional cooperation dynamics. These theories are useful insofar as they make it possible to account for institutional dynamics resulting from spillover effects in shifting or fuzzy cooperation areas. Second, it discusses the relevance of notions such as ‘megaregions’, ‘global integration zones’ and ‘ecosystems approach’ when describing macro-regional cooperation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, political scientists debated whether transnational regions were the spontaneous outcome of social and economic cross-border interaction or the deliberate product of state-led processes (see e.g. Deutsch 1954). Proponents of the former position argued that transnational cooperation usually first focuses on specific issues that cannot be solved otherwise and tend to be complex. As a result of this complexity, a wide range of actors are encouraged to elaborate and implement policies in new
collaborative configurations. This triggers an increasing number of actors to recognize the potential added-value of cooperation in other fields and progressively leads to the emergence of transnational territories of cooperation and integration. Summarized in a few words, this is the central hypothesis of the neo-functionalist approach of integration as proposed by Ernst Haas (Haas, 1957, 1964, 1975). It is noteworthy that Haas and others (see e.g. Colomy 1998; Eisenstadt 1995) have traditionally emphasized the role of institutional or policy entrepreneurs, thereby responding to the widespread criticism of (some) neofunctionalists’ neglect of agency. Our analysis of macro-regional developments confirms the importance of policy entrepreneurs.

The incorporation of a geographic dimension is a central element of Haas’s critique of functionalism; this opens avenues for considering the role of environmental issues in transnational integration processes. As it was initially formulated by David Mitrany (1948), functionalism posited the obsolescence of the territorially circumscribed nation-state and opposed the regionalization of policies because it would undermine the capacity to address sectoral issues. By contrast, the neo-functionalist emphasis on transnational spillovers as the main driving force of integration did not negate the utility of territorial approaches to policy-making and implementation (Hettne, 2005: 546; Rosamond, 2000: 50). Spillovers are described as “a situation in which a given action, related to a specific goal, creates a situation in which the original goal can be assured only by taking further actions, which in turn create a further condition and a need for more action and so forth” (Lindberg, 1963; Rosamond, 2000: 60). MRS confront environmental issues such as marine eutrophication (European Commission, 2009a: 9) and integrated river basin management (European Commission, 2010a) that correspond to these types of situations. These environmental issues can also be described as ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Not only are there no technical fixes available. There are also concerns regarding the capacity of existing coordination and governance mechanisms to address them, e.g. with regards to the Helsinki Commission’s capacity to address eutrophication in the Baltic Sea Region (Österblom et al., 2010). As possible solutions to overcome such environmental challenges, MRS offer a promising ground for neo-functionalist explanations.

However, such theories do not necessarily account for the emergence of inter-sectoral coordination and multilevel governance within geographical areas that are meaningful from an ecosystemic point of view. Some of the assumptions of neo-functionalist theory initially corresponded to so-called ‘old regionalism’ (Balsiger and Prys 2016; Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010; De Melo et al. 1993; Mansfield and Milner 1999),
which refers to post-World War Two attempts to produce “islands of cooperation that might build a bridge towards universal peace” (Rosamond, 2000: 69). ‘New regionalism’ is a phenomenon that started in the mid-1980s as part of the unfolding of globalization. According to Hettne (2005), it included both increased trade within regional blocs compared to between them (Chortareas and Pelagidis, 2004) and state regulation that led to the creation of regional blocs (Tussie, 1998; Wilkinson, 2013); in contrast to the old regionalist tendency to treat regions as outcomes, i.e. as dependent variables, new regionalist scholars ascribe agency to regions and regional actors seeking institutional change. ‘New regionalism’ also covered a growing number of domains, including environmental issues, identifying ‘transnational communities of fate bound by ecological impacts’ (Kelly, 2007: 205). New regionalism is therefore multi-dimensional in character and consensus has emerged on the fact that there are no ‘natural’ regions. As Hurrell (1995) states, “definitions of ‘region’ and indicators of ‘regionness’ vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation” (pp. 333–334). Ecosystem-based arguments for transnational coordination can be accommodated within such ‘new regionalism’-inspired approaches of neofunctionalism.

Ecosystem-based arguments have been advanced in the context of MRS establishment, especially with reference to environmental problems at the level of the regional sea or river basin. An ecosystem approach promotes policy design and implementation in ways that are adapted to “levels of biological organization, which encompass the essential structure, processes, functions and interactions among organisms and their environment” (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2004). It is also a principle that promotes inter-sectoral coordination and multilevel governance within geographical areas that are meaningful from an ecosystemic point of view (Vierros, 2008: 44). Although ecosystem-based management for the most part emerged in local settings (Gunderson and Holling, 2002), they have inspired the management of much larger areas and its principles now extend beyond management into governance.

The ecosystem approach has been pivotal in EU marine policy (Hoof et al., 2012), including the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. From the perspective of the EC, this Maritime Strategy was the main framework for the elaboration of the EUSAIR, but the question is whether the strategy remained faithful to this principle during negotiations with national and regional authorities and the ensuing widening of its thematic focus (Cugusi and Stocchiero, 2016). In the Baltic case, it has been argued that the added value of the EUSBSR lies precisely in its capacity to enable “a cross-sectoral approach to
environmental issues” which could not be implemented under pre-existing, more narrowly environmental cooperation initiatives such as HELCOM (European Commission, 2013: 6).

This wide cross-sectoral perspective helps explain why references to ‘natural’ or ‘historical and cultural’ regions (e.g. the ‘New Hansa’ in the Baltic Sea Region) play a significant role in the delineation of macro-regions and the promotion of macro-regional cooperation. Constructivist authors theorise these types of observations by defining regions as a symbolic act, which can be undertaken by a variety of actors to promote their respective political agendas (Balsiger and VanDeveer, 2010; Väyrynen, 2003). This implies that observed delineations of macro-regions are influenced by the policy objectives and communication strategies pursued by their proponents.

As shown by this brief account, a theoretical framework for the understanding of macro-regional strategies emerges by combining elements of neo-functionalism, and in particular the notion of spillovers, with multi-dimensional perspectives of new regionalism and constructivist approaches to transnational region-building processes.

Geographers and planners have developed other theories and notions to describe and analyse transnational integration processes and associated policy objectives, in relation to different types of conceptualisations of regions and regionalisation that were mostly not developed with the transnational scale in mind. One may distinguish the territorial, functional and relational perspectives on regions. The ‘territorial region’ is a more or less institutionalised, bounded space, epitomized by the NUTS acronym² in the EU jargon. The relevance of this traditional understanding of regions has been challenged in different ways. There is a long tradition of theorisation and empirical investigations of ‘functional’ regions (Haggett, 1965; Juillard, 1962; Nystuen and Dacey, 1961). They may be delineated on the basis of e.g. population flows (daily mobility patterns, commuting), trade in goods and services, communication and traffic flows and are typically organised around multiple urban centres. There has been resurgence of interest in functional regions in the last decades, as part of attempts to adapt ‘spaces of policy-making’ to ‘spaces social and economic interaction’ (Cörvers et al., 2009; Karlsson and Olsson, 2006; OECD, 2002). Other alternative ways of thinking the region developed from late 1990s onwards. Allen et al. (1998) observed

² NUTS is a French acronym for “Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques”. It is used to designate the bounded geographical territories of regions at different levels (‘NUTS 3’, ‘NUTS 2’ and ‘NUTS 1’) and Member States (‘NUTS 0’).
that the hegemonic neo-liberal project generates regional structures and processes that can best be described from a relational and networked perspective. The corresponding regional spatial objects are characterised by ‘soft’, ‘fuzzy’ borders. An important factor of boundedness is regional identity, which resurges as cohesion and social integration are challenged in an increasingly integrated and competitive global economy (Paasi, 2009, 2011).

These different types of approaches, focusing on functions, relations or identity, have been transposed to the transnational level by policy practitioners. The major policy objective, or regional function, they have focused on is the promotion of economic growth through enhanced integration in global trade flows. In its 2010 background analyses of the EUSBSR, the EC refers to “the economy of the BSR” and describes “systems of metropolitan regions acting as engines of development towards a Global Integration Zone” (European Commission, 2010c). This mention of ‘global integration zones’ refers to an established discourse in European spatial planning, as the term was for instance used in European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) adopted in 1999. This notion has been promoted as part of a concern for a geographically more balanced and harmonious development in Europe (European Commission, 1999; Faludi, 2012). The ESDP’s successor, the ‘Territorial Agenda’, considers functional integration in ‘transnational functional regions’ as an instrument that can “create a critical mass for development, diminishing economic, social and ecological fragmentation, building mutual trust and social capital” (BMUB, 2011). Both approaches are inspired by the principle of polycentric development which, based on a French planning tradition, seeks to promote a geographically more balanced development by promoting nodes outside of the core areas at different levels (Richardson and Jensen, 2000; Davoudi, 2003; Waterhout et al., 2005). Strikingly, currently adopted or envisaged macro-regional strategies all focus on spaces that are clearly outside of the European ‘core area’ (Baltic Sea Region, Atlantic Region) are located on its outer border (Danube Region, North Sea Region) or are organised around an area that rural geographers describe as an “inner periphery from the West European point of view” (Alpine Region) (Vaishar and Zapletalová, 2009). This suggests a continuity between discourses on European polycentric development and on macro-regional strategies. However, the perspective on cities and metropolitan regions has changed in the process: while ‘global integration zones’ were organised around networks of
urban nodes, natural features such as sea and river basins or mountain ranges are used to designate macro-regional strategies.

Urban geographers have suggested that large, transnational and functionally integrated areas (megaregions) could result from mergers of metropolitan areas leading to the formation of a Megalopolis. This type of enquiries were inspired by Gottmann and Hekscher’s (1961) seminal work on the ‘Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States’. Harrison and Hoyler (2015: 17) identify megaregional integration and visions developed to this end as levers of assertion in a globalised economy, where actors, localities and regions are well-connected to global networks of economic exchange and information flow.

In the Baltic context, the concept of ‘megaregion’ is used to express the ambition of involved actors to jointly gain in global significance (Baltic Development Forum think tank, 2014). However, Smas and Schmitt (2015) have shown that the Baltic Region does not constitute a unified urban megaregion. They do identify a ‘Nordic capital megaregion’ formed by Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo and Helsinki, but emphasize the existence of “significant discontinuities” (p. 160). They also observe that the EUSBSR focuses on “inter-sectoral challenges of the Baltic Sea Region, without mentioning where they occur or where such actions should be best tackled” (p. 165). Discussions on megaregional collaboration as a potential vector of environmental protection (Hahs, 2016; Ross et al., 2016) are therefore not necessarily relevant for MRS.

From an economic and social perspective, MRS are therefore inspired by different traditions within planning and urban and regional geography, without being firmly embedded in any of them. They are loosely connected both to European spatial planning discourse and to the urban geography concept of ‘megaregion’. As mentioned in the introduction, Bialasiewicz et al. (2013) have highlighted the risks associated with this loose and confused way of dealing with the concept of ‘region’.

Two main observations emerge from this review of possible theoretical frameworks of macro-regional cooperation, respectively drawn from political science and from geography and planning. First, neo-functionalist theory of spillovers may be drawn upon, insofar as these strategies address complex, multifaceted issues. The involvement of policy entrepreneurs from a wide range of sectors to solve these issues

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3 The ESDP argues that “The creation of several dynamic zones of global economic integration, well distributed throughout the EU territory and comprising a network of internationally accessible metropolitan regions and their linked hinterland (towns, cities and rural areas of varying sizes), will play a key role in improving spatial balance in Europe” (Committee on Spatial Development 1999)
could progressively give rise to an integrated region. The multi-dimensional approach of region building in new regionalism offers a promising basis for applying these theories to multilevel governance instruments such as MRS. Second, established notions used to designate transnational regions do not capture the realities of macro-regional cooperation in a convincing way. They can neither be assimilated to ‘global integration zones’ nor to ‘megaregions’. This suggests that functional integration in macro-regions is different from the types of transnational functional integration that geographers and planners have focused on so far.

This constitutes the theoretical backdrop to the following sections, which critically assess the importance of environmental issues in the adoption of MRS and the ways in which these strategies proposed to address environmental problems in their respective action plans.

3. EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

The preoccupying environmental status of the Baltic Sea has been considered as a political priority since the late 1960s, when Finland and Sweden initiated scientific collaborations with the Soviet Union to work on these issues. The mutual recognition of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Federal German Republic (FGR) in 1972 made it possible to draft the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, which was signed already in 1974 and ratified by all riparian states in 1980. However, this so-called ‘Helsinki Convention’ remained non-binding, as no measures were foreseen in case its recommendations would not be followed (Räsänen and Laakkonen, 2008). The Convention was also criticized for not applying to internal and territorial waters (Birnie, 1996) as a result of opposition from the Soviet Union (Räsänen and Laakkonen, 2008).

These weaknesses were in theory corrected when the Helsinki Convention was revised and re-ratified in 1992, after the end of the Cold War. However, major implementation gaps continued to be observed. In The first strategic report of the VASAB intergovernmental cooperation network emphasized the

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4 A number of organisations describe the Baltic Sea as one of the most polluted seas in the world (see e.g. European Court of Auditors (2016)). As noted by Bengtsson (2009), “the combination of the very shallow and almost completely enclosed character of the sea (only 3% of the water is exchanged every year), that rivers drain an area four times that of the sea, and that some 100 million people inhabit the region have resulted in severe environmental degradation for a long time”.

5 “Visions and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea”
importance of addressing sea pollution from terrestrial ‘hot spots’ by introducing “municipal waste water treatment plants and the control of industrial effluents” (VASAB, 1994). Since the European Community became a contracting party taking on a role of policy entrepreneur, the Helsinki Convention was progressively established as a component of EU maritime policy. According to the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Member States are required to use regional cooperation structures such as the Helsinki Commission when this is ‘practical and appropriate’ (Marine Strategy Framework Directive 2008/56/EC, art. 13).

A decisive impetus for a EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region came in a paper published by a group of Members of the European Parliament in 2005 (Beazley et al., 2005). This paper expresses two types of contradictions. First, while the Baltic Sea is claimed to have ‘for all intents and purposes, turned into a European Union lake’ with the 2004 enlargement, needs for cooperation with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine are repeatedly mentioned, notably with regards to environmental issues. There is both a need to develop integrated programmes and policies within the EU and to coordinate cooperation efforts with select neighbourhood countries. Second, while the environment is described as negatively impacted by human activities (e.g. agriculture, shipping and offshore oil drilling), suggested strategic options in the fields of economy, culture and education do not incorporate environmental concerns. This limitation is partly compensated in a 2006 European Parliament report stating that “the reduction of eutrophication is one of the most important aspects to be considered in the implementation of the Union’s agricultural and structural programmes in the region” and that “proper environmental impact assessments should be a prerequisite for all energy-related infrastructure projects” (European Parliament, 2006).

Environmental issues occupy an even more prominent position in the conclusions of the December 2007 European Council which invited the EC to present an EU strategy for the Baltic. Environmental challenges are the only ones explicitly mentioned, even if it specified that other fields of action also needed to be considered (European Council, 2008). The Swedish government had actively promoted this decision in view of the adoption of the strategy during its presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2009. In the environmental policy section of its budgetary proposals for 2007, the Swedish government refers to Baltic Sea cooperation and specifies that “the Baltic Sea should, within possibilities offered by EU regulations, become a pilot area for a new common management strategy in which the countries cooperate” (Swedish government - Ministry of Finance, 2006). It had the previous year noted that ‘the regional cooperation organisations, HELCOM, the Council of Baltic Sea States Baltic 21 initiative [...] are
struggling to find effective forms of cooperation after the enlargement of the European Union’ (Swedish government - Ministry of Finance, 2005). The Swedish initiative was therefore inspired by the observation that a new framework for action in favour of the Baltic Sea environment should be established after EU enlargement. Environmental issues thus played a central role in its promotion of the EUSBSR.

Upon initiating consultations, however, the Swedish EU Presidency in June 2009 drafted a work programme in which the suggested thematic scope of the EUSBSR was significantly widened. It then included “taking full advantage of the growth potential” and “addressing cross-border criminality”. The MRS appears as a component of a general ambition to “combine different policy areas so that good economic growth can be combined with a reduced burden on the climate and the environment” (Swedish government, 2009). However, the document does not include concrete proposals for mainstreaming environmental concerns.

The consecutive communication and indicative action plan from the EC concerning the EUSBSR specified that the environment is “foremost” among the challenges faced by the Baltic Sea Region and that an integrated approach was necessary for its sustainable development (European Commission, 2009b). A limited number of sectors were targeted in relation to environmental issues, as the Commission sought to make the Baltic Sea Region a “model region for clean shipping”. Additionally, agriculture, forestry and fisheries are mentioned as sectors of which the sustainability need to be reinforced while at the same time stressing the need to maintain their profitability and competitiveness. It is also stated that Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) contributes to the sustainability of the Baltic Sea Region. Lines of arguments developed by environmental interest groups, according to which CAP effectively subsidises agricultural practices leading to eutrophication of the Baltic Sea (World Wildlife Fund, 2007), were not addressed.

The first EUSBSR Action Plan, adopted in June 2009, foresees environmental measures at the level of the Baltic Sea Region in coordination with pre-existing transnational initiatives. The previous Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) between the contracting parties to the Helsinki Commission had been negotiated in parallel with the preparation of the EUSBSR and signed in November 2007. The contracting parties to HELCOM are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden and the EU. The Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP), established in 2001, more specifically targets environmental issues in Russia and Belarus and focuses on wastewater and solid waste management, energy efficiency and nuclear safety. The environmental component of the EUSBSR must therefore be
considered in relation to the HELCOM BSAP and the NDEP. Among the measures foreseen in the first EUSBSR Action Plan “implementation of the BSAP” is mentioned multiple times (European Commission, 2009c). Part of the underlying rationale for the EUSBSR is therefore that the implementation mechanisms foreseen in the BSAP would be insufficient. Compared to the NDEP, the EUSBSR promotes a more integrated perspective on an ‘environmental neighbourhood policy’.

The general objective of ‘Making the Baltic Sea Region an Environmentally Sustainable Place’ is subdivided in five sub-objectives: combat eutrophication, preserve natural zones, biodiversity and fish stocks, reduce the use and impact of hazardous substances, become a model region for clean shipping and, finally, mitigate and adapt to climate change. Foreseen inter-sectoral measures are cautiously non-confrontational, e.g. facilitation of cross-sectoral policy-oriented dialogue with agricultural policy based on support to examples of good practice, encouragements to adopt stricter national regulations on fishing than those foreseen in Community legislation, promotion of research on hazardous substances and encouragements for ports to adopt voluntary measures reducing wastewater discharges. The EUSBSR therefore primarily appears as an attempt by the above-mentioned policy entrepreneurs to aggregate goodwill and to reinforce the knowledge base for more environment-friendly development in the Baltic Sea Region.

4. EU Strategy for the Danube Region

While international cooperation on the Danube River dates back to the middle of the 19th century (Bodansky, 2010), environmental concerns did not appear on the agenda until the mid-1970s. By the time the EUSDR came into being more than thirty years later, however, environmental cooperation was well institutionalized through EU law such as the 2000 Water Framework Directive (WFD), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) treaties such as the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, and sub-regional instruments such as the 1994 Danube River Protection Convention. Each of these environmental instruments has imposed an ecoregional perspective: the 1992 Convention calls on states to ‘define the catchment area […] subject to cooperation’ (Art. 9.1); the 1994 Convention ‘applies to the catchment area’ (Art. 3) defined as ‘the hydrological river basin’ (Art. 1) and the WFD requires implementation at the level of river basins (Art. 33).
In 1985, in response to manifest water quality problems from urban and industrial waste, eight riparian states signed the Declaration of the Danube Countries to Cooperate on Questions Concerning the Water Management of the Danube (Bucharest Declaration). The Declaration confirmed the principle that the environmental quality of the river is tied to the environment of the basin as a whole, committing the signatories to an integrated approach in water management.

The resulting Environmental Programme for the Danube River Basin (EPDRB) was adopted in 1991, and the Danube River Protection Convention was signed in 1994. The Convention, which came into force in 1998, called for “cooperation on fundamental water management issues, including the conservation, improvement and rational use of surface waters and groundwater; preventive measures to control hazards originating from accidents, floods, ice or hazardous substances; and measures to reduce pollution loads entering the Black Sea from sources in the Danube River Basin” (Shepherd, 2014). It contains provisions for environmental impact monitoring, liability for cross-border pollution, wetland habitat protection rules, and the development of guidelines for conserving areas of ecological importance or aesthetic value. A Vienna-based International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) was established. The ICPDR did not only include the riparian countries, but also the EC, international financial institutions (e.g., European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, World Bank, UN organizations (e.g., United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)), and non-governmental organisations (e.g., World Conservation Union, World Wide Fund for Nature, Regional Environmental Centre). The ICPDR guided the development of a Strategic Action Plan, which for the first time required public participation in the development of an international management plan (Schulze, 2012). The Convention signatories additionally agreed to coordinate the WFD and the Floods Directives through the ICPDR, respectively in 2000 in 2007. Today, by its own estimate, the ICPDR is Europe’s largest international body of river basin management.

However, there is no continuity between these developments and the 2008 initiative leading to adoption of the EUSDR. In June of that year, the heads of government of Austria and Romania wrote to Commission President Manuel Barroso to ask that a strategy for the Danube region be initiated (Sielker, 2012). The initial focus was on integrating a region that was historically caught between the influences of the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires, and was then separated between Capitalist West and Communist East in the 20th century. The first preoccupation was therefore to promote European integration. In the final declaration of the Danube Summit in Ulm in May 2009, “improving water quality
of the Danube and its tributaries” is only mentioned as an objective to be implemented while pursuing strategic goals in the fields of e.g. energy, transport, tourism, economic development and tourism.

The use of the Danube River to designate the macro-regional cooperation area is therefore primarily symbolic. The need for coordinated action to enhance water quality and to preserve riparian ecosystems was not major driver when launching the strategy. Yet, because of the association of the strategy to a river basin, environmental concerns were quite naturally integrated once the process was initiated. In the February 2010 scoping paper accompanying the public consultation process, for instance, there was already a dedicated pillar for environmental issues and risk management (European Commission, 2010b). This pillar was maintained in the EC communication and in the Action Plan published later the same year. Priorities 1 (‘to restore and maintain the quality of waters’) and 2 (‘to manage environmental risks’) deal exclusively with water-related issues, while priority 3 (‘to preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils’) also addresses environmental challenges in non-riparian areas.

The authors of the EC communication on the EUSDR state that ‘the Danube Region is a functional area defined by its river basin’ (European Commission, 2010b). Considering the history of the EUSDR, such a statement can be interpreted as part of a ‘region-building strategy’, rather than as an empirically grounded assertion. Significantly, no supporting arguments are provided. Such an approach to the construction of the region can have concrete implications on the focus of the MRS, e.g. when the EUSDR is mostly about water for actors such as the ICPDR. Furthermore, while it is acknowledged in the Action Plan that the Danube Region also includes ‘the major part of the Carpathian Mountains, the Balkans and part of the Alps’, some of the participating countries in parallel tried to establish the Carpathians as a separate macro-region with the help of UNEP (Gaberell, 2015). They thereby suggest that a cooperation area built around a river may not be appropriate to deal with all issues pertaining to the mountain ranges it covers.

Overall, the EUSDR has a strong, albeit fairly symbolic, environmental dimension. However, addressing these issues was not a main driving force when it was first launched. Previously established agreements and programmes contributed to allow the strategy to incorporate environmental concerns. It was also facilitated by the reference to a river basin as the geographic justification for cooperation.

5. EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
Transnational environmental cooperation in the Mediterranean appeared in the beginning of the 20th century. The regional marine concept arose early with the International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean Sea (CIESM) set up in 1908. Other regional initiatives include the Treaty of Montreux (1936), the Nyon Arrangement (1937) on the freedom and security of navigation, and the General Fisheries Council for the Mediterranean (1948) set up by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (Suárez de Vivero et al., 2015: 215). The Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) and the Convention for the protection of the Mediterranean Sea against pollution (hereafter ‘Barcelona Convention’), adopted respectively in 1974 and 1975, pioneered the implementation of the Regional Seas Programme by UNEP. The Barcelona Convention involves 22 riparian states of the Mediterranean Sea facing the common challenges of protecting the marine and coastal environment while boosting regional and national plans to achieve sustainable development. Outside the framework of the Barcelona Convention, other agreements and initiatives have been established, some of which operate at the level of the Adriatic and Ionian sub-regions.

Reference should also be made to the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII), established at the Conference on the Development and Security in the Adriatic and the Ionian Sea in Ancona on 19 - 20 May 2000. The AII represents an inter-governmental platform of cooperation that encompasses environmental protection but extends also to other fields, such as economic development, land transport connections, health and cultural co-operation, tourism development and maritime co-operation. It includes EU Member States (Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece) and third countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) bordering the Adriatic and Ionian seas.

The AII, in particular under the impulse of the Marche regional authority and of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Cugusi and Stocchiero, 2016) has played a prominent role in building political consensus among its members on the establishment of an EU MRS in the Adriatic and Ionian areas.

The proposal for an MRS in the area was first endorsed by the Ancona Declaration adopted by the AII in May 2010. In this Declaration, the Adriatic-Ionian MRS is considered as a way to enhance regional cooperation in different fields. In particular, it recognizes that “the establishment of closer cooperation creates better possibilities for solving specific environmental problems jointly” (Adriatic Ionian Initiative,

6 Today, more than 143 countries have joined 18 Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans for the sustainable management and use of the marine and coastal environment.
2010). Nonetheless, enhanced cooperation was not limited to sustainable development and environmental protection. It also included fields such as economic, transport, tourism, culture, science and education as well as measures to jointly combat illegal activities.

At the beginning of the process, this vision differed from that of the EC. Since the endorsement of the European Council (June 2011), which recommended to continue working “in cooperation with the Commission on possible future MRSs, in particular as regards the Adriatic and Ionian region” (European Council, 2011, p. 14), the EUSAIR was rather considered as an instrument for implementing the Integrated Marine Policy (IMP) and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) in the Adriatic-ionian basin. In 2011, the Committee of the Regions specified that the mission of a macro-region should be to connect the diverse territories of the area “to foster its sustainable development while protecting the fragile maritime and coastal environment” (Committee of the Regions, 2011a, p. 6). This approach was confirmed by the declarations of Janez Potočnik, who as Commissioner for the Environment recognised the relevance of an MRS in the Adriatic Ionian sea basin for “addressing specific challenges for the marine environment in the Adriatic and Ionian seas and implementing successfully the ecosystem-based approach to the management of human activities” (Committee of the Regions, 2011b). Therefore, the EC considered the EUSAIR as linked to the regionalization process embraced by EU marine policies since the adoption of the IMP and the entry into force of MSFD.

In December 2012, the EC’s Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) reaffirmed the interest of the EC as a priority basin area for implementing the IMP by launching the Maritime strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. This was the first initiative of this kind in the Mediterranean. At the same time, it was recognized that the Maritime strategy might constitute the first component of an EU MRS in the area. After all, the functioning principles of sea basins and MRSs have many similarities. Both of them aim to use existing resources and improve coordination between existing structures and regulations, without new legislation and funding.

The negotiation process for elaborating the Action Plan was launched in December 2012, when the European Council gave the EC the mandate to present “a new EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region before the end of 2014”. As a result of this negotiation process, the scope of the Strategy was widened and a multi-pillar approach was adopted. In the words of Maria Damanaki, former Commissioner for maritime affairs and fisheries, the sea basin strategy was the first thematic component of an EU strategy
for the Adriatic and Ionian Region. The objective was then to widen this strategy so that it would also cover issues not directly related to the sea (Damanaki, 2012). In July 2014, the Communication of the Commission on the EUSAIR confirmed that the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region “is a functional area primarily defined by the Adriatic and Ionian Seas basin”, and specifies that it encompasses joint environmental challenges but is not limited these issues (European Commission, 2014a).

The EUSAIR has been shaped by two important factors. First, some Member States, e.g. Italy, have pushed to make the MRS an integrated development strategy with a marine/maritime dimension. Second, the EC’s Directorate General for Regional and Urban Affairs (DG REGIO) took the lead of the process, rather than DG MARE. This led to a strategy that emphasizes maritime and marine aspects but also covers other fields. The EUSAIR benefited from the preparatory work that led to the adoption of the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Area to such an extent that, since its adoption, the Marine Strategy has ceased to exist. Its content has been embedded into the first and the third pillars of the EUSAIR action plan, which are, respectively, dedicated to ‘blue growth’ and to ‘environmental quality’.

Although ‘environment quality’ is a self-standing pillar, the EUSAIR has been conceived, at least in principle, as “an integrated strategy encompassing four Pillars, [which] provides the opportunity to address environmental issues in an integrated way” (European Commission, 2014d). As stressed in the August 2013 Discussion Paper (European Commission, 2013), environmental issues will be tackled also in the other pillars of the Strategy. The second pillar, ‘Connecting the region’, will aim in particular to reduce the environmental impact of transport systems; to minimize the pollution from ship traffic; to preserve security of environment during transport of dangerous goods and activities related to the energy sector; to develop environment-friendly fuels in marine transport as well as implementation of renewable energy sources. The fourth pillar, ‘Sustainable tourism’, will support the sustainable development of coastal, maritime and hinterland tourism while reducing seasonality of demand, limiting its environmental footprint and taking into consideration the impacts of a changing climate.

6. A macro-regional rationale for action that remains unclear

As shown by the above review, the initial driving forces of macro-regional cooperation were not primarily environmental, despite the institutionalized legacy of environmental concerns. A possible exception is the EUSBSR, where the Swedish presidency initiative was initially environmentally driven. However, in the
European negotiations leading to the adoption of the Strategy, several policy entrepreneurs made environmental concerns a key issue. In the cases of the EUSDR and the EUSAIR, initial preoccupations were mainly related to EU integration and neighbourhood relations or of an economic nature. References to geographical features such as sea and river basins are therefore symbolic rather than functionally motivated. They primarily help to give macro-regional delineations a semblance of ‘naturalness’ which is a component of region-building strategies of involved players. They do not imply that the focus of MRS is on environmental issues.

However, proponents of more ecologically responsible forms of development sought to capitalise on the fact that MRSs were built around geographical features. This principle of delineation makes it possible to focus on the interface between social change and economic growth, on the one hand, and physical environment on the other. Additionally, pre-existing transnational environmental cooperation initiatives had extensively explored environmental challenges in the Baltic Sea, the Danube river basin and the Adriatic and Ionian seas. They were therefore in a favourable position to promote the inclusion of environmental concerns in all three MRS. This combination of factors encouraged proponents of MRSs to portray them as instruments to mobilise a wider range or actors around environmental objectives.

From a theoretical perspective, one could expect ‘spillover mechanisms’ such as those described in neo-functional theory of transnational integration to play a role in this ‘widening’. However, their role in the emergence and initial implementation of macro-regions remains debatable. Admittedly, MRS adopt an integrative stance. They highlight the need for coordination between sectors and levels of decision-making and seek to overcome existing barriers that prevent players from jointly designing and implementing policies. However, contrary to what has been observed when it comes to integration at the European level, neo-functional theories of regionalization do not appear to have inspired the design of MRS. There is little evidence of a strategic design of a ‘spillover inspired’ sequence of actions that would lead to the desired outcome. Negotiation processes leading to the adoption of the strategies all led to action plans with wide ranges of social, economic and ecological objectives. These objectives are consensually described as equally important and to be addressed in parallel. There are therefore no core objectives (comparable to market integration at EU level) around which spillovers would be foreseen to occur.
From an environmental perspective, the mixture of dedicated measures and objectives mainstreamed across relevant economic and transport related fields of intervention implies that environmental issues are addressed from multiple angles. However, based on the observation of processes leading to the adoption of MRSs, it is unclear how a governance setup capable of addressing complex environmental issues such as e.g. eutrophication and water quality would emerge from these disparate actions. While European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs), other transnational funding programmes, transnational cooperation initiatives such as HELCOM and the ICPDR were expected to contribute to the implementation of MRSs, limited concrete measures were taken to this end by the proponents of the strategies. These different instruments and bodies therefore did not have specific incentives to adapt their working methods (see e.g. Gløersen and Hermannek (2015) in the case of ESIF).

The review therefore first shows that MRS have not been built around environmental objectives. Second, while policy entrepreneurs introduced environmental objectives in prominent positions in all strategies, environmental concerns have not been mainstreamed across all sectors. Third, changes in governance structures enabling actors to address complex environmental challenges have not been foreseen. Finally, none of the MRS clearly determine whether the macro-region is a pre-existing natural or socioeconomic area, or an area that may become functionally integrated as a result of cooperation between institutions and other actors that are, geographically speaking, close to each other. The ‘ontological indeterminacy’ of transnational environmental regions has previously been observed when comparing different initiatives and the ways in which they are approached in the literature (Debarbieux, 2012). In spite of claims that MRS constitute ‘integrated frameworks’ (European Commission, 2014b), they are characterised by this same indeterminate ‘regionality’.
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