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**The new challenges of the European Union.
The case of macro-regional strategies**

Alessandro Laruffa

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The new challenges of the European Union. The case of macro-regional strategies

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Abstract

The rejection of the European Constitution and the retreat of the integration process in the Treaty of Lisbon highlights the crisis of European soft power. Rethinking and reforming the European Union is the most important challenge for the 21st century. As regards to the objectives of Europe 2020, the European Commission set up, between 2009 and 2015, four macro-regions inspired by a new approach to multi-level governance and cross-border cooperation. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the Macroregional strategies of the European Union, even framed in the history of cross-border cooperation; the critical issues found in the first period of activity; the potential of a new Mediterranean macro-region.

Keywords

European Union; European Integration; Multi-Level Governance; Macro-Regional Strategies; Mediterranean

Riassunto

La mancata approvazione della Costituzione europea e l'arretramento del processo di integrazione riscontrabile nel Trattato di Lisbona evidenzia la crisi del *soft power* europeo. Ripensare e riformare l'Unione Europea è la sfida più importante per l'Europa del XXI secolo. In relazione agli obiettivi di *Europe 2020*, la Commissione Europea ha istituito, tra il 2009 e il 2015, quattro macro-regioni ispirate ad un nuovo approccio alla *governance* multilivello e alla cooperazione transfrontaliera. Lo scopo del presente lavoro è analizzare le strategie macro-regionali dell'Unione Europea, inquadrate altresì nella storia della cooperazione transfrontaliera; le criticità rilevate nel primo periodo di attività; il potenziale di una nuova macro-regione mediterranea.

Parole chiave

Unione Europea; Integrazione europea; *Governance* multi-livello; Strategie macro-regionali; Mar Mediterraneo.

1. Introduction. – 2. Historical profiles of cross-border cooperation in Europe. – 3. The EU macro-regional strategies. – 4. States, regions and macro-regions. A conceptual critical revision. – 5. Present and future of macro-regional strategies. – 6. Towards the establishment of a Mediterranean macro-region?. – 7. Region, macro-region, sea, border: the different meanings of the Mediterranean. – 8. Multi-level governance in

relation to the macro-regional strategies. - 9. Conclusions. - 10. Documents. - 11. Bibliography. - 12. Curriculum Vitae.

1. Introduction

In academia, the structural weakness of the Nation State with regard to the phenomena of globalization and regionalism has encouraged the studies on the possible reforms of the state. Anglo-Saxon political science has emphasized the need to combine sovereignty discourse with the rethinking of the State, detaching from a rigidly rational conception which admits a state form uniquely idealistic and optimal¹ (Anter, 2014). Discussing about the state assumes the identification of its current meaning on a global scale, hence the need to construct a new epistemology of the state dimension entirely included in the historical process. In this simultaneous fragmentation of political space each level of the state attempts to react to a nearly overwhelming variety of subnational and supranational pressures, forces and constraints (Cerny, 1995, p. 598). The globalization has led, on the one hand, to the acceleration in the movement of commodities, capitals, people and information through geographical space constantly expanding; and, on the other hand, to the reconfiguration of relatively immobile spatial infrastructures (Brenner, 1999, pp. 432-433).

Rethinking statuality even means to analyse the “denationalization of territoriality” within the European Union, in which the integration process has long been focused on the states and on the national sovereignty (Burgess, 2002). In the current stage of weakness of the integration process, it can be observed that, within in the EU, is difficult to reconcile different political models, often linked to the past. The Ventotene Manifesto, still considered the foundation of the Community structure, drew a radical overcoming of the Nation States for the realization of a markedly federalist and decentralized framework, in contrast to the present structure. The failure of the European Constitution and the backwardness of the integration process in the Treaty of Lisbon highlight the crisis of the European soft power, that is the European Union as a “regulator” within a political dimension based on national sovereignties. Rethinking the structure of the Union and the centrality of the Member States is an opportunity to overcome the

¹ The comparison that has challenged the relationship among State and global and local authorities has strengthened some interpretative lines which can be divided in the two poles of the "hyper-globalist" theories of Anglo-Saxon school, whose postulate is the definitive overthrow of the Nation State in favor of global governance and world federalist thinking, and the "neo-institutionalist" currents which recognize, on the contrary, a renewed and decisive role for the State on a national basis. For a deepening on the topic see McGrew - Held, 2002.

resurgence of nationalisms towards the enhancement of sub-state entities within the continent.

Empirical observation testifies the formation of new political models which develop over-unity or sub-unity in comparison to the state level for different and compatible purposes. These models assume the existence of multiple levels of governance on the same territory, which even reflect the increasing limitations on state sovereignty. In relation to the reform of the Community framework and the objectives of Europe 2020, the European Commission established, between 2009 and 2016, four macro-regions built on multi-level governance approach: Baltic Region, Danube Region, Adriatic-Ionian Region and Alpine Region. However, the Commission procedures to set up macro-regional strategies are still subject of debate: indeed, the functionality of the macro-regional instrument to pursue the objectives set in the investigation phase and the theoretical-scientific system used for their implementation are deeply questioned.

Within the debate on macro-regional strategies, it is often discussed the possibility of establishing a macro-region for the Mediterranean basin. The new centrality of the area, due to political, economic and geo-strategic reasons, currently represents a concrete opportunity to generate development, integration and stabilization with benefits for all the actors involved. Nowadays, the actual cooperation arrangements, while valid and numerous, do not exclude and indeed support the possibility of a coordinated and coherent intervention involving the Community institutions, local actors and stakeholders from all sides of the Mediterranean.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the macro-regional strategies of the European Union, their role within the reform processes of the Community framework and their link with the Member States. In the first place, these strategies are examined in relation to the history of cross-border cooperation in Europe, which has been remarkably diverse and rich in the European continent since the "Crossborder Cooperation Forums" of the first post-war period to the modern Euroregions. It is then proposed an analysis of the four macro-regional strategies currently in place. The analysis focuses on the objectives set for their establishment, the levels of governance involved, of the impact on the areas concerned and of the criticalities highlighted in the period of activity. The debate on the possible establishment of a Mediterranean macro-region is therefore deepened. Ultimately, we conclude with the framing of macro-regional strategies as part of the scientific debate on EU governance processes.

2. Historical profiles of cross-border cooperation in Europe

Cross-border cooperation, defined as that particular type of cooperation, more or less institutionalised, among sub-state authorities belonging to different and neighbouring countries, is a widespread global phenomenon (Perkmann, 2003). Crossborder cooperation is historically heterogeneous and flexible in solutions, difficult to categorise into specific definitions that do not conceal the differences in specific cases. The types of collaboration vary in relation to the links between the involved entities, to the motivations of their foundation, to the objectives to pursue, to the degree of institutionalization of the participants (Perkmann - Sum, 2002, pp. 5-8).

Europe has a long history of cross-border cooperation, whose prodromes date back to the first post-war period, with the establishment of the “Crossborder Cooperation Forums” (Wassenberg - Reitel - Peyrony - Rubió, 2015). An important example was the Economic Union between Belgium and Luxembourg in 1921, which gave rise to the 1944 customs union and, subsequently, to the Benelux region, a virtuous model of integrated cross-border area (Cotter, 1999). Though at first relations were focused on state bilaterality, since the second post-war period a growing prominence of regional and local players could be observed (Perkmann, 1999, p. 660). Overall, the period after 1945 was particularly delicate for the territorial reconfiguration of states. The definition of the regimes to be applied along the borders and the possible forms of collaboration were influenced both by the balance among NATO and the Warsaw Pact and by the nascent Council of Europe (Cotter, 1999).

In relation to the identification of borders, the most complex question was, as is known, the structure of the defeated Germany. Not by chance, the western German borders, from the 1950s onwards, were affected by cooperation projects between local border authorities (O'dowd, 2002, pp. 13-16). Relations were established on the border between Germany and the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg and Switzerland, building a network of links which is still active and effective. It can be traced back to the present institution of the Euroregion, a cross-border cooperation structure, with legal personality, consisting of two or more territories located in different States of the European Union or of the continent (Hooper - Kramersch, 2004). In the area between Enschede, in the Netherlands, and Gronau, in West Germany, in 1958 was established the first official European cross-border region, EUREGIO, with the aim of working together to solve the common problems of economic crisis, precarious infrastructure and difficulties in the industrial sector (Sohn, 2017, pp. 415-

416). West Germany was also involved in the Upper Rhine Euroregion, which included the border area between France, Germany and Switzerland².

It is not possible to combine the experiences of the first cross-border regions, whose special features do not allow for the generalization of a model. However, we can observe some common features that would form the basis of future forms of cross-border cooperation. In the second post-war period, the principle that led to these forms of cooperation was firstly political, especially to restore the Franco-German divide, which was a necessary requirement for the construction of the unborn European dimension (Anderson - O'Dowd - Wilson, 2003). In this regard, convergences with the foundations of the ECSC, the EEC and the Euratom are identified, although the objective of cross-border cooperation differs from that of the Founding Fathers of European integration for its local dimension and its low supranational orientation (Perkmann, 2003). Furthermore, this perspective is simple to understand, considering the nature of these regions. Cross-border cooperation after the Second World War can be ascribed to the sphere of international relations, both for the already mentioned political value and for the need for consensus among the States concerned. The initiative of their establishment, however, is attributed to local public and private stakeholders, regardless of bilateral relations among states and of the emerging European institutions (Sousa, 2013, p. 670). Cross-border regions were thus the result of bottom-up processes, in which local authorities played a central role.

In a short time, the dynamism of the areas involved in cross-border cooperation became the object of special interest for the European institutions. The development of territorial units with strategic capabilities was fundamental for the achievement of the objectives set by the Council of Europe, non-Community body, and the European Community. Namely, the Council promoted the political and administrative decentralisation and the interlocution with regional and local authorities (Urwin, 2014). In 1957, the Council established the "Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe", replaced by the "Permanent Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe" in 1994. The Council, moreover, made the first attempt to establish and stabilise cross-border cooperation under the Madrid Framework Convention and its three additional protocols³. The Convention responded both to the needs of local actors, providing legal

² The Upper Rhine Euroregion includes, to the west of the river, the southern part of the Palatinate and the whole of Alsace; to the east the cities of Karlsruhe, Offenburg and Fribourg in Brisgovia; on the Helvetic side the two semicantons of Basel City and Basel Countryside and the cantons Argovia, Jura and Soletta.

³ Council of Europe (1989) *European outline convention on transfrontier cooperation between territorial communities or authorities*.

recognition to agreements and a set of pre-established models for cross-border cooperation; and to the need for guarantees of States, who were given the means to control and to delimit the phenomenon within state sovereignty (Perkmann, 2007, pp. 869-872). The agreement signed in Madrid marked the beginning of political recognition and the attribution of legal personality to European territorial authorities.

During the 1980s, the Council of Europe continued its efforts to strengthen links among territorial authorities with the aim of integrating them into a wide-ranging transnational perspective through top-down processes (Urwin, 2014). However, cross-border regions became widespread only in the 1990s, when the European Commission began to influence cooperation among local authorities from different countries. The Commission's "White Paper on the completion of the internal market"⁴, together with the establishment of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 1975 and the reforms of the Structural Funds between 1988 and 1999⁵, reshaped regional policy towards decentralisation, the principle of partnership and the availability of a specific budget, to ensure a link among cross-border cooperation and European integration. Regional development measures were the first step from negative integration, based on the removal of barriers among individual States, to positive integration, even complementing direct interventions in the cooperation activities of both Member States and regional authorities (Scharpf, 1999). Within this new Community policy the European Commission's support for cross-border cooperation was included, first and foremost the Interreg Community Initiative Programme, set up between 1988 and 1990 specifically to support European border regions and make use of local networks at a supranational level (Nilsson - Eskilsson - Ek, 2010, pp. 160-162).

The EEC grasped the potential of territorial cross-border cooperation in the construction of the European political space. The new directives led to the abandonment of the legalistic method of the Council of Europe, aimed at the establishment of cross-border regions in the shape of formally recognised entities at a political and administrative level, in favour of an economically oriented structure (Bellini - Hilpert, 2013). A change of approach which reflected the economic and functionalist perspective of the European institutions, in accordance with Member States' resistance to build a political union (Perkmann, 2003).

In the absence of a political and legal framework for the construction of cross-border institutions, the main instrument of cooperation has long been the bilateral

⁴ European Commission (1985) *Completing the internal market: white paper from the commission from the Commission to the European Council*.

⁵ European Commission (2010) *History and evolution of EU Regional and cohesion Policy*.

agreement among States, each one with different predictions and different outcomes. The funding programmes did not contain any indication either of how the funds were to be managed or which bodies would be responsible for developing cross-border cooperation. A significant innovation in this respect is the adoption of Regulation No 1082/2006 on the European Crossborder Cooperation Group (EGTC) or Euroregion, the first Community legislative act which established bodies dedicated to cross-border cooperation and equipped with legal personality⁶. This act even addressed the need for cooperation resulting from the enlargement of the European Union to 12 new Member States in 2000. In the objectives of the European institutions, the EGTC was designed as a tool for integrated multi-level governance that, on one hand, would allow the new areas involved in the integration process to refer to a defined model of territorial cooperation and use of funds; and, on the other hand, would provide European legitimacy and would reorganize the different forms of cross-border cooperation to date⁷.

The reform of the Treaties, which ended with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, further enhanced local and regional self-government and the principle of subsidiarity as the basis of European identity (Piris, 2010). Territorial cooperation is included both in the subject matter of art.174 TFEU, in which economic and social cohesion is added to the territorial one, and in the body of the article, in which cross-border regions are expressly mentioned. Since 2007-2013 Programming Period, territorial cooperation has been the third objective of regional policy, together with regional convergence and competitiveness/employment⁸.

3. *The EU macro-regional strategies*

The most recent development in the field of territorial cross-border cooperation is the macro-region institute. The European Commission, through the so-called macro-regional strategies, aims to deepen the scope of territorial cooperation to address the economic and political upheavals of the last thirty years and the enlargement of the Union to 28 Member States⁹.

The Commission defines a macro-region as a group of sub-state entities, belonging to different states but with common elements, which join forces to

⁶ European Parliament (2006) *Regulation N. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC)*.

⁷ Inter group (2008) *Handbook on the European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC)*.

⁸ Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (2009)

⁹ European Commission (2006) *Green Paper on territorial cohesion. Turning territorial diversity into strength*.

cooperate on matters of mutual interest¹⁰. In the interpretation of scholars, however, the identification of the characteristics of a macro-region is much more complex. The macro-region concept is linked to the more general region concept, designed as a variable entity among the administrative unit and the functional area (Sielker, 2016, pp. 1995-1998). Regions are not a pre-ordered entity like national states: there are no strict criteria for the construction of a region or, in this case, a macro-region. They are rather identified as dynamic cooperation groups, closely dependent on historical and territorial contingencies, which can evolve and change over time according to the requirements or changes that have occurred (Gänzle - Kern, 2015). The studies underline the etymology of macro-regions, a definition used in international relations to identify an area among two or more states, with spatial coherence and common features, characterized by a strong utilitarian and functional approach (Nagler, 2013, pp. 50-56). With regard to European macro-regions, an evolution of the concept can be observed, which focuses more on the cross-border and sub-national character not necessarily linked to homogeneity (Dubois - Hedin - Schmitt - Sterling, 2009). Although the process of internationalization and liberalisation of markets coexists with the growing trend of regionalisation (Petraikos, 2001, pp. 359-360), macro-regions are more developed structures of international relations than simple functional interdependences (Stead, 2014, pp. 690-693). Macro-regions are highly heterogeneous, have no fixed borders and can be part of multiple interregional networks (Stead - Sielker - Chilla, 2016, pp. 99-105). Macro-regional strategies can be considered as an innovative tool to deal with shortcomings in integration, cooperation and development, and to bring significant added value within a defined European framework.

Macro-regional strategies therefore include different stakeholders in a multi-level and multi-actor perspective. Following the Commission's advice, a macro-regional strategy should facilitate relations among different actors and socio-economic interests, favouring the construction of new methods to achieve objectives in certain policy areas (European Commission, 2009). The strategies contribute to the europeanisation of each level involved and form an area of territorial development that goes beyond the borders of the Member States, addresses common issues and implements European integration on the local dimension. In this regard, it is essential to highlight the central role of the European Commission and the growing influence of the European Union in new types of cross-border cooperation. The development and management of macro-regions differs both from the typical experiences of "Mitteleuropa" in the 1950s

¹⁰ European Union (2009) *Interact*. European Commission (2013) *Report concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies*

and 1960s and from the most recent Euroregions. Macro-regional strategies are based on elements of territorial unity, but on a larger scale than previous experiences (Medeiros, 2013, pp. 1249-1250). The greater extension of the area is connected with multilaterality, which consists in the obligation to involve at least three Member States for the constitution of a macro-region. The institutions process is implemented through a codified procedure: it provides a request from the European Council adopted by a Community legislative act, linked to an action plan defined by the Commission and approved by the Council¹¹. The centralized control of macro-regional strategies gives uniformity and harmony to the legal institution, even if it sacrifices the autonomy of the local actors. The influence of the European institutions is evident from the “principle of the 3 no”, under which no new legislation, no new institutions and no new dedicated funds derive from macro-regions (Sielker, 2016, pp. 2010-2013). They do not constitute a new level of government, do not have the power to enact legislation and cannot benefit from any specific fund for the reference area.

Three levels of governance are involved in the management of a macro-regional strategy: the first is composed of the European Commission and an intergovernmental group of coordinators, which have general powers of control and direction; the second consists of the Member States, in which the authority responsible for the strategy on the ground should be identified; the third and last level is the local one, in which the participation of sectorial entities and coordinators of each involved region is allowed (Piattoni, 2016, pp. 78-80). Despite the clear primacy of central structures, the Commission has repeatedly stressed that the most important level is the third one, on which the actual implementation of projects depends (European Commission, 2009).

The frame of reference and the principles for each macro-region are stable and defined, while there are differences in the modalities and the timescales by which the four macro-regional strategies activated to date have been developed. Just like in past experiences of cross-border cooperation, each strategy has its own history and its own peculiarities.

In chronological order, the first European macro-regional strategy is the Baltic Sea strategy, which began in 2006. The EUSBSR (European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region) strategy was officially adopted in 2009 for an area of 8 Member States and a highly multilateral cooperation¹². The priority of the strategy is the defence of the ecosystem of the Baltic Sea, but the EUSBSR has also taken action on the infrastructures, the energy market, the effectiveness of the Single Market, the

¹¹ European Commission (2015) *Territorial cooperation in Europe. A historical perspective*.

¹² European Commission (2009) *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*.

Europe 2020 agenda. A characteristic element of the Baltic macro-region is the implementation of the so-called “horizontal policies” of the European Union, such as sustainable development and cooperation with neighbouring non-European countries (Studzieniecki, 2016, pp. 236-237).

The second European macro-regional strategy is the EUSDR (European Union Strategy for the Danube Region), which was established in 2011 and includes an extremely large geographical area corresponding to the entire Danube waterway, comprising a population of 115 million people, nine Member States, three candidate countries for EU membership (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) and two other non-EU countries (Moldova and Ukraine)¹³. This area boasts an ancient collaboration, dating back to the Treaty of Paris of 1856 following the Crimean War, in which the first Permanent Commission of the Danube was established¹⁴. The EUSDR too focuses on economic development, transport and energy networks, environment and safety.

In 2012, the third macro-regional strategy began to be developed, that of the Adriatic-Ionian region¹⁵. The EUSAIR (European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region) develops a program of participation on two basins of the Mediterranean, the Adriatic Sea and the Ionian Sea, like part of the European Strategy for the Marine Safety, which involves all Member States bathed in the two seas. As in the case of the Danube, EUSAIR even includes Member States (Greece, Croatia, Italy, Slovenia) and has obtained partnerships with countries outside the Union (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia). The Adriatic-Ionian strategy deals substantially with issues relating to maritime safety, the economic and social diversity of the areas involved and the integration of the candidate countries into the Union.

The fourth and most recent macro-regional strategy is the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP)¹⁶. Unlike the previous ones, in the case of EUSALP we can assume, since its birth, the widest degree of involvement of local stakeholders, which have been the real promoters of the strategy (Tomasi -

¹³ European Commission (2011) *EU Strategy for the Danube Region*

¹⁴ The Treaty of Paris of 1856 introduced an embryonic form of cooperation between the coastal states in order to establish a common management of the waters of the Danube. Article 16: “In order to implement the provisions of the previous article, a Commission, in which (...) [the contracting powers] will all be represented by a delegate, will be responsible for designating the necessary works to be carried out (...) to free the mouth of the Danube (...) from the sands and other obstructive obstacles, in order to place that part of the river in the best possible navigability conditions”.

¹⁵ European Commission (2012) *EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)*.

¹⁶ European Commission (2015) *EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP)*.

Garegnani - Scaramuzzino - Sparber - Vettorato - Meyer - Santa - Bisello, 2018, pp. 132-135). This dynamism has its roots in the cross-border cooperation relations of the past, in particular the Alpine Convention of 1995¹⁷. EUSALP, which deals with a wide range of issues relating to the Alpine region, comprises 48 regions, 5 EU Member States (Germany, France, Italy, Austria and Slovenia) and two non-EU countries (Liechtenstein and Switzerland).

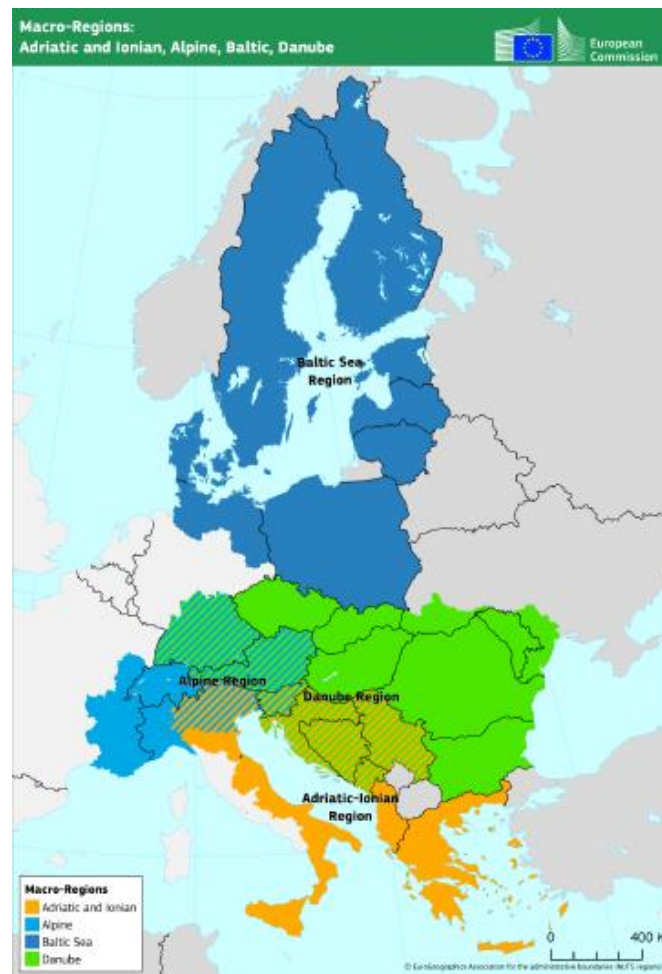


Fig.1 Macroregional strategies Map
(European Commission, 2019)

4. States, regions and macro-regions. A conceptual critical revision

Because of the extensive history of cross-border cooperation in Europe, scholars and especially geographers have deeply discussed the spatial dimension set up by

¹⁷ Alpine Convention, 1995.

EU's policy makers. According to the critical literature on the EU's spatial policy, starting from the concepts of state and region, we can observe some issues on the macro-regional strategies.

In the rapid growing of the geographic literature on globalisation (Castells, 1989, 1996; Ruggie, 1993; O'Brien, 1992; Ohmae, 1995; Appadurai, 1996; Scholte, 1996) many authors have highlighted the apparent detachment of social relations from their local-territorial conditions. However, these arguments neglect the forms of territorial organisation in the current globalisation phase, like regional agglomerations. Taking the cue from David Harvey (1985, pp. 128-163) and Henri Lefebvre (1978, 1991), the processes of re-scaling of territorial organisation like cities and regional agglomerations should be viewed as part of the current phase of the global phenomena. In this interpretation, globalisation is conceived as a re-territorialisation of both socioeconomic and political spaces that develops upon multiple geographical scales. On this basis, various dimensions of governance in contemporary Europe are analysed as expressions of a "politics of scale". The scales of these space building processes are no longer coincident with the national matrices of state territoriality, which have long defined Europe geographies (Brenner, 1999, p. 432). Swyngedouw (1992, pp. 39-67) introduced the concept of "glocalisation" to define the contemporary process of globalisation and territorial reconfiguration, underlining the conflictual restructuring and differentiation of spatial scales.

In Europe this increasing internal fragmentation of spaces has been intensified since the 1980s through the development of new forms of regional structural policy oriented towards major urban regions (Albrechts - Swyngedouw, 1989) and the construction of new forms and levels of state territorial organisation like regional or urban scales (Evans - Harding, 1997; Lefebvre, 1998). In mainstream interpretation, regions are understood both in a lower scale than nation-state, like Normandy or Cataluña, and in a supra-national scale, like Middle East or the Mediterranean area. In the first case, the region is conceived as a spontaneous, organic body: it is characterised by a specific territorial dimension, and it presents functional, cultural, historical or administrative attributes linked to local communities. In the second case, the region is conceived as a variable aggregate of countries with shared features, like religion, language, culture, etc.

In official EU documents, a macro-region is defined as "an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges" (INTERACT, 2009). This definition appears as a mix of both scales, which leads to important theoretic and practical consequences. Macro-regions are comparable to aggregates of already existing regions belonging to different countries: a somewhat agglomeration of micro-regions connected by common spatialities (Bialasiewicz - Giaccaria - Jones - Minca, 2013, pp. 64-65). In the EU documents, the macro-regional strategies are often presented as simply spatial

containers, without any evidence to the actual existence of the common characters. The implicit and explicit reference to local communities, spaces and places does not correspond to a deep analysis of the territories considered (see Turret - Wallaert, 2010).

The framework described shows the tendency of EU policy makers to mix different geographical concepts, conflating, on the one hand, “the region” par excellence, with common functional, historical, cultural features, and, on the other hand, the macroregional strategies set up within a network-based discourse.

This confusion among “regional” and “networked” geographies emerges, for example, in the Action Plan for the EUSBSR Strategy:

The geography of the Baltic Sea Region, the very long distances by European standards (especially to the northern parts which are very remote), the extent of the sea that links but also divides the regions, the extensive external borders: all these pose special challenges to communication and physical accessibility in the region. In particular, the historical and geographical position of the Eastern Baltic Member States, with their internal networks largely oriented East-West, makes substantial investment in communication, transport and energy infrastructures particularly important (European Commission, 2010, p. 7).

Terms like sea, region, borders, history, geography, networks, infrastructures seem to be employed with no theoretical reflection that could justify the mobilization of complex geographical concepts (Bialasiewicz, Giaccaria, Jones, Minca, 2013, pp. 68-69). The tension among current functional regionalization and past geographical and historical regions is the core aspect of the macro-regional new geography, as evidenced in a discussion paper presented by the former commissioner Pawel Samecki:

(...) the absence of a formal definition of the region does not remove the need for a rationale for the existence of a macro-regional strategy. The Baltic Sea, with its environmental state, its historical significance and its geographical influence, for example on transport routes, provides an undeniable unity to the region. (European Commission, 2009, p. 8)

As stated in critical literature, the attempts of re-thinking spaces and borders are expressions of a re-territorialisation for EU space-making, and not only the development of policies in political spaces already existing. In this perspective, the macro-regional strategies represent a new policy for the making of EU spaces, with a double-edged genealogy: in the first place, it comes from the internal regionalization of the Union and the raising of cooperation among member states (Legendijk, 2005, pp. 1160-1162; Hakli, 1998, pp. 87-89); secondarily, it is functional

to the re-writing of EU borders and to a new configuration of EU external relations (Medeiros, 2011). The macroregional strategies are therefore strictly linked to other cross-border initiatives of INTERREG programme: they aim to create new European regions, providing the “terrains for producing new transnational actors and new opportunities for existing actors” (Perkmann, 1999, p. 665). Macro-regions, in this perspective, are therefore conceived as a vaguely mixture between the internal and external dimension of EU policy without precise criteria¹⁸.

5. *Present and future of macro-regional strategies*

On 29 January 2019, the European Commission published its second report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies, following the first report of 2016¹⁹.

According to the document, macro-regional strategies, which currently include 19 Member States and 8 third countries, are an integral part of the EU's strategic framework²⁰. The European institutions show great interest in the innovative potential of macro-regions both within the Union and in the relations with neighbouring countries (European Commission, 2019). The political platforms built around the new forms of territorial cooperation constitute an important added value in cohesion policy. The Commission welcomes the results of the cross-cutting issues²¹, which are slow but steady in their development compared with the last evaluation. The participation of extra-EU countries is substantially equal to that of member countries, and indeed the participation of the Western Balkans in two macro-regions significantly promotes their integration into the Union (European Commission, 2019).

Strategy analysis and future prospects focus, rather than on governance aspects, on difficulties in accessing funds and funding. While expressing the need to improve relations among ministerial levels, national coordinators and policy makers, the main attention is on the financing possibilities of the strategies and how to facilitate the release of funds. With regard to the two longest-lasting strategies (EUSBSR and EUSDR), for example, the revision of the Action Plans coincides with the new programming of EU funds 2021-2027. The Commission

¹⁸ This paragraph shows an overview of a complex debate. For a deeper assessment on the topic, see Brenner, 1999; MacLeod, 1999; Painter, 2002; Hudson, 2004; Clark - Jones, 2008; Bialasiewicz - Giaccaria - Jones - Minca, 2013.

¹⁹ European Commission (2019) *First Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies*.

²⁰ European Commission (2019) *Second Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies*.

²¹ Cross-cutting issues are those that cover all four strategies: policy making and planning, administrative capacity, governance, monitoring, access to finance, communication, cooperation between stakeholders.

states that²²:

In the two oldest MRS [macroregional strategies], the revision of the action plans launched in 2018 coincides favourably with the programming exercise of the EU funds 2021-2027. This opportunity must be seized and coordinated efforts must be made to maximise the added value of these processes, which includes giving the MRS greater strategic focus. (European Commission, 2019, p. 9).

According to the Commission, the political deficits of the macro-regions are strictly linked to the problems of access to funds.

Bridging the gap between the MRS and funding opportunities is likely to remain a challenge for a while. The Interreg programmes — despite their limited amounts of funding — have played a significant role in supporting the strategies' implementation. However, the bulk of the EU funds, as well as national and other sources of funding, are not easily available to support the strategies' projects. This may explain why some countries lack political commitment and why participants lack capacity (European Commission, 2019, p. 10).

Within the framework of the financing perspectives of the strategies:

The preparation phase of the post-2020 programming offers a unique opportunity to plan and organise the consistent use of EU funds to support MRS objectives. Coordination between authorities of EU funding programmes and MRS key implementers should take place both within and among countries involved in a MRS. Countries' decisions and concrete actions in this respect would demonstrate their interest and political commitment towards the MRS. The dialogue between authorities of mainstream EU programmes and MRS key implementers should be further promoted. Ministries in charge of coordination of EU funds and MRS in participating countries have a key role to play in this (European Commission, 2019, p. 10).

The documents produced by the other European institutions pose some critical issues with regard to the levels of governance and the more properly political aspects of the macro-regional strategies (Gänzle, Mirtl, 2019, pp. 3-7). Alongside the funding issues, which are assumed to be the main instrument to implement macro-regions, these documents highlight some important issues in relation to the future of the strategies. The main recommendations concern strengthening political involvement at national and sub-national level, developing governance

²² The Action Plan includes all actions planned to achieve a macro-regional strategy objective.

methodologies, improving processes that could have an impact on the policies implemented.

The Council of the European Union²³, in its conclusions on the implementation of macro-regional strategies:

Notes that all four strategies face common and individual challenges and can be further developed, notably regarding governance, result-orientation, purposeful funding, communication and cooperation; considers that the governance of the strategies could be further strengthened to improve their effectiveness; in this context, invites the participating countries and their regions: a) to maintain a strong political commitment together with a high sense of ownership for the implementation of their macro-regional strategies; b) to improve coordination and cooperation in view of further enhancing the commitment to the strategies and their effective implementation; c) to build the necessary administrative capacity to ensure that political commitment translates into effective implementation; d) to empower key implementers (such as national coordinators, priority area coordinators/action group leaders, members of steering and action groups) and Increase the ownership of the involved line ministries; e) to mobilize regions, cities, agencies and institutions such as universities, private businesses and civil society, encouraging them to network, cooperation and participate in the implementation and development of macro-regional strategies. (Council of the European Union, 2017, pp. 3-4)

Likewise, the European Parliament, in its resolution on the implementation of macro-regional strategies²⁴:

Points out that MRS bear fruit if they are rooted in a long-term political perspective and organised in such a way that all public, especially regional and local authorities, and private stakeholders and civil society are effectively Represented from the outset, requiring an effective exchange of information, best practices, know-how and experience between macro-regions and their regional and local authorities; considers it necessary to strengthen the multi-level governance of MRS, which should be transparent, with more effective coordination and public communication mechanisms in order to make MRS known and for them to gain acceptance in local and regional communities (European Parliament, 2018, pp. 6-7)

The Committee of the Regions, in its opinion on macro-regional strategies²⁵,

²³ Council of the European Union (2017) *8461/17 Council conclusions of 25 April 2017*

²⁴ European Parliament (2018) *Resolution of 16 January 2018 on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies*

²⁵ European Committee of the Regions (2017) *COTER-VI/029 opinion adopted on 1 December 2017*

emphasises the role that macro-regions could play in the future structure of the Union, particularly as a result of Brexit and the changes it will inevitably cause in the Community structure. However, at the same time,

[The Committee] observes that the governance of MRS now needs to be strengthened, and to strengthen governance, the local and regional levels must also be strengthened. Governance cannot be entrusted only to the national governments because this contradicts the idea of the MRS; believes that implementing the MRS requires a specific governance approach based on cooperation and coordination, and underlines that improved administrative capacity based on increased ownership and better cooperation are necessary to that end. This specific governance approach should be integrated into existing governance structures in a concerted way with the aim of avoiding any duplication and of achieving a streamlined approach. Under no circumstances should coordination efforts result in covert centralisation (European Committee of the regions, 2017, p. 8).

The Committee of the Regions is even deeply critical on one of the guiding principles of macro-regional strategies.

[The Committee] argues that Three No's should be replaced by Three Yes's, to improve the use of existing Legislation, institutions and funding. A practical approach should be adopted whereby the necessary measures are taken to improve the functioning of MRS rather than focusing on confusing principles such as the Three No's. The CoR says yes to better synergies with funding instruments, yes to better embedding of existing structures in MRS and yes to better implementation of existing rules (European Committee of the regions, 2017, p. 7)

The COWI study²⁶ on macro-regional strategies, ordered by the Commission, indicates, among the main shortcomings, the coordination between the ESI Funds²⁷, EU programmes and macro-regional cooperation. Therefore, a significant improvement in the post-2020 period is expected. Surveys on the barriers and obstacles to the development of macro-regions show, however, the multiple levels of suffering of the actors involved, which relate to limited financial resources, fluctuation of institutions and staff, weak link between decision-makers and local levels, lack of a common regulatory framework (COWI Company, 2017, pp. 107-108). The study proposes a three-step model to identify the driving forces and possible critical aspects of each strategy:

²⁶ COWI Company (2017) *Study on Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy*.

²⁷ Structural Investments funds

- phase I (set-up phase): it relates to the capacity of the internal MRS actors mainly at the individual level

- phase II (operating phase): [it concerns] the development of the institutional capacity and performance of the internal MRS actors managing the strategy and the individual and institutional capacity of external stakeholders to respond to the strategy

- phase III (maturity phase): external stakeholders and the region as a whole are performing, i.e. they are implementing MRS relevant actions and their contribution to the integration and development of the region becomes visible through the achievement of the MRS objectives (COWI Company, 2017, pp. 136-137).

The European Commission, in its 2019 report, incorporates only some of the information provided by the above-mentioned documents and studies. In taking account the crucial phase currently facing by macro-regional strategies, the Commission hopes for a strengthening of the commitment of individual actors, so that the programming period 2021-2027 will be a major opportunity (European Commission, 2019). The negotiation and programming phase could be the best time to concentrate efforts and optimise the added value of macro-regions. The proposal for the three-phase system of the COWI study is welcomed:

Thematic coordinators of the strategies should assess the Situation of each policy area against the 'three-phase development' model, presented in the COWI study, to identify which drivers could be better used, and which barriers must be overcome, if you need be. They could then make recommendations to their national coordinators on resolving the problems identified, where appropriate (European Commission, 2019, p. 11).

So is the call for improved governance mechanisms through increased cooperation both at the level of each macro-regional strategy and in each country participating in the strategy. In addition, the Commission makes a provision for an *ad hoc* allocation of specific funds for the coordinated implementation of the priorities identified by the responsible for EU programmes:

During the implementation phase, the priorities, measures and projects agreed by EU programme authorities as being relevant to the MRS, should be executed in a coordinated and synchronised way across the MRS countries. To achieve this, specific funds may need to be allocated upfront by the EU programmes in question. Over and above these specific measures and projects, programmes could also develop and apply specific project selection criteria to encourage the creation of projects that support the priorities of an MRS (European Commission, 2019, p. 12).

6. *Towards the establishment of a Mediterranean macro-region?*

Since the Second World War, the European context has endured major changes. The birth of European Community in Rome in 1957 took place symbolically near the Mediterranean, but the fulcrum of continental policy was established in Brussels, where most of the Community bodies still reside. The Mediterranean basin, for centuries the centre of economic, social and political life of the continent, gradually lost its centrality. Since its foundation, the EU has been founded on the paradox of the intention to strengthen its identity far from its origins, while being aware of the importance of the links with the past and the potential of the Mediterranean (Checkel - Katzenstein, 2009).

Currently, the Mediterranean area is going through a particularly complex historical phase that is redesigning different balances. A prominent role is played by the European Union, although its evident limitations related to low planning of intervention, which is the main actor and could be the promoter of overall cooperation policies in the basin (Bozzato, 2017, pp. 73-77). A perspective that must necessarily start from a careful reflection on the critical issues and strategies of cooperation in the Mediterranean from the birth of the European Community to nowadays.

The relations among the Mediterranean countries are essentially based on bilateralism, determined by the mutual and particular interests of the single countries, which testifies the precarious role of the EU and undermines the implementation of comprehensive cooperation policies (Bicchi, 2011, pp. 5-10). For example, bilateral relations characterize the Union for the Mediterranean, an intergovernmental organisation founded in 2008 bringing together 43 countries from Europe, North Africa, Middle East and South-Eastern Europe with common objectives for cooperation. The choice of the bilateral model derives from the strongly economic and financial character of the Mediterranean relations, even of colonial derivation (Bicchi, 2011, pp. 10-13). Bilateralism involves several difficulties of interlocution among the Community bodies and the Mediterranean countries, furthermore in a context worsened by a geopolitical scenario in continuous evolution.

The Mediterranean partnership is already ongoing in some cross-border cooperation projects, albeit of a much more recent origin in comparison to continental Europe. In addition to the already mentioned Union for the Mediterranean, in 2010 was established ARCHIMED, the Euro-Mediterranean EGTC²⁸, developed on the basis of previous cooperation experiences and

²⁸ Convention of the European Group of Territorial Cooperation of Mediterranean Archipelago (2010).

supported by the Interreg programmes. The European Parliament has grasped the potential for a greater impact of cross-border cooperation in the Mediterranean basin, suggesting the establishment of a Mediterranean macro-regional strategy²⁹:

[The European Parliament] supports the implementation of a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean Basin, so as to offer an action plan for addressing the common and problematic challenges facing the Mediterranean countries and regions and to give structure to this key area for Europe's development and integration, and calls on the Council and the Commission to act quickly on this matter; (European Parliament, 2012, p. 8)

[The European Parliament] Emphasises the importance of the Mediterranean as a decentralised area of cooperation – that goes beyond strict geographical borders – for strengthening cross-regional decision-making and the sharing of good practices, not least concerning Democracy, human rights, the rule of law, ecology, economic development, ecotourism, as well as cultural, research, educational, youth and sport partnerships; underlines the specific importance of education as a catalyst for democratic transition; (European Parliament, 2012, p. 8)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)³⁰ shares this view:

The EESC believes that despite the very fragile and still indeterminate situation prevailing in the Mediterranean, the conditions are in place for multilevel dialogue to begin between the Commission, the member States, the countries involved in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, local and regional authorities and civil society to establish a Mediterranean macro-regional strategy (divided into two parts) that will meet the needs of the region by strengthening its international competitiveness (European Economic and Social Committee, 2012, p. 1).

In 2014 the Intermediterranean Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), composed of 40 regions of 9 EU and Extra-EU States with the objective of developing cooperation among the shores of the Mediterranean, drew up a document outlining the guidelines and the road-map for the macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean basin³¹. The Commission

²⁹ European Parliament (2012) *The evolution of EU macro-regional strategies: present practice and future prospects, especially in the Mediterranean.*

³⁰ European Economic and Social Committee (2012) *Opinion on Developing a macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean – the benefits for island Member States.*

³¹ Intermediterranean Commission of the CPMR (2014) *A road map for Macro-regional and sea basin strategies in the Mediterranean.*

identifies some key concepts for the macro-regional approach applied to the Mediterranean. In particular, it stresses the need to unify the so-called “variable geometry” of the various interventions on the Mediterranean sea, combining an overall macro-regional strategy with two different sub-strategies for the eastern side and for the western one, interacting also with the Adriatic-Ionian strategy (Intermediterranean Commission, 2014, p. 2). The development of Mediterranean strategies should follow a methodology of multi-level and polycentric governance, combining top-down and bottom-up elements, involving public and private actors, proceeding with a step-by-step road map and defining specific financial instruments (Intermediterranean Commission, 2014, pp. 2-4).

In the last years the European Commission has multiplied the attentions on the Mediterranean basin. It has developed two specific initiatives for the marine development (WestMed) and for the blue economy (BlueMed), and it has previewed, in the 2014-2020 multiannual financing programme, a specific Interreg Fund for the Mediterranean Countries (Interreg Med)³². Efforts welcomed from the Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance (MCA), the alliance promoted by the Intermediterranean Commission of the CPMR, the Euro-region of the Pyrenees-Mediterranean, the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion, the networks of local authorities MedCities and Arco Latino to reflect on the future of cooperation in the Mediterranean region towards a common strategy of sustainable and integrated territorial development of the basin³³. However, the MCA's document highlights the inadequacy of these measures for the development of a planned and effective cooperation in the Mediterranean basin:

STRESSING that nevertheless, much has still to be done for integration to higher extent the strategies, instruments and key players to foster concrete projects aiming to face with more efficacy and impact the complex common challenges of the Basin from the socio-economic, environmental and geopolitic point of view (Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance, 2019, p. 3).

UNDERLINING that the EU Commission proposals, in particular concerning the Multiannual Financial Framework are not enough ambitious, especially on the envelopes concerning territorial cooperation and the Mediterranean (Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance, 2019, p. 3).

MANIFESTING that the pro-activity and initiative of Mediterranean actors at all

³² European Commission (2013) *Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020*.

³³ Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance (2019) *Facing together common challenges and integrating strategies for a better and sustainable future*. Barcelona.

levels is a very positive aspect, but needs to be better coordinated, as too much dispersion may lead to dilute efforts. And that we need to bridge in a more integrated way all the Shores of the Basin to be more cohesive, Increase the weight of the area at EU and world level as well as its potential to innovate (e.g. through new technologies and new skills and jobs, use of big/open data for territorial policies and value chains etc.) and contribute to the well being of the citizens and the environment (Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance, 2019, p. 3).

In the final considerations, the MCA states the need to provide concrete initiatives for the implementation of the Mediterranean macro-regional strategy:

Further promote the strengthening, alignment and integration of all the relevant strategies and initiatives capable of reinforcing multilevel governance and cooperation, towards a unique integrated long-longterm strategy for the Mediterranean or at least a solid coordination mechanism (not necessarily based on a governing board) that could see the light in the decade after 2020 (Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance, 2019, p. 4).

In November 2018, following the meeting on the opportunities for the Mediterranean macro-region held in Naples among several public and private stakeholders from various Mediterranean countries, the Ombudsman of the Regional Council of Campania has promulgated a decree³⁴ in which complains the delay for the institution of the Mediterranean macroregional strategy:

[Established that] for the Mediterranean macro-region there were considerable delays and the promoters, while fully available, found that there were no adequate acts of the administrations addressed (Ombudsman at Campania Region, 2018, p. 3).

[Established that] every success must be wished to other macro-regions (North Atlantic, North Sea, Black Sea) but at the same time the process for the Mediterranean macro-region strategy must be accelerated, even in relation to current trends in the European organizational structure (Ombudsman at Campania Region, 2018, p. 3).

Despite the several inputs, in the European Commission's 2019 report on macroregional strategies³⁵, as in the Action Plan 2018-2019³⁶ of the Euro-

³⁴ Ombudsman at Campania Region (2018).

³⁵ European Commission (2019) *Second Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies*.

³⁶ Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (2019) *Action Plan 2018-2019*.

Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) at the European Committee of the Regions, and in the COWI³⁷ study, there is no direct reference to the Mediterranean macroregional strategy.

7. Region, macro-region, sea, border: the different meanings of the Mediterranean.

As stated by critical literature, the suggestion of a Mediterranean macro-region raises several issues in relation to EU space-making. The debate on conceptual gap (cf par.4) becomes even more complex referring to the Mediterranean, a plural area historically field of tensions and reluctant to any regionalization attempt (Giaccaria - Minca, 2011, pp. 346-348; Chambers, 2008). Despite these features, the Mediterranean has long been presented as a region par excellence, a source of comparison for other “regional seas” like the Baltic (Wójcik, 2008). Without any claim of analysing the history of the idea of the region, we can presume that the organicistic conceptions (Vidal De La Blanche, 1918, pp. 174-187; Braudel, 1972) still influences the European imagery of the Mediterranean and its possible regionalization. From second post-war period, we could identify five phases in Community institutions’ efforts to regionalize the Mediterranean basin, each one corresponding to a peculiar conception and representation (Bialasiewicz - Giaccaria - Jones - Minca, 2013, pp. 62-65). Initially, at the dawn of the European Community, the Mediterranean was designed as the most problematic area of Europe, with the Cold War scenario on the background. To address the difficulties in establishing the common market, the European Commission set up bilateral trade agreements with some Mediterranean countries, so to initiate the tradition of ongoing bilateral relations. According to this vision, in 1972 the EU launched the Global Mediterranean Policy, a first attempt of Mediterranean region building. The economic crisis, the growing of trade protectionism, the Arab-Israeli conflict pushed forward the need of securization for the area. The conception of the Mediterranean as an unstable and fragmenting space was confirmed in the Barcelona process in 1995 (Jones, 2006, p. 420), which declares that the area has to be “Europeanised” through specific measures such as the European Neighbourhood Policy born in 2003 (Jones - Clark, 2010). In the documents of Union for the Mediterranean, the most recent attempt of Mediterranean spatial building, it is represented as historically, geographically, and culturally linked with European Union. Even in the Renewed European Neighbourhood Policy (2011-2014), the Commission argues that

³⁷ COWI Company (2017) *Study on Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy.*

[Mediterranean] space where political cooperation is as close as possible and economic integration is as deep as possible' (European Commission, 2011)

Furthermore, the Commission has developed the "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity" (European Commission, 2011) committing funds, promising investment safeguards and "deep democracy" privileges.

The EU narrative on the Mediterranean, but even in relation to the macro-regional strategies, implies the redefinitions of the "margins of Europe" (Pace, 2008, pp. 160-163). Although it is not possible here to deep examine the history and the political meaning of various representations of the European geographical space, we can assume that the sea and the border are the most important spatial markers in macro-regional strategies building. Referring to the maritime scenarios, the concept of the "inland sea" performs a key role (Horden - Purcell, 2006, pp. 730-731). Indeed, inland seas are experienced not only as spaces of communication, cooperation and development, but even as soft and hard borders, as "network Europe" and "fortress Europe" (Kostadinova, 2009, p. 238; Rumford, 2008). The millennial history of the Mediterranean, characterised by contacts, interactions and conflicts, assumes the meaning of a prologue of European liberalism (Bernard, 2007). This maritime imaginary leads to the concept of "soft-bordered" EU, in which networking, trading and liberal freedoms are the dominant features for economic growth and integration. However, simultaneously, the soft borders represent a threat for the EU security policy, hence the maritime margins have to be strictly controlled because of their natural openness. The Mediterranean spatial imagination is distinguished by the following duality: on the one hand as a "seascape", the representation of the sea as a space of networking, connecting and meeting (Bentley - Bridenthal - Wigen, 2007); on the other hand as a "borderscape", a fragile limit which requires regulation and control (Rajaram - Grundy-Warr, 2007). This contradictory genealogy implies tensions and confusions which create variable and mobile spatialities (Paasi, 2005), reflecting even in the macro-regional planning³⁸.

³⁸ For a deeper assessment on the topic, see Bialasiewicz - Giaccaria - Jones - Minca, 2013.

8. *Multi-level governance in relation to the macro-regional strategies*

The debate on regionalism, the development of local self-government and cross-border cooperation has accompanied the European institutions since their establishment. However, this has led to a real interest only since the 1990s and, in particular, since the Maastricht treaty. In academia, within the European integration, this debate gives rise to the theory of multi-level governance as an alternative to both the intergovernmental doctrine and the functionalist doctrine³⁹. In the former only the Member States are identified as actors in the European political area, while in the latter, still prevailing, the Community has an essentially administrative task to integrate the spontaneous balance of the market (Piattoni, 2009, pp. 177-178). The concept of multi-level governance, born as an interpretation of the EU cohesion policy, aims at overcoming both the aforementioned perspectives. On the one hand, it shows that the reduction of state sovereignty is deeper than the mere convergence of interests theorized by the intergovernmental approach; on the other hand, it excludes the mechanical adaptation of institutions to the needs of society and the market hypothesized by functionalist theory⁴⁰. The redefinition of power relations among Member states, Community institutions and sub-national actors leads, in this perspective, to multi-level governance.

It is useful, preliminarily, to define the characteristics of governance, a term by which, in the European context, is identified the structure of the existing relations between the different institutions, from a horizontal point of view, and between these institutions and the decentralised bodies, in a vertical view (Rhodes, 1997). In doctrine, governance is often used as an alternative to government, to highlight the absence of a sufficient degree of political integration and a real form of democratic legitimacy (Jørgensen, 2016). A governance model includes all processes and tools that go beyond traditional forms of government and are well summarised in the expression “governing without government” (Bevir - Rhodes, 2016).

Multi-level governance is distinguished from simple governance by the participation, in addition to private actors, of institutional bodies at different levels without a rigid hierarchy (Pierre, 2000). In the Community context, the traditional concept of multi-level governance, developed by its early theorists, defines it as a coordinated action by the Union, the Member States and the regional and local authorities based on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality with the objective of defining and implementing EU policies (Hooghe - Marks - Marks,

³⁹ For a deeper assessment of the debate on governance doctrines, see Bache - Bartle - Flinders, 2016; Kramsch, 2002; Brenner, 1999.

⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis of the debate between intergovernmental theory, functionalist theory and multilevel governance, see Hooghe - Marks - Marks, 2001.

2001). The main thesis is the prominence given to the regional and local dimension by the EU's structural policies, as witnessed by the birth of the Committee of the Regions in Maastricht, which finds its natural expression in multi-level governance. Then, the debate polarized on two main lines of study, the first to define the theoretical terms of multi-level governance on a global scale, the second more focused on the Community context (Bache - Bartle - Flinders, 2016).

In accordance with the conceptualisation of multi-level governance, it is possible to analyse the procedural and structural dimension of macro-regional strategies. Within the European Union's cohesion policy, and in particular in the elaboration of macro-regional strategies, decision-making does not belong to the

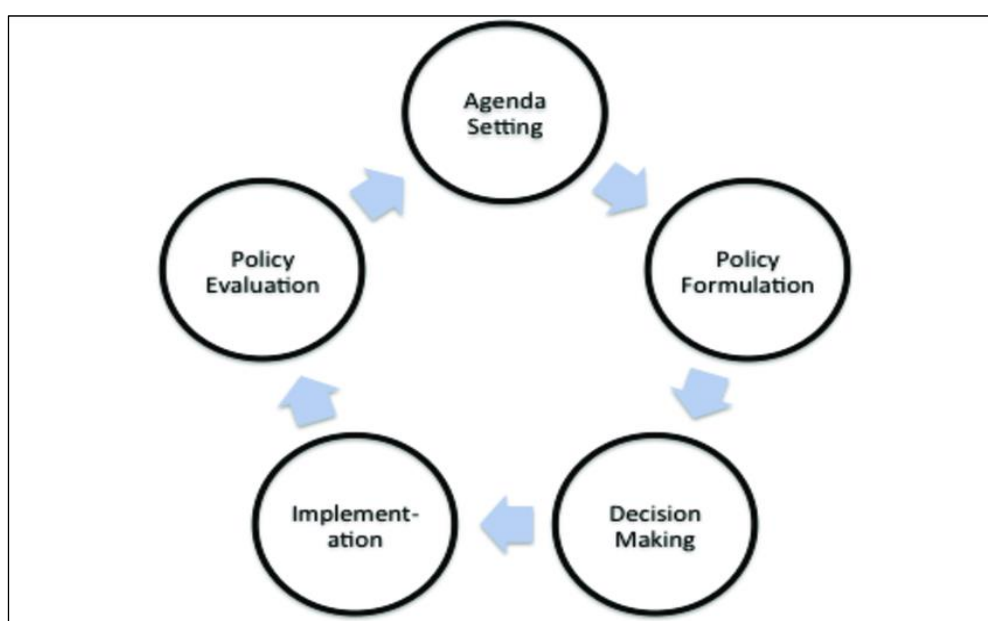


Fig.2 Public policy cycle (Howlett, Ramesh, 2009)

so-called "third level" sub-state, but is entrusted to the second intergovernmental level on the basis of the indications provided by the European Commission at the first level (Stephenson, 2013, pp. 830-833). In the policy cycle, the third level gives a stronger contribution to the implementation phase than the decision-making one.

Within the decision-making process, macro-regional strategies move into a top-down dynamic, involving only the European institutions and the Member States (Faludi, 2012, pp. 200-201). The executive part, which deals with governance aspects, instead follows a bottom-up method, widely involving the third level and the multiplicity of public and private actors within it. Furthermore, the classical theorization of multi-level governance focuses on the presence of actors of different backgrounds in the executive sector, valuing the subjects whose contribution was generally underestimated (Hooghe - Marks - Marks, 2001). As a result of the

conceptual innovation brought about by the multi-level approach, the disbursement of the Structural Funds has been modified, in fact the European Commission, dealing with territorial actors, often refers to generic stakeholders (Sielker, 2016, p. 2001). However, the Commission's definition gives a new value to certain types of entities, but at the same time it creates controversial points, involving democratic institutions representing millions of people and representative bodies of horizontal subsidiarity⁴¹ (such as trade associations, small economic actors, universities) in the same framework.

Multilevel governance raises one of the main topics of the functioning of the European Union: the legitimacy of the political system (Beetham - Lord, 2014). The problem concerns the EU's inability to combine the legitimacy of the input, the democracy, with the legitimacy of the output, the effectiveness (Schmidt, 2013, pp. 18-20). The democracy of the Union, a subject which has long been debated in the literature⁴², suffers of several critical issues, which increase the major democratic deficits of the Community institutions bodies. Indeed, the three dimensions of legitimacy (legality, legal justification and legitimacy) can only be partially attributed to the Community framework (Lord - Beetham, 2001, pp. 450-451)⁴³. The EU operates on the basis of codified rules, therefore on a legal basis, but legitimised only by the Member States, with low consensus of the political community of reference (Kohler-Koch - Rittberger, 2007). The participation in the policy making is one of the key points of multi-level governance, which should ensure, at least in intention, a broad representation of interests in society.

⁴¹ According to the principle of subsidiarity, introduced by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, in areas of non-exclusive competence of the Union, it shall act only if and to the extent that the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can be better achieved at the EU level. Subsidiarity has two modes of expression: vertical and horizontal. Vertical subsidiarity takes place within the framework of the distribution of administrative powers between different levels of territorial government and expresses the mode of intervention of higher and smaller territorial authorities. Horizontal subsidiarity takes place in the context of the relationship between authority and freedom and is based on the premise that the care of collective needs and activities of general interest is provided directly by private individuals (both as individuals and as associates), while the public authorities act in a subsidiary function, in the planning, coordination and, where appropriate, management.

⁴² About the democracy of the European Union see Blondel - Sinnott - Svensson, 1998; Loughlin, 2001; Eriksen - Fossum, 2002; Kauppi, 2018; Hoskyns, 2018.

⁴³ On the issue of the legitimacy of the European Union see Thomassen - Schmitt - Thomassen, 1999; Moravcsik, 2002; Banchoff - Smith, 2005; Kohler-Koch - Rittberger, 2007; Schmidt, 2013.

9. Conclusions

Macroregional strategies are the latest stage in the development of territorial cooperation and regionalisation processes since the establishment of European institutions. The different forms of cross-border cooperation, some of which precede the birth of the European Community, are the basis for the EU's regional policies. The Community institutions' interest in local and regional dimension has increased as cohesion and regional policy has been strengthened to intervene in the most disadvantaged areas with forms of cooperation targeted on local actors. The discovery of the added value that territorial government levels would bring to the EU framework has averted the danger of "regional blindness" which accompanied the European integration since its inception.

The first Community organisation which recognised the value of cross-border cooperation was the Council of Europe, whose intervention, however, has not been incisive in the development of regional policies. The role of the European Union, which provided legal means of recognition and forms of funding for transnational activities, has been more decisive. Cross-border regions, Euro-regions and, subsequently, macro-regions are an essential part of the Community strategy in terms of territorial cooperation.

Although sub-state actors play an important role in the Community context, the centrality of the regional and local dimension in the construction of EU policies cannot be affirmed. The evolution of territorial cooperation, in several aspects, marks the transition from a bottom-up approach to a top-down methodology. Macro-regional strategies represent a clear example of the EU's close leadership in cross-border cooperation, where local actors are involved only in the implementation phase and depend on instruments and funding developed at Community level, particularly by the European Commission. If this guide has led to undoubted results in terms of definition of the legal framework, within macro-regional strategies the theoretical axioms of multi-level governance result partially implemented. The novelty, introduced in Maastricht, of encouraging bottom-up methodologies through the development of cohesion policy and the EU Structural Funds, cannot be found in decision-making processes, in which the European Commission and the Member States have real power without counterweights, while sub-state actors only play a role of influence (Stocchiero, 2010). This practice conflicts with the *acquis communautaire* of the principle of subsidiarity set up in the Maastricht treaty, which established institutions like the Committee of the Regions. In this sense, multi-level governance qualifies as a neo-functionalist instrument, which gives rise to a series of paradoxes that undermine the democratic nature of macro-regional strategies, first and foremost the "three-no principle". More than thirty years after the conceptualization of multi-level governance, highlighting the specific issues in a European key can be a valuable contribution to the debate that

cyclically intensifies on the eve of new programming periods, like 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.

The analysis developed in this article cannot define in absolute terms whether the intervention of supranational bodies constitutes an added value or distorts the existence of macro-regional strategies. The response may vary on a case-by-case basis and depending on the parameters used for reviewing strategies. As the official documents show, it should also be pointed out that the European Commission's intention is not to play an invasive role, but rather to pursue an integrative approach in support of territorial government initiatives and levels, which remains the main focus. Would be more appropriate to affirm that all three levels of governance play a key role in the design and development of macro-regional strategies, but the greater attention should be given to bottom-up processes in the decision-making phase.

At the same time, as a further element of reflection, the consideration that the 20th century and its vision have really come to an end, as well as the policies related to the European Common Market. At the dawn of the 21st century there is still no real openness to a vision that recovers and actualizes the europeist message of the Ventotene Manifesto. The backwardness of the integration process highlighted in the Lisbon Treaty is the expression of a Community architecture that fails to depart from its recent functionalist past and to address the new needs arising from global phenomena with the perspective of a redefinition of the structure centred on Member states.

The uncertainty in the establishment of the Mediterranean macro-region bear witness to the lack of global vision and to the need for a deep community renewal even in terms of the barycentre of active policies. Regarding the development of strategic planning, it is essential to consider the Mediterranean not only as a basin of EU's exclusive competence. The possible effectiveness of a macro-regional strategy is strongly dependent on the significant participation of all partners, from North to South. If the guideline is the construction of a functional macro-region with common needs and objectives, collective and cooperative actions are required to reduce the rigidity of borders. The macroregional strategy can have a substantial impact on the Mediterranean transnational issues only if it is linked to the policies and interventions of both the countries of southern Europe and the countries of the other shores of the Mediterranean. At the same time, a parallel process of consolidating of the EU's transnational and multilevel internal cooperation is indispensable for the construction of a Mediterranean macro-region. Some local stakeholders in the regions involved have grasped the challenges and potential of a planned cross-border cooperation and have begun the procedures for the Mediterranean macro-regional strategy, pending the initiative of the EU central bodies.

Furthermore, according to critical literature, the “same characteristics” and the “territorial homogeneity” are difficult to project upon the Mediterranean. Indeed, the opportunity of regionalizing the Mediterranean is historically a disputed question, even from the perspective of a macro-regional strategy (Tourret - Wallaert, 2010). On the one hand, the Mediterranean could be extremely wide and complex to be macro-regionalized. On the other hand, the Mediterranean has been often considered as a region par excellence, the outcome of a long geographical and historical imagination, from Vidal de la Blanche to Braudel, profoundly influencing the representation and the categorization of inland seas. From the late 1950s, Mediterranean space has been intensively regionalized without promising results: this process primarily produced a heterogeneous and contested conceptual framework hostile to any further attempt of macro-regionalization (Jones, 1997, pp. 160-162).

The European spatial dimension must think regionally. Designing new spatial dimensions is a core activity of any institution; however, because of its importance, the spatial planning should be done with adequate knowledge of the concepts involved. Re-scalings of urbanization, state territorial power and regions have entailed a major transformation in the geographical organization (Brenner, 1999, p. 431). Every project of regional mapping or region-building is a political project translated into space, thus a confused theoretical structure could undermine their performative power. To confront these critical issues, EU policy makers should explicitly clarify the nature and the aims of the projects, the concept of region they refer to, the objectives to be pursued and the common background need to be formally stated for the territories involved (Bialasiewicz - Giaccaria - Jones - Minca, 2013, pp. 74-75). A new conception of re-territorialisation geographical scales is thus necessary to obtain an analytical and political consciousness on current governance processes in the globalization era.

The future of the EU's political aggregate will be based on the drive to reform the EU framework. Macro-regional strategies and other forms of cross-border cooperation cannot supply the historical shortcomings of “Europe building” processes or the EU's structural democratic deficits, but they might mitigate the effects. Analysing their effectiveness in relation to the challenges that Europe and the European Union will confront in the near future represents a field of research which has just opened up. Could the macro-region be, and in general any bounded spatial container, the right way for the policy making? Notably for the Mediterranean, this remains an open-ended question.

10. Documents

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12. *Curriculum Vitae*

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