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Macro-regional strategies of European integration. What can the Danube Region learn from the Baltic Sea Region?

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Abstract

The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) is the first European Union (EU) macro-regional strategy, it was adopted in 2009, and it was followed in 2011 by the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). Both of them seem to represent new ways of conducting EU's regional policy. Without creating new rules, without new institutions and without offering new financing sources, this so-called new macro-regional dimension of EU's regional policy is perceived as a new added value of the European territorial policy. Due to the lack of relevant studies regarding the implementation of the EUSDR Strategy, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the creation of macro regions and the opportunities that they provide. This article offers a comparative optic between EUSBSR and EUSDR, appealing to the experience of the first EU macro-regional strategy, highlighting the lessons that the Danube Region can learn from the Baltic Sea Region and making some remarks regarding the future of macro-regions.

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1. Introduction. Macro-regions and New Regionalism

The latest rounds of European enlargement, from 2004 onwards, have added to the European Union diverse countries, socially and economically unbalanced. Starting with 2009, EU has been developing the concept of macro-regions and applied it by creating two specific strategies for geographically determined areas: the Baltic Sea, in 2009

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and the Danube, in 2011. These areas cover various countries associated with common features and challenges. Even though the concept of macro-region is new in the EU vocabulary, similar sub-regional initiatives providing for cooperative arrangements in smaller geographic settings, such as the Baltic, the Barents, the Arctic and the Black Sea, have existed since the end of the Cold War (Cottee, 1999). It is noteworthy that most of these initiatives have emerged in the immediate vicinity of seas, lakes or river systems, and most of these arrangements materialize at the fringes of larger regional entities. For that reason, the Baltic Sea region has been described as a peripheral sub-region which links Europe's key regions: the European Union and the Russian Federation (Ganzle, 2011). After the 2004 EU enlargement, the Baltic Sea turned into an internal sea area, with the exception of Russia. In a similar manner, after the 2007 EU enlargement, the Danube is mostly seen as an internal EU river.

The first EU macro-regional Strategy was seen as a new EU policy formation and implementation instrument which provides possibilities to turn the peripheral Baltic Sea Region into a model of deeper integration, an experiment form of EU policy realization, which is inapplicable to any cooperation form of the past, a new form of regionalism (Zitkus, 2013), a new way of conducting EU regional policy (Marczuk, 2014). The main challenges for the implementation of the Strategy consisted, first of all, in the existence of a deeply heterogeneous area, divided into a rich modern Northern and Western part and a poor Eastern and Southern part (Ganzle, 2011). Secondly, another challenge consists in the fact that the model of governance described within the Strategy, does not grant any new legislation, new European funds or new special institutions.

The creation of macro-regions in the EU can be understood appealing to the New Regionalism (NR) theory. The NR concept originates in the planning literature and since mid 1990s is has been used to address diverse concerns, which could be best approached from a regional scale, such as sprawl, environmental impacts, homogeneity of built environment, uneven regional development and persisting social problems (Ortiz-Guerrero, 2013). NR is directly connected to several movements such as new urbanism, sustainable communities, and smart growth.

New regionalism underlines the openness of regions as social constructs (Hajizada, Marciacq, 2013), having localized governance systems and socio-economic assets, and sharing specific problems, which can be addressed through a decentralized holistic approach. This perspective promotes a regional development by empowering local actors, creating connectivity among them, bringing new interests to the regional agenda, and facilitating the creation of new capabilities and innovative initiatives (Ortiz-Guerrero, 2013).

Collaborative planning could be seen as one of the key theoretical roots of the New Regionalism perspective, useful for the understanding of EU macro-regions. Collaborative planning (Healey, 2004) is concerned with the transformative influence of planning upon existing structures (in the institutional sense) (Wallis, 1994). As we have seen, macro-regions do not create new-institutions, but rely on the existing ones to solve their complex shared problems. The emphasis on the territory and its multidimensional nature, the need to approach it from a holistic perspective that recognizes its governance system, institutional arrangements and multiple realities, the transformative power of local agency, and the need to approach regions from an endogenous perspective, are the key lessons offered by the NR (Ortiz-Guerrero, 2013), which can shed more light when addressing to increasingly complex problems such as macro-regional development. Collaborative planning is explicitly concerned with facilitating diverse actors' initiatives for collective action and also recognizes the importance of networks, as points of intersection and stimulus for institutional collaboration. From this point of view, macro-regions can be seen as networked spaces (Harrison, Growe, 2014).

This concept of New Regionalism within the macro-regional strategies is also connected with the so-called differentiated integration (Groenendijk, 2011), or other older concepts such as multispeed integration, concentric circles, *Europe à la carte* (Warleigh, 2002). According to this conception, the European integration must not be seen as a uniform or monolithic process (made by multilateral agreements) but rather, as a mosaic one, consisting of individual interrelated elements (such as regional organizations of different levels) with a common base. (Zitkus, 2013)

The Danube Strategy was prepared using the Baltic example and it presents the same challenges: important socio-economic disparities between the Western and Eastern countries part of the area and the necessity to use existing institutional bodies, money and legislation. These differences among the states from the Danube region, in terms of economic, demographical, territorial or military potential caused some doubts about the success of deeper integration, limited within the framework of existing financial instruments (Zitkus, 2013, Ganzle, 2011).

Due to the novelty of macro-regions and the lack of relevant information in this field, the purpose of this paper is two-folded. First of all, this paper will comparatively describe the two macro-regional strategies, pointing out their objectives and their governance structures. Secondly, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the existing evaluations of the two strategies, in order to extract the feedback regarding their implementation, and the lessons already learned by the Baltic region, that might be useful for the implementation of the Danube Region Strategy. The method used in this regard is the qualitative content analysis of EU documents: adoption and revision documents of the European Commission - Communications and Action Plans (European Commission 2009 a,b; 2010 a,b; 2012; 2013c.); Evaluation Reports by the Commission on the EUSBSR (European Commission, 2011) and EUSDR (European Commission, 2013a); general evaluations of macro-regions (European Commission 2013b., 2014a.), Annual Forums' Sites and Documents (for EUSBSR between 2010 and 2013, for EUSDR from 2012 to 2013).

2. The concept of macro-region in EU's documents

The European Union describes a macro-region as an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges (European Commission, 2009a.). From this point of view, EUSBR and EUSDR were necessary, as a number of issues in the Baltic Sea Region. or the Danube Region, required working together, across borders and national interests.

The golden rules of macroregions, decided by the General Affairs Council in April 2011 are the three NO : no new Legislation, no new Institutions, no new Money and the three YES: Better alignment of funding; Better Coordination; New Ideas. In the official EU rhetoric, the driving force of macroregions strategies is *endogenous* - finding new ways of addressing challenges and exploiting the opportunities *within* the region. For example, macro-strategies respond to matters such as the deterioration of the environmental state of the Baltic Sea or unused potential for improved navigability and water quality for an attractive Danube Region. On the other hand, critics claim the macro-regional approach, far from joining things up, splits EU territory and sets up clubs (Dieringer, Wulf, 2011).

The main objective of macro-regions, defined in the official documents, is to elaborate a coordinated response to issues better handled together than separately (European Commission, 2013b), and transnational responsibility is an important innovation in territorial cooperation and cohesion. In the official rhetoric, a macro-regional strategy is an integrated framework relating to Member States and third countries in the same geographical area; it addresses common challenges; and it benefits from strengthened cooperation for economic, social and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2013b). We will further compare the main features of the first two EU macro-regional strategies.

3. EUSBSR and EUSDR. A Comparison

3.1. Geographic and demographic data

EUSBSR encompasses the states bordering the Baltic Sea and their neighbors, in a total of eight EU countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden and three non-EU countries : Norway, Russia (north-west regions) and Belarus. More than 85 million people live in this region.

EUSDR refers to a functional area defined by Danube river basin. It is addressed to nine EU countries: Germany (the Landers Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Austria, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia and five non-EU countries : Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (the regions along the Danube). More than 100 million people live in this region that measures one fifth of the EU surface.

3.2. Strategy Adoption Process

In the case of EUSBSR the adoption process started in 2006 with a European Parliament Report, requesting the creation of a Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. It was followed by an Invitation from the European Council to the

European Commission (December 2007) to elaborate such a document. The Communication from the European Commission on the EUSBSR and the Accompanying Action Plan were issued in June 2009. They were consequently validated by the General Affairs and External Relations Council in October 2009, and endorsed by Head of States in the same month. It is important to note that following the first Evaluation Reports, EUSBSR was revised in 2012/2013.

The EUSDR adoption process started with an Invitation from the European Council to the Commission to elaborate the new Strategy (June 2009). The Communication from the European Commission and the Accompanying Action Plan were issued in December 2010. They were validated by the General Affairs Council in April 2011, and endorsed by Head of States in June 2011.

3.3. Objectives

Both Strategies divided their Strategic Objectives into Pillars and Priority Areas, and each Priority Area is managed by two responsible Countries. We can identify similar priorities of the two macro strategies.

Table1. The Objectives of EUSBSR and EUSDR.

| EUSBSR (2009) 4 Pillars, 15 Priority Areas | EUSDR (2011) 4 Pillars, 11 Priority Areas |
|--|---|
| <p>Environmentally sustainability To reduce nutrient inputs to the sea ; natural zones and biodiversity; impact of hazardous substances; Clean shipping; adapt to climate change</p> <p>Prosperity To remove hindrances to the internal market research and innovation; promote entrepreneurship, strengthen SMEs sustainable agriculture, forestry and fishing.</p> <p>Accessibility and attractiveness energy markets; internal and external transport links; attractiveness of the Region through education, tourism and health</p> <p>Safety and security maritime safety and security; protection from major emergencies at sea and on land; cross border crime.</p> | <p>1. Connecting the region Mobility&multimodality Sustainable energy Culture, tourism, people to people</p> <p>Protecting the environment Water quality Environmental risks Biodiversity, landscapes, air &soil quality</p> <p>Building prosperity Knowledge society Competitiveness People &skills</p> <p>Strengthening the Region Institutional capacity & cooperation Security</p> |

3.4. Macro-regional Governance

Both EUSBSR and EUSDR have the same governance structure, on three levels, composed by a Policy Level, a Coordination level and an Operational level.

The political role of governing macro-regions is awarded to the European/policy level, and the concerned institutions are the European Council, the European Commission and the High Level Group. While the European Council only had a role in the creation of the Strategy, the Commission helps implement the Strategy by facilitating and supporting actions of the participating countries. The Commission coordinates the Strategy at the policy level, assisted by a High Level Group (HLG). HLG is made up of official representatives from all EU Member States. It assists the Commission in the policy coordination of the Strategy. The Commission consults the HLG for modifications to the Strategy and the Action Plan, as well as for reports and monitoring. The HLG also addresses policy orientation and prioritization.

The Coordination level corresponds to the level of Member States and their assigned National Contact Points (NCP). Their role is to coordinate and keep an overview of the participation of their country in the implementation of the macro-strategies, including all Priority Areas. The role of the NCP is to promote the Strategy and inform relevant stakeholders on the national level of key developments. In Romania's case, and most of other countries, the assigned NCP is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In some cases, other Ministries have this role: Ministry of Regional Development (for EUSDR: Bulgaria, Moldova), Ministry of Economic Development and Trade (Ukraine), State Chancellery, State Ministry (Baden Württemberg, Bavaria).

At the Operational Level there can be found the experts, or Priority Area Coordinators (PAC) and Project Leaders, the Laboratory Group and the INTERACT network. PAC ensure the implementation of the Action Plan defined for the Priority Areas by agreeing on planning, with targets, indicators and timetables, and by making sure there is effective cooperation between project promoters, programs and funding sources. They also provide technical assistance and advice. Romania is PAC for several Priority Areas, and its responsible institutions are the following: Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure- PAC for PA "Inland waterways"; Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism- PAC for PA "To promote culture and tourism, people to people contacts"; Ministry of Environment and Forests-PAC for PA "To manage environmental risks" .

The Laboratory Group (LG) is a think-tank composed of members of national administrations, European Commission representatives and European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programs. Its tasks comprise advice and recommendation on how regional programs can best contribute in order to achieve the overall goals of the Strategy. INTERACT draws ideas and solutions from the Lab Group discussion to produce guidelines for PACs.

INTERACT points, having expertise in ETC, are involved in facilitating interaction between various stakeholders, managing the macro-regions' websites, producing and disseminating information and publications, supporting exchange of views among PACs and NCPs in their tasks and promoting the Strategy predominantly at the European level. For EUSDR the INTERACT point is located in Vienna, and for EUSBSR at Turku.

Flagship Project Leaders (FPL) is a concept used only for EUSBSR. FPL ensure the implementation and promotion of the projects with a high macro-regional impact in the macro regions (Flagship Project) contributing to fulfill the objectives of the Strategy. Projects not labeled as flagship but containing a Strategy-related approach are considered as contributing projects.

3.5. Financing the macro-regions

Giving the rule of no new European funds to finance the macro-regional projects, the sources of financing are the existing financial instruments. There are six types of such instruments, available for both macro-regions.

The mainstream sources are represented by the Structural and Cohesion Funds (under the Multiannual financial framework 2007-2013), more exactly, objective 1 – Convergence, and Objective 2 Competitiveness and Employment, of the Cohesion Policy, as well as Maritime and Fisheries Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Secondly, under Cross-Border Cooperation, finances are available under the Objective 3 of the Cohesion Policy. Experience shows that European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programs are the main source of funding. This aspect is a problematic one, giving the fact that within the total amount of money allocated to the Cohesion Policy between 2007 and 2013, territorial cooperation received only 2%. (Fig.1).

The Instruments for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and the European Eastern Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument are also available for Western Balkans countries. There can also be accessed on a project basis other EU sources for specific policies (for education projects – Framework Program 7, for environmental projects – LIFE +

Program), International Financing institutions – European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, private Banks or other donors (foundations).

To sum up, the governance and financing scheme of macro regions can be resumed to the role of national coordinators (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in most cases), which must develop a close relation with national Offices responsible for territorial cohesion and with the focal points in line ministries. This scheme has its pros and cons. State level coordination can be considered a plus as it enables short decision making process. Also, the fact that the same experts (in majority) at line ministries are responsible for specific areas can also provide synergies between macro-strategies. On the other hand, the exhaustion of experts at ministries leads to the limitation of countries priorities within macro-regions. The same countries, with a bigger GDP per capita, will be the motors of projects within the macro-regions. The success of macro-regional Strategies was evaluated by the European Commission in order to permanently adapt the process of implementation.

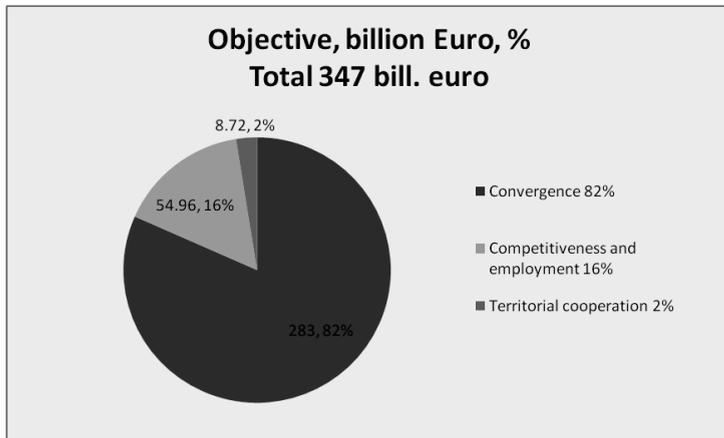


Fig. 1. 2007-2013 Cohesion Policy – financing by Objectives

4. The First Official Evaluations and Reviews of EUSBSR and EUSDR – identified problems and lessons learned

Being elaborated in 2009, EUSBSR has, until now, an official first Evaluation (European Commission, 2011), an official review (European Commission, 2012) based on this first evaluation, and a revised Action Plan (European Commission, 2013c.).

The main problems identified in the first evaluation pursued by the European Commission referred to coordinating the development and the implementation of the process between NCPs, Ministries and PACs, the lack of political involvement, the delivery mechanism and the alignment of funding sources.

The lessons learned, solutions and suggestions made by the European Commission were, first of all, to further political support for EUSBSR implementation. With this purpose, relevant meetings NCP –PAC were recommended, as well as the clarification of the responsibilities on all levels. Suggestions were also made regarding clear monitoring system and targets: the creation of an obligatory set of core indicators to evaluate implementation. Policy development was also seen as a necessity, in order to build closer links to Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010c.), and to strengthen the coordination between policies thematically relevant for EUSBSR. Further alignment of funding with EUSBSR objectives and further technical assistance were also recommended, and an informal Network for the Funding of EUSBSR was established in 2010. More communication was also demanded, so that information to be given to potential applicants.

Given the fact that both EUSBSR and EUSDR were launched in mid – financial period, making coherence with existing policies and programs was at times problematic (European Commission, 2013b.). This is the reason why recommendations were specifically made concerning the the next programming period: the necessity of more clear rules for the use of European Regional Development Fund in transnational regional projects (art.37.6, European

Commission, 2006); the establishment of project selection criteria in relation to the EUSBSR at the level of all programmes, which will grant priority to projects contributing to the implementation of the EUSBSR.

The revised EUSBSR Action Plan changed the Objectives of the Strategy, and reduced them to three: Save the Sea, Increase Prosperity, Connect the Region. We can assume that this change was made in order for EUSBSR Objectives to better fit the main objectives of Europe 2020 Strategy.

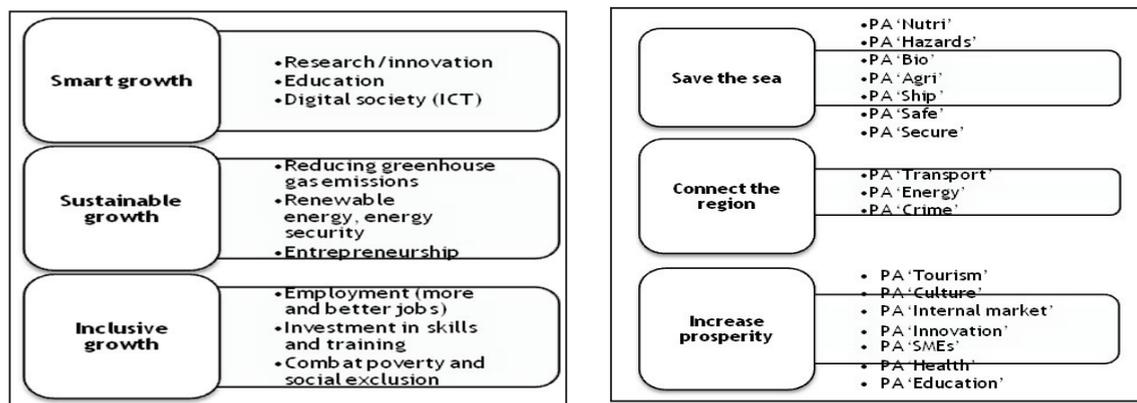


Fig.2 (a and b). Objectives and Priority Areas: a. Europe 2020 Strategy b. Revised EUSBSR (2013).

The revised objectives of the EUSBSR Action Plan (European Commission, 2013c) took into account the Recommendations made by the European Commission regarding the creation of a set of indicators in order to best measure the implementation of the Strategy. For example, under the Objective “Increase prosperity”, PA “Culture – Developing and promoting the common culture and cultural identity”, the revised Action Plan for the Baltic Sea Region has detailed a few targets to achieve, with the purpose of further developing a comprehensive system for the design, the monitoring and the follow-up of indicators and targets. This process was supposed to take place in 2013 and it is still pending.

Table 2. EUSBSR. Indicators & targets on the priority area level (European Commission, 2013c.)

| Objective | Indicator | Baseline | Target values/ situation | Information sources |
|--|---|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Promotion of BSR culture, cultural heritage and creative industries. | Percentage of creative industries of BSR countries GDP and employment rate. | Figures of 2012. | Increase of 10% by 2020. | National statistics and Eurostat. |
| Creative entrepreneurship within the BSR. | Percentage of new successful creative enterprises. | Figures of 2012. | Increase of 5% by 2020. | National statistics and Eurostat. |
| Efficient framework of BSR cultural cooperation. | Better cooperation of existing BSR cultural policy bodies. Better cooperation between the existing cultural networks and institutions. | 1st joint meeting of SOGC, NDPC, Ars Baltica and the MG Cultural Heritage in May 2012 in | Regular joint meetings of BSR cultural policy bodies. | Compilation by PACs. |

Greifswald.

The first implementation evaluation of EUSDR (European Commission, 2013a.) stated that the Danube Region has demonstrated clear potential in its first phase of implementation, of 18 months. The recommendations received referred, first of all, at strengthening the internal implementation structures, providing adequate financial support, political backing, and increased institutional stability. National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and their Steering Groups form the implementation core of the Strategy and they need sufficient human resources. Experience showed that national coordination works better in countries that have set up inter-ministerial working groups for coordinating Danube work at national level. Secondly, sustainable leadership and strategic planning for the Strategy, assisted by the European Commission, is vital, so that participating countries and regions fully assume their responsibilities. Thirdly, it is recommended more focus on results through paying further attention to appropriate targets and indicators, milestones and roadmaps. And also, it is recommended to ensure systematic embedding of the Strategy in EU, national and regional programs for the period 2014-2020.

The overall evaluation of both existing Macro-regional Strategies (European Commission, 2013b.) highlighted their added-value. It was underlined that the two strategies have created working structures around priority areas, selected in a bottom-up process of consultation, with political leadership in each area taken by participating countries and regions, supported by the Commission as facilitator. It was also pointed out the fact that the macro-regional approach helps align EU programs to act together on major shared goals. On the other hand, the lack of additional EU money also pushes implementers to seek funds more actively. While the added-value seems to be clear, the evaluation stated that it is essential to improve implementation methods, with regard of the operationalization of the programming period 2014-2020. Among the implementation methods, remarks were being made to: choosing the right objectives, maintaining political commitment, funding (not sufficient alignment funds-objectives-policies), monitoring and measurements of implementing projects, and better governance of the regions at all three levels: strategic leadership, coordination and implementation.

In the Commission's opinion, better governance of macro-regional strategies is not about new funds or new institutions. Instead, it should aim for smarter use of existing resources (European Commission, 2014a.). The current system relies heavily on the European Commission for strategic leadership, when, if we speak about regional policies, the accent should fall more on the national ministries. Besides the Annual Forum of each strategy, the European Commission proposed the introduction of a rotating chair for each Strategy for a given period, with an agreed rotation, and the nomination of a special representative for the Strategy, approved by all countries.

Currently, coordination and management functions are only partly fulfilled (European Commission, 2014a.). The Commission admits that a clarification of the NCP roles is required, as they have the lead in coordination and operational leadership. They should meet regularly to ensure continuous coordination and good information flow, and these meetings should be chaired by the country holding the rotating chair of the macro-regional strategy, or by the proposed special representative.

The implementation of the Strategies includes tasks such as facilitating generation and implementation of initiatives and projects, setting of indicators and targets, reinforcing bridges to the relevant funding programmes. Thematic experts and their Steering Groups are the key force to drive implementation forward in a thematically sound way. Current challenges are the lack of capacity and resources: although Steering Groups, composed by national experts, have been set up in most thematic areas, not all have good participation. Good examples include Priority Areas "People and Skills" in the Danube, or "Safe" or "Ship" in the Baltic Region. (European Commission, may 2014). Also, INTERACT points should provide better overall conceptual and developmental assistance, in terms of exchange of good practices.

Above all, the lessons learned from both Strategies seem to inspire the creation of new ones. The need to focus on a limited number of common challenges and/or opportunities, and to secure ownership, commitment and leadership from participating countries is the main lesson learned by the new Adrian and Ionian Region Strategy (European Commission, 2014b.).

5. What next for macro-regions?

Even though the success of macro-regions is doubtful until now, due, among others, to the late introduction of measurement indicators of implementation, the macro-regional approach of territorial development seems to have generated replications. Since 2012, two new macro-regions are being projected at EU level. The European Council invited the Commission at the end of 2012 to present a Proposal for the Adriatic and Ionian Region Strategy by the end of 2014, and the document was issued in June 2014. Also, the Strategy for the Alpine Region is to be finished in 2015, so the way is open for the creation new macro-regions. The economic, social and environmental diversity and fragmentation in the Adriatic Ionian Region, and territorial, economic and social imbalances between cities and rural areas in the Alps are the challenges that the two new Strategies must address.

Perhaps potential synergies could be found among macro-regions, in order to develop and test new initiatives regionally before applying to entire EU, to disseminate successful results from the Baltic Sea to other regions, and to implement results and recommendations from projects in other sea/rivers basins. Considering joint, large-impact projects in two or more sea/river basins at a time, and cooperating on uniform enforcement of global or European regulation are to be seen as future opportunities for EU regional policy.

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