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The role of macro-regional strategies as new tools in policy transfer and cross-national learning between the EU and third countries and intra-EU

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Abstract

Macro-regional strategies represent a new opportunity for comprehensive development of a larger region with EU and non-EU participants, addressing common challenges and potential. Their multi-dimensional integrated approach also allows important overall policy objectives to be incorporated in regional development work. The paper explores the legislation linked and guidances on macro-regional strategy for the coming programming period and what has happened so far to respond to the question, if these tool can be able in the praxis also improving policy transfer and whether this form of cooperation is effective, useful or not.

The findings showed that macro-regional strategies have already created valuable cooperation platforms, which did not exist in the past and they have not only a potential to improve socio-economic development or governance, but also strengthening the ties between the Member States and bringing the participating candidate and potential candidate countries closer to the EU, therefore reinforcing the process of European integration. However, the experience shows strong needs of common understanding and cooperation and the decisive point is whether the stakeholder will and would cooperate with each other in the implementation of the strategy.

Key Words: macro-regional strategy, integrated approach

Introduction

Macro-regional strategies are new development tools, completely in line with the priority of using synergies and integrated approach in the field of regional development. They represent a new opportunity for comprehensive development of a larger region, addressing common challenges and potential. Their integrated approach also allows important overall policy objectives to be incorporated in regional development work. So far, based on the experience, the macro-regional strategies are proving their added value both strategically and politically by improving existing cooperation mechanisms and networks and promoting - where relevant - the development of new ones within and between participating countries, leading to greater coordination and efficiency of the efforts.

The cohesion policy, which is traditionally working with policy transfer and cross-national learning, has a new general regulation for 2014-2020 (CPR)¹ setting off new integrated

¹ REGULATION (EU) No 1303/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund,

instruments and via these tools through multilevel governance European subsidies from different EU funds and other sources can be combined.

The paper focuses on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region experiences and explores also the legislation and other documents (council decisions, reports, action plans, working documents...etc.) on the macro-regional strategies and responds to the question, if the new tools can be able to achieve the top priority in practice: address common challenges and increase the coordination and cooperation between the different stakeholders. The paper uses also sources of information based on desk research (studies, evaluations... etc.) and experiences from participating council working groups, steering groups and other workshop meetings linked to macro-regional strategies.

Cohesion policy in change

The overarching objective of European cohesion policy is to promote the harmonious development of the union and its regions. EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 shall contribute to the EU 2020 Strategy of a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. This is the challenge for the new period. Policy makers shall even more in the current economic climate deliver results which are based on evidence in order to ensure the most efficient spending of funds². The multiple challenges confronting Europe – economic, environmental and social – show the need for an integrated and territorial place-based approach.

As a response to this fact, one of the key elements of the reform is using the integrated approach to increase efficiency with establishing new integrating tools such as common strategy or new territorial development tools for more coordination and less overlaps. An integrated approach is multi-dimensional, and may require greater willingness from different levels of government to co-operate and co-ordinate actions in order to achieve shared goals. The new cohesion policy regulation in response to the integrated approach offers the possibility to common use of the funds addressing the Common Strategic Framework and so establishing new integrating tools such as common strategy for macro-regions or new territorial development tools (Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI)³, Community-led Local Development (CLLD)⁴) or Joint Action Plan (JAP)⁵ for more coordination and less overlap. This means that projects which tackle a complex situation, such as structural interventions in different aspects and themes, may be funded by different sources.

the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006

² Györgyi Nyikos (2013): The impact of developments implemented from public finances, with special regard to EU cohesion policy, *Public Finance Quarterly, Journal of public finance*, 2013/2 165-185. pp.

³ ITI is a tool to implement territorial strategies in an integrated way, allows Member States to implement Operational Programmes in a cross-cutting way and to draw on funding from several priority axes of one or more Operational Programmes to ensure the implementation of an integrated strategy for a specific territory.

⁴ CLLD is a specific tool for use at sub-regional level, which is carried out through integrated and multi-sectoral area-based local development strategies and allows the integrated use of the Funds.

⁵ A Joint Action Plan (JAP) is a part of one or several priority axes or operational programmes implemented by a results-based approach, in order to achieve specific objectives agreed jointly between the Member State and the Commission.

Another important element of the cohesion policy reform is reinforcing cooperation across borders and making the setting up of more cross-border projects easier, also ensuring that macro-regional strategies are supported by national and regional programmes. The question is how to address the complex situations, the territorial challenges in the programming process and how this approach can support the integration process and the policy transfer.

Macro-regional strategies

Macro-regional strategies⁶ are a new form of regional cooperation and the rationale behind the initiative is that a lot of important issues cannot be dealt with by countries alone: they require cooperation with others. This is the case especially in the fields of transport, energy, the environment, the economy and security. This cooperation is partially done at the EU level, but the macro-regional level is sometimes better to address common challenges and opportunities, which can be identified over a large but coherent zone⁷. The objectives of a macro-regional strategy can clearly vary according to the needs of the regions concerned (*the Baltic Sea Region countries are clustered around a sea, while Danube Region countries are strung out along a line - so they must work together slightly differently and will not share all the same priorities*), however a special added value of the macro-regional approach can be that ***working together can become a habit and a skill***. In addition, overall co-ordination of actions across policy areas will very likely help to achieve better results, than individual initiatives.

1. Figure: EU macro-regional strategies

Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region	Strategy for the Danube Region	Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region	Strategy for the Alpine Region
8 EU countries	8 EU countries	4 EU countries	5 EU countries
3 non-EU countries	6 non-EU countries	4 non-EU countries	2 non-EU countries
17 thematic priorities	11 thematic priorities	4+2 thematic priorities	3 thematic priorities
100 million people	115 million people	70 million people	70 million people

Source: author's own compilation

To achieve the objective of result-orientation there is also the question of alignment, critical mass and impact, which allows for the reconciliation of - different types of – sectoral objectives and aspects of development (e.g. social, environmental, infrastructural, economic aspects etc.), different levels of governance (at the EU, Member State, region or local level)⁸.

⁶ A 'Macro-Regional strategy' is an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council to address common challenges faced by a defined geographical area relating to Member States and third countries located in the same geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion.

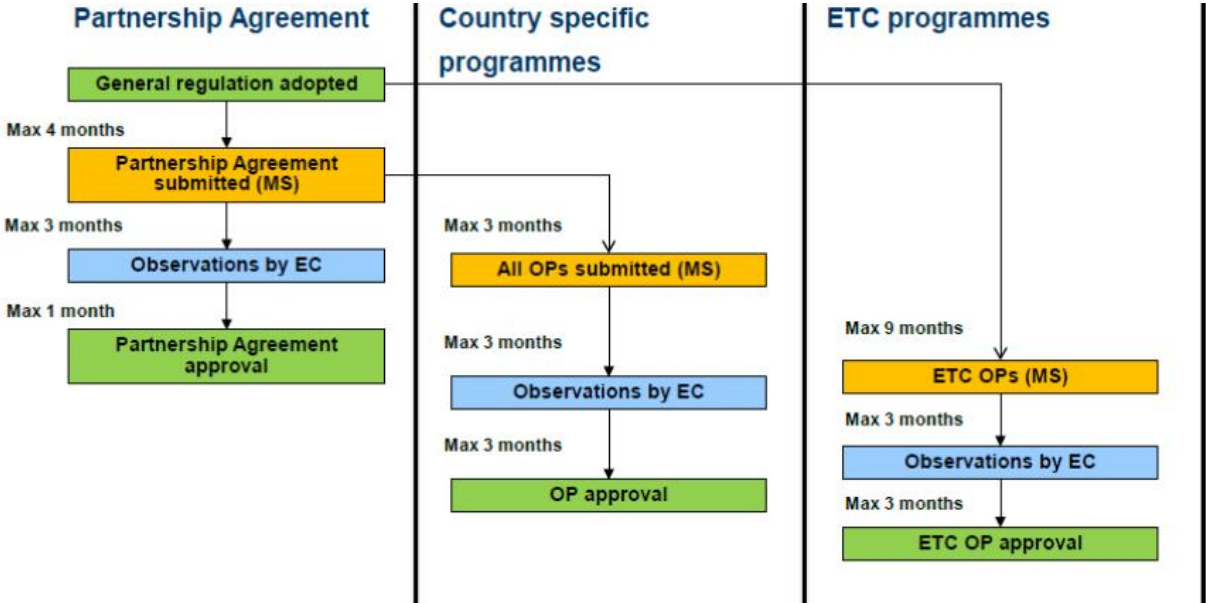
⁷ The definition of macro region is developed during the preparation of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region as “an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges.”

⁸ Györgyi Nyikos (2011): [How to deliver an integrated territorial approach to increase the effectiveness of public interventions](#), Panel Debate at High-level Conference “Integrated Approach to Development - a Key to Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Europe” 24. November 2011. Poznan

In the framework of the macro-regional strategies, through the *integrated approach* and multi-level governance, optimization of policy mixes can be achieved.

However facilitating truly integrated programmes and projects requires a shift in attitude, a stronger coordination and partnership at all levels between the various stakeholders. The coordinated and integrated approach can much be helped by macro-regional work. The macro-regional strategies identify the main priorities and challenges for the region where better coordination of policies and alignment of already existing financing instruments is needed, but is based on the guiding principles of no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures, no new EU legislation while relying on smart coordinated governance approach and synergy effects: better implementation of existing legislation, optimal use of existing financial sources and better use of existing institutions. Following the macro-regional strategies do not come with extra EU finance but they are supported from the resources already available. The regulations propose that macro-regional strategies be embedded throughout the programming process (*the Common Strategic Framework, the Partnership contracts, and all operational Programmes, as appropriate*) and when developing and implementing the policy in all respects. The Member States and other relevant authorities concerned are encouraged to embed these objectives into the programming documents in a coordinated way taking into account possibilities inter alia by cooperative governance arrangements and specific mechanisms, like giving priority in the selection process to the operations deriving from these strategies or by organizing specific calls for them.

2. Figure: Programming process 2014-2020

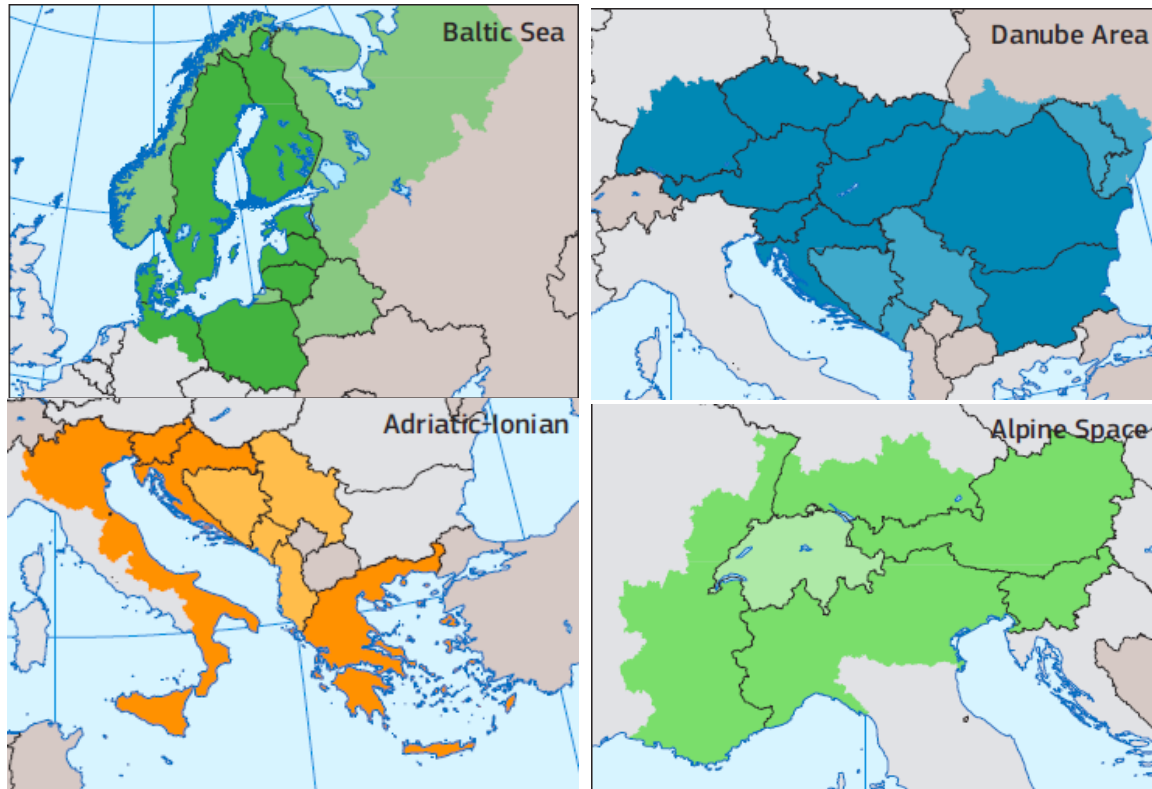


Source: European Commission

Financial resources are made available to countries on the road to membership through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). It is also encouraged to consolidate and coordinate the initiatives that already exist for non-EU countries (IPA, ENI sources) with the objectives of the relevant macro-regional strategies. This can be used for projects falling within the scope of the macro-regional strategy. Originally one of the key factors behind the development for regional policy of relations with non EU countries was the solid contribution that the knowledge and experience can make the policy in these countries more effective. Now with the macro-regional policies in place we have a new governance and coordination mechanism to strengthen this process.

For the 2014-2020 re-defined and specific *new transnational cooperation programmes* have been created, and the geography of the new transnational programmes matches exactly the territory of the macro-regional strategies.

3. Figure: Geography of Transnational Cooperation Programmes linked to macro-regional strategies 2014-2020



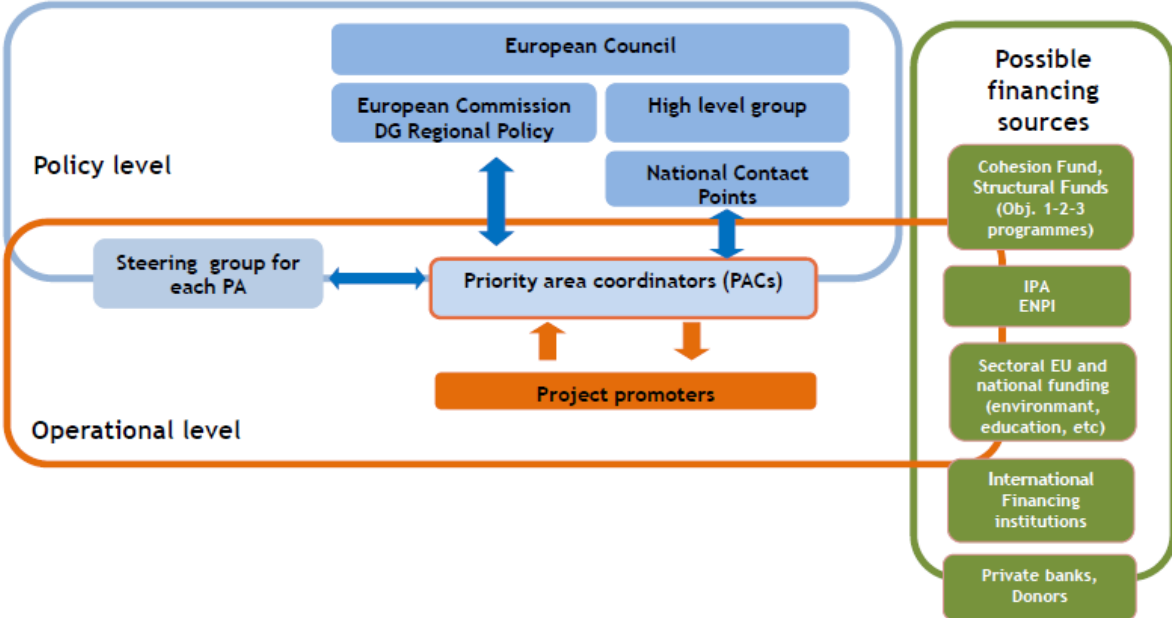
Source: European Commission

The macro-regional strategy and the transnational programme are two different instruments developed for similar aims but acting on different levels and principles. However, their matching territory and goals provide great opportunities for cooperation between the two: besides contributing to the strategy's thematic goals by realizing relevant cooperation projects, the programme might also support the institutional cooperation of stakeholders and institutions of the strategy. Naturally, thematic priorities of transnational programmes will be defined in line with the relevant draft EC legislation, the national priorities of Partner States, and reflect the needs of the programme area which have to be similar than the goals of the relevant macro-regional strategy. As far as the macro-regional strategies are concerned, important steps have been taken to improve support for the macro-regional approach. But not only the cohesion policy, also other policies and funds managed by the Commission (CEF, HORIZON20, COSME, ERASMUS ...etc.) have to align the different existing EU and other funds and instruments to the goals of the macro-regional strategies where appropriate. This concerns coordination mechanisms between those responsible for the different funds in each Member State, but also between those responsible for other policy areas and instruments: like research and development, innovation and transport. It is essential to integrate the macro-regional strategies systematically in programmes.

The macro-regional strategies are governed by a *multi-level governance structure*. Besides the European Council, the European Commission and the High Level Group on macro-regional strategies, for each Priority Area, each of the two responsible countries designates a

Priority Area Coordinator. The European Council as the highest political body of the EU gave the mandate to the European Commission to prepare the macro-regional strategies. The European Commission as the executive of the EU prepared until now 3 macro-regional strategies and helps implement them facilitating and supporting actions of the participating countries, coordinates it at the policy level. The High Level Group on macro-regional strategies is made up of official representatives from all EU Member States and assists the Commission in the policy coordination of the Strategy. Each Priority Area is jointly coordinated by two participating countries (or regions), who work in consultation with the Commission, relevant EU agencies and regional bodies. Also much attention has been paid to developing an appropriate structure also for the operative work. Coordinators for the Priority Areas have been appointed (for each Priority Area, each of the two responsible countries designates a Priority Area Coordinator⁹), assisted by Steering Groups gathering experts on each theme. The National Contact Points (NCPs) coordinate and keep an overview of the participation of their country in the implementation of the macro-regional strategy including all Priority areas.

4. Figure: Governance of macro-regional strategies



Source: author own compilation

This governance involves three levels: (i) political leadership and ownership, (ii) coordination and (iii) implementation and that these levels are interrelated, in particular political leadership and ownership being a pre-requisite for effective coordination and implementation. The governance is a shared process which relies on a collective effort on the part of the participating countries. On one hand good practice examples of successful macro-regional actions already exist; on the other hand, however, as work has gained momentum, experience¹⁰ has also revealed obstacles to implementation. Accordingly better governance

⁹ The Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) ensure the implementation of the Action Plan defined for the Priority Area by agreeing on planning, with targets, indicators and timetables, and by making sure there is effective cooperation between project promoters, programmes and funding sources. They also provide technical assistance and advice. The coordinators work in consultation with the Commission, and relevant EU agencies and national/regional bodies.

¹⁰ Communication concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, 23 March 2012 COM (2012)128 final; Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 8 April 2013 COM

must clarify what is required for the success of the approach. The ownership and the internal implementation structures of the countries for macro-regional strategies should reflect national characteristics and ensure horizontal coordination. However the different strengths of the macro-regions and participating countries must be understood and taken into account as well. In particular, good use should be made of current regional organizations.

This approach has revealed that with regard to better spending in the macro-region, overcoming national boundaries and fostering European integration is not only related to the development of transnational policies, initiatives and projects, but also to the integration of the macro-regional dimension into the national institutional system, including integration of the macro-regional strategies into strategic planning, programming and funding mechanisms.

Another important issue is the common effort to increase the coordination and cooperation between the different stakeholders. For coordination and cooperation, it's vital to get the right people involved from the start from the right countries, regions and associations. They must drive the process, with some countries taking the lead on certain issues and creating the right cooperation networks. The macro-regional strategy proposes a working method based on cooperation. Countries, stakeholders should meet regularly, at working level, to agree on the best ways to implement the actions.

In the case of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region the region has very wide disparities. It has some of the most successful but also the poorest regions in the EU. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region is addressing these disparities by bringing together the opportunities in the region. This cooperation is not easy, because of the different languages, and the administration is often nationally oriented and sometimes interests are diverging also. Even so the Strategy seems to be a well prepared cooperation mechanism for all stakeholders and there is experience in relation of ways of involving also the civil society. This means the initiation of political processes, but also the involvement of a vast variety of stakeholders from the private sector, regional, local and civil society stakeholders in the implementation of the Strategy. Awareness of the Strategy have been raised not only among the general public, but also among key stakeholders within the Danube countries' administrations. All the stakeholders and civil society actors are included in the work, including stakeholder seminars, Steering Groups and the Annual Forums¹¹, and particularly in Priority Area 10, 'Institutional Capacity'.

Working on shared actions is also meaning that we are able to establish closer relations in many fields between stakeholders from different Member States from different regions. There are non-EU countries participating in the macro-regional strategies too (see Figure 1). If we manage to implement common projects together, this can be an outstanding chance to involve them in the common policies and projects of the Union. The macro-regional strategy is an innovative instrument of cooperation between EU and non-EU countries, also with the political aim of assisting participating candidate and potential candidate countries on their path towards the EU. The preparation and implementation of macro-regional strategy is also a mutual learning process, thus stimulating the European path of EU candidates and potential candidates.

(2013) 181 Final. Report concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies, 27 June 2013 COM (2013) 468 Final; Conclusions of the General Affairs Council, 22 October 2013.

¹¹ The Annual Forum has been set up, to discuss the work, to consult on revised actions, and to develop new approaches. Countries, EU institutions, and stakeholders (especially inter-governmental bodies, the private sector and civil society) are the participants.

In the case of the EUSDR after 30 months of implementation there are already achievements, such as:

- concrete transnational projects with impacts on the region, giving new impulse to action in the region;
- coordination of different national and EU policies and funds, and paving the way for more coherence and better results;
- wide-ranging cooperation platforms, addressing challenges that have been identified as needing joint attention (e.g. Urban Platform Danube Region, Danube Finance Dialogue¹², Danube Business Forum, Danube Local Actors Platform, Danube Civil Society Forum...etc.)
- strategic support at ministerial level and concrete advances in terms of implementation.

The macro-regional strategies are clearly important new platforms, involving a wide range of stakeholders, including countries of the region politically committed at the overall level. It is also evident, that macro-regional strategies can become tools for policy transfer in relation to knowledge, governance and delivery mechanism of cohesion policy. This is also confirmed by the Commission, when one of the recommendations of them¹³ to the EUSDR participating countries and regions is to strengthen, together with the European Commission, coordination and coherence with existing and possible future EU initiatives.

The EUSDR also proves to be an innovative combination of bottom-up and top-down processes, which may make it an important contribution towards European integration in a rather heterogeneous macro-region, both in Central and in Southeast Europe. Specific attention is paid to the involvement of (potential) candidate countries on the Western Balkans and to countries of the European Neighborhood in the Danube Region. With its entirely new structure and participants from EU-Member States, (potential) candidate countries and countries of the European Neighborhood, it evolves into a specific kind of path dependency, i.e. it is not the unanimity of responses that is the driving force within the EUSDR discourse and implementation process, but the shared preoccupation. The experimental character of EUSDR should therefore be seen as strength and not as weakness.

Conclusion

With the purpose of raising awareness on existing funding sources and on the importance of exploring synergies (“better spending”), it is suggested to improve the cooperation between the stakeholders and improve exploitation of funding opportunities by combining the different sources within the next programming period 2014-2020. This approach must be implemented in a framework of coherent programming, common prioritization and strategic policy coordination. A holistic approach, covering cross-cutting issues, competitiveness and

¹² The Danube Financing Dialogue brings together project promoters (e.g. small and medium-size enterprises or else) from the whole Danube Region with international financing institutions and national funding sources. The Dialogue is providing a unique platform for stimulating match-making of project leaders’ financing needs and financing possibilities offered by financing institutions.

¹³ COM(2013) 181, “REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS concerning the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region”

sustainability aspects, calls for the active and harmonized involvement of all actors and agents at European, national and regional levels. Proactive coordination and interaction between policies at different governance levels, between different actors (ministries and agencies) with divided ownership and operational responsibilities with different priorities and scopes is also needed.

During the previous programming period synergies were to be found only exceptionally: we have had also different initiatives and organizations, regional, transnational/interregional and sectoral development programmes, sometimes even the existing institutions sufficiently covered the field of activities to the extent that any new body would be superfluous yet none of them was sufficiently broadly based or accepted to act as the overall coordinator. Also the fragmentation of programmes and responsibilities without systematic coordination was not strengthening the achievement of objectives and the desired effects.

For the next period 2014-2020 and beyond, solid preconditions exist for synergy implementation since all development instruments share the same programming period and the same goals set out under the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Common policy planning and priority alignment are major drivers for synergies, leading to greater policy coherence, and allowing better exploitation and leverage of EU funding.

With the macro-regional strategies, with their integrated approach and multilevel coordination mechanism we have a new, innovative and potentially powerful method of promoting European integration and territorial cooperation while preserving the subsidiarity and flexibility important for efficient and effective interventions. Moreover, outputs like increased networking, growth in trust among stakeholders and the development of practical means of cooperation suggest that macro-regional strategies will be of benefit for development initiatives where policy transfer and cross-national learning is important. The absence of new money or legislation at the EU level, and the agreement to avoid any duplication of institutions, will allow all the partners to focus on the significant issues: how can existing resources, legislation, and structures be better used for the benefit of the region. Hopefully we can realize also in the practice the possible advantages of this coordination and cooperation method.

So far the macro-regional strategies are proving their added value both strategically and politically by improving existing cooperation mechanisms and networks and promoting where relevant the development of new ones within and between participating countries leading to greater coordination and efficiency of the efforts. None of the macro-regional strategies' objectives can be achieved if efforts stop at EU borders: through the macro-regional approach, Member States, candidate and potential candidate countries as well as non-EU countries can all benefit from and contribute to the strategy.

Therefore it seems that better spending as well as promoting multilevel governance by encouraging cooperation between national, regional and local levels and between public and private sectors can be a result of the implementation of the macro-regional strategies. The decisive point is that whether the stakeholder will and would cooperate with each other in the implementation.