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**Macro-regions, 'la nouvelle vague' of transnational cooperation:
the geopolitical case of the Mediterranean basin**

by

Battistina Cugusi: Battistina.cugusi@cespi.it

Andrea Stocchiero: Andrea.stocchiero@cespi.it

CeSPI (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale): www.cespi.it

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Introduction

In recent years we have been assisting a multiplication of efforts to remap the European Union's geography through the creation of macro-regional strategies which represent "La nouvelle vague" in territorial cooperation and cohesive political discourse. Since the launching of the first macro-region in the Baltic in 2009, many other cross-border and transnational areas have expressed their interest in establishing a macro-region. The macro-regional discourse has been spanning from the Baltic to the Danube area, the Atlantic Arc trans-national space, the North Sea-Channel area, the Adriatic-Ionian sea and the Alpine macro-regions.

The analysis of the creation of macro-regional strategies offers new insights on the Europeanisation process¹ and geopolitical issues embedded in the relations with neighbour countries. The normative thesis is that macro-regional strategies could represent a new multilevel instrument to strengthen territorial cohesion inside the European Union (EU) as well as with bordering countries. The functional principle at the basis of the macro-regional approach overcomes national divisions and supports the need for more cooperative relations and blurred borders with neighbour territories against the Fortress Europe mantra.

But what exactly is a macro-region? This paper is based on the hypothesis that there is not a single answer to this question besides the general and generic definition proposed by the European Commission (EC). It is argued that, as is the case in previous examples of cross-border cooperation (e.g. Euro-regions), different macro-regional approaches are emerging. They depend on the dynamism of diverse actors, inside and outside the EU, interacting with different political frameworks. The political aims and scope of macro-regions range widely from strategic attitudes to opportunistic behaviours of different actors (access to funding and better national and regional positioning in multi-level governance). Macro-regions appear to be many things in one: a new way of dealing with transnational collaboration increasing effectiveness through a stronger coordination of community, national and regional funds; a new way of dealing with territorial cooperation at the EU borders deepening the linkages with accession and neighbourhood countries; a new way of positioning local actors into the different geopolitical scales and dynamics concerning European cohesion, accession and neighbourhood policies; etc. Moreover, macro-regions are perceived as a policy innovation entailing important opportunities in terms of development of bottom-up processes and of forms of transnational policy.

But the macro-region is confronted with numerous challenges. In what ways do they represent a real policy innovation? To what extent will they empower regional governments and local authorities and bottom-up processes?

In analysing these issues, this paper will focus its attention on the Mediterranean basin, where national governments and sub-national authorities are proposing new political initiatives for the establishment of an Adriatic-Ionian and a Western or basin-wide Mediterranean macro-region. What are the issues at stake for establishing a macro-region in the Mediterranean? What can the Mediterranean case add to the debate on macro-regions? We argue that the analysis of the macro-regional building processes can reveal the geopolitical objectives and interests of the diverse actors in a vast geographic scale (transnational proximity areas), and in relationship to superior scales (the EU, the Eastern and Mediterranean Partnerships) and inferior scales (national, regional and local).

¹ The Europeanization process as EU enlargement is twofold: it describes the increasing economic and social flows that are merging EU with neighbor countries, and it manifests the normative (imperial) discourse on values and standards that EU exports in the neighbor countries (Birgit Sitterman, 2006).

In this sense, a multi-scalar approach is adopted considering the macro-regional strategies as a nested policy.

Taking a grass-roots viewpoint and maintaining a multilevel and comparative perspective, this paper will help to understand the contribution of macro-regions in remapping the EU's geography taking into account the evolving nature of macro-regional discourses (with a focus on the Mediterranean basin), the different understandings and expectations emerging in the Mediterranean debate between policy actors.

The first part of the paper will review the analytical and innovative political aspects of the EU macro-regional strategies, identifying some questions to be investigated according to the new geopolitical approach. The second part will study the macro-regional dynamics in the Euro-Mediterranean basin. A multi-scalar analysis will consider the possible macro-regional strategies nested in the EU internal and external policies; and a multi-actor approach will allow for an understanding of the different political positioning of central and regional governments in the macro-regional debate. The analysis will indicate some conclusions about the main policy innovations and geopolitical issues that a macro-regional approach is creating in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

1. Analytical aspects and political questions of the EU macro-regional strategies

The first use of the term macro-regions can be traced back to the period following the Second World War, making reference to large scale regional integration processes that started to take place at that time (e.g. European integration process, etc.). These regional integration processes responded to international security concerns and common economic opportunities and needs. At that time, the analysis of regionalization processes was carried out according to a traditional geopolitical approach whose main features have been summarized by Agnew (Agnew J., 2003) as follows: a) the centrality of territorial States as the basic and unique geographical units of power relationships; b) the convergence between a “natural” knowledge² and the ideological aim to serve the own nation-State; c) the adoption of a problem-solving orientation for influencing the policy; d) the acceptance of racial concepts and geo-environmental causes of social and economic diversities; e) the vision of Europe and United States as the centres of the world and the idea that geopolitics consists of the study on the competition between great powers and rivalries between empires.

At the end of the '80s and in the '90s, the concept of macro-regions, as linked to regional integration processes, began to evolve (e.g. the re-launch of the European integration process with the Single European Act in 1987 and with the Maastricht treaty in 1992), with more emphasis, on the one hand, on trade liberalisation, political and economic concerns to respond to the emerging globalization process; and on the other, on the emergence of the so-called “Europe of the Regions”.

In the framework of the globalization process, which has eroded the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs and increased the inter-dependence between territories, diverse actors interact in the construction or contestation of policies affecting territories and peoples. Nation-States continue to be the main political actors but new supra-national and sub-national institutions (e.g. the European Union - EU) have begun to play the geopolitical game (Roseneau J.N., 1990). Among these actors, regional and local authorities try to influence the building of regulation at the supra-national level and engage themselves in transnational territorial competition and cooperation policies. Furthermore, multinational companies, financial and broadcasting corporations and global,

² “To speak of geopolitics was to speak of seemingly natural realities. The rhetorical power of geopolitical claims stems in significant part from their link to such supposedly self-evident “geographical” facts. (Kuus M.)

as well as local civil society, movements create flows and create nodes of networks that operate in territories all over the world, interacting with the traditional Nation-State sovereignty, supra-national and sub-national institutions.

The growing external action of non-traditional actors has led to the proliferation of literature dedicated to studying the evolving role of territorial institutions (New Regionalism), to explain and analyse the qualities of the international action (*actorness*) of civil society (Global civil society) and of regional and local authorities (Para-diplomacy). It is possible to say that the nation state as a mono-centric structure has started to be replaced by a “polycentric distribution of power” among local, national and international actors which transforms international politics in an arena where traditional nation-states, local and regional authorities, new businesses and civil society actors compete or cooperate (Beck U., 1999; Parsi V.E., 1998; Ianni V., 2004).

The academic literature on the new regionalism, global civil society and para-diplomacy (Keating M., 1999), has diverse linkages with the new geopolitical approach. “New territorial regimes are composed by a mix of flows between nodes of networks, territorial regulations and construction of identities that operate in diverse geographical scales – local, regional inside a State, national, regional and worldwide (Agnew J., 2003). According to Agnew, the characteristics of the new geopolitics approach are: a) the relativisation of the nation-State with the entrance of diverse actors in the scene that means the overcoming of the methodological nationalism in interpreting international/transnational relationships³; b) the adoption of multilevel and multi-actor approach; c) the application of scale and multi-scalar analytical concepts; d) the study of a new geography based on the interaction between flows and territories; e) the re-definition of the border and its meaning according to diverse perspectives and phenomena; f) the analysis of identities construction and their exploitation for political and interest aims.

The application of the new geopolitics approach is particularly appropriate for the study of macro-regional processes launched at the European level. This approach allows a deepening and contextualization of the study on the evolving nature of the macro-regional concept. It analyses the supposed contribution of macro-regional strategies to the redefinition of geographic and political relationships inside the EU according to natural, social and economic functionalities, beyond administrative borders, and also through the development of a ‘Macro-regional consciousness’, based on identity and solidarity elements. It applies the multi-scalar analytical concept⁴ and the multi-level and multi-actor approaches to investigate the new macro-regional opportunity structure for the para-diplomacy action of sub-national non-State actors.

1.1 A new geopolitical instrument for internal and external Europeanization

Following the launch of the macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea Region (2009) and, more recently, for the Danube area (2010), the European definition of “macro-region” has gained increasing prominence in current practices and debate. A macro-region is a vast area composed by

³ With the term “international” we mean, traditionally, the inter-nation relationships that are between nation-States, considering flows of companies (trade and foreign direct investments) and people with the label of the nation-States, while transnational means relationships of actors that transcend and pass through nation-States borders, being different from the nation-States: transnational companies, financial and media corporations have their own specific spatialities, migrants create specific flows which span all over the world with their own label, but also regions and cities develop new relationships with territories of other nations. These flows create a different transnational geography that overlaps with the standard political geography composed by nation-States.

⁴ The multi-scalar analytical concept investigates the interaction among diverse territorial scales, the relationships across territorial scales from international to national and local scales.

an inferior number of Member States in comparison to the whole of the EU, “including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges [...] geographical, cultural, economical or other” (European Commission, 2009).

The macro-regional strategy is an innovative geopolitical instrument as well as a new EU strategic policy arena for internal integration and external Europeanisation. EU macro-regions are identified according to a functional approach in order to respond to “common cross-border challenges and opportunities that requires a collective action” (Stocchiero A., 2010a). The concept of functional macro-region links together areas according to “mutual interdependence” and “spatially coherent” concerns: e.g. specific transnational interdependencies, material and immaterial flows, hard and soft linkages, qualifying the geographical scale and the contents of a macro-region (Stocchiero A., 2010b).

In the Baltic and Danube macro-regions the more evident functional geography is based on the geo-environmental reality of the catchment areas. The Baltic sea and relative affluents constitute basic resources for living conditions. The sea represents a common good that must be protected, first of all, by all the people and respective governments that are directly involved in its management, but, in general, it is a common good also for all the EU, neighbourhood countries and more distant countries because of holistic environmental interconnections. It is a transnational resource that should be conserved and managed by the EU and by all the external countries and territories which share the same good. The same applies for the Danube river and should be applied in the case of the Mediterranean sea as well.

The functional principle at the basis of the macro-regional approach overcomes the internal and external division and creates new geopolitical relationships and forms. It supports the integration process strengthening the implementation of common policies inside a specific transnational area of the EU; and Europeanisation by exporting political approaches outside the EU towards neighbor countries.

It re-designs the geographic relationships inside and outside the EU according to natural, social and economic functionalities, beyond administrative borders. “The adoption of a functional approach gives rise to possible variable geometries in the definition of the macro-regional scales, meaning that different spatial scales can be defined in accordance to the function” (Stocchiero A., 2010a). Thus, macro-regions do not necessarily coincide with political-administrative territorial units, encompassing EU accession and neighbourhood countries.

The added value (European Commission, 2009) of the macro-regional strategies consists of the integrated approach, meaning a collective action that strives towards a common objective, integrating various actors, policies and financing plans (Stocchiero A., 2010a). It should rely on its capacity to integrate multi-level policies and funds in a transnational approach. This presumes the convergence of diverse political wills and resources in the implementation of flagship projects in a common space (Dubois A., Hedin S., Shmitt P. and Sterling J, 2009; Stocchiero A., 2010a). The objective is to reduce economic and social divergences between the diverse territories and to construct competitive and sustainable macro-regions at the European level. These macro-regions should diminish divergences with respect to the EU core.

It should favour the building of a common European sense of identity and belonging; people of diverse nationalities should share common values and visions. As said in the case of the Danube area, “Projects initiated and developed within the framework of the European Danube Macro-regional Strategy could only be successful if people’s minds are undergoing meaningful changes and individuals of the region start to develop the so-called ‘Danube consciousness’, a set of identity

elements which describe their attachment to the river itself and also their solidarity towards the people living in the environs of the Danube” (Lütgenau S. A., 2010).

A macro-region cannot be grounded only in large, top-down strategic infrastructure projects and plans but has to cope with more subtle and soft questions that concern social and cultural aspects. A macro-regional strategy should take into consideration hard as well as soft borders, visible as well as imagined borders. It needs multilevel governance because places and local population matter. In complex and interconnected societies, democratic mechanisms should pay more attention to local issues. A macro-regional strategy should be based on a democratic governance able to negotiate different interests and perceptions on a transnational scale and with a multilevel approach.

This social and anthropological process sustained by institutional and political instruments should also be encouraged outside the EU’s borders, involving accession and neighbourhood countries, linked by proximity functions. From this perspective, the Danube macro-regional strategy is of particular interest, comprising eight EU Member States, four accession countries and two neighbourhood countries (Ukraine and Moldova). As stated by the European Parliament “The Danube region is an important crossover covered by the EU’s cohesion policy programmes, programmes for countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy and potential candidate countries, and therefore represents an area where enhanced synergies between different EU policies can be developed: cohesion, transport, tourism, agriculture, fisheries, economic and social development, energy, environment, enlargement, neighbourhood policy” (European Parliament, 2010).

EU macro-regional strategies incorporate an external dimension. This implies, at the policy level, the need for a strong coordination to also be ensured with EU external policies with particular regard to enlargement and neighbourhood policies and their instruments, respectively the IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession assistance) and ENPI (European Neighbourhood and Policy Instrument).

1.2 A new multilevel political instrument

Macro-regional strategies have been defined as a new multilevel governance instrument (Carsten S., Peer K., 2009). Macro-regional governance is situated between the EU supranational level and Member States, that is, the transnational level of vast areas with the participation of regions, local authorities and social and economic stakeholders. As such, macro-regional strategies represent a new political instrument for diverse actors at different levels. Thus, diverse visions and interests interact in the construction of macro-regions with effects inside the European Union, between Member States, regions and cities belonging to the same spatial scale, and, as highlighted before, also outside the EU, with accession and neighbourhood countries. In this sense, according to the new regionalism and para-diplomacy thinking, macro-regions could be considered a new channel, a new opportunity structure for the geopolitical positioning of the diverse actors inside and outside the EU.

Furthermore, the Macro-regional strategy does not imply new institutions, laws nor new funding (the three NOs indicated by the EC). It represents a political governance experiment for creating an integrated framework of multilevel and multi-sector actions and actors. The success of the experiment rests on the political will and commitment of multiple actors. It is a political innovation because it is a new multilevel governance mechanism. It has a very ambitious goal: to coordinate vertical and horizontal levels in a transnational dimension inside and outside the EU; but with

scarce resources and no specific institutions dedicated to it. It is like a giant with feet made out of clay.

Many authors have already expressed doubts on the innovative aspect and capacity of macro-regions. Some have raised questions about whether macro-regional cooperation is really as “bottom-up” as it is presented (Mirwaldt K., McMaster I., Bachteler, 2010; Stocchiero A., 2010a; CRPM, 2009). In actuality, the governance articulation proposed by the European Commission assigns a prominent role to the central governments of the Member States. The action plans annexed to the macro-regional strategies are approved by the European Council but identified by the Member States with the assistance of the EC DG Regio and in consultation with sub-national authorities and local stakeholders.

In addition, when it comes to the implementation phase this claim can be softened. Evidence shows that in the Baltic and Danube macro-regional areas some regional authorities have assumed the coordination role of priority areas and are leaders of flagship projects⁵. Thus, as noted by Perkmann in the case of the Euro-regions, the role regional authorities could play in the case of macro-regions also depends in part on the “policy entrepreneurship” of those actors where “policy entrepreneurs” are defined as “actors that position themselves as protagonists within specific policy areas by taking advantages of the windows of opportunity opened up by conjunctures within their policy environment” (Perkmann, 2006, p.866).

Other authors have claimed a strong similarity between the macro-regional approach and the transnational strand of the territorial cooperation objectives. “This is particularly true for the Baltic Sea Region, where a transnational ‘Baltic Sea Programme 2007-2013’ overlaps geographically with the Baltic Sea Strategy (Mirwaldt K., McMaster I., Bachteler, 2010, p. 8). “The aims of territorial cooperation programmes [...] are almost identical with the action identified in the strategy” (Mirwaldt K., McMaster I., Bachteler, 2010, p. 15). Similarities have also been stressed between the ‘flagship projects’ proposed by the macro-regional strategies and the ‘strategic projects’ implemented in the framework of the Transnational cooperation programmes (Stocchiero a), 2010). Further tensions regard the relations between the macro-regions and other forms of trans-boundary cooperation, such as the Euro-regions and the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC).

1.3 The challenges

The added value of the macro-regional strategies has also been put into question. As seen earlier, the added value of the macro-regional strategies consists of the integrated approach. In this respect, macro-regions are confronted with three different challenges: efficiency, governance and community challenges.

The *efficiency challenge* (Bergtsson R., 2009) is linked to a weak focus of the macro-regional strategies, based on an ample range of priorities and initiatives. “Without a proper focus, there is a loss of expected added value of the strategy, failure to implement criteria apt at concentrating on

⁵ In the Danube Strategy, the German Landers of Bavaria and Baden-Wuttemberg have respectively the coordination of the following priority areas: the preservation of biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soil; and the support to competitiveness of enterprises. In the Baltic Strategy the German Land Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is a Priority Area Coordinator for tourism while other Regions are Lead Partners for the implementation of flagship projects: Skåne (Create a Baltic Sea Fund for Innovation and Research); Blekinge (Improve waste handling on board and in ports’ within the framework of the Baltic Master II project), and South West Finland (Attract tourists to rural areas especially the coastal zones), and many Regional actors are partners or associate partners in different projects. (CRPM, 2010)

few projects and, above all, failure to observe the inter-dependency linking the various projects” (Stocchiero A., 2010a).

The efficiency challenge concerns another aspect. The fact that no additional funds should be allocated implies that resources for project implementation should originate from existing funds, such as community funds and contributions from International Financial Institutions (Commission, 2009). In this respect, it is worth stressing that evidence of the implementation of EU programmes, with particular regard to the territorial cooperation ones, shows that the coordination, as well as complementarity and coherence with other programmes and funding instruments (European as well as national and regional) is a major concern when evaluating the efficacy of the programmes themselves. The fact that EU programmes respond to different, and often conflicting, regulative frameworks represents another constraint for implementing coordinating activities between community funds.

Coordination between different instruments also requires a coordination between different institutions (European, national, regional, etc) that represents, indeed, a “*governance challenge*” (Bergtsson R., 2009).

Last, but not least, the creation of macro-region has been generating tensions inside the EU. If, on the one hand, the creation of the macro-regions responds to the spatial diversity of the EU, on the other it hand, it can feed into divergent dynamics among the different areas, favouring a multi-speed Europe. This represents a “community challenge”: the macro-region is a form of regionalisation inside the EU (intra-regionalisation) that, obviously, benefits those territories that are involved first-hand, yet, requires the solidarity of all Member States of the EU (Bengtsson R., 2009). The words of Isabel Moya Perez, representative of the Spanish EU Presidency, synthesize this concern well: “Macro-regions, being a partial grouping of territories, could break the communitarian principle of shared implementation, according to the co-operation principle [...], the real regional dimension in the EU is the community. [...] Cohesion and territorial solidarity are the basis of the regional policy and not inter-regional competitiveness. [...] The ‘resulting legitimacy’ should be accompanied by the ‘democratic legitimacy’ in a framework of solidarity ...”⁶.

A multi-scalar question is put forward: the diverse macro-regional scales should be distributed equally, cover all of the EU and be nested within the EU general scale. CPMR⁷ indicated the necessity that the European Commission should present a comprehensive plan on the macro-regionalisation of the EU.

This “*community challenge*” has been even more complicated by uncertainties over the possibility for the macro-region to benefit from additional funding in the near future. A debate was held with respect to whether or not a specific budget line of the EU budget can be allocated to macro-region in the programme period starting from 2014. A consensus exists on the opportunity of maintaining the position of no specific funding for the macro-regional strategies. However some doubts exist about the need for technical assistance support.

2. The EU macro-regional dynamics in the Mediterranean

Looking at the Mediterranean can enrich the debate on the innovative aspects and challenges of the macro-regional strategies, giving further insights. In analysing this case we will mainly refer to the

⁶ Speech by Isabel Moya Pérez, representing the Spanish Presidency of the EU at the Forum on Macro-Regions, Committee of the Regions, 13 April 2010. Translation by the author.

⁷ “The debate on the potential geographical areas to be covered by such strategies could be organised by each of the 13 existing transnational areas” (CPMR, 2010).

results of the interviews conducted⁸ with some of the Mediterranean key players at the institutional and social levels (Tourret J.C., Wallaert V., 2010); investigating, in particular, the agency or capacity to act of some of the main actors of the process: Mediterranean EU Member States and regional authorities.

During the last two years a debate on the possibility of building a macro-region in the Mediterranean area has arisen as well. This debate has been mainly bottom-up driven, having seen regional authorities (either individually or through their associations) investing much effort in discussing the potentialities of such a strategy in the area.

Substantially, the requirements for establishing a macro-regional strategy are met. Plenty of studies (see for example Beckouche P., Grasland C., 2007) dealing with Mediterranean functionalities provide evidence of the strict interconnections and claim the need to conceive an integrated approach at the Mediterranean Sea basin level in different fields: environmental as well as agricultural, transport, innovation and employment sectors, etc. Moreover, at the European level diverse policy options to provide a transnational and synergic response to common Mediterranean issues and concerns exist (e.g. the integrated maritime strategy proposed by the DG Mare⁹); policy instruments in particular in the framework of the EU territorial cooperation programmes as well as strong and mature cooperative dynamics at all levels (see for example, Cugusi B., Stocchiero A., 2010).

Nonetheless, the debate on the creation of a macro-region in the Mediterranean basin has shown that the existence of functionalities and experienced cooperative dynamics are important but not sufficient factors in the definition of macro-regional strategies.

Such a strategy will be confronted with existing geopolitical dynamics in the area and unsolved tensions that may pose “a geo-political challenge” to the future Mediterranean macro-region. Several questions on territorial cohesion have been hindering a polycentric development in this area, making competition prevail over cooperation in a number of sectors such as: competition between harbour cities in managing sea traffic, sea highways and transport corridors towards the European continent; conflicting interests in the implementation of new energetic pipelines and plants in diverse Mediterranean territories; over-exploitation of fishing resources and the territorial distribution of fishing rights; diverging geographical development of value chains and of delocalisation processes; territorial competition in agriculture and food sectors; etc.

In addition, geo-political constraints hindering cooperation in sensitive fields persist in the area: conflicting political views in the managing of migration flows at all levels; coherence problems between economic development and environmental conservation¹⁰; etc.

Nonetheless, the main geo-political challenge of a macro-regional dynamic in the Mediterranean – and where the debate has actually stuck – has to do with issues related to the “governance challenge”, such as on which geo-graphical scale a possible macro-region in the Mediterranean should be acquired, whether a sub-regional approach should be promoted or rather should cover all

⁸ A first round of Interviews were conducted in the framework of the Medgovernance project, funded by the Mediterranean transnational Programme. For more information see: www.medgov.net

⁹ For more information see: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/maritime_affairs_and_fisheries/maritime_affairs/l66049_en.htm

¹⁰ “We should pay particular attention to regional competition for water, cultivable land, energy, fisheries and other resources necessary to meet basic needs. That competition will intensify. Sustainable development is about peace and stability as much as it is about the environment. So we should ensure that our bilateral engagements, in volatile, water-scarce regions like the Middle East and Central Asia do not inadvertently store up trouble by fuelling future competition for water through unsustainable agricultural, urban or industrial development.” (Burke T., Abey N. M, 2006)

the Mediterranean sea basin; and in this last case, whether to involve non-EU Mediterranean countries or not.

To understand the relevance of this issue, one should bear in mind that a possible Mediterranean sea basin macro-region could cover seven EU Member States (Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Greece, Malta, Cyprus), six accession countries (Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia & Herzegovina, possibly Serbia and Kosovo, Albania, Turkey) and 10 neighbourhood countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia).

Such a vast area requires dealing with different EU policies: EU cohesion and relevant sectoral policies in the case of EU member states; the pre-accession strategies in the western Balkan countries and Turkey; the Neighbourhood policy, as well as that of the UfM, in the case of the southern neighbours.

This implies that the decision on the geographical scale of a macro-region entails important consequences in terms of policy coordination (governance challenge). The choice of one option or another, in terms of geographical scale, represents a very crucial issue at the Mediterranean level where diverse Euro-Mediterranean policies with relatively diverse geographical scales interact and overlap. In this sense, in the Mediterranean a macro-region should be part of a Euro-Mediterranean multi-scalarity, where different political agendas try to find a balance of interests and powers.

2.1 Which interaction between a macro-regional strategy and the Euro-Mediterranean Policy framework?

One of the reasons in pushing for the creation of a macro-region in the Mediterranean has to do with the need to improve the policy framework at the Euro-Mediterranean level and to set up a new multilevel governance where a stronger role should be attributed to the sub-national authorities in the EU external policies towards the Mediterranean. In addition, the demand for more space for action in the EU external policies is not new. Actually, it has been reiterated throughout all the changes occurring in the Euro-Mediterranean policy framework: from the setting up of the Barcelona Process in 1995; with the renewal of that Euro-Mediterranean partnership in 2005 (Chichowlaz P., 2006); with the launch of the neighbourhood policy (Cugusi B., Stocchiero A., 2005) in 2003 and up to the creation of the UfM in 2008 (Committee of the Regions, 2008).

However, neither the Barcelona process nor the neighbourhood policy (with the exception of its cross-border component) have satisfied the political demands of sub-national authorities. Moreover, the Euro-Mediterranean Assembly of Local and Regional Authorities (ARLEM) is suffering from a general blockage which is still affecting the UfM (Cugusi B., 2007; Schmidt D., 2010).

Bearing this in mind, a macro-region could have represented a new opportunity structure for the para-diplomacy of regional authorities in the Mediterranean. This position, put forward by some pioneering regions (such as PACA, Tuscany and Sicily), has not found the needed multi-level consensus among the regional authorities nor other relevant stakeholders in the Mediterranean.

The Italian position is quite fragmented. Some regional authorities consider the configuration of a Mediterranean macro-region at a basin level very difficult given the stalemate of the UfM; the majority have adopted a "wait and see attitude", proposing to concentrate on the implementation of a few strategic projects as a first step towards the definition of common political positions. Moreover, in 2010 eastern Italian regions have taken advantage of being the first-mover and paving the way for the adoption of a sub-regional approach, proposing the setting up of an Adriatic-

Ionian macro-regional strategy. The Italian central government has taken up and pushed forward this proposal having a strong interest in developing this relationship and in integrating Western Balkan countries in the EU.

Spanish stakeholders have been the most critical concerning the macro-regional approach stating that priority should be given to the re-launching of the UfM and the Barcelona Process. This position is shared by the Spanish central government and by the majority of Spanish Autonomous Communities (with Catalonia leading the way). During a debate that took place at the Open Days of the “European week of Regions and Cities”, Ramon Luis Valcárcel Siso, 1st Vice-President of the Committee of the Regions and President of the Murcia Autonomous Community, summed up the mood of the debate suggesting that, at this stage, it is perhaps too soon to develop a Euro-Mediterranean macro-region for two reasons. Firstly, he believes that “a thorough analysis of the existing macro-region needs to be done before it is exported to other areas and that even then, it would need to be tailor made to fit the specificities. Secondly, given the existing forms of cooperation in the Mediterranean including the Euro- Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly - ARLEM, he would like to encourage a deep reflection into how better support and develop these instruments before looking towards a new model” (Committee of the Regions, 2010).

On the French side, the central government has followed the macro-regional dynamics and their evolution while stressing the need to integrate a possible Mediterranean macro-region with the UfM (Tourret J.C., Wallaert V., 2010). The former French Foreign Minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, supported the idea of “articulating the EU actions ... in a framework of a macro-regional strategy ...”¹¹. Also, the French regions appear interested in the idea of creating a macro-region, especially the PACA region, having gone so far as to propose building a bridge between the Mediterranean macro-regional and the trans-national strands of cooperation of the Territorial cooperation objective of structural funds (Chichowlaz P., 2011).

Nonetheless, the debate is far from being over. Following the opening of a concrete macro-regional perspective on the Adriatic-Ionian area, coupled with the possibility of benefiting from additional funds from the new programming period, there are signals that positions are changing. In 2011, some civil society and scientific organisations in Catalonia, quite surprisingly, recommended the creation of diverse macro-regions in the Mediterranean as a complementary instrument to sustain the UfM and the role of ARLEM (Fundació congrés de cultura catalana, Institut universitari d’estudis europeus, Departament de geografia, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2011).

A strong push for the renewal of the debate has also been given by a recent report presented by the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament, which asks for a “roadmap for European macro-regions” and the need for “further consultations [...] before deciding between a single macro-region or two separate macro-regions: one in the western Mediterranean, and the other in the eastern Mediterranean, which is also known as the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region” (Alfonsi Francois, 2011). The Inter-Mediterranean Commission of the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions, supported by the Region of Sicily, is putting forward an “Integrated Strategy for the Mediterranean” that resembles a macro-regional strategy without specifically mentioning it. In particular, this strategy advocates a stronger link to be established between cohesion and external relations, externalising the principles of the cohesion policy in the EU policy framework towards southern Mediterranean countries (neighbourhood policy and UfM).

¹¹ Source : <http://www.rpfrance.eu/spip.php?article1349>

2.2 Paving the way for a sub-regional macro-regional approach in the Mediterranean: The case of the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-region

Since the European Council of June 2011 (European Council, 2011), the creation of Mediterranean sub-macro regions (a Western Mediterranean and an Adriatic Ionian) seems to be the most pragmatic and feasible option.

In the Adriatic Ionian macro area, a political and institutional dynamic is already in place and a constructive dialogue has been launched on geographic functionalities, with particular regard to the following strategic issues: the protection of the Adriatic sea and fishing resources, the development of transport routes and inter-modal facilities, corridors and harbour networks, the creation of energy pipelines and renewable energy plants with a common grid. These are initiatives shared by central governments and sub-national authorities.

In the Adriatic Ionian area, geopolitical conditions are more favourable than in the Western Mediterranean. Western Balkan countries are incentivized to participate, seeing the macro-regional strategy as a new instrument for facilitating and anticipating their accession process in the EU.

At the policy level, candidate and potential candidate countries can participate in the majority of European programmes and coherence has already been established with the European cohesion policy and the Pre-accession assistance deployed by the IPA. In particular, two of its components (the one dedicated to regional development and the one devoted to the rural development) are meant to prepare candidate countries to manage and implement structural funds. Moreover, inter-governmental initiatives like the Adriatic Ionian Initiative¹² go hand-in-hand with sub-national and stakeholder networks, decentralised as well as cross border cooperation programmes.

At the political level, a consensus has already been reached and a strong multilevel coalition has been created. The results achieved in the Adriatic Ionian area are strictly linked to the political entrepreneurship capacity performed by the Italian, Greek and Slovenian central governments. They have been able to create a strong coalition involving western Balkan accession countries and to implement a diplomatic effort convincing EU Member States to support, or at least to not block, this process (Stocchiero A., 2010b).

The Italian central government, with the Slovenian and Greek ones, has taken the leadership of the process but the Italian Adriatic regions have also been involved in supporting this effort. This is particularly the case for the Region of Marche which hosts and supports the secretariat of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, an inter-governmental institution. Furthermore, a specific Foundation with regional participation has been set up in order to sustain the macro-regional process¹³. All the Adriatic regions dialogue with the Italian central government and put forward suggestions to improve the elaboration of a common paper of proposals for an action plan for the macro-region. After two years (2010-2011) of interaction, the Conference of the Italian Regions voted unanimously to support the political initiative of the Italian central government for the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional strategy¹⁴.

Moreover, diverse stakeholder networks, funded by the regions through decentralised and territorial cooperation, are following the macro-regional process (Committee of the Regions, 2011). In

¹² For more information see: http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Politica_Estera/Aree_Geografiche/Europa/Balcani/IAI.htm

¹³ For more information see: <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Cooperazione/Dalle-regioni/Iniziativa-Adriatico-Ionica-constituita-la-Fondazione-86842>

¹⁴ For more information see: <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Cooperazione/Dalle-regioni/Macroregione-Adriatico-Ionica-la-Conferenza-delle-Regioni-approva-la-strategia-97368>

addition, the western Balkan countries have shared in the Italian, Slovenian and Greek member States' political declarations to support the creation of a macro-regional strategy¹⁵.

In the case of the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional perspective, after the indication of the European Council, "to continue work in cooperation with the Commission on possible future macro-regional strategies, in particular as regards the Adriatic and Ionian region" (European Council, 2011), new initiatives of EC DG Regio and DG Mare are foreseen for facilitating the exchange of information, the debate, the consensus building and the setting up of a real multilevel governance.

Conclusions

In the EU macro-regions represent new geopolitical scales, where territories and institutions are linked together to respond to common transnational challenges and opportunities that require collective action (*functional approach*), according to an integrated approach in terms of actors, policy and funding (*added value*). Macro-regional strategies are nested internally in the cohesion policy and sectoral policies, and externally with relevant accession and cooperation policies and programmes (IPA and ENPI).

Macro-regions are confronted with three main challenges: efficiency, governance, community challenges. The "*efficiency challenge*" is linked to a weak focus of macro-regional strategies but also to possible constraints in implementing coordination activities between community funds, which respond to different regulative frameworks. Coordination between different instruments also requires a coordination between different institutions (European, national, regional, etc.) which represents, indeed, a "*governance challenge*" in itself. Furthermore, if, on the one hand, the creation of the macro-regions responds to the spatial diversity of the EU, on the other hand, it can feed into divergent dynamics among the different areas, favouring a multi-speed Europe ("*community challenge*"). For this reason, following the setting up of macro-regions in the Baltic and the Danube areas, many other cross-border and transnational areas, including the Mediterranean one, have expressed their interest in establishing a macro-region.

The discussion over the setting up of a possible macro-region in the Mediterranean basin area can add significant insights to the EU debate on macro-regions. In this area, the macro-regional perspective is confronted with an external "geo-political challenge".

In the Mediterranean, macro-regions could assume diverse possible scales depending on the different kinds of functionalities but above all on the different geopolitical visions and interests of the actors involved. The macro-regional strategy can be applied at a basin level or at a sub-regional scale, implying, at the policy level, different multi-scalar interactions: it may be nested in the EU enlargement policy and in the neighbourhood policy.

The external dimension has, in actuality, dominated the debate on the creation of a Mediterranean macro-region. Many stakeholders, with particular regard to regional authorities, have seen the macro-region as a possible instrument to improve the policy framework at the Euro-Mediterranean level and to set up a new multilevel governance where a stronger role should be attributed to the sub-national authorities in the EU's external policies. In this sense, the macro-regional discourse represents a policy innovation and opportunity for the empowerment and stronger positioning of regions in the Euro-Mediterranean multilevel governance. On the other hand, even a nation-state like Italy, endorses the macro-regional discourse for sustaining its relationships with western Balkan countries and strengthening their integration in the EU.

15 For further information, see: <http://www.mzz.gov.si/nc/en/tools/cns/news/article/141/28876/>

The difficulty in reaching a consensus on the linkages between a possible Mediterranean macro-region and the current Euro-Mediterranean policy framework, with particular regard to the UfM, has represented the main obstacle for the creation of a macro-region at the sea basin level. In turn, this has favoured the option of a macro-regional approach in sub-regions of the Mediterranean, paving the way for an Adriatic Ionian macro-region. In this area, geopolitical conditions are more favourable than in the Western Mediterranean due, at a policy level, to a certain harmonisation between external and internal policies and funding instruments, and, at a political level, to a strong multilevel coalition.

All these dynamics manifest the ways that macro-regional strategies represent political concepts and constructions, instrumental to the geopolitical positioning of the diverse actors. The macro-regional strategy is perceived as a potentially useful means for strengthening the development opportunities of nation-States, regional and local autonomies in a vast area through collective and collaborative actions.

Finally, if it is still too soon to draw conclusions on the innovative aspects of the macro-regional strategies in terms of their efficacy potential, then the community and external challenges they are posing should not be under-evaluated. The emergence of a sub-macro-regional approach in the Mediterranean responds to the "community challenge". It balances the EU North-Eastern first-mover advantage (Baltic and Danube macro-regions), and creates new dynamics and tensions. A dialectic dynamic between the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional process and a possible western Mediterranean sub-region is occurring. Regions, Member States and now also the European Parliament are discussing the scales and scopes of one or more macro-regions in the Mediterranean.

The creation of an Adriatic-Ionian macro-region risks exacerbating tensions and divergences of the EU's external relations between accession and neighbourhood countries in the Mediterranean. Undoubtedly, the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional perspective would open up new opportunities for western Balkan countries, accelerating their integration and accession process. On the contrary, the Euro-Mediterranean policy framework is still confronted with many constraints, due to the inefficacy of the UfM and the Barcelona process. If not yet a macro-region, an effective political response is needed at the community level to re-launch Euro-Mediterranean relations and counterbalance the possible negative effects of creating such an approach only in the Adriatic Ionian area.

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