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HOW TO STUDY EU MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES? INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA

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Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the growing body of literature on EU macro-regional strategies and relate it to dominant theoretical approaches in the fields of political science and political geography. It deliberately takes an interdisciplinary perspective providing insights from the body of research and literature – bringing together the strands of spatial and political sciences. As yet another influence on European integration dynamics and as a new form of regionalism within the EU, they have been explored through the analytical lens of multilevel (and other interpretations of) governance by political science. Spatial scholars from planning studies and geography, in turn, reflect on this new form of cooperation as it is closely interwoven with the EU's different approaches in influencing spatial developments across Europe through cohesion policies and/or European territorial cooperation. Since EU macro-regional strategies are relatively recent phenomena, research on the topic is also equally new. The growing political importance of macro-regional strategies is one of the reasons for intensifying research activities in this area: some key areas have been identified in the final part of the paper in attempt to propose a (tentatively new) research agenda.

Keywords

Macro-regional strategies, EU programmes, Political science, Geographical and spatial studies.

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1. Preface

With the launch of the EU's first macro-regional strategy (the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, EUSBSR) in 2009, the EU added yet another feature to an already complex system of instruments and governance arrangements. Macro-regional strategies seek to establish a comprehensive framework for (sustained) cooperation and coordination of cross-cutting policies involving a large number of actors in a territorially defined 'region' or 'macro-region'. Macro-regional strategies aim to foster cooperation in order to address so called 'common challenges', such as environmental degradation or infrastructure bottlenecks. To date, four macro-regions have been endorsed: the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, for the Danube Region (2011), for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (2014) and lately for the Alpine Region (2015).

The idea of cooperation at the macro-regional level is certainly not new. Macro-regional cooperation can be seen as an intermediary form of territorial cooperation combining strategic elements in drawing on pan-European strategies as well as aiming to implement EU funded projects through a transnational approach (Dubois et al. 2009; Görmar 2010; Chilla and Sielker 2015). To some extent, macro-regional strategies can be conceived as a hybrid construction drawing on features of both intergovernmental as well as transnational cooperation: first, they build on elements of EU Cohesion policy (McMaster and van der Zwet 2016) and various forms of territorial cooperation under the Structural Funds, e.g. the European Regional and Development Fund (ERDF) and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF); second, they are closely intertwined with practices of intergovernmental 'regional' integration in Europe (Dangerfield 2009, 2010, 2016; Cottey 1999; Hubel and Gänzle 2002) with a clear territorial dimension. In this way, the concept 'macro-regional' indicates a comprehensive relationship between several layers of cooperation/integration which avoid explicit notions of hierarchy and which is less formalised (Dubois et al. 2009).

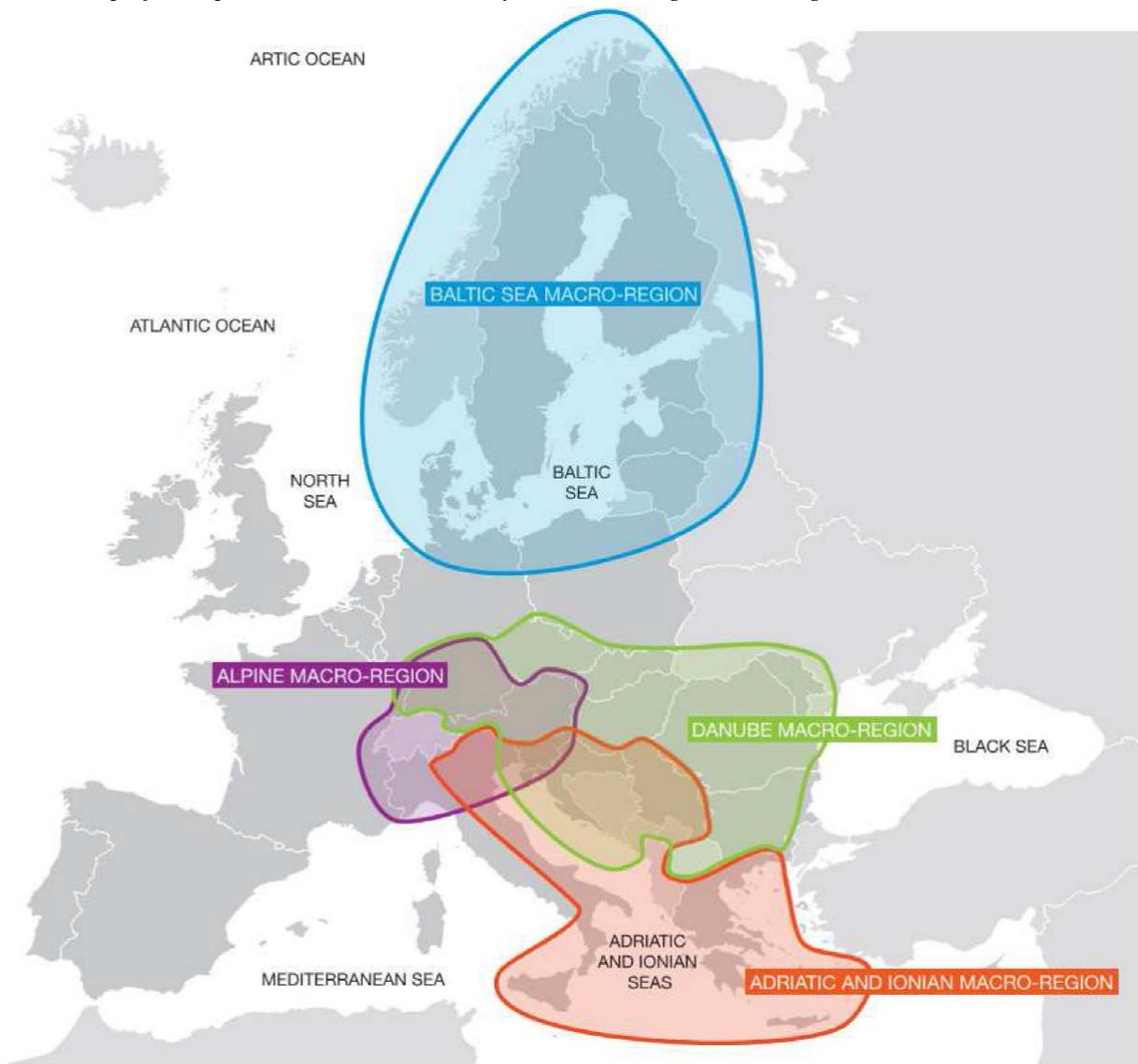
This paper reviews the growing body of literature on EU macro-regional strategies and relate it to dominant theoretical approaches in the fields of political science, policy analysis, (political) geography and spatial planning. It deliberately takes an interdisciplinary perspective providing insights from the body of research and literature. Scholars of all aforementioned disciplines have shown interest in macro-regional cooperation as they represent a new form of (territorial) cooperation within the EU multilevel governance system. Macro-regional strategies are of particular interest to political science: as yet another influence on European integration dynamics and as a new form of regionalism within the EU (Keating 2013), they have been explored through the analytical lens of multilevel governance (e.g., Gänzle 2015; 2017a, b; Piattoni 2016) or experimentalist governance (Gänzle 2017b) thus far. Spatial scholars from planning studies and geography, in turn, reflect on this new form of cooperation as it is closely interwoven with the EU's different approaches in influencing spatial developments across Europe through cohesion policies or European territorial cooperation. Both geography and planning scholars also reflect the underlying conceptualisation of space and scale that comes into practice with macro-regional cooperation.

This paper is divided into four main parts. The first part provides some background explanation to the development process and nature of the EU macro-regional strategies. Second, a review of political science scholarship is presented, distinguishing between literature drawing on theories of regionalism, sub-regionalism, Europeanization and various variants of European governance (e.g., multilevel governance, external governance, experimentalist governance and, perhaps most recently, evolutionary governance). In the third part, literature drawing on geographical concepts and theories is reviewed, focusing specifically on theories of soft policy spaces, reterritorialization and rescaling. The fourth part identifies new directions for future research on EU macro-regional strategies.

2. The concept of macro-regional strategy

Macro-regional strategies can be explained as a new phase in the development of strategies, programmes and institutions aimed at shaping the spatial development of Europe. In some academic literature, macro-regional strategies are discussed as a response to pan-European documents such as the Lisbon, Gothenburg and Europe 2020 strategies or the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and other European territorial cooperation activities. European macro-regional strategies can be traced back to policy documents on European regional development and spatial planning such as ‘Europe 2000’ or ‘Europe 2000+’ (from 1991 and 1994 respectively). The development and publication of the ESDP (approved by the Informal Council of Ministers of Spatial Planning of European Commission in 1999) paved the way to the development of transnational cooperation areas in the INTERREG programmes which now provide important sources of funding for cooperation initiatives across Europe (Stead et al. 2016). In turn, these programmes have shaped the development of the European macro-regional strategies.

Figure 2.1 - Map of European territories covered by EU macro-regional strategies



Source: European Commission, DG Regio

The European Commission defines macro-regional strategies as integrated frameworks for cooperation in order to address ‘common challenges’ (European Commission 2013). EU macro-regional cooperation thus

aims to coordinate the development of policy goals in international contexts, and at the same time offers a governance structure to support implementation. As opposed to other institutionalised forms of cooperation in the EU (e.g. INTERREG) or intergovernmental arrangements (e.g. Conventions or Commissions), macro-regional cooperation is strategy-oriented. The ‘three No’s’ (no new EU legislation, no new EU institutions, and no new EU fundings) were the main narrative promoted by the European Commission in the early stages. Hence, macro-regional strategies aim to build on existing structures and making use of existing resources.

To date, four macro-regional strategies have been developed covering the Baltic Sea Region, the Danube Region, the Adriatic-Ionian Region and the Alpine Region (see Figure 1). Various other potential macro-regions (e.g. the North Sea Region) have been discussed but few (if any) of these are likely to emerge in the near future. In all four macro-regions, various institutional layers of cooperation exist, including networks, cooperation arrangements, commissions, conventions and political platforms (e.g. the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River and the Alpine Convention).

One characteristic of macro-regional cooperation is that the strategies encompass a range of policy fields and are not limited to single issues (e.g. environmental protection of common seas or river systems). The areas of cooperation in the current macro-regional strategies range from navigation, climate change, biodiversity, infrastructure towards economic development, education, skill development, tourism to civil security matters and regional policy (Dühr 2011).

The call for more efficient and coherent territorial development across Europe has been made several times (see for example the reports Sapir et al. 2003 and Barca 2009). Whether macro-regional strategies have the potential to make a difference in this respect remains to be verified. According to some authors, greater alignment of cohesion policy with priorities contained in the macro-regional strategies can result in greater policy coherence (e.g. McMaster and van der Zwet 2016). Nevertheless, macro-regional strategies are still far from being able to establish a mandate for European territorial cohesion or spatial development policy (European Commission 2017). However, they have potential to support strategic decisions on spatial development by coordinating sectoral policies with strong spatial implications such as economic development, transport and environment (Chilla and Sielker 2015). In this respect, macro-regional strategies may be able to help establish clear spatial development objectives at the transnational scale.

3. Approaches of political science

Since 2009 when the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was endorsed by the European Council, the EU’s macro-regional strategies started to emerge as a new topic in the social science literature. While EU macro-regional strategies quickly gained scholarly attention among certain disciplines such as geography and spatial planning (Dubois et al. 2009; Nagler 2013) other disciplines, including political science, were slower off the mark. This section reviews the academic literature which originates from the political sciences according to the different perspectives taken. These perspectives include regionalism, sub-regionalism, Europeanization and various modes of governance.

When considering research on macro-regional strategies, it is important to recognise that the strategies refer both to a process and an outcome. As an outcome, macro-regional strategies contribute to ‘place-based’ policies that may ultimately foster the emergence, consolidation and permanence of macro-regions (i.e. ‘region-building’). Clearly, this can only occur over the long-term. Although formally grounded in EU Cohesion policy, macro-regional strategies are closely connected with a broader set of policies related to transnational ‘regional cooperation’ between member and partner countries of the EU. Consequently, macro-regional strategies have implications for politics and policies at both the EU and national and sub-national levels.

In the context of EU macro-regional strategies, the term ‘macro-regional’ refers to a regional or territorial unit that shares some territorial and/or functional characteristics situated below the level of the EU, but above the level of individual member or partner states. Macro-regions transcend state borders and are commonly understood as territories characterized by the externalities of a common pool resource (e.g. common sea, river system or mountain range) often in conjunction with some form of historical (and possibly cultural) underpinnings that connects a particular territory. The ‘strategic’ part of the concept, in turn, emphasizes a forward-looking commitment of actors to achieve some common objectives for the common ‘macro-region’. One of the rationales of EU macro-regional strategies is to translate EU-wide policy objectives defined in the Lisbon Agenda (2000) or in Europe 2020 into more specific objectives and actions at the ‘macro-regional level’.

Similar to the concepts of meso- or sub-regionalism (Christiansen 1997; Cottey 1999), the idea of macro-regionalism (Gänzle and Kern 2011, 2016c) refers to an intermediate and often unconsolidated ‘state level’ in terms of administrative organization or an ‘emerging in-between’ at the interface of regional integration and their constituent parts (i.e. member states). From this perspective macro-regional strategies can be viewed as instruments supporting a *process* of regionalization rather than a concrete policy outcome. Macro-regional strategies seek to empower macro-regional actors in the pursuit of specific objectives for a given territory with only functionally and even vaguely defined boundaries.

Although there is growing interest in EU macro-regional strategies in the field of political science, this has not yet been translated into major comprehensive research outputs with the exception of contributions to a volume edited by Gänzle and Kern in 2016 (Gänzle and Kern 2016a). To date, most work has remained descriptive and policy-oriented, reporting initial experiences with macro-regional strategies and primarily focussing on single examples of the ‘macro-regional experiment’ (e.g. Cugusi and Stocchiero 2012). In the later part of this section, the relevance of different analytical approaches within political science for examining macro-regional strategies is discussed. Before doing so, the position of EU macro-regional strategies in the broader debates on new regionalism and sub-regionalism is considered.

3.1. Regionalism

Neither regions and macro-regions nor processes of regionalization and macro-regionalization are easily definable matters. Both territorial and functional political processes entail a top-down and/or bottom-up dimension which must be taken into account in order to fully grasp the significance of regionalization. As Piattoni (2016) recognises, research has often distinguished between regionalism (mainly bottom-up) on the one hand, and regionalization (mainly top-down) on the other. Whereas the former refers to ‘spontaneous, socially generated instances of regional resurgence’ the latter concerns ‘planned, political processes of creation of regions from the top’ (ibid.). Despite some ‘continuities and similarities’ (Söderbaum 2016: 4) between the two concepts, this distinction is often used to differentiate between ‘old’ and ‘new regionalism’. While old regionalism is mostly associated with post-World War II European-style processes engineered and aimed at market regulation, new regionalism is ‘supposedly mostly non-European, spontaneous and driven by neoliberal market forces’ (Piattoni 2016: 76) with ‘more varied institutional design and business and civil society actors’ (Söderbaum 2016: 27) which assume a more active role.

Sub-regional forms of integration and cooperation, such as the Benelux and Nordic cooperation formats, emerged at the same time as European integration started in the immediate aftermath of World War II (Dwan 2000; Dangerfield 2016; Johansson 2002). The Benelux Union encompassing Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg built on a customs union agreed upon in 1944 and subsequently developed into a more comprehensive politico-economic union. The Nordic Council, in turn, was formed in 1952 and initially encompassed Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, with Finland joining 3 years later. These forms of regionalism provide important milestones in the development of regional thinking in the EU. After the end of

the Cold War, sub-regional groupings, mainly at the interface of the former Eastern and Western bloc or at the fringes of the post-Soviet space, grew and were ultimately precursors to the accession of most of these countries into the European Union or other Western organizations, such as the Visegrad Group, bringing together the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia for the purpose of furthering closer integration as well as advancing political, economic and military cooperation with one another (Dangerfield 2016).

Through the lens of regionalist approaches, these forms of sub-regionalism can be described in terms of *old regionalism*. However, as argued by Warleigh-Lack (2006: 756), the difference between old and new regionalism is ultimately ‘not so great as to prevent a fruitful dialogue between the two as well as between the new regionalism and integration theory in general’.

3.2. Europeanization

The concept of Europeanization entered the terminology of political science and European Studies in particular in the early 1990s. Since then, a range of definitions and theories have been put forward (Clark and Jones 2008; Olsen 2002). Europeanization has been considered in a variety of ways depending on the disciplinary perspective (Clark and Jones 2008). For some authors the significance of the concept lies in its diffusing state-based power and competencies, whereby state sovereignty is challenged by the new EU polity (Bache 2006; Green Cowles et al. 2001). For others, Europeanization can be seen as quite the opposite: strengthening state-based orders and buttressing national government (Milward 1992; Moravcsik 1998).

A simple interpretation of the concept is that Europeanization captures the idea of transforming political order through European integration. This may include changes of external boundaries, the development of institutions at new levels, the central penetration of national systems of governance, exporting forms of political organization and political unification projects (Olsen 2002: 923). Against the backdrop of European integration, projects such as the Single European Market and the Treaty of Maastricht, Ladrech (1994) adopted the concept to discuss the EU’s impact on public policies in EU member states. Since then the term has expanded significantly or has even been ‘stretched’ (to use the words of Giovanni Sartori in 1970) to encompass a range of dependent variables and dimensions of change.

For some authors, Europeanization refers to the ‘institutionalization of Europe’ as a dependent variable in terms of increasingly supranational, autonomous and self-sustaining institutions, norms and practices (Green Cowles et al. 2001). For others, Europeanization primarily captures the idea of EU-spurred impacts on the policies, politics and polities of EU member as well as partner states. The latter has been referred to as ‘Europeanization beyond Europe’ (i.e. as a dependent variable). The oscillation between these two poles has been identified by Claudio Radaelli who defines Europeanization as ‘processes of construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, *ways of doing things*, and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies’ (Radaelli 2003: 30; Knill and Lehmkuhl 2002; Knill and Lenschow 2005).

In the academic literature on Europeanization, a distinction has been made by several authors with regards to the direction of transformation. One can differentiate vertical, horizontal, and circular influences (Waterhout and Stead 2007). While vertical directions include top-down as well as bottom-up generated influences (e.g., EU downloading its legal norms and values; member states ‘Europeanizing’ specific national concerns and interests), horizontal directions are primarily concerned with interaction of actors at the same level (e.g., regions at the sub-national level). Circular dimensions combine both top-down and bottom-up perspectives in a dynamic relationship (see for example Stead et al. 2016).

Concepts of Europeanization provide an analytical lens for studying cohesion policy and a wider set of interconnected policies, and macro-regions can be considered as a result of processes of Europeanization (Dubois et al. 2009; Görmar and Kurnol 2012). This approach is outlined by Stead et al. (2016) and some

contributions related to policy rescaling (Stead 2011, 2014a). In these accounts, the effects of macro-regional strategies are considered in terms of shifts in policy-making arenas, processes and powers, as well as policy ideas, narratives, norms and justifications. For example, in the Baltic Sea Region national representatives called for this new kind of cooperation in cooperation with European Parliament representatives, thus subscribing to more vertical processes (Schymik 2011). At the same time, ambitions to influence developments in neighbouring (and third) countries can be reflected as horizontal influences.

3.3. Governance

The governance of the EU has become one of the central topics of European studies with some scholars even referring to a ‘governance turn’ (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006). The governance approach considers the EU as ‘a unique set of multi-level, non-hierarchical and regulatory institutions, and a hybrid mix of state and non-state actors’ (Hix 1998: 39). Especially under conditions of globalization, the governance approach provides useful analytical tools to examine political institutions and policymaking processes. More specifically, network governance (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999), informal governance (Kleine 2013), new and soft modes of governance (Héritier and Rhodes 2010), or innovative governance (Tömmel and Verdun 2008) all help to shed light on important aspects of governance. Conceptually, the idea of multilevel governance has developed into an umbrella concept encompassing these variations of governance. More recently, scholars have used the notion of experimentalism in relation to EU governance and started to explore the conditions under which the EU extends internal rules and policies beyond formal membership (Lavenex 2004).

From the perspective of *multilevel governance*, the EU can be conceived as ‘a system of continuous negotiations among nested governments at several territorial tiers’ that ultimately engineers arrangements in which ‘supranational, national, regional and local governments are enmeshed in territorially overarching policy networks’ (Marks 1993: 392). In order to explore the dynamics of multilevel governance, Piattoni (2010a and b) suggests a three-dimensional analytical space comprising international cooperation, subnational articulation and transnational mobilization. In contrast to other grand theories of European integration (e.g. neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism) the MLG-perspective focuses on both institutional and non-institutional actors (e.g. societal groups and subnational authorities). As a consequence, MLG is characterized by the ‘simultaneous activation’ (Piattoni 2010a: 159) of public and private actors at various jurisdictional levels. It is also characterised by a broader understanding of politics which maintains that interests can be refined throughout the governance process. In addition, it draws attention to the fact that these dynamics trigger significant effects on relations among member states, between the national and subnational levels, and between state and societal actors at all levels (Piattoni 2016) and increasingly involving the international level, of which the EU is part.

The main focus of the *external governance* approach is on processes by which EU practices, norms and policies are projected onto non-EU member states. This is of particular interest to EU macro-regional strategies which extend beyond the current territory of the EU (e.g. the Danube and Adriatic-Ionian Regions). According to Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2009), external governance can provide a mechanism for developing greater interaction and cooperation, thereby helping to move closer towards alternative forms of integration when regulative expansion is accompanied by the opening-up of organizational structures of policy-making. This is possible particularly in areas subject to ‘network governance’ – governed by horizontal, participatory and process-oriented modes of policy-making (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009). Hence, an external governance perspective on the EU’s macro-regional strategies strongly focuses on the participatory elements used to draw non-EU countries, sub-national authorities and societal groups closer to the EU (Bengtson 2009).

Experimentalist governance has recently been identified as a new mode of EU governance (Börzel 2012). The concept has for example been used in the case of EU Cohesion policy (Mendez 2011), it has only been applied to EU macro-regional strategies in a few instances (Gänzle 2017b). Experimentalism can be defined in terms of ‘attempts to conceptualize the institutional innovations that actors in persistently uncertain domains have devised to make best use of the malleability of their circumstances while reducing the dangers it creates’ (Sabel and Zeitlin 2012: 424). From that angle, governance concerns the strength of a network and the information about smart ways of doing things that flows inside the network. In short, the EU is perceived as a system where the role of the institutions is to capture innovation and diffuse it. It can therefore also be understood as ‘a recursive process of provisional goal-setting and revision based on learning from the comparison of alternative approaches to advancing them in different contexts’ (Sabel and Zeitlin 2010). Although macro-regional strategies do not seek to create regulatory politics *per se*, they follow a recursive experimentalist policy-cycle in various respects. This is evidenced for example by the fact that macro-regional strategies constitute broad frameworks and joint endeavours decided among authorities at different territorial levels of government (supranational, national, subnational). Although they follow the principle of ‘no new institutions’, macro-regional strategies tend to institutionalize consultation patterns, decision-making procedures, administrative roles and behavioural expectations. In other words, they trigger integrative dynamics. As well as this, macro-regional strategies provide the opportunity for public and private actors to mobilize to represent their own interests and to forge policies, alliances and institutions that will accommodate them. In addition, the main drive of macro-regional strategies is to encourage the implementation of a number of interconnected policies, which were originally pursued separately in response to distinct societal pressures, and to commit the member states to report regularly on process and result. The significance of macro-regions themselves also lies in other areas, such as in their capacity to recombine the institutional structures that have been created at various levels to manage and implement these policies in novel but fluid ways.

Going beyond the concept of experimentalist governance, authors such as Van Assche et al. (2014) and Beeunen et al. (2015) have introduced the term *evolutionary governance* highlighting that ‘governance arrangements are always influenced by the dynamic networks of actors, discourses and institutions’ (Van Assche et al. 2014: 4-5). The basic idea is that ‘all elements are subject to evolution, they co-evolve, and most of them are the product of governance itself’ (Van Assche et al. 2014: 5). Based on social-system theory, new institutional economics, development economics and post-structuralism, this approach follows a radical evolutionary view on processes of governance. The aim is to dissolve the dichotomies between socio-economic systems and governance. This leads to claims that many perspectives on governance ‘have evolved from analytical and descriptive to normative and prescriptive’ (Beeunen et al. 2015: 331). The underlying criticism here is that a normative agenda may emerge due to different governance approaches (Sielker 2016a and b). Because evolutionary governance theory is relatively new, it has not yet been explored in the context of macro-regional strategies (Bianchi 2016).

4. Approaches of geographical and spatial studies

Many facets of the political science debates are intertwined and overlapping with spatial approaches, in particular with regard to governance debates. However, different readings of the mentioned concepts and a series of original disciplinary arguments enrich the discussion. The conceptual debates below focus on two main elements. The first of these are various ‘soft’ characteristics of the strategies while the second relates to processes of rescaling induced by this new form of cooperation.

Scholars from spatial sciences have welcomed macro-regional strategies as an innovative approach to European policy-making (Dubois et al. 2009). This new form of macro-regionalisation leads to formal, semi-formal and informal cooperation between a range of stakeholders in a variety of different policy fields but

without recourse to new administrations (one of the precepts of the ‘three No’s’). The limited degree of institutionalisation has already generated some academic debate (e.g. Dühr 2011; Dubois et al. 2009; Sielker and Vonhoff 2015). More specifically, the debate on macro-regional strategies as *soft spaces* has received some attention among scholars (e.g. Faludi 2011; Stead 2011; Sielker 2016a; Chilla and Sielker 2014). This debate centres on the co-existence of territorial (hard) spaces and ‘softer’ spaces (non-statutory with fuzzy boundaries) and few classical mandates linked to specific territories. This debate is part of the paradigm of relational concepts of space that has gained traction since the 1990s in an attempt to supersede traditional views of territory as enclosed container spaces. Scholars such as Amin (2004), Massey (2005), Brenner (1999), Jessop (2004), Swyngedouw (1992) and Agnew (2002) have argued for relational approaches towards territoriality based on networks and flows. The dynamic between the actors involved is the dominant focus (Haughton et al. 2007; Painter 2010; Agnew 2015; Paasi 2004; Chilla and Sielker 2015; Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2015).

Coined by Allmendinger et al. (2009), the concept of soft spaces was originally developed and applied in local planning processes. Since then, scholars with an interest in spatial planning have applied the concept to EU macro-regional strategies which contain soft spaces of cross-border governance along hard spaces of national governance (Faludi 2010b; Metzger and Schmitt 2011; Stead 2011, 2014; Stead et al. 2015; Sielker 2012, 2016a). An important characteristic is that macro-regional strategies are closely interwoven with the hard spaces and their national representatives cooperating in macro-regions across national borders. The informal character of the macro-regional committees, the flexibility with which different thematic areas operate as well as the fuzzy involvement of different actor groups are also characteristics of these soft spaces (Allmendinger et al. 2014; Chilla and Sielker 2014; Sielker 2016b; Stead 2011).

This relational view on macro-regional strategies provides an analytical framework for examining the formulation and implementation processes. It also provides a framework for analysing political agendas and actor networks. An important question here is whether macro-regional strategies as soft spaces are a temporal phenomenon of the implementation phase that can lead to hardening or dissolution of governance arrangements (Metzger and Schmitt 2012; Allmendinger et al. 2014). Soft spaces may not only be temporal forms of governance arrangements but also constitutive elements of postmodern political processes.

At the same time, the concept of soft spaces is prominent in debates on re-territorialisation and the macro-regional implementation process. Re-territorialisation focusses on the constant struggle for appropriate boundaries, institutions, and resources which ‘fit’ a specific territory.

The soft spaces debate has some links to the early works on multilevel governance as Hooghe and Marks (2003) who distinguished between two types of governance: (i) vaguely identified and non-institutionalized (MLG type I; soft) spaces and precisely identified; and (ii) institutionalized ones (MLG type II; hard).

Similar to the discussion in political sciences around processes of European integration and the supranational or intergovernmental attributes of macro-regions as described above, spatial scholars have sought to analyse the macro-regional strategies in the context of *rescaling* (Bialasiewicz 2013; Stead 2014a and b; Stead et al. 2015). The basic rationale is that European integration can bring about changes in powers across existing layers of decision-making but also new scales in a discursive sense and new layers in a formally institutionalised sense, in addition to new types of intervention and new actor constellations.

Like Europeanization, rescaling can occur in different directions as the vertical aspect of Europeanization is referring to ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’ of policy ideas. Rescaling is often defined as a process in which transfer of competences from one level to another (Gualini 2006). Much contemporary writing follows a broader understanding of rescaling (Brenner 1999; Swyngedouw 2004). In this understanding, rescaling processes can be described alongside ‘three dimensions, the functional, the political and the institutional’ (Keating 2013: 6). One can differentiate between the rescaling of mandates and budgets, dominant levels of power, spatial frames, policy networks, policy concepts, rationales, instruments, actor- networks, policy agendas and national policy argumentations, policy networks as well as rescaling of norms, narratives and (Stead et al. 2015).

Macro-regional cooperation can potentially lead to a variety of rescaling processes. Three processes are most reflected in recent literature. First, the macro-regions represent new networks, constructed by a huge diversity of stakeholders (Stead et al. 2014; Sielker and Chilla 2014; Gänzle and Wulf 2014). Second, this new framework offers opportunities for new dynamics of agenda setting in the policy fields addressed by the strategies (Allmendinger et al. 2014; Sielker 2016a). Third, decisions for funding within other EU programmes (e.g. Connecting Europe Facilities) are not only shaped by macro-regional debates, they are also helping to consolidate political support as a result of macro-regional processes (Sielker 2016b).

Apart from conceptual reflections on macro-regions, scholarly attention has also been focused on discussing macro-regions in the policy context of *European territorial cooperation* initiatives. For example, they have discussed macro-regions in terms of various policy antecedents such as ‘Europe 2000’, ‘Europe 2000+’ and the ESDP (Dubois et al. 2009; Görmar 2010; Görmar and Kurnol 2012; Faludi 2010a). Others have discussed the concept of macro-regions in relation to statements and ambitions about EU regional policy (e.g. Schymik 2011). Some authors have also focused their attention on the issue of territorial cooperation and examined the nature and type of arrangements to promote territorial cooperation in macro-regional processes (e.g. Dühr 2011).

At a more fundamental level, questions remain about the extent to which macro-regional strategies are able to influence European integration with respect to the spatial dimension. This has to be seen against the background where there is still no solid mandate for spatial development at the European level, even though regional policy budgets are relatively high and the concept of territorial cohesion is now contained in European treaties.

In addition to the conceptual and policy debates, various authors have described and analysed developments in specific macro-regions. As well as more conceptual contributions, case studies on all the existing macro-regions can be found in Gänzle and Kern’s (2016) edited volume on macro-regional strategies. Given its long-standing experience of transnational cooperation, the *Baltic Sea* region is often referred to as an archetype (Karlsson 2004). Most of the literature on macro-regional strategies and macro-regionalism refers to the Baltic Sea Region (Dubois et al. 2009; Bengtson 2009; Schymik and Krumrey 2009; Schymik 2011; Gänzle and Kern 2016b; Gänzle and Wulf 2014; Wulf 2016; Escach 2014). In the case of the *Danube Region*, the edited volume by Stratenschulte and Setzen (2011) focuses on regional cooperation and the changes induced. The contributions discuss the EUSDR from a broad academic perspective as well as different experiences and perspectives in a range of Danube regions and countries (Sielker and Vonhoff 2015; Wulf 2016; Sielker 2016b; Ágh et al. 2010; Arbter 2014; Stratenschulte 2013; Gänzle 2015). Academic discussions within the *Alpine Region* have only relatively recently started. This needs to be seen against a background where the institutional thickness of territorial cooperation is already substantial (Dax 2014; Debarbieux et al. 2015; Balsiger 2016; Bussjäger and Chilla forthcoming; Bätzing 2012; Chilla and Streifeneder forthcoming). Accounts about the *Adriatic-Ionian* Region mainly include reflections by Stocchiero and Cugusi (2012, 2016). Apart from the case study literature around the four existing macro-regions other potential formats of macro-regional cooperation have been discussed in contributions on the *Mediterranean* (Bialiasiewicz et al. 2013), the *North Sea Region* (Danson 2016) and the *Atlantic Arc* (Wise 2016).

5. Conclusions

Since EU macro-regional strategies are relatively recent phenomena, research on the topic is also equally new. The growing political importance of macro-regional strategies is one of the reasons for intensifying research activities in this area. In terms of a new research agenda, some key areas have been identified as follows.

There is a strong need for detailed *empirical evidence* on macro-regional strategies. Many publications reviewed in this paper are more conceptual or discursive in character. While these contributions provide a good starting point for research, a more solid analytical base would help to provide deeper insights.

The analysis of macro-regional strategies would benefit from a more *comparative perspective*. To date, single case studies dominate the empirical analysis that is currently available. Clearly, the four existing macro-regional strategies are very different in terms of history, political priorities and geographical contexts, which means that developing and applying a comparative research design will pose significant challenges. Nevertheless, this type of comparative research can potentially deliver valuable new insights.

Although it is too early to fully grasp how the governance architecture induced by EU macro-regional strategies will affect both the EU and its member states, it would be helpful to apply the concept of *multilevel administration* in a more systematic way. This would allow for a better understanding of conditions conducive to strengthening and solidification (or the lack thereof) of the macro-regional governance architecture. While it may be premature to expect a significant growth of institutional independence, public administration-informed scholarship could promote discussion and debate about the capacity of the European Union to co-opt non-EU bodies (such as the CBSS) into the macro-regional governance structure.

From a more normative perspective, analyses should reflect both the *impacts and outputs* of macro-regional strategies. Beyond reflections on conceptual issues, the political relevance and effectiveness should also be addressed, and institutional aspects of impacts and outputs should be considered. To date, many impacts of macro-regional strategies are the subject of conjecture. Europeanization research provides one suitable framework that would allow focusing on the strategies' actual impact. From that angle it would be interesting to analyse the extent to which objectives of EU macro-regional strategies have entered national operational programs of cohesion policy (and *vice versa*).

The contribution of macro-regional strategies to the *governance debate* can be addressed in a more fundamental way. Various governance approaches, particularly multilevel governance, emphasize the need to study political mobilization at various levels, not just within the EU but also beyond (e.g., in partner countries). One particular area of focus for new research is the design and shape of the macro-regional governance architecture. Given the fact that macro-regional strategies have only had limited effects on policy coordination to date, the question whether macro-regional strategies can deliver 'well-controlled regional differentiation' (Lehti 2010: 140) remains unanswered.

The processes of macro-regionalization present an excellent opportunity for interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation. This can draw on the existing academic literature on the development of regional policy which has been built up over the last few decades.

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