The European Union’s Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR): Improving Multi-level Governance in Baltic Sea Cooperation?

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Abstract: Macro-regional strategies – such as the ones for the Baltic Sea, the Danube, the Ionian-Adriatic and the Alpine regions – constitute new elements of European Union (EU) Cohesion policy and territorial cooperation. In a nutshell, these strategies aim at building functional and transnational “macro-regions” involving the EU, its member states as well as partner countries within the EU’s system of multi-level governance. As the oldest macro-regional strategy, the EU Strategy of the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) has been in operation since 2009. Drawing on the theory of multi-level governance (MLG), this contribution assesses the effects on the political mobilization of and interplay between international, intergovernmental, and non-governmental actors in the region.

**Keywords:** Macro-regions; Baltic Sea region; Macro-regional Strategies; Multilevel governance; institutional interplay.
Introduction

According to the then European Commissioner for Regional and Urban Policy, Johannes Hahn, the aim of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), presented as the first EU macro-regional strategy in 2009, was not only to serve as a “new model for co-operation” in Europe, but was also “to inspire other regions” (Hahn 2010, 2). Embracing eight EU member states, the EUSBSR is not only the “oldest”, but is also the most advanced “macro-regional project” thus far.1 Since that time, three more EU macro-regional strategies have been endorsed by the European Council: the Strategies for the Danube (2011), the Adriatic-Ionian (2014) and the Alpine Region (2015) (see Gänzle and Kern 2016a for a comprehensive overview).

According to the European Commission, a “macro-region” is to be conceived of as “an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges” (European Commission 2009, 1, original in bold). Referring to a pool of commonalities, macro-regions are socially construed products, “demarcated” by “flexible, even vague” (European Commission 2009, 8) boundaries. By devising macro-regional strategies, the EU seeks to establish an “integrated framework to address common challenges, […] [such as] the urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea, and to contribute to the economic success of the region and to its social and territorial cohesion, as well as to the competitiveness of the EU” (Council of the European Union 2009, 11). The core aim of these strategies consists of driving coordination and integration of different policy sectors, such as environment and agriculture, in a comprehensive way. This goal, however, is subject to the principle of the so-called “Three No’s”, which means that the implementation of macro-regional strategies should not result in any (major) (1)
additional costs, for example in terms of funding via EU cohesion policy, should not
(2) trigger the establishment of any new institutions, and finally they should not give
rise to (3) specific EU legislation devised for the “macro-region.”

In contrast to previous EU attempts to refer to established forms of regional
cooperation, such as the “Union’s Approaches to the Baltic Sea Region” (European
Commission 1994) or the “Northern Dimension” of 1997/99 (Archer and Etzold
2008), the EU has sketched out a framework that not only addresses common
challenges, such as environmental matters, but also various opportunities in terms of
economic integration within the region. Interestingly enough, the Commission has
emphasized the importance of this form of “regionalism” inside the EU for the entire
European Union. By applying the label “macro-region”, the project in the Baltic Sea
Region is framed as a legitimate form of regionalization inside the European Union
(and including its immediate vicinity when appropriate). Henceforth, macro-regional
strategies are conceived “as building blocks in reaching European objectives”
(European Commission 2013a, 20) and macro-regions consequently become “an
integral aspect of the essence of the Union” (Joenniemi 2010, 33) itself.

Regional cooperation “underneath” the level of the European Union tends to be
constituted by a plethora of regional actors and arrangements covering a wide range of
policies. By forging both a comprehensive and integrated framework for the Baltic
Sea Region, it is argued here that the macro-regional strategy seeks to provide a
response to longstanding and significant problems of coordination and collective
action in multi-level systems of governance, which are, in short, the comprehensive
realignment of complex politico-social, regulatory, and ecosystem boundaries. In a
nutshell, the EUSBSR is a facilitator of coordination in the Baltic Sea Region in a much more comprehensive way (Gänzle and Kern 2016b).

This contribution proceeds in the following way. First, it will briefly sketch out the development of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). Second, it will introduce the multi-level governance approach as a theoretical tool accounting for the mobilizing effect (or lack thereof) of actors in the EU’s multi-level system. Third, it will analyze the governance architecture that has emerged in the shadow of the “Three No’s” and will address the question whether the EUSBSR has fostered interplay and coordination among existing bodies of regional cooperation. Finally, it will present the main achievements and shortcomings of this new EU policy tool.

The Development of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) started its life in the European Parliament: a Euro-Baltic Intergroup consisting of MEPs from member states in the Baltic Sea Region presented the Strategy to European Commission President José Manuel Barroso in 2005. The core idea of the initiative was to maximize the economic potential of the reunited Baltic Sea Region (see Beazley 2007, 14), and to lobby for a consolidated EU pillar of Baltic Sea states within the Northern Dimension. Following a mandate by the European Council (2007), the European Commission subsequently took up the initiative and quite considerably de-emphasized the external dimension of the Parliament’s original proposal. A public consultation process among different stakeholders in the region eventually took place between August 2008 and February 2009 (see Bengtsson 2009, 3; Rostoks 2010, 15ff.). Schymik and Krumrey (2009, 15) conclude that “the European Commission has by and large been able to
draft an Action Plan that captures the essence of public opinion in the region.” This particular instrument of stakeholder participation was perpetuated by a so-called Annual Forum for the EUSBSR, the first of which was held in Tallinn in 2010; annual fora in Gdansk (2011), Copenhagen (2012), Vilnius (2013), Turku (2014), Jūrmela (2015) and Stockholm (2016) followed suit. By bringing together both policymakers and stakeholders, these meetings provided a platform for networking, discussions and an exchange of views about the Strategy and its implementation.

Finally, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was presented by the European Commission in June 2009, and adopted by the European Council in October that year. The Strategy was based on the assumption that macro-regional strategies would: (1) not create new institutions, but would be supported by a multi-level, multi-actor and multi-sector governance approach; (2) not generate new legislation for developing and implementing macro-regional strategies, but would be driven by Action Plans and their regular updates; and (3) not lead to new funding schemes, but would be based instead on the need to utilize and combine the already existing schemes (European Commission 2013b, 10). The EUSBSR was accompanied by an Action Plan, which proposed the establishment of four pillars for “macro-regional” cooperation. The Strategy aimed to: (1) improve the environmental state of the Baltic Sea; (2) promote more balanced economic development in the region; (3) make the region more accessible and attractive; and (4) make it a safer and more secure place. These areas have been broken down into fifteen different so-called Priority Areas (PAs), and have been assigned a set of highly relevant projects (also known as flagship projects), which served as a showcase for the EUSBSR. The Action Plan was conceived as a “rolling” plan, which implied that it was designed in order to quickly absorb “lessons
learnt”; as such, it was revised in 2010 and 2013 (European Commission 2013c). As a result, the original four overall Strategy pillars have been streamlined and transferred into just three objectives, which are (1) to save the sea; (2) to connect the region; and (3) to increase prosperity. As the number of priority areas simultaneously rose from 15 to 17, however, it was at the time already doubtful “whether the Strategy will in practice become more focused and more effective” (Etzold 2013, 11). Still, the horizontal actions (cross-cutting themes) have been reduced quite significantly from 13 to five.

Following an interim implementation report in 2010, the first major report was drawn up in June 2011. Unsurprisingly, the Commission found that the EUSBSR’s overall impact had been successful; in particular, it “has led to concrete action, with a more streamlined use of resources. New working methods and networks have been established, and many initiatives developed” (European Commission 2011, 3). Clearly, as the EUSBSR was launched in the midst of the 2007-2013 programing period, a great deal of financial resources had already been earmarked for other projects. Still, a number of new projects were launched, such as the “Baltic Deal” whereby members would work “with farmers across the region to reduce nutrient run-off, and therefore eutrophication” (European Commission 2011, 2). This project is often referred to as a showcase for enhancing awareness across different policy sectors and communities in the region. Finally, in 2013 the European Commission carried out an evaluation exercise that included an extensive survey of more than one hundred key stakeholders, as well as independent assessments by external experts. The evaluation concludes that macro-regional strategies have triggered clear results “evident in terms of projects and more integrated policy making, although further
improvements are essential in implementation and planning” (European Commission 2013a, 11). At the same time, the document also identifies a set of problems, in particular the lack of leadership in some corners of the macro-region. While a lack of administrative capacities and national resources may account for political disinterest in some countries, the complexities of the EUSBSR’s governance architecture have not helped to make either EU member states or partner countries wholeheartedly hail the new initiative.

Following the revisions introduced in the Action Plan of June 2015, the EUSBSR now subscribes to three core objectives, which focus on environmental protection (“Save the Sea”), economic development (“Increase Prosperity”) and improvement of the infrastructure (“Connect the Region”). The three overall objectives are now linked to 13 PAs – for instance, bioeconomy (PA “Bioeconomy”) or innovation (PA “Innovation”) – and complemented by four Horizontal Actions (HA) (e.g. HA “Neighbors” or HA “Spatial Planning”) that cut across various policy areas. Different member states or organizations are responsible for the PAs and the HAs. Several organizations operating at the macro-regional level – for instance, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), and Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea (VASAB) – actively take part in the implementation of the Strategy as either Policy Coordinators, such as the CBSS for PA “Secure”, or Horizontal Area Leaders, such as VASAB and HELCOM for HA “Spatial Planning.”

Each PA is coordinated by administrative managers from different member states and organizations participating in the Strategy. Policy coordinators assume a managerial role in the implementation of the Strategy, create ideas and support the
implementation of the EU structural policy in the macro-region. Furthermore, steering
groups have been established, bringing together various interested stakeholders from
other line ministries, subnational authorities and international organizations of the
region (see Gänzle and Wulf 2014). Hence, the delivery of the strategies very much
depends on the willingness and capacities of participating states. EU member states
also operate the network of National Contact Points (NCPs) or National Coordinators
(NC), which assist and coordinate the implementation of the strategies at the national
level. By and large, the commitment and willingness of member states to (re)allocate
national resources for the aims of the strategies is decisive. In addition, the public
management traditions of participating countries vary considerably and thus influence
the effective implementation of the strategies. A certain degree of convergence among
countries is therefore required as an institutional basis at the national level.

Apart from the increasing visibility of the member states in this process, the European
Commission has maintained an important role. Together with EU member states in
the Baltic Sea Region, it has become the driving force behind the policy process
leading towards the successful implementation of the Strategy. It assumes an
important role in preparing strategy reviews, in monitoring its implementation, and in
leading the overall coordination of the rolling Action Plan. Participating states are
linked to policy formulation by the so-called High Level Group (HLG), which also
brings together all other member states at the EU level. EU member states that are not
part of a given macro-region, however, do not actively participate in the HLG
meetings (author’s interview with a Horizontal Area Leader, Stockholm, June 30,
2013). This could potentially change when an increasing number of EU member states
are engaged in macro-regional strategies.
Multi-level Governance and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

From a holistic perspective, EU macro-regional strategies in general may trigger important consequences, in particular vis-à-vis the spatial dimension, boundaries, institutional set-up and the way macro-regions are governed. This is not restricted to changes of powers across levels of government, but also implies territorial “rescaling” (Keating 2009), that is, new scales of intervention, new actor constellations, and variable geometries of governance (Stead 2011, 163). Departing from the seminal works of Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe (Marks 1992, 1993; 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2001; 2003), Piattoni constructs a three-dimensional analytical space that can account for most EU dynamics (Piattoni 2010a) and that directs our interest to processes of political mobilization (politics dimension), policymaking (policy dimension) and change of polity (polity dimension) that results in permeability and fluidity between institutions, internal and external policymakers, and policy-takers (see Piattoni 2010a). While it is often the EU’s member states that primarily regulate certain policy areas, political mobilization may also be triggered by other institutional and non-institutional actors – subnational authorities and societies, and transnational societal groups – to which member states then react. Consequently, MLG is characterized by the “simultaneous activation of governmental and non-governmental actors at various jurisdictional levels” (Piattoni 2010b, 159). From an MLG perspective, it is more important to account for the effects rather than discerning which level or which type of actor activates political mobilization around a certain policy issue. Ultimately, political mobilization induces institutional and non-institutional actors to interpret, narrate and promote their interests and to press for institutional solutions that will hopefully strengthen their position in the next round of
mobilization and, therefore, also set in motion political and institutional dynamics (Piattoni 2016).

Macro-regions are joint endeavors among territorial authorities at different levels of government (subnational, national and supranational) and tend to give rise to governance arrangements, such as consultation patterns, decision-making procedures, administrative roles and behavioral expectations, some of the defining traits of institutions – despite the mantra of “no institutions.” Therefore, macro-regional strategies provide the opportunity for governmental and non-governmental actors to mobilize in defense of their own interests, as they get interpreted and narrated during implementation, and to forge policies and institutions that will accommodate them. The main drive of macro-regions is the implementation of a number of interconnected policies, which were originally pursued separately in response to distinct societal pressures.

From an MLG perspective, macro-regional strategies are important because they mobilize institutional and non-institutional actors towards policy goals that have been identified as central to the Union since at least the late 1990s, such as the ones expressed in the Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs is “perhaps the most high-profile initiative of the European Union” (Borràs and Radaelli 2011, 465) […]. Launched in March 2000, its original goals included competitiveness, employment and social cohesion, with the aim of becoming “world leader in sustainable development” added by the Gothenburg European Council summit of June 2001. In terms of governance, the EU sought to embrace policy areas that had previously escaped the reach of the Union, by devising new modes of governance
such as, for example, the method of open coordination (Tholoniat 2010). Macro-regional strategies, it is argued here, seek to encourage the establishment of a governance architecture that recombines existing institutional structures “at various levels to manage and implement these policies in novel but fluid ways” (Piattoni 2016, 91). They have also allowed the European Commission, in particular the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG Regio), to come forward as a core actor in driving comprehensive strategies and coordination across DGs inside the bureaucracy – an important legitimizing factor of bureaucratic politics in the light of the ongoing economic crisis of the European Union, if not European integration – and “to make itself more important inside the Commission” (author’s phone interview with former CBSS official, 23 May 2015).

**Actor Mobilization and Institutional Interplay at the Macro-regional Level**

*Regional Organizations and Conventions*

Among the most important institutions at a macro-regional level in the Baltic Sea Region are the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), an intergovernmental platform of countries bordering the Baltic Sea (including Norway and Iceland), and HELCOM, the executive body of the Helsinki Convention. The CBSS was established in 1992 bringing together heads of states and governments of the region (at the occasion of biannual Baltic Sea Summits, with the latest one taking place under the German CBSS Presidency in Stralsund in 2014) as well as Foreign Ministers. Since 1998, the CBSS is supported by a permanent secretariat based in Stockholm. Its primary objective is to build trust and security in the region after the end of the Cold War (Etzold 2010) and to deal with concrete joint regional challenges and issues
(Hubel and Gänzle 2002). The CBSS has acquired outstanding expertise in areas such as civil security (for example, children at risk, trafficking of human beings, and radiation and nuclear safety), maritime economy and sustainable development.

Although the first EUSBSR Action Plan did not contain any reference to the CBSS, the CBSS has subsequently been integrated into the governance architecture of the Strategy. Today, it occupies a prominent place and assumes the responsibility for several HAs and PAs. Together with the Nordic Council of Ministers, the CBSS coordinates “Sustainable Development and Bio-energy”. This form of twinning with regards to a specific priority area seems to have contributed towards better inter-institutional coordination:

[…] They [the Nordic Council of Ministers, the author] do biodiversity and we [CBSS] do climate. Whatever they do, they coordinate with us. We are much better coordinated than we ever were. This is partly due to the Strategy (author’s phone interview with CBSS official, 28 November 2014).

Perhaps more importantly, whereas the European Union does not contribute to the core budget of the CBSS secretariat, the EUSBSR now provides the opportunity to apply for project funding. These financial opportunities are being seized by several regional organizations. In the case of the CBSS, this even required a change of the internal rules:

Now everybody does projects in the Secretariat. A project can be defined in many ways, it does not always have to be money, it can be activities. […] We
have projects with the EU […]. We have projects with Körber Foundation (Youth Dialogue), with Humboldt University (CBSS Summer University). […] We have to be inventive in terms of financial engineering […] [and we, the author] also managed to convince the CSO [Committee of Senior Officials, the author] to change the rules which meant that the Secretariat had a much stronger position in project decision-making. We kept the CSO informed, but we no longer had to return to the CSO for deciding every single step of a project, this was a way of killing any project orientation. The CSO stepped back from micro-management what we were doing […] (author’s phone interview with CBSS official, 28 November 2014).

Although it is only a matter of nuances, this effectively means that the Secretariat of the CBSS acquires some autonomy in how it assumes its proper role in regional cooperation. From the perspective of CBSS member states, in turn, such activities undertaken by the Secretariat with regard to project acquisition and management provide yet another opportunity to secure funding for jointly agreed objectives.

Turning to another major regional organization in the Baltic Sea Region, HELCOM has primarily been concerned with the objective of protecting the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution, and to restore and safeguard its ecological balance. As these environmental objectives converge with the ones expressed by the EUSBSR, the EU’s macro-regional strategy seeks to provide regional organizations with the opportunity to embed their activities in a wider strategic design and broader institutional framework; meanwhile, the EU is able to benefit from the regional experience and expertise that these bodies have accumulated
over time. It therefore does not come as a surprise that the Council of the EU encouraged member states to further investigate:

[the] synergy effects between the EUSBSR and multilateral cooperation structures and networks within the Baltic Sea Region [...] through better co-ordination and effective use of communication channels and fora related to EUSBSR and Baltic Sea Region to provide increased efficiency of intervention within macro region (Council of the European Union 2011, 5)

The development of individual PAs shows that there is now a direct link between the EUSBSR and existing international organizations such as HELCOM:

The benefits of these joint approaches are: involvement of all Baltic Sea countries as well as stakeholders (HELCOM Observers), linkages provided to a larger policy context (e.g. the existing or developing integrated coastal management frameworks for HA Spatial Planning), outcomes taken forward for implementation at national level and no risk of double structures or duplicated meetings. For successful co-existence, EUSBSR matters should have a proper place in the work plan and agenda of the HELCOM meetings; EUSBSR visibility has to be ensured and pro-active contributions to EUSBSR processes provided as needed (HELCOM 2015, 3).

The institutional interplay and the resulting synergies between HELCOM’s Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) and the EUSBSR are evident in the EU Strategy’s recommendation for the implementation of the BSAP (European Union 2010, 144ff.).
This has strengthened HELCOM’s position, as well as the implementation of BSAP, which had been hampered by the influence of sectorial interests because they were seen as negatively affecting the implementation of an integrative ecosystem approach (European Commission 2013a, 5). For the implementation of PA 2 (“Natural Zones and Biodiversity”), for example, HELCOM also provides the technical and scientific framework (indicators and targets) for the implementation of EU Directives (EUSBSR News, May 2012, 5).

Although the EUSBSR has not created any new specific legislation, it aims to improve the implementation of existing EU legislation (European Union 2010). The Marine Strategy Framework Directive has been built on the experience of HELCOM’s BSAP, and the Commission uses the macro-regional approach to systematically improve the implementation of HELCOM guidelines that have thus far only been politically binding. While HELCOM recommendations require a consensus among the cooperating countries and lack formal enforcement powers, most EU directives are enacted on the basis of a qualified majority and are binding after transposition into national law. They are also subject to the infringement procedure, which can be invoked against non-compliant EU member states (Wenzel 2011; van Leeuwen and Kern 2013).

Moreover, the EUSBSR provides the European Commission with a central and policy entrepreneurial role in its own decision-making, with EU member states and partner countries much more confined to matters of implementation. Although the European Commission has been a member of many regional bodies, such as HELCOM and the CBSS since the beginning, it is only with the EUSBSR that the Commission has
gained significant influence inside these organizations. This can be attributed to the fact that the Commission on the one hand serves as a watchdog able to guarantee policy coherence across sectors and scales, and on the other, macro-regional strategies are increasingly recognized as frames for regional cooperation in Europe – with the Commission entrusted with a core monitoring role. The EUSBSR has also contributed to increasing the visibility of actors and regional bodies, such as for instance HELCOM (author’s phone interview with HELCOM Secretariat official, February 27, 2015).

Subnational Authorities and Civil Society

Macro-regional strategies create new political arenas as well as policy opportunities for both subnational authorities and civil society. If, for example, subnational authorities establish transnational networks, they have the potential to develop into constitutive elements of macro-regions. In the Baltic Sea region, institutional capacities are well established, as demonstrated by the more than 100-member-strong Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) and the Baltic Metropoles Network (BMN), both of which play an active role in the implementation of the EUSBSR. In its strategic vision, UBC has declared itself a “key partner in promoting the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region” (UBC 2009). Both UBC and BMN have a long history of cooperation and are relatively well-equipped in terms of budget and expertise. Cooperation between Hanseatic cities, often based on twinning relationships, even survived the Cold War period. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the UBC was soon complemented by a wider network of sub-regional authorities, most prominently by the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC). Drawing on existing literature, these networks, which often include cities with active
sister-city agreements (Kern 2001), can be expected to trigger a positive impact on the implementation of the EUSBSR.

In a few PAs of the EU’s Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, subnational governments serve as coordinators; Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (Germany), for example, is in charge of the PAC focusing on tourism. Moreover, city initiatives have become essential for the implementation of the EUSBSR, in particular the so-called “Turku Process.” This collaborative process was initiated by the City of Turku and the Regional Council of Southwest Finland in 2010, based on the continued cooperation between Turku and St. Petersburg, and stimulated by the start of the EUSBSR and HELCOM initiatives. It adds the expertise and knowledge of local authorities to the EUSBR process. Today, the process is coordinated by three partners: the City of St. Petersburg, the City of Hamburg, and the City of Turku-Region together with the Region of South-West Finland. Regions, cities and their associations could help implement specific projects that require the cooperation of actors from different levels, and which require an alignment of EU and macro-regional approaches on the one hand with national and subnational policies on the other (European Commission 2013b, 15).

Moreover, the EUSBSR paves the ground for a trend towards a transnationalization of the region’s civil society. The Baltic Sea region, for example, has developed into a highly dynamic area of cross-border cooperation and transnational networking (Kern 2001; Kern and Löffelsend 2008; Kern 2011) that includes not only cities and subnational regions, but also non-governmental organizations covering the whole macro-region. As macro-regional governance is not restricted to the nation-states, this
requires the institutionalization of new forms of cooperation and collaboration at the macro-regional scale. Transnational institutions are a constitutive element of macro-regions, and include hybrid arrangements of governmental and non-governmental actors (Joas et al. 2007). The combination of these different forms provides options for the direct involvement of stakeholders and the public at the macro-regional level. This development opens up new opportunities, but it also leads to new challenges since stakeholder participation in macro-regions faces the same legitimacy and accountability problems as stakeholder participation at the global level. Due to a lack of capacities, stakeholder participation – for example, in the Annual Forums on the macro-regional strategies – seems to be limited to a small number of organizations which have sufficient capacities to participate in such events (Kodric 2011). However, the Horizontal Action INVOLVE (Strengthening multi-level governance including involving civil society, business and academia) aims at pan-Baltic organizations and includes experts from NGOs, in particular the Baltic NGO Network, in the preparation and implementation of the EUSBSR. This requires capacity building or, alternatively, capacity development, which will enable members of this network to cooperate transnationally (European Commission 2013c, 152).

**Blurring the Boundaries of the “Inside” and the “Outside”: The Case of Russia**

Since the EUSBSR is based on activities of mutual interest to EU member states and neighboring countries, close cooperation with non-member countries, in particular with the Russian Federation, is critical in many areas of the Strategy, such as in its goal of more efficient and compatible maritime surveillance (European Commission 2012, 8). As the EUSBSR presents an EU initiative and does not commit non-member states, constructive cooperation with the region’s external partners is needed for the
successful implementation of the Strategy (European Commission 2013b, 31). This means that existing institutions, in particular HELCOM, CBSS and VASAB, provide the best platform for cooperation between EU member states and non-EU countries. In that vein, the Director General of the CBSS maintains:

The Strategy has improved transparency in regional cooperation, and the CBSS is together with e.g. HELCOM and the Northern Dimension one of several platforms on which EUSBSR cooperation can occur, with participation also by non-EU BSR (Baltic Sea Region, the author) countries (Lundin 2013, 15).

By involving Russia, the EU (represented by the European Commission until 2010 and by the European External Action Service following the establishment of the EU’s new diplomatic service), and its member states as “equals”, and by being involved in the Northern Dimension (ND) as well as in the EUSBSR, the CBSS is in a favorable position to provide a “platform for interplay” (author’s phone interview with CBSS official, November 28, 2014) at the intersection of EU internal and external policies. Since the launch of the EUSBSR, the EU has developed into a point of reference for most actors under the umbrella of the CBSS. Today, many actions and projects – for example, under the “Save the Sea” objective – are implemented under the framework of the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) through HELCOM, the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), new initiatives like the Turku process, and SEBA (European Commission 2013c, 24–25). Several interviewees (author’s interviews with European Commission official, February 2, 2015, and with NDEP official, February 3, 2015) have identified the establishment of the St. Petersburg waste water treatment system over the past ten years as one of the “success stories” of
environmental cooperation in the Baltic Sea – involving several institutional arrangements such as HELCOM, NDEP and EUSBSR. In addition to the financial incentives (matched by the Russian Federation) provided through the NDEP, St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region (oblast) were put into a position where they could

[…] use international cooperation as a pretext to align themselves to EU norms and standards. […]: HELCOM standards are even stricter than EU norms in some regards […]. St. Petersburg follows them and diverts from Russian regulations, which often exist, but are not consistently enforced (author’s phone interview with NDEP official, February 3, 2015).

It indeed seemed that the EUSBSR could be acceptable as a reference point for cooperation in the Baltic Sea region for non-EU members which cannot become fully involved in the Strategy, but which should naturally be included in any major framework of macro-regional cooperation (see Etzold and Gänzle 2012, 8). Although Russia perceives the EUSBSR as an EU internal strategy, it has nonetheless launched a North-West Strategy, which de facto provides for several interfaces with the EU Strategy (Russian Federation 2012). Thus, we find parallel actions and initiatives to cooperate within common priorities, which become most obvious in comparing the EUSBSR and the Strategy for Social and Economic Development of the North-West Federal District of Russia (author’s interview with European Commission official, Brussels, March 18, 2014).
Cooperation with Russia in the Baltic Sea region not only has a long history, but it has also become increasingly “sub-nationalized”. Under the revised Action Plan of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the CBSS Secretariat and the Turku Process have become leaders of the HA “Neighbors”, which addresses cooperation with EU neighboring countries (EUSBSR News, March 2013). The Turku Process primarily aims at practical cooperation with Russian partners at the subnational level, and is based on longstanding twin city partnerships. It includes a variety of actors, ranging from cities and regional authorities to businesses and their representative bodies, as well civil society and research organizations. Despite these developments, there are still shortcomings when it comes to the involvement of the Russian Federation in the implementation of the Strategy, either through specific projects or existing regional frameworks and organizations (European Commission 2013b, 31). Clearly, the ongoing violent conflict between Russia and Ukraine has complicated matters further. Although at the municipal level, St. Petersburg and Turku in particular claim that local cooperation could and should be ring-fenced from broader developments at the national and the European Union level (author’s phone interview with official of Turku Process, January 19, 2015), it seems the entire framework for cooperation with the Russian Federation is currently at a critical juncture.

**Conclusion**

The multi-level governance approach immediately draws our attention to the mobilizing effects of EU governance on existing institutions and international conventions. Although the macro-regional strategies of the European Union are a relatively new tool of EU policy, they have already triggered some impact – as demonstrated by the analysis of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR).
Anchored in EU Cohesion policy, the EUSBSR reaches out to a number of adjacent policy areas and provides a platform to regulate both cooperation and – as observed in the case of Russia’s participation – conflict on matters of regional cooperation. The EUSBSR seeks to provide the local and regional level within the Baltic Sea Region with more leverage than the Northern Dimension, which brings together the Russian Federation, Norway, Iceland and the EU as a whole. Hence, from that angle it is possible to interpret the EUSBSR as yet another attempt of appropriating the Baltic Sea region as a macro-region inside the European Union, just as the Baltic Sea is increasingly framed as a common EU sea rather than emphasizing the aspect of “shared” one in regard to Russian presence (Leningrad and Kaliningrad regions) along the coastline. As an intergovernmental strategy, the EUSBSR has also empowered the member states in matters of regional policy. Policy coordinators – most of them from line ministries in the EU member states – assume a key role and have started to foster a trans-governmental network underpinning the EUSBSR. The EUSBSR seeks to support and adjust the implementation of EU directives at the macro-regional level. The Strategy improves the implementation of existing EU legislation because projects under the Strategy’s umbrella are linked to EU regulations such as Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), the Water Framework Directive, and the Maritime Strategy Framework Directive (see European Commission 2013b, 15). Drawing on interviews with policy-makers from various regional bodies, it is fair to claim that the strategy has improved the coordination of existing organizations, networks, projects and financing tools (European Commission 2013b, 74), as well as cooperation between actors in the macro-region, including the private sector. The strategy has also initiated new projects, among which, for example, there are two that aim to reduce the
eutrophication of the Baltic Sea and improve existing transportation infrastructure. Nevertheless, effective integration of non-governmental actors and stakeholders still remains an important challenge.

Finally, and most importantly, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region has not only revived a hitherto stalled regional cooperation, it has also contributed to increasing the visibility of individual actors of regional cooperation and the establishment of more permanent contact points in many countries off the shore of the Baltic Sea.

[…] but on the policy level, the EUSBSR has involved ministries of foreign affairs to a larger extent, and in some countries that have not yet been that involved in Baltic Sea Region issues including environment […] I can see this change. It becomes an attractive topic for politicians in these countries and it raises the issues to a higher political level. This is the main added value. Poland is one of the countries that is more interested […] (author’s phone interview with HELCOM official, February 27, 2015).

For the time being, the EUSBSR has established a platform involving a wide range of concerned “macro-regional” actors and institutions. Yet, it is also clear that the European Union presents a strong – and perhaps increasingly amalgamated – power in the Baltic macro-region, which may force a greater deal of domination in the medium term. As we have seen, some of the key organizations, such as the CBSS and HELCOM, are increasingly operating in the shadow of the European Union and its Strategy. At the same time, all countries bordering this common sea – the only sea in the European periphery entirely surrounded by European countries –, need to agree on
measures to effectively protect this resource, and to actively engage into functional and need-driven cooperation – a process that have become even more important in the light of the political crisis we are witnessing today.
Endnotes

1 Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany, that is, the German Länder of Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Hamburg, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region also includes partner countries, such as Norway and the Russian Federation.

2 The EUSBSR Action Plan of June 2015 changed the names of priority area coordinators and horizontal action leaders to policy area coordinators and horizontal area leaders.

3 Kern and Löffelsend (2008) distinguish three types of trans-nationalization: (1) the emergence of transnational networks and institutions such as the Coalition Clean Baltic; (2) the transnationalization of existing international and intergovernmental organizations that provide access to decision-making for non-governmental and subnational actors; and (3) the establishment of new transnational institutions that are based on a multi-stakeholder approach and promote the participation of civil society from the outset.
References


**Interviews**


HAL “INVOLVE” official – Stockholm, June 30, 2013

EC official, DG Regio – Brussels, March 28, 2014

CBSS official – phone interview, November 28, 2014

CBSS official (former) – phone interview, May 23, 2015


NDEP official – phone interview, February 3, 2015

EC official, DG Environment – phone interview, February 2, 2015

HELCOM official – phone interview, February 27, 2015