Transboundary marine governance and stakeholder engagement in complex environments and local seas: experiences from the Eastern Mediterranean

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Abstract
This paper discusses marine governance experiences from the Eastern Mediterranean, an area characterized by great complexities in spatial and governance terms. In particular, the paper examines experiences drawn from two research projects where multi-level and cross-sectoral governance schemes were tested as a side procedure to maritime spatial planning (MSP). The case studies represent highly complex marine environments (with great insularity, extended coastlines, formation of gulfs, etc.), where an unusually high number of national and local stakeholders are involved. Following the lessons learnt, the paper argues that (1) local governments (regions and municipalities) should have a more meaningful involvement in the MSP process that is currently a task mainly addressed by central government, and (2) certain competencies and licensing of marine activities and infrastructure can be transferred to the local governments. This paper also argues that MSP should also be performed at the local scale, where planning has a more regulatory nature and land–sea interactions can be addressed. Useful steps to achieve the above are as follows: (a) establishment of (regional) networks engaging coastal and insular regions and municipalities sharing the same (local) sea in the MSP process, and (b) establishment of local stakeholder networks having the same agendas and priorities at sea. Engaging regional and municipal authorities, as well as local stakeholders in a more fundamental way, is of paramount importance because at this (local) level, citizen science and ocean literacy prevail and can be of great use to the MSP process.

Keywords Marine governance · Stakeholder engagement · Transboundary MSP · SUPREME · MSP Med-Greece · Eastern Mediterranean

Introduction
Spatial (or territorial) governance is a concept that can be defined in many ways, from country to country or even within each country (Rhodes 2000; Loughlin 2007). In some circles, the term spatial/territorial governance is treated as synonymous with spatial planning (Faludi 2012). Spatial planning is about allocating functions and infrastructure; identifying urban and economic poles and networks; setting the grounds for economic, social, and environmental development; and promoting territorial cohesion (Papageorgiou and Kyvelou 2018). On the other hand, spatial/territorial governance is responsible for defining the way that territories are governed, defining patterns of co-operation and collaboration, both between governmental and non-governmental actors and among levels of government (Lidström 2007).

According to the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CoE-CEMAT), spatial governance is “a global concept which characterizes the way spatially-relevant policies, considered together, are applied”. It is also “the result of multi-level and cross-sectoral relationships in the field of public policies”, promoting “horizontal and vertical cooperation in the shaping and implementation of these policies” (Council of Europe—Conférence du Conseil de l’Europe des Ministres responsables de l’aménagement du territoire). In this conception, spatial governance is directly associated with the way that competencies and decision-making are shared among the different levels of government and administration. At the
same time, it is also about public participation and consultation, among stakeholders that have a stake in the territory in question (Lalenis et al. 2015).

Spatial governance involves actors (deriving from different levels) and participators (including local representatives/ stakeholders, planners and related personnel, and the public). This means that, when participating strategies are formed, critical issues to define are (Lalenis 1993) as follows: the focus of the participation procedures (what); the timing of the participation (when); the spectrum of participators that should be involved (who) and finally, the techniques and ways of participation that will be used (how).

In the case of marine governance, the same rules apply since the objectives and purpose are the same. Marine governance is about considering spatially-relevant policies and governing their consequences in the marine space (Van Tatenhove 2011), by involving actors and participators in the maritime spatial planning (MSP) procedure in a meaningful way (Kraan et al. 2014). As in territorial governance, state actors may operate at several levels (international, supranational, sub-national), in interaction with participators (markets, public/civil society) (Soma et al. 2015). Performing wise and effective spatial governance in marine environments has recently become a very critical issue worldwide, given the growing interest of coastal countries in allocating more and more activities in their seas, but also given their obligation to perform spatial planning in the marine parts of countries.

Building upon this need, new theories related to spatial and marine governance have recently been articulated. These theories are mainly based on Evolutionary Governance Theories (EGT) which focuses on the way societies, markets and governance evolve (Beunen et al. 2015), giving central place to co-evolution (Schlüter et al. 2020). At the same time, these theories also build upon adaptive governance approaches which pertain to society’s capacity to understand and respond to environmental (and social) feedback in uncertain conditions, aiming at sustaining resilience of the system configurations (Hahn et al. 2006).

Adapting these concepts to the sea, Kelly et al. (2019) stressed the need for transformative marine governance, suggesting the adoption of radical and innovative societal governance approaches to surpass existing problems arising from system structures that have evolved over decades and cannot be tackled by simply adopting new policies (Verbong and Loorbach 2012). According to several studies conducted, engaging – especially local – stakeholders at an early stage is of crucial importance for the implementation of MSP (Ritchie and Ellis 2010; Gopnik et al. 2012; Keijser et al. 2018; Zaucha and Kreiner 2021). Participation of professionals, as well as local communities and the public, is also critical when allocating new marine economic activities (such as off-shore wind farms, aquaculture farms, tourism, etc.) (Nutters and da Silva 2012; Yates 2018; Kyvelou and Ierapetritis 2019; Koutsi and Stratigea 2022), but also when actions must be undertaken so that the flow of ecosystem services is maintained in local and regional seas (Yet et al. 2022; Paramana et al. 2021; Tulonea et al. 2020; Argyropoulos and Stratigea 2019).

Furthermore, Van Tatenhove (2017), stressed the need to move towards transboundary maritime spatial planning (TMSP) and reflexive marine governance, in which actors would be able to challenge dominant discourses of MSP and reset the institutional rules of the game. This emphasis on transboundary MSP – and by association on transboundary governance schemes – is not only useful at the regional seas level (Van Tatenhove 2011; Hammer 2015; Flannery et al. 2015; Jay et al. 2016), but also at the level of local seas (within a state – at the regional/inter-regional level) and in general wherever fragmentation and conflicts among policies and documents is observed, and especially when policies and documents have a sector-based approach.

This paper deals with the complexities and adversities of marine governance in local seas by using two case studies from the Eastern Mediterranean (in particular, from Greece), which present great complexities in spatial and governance terms. The first case study regards a large, enclosed Gulf, where an unusually high number of state actors and decision-makers are involved. The second case study regards a marine area with great insularity, where populations and local administrations face double isolation because of the limited connectivity both among the same group of islands and between each island and the central government decision-makers. Apart from the fact that the findings of the two projects regarding marine governance issues have not been thoroughly discussed in previous publications, the originality of this paper also lies in the fact that it discusses the challenges which arise in procuring meaningful stakeholder involvement, as well as in performing wise and transboundary marine governance in local seas, where maritime spatial planning practices are at an early stage and where fragmentation and conflicts among policies and stakeholders are observed. Existing literature mainly focuses on the complexities and adversities regarding marine governance in large (international) marine areas/regions where more than one country needs to be involved. However, these kind of complexities and adversities may also be faced in local seas of countries with a highly coastal and insular nature, such as Greece. This paper contributes to the ongoing discussions towards the adoption of the country’s first maritime spatial plan, which will concern management units at the sub-national level.
MSP and marine governance in Greece – a highly insular and coastal country

MSP experiences and legislation

Greece is a country in the Eastern Mediterranean, known for its extremely coastal nature. The coastline of Greece – both in the continental and insular parts – extends more than 15,000 km. This makes Greece the second most coastal country in Europe (Beriatos 2013). At the same time, Greece is also well known for its greatly insular nature. More than 3000 Greek islands, islets and outcrops are found in the Greek marine space that spreads along three different seas of the east Mediterranean Basin: the Ionian, the Aegean and the Levantine. The inhabited islands number about 120, and they vary considerably in size as well as in distance from the mainland of the country. Because of this highly insular and coastal nature, Greece has an interesting and long nautical and maritime tradition that dates to ancient times (Papageorgiou 2016).

Due to this maritime-oriented development and culture, the organization of activities in the Greek seas have always been of paramount importance for the country. Among the most significant maritime activities and sectors in the Greek marine space are aquaculture and sea farming, marine transportation (and ports facilities), off-shore energy farming and fossil extraction, and marine tourism (Latinopoulos and Vagiona 2013; Sakellariou et al. 2016). Beyond these, marine protected areas (MPAs) have also been the focus of management and planning initiatives for a long time, given the rich biodiversity of the Greek marine space, which calls for special regulations and the protection of these fragile ecosystems (Mazaris et al. 2019).

Considering the above, when the European Union (EU) MSP Directive was launched in 2014, Greece (along with the rest of the EU countries) had to make the turn from the long-established sectoral approach in MSP to a more place-based approach that is also in accordance with the EcAp (Ecosystem Approach), when planning in the sea (Papageorgiou 2016; Asprogerakas et al. 2020). The law harmonizing the EU MSP Directive in the Greek legislation system passed in 2018 (Law 4546). This was the first legislative document fully dedicated to maritime spatial planning (MSP) in Greece. According to this law, the Greek marine spatial planning system is composed of (i) a National Spatial Strategy for the marine space of the country, and (ii) Maritime Spatial Plans at the regional scale (Papageorgiou and Kyvelou 2021; Stefani et al. 2019).

In 2020, 2 years after passing the first Greek MSP L.4546, this law was amended by L.4759, which introduced two major changes. The first change regarded the geographical scope of MSP in Greece. In the amended law, the marine parts of the coastal zone were excluded from the MSP geographical scope. The second change that the law of 2020 introduced regarded the type of MSP plans: they were classified as regional plans (i.e. at a level below the national plans, which is a level of a non-regulatory and non-binding nature).

Currently, Greece is very close to the official approval of its first National Spatial Strategy for the marine parts of the country. It is also very close to the elaboration of the first maritime spatial plans under a place-based approach (also imposed by the EU MSP Directive) and to the replacement of the sectoral approach that has prevailed so far in Greece. According to the latest announcements of the competent MSP Authority, four maritime spatial plans will eventually be adopted in Greece, one for each of the four marine regions that the Greek marine space will be divided into. For those plans, complex marine governance schemes will have to be developed, involving a high number of local governments and stakeholders for each case because of the greatly insular and coastal nature of the country, and the size and form of the marine regions suggested by the competent MSP Authority. Such complex governance schemes regarding the marine space and policies of the country, have only been tested in the context of MSP research projects (and particularly in those presented in the following “Introduction” section: MSP Med-Greece and SUPREME).

Marine governance in Greece

In Greece, the competent authority for maritime spatial planning is the Ministry for the Environment (which is also the competent authority for terrestrial spatial planning). This ministry is responsible for the elaboration, implementation and assessment/evaluation of the maritime spatial plans. Another ministry that is involved in the MSP process is the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Insular Policy, due to its responsibility for the surveillance of the seas. This ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry for the Environment, is involved in the formation of the specifications of the maritime spatial plans and has an advisory role over the approval of these plans. Apart from the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, nine other Ministries - those having competencies over economic activities and sectoral policies related to the sea (e.g. the Ministry of Agriculture, responsible for aquaculture; the Ministry of Transportation, responsible for ports facilities, etc.) – have an advisory role in the Greek MSP process. Their role regards the approval of both the maritime spatial plans, and the National Spatial Strategy for the marine space of the country.

In the MSP process, an official consultation body (the National Council for Spatial Planning) is also involved. This council is common for both MSP and Terrestrial Spatial Planning (TSP). According to the latest law of 2020
In the following section 3.2, this paper discusses the challenges that arise and should be addressed at the local scale, especially in complex marine environments, governed by an unusually high number of local and regional authorities, where different marine regimes also have a stake.

Evaluating governance schemes, competencies and public participation in complex marine environments and local seas in the Eastern Mediterranean

Introduction

The project “MSP Med—Greece” focusing on the Ionian Islands Region

MSP Med—Greece: paving the road to marine spatial planning was a project conducted between 2015 and 2016 by the University of Thessaly—GREEN_PLAN Laboratory (Greece) in collaboration with external experts. The project was commissioned by Priority Action Plan (PAP)/Regional Activity Center (RAC), one of the regional centres of Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP)/United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) (UNEP/MAR-PAP/RAC and the University of Thessaly, 2016). The project aimed to facilitate the implementation of the integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) protocol [under the United Nations (UN) Barcelona Convention] regarding its provision for MSP. In particular, the project tested a set of methodologies and tools related to MSP and also tested marine governance schemes, using the Ionian Islands Region in the Adriatic–Ionian Sea (Greece), as a pilot area.

A set of local meetings were organized in the pilot area, and specifically in three (out of the 12) inhabited islands of the Ionian Islands Region: Corfu, Ithaca and Zante. In the framework of these meetings, governance schemes were tested, with the intention of involving local stakeholders interacting with the sea, as well as the local administrations and communities. Apart from the decision-makers (i.e. the local licensing authorities) and the surveillance authorities (Coast Guard, etc.), the groups of local stakeholders invited to participate in the Local Meetings fell into the following categories: (1) chambers and associations, (2) protected area managers/ecologist groups, (3) sea and coastal users (professionals, entrepreneurs, etc.).

During the local meetings, questionnaires were also distributed and filled in by the stakeholders. Included were questions designed to identify the degree of the stakeholder’s awareness of MSP issues and the impact of their activity on the marine ecosystem. They were also asked to identify synergies and conflicts in the marine space, as well as to express their aspirations and the needs to be tackled in future maritime spatial plans.
MAP-PAP/RAC, between 2017 and 2019. As part of the EU initiatives to assist member states with the implementation of the MSP Directive, five pilot areas were selected. The Hellenic Ministry for the Environment (YPEN) was the supervising authority for the Greek pilot areas: the Inner Ionian Sea–Corinthian Gulf and the Myrtoon Sea (Beriatos et al. 2019; Papageorgiou et al. 2021). This paper discusses the results of the research conducted in the Inner Ionian Sea–Corinthian Gulf that was carried out by the University of Thessaly (UTh), Department of Planning and Regional Development (GreenPlan Research Laboratory), with the contribution of two other universities: the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA). The study area of the Inner Ionian Sea–Corinthian Gulf constitutes a semi-closed marine area (which is very common in Greece). It includes part of the Ionian Sea (the islands of Zante, Cephalonia, Ithaca and Lefkada) and extends up to the Corinthian Gulf (separating central/continental Greece

The following questions were included: (1) Describe the activity/responsibility of your agency in the marine space, (2) Describe the natural resources your activity uses, (3) Describe the consequences of your activity on the marine environment, (4) List any conflicts you notice in the marine space, (5) Describe the level and form of contribution of your activity to the local economy and society, (6) Note your agency’s proposals for the optimal organization and planning of the marine space.

The “SUPREME” project focusing on the Corinthian Gulf (and the inner Ionian Sea)

SUPREME (Supporting Maritime Spatial Planning in the Mediterranean) is a project that was co-funded by the EU and four coastal countries in the eastern Mediterranean Sea (Greece, Italy, Croatia and Slovenia), with the collaboration of UNEP/MAP-PAP/RAC, between 2017 and 2019. As part of the EU initiatives to assist member states with the implementation of the MSP Directive, five pilot areas were selected. The Hellenic Ministry for the Environment (YPEN) was the supervising authority for the Greek pilot areas: the Inner Ionian Sea–Corinthian Gulf and the Myrtoon Sea (Beriatos et al. 2019; Papageorgiou et al. 2021). This paper discusses the results of the research conducted in the Inner Ionian Sea–Corinthian Gulf that was carried out by the University of Thessaly (UTh), Department of Planning and Regional Development (GreenPlan Research Laboratory), with the contribution of two other universities: the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA). The study area of the Inner Ionian Sea–Corinthian Gulf constitutes a semi-closed marine area (which is very common in Greece). It includes part of the Ionian Sea (the islands of Zante, Cephalonia, Ithaca and Lefkada) and extends up to the Corinthian Gulf (separating central/continental Greece
from the Peloponnesse). It is a marine area shared among four regions and 13 municipalities (33 municipal units; municipalities before the administrative reform of 2010). This means that four regional spatial plans and more than a dozen land-use plans provide fragmented spatial guidelines for the coastal areas surrounding the Corinthian Gulf. Governance issues and competencies are as complex as spatial planning, as a result of the intense land–sea interactions in the area. To overcome this complexity, in 1993, a special association/body was launched (SPOAK), having only municipal authorities as members. The main purpose of this body was to enhance the common identity of the communities surrounding the Corinthian Gulf, and to form a common agenda across local governments, reversing the fragmented way that the Corinthian Gulf was governed up to that time.

In the framework of the project, three stakeholders and consultation meetings were organized (at the national and regional levels). In addition, a two-type questionnaire survey was conducted. It was addressed to the local stakeholders (chambers, NGOs, associations, etc.) and the public on the one hand, and to the decision-makers (regions and municipalities) on the other hand. The questions were, more or less, similar to the ones included in the survey of the MSP Med-Greece project, with the exception of an extra question that was addressed to the municipalities and regions. This question was with regards to their interest in undertaking the responsibility for the licensing of maritime activities to be allocated in their local seas (a competency that has been the central government’s responsibility so far).

Lessons learnt and discussion

Evaluating stakeholder involvement and public participation in insular areas/regions

Organizing meetings to involve stakeholders in an insular region was a rather challenging task. Stakeholders were not always easy to contact. Up-to-date lists were not always available, resulting in time-consuming efforts to reach and invite all related stakeholders. Once reached, their participation was not always assured. Given the insular nature of the study area (Ionian Islands Region), reaching the venue and participating in the meetings depended on the ferry connections (the regularity of which usually depended on the season and the weather conditions), as well as on the ability of each stakeholder to undertake the cost of travel and accommodation in the location of the venue (itineraries were not always suitable for commuting).

The level of involvement of stakeholders in the meetings varied per island, according to their distance from the regional or central decision-making centres. Stakeholders from smaller and more isolated islands were usually very sceptical about the purpose of the meetings, expressing doubts on whether the intention was really for them to be heard, or just to get informed about top-down policies that had already been decided for their local seas. Stakeholders’ involvement in the meetings also depended on the relations among them. This means that in certain cases, stakeholders were doubtful, knowing that at the same discussion table there would also be stakeholders with whom they had conflicting interests.

Regarding the degree of their involvement and engagement in the meetings, this varied considerably per stakeholder group and the civil society, both in terms of representation and active participation in the discussion. Usually, the more influential and powerful stakeholder groups were either absent or very cautious when expressing their opinion. For example, in Corfu and Zante (which are both medium-sized islands with an overdeveloped tourism sector), stakeholders from the tourism industry were poorly represented in the local meetings. On the other hand, entrepreneurs (e.g. aquaculture farmers) and sea users with small businesses were the most interested in participating in the meetings, since they viewed his occasion as an opportunity to reverse local society’s apprehensions about the impact of their business on the environment and on other coastal and sea users (such as fishermen). Entrepreneurs, along with ecologists, were the only stakeholders that were the most prepared when participating in the meetings. They were also the only ones that used Powerpoint presentations when discussing their views. In some cases, they were also the only ones distributing leaflets to promote their arguments. Fishermen, representing the most traditional maritime activity, expressed their concerns about the over-exploitation of marine resources and the ability of the marine ecosystem to keep delivering catches and other ecosystem services. However, it was interesting to note that the smaller the island, the easier it was to resolve conflicts among sea users, due to the intimate bonds that develop within limited and isolated populations.

It was also notable that, despite the developed ocean literacy in insular and coastal societies in the study areas, awareness of stakeholders and citizens on maritime spatial planning issues was low (mainly due to the novelty of the process). Despite that, most of the stakeholders and citizens highly supported the tourism-oriented development of their local economy and expressed their aspiration that maritime spatial planning will also give priority to this “industry” (compared with other economic activities and sectors). It was also significant that local stakeholders and citizens expressed their interest in engaging in future governance schemes related to MSP regarding their local seas, as they were fully aware of the land–sea interactions (LSIs) and of the necessity to sustain marine and coastal ecosystem services.
Evaluating involvement of decision-makers in marine areas governed by an unusually high number of regional and local authorities

In terms of involvement, local and regional authorities were seriously interested in participating in local meetings for MSP, given their understanding that there is a growing interest in allocating uses and infrastructure in their local seas. In fact, they were over-represented in all meetings compared with other groups of stakeholders that were represented by just one person. The higher the administrative level and power of the decision-maker, the more interest in the meetings. For example, in the case of Corfu, which is the capital island of the Ionian Islands Region (MSP Med-Greece project), the interest of authorities (and other stakeholders) to become part of a wider governance network/scheme dealing with MSP was higher compared with Ithaca Island, where the local authority (and stakeholders) expressed their deep concern whether a small society’s opinion matters and can be truly heard by central government decision-makers.

On the other hand, participation from the central government varied depending on the accessibility of the venue from Athens (the capital of Greece and home location of all central government authorities). When the meetings took place on islands, representatives from the central government were usually absent (due to the poor connectivity). However, when they were present, they were usually overly engaged in the meetings, since they saw this occasion as an opportunity to understand the MSP process, a new task, fully under their responsibility, for which they had no previous experience or know-how.

Apart from engaging in the meetings more actively than the rest of the stakeholders, representatives from local and regional authorities showed more interest in the questionnaire survey (in quantity and quality), completing more questionnaires and providing more answers. The lessons learnt by this survey were two-fold, relating to the MSP process per se and the MSP competencies.

Regarding the MSP process per se, local and regional authorities were interested in becoming familiar with methodologies and tools about user–user conflicts and user–environment conflicts, as well as land–sea interactions (LSIs) that are critical for their decision-making (and licensing in the land areas of the coastal zone). They placed emphasis on aquaculture, off-shore energy production and fossil extraction, and professional fishing, which are the prevailing marine activities in the Greek seas. They also expressed their interest in ensuring synergies among sectors and activities, and especially with tourism, an “industry” of prime importance in all Greek islands and coastal areas. Balancing environmental protection and blue growth was high on the agendas of local and regional authorities. At the same time, the higher the administrative level and power of the decision-maker, the greater the interest in being informed about funding possibilities (EU projects, etc.) and MSP policies (such as the EU Directive on MSP, the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy and other commitments of the country regarding the management of the marine and coastal space and the blue growth trend).

In terms of competencies, following the responses to the questionnaires, representatives from the local and regional authorities expressed their interest in having a more meaningful involvement in the MSP process. Regions and municipalities also challenged the totally top-down enforcement of decision-making for MSP, and expressed their interest in undertaking more responsibilities/competencies regarding the licensing of sea uses to be allocated in their local seas. Despite that, however, in most answers it was obvious that local and regional authorities were underestimating (or disregarding) the trans-boundary impacts/effects of sea uses. By extension, they were underestimating the growing necessity to cooperate and share responsibilities with other first and second tier administrative authorities sharing the same local sea.

Conclusion

Performing appropriate and wise spatial governance is equally as important to the marine space as it is to continental territories. This is especially critical in countries that have a sector-based operation, complex marine environments (local seas) in spatial and governance terms, fragmentation of jurisdictions and especially, fragmented and conflicting policies and documents. The findings of the two research projects presented in this paper (focusing on marine governance issues explicitly), highlight the governance challenges that arise and must be addressed to perform wise and sustainable MSP in highly insular and complex local seas, such as those in the Eastern Mediterranean, and more specifically, Greece.

Following the analysis, this paper makes suggestions for achieving wise and effective marine governance in local seas where the following conditions apply: (a) marine governance takes place at the central government level and local governments are poorly involved, (b) competencies and responsibilities related to the sea are also mainly state-based (i.e. local governments and civil society have a minimum role in the MSP process and, by association, in the decision-making of their local seas) and (c) the marine areas/regions for which maritime spatial plans have to be
adopted are shared among an unusually high number of local governments (regions and municipalities).

When such conditions apply (such as in Greece), this paper suggests that (i) local governments (regions and municipalities) must have a more meaningful and official involvement in the MSP process and (ii) certain competencies related to the sea (licensing of certain marine activities and infrastructure) must be transferred to local governments. This paper also suggests that MSP is also performed at the local scale (e.g. in semi-closed gulfs, marine protected areas, etc.), where planning has a more regulatory nature, and where land–sea interactions can be addressed. Involving in a more essential way, authorities of a lower level than the national (e.g. regions and municipalities) is of paramount importance because at this level, citizen science and ocean literacy is stronger and can be of great use to the MSP process (e.g. fill-in the missing information, provide missing geospatial data, etc.). Also, engagement of local communities ensures that policies, plans and regulations remain relevant (Yet et al. 2022). Last, but not least, performing MSP and marine governance at the local level is better suited for adopting a more place-based approach to MSP and for addressing the land–sea interaction (LSI), which is of paramount importance when planning in the marine space (Kidd and Ellis 2012).

All of the above are especially relevant and important in the case of Greece, given the country’s highly complex marine environment (in spatial and governance terms), and especially since MSP is still pending. Hopefully, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussions towards the adoption of the country’s first maritime spatial plans, which will concern management units at the sub-national level, involving an unusually high number of national and local actors and participants (stakeholders).

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**Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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