New approaches in European governance? Perspectives of stakeholders in the Danube macro-region

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(Received 27 November 2014; accepted 3 November 2015)

Macro-regional cooperation in the EU are networks that use the horizontal and vertical dimension of the multilevel governance system to influence both strategic decision-making as well as implementation activities. Drawing on an analysis of expert interviews in the Danube Region the paper scrutinizes stakeholders’ shared views towards expectations, challenges and added values, and thereby seeks to explain why a trend towards macro-regions arises and for what reasons stakeholders are getting involved. The analysis of the drivers for stakeholders’ commitment in the EU Danube Region Strategy shows that new governance arrangements need to be adjustable to different contexts, allow for negotiation and new network creation whilst simultaneously offering the political ability to act. The evidence presented suggests that multilevel governance in the EU is becoming increasingly complex, embracing more and different types of cooperation, with soft characteristics as crucial elements.

**Keywords:** macro-regional strategies; Danube Region; multi-level governance; European integration; soft spaces

**Introduction**

Two years after the first macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the European Commission (EC) adopted the European Union Strategy for the Danube River (EUSDR) in 2011 (Schymik, 2011). With the Alpine Region (2015) and the Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014), most European territory will be within a macro-region (cf. Commission of the European Countries (CEC), 2013). The appearance of this new framework stimulated spatial scholars to consider its characteristics and implications for the EU. Interim Commissioner Samecki (Samecki, 2009, p. 1) defined macro-regions as ‘an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges’. The EC consolidated this initial definition in June 2013 (CEC, 2013). Nation-states and regions cooperate in macro-regional governance structures to formulate strategic goals for different policy fields (Dühr, 2011).

New to European integration is that several states and regions implement these strategies through new governance structures in multiple national political and economic contexts. Increased interest for trans-border cooperation encourages new modes of cooperation that are increasingly justified via ‘functional argumentations’ (Luukkonen, 2014), something which is true for macro-regions constructed around geophysical elements such as the Danube River. Yet, functional arguments cannot exclusively explain stakeholders’ involvement in these cooperative activities. Macro-regions seek...
governance forms permitting diverse stakeholders to pursue their goals, whether
different perceptions/motivations, different administrative levels or indeed different insti-
tutional backgrounds. There has been little in-depth analysis of stakeholders’ motiva-
tions for involvement, a question of contemporary relevance given macro-regional
strategies increasing importance in Cohesion Policy 2014+.

The development of new types of cooperation also implies changes to the existing
European multilevel governance system and actor networks (Stead, 2013). This paper
scrutinizes this new approach’s characteristics and the consequences for European multi-
level governance. Analysing stakeholders’ perspectives towards macro-regions provides
new insights on European policy process evolution, the search for new governance
arrangements and facilitates understanding drivers of cooperation in these contexts. This
paper, therefore, first seeks to explain these new developments better in terms of
stakeholder perspectives towards expectations, challenges and added values in the
Danube Region. Second, it explores those characteristics stakeholders demanded from
macro-regions, thereby revealing the current dynamics within European governance. By
scrutinizing stakeholders’ shared views, I can therefore reflect on challenges for
European governance to answer the two research questions:

Why does a trend towards a Europe of macro-regions arise and what makes this
framework promising to other regions?
For what reasons do stakeholders get involved?

I conclude that soft characteristics are perceived as a crucial element of the macro-
regional framework from which stakeholders’ willingness to cooperate and commit
derive.

European governance and macro-regional cooperation

Contemporary scientific discussions widely recognize the importance of multilevel gov-
ernance systems bringing together diverse stakeholders’ influences (cf. Jessop, 2004),
and provides a means of contextualizing stakeholders motivations in the Danube case
study with reference to macro-regions and EU multilevel governance debates. Marks
and Hooghe (1996) understand the EU as a multilevel governance system where deci-
sion-making competences are transferred between different levels (vertical dimension) or
within similar same levels (horizontal dimension). Both within level networks, (network
orientation, governance) and inter-level interdependencies, (multilevel) appear to be
important in driving macro-regional governance in different policy contexts. Jessop
(2004, p. 73) describes EU governance processes as complex multilevel meta-
governance where neither state-centric nor the governance-centric perspectives are suf-
cient to explain its dynamics. The EU’s multilevel governance structure creates multiple
challenges including the European bureaucracy, the joint decision trap defined by
Scharpf (leading to lowest-common-denominator decisions) or coordination challenges
(Benz, 2002). New cooperative modes arise where existing modes are either insufficient
or unadministrable in new contexts. But what are motivations for stakeholders to foster
these new governance elements and which of these new cooperative forms’ characteris-
tics are those that make macro-regions a promising approach?

One key debate relating to macro-regional strategies frames macro-regions as soft
spaces (Allmendinger, Chilla, & Sielker, 2014; Sielker, 2012; Stead, 2013), ‘multiple
spaces of governance alongside other devices for policy integration’ (Haughton,
Allmendinger, Counsell, & Vigar, 2010, pp. 23–24), and with fuzziness in terms of timeframe, stakeholder involvement, borders and policy fields. Stead argues macro-regional strategies represent a means of policy rescaling to a new macro-regional level (Stead, 2013). However, empirical evidence has yet to reveal whether these characteristics (fuzziness, macro-scale) motivate stakeholder cooperation. Any stakeholder network involves creating novel networks offering information and decision-making channels. Several research strands focus upon stakeholders’ diverse roles, including decision-making or governance (Healey, 2006), network analyses (Stegbauer & Häussling, 2010) alongside organizational and power relations (e.g., Schubert, 2008). Actors pursue different interests following different institutional logics: ‘polyrationalities’ (Kleger, 2009). Despite institutional interests, actor constellations, particularly in informal governance contexts, depend on relationships between individuals and their cultural backgrounds. The implications of evolving macro-regional governance structures on EU multilevel governance systems remain unclear. Analysing stakeholder perspectives on macro-regional cooperation’s added values and challenges helps understanding these implications.

The Danube Region case study

The paper answers this question via a stakeholder analysis of the Danube Region macro-region. The Danube River basin defines this macro-region’s territory, comprising 14 countries and regions (Figure 1). The Danube macro-region provides an interesting case study: first, the macro-region combines old and new EU member states, candidate states as well as third countries. Second, the countries have a history of conflict across
the Iron Curtain and the Balkan wars, and limited cooperation experience in the macro-region. Third, there is enormous cultural, socio-economic, and natural diversity and disparity, providing different institutional and financial resource backgrounds. These circumstances lead firstly to diverse expectations and secondly to diverging resources for macro-regional activities.

The idea of political and administrative cooperation within different thematic fields via an organized transnational cooperation is new to the Danube Region. Austrian and Romanian representatives requested a strategy following the Baltic Sea example in a letter to EC President Barroso in 2008; in 2009 the European Council asked the EC to prepare the EU Strategy for the Danube Region by 2011. The EC undertaken a broad stakeholder consultation resulting in a strategy document and an action plan. The strategy comprises four thematic pillars and 11 thematic priority areas, including mobility and multimodality (Figure 2), whilst the action plan lists different fields of activity and exemplary projects. The strategy came into operation in 2011; they created a governance structure of priority area coordinators for each cooperation area supported by a committee of national representatives, the steering groups. National contact points (NCP) are responsible for overall strategic development with the EC monitoring implementation.

The results draw on 33 interviews conducted 2011–14 with interviewees from old and new EU member states, candidate states and third countries. To understand stakeholders’ motivations it is also necessary to understand their institutional and national backgrounds, alongside their position within the EUSDR governance structure. Interviewees were drawn from across the Danube Region governance structure, including the

| Pillar 1 | Connecting the Danube Region |
| --- | --- |
| PA 1 | To improve mobility and multimodality |
| • Inland Waterway (Austria & Romania) |
| • Rail, Road & Air (Slovenia & Serbia) |

| Pillar 2 | Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region |
| --- | --- |
| PA 4 | To restore and maintain the quality of waters (Slovakia & Hungary) |

| Pillar 3 | Building Prosperity in the Danube Region |
| --- | --- |
| PA 7 | To develop the Knowledge Society through research, education and information technologies (Slovakia & Serbia) |

| Pillar 4 | Strengthening the Danube Region |
| --- | --- |
| PA 10 | To step up Institutional capacity and cooperation (Austria (Vienna) & Slovenia) |

Figure 2. Pillars and priority areas with coordinators in the European Union Strategy for the Danube River (EUSDR). Drawing: author.
EC, NCPs, priority area coordinators, steering groups, consultants, financing institutions and project lead partners. EUSDR stakeholders came from different institutional backgrounds, including policy-makers, administrative units, EU programmes, civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private economy, public companies and science, at different levels: European, national, regional and local.

**EUSDR stakeholders’ perspectives: value added, challenges, expectation**

Three points of agreement were striking in all interviews. Firstly, interviewees experienced the development positively, with the contribution to a further European integration and network building regarded as having a medium-term positive payoff. Secondly, all stakeholders differentiated between short-term recent practical challenges in establishment from long-term challenges deriving from diversity alongside the necessity for long-term commitment. Thirdly, nearly all interviewees stated that they expected long-term positive benefits. Administrative interviewees emphasized implementation challenges whilst political interviewees highlighted potential chances. More detail on these differing perceptions is provided below.

Stakeholders from a range of institutional backgrounds perceived the macro-region as offering added value. One NCP argued macro-regions led to a ‘productive turmoil’. Many stakeholders used the new committees to tackle common challenges and strengthen functional linkages. Several contact points and politicians perceived that ‘the prioritization of fields of action as a progress in content’. Including a broad variety of stakeholders was welcomed particularly by administrative representatives and a priority area coordinator: ‘In contrast to the INTERREG programmes all stakeholders are involved in the strategy process, though they do not have the money the programmes have.’ However, INTERREG programmes remained crucial for funding implementation activities (new member state representative). An Austrian representative argued stakeholder diversity was a main trigger for the dynamic. Governance structures offer entirely novel ‘connecting factors’ (steering group representative). Existing networks in the Danube Region were often issue-bound, e.g., the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, ever where some (such as the working group ‘Arbeitsgemeinschaft Donauländer) connect regional and local levels. The macro-regional strategy is the first attempt within the Danube basin to build a comprehensive network comprising stakeholders from different policy fields. Political and administrative stakeholders from all countries highlighted the priority areas and their steering groups’ added value. Most common was the perception that the EUSDR served as a platform to ‘build’, ‘increase’, ‘activate’ or ‘strengthen’ networks.

The second common perspective noted by all interviewees regards challenges to the governance structure, in particular the alignment of funding, which emerged as a crucial task in an evaluation at the second annual meeting in Bucharest 2013. Old and new member states’ representatives argued that ‘the money allocated cannot be absorbed easily by countries such as Bulgaria or Romania’ (a new member state representative). The macro-regional strategies was expected to support funding absorption via institutional support, with EUSDR steering groups providing letters of support to projects applying for funding, such as the transnational programmes.

Stakeholders regarded Danubian countries’ diversity as a challenge due to the ‘different understandings of hierarchies and leeway’s in decision-making’, ‘different modes of action’ or the absence of a ‘common language’. Whilst accession and third countries saw macro-regional processes as a ‘chance to learn the EU mechanisms’ (NCP), some
new member states’ administrations feared an imbalance in decision-making based on economic strength. Striking was the importance all interviewees attributed to political support: ‘The success actually depends on political stakeholders and their commitment’ (Priority Area Coordinator).

Thirdly, actors were asked about their expectations towards this tool; generally the EUSDR was expected to help to develop long-term networks. However, all stakeholders saw a significant potential to link existing networks, and support cooperation between territorially focused and issue-bound stakeholders. One project partner argued the strategy would have additional value ‘if competent partners that have strong instruments for implementation and the decision-makers would use this platform’. The EUSDR was seen as an opportunity to provide a platform for formulating common goals, building trust and influencing politics. Increasingly, stakeholders expect the development of more concrete projects and implementation activities.

**Analysing drivers and characteristics of the Danube macro-region**

This positivity is perhaps surprising given that no direct money is allocated via the EUSDR. There are three main challenges and drivers necessary to ensure the ‘credibility of this new format’ (NCP), and identify how European cooperation and governance is evolving.

Firstly, the change from government to governance and soft spaces challenges cooperation but provides fuzziness. An Austrian administration representative argued the concept succeeded because it was precisely a ‘concrete concept, but diffuse enough to avoid discussions on competences’. It ‘moves along the different levels’, and can be described as a soft space. The case also suggests that private-sector stakeholders active across various networks valued the political institutionalization. NGOs and half-public stakeholders argued that the ‘stability given by a political commitment in combination with an efficient administration framework allowing for a network governance builds the basis for a successful cooperation’ (project partner). This network informality in the absence of decision-making competences is an important characteristic, providing a ‘space of opportunity’ for strategy-making between the national representatives (steering group member).

Secondly, stakeholders regarded macro-regional frameworks to offer opportunities to achieve their institutions goals, e.g., administrative institutions can simultaneously gain political support and reflect on implementation practicalities. Politicians can invest in a long-term cooperation initiative whilst increasing their activities’ short-run visibility by promoting existing projects, such as bridge construction between Bulgaria and Rumania. Priority area coordinators called this ‘harvesting of low hanging fruits’, highlighting combining long- and short-term goals as an important rationale for political commitments.

Thirdly, expectations of increased chances for funding are a rationale. Aligning the EU transnational cooperation programmes’ perimeters with the Danube Region’s territorial coverage drove widespread recognition that the Danube Region will affect funding schemes, thereby increasing stakeholders’ commitment. The three key drivers that make macro-regions a promising framework to help overcome inefficiencies of existing frameworks are first, fuzziness, second, frameworks meeting different interests alongside third, improved access to EU budgets.
Conclusions

I argue that analysing stakeholder perspectives towards how macro-regional cooperation has added value and brings challenges allows conclusions to be drawn regarding European multilevel governance dynamics. According to the Danube stakeholders, macro-regional strategies offer opportunities as a framework for thriving future territorial cooperation, depending upon the political commitment of states and key stakeholders to identify and deploy the potential as a strategic network for transnational activities. The EUSDR, despite lacking formal decision-making competences, is a network that uses the horizontal and vertical dimension of the multilevel governance system to influence both strategic decision-making as well as implementation activities. The EUSDR’s influence can be seen across a range of areas, including renegotiating waterway coordination and redefining strategic coalitions, within the different priority areas or the influence on funding decisions within territorial cooperation programmes.

This contributes to a better understanding of European governance processes and their drivers: the three main drivers in the EUSDR show that new governance arrangements need to be adjustable to different contexts, allow for negotiation involving manifold stakeholders, allow for new network creation whilst simultaneously offering the political ability to act. The evidence presented suggests that multilevel governance in the EU is becoming increasingly complex, embracing more and different types of cooperation. And this diversification across the governance arrangement has affected not only the EU as a whole but also these newly emerging territorial cooperation arrangements. Macro-regional strategies with their fuzzy governance arrangements, described as soft spaces, serve as a tool for stakeholders to operate alongside the existing multilevel governance system. In line with the stakeholders’ overall positive, but critical, judgements, macro-regions as soft governance space are likely to become increasingly important. The macro-regional approach could offer the opportunity to pool different aspects of policy practice reflecting the general level of stakeholders’ commitment.

These findings further imply that the linkages with hard governance spaces remain loose and indeed require additional clarification in order for these soft spaces to fulfil the purpose for which stakeholders get involved. The different priority areas in the EUSDR suggest that transnational governance and political levels addressed differ within different policy areas. The notion of soft spaces is useful to characterize the dynamics European governance undergoes. However, further research is needed that takes account of the ongoing diversification of transnational governance processes and expands on the theoretical debates around the linkages between hard and soft spaces, particularly in strategic cooperation. Whilst this study cannot explain in detail the interdependencies with other cooperation in the EU, it can be concluded that the general concept could develop further if stakeholders continue to achieve their expectations in this governance arrangement.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a diploma thesis written at TU Dortmund University. For constructive feedback in the writing process of my diploma thesis, I would like to thank Professor Dr Klaus R. Kunzmann and Dr-ing. Alexandra Hill. Discussions with Professor Dr Tobias Chilla have further influenced my understanding of macro-regions. Particular thanks go also to Dr Paul Benneworth for feedback on this manuscript.
Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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