

THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION – THE EMERGENCE OF SOFT SPACES AND THE ROLE OF ACTORS

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Abstract

Since 2009 the appearance of macro-regional strategies has stimulated discussion regarding new concepts of territorial cooperation in the EU where functional linkages become more and more important. The emergence of soft spaces linking fuzzy functional geometries with different stakeholders is one of the most significant discussed phenomena. Driven by the current interest in macro-regional strategies this paper examines whether they can build an appropriate framework for the facilitation of transnational soft spaces. In order to analyze whether the concept of soft spaces is applicable, the governance structure and the role of the different stakeholder groups in the strategy are analyzed through the example of the newest strategy, the EU Danube Region Strategy. As clear definitions for the different stakeholders in the strategy are missing, the paper summarizes a set of tasks for each committee in order to understand the role of the different stakeholder groups and estimate the potentials for the development of transnational soft spaces. Building on the analysis of interviews the potential added-value, challenges and the expectations of stakeholders towards the EU Danube Region Strategy are examined, in particular with respect to relational geographies.

This paper shows that the Danube region, initiated by Nation States and thus following mainly a political logic, shows important characteristics of the concept of soft spaces. It argues that the governance-structure is fuzzy in a vertical, horizontal and geographical dimension and thus offers possibilities to foster soft spaces.

1. Introduction and theoretical background: macro-regional strategies and soft spaces

After the development of the first EU macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea Region similar initiatives evolved quickly, leading to the adoption of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) in June 2011. The development of further macro-regions is currently under discussion. Macro-regional strategies build “an integrated framework” (Samecki, 2009) for transnational cooperation contributing to territorial cohesion. The macro-regional concept aims at integrating different sectors, levels and politics in one strategy through an overall coordination - tailored for functional

regions. Hence, forming a strategic roof, they link regional policies as a project focused approach with sectoral policies. According to the European Commission (EC) macro-regions are defined as “an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges” (Samecki, 2009).

The appearance of macro-regional strategies has stimulated discussions regarding new concepts of territorial cooperation in the EU. As a result of ongoing globalization and Europeanization, functional linkages become more and more important, hence leading to new conceptualizations of territory based on functional approaches. Macro-regional strategies constitute an adaptation process and shape spatial development as well as the creation of networks. In the light of the rescaling debate, macro-regional strategies operate as a new framework for cooperation in the multi-level governance system of the EU (Schymik, 2011).

The emergence of ‘soft spaces’ at the regional level is one of the most significant contemporarily discussed phenomena in the recent planning debate. The shift from government to governance entails a new understanding of states, away from ‘hard containers’ towards actors in networks. The underlying processes are as well ongoing globalization, Europeanization and rescaling processes. Simultaneously, discussions on relational geographies and ‘spaces of flow’ aim at developing new conceptualizations of territory following functional linkages. In the course of these debates Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) argue that planners using the legal set of boundaries need to operate within ‘soft spaces’ across different ranges of geographies, scales and networks. Soft spaces describe “multiple spaces of governance alongside other devices for policy integration” (Haughton et al., 2010, pp. 23-24). They follow a flexible approach with respect to stakeholder participation, time frame as well as territorial delineation and they result from existing networks and functional cooperations. Soft spaces are informal and have fuzzy horizontal (across sector policies), vertical (across different levels of governance) and geographical (across different boundaries) dimensions (Dühr, 2011, p. 26). Stead (2011) and Faludi (2010, pp. 167–168) consider that with macro-regions as a new layer of intervention an example for soft spaces has occurred at the EU level. Thus, macro-regional strategies offer a chance for stakeholders of administrative units as well as for issue-bound stakeholders pursuing sectoral aims in order to cooperate loosely within their priority areas.

It remains open if the emergence of transnational soft spaces at a European scale might be facilitated in future due to the soft framework of macro-regions. Emphasizing the importance of different stakeholder groups, this paper discusses the appearance of soft spaces through actor-networks within the framework of macro-regional strategies. Against the background of the rescaling debate it is to be analyzed whether macro-regional strategies, initiated by nation states and thus following mainly a political logic, can build an appropriate framework for governance within fuzzy functional geometries. For this reason, part of this work is to examine whether the concept of soft spaces can be applied to further explain

processes on the macro-regional level. Compared to the Baltic Sea Region there is less experience in cooperation within the Danube region as there are fewer and younger transnational structures and initiatives. Hence, the governance structure developed throughout the macro-regional cooperation may give a new strategic roof that leads to new incentives linking political and functional processes. Moreover, the cooperation between old and new member states with membership aspirants and non-member states makes the Danube region an interesting case. Therefore, the example of the Danube region enables to analyze the potential to strengthen functional linkages via a flexible, macro-regional metagovernance-level in an area with less cooperation experience. All in all, the focus of the paper is to analyze whether macro-regional strategies foster the development of transnational soft spaces at the European scale based on the case study of the Danube region.

The paper is structured as follows: for setting the stage, first the Danube region and the EUSDR are introduced. Then, the governance structure of the EUSDR is worked out and the tasks of the different stakeholders within this organizational set-up are examined. Drawing on the analysis of interviews with representatives of all relevant stakeholder groups in the EUSDR, the potential added value and challenges for a successful implementation as well as the resulting expectations towards the EUSDR are presented thereafter. Building on these results, it is finally discussed whether the concept of soft spaces is applicable to the macro-regional level. The concluding remarks include opinions whether due to their governance structure macro-regional strategies foster transnational soft spaces.

2. Setting the stage: The Case of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The Danube macro-region

The macro-region Danube “is a functional area defined by its river basin” (CEC, 2010). Geographically it concerns primarily but not exclusively fourteen countries: “Germany (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Austria, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria within the EU, and Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (the regions along the Danube) outside” (CEC, 2010) A map of the macro-region is shown in Figure 1. The region encompasses one fifth of the European territory, thereby constituting an important economic area within Europe (CEC, 2010). Cooperation in the Danube region has to face different challenges due to the diversity and history of the region. During its colorful history the Danube countries were involved in various conflicts and wars coming along with changes in power. After the World War II the region was separated by the iron curtain. Since the political change of 1989, a transformation and convergence towards Europe started over (Weigl, 2010). The Danube itself is still of relevance as a border river along its way (Deimel, 2010). The Danube region is characterized by high social and cultural diversity influencing the cooperation possibilities and the behavior of the stakeholders. Regarding the economic diversity the Danube region contains some of the richest and of the poorest countries of the EU (EUROSTAT, 2011). The natural

environment includes mountains such as the Alps or Carpathians as well as low lands such as the Danube delta as well as huge diversity in flora and fauna. The whole Danube basin contains more than 800,000km² (Zuser, 2010). The EUSDR shall support new opportunities in order to address common challenges in this region and lead to a sustainable development.



Figure 1. Geographical coverage of the Danube Region (EEAS, 2012)

Content and structure

The EUSDR consists of the Strategy document and an accompanying Action Plan. These documents are the result of an extensive consultation process coordinated by the European Commission (EC). From the idea by the end of 2008 until the Communication document of the EC in December 2010, the EC played the leading role in organizing, coordinating and drafting the document. The strategic document presents the overall goals as well as the challenges and opportunities of the region. Thematically the EUSDR is structured in four pillars with eleven priority areas (PA) (CEC, 2010; Figure 2). PA 1 is separated in PA 1a and PA 1b.



Figure 2. Set-up of EUSDR (own illustration based on Simoner, 2011)

For each PA possible aims and main issues are presented. The Action Plan provides more detailed information on the main problems within each PA and the respective actions. Furthermore, illustrative projects supporting the actions are listed (CEC, 2010a). In total the Action Plan comprises 129 actions and names 123 project examples (Figure 2). The EUSDR aims at addressing the main challenges of the mobility of the TEN-T Corridor Danube River, energy supply and production, environmental pollution, risk prevention, socio-economic disparities, security and organized crime.

3. Analysis of the EUSDR with respect to the governance structure

3.1 Methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyse the EUSDR and to reflect on this basis whether the macro-regional strategy fosters transnational soft spaces and whether this concept is applicable to the macro-regional level. As soft spaces are determined by a flexible approach in a horizontal, vertical and geographical dimension, the underlying governance structure and the participating stakeholder groups are of interest in the analysis. The development of the governance structure, the tasks of the different committees and the analysis of the involvement of the different stakeholder as well as their logics are results of an extensive analysis of 27 interviews, one written questionnaire and of primary literature, policy documents as well as presentations. The interviewees were chosen with respect to three criteria in order to include all relevant opinions. The first criterion was to include representatives from each committee of the governance structure. Secondly, interviewees from each level and from different logics were chosen. Thirdly, stakeholders of countries with different EU status were involved. In order to figure out whether macro-regional strategy might lead to transnational soft spaces, the governance structure itself as well as the participation of the different stakeholder groups during the development of the strategy were analyzed. Moreover, the potential added-value, the challenges and the expectations from the viewpoint of the different stakeholders on the EUSDR were studied and related to their institutional logic.

Governance structure of the EUSDR

The governance structure of the EUSDR is under development and may also change during the process. In particular during the first phases each committee had to find its place in the governance system. No detailed description was given top-down which as well led to a different understanding in the different PAs. There still remains uncertainty on the exact tasks and understanding of the roles of the different committees. Thus, during the conduction of the interviews it turned out to be of huge interest by all stakeholders how these different committees interact and who does

what. Building on the analysis of the interviews and existing policy documents this paper presents a first attempt to summarize a common current understanding of each stakeholder and their interactions.

The governance structure of the EUSDR can be described in three parts. First the political level (dark gray) can be identified, being responsible for the overall strategic decisions of the EUSDR. This level consists of the European Council, European Commission represented by the Directorate General Regional Policy (DG Regio) and the High Level Group (HLG) for macro-regional strategies. The fourth committee is composed of the Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) and the National Contact Points (NCPs) (Figure 3, Table 1).

The second level is the strategic level (light gray) which includes the political level and the three committees of the PACs, the annual Stakeholder Conference and the Steering Groups (SGs). These are on the linking position between the political level and the operational level (light green), but they still have an important role in the strategic decision-making and the overall development of the strategy. The annual Stakeholder Conference plays an indirect role whereas the PACs and the SGs represent the strategic decision-making level in each Priority Area (Figure 3, Table 2).

The third level, marked in light green, is the operational level responsible for the implementation of the strategy. All elements marked in dark green exist for each PA, thus, 12 times. In addition to the Stakeholder Conference, the PACs and the SGs, this level comprises consultants, Observers, different Working Groups and the Projects (including preparatory and pilot projects) (Figure 3). The implementation of the strategy is further supported by the INTERact Labgroup, the interregional group “Danube” of the Committee of the Regions as well as by other transnational cooperations and institutions of the Danube region. The implementation of the strategy builds on financing resources by Nation States and the EU (e. g., ERDF Funds and Cohesion Fund) and their project funding (Figure 3, Table 3).

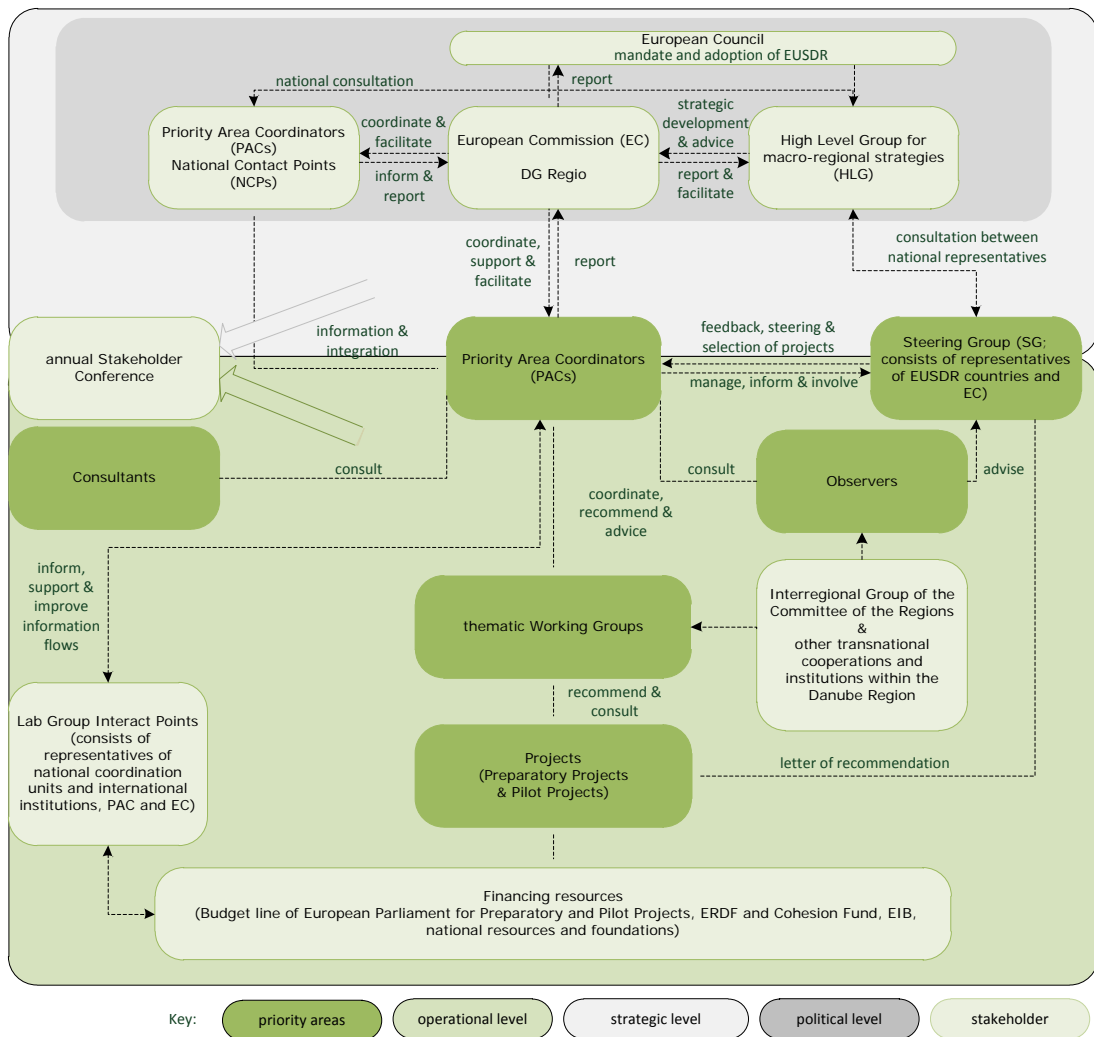


Figure 3. Governance structure of the EUSDR (own illustration on the basis of Simoner and Vorderwinkler 2011, p. 2; Schmitt, 2011)

The role and tasks of the crucial committees within the governance structure of the EUSDR can be shortly described as follows. A detailed description of the tasks of each group is given in the Tables 1 to 3.

The European Council is responsible for mandating to the EC and adopting the strategy. The ECs main task is the overall coordination, facilitation and evaluation of the strategy. During the development of the EUSDR the HLG approves the decision of the European Council. The newly constituted HLG for macro-regional advises the EC and member states and decides upon the future strategic directions. The NCPs are responsible in their national context for coordinating the official national position and implementation activities (Table 1).

Table 1. Tasks of stakeholders of political level in the EUSDR

European Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ mandate and invite the EC to present an EU strategy ▪ endorsed the EUSDR and call on actors to implement the strategy
European Commission (EC), mainly represented by DG Regio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ coordinate consultation and take into account other relevant policies and EU programmes ▪ draft and review EUSDR and Action Plan ▪ consult Member States via the HLG and NCPs ▪ evaluate and report on progress to member states and European Council ▪ facilitate implementation as well as decision-making and support SGs and PACs ▪ review concept of macro-regional strategies
High Level Group (HLG) National Contact Points (NCPs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ advise EC and Member States and make strategic decisions on future political direction and feedback evaluation of EUSDR ▪ coordinate and formulate national positions and non-paper ▪ ensure and coordinate implementation of EUSDR in home countries ▪ inform and consult national institutions and all relevant stakeholder ▪ report to EC on progress and implementation activities within home countries ▪ support SGs and PACs and other stakeholders during implementation ▪ inform on EUSDR and promote actions taken, communicate results ▪ coordinate and ensure integration of EUSDR in national policies

(own summary based on analysis of interviews and INTERact Point Turku, 2011)

The annual Stakeholder conference is the forum for information exchange between all stakeholders. Furthermore it builds a monitoring system for the implementation steps within the year and gives the opportunity for the committees to meet and outline further strategic steps based on the presented results. The PACs are responsible for the overall management of one PA and coordinate and organize activities. They maintain the dialogue with other PAs and feedback the development of the EUSDR to the EC together with the NCPs. Having in mind the coordinating task of the implementation activities, the PACs are as well responsible for the integration of the different PAs specifically within its pillar. The Steering Groups are responsible for the strategic decisions within one PA and include representatives of each country. These ensure the implementation of the PA in the home countries (Table 2).

Table 2. Tasks of stakeholders of strategic level in the EUSDR

annual Stakeholder Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ forum for all stakeholders and information exchange ▪ presentation of results and networking between all stakeholders and PAs ▪ meeting of different committees and strategic development of strategy
Priority Area Coordinators (PACs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ responsible for overall management of PA: coordinate and organize activities ▪ link different stakeholders and committees in PA ▪ propose updates of Action Plan and targets ▪ manage SG, ensure contact and prepare project selection ▪ report to EC on progress in PA twice a year ▪ ensure vivid contact with each country and the policy level ▪ maintain dialogue with projects and financing resources ▪ facilitate alignment of funding, policies and instruments ▪ ensure integration and communication with other PAs ▪ ensure communication of PA and make actions taken visible ▪ advise HLG together with NCPs in overall strategic development of strategy
Steering Groups (SGs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ responsible for project selection and identification ▪ promote and encourage implementation in home country ▪ integrate strategy in policies and with different sectors ▪ integrate, inform and contact all relevant stakeholders in home countries ▪ integrate different sectors and different levels ▪ seek for funding opportunities and impulse new initiatives ▪ ensure implementation in respective field of interest in countries ▪ decide on targets for PA and feedback PACs ▪ prepare implementation and ensure proper circumstances in home countries ▪ (in some countries) report to the NCPs or HLG ▪ communicate and enhance visibility of the strategy ▪ support transnational networking

(own summary based on analysis of interviews and INTERact Point Turku, 2011)

The operational level is complemented by all other stakeholders involved in the implementation of the EUSDR. The Observers have an important role in advising the SG content-wise and thereby represent the functional approach of the projects. Consultants support some PACs. The Working Groups are temporarily constituted committees on expert level that support the project selection of the PAs. The projects represent the implementation activities of the EUSDR. In addition, the Labgroup supports the PACs in finding solutions for their management and builds a forum for enhancing the alignment (Table 3).

Table 3. Tasks of stakeholders of operational level in the EUSDR

Observers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ advise the Steering Group content-wise and ensure quality of projects
Consultants (of PACs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ support organization and management of PA
Working Groups (WGs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ responsible for content related support of PA and advise SG on expert level ▪ prepare project selection, support PA with preparation and coordination of implementation activities, and detail Action Plan ▪ integration of different PAs and facilitate contact with other PAs
Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ networking and implementation of targets of EUSDR ▪ communicate EUSDR and ensure visibility ▪ overcome challenges and use opportunities of the region ▪ link the functional approach of concrete actions with targets of the EUSDR
Labgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ support PACs in particular concerning project identification ▪ seek and propose operative solutions to identified issues ▪ propose common approaches for PACs and programmes concerned ▪ improve information flows and awareness-raising in projects and programmes and discuss possible ways to exploit synergies ▪ support alignment of funding and integrative approach ▪ constitute a committee for stakeholders outside and inside EUSDR

(own summary based on analysis of interviews and INTERact Point Turku, 2011 and INTERact Point Vienna, 2011)

Within the governance structure of the EUSDR the different committees have their tasks as described in Tables 1 to 3. The group of PACs with NCPs, the EC and the HLG are responsible for overall decisions for the strategic development. The EC plays an important role in linking these two committees and the European Council. The EC coordinates the political decision-making level and ensures the contact of this level with the different Priority Areas and the operational level in general. The PACs are presented in the center of Figure 3 as they are on the linking position between all stakeholders. Thus, the PACs collect a huge amount of knowledge which is beneficial for all stakeholders. The PACs work closely in particular with the SG, the EC, WGs and Observers. Moreover, they link these stakeholders. The SG ensures the implementation within the home countries and works closely together with NCPs, PACs and observer. This committee is the most important committee within each PA for proposing common initiatives of the different countries and ensuring the political commitment of the countries within each PA. Furthermore, the SG is the responsible committee for the agreement and coordination between the countries in

the implementation phase. The representatives within the SGs link national stakeholders to the EUSDR. Thus, the SG links politics and administrative challenges for the implementation. The interaction of the Observers with other committees of the governance structure is different in each PA.

From the initial idea to the implementation of the EUSDR and the stakeholder participation

Knowing the governance structure of the EUSDR and for analyzing the fostering of soft spaces within this framework, an overview of the development of the EUSDR and the involved stakeholder groups is of interest. The initial idea for a macro-regional strategy for the Danube region came up by the end of 2008. The initiative was driven forward in particular by Austria, Rumania and Baden-Wuerttemberg. The European Council endorsed the strategy in June 2011. In the time between the initiative and the adoption of the strategy three phases can be distinguished. The first one includes the period from the first idea to the mandate of the ER to the EC. Within this phase exclusively political stakeholders were involved. With the official decision approving a macro-regional strategy in the Danube region, the first two levels of the governance structure were developed along with decisions on the content, targets and the overall strategic direction (Figure 4). The second phase started in June 2009 and lasted till December 2010. It includes the consultation process and the drafting of the EUSDR. The European Parliament got involved defining tasks and giving indications on the content. The participating countries appointed NCPs that organized the consultation within the countries being responsible for the thematic direction of the strategy. Thus, e. g. ministries, NGOs or private stakeholders were included in the process in the countries. Through the consultation of the EC the administrative, civil and private logic got increasingly involved (Figure 4).

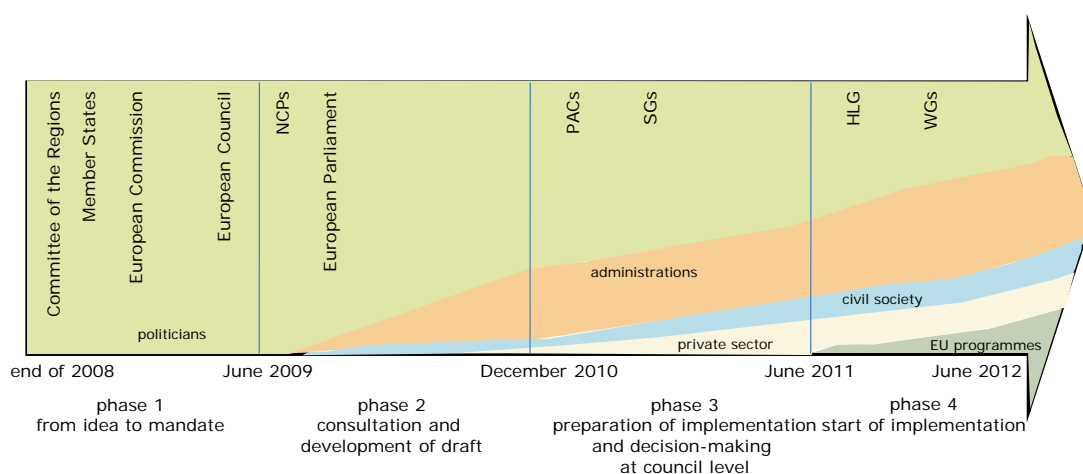


Figure 4. Different stakeholder groups during the development of the EUSDR and its governance structure (own illustration)

All in all, during the first two phases the first level of the governance structure was developed and came into action. In the implementation phase the NCPs as part of the governance structure will work in a committee with the PACs together.

The third phase embraces the time period from December 2010 till June 2011. After the drafting of the strategy document, the EC and the NCPs decided to appoint a tandem of PACs for the PAs. While the final decision on the selection of the managing countries of the PAs was in hand of the EC, the countries themselves appointed the PACs. After the PACs had started their work, the constitution of the SGs began immediately. With these stakeholders coming into charge for the preparation of the implementation, the administrative logic became more important. As Observers serve directly the SGs the private sector and the civil society became more and more influential on the decision-making. By end of this phase, also the Labgroup took up its work. It contains different logics, but most importantly includes the logic of EU programmes. With the endorsement of the strategy by the European Council the EUSDR entered officially into the implementation phase by the beginning of July 2011. The fourth phase comprises the implementation which is in a testing phase until the first annual Stakeholder Conference. In the meantime, a HLG constituted for macro-regional strategies took over from the general HLG. In order to start further detailing the Action Plan and to select projects for recommendation each PA formed Working Groups. The PACs started to communicate with the existing EU programmes and to provide letters of recommendation according to the selections of the SG. Thus, the integration of programmes and projects with their logics has started to gain more importance.

4. Analysis of stakeholders' opinions and expectations

Apart from the governance structure and the participating stakeholders soft spaces are invoked by stakeholders' behavior. The attitude towards the strategy depends therefore to a high extent on their expectations and the potential added-values of the cooperation and the challenges they see for a successful implementation. Hence, the participating stakeholder groups and their logics in the process are examined. Thereafter, a short analysis of the stakeholder opinions with respect to the added-values and the challenges is given before summarizing their expectations.

Involvement of different logics and key stakeholders for a successful implementation

Whereas in the first phase the political logic has dominated the process, gradually other logics got increasingly involved. However, mainly the political logic and the administrative logic (partly following as well a political approach, e. g., in ministries), are dominant in the process (Figure 3). It remains open whether others will gain more importance in the implementation. It can be assumed that they will. However, the direct influence on results and strategic lines will remain limited. In particular within the SGs, which as well have a decisive role, the different logics are coming together. Also, the WGs and projects include different logics. The network

formed through this process may lead to strong or weak ties between the different logics and committees depending on the interaction of the different stakeholders.

Within the governance structure of the EUSDR the stakeholders themselves and external observers assess that a successful implementation of the strategy depends highly on the PACs and their engagement. In particular stakeholders of the political and strategic level see the responsibility for a vivid implementation of the different PAs lying in the hands of the PACs. All stakeholders, in particular those of the operational level, attribute the responsibility for a successful implementation to the Nation States and their political commitment. Generally they are considered being key stakeholders as their commitment is estimated crucial for a long-lasting cooperation and support of implementation activities. The operational level concludes in accordance that without a formal mandate the PACs need to rely on strong support by NCPs and SGs. The role of the EC is evaluated more ambivalently. All stakeholders know and also accept that they have a coordinating and facilitating role. However, most of the stakeholders expect top-down orders for the different committees for enabling an efficient cooperation of the 14 countries. It should be noted that interviews were conducted in the orientation phase of the stakeholders, so this wish might as well diminish later on.

Added-values and challenges for the macro-regional cooperation

The aim to work in an integrated framework in a region with common features in order to integrate sectors, levels and politics is welcomed warmly by all stakeholder groups. The EUSDR triggered a huge dynamic. Generally a lot of interest in this new cooperation form could be observed. Knowing the governance structure, observing the first implementation steps and taking into account challenges of former cooperations within the Danube region, the stakeholders consider challenges for the EUSDR and award added-value. Thus, it is of interest what the main challenges and estimated potentials are. Further it is interesting to analyze what expectations the stakeholders have for the EUSDR due to the potentials and challenges. Thereafter, analyzing these results it is reflected whether the stakeholders consider functional regions to be fostered by the macro-regional approach.

Generally the different stakeholders are widely in agreement with respect to potential added-values of the EUSDR. Regarding the challenges the different stakeholder groups point attention to different ones. It can be observed that the political logic at this point of implementation considers more potential and does not see crucial challenges. On the contrary, the administrative stakeholders and the private sector do agree upon the EUSDR facing many challenges.

The added-values awarded to the EUSDR are the networking via this cooperation itself, the political commitment and the functional approach of the strategy. Furthermore, all stakeholder groups underline the attempt to cooperate between countries of different EU status with this conflictual history and diversity among the countries. Moreover, the agreement on common targets and priorities is considered

being of added-value for the region. The constitution of a region built on common challenges raises hopes for the development of a common identity.

Due to the orientation phase of the strategy the stakeholders mentioned in total more challenges for the cooperation. Compared to the added-values these include practical challenges for cooperation within this framework. The political stakeholders themselves consider it as a challenge that the EUSDR will have concrete influence on national politics. While the three No's of the EC (no new funds, no new legislation and no new institutions for the macro-regions) are not considered an overall challenge, the implementation of the strategy via a letter of recommendation is estimated not to be effective. Thus, many question what the concrete implementation activities are. The administrative stakeholders and the private sector emphasize the challenge of insufficient political commitment, additional administrative and financial effort as well as limited time resources. The integration of different sectors and levels as a challenge is pointed out as well. However, the most important challenge outlaid by the different stakeholder groups refers to challenges of cooperation between these different countries and the need to build up trust as well as to establish regular contact among them.

Stakeholders' expectations

The EUSDR and the first implementation steps aroused many expectations of stakeholders. In order to be considered successful the strategy is about to meet these. The analysis of the mentioned expectations by the interviewees shows clearly that the overall expectation of all stakeholders is the development of long-lasting cooperation networks and an enlargement of the individual network. The added-value of a strategic cooperation relying on existing networks coincides with this overall expectation. Moreover, the history and insufficient political support for the political involvement in these functional networks of the PAs is considered a crucial challenge for this expectation. The EUSDR raises hopes that the existing differences in the countries that have hindered the network building can be overcome under the framework of the strategy. More expectations for the EUSDR are that there will be new impulses and incentives, a high self-commitment by the different stakeholders and a long-lasting level of cooperation between the Nation States and the EC. Furthermore, the stakeholders expect the EUSDR to become a platform for agreements on policies and formulation of common targets and actions as well as a first step to harmonize standards in different sectors. The EUSDR is expected to be a first step into the direction of an integration of the different sectors and the preparation of future common policies. Through the strategy stakeholders expect existing initiatives and cooperations to be stimulated and old projects to become more prominent. The strengthening of the functional linkages is expected to possibly result from this cooperation and the political support.

5. Discussion: The EUSDR as a soft framework for transnational soft spaces?

From these results on the expectations towards the EUSDR it can be concluded that the overall expectations concern an improvement of networking and the political reconciliation of the countries in the Danube region. The direct advantages for functional regions are estimated to be a long-term added-value indirectly evolving from stronger political ties. However, a more efficient functional cooperation to overcome common challenges remains the overall goal. This paper aims at showing whether this long-term goal may be achieved with the macro-regional strategy as an appropriate framework. Do the governance structure and its actor-networks facilitate the emergence of transnational soft spaces at a European scale? Does the EUSDR as a new metagovernance-level offer possibilities for new incentives that strengthen and link political and functional processes as well as networks via a fuzzy approach?

First it is to be examined whether the concept of soft spaces can be applied to explain processes on the macro-regional level. The EUSDR, in particular during the first preparation phase, can be considered as a mainly political process. Thus, the external boundaries are administrative building a political space. The Danube Region can rather not be considered as one soft space. As soft spaces are multiple spaces of governance alongside other devices for policy integration, this framework and the macro-region Danube can be considered as such other devices for policy integration. As soft spaces are shaped fuzzy across different ranges of geographies, scales and networks within the Danube region the Priority Areas and their set-up in the governance-structure can be considered fuzzy in these senses. The governance-structure enables the PAs to operate at different levels depending on the radius the stakeholders involved use. The networks involved are changing depending on the subject currently on the top in the PAs. This means e.g., that the Working Groups and the involved projects are temporarily and change over time. Hence, the networks in the strategy are flexible and result from existing networks. Different committees, e. g., the SGs include administrative units as well as issue-bound stakeholders pursuing sectoral aims. These are all characteristics of soft spaces. If the EUSDR follows a flexible approach concerning the outer boundaries is not obvious yet. However, within the PAs and the Danube region the activities are geographically fuzzy. The concept of soft spaces may thus explain the processes on the macro-regional level. Furthermore, the overall goal and the necessity to cooperate in order to overcome common functional challenges suggest itself for applying the concept. Macro-regions may be considered as a new layer of intervention at the European level as in particular the SGs, being responsible for strategic decisions, lay out the route to take. Nevertheless, macro-regional level does not have formal competencies neither do the different committees.

All in all the governance structure may facilitate the emergence of transnational soft spaces as the different stakeholder groups are interacting with each other and thus learn about the needs of the others. Generally the governance structure offers possibilities for fuzziness to meet functional linkages as stakeholders from different levels, geographies and sectors are involved. The whole governance structure may serve as metagovernance-level for the PAs and the relational geographies in them. The different committees may as well come up with new incentives and give

impulses to the region depending on the main challenges: future political commitment and assignment of competencies, the cooperation between the different countries in the strategy and the upcoming implementation activities.

6. Conclusion

Analyzing the governance structure of the EUSDR as well as the expectations and added-values of this cooperation, the process can still be considered to be mainly a political one and thus the EUSDR also being a political cooperation. Nevertheless, the EUSDR enables through the PAs a vertical, horizontal and sectoral integration. The EUSDR offers an official metagovernance system while still leaving room for fuzziness. The Danube macro-region may strengthen functional linkages in particular in this area with little cooperation experience. Also, the EUSDR as a metagovernance-level can consolidate networks while building on existing ones. The PAs show key aspects of characteristics that transnational soft spaces would have. Concluding, macro-regional strategies and their governance structure can lead to a new macro-regional governance with the potential to favour functional linkages and thus foster soft spaces. The overall expectation of networking can be satisfied in the EUSDR. These potentials are not yet fully recognized and exploited. The author therefore underlines the importance of the PAs. How and in which way the PAs can foster soft spaces will be subject to further research and publications.

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