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The EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region one year later: the fatigues of the process

Executive summary and policy recommendations

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The executive summary and policy recommendations here presented are part of the study “The Adriatic-Ionian macroregion: a hurdle process. The start of the Adriatic-Ionian Regional Strategy in the perspective of Italian foreign policy and the European integration of the Western Balkans”, supported by the Unit for analysis and planning of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The study comprises the executive summary plus one chapter dedicated to the governance issue of EUSAIR taking sparks from the Baltic macro-region, elaborated by CeSPI, and a second chapter with a case study focused on EUSAIR in the Croatian Media, conducted by OBC.

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In October 2014, the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (**EUSAIR**) started with the adoption of the Action Plan drafted by the European Commission¹ on the basis of a consultation with the countries and stakeholders of the area². The Strategy is part of the EU toolbox to enhance the territorial cohesion of vast areas, also involving the countries in the process of European enlargement . It is therefore an instrument with both an **internal and external dimension** and thus one of significance for Italian foreign policy too.

After the strategies for the Baltic and the Danube, the Adriatic-Ionian area adopted the macro-regionalisation as a “*strategic process [...] aimed at **building functional transnational spaces between (states, ed.), (administrative) regions, municipalities at the subnational level of EU member states and partners that share a sufficient number of issues***”³. Compared with other instruments for territorial cohesion, macro-regionalisation appears as more comprehensive and “*can be conceived as a prototype of territorial differentiation in the European integration*”⁴.

1 The Action Plan is based on four pillars: Blue Growth, Environmental Quality, Connections and Sustainable Tourism.

2 European Council for General Affairs, Conclusions of the Council on the European Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR), Meeting of the Council for General Affairs, September 29th, 2014; Communication of the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions on the European Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, Brussels, 17.6.2014 [COM(2014) 357 final]; European Commission, Action Plan concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region {COM(2014) 357 final}, 17.06.2014

3 Stefan Ganzle and Kristine Kern, “Macro-regions, Macro-regionalisation and Macro-regional Strategies in the European Union: Towards a New Form of European Governance?”, p. 6, in Stefan Ganzle and Kristine Kern (eds), *A Macro-regional Europe in the Making*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015.

4 *Ibidem*

Furthermore, it can be regarded as a **novel form of governance** because it is “*a new, complementary level of integration in Europe [...] which is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather indicates a general process of territorial restructuring or spatial reconfiguration that essentially modifies Europe's current geography*”⁵.

On the other hand, macro-regional strategies start with significant limitations in comparison with other EU instruments for territorial cohesion, i.e. the so called **3 NOs** – *No regulation, No institution, No funds*. Their added value is thus to be found in the capacity to activate already existing laws and institutions and mobilise resources from different sources with an integrated approach.

In 2014, together with ISTRID, CeSPI presented to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) a study on the process of creating EUSAIR⁶, which highlighted the need to give the Strategy a **political vision** able to go beyond a technical, bureaucratic approach in order to set up a functional approach and to be able to deal with topical issues like the European crisis, social cohesion, and migrations. Supporting stronger territorial cooperation on commons is necessary to find back a European sense of belonging based on the Union's founding values – a sentiment severely tested by economic, social, and political crises of the recent years, and even more so by the migration emergency of 2015. Migration is never mentioned in the EUSAIR Action Plan, but it requires political initiative in the light of the priority set out by the Balkan route.

The crises have exacerbated divisions and damaged the process of European integration and EU *soft and civilian power* in external relations. Therefore, the integration of the Western Balkans is being severely tested, too. The Juncker plan for the European Commission **postpones enlargement until after 2020**⁷. The traditional debate on the relationship between enlarging and deepening the Union has been favouring the latter task. On the other hand, Europe cannot isolate itself. Conflicts in neighbouring areas, the increasing number of refugees, the difficult integration of migrants, and the alleged clash between Christian and Islamic civilisation bring external issues to deflagrate within the EU. The Western Balkan

5 Nagler A., "European Macro-regions as a New Dimension of European Geography: Networks of Collaboration in the Light of Culture, History and Language Capabilities", in N. Bellini and U- Hilpert (eds) *Europe's Changing Geography. The Impact of Interregional Networks*, London and New York Routledge. 2013, p. 56.

6 Andrea Stocchiero and Paolo Quercia, *La strategia dell'Unione Europea per la regione adriatico-ionica e la politica estera italiana*, CeSPI and ISTRID, March 2014.

7 Jean-Claude Juncker, *A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change* Political Guidelines for the next European Commission Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session, Strasbourg, 15 July 2014.

adhesion cannot therefore be considered only in its external dimension, but also as a matter that is internal or increasingly tightly linked with the stability and welfare of the Union.

In this perspective, the **Berlin Process** relaunched regional dialogue with the Western Balkans through a set of common projects (especially in infrastructures), initiatives to alleviate tensions, and reforms aimed at meeting EU criteria for the enlargement. The scale of the process exceeds the Adriatic-Ionian area to involve member states like Germany, Austria and France. Its form is inter-governmental, although it purports to involve civil society too.

The issue of adhesion has therefore to do with rebuilding the Union in times of crisis, starting from the threads of European belonging and citizenship. Particular attention is due to the so called multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance, defined as the relationship between levels of government (supranational, national, subnational), open to the different stakeholders, and therefore a **space of organised active citizenship**. Macro-regionalisation, as an instrument of Europeanisation and building a European citizenship, can be a space to relaunch an idea of open, cohesive Europe – an instrument to keep alive the prospect of Western Balkan adhesion together with the Berlin Process.

In this sense, dialogue between political and administrative institutions is not enough. Extensive public debate is needed to stimulate political action on urgent matters of common interest and to mobilise the transnational public sphere. In other words, the process of creating a credible, durable macroregion requires public debate and **citizens' awareness and participation** – the lack of a shared notion of belonging makes it extremely difficult to consolidate the macroregion itself.

A year after its launch, **EUSAIR** is dealing with several practical problems. **Governance issues** emerge as regards its efficacy, coordination, use of resources, and identification of flagship projects as well as the creation of a shared political vision for the region's sustainable development, with greater participation of stakeholders and informed public debate. These challenges unveil a tension between **politics** (the process of consensual creation of the basic tenets of a political community for a good society), **policies** (concrete plans and actions), and **polity** (system, space, and form of government). In the case of EUSAIR, a difficult process of creating a transnational, multi-level polity is striving to produce policies that should be matched by shared politics. On the basis of the analysis of the first steps of EUSAIR, of the comparison with macroregionalisation in the Baltic, and of public debate on Croatian media as a case study, several issues were identified, leading to the following **policy recommendations**.

In a framework of *nested scales*, the appropriate role of **EUSAIR with respect to initiatives like the Berlin Process** needs to be defined. Obviously, as regards for example the pillar on connections, EUSAIR can play a **complementary role**, as its flagship projects can be aimed at designing and activating instruments for the feasibility and management of the infrastructural investments identified by the Berlin Process, with the support of International Financial Institutions (IFI). The Baltic case shows how the macroregion did not mobilise large resources for infrastructural projects, but rather focused on *soft measures*, on the creation and exchange of knowledge and competencies for planning and managing investments involving different stakeholders and devoting special attention to the local level, cities, governance, and public debate.

Compared with the inter-governmental character of the Berlin Process, EUSAIR has a **specific role** to play as an instrument of multi-level governance **in developing integrated projects, both top-down and bottom-up, as well as in encouraging belonging and participation in the Adriatic-Ionian space through the animation of a more informed and open public debate**. In particular, the participation, transparency, and discussion of initiatives need to be promoted. Transparent, integrated planning between different levels is a requirement of legitimacy and efficacy in order to overcome syndromes, like the “Not In My Back Yard”, that put in question several policies and projects like the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).⁸

As apparent in the Berlin Process and highlighted by the European Commission, macroregionalisation can proceed more quickly if it is managed and shared by a **strong leadership**. In this sense, **EUSAIR needs more momentum** at the political level, more commitment by relevant ministries, and more work by stakeholders with the mobilisation of the necessary resources, as discussed later. Pairing up the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative with the EUSAIR Governing Board goes in this direction and could be made more explicit in the Thematic Steering Groups. The asymmetry that has so far characterised countries' participation indicates that particular attention needs to be paid to countries in the process of adhesion, better supporting their ownership and capacity.

For EUSAIR not to be just a new inter-governmental exercise, but to develop an authentic multi-level governance in a transnational space, it is necessary to **strengthen the involvement of local authorities (so far mostly limited to Italian regions) and the participation of stakeholders**. The Adriatic-Ionian Initiative as a space for political dialogue

⁸ See the Nimby Forum: <http://www.nimbyforum.it/> and the Italian Atlas of environmental conflicts: <http://atlanteitaliano.cdca.it/>

among governments needs to be accompanied by an authentic, ongoing, and structured relationship with stakeholders, which cannot be limited to an annual Forum. Transnational networks of NGOs, universities, youth, women, business, and local authorities are pivotal in the governance of a macroregional strategy, as they are its social and cognitive capital. The **stakeholder platform** supported by the cross-border ADRION programme needs to be implemented as soon as possible and in a subsidiary fashion, providing existing and budding networks with adequate resources, as in the case of the Horizontal Action Capacity of the Baltic Strategy, to strengthen their capacity to mobilise actors, ideas, and competencies. Resources should especially target Balkan countries, where the involvement of subnational authorities and social and economic actors has so far been weaker. Should it not be possible to activate the ADRION resources soon, it will be nevertheless important to start a low-cost interaction between the Thematic Steering Groups and the networks of stakeholders to open a dialogue and mobilise ideas and competencies.

Since EUSAIR is largely unknown to the public, as is apparent from the case study on Croatia, **adequate space should be granted to the media**, especially at the local level, for citizens to be informed on the importance of linking the development of one's territory to a transnational regional perspective, and thus on EUSAIR's specific potential as an instrument of multilevel governance and promotion of grassroots participation. The investment in communication should not be merely conceived as a visibility strategy, but rather as an investment into citizens' awareness and participation in the common interest of the Adriatic-Ionian region, and more generally of an open, civic Europe.

Opening the debate beyond the inter-governmental tables would also allow to overcome national, localistic exploitation of projects under construction and **to better balance the transnational regional perspective, focused on the general and common interest, with the national and local ones, including bilateral disputes** (as emerges from media analysis and on the topic of energy). These should not be censored, but productively acknowledged in the "both/and" logic highlighted by Beck⁹. In this regard, EUSAIR's potential has yet to play out. A difficult learning process between countries will be necessary to strengthen the

⁹ Beck's thesis is based on the idea of a cosmopolitan Europe: "While universalism and nationalism (but also essentialist, pre-modern particularism) are founded on the principle of the "aut...aut", cosmopolitanism is founded on the principle of "both/ and". [...] There is therefore a selfishness of cosmopolitical interests. [...] A cosmopolitan Europe means therefore both – difference and integration" (pp. 28-29). "Europe "both/ and" refers to the way the institutional world of the first modernity remains an integral part of creating Europe. [...] Europe is unreal, unthinkable without the national states of the first modernity. [...] Cosmopolitan Europe is therefore intertwining, blending, and internal opening, fully understood and no longer subject to inadequate representations, of a Europe that is still national, but no longer just national". U. Beck and E. Grande, *L'Europa cosmopolita. Società e politica della seconda modernità*. Carocci, 2006, pp. 52-53

capacity of reconciling national perspectives and bilateral disputes in a transnational vision of reciprocal benefit. Perhaps, it may be important to create opportunities for common reflection in the form of *ad hoc* political-cultural meetings, currently not included in EUSAIR.

The governance of the macroregion **requires strong coordination**. It is essential to strengthen the role of National Contact Points and their necessary promotional function as well as that of the coordinators of the Thematic Steering Group. Resources, however, appear insufficient – it is therefore up to governments and competent ministries, particularly sectorial ministries, **to invest more**. In the case of Italy, Regions are playing a substitute role that might not be appropriate, especially as regards the pillar on connections, while they should put even more effort into involving stakeholders.

The issue of aligning programmes and therefore resources needs to be tackled, as in the case of the Baltic Strategy, through different measures: a) with initiatives and projects explicitly devoted to mobilising funds and with *ad hoc* instruments like *seed money facility* (see the Baltic projects financed by the Interreg programme and the working tables created on the European Social Fund); b) negotiating with the Commission specific projects on programmes like Horizon 2020, Cosme, and others, with co-financing from national resources (see for example the BONUS programme based on the investment by national research centres of the Baltic countries, supported by resources of the 7th European framework programme for research); c) with the Commission's direct commitment to facilitate the relations of the different General Directorates with EUSAIR and to clarify the possibilities for aligning resources through adequate procedures; d) with the assistance of the INTERACT programme, which can play a role of information, training, and consulting in exploring existing potentials (as in the case of the Baltic Laboratory); e) defining a EUSAIR “label” to make projects to be financed visible and recognisable, making contents and expected results explicit in terms of regional integration and at the EU level, with a promotional strategy targeting potential donors and access to funding by direct assignment or through preferential channels in the call for projects.

On the other hand, we need to consider that EUSAIR, in comparison with other macroregions, involves a greater number of countries in the process of adhesion, that would need more dedicated resources to take adequate part in the Strategy. The ADRION cross-border programme, partly supported by IPA II funds, should support the involvement of Balkan authorities and stakeholders, as stated by the multi-country financial assistance through the

fourth channel devoted to territorial cooperation¹⁰. Resources, however, are insufficient. A solution could be to transversally include participation in EUSAIR in other programmes like the Civil Society Facility, devoted to support Balkan civil society capacity.

At the political level, issues include migrations and the transversality of the macroregional approach. Recent events on the **Balkan route** have called EUSAIR to reprogramme actions and deal with the issue of migration. This can be done without altering the planning, introducing a series of possible actions (in particular in the pillar on connections) and adopting a vision not only on infrastructures, but also on human mobility in terms of assisting refugees and managing migration flows. Considering that migration does not only involve asylum seekers from war zones, but also the citizens of the Balkan countries, it is appropriate to remind that for the Western Balkan region remittances from Balkan migrants are more important than direct foreign investments. Therefore, measures could be implemented to employ migrants' competencies and resources for the development of their countries of origin, without burdening them with the task of stopping flows. The political relevance of migration issues may bring new momentum for EUSAIR and an important contribution to face the walls that threaten to divide Europe.

Finally, the issue of migration highlights how EUSAIR cannot merely focus on policies, or rather projects, but needs to build **politics**, authentic common politics that should be cross-cutting in terms of the four pillars. With this regard, what needs to be stressed is the political value of EUSAIR in view of European integration and the legal harmonisation between the countries of the area, fundamental to achieve the goal of shared policies. It is therefore necessary to **strengthen the transversality** of the EUSAIR action plan which, unlike the Baltic one, does not establish cross-cutting actions. The risk is indeed for an excessively sectorial approach to create inconsistencies between projects and hamper the construction of a common vision. On this note, the **energy topic** that crosses the different pillars of EUSAIR requires better governance to deal with existing tensions and balance the agenda in favour of exploiting renewable sources at the local level, as in the Baltic case, and not only fossil fuels.

10 See: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/instruments/multi-beneficiary-programme/index_en.htm

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