

## PROSPECTS FOR AN EU MACRO-REGIONAL APPROACH IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Recent years have witnessed the emergence of the first EU macro-regional strategies as a new instrument for territorial governance. This paper argues that both the benefits and limitations of the macro-regional approach are largely determined by the existing territorial, political, institutional and socio-cultural context of each big transnational area. Studying the debate about macro-regionalisation of the European territorial cooperation, the paper assesses the prospects for projection of the macro-regional idea upon the Black Sea area. It analyses the complex Black Sea regional context, marked by ongoing political and economic changes, studies the cooperation landscape in the area and concludes that despite the existing high level of multi-functionality in the Black Sea, the region currently lacks clear perspectives for the development of a comprehensive macro-regional approach.

*Keywords:* EU macro-regional approach, Black Sea, regional cooperation.

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### Introduction

The processes of globalisation, EU enlargement and enhanced European integration have released new dynamics in the development of the European territory and have caused its fundamental transformation. The growing concern about economic competitiveness, the dependency on external energy resources and the transnational character of many pressing issues such as climate change and security have led to promotion of new policy scales, domination of functional logic over territorial logic and to the decreased role of fixed administrative borders (Faludi, 2013; Jessop, 2013). The search for effective tools to tackle issues of common interest and concern has necessitated the consideration of each territory in a wider geographical context and has resulted in the emergence of new types of cooperation across large-scale transnational regions. These are defined on the basis of existing functional interdependencies, especially evident in river catchment areas (e.g. the Danube region) and sea basins (e.g. the Baltic Sea region), and are characterized by divides and heterogeneity resulting from the different administrative structures, socio-political cultures, etc. of the individual nation states. Heterogeneity is particularly indicative for large-scale transnational regions that stretch beyond the EU external borders since the development of these areas largely reflects the interplay between their internal regional dynamics and the influence of international policies. The geopolitical significance of such regions and the importance of their stability and prosperity for the stability and prosperity of the European continent emphasize the need for rethinking their cooperation process.

Looking throughout the recent history of Europe a more diverse and dynamic region than the Black Sea could hardly be found. The territorial delineation of the region significantly varies according to who defines it and thus ranges from the area of the Black Sea littoral states solely up to a wider area stretching over the Balkans and the Caucasus (Manoli, 2012; King, 2008). In this paper the Black Sea region will be defined as the six littoral states Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine as well as Moldova that prove historical and present socio-cultural, political, geostrategic and economic interdependencies. After the EU accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 the Black Sea region has changed from peripheral for Europe to a part of the EU where important gas, oil and energy routes cross. Yet, due to the still existing domestic and inter-state conflicts, non-recognized entities and weak state systems (Balcer, 2011), the region is often perceived as a source of instability for Europe. The recent security threats on the Turkish-Iraqi border, the spill-over effects of the Syrian civil war and the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on the region and the political instability in Ukraine with the Russian presence in Ukraine's border areas have additionally increased the attention of domestic and external actors to the Black Sea and have emphasized the importance of its stable development and cooperation process both for the locals and the EU.

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As a result, the regional dynamics in the Black Sea area are presently greatly influenced by the policies and interests of a wider range of actors. In this context the EU, launching a number of initiatives aimed at the region, proved to be an important player in determining the region's future development. Yet, despite the application of its Neighbourhood Policy, the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership, the EU still lacks a comprehensive approach to the Black Sea area. In 2010 the European Parliament pointed out that there is a need for a comprehensive Black Sea strategy that should enhance the coherence of EU actions in the region and should provide an integrated way to address the challenges and opportunities of the area. Such a strategy should promote the coordination of sector policies and the alignment of resources and could thus contribute to strengthened regional cooperation and sustainable development in the Black Sea (EP, 2010).

The discussion about a possible strategy for the Black Sea is placed in the broader debate about the macro-regionalisation as a new form of governance of European territorial cooperation (Schuh *et al.*, 2015). The discussion has been initiated in the context of preparation and implementation of the first macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea and the Danube regions and has raised the question whether such a strategy is conceivable for the Black Sea region as well. Using this questing as a starting point the current paper aims to study whether an EU macro-regional approach is appropriate for the Black Sea region and what are the main challenges for the adaptation of a comprehensive regional strategy for the area.

The paper follows a qualitative empiric approach based on literature review and expert interviews. It is structured in five main sections. After this introduction, section two studies the key features of the EU macro-regional concept tracing the current debate about its added value and shortcomings in the context of European territorial cooperation. In section three, the paper introduces the dynamics and the present context in the Black Sea area and gives an overview of its regional cooperation process. Based on the gained insights the paper analyses in section four the expected added value and the main challenges for the application of a Black Sea macro-regional approach and ends with a discussion on the possible future development of the Black Sea area.

### **The EU macro-regional approach**

In recent years, large territories confronted with similar problems have been increasingly faced with the need to jointly address common challenges and achieve common objectives. This has resulted in a noticeable expansion of the activities and fields of cooperation and has at the same time moved the need for better interregional governance to the front. The attempts to ensure better governance of large territories have led among others to the establishment of macro-regions as a new territorial governance principle and to the promotion of EU macro-regional strategies as a new tool for European integration (Kern

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& Gänzle, 2013; Dubois *et al.*, 2009). The concept of macro-regionalisation builds on the principles of multi-level governance. These illustrate the dynamic interrelations between and within the different levels of government and governance, point to the moving away from the sovereign state towards more international cooperation and to the transfer of competences upwards to interregional organisations and downwards to the subnational level (Bache & Flinders, 2004). Moreover, the process of macro-regionalisation promotes the interrelation between formally independent but functionally interdependent territorial entities and stakeholders and is to be seen in the context of weakening of fixed administrative borders and the emergence of soft spaces following functional logic for policy making and strategy delivery (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015). How does a macro-regional approach address the multi-level, multi-actor and functional character of territorial cooperation, what are its added value and limitations in terms of functional and strategic considerations, actors' involvement, implementation and structural issues?

Although the term 'macro-region' has long been used in political discussions of various kinds, it was not before 2008 that it was officially placed on the European agenda with a clear conceptual intent. Its significance and acceptance in EU documents is closely related to the development of the EU policy in the Baltic Sea region, which was declared the first EU macro-region (Schymik, 2011). While in the international context the macro-regions generally fall under the description "significant groups of nations or groupings of administrative regions within a country" (CoR, 2010, p. 3), in the European context macro-regions have been more precisely defined as "area[s] including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges" (CEC, 2009, p. 1). Thus, besides the simple geographical criteria (a common sea basin, a river catchment area, etc.) it is the multi-functionality, i.e. the existence of a large number of common issues, challenges and problems that is an important prerequisite for the definition of a given territory as a macro-region (Schymik, 2011).

Along with the need for overlapping of territorial and functional characteristics, the establishment of a macro-region is also conditioned by the existence of historical and cultural traditions, of strong subnational authorities and an active civil society (Kern & Gänzle, 2013). The focus of the macro-regions are the administrative regions and municipalities at the subnational level. These are now provided with new options for stakeholder participation in the processes of policy making and implementation (Gänzle & Kern, 2011). The initial macro-regional concept has seen the involvement of third countries as an exception than as a rule. Yet, the establishment of the first EU macro-regions has proved that macro-regional cooperation might serve as a vehicle of involving EU neighbouring countries and of governing the relations between the EU Member States and their external neighbours. Thus, as argued by Schuh *et al.* (2015, p.23) "macro-regions are imageries of both the internal and external re-scaling of the territorial borders of the EU".

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The novelty of the macro-regional concept lies in the consideration of a given area as a singular entity and the development of a comprehensive approach towards it (Bengtsson, 2009). Yet, macro-regions have no independent political status. They are characterized by variable geometries and fuzziness of their boundaries, which may vary according to the type of problem being tackled at a macro-regional level (CoR, 2010), and might be investigated as emergent soft spaces (Stead, 2011). Hence, it might be assumed that “macro-regionalisation can be conceived as a shift from territorial to functional regions” (Kern & Gänzle, 2013, p.10).

The issues with priority for each macro-region are set by a common strategy. As formulated in the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), a European macro-regional strategy is “an integrated framework that allows the European Union and Member States to identify needs and allocate available resources thus enabling the [Baltic Sea] region to enjoy a sustainable environment and optimal economic and social development” (CEC, 2009, p. 1). The preparation and subsequent implementation of European macro-regional strategies do not envisage the establishment of any new legislative, financial or institutional mechanisms, the so-called “*three No's*” (Schymik, 2011; Dubois *et al.*, 2009). The adopted definition highlights that the integration of efforts, stakeholders and resources and their optimal use as well as the attempts to achieve coordination between European, national and subnational and sector policies is considered to be the main added value of the macro-regional strategies (Böhme, 2013). Besides the integrated approach and the policy coordination it is the determination of the scope of cooperation in accordance with the objectives for cooperation (Stocchiero, 2010) that completes the picture of the added value of the macro-regional strategies. Similar to the delimitation of the macro-regions, the coverage of the strategy and its actions depends on the topic concerned. Each action covers different geographical boundaries and requires involvement of different actors which results in ‘a complex, overlapping, “soft” patchwork of activities, relationships and responsibilities’ (Stead, 2011, p. 165).

So far, four EU macro-regional strategies have been put forward - the Baltic Sea strategy, endorsed by the European Council in 2009, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (2011) and the recently adopted strategies for the Adriatic and Ionian region (2014) and for the Alpine region (2015) that are still in an early phase of implementation. Possible strategies for further regions such as the Black Sea, the Carpathians, the Mediterranean and the North Sea are currently under consideration (Schuh *et al.*, 2015). The experience from the Baltic Sea and Danube regions shows that intergovernmental cooperation has played a pivotal role in the process of strategy-making. This could be interpreted as an attempt by the nation states to safeguard a strong position in the context of EU enlargement (cf. Keating, 1998, on territorial rescaling). The European Commission, in particular the Directorate General for Regional Policy (DG Regio) and its Unit for Territorial

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Cooperation, has facilitated and later on also shaped the design and implementation process of the macro-regional strategies. It has been responsible for the coordination and consultation with other DGs, the nation states, the regional authorities and the existing transnational organizations and NGOs in the process of strategies' formulation (Metzger & Schmitt, 2012; Gänzle & Kern, 2011).

It could be argued that the involvement of the European institutions, and in particular the European Commission, aims to provide more stability in the cooperation process, the success of which is often limited by its intergovernmental nature. Changes in the political priorities of successive governments and cases of competing or even diverging political interests for instance may influence the cooperation agenda and may lead to uncertainty about expected cooperation results (Dühr, 2011). Furthermore, the moving of transnational cooperation from the intergovernmental cooperation domain into the domain of EU multi-level governance might contribute to improving coordination of sector policies across national borders. It calls for increased relevance of supranational institutions as well as better embedment of regional stakeholders in the process of macro-regional cooperation. Yet, it might also be true that while performing mainly coordinating functions in the preparation and implementation of macro-regional strategies, the European Commission could also take the role of a "legitimate regional spokesperson" with the right to define the interests of the macro-region (Metzger & Schmitt, 2012, p. 272). Responding to this statement the European Council has recently asked for the creation of Strategy Points as coordinating layers that could replace the strong role of the Commission while the latter should maintain its role in supporting the initiation and implementation of the macro-regional strategies (Schuh *et al.*, 2015).

Along with the potentials and added value of the macro-regional approach there are associated practical challenges. As per Dühr (2011, p. 37) these challenges could be summarized in the following four categories. Firstly, there exists a contradiction between functional geographies and political realities. The definition of macro-regional borders according to functionalities faces the political dimension of policy-making, since the political conditions, especially concerning internal and external relations of the countries, remain relevant even in the context of functional geographies. An example in this regard comes from the Baltic Sea strategy, in which insufficient attention has been given to Russia, which is a non-EU Member State, but at the same time a key player from a functional and territorial perspective. The insurance of lasting macro-regional cooperation thus requires better alignment of the functional regional approach and the political reality of the EU and its neighbours.

Secondly, difficulties arising from the definition of priorities for cooperation might be expected. To bring actual results, the macro-regional strategies should focus only on

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issues of truly transnational significance, which will bring a real added value. A consensus should be reached to narrow the priorities of the strategy, so that the political energy could focus on a set of specific tasks. However, this narrowing is a complex political process, since it necessitates the integration of views of a number of different parties with own and sometimes diverging interests.

Thirdly, to achieve coordination horizontally (across sector policies), vertically (across different levels of governance), and geographically (across administrative boundaries) the EU macro-regional strategies are based on complex governance arrangements. There is a web of institutional relations between the EU Commission as an overall strategy coordinator and the Member States in their responsibility to coordinate the different priority areas within the strategies. Since the Member States have different experiences with EU politics and diplomacy, the risk exists that the macro-regional cooperation agenda is defined by a small number of powerful leaders rather than being a result of a collective action.

Fourthly, since macro-regional strategies should lead to the optimisation of existing policy networks it could be expected that they may have transformative potential. On the one hand, although they do not envisage the establishment of new institutions they could prompt institutional changes in order to facilitate the implementation of the strategy's objectives and actions (the network of agencies in Sweden, established to strengthen the implementation of the Baltic Sea strategy, for instance). On the other hand, since the strategies do not get additional EU funding, but aim at better coordination and optimal use of existing funding sources, it is often argued that the EU policies and instruments should be aligned to the needs of the macro-regional strategies and the coordination between them should be improved.

The above discussion on the added value and possible limitations of the EU macro-regional approach and its significance in the context of European integration has shown that the outcomes of its application depend greatly on various factors. Promoting functional geographies, the macro-regional approach faces different political realities, interests and conditions and is largely dependent on the existing territorial, political, institutional and socio-cultural context in which it is embedded. Against this background the extent to which this approach could be replicated across Europe should be questioned. In the following sections the prospects for its application in the Black Sea and the challenges related to it will be analysed. First, the analysis will study the nature and dynamics of regional cooperation in the area. It will discuss the existing territorial context identifying the main motives behind the Black Sea cooperation activities, the nature of cooperation, the driving actors in the regional cooperation process and the role and involvement of external actors, in particular the EU. Second, based on the gained insights, the analysis

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will focus on targeted discussion on whether the presented specific regional context in the Black Sea would facilitate the application of a macro-regional approach in the area. The discussion will be structured according to the identified main principles of the macro-regional approach in functional and strategic considerations, driving actors and stakeholder participation, implementation and structural issues.

### Regional context and dynamics in the Black Sea area

The Black Sea area, strategically situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, has for many years witnessed a competition of great powers to dominate it. Situated on the margins of the historically important Danube region to the west and the Caspian Basin to the east, the Black Sea enabled the only connection with the Marmara and the Aegean Seas (via the Bosphorus strait) and turned into a subject of manifold interests. The struggle for dominance by the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Russian Empires and later on by the Soviet Union resulted in the region's closure to the outside world for decades. It was only after the end of the Cold War when fundamental geopolitical changes happened (formation of new sovereign states (Figure 1) and changes in the political and economic dynamics) that a new international future of the region was made possible (Aydin, 2004). It is within this context that attempts have been made to transform the Black Sea area into an area of peace, stability and security by means of enhanced regional cooperation.

**Figure 1:** Changes in the political map of the Black Sea region: political map of the region in the 20th century (Left); and formation of new independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Right). Source: Authors' visualisation.



In response to the altered realities after the collapse of the Soviet Union the Black Sea states endeavoured to initiate a number of regional activities and schemes (Aydin, 2005). In the early 1990s significant efforts have been undertaken to strengthen the process of regional cooperation with the establishment of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation forum (BSEC) in 1992 (Manoli, 2012) and its update in a full-fledged organisation in 1999 (King, 2008). These initial efforts to develop regional cooperation in the area clearly reveal the attempt of the Black Sea states to revive their own identity after many years of imposed Soviet identity (Manoli, 2010). Initially, regional cooperation was seen by the states as a means to enhance their international standing, but also mainly as a way to “return to Europe” rather than as

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a process of integration with the neighbours (Manoli, 2012). Gradually, experiencing the growing regional impact of global issues such as climate change and organized crime, and facing the pressing need to find solutions to common challenges such as maritime security, the Black Sea states started concentrating efforts on concrete sector issues. As a result, a number of sector initiatives and structures have been launched for example the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group, the International Centre for Black Sea Studies and the Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Dialogue (see Table 1).

While some fields of Black Sea cooperation (e.g. the environmental and maritime security field) enjoy the support and participation of all states, others are dominated by the major regional powers and their national interests (the energy field for instance). It is not an exception that individual countries approach regional issues on a bilateral basis. This has led to the establishment of a number of subregional arrangements and schemes, covering only a part of the Black Sea states, and has in some cases moved the search for opportunities to cooperate to the background. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Black Sea cooperation runs mainly at the national level, which could, to a large extent, be explained by the fact that many of the Black Sea states are very centralized and do not have traditions in regional development. In addition, the subnational level often has insufficient administrative powers of its own especially when it comes to foreign relations, definition and implementation of regional policies, setting of cooperation priorities and participation in international projects (Vladova & Knieling, 2014).

Many of the cooperation initiatives in the Black Sea have been predominantly initiated by the big regional states Russia and Turkey. These, although still competing for influence in the area, have joined powers to withstand external involvement in the region. The reaction of Russia and Turkey could be explained by the fact, that while the Black Sea cooperation was firstly ignored by external players such as the EU, it gradually attracted more and more external attention and involvement. The increased interest in the region was predominantly due to three main reasons. Firstly, the Black Sea region has a geostrategic importance as a crossroad of major oil, gas, transport and trade routes, due to which it has turned into a key area in the competition between major powers like Russia, the US and the EU (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010). Secondly, the demise of the Soviet Union has raised instability and security problems in the region, liberalizing ancient sources of tension and grievances as well as a series of frozen conflicts - Chechnya in Russia, Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia in Georgia, Trans-Dniester in the Republic of Moldova, and Crimea in Ukraine (Rusu, 2011; Aydin, 2005). Thirdly, after the latest phase of EU enlargement in 2007, when Bulgaria and Romania became full EU members, the Union turned into "the newest member of the Black Sea regional complex" (Manoli, 2012, p.16). The recent developments in Ukraine and its border regions with Russia and the threat for military actions and ethnic conflicts related to them have had significant implications on the Black

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Regional institutions and initiatives in the Black Sea	Year	Members (2012)	Status
<b>Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)</b>	1992	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine.	Multilateral political and economic initiative functioning since 1999 as a regional economic organization with an international legal entity.
<b>The Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution</b>	1992	Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine.	Intergovernmental body established in implementation of the Convention on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution.
<b>Black Sea NGO Network (BSNN)</b>	1998	Over 60 NGOs from Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.	An independent, non-political, nongovernmental, non-profit voluntary regional association of NGOs.
<b>Black Sea Universities Network</b>	1998	Over 100 universities from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.	A multilateral cooperation among academic communities from the Black Sea region.
<b>International Center for Black Sea Studies</b>	1998	Albanien, Armenien, Aserbaidschan, Bulgarien, Georgien, Griechenland, Moldau, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine.	A non-profit organization functioning as an independent research and training institution in the wider Black Sea region and as a related body (think-tank) of the BSEC.
<b>Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (BSTDB)</b>	1999	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine.	A regional multilateral development institution established as a financial pillar of BSEC and functioning as a private bank, financed by the BSEC Member States.
<b>Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR)</b>	2001	Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine.	A multinational naval on-call peace task force.
<b>Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)</b>	2008	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, EU, international donor states and organizations.	Regionally owned organization working under the political guidance of the South - East European Cooperation Process.
<b>Black Sea NGO Forum</b>	2008	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, engagement of other EU Member States.	A regional forum for debate centered on NGOs as a driving force for positive change in the wider Black Sea region.
<b>Black Sea Euroregion</b>	2008	14 local or regional authorities from Bulgaria, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Romania, open also to the other 3 riparian states Russia, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as to Albania, Greece, Serbia, Azerbaijan.	Non-profit making association with a legal personality / forum for cooperation among local and regional authorities of the Black Sea area.
<b>International Black Sea Economic Forum</b>	2010	Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan.	A high-level continuous platform for dialogue among leading government and business stakeholders of the Black Sea area.

Table 1: Overview of major regional institutions and initiatives in the Black Sea.  
Source: Authors' visualisation.

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Sea cooperation process (e.g. lack of trust, predominance of national interests over regional ones) and have evoked a new wave of increased external interest in the Black Sea region. As a result, the regional dynamics in the Black Sea area are presently determined both by the policies and interests of the Black Sea states and the policies and intentions of a number of external actors. In this regard, Balcer (2011, p. 21) sums up that the Black Sea stands today “at the intersection where Turkey claims its status as a regional power, Russia considers it as a zone of Russian influence, and the EU has been formulating its own policies of transformation for creating a secure ring around its borders”. The present uncertain situation in the Ukrainian-Russian border regions proves the truth of this statement. It raises concerns for future intensification of the East-West division in the region and for the provocation of ethnic conflicts. At the same time it (along with the weakened economic climate in several countries as a result of the financial and debt crisis) might lead to renegotiation of interests on the Black Sea regional scene as is obvious from the recent attempts at discussion on a possible Russian-Greek cooperation in the energy field. In this regard it might be argued that on the one hand recent developments have led to a slowdown of cooperation activities in the region and on the other hand have emphasized the importance of regional cooperation for the achievement of democratic development, economic stability and enhanced security in the area.

The involvement of external actors in the Black Sea region has fostered the emergence of new alliances between the states and has resulted in participation of the states in several schemes at the same time. While in some cases the external initiatives have led to overlapping with existing regional agendas and activities, they have also largely facilitated the cooperation process in the Black Sea region (Manoli, 2012). External actions have proved to be especially beneficial for peaceful discussions on the resolution of some of the region’s frozen conflicts and the strengthening of the weak governance structures in the countries. In this context the EU has played an important role in supporting the region towards democratisation and stability. Currently after the EU is implementing three different policies towards the non-member states in the region – pre-accession policy towards Turkey, European Neighbourhood Policy towards Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and Strategic Partnership with the Russian Federation (CEC, 2007).

Approaching the Black Sea countries mainly on a bilateral basis, the EU has for a long time lacked a perception of the region as a separate functional area. It was not before the launching of the Black Sea Synergy in 2008 that the EU addressed the region as a whole<sup>1</sup> and explicitly stressed the need to reinvigorate the cooperation among the Black Sea

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<sup>1</sup> In the Black Sea Synergy the EU adopted the definition of a Wider Black Sea Region including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine (Manoli, 2012)

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countries. The EU approach to the Black Sea has been rounded by the Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009. This targets the post-Soviet republics (among which are the Black Sea states Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) and intends to bring them closer to the EU through intense bilateral cooperation (Rusu, 2011; Manoli, 2010). Since 2010 the Black Sea states Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine have also been involved in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. They are expected to benefit from projects in the fields of transport and energy, environment, socio-economic development, tourism and security when the strategy is fully implemented and at the same time to get further experience in regional cooperation (EC, 2013).

The variety of cooperation initiatives and schemes in the Black Sea region, as well as the existing complex constellation of relevant actors in the area, moves the need for better coordination between the various cooperation activities to the fore. Yet, up to now there exists no comprehensive approach towards the region neither from the regional states themselves, nor from the external interested parties. Instead, the area is currently approached mainly within the framework of different policies (security policy, maritime policy, etc.). Against this background, the following section will analyse the potentials for a comprehensive macro-regional approach in the Black Sea. It will consider the present Black Sea cooperation process and dynamics and will identify the main benefits and challenges for application of a macro-regional approach in the area in terms of functional and strategic considerations, driving actors and stakeholder participation, implementation and structural issues.

### **Prospects for a macro-regional approach in the Black Sea area**

An overview of the Black Sea cooperation process reveals that there is a high level of multi-functionality in the area. Regional actions are concentrated in the fields of maritime security, environmental protection and trade while the issues of energy and border security are still largely dominated by the policies of individual states. Currently, there is overlapping and insufficient coordination between cooperation activities. In this sense, a comprehensive macro-regional approach would bring significant added value in terms of improved coordination between organisations across sectors and borders. From a strategic point of view, promoting cooperation in functional areas, a macro-regional approach would contribute to the identification of cross-sectoral goals of real Black Sea interest. This would have a positive impact both on the establishment of joint priorities for cooperation and on the alignment of the agendas and implementation methods of the various regional organisations. Yet, while the targeted focus on issues of common interest is expected to support the generation of mutual trust and the promotion of regional identity, it could face long-lasting problems and pre-existing regional disparities that hamper the integration of views and interests of the regional actors as well as the process of consensus finding. Hence, a macro-regional approach in the Black Sea region could be conceivable only in case it is

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adapted to the specific policy-making landscape in the area and takes into consideration the established habits of cooperation.

Presently, the Black Sea cooperation process runs predominantly at the national level. Opening new options for stakeholder participation in the processes of policy making and implementation (Gänzle & Kern, 2011) a macro-regional approach could enable new role of the subnational level and of local organisations in regional cooperation. Yet, to gain support by the regional parties, a new comprehensive cooperation approach should be perceived as locally driven and not imposed from outside. In this line a new macro-regional strategy for the Black Sea, coordinated by the European Commission, could be considered as an external action which aims at diminishing the influence and power of the two dominating Black Sea states Russia and Turkey. On the other hand, the EU itself, while recognizing the geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region, realizes the difficulties related to the application of a macro-regional approach in the area. Currently, only two of the Black Sea states - Bulgaria and Romania - are EU members. Given their limited power, experience in cooperation activities and available resources, they could hardly serve as promoters of macro-cooperation in the region. This function could rather be taken by the core states Russia and Turkey. These, however, are reluctant to new EU policies in the Black Sea due to concerns about increasing EU influence in the region and possible conflicts with existing regional designs such as the new Eurasian Economic Union with the participation of Russia. In this sense, intensified intergovernmental cooperation in the region is an important prerequisite for a new macro-regional strategy for the Black Sea to receive adequate regional support. This, together with a possible future EU accession of the Black Sea states Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine after a full implementation of their association agreements might create the necessary conditions for successful initiation of a macro-regional approach in the area.

The expected challenges in the initiation and preparation of a comprehensive strategy for the Black Sea region are related to challenges in the implementation of such a strategy. As the experiences from the Baltic Sea and the Danube regions have shown the actual strategy implementation is left to the regional stakeholders (Metzger & Schmitt, 2012) and no new legislative, financial or institutional mechanisms are envisaged. As it became clear during the implementation of the Black Sea Synergy, the complex constellation of actors and the diversity of actions envisaged in a comprehensive strategy, on the one hand, and the limited organizational and institutional resources in the Black Sea on the other hand could hamper the coordination of actors and actions. Hence, the coordination and implementation of the strategy's various actions could require the adaptation of new governance arrangements. However, the establishment of any new institution or organization in the Black Sea could be seen by the regional states as duplication of existing regional structures and might not receive their backing. It is thus possible that the responsibility for the coordination

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and stability of the macro-region, defined by the EU macro-regional strategy, is pushed from the regional stakeholders to the European Commission (Metzger & Schmitt, 2012, on the EUSBSR), which in the case of the Black Sea region will additionally reinforce the perception that the strategy is externally imposed.

Besides the need for new governance arrangements a possible strategy for the Black Sea region would most probably require a separate budget line or a new financial instrument designed for the region (cf. EP, 2010). This contrasts to the Baltic Sea and the Danube region strategies that have been designed to fit within the existing institutional arrangements and rely on already available instruments and financial resources. Although some may argue that the assignment of extra grants to the EU strategies might be seen as a mere source of money and could thus lead to feeding of resources in artificially created macro-regions, the Black Sea case is quite exceptional. Currently, the Black Sea cooperation is financed by different instruments within the framework of different programmes (the Danube Transnational Programme, supported mainly by the Regional Development Fund, the cooperation with Turkey by the Instrument for Pre-Accession, the Black Sea Synergy and the Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme by the Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument). The lack of coordination between these, reinforced by the poor financial situation of the Black Sea states and organisations active in the region would be a challenge for the application of a macro-regional approach in the area. The unequal access to resources by the individual countries along with the contrasts in political cultures, the recent tensions in the region and the increasing lack of trust between the states in the area add to the uncertain outcomes of the approach.

Taking the above aspects into consideration it could be argued that the Black Sea area is not ready yet for coordinated macro-regional cooperation the way the Baltic Sea and the Danube regions are. In this regard, the preparation and implementation of a macro-regional strategy for the area currently lacks important fundamentals to build on. It could be assumed that a future approach towards the Black Sea should initially focus on the rebuilding of trust and promotion of regular exchange between the regional institutions setting the ground for a generation of mutual confidence and identification of common interests. Additionally, efforts should be concentrated on the reinvigoration of existing cooperation activities in the region, mainly the Black Sea Synergy and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation as well as on further development of the European Strategy for the Danube Region. The latter could provide Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine with the possibility to gain experience in cooperation that could be an important basis for future development of the Black Sea cooperation.

In the meantime, the possibility should not be excluded that the Black Sea states, collaborating within the framework of the BSEC for instance, agree on a comprehensive

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approach towards the development of the Black Sea region and its cooperation process. However, given the many problems in the Black Sea, which cannot be solved only within the region, such as security concerns, closed borders, etc., the achievement of a consensus in the different areas of cooperation will need time and will in many cases require external support. In this regard, a common strategy covering all areas of cooperation between all the states in the region could be assumed as a next step or as a logical consequence of the reassessment of the individual fields of Black Sea cooperation. Therefore, it is currently reasonable to promote further the sector-based approach as the most relevant route for future development of the Black Sea cooperation. This should focus on a small number of sectors offering joint incentives and promoting existing geographical and functional interdependencies. In addition, it should aim at balance between regional and external actors and focus on concrete projects of joint interest. In doing so it will contribute to strengthening the mutual confidence and trust in the region that will be an important prerequisite and basis for the application of a macro-regional approach at a later phase.

### Conclusion

The current cooperation scene in Europe has been defined by a variety of activities embedded in different territorial, political, institutional and socio-cultural contexts. The cooperation process differs greatly from one region to another and reflects the specific regional framework conditions and dynamics. The newly launched macro-regional approach opens up new opportunities for cooperation among different stakeholders at various levels within large-scale transnational areas. Promoting the coordination of sector policies, functional geographies and the alignment of existing activities and resources as its main principles this approach proves to be of benefit for areas with established structures and experience in cooperation. Yet, when it comes to regions which stretch far beyond the EU external borders and which are characterized by a high grade of regional disparities this approach faces a number of limitations both regarding its conceptualisation and application. This statement proves to be particularly true for regions marked by ongoing stability dilemmas, historical rivalries and divergence between national interests as in the case of the Black Sea.

The study of the specific regional context in the Black Sea area, the main motives behind its cooperation activities, the driving actors of the cooperation process and the interplay between the different parties reveals that there exists a high level of multi-functionality in the region, diverse often overlapping cooperation activities and insufficient coordination between them. Although the involvement of external stakeholders in the region has often facilitated its cooperation process, cooperation activities have mainly been initiated and controlled by the regional states. Against this background a potential macro-regional approach that is perceived as imposed from outside is expected to face serious limitations and to gain insufficient support from the regional parties, at least at the current stage.

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A comprehensive Black Sea approach, initiated by the regional states, could presently also be judged as difficult or at a very initial phase due to the limited power and resources of the Black Sea states, the often diverging political agendas, the dominance of national interests over regional ones, the still existing frozen conflicts and the security threats in the area. It could be argued, however, that exactly due to the recent developments in the region with the unrest in Ukraine and the uncertainty in the relations with Russia, the rethinking of the Black Sea cooperation process gains increasing relevance and the need for building of mutual understanding for problems of common interest comes to the fore. In this regard, it is important to conduct a further research to identify those sectors, for which a regional cooperation brings benefit and to create conditions for stronger involvement of the local actors in the cooperation process. In the meantime, it will be necessary to define those issues for which an external involvement would be crucial and beneficial and for which could not be solved purely by the regional parties such as the security threats. Seen against this background it could be argued that the promotion of a regionally tailored sector approach could set the basis for reinvigoration of the Black Sea cooperation process. This should be based on building trust and activation of the regional parties as well as on the interplay between regional and external ones and will lay the foundation for the application of a macro-regional approach at a later phase.

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