The European Union's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR): improving multilevel governance in Baltic Sea cooperation?

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT
Macro-regional strategies – such as the ones for the Baltic Sea, the Danube, the Ionian-Adriatic, and the Alpine regions – constitute new elements of European Union (EU) Cohesion Policy and territorial cooperation. In a nutshell, these strategies aim at building functional and transnational 'macro-regions' involving the EU, its member states, as well as partner countries within the EU's system of multilevel governance (MLG). As the oldest macro-regional strategy, the EU Strategy of the Baltic Sea Region has been in operation since 2009. Drawing on the theory of MLG, this contribution assesses the effects on the political mobilization and interplay between international, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental actors in the region.

Introduction

According to the then European Commissioner for Regional and Urban Policy, Johannes Hahn, the aim of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), presented as the first EU macro-regional strategy in 2009, was not only to serve as a 'new model for co-operation' in Europe but was also 'to inspire other regions' (Hahn 2010, p. 2). Embracing eight EU member states, the EUSBSR is not only the 'oldest,' but is also the most advanced 'macro-regional project' thus far.[1] Since its introduction, the European Council has endorsed three more EU macro-regional strategies: the Strategies for the Danube (2011), the Adriatic-Ionian (2014), and the Alpine Region (2015) (see Gänzle and Kern 2016a for a comprehensive overview).

According to the European Commission, a 'macro-region' is to be conceived of as 'an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges' (European Commission 2009, 1, original in bold). Referring to a pool of commonalities, macro-regions are socially construed products, 'demarcated' by 'flexible, even vague' (European Commission 2009, 8) boundaries. By devising macro-regional strategies, the EU seeks to establish an 'integrated framework to address common challenges, […] [such as] the urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea, and to contribute to the economic

success of the region and to its social and territorial cohesion, as well as to the competitiveness of the EU' (Council of the European Union 2009, 11). The core aim of these strategies consists of driving coordination and the integration of different policy sectors, such as environment and agriculture, in a comprehensive way. This goal, however, is subject to the principle of the so-called Three No's, which means that the implementation of macro-regional strategies (1) should not result in any (major) additional costs, for example, in terms of funding via EU Cohesion Policy, (2) should not trigger the establishment of any new institutions, and finally (3) should not give rise to specific EU legislation devised for the 'macro-region.'

In contrast to previous EU attempts to refer to established forms of regional cooperation, such as the 'Union's Approaches to the Baltic Sea Region' or the 'Northern Dimension' of 1997 and 1999 (Archer and Etzold 2008), the EU has sketched out a framework that not only addresses common challenges, such as environmental matters, but also the various opportunities in terms of economic integration within the region. Interestingly, the Commission has emphasized the importance of this form of 'regionalism' within the EU for its entirety. By applying the label 'macro-region,' the project in the Baltic Sea Region is framed as a legitimate form of regionalization inside the European Union (EU) (including its immediate vicinity when appropriate). Henceforth, macro-regional strategies are conceived 'as building blocks in reaching European objectives' (European Commission 2013a, p. 20), with the macro-regions consequently becoming 'integral aspect[s] of the essence of the Union' (Joenniemi 2010, p. 33) itself.

Regional cooperation 'underneath' the level of the EU tends to be constituted by a plethora of regional actors and arrangements covering a wide range of policies. By forging both a comprehensive and integrated framework for the Baltic Sea Region, this article holds that the macro-regional strategy seeks to provide a response to long-standing and significant problems of coordination and collective action in multilevel systems of governance, which are, in short, the comprehensive realignment of complex politico-social, regulatory, and ecosystem boundaries. In a nutshell, the EUSBSR is a facilitator of coordination in the Baltic Sea Region in a much more comprehensive way (Kern and Gänzle 2013; Gänzle and Kern 2016b).

This contribution proceeds as follows. First, it will briefly explicate the development of the EUSBSR. Second, it will introduce the multilevel governance (MLG) approach as a theoretical tool accounting for the mobilizing effect (or lack thereof) of actors in the EU's multilevel system. Third, it will analyze the governance architecture that has emerged in the shadow of the 'Three No's' and address the question of whether the EUSBSR has fostered interplay and coordination among existing bodies of regional cooperation. Finally, it will present the main achievements and shortcomings of this new EU policy tool.

A short history of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

The EUSBSR began in the European Parliament whereby a Euro-Baltic Intergroup consisting of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from member states in the Baltic Sea Region presented it to the European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, in 2005. The core idea of the initiative was to maximize the economic potential of the reunited Baltic Sea Region (see Beazley 2007, p. 14), and to lobby for a consolidated EU pillar of Baltic Sea states within the Northern Dimension (ND).

Following a mandate by the European Council, the European Commission subsequently adopted the initiative and – in contrast to the Parliament's original proposal – emphasized the strategy's role as an EU internal initiative. A public consultation process for different stakeholders in the region eventually occurred between August 2008 and February 2009 (see Bengtsson 2009, p. 3; Rostoks 2010, p. 15ff.). Schymik and Krumrey (2009, p, 15) concluded then that: 'The European Commission has by and large been able to draft an Action Plan that captures the essence of public opinion in the region.' A so-called Annual Forum perpetuated this particular instrument of stakeholder participation for the EUSBSR, the first of which was held in Tallinn in 2010 to which annual fora in Gdansk (2011), Copenhagen (2012), Vilnius (2013), Turku (2014), Jūrmela (2015), Stockholm (2016), and Berlin (2017) followed suit. By bringing together both policymakers and stakeholders, these meetings provided a platform for networking, discussions, and an exchange of views about the Strategy and its implementation.

Finally, the EUSBSR was presented by the European Commission in June 2009, and adopted by the European Council in October that year. The Strategy was based on the assumption that macro-regional strategies would not create new institutions, but would be supported by a multilevel, multi-actor, and multi-sector governance approach; not generate new legislation for developing and implementing macro-regional strategies, but would be driven by Action Plans and their regular updates; and, not lead to new funding schemes. Instead, it would be based on the need to utilize and combine already existing schemes (European Commission 2013b, p. 10). The EUSBSR was accompanied by an Action Plan which proposed the establishment of four pillars for 'macro-regional' cooperation. The Strategy aimed to improve the environmental state of the Baltic Sea, as well as promote more balanced economic development in the region, making it more accessible, attractive, safer, and securer. These areas have been reduced into 15 different so-called priority areas (PAs) which have been assigned a set of highly relevant projects (also known as flagship projects) as the showcase for the EUSBSR. The Action Plan was conceived as a 'rolling' plan, which implied that it was designed in order to quickly absorb 'lessons learned.' Therefore, it was revised in 2010 and 2013, respectively (European Commission 2013c). As a result, the original four overall Strategy pillars have been streamlined and transferred into just three objectives, which are (1) to save the sea; (2) to connect the region; and (3) to increase prosperity. As the number of PAs simultaneously rose from 15 to 17, however, it was at the time already doubtful 'whether the Strategy will in practice become more focused and more effective' (Etzold 2013, p. 11). Still, the horizontal actions (HAs) (crosscutting themes such as 'neighbors' with the aim of integrating stakeholders in neighboring countries, especially in the north western territories of the Russian Federation, as well as Norway) have been reduced quite significantly from 13 to 5.

Following an interim implementation report in 2010, the first major report was published in June 2011. Unsurprisingly, the Commission found that the EUSBSR's overall impact had been successful. In particular, it 'has led to concrete action, with a more streamlined use of resources. New working methods and networks have been established, and many initiatives developed' (European Commission 2011, p. 3). Clearly, as the EUSBSR was launched in the midst of the 2007–2013 programing period, a great deal of financial resources had already been earmarked for other projects. Still, a number of new projects were launched, such as the 'Baltic Deal'

whereby members would work 'with farmers across the region to reduce nutrient run-off, and therefore eutrophication' (European Commission 2011, p. 2). This project is often referred to as a showcase for enhancing awareness across different policy sectors and communities in the region. Finally, in 2013, the European Commission carried out an evaluation exercise that included an extensive survey of more than 100 key stakeholders, as well as independent assessments by external experts. The evaluation concludes that macro-regional strategies have triggered clear results, 'evident in terms of projects and more integrated policy making, although further improvements are essential in implementation and planning' (European Commission 2013a, p. 11). At the same time, the document also identifies a set of problems, in particular the lack of leadership in some corners of the macro-region. While the scarcity of administrative capacities and national resources may account for political disinterest in some countries, the complexities of the EUSBSR's governance architecture have not helped to make either its EU member states or partner countries wholeheartedly hail the new initiative.

Following the revisions introduced in the Action Plan of June 2015, the EUSBSR now subscribes to three core objectives, which focus on environmental protection ('Save the Sea'), economic development ('Increase Prosperity'), and improvement of the infrastructure ('Connect the Region'). The three overall objectives are now linked to the 13 PAs – for instance, bioeconomy or innovation – and complemented by four HAs (e.g. HA 'Neighbors' or HA 'Spatial Planning') that cut across various policy areas. Different member states or organizations are responsible for the PAs and HAs. Several organizations operating at the macro-regional level – for example, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), and Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea (VASAB) – actively participate in the implementation of the Strategy as either policy coordinators, such as the CBSS for PA 'Secure,' or horizontal area leaders, such as VASAB and HELCOM for HA 'Spatial Planning.'[2]

Administrative managers from different member states and organizations participating in the Strategy coordinate each PA. Policy coordinators assume a managerial role in the implementation of the strategy, as well as create ideas and support the application of the EU structural policy in the macro-region. Furthermore, steering groups have been established, bringing together various interested stakeholders from other line ministries, subnational authorities, and international organizations of the region (see Gänzle and Wulf 2014). Hence, the delivery of the strategies very much depends on the willingness and capacities of participating states. EU member states also operate the network of National Contact Points or National Coordinators, which assist and coordinate the implementation of the strategies at the national level. By and large, the commitment and willingness of member states to reallocate national resources for the aims of the strategies is decisive. In addition, the public management traditions of participating countries vary considerably and thus influence the effective implementation of the strategies. A certain degree of convergence among countries is therefore required as an institutional basis at the national level.

Apart from the increasing visibility of the member states in this process, the European Commission has maintained an important role. Together with EU member states in the Baltic Sea Region, it has become the driving force behind the policy process leading toward the successful implementation of the strategy. It assumes an important role in preparing strategy reviews, as well as in monitoring its implementation, and leading the overall coordination of the rolling Action Plan. Participating

states are linked to policy formulation by the so-called High-Level Group (HLG), which also brings together all other member states at the EU level. EU member states that are not part of a given macro-region, however, do not actively participate in the HLG meetings (author's interview with a Horizontal Area Leader, Stockholm, 30 June 2013). This could potentially change when an increasing number of EU member states are engaged in macro-regional strategies.

Multilevel governance and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

From a holistic perspective, EU macro-regional strategies in general may trigger important consequences, particularly *vis-à-vis* the spatial dimensions, boundaries, institutional setups, and the way macro-regions are governed. This is not only restricted to power changes across levels of government but also implies territorial 'rescaling' (Keating 2009), that is, new scales of intervention, new actor constellations, and variable geometries of governance (Stead 2011, 163). Departing from the seminal works of Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe (Marks 1992, 1993, 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2001, Hooghe and Marks 2003), Piattoni construes a three-dimensional analytical space that can account for most EU dynamics (2010a) and that directs our interest to processes of political mobilization (politics dimension), policymaking (policy dimension), and change of polity (polity dimension) which results in permeability and fluidity between institutions, internal and external policymakers, and policy-takers (see Piattoni 2010a). While it is often the EU member states that primarily regulate certainpolicy areas, other institutional and noninstitutional actors – subnational authorities and societies, and transnational societal groups – to which member states then react, may also trigger political mobilization. Consequently, MLG is characterized by the 'simultaneous activation of governmental and non-governmental actors at various jurisdictional levels' (Piattoni 2010b, p. 159). From an MLG perspective, it is more important to account for the effects rather than discerning which level or which type of actor activates political mobilization around a certain policy issue. Ultimately, political mobilization induces institutional and noninstitutional actors to interpret, narrate, and promote their interests and to press for institutional solutions that will hopefully strengthen their position in the next round of mobilization, therefore further setting in motion political and institutional dynamics (Piattoni 2016).

Macro-regions are joint endeavors among territorial authorities at different levels of government (subnational, national, and supranational) and tend to give rise to governance arrangements, such as consultation patterns, decision-making procedures, administrative roles, and behavioral expectations; some of the defining traits of institutions, despite the mantra of 'no institutions.' Therefore, macro-regional strategies provide the opportunity for governmental and nongovernmental actors to mobilize in defense of their own interests, as they are interpreted and narrated during implementation, forging policies and institutions that will accommodate them. The main drive of macro-regions is the implementation of a number of interconnected policies, which were originally pursued separately in response to distinct societal pressures.

From an MLG perspective, macro-regional strategies are important because they mobilize institutional and noninstitutional actors toward policy goals that have been identified as central to the Union since at least the late 1990s, such as the ones expressed in the Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs is 'perhaps

the most high-profile initiative of the European Union' (Borràs and Radaelli 2011, p. 465) […]. Launched in March 2000, its original goals included competitiveness, employment, and social cohesion, with the aim of becoming 'world leader in sustainable development,' added by the Gothenburg European Council summit of June 2001. In terms of governance, the EU sought to embrace policy areas that had previously escaped the reach of the Union, by devising new modes of governance such as, for example, the method of open coordination (Tholoniat 2010). Macro-regional strategies, it is argued here, seek to encourage the establishment of a governance architecture that recombines existing institutional structures 'at various levels to manage and implement these policies in novel but fluid ways' (Piattoni 2016, p. 91). They have also allowed the European Commission, in particular the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG Regio), to come forward as a core actor in driving comprehensive strategies and coordination across DGs inside the bureaucracy – an important legitimizing factor of bureaucratic politics in the light of the ongoing economic crisis of the EU, if not European integration – and 'to make itself more important inside the Commission' (author's phone interview with former CBSS official, 23 May 2015).

Actor mobilization and institutional interplay at the macro-regional level

Regional organizations and conventions

Among the most important institutions at a macro-regional level in the Baltic Sea Region are the CBSS, an intergovernmental platform of countries bordering the Baltic Sea (including Norway and Iceland), and HELCOM, the executive body of the Helsinki Convention. The CBSS was established in 1992, bringing together heads of states and governments of the region (at the occasion of biannual Baltic Sea Summits, with the latest one occurring under the German CBSS Presidency in Stralsund in 2014), as well as Foreign Ministers. Since 1998, the CBSS has been supported by a permanent secretariat based in Stockholm. Its primary objective is to build trust and security in the region after the end of the Cold War (Etzold 2010), and to concretely deal with joint regional challenges and issues (Hubel and Gänzle 2002). The CBSS has acquired outstanding expertise in areas such as civil security (e.g. children at risk, human trafficking, and radiation and nuclear safety), maritime economy, and sustainable development.

Although the first EUSBSR Action Plan did not contain any reference to the CBSS, the latter has subsequently been integrated into the governance architecture of the Strategy. Today, it occupies a prominent place and assumes the responsibility for several HAs and PAs. Together with the Nordic Council of Ministers, the CBSS coordinates 'Sustainable Development and Bio-energy.' This form of twinning with regards to a specific PA seems to have contributed toward better interinstitutional coordination: 'They [the Nordic Council of Ministers, the author] do biodiversity and we [CBSS] do climate. Whatever they do, they coordinate with us. We are much better coordinated than we ever were. This is partly due to the Strategy' (author's phone interview with CBSS official, 28 November 2014).

Perhaps more importantly, whereas the EU does not contribute to the core budget of the CBSS secretariat, the EUSBSR now provides the opportunity to apply for project funding. These financial opportunities are being seized by several regional organizations. In the case of the CBSS, this even required a change of the internal rules:

> Now everybody does projects in the Secretariat. A project can be defined in many ways, it does not always have to be money, it can be activities. […] We have projects with the EU […]. We have projects

with Körber Foundation (Youth Dialogue), with Humboldt University (CBSS Summer University). […] We have to be inventive in terms of financial engineering […] [and we, the author] also managed to convince the CSO [Committee of Senior Officials, the author] to change the rules which meant that the Secretariat had a much stronger position in project decision-making. We kept the CSO informed, but we no longer had to return to the CSO for deciding every single step of a project, this was a way of killing any project orientation. The CSO stepped back from micro-management what we were doing […]. (author's phone interview with CBSS official, 28 November 2014)

Although it is only a matter of nuances, this effectively means that the Secretariat of the CBSS acquires some autonomy in how it assumes its proper role in regional cooperation. From the perspective of CBSS member states, in turn, such activities undertaken by the Secretariat with regard to project acquisition and management provide yet another opportunity to secure funding for jointly agreed objectives.

Another major regional organization in the Baltic Sea Region, HELCOM, has primarily been concerned with the objective of protecting the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution, and to restore and safeguard its ecological balance. As these environmental objectives converge with the ones expressed by the EUSBSR, the EU's macro-regional strategy seeks to provide regional organizations with the opportunity to embed their activities in a wider strategic design and broader institutional framework; meanwhile, the EU is able to benefit from the regional experience and expertise that these bodies have accumulated over time. It therefore does not come as a surprise that the Council of the EU encouraged member states to further investigate: [The] 'synergy effects between the EUSBSR and multilateral cooperation structures and networks within the Baltic Sea Region […] through better co-ordination and effective use of communication channels and fora related to EUSBSR and Baltic Sea region to provide increased efficiency of intervention within macro region' (Council of the European Union 2011, 5). The development of individual PAs shows that there is now a direct link between the EUSBSR and existing international organizations such as HELCOM:

The benefits of these joint approaches are: involvement of all Baltic Sea countries as well as stakeholders (HELCOM Observers), linkages provided to a larger policy context (e.g., the existing or developing integrated coastal management frameworks for HA Spatial Planning), outcomes taken forward for implementation at national level and no risk of double structures or duplicated meetings. For successful co-existence, EUSBSR matters should have a proper place in the work plan and agenda of the HELCOM meetings; EUSBSR visibility has to be ensured and pro-active contributions to EUSBSR processes provided as needed. (HELCOM 2015, p. 3)

The institutional interplay and the resulting synergies between HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) (Helsinki Commission 2007) and the EUSBSR are evident in the EU Strategy's recommendation for the implementation of the BSAP (European Union 2010, p. 144ff.). This has strengthened HELCOM's position, as well as the implementation of BSAP, which had been hampered by the influence of sectorial interests because they were seen as negatively affecting the implementation of an integrative ecosystem approach (European Commission 2013a, p. 5). In the implementation of PA 2 ('Natural Zones and Biodiversity'), for example, HELCOM also provides the technical and scientific framework (indicators and targets) for the implementation of EU Directives (EUSBSR News 2012, p. 5).

Although the EUSBSR has not created any new specific regulation, it aims to improve the implementation of existing EU legislation (European Union 2010). The Marine Strategy Framework Directive has been built on the experience of HELCOM's BSAP, and the Commission uses the macro-regional approach to systematically improve the

implementation of HELCOM guidelines that have thus far only been politically binding. While HELCOM recommendations require a consensus among the cooperating countries and lack formal enforcement powers, most EU Directives are enacted on the basis of a qualified majority and are binding after transposition into national law. They are also subject to the infringement procedure, which can be invoked against noncompliant EU member states (Wenzel 2011; Van Leeuwen and Kern 2013).

Moreover, the EUSBSR provides the European Commission with central and decisive roles in its own decision-making, with EU member states and partner countries much more confined to matters of implementation. Although the European Commission has been a member of many regional bodies, such as HELCOM and the CBSS, since the establishment of these arrangements in the early 1970s and 1990s, respectively, it is only with the EUSBSR that the Commission has gained significant influence inside such organizations. This can be attributed to the fact that the Commission, on one hand, serves as a watchdog which able to guarantee policy coherence across sectors and scales, and on the other hand, macro-regional strategies are increasingly recognized as frames for regional cooperation in Europe – with the Commission entrusted a core-monitoring role. The EUSBSR has also contributed to increasing the visibility of actors and regional bodies, such as for instance, HELCOM (author's phone interview with HELCOM Secretariat official, 27 February 2015).

Subnational authorities and civil society

Macro-regional strategies create new political arenas as well as policy opportunities for both subnational authorities and civil society. If, for example, subnational authorities establish transnational networks, they have the potential to develop into constitutive elements of macro-regions. In the Baltic Sea Region, institutional capacities are well established, as demonstrated by the more than 100-member-strong Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) and the Baltic Metropoles Network (BMN), both of which play active roles in the implementation of the EUSBSR. In its strategic vision, UBC has declared itself a 'key partner in promoting the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region' (UBC 2009). Both UBC and BMN have long histories of cooperation and are relatively well equipped in terms of budgets and expertise. Cooperation between Hanseatic cities, often based on twinning relationships, even survived the Cold War period. In the aftermath of the Cold War, a wider network of subregional authorities, most prominently by the Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation, soon complemented the UBC. Drawing on existing literature, these networks, which often include cities with active sister-city agreements (Kern 2001), can be expected to trigger a positive impact on the implementation of the EUSBSR.

In a few PAs of the EU's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, subnational governments serve as coordinators; Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (Germany), for example, is in charge of the Policy Area Coordinator (PAC) focusing on tourism. Moreover, city initiatives have become essential for the implementation of the EUSBSR, in particular the so-called 'Turku Process.' This collaborative process was initiated by the City of Turku and the Regional Council of Southwest Finland in 2010, based on the continued cooperation between Turku and St. Petersburg, and stimulated by the start of the EUSBSR and HELCOM initiatives. It adds the expertise and knowledge of local authorities to the EUSBSR process. Today, the process is coordinated by three partners: the City of St. Petersburg, the City of Hamburg, and the City of Turku Region, including the region of Southwest Finland. Regions, cities, and their associations could help

implement specific projects that require the cooperation of actors from different levels, and which require an alignment of EU and macro-regional approaches on the one hand, with national and subnational policies on the other (European Commission 2013b, p. 15).

Moreover, the EUSBSR paves the ground for a trend toward a transnationalization of the region's civil society. The Baltic Sea Region, for example, has developed into a highly dynamic area of cross-border cooperation and transnational networking (Kern 2001; Kern and Löffelsend 2008; Kern 2011) that includes not only cities and subnational regions but also nongovernmental pan-Baltic organizations. As macro-regional governance is not restricted to the nation-states, this requires the institutionalization of new forms of cooperation and collaboration at the macro-regional scale. Transnational institutions are constitutive elements of macro-regions, and include hybrid arrangements of governmental and nongovernmental actors (Joas, Sanberg, and Kern 2007).[3] The combination of these different forms provides options for the direct involvement of stakeholders and the public at the macro-regional level. This development opens up new opportunities and it also leads to new challenges as stakeholder participation in macro-regions faces the same legitimacy and accountability problems as that on the global level. Due to a lack of capacities, stakeholder participation – such as the Annual Forums on the macro-regional strategies – seems to be limited to a small number of organizations that have the sufficient capacity to participate in such events (Kodric 2011). However, the Horizontal Action INVOLVE (strengthening MLG including involving civil society, business, and academia) aims at pan-Baltic organizations and includes experts from NGOs, particularly the Baltic NGO Network, in the preparation and implementation of the EUSBSR. This requires capacity building or, alternatively, capacity development, which will enable members of this network to cooperate transnationally (European Commission 2013c, p. 152).

Neighbors: the case of Russia

As the EUSBSR is based on activities of mutual interest to EU member states and neighboring countries, close cooperation with nonmember countries, in particular with the Russian Federation, is critical in many areas of the Strategy, such as in its goal of more efficient and compatible maritime surveillance (European Commission 2012, p. 8). As the EUSBSR presents an EU initiative and does not commit nonmember states, constructive cooperation with the region's external partners is needed for the successful implementation of the Strategy (European Commission 2013b, 31). This means that existing institutions, in particular HELCOM, CBSS, and VASAB, provide the best platform for cooperation between EU member states and non-EU countries. In that vein, the Director General of the CBSS maintains: 'The Strategy has improved transparency in regional cooperation, and the CBSS is together with e.g. HELCOM and the Northern Dimension one of several platforms on which EUSBSR cooperation can occur, with participation also by non-EU BSR (Baltic Sea Region, *the author*) countries' (Lundin 2013, 15).

By involving Russia, the EU (represented by the European Commission until 2010, and by the European External Action Service following the establishment of the EU's new diplomatic service), and its member states as 'equals,' as involved in the ND as well as in the EUSBSR, mean that the CBSS is in a favorable position to provide a 'platform for interplay' (author's phone interview with CBSS official, 28 November 2014) which is at the intersection of EU internal and external policies. Since the launch of the EUSBSR, the EU

has developed into reference point for most actors under the umbrella of the CBSS. Today, many actions and projects – for example, under the 'Save the Sea' objective of the Strategy – are addressed under the framework of the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) using HELCOM, the CBSS, and new initiatives such as the Turku process as implementing bodies and agencies (European Commission 2013c, 24–25). Several interviewees (author's interviews with European Commission official, 2 February 2015, and with NDEP official, 3 February 2015) have identified the establishment of the St. Petersburg waste water treatment system over the past 10 years as one of the 'success stories' of environmental cooperation in the Baltic Sea – involving several institutional arrangements such as HELCOM, NDEP, and EUSBSR. In addition to the financial incentives (matched by the Russian Federation) provided through the NDEP, St. Petersburg, and the Leningrad region (*oblast*) were put into a position where they could: '[…] use international cooperation as a pretext to align themselves to EU norms and standards. […]: HELCOM standards are even stricter than EU norms in some regards […]. St. Petersburg follows them and diverts from Russian regulations, which often exist, but are not consistently enforced' (author's phone interview with NDEP official, 3 February 2015). It indeed seemed that the EUSBSR could be the acceptable reference point for cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region for non-EU members which could not become fully involved in the Strategy, but should naturally be included in any major framework of macro-regional cooperation (see Etzold and Gänzle 2012, 8). Although Russia perceives the EUSBSR as an EU internal strategy, it has nonetheless launched a northwest Strategy, which *de facto* provides for several interfaces with the EU Strategy (Russian Federation 2012). Thus, we find parallel actions and initiatives to cooperate within common priorities, which become most obvious in comparing the EUSBSR and the Strategy for Social and Economic Development of the North-West Federal District of Russia (author's interview with European Commission official, Brussels, 18 March 2014).

Cooperation with Russia in the Baltic Sea Region not only has a long history but it has also become increasingly 'sub-nationalized.' Under the revised Action Plan of the EUSBSR, the CBSS Secretariat and the Turku Process have become leaders of the HA 'Neighbors,' which addresses cooperation with EU neighboring countries (EUSBSR News, March 2013). The Turku process primarily aims at practical cooperation with Russian partners at the subnational level, and is based on long-standing twin city partnerships. It includes a variety of actors, ranging from cities and regional authorities to businesses and their representative bodies, as well civil society and research organizations. Despite these developments, there are still shortcomings when it comes to the involvement of the Russian Federation in the implementation of the Strategy, either through specific projects or the existing regional frameworks and organizations (European Commission 2013b, p. 31). Although at the municipal level, St. Petersburg and Turku in particular claim that local cooperation could and should be ring-fenced from broader developments at the national and the EU level (author's phone interview with official of Turku Process, 19 January 2015), it seems the entire framework for cooperation with the Russian Federation is currently at a critical juncture.

Conclusion

The MLG approach immediately draws our attention to the mobilizing effects of EU governance on existing institutions and international conventions. Although the macro-regional strategies of the EU are a relatively new tool of EU policy, they have already

triggered some impact – as demonstrated by the analysis of the EUSBSR. Anchored in EU Cohesion Policy, the EUSBSR reaches out to a number of adjacent policy areas and provides a platform to regulate both cooperation and – as observed in the case of Russia's participation – conflict on matters of regional cooperation. The EUSBSR seeks to provide the local and regional level within the Baltic Sea Region with more leverage than the ND, which brings together the Russian Federation, Norway, Iceland, and the EU as a whole. Hence, from that angle it is possible to interpret the EUSBSR as yet another attempt of appropriating the Baltic Sea Region as a macro-region inside the EU, just as the Baltic Sea is increasingly framed as a common EU sea rather than emphasizing the aspect of 'shared' one in regard to Russian presence (Leningrad and Kaliningrad regions) along the coastline. As an intergovernmental strategy, the EUSBSR has also empowered the member states in matters of regional policy. Policy coordinators – most of them from line ministries in the EU member states – assume a key role and have started to foster a trans-governmental network underpinning the EUSBSR. The EUSBSR seeks to support and adjust the implementation of EU Directives at the macro-regional level. The Strategy improves the implementation of existing EU legislation because projects under the Strategy's umbrella are linked to EU regulations such as Registration, Evaluation, Authorization, and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), the Water Framework Directive, and the Maritime Strategy Framework Directive (see European Commission 2013b, p.15). Drawing on interviews with policymakers from various regional bodies, it is fair to claim that the Strategy has improved the coordination of existing organizations, networks, projects, and financing tools (European Commission 2013b, p. 74), as well as cooperation between actors in the macro-region, including the private sector. The Strategy has also initiated new projects, among which, for example, there are two that aim to reduce the eutrophication of the Baltic Sea and improve the existing transportation infrastructure. Nevertheless, effective integration of nongovernmental actors and stakeholders still remains an important challenge.

Finally, and most importantly, the EUSBSR has not only revived a hitherto stalled regional cooperation but it has also contributed to increasing the visibility of individual actors of regional cooperation and the establishment of more permanent contact points in many countries off the shore of the Baltic Sea. As noted:

> […] on the policy level, the EUSBSR has involved ministries of foreign affairs to a larger extent, and in some countries that have not yet been that involved in Baltic Sea region issues including environment […]. I can see this change. It becomes an attractive topic for politicians in these countries and it raises the issues to a higher political level. This is the main added value. Poland is one of the countries that is more interested […]. (author's phone interview with HELCOM official, 27 February 2015)

For the time being, the EUSBSR has established a platform involving a wide range of concerned 'macro-regional' actors and institutions. Yet, it is also clear that the EU presents a strong – and perhaps increasingly amalgamated – power in the Baltic macro-region, which may force a greater deal of domination in the medium term. As we have seen, some of the key organizations, such as the CBSS and HELCOM, are increasingly operating in the shadow of the EU and its Strategy. At the same time, all countries bordering this common sea need to agree on measures to effectively protect this resource, and to actively engage in functional and need-driven cooperation – a process that has become even more important in the light of the political crisis we are witnessing today.

Notes

1. Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Germany, that is, the German *Länder* of Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Hamburg, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region also includes partner countries, such as Norway and the Russian Federation.
2. The EUSBSR Action Plan of June 2015 changed the names of priority area coordinators and horizontal action leaders to policy area coordinators and horizontal area leaders.
3. Kern and Löffelsend (2008) distinguish three types of transnationalization: (1) the emergence of transnational networks and institutions such as the Coalition Clean Baltic; (2) the transnationalization of existing international and intergovernmental organizations that provide access to decision-making for nongovernmental and subnational actors; and (3) the establishment of new transnational institutions that are based on a multi-stakeholder approach and promote the participation of civil society from the outset.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

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EC official, DG Environment – phone interview, 2 February 2015

HELCOM official – phone interview, 27 February 2015