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The Adriatic Ionian Region: challenges and opportunities in the time of geopolitical tensions and the rule of EUSAIR

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Abstract

Due to its geographical features and geopolitical potential, the Adriatic-Ionian region is expected to become crucial for the European Union in reaffirming its role within the region and beyond. However, recent developments such as the Ukrainian War and divergent interests and strategies of international players (including the EU, USA, China, Turkey, and Russia) are changing and challenging territorial development, increasing regional uncertainty in the medium and long term. In 2014, the EU launched the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region (EUSAIR) to support and foster regional territorial cooperation. The EUSAIR is a European Union (EU) macro-region strategy that addresses territorial development from a multi-governance perspective. However, since their conceptualisation, European Union macro-regions have been relegated to the role of a high-level and intergovernmental institutional platform. Unlike the other EU macro-regions, the EUSAIR has also played a central role in harmonising national-based relations among countries participating in the strategy. Indeed, for the current programming period of 2021-2027, the EUSAIR is the only macro-strategy where participants are EU member states (Italy, Greece, Slovenia, and Croatia), candidates (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), potential candidates (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and third-party states (San Marino). This heterogeneity makes the role of EUSAIR even more challenging and strategic for the future development of the entire Adriatic-Ionian region.

This paper reflects upon several pressing questions that the Adriatic-Ionian region will face by stressing the role that the EUSAIR should have in addressing them

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1. Introduction

The Adriatic-Ionian region is becoming increasingly strategic for global powers (Berisha et al., 2021). As Gaifami et al. (2020) have pointed out, from a historical perspective, the region has represented a "hinge" between the Mediterranean Sea and the central and eastern parts of the European continent. This geographical position is attracting international investors such as Russia, Turkey, and, last but not least, China. Although very heterogeneous and historically unstable, in the previous decades, the Adriatic-Ionian region is experiencing the importance of territorial cooperation among European Union (EU) member states and neighbourhood countries. Indeed, since the beginning of the 2000s, the European Union Accession Integration of Western Balkan countries has started, and several cooperation programs have been activated. Among them, establishing the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR), approved by the European Commission in 2014, was the final recognition of the region's strategic importance. More in detail, the EUSAIR aims to increase cooperation capacities and collaboration initiatives among various institutions across the region. Since its introduction, the EUSAIR has promoted knowledge exchange, coordinated actions, and enhanced political commitment.

This paper questions the role the EUSAIR might have in balancing international powers' divergent interests and, at the same time, addressing regional needs and challenges. Although not conceived as an EU foreign policy tool, the EU macro-region might also be seen as an effective tool to coordinate national foreign policy for specific issues. Based on a literature review on EU macro-regions (Solly and Berisha, 2021; Belloni, 2020; Gänzle, 2018; Gänzle et al., 2018; Stead, 2014; Cugusi, B., Stocchiero, 2013; Mirwaldt et al., 2011), the paper discusses the essential limits of EU macro-regions by pointing out several questions. Although there is no standard definition of macro-regional strategies, they are generally considered institutional experiments that address territorial development from a multi-governance perspective. The essential nature of the “platform of cooperation” and their three “NO” (i.e. no new funds, no new legislation, no new institutions) are at the centre of the debate. The discussion on the nature of the EU macro-regions, particularly the EUSAIR, is functional to understand whether this kind of initiative can effectively address regional challenges.

Thought of as a policy-oriented paper, the final aim of this contribution is to stimulate the discussion around the unexplored potentialities of the EUSAIR considering upcoming regional challenges. To do that, the paper is structured in five sections. After this brief introduction, section 2 explores the centrality

of the Adriatic-Ionian region as an identity in construction by highlighting its cooperation limits and impediments. Section 3 focuses on understanding international relations, exploring asymmetric power interests and highlighting regional challenges. Then, section 4 discusses the role of the macro-regional strategies by looking at their historical path and future perspectives, while section 5 ends up with the conclusion and final considerations.

2. Adriatic-Ionian: a regional (identity) in construction

The Adriatic Ionian region is geographically heterogeneous, with a variety of coastal, insular, rural, and mountainous areas, as well as large urban agglomerations and suburban territories (Gaifami et al., 2020). Historically, the region has served as a "hinge" between the Mediterranean Sea and the Central and Eastern parts of the European continent. It has been strategically crucial for trade exchanges between Asia and Europe and between the southern Mediterranean seaway connecting the Suez Channel and the Strait of Gibraltar and the centre of the European Union market (Gaifami et al., 2020).

Despite that, the Adriatic-Ionian region is perceived as something other than strategically relevant from a geopolitical and economic perspective. Although historical relations existed within the region, exchanges were interrupted after World War II until the beginning of the '90s. Relations have only been (re)started in the last three decades, with numerous initiatives implemented under the EU umbrella, leading to several cooperation programs and investments. In addition to bilateral agreements, a significant step forward in the internal integration of the region began in the early 2000s when Italy hosted the first Summit on Development and Security in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, attended by almost all the EUSAIR countries, except Montenegro and Serbia, which were included later (Solly and Berisha, 2021). The main objective of this summit, known as the Ancona Declaration, was to ensure the political and economic stabilisation of the Adriatic and Ionian regions after years of uncertainty, as well as to enhance regional cooperation since "it is an effective incentive that is instrumental to fostering political and economic stability, thereby making it the most solid basis for progress in the European integration process" (Ancona Declaration, 2000, p. 1). In parallel, the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII) was launched as an "initiative for dialogue and cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian Region and, to this end, to establish the Adriatic and Ionian Council (AIC)" (Ancona Declaration 2000, p. 3). Since then, the AII has organised an annual meeting every year, where progress in the level of cooperation is usually assessed, and new initiatives are presented.

In 2008, the Permanent Secretariat of the Adriatic Ionian was established in Ancona to formalise these cooperation activities. The main objective of the Permanent Secretariat is to make the AIC more project-oriented by coordinating several transnational cooperation activities. The turning point for the consolidation of the EU macro-region strategy was the 2010 Declaration of the Adriatic Ionian Council on the support of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region, where the AIC affirmed its readiness to foster an attractive, secure, and prosperous region, as well as to place the region within a European regional policy perspective (Solly and Berisha, 2021). Moreover, the importance of collaborating with the EU Commission for preparing and implementing the Strategy, involving national, regional, and local administrations, was finally recognised. With the 2012 launch of the EUSAIR Strategy, the European Council provided the mandate to present the Strategy before the end of 2014. Since its introduction, the EUSAIR has actively promoted cooperation among actors, levels and different sectors. The current institutional efforts of the macro-regions are focused on embedding and integrating flagships and actions. For the current programming period (2021-2027), EUSAIR has already adopted its flagships (15) and is revising the Action Plan via public consultation. Each identified flagship has a list of proposed actions

and projects that are coherent and integrated. The novelty of this programming period is the willingness to "embed" these flagships within national and regional development programmes. As confirmed by Anze Logar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia, during the closing event of the EUSAIR Slovenian Presidency 2020-2021 and as stated in the Izola Declaration (2021), the goal is to embed flagship projects into concrete funding programmes at the European, regional, and national levels, thereby making many of our joint projects not only possible but feasible. The idea is to create synergies among different programs and levels to implement concrete ideas with great benefits for the territories involved.

Although these institutional attempts, several obstacles still exist. According to the recent publication of the European Commission (2021), "Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries," cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region, particularly within the Western Balkans, is hampered by several multi-dimensional impediments. These impediments are various and pertinent to different fields: (i) political obstacles, such as legal and administrative barriers, (ii) geographic-natural obstacles, like transport infrastructure and natural barriers; (iii) economic and social obstacles, like economic discontinuity, historical legacy, and cultural tradition. Based on the study, almost 145 obstacles exist between EU member states and Western Balkans countries, while 86 are between Western Balkans countries. The effects of these impediments are numerous and affect the quality of territorial development and cross-border cooperation (Pinnavaia and Berisha, 2021).

3. International relations, asymmetric power interests and regional challenges

As asserted in the academic debate (Cotella and Berisha, 2019, 2021; Đurašković et al., 2021; Jaćimović et al., 2021), since the end of the totalitarian regimes in the 90s, the Western Balkans, in particular, has become a field for international geopolitical disputes, where exogenous interests have mixed with endogenous ones. Apart from Italy and Greece, the rest of the Adriatic-Ionian region countries have undertaken several economic, political, and social reforms with the final aim of moving from a centrally controlled economy to a market-oriented one (Berisha et al., 2021; Berisha and Cotella, 2021). The need to change their economic and political system has allowed external actors like the USA, the European Union, and its member states, Russia, Turkey, and last but not least, China, to invest - in various forms, often with divergent objectives and through different mechanisms - in the region. Since then, numerous external initiatives have occurred within multiple sectors and fields like energy, infrastructure, economic reconversion, institutional arrangements, security cooperation, health, pandemic emergency, etc. However, external influences have hampered the transition process instead of facilitating the EU integration path despite substantial foreign investments (Estrin and Uvalic, 2016). As recognised mainly in the literature (Brljavac, 2012), the asymmetric interests of external actors have somehow undermined the transition process and slowed the integration of the Western Balkans countries into the EU. The multipolar dispute in the region shows different geopolitical connotations. In this analysis, it is important to separate our geopolitical considerations between EU member states (Italy, Greece, Slovenia, and Croatia) and the rest of the Western Balkan countries participating in the EUSAIR (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). Regarding the former, the impact of external actors has been relatively low since being an EU member state has prevented them from external influences, except in the case of Greece and, to some extent, Italy concerning the implementation of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (Cotella and Berisha, 2021; Berisha, 2018). In this regard, Greece officially joined China's 'Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, becoming the 16th European nation to join the initiative, making it 16+1, while Italy signed a

memorandum agreement with China in 2019. That being said, investments of other international powers in these two countries have been relatively insignificant. Regarding the Western Balkans countries, asymmetric interests have varied according to the actors involved. For example, Russia's interests became more evident during the so-called NATO bombing in Belgrade in 1999 when Russia condemned it, or when the country used its status as a permanent UN Security Council member in Serbia's favour in two different situations: in 1994 and 2015, Moscow vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions condemning violence by Bosnian Serbs, the latter being the resolution which qualified the 1995 Srebrenica massacre as genocide. Russian soft power was also manifested during the pandemic, as is generally called "vaccine diplomacy," trying to revitalise the region's tarnished "Moscow Consensus" (Lewis, 2016), particularly in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. Russian pandemic diplomacy has also involved countries like Italy, where the first pandemic wave hit particularly hard.

In the case of Turkey, its soft power is well-documented in the literature (Đurašković et al., 2021). In many instances, Turkey uses NGOs, charity organisations, etc., to become a reference point for selected Western Balkans countries. In this respect, several Turkish NGOs have played a crucial role in supporting all the Balkan ethnic groups with aid for education and the restoration of important cultural monuments (Brljavac, 2012). Being a member of NATO, Turkey has also applied deterrent power to enlarge its NATO influence, and this happened for the inclusion of some Western Balkans countries. While EU countries demonstrated vague and often inconsistent positions, Turkey used this "power gap" to show that it has the economic and diplomatic capacity to become a regional leader.

While the interests of Russia and Turkey are deeply rooted in the region's history, China's influence is much more recent but not less effective. As Cotella and Berisha (2021) argued, Chinese investment in the region is growing, and the impact of their initiatives is as well. Unlike Russia and Turkey, China seems uninterested in the region but sees the Adriatic-Ionian region as the "door of Europe" through which goods and resources must go. Indeed, by looking at the investments put in place until now, it seems that all the efforts are dedicated to creating a functional infrastructure system to facilitate communications between East and West with great benefit for China and less for the countries involved, as learned by Montenegro with the so-called "debt trap" (Shopov, 2022). The Adriatic-Ionian Region is a relatively new "territorial entity," very heterogeneous and often fragmented regarding political power and interests. Concerning the region's future, there are at least three challenges the region should deal with sooner or later.

The first concerns the role the region should have in the new multipolar geopolitical schema by avoiding shifting "from a space of political confrontation to a space of spatial dispute." This is mainly linked with the current situation of the Ukrainian War but is rooted in the regional historical path. The asymmetric interests that have somehow influenced the transition process are still there and need to be solved as soon as possible. As recently reminded by the EU High Representative Josep Borrell, as candidates and potential candidates, Western Balkans countries are asked to align their position to the EU - without any additional ambiguity. To accelerate the process of EU Integration, on July 19th, 2022, the European Commission announced the opening of access negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia, while in December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina gained its candidate status.

The second challenge concerns the Adriatic-Ionian Region's role in the new semi-globalized world. In this regard, the region should avoid shifting from a "space of transition to a space of transit" (Cotella and Berisha, 2019). This is mainly linked to the region's geographic position and territorial potential. To fully benefit from the implementation on one side of the TEN-T and, on the other side, of the BRI infrastructure, the region should be able to integrate its infrastructural and economic systems within. However, since the implementation of the BRI seems to be slowing down, the region should autonomously take care of its infrastructure system to avoid becoming even more territorially fragmented.

Yet importantly and strongly connected with the former two challenges, the region should consider how to turn regional obstacles into opportunities. The European Commission (2021) pointed out that the region suffers from internal and external multidimensional barriers. As the nature of obstacles is often localised, countries can overcome them by working bilaterally in some cases, while a multilateral framework is needed in other cases. In this regard, the use of EU funds, the implementation of EU programs like EUSAIR, and the number of cross-border cooperation initiatives should support the region in overcoming existing and emerging obstacles and impediments.

4. What is an (EU) macro-regional strategy: historical path and future perspectives

According to the definition given by the European Commission (2017), the European Union macro-regional strategy¹ is a policy framework which allows countries located in the same region to tackle and find solutions to problems jointly or to use better the potential they have in common (e.g., pollution, navigability, worldwide business competition, etc.). By doing so, they benefit from strengthened cooperation to make their policies more efficient than if they had addressed the issues in isolation. Despite this institutional definition, however, there has yet to be an agreement on the exact meaning of the EU macro-regional strategies, as Mirwaldt et al. (2011) pointed out. For Soukos (2017), EU macro-regions are ‘hybrid forms of organisation’, which include both a territorial and a functional dimension that needs to be carefully managed and balanced. Existing institutional arrangements affect EU macro-regions, including countries with different historical, political, cultural, and normative backgrounds (Solly and Berisha, 2021). As Gänzle et al. (2018, p. 1) point out, “both the macro-regional strategies and the macro-regions themselves have been met with increasing interest across several disciplines, including geography, regional planning, political science and public administration, triggering questions and debates on issues such as their impacts on existing practices of territorial cooperation and their relation to previously established forms of regional cooperation”. Thus, Gänzle et al. (2018, p. 10) further suggest that scholars should reflect more extensively on “the impacts and outputs of macro-regional strategies”, focusing on their political relevance and effectiveness. As an instrument for managing transnational territories that deal with common challenges and spatial perspectives, macro-regions result from the rescaling process of functional regions beyond administrative subdivisions. Indeed, the European Parliament (2015) defines macro-regions as “a major emerging instrument of governance in the EU that involves a plurality of state and non-state actors around a series of functional problems in a given territory”. Overall, macro-regions should be considered through the lenses of European territorial governance and seen as a first attempt to territorialise EU Cohesion Policy (European Parliament, 2015), as well as “soft policy spaces” (Stead, 2014) where formal and informal relational mechanisms may happen.

¹ Currently, four EU macro-regions are formalised. The first EU macro-regional strategy launched was the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) in 2009, involving various EU member states: Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. In 2011, the European Council endorsed the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). This macro-regional strategy involves a high number of stakeholders geographically located in fourteen different countries, of which nine are EU Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia), three are accession countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia), and two are neighbouring countries (Moldova, Ukraine). Later, in 2014, the European Council endorsed the EU Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region (EUSAIR). The Strategy involves eight countries: four Member States (Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia) and four non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia). Two new members have joined the strategy recently: North Macedonia (2020) and the Republic of San Marino (2022). Finally, in 2015, the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) was launched. This Strategy includes seven countries, of which five are EU Member States (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia) and two are non-EU countries (Liechtenstein and Switzerland).

Being considered an “institutional experimentation” (Solly and Berisha, 2021) and a “political governance experiment” (Cagusi and Stocchiero, 2013), the EU macro-regions have been representing a new multilevel instrument to strengthen territorial cohesion inside the European Union as well as with bordering countries. However, according to the European Commission (2020), the platform provided by the macro-regional strategies for policy coordination across countries and among funds, sectors, governance levels, and stakeholders has been key in achieving results that seem insufficient. Indeed, even though the macro-regions strategies have already delivered meaningful results, realising their full potential requires time and a bold mindset change among countries, ensuring they systematically consider the benefits of working together (European Commission, 2020). After more than 10 years of “experimentalist governance,” as Ganzle and Mirtl (2018) called it, it is time to look at the potentials and limits of macro-regions. According to the authors, reflecting on the meaning of the macro-regions and what responsibilities and tasks they should have is still necessary. Even more important, they call for the establishment of a common understanding of the nature of the macro-regions that should be intended as “long-term endeavours aimed at incremental change and not a mere duplication of existing programs and related project activities” (Ganzle and Mirtl, 2018: 28). Considering that, some questions are raised.

First, to what extent have the three “no” - no new funds, no new legislation, no new institutions – been constructive or limiting factors for developing a real multi-level governance system where the macro-regions could have a prominent role? In hard times, a solid and independent macro-regional authority – with its own funds and rules - would have been essential in addressing unpredictable challenges. As the macro-regions are conceived, unfortunately, there is no space for rapid reaction to internal and external stimuli, while the success or failure of the macro-regions strategy is ultimately linked to their capacity to ensure that EU, national, regional, and other public and private funds are aligned with the priorities of the relevant strategy (European Commission, 2020). What would it have been like if the macro-regions had been given a chance to manage EU funds directly?

Second, after a decade of incremental experimentations, the main role of macro-regions remains anchored to that of being a “platform of exchange” or a platform of “policy integration” (Stead, 2018). With the scope of increasing coordination, the new concept of macro-regions is “embedding”. The embedding activities started in 2018 and are expected to be even more emphasised in the current programming period of 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020). Accordingly, the embedding approach should be seen in integrating the priorities of the macro-regional strategies into existing EU programs and pushing countries to incorporate them within the national and regional operative programs. In so doing, embedding is expected to increase program impacts through better cooperation and coordination. However, in this perspective, it is hard to see the added value of macro-regions concerning effective territorial development since there isn’t a clear spatial/territorial strategy upon which to converge flagships and projects.

Thirdly, the significant efforts made by macro-regions have focused on their governance mechanisms and organisational features, addressing institutional and internal challenges. However, the external dimension of their effectiveness in territorialising their impacts has been less emphasised. As many authors have argued (Ganzle and Mirtl, 2018; Stead, 2018), there is a need to involve further territorial stakeholders and citizens, as well as to push countries to involve institutional actors at various levels (central, regional, and above all local units) in their daily activity. This will allow macro-regions to go beyond their conceptual and institutional borders. Indeed, in the current context, additional efforts from a multi-level perspective are required to (re) conceptualise EU macro-regions and better position them within the EU macro institutional framework, especially considering the new geopolitical multi-polar scheme.

5. Conclusions

This policy-oriented paper offers an alternative view of the role of the EU macro-regions, particularly the EUSAIR, in addressing geopolitical issues. The Adriatic-Ionian Region is a relatively new "territorial entity", which is very heterogeneous and has often been historically fragmented regarding territory, economic performance, and political power. Over time, internal fragmentation, a relatively scarce sense of regional belonging, and a lack of self-recognition have made the Adriatic-Ionian region a space where institutional interactions could have been more consistent, linear, and often unproductive. Only recently, cooperation among countries within the Adriatic-Ionian Region started to take place under the umbrella of the EU. Although the EUSAIR was adopted only in 2014, the strategy is rooted in cooperation activity that began with the first Ancona Declaration of 2000 (Solly and Berisha, 2021). The role played by the EUSAIR in coordinating actions has been praiseworthy. However, the challenges the region faces and the upcoming ones are greater than EUSAIR's practical possibilities (Belloni, 2020). It is still unclear what the EUSAIR can do to support the region to avoid shifting "from a space of political confrontation to a space of spatial dispute." Even if not directly affected by the Ukraine war, the Western Balkans countries are the "weakest link" of the West where divergent interests exist. Another issue is preserving regional territorial integrity by avoiding shifting "from a space of transition to a space of transit" where international actors can influence strategic sectors like infrastructure, energy, and industry. Although the embedding activity promoted by EUSAIR goes in the right direction, it seems insufficient to face the region's recent incremental foreign investments (mainly derived from China). Conversely, embedding would be an excellent instrument to reduce intra and infra-regional obstacles, as the European Commission (2021) pointed out.

Although efforts were made, macro-regions seem to be limited in their actions by their essential nature of being a "soft instrument" with no funds, rules, or recognised authority. Regarding the regional challenges mentioned, the EUSAIR seems structurally and conceptually unprepared to deal with them, being perceived thus inadequate for promoting the region's effective territorial development. To overcome this impasse, the actors involved should:

- At the EU Level - (re)discuss the three "NO" redesigning the macro-region as a new and more self-standing and effective instrument.
- At the regional level - think about the potential of upgrading the EU macro-regions strategies from a platform of cooperation to an effective EU foreign policy instrument that can address supranational challenges.

It is difficult to say whether the EU macro-regions strategies are at the end of their days. However, a reconceptualisation is needed to redefine their role and effectiveness in dealing with unpredictable events. This is particularly relevant for those EU macro-regions strategies facing multiple (geopolitical) challenges as the EUSAIR area is experimenting.

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