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**ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF PLAY OF MULTI-LEVEL AND  
MULTI-FACTOR GOVERNANCE IN THE ADRIATIC-IONIAN  
AREA**

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## List of Abbreviations

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <i>AIE</i>       | Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion   |
| <i>AII</i>       | Adriatic-Ionian Initiative   |
| <i>AI-NURECC</i> | Adriatic-Ionian Network of Universities, Regions, Chambers of Commerce, and Cities |
| <i>AIR</i>       | Adriatic-Ionian region   |
| <i>CEI</i>       | Central European Initiative  |
| <i>COSIPLAN</i>  | South American Infrastructure and Planning Council                                 |
| <i>CPRM</i>      | Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions  |
| <i>ETC</i>       | European Territorial Cooperation   |
| <i>EU</i>        | European Union   |
| <i>EUSAIR</i>    | European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region                             |
| <i>MLG</i>       | Multi-level Governance   |
| <i>NAFTA</i>     | North Atlantic Free Trade Area   |
| <i>NATO</i>      | North Atlantic Treaty Organization   |
| <i>NEPAD</i>     | New Partnership for Africa's Development   |
| <i>OECD</i>      | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                             |
| <i>OSCE</i>      | Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe                               |
| <i>RCC</i>       | Regional Cooperation Council   |
| <i>SEECF</i>     | South-East European Cooperation Process  |
| <i>UN</i>        | United Nations   |
| <i>UniAdrion</i> | Association of Universities of the Adriatic-Ionian Area                            |
| <i>US</i>        | United States (of America)   |

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## Introduction

This research aims at assessing the state of play of regional integration and multi-level governance in the Adriatic-Ionian region (AIR). More specifically, it provides a theory-framed evaluation of the added value, structural limits, and medium-to-long term challenges of regional cooperation in the AIR, vis-à-vis the area's socio-political dynamics. The analysis focuses on the eight countries participating in the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Source: European Commission (16 June 2014). For a Prosperous and Integrated Adriatic and Ionian Region. Bruxelles: EU Publication Office, pp. 12-

13.

The Association of Universities of the Adriatic-Ionian Area (UniAdriion) commissioned this research within the framework of the Adriatic-Ionian Network of

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<sup>1</sup> At the 4<sup>th</sup> Forum of the EUSAIR, held in Budva (Montenegro) on 8 May 2019, it was decided that North Macedonia should become a new member of the Strategy. However, this research does not include North Macedonia because, at the moment of writing, Skopje is not a full member yet and, *ceteris paribus*, the reflections presented here can be extended to North Macedonia without major inconsistencies.

Universities, Regions, Chambers of Commerce and Cities (AI-NURECC) initiative - which aimed at contributing to EUSAIR's objectives by promoting structured dialogue and effective cooperation among key Adriatic-Ionian stakeholders. The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPRM) coordinated the AI-NURECC initiative, which was funded by the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policies.

This is not the first study of its kind. However, literature is scarce, poorly diversified, and lacks a progressive systematisation. The European Union (EU) has issued the majority of publications on the EUSAIR under the form of official documents and technical opinions. As such, they cannot even be labelled as proper 'literature'. Reports sponsored by governmental and administrative authorities try to move a step forward, bringing the Strategy's grand design down to the local level. While these reports benefit from higher concreteness, they fail to dispense with the dry, functionalist, index-based jargon already characterising EU documents.<sup>2</sup> The AIR's broad socio-political and historical dynamics find virtually no space in these publications and are given some relevance only in the handful of research papers written by think tanks and research groups in support of further regional integration.<sup>3</sup> These works, however, need to be updated in light of the seismic changes which have stricken international politics in recent years. No help in this regard comes from specialised academic publications, which cover extensively the region but not the EUSAIR as such. A keyword search for 'EUSAIR' in three of the leading journals dealing with the region (Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans) gives just one result back.<sup>4</sup> This is symptomatic either of scarce interest in or low consciousness of the EUSAIR in scholarly circles - both of which are bad indicators of the Strategy's impact.

This research adds to the limited number of non-technical studies on the EUSAIR and deals with the topic without resorting to the aforementioned bureaucratic approach, thereby complementing the study carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) within the AI-NURECC framework.<sup>5</sup> My research

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<sup>2</sup> N/A (2016a). *4 Pillars: Report On The Results Of The Consultation About The Status Of Multi-Level Governance Activities In EUSAIR Countries*. Campobasso: Regione Molise.

<sup>3</sup> Plures (2015). *La Strategia dell'Unione Europea per la regione adriatico- ionica: le fatiche della costruzione di un processo*. Roma & Trento: Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) & Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso (OBC); Plures (2016). *Innovation Through Integration in Territorial Policies for the Adriatic-Ionian Region: Ideas for Reflection from a Local and Regional Perspective*. Bologna: Regione Emilia Romagna.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Frontini & Davide Denti (2017). "Italy and EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans: The Europeanization of National Interests?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 571-589. Indeed, the article mentions the EUSAIR but deals with it only tangentially.

<sup>5</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019). *Multi-Level Governance and Cross-Sector Practices Supporting EUSAIR*. Paris: OECD.

attempts to make politological thinking directly relevant for policy-making by taking stock of the consolidated academic literature on international regimes and regional processes. Theoretical scholarship provides a series of conceptual tools useful for diagnosing the EUSAIR's 'state of health' and evaluating the Strategy's prospective impact against the region's socio-political context. Not to give space to political dynamics in a study on multi-level cooperation would be myopic - especially so in the case of the EUSAIR, whose ultimate goal is to facilitate the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU. Logistical connections, communication opportunities, and economic exchanges are important but cannot monopolise the attention of stakeholders. In fact, "the [material] capability of interaction always determines the type and extent of the processes that *may take place* among actors, but does not necessarily determine the type and extent of the processes that *actually take place* among them."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the above mentioned factors are necessary but insufficient conditions to bring about political convergence. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of globalisation and market interdependence, political spaces emerge only if certain political, cultural, and strategic premises are given - at multiple levels. This is what this study wants to understand.

In order to do so, I employ a qualitative methodology mainly based on a deductive method. Primary sources such as documents and reports drafted by the EU and other international, regional, and local institutions constitute the rough empirical material of this research. Secondary sources commenting on global and regional dynamics add depth and width to the empirical background, which is then interpreted through a series of different lenses. I have tried not to side with any particular school of politological thought, but rather to employ a diversified set of 'tools of understanding.' This helps approach the topic from different angles and provide policy-makers with a wide range of perspectives. This research is also enriched by the information gathered during (semi-structured) interviews that I conducted in February 2019. The identities of the three EUSAIR-related officials with whom I had the chance to talk will not be disclosed, in order to comply with ethical standards. No need to say that the propositions formulated here on the basis of theoretical and empirical evidence cannot be equated to infallible recipes for practical-political success. As Raymond Aron once put it: "We cannot go directly from theory as a science to theory as a doctrine for action."<sup>7</sup> To policy-makers the hard task of choosing the path to follow.

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<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Colombo (2009). "La globalizzazione politica alla prova. Verso una scomposizione regionale del sistema internazionale?" *Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali*, vol. 9, p. 85 (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Aron (1967). "What is a Theory of International Relations?" *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 189 (see also pp. 201-206).

This study proceeds as follows. In the first chapter I present the theoretical framework of my research. Secondly, I provide a broad background about the current state of international relations and the core characteristics of the region under consideration. I also outline the rationale and main features of the EUSAIR. In chapter three I apply the aforementioned conceptual tools to the empirical context, carrying out a structured analysis of institutionalised regional cooperation in the AIR. I conclude summing up the main findings and providing some policy recommendations.

Before moving on, I take advantage of this occasion to thank all the people who contributed directly or indirectly to this research. In particular, I would like to express gratitude to Prof Stefano Bianchini (University of Bologna) and Prof Donato Iacobucci (Marche Polytechnic University) for their scholarly advice and to Marzia Bona (Eurac Research), Dr Luisa Chiodi (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso – Transeuropa), and Marija Vishinova (Balkan Civil Society Development Network - BCSDN) for the time they spent to discuss with me the EUSAIR and the region. I am also very grateful to the three officials who agreed to share with me their insider knowledge of the Strategy.



## 1. Assessing Institutionalised Regional Cooperation: a Theoretical Framework

A region, rather than a mere geographical object, is a social construct. As many social objects, regions are anchored in an “ontologically objective” layer of existence, but their qualities and inner dynamics are shaped (also) by non-material and inter-subjective factors that pertain to the realm of politics.<sup>8</sup> Ideas of collective belonging, amity-enmity patterns, institutional practices, (the perception of) shared threats, and loosely defined power dynamics are among these factors.<sup>9</sup> Thus a circumscribed geographical space is a necessary but insufficient condition for the emergence of a region; for this to happen, processes of regionalism and/or regionalisation should take place.

While they both contribute to the same outcome, ‘regionalism’ and ‘regionalisation’ imply different socio-political dynamics.<sup>10</sup> The former is State-led and relies heavily on formal institutions that channel resources and catalyse inter-governmental efforts, typically focussing on narrow areas of concern. The EU was born this way - resulting from inter-governmental efforts originally concerned with trade. Conversely, regionalisation indicates bottom-up processes of regional clustering based on a rather informal and spontaneous intensification of socio-economic exchanges among geographically contiguous non-State actors. This is the region-formation process that post-Cold War globalisation has typically supported.

Regionalism and regionalisation are clearly two ideal-typical categories. Regions actually result from a blend of these two processes, involving multiple levels of interaction. But irrespective of their relative combination, these processes lead to the formation of geographically bound socio-political constructs whereby participant actors share some sort of ties or concerns and enjoy comparatively high rates of interaction.

### 1.1. Nature and Origins of Regional Processes

Political Science helps disentangle the bundle of regional processes with a series of conceptual lenses, which address the issue from different angles. It is possible to distinguish

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<sup>8</sup> For the analytically useful classification of ontologically/epistemically objective/subjective objects please refer to: John R. Searle (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin, pp. 1-29.

<sup>9</sup> Berry Buzan (2016). *People, States and Fear*. Colchester: ECPR Press, 2nd edition, pp. 157-162.

<sup>10</sup> Here I refer to the terminological distinction presented in: Tanja A. Börzel & Thomas Risse (2016). “Introduction: Framework of the Handbook and Conceptual Clarifications”, in Idem (ed.s). *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-15.

three main logics underpinning regional processes, characterised by a power-based, (liberal) rationalist, or socio-constructionist approach.<sup>11</sup> These different logics are not mutually exclusive and may be used as jointly as inter-changeably to account for or explain a certain situation.

Power-based approaches resonate with hegemonic and balance theories of International Relations and suggest to understand regional dynamics by looking at States' material interests. Power and prestige are the main variables to consider.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, region-building is the result of a State's attempt to expand or maintain its material advantage within a geographical area by pushing (more or less forcibly) other States to cooperate. According to the same logic but reversing the perspective, processes of regional clustering could be seen also as the result of the initiative of minor States, which may bandwagon with or close their ranks against a major threatening power. A power-based perspective calls for paying attention to the ebb and flow of the hegemon's and/or minor States' commitment to the regional project in terms of will and resources.

A rationalist logic focuses on totally different aspects. Rather than on power-plays and zero-sum dynamics, multiple channels of complex and mutually beneficial interdependence play the main role in shaping regional dynamics.<sup>13</sup> Regional formations are the result of converging forces working both at global and sub-national level: globalisation, on the one hand; and domestic interest groups, on the other. Their joint action brings about large scale trans-national synergies in a variety of domains, raising the benefits of cooperation as well as the costs of resorting to violent competition. Competition for relative gains is not to be excluded but the overall outcome of a regional process led by this logic should be positive in absolute terms. This ratio was behind the 'transition to market and democracy' advocated by the Clinton Administration and still upholds the EU's cohesion and neighbourhood policies.

Finally, socio-constructionism. This rationale stresses the role of culture and knowledge - more in general, ideational factors - in shaping cooperation and integration, at various levels of analysis.<sup>14</sup> The underlying assumption is that actors do not act on the basis

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<sup>11</sup> Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer & Volker Rittgenberg (1997). *Theories of International Regimes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 23-210; Tanja Börzel (2016). "Theorizing Regionalism: Cooperation, Integration, and Governance", in *Oxford Handbook*, op. cit., pp. 43-52.

<sup>12</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau (2006). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 7th edition; Kenneth N. Waltz (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA; London; etc.: Addison-Wesley.

<sup>13</sup> Robert O. Keohane & Joseph S. Nye (2012). *Power and Interdependence*. Boston, MA; London: Longman, 4th edition.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Wendt (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Nicholas G. Onuf (2012). *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*. London: Routledge

of an atavistic hunger for power or rationalist calculations, but rather according to (non-universal) sets of ideas that define interests, perceptions, and standards of appropriate behaviour. The higher the homogeneity of ideas, the easier to achieve coordinated action; conversely, ideational dis-homogeneity fosters cognitive refusal and hinders the very possibility to understand the other. Social learning is possible, but rare and slow; it is the outcome that awareness campaigns or the expansion of organisations usually aim at reaching.

These three logics reflect not only different analytical standpoints, but also the multiplicity of forces that contribute to regional processes. Different actors may move from different perspectives (on different tables), creating forces and counter-forces that converge at regional level to support or thwart cooperation. There is no coercive centre backing regionalism/regionalisation, but a complex network of subjectivities that, absent a shared project or sufficient elements of aggregation, would not coalesce in any meaningful way.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore essential to unpack carefully the scenario and understand which type of forces lies at each level.

The forces shaping regional processes differ not only in terms of structuring logics, but also with respect to the *locus* of origin and the dynamics of authority underpinning the region's genesis. As regards the first aspect, regional constructs may result, on the one hand, from forces endogenous to the region itself. It is the case of the Central European Initiative (CEI), founded by Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Yugoslavia in 1989. The CEI stemmed from the *motu proprio* of these four governments, which were willing to go beyond the rigid amity and enmity patterns dictated by the Cold War. CEI members' commitment made possible the institution's progressive enlargement and adaptation to the post-Cold War order.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, regional constructs may result from forces exogenous to the region, shaped by the interests of third countries or global dynamics with trans-national impact. Globalisation is a powerful process which is often depicted as the main force responsible for the 1990's 'new wave' of regionalisation. Similarly, the influence of the United States (US)

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<sup>15</sup> Björn Hettne (1999). "Globalisation and the New Regionalism: The Second Great Transformation", in Björn Hettne, András Inotai & Osvaldo Sunkel (ed.s). *Globalism and New Regionalism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> The CEI is often viewed as a brilliant example of institutional adaptation. Just a couple of years after CEI's foundation, the end of the Cold War brought about the risk of sudden obsolescence for the institution. However, instead of dismantling the CEI, member States decided to reshape its goals in accordance with the new international environment. This allowed the CEI to survive 1991. Unfortunately, this successful story seems to have come to an end in May 2018, when Austria - a founding member - withdrew its membership.

via the Atlantic Alliance contributed undeniably to post-World War II regional consolidation on European soil.<sup>17</sup>

This aspect relates closely to the dynamics of authority that bring to the emergence of regional processes.<sup>18</sup> One should not assume that free will and conscious coordination are necessary conditions for such processes to happen. So-called spontaneous orders emerge from the natural convergence of behaviour, often thanks to the implicit action of a common ethos shared by relevant actors. This type of orders, given their ideational nature, are highly resistant to change and, though they do not usually bring about formal systems of restrictions, they nonetheless exert a certain social pressure in support of homogenous behaviour. At the opposite side of the spectrum there are imposed orders - purposefully created by a dominant actor to exert authority over a set of subordinate others. Norms of behaviour may not be explicitly stated in this case, too. But in any case behavioural compliance is achieved via coercion, cooptation, manipulation or moral leadership. For such an order to survive, the region's demiurge has to invest a considerable amount of resources to support its own legitimacy and to avoid centrifugal pushes. Negotiated orders, well represented by mainstream institutionalised international cooperation, are a third option lying in-between the aforementioned extremes. They are the product of mindful efforts of actors who agree, via bargain and compromise, a set of practical tools to deploy in the pursuit of common goals. The very negotiated nature of such orders makes them as complex as unstable. While environmental changes may rapidly reduce their effectiveness, internal changes (e.g., of the interests of participants) hardly impact on the normative status quo, if not in the long-term.

Early forms of regional clustering - and their study - revolved around economy and state-building. The strengthening of cooperation in these areas was (is) seen as inherently advantageous, as well as a precondition for political integration. Later waves of regionalism acquired instead a multi-dimensional character and developed in all sorts of domains: security, finance, development, environment, culture etc.<sup>19</sup> These diverse regional trends can have either a conservative or transformational purpose, but they always involve some degree of homogenisation or convergence - be it inward-looking, i.e., aimed at consolidating

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<sup>17</sup> Karl W. Deutsch et al. (1957). *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in Light of Historical Experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Oran R. Young (1982). "Regime Dynamics: The Rise and Fall of International Regimes". *International Organization*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 281-288.

<sup>19</sup> Hettne (1999). "Globalisation", op. cit., pp. 6-11; Fredrik Söderbaum (2016). "Old, New, and Comparative Regionalism: The History and Scholarly Development in the Field", in *Oxford Handbook*, op. cit., pp. 16-37.

the internal coherence *within* a region vis-à-vis what lies beyond its borders; or outward-oriented, i.e., aimed at integrating the inside and the outside of the region.

‘Convergence’ is thus key to regional processes. And if one is concerned with regional processes of positive, cooperative nature, then convergence *of expectations* is particularly important. It originates spontaneously or artificially as a result of the aforementioned balance of ‘forces’ and is necessary condition to reap the gains of cooperative action. In this sense, regional processes can be understood also through the theory of international regimes - which are defined by Oran Young as “[in]formal] social institutions governing the actions of those interested in specifiable activities (or meaningful sets of activities)”.<sup>20</sup> Regimes facilitate decision-making by providing (regional) actors with pre-constituted sets of goals, procedures, and behaviours that drastically downsize the need to hold draining discussions on each and every decision. Deviance is always possible, but not fatal to the regime itself.<sup>21</sup>

A particular form of regime-making revolves around the so called multi-level governance (MLG). Broadly speaking, MLG points to the formalised and binding interaction among different levels of authority in need to coordinate their agendas, competences, and resources in the pursuit of a shared goal. The term was coined in the early 1990s to grasp the growing role of sub-national actors in the EU’s policies. Today MLG designates those rule-based structures for the pooling of resources and cross-sector coordination lying in-between the national, supra-national, and sub-national levels. In some measure, MLG applies on a bigger scale the rationale of competence-sharing among administrative units *within* states.<sup>22</sup>

In itself the construct of MLG does not add much to what I have presented so far. At best, it enables to gather all those reasonings under the same label, in the attempt to provide a broader picture of the contemporary networks of global interaction. The practical adoption of this concept by international institutions has stressed in particular the aspects of vertical and horizontal bargains and administrative adjustments, as well as the need to define clear goals, indicators of effectiveness, and sanctioning mechanisms. In doing so, however,

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<sup>20</sup> Oran R. Young (1980). “International Regimes: Problems of Concept Formation”. *World Politics*, vol. 32, no. 3, p. 332.

<sup>21</sup> *Caveat!* Throughout this research, the term ‘regime’ will be used coherently with the definition provided in this paragraph. Such definition has nothing to do with the common usage of the term, usually referring to a (rogue) domestic rule (e.g., the regime imposed by dictator X).

<sup>22</sup> Joan DeBardeleben & Achim Hurrelmann (2007). “Introduction”, in idem, *Democratic Dilemmas of Multilevel Governance. Legitimacy, Representation and Accountability in the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-14.

institutions have employed a rather legal-economistic parlance that, while motivated by technical purposes, overshadows many of the factors highlighted above.<sup>23</sup>

### 1.2. Variation Dimensions of Regimes and Governance Structures

Regional experiments that develop into regimes and MLG systems vary across several dimensions. I will sketch the most relevant ones in the following paragraphs, as they will be useful frames to assess the value and limits of the EUSAIR.

Firstly, institutional variation can be registered in terms of goals, with respect to three main aspects: extension, intension, and depth. The former two indicate the number of targeted issue-areas and the specificity of the rights/injunctions enshrined in the regime - respectively.<sup>24</sup> The Program for Infrastructure and Development in Africa is a case of narrow extension, while the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) - with its 7 areas of concern - has a wide extension. The EU's regime(s) offers examples of both high and low intension - respectively in the domain of foreign policy and fiscal issues. Depth indicates instead the emphasis put by a regime on building domestic capabilities and on leading partners towards autonomy, rather than providing simply some sort of superficial aid, with no explicit end-state.<sup>25</sup> The programmes of assistance implemented within the framework of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) belong to the latter category; opposite the case of the EU cohesion policy.

Secondly, (regional) governance structures may vary in their modes of interaction and problem-solving.<sup>26</sup> Dyadic structures (e.g., South American Infrastructure and Planning Council, COSIPLAN) are characterised by interactions among actors of the same type. Decision-making, assistance and monitoring are carried out at the same level; other levels either do not take part in the regime's activities or are mere objects/executors of higher level decisions. Conversely, multiplex modes of interaction involve many levels of agency - as it is usually the case with MLG. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent each type of actor actually participates in the regime's activities. Variations in terms of problem-solving mechanisms are also worth considering, in as much as they impact directly on the

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<sup>23</sup> See the case of the OECD, at: <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/multi-levelgovernance.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Laszlo Bruszt & Stefano Palestini (2016). "Regional Development Governance" in *Oxford Handbook*, op. cit., pp. 383-384; Stephan Haggard & Beth A. Simmons (1987). "Theories of International Regimes" *International Organization*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 497-498; Donald J. Puchala & Raymond F. Hopkins (1982) "International Regimes: Lessons from Inductive Analysis" *International Organization*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 248-249; Young (1980), op. cit., pp. 342-344.

<sup>25</sup> Bruszt & Palestini (2016), op. cit., pp. 383-384.

<sup>26</sup> Bruszt & Palestini (2016), op. cit., pp. 384-386.

effectiveness of a regime. Modes of problem-solving pertain to the way the actors share and use available information. For example, the procedures relative to EU structural funds involve a mere checklist compliance, whereby the only relevant piece of information is whether or not a certain goal has been reached. Brussels employs joint-problem solving modes when dealing with pre-accession procedures instead. In this case, the EU and candidate countries assess jointly each item on the agenda, and progress is continuously re-evaluated. Such mechanism allows to change strategy and generate alternative solutions while the reform process is still underway.

A third analytical aspect to consider revolves around decision-making. The inter-related concepts of pooling and delegation result particularly useful in this sense - as Tobias Lenz and Gary Marks underline.<sup>27</sup> The former concept refers to the degree of concentration of decision-making power within a given regime. The lesser the decisional authority of a single actor, the higher the pooling - i.e., authority is shared across participants, whatever their type, for example via a majority voting system (e.g., African Union). Usually pooling is higher with regard to budgeting. On the other hand, delegation is high when participant actors decide to grant decisional authority to a third party (e.g., an executive secretariat) that decides on their behalf (as in the case of the Pacific Community). Over the past two decades States have shown more willingness to delegate decision-making powers to independent non-State bodies attached to regional organisations.

Three more aspects are worth considering, the first being that of robustness.<sup>28</sup> It indicates the capacity of a regime to withstand environmental challenges as those generated by (the mutation of) the international system. Thus robustness is a dynamic dimension, which can be evaluated only throughout time by observing to what extent an institution continues to be able to fulfil its role even in the face of exogenous pressures. Instead effectiveness is a static quality, since it can be 'measured' in each single moment in time.<sup>29</sup> Effectiveness subsumes two overlapping concepts: strength - i.e., the degree of behavioural convergence that the regime is able to sustain -, and efficacy - i.e., the regime's actual capacity to reach its goals. Last but not least I shall mention the organisational distinction between formal and informal regimes, i.e., between projects which have developed physical bureaucratic apparatuses and those which have not.<sup>30</sup> A regime's organisational form is

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<sup>27</sup> Tobias Lenz & Gary Marks (2016). "Regional Institutional Design" in *Oxford Handbook*, op. cit., pp. 514-517.

<sup>28</sup> Hasenclever, Mayer & Rittenberg (1997), op. cit., pp. 2-3.

<sup>29</sup> Young (1980), op. cit., pp. 338-339; Puchala & Hopkins (1982), op. cit., pp. 272-273; Hasenclever, Mayer, Rittberger (1997), op. cit., pp. 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> Puchala & Hopkins (1982), op. cit., p. 249.

often linked to the way it was born - in particular, to its spontaneous, negotiated, or imposed nature. But also the nature of the goals which the actors intend to pursue has an impact on the regime's organisational form.<sup>31</sup> For example, some issue-areas as that of pollution may merely require an exchange of information or passive actions, with no need to develop a permanent institutional machinery. Conversely, regimes on exchange rates or systems of economic governance will always require at least a small physical apparatus, since these projects need to intervene directly and extensively into the participants' ways of life and support continued cooperation.

### *1.3. Dimensions of Impact and Change*

Regional processes have no inherently positive or negative nature. Think about one of the many empirical reasons behind regional processes: the risk of war among a set of neighbouring countries. This same condition has generated opposite outcomes. On the one hand, the repeated occurrence of wars among European powers led eventually to the creation of peaceful regional institutions such as the EU. Such institution has enormously contributed to the establishment of peace on the continent by providing arenas for discussion and non-conflictual problem-solving among participant States. On the other hand, and well before the EU was founded, the very term 'Europe' acquired meaning thanks to the high rate of interaction enjoyed by its constitutive units - an interaction which has been frequently characterised by conflictual outcomes. Hence it is possible to say that Europe has clustered as a region (also) because of the centripetal role of war; it was not peaceful cooperation but bloodshed which dragged Europe together as a region. The same is true for today's Middle East.

However, the contemporary wave of highly institutionalised regionalism is certainly backed by a positive, constructive rationale. Processes of regional clustering can deliver many common goods beyond their specific goals.<sup>32</sup> First of all, in the presence of economic complementarities and clear commitments, these projects can support welfare. The pooling of resources helps face global competition and overcome individual shortcomings, sustaining regional growth and - as a consequence - global development. Regional institutional processes can also help provide for minimum regional order. For this to happen, the institutional dimensions of the project need to be arranged in such a way as to

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<sup>31</sup> Haggard & Simmons (1987), op. cit., pp. 496-497.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Falk (1999). "Regionalism and World Order After the Cold War" in *Globalism and the New Regionalism*, op. cit., pp. 228-249; Hettne (1999). "Prologue" in *Globalism and the New Regionalism*, op. cit., pp. xxvi-xxvii; Lenz & Marks (2016), op. cit., pp. 522-527.



facilitate the exchange of information, effective signalling, and reciprocity. The creation of independent institutional organs with arbitration and sanctioning functions would be useful to this end; they may even help carry out agendas which individual participants would not be able to implement by themselves, because of strong opposition at their level of action. In this sense, the externalisation of an issue allows to bypass local constraints. Regimes can also provide participant actors with an additional source of legitimacy, thereby sustaining domestic stability. This works for both democratic and authoritarian countries, raising the issue of whether regime expansion always supports the diffusion of norms and best-practices, or it can be rather used as a cover-up for ulterior motives.<sup>33</sup>

While institutionalised regional processes have the ambition to impact significantly on their field of competence, they themselves can undergo change over time. Conditions for regime change differ from case to case, on the basis of environmental conditions and the regime's nature.<sup>34</sup> Internal normative contradictions developed over time and independent mutations of the very nature of the object on which the regime focuses may drastically reduce the latter's effectiveness or make it obsolete *tout court*. Notwithstanding the efforts of the governance system to homogenise expectations and behaviour, participants' values, structures of knowledge, and interests may start diverging (again) as a result of forces which are outside the regime's reach. It does not necessarily mean that the regime has failed as such; it may well be that its institutional checks and balances, while devised appropriately, are not able by their own constitution to govern particularly impactful centrifugal thrusts. This is especially the case when the regime has a narrow technical nature but the exogenous factors foreshadowing change have a rather holistic, structural nature. Such is the case of ideational or power shifts. All types of orders are sensible to such factors, which are constitutive of politics as such. In this sense, not only the decline of a regime's patron, but also the rise of new centres of power, the ebb and flow of legitimacy and ideas can change allegiances and commitments, impacting on the survival of governance structures.

Regime change does not need to be radical.<sup>35</sup> When it involves only the regime's supra-structure - thus its procedures, goals or, more in general, its institutional arrangements - then we are facing a case of evolution, or change *within* the regime. Nothing

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<sup>33</sup> Alessandra Russo & Edward Stoddard (2018). "Why Do Authoritarian Leaders Do Regionalism? Ontological Security and Eurasian Regional Cooperation" *The International Spectator*, vol. 53, no. 3, pp. 20, 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> Ernst B. Haas (1980). "Why Collaborate? Issue-Linkage and International Relations" *World Politics*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 385-396; Young (1982), *op. cit.*, pp. 348-355.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen D. Krasner (1982). "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables" *International Organization*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 185-205; Puchala & Hopkins (1982), *op. cit.*, pp. 249-250.

changes in any fundamental sense in the 'rules of the game'. Evolutionary adjustments imply second-order modifications that allow the regime's survival at admissible costs, vis-à-vis potentially disruptive changes of endogenous or exogenous origin. Quite the opposite when revolutions (changes *of* regime) occur. This option is closely connected with shifts in the distribution of power and prestige, which strike at the basis of political relations as such. By altering the assessments of the costs and benefits related to the maintenance of the governance structure, they sustain non-compliance and the adoption of exit strategies by participant actors. As a result, the regime either collapses or results totally altered in its essence (composition, goals, authorities, structures), mirroring the new political configuration. When designing a new governance structure, participants should be aware of these risks (and opportunities) and devise institutional frameworks that can ease transformative changes. Formal institutions with clear procedures and high on pooling and delegation usually help this purpose.

## **2. The ‘Big Picture’: Empirical Background and Preliminary Comments on the Adriatic-Ionian Region, and Beyond**

In order to diagnose the state of play and the opportunities of institutionalised regional governance in the AIR we need to look beyond the region itself.<sup>36</sup> The AIR - as any other region - is not an independent unit impermeable to what happens at higher (global, international) and lower (national, subnational) levels. It is thus essential to gain knowledge of the broader context in which the AIR is imbued, even more so if we want to discuss *multi-level* governance - which develops at the crossroads of the international, transnational, and (sub)national domains. This is not the place for lengthy discussions on all these aspects, but key elements are presented here in support of the research’s purpose. The chapter concludes with an overview of the structure, mechanisms, and aims of the EUSAIR.

### *2.1. The Global and International Level*

The liberal world order is in crisis.<sup>37</sup> Since its inception, it has suffered many setbacks, but none of them was tantamount to an existential challenge - as it is the case today instead. The future scenario is not foreseeable at the present stage. But while it may not be clear where we are heading to, our understanding of the present and how we got here is more solid.

Global hierarchies are being challenged on both material and ideational grounds. In military terms the US is still the leading actor by far. In 2018 Washington has further increased its defence spending by 5%, accounting for almost the 45% of total defence expenditures in the world.<sup>38</sup> No other State will be able to bridge the gap in military capabilities in the near-to-middle term and this gives the US-led status quo some stability. However, the relative increase in the capabilities (China) and assertiveness (Russia) of competing actors, together with Washington’s willingness to scale down its international

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<sup>36</sup> Remember that, for the purposes of this research, the AIR corresponds to the geographical area covered by the EUSAIR.

<sup>37</sup> John J. Mearsheimer (2018). *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Vittorio Emanuele Parsi (2018). *Titanic: il naufragio dell’ordine liberale*. Bologna: Il Mulino. See also the special issue “Ordering the World? Liberal Internationalism in Theory and Practice” *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>38</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (2019). *The Military Balance 2019*. IISS.

commitments will prompt international and regional balances to change. The economic basis of the liberal order is less stable, being shaken by cyclical crises and having shifted in the recent past in favour of non-Western poles - notably, China. Yet the capitalistic model of development has been able to adapt to or at least endure beyond these disruptive phenomena, and the Western world still detains a considerable portion of global wealth. While the US is not anymore the first economy in real terms, its financial dominion is still undisputed and the Dollar remains the main currency of choice.<sup>39</sup>

The situation is more serious if one assesses the state of the legitimacy and ideational grip of the liberal world order. The liberal leadership and liberal-democratic values are contested both externally and internally. Externally - favoured by a relative increase in the diffusion of power and Washington's growing reticency to police the post-Cold War order -, a growing number of State and non-State actors contest liberal beliefs and contrast Western deeds, with the aim of re-arranging the international setting to their own benefit. Internally - the West is increasingly divided and disillusioned with regard to the promises of Liberalism. The economic backlashes of an un-governed globalisation, the fears sparked off by new threats to security, the social impact of the digital revolution, and the re-politicisation of cultural identities have all stricken at the basis of individual liberal national orders and, through them, at global level, in a nefarious cycle.<sup>40</sup>

Overall, we are facing a retreat of the globalisation of power and political languages. These phenomena render the picture of a system sliding into multipolarity and with a high degree of ideological heterogeneity. This opens up to both opportunities and risks. On the positive side, actors enjoy higher freedom of choice, which supports flexibility of action and the possibility to make up for issue-specific tensions by cooperating on other tables. At the same time, however, this condition lowers the ability of actors to foresee the outcome of their actions as well as others' intentions. Opportunities for cooperation multiply, but so do the risks of competition, while alliances become feebler, weakened by diverging interests. Such negative aspects are amplified by the ideological fragmentation of the world, which bolsters incommunicability, mis-trust, and reciprocal de-legitimation.

All these developments hinder the West's ability to translate its resources into influence as effectively as before. Strategies of action whose admissibility and successfulness

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<sup>39</sup> Photis Lysandrou (21 May 2018). "A Post-West Future? US Still Leads Way in Bonds and Equities", *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/94aa412c-5aa5-11e8-b8b2-d6ceb45fa9d0>.

<sup>40</sup> Sonia Lucarelli (2019). "Unione Europea nell'era post-liberale: una sfida esistenziale dalle radici globali" in: Alessandro Colombo & Paolo Magri (ed.s). *La fine di un mondo. Rapporto ISPI 2019*. Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), pp. 77-92.

were taken for granted now face failure and contestation. Actors, regions, and issues once of primary importance see their relevance drastically downsized - and vice versa.

The EU, as physical embodiment of the liberal order, is not immune to this crisis. The maturity and density of European institutions make the EU particularly resilient to disruptive changes and fragmentation.<sup>41</sup> A layer of collective values and shared interests underpins the EU, binding together its member states into a social community via a web of formal rules and cognitive assumptions. This condition fosters homeostatic tendencies, but it does not rule out change *tout court*. By striking at the level of those shared values and interests, the crisis of the liberal order does pose a risk for the EU's ability to present itself as a credible actor both inside and outside of its own borders. The rise of illiberal and populist forces, Brexit, and new secessionist tendencies challenge the European experiment from within, undermining its legitimacy and nurturing the unprecedented fear of its reversibility. The impact of these phenomena is not relegated to political debates. These are phenomena that may change the internal balances and constitution of the EU and, in so doing, re-shape the nature and purposes of its (external) action.

The EU as a whole still enjoys a good economic position and can leverage its political capital against competing actors, but this position should not be taken for granted in the long-term. The international role of the EU has been criticised on multiple grounds and the present conditions may contribute to the further erosion of the EU's prestige and effectiveness. One of the major risks for the EU is to fall into the same trap that got the US in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the quantity and quality of military display, Washington has failed to influence sensibly local dynamics and today still finds itself engaged in a political and military quagmire. By the same token, the EU should not think that the profusion of material resources will necessarily make up for the socio-political problems it tries to confront - internally and externally.

This is particularly important when the EU tries to attract and stabilise a region so diverse and complex as the Balkan region. Bruxelles has deployed massive financial assets there, but these instruments have had varying degrees of success, complicit the heavy involvement of the US and the United Nations (UN) in local processes during the 1990s and the contrasting agendas of EU members re enlargement and dynamics in post-Yugoslav space. In addition, the region's peculiar features have been particularly difficult to understand for the EU - a condition hampering the smooth progress of the economic agenda.

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<sup>41</sup> For the same reason, however, the EU adapts slowly to environmental changes. High institutionalisation brings about bureaucratic inertia.

In order to go beyond such limitations, the EU set forth two principles (in addition to the so-called Copenhagen criteria<sup>42</sup>) on which to base relations with the former Yugoslav countries - namely the willingness to cooperate at regional level with neighbours and the fulfilment of the international legal obligations prescribed by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the UN, and the Dayton Accords (1995). European efforts have resulted in the accession of two such countries into the EU (Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia in 2013); other three countries were granted candidate status (Montenegro in 2010, Serbia in 2012, and Albania in 2014) and one is covered at least by a Stability and Association Agreement (Bosnia and Herzegovina, agreement into force since 2015).<sup>43</sup> In the Western Balkans, depending on the country, trade with the EU amounts to 60-70% of the total exports; trade of goods is particularly strong, while services still face barriers.<sup>44</sup> Yet corruption, organised crime, poor administrative and judicial systems, and ethno-political tensions still thrive in the region. These, together with the EU's enlargement fatigue and focus on other priorities (e.g., terrorism, immigration, internal economic and political stability) have downsized drastically the chances of further enlargement in the foreseeable future.

## 2.2. Regional Complexities

The contemporary Balkan complex largely results from the fragmentation of a pre-existing geopolitical space - Yugoslavia. Because of this fact, opposite centrifugal and centripetal forces coexist in the area.<sup>45</sup> On the one hand, the new system has inherited the dense web of infrastructural, demographic, and cultural interconnections that once kept together the Yugoslav federation. These elements certainly play in favour of a certain physical coherence. On the other hand, however, Yugoslavia's breakup along ethno-national rifts has resulted in instability and a lack of political cohesion within and across the Balkan states. Albania was

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<sup>42</sup> European Commission (N/D). "Accession Criteria" *European Commission website*, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria_en).

<sup>43</sup> Also Kosovo is recipient of a Stability and Association Agreement (2016). However, unlike the other documents of this kind, this Agreement does not represent a pact between EU member states and Kosovo, but between the *EU as a legal subject* and Kosovo. Members were not asked to ratify the Agreement. This because of the intra-EU divergencies in regard to Kosovo's sovereignty. It is for the same reason this country does not fall within the EUSAIR's reach.

<sup>44</sup> Intra-regional trade is instead very low (with the exception of Montenegro). For an overview, see: Economist Intelligence Unit (21 June 2018). "The Western Balkans: Trading Below Potential", *The Economist*, <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=976854481&Country=Macedonia&topic=Economy&subtopic=Economic+profile> (last access: 28 May 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Alessandro Colombo (2008). "Dai Balcani al Caucaso. Le guerre di successione e i nuovi sistemi regionali" *Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali*, no. 7, 85-97.

not part of Yugoslavia but its socialist past gives rise to social, economic, and institutional fragilities comparable to those I have just mentioned. In the Balkan complex, any attempt to settle and legitimise the new order has punctually (re-)activated contrasting memories and reciprocal rivalries. Still today, regional States securitise their identities in the attempt to give meaning to their (actual or desired) nationhood and de-legitimise others'. After the Yugoslav wars, social and political institutions have strengthened, civil society has developed, and economies have improved. However, contemporary events warn us against any excesses of confidence.<sup>46</sup>

Serbia is a key country in the Balkan region, in light of its decisive role in the unsettled issue of Kosovo and also because of its geopolitical relevance. Thanks to its location at the crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the South, Belgrade enjoys considerable contractual power and can capitalise on that in economic and politico-strategic terms. Yet the country's potential is drastically diminished by weak development parameters, which fall short of EU standards. Significantly, during the last decade Serbia has experienced a three-digit recession for three times (2009, 2011, 2014) and its democratisation score in Freedom House rankings has lowered consistently. Contemporary Serbia is also characterised by the growing politicisation of the memories relative to the Yugoslav experience and World War II. These memories are used by several political entrepreneurs to gain domestic and regional leverage, at the expenses of reconciliation.

Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania are not in a better position than Serbia. In particular, the behaviour of Montenegro's parliamentary oppositions raises concerns about the state of the internal political debate. While the country is labelled as a 'Balkan success story' and the recent accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) seems to bear witness to this fact - corruption and clientelism persist, aggravated by the low turnover of key institutional figures. Also Albania has shown a clear interest in getting closer to the West but, notwithstanding remarkable achievements, structural fragilities have required the regular intervention of international financial institutions and other states.<sup>47</sup> An unconvincing investment climate, ineffective public governance, and the aftermath of a labour-export economy still constrain the country. Bosnia and Herzegovina shares many of these features. There, the main obstacle is a very complex politico-

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<sup>46</sup> For an overview, see: Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti (ed.) (14 May 2018). *Western balkans: Still Living the EU Dream?* Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/western-balkans-still-living-eu-dream-20515>; NATO Defence College Foundation (2018). *The Western Balkans at a Crossroads*. Rome: NDCF, <http://www.natofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/NDCF-2018-balkan-web.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> In this regard it is worth remembering three military operations sponsored by Italy: 'Pellicano' (1991-1993), 'Alba' (1997), and 'Allied Harbour' (1999).

administrative system, which reflects the country's contested origin and makes decision-making ineffective.

Croatia and Slovenia are better positioned in terms of economic performance and institutional quality. But while the EU membership of these two countries is at the same time a symptom of and further stimulus for their reformist efforts, Zagreb and Ljubljana still partake in the regional dynamics of political contestation and instability. Croatia has experienced the deterioration of relations with many neighbours, due to disagreements over territorial, infrastructural, and cultural issues which have provided fertile ground for the harsh nationalist rhetoric of certain socio-political groups.<sup>48</sup> For its part, Slovenia performs better than the other former Yugoslav countries in terms of institutional accountability and democratisation. In 2017 it scored 7.50 in the Democratisation Index - the same score as Italy and not far from the EU average.<sup>49</sup> However, Euro-skepticism and active political extremism are on the rise, and the growing abstentionism of the moderate strata of the population makes such trend even more worrisome.<sup>50</sup>

Overall, unresolved structural deficiencies inherited from the recent past and contested processes of state-building based on ascriptive conceptions of community hinder to varying extents the economic and political transition of the Balkan region. Relative improvements do take place, but they are neither smooth nor solid.<sup>51</sup> Convergence with Western Europe remains a remote possibility for many of the countries of this region.<sup>52</sup>

These broad contradictions impact on the growth and quality of the Balkan civil societies. The relative liberalisation of political life has created spaces for citizens to organise themselves and to influence decision-makers on a number of issues - migration, justice, and corruption being the most sensitive ones. Demonstrations regularly take place and NGOs

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<sup>48</sup> Giorgio Fruscione (26 September 2017). "Croazia: problemi con tutti i vicini", *East Journal*, <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/86097>.

<sup>49</sup> The historical series of data on the Democracy Index can be retrieved at: <https://infographics.economist.com/2018/DemocracyIndex/>.

<sup>50</sup> Amedeo Amoretti (8 September 2018). "L'estrema destra costituisce una milizia armata", *East Journal*, <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/91816>; Pietro Aleotti (14 May 2019). "Slovenia: elezioni europee, tra voto ai moderati e rischio astensione", *East Journal*, <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/97873>.

<sup>51</sup> World Bank (2019). *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Spring 2019*. Washington: World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>.

<sup>52</sup> Euractiv/Reuters (27 February 2018). "EBRD: Western Balkans could take up to 200 years to catch up with EU" *Euractive.com*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/ebrd-western-balkans-could-take-up-to-200-years-to-catch-up-with-eu/>.



cooperate with the legislative and executive power in various forms.<sup>53</sup> Targeted foreign aid has been particularly useful to strengthen the material basis of the civil society, *de facto* granting sufficient resources for citizens to mobilise. The EU has played an important role in this process, being the development of civil society a transversal issue in accession negotiations. However, irrespective of the state of integration with the EU, civil society is under-performing in the Balkans.<sup>54</sup> Various legislative frameworks encourage the participation of civil society in the governance of these countries but existing mechanisms do not support sustained vertical cooperation and consultation - which are sporadic, *ad hoc*, and largely dependent on individual initiatives from the bottom. Political and administrative levels declare openness to the engagement with civil society, but the region's prevailing political culture often prevents to translate words into practice.<sup>55</sup> On the other side, civil society itself still lacks the lobbying power and specific competences to exert a real impact on public life. There is also the problem of civil society groups with nationalist agendas, which leads us back to the issues discussed in the previous paragraphs.

The institutional fragility of the Balkan states favours the penetration of external powers into the region, too.<sup>56</sup> The Balkans have been historically an heteronomous complex, characterised and re-produced by strong external influences. After the 1990s' season of protagonism, the US has dis-engaged from the region, leaving other international actors room for manoeuvre.<sup>57</sup> China - facilitated by non-restrictive local market regulations - is investing enormous resources there, especially in telecommunications and logistical infrastructures. Beijing's 'Belt and Road Initiative' sees the Balkan peninsula as a pivotal

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<sup>53</sup> Tomasz Zornaczuk (ed.) (2014). *Civil Society in the EU Integration of the Western Balkans*. Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), <http://www.pism.pl/publications/books/Civil-Society-in-the-EU-Integration-of-the-Western-Balkans>.

<sup>54</sup> To delve into this issue, see: Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, James Ker-Lindsay, & Denisa Kostovicova (ed.s) (2013). *Civil Society and Transitions in the Western Balkans*. London: Palgrave.

<sup>55</sup> Ana Marjanović Rudan (5 May 2018). "Ensuring the Impact of the Western Balkans Civil Society on the Regional Processes", *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/05/05/ensuring-impact-western-balkans-civil-society-regional-processes/>.

<sup>56</sup> For an overview of third powers' interests in the region, see: *Phures* (2018). *The Influence of External Actors in the Western Balkans: A Map of Geopolitical Players*. Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73&groupId=252038); Giorgio Fruscione (ed.) (12 April 2019). *The Balkans: The West, the East and the Rest*. Milano: Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/balkans-west-east-and-rest-22834>.

<sup>57</sup> Ashish Kumar Sen (30 November 2017). "Here's Why US Commitment to the Western Balkans Matters", *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/here-s-why-us-commitment-to-the-western-balkans-matters>; Wesley K. Clark (11 April 2018). "Don't Wait for the Western balkans to Blow Up Again. The US and the EU Must Act", *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/11/dont-wait-for-the-western-balkans-to-blow-up-again-the-u-s-and-the-e-u-must-act/?utm\\_term=.0823eb05fe9c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/11/dont-wait-for-the-western-balkans-to-blow-up-again-the-u-s-and-the-e-u-must-act/?utm_term=.0823eb05fe9c).

area to reach the European market.<sup>58</sup> Also Turkey plays an increasingly important role in the Balkans both in economic and political terms, and has made its presence particularly strong by exploiting Islam, historical ties, and financial assets.<sup>59</sup> History and religion play instead a more superficial (yet effective) role in Russia's engagement strategy. Cognisant of its own inability to control the Balkan peninsula, Moscow aims instead at containing Western influence via pragmatic dealmaking and by deploying the usual toolbox of direct and indirect influence methods.<sup>60</sup> Gulf states have recently added to the list of external actors interested in the area and are particularly active in real estates and tourism,<sup>61</sup> while Germany - together with Italy (which I will discuss later on) - is the most relevant European actor in the (Western) Balkans. Berlin has invested enormous economic and political capital in reconstructing the region and is one of the strongest supporters of its integration in the EU. The so-called Berlin process testifies about German interests. The condition of heteronomy makes both the Balkan complex and the individual local statehoods more contestable by both internal actors - who may see the status quo as illegitimate because super-imposed -, and external actors - especially those that did not participate in the construction of the present order.

As if the picture depicted so far was not complex enough, the object of this study imposes to consider two additional players. In fact, this is not a research on the Balkans only - but on the AIR. The first of these last two actors is Greece. By virtue of its position in the international hierarchy of power and prestige, Athens' foreign policy ambitions are limited. Furthermore, the pseudo-resolution of the age-old name issue with North Macedonia has reduced regional tensions and offers the chance to include Skopje in many multilateral fora where Greece already sits in. After the post-2008 socio-economic breakdown, today Greece

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<sup>58</sup> To delve into the issue, see Balkan Insight's continuously updated dossier on "China in the Balkans", at: <https://balkaninsight.com/china-in-the-balkans-analysis/>.

<sup>59</sup> Zia Weise (15 May 2018). "Turkey's Balkan Comeback", *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-western-balkans-comeback-european-union-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>; Asli Aydintaşbaş (13 March 2019). *From Myth to reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans*. European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from\\_myth\\_to\\_reality\\_how\\_to\\_understand\\_turkeys\\_role\\_in\\_the\\_western\\_balkans](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans).

<sup>60</sup> Dimitar Bechev (2017). *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>61</sup> Velina Lylyanova (November 2017). *Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans*. European Parliament Think Tank, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/614582/EPRS\\_ATA\(2017\)614582\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/614582/EPRS_ATA(2017)614582_EN.pdf).

is on track to recovery but far too weak to embark on any adventure requiring considerable economic resources.<sup>62</sup>

The other player - Italy - deserves more attention. Rome enjoys a far higher international position than all the other actors in the AIR, across all dimensions of power. As a middle power, Italy is primarily concerned with its immediate neighbourhood, that is the Euro-Mediterranean region - even though membership in the EU, NATO, the G7 and the active participation in the UN give a global outreach to Rome. Within this framework, Rome maintains an interest in the Balkan complex and there is a considerable track-record of relations between the two shores of the Adriatic-Ionian basin. The historical tension of Italy to expand into the Balkans may be the cause of some residual resentments, but these have been largely superseded by a steady improvement of bi- and multi-lateral relations since the 1990s. Geographical closeness, economic interests, and peace-building have framed Italy's post-Cold War engagement with the Balkans, which in their turn see Italy as a big opportunity for development and integration in Western institutions. It has to be stressed that the Italian presence in the region also responds to an atavistic search for international recognition.<sup>63</sup> Attention-seeking behaviour is one of the constants of Rome's foreign policy: by engaging in regional multi-lateral fora and by developing bi-lateral ties with Balkan states, Italy fulfils its political drive to appear as an indispensable partner in the eyes of the Allies and tries to gain political capital to leverage in other contexts (primarily the EU and NATO). Rome's interest in the region also reflects the traditional preference for a larger, rather than deeper, EU.<sup>64</sup>

Italy's foreign policy design should be weighed against its current economic conditions and internal political context - neither of which is rosy. Italy started recovering from the setbacks of 2008's economic crisis only in 2013 but the GDP's positive trend stopped in the second half of 2018, slipping into a "mild contraction" that will persist in 2020.<sup>65</sup> Structural deficiencies, administrative inefficiencies, and the global conjuncture

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<sup>62</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2019). *OECD Economic Outlook*, vol. 2019, no. 1, 141-143, <http://www.oecd.org/economy/greece-economic-snapshot/>; European Commission (2019). *Spring Economic Forecast*. Bruxelles: European Commission, 102-103, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ecfin\\_forecast\\_spring\\_070519\\_el\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ecfin_forecast_spring_070519_el_en.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> To delve into the role of Italy in the region and beyond see: Gianni Bonvicini et al. (2011). *Italian Foreign Policy in 2010: Continuity, Reform and Challenges 150 Years After National Unity*. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1106e.pdf>; Fabrizio Coticchia & Jason W. Davidson (2018). *Italian Foreign Policy During Matteo Renzi's Government: A Domestically Focused Outsider and the World*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

<sup>64</sup> Bonvicini et al. (2011), op. cit., 7-8; Frontini & Denti (2017), op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2019). *OECD Economic Outlook*, vol. 2019, no. 1, 162-165, <http://www.oecd.org/economy/italy-economic-snapshot/>; European

have contributed to the creation of such situation. Domestic political instability further contributes to this state of things, hindering the adoption of a coherent and linear political plan. Given this context, the main axes of Rome's foreign strategy will not change drastically but specific commitments will be re-assessed in light of economic constraints and the new domestic dynamics. While Italy's place in NATO is not under discussion, relations with the EU are at a low point. A positive note comes from the civil society, which continues to be highly engaged with internal and international political debates.

This overview of Italy's position almost closes the narration of the complexities of the AIR. Before moving forward, it is worth noticing two last conditions that cut across the whole region. The first one has a negative character and involves migration fluxes.<sup>66</sup> The AIR is suffering from two concomitant processes: on the one hand, the uneven re-distribution of populations from the countryside to (a few) urban centres; and, on the other hand, intense emigration out of the state of residence, within or even outside the AIR. Reduced territorial cohesion *and* brain-drain result from these processes, downsizing drastically the region's development potential. This will have a long lasting effect, in as much as more than 50% of the (internal) migrants in each country was aged between 20-39 and thus an entire generation of skilled workers is lost.<sup>67</sup>

The second condition is instead positive and points to the good institutional density that the AIR enjoys in spite of its heterogeneity and multiple cleavages. Beyond the EU, NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) - just to name a few of the main international organisations in the area -, it is important to mention region-specific projects such as the Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AII), the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion (AIE), the Balkan 5 Group, the CEI, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), as well as the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEEC). Many other non-governmental links of educational, commercial, and other nature (e.g., UniAdrion, the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities, the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce) multiply the interaction across the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. The extent to which all these initiatives are productive of substantial improvements, integration, or stability is open to debate and beyond the reach of the present research. Nevertheless, at least theoretically,

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Commission (2019). *Spring Economic Forecast*. Bruxelles: European Commission, 110-111, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ecfin\\_forecast\\_spring\\_070519\\_it\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ecfin_forecast_spring_070519_it_en.pdf).

<sup>66</sup> Plures (2018b). *MIGRATUP – Territorial and Urban Potentials Connected to Migration and Refugee Flows*. Luxembourg: European Territorial Observatory Network (ESPON).

<sup>67</sup> Here with "brain-drain" and "skilled workers" I do not refer only to perspective intellectuals, people holding a degree or white collars; I point also to people with practical skills relevant to the primary and secondary sectors of the economy. Indeed, the sharp decline in the latter's number is even more worrisome for the even development of this region.

such institutional density should help reciprocal familiarisation and grant opportunities to create synergies at multiple levels and domains. This rationale is not far from the EUSAIR's - to which I devote the remainder of this chapter.

### 2.3. The European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region

The EUSAIR was launched in 2014 as the third of four macro-regional strategies devised by the EU to support economic and social convergence over broad, diversified territories comprising both member States and third countries.<sup>68</sup> By transcending EU formal borders, macro-regional strategies provide a potential synthesis between neighbourhood and cohesion policies - i.e., the external and internal dimensions of the EU's commitment to stability.<sup>69</sup> This is reflected in the words of the Commission, according to which macro-regional strategies:

“[...] add value to the cooperation dimension of cohesion policy. They offer a platform for multi-sectoral, multi-country and multi-level governance, also open to non-EU countries. They can play a substantial role in helping these countries to strengthen their links with the EU and mitigate possible negative effects on the EU's external borders.”<sup>70</sup>

Institutional documents treat the AIR as a “functional region” whose virtual borders are delimited by geography, common challenges, the willingness to pool resources, and a common identity.<sup>71</sup> A “much shared history” is mentioned as well.<sup>72</sup> This is a rather holistic view of the region, one that recognises regional complexities at least on paper. In practice, however, the relative balance of the region's constitutive components is lost in favour of a purely functional-rationalist approach that confers primacy to the geographical criterion

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<sup>68</sup> The other macro-regional strategies are: the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR, 2009), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR, 2010), and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> Plures (2015), op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> European Commission (16 December 2016). *Report on the Implementation of EU Macro-regional Strategies*. COM(2016)805, Bruxelles, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> European Commission (27 June 2013). *Report Concerning the Added Value of Macro-regional Strategies*. COM(2013)468, Bruxelles, p. 3. See also: European Commission (27 June 2013). *Commission Staff Working Document Concerning the Added Value of Macro-regional Strategies*. SWD(2013)233, Bruxelles.

<sup>72</sup> European Commission (17 June 2014). *Communication Concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region*. COM(2014)357, Bruxelles, p. 3.

and the fulfilment of project indicators, while failing to properly consider non-material forces. I will discuss it in greater detail in the next chapter. Suffice here to say that the EUSAIR does not seem to pay any substantial attention to common identity and shared history. They are considered formally as two constitutive elements of the AIR, but the Strategy does not show any actual, practical interest in such factors and the role they could play in relation to regional cohesion. Indeed, the existence *tout court* of a common identity in the AIR is highly debatable.

The EUSAIR incorporates the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and builds on the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII).<sup>73</sup> The latter is a formal inter-governmental organisation constituted in 2000 with the aim to promote common solutions to problems shared across the Adriatic-Ionian basin. Today, AII sees the participation of four EU members States (Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia) and four non-members (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia).<sup>74</sup> The overlapping of the EUSAIR and AII in terms of geographical extension and functional ratio is evident. In this sense, the EUSAIR looks like an act of internalisation by the EU of the AII-based regional cooperation, with the aim of bolstering efficiency and facilitating the influx of resources.

The Strategy is oriented towards three main objectives: promoting economic growth and social prosperity; protecting sea, coastal, and inland ecosystems; and sustaining the integration of Western Balkans in the EU. The EUSAIR intends to fulfil these objectives by coordinating integrated initiatives in four issue-areas or “pillars”: blue growth, connecting the region, environmental quality, sustainable tourism.<sup>75</sup> Within this framework, all parties involved in the Strategy - not only States but also lower levels of public administration as regions and cities, and non-State actors such as Universities and entrepreneurs - are called to pool ideas and resources, realising trans-national projects able to fulfil the aforementioned goals and ideally foster “a sense of common responsibility”.<sup>76</sup> Taken individually, the four pillars are quite self-standing units with no thematic overlapping. In order to enable a transversal approach and enhance the overall coherence of the EUSAIR’s design, “cross-cutting aspects” and “horizontal principles” are introduced.<sup>77</sup> The former deal

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<sup>73</sup> N/A (20 May 2000). *Ancona Declaration*. Conference on Development and Security in the Adriatic Ionian, Ancona; European Commission (30 November 2012). *A Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas*. COM(2012)713, Bruxelles.

<sup>74</sup> Plus North Macedonia, which, at the time of writing, is in the process of becoming a new member. See footnote no. 1.

<sup>75</sup> For a detailed description of the four pillars please refer to: COM(2014)357; European Commission (17 June 2014). *Action Plan Concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region*. SWD(2014)190, Bruxelles.

<sup>76</sup> COM(2013)468, 2. See also: SWD(2014)190, pp. 3-6.

<sup>77</sup> COM(2014)357; SWD(2014)190.

with innovation (research and development, with particular attention to small and medium size enterprises) and capacity building (education, brain circulation, public awareness campaigns). The two “horizontal principles” address instead the effects of climate change and the



management of disaster risks.

Figure 2: the EUSAIR’s goals. Source: SWD(2016)443, 35.

Since the beginning Bruxelles has stressed that macro-regional strategies would not involve any new EU legislation, funds, and institutions (the so called “three no’s”). The EUSAIR is no exception. The Strategy is designed to avoid additional bureaucratic costs for the EU, promoting instead the creation of synergies among already existing tools and resources.<sup>78</sup> A range of funding opportunities is available in support of the EUSAIR, which can take advantage of the many EU and non-EU developmental programmes already operating at national and international level.<sup>79</sup> The EUSAIR’s synergistic rationale is reflected also in its three-layers governance structure, which exploits the AII’s and EU’s decisional fora as frameworks for the Strategy’s decision-making and coordination.<sup>80</sup>

The EUSAIR benefits from not being the first EU macro-regional strategy. AIR partners have taken stock of the lessons learned from EUSBSR and EUSDB in order to design the institutional framework most suitable for fulfilling the chosen objectives. This notwithstanding, the EUSAIR - as much as the other strategies - has to cope with some challenges which are to some extent an intrinsic factor of complex governance structures. The Commission and external experts have repeatedly underlined the need to maintain political commitment, clearly define and distribute responsibilities across levels of governance, ensure funding and adequate staffing, and develop appropriate tools for measuring success and failure.<sup>81</sup> These problems seem to be even more pressing for the EUSAIR, whose effective functioning is made *de facto* more difficult by the features of the region. The main obstacle lies in the disproportion and detachment between the technical-bureaucratic design of the Strategy and the political ownership of the underlying project. To this and other issues I will turn in the next chapter.

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<sup>78</sup> On the value added of EUSAIR see in particular: European Commission (17 June 2014). *Commission Staff Working Document Concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region*. SWD(2014)191, Bruxelles.

<sup>79</sup> E.g., Horizon 2020, European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), Interreg ADRION, Western Balkan Investment Framework (WBIF), European Investment Bank (EIB), World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF). See: SWD(2014)190, pp. 64-65.

<sup>80</sup> European Commission (16 December 2016). *Commission Staff Working Document on the Implementation of EU Macro-regional Strategies*. SWD(2016)443, Bruxelles, pp. 35-36.

<sup>81</sup> COM(2013)468, pp. 7-9; SWD(2013)233; European Commission (20 May 2014). *Report Concerning the Governance of Macro-regional Strategies*. COM(2014)284, Bruxelles. On measuring success and failure in meeting strategic objectives, see: SWD(2014)190, pp. 66-67.



### **3. EUSAIR: A Regime-based Analysis**

After having presented the conceptual tools and the empirical background, I now turn to the kernel of this research. In the following pages I analyse the EUSAIR in its capacity of institutional tool for region-building and cooperative integration, assessing its limits and potentialities against the aforementioned parameters of regime design, as well as the current state of regional and international relations.

#### ***3.1. Organisational Form, Modes, Decision-making Arrangements, and Goals***

Firstly, a few observations in regard to the Strategy's positioning on the formal-informal continuum. The EUSAIR is characterised by a low degree of formalisation, but it is not an informal institution *tout court*. The Strategy does not rest merely on some sort of ritualised behaviour or tacit agreement among participants, but no physical and bureaucratic apparatuses have been specifically created to support the EUSAIR. Conversely, existing structures have been adapted and exploited to accommodate to the needs of the Strategy. This choice is direct consequence of the "three no's" that lie at the basis of the EU's approach to macro-regional projects.

On the one hand, these “three no’s” make sense in light of Brussel’s goal to foster synergies among existing institutions, save money in times of economic and financial hurdles, and reduce intra-EU attritions. In fact, some EU members might oppose the adoption of macro-regional strategies if they would entail new legislation, funds, and institutions. A utilitarian logic backs the “three no’s”, since, in so doing, the EU grants itself an additional pivot in the AIR, but at minimal costs. At the same time, all participants gain at least a little something: Italy - the strongest supporter of the EUSAIR - obtains something with which to satisfy its attention-seeking drive, and the Balkans (plus Greece) receive a sort of expression of continued interest from Brussels. However, on the other hand, the “three no’s” policy shows considerable limitations. Firstly, to base macro-regional strategies on a triple negation does not contribute to their communicational appeal. Considering that the strategies’ actual impact is relatively limited, a more palatable presentation would help support their popularity by other means. Secondly, the no’s can also be interpreted as signal of low commitment, especially by non-EU participants. While it is true that the EUSAIR testifies about the continued interest of the EU in the Mediterranean basin, *de facto* it adds no politically relevant contribution to the basket of commitments. Thirdly - going back to the theme of organisational forms - the low level of formalisation determined by the policy of the “three no’s” limits the regime’s ability to influence participants’ behaviour. The absence of coercive (legislative) instruments and independent bureaucratic apparatuses reduces costs and institutional redundancy - but not only. Such absence implies also a lower ability to reach and enforce productive decisions, overcoming political stalemates. This is quite a problem in the AIR, where pre-existing regional conditions create a playing field characterised by dis-homogeneous interests and behaviours.

The multiplex nature of the EUSAIR does nothing to reduce the risks associated with such condition. For sure multiplexity - i.e., the state of being a system of MLG - fosters the development of (trans-)national bonds and the strengthening of capabilities at multiple levels. By widening the horizon of information involved in policy-making, it supports creative learning, the integration of perspectives, and potentially dilutes the concentration of power. In this way, gatekeepers can be bypassed.<sup>82</sup> For example, MLG platforms offer NGOs the opportunity to work around national governmental opposition by searching for external approval of their agendas. This is particularly useful in social contexts where civil society has limited room for manoeuvre - as in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, multiplexity gives rise to a typical problem of coordination: the more the actors involved, the more difficult to

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<sup>82</sup> Jens Steffek & Claudia Kissing (2006). “Why Co-operate? Civil Society Participation in the WTO”, in Christian Jorges & Ernst-Ulrich Petermann (ed.s). *Constitutionalism, Multilevel Trade Governance and Social Regulation*. Oxford & Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, pp. 136-155.

reach convergence and effective decision-making. This is not a mere numerical issue; it is also a matter of quality, in as much as the heterogeneity of the AIR is reflected in the heterogeneity of outlooks, efforts, and capabilities across levels and participants in the Strategy. The public officials I interviewed stressed this point by comparing the cases of Albania, Italy, and Montenegro.<sup>83</sup> The very different administrative articulations of these countries impair horizontal communication and the identification of interlocutors with compatible responsibilities. Such organisational discrepancies couple with differing administrative capabilities. While Italian regions, municipalities, and universities enjoy the autonomy and capacities to participate actively in the EUSAIR<sup>84</sup>, Albania's sub-national entities have displayed low planning capabilities and consequently the ministerial level has taken over the Strategy. The case of Montenegro is similar. The EUSAIR intends to overcome these limitations by 'forcing' parties to cooperate but, unfortunately, social reality is circular and some degree of pre-existing homogeneity is a necessary precondition to foster further convergence.<sup>85</sup>

There are other elements of institutional design that could help push participants towards coordination and give more substance to the EUSAIR. I am talking about the three closely related dimensions of: mode of problem-solving, decision-making, and goals' intension. However, the EUSAIR has arranged them in a way that does not support the aforementioned outcome. As concerns problem-solving, suffice here to say that the Strategy is quite off the charts. Nothing like what I described as joint problem-solving takes place, and checklist compliance is scarce if not absent at all. Secondly, EUSAIR's decision-making design presents both low pooling and low delegation. Decisions are taken at collegial level by the Governing Board, which gathers representatives from different levels of governance. Authority is scattered across actors and no third party of institutional nature is entrusted with independent decisional power by participants. Finally, the intension of EUSAIR's goals is pretty low, too. Indeed, there are no injunctions as such, if not those relative to the participation in the Strategy's management meetings. But all the rest - e.g., the quantity and quality of substantial commitment to projects - is a matter of discretion.

These arrangements sustain the Strategy's legitimacy by giving direct responsibility of failure and success to participants. *Inter alia*, the absence of strict regulations and strong delegation may also help avoid blaming the EU for being too intrusive. Overall, this is beneficial to the EUSAIR's perceived legitimacy, which is no secondary matter in the AIR's context. However, excessive leeway has costs in terms of coordination and effectiveness. In this

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<sup>83</sup> Interviews conducted on 14 February 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Yet coordination between the regional and the state level remains difficult in the case of Italy.

<sup>85</sup> Together with a sufficient set of internal and external incentives - which I will discuss later on.

regard, officials complain about the lack of clear ownership of the EUSAIR's project.<sup>86</sup> Trans-Adriatic cooperation between local authorities had existed already before the launch of the EUSAIR in 2014. The Strategy's aim of reinforcing the rate of interaction coupled *de facto* with a greater involvement of state- and EU-level authorities, which in its turn has reduced the space for sub-national cooperation. The strong involvement of upper levels of governance does not hinder macro-regional cooperation as such, and it might even help MLG by injecting greater resources and providing top-down guidance. Unfortunately, this has not happened consistently. The heavy intervention of states has not resulted in any political ownership of the EUSAIR but rather in fluctuating commitments - hostage of regional disputes, domestic dynamics, and designs often far too detached from local needs to be practically relevant.<sup>87</sup> Italy provides a textbook case. While having all the interest and resources to lead the initiative, Rome has given proof of poor leadership.<sup>88</sup> At internal level, the formal ministerial ownership of the project does not concretise in substantive coordination efforts. Sub-national authorities receive poor instructions from the centre in regard to the EUSAIR and the centre's own commitment to the Strategy is distracted by Italy's institutional instability. At external level, the traditional features of the Italian foreign policy prevents Rome from being leader in the region. Italy's inability to halt the Berlin process or at least link it with the EUSAIR testifies to this condition. While it is true that the merger of the two projects would have conferred even more regional influence upon Germany, the Italian choice to sit separately at both tables results simply in the dispersion of efforts and resources. On top of that, the frequent change of officials at all levels in all participant states does not help find the much needed continuity.

Let's now turn to the aspects of extension and depth - starting with the former. As illustrated in Chapter 2, the EUSAIR serves three major objectives, which are pursued by coordinating action along four pillars; coherence of action should be granted by addressing four transversal issue-areas. There is nothing wrong with the organisational essence of this subdivision, but some problems emerge if we look at the specific areas covered by the Strategy. Overall, the EUSAIR seems over-stretched across too many goals. While sharing the same rationale - the rationale determined by the Strategy's three overarching objectives -, the four pillars deal with very different, broad domains that are not necessarily connected among themselves. Given the limited resources available to the Strategy, such over-stretch breaks the golden rule of (foreign) policy - i.e., to maintain a balance between commitments

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<sup>86</sup> Interviews conducted on 14 February 2019 and 22 February 2019.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*.

and resources. The EUSAIR's high extension facilitates the dispersion of attention, knowledge, and planning capacities, with the risk to create uneven coverage of the four pillars and drastically reduce the incisiveness of action. Pillars are indeed unevenly covered.<sup>89</sup> It is also doubtful whether these pillars really address key regional priorities. Regional characteristics show that the AIR has not overcome many hurdles linked with socio-economic development, political stability, and institutional quality yet. Typically, when societies are still coping with the 'modern needs' of physical and political survival, attention towards 'post-modern needs' such as blue growth, environmental quality, and sustainable tourism is lower. This is the case in the AIR, where borders are still being disputed and social attritions are high. Almost monopolising the political agenda, these issues drastically downsize the attention and resources to be dedicated to other, post-modern purposes such as those covered by the EUSAIR.

Theoretically, the inclusion of the so-called "cross-cutting aspects" and "horizontal principles" helps the EUSAIR improve its depth. In particular, the aim to foster independent capacity-building and innovation can support the Strategy by contributing to the development and consolidation of transversal skills that cut across pillars. Capacity-building emerged in the previous pages as a core priority for both public administration and civil society. However, the already mentioned limits of the "cross-cutting aspects" and "horizontal principles" kick back on the Strategy's actual ability to foster innovation and capacity-building. This makes the EUSAIR closer to a programme of superficial aid than of deep structural change. The Strategy's organisational form constitutes the main obstacle in this regard, for two main reasons. Firstly, transversality is hindered by the organisation of Working Groups in accordance with pillars. Each Working Group deals with a single pillar, disregarding others. "Cross-cutting aspects" and "horizontal principles" should formally be taken into account by all Working Groups but *de facto* they end up being put aside, not being the primary concern of the Working Groups themselves.<sup>90</sup> The second obstacle to the depth of EUSAIR's goals relates to the "three no's" – namely, the non-availability of dedicated sources of funding. Even if not abundant, sources of funding are available - the main ones being those linked to the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC - Interreg). However, the EUSAIR came into force at a time when the bulk of the funds dedicated to cohesion policies (of which the ETC is part) had already been allocated. The EUSAIR has drown from other

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<sup>89</sup> Interview conducted on 14 February 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Interview conducted on 14 February 2019.

pockets, but far more limited ones. This being the context, the projects implemented under the EUSAIR's insignia could not aspire to any grandiose impact.<sup>91</sup>

### *3.2. Effectiveness and Robustness*

The picture I have presented so far raises serious doubts on the effectiveness (as both *strength* and *efficacy*) of the EUSAIR, since regional pre-conditions, by complicating behavioural convergence, impair cooperation and hinder the achievement of actual results. In this regard, two main considerations are worth presenting.

Firstly, the dis-alignment between the region's structural features and the EUSAIR's institutional arrangements is evident. Put differently, there is a clear tension between the AIR as a geopolitical and social space, on the one hand, and the EUSAIR as an artificial tool of governance, on the other hand. While the former is an heteronomous complex originated from a mix of indigenous turbulences and heavy external meddling,<sup>92</sup> the latter is a super-structural institutional framework of negotiated nature. The same geographical space is thus occupied by two constitutively opposite structures. Indeed, the latter is precisely aimed at changing the former. However, until such constitutive change will happen (if it will ever happen), the institutional super-structure (EUSAIR) cannot but be affected by the pre-existing conditions of the AIR. In other words, before being able to impact on the state of the region, the EUSAIR is affected by the region itself. This dynamic is universal, but particularly relevant for our context. In fact, the radical constitutive alterity of the two structures (the AIR and the EUSAIR) introduces an underlying element of attrition that undermines attempts at social engineering.

Secondly, and relatedly, the effectiveness of multi-level cooperation in the AIR is drastically limited by the absence of crucial element: a transnational polity. While regional civil societies have developed considerably, formal structures of power and rooted socio-political divisions hamper intra- and inter-state communication and thus the emergence of such transnational polity. At the micro-level, professional, intellectual, and family ties have provided oases of relative peacefulness and understanding, but they cannot recompose on their own the region's fractures. This is particularly true on the eastern shores of the AIR,

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<sup>91</sup> Even less so if one thinks about the shortcomings in administrative capabilities of which I discussed above.

<sup>92</sup> I presented heteronomy as a structural condition of the Balkan complex but it can be extended to the whole AIR, in as much as also Italy's history was characterised by strong foreign meddling in the state- and nation-building process.

where the persistence of domestic instability, national(ist) claims, and shaky diplomatic relations mirrors cleavages rooted in the socio-political constitution of the Balkan complex, which is trapped since the XIX century in the ‘psycho-drama’ of ethnic rivalries - a condition that the interference of external powers has often exacerbated.<sup>93</sup> On the Italian side, people’s traditional disinterest in foreign policy matters and the clustering of the public debate around the issues of domestic stability and immigration do not encourage large-scale grassroots movements aimed at building bridges with the Balkans. Given these premises, the AIR’s shared historical, social, and cultural heritage is hardly considered or even becomes a ground for contention, while its peace-building potential remains largely unexploited. The national political level further feeds on this situation, perpetuating the fragmented status quo and transmitting social cleavages up to the level of international relations. Lacking social cohesion and a shared political vision, the EUSAIR risks to become a sterile dialogue among administrators, with no real opportunity to stimulate positive change at regional level.<sup>94</sup>

Some other factors signal and, at the same time, contribute to EUSAIR’s doubtful effectiveness. To begin with, the interviewed officials underlined the small or null contacts held between authorities located at the same level of governance in different participant states.<sup>95</sup> The fact that many states in the region do not have comparable administrative structures is a further detriment to the quality and quantity of exchanges. This cannot but yield negative results in terms of trans-national cooperation - and thus of regime effectiveness. In addition, local administrators, private stakeholders, and citizens display varying and generally low levels of awareness of what the EUSAIR is and does.<sup>96</sup> Such state of things indicates either limited multi-level coordination or scarce interest in the Strategy from participants – or both. The less the EUSAIR is known, the less it can attract ideas and projects. As a consequence, the Strategy’s potential impact decreases and this affects in its turn the capacity of the EUSAIR to raise further interest – and so on, in a nefarious circle. The recent approval of the stakeholder platform could help break such negative cycle.

Overall, even in the absence of precise indicators of performance, it does not seem very clear how the EUSAIR could credibly promote economic growth, social prosperity, and

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<sup>93</sup> Stefano Bianchini (2018). “I vicini dimenticati: l’instabilità nei Balcani occidentali”, in Monica Trecca & Stefano Maria Torelli (ed.s). *Atlante Geopolitico Treccani*. Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, pp. 111-120.

<sup>94</sup> SWD(2016)443, pp. 41-43. The issue was particularly stressed by Plures (2015). See also the earlier study: Andrea Stocchiero (2014). *La Strategia dell’Unione Europea per la Regione Adriatico-Ionica e la Politica Estera Italiana*. Roma: Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) & Istituto Ricerche Studi Informazioni Difesa (ISTRID).

<sup>95</sup> Interviews conducted on 14 February 2019 and 22 February 2019.

<sup>96</sup> See the case of Croatia in: Plures (2015), op. cit., pp. 49-82.

integration into the EU. The Strategy has the theoretical potential to do so but its soft institutional design fails to address properly a series of administrative, social, and political factors that drastically reduce the chances of success.

What is more, the present state of international relations presents an environment dense of challenges for institutional cooperative processes. In the case of the EUSAIR, challenges are linked with: the declining global influence of the West and the parallel rise of competing actors, which manage to intrude into regions where they did not have access before; the declining appeal of the Western model of development and of Western ideas, vis-à-vis alternatives offered by competitors without any need for receiving countries to subscribe to strict ethical and political standards; the EU's waning internal cohesion and its consequences in terms of external legitimacy and ability to continue influencing political processes beyond its borders; and the re-emergence of national political languages characterised by confrontational rhetorics. These processes have the potential to redraw the map of incentives that keep Italy, Greece, and the Balkans interested in the EUSAIR and, more in general, in EU-framed regional cooperation.

*Inter alia*, it is worth noticing that under present conditions the indefinite perspective of a new EU enlargement to include the Western Balkans exerts a diminishing appeal on aspirant countries and won't be enough to keep the region together. These countries have grown increasingly disillusioned in regard to the EU. Governments maintain a *façade* of commitment to the 'European dream' but they often hide behind a pseudo-liberal rhetoric merely to legitimise a status quo which is all but democratic.<sup>97</sup> In the meantime, these same governments sign deals of strategic importance with competing powers, showing no willingness to cast a definite choice in favour of the West and leaving open the possibility to renegotiate bilateral relations. This happens with the connivance of Bruxelles, whose attention towards the substance of its partnerships is distracted by many other problems. As a consequence, frustration and disillusion mount in those components of the local civil societies that truly believe in the possibility of EU integration. At the end of the day, instead of favouring social stability, the EU's presence in the region risks to cause the growth of new anxieties - not necessarily productive of positive change. The shaky support for EU-framed policies in the AIR may even come to affect soft projects such as the EUSAIR.

A soft institutional design can be advantageous in the event of strong pressures such as those presented above, in as much as change can be more easily accommodated. However,

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<sup>97</sup> Srđa Pavlović (5 May 2017). "West is Best: How 'Stabilitocracy' Undermines Democracy Building in the Balkans", *London School of Economics (LSE) blogs*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/05/05/west-is-best-how-stabilitocracy-undermines-democracy-building-in-the-balkans/>.



the EUSAIR's robustness and survivability depend on issues and dynamics well beyond the narrow and technical reach of the Strategy itself. Some adaptive changes can be implemented, but the final choice among stagnation, evolution, and revolution is inextricably linked with the geopolitical, ideational, and social dynamics of the region - which need to find a solution in their own domains of reference.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed at assessing the state of play of regional integration and multi-level governance in the AIR, focussing in particular on the promises and limits of the EUSAIR. I devoted the first chapter to the review of a series of theoretical reflections on regional processes and institutional design. These concepts have value beyond the narrow purpose of this study and can be useful tools for any policy-maker and official dealing with cooperative regimes. In the second chapter I presented the main trends characterising contemporary international affairs and I spent a few paragraphs discussing the features of the AIR, in order to provide the empirical framework within which the EUSAIR takes place. I also sketched the main characteristics of the Strategy itself. Finally, in the third chapter, I used the above mentioned conceptual tools to discuss in detail the limits and potentialities of the EUSAIR in the face of today's international developments.

*The Strategy displays a very soft institutional design that, while having internal coherence, is scarcely adequate to cope with the specificities of the AIR.* The EUSAIR's low degree of formalisation, multi-level nature, and high extension, coupled with low scores in terms of intention, depth, problem-solving, and decision-making arrangements provide an

institutional framework that is characterised by doubtful effectiveness. The fact that other EU macro-regional strategies work properly with similar designs has no relevance here, in as much as the empirical context is totally different. The AIR's socio-political heterogeneity and its economic, administrative, and institutional fragilities engender deeply rooted dynamics of competition and contestation that hinder mutual understanding and the convergence of interests. The non-authoritative means of behavioural convergence deployed by the Strategy – whose efforts are dispersed across a variety of broad, non-priority goals - do not have sufficient weight and specificity to win regional resistances and its typical administrative inefficiencies. Current shifts of power, prestige, and legitimacy taking place globally at the supra-national level add an additional element of distress that may further reduce the benefits attached to regional cooperation in the AIR - EUSAIR included. The inclusion of North Macedonia in the Strategy may further complicate this state of things. In fact, the addition of a new member could alter the existing balance of interests and priorities, exerting an impact not only on the group's ability to reach consensus, but also on the very structure of the EUSAIR. How should the pillar-based division of labour be reorganised? And will the pillars themselves need to be rearranged, in order to reflect the aforementioned change in aggregate priorities? All the parties involved need to think carefully about these issues.

*It is clear then that the EUSAIR alone will never be able to foster significant convergence at regional level. However, it does not mean that the Strategy should be trashed. Even if not a revolutionary asset, the EUSAIR can support the efforts of other, deeper regional projects. The success of the EUSAIR's synergetic effort will depend first and foremost from the success of these other projects – dealing with post-conflict reconciliation, regime stabilisation, economic development, the convergence of memories, etc. In other words, projects aimed at recomposing the socio-political cleavages and the economic imbalances that characterise the AIR and define the interaction among its components, at all levels. Improvements in technical, post-modern sectors such as tourism and environment have limited value and impact in divided societies as those of the AIR.*

Cognisant of this and bearing in mind earlier observations, I put forth the following recommendations, which add to those cast by the OECD in its fellow research within the AI-NURECC framework:

1. *The actors involved in the EUSAIR should be clearer with regard to their commitments not only towards the Strategy, but also towards EU integration and regional cooperation at large. This would help define the ownership of the initiative, to the benefit of its manageability and effectiveness. There are three main scenarios in this regard. First, if the EU wants to take the lead, then the perspective of enlargement*

should stand out as a concrete possibility in the foreseeable future. This is the most credible way to legitimise the EU's lead in the Adriatic-Ionian regional process. As noticed by Berry Buzan and Ole Waever, the EU's rational policies work "only for those who see themselves as realistic future members".<sup>98</sup> If not, these policies risk to be framed as nothing more than illegitimate interference. Alternatively, Italy could try to be a more active promoter of the Strategy. However, in order to do so, Rome's tendency to conduct foreign policy in a dis-continuous and reactive manner should be put aside, in favour of a systemic approach able to provide a long-term view of regional development. Lastly, being a MLG project, the EUSAIR could also be led directly by a collectivity of actors located at the sub-national level, thereby reinvigorating the centuries-old tradition of local contacts across the Adriatic-Ionian sea. This would be coherent with the Strategy's rationale but would still demand the States' *placet*. Whatever the choice, commitments should be stated clearly and maintained consistently.

2. Once set the issue of ownership and commitments, *the specific roles of the various levels of governance should be arranged coherently, reflecting a clear subdivision of labour* within the EUSAIR. In other words, once determined the leadership of level X, what should the contribution of the other levels of governance be? What should/must they do in order to contribute to the EUSAIR? And how could their activities be harmonised? This will help tackle the problem of internal coordination which is left unresolved by the EUSAIR's present design. Such questions cannot be satisfactorily answered a priori, without having set the (political) issue at point 1 before. But one general principle that the preceding analysis suggests is that the EUSAIR should try to build better links across and within levels of governance, especially at the the sub-national administrative level. Fulfilment of points 3-4 will support this outcome.
3. *The institutional design of the EUSAIR could be fine-tuned*, in order to raise its prospective effectiveness. A few *caveats* should be kept in mind:
  - A. *Avoid dispersion and fuzziness of goals*, at the expenses of efforts and resources: it is always better to tackle a few issues, but in depth and knowledgeably - than a whole variety of topics, but without even the means to do so. In this sense, to add other transversal issues or pillars to the Strategy would be counterproductive. Many people suggest that the topic of migration should be

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<sup>98</sup> Berry Buzan & Ole Waever (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 364.

included in the EUSAIR. While it is an important issue for the region, the management of migration fluxes cannot be dealt with effectively within the EUSAIR's soft institutional design; more resources and coordination potential would be needed to tackle the issue properly. And while a EUSAIR dealing with migration as a pillar would make no significant contribution to the solution of the problem, the inclusion of a new issue-area in the EUSAIR would result in the further over-stretch of the Strategy - to renewed detriment of its effectiveness. The EUSAIR could rather deal with migration in terms of capacity building and innovation, in line with the findings of the ESPON-MIGRATUP research and recommendation 3B here. <sup>99</sup>

- B. *Prioritise the “cross-cutting aspects” of capacity building and innovation.* As underlined several times throughout this research, inconsistencies within and across levels of administration, within and across states impinge on the proper functioning of the EUSAIR.<sup>100</sup> To address such problems would have a real impact on the region's ability to develop and take care of itself. At present, capacity building and innovation are not given due consideration, complicit the ‘pillar-first’ division of labour within the EUSAIR. To reverse the existing logic would be beneficial: the two aspects should be made strategic priorities to be addressed in the specific sub-fields of transportation, environment, blue growth, and tourism. The region would hardly achieve a better position without strong, capable, and innovative administrative apparatuses and stakeholders. This is where the EUSAIR could make a difference, with minimal rearrangement costs and without the risk of becoming ‘something else’. Adaptation is key to survival.
- C. *Reinforce the communication potential of the Strategy.* Be they power-oriented, rational, or constructionist players - all participants will benefit from greater awareness of the benefits the EUSAIR can bring about. Wider awareness of what the EUSAIR is and does would help raise more participation, funds, and facilitate the coordination of activities; more projects will be implemented. This means that the Strategy would be able to achieve a greater number of tangible outcomes, supporting more intense cross-border, multi-level cooperation - to the advantage of the region's socio-political coherence.

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<sup>99</sup> Plures (2018b), op. cit..

<sup>100</sup> On the relevance of these themes, see also: N/A (2016b). *Administrative Capacity Building in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region*. Ancona: Regione Molise.

4. *Additional projects and research should be carried out in support of the EUSAIR and, more in general, cooperation in the AIR.* Particular attention should be devoted to those issues that contribute to the region's cleavages and/or their prospective solution, such as: shared and contested memories; reciprocal representations; the geopolitical players in the region; international institutional design; comparative administrative arrangements; trans-national connections among civil societies. These themes were touched upon in the previous pages of this research and they deserve individual attention. *Inter alia*, the strengthening of bonds among the Universities of the AIR would be an important step in support of more practically relevant region-specific research. The facilitation of academic exchanges (at both staff and student levels) would help raise intra-regional interaction, improve the circulation of ideas and best-practices, and promote the launch of projects of shared relevance - such as those mentioned above. The creation of a framework allowing students to do internships/traineeships in AIR-based private enterprises, public institutions, or international organisations would serve the same purposes above and further help building a mutual sense of understanding. These suggestions are coherent with my previous recommendation at point 3B.

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