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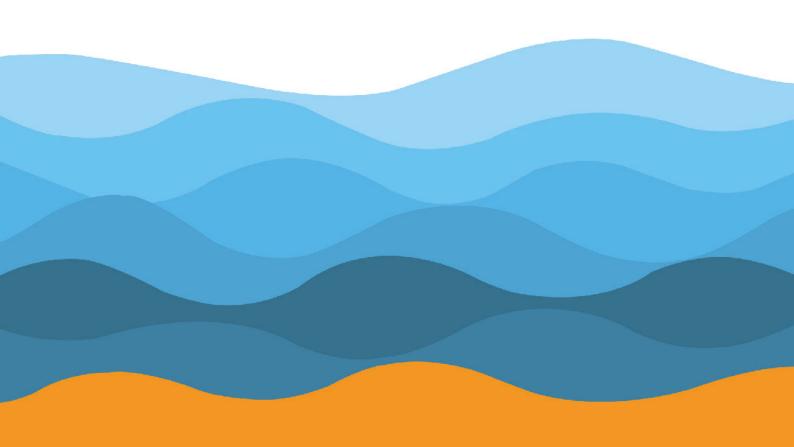
Going macro-regional?

Territorial cooperation, governance and local and regional authorities in the Mediterranean

About the author

The present study has been commissioned by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), jointly with the Government of Catalonia, to Professor Andrea Noferini.

The study analyses the territorial dimension of Euro-Mediterranean relations with a special emphasis on the role of regional and local authorities and the impact of current trends in terms of governance, macro-regionalisation and transnational spaces. It relies upon varied academic literature, official documents and in-depth interviews with experts and practitioners, as well as on relevant networks operating in the region.

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Introduction

The Barcelona Process turns 25 at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic is putting a strain on the responsiveness of governments, the resistance of economic systems and the resilience of populations almost all over the world. For each month of confinement, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that there will be a loss of 2% in annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth[1] and the economic downturn alone is expected to be worse than the 2008 recession. In the Mediterranean region, where conditions of fragility and exposure are further exacerbated, the scenario is nonetheless a more urgent one. Almost five years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, no Mediterranean country is on track to achieve all the goals.[2] With little over 50% of households in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region having access to internet, for example, the Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the distributive effects of the crisis and the need –among other issues– to address the digitalisation gap on the Euro-Mediterranean agenda.

As a matter of fact, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the weak capacity of a number of central governments to deliver their core functions to absorb the shock. In the aftermath of the first wave of the pandemic, local and regional authorities (LRAs) led the first interventions on the ground aimed at regulating social and economic interactions on a community scale in some relevant policy areas such as urban mobility, commercial activities, social assistance and education, with particular attention to primary schools. This leads, once again, to rethinking the role of LRAs in the provision and production of local public goods. As public service providers, LRAs are indeed key actors in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (particularly, SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17). As democratically legitimated organisms, LRAs contribute to defining localised policy processes that favour policy effectiveness and legitimacy towards more sustainable and resilient societies in the post-Covid-19 era (Sachs *et al.*, 2019; Sachs *et al.*, 2020). In the Mediterranean area, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), in a statement by its Secretary General Nasser Kamel released in June 2020,[3] reiterated how the promotion of local, regional and circular economies still represents the best way out of the crisis in order to create fairer, sustainable, gender-sensitive and youth-centred societies.

This paper analyses the territorial dimension of Euro-Mediterranean relations in the framework of the 2030 Agenda with a special emphasis on territory and governance. The main units of analysis are LRAs in the context of European territorial cooperation. The analytical framework combines, in an original format, ideas and concepts stemming from

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[1] Secretary General Angel Gurría's Statement for the G20 Videoconference Summit on COVID-19 available at: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=126_126445-5ofyod1xpv&title=SecretaryGeneralAngelGurriaStatementforthe20_VideoconferenceSummitonCOVID19

[2] Mediterranean Countries Edition of 2019 Sustainable Development Report available at: http://www.sdsn-mediterranean.unisi.it/2019/10/15/sustainable-development-report-2019-mediterranean-countries-edition/

[3] https://ufmsecretariat.org/covid-19-what-next-mediterranean/ (Last accessed on 10/09/2020).

the debate on the implementation of the SDGs and from the emerging literature on macro-regionalisation and transnational spaces. The study relies upon different sources such as academic literature (from political science, border studies and European Union [EU] integration studies) and official documents from EU institutions and other international organisations. In-depth interviews with experts and practitioners have served to deepen the understanding of current cooperation frameworks in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

The paper is divided into three parts. Part 1 contextualises the change in the relations between the EU and the Mediterranean countries from the Barcelona Process to the «resilience approach» established in the 2016 EU Global Strategy. In this part, the territorial dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is critically reviewed with a particular focus on the role of LRAs –and network of LRAs– in the implementation of transnational policies. Part 2 presents the analytical framework, mainly based on the renewed emphasis that both «macro-regional thinking» and the debate on the 2030 Agenda attach to territory and governance. Macro-regionalisation is conceived as a process –eventually endorsed by macro-regional strategies (MRSs)– aimed at the construction of functional and transnational spaces among different levels of government of EU member states that have a sufficient number of issues in common (Gänzle & Kern, 2015). In this second part, the MRSs officially adopted in the EU context are briefly evaluated.

Finally, Part 3 presents a critical assessment of the potentials of macro-regionalisation processes in the Mediterranean context. The analysis draws on from the already existing debate and presents some final conclusions (Part 4) on the basis of the current political climate in the region and of the lessons drawn from the current MRSs. In Part 3, the study also offers a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis for the role of the Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance (Med Coop Alliance) in the current and future context of territorial cooperation in the Mediterranean. The Med Coop Alliance is an informal platform of networks launched at the beginning of 2019 by five Mediterranean networks of LRAs: the Intermediterranean Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), the Euroregion Pyrenees Mediterranean, MedCities, the Latin Arch, and the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion. The selection of the case study is justified according to the multilevel and network nature of the Alliance, its central position in the complex scenario of transnational cooperation and its potentials in the search for more coordination and greater synergies in the Mediterranean area.

1. The territorial dimension of the Barcelona Process: the state of play

1.1 Euro-Mediterranean relations: from multilateralism to resilience

Under different and evolving frameworks, Europe has always been proactive in furthering its influence into the Mediterranean area, sometimes for the achievement of purely economic, political and extractive interests; other times with the aim of «Europeanising» a policy or political area in the sea basin. Indeed, the Mediterranean is one of the areas in which the EU has devoted a great deal of creativity and imagination to rethinking cooperation frameworks (Khader & Amirah-Fernandez, 2020). Although one still cannot speak of a unified comprehensive EU policy towards the Mediterranean, since the launch of the pioneering Global Mediterranean Policy in the early 1970s the EU has established several cooperation frameworks covering the three shores of the Mediterranean.

The clear turning point was 1995 when, in Barcelona, the governments of the then EU member states and the Mediterranean countries set up the EMP. The basic idea was then to export the model of European liberal democracy based on the free market to the Arab Mediterranean, accompanying it with considerable flows of financing and technical assistance. More than ten years later, in 2008, the establishment of the UfM as a «union of projects» –in contrast with the «three pillars architecture» of the EMP and the bilateral «action plans» of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) created in 2004– put a greater emphasis on multilateralism. Multilateral partnership –based on the principles of equality, ownership, gradualism and co-responsibility– was then focused on promoting regional integration through pragmatic, visible and relevant regional and flagship projects.

In 2010, the eruption of the Arab Spring inspired a further review of the ENP –officially revised in 2015– with a great emphasis on the stability-security nexus to the detriment of democratisation and human development priorities. More recently, in 2016, the Global Strategy for the EU Foreign and Security Policy recalled the relevance of the Mediterranean by stressing that «Solving conflicts and promoting development and human rights in the south is essential to addressing the threat of terrorism, the challenges of demography, migration and climate change, and to seizing the opportunity of shared prosperity» (EU Global Strategy, 2016, p. 34).

A critical view of the historical trajectory of Euro-Mediterranean relations seems to indicate that the scenario has dramatically evolved across time. Today, the declared interest of the EU has become to promote peace and guarantee the security of its citizens and territory. Under this less ambitious but more pragmatic perspective, the EU rhetoric has switched in these years from that of a «ring of friends» and «partner countries» to the idea of «resilience». By focusing on the promotion of «resilience», the EU no longer aims to

stabilise the neighbourhood but «itself» (Johansson-Nogués, 2018). Secondly, the re-nationalisation of the foreign policies of the EU member states undermines the original multilateral accent of the Barcelona Process (Woertz & Soler i Lecha, 2020). The prevailing concept of «selective» and «differentiated» bilateralism makes it clear that the EU is willing to reward «good scholars» but not to extend the same privileges to those countries that do not accept conditionality (Fernández-Molina, 2019).

Thirdly, the EU has become more realistic about what it can achieve in terms of influence, given its geo-political standing in the region. The EU is no longer the main actor in the Mediterranean, nor does it dominate the situation as it once did. New players are in town and other regional powers –such as the Gulf countries, Russia, China and Turkey– have indeed taken on a significant role in the area (Florensa, 2018). Under the complexity of the current scenario, it remains to be assessed how much (and with what results) the «new resilience agenda» will support governments and societies of the Mediterranean in dealing with urgent and dramatic common challenges. In 2020, at the second EU-Southern Neighbourhood Ministerial Meeting for a renewed partnership, the EU Foreign Affairs ministers reaffirmed their commitment to a stronger political dimension of the partnership in key policy areas such as the green and digital transformation, governance reforms and economic development based on people, education, training, research and culture.[4] It seems clear that whether regarding the green and digital transition, the fight against radicalisation processes, youth unemployment, migration and the post-Covid-19 recovery, no country in the region will be able to cope with these challenges on its own (Soler i Lecha & Tocci, 2017; Barbé & Morillas, 2019; IEMed, 2020). On the contrary, regional cooperation and coordinated governance, whether in the framework of a renewed ENP, the UfM or the 5+5 Dialogue, will be key to seizing shared opportunities and delivering effective public polices for a sustainable and prosperous Mediterranean basin.

1.2 The territorial question in Euro-Mediterranean relations

Historically, the traditional prudence regarding urban and territorial matters of the EU has limited the formal rights of LRAs to participate in supranational decision-making. In the context of Euro-Mediterranean relations –and the EU more in general– the «territorial question» has usually been framed under the debate on the role of LRAs[5] in EU policy-making, with a special emphasis on the definition and implementation of territorial

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[4] Official Statement 089, Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. Available at: http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/en/SalaDePrensa/Comunicados/Paginas/2020_COMUNICADOS/20201126_COMU089.aspx

[5] The vocabulary is often contested and the literature presents different terms, such as local and regional authorities (LRAs), local and regional governments (LRGs), sub-national authorities (SNAs) or sub-state authorities (SSAs). In this text the reference is mainly to regional, supra-local and local governments meant as (usually) representative public organisations with (some) degree of autonomy and control over (some) salient policy areas.

development policies.[6] Although originally the 1995 Barcelona Declaration included some references to the involvement of LRAs in the EMP,[7] the early initiatives failed to address the territorial issue. The intergovernmental nature of the agreement and the formal spaces of diplomatic negotiation did not reserve a real role to LRAs. It was not until the early 2010s when the territorial dimension of the partnership began to gain relevance in the regional policy agenda. The establishment of the Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) in 2010, the reformulation of the ENP and a growing sensitivity of the UfM towards local policies –not least the approval of an urban strategy in 2017– contributed to responding to those voices that claimed a renewed role for LRAs in the policy-making of the strategies, programmes and projects in the Mediterranean.

Bringing together members of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and municipal representatives from the southern Mediterranean, the ARLEM aims to enhance the territorial dimension of the UfM and constitutes a relevant political forum on policy issues of mutual concern such as climate change, youth employment, migrations and inequalities. On its 10th anniversary in Barcelona in 2020, Karl-Heinz Lambertz –President of the CoR and ARLEM Co-chair– explicitly claimed a specific Green Deal for the Mediterranean, a climate pact which should strengthen cooperation between the three shores by offering new financial tools to LRAs in order to deliver effective public policy action across the region.[8]

Under the «preventive security» framework of the renewed ENP –by linking security and migration to endogenous economic development–, job creation and better living conditions in the territories of the southern and eastern Mediterranean became the best solution for reducing flows of young migrants towards Europe. Under this view, the role played by LRAs from the three shores of the Mediterranean becomes fundamental. In the south, for example, rural-urban migrations and endogenous urban growth are already generating a strong demand for housing, facilities and urban services. In the northern and eastern Mediterranean, LRAs are key players in the internal dimension of migrations, supporting reception and accommodation as well as other basic needs like healthcare, access to the labour market or the management of non-accompanied minors.[9]

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[6] Since the 1990s within the controversial debate about «the Europe of/for/with the regions», the mobilisation of LRAs has been also deeply explored in EU integration studies and the literature on local economic development. For a review, see Keating, 2008; Hepburn, 2008, and Shackle, 2020.

[7] «The participants also agree to cooperate in other areas and, to that effect: [...] undertake to encourage cooperation between local authorities and in support of regional planning». Barcelona Declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference (27-28/11/95).

[8] See the Declaration at: https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/Pages/climate-emergency-local-and-regional-leaders-call-for-a-green-deal-.aspx

[9] In November 2020, in the locality of Mora on the Greek island of Lesbos, a terrible fire burned down the largest refugee camp in Europe. The «jungle», as the refugees renamed the camp, is a clear example of the inability of national governments, and of the EU itself, to converge towards a common migration policy. On the territorial level, the jungle, designed to accommodate 2,500 refugees but with a real population of over 20,000 individuals, witnesses the difficulties of the domestic management of migratory flows and the frictions between central governments and local authorities that are forced to host these structures in the territory of their communities.

More recently, the UfM has notably contributed to exploring means of urban convergence and capacity development in the context of sustainability, policy planning and the consolidation of democratic governance in the Mediterranean. Indeed, urban areas have a central role to play both in climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as in the transition to sustainable energy economies. In response to the region's urban challenges – and inspired by the United Nations (UN)'s New Urban Agenda adopted at Habitat III in 2016–, the UfM Urban Agenda strives to establish a more integrated and coordinated approach in Mediterranean countries with regard to policies, legislation and investments with a potential impact on urban areas. After 25 years, the territorial dimension of Euro-Mediterranean relations has definitely gained momentum and central governments have started to show a greater attention to urban matters. Under the 5+5 Dialogue, for example, the Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development, held in 2019 in Montpellier, is an encouraging step forward towards a greater involvement of LRGs for the definition of resilient and sustainable cities in the Mediterranean. Finally, the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood (a New Agenda for the Mediterranean) released by the Commission in February 2021 recognises that the implementation of sustainable urban mobility plans or greener multimodal transport solutions will not be possible without a more coordinated and enhanced policy with all stakeholders involved, including the private sector and civil society, and at the local level (European Commission, 2021).

1.3 Networks of LRAs and transnational programmes in the Mediterranean

Today on the three shores of the Mediterranean there are many LRAs, and networks of LRAs, actively engaged in diverse –and sometimes overlapping– cooperation frameworks and programmes. In the last 15 years, under the ENP framework, the EU has allocated €20.5 billion for cooperation through the European Neighbourhood financial instruments. And since 2012, only under the UfM label, 59 regional cooperation projects with a budget of more than €5 billion have been agreed, many of which involve the participation of LRAs. Although eminently intergovernmental, the BLUEMED initiative and the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) have, for example, promoted regional cooperation, respectively, in the fields of research and innovation for blue jobs and growth, and in the fields of sustainable water provision and food production. Besides these cooperation schemes which cover the whole region, two other frameworks cover sub-areas of the Mediterranean: the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) launched in 2014, and the WESTMED initiative for the blue economy, approved in 2017. Finally, under the 2014-20 financial framework, a high number of territorial cooperation programmes with different geographical coverage have been implemented in the Mediterranean.[10]

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[10] The ENI CBC Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme –linked to EU external action– involves 13 countries that potentially cover the whole Mediterranean basin. Concerning the internal dimension of

Importantly, LRA activism is not exclusively imputable to the deployment of territorial cooperation under the EU framework but is part of a greater picture definitely linked to the processes of globalisation and to the consolidation of the external action of LRAs – sometimes defined as paradiplomacy, Track II diplomacy, regional and municipal diplomacy (Duchacek, 1984; Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990). Decentralised cooperation – understood as the external development finance and cooperation provided by LRAs in support of partner authorities– has also contributed to strengthening horizontal cooperation between LRAs with different institutional capacities but often on similar policy issues (OECD, 2019a; Fernández de Losada & Calvete Moreno, 2018). All these phenomena have produced, in the Mediterranean, a dense network of public administrations firmly engaged in strengthening joint cross-border and transnational activities in salient policy areas such as the sustainable use of water and agricultural resources, climate change, strategic urban planning, local economic development, tourism, education and culture.

Furthermore, and aside from EU territorial programmes, there is also an almost overwhelming diversity of international networks of LRAs operating today in the Mediterranean. As the urban dimension has gained prominence in the context of the 2030 Agenda, city networks have started to play a special role in assisting urban policy formulations. Indeed, cities can share knowledge and practices in more horizontal fashion and provide support on concrete issues such as participatory city planning, waste management, urban mobility and housing. Only to quote some relevant experiences, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Eurocities, and the Conference of European Regions and Cities and Metropolis all represent –albeit at different scales– some attempts to bundle some of this municipal and regional advocacy at the international level. With its pan-Mediterranean focus, MedCities is another relevant network of 61 cities of the three shores of the Mediterranean that operates under contemporary global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, the New Urban Agenda, the Pact of Amsterdam, and the UfM Urban Agenda for the Mediterranean.

By aggregating interests at an upper scale, networks of LRAs are crucial in the consolidation of the territorial dimension. Because of their size, national and international associations of LRAs more consistently and effectively develop advocacy and lobbying actions in favour of a stronger position for LRAs in global governance agendas. Domestically, they can improve coordination mechanisms with national authorities and press for better financing schemes.[11] And finally, they provide incentives and share information with laggard members that, in other ways, would not show interest in territorial

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territorial cooperation, the MED is a transnational cooperation programme applicable to the whole European side of the sea basin, while the ADRION and BALKAN MED programmes focus on sub-basin areas of the Mediterranean.

[11] Tangible results can be achieved by opening the debate in favour of higher levels of decentralisation, renewed spaces for more inclusive intergovernmental relations and even better financing schemes. As the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the New Urban Agenda make clear, for example, localisation of the SDGs will be unfeasible without supporting LRAs through innovative financial mechanisms built up on domestic resources (UCGL, 2019).

programmes and other experiences.[12] LRA activism and dynamism in the Mediterranean is not, however, exempt from criticisms. Currently, serious challenges still remain to be addressed, such as asymmetric institutional capacities, heterogeneity of interests among networks, and coherence among territorial programmes and initiatives.

Firstly, in the southern and eastern Mediterranean, while the situation varies from country to country, the autonomy of LRAs is very limited. Conflicts, political instability and ethnic/religious tensions have prevented further decentralisation in those countries where governmental elites have little appetite for devolving power to local levels of government (El-Mikawy, 2020). In this scenario, local budgets frequently come from subsidies and transfers from central governments, with LRAs unable to efficiently levy local taxes and with very limited access to funding. Secondly, South-South cooperation between LRAs is largely limited to informal collaborations. Only a small number of LRAs with strong leaders, sufficient competencies and some administrative capacity (e.g., proposal writing and implementation of projects) manage to participate in cooperation and development programmes. While the Arab Towns Organization (ATO) has been identified as having great potential to become a vehicle for promoting urban resilience in the region, its involvement is still weak. Similarly, the Arab League seems not to have a strong vision on the topic (Chmielewska, A. *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, the presence of a high number of cooperation schemes, each one with different dynamics, regulations and goals, clearly undermines policy coherence for development (OECD, 2019b). Target 17.14 of SDGs calls on all countries to enhance policy coherence for sustainable development as a key means of implementation aimed at building synergies between different policies. Policy coherence requires horizontal coordination between strategies, objectives, instruments and projects in order to decrease the risk of implementation failures and of misalignments in policy approaches. It also calls for vertical coherence among different scales of governance and levels of government (supranational, national and subnational). And, finally, it also requires balancing short-term priorities with long-term sustainability objectives (time coherence between policies and initiatives).

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[12] Bringing together some 160 sub-national governments from 24 states from the EU and beyond and representing about 200 million people, the CPMR has, for example, become a regular partner of the European institutions for streaming territorial interests in EU policy-making.

2. Macro-regional strategies, governance and the 2030 Agenda

2.1 Macro-regional strategies: the state of the art

Labelled as a new «tool of European integration» inside and outside European borders (Bellini & Hilpert, 2013), MRSs have today become a novel governance approach used by the EU in order to attain diverse policy goals in the framework of territorial cooperation and neighbourhood policies. At present, there are four MRSs that concern 19 EU member states and 9 non-EU countries, with some 236 million EU citizens and about 33.5 million citizens of third countries.[13] And a fifth macro-regional strategy –for the Carpathian region– is currently under debate.[14] While each macro-regional strategy is unique in terms of members, goals and governance solutions, they all share the same common aims: to ensure a coordinated approach to issues that are best tackled together and to bring an added value to coordinated action and policy implementation (European Parliament, 2020).

Endorsed by the European Council –and actively promoted by the European Commission– MRSs represent an intergovernmental policy framework for cooperation to address common challenges in a defined geographical area by EU member states and third countries. Indeed, for most current challenges –such as sustainability and climate change, and migrations– the EU is not an optimal regulatory area, either too large or too small (Majone, 2014). In the Mediterranean, for example, the scope of some problems is regional rather than EU-wide, and is best tackled through regional arrangements. Originally framed around the three No's-narrative (no new EU legislation, no new EU institutions and no new EU budget), at the core of the strategies there is the idea of fostering synergies and complementarities among already existing initiatives, programmes and governance structures. The desired outcome would be a new governance architecture at the macro-regional level and a change in the *modus operandi* concerning cooperation and coordination (Gänzle & Kern, 2015).

Although formally introduced at the EU level, when and why MRSs are more likely to develop depends on a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors. Since the beginning of the 2000s, external factors have notably contributed to the promotion of the strategies. They include: the new emphasis on territorial cohesion as a consequence of the approval of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007; the search for greater efficiency as a consequence of austerity measures stemming from the financial crisis started in 2008; the re-bordering of

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[13] The first macro-regional strategy established in 2009 –the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)– has acted as a model for a further three EU strategies: the Danube strategy (EUSDR, 2010), the Adriatic-Ionian strategy (EUSAIR, 2014) and the Alpine strategy (EUSALP, 2015).

[14] See, for example, European Parliamentary Research Service (2019), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642257/EPRS_BRI(2019)642257_EN.pdf

the external limits of the EU and the reconfiguration of relations between the EU and its immediate surroundings. The Europe 2020 Strategy, for example, paved the way for testing experimental governance architectures at functionally-defined territorial scales below the EU level (Borrás & Radaelli, 2011).

Internally, the presence of some geographical shared obstacles (or/and resources), such as a sea basin, a river and/or a mountain area, has usually prompted the initial debate regarding the opportunity to «go macro-regional». When these aspects have been accompanied by the presence of common historical and cultural legacies and the existence of some active and endowed LRAs, macro-regionalisation processes have assumed a more bottom-up approach, lately sponsored and supported by central governments.

Although the four MRSs are at different stages of maturity,[15] they all share some common challenges (Núñez Ferrer, Catuti, Stroia, & Bhryn, 2019; European Parliament, 2020; COWI, 2017; Bergström, Eggensberger, Jerina, Lütgenau, & Singer, 2020; European Commission, 2019), such as:

  a) discontinuous and asymmetric political support at the national level;
  b) problems in setting inclusive and effective governance models;
  c) difficulties accessing funding for MRS priorities.

Political commitment tends, for example, to be visible in the launch of the strategy but it usually decreases due to the effect of changes in political majorities, international disengagement or removal of political promoters. Within the same strategy, moreover, states also show different degrees of commitment. Interestingly, EUSAIR –affected by this differential cross-country commitment– has opted for the adoption of high-level political documents (such as the 2018 Catania Ministerial Declaration, for example) as an instrument to keep political momentum high.

In terms of governance, all MRSs face the coordination dilemma that characterised systems of multilevel governance (Egeberg & Trondal, 2016). Each strategy has very different and complex governance arrangements, usually based on a three-tier structure. National coordinators exist, for example, in all four strategies and their main role consists of ensuring and overseeing that the macro-regional strategy is firmly anchored in the domestic context. However, the four strategies place national coordinator units in different ministries –Foreign Affairs, Economy, European Affairs or Prime Minister's offices. Internal governance structures are still top-down driven. Usually, LRAs are not directly represented in the governing bodies of the MRSs or either –in the most favourable scenarios– they have a mere observatory status (with the exception of EUSALP). Full participation in the upstream stage of macro-regional policy-making –such as the selection of priorities and

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[15] The process of development of an MRS occurs in three phases: Phase I (agenda setting), Phase II (implementation), Phase III (maturity). Each of these phases presents specific barriers and obstacles as well as drivers for development (COWI, 2017).

instruments and the distribution of responsibilities– remains a basic priority for better implementation, higher ownership and policy effectiveness.

Thirdly, access to funding resources is still complex and limited. Despite the «three No's rule», in the last few years the Commission has made some efforts to ensure strategies can tap more easily into EU territorial programmes, neighbourhood policy and European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds, more in general. For a period, the European Parliament has also provided some funding via pilot projects and preparatory actions. Nevertheless, resources are still limited and insufficient. Some good practice from current ESI programmes already exists, such as targeted calls, bonus points to projects of macro-regional relevance and direct support for strategy projects. Remarkably, the recently created networks of Managing Authorities in each of the already existing MRSs and for each of the ESI programmes can represent a valuable interface for financial dialogue between implementers of the strategies and programmes.

For the future, the new 2021-27 Cohesion Policy regulatory framework is expected to establish more synergies between the strategies and INTERREG programmes as well as to improve the mainstreaming of the programmes into the strategies. Moreover, the Commission, in the context of the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean, has proposed mobilising up to €7 billion under the Neighbourhood and Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) with a leverage effect that could reach up to €30 billion in the Southern Neighbourhood thanks to the synergies between private and public investments.

2.2 Macro-regionalisation processes in the context of the 2030 Agenda: the new emphasis on territory and governance

2.2.1 On governance and macro-regionalisation

Beyond the usual EU interpretative schemes, macro-regionalisation processes fit relatively well with the new narrative stemming from the 2030 Agenda, at least in two basic principles: the claim for experimental and innovative models of governance and the emphasis on territory (and on territorial differentiation).

Firstly, the 2030 Agenda relies on «governance through goals», a novel form of governance defined by weak institutional arrangements and the absence of legally-binding commitments and formal enforcement incentives (Biermann, 2018; Kanie & Biermann, 2017). Basically, MRSs represent intergovernmental and non-binding agreements for enhancing policy cooperation to address common challenges in a determined geographical area. It turns out, clearly, that both approaches share the same problems: high risks of implementation failure and weak enforcement. Enforcing political decisions is, indeed, difficult without a formal sanctioning system (Dahl, 1989; Peters, 1986). Under this

circumstance, it becomes necessary to strengthen alternative drivers of policy support, such as policy effectiveness and legitimacy (Granados & Noferini, 2019). These two policy characteristics can be fostered if strategies are determined according to local stakeholders' preferences and they prove to be sensitive to development needs and social, economic and political characteristics of specific territories and implementers. This is why macro-regionalisation processes that can include a fair negotiation of local preferences, an inclusive and plural governance structure and a goal-oriented policy approach are likely to be more successful.

Secondly, by placing emphasis on the need to adapt the implementation of the 17 SDGs to different territorial contexts, the 2030 Agenda calls for combining different (and sometimes contrasting) governance models on the ground. Indeed, this approach enshrines a dual process that must combine «common» shared principles with «differentiated» territorial contexts.[16] Basically, what is «common» is a set of universal values normatively recognised as «good governance» elements, such as the rule of law, accountability, participation, transparency, inclusiveness and responsiveness. Nevertheless –since territories differ regarding their initial positions, governance styles and preferences–, common principles must be translated into a «differentiated» way when implementing at the national, regional and local level. This dual dimension opens the avenue for combining different governance styles successfully «on the ground» depending on the available opportunities (and limitations) posed by a specific territory and its policy actors. More importantly, within this framework, apparently contrasting approaches (e.g., bottom-up versus top-down models, cooperative versus market-oriented methods, [strong] leadership versus [decentralised] ownership) are not contradictory but mutually enforcing.

In general terms, novel governance[17] models inspired by the 2030 Agenda make reference to a set of elements that should drive the definition and the implementation of public policies aimed at achieving the SDGs. Usually, these elements include:

- the integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions across sectors and policy domains (policy coherence);

- the institutional coordination between levels of government (vertical dimension of multilevel governance approach);

- the engagement and participation of main stakeholders (horizontal dimension of multilevel governance approach), and

- the inclusion of the principles of transparency, accountability and monitoring for evaluation in public service delivery.

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[16] This dual nature is fully recognised in the «common but differentiated governance-approach» (Meuleman, 2018).

[17] Different definitions of governance are available in the academic context. Generally, governance is the totality of interactions in which government, other public bodies, the private sector and civil society participate aiming to solve societal problems.

Usually interpreted as soft-space of governance, MRSs have been considered as laboratories for multilevel, experimentalist and collaborative governance. From the first perspective, MRSs are usually conceived as joint endeavours between territorial entities at different levels of government (sub-national, national and supranational). Hence, they are decidedly multilevel (Piattoni, 2015). Although constrained within the 3 No's-narrative, they usually give rise to governance arrangements which, in time, consolidate collective consultation patterns, decision-making procedures, administrative roles and actors' expectations. In the end, they provide the opportunity for public (and non-public) actors to mobilise in defence of their own interests at the domestic as well as the supranational level.

The significance of MRSs from an experimentalist perspective lies in their capacity to mobilise institutional and non-institutional actors towards policy goals that have been identified as central to the EU. Experimentalist governance refers to the way of conceptualising institutional innovation stemming from a continuous process of goal-setting and revision based on mutual learning, adaptation and flexible cooperation schemes (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). Under this perspective, MRSs serve to recombine the institutional structures that have been created at various levels to manage and implement public policies at the transnational level. Lastly, the collaborative accent of these governance agreements makes reference to processes and actions driven by public actors that involve also non-governmental organisations in any stage of the policy-process with the aim of negotiating interests and policy preferences (Batory & Svensson, 2019). This raises questions of interdependencies and coordination across levels of governance, and between public and private actors, institutions and organisations. In the end, the ultimate goal of any macro-regional strategy is to guarantee policy coherence (within a functionally-defined region or territory) to diverse cooperation initiatives that include –on a participatory basis– different levels of government and multiple stakeholders.

2.2.2 On territory and macro-regionalisation (place-based versus network-based policies)

With regard to the emphasis on territory, it is worth recalling the «territorial turn» that regional development policies underwent during the late 1990s. This approach, indeed, enhanced the decentralisation of decision-making to LRAs with the aim of implementing territorially-targeted public policies more aligned to local preferences and policy instruments. In the context of Cohesion Policy, the influential Barca Report put onto the European agenda the need for place-based approaches stressing the importance of regional specificities and local institutions as well as endogenous model of socioeconomic development (Barca, 2009). The application of the principles of subsidiarity and of partnership stimulated the generation of development policies based on the active involvement of a wide range of local, public and private actors during both the programming and implementation stages.

Nonetheless, place-based approaches have been criticised for their «local bias» (Celata & Coletti, 2014). Firstly, an excessive emphasis on territorialisation leads to excessive localism, inward-looking strategies and policy capture by local elites interested in controlling

the distribution of public resources. Secondly, LRAs show variety regarding institutional and administrative capacities with many examples of under-resourced and poorly-endowed local governments that have frankly failed in absorbing European funds and in delivering effective public policies for development. Thirdly, place-based approaches become less appropriate and effective when policy issues cross political and administrative borders.

Through a scalar (transnational) reorganisation of roles and by focusing on complementarities and synergies between places, territorial cooperation has addressed (some of) the limitations of place-based approaches (Celata & Coletti, 2014). During the last few decades, the explosion of hundreds of Euroregions, working communities and European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) have indeed prompted innovative schemes of territorial and collaborative governance across the internal and external borders of the EU. Mainly focused on providing pragmatic solutions to policy problems shared across a political border, Euroregions have for example incentivised the interchange of best practices and shared solutions among LRAs belonging to different institutional settings (Durá *et al*., 2019; Medeiros, 2011; Perkmann, 1999).

Today, place-based approaches are still considered a major source of inspiration and have been included in the 2030 Agenda framework through the concept of localisation. Localising means «taking into account sub-national contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress».[18] Basically, localisation recognises local development as an endogenous and spatially-integrated phenomenon, conferring primary responsibility for its planning, managing and financing to LRAs (OECD, 2020). Nevertheless, in the context of macro-regionalisation processes, the definition of functional spaces of action (around a challenge or a border) has widened the idea of endogenous growth by depicting regions as places of overlapping –but not necessarily locally-connected– relational networks. Under this renewed perspective, LRAs would remain key actors of development strategies but they would be asked to participate in collaborative models for governing and administering transnational policy spaces characterised by the presence of supranational, national, regional and other local actors.

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[18] Statement adopted by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments at the Local and Regional Authorities Forum in the HLPF of June 2018.

3. Macro-regionalisation processes in the Mediterranean space

3.1 The Mediterranean: an impossible puzzle?

Historically, the regionalisation of the Mediterranean encompasses a never-ending debate among those who conceive the sea basin and its territories as sharing (some) historical, geographical and cultural commonalities and those who, instead, consider the Mediterranean as an endless field of tensions or simply «too big» and «too fragmented» to be successfully regionalised (Bialasiewicz, Giaccaria, Jones & Minca, 2013; Giaccaria & Minca, 2011). If one considers, however, that any process of regionalisation is eminently about «the making of spaces for political action», macro-regionalisation can be interpreted as a deliberate (political) attempt to overcome existing institutional barriers to regional cooperation in international contexts. Therefore, although historical commonalities can support the start of the process, they constitute «neither sufficient nor necessary conditions» per se and macro-regions can be «artificially or functionally imagined» by the (sole) need for strengthening goal-oriented transnational cooperation.

Aside from the debate on the Mediterranean as a shared versus a dividing space, the «macro-regional fever» (Dühr, 2011) has today definitely affected the Mediterranean.[19] Starting from the 2010s, the EU institutions and diverse public actors have indeed devoted some interest in speculating on how (and whether) to apply an integrated macro-regional approach to the Mediterranean. In its 2014 Report on a Cohesion Policy for the Mediterranean, for example, the ARLEM explicitly called for a unique and integrated macro-regional strategy for the entire Mediterranean (ARLEM, 2014).

According to the Report, the process relied upon the idea of «variable geometry» with the aim of combining bottom-up and top-down governance approaches and offering a voluntary gradual method to southern countries and regions. Basically, the «step-by-step» approach opened the doors to a flexible route to membership –the variable geometry concept– according to which, affiliation would be based on the voluntary participation of Mediterranean countries. From the perspective of international relations, this gradual and voluntary involvement had to avoid political vetoes and minimise possible obstacles coming from central governments. Meanwhile, in this initial phase, LRAs participation was limited to capitalisation on already existing cooperation frameworks, programmes and projects.

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[19] Currently, the 5+5 Dialogue encompasses four macro-regional strategies, including three involving EU Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Greece) as well as non-EU Mediterranean countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro): the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (adopted in 2010), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (2014), and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (2015).

Geographically, this gradual process considered a three-stage route with the creation of three individual and separate (sub)macro-regional strategies: one for the Adriatic-Ionian, one for the western Mediterranean (Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) and one for the eastern Mediterranean (Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Libya). Progressively, these three (sub)-MRSs had to be synthesised in a unique and integrated macro-regional strategy for the entire Mediterranean. Currently, this gradual approach seems to have achieved some concrete results with the establishment of the first of the three strategies, the EUSAIR – officially approved in 2014 and involving four EU member states (Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia) and five non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia[20] and Serbia).

The EUSAIR has already entered its Phase II-maturity stage (COWI, 2017) by consolidating a complex implementation chain, which is already producing macro-regional policy outcomes such as the Adriatic-Ionian Network of Universities, Regions, Chambers of Commerce and Cities (AI-NURECC) and the creation of the EUSAIR Facility Point. Coordinated by the CPMR –with the support of the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion (AIE), the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities (FAIC), the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce, and UniAdrion–, the AI-NURECC initiative helps to promote a structured dialogue among LRAs, universities, chambers of commerce, youth associations and networks, entrepreneurs and civil society. The establishment of the EUSAIR Facility Point – financed through the transnational programme ADRION– aims to facilitate the development and functioning of stakeholders' platforms as well as to provide operational support to the governance structure of the EUSAIR.

Nonetheless, the other two (sub)-MRSs (the one for the eastern and the one for the western Mediterranean) have not even entered the political agenda. If in the western Mediterranean the scenario seems to be more favourable thanks to the role of the informal 5+5 Dialogue (after all, the oldest framework of intergovernmental cooperation in the basin), in the eastern side, in contrast, unceasing tensions and frictions make concrete advancements unfeasible and unrealistic in the short to medium term. Indeed, most recent positions have become extremely prudent and they have framed a possible process of macro-regionalisation in the entire Mediterranean within the next two EU financial frameworks which ultimately end beyond 2030. It remains to be seen how much the renewed commitment between EU member states and countries in the Southern Neighbourhood, as expressed in the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean, will be able to enhance regional cooperation and support sub-regional, inter-regional and trilateral cooperation, notably with African partners.

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[20] North Macedonia participated as a guest at the 10th Governing Board Meeting (November 2019), and it was officially added to EUSAIR on 3 April 2020.

3.2 Obstacles and potentials in the process of macro-regionalisation in the Mediterranean

Leaving aside the intriguing question of whether an integrated macro-regional strategy for the entire Mediterranean is desirable or not, there is no doubt that better synergies and greater coordination among sea basin, thematic and regional strategies and other cooperation instruments are necessary in the Mediterranean. Today, mapping the number of strategies, programmes and policy frameworks operating in the Mediterranean is almost impossible, and overlaps, inefficiencies and coordination gaps are undermining policy coherence and the achievement of concrete results in the entire region. In 2019, the Mediterranean Countries Edition of the Sustainable Development Report placed the region at around position 49th in the world ranking. Yet, on the issue of regional cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships promoted by SDG no.17, the Mediterranean is clearly behind (Fossie, 2020).

To revert these current negative development patterns, a more ambitious and integrated vision is necessary in the Mediterranean. Greater synergies and stronger coordination between initiatives and programmes would nevertheless face the following challenges:

a) rising political commitment and promoting convergence of national interests from EU and non-EU states involved in the process;

b) defining a fair and effective governance structure;

c) selecting common policy priorities, and

d) finding adequate and sufficient funding schemes.

It is probably too early to speculate about whether the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic will have a profound negative impact on the nature of international relations among central states or –on the contrary– it will reinvigorate multilateralism. In the context of Euro-Mediterranean relations, the previous paragraphs of this paper have already informed about the current «less benevolent» EU attitude towards the entire area under the new EU «resilience paradigm».

Twenty-five years after the kick-off of the Barcelona Process, the Mediterranean still presents urgent and unsolved questions. In the Maghreb, for example, political instability and enduring tensions between Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia continue to frustrate any progress as regards cooperation. The situation in the eastern Mediterranean (Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria, as well as Greece and Cyprus) continues to be dominated by a series of frictions that not only limit integration options but also undermine the very stability of the area. Obviously, macro-regionalisation processes require political stability and institutional enabling conditions that can guarantee long-term political commitment. Political commitment is, however, dependent on the convergence of national interests from EU and non-EU states in favour of an enhanced cooperation and coordination regarding already existing strategies and initiatives in the Mediterranean.

The 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration reminds us that a strengthened Mediterranean partnership remains a strategic imperative for the European Union, as the challenges the region continues to face require a common response, especially ten years after the Arab Spring (European Commission, 2021, p. 1). Nevertheless, national governments must find a proper incentive for enhancing their commitment and support towards integrating strategies in the Mediterranean.

Given the intergovernmental nature of formal macro-regionalisation processes, LRAs probably have a weaker leverage at this initial stage of the process. Still, the participation of the ARLEM, of LRAs and their international networks at this early stage would guarantee that the territorial dimension is correctly included in the process of macro-regionalisation. To begin with, at the aggregate level, networks of LRAs can positively lobby national and supranational institutions for a shared vision for a better, cohesive and sustainable development in the Mediterranean. Secondly, their action could be orientated to involving, from the start, civil societies of the three shores of the Mediterranean. According to the Eurobarometer on regional policy,[21] citizens' awareness of MRSs is dramatically low, with only between 5 and 15% of the population declaring any knowledge about these strategies (with the exception of the Baltic Sea countries). Increasing awareness and knowledge with respect to the potential advantages of «going macro-regional» is likely to increase actors' ownership and strategy's legitimacy with positive effects on the following implementation stage.

The second challenge regards the model of governance that would lead the process of macro-regionalisation and that should guarantee an equilibrated and fair model of representation among actors involved. Following the principles of multilevel and collaborative governance approaches, the main idea would be to horizontally and vertically establish negotiation processes that help define a clear redistribution of responsibilities and commitments among the actors. A more balanced governance structure is indeed paramount to ensure legitimacy and effectiveness. The evidence shows that clear leadership and already pre-existing cooperation structures are among the enabling factors that can contribute to the success of MRSs. Both factors have, for example, facilitated the pioneering process of macro-regionalisation in the Baltic region as well as the definition of the strategy in the Adriatic and Ionic area.

Given the peculiar nature of the strategies, it remains intrinsically problematic to build up an effective governance system. A higher degree of coordination across different levels of government and greater inclusion of civil society in governance structures remain the two basic factors that can improve the functioning of the implementation chain between decision-makers and key implementers. In this initial stage, taking advantage of collaborative platforms and regional institutions already operating in the Mediterranean can be tactically effective. The role of the ARLEM could serve to strengthen political cooperation between regional and local actors of EU and non-EU Mediterranean countries. Networks of LRAs, with experience in the implementation of territorial programmes, could

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[21] Available at: ec.europa.eu

help in capitalising on good practices and project results as well as in fostering macro-regional governance capacity through the connection between various Mediterranean initiatives and programmes. The members of the Med Coop Alliance are all somehow involved, for example, in some of the most relevant regional initiatives, such as the WESTMED initiative, BLUEMED initiative, ESPON programme, EUSAIR, UfM and INTERREG MED.

In terms of priorities –the third challenge–, the Mediterranean is already covered by different strategies and frameworks that have already established general policy urgencies (climate change, youth unemployment, digital transition, governance, the rule of law and democratisation), sectorial priorities (sea safety and sustainability, blue and green economy, digital transition, tourism, maritime traffic and pollution) and flagship initiatives. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, for example, in 2016 twenty-one Mediterranean countries and the EU adopted the revised Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD 2016-2025), an integrative policy framework to translate the 2030 Agenda at the regional, sub-regional and national levels. Under the UfM framework, the well-known six strategic priority areas include: business development, social and civil affairs, higher education and research, transport and urban development, water and environment, energy, and climate action. Finally, in 2021, the European Commission has explicitly renewed the commitment to a new agenda for a green, digital, resilient and just recovery, guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2021).

If macro-regionalisation means bringing added value to policy action by enhancing coordination among already existing frameworks, the debate should focus on how many (and which) of the already fixed priorities could be treated at the (integrated) macro-regional level. Defining a set of limited and feasible policy priorities becomes essential for the rationalisation and coordination of the different scales of intervention. In this respect, already existing frameworks are a source of inspiration for the selection of a limited set of thematic priorities. Starting from the critical review of current priorities in the light of the 2030 Agenda would be a first interesting exercise in order to assess the added value of a unique macro-regional strategy. Recalling the debate on place-based *versus* network-based approaches, the 2030 Agenda could serve also as a basic framework for this prioritisation exercise in which universal principles would then be defined and settled at the territorial level by considering the specificities of the many territories that form the Mediterranean basin.

Finally, any process of regionalisation should be accompanied by reasonable and effective mechanisms of financing especially devoted to increase capacity-building and governance issues at the transnational level. Some voices have already opened the debate and they have tried to revert the 3 No's-narrative in favour of the 3 Yes rule: more complementary funding, more institutional coordination and more new projects. Scaling up programmes and ensuring constant financial support to long-term strategies is certainly a well-recognised priority for all the already-established MRSs. In this respect, the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework –especially with the new regulation for the INTERREG MED programme– is creating high expectations with regards to the capitalisation and

mainstreaming of ERDF funds in the Mediterranean. Financial resources are indeed expected to ensure a greater impact of project outputs by reserving a specific number of resources for a governance axis that would increase coordination, institutional capacity and effectiveness among LRAs.

3.3 The Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance

This section presents a qualitative SWOT analysis that focuses on the potential role of the Med Coop Alliance in the current scenario of transnational cooperation policies in the Mediterranean area. The main question is: considering the current state of Euro-Mediterranean relations, what would the main SWOT of the Med Coop Alliance be in the implementation of present and future territorial cooperation programmes in the Mediterranean?

The Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance (Med Coop) is an informal network of networks launched in early 2019 in Barcelona by five Mediterranean networks: the Intermediterranean Commission of the CPMR, the Euroregion Pyrenees Mediterranean, MedCities, the Latin Arch, and the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion (see Annex 1). Building a progressive Mediterranean geography of actors, the Alliance is an open framework willing to receive the support and the participation of other key territorial actors and institutions. According to the official declaration, the Alliance aims to strengthen its efforts towards a joint long-term strategy for the sustainable and integrated development of the Mediterranean. It is to be considered a political project welcoming other networks and key Mediterranean players as well as getting the direct support of citizens. As explained in the 2020 ARLEM Report,[22] «this territorial alliance aims to develop a long-term strategy to build a sustainable future for all citizens in the Mediterranean. It will work hard towards the implementation and integration of emerging sea basin, macro-regional strategies and other connected initiatives and cooperation instruments, so as to build a common, more cohesive sustainable and co-owned Mediterranean macro-region involving all the territorial actors» (ARLEM, 2020, p. 3).

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[22] «Euro-Mediterranean integration: The role of regional and local authorities», report presented during the 11th ARLEM plenary session in Barcelona in 2020.

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Government of Catalonia

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25 YEARS 1995 - 2020
BARCELONA PROCESS
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Strengths	Weaknesses
• *Multilevel character*. By including the main levels of governments on the three shores of the Med (regional, supra-local and local), the Alliance reinforces the territorial perspective and can cover different scales of interventions.	• *Permanent political commitment*. The high number of participating actors and the significant differences between interests and priorities can weaken political momentum.
• *Implementation* capacities. As implementers, the members of the Alliance already have proven experience in EU territorial programmes, particularly in EU Cohesion Policy and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). This is especially true for the governance axis of cross-border and transnational cooperation programmes.	• *Coordination dilemma*. The Alliance presents a high institutional density (number of members) that can increase coordination costs (without a dedicated organisational structure).
• *Decentralised development cooperation (DDC)*. Members are involved in DDC activities with a great record of initiatives in the field of capacity-building and technical assistance with LRAs of eastern and southern Med.	• *Asymmetries in administrative and institutional capacities*. Limited operational capacities for some members of the Alliance (especially those coming from non-EU countries).
• *Lobbying and advocacy*. (Some of) the members are well positioned in the EU policy context and have a considerable lobbying and advocacy power vis-à-vis EU institutions.	• *Legal status*. The different legal status of the members of the associations can raise obstacles for the participation to EU territorial programmes and other initiatives.
• *Raising commitment among members*. The Alliance can increase awareness of and commitment to territorial strategies among less active members of the individual networks by acting as a platform for sharing best practices as well as designing bottom-up pilot initiatives and capitalisation.	• *Funding*. Lack of proper funds increase dependency from alternative sources of financing (especially in the light of the 3 No's rhetoric by the Commission).
• *Experience in innovative models of governance.* Two of the members are Euroregions (one of which owns an EGTC) that have already exploited the potentials of cross-border initiatives.	• *Under-representation of (especially) the south Med*. The Alliance is Europe-driven and the southern and eastern Med are underrepresented.
• *Horizontal cooperation and capacity to involve public administrations from non-EU members.* As implementers of EU territorial programmes and DDC, members of the Alliance already engaged in cooperation initiatives with LRAs from the south and the east of the Med.	• *Thematic dispersion*. Covering a wide range of thematic areas may not allow for easy prioritisation and focused action.
• *Urban* (and *rural-urban*) *dimension*. With MedCities and the Latin Arch, the Alliance guarantees the prominence of the urban perspective in the development of joint strategies.	• *Legitimacy and accountability*. Given the composition of the Alliance, issues of legitimacy and accountability can be raised.
• *Networks dimension*. Being a network of networks, the Alliance can insulate possible political interferences stemming from different political cycles (political change in some partner administrations is mitigated by the network nature of the Alliance).	
• *Bottom-up and localisation*. The bottom-up and territorial nature of the Alliance gives prominence to local needs and preferences, thus increasing the legitimacy of the initiative.	
• *Openness:* The Alliance is to be considered open to extended memberships (especially from the south).	
• *Complementarity:* If the Alliance is able to maintain the expected technical level, it can be complementary to further institutional organisations (among all, the ARLEM).	

Opportunities	Threats
› *Governance momentum.* The 2030 Agenda claims for innovative governance models based on policy coherence, vertical integration, stakeholders participation and monitoring for accountability.	› *Political instability and conflicts.* The Med continues to be a heterogeneous region with differences in economic and territorial size and capacity, limiting the potential for cooperation.
› *Macro-regional momentum.* The EU is sensitive to territorial (macro)regional strategies and the Mediterranean area already includes two relevant initiatives: EUSAIR and WESTMED. ARLEM/CoR and CPMR already presented some reflections on a unique integrated strategy for the entire Mediterranean area.	› *Central state reticence.* In some territories, central states are not willing to delegate powers to territorial units.
	› *EU foreign policy.* EU multilateral approach to the Mediterranean has lost momentum and re-nationalisation of foreign policies can reduce the commitment to transnational cooperation initiatives.
› *New EU MFF.* The negotiation of a new Cohesion Policy within the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will include some measures and instruments in order to increase the availability of funding for MRSs and the potential for mainstreaming.	› *Funding reduction.* The possible reduction of funds in the next MMF can reduce the availability of funds.
	› *New normality.* Worsening of the global and regional scenario as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic.
› *New normality.* Some evidence shows an opportunity for LRAs to act in mitigation of the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis (especially if central states fail to act rapidly).	› *National interests.* National agendas dominate in areas such as migration and security, limiting cooperation and integration in these areas.
	› *International positioning.* Overlapping with other sub-regional initiatives, organisations and/or strategies.

Table 1: SWOT analysis

Formed by an interesting variety of networks (see Annex 1) –which in a multilevel fashion includes the three main levels of government: local, supra-local and regional (subnational)– the Alliance brings together LRAs with an already consistent experience in the implementation of territorial and development cooperation programmes in the Mediterranean. Individually, many of its members actively participate in the implementation of EU cross-border and transnational programmes or either operate in the context of decentralised development cooperation at the urban level. Interestingly, two members of the Alliance –the EPM and the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion– are organisations that arose in the context of territorial cooperation and they rely on experimental models of territorial governance. Finally, the Alliance presents a great potential regarding the specific policy areas of intervention such as local development, circular economy, sustainability, education, mobility, and the green and digital transitions.

If the Alliance is able to overcome some relevant obstacles –such as lack of continued political impulse, the definition of an effective coordination scheme and the opening to LRAs of the southern Mediterranean– it can surely help to activate some first synergies between the different Mediterranean programmes. In fact, all the networks present in the Alliance have among their members public administrations familiarised with and actively involved in dynamics of transnational policies on an urban, metropolitan, provincial and regional scale. In addition, members already show a large level of familiarity with the formal and informal channels of European policy-making relating to both cohesion policy and the context of Euro-Mediterranean relations (with a special emphasis on the role of the ARLEM).

Despite the existence of current political tensions in the Mediterranean, the international scenario seems to have opened a window of opportunity for innovative schemes of cooperation. On the one side, the 2030 Agenda reinforces the claims for innovative governance models based on policy coherence, vertical integration, stakeholder participation and monitoring for accountability. From the European perspective, the «macro-regional momentum» still represents an inspiring framework that could be notably strengthened in the coming multiannual financial framework 2021-2027.

4. Conclusions

Macro-regionalisation approaches and the 2030 Agenda represent two inspiring frameworks to address the urgent challenges that the Mediterranean region is currently facing. Their emphasis on the territorial dimension of public policies and on innovative models of governance are promising policy guidelines that can steer the definition and implementation of more effective and legitimated transnational policies. Macro-regionalisation processes are indeed trying to innovate the *modus operandi* of transnational cooperation dynamics by offering a common framework to foster synergies and complementarities among already existing initiatives, programmes and governance structures. The debate on the implementation of the SDGs recalls the need to define and implement development policies on the basis of the principles of policy coherence, multilevel governance and localisation (place-based approach).

By combining both approaches, the analytical framework used in the paper suggests that macro-regionalisation processes that include a fair negotiation of local preferences, an inclusive governance structure and a goal-oriented policy approach are likely to be more successful. Moreover, these processes will be perceived as legitimated and effective by the public in general (citizens) and the actors directly involved in the process (implementers). Clearly, coordination efforts involve all levels of government and civil society at the local, national and supranational level. EU institutions must continue to offer formal frameworks that incentivise experimental (but accountable) models of governance. Central governments must assure long-term political support and must involve LRAs in the negotiation of domestic policy-making related to territorial and transnational policies. Finally, LRAs must increase administrative and institutional capacities in order to consolidate their ability in policy delivering.

Twenty-five years after the kick-off of the Barcelona Process, the Mediterranean still presents urgent and unsolved questions. Firstly, economic integration has not happened at the expected rate (Ayadi, 2020). Secondly, migrations continue to represent a human tragedy that still involves entire families and communities and for which central governments have not provided an effective and shared framework. Finally, none of the conflicts that were already present in the Mediterranean in 1995 has been fixed. Nonetheless, under the wide framework of Euro-Mediterranean relations, hundreds of initiatives –from large-scale international projects to local initiatives– have served to shape several –sometimes overlapping– networks of cooperation among public actors at different levels of government in the Mediterranean. Some of these experiences have proven the feasibility of cooperation mechanisms between the territories of the three shores of the Mediterranean. Some others have clearly been unsuccessful.

Leaving aside the intriguing question as to whether an integrated macro-regional strategy for the entire Mediterranean is desirable or not, there is no doubt that better synergies and greater coordination are needed today in the whole area. The New 2021 Agenda for the Mediterranean proposes a range of actions along key policy areas and priorities, such as human development, good governance and the rule of law, economic resilience and the digital transition, peace and security, migration and mobility, and the green transition. A

renewed commitment to unity and solidarity between EU member states, as well as joint actions with partners in the Southern Neighbourhood, is the precondition for the effective implementation of the Agenda for the Mediterranean. This enhanced political and policy dialogue must, however, encourage the deepening of socioeconomic sustainability at the territorial level. Concretely, this means providing institutional and financial resources for setting innovative, experimental and multilevel governance mechanisms at the regional level by raising political commitment and common understanding through strengthening administrative and institutional capacities as well as targeting technical assistance to implement and enforce legislation both at the central and local levels.

Currently, LRAs are firmly engaged in strengthening joint cross-border and transnational activities in salient policy areas such as the sustainable use of water and agricultural resources, climate change, strategic urban planning, local economic development, tourism, education and culture. Nonetheless, the role of LRAs in the upstream stage of existing MRSs is still weak, mainly consultative and often scarcely influential. In the Mediterranean, the slow advancements of the last few years show that multilevel, network and collaborative governance models are not packages of tools that can be applied everywhere. On the contrary, they require a broad political consensus, some degree of autonomy at the different levels of government, administrative and technical capacity and a cooperative political culture. It is probably true that the implementation of innovative governance schemes is even more difficult in the Mediterranean, where reforms often stall, fail and are even reversed.

By focusing on a recently created structure –the Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance–, the paper invites us to think about the renewed role that LRAs –and their networks– can play in the search for greater coordination among already existing transnational frameworks, eventually under the macro-regional perspective. In the short term, for example, the Alliance would be an interesting platform to enhance strategic coordination between LRAs and organisations in the Mediterranean within already existing programmes, such as the INTERREG MED. The main conclusion warns that relegating LRAs to mere executors of policies decided elsewhere reduces policy legitimacy and increases the probability of implementation failures and policy «incoherence».

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Annex. The Med Coop Alliance

	Year of creation	Mission & Sectors	Number of members	Geographical coverage	Typology of government (main)
Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion	2006	The protection of cultural heritage, protection of the environment, sustainable economic development in the field of SMEs, tourism, fishery, transport and infrastructure	33	European territories of the eastern Med and territories from the western Balkans	Regions and municipalities
CPMR	1973 (1989, Intermed. Commission)	To defend the interests of regions in EU policies with a high territorial impact. It focuses on social, economic and territorial cohesion, maritime policies and blue growth, migrations, governance, energy and climate change, neighbourhood and development	160	European (with also some non-European) territories of the northern Mediterranean (Intermediterranean Commission)	Regions
Latin Arch	2002	Political and technical cooperation aimed at the construction of a common space through collaboration in social, economic and territorial cohesion with the southern Mediterranean territories	33	European territories of the northern Mediterranean	Supra-local level (provinces)
MedCities	1991	To support the development and implementation of city development strategies along with other urban projects	61	European and southern and eastern Med	Municipalities
Euroregion Pyrenees Mediterra-nean	2004	To create a sustainable development cluster in the north-western Mediterranean region based on innovation and the social and economic integration of the territory	3	European territories of the southern Med	Regions