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To cite this article: Stefan Gänzle (2018) 'Experimental Union' and Baltic Sea cooperation: the case of the European Union's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 5:1, 339-352, DOI: [10.1080/21681376.2018.1532315](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2018.1532315)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2018.1532315>



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Published online: 29 Oct 2018.



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# 'Experimental Union' and Baltic Sea cooperation: the case of the European Union's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)

Stefan Gänzle

## ABSTRACT

In the past, Baltic Sea cooperation has been characterized by a plethora of actors, embracing a wide range of policy objectives, such as the establishment of a good environmental status for the regional sea. In 2009, the European Council endorsed the European Union's (EU) Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) as a new tool in the repertoire of Cohesion Policy and European Territorial Cooperation (ETC). The EUSBSR seeks to foster cross-sectoral coordination and functional cooperation in policy areas of 'macro-region-level' relevance, such as transport infrastructure, economic development and environmental protection – thus projecting a 'soft space' of transnational Baltic Sea cooperation. Although firmly placed under the so-called 'Three No's', that is, the requirement of no additional EU funding, institutions and legislation, a lean governance architecture at the macro-regional level has emerged over time and the strategy mobilizes actors from all tenets of the EU's multilevel governance system, including the EU itself, its member and adjacent partner states, as well as subnational authorities and civil society. Drawing on the lens of experimentalist governance, this paper analyzes the underlying mechanisms that allow it to be gauged to what extent the Baltic Sea 'soft space' has solidified over the past decade. It also shows that the EUSBSR effectively rebalances EU transnational and intergovernmental regional cooperation in the Baltic macro-region.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 May 2018; Accepted 2 October 2018

## KEYWORDS

Baltic Sea cooperation; European Union; European Union macro-regional strategies; European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR); European Territorial Cooperation (ETC); Cohesion Policy; transnational and regional cooperation; governance architecture; experimentalist governance

## INTRODUCTION

Regional cooperation amongst countries surrounding the Baltic Sea has always been characterized by a high number of actors stretching across various levels of governance and different policy sectors. It has been estimated that there are no fewer than 40 pan-Baltic organizations, such as the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and others, and more than 600 organizations which promote some regional cause (Schymik, 2012, p. 71) – turning the European Union's (EU) (almost) common sea into a veritable 'sea of acronyms' (Löwendahl & Pursianen, 2009, p. 614). The policy scope as

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well as institutional depth of cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region has grown substantially in the aftermath of the East–West conflict. While some political observers, however, dismiss regional cooperation in this part of Europe as ‘unstructured and “messy”’ (Herolf, 2010, p. 25), others perceive it in more positive terms (Gänzle, 2017a).<sup>1</sup> Several organizations were already established during the Cold War, such as HELCOM, which was founded in 1974 with a view to protecting the maritime environment and because of the Soviet Union’s attempt to push for recognition of the German Democratic Republic as a signatory to the convention; however, most regional organizations only started to mushroom after the collapse of Communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe (Cottey, 1999; Schymik, 2012, pp. 69ff.). Most notably, the CBSS emerged as the pivotal ‘regional undertaking to promote new ideas for cooperation’ (CBSS, 1992, p. 1) amongst the 11 Baltic Sea states (Etzold, 2010);<sup>2</sup> the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) and the UBC, in turn, sought to foster sub-national and municipal cooperation (Mälly, 2018). Taking aside the ongoing crisis with Russia because of Ukraine, which does not only affect the EU at large, but also the countries of the Baltic Sea Region (Brask, 2014), regional cooperation still seems to be prospering.

In addition to intergovernmental regional cooperation, the EU has a track record of functional collaboration in the framework of territorial and cross-border cooperation (Gänzle, 2016). It is today widely accepted that European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) constitutes one of the cornerstones of European integration (Knippenberg, 2004; Perkmann, 2003). EU macro-regional strategies are the most recent addition to this toolbox of functional cooperation in a territorial context (Dühr, 2011, 2018; Gänzle & Kern, 2016a, 2016b; Metzger & Schmitt, 2012; Schuh et al., 2015; Sielker, 2016; Stead, 2011, 2014a, 2014b). Although geographically focused on a ‘macro-region’, such as the Baltic Sea, these strategies have been devised to address specific challenges and opportunities, and to promote mutual learning processes through ‘experimenting’ (Gänzle, 2017b; Gänzle & Mirtl, 2017a, 2017b) with new governance architectures. The EUSBSR is not only the first and oldest, but admittedly also the most advanced EU ‘macro-regional project’ to date (see the contributions to Gänzle & Kern, 2016a). Comprising Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany,<sup>3</sup> Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden, it is primarily conceived as an EU internal strategy. ‘Partner’ countries of regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea, such as Iceland and Norway, but also the Russian Federation, have remained loosely ‘associated’ via the frame of the Economic Area Agreement (EEA) and the Northern Dimension (ND) (Bengtsson, 2009; Makarychev & Sergunin, 2017; Salines, 2010). The EU’s inward-looking focus of the EUSBSR – furthered by the bilateral sanction regime between the EU and Russia as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis – stands in stark contrast to the three other EU macro-regional strategies that have hitherto been adopted by the European Council. That is, the EU Strategies for the Danube (2011), Adriatic–Ionian (2014) and Alpine Region (2015) all exhibit a relatively clear external dimension, involving countries such as Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Serbia and Montenegro, as well as Moldova and Ukraine ‘on a par’ in the macro-regional governance architecture (see the contributions to Dühr, 2011; 2018; Gänzle & Kern, 2016a; Plangger, 2018).

According to the European Commission, a ‘macro-region’ is ‘**an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges**’ (European Commission, 2009, p. 1, original emphasis). Macro-regions are certainly purposefully construed, albeit in the case of the Baltic Sea, the idea of region-ness – defined as ‘the process whereby a geographical area is transformed from a passive object to an active subject, capable of articulating the transnational interests of the emerging region’ (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000, p. 461) – is possibly most advanced given the well-established trajectory of regional and territorial cooperation in the wider Baltic and Nordic areas. In terms of their ‘strategic’ focus, EU macro-regional strategies involve a deliberative process by which a set of objectives and measures is determined to address challenges and opportunities of a macro-region; thus,

they become 'long-term political initiatives ... on cross-cutting policy issues locked in commitments about targets and processes' (Borrás & Radaelli, 2011, p. 464) lacking an 'expiry date' and thus decoupled from specific constraints set by the EU's timeline for multi-annual budgets.

By proposing macro-regional strategies, the EU aims to establish an:

integrated framework to address common challenges, i.e. the urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea, and to contribute to the economic success of the region and to its social and territorial cohesion, as well as to the competitiveness of the EU. (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 11)

This may be supported by existing financial means from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). The core aim of these strategies is to define and drive coordination and integration of different policy sectors, such as environment and agriculture, in a comprehensive way. This goal, however, has been made subject to the principle of the so-called 'Three No's', which means that the implementation of macro-regional strategies (1) should not result in any (major) additional costs, for example, in terms of funding via EU Cohesion Policy; (2) should not trigger the establishment of any new institutions; and finally (3) should not give rise to specific EU legislation devised for the 'macro-region' (European Commission, 2009, p. 5; Schymik, 2011, pp. 5–6). The lack of financial sources was due to the first macro-regional strategy having been endorsed at a time when the EU budget was already in operation for the 2007–13 financial perspective, and therefore did not allow the inclusion of new budget lines – a principle that has been subsequently maintained. Thus, the creators of this new approach hoped to avoid competition for financial resources and rather aspired to use the 'Three No's' as a test-bed for new formats of governing transnational cooperation in line with intergovernmental forms of collaboration. Towards this background the present paper seeks, first, to contribute to furthering the conceptualization of EU macro-regional strategies; second, to answer whether the EUSBSR can be grasped as an instance of experimentalist governance; and, if so, third, unpack the dynamics of macro-regional experimentalist governance.

In methodological terms, this paper pursues a threefold approach. First, it draws from document analysis and the critical reading of a growing body of literature dealing with the topic. Second, the author has conducted a number of semi-structured and informal experts' interviews (2011–18) since the start of the 'macro-regional project'. Most of the anonymous interviews have been transcribed – or been summarized in those cases where interviewees did not grant permission for recording. The interviews include actors from the EUSBSR governance architecture, such as policy coordinators, national coordinators (NCs) and representatives from intergovernmental regional organization and organizations of the ETC (see Table 1). Third, the paper also benefits from the author's participatory observation at the occasion of attending several EUSBSR-related meetings and events such as the EUSBSR annual fora (in Copenhagen, Berlin, Stockholm, Riga and Tallinn).

This contribution proceeds as follows. First, it introduces the experimentalist governance approach (Gänzle, 2017b; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008, 2010, 2012; Zeitlin, 2015) as an analytical tool for assessing the dynamics of the EUSBSR embedding it in the ongoing debates on soft spaces, reterritorialization and multilevel governance in Europe. Second, it reviews the emergence of regional cooperation in particular in light of the emerging EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). Third, it analyzes the governance architecture in light of the propositions – the joint framework development, the empowerment of lower level units to implement, reporting and periodic and recursive feedback – of the experimentalist governance. Finally, it addresses the core achievements and shortcomings from the strategy, drawing several conclusions for future research.

## SOFT SPACES, RETERRITORIALIZATION AND EXPERIMENTALIST GOVERNANCE

Scholars from the fields of geography, regional and spatial planning have interpreted macro-regional strategies as an innovative approach to European policy-making (e.g., Dühr, 2018; Faludi, 2012; Sielker, 2016) leading to different forms of cooperation with involvement of a wide range of stakeholders from different sectors and levels of governance. More specifically, the notion of macro-regional strategies as ‘soft spaces’ of governance has gained currency among scholars. The idea was originally forged to reflect on the emergence of numerous entirely new planning scales in the form of ‘soft spaces’ characterized by ‘fuzzy boundaries’, consisting of non-statutory ‘spatialities of planning’ with associations and relations cutting across both formally established boundaries and scalar levels of planning and previously entrenched sectoral divides. Subsequently, the concept has been applied to EU macro-regional strategies (e.g., Faludi, 2010; Stead, 2011, 2014a, 2014b). Informality, variability and flexibility of the institutional structures, different thematic and stakeholders’ involvement are defining characteristics of these soft spaces (Allmendinger, Chilla, & Sielker, 2014). Key questions are how new spatial references impact on political bargaining and negotiations and whether the non-statutory arrangements in macro-regions will eventually lead to a solidification, if not ‘hardening’ (or formalization) of these ‘soft’ arrangements (e.g., Allmendinger et al., 2014; Faludi, 2012; Hincks, Deas, & Haughton, 2017; Metzger & Schmitt, 2012). Consequently, one may speculate if macro-regional strategies ultimately imply a process of reterritorialization and the redefinition of borders, possibly underwritten by general trends of differentiated integration in the European Union.

The overlaps between the academic debates in geography, regional planning and political science are considerable as they put into question ‘the character of relations between different actors, levels and territories and the way administrations, political and private stakeholders seek to identify appropriate governance arrangements’ (Gänzle, Stead, Sielker, & Chilla, 2018, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1478929918781982>). Whereas classical theories of regional integration – such as neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism – have been interested in disclosing the main driving forces of integration (Piattoni, 2016), governance approaches are interested in procedural aspects and effects of regional integration on member states and regions. Since the 1990s, governance approaches, such as multilevel, network and external governance, have come to the fore of the research agenda in political science, public administration and European studies (Jachtenfuchs, 2001; Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2006). Whereas multilevel governance presumably sticks out as the most popular and prominent governance approach (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Marks, 1992, 1993; for a criticism of the multilevel governance concept for its ambiguity, see Faludi, 2012), the concept of experimentalist governance has been developed as an explanatory tool for European integration under conditions of crisis, sustained uncertainty and change (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008, 2010, 2012). Sabel and Zeitlin have described experimentalist governance as ‘a recursive process of provisional goal-setting and revision based on learning from the comparison of alternative approaches to advancing them in different contexts’ (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012, p. 1). From this assumption, the experimentalist governance approach analytically distinguishes four phases of the recursive process as follows:

[F]irst, framework goals (such as ‘good water status’, safe food, non-discrimination, and a unified energy grid) and measures for gauging their achievement are established by joint action of the Member States and EU institutions. Lower-level units (such as national ministries or regulatory authorities and the actors with whom they collaborate) are, second, given the freedom to advance these ends as they see fit. ...  
[I]n return for this autonomy, they must, third, report regularly on performance, especially as measured

by the agreed indicators, and participate in a peer review in which their own results are compared with those pursuing other means to the same general ends. Fourth and finally, the framework goals, metrics, and procedures themselves are periodically revised by the actors who initially established them ... (p. 3)

'Experimentalist governance' is much more concerned about procedural aspects than policy outcomes. Moreover, experimentalist governance in the EU is not exclusively confined to those policy fields where the EU has weak competences, for example, when issuing mainly non-binding guidelines, action plans, scoreboards and recommendations. In many cases, the experimentalist architecture may trigger revisions of EU law, or the elaboration of revisable standards mandated by law and principles that may eventually be given binding force. While a uniform pattern of experimentalist governance does not exist, experimentalist governance can even trigger 'a reversal to classic modes of governance' (Mendez, 2011, p. 521), which implies the solidification or hardening of previously soft spaces.

This has important consequences for EU macro-regional strategies. Although they started under the constraint of the 'Three No's', it cannot be excluded to see the emergence of new institutions, new funding logics and sources, and – possibly – legal arrangements. Thus, we treat the EUSBSR as an instance of experimentalist governance and a challenge to the (more formal) territorial cooperation of the EU's regional policy. Owing to the vagueness concerning implementation tools and power dispersed across the EU's interdependent multilevel system of governance in general, and the consensual approach characterizing EU regional policy, the EU's macro-regional strategies constitute paradigmatic examples of experimentalist governance, such as, for example, the so-called 'Turku process' (Jetoo, 2018), an initiative of the twin cities of Turku, Hamburg and St Petersburg to promote municipal cooperation and 'to increase the number of Northwest Russian partners in the Baltic Sea region cooperation' (Centrum Balticum, 2018). Ultimately, their significance resides in their capacity to mobilize institutional and non-institutional actors towards central EU policy goals, and their capacity to recombine the institutional structures of the EU's multilevel governance system in order to conduct and implement policies 'in novel but fluid ways' (Plangger, 2018, quoted in Gänzle et al. (2018), p. 6).

## THE PATH TOWARDS THE EUSBSR

Taking the long trajectory of regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea area into account, it does not come as a surprise that the first of the EU's set of macro-regional strategies was devised for this region (Rostoks, 2010). After EU enlargement in 2004, the Baltic Sea became almost entirely part of EU territory, rendering the future of hitherto established formats of regional integration – e.g., in the frame of the CBSS (Etzold, 2010; Lundin, 2013) – uncertain with regards to future purposes and directions.

Historically, regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea area has left traces in the collective memory of its inhabitants ever since the Hanse, an alliance of several Baltic cities to protect and defend commercial interests during the Middle Ages, contributed to the formation of 'region-ness' in the area. Drawing on cultural proximity, this triggered sensitivity for regional collaboration in the aftermath of the Second World War, which first resulted in Nordic cooperation (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and – later – Finland) along a wide range of policy areas, including the formation of a passport union. Second, it informed the signing of the Helsinki Convention and the subsequent establishment of the so-called Helsinki Commission<sup>4</sup> as its body for steering intergovernmental cooperation with a view to protect the fragile marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution. The Helsinki Commission was one of the few examples of regime formation across the ideological blocs during the East–West conflict. Third, Baltic Sea cooperation was eventually the first sub-regional cooperative arrangement, mushrooming along the borders of the former East–West dividing lines, for instance, the Visegrád and Black Sea

cooperation (Cotter, 1999; Dangerfield, 2016). However, in contrast to the latter formats, the Baltic Sea cooperation – as institutionalized in the CBSS in March 1992 – brought the participating countries from both sides of the former Iron Curtain to the discussion table; although strictly speaking several of the Nordic countries – i.e., Finland and Sweden – have remained non-aligned. The growth of cooperation at the national level amongst the states off the shores of the Baltic Sea almost immediately translated into efforts improving the participation of both municipalities and other sub-national authorities in the region. Consequently, the Union of Baltic Cities and the Baltic Sea State Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) were formed in 1993. Fourth, the prospect of EU integration – first with the admission of Finland and Sweden in 1995, and Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2004 – not only pushed the EU to become a key regional actor, but also turned almost the entire Baltic Sea into a common sea of the EU – with the sole exception of the Russian Federation. To accommodate the specific needs of the region, the EU sought to coordinate better its own instruments and policies for regional cooperation such as through the ND, endorsed in 1999 and renewed in 2006, which focuses on economic development, environmental protection, public health and transport (Archer & Etzold, 2008; Catellani, 2000).

In the wake of EU enlargement, many policy-makers of the Baltic Sea Region eventually felt the urgent need to improve coordination amongst the plethora of institutions that had started to populate regional collaboration over the past few years, and to integrate better the EU member states participating in Baltic Sea cooperation (Aalto, Espíritu, Kilpeläinen, & Lanko, 2016; Hubel, 2004). To achieve these goals, the ND was morphed into a common policy beyond the EU to include Iceland, Norway and the Russian Federation. The CBSS, in turn, was transformed into a more project-orientated body, stripping off its post-Cold War features primarily geared towards ensuring a smooth return of the newly independent Baltic States on the diplomatic floor. Concomitantly, after the first post-enlargement European Parliament elections, a Euro-Baltic Intergroup was established in 2004 bringing together members of the European Parliament from various Baltic Sea Region countries, such as Alexander Stubb and Hendrik Ilves. In 2005, the group presented an initiative to the European Commission president with the idea to maximize the economic potential of the reunited Baltic Sea Region (Beazley, 2007, p. 14), and to lobby for a more consolidated EU pillar of Baltic Sea states within the ND. Following a mandate by the European Council, the European Commission subsequently adopted the initiative and started to develop a joint framework.

## EXPERIMENTALIST GOVERNANCE AND THE EUSBSR

EU macro-regional strategies, such as the EUSBSR, constitute first and foremost broad frameworks and joint endeavours decided among authorities at different territorial levels of government (supranational, national and subnational) which tend to institutionalize some consultation patterns, decision-making procedures, administrative roles and behavioural expectations over time, despite the so-called ‘Three No’s’. Second, macro-regional strategies provide public and private actors with the opportunity to mobilize the defence of their own interests and to forge policies, as well as alliances and institutions that will accommodate them. In this process, actors at the ‘lower’, that is, national or subnational, levels are given some discretion in terms of implementation. Third, the main drive of macro-regional strategies is to encourage the implementation of a set of interconnected policies, which were originally pursued separately in response to distinct societal pressures, and to commit the member states to report regularly on process and result – thus encouraging ‘diagnostic monitoring’ (Sabel, 2016). Fourth, based on these experiences and feedback, the framework is regularly revised and adjusted, before the cycle then repeats itself. Hence, one would expect some sustained forms of navel-gazing and evaluation-based revision of policy tools serving the implementation of macro-regional strategies.

## Developing a joint framework for the EU's Baltic Sea strategy

Once the European Commission had taken the initiative from the European Parliament, it sought to include a wide range of stakeholders during the preparation of both the strategy and its accompanying action plan. To this end, a public consultation process was organized that occurred between August 2008 and February 2009 (Bengtsson, 2009, p. 3; Rostoks, 2010, pp. 15ff.). During that time, several hundred position papers and statements were prepared, issued from various corners encompassing different private and public actors from virtually all levels of Baltic Sea cooperation. After a synthesizing analysis of the publicly available documents, Schymik and Krumrey (2009, p. 15) concluded that '[t]he European Commission has by and large been able to draft an Action Plan that captures the essence of public opinion in the region'. Eventually, the EUSBSR was presented by the European Commission in June 2009 and adopted by the European Council in October that year under the Council Presidency of Sweden. Sweden had turned the EUSBSR into a top priority and ensured support among the targeted EU member states. Whereas the macro-regional strategy constitutes a broad and comprehensive framework, the action plan identifies 'the concrete priorities for the macro-region'. The action plan proposed the establishment of four pillars for macro-regional cooperation with the aim (1) to improve the environmental state of the Baltic Sea; (2) to promote more balanced economic development in the region; (3) to make the sea more accessible and attractive; and (4) to increase macro-regional safety and security. Once included in the action plan, the action or project 'should be implemented by the countries and stakeholders concerned ... [and] be *illustrative, providing examples of types of projects or approaches to be more generally encouraged*' (p. 3, added emphasis). Whereas the macro-regional strategy itself constitutes the broad and comprehensive framework, the action plan identifies 'the concrete priorities for the macro-region' (p. 3) and is being renewed regularly.

In the first major review report published in June 2011, the European Commission stressed that the EUSBSR's overall impact had been successful, emphasizing that, in particular, it 'has led to concrete action, with a more streamlined use of resources ... [where] [n]ew working methods and networks have been established, and many initiatives developed' (European Commission, 2011, p. 3). Clearly, as the EUSBSR was launched in the middle of the 2007–13 programming period, a great deal of financial resources had already been reserved for other projects. Nevertheless, a number of new projects began, such as the 'Baltic Deal', which make strong references to the strategy. Members of the Baltic Deal network would work 'with farmers across the region to reduce nutrient run-off, and therefore eutrophication' (p. 2), which is one, if not the key, challenge of the Baltic Sea. This project has often been used as a reference point to showcase enhanced awareness across different policy sectors and communities in the region. In 2013, the European Commission engaged in an evaluation exercise that included an extensive survey of more than 100 key stakeholders, as well as independent assessments by external experts. The evaluation concluded that macro-regional strategies have triggered clear results, 'evident in terms of projects and more integrated policy making, although further improvements are essential in implementation and planning' (European Commission, 2013a, p. 11). At the same time, the document also identifies a set of problems, such as the lack of leadership in some corners of the macro-region. While the scarcity of administrative capacities and national resources may account for political disinterest in some countries, the complexities of the EUSBSR's governance architecture have not helped to make either its EU member states or partner countries wholeheartedly hail the new initiative.

## Entrusting lower-level units in Baltic Sea EU member states with autonomy

Despite the 'Three No's', the adoption of the EUSBSR was accompanied by the emergence of a lean governance architecture comprising a wide range of actors from the EU's system of



multilevel governance. In this region, the member states assume a paramount role and are constantly compelled to assume political leadership of the ‘macro-regional project’. In general, the success of the strategies is dependent on the political willingness, as well as the administrative and financial capacities of participating states. EU member states collaborate in the network of national contact points (NCPs), or NCs, which have – over time – become the cornerstone of macro-regional strategies, assisting and coordinating their implementation at the national level. Participating states are linked to policy formulation by the so-called High-Level Group (HLG), which also brings together all other member states at the EU level. EU member states that are not part of a given macro-region, however, ‘do not actively participate in the HLG meetings’ (interview 1). (For interviews, see [Table 1.](#)) The European Commission, in turn, assumes overall responsibility for monitoring the implementation of both the strategy and its accompanying action plan. Together with EU member states in the Baltic Sea Region, it has become the driving force behind the policy process leading towards the strategy’s successful implementation. It assumes an important role in preparing strategy reviews, as well as in monitoring its implementation and leading the overall coordination of the rolling action plan. Policy area coordinators (PACs) or horizontal action leaders (HALs) – later called policy or horizontal actions coordinators – from different member states and organizations coordinate each priority area (PA). Different member states or organizations are responsible for the PAs and horizontal action(s) (HA). Further, several organizations operating at the macro-regional level – e.g., the CBSS, HELCOM and Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea (VASAB) – actively participate in the implementation of the strategy as either PACs, such as the CBSS for PA ‘Secure’, or HALs such as VASAB and HELCOM for HA ‘Spatial Planning’. As one policy coordinator put it: ‘[w]orking in the capacity of PAC/HAL implies having to tackle a great deal of complexity. Besides, it often takes place in environments characterized by uncertainty (e.g., of mandates, agendas, possibilities) and ambiguity (e.g., unclear roles, poor information)’ (Bergström, 2013, p. 2). With a view to assisting policy coordinators with their coordinating tasks and functions, steering groups have also been established. These groups bring together a number of representatives from various organizations and line ministries in order to consult the PACs who themselves work in cooperation with the European Commission, relevant EU agencies and national/regional bodies. Subsequently, policy coordinators are compelled to identify – together with the steering group members – ‘macro-regional models’ of flagship projects for funding by combing existing and available European and national sources. Over time, steering groups ‘have become more central in the EUSBSR’ (interview 2) as they provide an opportunity for sectoral coordination amongst administrators across the all participating countries.

### Ensuring regular reporting

Monitoring and reporting has developed into a yardstick of EU macro-regional strategies. In 2015, the Council decided that the European Commission was to evaluate all macro-regional strategies in a comprehensive way every other year. Thus, this aimed to avoid fragmentation, as well as ‘to make it possible to compare MRS [macro-regional strategies] and will provide all institutions concerned with sufficient insights for an informed debate’ (European Commission, 2016, p. 3). The reports themselves, of which the first was published in 2016, are based on contributions from the macro-regional strategies’ stakeholders, European institutions, member state representatives, academia and experts. Interestingly, the presentation tools – e.g., the

**Table 1.** Interviews

Interview 1: Horizontal Area Leader, Stockholm, June 30, 2013

Interview 2: Interact official, Tallinn, June 4, 2018

Interview 3: Representative of the Council of Danube Cities and Regions, January 22, 2013

website of macro-regional strategies such as the EUSBSR and EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) – have converged with a view to strengthening the horizontal dimension of comparability between the macro-regional strategies. Furthermore, policy coordinators and horizontal action coordinators are compelled to report on a yearly basis to the European Commission on the implementation progress regarding the objectives and projects which have been agreed upon on the EUSBSR in 2012. As noted:

There is increasing demand, not least from the Commission, for a stronger focus on the strategies' core priorities. In this regard, it is important to align the MRS with broader strategies for EU policy-making and to ensure regular reviews towards identified objectives, as this increases chances of delivering results. Without clearly defined indicators and targets, it is difficult to assess how well the planned objectives have been met. A sound monitoring system based on results-oriented action is crucial to make it possible to measure, steer and report on each MRS to inform decision making. (European Commission, 2016, p. 4)

With regards to its target-informed approach, the EUSBSR occupies a unique place amongst all macro-regional strategies. Still, it has remained difficult to assess the precise impact of the EUSBSR on specific policy developments in the region, such as eutrophication (EU Court of Auditors, 2016).

### Providing feedback-loops to inform the governance architecture of the EU's Baltic Sea strategy

The EUSBSR Action Plan was conceived as 'rolling', which fundamentally implied that it would quickly absorb 'lessons learned' and engage in a recursive process of experimentalist governance. Therefore, it was revised in 2010, 2013 (European Commission, 2013c) and 2015 (European Commission, 2015) respectively. As shown, the EUSBSR action plan had originally proposed the establishment of four pillars for macro-regional cooperation along the lines of the four challenges identified for the macro-region. These areas have subsequently been turned into 15 different so-called PAs that have been assigned a set of highly relevant projects (also known as flagship projects) as the showcase for the EUSBSR. The original four overall strategy pillars have been streamlined and transferred into just three objectives: (1) to save the sea; (2) to connect the region; and (3) to increase prosperity. Concomitantly, however, the number of PAs was increased from 15 to 17, which at the time raised doubts amongst some observers 'whether the Strategy will in practice become more focused and more effective' (Etzold, 2013, p. 11). The HAs (cross-cutting themes such as 'Neighbours' with the aim of integrating stakeholders in neighbouring countries) have been reduced quite significantly from 13 to five, and subsequently to four, now including 'Sustainability', 'Neighbours', 'Climate' and 'Capacity'.

Several of these HAs are managed by regional organizations such as the umbrella organization for civil society Norden, the UBC and the CBSS. Whereas the CBSS did not occupy a central role at the beginning at the launch of the EUSBSR, it was gradually recognized as an important player in the revised action plan of February 2013 and June 2015 – when it started to manage several macro-regional projects and contribute to the governance of the strategy. Since then, the CBSS has, amongst other things, co-coordinated a PA focusing on civil contingencies and two HAs, namely 'Neighbours' and 'Sustainability'.

In addition, annual fora for the EUSBSR have strengthened stakeholder involvement and participation, the first of which was held in Tallinn in 2010, followed by Gdansk (2011), Copenhagen (2012), Vilnius (2013), Turku (2014), Jürmela (2015), Stockholm (2016), Berlin (2017) and Tallinn (2018). By bringing together both policy-makers and stakeholders, these meetings provided a platform for networking, discussions and an exchange of views about the EUSBSR and its implementation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis clearly demonstrates that the EUSBSR is underpinned by a logic of experimentalist governance. Despite the call for ‘no new institutions’, a lean governance architecture has been established that strongly draws on existing institutions that have been integrated ‘into the texture’ of EUSBSR governance. The strategy-making and the implementation of strategy-related objectives can be grasped as a sequence of recursive processes that subsequently allow for mutual learning of all participating actors and stakeholders. In this vein, the Baltic Sea Fisheries Forum, for example, can be interpreted as representing a permanent change brought about by an EUSBSR flagship. It has been transformed into a permanent fisheries forum that ‘is embedded into the everyday cooperation work of the Ministries of the region’ (EUSBSR Policy Area Bioeconomy, n.d.). Gradually, transnational institutions are redesigned and solidify, becoming constitutive elements of macro-regions, which include hybrid arrangements of governmental and non-governmental actors (Joas, Sanberg, & Kern, 2007). Combining the perspective of experimentalist governance with the literature on soft spaces ultimately helps grasping the nature of softness which is determined by the recursive process of governance. In other words, the soft space of the Baltic Sea Region is hardening, although it remains to be seen how sustainable and desirable these processes ultimately are.

Furthermore, and in contrast to previous EU attempts to reinforce regional cooperation, such as the EU’s Approaches to the Baltic Sea Region of 1994 or the Northern Dimension of 1999 (Archer & Etzold, 2008; Catellani, 2000; Council of the European Union, 1999), the EU has now begun to sketch out a framework that addresses common challenges and opportunities not only in a more comprehensive manner but also in an EU-centred manner. It is perhaps in this regard where the EUSBSR differs most from the other macro-regional strategies which have more of an eternal focus, such as the EUSDR and EU Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region (EUSAIR). Regional cooperation below the EU level has been characterized in the past by a plethora of region-specific actors and arrangements, covering a wide range of objectives and policies (Aalto et al., 2016). The EUSBSR, therefore, serves as a facilitator of coordination in the Baltic Sea Region with significant effects beyond its territorial boundaries. By applying the label of macro-regional strategy, different macro-regional territories – such as the Alpine, Baltic Sea or Danube macro-regional space – can be compared with each other in terms of their governance architecture and overall ‘effectiveness’, thus allowing for some competition for best possible practice. As such, the ‘Baltic example’ has been accepted as a ‘model’ in other macro-regional set-ups such as the EU Strategy of the Danube Region (interview 3).

This paper has shown that EU macro-regional strategies such as the EUSBSR aim at the alignment of objectives and resources of both transnational with intergovernmental cooperation. Macro-regional strategies after all support the implementation of EU-level strategies – such as the ones expressed in Europe 2020 – as part of the ESIF on a macro-regional scale (Roggeri, 2015). By this, EU macro-regional strategies ultimately aim to substantiate the objective of territorial cohesion introduced by Article 174 of the Treaty of Lisbon with a view to complement the principles of social and economic cohesion. Consequently, the European Commission has emphasized the importance of this form of ‘regionalism’ inside the EU for the entire European Union. Conceived ‘as building blocks in reaching European objectives’ (European Commission, 2013b, p. 20), macro-regions consequently become ‘integral aspect [s] of the essence of the Union’ (Joenniemi, 2010, p. 33). By forging both a comprehensive and integrated framework for the Baltic Sea Region, the EUSBSR ultimately aims to realign complex politico-social, regulatory and ecosystem boundaries, framing itself as a legitimate form of regionalization inside the EU – and thus contributing to the hardening of the soft space of Baltic Sea cooperation.

## NOTES

1. For a fundamental critique vis-à-vis EU macro-regional strategies, see Bialasiewicz, Giaccaria, Jones, and Minca (2013).
2. The CBSS members are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, Sweden as well as a member of the European External Action Service (EEAS).
3. That is, the German *Länder* of Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Hamburg.
4. Today, the contracting parties are Denmark, Estonia, the European Union, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Sweden. The Helsinki Commission is not to be confused with the US Helsinki Commission (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe), which is an independent US government agency created by Congress in 1975 to monitor and encourage compliance with the Helsinki Final Act and other Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) commitments.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful to the comments of two anonymous reviewers, Kimmo Elo and the participants of a seminar at the Jean Monnet Society of Finland in Turku, Finland, October 23, 2017.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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