

EU Region-building for Maritime cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea: the EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an overview of EU region-building strategies in the Mediterranean, with a focus on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and on the Western Mediterranean Initiative (WestMED). Both of these strategies include the blue growth among their priorities and ensure the mobilization of various stakeholders at different scales. This paper discusses the contribution that these strategies may offer to activate synergies and coordination among different programmes and funds, in order to make the efforts towards a sustainable management of the Mediterranean Sea more effective. The 2021-2027 programming period of EU funds offers an important opportunity in this regard. This paper is complementary to the [video](#) presented by the author at Blue Planet Economy (BPE) European Maritime Forum 2021.

KEYWORDS: European Union, Blue Growth, Mediterranean, EUSAIR, WestMED.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to offer an overview on two EU Region-building strategies for Maritime cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea: the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the Western Mediterranean Initiative (WestMED).

In general terms, regional strategies are based on the definition of transnational areas of cooperation which offer spaces for inter-institutional dialogue between the European Union and third countries on topics of common interest (Coletti & Celata, 2013).

As we shall see, these strategies have been largely used by the European Union in the relationship with its neighbouring countries, including in the Mediterranean. In this framework, the peculiar characteristics of both the EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative are to be identified in the wide involvement of stakeholders at different scales that these initiatives ensure, and in the attempt to coordinate and create synergies among different programmes and funds. From this point of view, the EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative may offer a specific added value during the incoming 2021-2027 programming period of EU funds, as they offer a pre-defined and agreed set of priorities where it is possible to focus efforts and resources with the aim of obtaining more relevant and long-lasting results, including in the field of blue growth.

The paper is structured as follows: section two introduces policies and practices of EU region-building in the Mediterranean. Sections three and four present the EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative respectively. In section five, the main future opportunities and challenges for the two initiatives are discussed, highlighting the contribution that they may offer to a sustainable management of the Mediterranean Sea.

2 EU DRIVEN REGIONALIZATION PROCESSES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

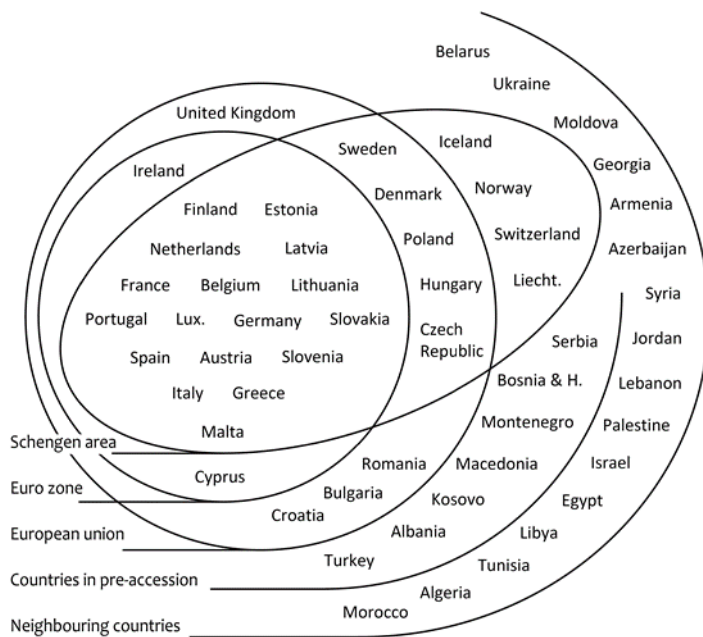
The EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative, discussed in this brief contribution, are not the first examples of regionalization processes in the Mediterranean; rather the EU has put in place several initiatives of region-building in the area.

Firstly, we can say that the very policy frameworks adopted by the EU in the relationship with its neighbouring countries determine different frameworks and regionalization throughout the Mediterranean Sea. With a “territorial turn” adopted in 2007, the European Union has given value to geographical proximity, by adopting the European Neighbourhood Policy for framing the relationships with non-EU countries at EU Eastern border and in the Southern Shore of the Mediterranean. The European Neighbourhood Policy has determined the creation of a geographical category, the “European neighbourhood”, which includes all the recipient countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy despite the profound differences that exist among them (Aliboni, 2005; Dimitrovova, 2010); however, different applications and approaches emerge respectively between the Eastern and Southern dimensions of the Neighbourhood Policy (Coletti & Celata 2013; Celata & Coletti 2015). At the same time, the Enlargement Policy applies to candidate and potential candidate countries in South Eastern Europe, *de facto* creating a region in the heart of the European Union territory, as evident in Picture 1.



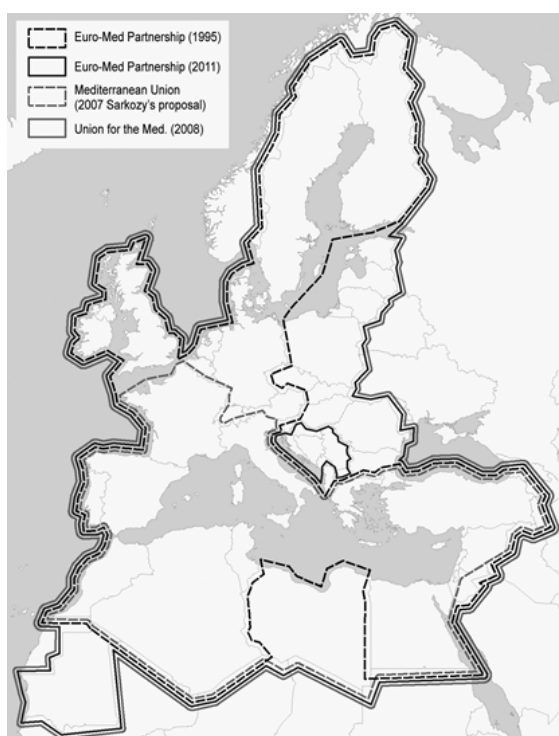
Picture 1. The European Union and its neighbourhood (Celata & Coletti, 2015, p. 2).

An effective metaphor to describe the territorial dimension of the EU integration is that of concentric circles, which exist both inside and outside EU borders (Moisio, 2007; Zielonka, 2006): inside, through the definition of the Eurozone or the differentiated accession to the Schengen Treaty; outside, through the differentiation between countries with accession prospects (medium or long term) and countries excluded from these perspectives but with which the EU is still trying to establish privileged relationships by virtue of their geographical proximity (Coletti & Celata, 2013).



Picture 2. Concentric circles of integration (Celata & Coletti 2015, p. 3).

Both the policy frameworks adopted by the EU in the relationship with proximate countries include bilateral as well as regional relations. In the case of Enlargement Policy, regional cooperation and reconciliation of Western Balkan countries is explicitly mentioned as a crucial area of intervention for a credible enlargement perspective (European Commission, 2018). The European Neighbourhood Policy includes an Eastern Dimension and a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Celata & Coletti, 2015). In the Southern shore, actually, several Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation programmes have been launched since the 1970s, with the establishment of the Global Mediterranean Policy. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership or Barcelona process, launched in 1995, can be considered as the most ambitiously coordinated multilateral effort to establish a common policy towards the Mediterranean. The partnership was successively revitalized within the Union for the Mediterranean (2008), with partially different and evolving geographies (Celata & Coletti, 2015).



Picture 3. Delimitations of the Euro-Mediterranean area within EU policies (Celata & Coletti, 2015, p. 92).

Cooperating regions are created also by Interreg cross-border and transnational cooperation programmes in the Mediterranean, funded within the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective of the EU Cohesion Policy (Celata & Coletti 2011; 2015; Coletti 2013; Medeiros 2018). By supporting cooperation across internal and external EU borders, ETC programmes create spaces of cooperation with different geographies and open to the participation of diverse stakeholders.

Finally, and more recently, other regionalization processes are put in place in the framework of EU macro-regional strategies and sea basin initiatives, further discussed in the following sections dedicated to the EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative respectively.

Overall, EU region building strategies can be considered as a response to the complexity of the challenges faced by the European Union inside and outside its boundaries, including in the Mediterranean. They present indeed several advantages, as they create spaces of governance where to coordinate efforts and initiatives to face challenges and opportunities at different scales, and they propose an open and trans-European scale of development. In doing so, they offer powerful instruments not only in a material but also in a symbolic perspective (Celata & Coletti 2011; 2015).

Marine and maritime issues have always been important topics within the “regions” that have been created at different scales across the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean Sea is indeed

characterized by a number of threats and opportunities that need to be tackled jointly by the different actors and countries bordering its shores. To be realized, Blue growth needs the efforts of different levels of government, from supranational to local, and different typologies of stakeholders, from private companies to local communities (European Commission 2012). There is the need to coordinate different actions and initiatives in order to obtain significant impact; that is where the two initiatives here under scrutiny can play an important role.

3 THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE ADRIATIC AND IONIAN REGION

The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) was adopted by the European Commission and endorsed by the European Council in 2014 (European Commission, 2014). It is a macro-regional strategy, or “a policy framework which allows countries located in the same region to jointly tackle and find solutions to problems or to better use the potential they have in common” (European Commission, 2017a, p. 1). EU macro-regional strategies are initiated and requested by States located in the same geographical area, eventually in coordination with sub-national authorities. In the case of EUSAIR, for example, subnational authorities have played an important role alongside national ones for the emergence of the initiative; in particular, we can report an activism of Italian Adriatic regions (Cugusi & Stocchiero, 2016). Macro-regional strategies are built around physical features – sea basins, river basins, mountain ranges (Gloersen et al, 2019); in the case of the EUSAIR, around the Eastern portion of the Mediterranean, and more precisely the Adriatic-Ionian Sea.

The Strategy includes four EU countries (Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece) and five Western Balkans Countries (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia), with North Macedonia that joined the group in 2020. The aim of the EUSAIR is to catch the strategic opportunities in the area, favoring at the same time a sustainable development of all the countries involved. Moreover, the strategy aims at accompanying the EU integration process of Western Balkan Countries (Chiodi et al, 2021).

Macro-regional strategies offer a multi-level governance framework for integrated territorial development in functional areas and, consequently, for the definition of a polycentric development in the European Union (Prezioso, 2017; Stocchiero 2018). According to OECD (2020), a functional area or region can be defined as a territorial unit that results from the structure of social and economic relations between residents across space, with boundaries that do not necessarily reflect administrative geographies or historical events. Consequently, a functional region offers an alternative subdivision of territories (OECD, 2020). As stated in its official website, the EUSAIR “is a functional area primarily defined by the Adriatic and Ionian Seas basin. Covering also an important terrestrial surface area, EUSAIR treats the marine, coastal and terrestrial areas as interconnected systems”¹. Blue growth is one of its main pillars, together with other relevant marine and maritime issues as summarized in Table 1.

With respect to other macro-regional strategies, on the one hand, a specific complexity has been recognized in the case of the EUSAIR as a consequence of the participation of enlargement countries (Cugusi & Stocchiero, 2016; Caligiuri, 2016). Asymmetries in the institutional structure and administration capacity between EU and Western Balkan countries, in particular, have been identified as limiting the implementation of the strategy (Bianchi, 2018; Belloni, 2020). On the other hand, several strengths can be identified in the potential contribution of EUSAIR to the enlargement process, including the opportunity for Western Balkan countries to collaborate as peers with EU countries and the involvement of different stakeholders (Chiodi et al., 2021).

¹ www.adriatic-ionian.eu

Table 1. Pillars and specific objectives of EUSAIR

	Pillar 1 Blue Growth	Pillar 2 Connecting the region	Pillar 3 Environmental quality	Pillar 4 Sustainable Tourism
Topic 1	Blue Technologies	Maritime transport	The marine environment	Diversified tourism offer (products and services)
Topic 2	Fisheries and aquaculture	Intermodal connections to the hinterland	Transnational terrestrial habitat and biodiversity	Sustainable and responsible tourism management
Topic 3	Maritime and marine governance and services	Energy networks		

Source: Author's elaboration on European Commission 2020.

The Macro-regional strategies merge EU, national, regional and local authority levels, and should mobilize and create synergies among resources from different instruments and funds (Stocchiero, 2010). Macro-regional strategies are indeed based on the “3 NO” principle: no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures and no new EU legislation. The lack of specific funds can be considered as a limitation, but it can rather represent an opportunity, insofar as the strategies offer mechanisms that can create synergies and foster coordination among all the territories involved, at different scales.

ETC transnational cooperation programmes in the respective areas are recognized as crucial financial instruments for the implementation of macro-regional strategies, and are explicitly bound for this purpose (EU Regulation 2021/1059). Supporting the governance of EUSAIR, for example, is one of the priority axes of the transnational cooperation Interreg Adrion programme. Moreover, many projects funded within Adrion supports the goals of the EUSAIR. For the incoming programming period, 80% of the resources of Adrion programme should contribute to the objectives of the EUSAIR (idem, art. 15.3). Moreover, there are a number of other ETC cross-border cooperation programmes which are included in the EUSAIR cooperation area, and which consequently contribute to the goals of the strategy (overall twelve programmes including, across the Adriatic-Ionian Sea, Italy-Slovenia, Italy-Croatia, Greece-Italy, Italy-Albania-Montenegro).

However, countries are encouraged to use different funding sources, going beyond European Territorial Cooperation, to contribute to the common goals outlined in the strategies (European Parliament 2017). Specific efforts to encourage an “embedding” of the priorities defined within macroregional strategies across different funds have been put in place by the European Commission and by single countries in light of the 2021-2027 programming period (Council of the European Union, 2020).

4 THE WESTMED INITIATIVE

The Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the Western Mediterranean region, WestMED, was adopted by the European Commission and endorsed by the Council of the European Union in 2017 (European Commission, 2017b). It is a sea basin initiative².

² www.westmed-initiative.eu

The strategy was established following the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Declaration on the Blue Economy endorsed by the Union for the Mediterranean in 2015, which invited the participating countries to explore the added value and feasibility of appropriate maritime strategies at sub-regional level. Successively, the Directorate General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) of the European Commission together with the Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME) supported a project with the aim of preparing a Maritime Initiative for the Western Mediterranean and the development of an action plan for its implementation³.

If compared to macro-regional strategies – including the EUSAIR – the WestMED initiative is characterized by a stronger involvement of the European Commission and, in particular, of the DG MARE. The process that led to the definition of the initiative, moreover, can be defined as top-down, differently from the countries-led approach which is at the basis of macro-regional strategies.

Table 2. Goals and priorities of the WestMED initiative (including the six priorities selected in Algiers, in italics)

	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3
	A safer and more secure maritime space	A smart and resilient blue economy	Better governance of the sea
Priorities	1. Coastguard functions cooperation (training, capacity building, search and rescue)	3. Strategic research and innovation	7. Spatial Planning and coastal management
	<i>2. Maritime safety and response to marine pollution rescue</i>	<i>4. Maritime clusters development</i>	8. Marine and maritime knowledge (data gaps, data analysis and sharing)
		<i>5. Skills development and circulation</i>	<i>9. Biodiversity and marine habitat conservation</i>
		<i>6. Sustainable consumption and production (maritime transport, ports, maritime and coastal tourism, marine aquaculture)</i>	<i>10. Sustainable fisheries and coastal community development</i>

Source: Author's elaboration on European Commission, 2017b; 2017c.

However, since its official launch in 2017, the ten countries participating to the Strategy (in the EU Italy, France, Spain, Malta, Portugal; in the Southern shore Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania) actively participate to the management of the initiative, based on a rotating co-presidency between an EU and a non-EU member. The geography of the initiative is based on the experience of the 5+5 Dialogue, launched in 1990 with the celebration in Rome of a first foreign affairs ministerial meeting. After an interruption of ten years, the Dialogue resumed in Lisbon in January 2001. It is based on annual foreign affairs ministerial meetings and has progressively expanded its scope to different fields such as defense, transport, migrations and

³ For more information: <https://www.msp-platform.eu/projects/support-development-maritime-strategy-western-mediterranean-sub-sea-basin>

education and successively renewable energy and environment, health, education, culture, tourism, and water, among others.

The goals and priorities of the WestMED initiative are entirely focused on marine and maritime issues. In 2018 in Algiers six priorities were agreed upon by the Ministers of the WestMED countries together with the European Commission and the Union for the Mediterranean, in order to establish a common roadmap for the development of a sustainable blue economy in the Western Mediterranean area.

Like the EUSAIR, also the WestMED initiative is characterized by the involvement of different stakeholders. This is favored in particular by the Assistance Mechanism of the initiative, funded by the European Commission, which offers support to the dissemination of the WestMED initiative and the development of project ideas through a network of national hubs.

Moreover, like the EUSAIR, also the WestMED initiative does not offer funds for realizing projects, but rather aims at fostering synergies and impact by coordinating different programmes and funds within its goals and priorities. Several projects have been identified which are considered aligned with the aims of the WestMED initiative (WestMED, 2021). Different funding programmes are mobilized, but Interreg plays an important role also in the framework of the WestMED initiative. Indeed, the already mentioned regulation for European Territorial Cooperation 2021-2027 (EU Regulation 2021/1059) explicitly mentions sea basin initiatives alongside macro-regional strategies, as crucial references for the definition of priorities and goals of each programme. Unlike the example of EUSAIR and the Adrion programme, there is no Interreg programme specifically covering the WestMED initiative, but several programmes include two or more WestMED countries among their eligible territories (namely, the transnational MED and ENI MED programmes, and the cross-border maritime programmes Italy-France, Italy-Malta and Italy-Tunisia in the 2014-2020 programming period). These programmes can thus potentially contribute, through cross-border and transnational projects, to the aims of the initiative. As in the case of the EUSAIR, in the case of the WestMED initiative, too, the attention to financial instruments is not limited to European Territorial Cooperation funds; rather, the aim of the initiative is to exploit and coordinate different typologies of funds to pursue its goals.

5 ACHIEVEMENTS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

The EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative play an important role for activating synergies in the Mediterranean Sea, in particular for projects related to marine and maritime issues. By recognizing and emphasizing the contribution of different projects to the aims of the initiatives (in particular, but not exclusively, ETC funded projects), the two strategies stimulate the convergence of resources and potentially amplify the impact of the activities carried out, by framing them into a bigger picture of shared goals across respectively the Eastern and Western Mediterranean.

The role played by the initiatives in the field of blue economy was recently recognized in the framework of the Ministerial Declaration on Sustainable Blue Economy of the Union for the Mediterranean issued on February 2021, where, at art. 17 “Ministers recognise both the WestMED initiative and the EUSAIR as successful examples of cooperation, focused on clear goals, priorities and measurable targets and as a catalyst for the development of sustainable blue economy projects in the region”.

The need to improve synergies in the Mediterranean among different actors and programmes is particularly urgent in the field of environmental sustainability, in order to strengthen the impact of the various initiatives and to make blue growth a tangible reality.

The EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative may prove to be useful tools to this aim, in two ways: firstly, because they offer a space of concerted governance; secondly, because they offer a set of concerted priorities where different funds and programmes may converge.

From this point of view, the new programming period of EU funds for 2021-2027 offers an important opportunity, because now it is the time to define priorities and instruments for the next seven years.

Indeed, significant efforts had been put in place in the last years by the European Commission and member states in order to facilitate the embedding of the priorities of these initiatives in the relevant national/regional EU funding for 21-27. These efforts were particularly evident in the case of macro-regional strategies, including the EUSAIR (Council of the European Union, 2020), but activities were undertaken also in the framework of the WestMED initiative.

It is soon to assess if and to what extent these efforts were successful. What we can say is that the success of the embedding would surely support the achievement of the goals of the initiatives, which are of crucial importance for the present and future of the Mediterranean Sea.

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