

## MACRO-REGIONS: REGIONAL INTEGRATION WITHIN AND BEYOND THE EU

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**Paper presented at the 21<sup>st</sup> NISPAcee conference**

**“Regionalisation and Inter-Regional Cooperation”**

**May 16-18, 2013**

**Belgrade, Serbia**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on three European macro-regions: the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), the –revamped- Benelux, and the Danube Region (DR). It makes a comparative analysis of these three schemes of regional integration within (and in some cases beyond) the EU. The paper discusses literature on differentiated integration as well as literature on (old and new) regionalism and territorial governance. It develops an analytical framework which involves various aspects of differentiation/regionalization: time, matter, drivers for differentiation and /or regionalization, membership, institutions, decision-making, and modes of governance. Through desk-research (policy documents, websites, and earlier research) the framework is applied to the three macro-regions at hand. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the macro-regional strategies for the BSR and DR are almost identical, that the Benelux is different from the other two macro-regions, but that there also is some convergence, with the Benelux becoming more open and process-oriented, and the BSR and DR being effectively institutionalized by the EU. Rather than being a threat to European integration, the macro-regional strategies of the EU have essentially strengthened its position.

**Keywords:** Macro-regions, European integration, regionalism, regionalization, differentiated integration

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Within the EU we have witnessed the relatively recent emergence of so-called macro-regions, or intentions to create such regions. Examples are the Baltic Sea Region, the Danube Region, the European North Sea Strategy, the Black Sea Synergy, and the Adriatic-Ionic Initiative, to just name a few cooperation schemes (which admittedly vary considerably in nature). From a different perspective, we can also recently witness the emergence of the use of the formal EU differentiated integration mechanism, enhanced cooperation, in the field of divorce law and in the field of patents. These cooperation schemes are probably just the proverbial tip of the iceberg, as enhanced cooperation schemes are now discussed in several other policy fields as well. More generally, ever since the 80s, flexible integration schemes within the EU have been used more and more, and have been the topic of academic and political debate. This paper discusses the emergence of macro-regions in the European Union (EU) as an appearance of both flexible integration and regionalization, here understood as the cooperation between sovereign jurisdictions<sup>2</sup> that are in geographical proximity.<sup>3</sup>

The paper focuses on three European macro-regions (or: three cases of regionalization): the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), the –revamped- Benelux, and the Danube Region (DR). It makes a comparative analysis of these three schemes of regional integration within (and in some cases beyond) the EU, by looking at the drivers for the establishment of macro-regions, their policy domains, their institutional set-up, their membership, and their modes of governance.

The paper is structured as follows.

First, when discussing macro-regions in the EU, it is important to link macro-regions to but at the same time demarcate them from other types of so-called non-uniform (or: flexible) integration within the EU. To that end, *section 2* discusses various concepts of non-uniform integration, resulting in dimensions of differentiated integration that can later be applied to macro-regions.

Secondly, our premise is that regionalization starts from regionalism. Regionalism is here understood as the approach that is applied in establishing concrete regionalization schemes. *Section 3* discusses insights from the literature on regionalism, especially the distinction that has been made between “old” and “new” regionalism.

Both parts of the literature will then be put into a single analytical framework to typify and describe macro-regions. Up till now, with the exception of Groenendijk (2011) and Matarrelli (2012), literature on regionalization and literature on differentiated integration have not been brought together.

Consequently, in *section 4*, we will tentatively apply this framework to the three macro-regions at hand. To do so, we will first briefly discuss the EU macro-regional strategies in general and the three macro-regions specifically, and then discuss the different parts of the framework.

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<sup>2</sup> A less general definition would refer to any such cooperation between nation states, thereby excluding cooperation schemes which involve jurisdictions within nation states (e.g. autonomous regions).

<sup>3</sup> See Hettne (2005) for a discussion of the concepts of regions, regionalism and regionalization. We stay out here of a discussion of the concept of regions. As Hettne states it is widely accepted that there are no ‘natural’ regions: definitions of a region vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation. Regionalism refers to a tendency or political commitment to organize the world in terms of regions; regionalization is the actual –often complex- process of forming regions and the resulting regional cooperation.

Based on this analysis, *section 5* concludes.

## 2. NON-UNIFORM INTEGRATION AND MACRO-REGIONS

### 2.1 Non-uniform integration

As argued elsewhere (Groenendijk 2007, 2012), contrary to common belief, EU member states have always and substantially been involved in alternative integration schemes, outside the EU, as well as in differentiated integration, within the EU. The classic community method of uniform integration throughout the EU is increasingly becoming a myth, as member states get more and more engaged in flexible integration schemes which do not involve all 27 member states and/or involve nation states from outside the EU. Non-uniform integration is a permanent feature of the European integration process, but it has increased considerably from the early 90s.<sup>4</sup> Such non-uniform integration within the EU often takes the form of cooperation between sub-sets of EU member states on particular policy challenges. Recent examples include enhanced cooperation schemes on family law (i.c. procedures in divorce law) and on the European Union patent. Another recent example is the Treaty on Stabilisation, Coordination and Governance in the EMU (involving all EU member states except or the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic); the EMU as such is probably the most obvious example of non-uniform integration. Another less recent example is the establishment of the Schengen Area. Examples of non-uniform integration which also involves non-EU member states are the Bologna Process and the European Patent System.

In the 80s and 90s non-uniform integration has been discussed in the literature under a large number of different terms (core Europe, vanguard groups, multi-speed Europe, *afgestufte Integration*, concentric circles, variable geometry, the European Onion et cetera). This part of the literature mainly dealt with visualising non-uniform integration schemes and with finding adequate metaphors to capture the phenomenon. With some exceptions (like Stubbs, 1996), it generally is lacking in terms of robustness of conceptualization<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, some literature has dealt with the formal scheme (introduced in the Nice Treaty) of closer or enhanced cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Here we focus on more recent literature in which various attempts have been made to conceptually make sense of non-uniform integration.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Schimmelfennig, Leuffen & Rittberger (2011) for a quantitative analysis of differentiation practice in the EU (1950-2010).

<sup>5</sup> See for a detailed discussion of these concepts and for literature references: Groenendijk (2007, 2012). See also the contributions in Dyson & Sepos (2010). See Holzinger & Schimmelfennig (2012) for an assessment of the state-of-affairs in research in this field, which is adequately captured in the title of their contribution: *many concepts, sparse theory, few data*.

<sup>6</sup> See also Groenendijk (2007, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> In this paper we will not discuss the –often: tentative- explanations that have been put forward for differentiated integration, often based on traditional European integration theories. See Kölliker (2001), Schimmelfennig, Leuffen & Rittberger (2011), Holzinger & Schimmelfennig (2012).

## 2.2 Su's schemes of sub-integration

In discussing sub-integration, the yardstick is *uniform integration* (or: monolithic integration) as the default mode of EU integration: integration that is uniform in time and matter for all members of the integration scheme. According to Su (2005), *sub-integration* then refers to an instance of integration that takes place among some but not all members of an already existing (larger) integration, and it can take different shapes. The first distinctive feature is whether sub-integration takes place within the EU institutional framework or not. The second feature refers to the policies that are involved. Sub-integration can deal with policies that are within or outside of the EU policy domain (as marked out by the relevant EU treaties). If sub-integration uses another institutional framework than the EU framework it can either be labelled new integration or alternative integration. *New integration* refers to sub-integration outside the EU institutional framework dealing with policy areas that are not part of the EU policy domain. Sub-integration outside the EU institutional framework, concerned with policy areas that are within the EU domain, is called *alternative integration*. In both cases it is possible to cooperate either among EU Member States only or with outsiders as well (third countries).

If sub-integration occurs within the EU institutional framework, there are again two possibilities. One may call *odd integration* sub-integration that employs EU institutions but deals with policies outside the EU domain. The term *differentiated integration* is used to denote sub-integration taking place both within the institutional framework and within the policy domain of the EU.

Table 1 lists the various forms of sub-integration.

Table 1: Types of sub-integration (adapted from Su, 2005)<sup>8</sup>

Differentiated integration	Within the EU framework, dealing with policies within the EU domain
Odd (or: alienated) integration	Within the EU framework, dealing with policies outside of the EU domain
Alternative integration	Outside the EU framework, dealing with policies within the EU domain
New integration	Outside the EU framework, dealing with policies outside of the EU domain

## 2.3 Vertical integration, horizontal integration and differentiated integration

Following and paraphrasing Schimmelfennig, Leuffen & Rittberger (2011) three dimensions can generally be distinguished regarding polity configurations (or jurisdictions):

- level of centralization: ranging from “loose” coordination to full supranationalization;
- functional scope: ranging from small (authority over a single-issue) to wide (authority over multiple issues);
- territorial extension: ranging from a single territory to several territories.

They argue that integration theory has traditionally focused on the first two dimensions (centralization and functional scope), from the perspective of the two main strands of integration theory (intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism). Subsequently, they collapse functional scope and centralization into “vertical integration” and let “horizontal integration” refer to the territorial dimension (i.e. the extent to which the EU covers Europe). “Differentiated integration” then refers to a situation in which one or more EU member states is excluded from an EU policy regime. Horizontal integration and differentiation integration are then combined into four constellations of *horizontal differentiation*:

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<sup>8</sup> Su (2005) uses the term opt-out integration for alternative integration. This is not followed here as opt-outs are very often associated with differentiated integration.

- Unity: EU rules apply to all EU members uniformly and to EU members only;
- Internal differentiation: EU rules apply to EU members only, but not to all EU members (example: EMU);
- External differentiation: EU rules also apply to non-EU members (example: European Economic Area)
- Internal and external differentiation combined: EU rules apply to some EU members and to some non-EU members (example: Schengen).

In their empirical analysis they find that exclusively internal differentiation is relatively rare; most cases of horizontal differentiation are cases of external differentiation and/or combinations of internal and external differentiation. Generally, horizontal differentiation emerged in the early 1980s; up till then unity was the dominant integration mode.

## 2.4 Dimensions of differentiated integration

Building on Stubbs' (1996) three-way classification of differentiation in time, space and matter, Holzinger & Schimmelfennig (2012) have put forward six dimensions of differentiated integration:

1. Permanent versus temporary differentiation;
2. Territorial versus purely functional differentiation;
3. Differentiation across nation states versus multi-level differentiation;
4. Differentiation within the EU treaties versus outside of the EU treaties;
5. Decision-making at EU level versus at regime level (club decision-making);
6. For member states only versus also for non-member states/areas outside the EU territory.

Dimension (1) is straightforward; it refers directly to Stubbs' dimension of differentiation in time.

Dimension (2) is problematic; it refers to Stubbs' second and third dimension: differentiation in space and matter. Holzinger and Schimmelfennig argue that differentiation always has a territorial aspect and always has a functional (or: sectoral aspect). They state that differentiation in space and matter is actually about fixed and flexible memberships in regimes, but still they make a difference in territorial versus purely functional differentiation. Their application shows that this distinction does not really work; all their models of differentiated integration are territorial; they can only put forward Frey and Eichenberger's (1997) Functionally Overlapping Competing Jurisdictions (FOCJ) as an example of an exclusively functional scheme of differentiated integration. This does not do justice to the idea of FOCJ; the territorial aspect is also relevant to FOCJ. The idea of FOCJ is that jurisdictions that deal with specific functions can territorially overlap with jurisdictions that deal with other specific functions. I.e. FOCJ do not follow the same territorial pattern; they are not territorially embedded in a fixed administrative structure (as in a Russian doll model<sup>9</sup>). This is probably what Holzinger & Schimmelfennig mean by fixed/flexible membership, but the formulation of their second dimension is confusing. Dimension (3) refers to the involved jurisdictions: often -as in the analysis of Schimmelfennig, Leuffen & Rittberger (2011)- differentiated integration is limited to cooperation schemes between nation states; in line with our earlier definition of regionalization it can however involve sovereign jurisdictions at all levels.

Dimension (4) refers to Su's mode of alternative integration.

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<sup>9</sup> Jauhiainen (2013) uses the concept of "bounded" regions, whose territorial governance is hierarchically arranged as a series of spatially nested territorial tiers encompassing increasing number of inhabitants.

Dimension (5) is about the sovereignty in terms of decision-making of the differentiated integration scheme: are decisions taken by the EU or is this the competence of the regime itself?

Dimension (6) is straightforward: does the regime reaches outside of the EU or not?

Groenendijk (2007) has put forward some other relevant dimensions:

- differentiated integration may deal either with a single issue (or a few single, nonrelated issues) or with a multitude of (potentially interrelated) policy issues;
- it can differ as far as the size of the group of insiders is concerned (relative to the size of the group of outsiders);
- it can be open to newcomers or closed.

In addition, and following up on the discussion above on the territorial/functional aspect of differentiated integration, two other aspects should be taken into account:

- is the differentiated integration scheme embedded into the existing administrative structure (or: institutions) or does it involve the creation of a new administrative structure? To illustrate this point with an example from regional/local governance: if, within a nation state, municipalities cooperate in providing primary and secondary education, the cooperation scheme is still embedded into the existing administrative structure. If new school districts are established and formally tasked with providing such education, the administrative structure is changed: (single purpose) jurisdictions are added to the basic structure of (multipurpose) government;
- does the functional cooperation involve geographical proximity or not? In the case of cross-border cooperation (like with Euregios) the functional aspect is all about geographical proximity; in the case of EMU, or with the enhanced cooperation mechanism for divorce law, for example, the functionality is not necessarily about geographical proximity.

Taken these issues into account and combining them with (some of the) the issues and dimensions put forward above, we derive table 2 with the following dimensions of differentiated integration.

*Table 2: Dimensions of differentiated integration*

Permanent or temporary
Single issue or multi-issue
Open or closed
Embeddedness of policy area(s): inside EU policy domain or outside
Embeddedness of institutions: use of existing EU framework or use of own institutional framework
Embeddedness of decision-making: EU decision-making or –sovereign- club decision-making
Nature of decision-making: “loose” coordination or centralized/supranational
Nation states only or multi-level
Geographical proximity relevant or not
Small or large (insiders/outside)
Territorially exclusively inside the EU or also outside

### 3. OLD AND NEW REGIONALISM, AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

We now turn to the second part of literature which is relevant to making sense of macro-regions: the literature on regionalism. We focus here on Wallis (2000/2009) who has contrasted “old” regionalism (which according to him has been the dominant school of thought of practice in regionalisation from the 1880s to the 1980s) and “new” regionalism by looking at six characteristics. In table 3 these characteristics are listed and briefly discussed (following but different from Wallis, 2000/2009 and Williams, 2005).<sup>10</sup>

Table 3: Old versus new regionalism

<i>“Old” regionalism</i>	<i>“New” regionalism</i>
Government: top-down establishment of new layers in the hierarchy of governments, with nation states as main actors	Governance: bottom-up, goals-oriented, networks-based, with involvement and shared responsibility of various public and private actors
Structure-oriented: focus on formation of new regional structures (public entities), procedures as the pathway through these structures	Process-oriented: process is central to creating vision, resolving conflict and building consensus.
Closedness: focus on defining boundaries and jurisdictions. Delimitation and membership are crucial to the definition of the region	Openness: boundaries are open, fuzzy or elastic. The region is defined by the issues at hand
Coordination: hierarchical redistribution of resources through governments	Collaboration/cooperation: voluntary agreements among equals
Accountability & responsibility: fixed responsibilities and little flexibility	Trust: as a binding element among regional interests. Responsibilities are flexibly shared
Concentration of power: sovereignty of the state	Diffusion of power, aimed at empowerment of actors

As Wallis does, it is important to stress that the new regionalism is not necessarily superior to old regionalism. The old regionalism continues to offer important solutions to significant problems. Rather, the new regionalism is most centrally a response to a new set of problems that the old regionalism was either not aware of, or was not designed to address.

Another strand of literature that is of interest here is that on governance dimensions of territorial cooperation. Based on theoretical work on Europeanization, multi-level governance and new regionalism insights, Van der Zwet & McMaster (2012) have put forward five dimensions of European territorial cooperation, some of which correspond to characteristics of old/new regionalism:

- Top-down versus bottom-up;
- Centrally driven versus locally driven;
- Highly institutionalized versus loosely organized;

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<sup>10</sup> Although Wallis’ typology is primarily meant for application to regions within (federal or unitary) states, the typology of “old” versus “new” regions can be applied to the EU as a whole (i.e. as a region on a global scale). The typology is also relevant for what happens in terms of region-building within the EU. As Hettne (2005) argues the process of regionalization in Europe is both endogenous (i.e. emerging from within the geographical area in question) and exogenous (i.e. acting on the challenges of globalization). Or, following Gänzle & Kern (2011), the process of region-building within the EU can be understood from two perspectives. First, internally, it can be understood from the inability of the EU to devise integration schemes that solve collective action problems that result from diverse membership (in socio-economic, geopolitical, cultural and political terms). Secondly, it can be understood as a way for the EU to provide the basis for external cooperation in a globalised world.

- Closely managed/regulated versus open/flexible arrangements;
- Narrow involvement versus broad partnership.

Bringing together the dimensions of differentiated integration and regionalism/territorial cooperation, we can now put together the analytical framework that will be used in the remainder of this paper.

*Table 4: Analytical framework for description of differentiated integration through macro-regions in the EU*

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Variation</i>
Time	Permanent or temporary
Matter	Single issue or multiple issue
	Geographical proximity important to the issue(s) or not
	Inside EU policy domain or outside
Drivers	Top-down or bottom-up
	Centrally driven (nation states) or regionally/locally driven
Membership	Small/narrow involvement or large/broad partnership
	Open/fuzzy boundaries or closed/strict delimitation
	Nation states or multi-level
	Public or public+private
	EU-only or EU+outside
Institutions	Embedded in existing larger framework or own/new framework
	Highly institutionalized or loosely organized
Decision-making	Embedded in existing decision-making or new/sovereign club decision-making
Mode of governance	Hierarchical/centralized/closely managed/regulated or loose/open/flexible coordination
	Structure-oriented or process-oriented
	Fixed responsibilities (with accountability schemes) or shared responsibilities (based on trust)

#### **4. MACRO-REGIONS WITHIN THE EU**

In this section we will apply the analytical framework to three –existing- macro-regions: the Benelux, the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) and the Danube Region (DR). The Benelux is a relatively old region (as a customs union dating from 1948, but established during the Second World War). It has been a macro-region (*avant la lettre*) within the EU ever since the European Communities started. Cooperation in the BSR dates from the late 80s (the Council for Baltic Sea States, CBSS, was officially founded in 1992); the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) dates from October 2009. The EU Strategy for the DR was initiated in 2009, when the European Council invited the European Commission to develop such a strategy, which was adopted in June 2011.

Table 5 displays some general information on the three macro-regions.

Table 5: Three macro-regions compared

	<i>Benelux</i> <sup>11</sup>	<i>Baltic Sea Region</i>	<i>Danube region</i>
EU member states	Belgium Netherlands Luxembourg (Germany: Nordrhein-Westfalen)	Denmark Sweden Finland Estonia Latvia Lithuania Poland Germany: Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	Romania Bulgaria Hungary Slovenia Slovakia Czech Republic Austria Germany: Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria
Non-EU partners	-	Norway Russia Belarus	Ukraine Croatia Serbia Bosnia & Herzegovina Montenegro Moldova
Population (millions)	28 (45)	71	89
Area (in 1000 km <sup>2</sup> )	1 (3.5)	1279	769
GDP in billions of euro	1.015 (1.597)	1.375	1.620

Before the actual application we will give a brief description of the three macro-regions; before doing that we will pay attention to the EU macro-regional strategies.

The methodology used in this section is desk-research; it is based on (and limited to) the analysis of policy documents, earlier research and websites.

#### 4.1 EU macro-regional strategies

The debate on EU macro-regional strategies should be understood in relation to various shifts in the EU policy framework (Dühr, 2011): with the Lisbon Treaty territorial cohesion has become a central objective in EU policy, the importance of territorial governance to the effectiveness of the Europe 2020 Agenda, and the related changes in EU cohesion policy for the next programming period. Still, as Dubois c.s. (2009) argue, the concept of macro-regions is not new. Although the term as such has not always been explicitly mentioned in EU policy documents (it is first used in a 2005 document where macro-regions are set apart from micro-regions, mainly smaller cross-border regions), the idea has been present between the lines for a longer period, starting with the 2001 White paper on European Governance. According to former European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Samecki (2009), a *macro-region* is an area including territories from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges. The number of member states involved should be significantly fewer than in the Union as whole. The extension of a macro-region does not have to be identical with administrative boundaries of nation states but can just cover parts of those. According to DG Regio, boundaries of macro-regions are flexible and subject to the issue addressed. A *macro-regional strategy* is an integrated framework that allows the EU and its member states to identify needs and match them to the available resources through coordination of appropriate policies (Samecki, 2009). Two types of macro-regional strategies are distinguished. The first type deals with problems that cannot be satisfactorily addressed by regions or

<sup>11</sup> Between brackets: including Nordrhein-Westfalen.

countries acting alone, like environmental challenges. The second type deals with a cooperation which is beneficial to regions and countries involved, but not necessary in terms of dealing with such externalities. As Dühr (2011) points out this distinction reflects the distinction between a transnational issue and a common issue (used in the debate on transnationality and subsidiarity of EU funding). According to DG Regio, the European Commission is primarily interested in the first type of macro-regional strategy.

Figure 1: Macro-regional strategy areas in the EU (taken from Dühr, 2011)



So far, EU macro-regional strategies have only been prepared for and implemented in the BSR and the DR. Other strategies are under discussion (see figure 1 for an overview of the macro-regional areas involved). In the case of the Benelux the regionalization scheme exists without an EU strategy. In the case of the BSR, the EU

Baltic Sea Strategy (EUBSR) is part of a longer process of regionalization in the area. In the case of the DR, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) was the main driver of the regionalization process as such.

There are three No's for EU macro-regional strategies: no new funds, no new legislation, and no new institutions. "No new funds" implies that the expected added value of these strategies lies in coordination of actions across policy areas, which should lead to more effective outcomes and a more efficient use of resources than individual initiatives. "No new legislation" means that the strategies take the form of a non-binding Communication by the European Commission which is endorsed by the European Council. "No new institutions" means that no new institutions are created at the EU level. DG Regio is not the process manager of the macro-regional strategies; it relies on the existing institutions and organizations in the macro-region.

Macro-regional strategies have some characteristics which set them apart from just any other territorial cooperation between member states within a region (Dubois c.s., 2009; Nacchia, 2011): a multi-sectoral approach (i.e. coordination across policies), a multi-instrumental approach, and a multi-actor approach. More specifically, in the literature some efforts have been made to distinguish macro-regional strategies from multi-level governance, and from transnational cooperation within the INTERREG framework. In this respect it is mentioned (Nacchia, 2011; Schymik, 2011) that multi-level governance is very much about territorial diversification of policies across the vertical range of different public authorities (EU-states-subnational authorities), and less about cross-policy issues and the involvement of private actors. An EU macro-regional strategy stresses the transnational, horizontal dimension of policies and aims at strengthening the territorial cohesion of existing cooperation at bilateral, multilateral, supranational, and subnational levels. Moreover, macro-regional strategies provide the basis for external cooperation in the macro-region as they include the EU external and neighbourhood policy fields. EU macro-regional strategies are different from the mainstream territorial cooperation scheme aimed at the transnational dimension (INTERREG IVB) in the sense that this scheme is primarily a funding scheme for a diversity of transnational projects and involves far less multi-sectoral coordination. Moreover, although there is some overlap between the areas covered by the 10 (European continental) regional INTERREG IVB programmes<sup>12</sup> and the macro-regions in figure 1, some of these INTERREG IVB areas are rather huge and do not have a centripetal geographic feature (like a sea or a river as in the case of the BSR and DSR). In this respect enlargement has been an important factor for the emergence of EU macro—regional strategies. In the cases of the Baltic sea and the Danube river enlargement meant that these waters became –to a large extent- internal EU waters. Enlargement also changed the geopolitical configuration of the EU, in terms of centre and periphery. By combining old and new member states, and the periphery and the centre, EU macro-regional strategies can contribute to territorial cohesion in Europe (Schymik, 2011).

#### **4.2 The Benelux Union**

The so-called Low Countries are the historical lands around the low-lying delta of the Rhine, Scheldt, and Meuse rivers, and include the modern countries of Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and parts of northern France and western Germany. The term originates from the Late Middle Ages. For centuries, the Low Countries have

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<sup>12</sup> Northern Periphery, Baltic Sea, North West Europe, North Sea, Atlantic Coast, Alpine Space, Central Europe, South West Europe, Mediterranean, South East Europe .

been united, separated and re-united. As from 1430 the Low Countries were under the rule of the Dukes of Burgundy, followed by Habsburg rule. In 1512 Charles V established the so-called Burgundian Circle as one of the imperial circles of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1549 (after the *Diet of Augsburg* of 1548) he declared the 17 provinces of the Circle inseparable. Nevertheless, 30 years later, in 1579, separation did take place, as the seven protestant Northern provinces, during the Eighty Years' War, formed the Union of Utrecht, with the ten catholic Southern provinces remaining under Spanish rule. This situation, which lasted for more than two centuries (i.e. the Republic of the United Netherlands, later called the Batavian Republic), ended with the accession, in 1806, of Louis Bonaparte (Napoleon's brother) to the throne of the newly established "puppet" Kingdom of Holland, placing all the Low Countries under French rule. After Napoleon was driven out of the Low Countries in 1813 (followed by his defeat at Waterloo in 1815), William VI of Orange (aka William I of the Netherlands) became king of the Dutch and Belgian Netherlands (the latter having been under Spanish, Austrian and French rule consecutively) and became grand duke of Luxembourg. This reunification lasted for only 15 years as Belgium separated itself from the Kingdom in 1830, with Luxembourg temporarily being brought under Belgian rule, until it also became fully independent in 1839.

In the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the three independent nation states flourished economically, through increased trade, the development of a strong agricultural sector and the establishment of new manufacturing industries. Relations between the states normalized rapidly. In 1846 a treaty on trade was conducted between the three states. After Luxembourg, for political reasons, retreated from the German *Zollverein* (in 1919), a treaty was conducted in 1921 which laid the foundations for an economic union, i.e. a common Benelux market. Economic decline in the *interbellum* led to an initial delay in the implementation of these plans, but the 1932 Treaty of Ouchy provided for a decrease in import duties and abolished protectionist measures. A number of treaties conducted in 1943 and 1944 led to the birth of the Benelux customs union, on January 1, 1948, which eventually was to progress into a full-fledged internal market. On November 1, 1960, the –consolidated– Treaty on Benelux Economic Union (BEU, conducted in 1958) came into force, effectively creating such a common market. In June 2008 the Treaty was renewed.

The main policy area that the Benelux has been involved in is market integration (including integration in the field of intellectual property rights). This is still the core of the Benelux activities, even though these activities have largely been become part of the mainstream common market policies of the EU. In addition the Benelux has been involved in specific issues of cross-border cooperation. Recently, with the renewal of the Benelux treaty, the Benelux has identified a couple of new policy areas it has or will be engaged in: innovation, sustainable development and justice & home affairs. More recently, we can witness an increase in joint political statements by Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, on topical issues in a variety of policy areas.<sup>13</sup>

Another recent feature is the "flirt" between the Benelux and the German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen (see Andringa, 2010, for a detailed discussion). In December 2008 (just after the renewal of the Benelux Treaty) a partnership agreement was signed between the Benelux and Nordrhein-Westfalen (effective from 2012), which deals with five policy areas: disaster management, police cooperation, air pollution, spatial planning, and food safety.

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<sup>13</sup> For example: on Friday March 15, 2013, the Benelux countries issued a joint statement to urge for unity on the part of the EU on the issue of supply of weapons to the Syrian opposition.

The Benelux is an intergovernmental organization. Decisions are taken unanimously. They only become legally valid after they have been incorporated into national legislation. The Committee of Ministers is the main decision-making body of the Benelux and is made up of the ministers of the three countries. The Committee has a different composition depending on the issues at hand, and has a rotating presidency. In EU terms the Committee is the Council of Ministers. The Benelux Council consists of high-level civil servants of the three member states. It is in charge of preparation of Committee decisions (in EU terms: Coreper). The Secretariat-General is in charge of implementation of decisions and resembles the EU Commission. The Benelux parliament is not chosen directly, but is made up of national parliamentarians. In that sense it resembles the “old” European Parliament, before EP became a directly elected body in 1977. As with the EU the Benelux also has a court, similar inset-up to the EU Court of Justice.

The legal instruments of the Benelux again are very similar to the EU: regulations, directives and recommendations can be issued by the Committee of Ministers. The Benelux budget is set for a period of five years. This multi-annual budget is funded by the member states based on their national income. Within this multi-annual framework the Committee of Ministers sets annual budgets.

#### **4.3 The Baltic Sea Region (BSR) & the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)**

As with the Low Countries, the countries of the Baltic Sea rim (i.e. a coastline of 8.000 km) have a complicated history of political unions, separations and conflicts. Roughly, according to Tassinari (2004), the Baltic Sea region comprises the German *Länder* of Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Northern Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the Leningrad and Kaliningrad *oblasti* (regions) and the St. Petersburg Municipality, Finland, Sweden and Denmark.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States, which is the main political forum of the region, was officially founded in 1992, but as Tassinari (2004) and Williams (2005) argue, the region-building period started already in 1988, as the initial ideas of region-building in the Baltic Sea region arose parallel to the main changes that took place in the late 1980s in Europe in general and the specific geopolitical changes in the Baltic states. During this period of region-building references were made to various earlier regional cooperation schemes in this area, including the Hansa cooperation which stretched from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Within the BSR, and in addition to the CBSS, in the 90s there were other well-established cooperation schemes (of which some still exist), like the Nordic Council (since 1952, for inter-parliamentary and inter-governmental cooperation, originally between Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Sweden; now also including Finland, and associate and observer members from the Baltic Sea region), HELCOM (environmental policy), VASAB (transnational spatial planning), the NB8-group, Baltic 21, the Union of Baltic Cities, the Baltic Development Forum, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and various INTERREG programmes and projects in the region (including Baltic Sea Region Programme). The multitude of actors already involved in cooperation schemes in the region was reflected in the large number of organizations (109) that participated in the written public consultation on the EUSBSR in 2008; interestingly enough, some member states refused to speak out and contributed so-called non-papers.

The EUSBSR was initiated in 2005 by the Europe Baltic Intergroup (i.e. an informal group of MEPs from the Baltic Sea region) as a spin-off from the 2005 Parliament’s resolution on the Northern Dimension. The outline for an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was drawn up by Henrik Iilves (Estonian MEP, later Estonian

President), later followed up by a EP report by Finish MEP Alexander Stubb (later Finland's foreign minister). Germany and Finland (during their presidencies in 2006 and 2007) tried to sell the idea to other member states, but initially the idea did not meet with enthusiasm in the European Council. It was taken up again by Sweden in the run-up to its presidency in 2009; the European Council invited the European Commission to present a EUSBSR by June 2009, which was then endorsed in October 2009.

Metzger (2010, following Marres) argues that in the 1990s in the Baltic Sea region a regional public or "community of concern" had begun to emerge, which raised issues concerning security, the environment and economic development, but this community was not fully able to turn these issues into a coherent whole. This is exactly what the EUSBSR focused on: the transformation of a loose regional public into a more stabilized regional stakeholder community and the translation of multiple interests into a set of shared interests (Metzger, 2010). Schymik (2011) also points to the growing dissatisfaction over the stagnating cooperation in the region, after a dynamic start following the end of the Cold War. He argues that after integration of the eastern states into EU and NATO was achieved, the regional cooperation temporarily lost its driver. The EU macro-regional approach revitalized the process of transnational cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region (Dühr, 2011). Metzger & Schmitt (forthcoming) state that the EUSBSR solidified Baltic Sea regional cooperation, by formalizing the soft space of the region.

Although it could be argued that with the development of the EUSBSR the CBSS has become less important (and EU institutions have become more important), the CBSS still is the overall political forum for inter-governmental cooperation in the BSR. It deals with five policy domains/priorities: environment/sustainable development, economic development, energy, education and culture, civil security and the human dimension. The Members of the Council are the eleven states of the Baltic Sea Region (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, and Sweden) as well as the European Commission. The Council consists of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs from each Member State and a member of the European Commission. The Presidency of the Council rotates among the Member States on an annual basis. The role of the Council is to serve as a forum for guidance and overall coordination among the participating states. The foreign minister of the presiding country is responsible for coordinating the Council's activities and is assisted in this work by the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO). The Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) consists of high ranking representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Member States as well as of the European Commission. The CSO serves as the main discussion forum and decision-making body for matters related to the work of the Council between Ministerial Sessions. The CSO monitors, facilitates and aims to coordinate the work of all CBSS structures. The CSO and its Expert Groups are serviced by the Permanent International Secretariat of the CBSS, which was established in 1998. The mandate of the Secretariat is to provide technical and organisational support to the Chairman of the CBSS and the structures and working bodies of the Council; to ensure continuity and enhanced coordination of CBSS activities; to implement the CBSS Information and Communication Strategy; to maintain the CBSS archives and information database; to maintain contacts with other organisations operating in and around the Baltic Sea region, the national authorities of Member States and the media.

As the CBSS focuses on specific cooperation projects, it does not require specific legislative competencies. It does not have a general budget or project fund. Members are responsible for funding common activities and/or

for seeking and coordinating financing from other sources. Since 1998, the CBSS Member States have financed jointly the Permanent International Secretariat of the CBSS.

Returning to the EUSBSR, the EUSBSR as such is set out in a communication by the European Commission, elaborated upon in more detail in its Action Plan, and evaluated/accounted for in annual reports. The Action Plan prioritizes the activities into 15 priority areas, organized into four thematic pillars and a horizontal section. Every priority area has got flagship projects. The four thematic pillars are: environment, prosperity, accessibility and attractiveness, and safety and security. For each priority area, some EU member states are designated as coordinators (contrary to the EUDSR non-EU states do not act as coordinators within the EUSBSR). The strategy is overseen by a High Level Group of all EU member states. Figure 2 shows the governance system of the EUSBSR.

Figure 2: Governance system of the EUSBSR (from: <http://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/pages/governance>)



#### 4.4 The Danube Region (DR) & the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

Just as in 2004 the Baltic Sea became a common EU sea, in 2007 the Danube river largely became an internal EU river. Historically, cooperation in the Danube Region started developing right after World War II, in order to coordinate the navigation of the Danube river, more generally to coordinate transport issues, but also involving cultural exchange. During the Cold War the region served as a link between East and West. During the 90s the region went through deep political transformation and conflicts (Balkan wars). In addition to navigation/transport issues, security and stability issues become important, as well as the environmental protection of the Danube river. In this period several international organizations became important players: the OSCE, the UN, NATO, the Council of Europe, and of course the EU. EU involvement consisted of bilateral arrangements with outsiders (accession partnerships; use of IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance); Stabilization & Association Agreement; European Partnership; Partnership & Cooperation Agreements within the ENP framework) and through EU cohesion policy. Just as in the case of the BSR in the DR various organizations and networks were active, before introducing the EUSDR. The OCSE initiated the Danube

Cooperation Process, which replaced the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and the South East Cooperation Initiative (SECI, founded in 1996, on US initiative). In 1996 Bulgaria initiated the South-East European Cooperation Process and in 2008 the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was established. Various other organizations were active as well, mainly concerned with the management of the Danube river: Danube International Commission (set up in 1948, fully operational as from 1964), International Sava River Basin Commission, ISBRC, 2001), International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR, 1998), Working Community of the Danube Countries (1989), Council of Danube Cities and Regions (CDCR, launched in 1998, formally established in 2009) and various NGOs and business associations.

The institutional landscape of the DR prior to introducing the EUSDR was far more complex than that of the BSR in the 90s. Still, compared to the BSR the DR is hardly unified by a shared regional identity or culture; the EUSDR involves more region-building than the EUSBSR. The main drivers for regional cooperation are shared political and historical developments, the felt need to respond to integration processes in other parts of Europe, the wish to overcome political divides from the past, and obviously the management of the Danube river. The external dimension is more prominent with the EUSDR than with the EUSBSR.

Compared to the EUSBSR the role of EP was less prominent; only when the EUSDR was already in the process of development (i.e. shortly after European Council decision of June 2009 to create a EUSDR), a Danube Intergroup was set up in EP (July 2009). The main driver has been the European Commission which called for a EUSDR, backed by Austria, Serbia, Slovakia, Romania en Baden-Württemberg. The idea met with enthusiasm in the European Council right away. The European Council asked the European Commission to prepare EUSDR, to be adopted in 2011. A consultation procedure was launched (February-June 2010), in which all EU member states openly participated on a broad scale (Schymik, 2011), as well as third countries including Russia (which was far less reserved regarding this strategy than regarding the EUSBSR). The EUSDR was adopted in 2011, under the Hungarian presidency.

In terms of governance, the EUSDR is constructed in the same way as EUSBSR (strategy in a European Commission communication, on which an Action Plan is build), with pillars, priority areas, and coordinators. The four pillars are: connecting the Danube Region, environmental protection, prosperity, and strengthening the Danube Region. In contrast to the EUSBSR here we find that non-EU countries in some cases are part of coordinators group (always coupled to one or more EU member states), except for the area of security/safety.

#### **4.5 Application of the analytical framework**

##### ***Dimension: time***

##### ***Permanent or temporary***

All three macro-regions are permanent features of differentiation. In the case of the Benelux, the treaty arrangements have recently been renewed. In the case of the EUSBSR and the EUSDR the time frame is undetermined; a long-term perspective is used, with the possibility of revision of the strategies (see also Matarrelli, 2012).

***Dimension: matter***

*Single issue or multiple issue*

All three macro-regions deal with multiple issues. In the case of the EUSBSR and the EUSDR the multi-sectoral approach is one of the defining characteristics of the strategies; in the case of the Benelux, it originally dealt with a single issue (cross-border trade), but it has developed into a cooperation scheme that deals with a multitude of issues.

*Geographical proximity important to the issue(s) or not*

Again, territoriality is essential to the macro-regional strategies. Both the BSR and the DR are centred around a natural entity (sea, river) and all pillars and priorities do have a distinct geographic dimension, although one could argue that in the case of the DR the extent to which the region is united by a number of functional characteristics is less than in the case of the BSR.

In the case of the Benelux, to some issues the geographical aspect is important, but especially when it comes to the cooperation by the three countries in order to bundle bargaining power within the EU, increasingly non-geographically determined issues are involved.

*Inside EU policy domain or outside*

The EUSBSR and the EUSDR are internal EU strategies. Although there is no specific Treaty clause that refers to such strategies, they have been developed as part of the objective of territorial cohesion. As such, but also if we look at the specific pillars of the strategies, they stay within the EU policy domain.

The same is true for the Benelux: market integration, innovation, sustainable development and justice & home affairs are all issues within the EU policy domain, on which integration deepens between the three countries (and its German partner).

***Dimension: drivers***

*Top-down or bottom-up*

According to Nacchia (2011), Dühr (2011) and Van der Zwet & McMaster (2012, following Armali and Salines) the macro-regional strategies involved a mix of (or: balance between) bottom-up and top-down approaches. For instance, regional cooperation in the BSR started bottom-up (already in the 80s) by development of networks of sub-national and private actors, but nation states then built on this, followed by the EU (mainly EP and/or European Commission). Regional cooperation in the DSR was more led by international organizations and has relatively more top-down features than regional cooperation in the BSR.

Benelux cooperation is the result of a top-down approach; later, when the Benelux was incorporated into the EU framework, bottom-up regional cooperation (cross-border cooperation) emerged, but mainly within the INTERREG framework.

*Central government driven or regionally/locally driven*

As with the establishment of the Benelux, central governments have been crucial to the development of the macro-regional strategies. Although sub-national actors have been important, the process of macro-regionalization primarily has also been driven by central governments.

***Dimension: membership***

*Small/narrow involvement or large/broad partnership*

In terms of countries involved, the Benelux is a small macro-region, whereas the EUSBSR and the EUSDR are large/broad partnerships.

*Open/fuzzy or closed/strict delimitation*

All three regions are open, but to a very limited extent. It is hard to see how the (EUS)BSR and the (EUS)DR can geographically enlarge, given that they currently already encompass all relevant territory. However, here we must make a distinction between the macro-regional strategy and the broader regional cooperation scheme. For example, if we take the case of the BSR, the strategy is clearly EU-centred (and as such not open or fuzzy), but one of the main political entities in the region, the CBSS, is open, as is shown by the involvement of many observer states (Belarus, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, the Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States of America) and of various strategic partners.

With the Benelux, the recent cooperation with Nordrhein-Westfalen shows that there is less strict delimitation of its boundaries than previously.

*Nation states or multi-level*

Central governments are the nodes of the macro-regional governance systems (Stocchiero, 2010). In forging the macro-regional strategies, the EU and its member states were important, but also in the actual governance of the strategies.<sup>14</sup> EU member states are the main actors in the European Council and have general oversight power through High Level Groups. The role of subnational actors in macro-regions is limited to consultation in the initiation & policy making phases, weak in the management phase (where central governments and the European Commission are responsible) and mainly concerns the implementation phase (Van der Zwet & McMaster, 2012): Still, membership and involvement in coordination is possible for sub-national authorities. In the EUSBSR Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is one of the coordinators for tourism, and Hamburg for education. In the EUSDR Bavaria is coordinator for biodiversity, Baden-Württemberg for competitiveness of enterprises.

The Benelux is an intergovernmental organization in which the nation states dominate. However, in addition to involvement of sub-national authorities in specific projects, there is multi-level governance, if we take into account the cooperation with Nordrhein-Westfalen.

*Public or public+private*

The same as for sub-national authorities, but even more so, is true for private actors, in all three macro-regions: involved in the actual implementation of projects, but hardly in the policy making and coordination domains. Obviously, they are part of the macro-regional networks, but they are not “full” members of the formal regional cooperation schemes. At heart, all three macro-regions are governmental entities.

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<sup>14</sup> As Williams (2005) shows, the initial ideas of Schleswig-Holstein’s prime minister Engholm for a truly non-governmental Baltic Sea Forum or New Hanse, supported by Sweden’s minister (and later ambassador to Germany) Hellström, were slightly weakened by interventions from the German foreign Minister Genscher and his Danish counterpart Elleman-Jensen, who insisted on a significant role for the nation states in the CBSS.

*EU-only or EU+outside*<sup>15</sup>

The Benelux fully falls within EU territory; the EUSBRS and the EUSDR include partners from outside of the EU.

***Dimension: institutions***

*Embedded in existing framework or new/own institutional framework*

The EU macro-regional strategies have led to a situation where the regional cooperation has been embedded into the EU institutional framework. In the case of the EUSBRS a dense and hardly manageable array of transnational organisations and networks already existed. The EUSBSR aimed at a realignment of the institutional structure, mainly with a view towards the CBSS, which is not any longer the leading political council cooperation in the region as this role has been taken over by the EU (Schymik, 2011). Though its role may be less prominent, the CBSS still has its own (intergovernmental) institutional framework.

In the case of the EUSDR, the transnational institutional landscape was weakly developed. The EU stepped in, and in line with one of three No's no new institutions were established, but still there are calls for a Danube Council, especially to better accommodate third states (Schymik, 2011).

In the case of the Benelux, there is a separate institutional framework, which preceded the EU framework, but has become perfectly aligned with it. Within its member states the institutional set-up (especially the role of the Benelux parliament) is increasingly discussed, in light of this embeddedness, which leads to all kinds of overlap.

*Highly institutionalized or loosely organized*

Both the EU framework for the macro-regional strategies and the Benelux framework are highly institutionalized.

***Dimension: decision-making***

*Embedded in existing decision-making or new/sovereign club decision-making*

What goes for the institutional framework is also true for decision-making: almost perfectly embedded into EU decision-making (even though in the case of Benelux, decision-making is sovereign and the Benelux has its own legislative order).

***Dimension: mode of governance***

*Hierarchical/centralized/closely managed/regulated or loose/open/flexible coordination*

Coordination within the macro-regional strategies does not involve (new) legislation or funding. The strategies as such are non-binding communications, endorsed by the European Council. The Benelux uses hard as well as soft coordination (in that way it mirrors the current use of both types of coordination in the EU). It has moved

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<sup>15</sup> Schymik (2011) combines the external dimension, the broadness of membership, and countries' sizes into what he calls "symmetry". He argues that the (EUS)BSR and (EUS)DR are reasonably symmetrical (Schymik, 2011): the countries as such, and taken together are small enough to have an equal incentive to raise their stature and influence within the EU through transnational cooperation, and they are mainly within the EU (BSR: 8 insiders, 3 outsiders; DSR: 8 insiders, 6 outsiders). According to him no other macro-regions can be found in the EU that have the same balance, which limits the transferability of the current experiences.

away from its single focus on market integration through harmonization of legislation and is more oriented towards cooperation through projects in the policy fields it has newly embraced.

*Structure-oriented or process-oriented*

Because of the three No's emphasis within the macro-regional strategies is on processes and outcomes rather than on building and maintaining structures. Again, the Benelux shows a mix of both approaches; historically, it has always paid close attention to the institutional set-up (which served as a role model for and is very much similar to the set-up of the European communities) but increasingly it is oriented towards process and outcomes.

*Fixed responsibilities (with accountability schemes) or shared responsibilities (based on trust)*

In all three cases responsibilities and accountability schemes are very clearly outlined. This is especially true for the Benelux (where responsibilities and accountability are well-defined and linked up to its institutional structure, which includes a parliament and a conflict-settling court, but also for the EUSBSR and the EUSDR, where the European Commission and the member states are responsible.

Table 6 lists the outcomes of the application of the analytical framework on the three macro-regions.

Table 6: Outcomes of application of the analytical framework for three EU macro-regions

<i>DIMENSION</i>	<i>Variation</i>	<i>BENELUX</i>	<i>BALTIC SEA REGION</i>	<i>DANUBE REGION</i>
Time	Permanent or temporary	Permanent	Permanent	Permanent
Matter	Single issue or multiple issue	Increasingly multiple issue	Multiple issue	Multiple issue
	Geographical proximity important to the issue(s) or not	Geographical proximity important, but not on all issues	Geographical proximity essential (Baltic Sea)	Geographical proximity essential (Danube river)
	Inside EU policy domain or outside	Inside EU policy domain	Inside EU policy domain	Inside EU policy domain
Drivers	Top-down or bottom-up	Top-down	Mixed	Mixed
	Central government driven (nation states) or regionally/locally driven	Central government driven	Central government driven	Central government driven
Membership	Small/narrow involvement or large/broad partnership	Small/narrow	Large/broad	Large/broad
	Open/fuzzy or closed/strict delimitation	Open (limited)	Mixed (EUSBSR <> region as such)	Mixed (EUSDR <> region as such)
	Nation states or multi-level	Nation states + multi-level	Multi-level	Multi-level
	Public or public+private	Public	Public + private	Public
	EU-only or EU+outside	EU only	EU+outside	EU+outside
Institutions	Embedded in existing framework or own/new framework	Own institutions, but aligned with EU framework	Embedded in EU framework	Embedded in EU framework
	Highly institutionalized or loosely organized	Highly institutionalized	Highly institutionalized	Highly institutionalized
Decision-making	Embedded in existing decision-making or new/sovereign club decision-making	Sovereign club decision-making, but embedded in EU decision-making	Embedded in EU decision-making	Embedded in EU decision-making
Mode of governance	Hierarchical/centralized/closely managed/regulated or loose/open/flexible coordination	Mixed	Open coordination	Open coordination
	Structure-oriented or process-oriented	Mixed	Process-oriented	Process-oriented
	Fixed responsibilities (with accountability schemes) or shared responsibilities (based on trust)	Fixed responsibilities	Fixed responsibilities	Fixed responsibilities

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis leads to the following conclusions.

First, the EUSBSR and the EUSDR are largely identical, even though the two strategies involve regions that are different in terms of regional identity and historical background. The main difference is that in the BSR there seems to be more involvement of private actors. Secondly, the Benelux differs from the two “new” macro-regions. It is more top-down driven, it is relatively small (in terms of participating countries), it does not reach outside of the EU and it has its own institutions and decision-making procedures. Thirdly, when looking at the Benelux on the one hand and the other regions at the other hand, it can be argued that some convergence has taken place. The Benelux has started cooperation with Nordrhein-Westfalen, which diminishes its “nation states only”-character and brings it closer to the multi-level character of the other two regions. It is increasingly involved in multiple issues, with more open coordination and more orientation towards processes. On the other hand, the EU macro-regional strategies have brought institutionalization to more or less fuzzy, fluid and heterogeneous cooperation schemes that emerged after the end of the Cold War in the BSR and the DR, as part of the process of EU accession of most of the countries involved. The EU macro-regional approach has lifted such transnational cooperation out of the domain of intergovernmental cooperation and into the sphere of EU multi-level governance with a stronger role for supranational institutions (Dühr, 2011). Or to put it differently: the EU has effectively taken over these regional cooperation schemes and has successfully imposed its institutional framework. In that sense, macro-regions (as appearances of differentiated integration and regionalization) are no threat to EU integration; through its macro-regional strategies the EU has actually strengthened its position.

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