

THE THREE SEAS UNIVERSITY NETWORK AS A VEHICLE FOR MACRO-REGIONAL COOPERATION

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Abstract. This article is concerned with the Three Seas University Network as a vehicle for the macro-regional development of the Three Seas Initiative area. Based on the existing body of research, the author identifies potential new administrative and legal solutions for advancing cooperation between the higher education and research sectors and local governments. To achieve the research aim, he explores the legal possibilities of enabling the macro-regional development of the Three Seas Initiative area. Following a legal analysis, the author concluded that a networking scheme in the form of the Three Seas University Network would be an effective legal vehicle for fostering the macro-regional development of the region concerned. The Network would intensify international cooperation not only in the fields of education or research, but also, and most importantly, in the sphere of regional development.

Keywords: macro-regional local government cooperation; network administration; cooperation between the education and research sectors and local government; Three Seas Initiative

INTRODUCTION

The legal and administrative considerations of regional development from the macro-regional perspective have not been the subject of extensive research. There exists a particularly noticeable gap in interdisciplinary research on regional development in the Three Seas area.¹ This has significant implications, since interdisciplinary approaches are very important for exploring this subject-matter. While publications on the Three Seas Initiative do exist, the large majority of them focus on economic [Popławski and Jakóbcowski 2020] or political issues [Kowal and Orzelska-Stączek

¹ An initiative formed by 12 European states – Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary. During the presidential summit of the Initiative in 2023, Greece and Moldova were invited to join as a member and as a partner-participant, respectively. Ukraine became a partner-participant in 2022. See <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wizyty-zagraniczne/szczyt-inicjatywy-trojmorza,74048> [accessed: 30.09.2023].

2019; Grosse 2022; Raczkowski 2022]. Hence, it is very important to align the legal forms of macro-regional development functioning within the European Union with the bottom-up initiatives emerging under the Three Seas Initiative in the fields of education and research. This paper explores the legal avenues through which to support the macro-regional development of the Three Seas area by facilitating institutional cooperation in the educational and research sectors. The research hypothesis is that network administration processes, such as those occurring within the Three Seas University Network, should be used as a legal vehicle for promoting regional development in higher education. The above-mentioned subjects will be analysed using primarily the doctrinal method, with minor elements of the historical and comparative-legal methods.

1. MACRO-REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Macro-regional strategies are political frameworks established by EU states and non-EU European countries to form collaborative partnerships to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion. These strategies facilitate problem-solving on partnership terms and help tap the combined development potential. They operate on the principle of cross-sectoral and multi-level governance. At the same time, macro-regional strategies highlight regional identities to strengthen accountability and encourage active civic participation. The soft cooperation model adopted under macro-regional strategies is an advantage in that it opens up paths to solutions that are more difficult to develop in more formalised contexts characterised by competing national interests.²

The existing four macro-regional strategies involve 19 EU and 10 non-EU states.³ They are: the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region,⁴ the EU Strategy for the Danube Region,⁵ the EU Strategy for the Adriatic –

² Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, Brussels, 9.12.2022, COM 705 final, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region COM 2009, 248 final, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/baltic/com_baltic_en.pdf [accessed: 12.09.2023].

⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, Brussels, 8 December 2010, COM 2010, 715 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A52010DC0715> [accessed: 12.09.2023].

-Ionian Region⁶ and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region.⁷

Macro-strategies provide frameworks of response to emerging problems. For instance, a situation where Ukrainian refugees fleeing from war are seeking shelter all over Europe calls for orchestrated action within the framework of all four macro-regional strategies. This raises new concerns, particularly around the additional burden that the crisis has put on healthcare and welfare systems already strained by the pandemic. Many stakeholders of macro-regional strategies help refugees and support humanitarian aid initiatives. Recently, the macro-regional strategy measures have been focusing on integrating Ukrainian refugees and establishing safe routes for goods transportation.⁸

In all of the four macro-regional strategies, the political level is represented by ministers of foreign affairs and, in some cases, by ministers or authorities responsible for EU funds. The rotating presidency plays an increasingly important role in all these strategies. This includes both EU and non-EU states. In all the three macro-regional strategies involving non-EU members (Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine Regions), a non-EU state has already held, or will hold, presidency. Currently, each of the four macro-regional strategies has a fixed, rotating presidency arrangement, and uses the format of three succeeding presidencies (previous/current/next presidency). The role of the presidency has been elevated through the establishment of “a group of three presidencies within four strategies.” This group meets regularly and always closely ahead of the annual EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week.⁹

It is worth noting that efforts have been made to engage young people in developing macro-regional cooperation. This is a tool of building civil society – a process that requires encompassing civic initiatives and a population of young people that have experience in tackling social issues and collaborating with institutions at all levels [Chafas and Szewczak 2021, 85]. In recent years, the annual forums held under all four macro-regional strategies have invited young people to contribute to discussions with

⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, Brussels, 30 November 2012, COM 2012, 713 final, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/adriatic/com_2012_713_en.pdf [accessed: 12.09.2023].

⁷ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region, Brussels, 28 July 2015, COM 2015, 366 final, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/alpine/eusalp_communicationtion_en.pdf [accessed: 12.09.2023].

⁸ Report, p. 5.

⁹ Report, p. 8-9.

decision-makers. “Youth councils have been created and institutional civic dialogue has been opened on a macro-regional scale to foster synergies through intensive exchange between macro-regional strategies and other regional cooperation networks.”¹⁰ It seems that the existing macro-regional strategies and their implications for the educational and research sectors could serve as positive examples on which to model analogous strategy documents covering the Three Seas Initiative area, or at least parts of it. Consider, for instance, the Carpathian Strategy that is being worked on. Its main objective would be “to preserve the area’s high nature value, and to boost the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Carpathian macro-region on the basis of its unique natural and cultural heritage, internal sustainable development potential and creating a competitive advantage.”¹¹ One of the key priorities of the Carpathian Strategy would be to support the innovative development of regional ties through cross-sectoral cooperation between science and business [Smętkowski, Majewski, and Przekop-Wiszniewska 2022, 50]. Regrettably, despite the many years of work put into its preparation, the Carpathian Strategy still awaits acceptance to become another macro-regional strategy of the European Union.

To summarise, macro-regional strategies are important vehicles for economic, social and territorial development. They shape the macro-regional identities and aspirations and build trust among neighbouring countries.¹² They should foster regional integration around “economic cooperation and the resulting mutual benefits, as well as support for the weakest economic organisms” [Grosse 2022, 128]. This begs the question of why there is no macro-regional strategy in Central and Eastern Europe despite the lively regional cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative.

2. THE THREE SEAS UNIVERSITY NETWORK

First, it is important to consider the role of the Three Seas Initiative. In 2016, its Member States signed a Joint Statement that: “Having recognised the importance of connecting Central and Eastern European economies and infrastructure from North to South, in order to complete the single European market, given that so far, most efforts served to connect Europe’s East and West; [...] Convinced that by expanding the existing cooperation in energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors,

¹⁰ Report, p. 7.

¹¹ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, 10 March 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/PL/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IR3425&from=EN> [accessed: 13.09.2023].

¹² Report, p. 14.

Central and Eastern Europe will become more secure, safe and competitive, thus contributing to making the European Union more resilient as a whole; [...] they have endorsed The Three Seas Initiative as an informal platform for securing political support and decisive action on specific cross-border and macro-regional projects of strategic importance to the States involved in energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors in Central and Eastern Europe.”¹³ Almost a decade after its establishment, the Three Seas Initiative has yet to see concrete efforts towards its institutionalisation. It does not have a head office, lacks a structural framework and relies on non-binding statements promulgated at annual summits. Consequently, the project is largely driven by political factors [Orzelska-Stączek 2022, 55].

However, there are exceptions to this. One example of macro-regional efforts towards the institutionalisation of the Three Seas Initiative is the Network of the Three Seas Regions, established in Lublin in 2021 [Szewczak 2021]. This network is based on cooperation between regions from the Three Seas Initiative Member States. One of its priorities is to strengthen cooperation between Three Seas regions in the fields of education and research. The subject was addressed during a session entitled “Cooperation between Three Seas Universities” at the 2nd Three Seas Local Government Congress held in Lublin in 2022.¹⁴

Member states followed up on this discussion by taking further steps to promote research cooperation between Three Seas universities as an important component of macro-regional regional development. A research project has been implemented to help draw up a more concrete agenda. It saw an interdisciplinary team of Polish researchers (W. Gizicki, J. Dobkowski, G. Grzywaczewski, A. Ostrowska, I. Szewczak) explore opportunities for cross-regional cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative in the fields of education and research, among others. The central problem was to determine whether the Three Seas University Network was seen as a viable and effective undertaking with the potential to strengthen international local-government cooperation. Based on their analysis of empirical studies conducted at the turn of October and November 2022 in a large number (61) of Three Seas regions, the researchers found that an overwhelming 98.4% of the respondents were in favour of establishing the Three Seas University Network. They were largely in agreement that this undertaking would strengthen international local-government cooperation [Gizicki, Dobkowski, Grzywaczewski, et al. 2022, 30, 44].

¹³ See <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wizyty-zagraniczne/art,105,wspolna-deklaracja-w-sprawie-inicjatywy-trojmorza.html> [accessed: 16.08.2023].

¹⁴ See <https://congress.lubelskie.pl/agenda-2022/> [accessed: 20.08.2023].

It should be stressed that international academic cooperation has already been the central subject of two editions of the Three Seas Local Government Congress in Lublin (2021, 2022). Representatives of local governments, as well as of the education and research sectors, welcomed that discussion, making it clear that further moves towards institutionalised macro-regional cooperation between Three Seas regions was strongly expected. The above-mentioned findings align with what the “Cooperation between Three Seas Universities” panel at the 2022 Three Seas Local Government Congress in Lublin concluded – namely, that the primary way for Three Seas states and societies to establish stronger relations was by increasing student exchange, bolstering inter-university cooperation, undertaking joint scientific research, as well as sharing ideas at the university level [Czarnek 2022].

From a functional point of view, it was important to map specific areas of cooperation under the Three Seas University Network. Here, the aforementioned study provided some interesting insights. The respondents mentioned medical sciences – 72%, technical sciences – 49.2%, social sciences – 36.1% and jurisprudence and administrative science – 32.8% as critically important areas of inter-university cooperation in the Three Seas Initiative area. [Gizicki, Dobkowski, Grzywaczewski, et al. 2022, 44]. The findings of the study are consistent with the position adopted by the academic community concerning the development of medical programmes at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, which launched the Medical Faculty in October 2022.¹⁵

In order for macro-regional cooperation in the fields of education and research to work and bring the expected outcomes, certain conditions must exist to stimulate it and make it more effective. According to the study, these include: academic faculty mobility (39.3%) and joint research projects (39.3%), student mobility (36.1%), academic faculty courses and training (34.4%) and joint e-learning programmes (19.75). University administration training took the last two positions – 16.4% of the respondents thought it was necessary to train managerial staff, while 13.1% believed academic administration staff should receive training [Gizicki, Dobkowski, Grzywaczewski, et al. 2022, 45]. It is evident from the study that higher education requires internationalisation addressed to students, research faculty and administrative staff alike. This would foster interdisciplinary cooperation and provide a concrete framework for cooperation between the educational and research sectors and local governments.

The Three Seas Initiative area encompasses 12 states with different aspirations and problems. Due to social, cultural and economic differences,

¹⁵ See https://www.kul.pl/wydzial-medyczny-kul-zainaugurowal-dzialalnosc,art_100380.html [accessed: 12.09.2023].

it is important to identify common areas in which university cooperation would effectively stimulate regional development. According to the respondents, the following aspects should be considered: environmental protection (42.6%), cultural heritage (39.3%), entrepreneurship (37.7%), information technology (34.4%), social issues (26.2%), sports and tourism (13.1%) and religious heritage (11.5%) [ibid.]. From the local-government perspective, these aspects are critical and indispensable for macro-regional cooperation. Collaborative partnerships between research establishments (universities) in these areas may contribute to the regional development in the Three Seas Initiative area.

Just as there are numerous benefits of developing macro-regional cooperation between Three Seas Initiative Member States, there are many different barriers that hamper or altogether prevent its progress. The main barriers mentioned by the respondents were inadequate funds (67.2%), excessive bureaucracy (49.2%) and sociocultural differences (29.5%). Other identified obstacles included low level of interest among beneficiaries (26.2%), lack of central-government support (11.5%) and lack of local-government support (4.9%) [ibid., 46]. It is important to note here a possible solution that could facilitate both the Three Seas University Network and macro-regional development in this area – the Three Seas Fund, which is now primarily an investment fund focused on supporting infrastructural projects [Raczkowski 2022, 28]. With a steady source of funding, it is certainly conceivable for macro-regional cooperation to grow within the Three Seas University Network.

Based on their survey, the researchers produced a set of recommendations and conclusions. One of their key recommendations was to establish the Three Seas University Network with Lublin as its seat [Gizicki, Dobkowski, Grzywaczewski, et al. 2022, 61]. The Three Seas Initiative followed through with this recommendation fairly quickly. A year later, at the 3rd Three Seas Local Government Congress held in May 2023 in Lublin, twelve Three Seas Universities signed an international agreement on establishing the Three Seas University Network. The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin took leadership of this undertaking. The Network's objectives include to promote the internationalisation of academic research cooperation by establishing an internal system of research faculty and student exchange, organising joint international conferences, providing summer schools, undertaking joint international projects and cooperating with the socio-economic environment.¹⁶ Designed to foster macro-regional cooperation between universities, this new legal instrument will also serve as a vehicle for consolidating cooperation between local governments and businesses.

¹⁶ See https://www.kul.pl/siec-uniwerytetow-trojmorza-umiedzynarodowi-wspolprace-naukowa,art_102924.html [accessed: 30.09.2023].

CONCLUSIONS

Based on our analysis, we can draw several key conclusions on how to promote macro-regional development under of the Three Seas Initiative and create the legal instruments to make the project viable and effective.

First of all, it is important to note that there are legal and administrative possibilities for the regional development of the Three Seas Initiative area in the fields of research and higher education. Important changes have been set in motion to shift the emphasis from the presidential to the regional level in relation to developing macro-regional inter-university cooperation. Consequently, new opportunities have been unlocked to develop and implement joint international projects.

Second, it is essential to take advantage of international cooperation opportunities in the research and higher education sectors within macro-regional EU strategies. It seems that the key challenge for the Three Seas Initiative area would be to implement the Carpathian Strategy [Paruch 2017, 213]. This strategy could become a vehicle for advancing the macro-regional development of the research and higher education sectors.

Third, the further development of the Three Seas University Network is a prerequisite to fostering macro-regional cooperation in the Three Seas area. The Network should form an international association of universities within a broader administrative system to encourage active cooperation with local-government communities, aimed particularly at advancing education and cooperation between research institutions and businesses.

To conclude – the Three Seas University Network should be prioritised as a vehicle for macro-regional development of the Three Seas Initiative area. It will facilitate cooperation between the education and research sectors, local-government administration and business, and consequently promote inter-regional collaborations.

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