

AN EU STRATEGY FOR THE ALPINE REGION (EUSALP) CORE DOCUMENT

DG REGIO, D1, 3-7-2014

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Council Presidency Conclusions of 19/20 December 2013 include at paragraph 50: "(.../...) the European Council invites the Commission, in cooperation with Member States, to elaborate an EU Strategy for the Alpine Region by June 2015". This Strategy concerns 7 countries, of which 5 EU Member States (Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia) and 2 non-EU countries (Liechtenstein and Switzerland), and 48 regions.

As is the case for the other Macro-regional Strategies already started (EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, EU Strategy for the Danube Region) or under preparation (EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region), the objective of this Strategy is to provide a coordinated response to issues better handled by acting together than separately. This Strategy, therefore, will seek to unlock the potential of the Alpine Region, by encouraging participants to overcome barriers to thinking more strategically and imaginatively about the opportunities available.¹

The EU Macro-regional Strategy for the Alpine Region aims to bring a new impetus for co-operation and investment to the benefit of all involved: States, regions, civil society stakeholders and, above all, European citizens. It will build on a long tradition of co-operation in the Alps, and will seek to complement, rather than duplicate existing co-operation structures.

This also aims to ensure that this Region remains one of the most attractive areas in Europe, taking better advantage of its assets and seizing its opportunities for sustainable and innovative development in a European context.

Building on the Grenoble agreements between Alpine States and regions of last October 2013², the following document analyses the Alpine context and sets out proposals on the way forward. However, **it would be very helpful if you gave us your opinion on these.**

2. GENERAL FRAMEWORK

The Alpine Region has many specific characteristics that deserve special attention, e.g.

1. The population of the Alpine Region is around 70 million people. This Region includes five EU Member States as well as two non-EU countries, which are situated at the heart of a unique and world-renowned mountain range at the centre of Europe;
2. All the partners involved enjoy mature and stable administrations, with administrative capacity to step up their co-operation with each other;
3. Many of the regions in the Alps are among the most developed in the world with competitive, market-oriented and specialised economies, a high quality of life, social and political stability and strong innovation levels;
4. Nevertheless, certain localities and regions are considerably less prosperous;

¹ Report concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies, 27 June 2013 COM (2013) 468 Final.

² These agreements were reflected in two documents: "Intervention document for the implementation of an European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region" and "Political declaration towards an European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region", signed in Grenoble last 18 October 2013.

5. The territorial pattern of the area is unbalanced: mountainous, rural areas at the core of the Alps face particular challenges such as low population densities and poor accessibility to services, while there is high connectivity and intense urbanisation in the surrounding lowlands and urban areas within the Alpine Region;
6. Local, regional, national and international traffic streams have become an environmental and congestion issue for many territories in the Region;
7. This Region of great natural heritage is vital to the maintenance of ecosystems on many levels, as a continent-wide source of water, as a region of great natural beauty and as the home at local level to diverse bio-habitats;
8. The cultural heritage of the Alpine Region is an important factor for social cohesion and regional development;
9. Global issues, such as international economic competition or climate change, or more specific ones, like Europe's increasing number of elderly people or Alpine's decreasing biodiversity, underscore the need to (re)think the ability of the Alpine Region to maintain a model of development that guarantees a sustainable use of Alpine resources, such as water and biomass.

To address these and other issues, the European Commission, in co-operation with the States and regions involved, proposes an EU Strategy for the Alpine Region. In line with much work already underway, and the Commission Report on the added value of macro-regional strategies³ and the Commission Report on "governance"⁴, this Strategy should

- focus specifically on co-operation challenges that cannot be adequately tackled by existing structures; complement and not duplicate the work of existing organisations working in the Alps and the wider public, and build on previous work done by Alpine stakeholders;
- serve the implementation of EU policies at national, regional and local level, focusing on Europe 2020, to achieve a benefit for the whole EU and not only the Alpine Region;
- be accompanied by adequate governance structures and human resources to deliver results;
- adopt a long-term, rolling approach, with a focus on results rather than recommendations;
- focus only on issues of strategic importance for the macro-region, both challenges and opportunities⁵;
- be transparent, open to critical public appraisal and evolve as existing policies and programmes are being renewed for the next programming period.

The main challenge of the Strategy should be to tackle the economic, social and territorial imbalances existing in the Alpine Region. The main opportunities should be in stimulating an innovative and sustainable model of development, able to conciliate the promotion of growth and jobs, and the preservation and enjoyment of natural and cultural assets in the area.

The Strategy will build upon three general action-oriented pillars

1. To improve the competitiveness, prosperity and cohesion of the Alpine Region;
2. To ensure accessibility and connectivity for all the inhabitants of the Alpine Region;

³ Report concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies, 27 June 2013 COM (2013) 468 Final.

⁴ Report concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies, 20 May 2014 COM (2014) 284 Final

⁵ Report concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies, 27 June 2013 COM (2013) 468 Final.

3. To make the Alpine Region environmentally sustainable and attractive.

3. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES. Description of the Pillars of the Strategy.

More specifically, the Strategy will focus on defined areas of (macro) regional mutual interest. Therefore, the priority areas and specific objectives selected should reflect genuine commitment to working together to achieve common solutions to challenges or unused potential.

This will be attained through the following 3 thematic pillars:

Pillar 1. Fostering sustainable growth and promoting innovation in the Alps: from theory to practice, from research centres to enterprises.

The Alpine Region constitutes the largest European economic and productive hub, with a high potential for development.

However, lack of economic, social and territorial cohesion is still an issue. Mountains constitute a challenge to homogenous development, entrenching disparities among different territories in the Alpine Region. For instance, access to social services as well as economic services of general interest still remains quite difficult in rural areas at the core of the Alps, while surrounding urban areas develop more easily.

To bridge these gaps, and improve cohesion, this Strategy therefore aims to support innovative economic development in the Alpine Region. This could also contribute to a more balanced model of development, through innovative approaches to strengthen the *sustainability* of the Region, while taking into account the diversity/specificities of Alpine territories. By enhancing this notion of *sustainability*, the goal of the Strategy is to show to Europe that a competitive economy can successfully combine prosperity, energy-efficiency, a high quality of life and traditional values.

This is facilitated by co-operation embracing a variety of economic activities, in the domains of agriculture, industry, commerce, tourism and other services.

The main priorities of this Pillar would be the following:

- (1) Developing innovation and research capacity and transfer into practice;
- (2) Improving and developing support for enterprises;
- (3) Promoting high levels of employment, with the aim of ensuring full employment in the Region.

Pillar 2. Connectivity for all: in search of a balanced territorial development through environmentally friendly mobility patterns, transport systems and communication services and infrastructures.

The Alpine Region is a major European crossroads. However, sustainable transport systems are a major challenge for the Region. A coordinated policy, therefore, able to match the transport needs of the Macro-region, population welfare and the equilibrium of (a particularly fragile) environment is a priority for this Strategy.

Besides transport systems, the notion of *connectivity* also embraces communication infrastructures and services (including tourism). Although citizens and business in the Alps are usually well connected, a higher accessibility to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) could further bridge accessibility gaps remaining in the Region, as well as contribute to a more sustainable model of development.

As a consequence, the main priorities of this Pillar will be the following:

- (1) Better overall transport systems in terms of sustainability and quality;
- (2) Improve sustainable accessibility for all Alpine areas;
- (3) A better connected society in the Region.

Pillar 3. Ensuring sustainability in the Alpine Region: preserving the Alpine heritage and promoting a sustainable use of natural and cultural resources.

One of the main features of the Alpine Region is its outstanding natural and cultural heritage. Natural resources (in particular, clean and abundant water, minerals, a variety of landscapes and great biodiversity), and strong and diverse cultural life are major assets of this Region.

However, use of natural resources (like water or biomass), and exploitation of their potential (such as energy sufficiency or regional capacity for energy storage) need to be carried out in an environmentally friendly way.

At the same time, climate change could particularly affect the Alpine Region in terms of availability of resources and threats to population. Joint regional responses are necessary to establish efficient management systems.

The main priorities of this Pillar would be the following:

- (1) Reinforcing Alpine natural and cultural resources as assets of a high quality living area;
- (2) Building further on the position of the Alpine Region as world-class in terms of energy efficiency and sustainable production of renewable energy;
- (3) Alpine risk management including risk dialogue, to tackle potential threats, such as those of climate change.

4. PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Development and implementation of the Strategy will need an integrated approach, requiring coordination among selected initiatives. Therefore, it will imply:

Coordinated Policy design

Sectoral policies to be implemented in the Alpine Region are often inter-dependent (both trans-boundary and trans-topic). Certain issues concerning economic innovation, transport modes or environment, cannot be addressed satisfactorily at a national level, but need the bigger perspective of the macro-regional level. Issues also affect each other. Therefore, it is important that policies are coordinated in favour of territorial cohesion. How should a new Macro-regional Strategy serve to achieve this?

Better funding opportunities: alignment and coordination of funds

There are currently many funding opportunities for projects in the Alpine Region. These concern different institutional actors – European Commission, countries and regions –, financial institutions and the private sector. In the programming period 2014-2020, further funding opportunities will be available under many EU and similar instruments such as HORIZON 2020, LIFE Programme and others. **What are the key sources to funding to mobilise?**

Better co-operation

The Alpine Region has a long tradition of co-operation, but the effectiveness of co-operation among different instruments could still be improved:

- on the one hand, co-operation between the national and the regional or local level (vertical co-operation) may benefit from a new impetus;
- on the other hand, co-operation between Member States, as well as between Member States and non-EU countries – through existing structures, such as for example the Alpine Convention or the European Transnational Co-operation programme "Alpine Space" –, and co-operation between stakeholders in the same sphere of action (horizontal co-operation), may also take advantage of more intensive work on the ground.

There are other issues. The Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013⁶ indicates that the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region should ensure that:

- There is clearly expressed political will from both the States (EU Member States and non-EU countries) and their involved regions for such an appraisal;
- The involvement of the EU is appropriate and existing EU horizontal policies will be reinforced;
- The appraisal of the added value at European and macro-regional level is evidence-based.

Your views on all these principles are very helpful.

⁶ Council conclusions on added value of macro-regional strategies