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**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

{SWD(2019) 6 final}

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1. Introduction

Since the European Council endorsed the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) in 2009, three further EU macro-regional strategies (MRS) have been developed: the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) in 2011, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) in 2014 and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) in 2016.

On 16 December 2016, the Commission adopted the first report on the implementation of MRS¹ which now involve 19 EU and 8 non-EU countries. These MRS have become an integral part of the EU policy framework; they offer strong potential and contribute in a unique and innovative way to cooperation within the EU and with neighbouring countries.

Subsequently, the Council², the Committee of the Regions³ and the European Parliament⁴ also recognised the importance of the MRS as a unique integrated framework to address common challenges and as a relevant instrument for the optimal use of existing financial resources, especially in the globalisation context.

However, these institutions also went beyond some Commission recommendations⁵ and pointed out the need to improve certain key aspects in the implementation of the MRS by:

- strengthening the political commitment at national level;
- improving governance mechanisms; and
- improving access to funding for MRS priorities and projects.

They made some specific recommendations on the content for the current Report, calling for:

- a stronger focus on processes which may impact policies;
- an analysis of the consistency between EU and national policies and funding schemes;
- a deeper discussion on indicators and results of the MRS' core policies.

The untapped potential and the persisting challenges of the MRS are also confirmed in an independent study⁶ mandated by the Commission, and in some works carried out under the Interact programme⁷.

The draft proposal presented on 2 May 2018 by the Commission on the multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027, followed on 29 May 2018 by a draft legislative package for the

¹ COM(2016) 805 final.

² 8461/17 Council conclusions of 25 April 2017.

³ COTER-VI/029 opinion adopted on 1 December 2017.

⁴ European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2018.

⁵ COM(2013) 468 final, on the added value of macro-regional strategies; COM(2014) 284 final, on the governance of macro-regional strategies; COM(2016) 805 final, on the implementation of macro-regional strategies.

⁶ COWI study: 'Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy' – November 2017:

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/mrs_links_cohesion_policy.pdf

⁷ Interact programme library: <http://www.interact-eu.net/library>

<http://www.interact-eu.net/search/node/macoregional%20strategies>

future cohesion policy⁸, opened a period of negotiation, likely to both influence and clarify the intentions of the countries involved regarding the future of MRS.

Since the Commission's first Report on the implementation of the MRS in 2016, the favourable development of the economic environment in the EU and in the Western Balkans⁹ has created a more positive setting for implementing the MRS.

The purpose of the current Report is two-fold. Firstly, it assesses the implementation of the four MRS in this encouraging economic context which may have helped countries improve their long-term strategic cooperation approach. Secondly, it considers possible development of the MRS in light of the post-2020 draft regulations.

The Report is complemented by a Staff Working Document (SWD) which gives more details on the state of play for each MRS. Both documents are based on contributions from MRS stakeholders, EU institutions, Member States' representatives, and experts.

2. Results

2.1. Cross-cutting issues

Policy making and planning

The MRS are political platforms which bring added value to the cooperation aspect of cohesion policy and provide an opportunity for multi-sectoral, multi-country and multi-level governance. Several initiatives have been taken at macro-regional level, helping to change mind-sets (e.g. EUSALP: Green Infrastructure Conference¹⁰; Forest summit 'Protection.Forest.Climate'¹¹; Mobility Conference in the Alps¹²) and are expected to continue. Macro-regional and sea-basin developments helped to strengthen the territorial approach and European territorial cooperation as a cross-cutting aspect of cohesion policy, and to increase attention to "functional areas".

Participation of non-EU countries in the EUSDR, the EUSAIR and the EUSALP takes place on an equal footing with EU Member States. For instance, as of 1 June 2018, Montenegro is holding the rotating presidency of the EUSAIR.

The participation of Western Balkan countries in the EUSDR and the EUSAIR significantly help to foster their integration in the EU. The request made to the Council by the four EUSAIR EU Member States (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia) to include the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the strategy is a tangible step in this direction.

The EUSDR also helps to promote cooperation between the EU and Moldova and Ukraine, which are now fully integrated into the Danube transnational programme. Participation of Ukraine (the regions along the Danube River) and Moldova in the EUSDR-related joint work has intensified significantly in 2016-2018, with benefits for the implementation of their Association Agreements with the EU.

Although not being members of the EUSBSR, Belarus, Iceland, Norway and Russia also participate in certain macro-regional projects in the Baltic Sea region, e.g. via the Interreg

⁸ Followed, on 14 June 2018, by the draft regulations for future Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) and Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), relevant for non-EU countries participating in the MRS.

⁹ For more details, see European Commission: Summer 2018 Interim Economic Forecast, 12 July 2018 and World Bank: Western Balkans Regular Economic Report (N° 12), Fall 2017.

¹⁰ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/news/first-eusalp-environmental-ministers-conference-alpine-green-infrastructure-2>

¹¹ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/events/forest-summit-protectionforestclimate>

¹² <https://www.alpine-region.eu/events/3rd-eusalp-ag4-mobility-conference>

cross-border and transnational cooperation programmes in the region¹³. With reference to the Interreg Baltic Sea transnational programme, the signing of the financing agreement between the EU and Russia in early 2018 allows now Russian partners to be full partners in the projects, thus increasing cooperation opportunities.

Administrative capacity

The Interact programme continues to promote the macro-regional concept, by means of building or consolidating networks between key implementers¹⁴ of the strategies (e.g. in governance, transport, environment or climate change areas), and by developing cooperation methods and tools to embed MRS into European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds¹⁵. Moreover, the Commission, together with the Interact programme, has set up a platform to facilitate the exchange of experiences on implementing the MRS and embedding them into the ESI Funds.

The EUSAIR Facility Point is supporting the strategy's key implementers in carrying out their tasks.

The new Danube Strategy Point (DSP) has been up and running again since early September 2018, after a period of interruption.

Governance

Some new political initiatives have been taken since the 2016 Report.

Bulgaria, which has been chairing the EUSDR throughout 2018, has brought a proactive approach to cooperation within the strategy by assigning responsibilities for the EUSDR and the ESI Funds to the same ministry.

The EUSAIR annual forum regularly hosts a meeting of both foreign affairs ministers and ministers responsible for EU funds from the eight participating countries, where a declaration is adopted.

In the EUSDR, civil society has been actively involved in meetings of certain steering groups of Priority Areas as well as in events and annual fora.

In cooperation with the 'LOS_DAMA!'¹⁶ project funded by the Alpine Space programme, the mayors of Alpine cities (Munich, Vienna, Torino, Trento, and Grenoble) launched, on the margins of the first EUSALP Conference of Environmental Ministers in October 2017, a network on deploying green infrastructure in Alpine urban areas. This network is the first specific step taken in implementing the EUSALP at municipality level.

Monitoring

New monitoring tools are being developed with the support of the ESPON programme¹⁷.

They consist of territorial monitoring systems, tailor-made for each of the four macro-regions, which monitor the situation on regional development using predefined territorial indicators. The monitoring system is meant to capture the achievements of policy objectives. It will provide an understanding of territorial structures and trends within the macro-region.

¹³ E.g. Interreg Baltic Sea Region transnational programme: <https://www.interreg-baltic.eu/home.html>

¹⁴ National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators, Pillar Coordinators, Objective Coordinators, Action Group Leaders, Steering/Action Group Members,....

¹⁵ Interact library: <http://www.interact-eu.net/search/node/macoregional%20strategies>

¹⁶ http://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/los_dama/en/home

¹⁷ <https://www.espon.eu/>

Access to funding

Some good practices from current ESI Funds programmes include: targeted calls, bonus points to projects of macro-regional relevance, direct support to strategy projects, and the participation of MRS representatives in programme monitoring committees.

In February 2017, the Commission organised a study-visit for Romanian managing authorities of ESI Funds operational programmes, who learned about the practical implications of the EUSDR and about developing ideas on mobilising EU funds. This initiative could be extended to other participating countries.

Based on the information collected in the 2017 annual implementation reports of ESI Funds programmes, seven MRS targeted calls for proposals were launched by programmes: two in the Baltic region, three in the Danube region and two in the Adriatic-Ionian region. The number of programmes which invested EU funds in the MRS amount to 29 in the Baltic region, 14 in the Danube region, 4 in the Adriatic-Ionian region, 4 in the Alps region. This shows that the inclusion rate of MRS priorities in EU programmes is directly related to the age of the strategies.

On measuring the amounts of ESI Funds support mobilised for implementing macro-regional projects, these figures are presented in detail by strategy in the accompanying SWD. However, the figures provided by programme authorities are not always fully comparable and should be used with caution. For example, some authorities believe that the full budget of a programme supports a certain strategy's objective since it concerns the same policy area (e.g. environment), even though the projects funded do not necessarily have a macro-regional impact. Therefore, in the SWD it has been decided to only take into account amounts that support individual projects and not the whole budget of a programme (except for transnational programmes corresponding to a certain MRS).

Communication

All MRS have strengthened their communication activities since 2016.

Slovenian authorities, together with the Commission, used the 'macro-regional week'¹⁸, organised every year in their country, to create a single forum across all MRS on media and communication, focusing in particular on common content, the participative process and innovative tools.

The development of communication strategies for the EUSAIR and the EUSALP is ongoing. Also the revamping of the EUSDR's communication strategy continues. In the EUSBSR, communication is producing concrete outcomes like the 'Let's Communicate'¹⁹ project.

Further efforts are needed to improve internal and external communication. These should focus on defining common messages in the national language(s), thus strengthening communication at national and regional levels. Communication also needs to be more focused and targeted, as well as constant.

Cooperation across strategies and between stakeholders

Cooperation with other MRS may result in added value and should be explored further. Some cooperation, especially between EUSBSR and EUSDR, has already taken place, while EUSAIR partners are considering collaboration with other MRS to build on their experience

¹⁸ <https://www.adriatic-ionic.eu/2018/06/11/save-the-date-mediterranean-coast-and-macro-regional-strategies-week-sep-2018-slovenia/>

¹⁹ http://www.centrumbalticum.org/en/projects/lets_communicate!

(e.g. with the EUSDR on mobility and transport organisations or with the EUSALP on green corridors and green infrastructure projects).

Within the EUSALP, the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund²⁰ (ARPAF) has boosted the implementation of the strategy and cooperation across the board. A Board of Action Groups Leaders has been established to ensure that knowledge and experiences are permanently exchanged among the groups.

2.2. Thematic priorities

This section presents concrete achievements by the four MRS on selected thematic priorities. More details are to be found in the SWD.

The EUSBSR has continued to consolidate EU law and has also helped to shape policy and development (e.g. in energy, navigation, environment and climate change).

Under Hungarian Presidency in 2017, the EUSDR annual forum brought together stakeholders from the Danube region in the fields of energy, transport and environment. A joint statement was issued by the 14 participating countries²¹. The 2018 EUSDR forum in Sofia focused on economic growth by tourism and culture.

In the EUSAIR, major opportunities for cooperation have been identified (for blue growth, transport and energy network, the environment and tourism) which can boost growth and job creation.

For the EUSALP, subgroups working on specific topics (e.g. wood, health tourism, water management) have been set up.

Environment and climate change

Preserving environmental resources is a common public good and a priority that all four MRS share. In this respect, the MRS are important tools to address various matters (e.g. pollution, flood protection, climate change and biodiversity) and support the implementation of relevant EU legislation.

While the Commission adopted the first ever Europe-wide strategy on plastics in January 2018, significant work in tackling plastic marine litter has already been carried out in the EUSBSR (e.g. the BLASTIC project²²). The conclusions from the HELCOM²³ ministerial meeting in March 2018 acknowledge that projects of common interest under the EUSBSR have helped to implement the Baltic Sea action plan.

The ministerial ‘Ioannina Declaration’ of May 2017 emphasises how important the Blue Economy is for sustainable development in the Adriatic and Ionian region, including for combating marine pollution.

A joint declaration of Alpine states and regions on Alpine green infrastructure (October 2017)²⁴ stated that a number of specific measures would be carried out to make the Alpine region a model for green infrastructure.

²⁰ Preparatory action decided by the Commission at the initiative of the European Parliament.

²¹ http://www.danube-forum-budapest.eu/system/danube-forum-budapest/files/Declaration_of_the_6th_EUSDR_Annual_Forum.pdf?1508355644

²² <https://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/news-room/highlights-blog/item/30-for-a-litter-free-baltic-sea>

²³ HELCOM: ‘Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission - Helsinki Commission’, <http://www.helcom.fi/about-us>

²⁴ https://www.alpine-region.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/inline/956/eusalp_joint_declaration_green_infrastructure_final_en.pdf

The joint statement of the ministers in charge of the EUSDR, adopted in October 2017, stresses the importance of clean and connected mobility and environmentally friendly energy solutions in further developing the Danube region. The first integrated Tisza River basin management plan is being prepared through the JOINTISZA project²⁵, and a civil protection mechanism was launched to tackle pollution in the Tisza River from the Solotvyno salt mine in Ukraine.

Research/innovation and economic development

Improving economic prosperity of the macro-regions is also a core objective of all four MRS.

In the EUSBSR, a network of European Regional Development Funds Managing Authorities was established to develop proposals on transnational collaboration to help regions implement smart specialisation strategies focusing on clean technologies. Two pilot projects will be pursued under the ‘Cleaner Growth’²⁶ initiative: ‘Jointly Entering New Markets’ and ‘Commercialising Forest-Based Protein — Verification and Improvement of Protein Quality’.

The ‘Baltic Sea Pharma platform’²⁷ also provides a regional cooperation platform to reduce pharmaceutical residues in the Baltic Sea. Based on a cluster of transnational projects (e.g. advanced waste water treatment, waste management, and procurement criteria), the platform will help develop regional and European policy on the issue of pharmaceuticals in the environment.

In the Danube region, a centre to implement dual vocational training²⁸ in the construction industry, based on public/private partnership, was set up in Chisinau (Moldova). The Smart Specialisation Strategy Platform²⁹ supports the development of innovation strategies in a pilot project covering Serbia, Montenegro, Moldova and Ukraine.

For the EUSAIR, the EU-China tourism year and the European year of cultural heritage 2018 are helping to develop sustainable tourism. The Interreg programme for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (ADRION) supports the ‘ADRION 5 senses’³⁰ project which aims to build a common brand name for the region, and promote it in world markets.

In the EUSALP, projects like ‘CirculAlps’³¹ (promoting innovation, sustainability and the circular economy in forestry value chains across the Alpine region) or AlpLinkBioECO³² (Linking bio-based industry value chains across the Alpine region) have been launched.

Connectivity

Interesting connectivity activities have been implemented under all MRS.

In the EUSBSR, the ‘Baltic Link’ project helps to implement the TEN-T Motorways of the Sea, and was supported by the TEN-T programme and the Polish Cohesion Fund. It addresses a missing link in freight transport between Sweden to Poland and beyond.

In the EUSDR, within the FAIRway³³ project, new surveying vessels have been put into operation. In particular, dredging activities have begun on the section of the Danube River

²⁵ <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/jointisza>

²⁶ https://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/attachments/article/590847/Niclas%20Forsling_ERDF%20MA-Network%20progress%20and%20current%20status%2013th%20of%20June%20at%20Annual%20Forum.pptx.pdf

²⁷ <https://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/news-room/highlights-blog/item/40-baltic-pharma-platform>

²⁸ Combining vocational education, provided by schools, with practical training provided by companies.

²⁹ <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/s3-platform>

³⁰ <https://keep.eu/keep/project-ext/44652/ADRION+5+SENSES?ss=a785c5b10443932ecb3b4eef3ac00d06&espon=>

³¹ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/projects/circulalps>

³² <http://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/alplinkbioeco/en/home>

that form the border between Bulgaria and Romania. For the first time an overview of short-term strategic projects on land transport in the Danube region was carried out, with the support of the European Investment Bank.

Efficient and sustainable transport and energy networks are a precondition for the economic and social development of the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. In the EUSAIR, an initial list of projects concerning transport and energy networks with distinct macro-regional added value has been drawn up.

In the EUSALP, a project on logistic strategies to boost the modal shift of freight transport from road to rail by optimising logistic processes (Alpine Spider) has been developed.

3. Challenges

Administrative capacity

The COWI study³⁴ highlights the persistence of some challenges and lists the barriers to successfully implementing the MRS which have a negative impact on cooperation:

- institutional and staff fluctuations;
- resource limitations;
- disparities in economic, institutional and administrative capacity;
- weak implementation chains between decision makers and key implementers;
- insufficient representation and commitment from all participating countries; and
- lack of common reference frameworks.

However, the study also identifies certain drivers that can help to implement the MRS:

- pre-existing cooperation structures;
- existence of leaders;
- ubiquity of thematic issues across countries;
- implementation of the EU law;
- requirement for concrete transnational measures, etc.

Furthermore, the study presents an MRS development model:

- phase I (set-up of a MRS governance system, individual capacity building of MRS key implementers);
- phase II (MRS is understood by external stakeholders and starts to operate, institutional capacity built); and
- phase III (maturity of the strategy which delivers tangible measures and results).

These three phases can provide a framework for developing a monitoring system which will help maintain political support.

Governance

An effective governance system requires a balance between three equally important levels: ministers, national coordinators, and thematic coordinators.

In order to raise their political profile, the MRS would benefit from political visibility provided by ministerial meetings and a ministerial declaration back-to-back with the annual fora, as is the case with the EUSAIR.

³³ <http://www.fairwaydanube.eu/eusdr/>

³⁴ See footnote 6.

The possibility of hosting ministerial meetings at the EUSBSR annual fora was discussed at the annual forum in Tallinn in June 2018.

The main challenge for the EUSDR is the decrease of political momentum at national level, which has resulted in a low level of participation in the steering groups of some priority areas. As the strategy is a long-term process, it is vital that capacity and resources be continually provided to implement the strategy and strengthen national coordination mechanisms. Moreover, it has been widely recognised that the absence, between the summer of 2017 and the autumn of 2018, of a common body fully dedicated to support the EUSDR governance (the Danube Strategy Point) hampered the smooth development and implementation of the strategy. The new Strategy Point, jointly hosted by Austria and Romania, is now up and running.

In the EUSAIR, governance aspects still dominate discussions at meetings of its Governing Board. The gap between political commitment, as expressed in ministerial declarations, and actual follow-up at both administrative and implementation level, has still not been bridged. Ownership of the strategy by the participating countries needs to be considerably strengthened.

Even though the EUSALP is gaining more and more traction, it remains a challenge to motivate members of action groups (AGs) and provide them with the necessary decision making capacity and technical competence. AGs keep calling on states and regions to make sure they are suitably represented in the AGs meetings, and they provide for better coordination within the Executive Board so as to ensure effective strategic direction of measures and adequate political support.

The concept of multi-stakeholder governance is largely supported in all MRS. However, greater participation on the part of civil society could strengthen the bottom-up dimension of the strategies. The large participation of the private sector in the EUSAIR fora (e.g. business-to-business sessions) has been much appreciated and could be replicated in other strategies if appropriate.

Policy programming

In the two oldest MRS, the revision of the action plans launched in 2018 coincides favourably with the programming exercise of the EU funds 2021-2027. This opportunity must be seized and coordinated efforts must be made to maximise the added value of these processes, which include giving the MRS greater strategic focus.

In the EUSBSR, the high number of priorities is a concern. Partners should use the revision of the action plan as an opportunity to check whether all priorities still have the macro-regional relevance to justify their inclusion in the strategy.

In the EUSDR, the lack of political ownership needs to be addressed in the revision of the action plan in 2018-2019. The Commissioner responsible for Regional Policy reminded EUSDR coordinators about this in a joint meeting in June 2018. Some priority areas (e.g. inland transport or tourism) have yet to produce concrete projects. The allocation of priority areas should take into account that certain countries without any coordination role wish to acquire a priority area. The issue of administrative capacity should also be tackled. It requires an appropriate response at national and regional level, mainly in the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) countries.

Partner states in the EUSAIR differ in their views on cooperation priorities. So far, they tended to focus on projects with a narrow, national scope, instead of viewing the MRS as a

framework for policy change that generates specific processes, interregional networks, and collaborative platforms. A different approach would help these states to build and plan measures that are better balanced from a geographical point of view, thus having a stronger macro-regional added value. In more general terms, there is a need to reconcile EUSAIR priorities with national, regional, and sectoral policies as well as with strategy documents and processes (e.g. Berlin process, Western Balkan strategy, etc.).

There is currently no need to revise the EUSALP action plan, although in some AGs initial actions outside the action plan have been taken. Instead, better implementation, communication, transfer of results and skills development within the AGs based on the existing action plan are needed and will be further developed in the upcoming months.

Funding

Bridging the gap between the MRS and funding opportunities is likely to remain a challenge for a while.

The Interreg programmes — despite their limited amounts of funding — have played a significant role in supporting the strategies' implementation. However, the bulk of the EU funds, as well as national and other sources of funding, are not easily available to support the strategies' projects. This may explain why some countries lack political commitment and why participants lack capacity.

The dialogue between authorities of mainstream EU programmes and MRS key implementers should be further promoted. Ministries in charge of coordination of EU funds and MRS in participating countries have a key role to play in this.

The preparation phase of the post-2020 programming offers a unique opportunity to plan and organise the consistent use of EU funds to support MRS objectives. Coordination between authorities of EU funding programmes and MRS key implementers should take place both within and among countries involved in a MRS. Countries' decisions and concrete actions in this respect would demonstrate their interest and political commitment towards the MRS.

Communication

The EUSAIR's visibility still suffers due to a lack of communication, which could be partly overcome if the planned stakeholder platform was to be set up. This would also improve the participation and awareness of subnational stakeholders who currently have a limited role in the macro-regional processes.

EUSALP communication also remains an issue. Even though the communication tools have been developed, there is a need to improve the technical setting and, in particular, content related communication work. A focused communication strategy based on agreed policy messages is urgently needed.

4. The way forward

In its proposals on EU cohesion policy regulations for the post-2020 period, the Commission emphasises how important cooperation is as a cross-cutting feature of cohesion policy, and invites Member States and regions to better embed this feature into the next phase of national and regional policy planning and programming. This gives a strong and positive signal to those already involved in the MRS, and invites them to think ahead how and for which core priorities the programmes and MRS could be mutually supportive.

This would address the issue highlighted by the COWI study which states that '*coordination with ESIF and EU programmes places high demands on all parties involved; and to date this*

coordination has not been satisfactorily achieved. There is thus significant scope for improvement in the post-2020 period’.

In this context, and considering the potential of the MRS, the Commission urges the countries concerned to immediately launch the following actions:

1. Thematic coordinators of the strategies should assess the situation of each policy area against the ‘three-phase development’ model, presented in the COWI study, to identify which drivers could be better used, and which barriers must be overcome, if need be. They could then make recommendations to their national coordinators on resolving the problems identified, where appropriate.
2. Key implementers in each MRS should continue to improve their governance mechanisms, with the commitment and support of line ministers. They should look for synergies and complementarities with organisations that already operate in the macro-region and they should enable regional and local stakeholders to contribute to the MRS (e.g. via a stakeholder platform). They should also continue to try to better monitor the progress of the different thematic areas, and strengthen the capacity of the actors involved in implementing the MRS.
3. Concerning the EUSBSR and the EUSDR, thematic and national coordinators should use the revision of their respective action plans as an opportunity to select the most relevant core priorities that have the highest EU added value, and that are worth mobilising EU and national funds.
4. In order to benefit from the new legislative framework which will strengthen links between the mainstream programmes, cooperation and the MRS, the following activities should be envisaged in the programming process:
 - *At the level of each MRS:* EU programme authorities in the participating countries should closely coordinate among themselves from the early stages of the 2021-2027 programming exercise. Specifically, for each MRS, national authorities responsible for EU funds should jointly agree — in cooperation with MRS national coordinators — on main macro-regional priorities, measures, projects and governance mechanisms to be included in their respective partnership agreements (EU Member States) and multi-annual programming (framework) documents (non-EU countries)³⁵.
 - *At the level of each country participating in a MRS:* the priorities, measures and projects agreed and included in the partnership agreements or multi-annual programming (framework) documents should then be developed in the relevant EU programmes³⁶ in a coordinated manner with the other participating countries. To achieve this, MRS thematic and national coordinators should seek to build a closer relationship and cooperation with the managing authorities of the relevant EU programmes (ESI Funds and/or IPA, as appropriate) at national, regional and cooperation level. They should initiate a dialogue, jointly identify future relevant areas of cooperation and ensure that key implementers of the MRS participate in and contribute to the preparation of the 2021-2027 programmes.

³⁵ The proposal for such early coordination among EU programme authorities within a MRS was firstly put forward by the EUSAIR ministers in their ‘Catania Declaration’ adopted at the ministerial meeting held on 24 May 2018: https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/catania_declaration_approved.pdf

³⁶ For non-EU countries, ‘programmes’ should also be understood as ‘action plan’.

5. During the implementation phase, the priorities, measures and projects agreed by EU programme authorities as being relevant to the MRS, should be executed in a coordinated and synchronised way across the MRS countries. To achieve this, specific funds may need to be allocated upfront by the EU programmes in question. Over and above these specific measures and projects, programmes could also develop and apply specific project selection criteria to encourage the creation of projects that support the priorities of an MRS (e.g. budget earmarking, specific calls for macro-regional projects, allocation of extra points to projects contributing to macro-regional targets and actions, etc.).

5. Conclusions

Partners involved in the MRS are now facing a moment of truth: the preparation for programmes over the 2021-2027 period provides a unique opportunity for them to demonstrate and strengthen their commitment to the priorities of the MRS, notably by embedding them in the EU programmes' priorities, thanks to the facilities provided under the new proposed regulations.

The MRS have gained political visibility and generated very high expectations. However, without joint political impetus at national and regional level, the commitment of players on the ground, while very valuable, will not be enough to ensure the MRS survive.

The will to cooperate and to jointly work towards common goals, and carry out activities together within the macro-regions, must come from the participating countries and partners, who are invited to make the MRS their common and central political agenda.

The current period of discussions and negotiations about the future financial and legislative framework and its supporting programmes provides a unique opportunity, that cannot be missed, for participating countries and partners to confirm their shared commitment to the jointly agreed priorities of the MRS. This would optimise the added value of the MRS and enable them to reach their full potential.

Appendix: Map of macro-regional strategies

