

## The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region

### SUMMARY

Launched in January 2016, the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) is the latest macro-regional strategy to be set up by the European Union. One of the biggest challenges facing the seven countries and 48 regions involved in the EUSALP is that of securing sustainable development in the macro-region, especially in its resource-rich, but highly vulnerable core mountain area. The Alps are home to a vast array of animal and plant species and constitute a major water reservoir for Europe. At the same time, they are one of Europe's prime tourist destinations, and are crossed by busy European transport routes. Both tourism and transport play a key role in climate change, which is putting Alpine natural resources at risk. Global warming, clearly evidenced by receding glaciers, is threatening not only water supply, but also the winter tourism industry, a vital source of income for many Alpine regions.

Although there is a marked gap between urban and rural mountainous areas, the macro-region shows a high level of socio-economic cohesion. Disparities (in terms of funding and capacity) between participating countries, a feature that has caused challenges for other EU macro-regional strategies, are unlikely to be an issue in the Alpine region. Furthermore, the strong bottom-up approach behind the development of the EUSALP should ensure local ownership of the strategy. These are key elements for success.

An EP report on the EU Alpine Strategy, adopted in June 2016 by the Committee on Regional Development, is expected to be discussed at the September plenary session.



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## Background

The European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region ([EUSALP](#)) is the fourth EU macro-regional strategy, following those for the Baltic Sea region ([EUSBSR](#), adopted in 2009), the Danube region ([EUSDR](#), 2011) and the Adriatic and Ionian region ([EUSAIR](#), 2014).<sup>1</sup>

The EUSALP is unique in that the initial impetus for a macro-regional strategy came from the regions themselves. This first trigger came as early as 2010, with the [Mittenwald declaration](#). Fuelled by the work and input<sup>2</sup> of various stakeholders, the elaboration process then ran its course, following the same pattern as previous strategies: request from the European Council to the Commission (19-20 December 2013); preparation, by the Commission, of a [communication](#) and an [Action Plan](#); adoption of both documents by the College of Commissioners (28 July 2015); endorsement of the strategy by the Council of the EU (27 November 2015); and official launch event (25-26 January 2016).

## The macro-regional concept

Responding to the objective of achieving [territorial cohesion](#), macro-regional strategies provide an [integrated framework](#) for cooperation, across EU and non-EU borders, in a specific area known as a 'macro-region'. This space, usually defined on the basis of a significant geographical or physical feature (a river basin, a maritime area or, in the EUSALP's case, a mountain range), includes territory from a number of different countries or regions faced with common cross-border challenges and opportunities for which joint action is necessary. The macro-regional concept thus has both a **territorial** and a **functional** dimension.

The implementation of macro-regional strategies is governed by what is referred to as the 'three 'no's rule', meaning that no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures and no new EU legislation can be mobilised; the idea being rather to better align existing funds and policies at EU, national and regional levels, and to rely upon existing structures, in short, to do more with what is available. The concept includes five key [principles](#), namely: *integration* within existing policy frameworks, programmes and funding instruments; *coordination* between sectorial policies, actors or tiers of government; *cooperation*, between both countries and sectors; *multi-level governance* (involvement of policy-makers at different levels) and *partnership* between EU and non-EU countries.

## The challenges facing the Alpine region

### The key issue of sustainability

The [Alps](#) represent one of the largest continuous natural areas in Europe and are home to some 30 000 animal species and 13 000 plant species, many of which are today endangered. With their rivers, lakes and glaciers providing a natural storage mechanism,<sup>3</sup> the Alps act as Europe's 'water tower'. Every year, Alpine rivers convey on average 216 km<sup>3</sup> of water to the nearby regions. In some seasons, the Alps provide up to [90%](#) of water to lowland Europe, in particular to arid areas during the summer.

These rich natural resources are under threat, as a result of human activity and climate change. In the last hundred years, temperatures in the Alps have increased by nearly 2°C, almost twice as much as the global average, and this trend is set to continue. Alpine glaciers provide the most tangible evidence of global warming. They have lost about [half](#) of their ice volume since 1850, and loss rates have accelerated strongly in the last decades. Climate scenarios indicate that in less than [100 years](#), the eastern Alps, and

large parts of the western Alps, will be completely free of ice. Besides receding glaciers, implications of climate change include melting permafrost (increasing the risk of rock falls and landslides) and changing precipitation patterns, with less snow. Winter rain is expected to be increasingly frequent in regions currently receiving snowfall, leading to a shorter snow cover period. All this will have significant consequences, not only for the water cycle and resources (and subsequently, for households, agriculture and hydropower production), but also obviously for the winter tourism sector (see box).

#### Winter sports and climate change

For many Alpine mountain areas, winter sports represent a vital source of income. With climate change, the minimum snow presence elevation (or [snow reliability line](#)) will increase (by about 150 metres for every 1°C increase in temperature, as estimated by the European Environment Agency), which implies a much more marked reduction in snow cover at low altitude. Nearly [half](#) of all ski resorts in Switzerland, and even more in Austria, Germany and the Pyrenees, might have trouble attracting winter-sports enthusiasts in the future.

Artificial snowmaking is one of the strategies developed to compensate for the lack of natural snow and help regions maintain their winter tourism industry. This is, however, a resource-consuming practice. The International Commission for the Protection of the Alps ([CIPRA](#)), which has [counted](#) 18 000 ski slopes in the Alps, estimated that approximately 1 million litres of water are needed to cover a 1-hectare slope area with manmade snow. To transform water into snow, the snow cannons use as much energy in a year as a city with 130 000 inhabitants, and as much water as a city with 1 million inhabitants. According to the Alpine Convention, nearly [three quarters](#) of Alpine ski slopes are already covered with artificial snow.

Tourism and transport play a crucial role in relation to climate change. The Alps are one of Europe's prime tourist destinations, attracting about 120 million guests every year. According to CIPRA, cars are used for [84%](#) of holiday travel to the Alps, while motorised road traffic accounts for a high proportion of transport-related greenhouse gas emissions. Transport is responsible for nearly [30%](#) of all greenhouse gases in the Alps. Alpine valleys and passes are highly affected by transport-related noise and air pollution and the impacts of engineered infrastructure on the landscape, with considerable consequences both for flora and fauna, and for people's quality of life.

At the same time, the region constitutes a key transport node. It is crossed by traffic flows linking the south to the north, and the east to the west of Europe. Five of the [nine](#) European [transport corridors](#) extend through the Alps, including the [Rhine-Alpine Core Network Corridor](#) – one of the busiest freight routes in Europe.

From all of the above, it is clear that sustainable development takes on its full meaning and is a major policy challenge in the Alpine region, with far-reaching implications for Europe as a whole.

#### Contrasting realities and territorial imbalances

Mountains represent a challenge to homogenous development, and there is a strong contrast between the various territories in the Region, in particular between cities and rural mountainous areas. Remote mountain areas still experience difficulties in accessing social services and economic services of general interest; face less favourable labour market conditions; often lag behind as regards e-connection possibilities; and suffer from ageing and depopulation. Lowland metropolitan areas, meanwhile have constantly growing populations, have high levels of information and communication technology provision, and are extremely well-served in terms of infrastructure and

connections. The contrast is also sharp in the fields of innovation, competitiveness and entrepreneurship support,<sup>4</sup> for instance.

## The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region

### Territorial coverage

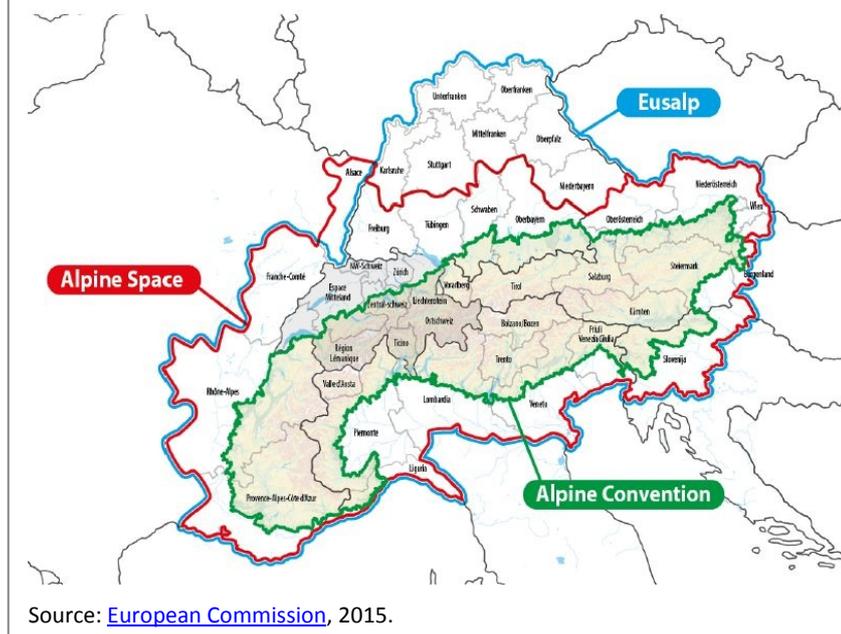
The strategy involves:

- five EU Member States: Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia;
- two non-EU states: Switzerland and Liechtenstein;
- and covers a total of 48 regions.

The territory covered is home to around 80 million people.

The EUSALP is being established in a region where cooperation schemes with different spatial perimeters are already in place (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – The EUSALP, the Alpine Space programme and the Alpine Convention**



Concluded between the eight countries of the Alpine arc (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia and Switzerland), as well as the EU, the [Alpine Convention](#) aims to secure the protection and sustainable development of the Alps. It came into force in 1995, and is binding under international law. This marks the first time a transnational mountain area has been considered a common territory facing common challenges. The convention acts through a fixed [structure](#), including decision-making and executive bodies, a permanent secretariat and several working groups, one of them dedicated to the EU Alpine Strategy.

The [Alpine Space](#) transnational cooperation programme, which provides funding for projects under the European Territorial Cooperation ([ETC](#)) objective, has a much broader territorial reach than the Alpine Convention. It covers an area almost twice as large and five times as populous, i.e. 390 000 km<sup>2</sup> and 70 million inhabitants, and includes major metropolitan areas such as Milan, Lyon, Munich and Vienna. Launched for the first time from 2000 to 2006, the programme is endowed, for the current period, with a budget of [€139 million](#), of which some €116 million comes from the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)). It is expected to contribute directly to the implementation of the EUSALP through the alignment of its thematic priority axes with the strategy's priorities, and its support for the strategy's governance structures and mechanisms.

The territorial scope of the EUSALP was much debated, the issue<sup>5</sup> being whether to align it with the perimeter of the Alpine Convention, or to go beyond that and include regions with major cities located outside the 'core Alpine area'. The latter option, corresponding to the approach taken in the Alpine Space programme, was upheld. Indeed, the EUSALP's philosophy is to [ensure](#) mutually beneficial interaction between the mountain regions at its core and the surrounding lowlands and urban areas, taking into account, in a flexible way, the functional relationships existing between them.

### Thematic scope

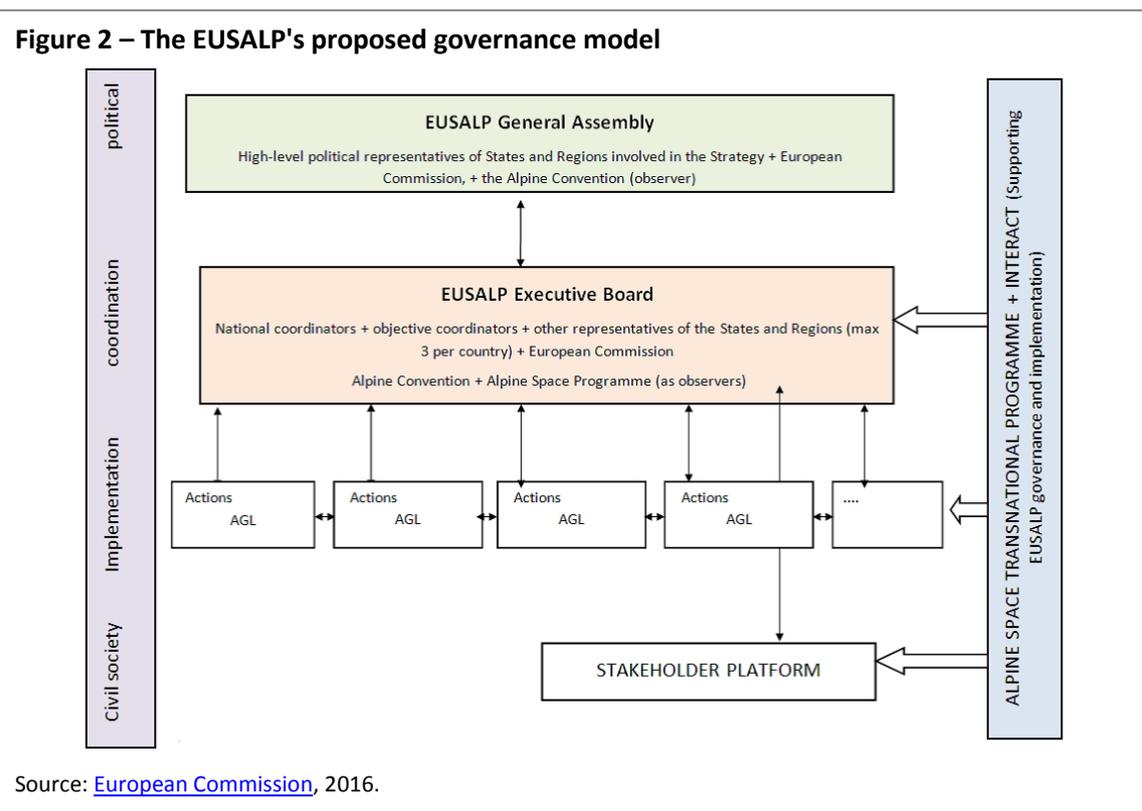
The strategy covers three thematic policy areas (or pillars), i.e. (1) economic growth and innovation; (2) mobility and connectivity; and (3) environment and energy; as well as a cross-cutting policy area addressing governance and institutional capacity. They translate into thematic objectives, implemented by various actions (see Table 1), which will themselves be supported by projects.

Policy areas and corresponding objectives	Actions
<p><u>1st thematic policy area</u>: Economic growth and innovation</p> <p><u>Objective</u>: Fair access to job opportunities, building on the high competitiveness of the region</p>	<p>(1) Developing an effective research and innovation ecosystem</p> <p>(2) Increasing the economic potential of strategic sectors</p> <p>(3) Improving the adequacy of the labour market, education and training in these strategic sectors</p>
<p><u>2nd thematic policy area</u>: Mobility and connectivity</p> <p><u>Objective</u>: Sustainable internal and external accessibility to all</p>	<p>(4) Promoting inter-modality and interoperability in passenger and freight transport</p> <p>(5) Connecting people electronically and promoting accessibility to public services</p>
<p><u>3rd thematic policy area</u>: Environment and energy</p> <p><u>Objective</u>: A more inclusive environmental framework for all and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future</p>	<p>(6) Preserving and valorising natural resources, including water and cultural resources</p> <p>(7) Developing ecological connectivity throughout the EUSALP region</p> <p>(8) Improving risk management and climate change management, including major natural risks prevention</p> <p>(9) Making the territory a model region for energy efficiency and renewable energy</p>
<p><u>Cross-cutting policy area</u>: Governance</p> <p><u>Objective</u>: A sound macro-regional governance model for the region (to improve cooperation and coordination of action)</p>	

Source: [European Commission](#), 2015.

### Governance

A General Assembly, a standing Executive Board and implementing bodies form the basis of the planned governance structure (Figure 2). The **General Assembly**, which will be responsible for laying down general political guidelines, will include high-level political representatives of the participating states and regions; the European Commission; and the Alpine Convention as observer. The **Executive Board** will be made up of representatives of states and regions, and will include representatives from the European Commission, and the Alpine Convention and the Alpine Space transnational programme as observers. The board will oversee the implementation of the EUSALP and provide strategic guidance as regards management and implementation of the strategy and its Action Plan. The **Action Groups** and Action Group leaders (AGL) will form the core of the implementation level. As AGLs are meant to be the drivers of day-to-day implementation, their capacities, resources and engagement will be key factors in the success of the Alpine strategy. The European Commission, for its part, will act as an independent facilitator and participate in the overall coordination of the strategy.



## Funding

In line with the 'three 'no's rule', the EUSALP does not come with extra EU financing and will have to mobilise existing EU and national funding instruments of relevance to the thematic objectives and actions of the strategy.

Significant financial resources are available through the relevant country-specific, cross-border and transnational programmes under the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds. The regulatory framework for the 2014-2020 period (in particular Articles 15(2), 27 and 96 of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) governing the five ESI Funds) provides for more systematic integration of macro-regional strategies in programming. The mainstreaming of the EUSALP into the relevant 2014-2020 [operational programmes](#) (the plans detailing how money from the ESI Funds will be spent) has already [taken place](#).

As highlighted in the previous section, the strategy will benefit from the ERDF co-financed Alpine Space programme, whose priority axis 4 ('Well-Governed Alpine Space') is designed specifically to support EUSALP governance.

Other EU Funds and programmes, such as [Horizon 2020](#), the [COSME programme](#), the [Connecting Europe Facility](#), or the [LIFE programme](#) can be used, as well as the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). Budgetary resources at national and regional level will also come into play, in particular in the non EU countries that are not entitled to EU funding. The blending of grants and loans from international financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank is also encouraged.

## The European Parliament perspective

A report on the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (procedure file: [2015/2324\(INI\)](#)), adopted in June 2016 by the Committee on Regional Development (rapporteur: Mercedes Bresso, S&D, Italy) is due to be voted at the September plenary session. The

text welcomes the strategy, while recalling the importance of the Alpine Convention and the need to respect the agreements reached in that framework. As regards **governance**, it notably takes the view that local and regional authorities should play a leading role in decision-making procedures within the managing and implementing bodies of the strategy. In the area of **economic growth and innovation**, the text suggests, for instance, the creation of an investment platform for the Alpine region, enabling mobilisation of public and private funding. It also advocates the diversification of economic activities, in particular that of tourism supply. In the fields of **mobility and connectivity**, the report calls for a holistic approach to the future design and implementation of Alpine transport and environment policy, stressing the need to prioritise modal transfers in order to promote a shift from road to rail, particularly for freight. It also requests that better transport and digital connections be facilitated at local and regional level, and insists on the importance of public investment to ensure digital connectivity in mountain areas. Finally, regarding **environment and energy**, the report calls for the further diversification of energy supply sources and the development of the renewable sources available, as well as for new measures to preserve biodiversity and combat air pollution. It proposes the adoption of a wide-ranging transnational plan to tackle the melting of the glaciers and respond to climate change throughout the Alps. The Commission is invited to submit a report on the EUSALP's implementation to the EP and Council, every two years, to assess, notably, its added value in reducing disparities and securing sustainable development in the Alpine region.

In its recent [resolution](#) on EU mountainous regions, the EP welcomed the idea of including in the EUSALP non-mountainous regions strongly linked with the Alpine core mountain area, as a good example of an integrated approach to territorial development.

## Outlook

The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region is still at too early a stage of implementation to allow any assessment. However, as the latest macro-regional strategy launched by the EU, it has a significant body of experience to draw upon. Some of the countries participating in the EUSALP (Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Italy) are indeed already involved in other macro-regional strategies.

The added value of the macro-regional approach was evaluated in 2013, when the Commission presented a [report](#) drawing lessons from the implementation of the Baltic and Danube strategies. While stressing the positive impact achieved in terms of projects and more integrated policy-making, it identified some significant challenges, including political commitment and ownership; funding (in particular, insufficient resources in non-EU countries); and organisation and governance (complexity of structures, difficulties at administration level owing to a lack of human resources or poor knowledge).

Some of the EUSALP's features suggest that the strategy could avoid these pitfalls. The Alpine region has a dense institutional fabric and a long tradition of cooperation, with the Alpine Convention, and other longstanding initiatives such as the [Arge Alp](#), operating in the area. Although there is a marked gap between urban and rural mountainous areas, the macro-region shows<sup>6</sup> strong socio-economic cohesion. The two non-EU countries, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, have high levels of institutional and administrative capacity, enabling them to cooperate with the EU Member States at the same level. Unlike the non-EU countries belonging to the Danube and Adriatic-Ionian strategies, they do not suffer from a lack of EU-funded regional development programmes. Indeed, all the countries involved in the EUSALP are involved in the Alpine

Space programme, and Swiss territories are covered by a number of cross-border cooperation programmes such as [Alpenrhein – Bodensee – Hochrhein](#) (which includes Liechtenstein), [France-Switzerland](#), [Rhin supérieur – Oberrhein](#) and [Italy-Switzerland](#).

One lesson learned<sup>7</sup> from early difficulties with the implementation of the strategies for the Baltic Sea and Danube regions is that the involvement, from the outset, of those authorities responsible for implementation is of the utmost importance to ensure ownership. In this regard, the strong bottom-up approach at the origin of the EUSALP bodes well for the future of the strategy.

## Main references

Jörg Balsiger, 'The European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region', in Gänzle, Stefan, Kern, Kristine, Polonsky, Antony (Eds.) *A 'macro-regional' Europe in the making. Theoretical approaches and empirical evidence*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp.189-213.

European Commission, Communication concerning a European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region, [COM\(2015\) 366 final](#), and accompanying Action Plan, [SWD\(2015\) 147 final](#).

European Environment Agency, [Alps – The impacts of climate change in Europe today](#).

New role of macro-regions in European territorial cooperation, [study](#) (with [annex](#)), Policy Department on Structural and Cohesion Policies, European Parliament, January 2015.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive overview of each of these strategies, see the following briefings prepared by the European Parliamentary Research Service: [The EU Strategy for the Danube Region](#) (May 2015); [EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region](#) (October 2015); and [EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region](#) (June 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> See in particular the [Bad Ragaz Decision](#) and the Initiative Paper of the Conference of Alpine Regions of 29 June 2012; the [European Parliament resolution of 23 May 2013 on a macro-regional strategy for the Alps](#); the Grenoble 'Political resolution towards a European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region' of 18 October 2013; the [public consultation](#) on the EUSALP (July-October 2014); the [high-level Stakeholder Conference on the EUSALP](#) and the [Milan Declaration of the Alpine States and Regions](#) (1-2 December 2014).
- <sup>3</sup> During winter, water is collected and stored as snow and ice in glaciers, lakes, groundwater bodies and soil in the Alps. It is then slowly released as the ice and snow melt throughout spring and summer, feeding rivers such as the Danube, Rhine, Po and Rhone, which have headwaters in the mountains. Water is thus made available when supply is dropping in the lowlands, and when demand is highest (Source: [European Environment Agency](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> See the Commission Action Plan accompanying the communication concerning the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region, [SWD\(2015\) 147 final](#), '1st thematic policy area: economic growth and innovation', p.8 ff.
- <sup>5</sup> Balsiger, Jörg, 'The European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region', in *A 'macro-regional' Europe in the making. Theoretical approaches and empirical evidence*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 202.
- <sup>6</sup> Information in this paragraph is drawn from 'Macro-regional strategies in preparation: Strengths and weaknesses of the strategies for the Adriatic and Ionian Region and Alpine Region', in 'New role of macro-regions in European territorial cooperation', [p. 67 ff.](#)
- <sup>7</sup> See foreword by Dirk Ahner, former Director-General of DG REGIO, in *A 'macro-regional' Europe in the making. Theoretical approaches and empirical evidence*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. xiv.

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