

Implementation of macro-regional strategies

SUMMARY

While each macro-regional strategy is unique in terms of the countries it brings together and the scope of its policies, they all share the same common aim: to ensure a coordinated approach to issues that are best tackled together. Building on the success of the pioneering 2009 European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea region, this form of cooperation has since become firmly embedded in the EU's institutional framework, with four strategies now in place, covering a total of 19 Member States and eight third countries.

Every two years, the European Commission publishes a report to assess the implementation of these strategies, most recently in 2016. With the views of stakeholders and other players helping to complete the picture, it is possible to identify a number of challenges common to all macro-regional strategies in areas such as governance, funding, political commitment or the need to be more result oriented. As discussions begin on the future of cohesion policy, and the role of macro-regional strategies within the post 2020 framework, this can help focus debate to chart new solutions for the future.

Parliament is also involved in this debate, with the Committee on Regional Development now preparing a report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies, while the current Estonian EU Presidency has committed to advancing political discussion on the future of cohesion policy. As plans for a new Carpathian strategy emerge, the importance of consolidating the position of macro-regional strategies within the future cohesion policy framework has arguably become more important than ever.



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Background

One of the European Union's main instruments for promoting European territorial cooperation, macro-regional strategies bring together regions from Member States and third countries confronted with a common set of challenges. Whether inspired by a sense of regional identity, a desire to engage in closer cooperation or to pool resources, all macro-regional strategies share a common aim: to ensure a coordinated approach to issues best tackled jointly. Strengthened by the introduction of a new requirement for Member States to take account of macro-regional strategies when programming structural funds during 2014-2020, this form of cooperation has become firmly embedded in the EU's institutional framework, with a total of 19 Member States and 8 third countries currently participating in macro-regional strategies.

The macro-regional concept

According to the [Common Provisions Regulation](#), a macro-regional strategy means an 'integrated framework endorsed by the European Council, which may be supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds among others, to address common challenges faced by a defined geographical area relating to Member States and third countries located in the same geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion'. While the issues involved differ from one geographical area to another, priority is given to issues of strategic importance covering challenges where closer cooperation is vital, such as environmental protection, and opportunities, where cooperation is of mutual benefit, e.g. in research and innovation. The EU's first macro-regional strategy, the European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea region ([EUSBSR](#)) has acted as a model for a further three EU strategies: [the Danube strategy](#), the [Adriatic-Ionian strategy](#) and the [Alpine strategy](#).

Guiding principles

Macro-regional strategies are guided by three basic rules:

- No new EU funds,
- No additional EU structures,
- No new EU legislation.

The idea is to better align existing funds and policies at EU, national and regional level and to rely on existing bodies for implementation.

Overview of the strategies

EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region

Encompassing the eight EU Member States of the Baltic region and four neighbouring third countries, the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region was launched in 2009 following the adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#) by the European Commission. The Strategy has three key **objectives**: 1) **Save the sea**, which aims to protect the Baltic against such dangers as excess nutrient discharge into the sea (eutrophication), over-fishing, and pollution, and promote clean shipping; 2) **Connect the region**, which seeks to improve transport connections and energy security by integrating the region's transport systems and energy markets; and 3) **Increase prosperity**, which focuses on creating growth and improving competitiveness through more cooperation in R&D, stronger partnerships and completing the single market. These three objectives are divided into 13 separate **policy areas** (PA), with the framework completed by four cross-cutting **horizontal actions** (HA). **Flagships** are a key delivery tool in the strategy alongside actions, and take the form of projects which put forward new solutions, methodologies or practices or involve investments of key importance for the region.

In terms of funding, the [Interreg Baltic Sea programme](#) has played a key role in financing the implementation of the EUSBSR from the outset. For the 2014-2020 period, the programme's priorities have been aligned with the three objectives of the EUSBSR,

contributing some €278 million to help mobilise projects in the region, with a total programme budget of €344 million thanks to co-financing. Its governance system is based on three tiers, comprising a policy level, coordination level and an operational level.

EU Strategy for the Danube Region

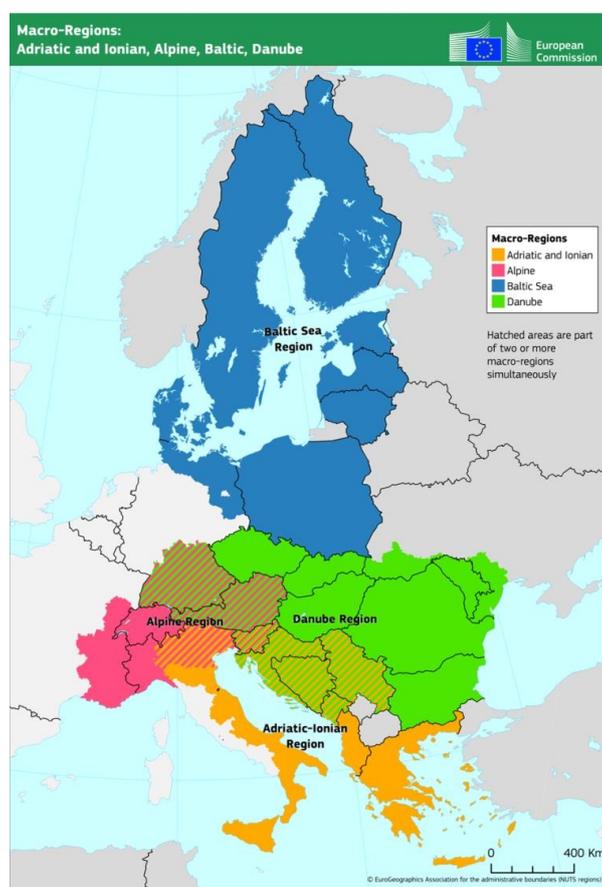
Covering 14 countries that differ widely in terms of their development level and status in relation to the EU, the EU strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR) includes nine EU Member States and five third countries among its members. Initiated through the adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#) by the European Commission in December 2010, the EUSDR is organised around four main pillars. **Connecting the region** covers issues such as improving inland navigation along the Danube and promoting culture and tourism; **Protecting the environment** seeks to restore and maintain water quality, among other issues; **Building prosperity** aims to develop the knowledge society; while **Strengthening the region** focuses on enhancing decision-making capacity and structures in the public and private sector. These four goals are further divided into 11 priority areas. The strategy's governance structure comprises a policy level, which decides on main policy orientations, reports on progress and coordinates the participation of individual countries in the strategy, and an operational level, where priority area coordinators, appointed by the two countries responsible for

each priority area, are in charge of implementation. Their work is supported by a steering group and project promoters, who identify partners and possible funding opportunities. On funding, support is available under the European structural and investment funds (ESIF), with the [Danube transnational programme](#) providing total EU funding of €231 million, including €202 million under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and an additional €20 million from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), used to fund projects in the region and co-finance the activities carried out by the Priority Area Coordinators. Other EU funding, such as Horizon 2020 or the [European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument](#), may also be drawn upon, depending on the policy area and countries involved.

EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region

Bringing together eight countries, including the four EU Member States in the region and four countries from outside the EU, the EUSAIR was initiated on 17 June 2014 with the adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#) by the Commission. The strategy is structured around four main pillars: **Blue growth**, covering themes such as blue technologies or fisheries and aquaculture; **Connecting the region**, which examines areas including maritime transport or energy networks; **Environmental quality**, which focuses on issues such as the marine environment or sea pollution; and **Sustainable tourism**, which seeks, inter alia, to promote sustainable and responsible tourism management. The governing structure has two levels: a coordinating level, the **Governing Board**, in

Figure 1 – Map of EU macro-regions



Source: European Commission.

which each participating country has two delegates and which provides strategic guidance on the management and implementation of the EUSAIR and its action plan; and an implementation level, the **Thematic Steering Groups**, which bring together officials from participating countries to identify actions and projects to be included in the action plan. On funding, the ESIF for 2014-2020 can provide substantial financial resources for projects in areas such as energy, transport and ICT infrastructure, complemented by support under the IPA for non-EU countries, while funding for specific pillars is also available under funds such as Horizon 2020. Additional assistance is provided by the Interreg [ADRION](#) programme, allocating a total of €118 million to funding projects under the EUSAIR's four pillars, including support for EUSAIR governance under priority axis 4.

EU strategy for the Alpine region

Spanning five EU Member States and two non-EU countries, the process of setting up the EU's most recent macro-regional strategy began in July 2015, with the Commission's adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#). The strategy has three thematic areas: **Economic growth and innovation**, which seeks to provide fair access to job opportunities; **Mobility and connectivity**, which aims to provide sustainable internal and external accessibility to all; and **Environment and energy**, whose objective is to achieve a more inclusive environmental framework for all. The three thematic areas are complemented by one cross-cutting policy area on **Governance**, which is tasked with ensuring a sound macro-regional governance model for the region. The governance structure comprises a **General Assembly**, whose role is to set general political guidelines, the **Executive Board**, which is responsible for horizontal and vertical coordination of the EUSALP action plan and ensuring guidance for EUSALP management and implementation, and **Action Groups**, who play a key role in the actual implementation of the strategy and ensure adequate resources and capacities. With a budget of €139 million for 2014-2020, the [Alpine Space](#) transnational cooperation programme provides funding for the EUSALP, contributing to furthering EUSALP governance via its priority axis on a well-governed Alpine space.

Assessing macro-regional strategies

European Commission

Noting clear results in terms of projects and more integrated policy-making, a June 2013 Commission [report](#) found they generate added value as they improve policy development, provide better value for money, ensure greater integration, tackle regional inequality and promote territorial cohesion. More recently, in December 2016, the Commission published a [report](#), which provides an overall assessment of their state of implementation, together with specific comments for each strategy (see box below), drawing on contributions from macro-regional stakeholders, EU institutions, Member States and experts. On **policy-making and planning**, it considers that macro-regional strategies (MRS) have gradually been taken into account in EU policies and have strengthened cooperation in certain policy areas, stressing also the important role played by MRS in developing links with non-EU countries, especially accession countries. It emphasises, however, that many projects require stronger coordination within and between participating countries if they are to achieve results, pointing in this context to the benefits of combining annual fora with ministerial meetings. While noting positive developments in the area of **governance**, such as the creation of stakeholder platforms or the growing importance of rotating MRS presidencies, the report pinpoints challenges including ensuring efficient coordination and cooperation structures, empowering key players such as national coordinators or members of steering groups, providing adequate human and financial resources or securing commitment from all countries, stressing that

Member States need to take full responsibility for their implementation tasks and to complement the European Commission's work. On **monitoring and evaluation**, the report considers that to measure and report on all macro-regional strategies, a clear monitoring system based on results-oriented action is needed, highlighting indicators and targets agreed for priority areas under both the EUSDR and EUSBSR. In the area of **funding**, the Commission reports progress on the information provided by managing authorities, with stronger links between programme managers and MRS implementers, yet notes that the gap between strategies and funding opportunities is still a challenge.

European Commission assessment of individual macro-regional strategies

The Commission's 2016 report considers that the **Baltic Sea strategy** has given impetus to new networks and made existing ones more effective, providing a joint framework for dialogue by consolidating multi-level governance in the region, helping to shape policy at different levels and contributing to the implementation of existing EU legislation in the region. However, more effort is necessary to address environmental challenges such as eutrophication, with a need for a better response to the impact of climate change and greater cooperation among countries on migration.

On the **EU strategy for the Danube region**, the Commission stresses that it has boosted the culture of cooperation by bringing together stakeholders and connecting existing institutions. It notes that the strategy has made the governance system more effective by enhancing coordination between policies and institutions at national level and contributed to the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policy, improving stability in the region. Alongside migration, inadequate administrative capacity continues to be a challenge, especially for non-EU countries.

Noting that the **EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region** has developed ownership by providing dedicated resources for thematic steering groups, the Commission stresses the strategy's high-level political backing, as underlined by the May 2016 Dubrovnik Declaration of Ministers. Nonetheless, challenges remain, with the Commission highlighting that the resources made available by the countries involved are largely insufficient. In terms of scope, the Commission calls, for instance, for transport and energy priorities to be adjusted to enhance initiatives taken in other cooperation fora.

The Commission considers that implementation of the **EU strategy for the Alpine region** has begun quickly thanks to the region's high level of political and economic cooperation, noting that the first Action Group meetings brought agreement on working methods and a programme to identify thematic topics. Progress is needed, however, on governance, with further efforts required to strengthen the link between the Executive Board and the Action Groups, with the Commission also pointing to the development of the stakeholder platform as another challenge.

European Parliament

Building on its previous resolutions covering individual macro-regional strategies such as the [Adriatic and Ionian strategy](#) and the [Alpine strategy](#), Parliament's Committee on Regional Development (REGI) published a [draft report](#) on the overall implementation of macro-regional strategies in July 2017. While acknowledging that problems remain in such areas as political commitment, ownership, resources or governance, the draft emphasises that macro-regional strategies make a key contribution to cross-border, cross-sector and multi-level cooperation in Europe. It also encourages better coordination and partnerships among the various actors and policies at regional and national level and highlights the importance of developing administrative capacity with a view to ensuring the successful implementation of macro-regional strategies. The text welcomes the results achieved by the **Baltic strategy**, in particular its cooperation mechanisms, and praises its communication strategy, yet notes that challenges continue in areas such as the environment and connectivity, calling on the countries involved to redouble their efforts to address Baltic Sea pollution. While noting the **Danube strategy's** positive impact on cooperation among participating countries and the success of the

Danube Financing Dialogue as an example of how to tackle financing difficulties, the draft report highlights the need to maintain political support and increase resources and capacity. It considers that the **Adriatic and Ionian strategy** represents a good opportunity for the region, which could in particular help ease the challenges of the migration crisis in the area, yet stresses continued problems with resources, governance and ownership. It welcomes the governance strategy of the **Alpine strategy** currently being set up and considers it could act as a template strategy for territorial cohesion, also noting that it provides an opportunity to enhance cross-border cooperation and remove barriers.

Council of the EU

On 25 April 2017, the Council adopted [conclusions](#) on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. It welcomes the progress and preliminary results of the strategies and their contribution to territorial cohesion, a more integrated implementation of EU sectoral policies, and closer links with third countries, yet notes that the strategies all face common and individual challenges that could be developed further, particularly in terms of governance, result orientation, funding, communication and cooperation.

Committee of the Regions (CoR)

Stressing that macro-regional strategies are a vital element in achieving the EU's strategic objectives, the Committee's 2017 [draft opinion](#) on the implementation of MRS emphasises the importance of greater efficiency, prioritising outcomes and a more practical focus on strategy implementation. In particular, the CoR argues that the 'Three No's' should be substituted with 'Three Yes's' which seek to enhance the use of existing legislation, institutions and funding, and regrets that, in many cases, macro-regional strategies still experience a lack of ownership, highlighting the need to strengthen governance, which can be achieved by making the local and regional level stronger. According to the CoR, implementing strategies requires a cooperation-based approach to governance involving improved administrative capacity based on increased ownership.

Stakeholders

A recent [workshop](#) organised by the REGI committee provided an interesting insight into some of the challenges facing macro-regional partners on the ground. A speaker from the EUSBSR noted that there was very little public awareness of the strategy and that it was hampered by differences in the implementation rules of various countries, suggesting there was a need both to increase the strategy's visibility and to simplify its rules. In a similar vein, a representative of the EUSDR's presidency argued that the macro-regional system was too complicated, which made it difficult for the countries involved to reach agreement, adding that there was often no connection between macro-regional strategies and funding instruments. This point was also raised in Interact's June 2017 [report](#) which notes persistent problems in the extent to which strategies are embedded into EU funding programmes, such as a lack of information in EU funding programmes on how they can support the EUSDR and EUSAIR, or the limited involvement of EUSDR and EUSAIR stakeholders in implementing such programmes. Macro-regional strategies have also been the subject of much interest in the academic world. Stefan Ganzle, for instance, has [argued](#) that the diagnostic monitoring of implementation is the weak point of macro-regional strategies, while Franziska Siekler and Jorg Mirtl [stress](#) that a lack of resources for macro-regional strategies continues to be a major concern. The above assessment reveals a certain agreement among EU institutions and stakeholders as to the benefits of macro-regional strategies, yet a common set of challenges is also identifiable, with stakeholders pointing to shortcomings in governance, result orientation, funding, and

political commitment and ownership. As discussions on cohesion policy post 2020 get under way, it is useful to examine the proposals made by the various players involved.

Macro-regional strategies and the cohesion policy framework post-2020

European Commission

According to the Commission's 2016 [report](#), cohesion policy reform should address a number of questions, such as how to strengthen synergies between MRS and ESIF programmes to maximise their impact, how to further improve the governance system, as well as the issue of whether or not to align transnational programmes more closely with MRS. To achieve progress in the field of governance, the Commission recommends that all strategies regularly assess their governance systems and that close cooperation is ensured between steering group members and programmes' managing authorities. In addition, the report finds that macro-regional strategies should place a greater focus on results and performance, action which will require the introduction of a sound monitoring system to report on progress and measures to improve the quality of projects and processes. The Commission stresses the need to ensure more coordinated use of funding streams at different levels and to continue the dialogue between ESIF programme managing authorities and MRS implementers to align funding as effectively as possible.

European Parliament

On the future of macro-regional strategies post 2020, the REGI Committee [draft report](#) argues that, if it is to be successful, strategy implementation must be based on efficient coordination and cooperation structures backed by adequate funding, noting also that the countries involved should make clear financial commitments from the start. It stresses the need to be more result oriented and the importance of improving the visibility and awareness of macro-regions, highlighting that the revision of MRS objectives should be aligned with the multiannual financial framework to strengthen links with EU priorities.

Council of the EU

The Council [notes](#) that it is open to any jointly agreed initiative to set up a new macro-regional strategy from Member States in a specific geographical area and facing common challenges. On funding, it calls on participating countries and regions to ensure that ESIF, IPA and European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) funds are more closely aligned with macro-regional strategies, urging the Commission to ensure that macro-regional strategies are involved in other EU funding programmes. It also calls on participating countries and the Commission to strengthen links between macro-regional strategies and EU funding when designing and implementing programmes, and to improve coherence between macro-regional objectives and those set at national or regional level.

Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Regions' 2017 [draft opinion](#) notes that MRS objectives must be included in the overall strategy after 2020 in a concerted manner, adding that, to ensure access to financial resources post 2020, all EU policies should provide specific implementation rules for MRS projects that facilitate access to financing. The CoR supports increasing the transnational dimension of mainstream operational programmes and aligning them with MRS.

Stakeholders

A group of participating regions from the Alpine and Danube macro-regional strategies published a [position paper](#) in April 2017, calling for action to embed macro-regional strategies more firmly within the EU regulatory framework post-2020 to boost the impact of MRS. Specifically, it recommends the greater recognition of MRS in legislative

documents, noting that macro-regional strategies should be defined more clearly in the EU regulatory framework and be taken into account when drafting future legislation and programmes, and urges action to improve the institutional framework for implementing MRS. In addition, it argues that funds should be addressed more effectively to implement the goals of MRS, with the paper noting that operational programmes should be encouraged to provide more support for macro-regional objectives and projects.

The **Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe** published a [paper](#) on EU strategies with a macro-regional dimension in March 2017, putting forward a number of proposals. In particular, it calls for the creation of a horizontal Commission task force on strategies with a macro-regional dimension to prevent the fragmentation of actions under MRS, and recommends adjusting the Interreg programmes, stressing the need to increase the cooperation budget within cohesion policy, especially for transnational programmes. It also recommends introducing incentives for all ESIF funds, such as a co-financing bonus of 5 % for cooperation projects with a macro-regional dimension.

Outlook

With the [Estonian Presidency](#) committed to advancing political discussion on the future of cohesion policy, the debate on the role of macro-regional strategies within the post-2020 cohesion framework looks set to continue in the months ahead. While each macro-regional strategy is unique, it is nonetheless possible to identify a common set of challenges facing strategies in areas such as governance, funding, political commitment and ownership or the need to be more result oriented, which should help to focus discussions on the key issues at stake. There is clearly much to be gained by ensuring a secure future for the four macro-regional strategies within the cohesion policy framework post-2020, yet this framework also needs to consider a wider approach that looks beyond the macro-regional strategies currently in place. With a [draft outline](#) for a new macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region, published by Poland's Ministry of Development in March 2017, sparking discussions on the possible emergence of a fifth macro-regional strategy, the importance of consolidating the position of macro-regional strategies within cohesion policy has arguably become more important than ever.

Main reference

European Commission, [Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies](#), December 2016.

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