

A macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region

SUMMARY

Encompassing regions from European Union (EU) Member States and third countries confronted with a common set of challenges, macro-regions are defined on the basis of geographical features. Whether inspired by a sense of regional identity, a desire to engage in closer cooperation or to pool resources, all macro-regional strategies share the aim of ensuring a coordinated approach to issues best addressed jointly. In spite of a broad consensus on the importance of the macro-regional strategies as a relevant instrument for the optimal use of existing financial resources, some assessments indicate that stronger political ownership is needed.

Currently the EU has four macro-regional strategies, covering the Baltic Sea region, the Danube region, the Adriatic-Ionian region and the Alpine region, which address common challenges and achieve economic, environmental, social and territorial cohesion. On occasion, calls are made to launch additional strategies, covering new geographical areas.

Some Member States currently voice the need for a fifth macro-regional strategy, covering the Carpathian mountains, where the borders of many countries meet. The region suffers inherent weaknesses in fields such as transport, socio-economic development, innovation and energy supply, and needs to protect its rare and valuable natural resources and cultural heritage. The Polish government has presented a proposal for a common strategy for the Carpathian region to the European Commission, after consultation with several countries in the region. This draft plan has not yet been approved by all of the countries concerned. The Council remains open to any commonly agreed and mature initiative aimed at setting up a new macro-regional strategy; however it has not endorsed the creation of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region. The Committee of the Regions explicitly supports the initiative to create an EU strategy for the Carpathian region. The European Commission and the European Parliament are more cautious when it comes to launching new strategies and suggest building on existing ones instead.

This briefing has been produced at the request of a member of the European Committee of the Regions, in the framework of the Cooperation Agreement between the European Parliament and the Committee.



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Background

The macro-regional concept

Within EU cohesion policy, Member States can initiate macro-regional strategies 'to address common challenges in a defined geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened transnational cooperation', as stated in the [Common Provisions Regulation](#) on EU funds. These macro-regional strategies are one of the European Union's main instruments for fostering European territorial cooperation, as they link regions from Member States and third countries that share a joint set of challenges.

Currently, the EU has four [macro-regional strategies](#), covering the [Baltic Sea region](#) (2009), the [Danube region](#) (2011), the [Adriatic-Ionian region](#) (2014) and the [Alpine region](#) (2015). Once agreed among countries concerned and formally requested by the European Council, the strategies are drafted and adopted by the European Commission. Nineteen of the EU Member States are covered by a macro-regional strategy, as well as eight non-EU countries. Some countries are involved in two, or even three, macro-regional strategies with a different focus.

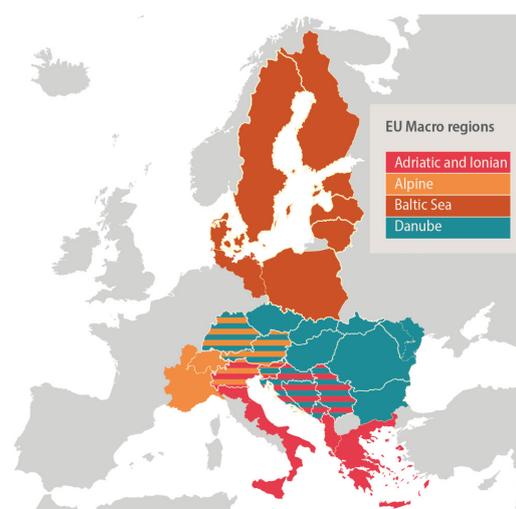
The implementation of the strategies is governed by what is referred to as the 'three 'no's rule', meaning that no new EU funds, no additional formal EU structures and no new EU legislation can be mobilised; the idea being rather to better align existing funds and policies at EU, national and regional levels, and to rely upon existing structures. In short, to do more with what is already available.

While the issues covered by macro-regional strategies necessarily differ from one geographical area to another (the common area usually being a sea, a river or a mountain range), priority is often given to matters of strategic importance including challenges where closer cooperation is vital, such as environmental protection and transport and energy infrastructures needed for socio-economic development.

Challenges facing the Carpathian region

The Carpathians cover a larger landmass than the Alps, stretching over 190 000 square kilometres from the Austrian-Czech border in the west to the Romanian-Serbian border in the south-east, passing through Czechia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine, with lower hills in Hungary. Due to its remoteness and low population rate, the region is central Europe's last great wilderness area, with virgin forests hosting large carnivores, such as bears, wolves and lynx. The common geographical, environmental, socio-economical and geopolitical challenges in the Carpathian macro-region differ in some aspects from challenges in countries covered by the Danube strategy, which covers regions in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania within the EU, as well as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Moldova and Ukraine. The Danube strategy is river-oriented, with an east-west axis; participating Member States with large mountainous regions therefore claim specific needs and challenges that require different and separate management, also considering a south-north perspective when it comes to transport and energy infrastructures. Mountainous regions imply greater isolation and accessibility difficulties

Figure 1 – Map of EU macro-regions



Striped areas are part of two or more macro-regions simultaneously

Source: '[What is an EU macro-regional strategy?](#)', European Commission factsheet, 2017.

than river valleys. Many regions in the Carpathians are among the poorest in Europe, with a GDP per capita not exceeding 50 % of the EU average. As the macro-region is characterised by rich environmental value, a difficult socio-economic situation, and poor accessibility and connectivity, a tailored strategy is required both to protect the environment and stimulate sustainable socio-economic development through enhanced institutional cooperation and improved infrastructure.

Early cooperation in the Carpathian region

The first structured cooperation in the Carpathian region dates back to 1993, when the [Carpathian Euroregion](#) project started, as a political initiative supported by Hungary, Poland and Ukraine. It now also comprises regions from Romania and Slovakia. In 2003, the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians ([Carpathian Convention](#)) was signed by seven parties (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine). Like the Alpine Convention, this sub-regional treaty provides a multi-level governance mechanism for the protection and sustainable development of the mountain region. Its objective is to improve the quality of life, strengthen local economies and communities, and to preserve natural values and cultural heritage in the Carpathian area. It constitutes a framework for cooperation and multi-sectoral policy coordination, a platform for joint strategies for sustainable development, and a forum for dialogue between all stakeholders. In addition, a [spatial development strategy](#) was signed by the Visegrad countries and Bulgaria and Romania in April 2014, aimed at analysing and managing transport networks, technical infrastructure, socio-economic spatial analysis and spatial development.

More recently, in September 2018, a [declaration of intent](#) to create an EU macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region was signed in Poland, aimed at boosting cooperation in infrastructure, ecology, tourism, innovation and investment through a range of joint projects, presented in a [proposal for a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region](#). This declaration was signed by representatives from **Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine** during a [Foundation Institute for Eastern Studies economic forum](#). Eventually, the strategy is meant to also involve Czechia, Moldova, Romania and Serbia. The signatories emphasised that an EU strategy for the Carpathian region 'will serve the goal of increasing prosperity, security and peace for people in the region', and asked the Commission to support the process of preparing such a macro-regional strategy. They stated their readiness for active involvement, to strengthen synergies, and engaged to cooperate with existing macro-regional strategies, in particular the Danube strategy.

A macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region

The comprehensive [proposal](#) for a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region, mentioned in the joint declaration of intent from September 2018, was submitted by the Polish government to the European Commission in October 2018. Poland and the other signatories believe that the Carpathians, due to the specific character of the geographical conditions of this mountainous area on the eastern fringes of the EU, should be treated as an integrated territory, in order to increase the efficiency of regional development policy activities.

According to the proposal, the main objective of the Carpathian strategy is to strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Carpathian macro-region, based on its unique natural and cultural heritage and internal development potential, as well as by creating competitive advantages to increase the level and quality of life of the region's inhabitants, while preserving the unique environmental quality of the Carpathians. This goal is to be achieved by further strengthening the frameworks for cooperation between Carpathian countries and regions through common measures within the framework of a macro-regional strategy.

The strategy outlines four main priority areas based on the three economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development: competitive Carpathians, green Carpathians and cohesive Carpathians, with a fourth horizontal priority concerning institutional cooperation.

Table 1 – A macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region

A macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region – priority areas, goals and actions	
1. Competitive Carpathians Strengthening economic cooperation	1.1. Development of clean, green industries 1.2. Sustainable development of tourism 1.3. Increasing the competitiveness of the agro-food sector 1.4. Development of macro-regional innovation ecosystem
2. Green Carpathians High quality of natural environment	2.1. Protection and rational management of natural resources 2.2. Diversification of energy sources 2.3. Management of environmental risk and natural threats
3. Cohesive Carpathians Increasing the functional accessibility of the Carpathians	3.1. Increasing transport accessibility in the Carpathian mountains 3.2. Increasing the digital accessibility 3.3. Developing e-service system
4. Horizontal area Institutional cooperation	4.1. Spatial planning 4.2. Cross border and transnational cooperation 4.3. Programming development and capacity building

Source: based on the [proposal](#) for a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region.

The priority areas are similar to those of the Danube strategy (connecting the region, protecting the environment, building prosperity and strengthening the region), and the Alpine strategy (economic growth and innovation, mobility and connectivity, environment and energy). Carpathian priorities are detailed in the proposal as follows:

1 Competitive Carpathians – strengthening economic cooperation

With industry accounting for a large share of the economy of the Carpathian region, Action 1.1 on the **development of clean, green industries** calls for a common strategy to modernise existing industries and develop clean industries in such areas as modern extraction technologies, sustainable forestry, renewable energy or the sustainable food and agricultural sector. As a valuable asset for the region, natural and cultural heritage are the main focus of Action 1.2 on **sustainable development of tourism**, which seeks to promote cross-border tourism infrastructure and develop common destination management by linking public and private actors. It also calls for joint action to develop rural tourism, eco-tourism and health tourism. Reflecting the importance of farming for the identity of the Carpathian region, Action 1.3 on **increasing the competitiveness of the agro-food sector** urges action to promote regional products, create a Carpathian food brand, and calls for cooperation between the agricultural sector and biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries. Taking account of the Carpathian region's low innovation rate in terms of R&D expenditure and patents awarded, Action 1.4 on the **development of a macro-regional innovation ecosystem** identifies the need for more coordination between universities, research and development centres and entrepreneurs, focusing on key sectors such as climate change, water management or tourism.

2 Green Carpathians – high quality natural environment

Environmental pressures are often cross-border in nature, Action 2.1 on the **protection and rational management of natural resources** therefore identifies the need for institutional cooperation, in particular under the Carpathian Convention, to protect species and establish trans-border ecological corridors for wildlife; counteract air and soil pollution, or reduce the negative impacts of tourism. In view of the region's high reliance on fossil fuel for generating energy, Action 2.2 on **diversification of energy resources** calls for action to increase the share of renewable energy by developing solar and hydro energy or biomass and geothermal energy. This would also

involve developing cross-border transmission and distribution systems for electricity, natural gas, oil and petroleum products. Action 2.3 on the **management of environmental risk and natural threats**, meanwhile, focuses on mountain areas as ecosystems that are highly exposed to both natural factors and human activity. It identifies the need for common and comprehensive risk assessment, a joint threat warning system and collaboration between emergency services reacting to environmental threats.

3 Cohesive Carpathians – increasing the functional accessibility of the Carpathians

With economic growth dependent on physical accessibility, e-accessibility and related infrastructures, as well as fair access to public services, Action 3.1 on **increasing transport accessibility**, calls for improvements in the quality of road, rail and air transport, increased digital accessibility in peripheral areas and stresses the need for infrastructural investments for '[Via Carpatia](#)'. Action 3.2 on **increasing digital accessibility**, in turn, calls for appropriate information technology infrastructure, which can decrease the negative effects of peripheral location and isolation, and provide opportunities for economic, educational, social and cultural activity and stimulate economic development. Public-private partnerships could be created to create connectivity infrastructures in the mountain regions. E-services can contribute to better entrepreneurship, make the macro-region more attractive and improve accessibility. With this in mind, Action 3.3 on **developing an e-service system** calls for information to be made available in digital format and for the installation of modern channels to facilitate communication between citizens, public administrations, clients and entrepreneurs.

4 Horizontal priority – institutional cooperation and spatial development

Cross-border cooperation between public bodies in neighbouring countries is of key importance for spatial planning in border areas. Action 4.1 on **spatial planning** calls for the creation of new TEN-T corridors and trans-border access to motorways, mainline railways and airports from neighbouring countries, as well as urban-rural cooperation to form functional regions. Such cooperation would support the principles of free movement of persons, goods, services and capital. Action 4.2 on **cross border and transnational cooperation** calls for action at border crossing points to eliminate bottlenecks, unify customs clearances, and develop common patterns of behaviour in case of a threat of cross-border crime. In the absence of common long-term macro-regional planning, Action 4.3 on **programming development and capacity-building** identifies the need for a common strategy that would limit competition and help to make sure that the use of EU funds is not only in line with a local or regional rationale, but also one with a macro-regional scope, helping to create synergy effects.

Potential added value of the Carpathian strategy

The proposal's authors consider that the creation and delivery of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region would allow the countries of the region to fully focus on the challenges that they face. A common strategy would provide the regions with an opportunity to carry out joint planning and actions in line with their own specific needs and capacities, to better unlock their potential and reinvigorate the role that central and eastern European countries play within the EU.

The authors argue that the development and implementation of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathians will provide a number of key benefits. Firstly, they note that the strategy will help support national and regional authorities' decision-making processes and provide support for existing cooperation frameworks, programmes and projects within the region. Secondly, they consider that the strategy can help strengthen cooperation between the individual countries and regions that are part of the Carpathian macro-region and provide an opportunity to make use of the EU institutional and legal framework, such as specific legal, territorial and administrative instruments for mountain areas. Thirdly, the document emphasises that the strategy will also provide the countries and regions involved with the opportunity to apply EU methodology and

standards, including coordinating and concentrating actions or integrating the various levels of public authorities.

In terms of who would benefit from the Carpathian strategy, the draft strategy identifies four specific groups. Residents of the Carpathians are the intended primary recipients of all actions under the strategy. Secondly, as it is easiest to identify problems and unlock development potential by acting at local level, the Carpathian regional authorities will also benefit, since the actions that are taken at macro-regional level will facilitate integration, development and improve convergence with the more developed regions of the EU. A third group that stands to benefit is the Carpathian countries, thanks to joint development of parts of their territories that face similar challenges, helping to accelerate national development and ensuring sustainable growth for the whole country. Finally, the Carpathian strategy could contribute to the harmonious cooperation and integration of not just the Carpathian region but of the EU as a whole, thanks to a stronger north-south axis in the eastern sector and better connection between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black seas. The EU in general could also benefit in terms of European integration, as the strategy would help prepare for future enlargements, involving Serbia, an EU candidate country, and Ukraine and Moldova, neighbouring countries within the [Eastern partnership](#).

Expert views

In 2014, Dutch researcher Stefanie Dühr estimated that there were 'no clear and convincing arguments for a comprehensive and integrated strategy for the large area of the Central European space', in a [study](#) asking 'Are there arguments for a Central European macro-regional strategy?'. The region seemed very diverse, and 'missed a clear transnational rationale around which cooperation could be structured and which would ensure longer-term political attention'. Dühr pointed out, however, that 'cooperation needs arise around sector-specific issues, such as EU policy agendas for river management, transport corridors and energy networks' and did not exclude that this would occur in the future. In an [article](#) from 2015, 'Toward a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathians', Bianca Tescasiu, a Romanian researcher, considered the main difficulty was 'that the countries that compose the macro-region are heterogeneous in terms of level of development. It includes both developed countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary) and developing countries (Romania, Ukraine and Serbia)'. Tescasiu concluded nevertheless that a macro-regional strategy 'would be a good initiative', with goals such as development of [Trans-European Networks](#), improvements of environmental aspects, development of other European interrelated regional policies and better integration and coordination.

The 2015 [study](#) 'New role of macro-regions in European Territorial Cooperation', requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development, highlights that the need for cohesion across the Carpathian region is considerable and it says access to funds is good, while the complexity of territorial cooperation is moderate, all of which suggests that the conditions in the region could be conducive to the introduction of a dedicated macro-regional strategy. The region also has solid experience with European territorial cooperation, shares common environmental concerns, and the possibility to involve non-EU-countries such as Serbia and Ukraine (both parties to the [Carpathian Convention](#)) and Moldova.

The successful implementation of a macro-regional strategy is, however, dependent on a variety of different factors. A number of studies have sought to identify the elements needed to ensure the successful delivery of macro-regional strategies, one example being the 2017 [study](#) prepared for the European Commission by the COWI consultancy on 'Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy', which identified three key drivers: pre-existing cooperation structures; the ubiquity of thematic issues; effective implementation of EU law and existing programmes requiring concrete transnational measures. This is also the [view](#) of German academic Stefan Gänzle, who underlines that 'as macro-regional strategies are intergovernmental in character, the political will of Member States to support this form of European governance remains decisive'.

Institutional voices in the debate

The strategy presented by the Polish government puts forward a number of ambitious measures for ensuring closer cooperation within the framework of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region. It should be stressed, however, that this document is a draft plan, which has yet to be approved by all of the countries concerned. Furthermore, the future of this project is ultimately dependent on the active participation and support of the EU institutions, in particular the Council of the European Union and the European Commission.

Council of the European Union

With its April 2017 [conclusions](#) on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies indicating Council's openness to 'examining any commonly agreed and mature initiative of Member States facing the same challenges in a defined geographic area aimed at setting up a new macro-regional strategy', the Council adopted an open approach to the idea of establishing new macro-regional strategies. However, while the Council reiterated this message in its May 2019 [conclusions](#), it stopped short of endorsing the creation of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region, with neither set of conclusions making any specific reference to a macro-regional strategy for this region.

European Commission

For its part, the Commission would appear to be taking a somewhat cautious line on possible establishment of a Carpathian macro-regional strategy. Speaking in the capacity of EU Commissioner for Agriculture at a European Parliament [plenary debate](#) on the Carpathians in October 2013, Dacian Cioloş stressed that the Commission saw no reason to create an EU strategy for the region. In particular, he drew attention to the May 2013 Commission [report](#) on the added value of macro-regional strategies, which emphasised that new strategies should only be used in particular circumstances where EU involvement was appropriate. Cioloş argued that EU participation was already guaranteed within the framework of the Danube strategy, which covered most of the Member States in question. This view was reiterated in the Commission's written [answer](#) to a parliamentary question of 6 January 2014, which stated that the Commission saw no rationale for a Carpathian strategy, urging the Carpathian countries to rather make use of the existing EU strategy for the Danube region. More recently, European Commissioner for Regional Policy until July 2019, Corina Creţu adopted a similar approach in her response to the strategy submitted by the Polish government, noting that an initial exploration of all possible options, including the extension of the EU strategy for the Danube region to the Polish Carpathian regions, should take place before launching a new strategy.

European Parliament

During a 2013 plenary debate, a number of Members of the European Parliament spoke in favour of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region, highlighting its potential role in terms of promoting regional development and harmonious growth and strengthening economic and political cooperation with Ukraine. They also expressed their disappointment at the European Commission's approach, particularly in light of the significant local level support for the strategy.

In 2015, a group of Members signed a [written declaration](#) on the Carpathian region in the EU. The declaration notes that the Carpathians meet the criteria for macro-regional strategies, and stresses that the strategy could provide genuine added value and reinforce economic, social and territorial cohesion. The Commission is called upon to strengthen its actions with a view to establishing a macro-regional strategy. However, the written declaration failed to gain the support of a majority in Parliament and no further action was taken. Indeed, while Parliament has referred to some of the strategy's potential benefits, with its 2016 [resolution](#) on transport infrastructure noting that macro-regional strategies, including the possible Carpathian strategy, offer an innovative governance framework for tackling transport policy challenges which cannot be solved by Member States alone,

its position regarding the actual creation of a Carpathian macro-regional strategy has been somewhat more ambiguous. A January 2018 [resolution](#) on the implementation of macro-regional strategies, for instance, emphasises that calls to develop new strategies, such as for the Carpathians, should not divert attention from the primary objective of improved, deeper implementation of existing macro-regional strategies.

European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions has long been a strong advocate of the idea of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region, setting up a dedicated Carpathian interregional group in February 2016, to investigate the possibility of creating a Carpathian macro-regional strategy and promote a multilevel governance approach to the development of the Carpathian strategy. It has also promoted the strategy in a number of its opinions, including a June 2019 [opinion](#) on macro-regional strategies and transnational clusters that explicitly supports the initiative to create an EU strategy for the Carpathian region, which would form a permanent framework for cooperation between the countries, regions and communities in the Carpathians. This opinion emphasised that the creation of a strategic document for the Carpathian region would focus on the problems faced by the macro-region as well as create opportunities for leveraging the specific cultural and environmental potential of the Carpathian states.

The [Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy](#) (COTER) is currently preparing an opinion on the establishment of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathians. Highlighting the singular nature of the Carpathian region with its rich natural habitat, unique cultural heritage and common cultural identity, the document notes that placing the Carpathians at the centre of such a strategy would help focus attention on the region's problems and make it possible to fully harness the entire macro-region's potential. In his [draft opinion](#), rapporteur Władysław Ortyl (ECR, Poland) considers that the Carpathian strategy's main objective would be to boost Carpathian macro-region competitiveness by creating competitive advantages to raise the level and quality of life of the region's inhabitants while preserving the unique environmental resources. Activities proposed in the strategy should aim to strengthen economic cooperation in a number of strategic macro-regional sectors, such as clean industry, sustainable tourism and a competitive agrifood sector, and focus on making effective use of local resources and the joint potential of the Carpathians. Noting that macro-regional cooperation will improve the quality of the natural environment in the region, the draft opinion emphasises that initiatives to increase competitiveness and innovation must be accompanied by improved accessibility and highlights the importance of spatial planning and regional cooperation for the development of the macro-region. In particular, it considers that the Carpathian strategy could complement the activities of the existing Danube strategy, while emphasising that although the Danube strategy also covers parts of the Alpine macro-regional strategy and the Adriatic and Ionian strategy, this has not led to any negative impact. Finally, the draft opinion calls on the European Commission to support the initiative to establish a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathians.

The opinion is scheduled for a vote in plenary of the European Committee of the Regions in December 2019.

Outlook

Most European structural and investment (ESI) funds will remain targeted at poorer regions with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita under 75 % of the EU average. Among the five main policy objectives in the [proposal](#) for a common provisions regulation for the ESI funds are a greener, carbon-free Europe, investment in energy transition, renewables and the fight against climate change, as well as a more connected Europe, with strategic transport and digital networks – all of major concern for the Carpathians and possibly more efficiently managed within a macro-regional strategy if this demand gains sufficient support.

Considering, however, that the draft strategy currently seems to have the support of only three EU Member States – Poland, Hungary and Slovakia – the level of political attention and commitment to the project across the wider region appears rather uncertain. This issue could turn out to be crucial for the strategy's future success, as broad political support is needed. Romania handed over the rotating Council presidency to Finland in July 2019. None of the other countries concerned by the proposal for a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region will be in charge of the agenda of the Council until the second part of 2022, when Czechia takes over the Presidency. The European Commission's implementation reports state that political commitment is crucial for the strategy, as the implementation of macro-regional strategies is heavily dependent on strong involvement of all levels of governance.

Other than launching a new macro-regional strategy, the new European Commission and the European Council may explore other options, whether including the Polish Carpathian regions into the Danube strategy, addressing needs in mountainous areas through cooperation between the Danube and the Alpine strategies or through an EU agenda for rural, mountainous and remote areas to promote socioeconomic development, economic growth and diversification, social wellbeing, protection of nature, and cooperation and interconnection with urban areas, to foster cohesion in these regions.

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