

Revision of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region

Position of Croatia

In October 2021, under the Presidency of Albania, the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) agreed to commence the process of reviewing and updating of the EUSAIR Action Plan (AP). It was universally accepted among participating countries that some level of revision is necessary in order to adjust the AP to new circumstances, both at the level of macro-region and EU as a whole.

In practical terms, this meant reviewing and updating as necessary the current priorities of the AP (*topics* and *actions*) to better respond to current needs of the macro-region as well as to better match the current EU policies. During the lifetime of EUSAIR, since 2012-2014 when the Strategy was conceived and launched, both the needs of the macro-region and policies of the EU have evolved to some extent. The process of AP revision has already started and is led by the Facility Point Lead Partner, with Facility Point Project Partners and other stakeholders contributing.

At the same time, some EUSAIR participating countries took the view that not only revision of the AP is justified, but Strategy itself, i.e. the Communication concerning the EUSAIR from the European Commission to other EU Institutions, should also come under review. The same logic applied: with evolving needs on the ground and shifting policy foci, the Strategy document is in need of appraisal, and amendment as necessary.

Croatia subscribes to this point of view, a position it voiced at two meetings of the EUSAIR Governing Board during the Albanian Presidency. In terms of revision of the Strategy, Croatia wishes to focus on two crucial aspects: Strategy content and Strategy governance.

The aim of this position paper is to present, in brief manner, some ideas for consideration of participating countries and the Commission, which aim to update and improve on those two aspects of EUSAIR.

1. Content update: adding the fifth pillar relating to social issues

At the ministerial meeting in Tirana, on the occasion of the 2022 EUSAIR Annual Forum, State Secretary for Europe at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia Ms Andreja Metelko Zgombić presented the view that Croatia would prefer to see more EUSAIR engagement in the area which corresponds with the fourth policy objective of the EU Cohesion policy: “a more social and inclusive Europe”.

As the current AP lacks any reference to these topics, Croatia proposes that a new, fifth pillar relating to social issues (Social Pillar) be added to the Strategy and accompanying AP.

Topics related to employment and social and educational policies and rights became more prominent at the EU level with the adoption of the Pillar of Social Rights in 2017. Its importance was further accentuated in 2021, when the Action Plan for implementation of the Pillar was adopted. The EU member states defined national targets for employment, lifelong learning, social protection and poverty reduction by 2030.

Tripartite Porto Declaration adopted at the Social Summit in May 2021 strengthened the EU's commitment to implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and set action for inclusive and sustainable growth and recovery that leaves no one behind.

It is worth mentioning that the ADRION Programme, in its fifth published call for the 2014-2020 financial perspective, also called for strengthening social innovation topics to tackle better the emerging needs regarding social inclusion, fight against poverty, and migrants and refugees' integration into society and labour market.

Taking into account the importance of preserving and promoting the European social model, as well as the aspirations of non-EU members to join the EU, macro-regional cooperation through the Social Pillar would be an additional tool for strengthening European and national policies in relevant fields. Cooperation would include exchange of experiences, coordination of policy measures, definition of priorities and standardisation of approaches to solving social challenges that transcend national borders.

Should the participating countries and the Commission accept this proposal, the Ministry of Labour, Pensions System, Family and Social Policy of Croatia is ready to take over, together with another participating country, the task of coordination of this pillar.

The Ministry has the role of Managing Authority for the European Social Fund and experience in the management and implementation of pre-accession funds as well as the ESF. In particular, the programming unit in the Managing Authority could assume the role of a co-coordinator for the Social Pillar. The unit has experience of participation in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and overview of EU policies relevant to the Social Pillar.

In order to prepare the Social Pillar proposal, the Managing Authority can organise one or more workshops for policy experts from EUSAIR members during the Presidency of Bosnia & Herzegovina with the aim of agreeing on specific goals of mutual interest. In that case, the results of workshop(s) would be presented in Q2 2023.

2. Governance update: increasing efficiency and effectiveness in the EUSAIR

Efficient governance and effective implementation is *condicio sine qua non* for the life of any macro-regional strategy. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a number of mutually reinforcing negative phenomena and trends related to both management of the EUSAIR and work on the ground. Some of the most acute include: weakening sense of ownership and awareness, insufficient commitment, unstable participation in governing structures (namely TSGs), uneven procedures between TSGs, shortcomings in implementation and follow-up of the actions. Some of these challenges were cited in the relevant Commission and Council documents in recent years.

In broader terms, it appears that improvements are especially required in the fields of 1) political leadership and commitment, 2) efficient decision-making and 3) Strategy implementation oversight. For the first point, there needs to be a clear, strong and consensual call coming from the highest political level for a renewed commitment to the project of Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. For the second, a greater clarity in the organisation and management of work is required. For the third, a novel mechanism that would allow for simple and quick overview of EUSAIR project activities at all levels should be devised.

Guided by these observations, as well as by a wish to be as to-the-point as possible, Croatia proposes the following ideas for consideration of participating countries and the Commission. If included in the EUSAIR revision, they may contribute to Strategy's increased efficiency and effectiveness in the coming years.

- Call for more high-level involvement (Commissioner level, Ministerial level).
In particular, on-site participation of European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms and responsible Ministers of the participating countries at the EUSAIR Annual Forums should be a rule, not an exception.
- Review, if needed redefine and unify the Rules of Procedures across TSGs.
In particular, TSG RoPs should have clear descriptions of methods, procedures, deadlines, timeframes, etc. related to their regular work and decision-making process. Decision-making process needs to be clearly presented and transparent; all relevant information shaping a particular decision needs to be available in full and inside adequate (ample) timeframe. Public procurement calls with related documentation, which are normally subject to national procedures and legislation of one EUSAIR participating country, should be translated to the formal working language of EUSAIR and delivered to respective TSG and National Coordinators on time to allow for possible applications from legal entities from other EUSAIR participating countries. Outside/external expert organisations and individuals – who in most cases drive the implementation of projects on the ground – should be given access to the work of TSGs, either at observer level or as contributors to the governance process. Ideally, the work of TSGs should be harmonised with the dynamics of public calls.

More generally, TSGs should focus on prioritising and accelerating the implementation of relevant policies in the Adriatic-Ionian region and related projects of common interest.

- Recommend a practice of merging the roles of Pillar coordination and FP project partnership within a single national entity.
For example, in Croatia the Ministry of Tourism and Sport is both the co-coordinator of Pillar 4 and the FP Project Partner.
- Develop a platform for training of newcomers to EUSAIR.
Structured instructions for newcomers to the EUSAIR ecosystem should be organised by the FP on regular basis, ideally semi-annually.
- Develop a system for easy on-line overview of statuses of all EUSAIR project activities.
A database of all EUSAIR flagships/projects with their implementation statuses, hosted at the Strategy website or the EUSAIR Stakeholders' Platform.

Prior to this, a clear definition of terminology related to EUSAIR project activities (flagships/project ideas/projects etc.) should be adopted.

- Establish a formal link between EUSAIR stakeholders (GB and TSG) and managing/programming authorities.
The embedding process clearly demonstrated the necessity of this connection. As the embedding process is recognised as vital for the future of EUSAIR (or any macro-regional strategy), the involvement of managing/programming authorities in the work of EUSAIR should be more direct.

In practice, this may include the following: greater involvement of TSGs in calls preparation; technical assistance (a person per programme); targeted calls; structured dialogues with MAs; macro-regional financial dialogues; frequent data sharing; focus on real needs.

- Territorial dimension (coastal vs inland) and compromise solutions should be taken into consideration during the revision process.

In particular, review and update where needed the sectoral parts of EUSAIR, by taking into consideration similarities/differences/shared interests of EU participating countries and non-EU (IPA) participating countries.