



# REVISION OF THE EUSAIR ACTION PLAN

## Position of Slovenia

### **BACKGROUND:**

On 16 November 2022, Slovene EU MRS national coordination (in the framework of the EUSAIR facility Point project) organised a **national consultation event** that put into focus the revision of the EUSAIR Action Plan. The event in the form of a workshop highlighted the work of the four Thematic Steering Groups (TSG1, TSG2, TSG3 and TSG4). Additionally, new potential horizontal themes have been discussed, where also national positions of Italy, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been taken into consideration.

### **1) SLOVENE RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE EXISTING EUSAIR PILLARS:**

#### **GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

In line with the European guidance to support the transition to a green, digital and fairer Europe, Slovenia believes that in order to keep the strategic guidance of the EUSAIR, more focus should be given to the **preparedness policy** and **foresight in policy making** within the Adriatic and Ionian region.

The general objective of the strategy is to promote sustainable economic and social prosperity in the Region through growth and jobs creation, and by improving its competitiveness and connectivity, while preserving the environment and ensuring healthy and balanced marine and coastal ecosystems. Slovenia believes that the four EUSAIR Pillars have contributed significantly to the EUSAIR development and there is no need for introducing new thematic pillars. Nevertheless, the existing and emerging economic and social challenges demand to address the new emerging horizontal topics. In this respect, Slovenia advocates to address the issue of **circular economy** in different pillars, focus the attention systematically on **skills and competences development** and the inclusion and **involvement of youth**.

Finally yet importantly, we firmly believe that EUSAIR region has to capitalise the potentials of different Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) in the Adriatic and Ionian Area. Hence, we propose to introduce a horizontal theme **platform for continuous exploration and exploitation of potentials deriving from respectful Smart Specialisation Strategies**.

Currently there is a big pressure on all Pillars to deliver new projects, which sometimes strays away from their mission – strategic thinking and finding joint solutions. Instead, concrete actions should be built on the existing strategies and solutions by taking one step further. In this respect, Slovenia encourages all Pillars to give more focus to **capitalisation of existing results**, implemented activities and projects within the EUSAIR. Additionally, Slovenia is in favour of finding joint and strategic solutions by encouraging the existing pillars to develop their **inter-pillar systematic cooperation**. Additionally, **connecting the EUSAIR pillars to other macro-regional strategies'** priority areas (Action Groups within EUSALP or Priority Areas within the EUSDR) could become a guidance for EUSAIR Pillars in the future.



## **PILLAR 1: BLUE GROWTH**

Slovenia strongly encourages further development of joint solutions in the field of **Blue growth**. Nevertheless, there are some new **economic and demographic challenges** that require new focus or special attention to certain topics. On the **economic side**, nowadays many business opportunities and challenges should be additionally addressed or highlighted. One of them is the inclusion of **circular economy**, as well as innovation within the discussions on Blue Technologies, and also Fisheries and Aquaculture. Additionally, because of **demographic challenges** such as demographic decline, brain drain and aging in the region, **a growing need for professions of the future** and future provision of services, especially within the Maritime and Marine Governance and Services, calls for the inclusion of **skills development and capacity building**.

In order to bring forward the past work of TSG1, more focus should be given to **the capitalisation of results** that are deriving from numerous implemented projects. These results should become more visible and the solutions and past achievements should be more connected and shared among different stakeholders.

The addressing of **(1) Blue Technologies topic** is important and should be further addressed within the EUSAIR.

The importance of **the circular economy for the development of Blue technologies** could be highlighted by these examples/initiatives/lines to take:

- There are many waste materials and products that could be re-used in a production chain as a new raw material (i.e. discards, converting jellyfish into collagen, reuse of fishing nets...);
- The new Regional Maritime Lab could be explored that would serve as a Research Centre for the Adriatic-Ionian Sea for research of marine life, developing joint solutions for addressing climate changes, water safety issues and new marine technologies development, testing and pilot applications;
- In order to foster the productivity in different sub-sectors of Blue economy, new use of underwater robotic and use of other advanced technologies and advanced materials could be explored, but the opportunities lie also in green shipbuilding, ecological biodegradable coating of boats....;
- Encourage closing the loops in maritime and shipyard industry and diminishing fishery, maritime and shipyard industry waste by use of advanced technologies and novel managerial systems (such as collecting and reusing fishing nets by the frontrunner industry).

The addressing of circular economy is also needed in further discussions within the **(2) Fisheries and Aquaculture topic**. There are too many waste on daily basis in the fisheries sector (i.e. (discarded species or stocks that are not of commercial interest) and addressing their re-use should be put on the agenda as well.

Here are some examples of the importance of **circular economy in connection to the Fisheries and Aquaculture topic** that could be further addressed:

- Joint EUSAIR awareness rising actions and transfer of existing best practices in the EUSAIR to stimulate needed changes with circular behaviours, new business models development, scaling up and the necessary uptake of novel circular practices, supported by the use of advanced technologies; use working examples and best practices from other EU macro-regional strategies where applicable (i.e. Baltic, Alpine, Danube);
- The usage of new underwater robotic and other advanced technologies and advanced materials for increasing the productivity and optimisation of business practices or value recovery in different sub-sectors



of Blue Economy (for example use of sensors for tracking and/or detecting materials flow and/or decoupling, use of drones for surveillance of water and land use and use of already available open data on land/water uses for firefighting and sustainable mariculture/agriculture; refurbishing and reuse of fishing nets from mariculture, application of robots for monitoring marine life and underwater infrastructures, measuring sea warming and related changes with the biodiversity such as overgrowth of sea organisms like jellyfish that endanger other systems ; use of artificial intelligence, digital twin simulations, 3D prints, block chains and many other advanced technologies for various sectors of industries and maritime economy for products design, optimisation of business process and waste recovery);

- All emerging subsector of Blue Economy could be explored (Infrastructure - Submarine cables and Robotics, Ocean energy, Blue bio-economy and biotechnology, Desalination, Marine defence, security and surveillance, Research and education);
- Searching for solutions for short-chain supplies and closed loop solutions within the Adriatic and Ionian region and finding opportunities for developing and promoting the local brands and eco-designed solutions;
- Creating stimulating measures and instruments for developing new circular business models adaptation and exploitation of the advanced technologies and materials for cleaner sea, soil and air and reducing use of raw materials;
- Finding solutions for social problems of fishermen and workers in aquaculture, upskilling and reskilling, especially in times of economic crises, pandemics or other circumstances that might lead to the shortage of funding.

Within the **(3) Maritime and Marine Governance and Services topic**, Slovenia encourages the necessity of including the **skills development and capacity building** for introducing new advanced and digitally supported technologies, such as remote robotics, smart devices, sensorics, AI supported devices, digital twins, AI/VR technologies, IoT and other advanced technologies for use with designing, maintenance and development of port infrastructures, shipbuilding, maritime vessels etc. There is a new **demand for workforce** that has expertise on handling new advanced technologies, using advanced materials and smart devices.

Here are some examples of challenges related to the new **workforce skills and competences development**:

- Disappearance of apprenticeship that is crucial for further development of Blue economy, especially in the shipping industry (need for re-animation, enabling practical skills, the lack of national ship owners);
- Strengthen collaboration between technologically more advanced regions and “tech-savy” solution providers and the less technologically advanced regions and industries, i.e. traditional industries to accelerate transition to digitally supported circular economy;
- Small and medium enterprises should remain the driving force of innovations, but they are facing to many obstacles (unfavourable legislation, lack of funding, market size, underdeveloped innovation eco systems in the region etc.) to maintain their innovation potentials;
- **Demographic challenges** such as aging of population, the young generations are not attracted to the traditional professions, motivation is needed to attract and retain younger generations for the Blue economy professions, in particularly with the respect to the modern skills needed to operate and use digitally supported advanced technologies and digitally supported circular business solutions...);

## **PILLAR 2: CONNECTING THE REGION**

Regarding the aim of the pillar Connecting the Region Slovenia believes that all three topics (Maritime Transport, Intermodal Connections to the Hinterland, and Energy Networks) should remain in focus within the EUSAIR Action plan. Nevertheless, there are **social dimensions** that should be taken into account by the revision of the new Action plan. It is of vital importance to address **new and emerging skills, knowledge and professions of the future, shortages of skilled workers** within all three sub-



topics. Moreover, special focus should also be given to the strengthening of competences (capacity-building) of the existing and new stakeholders that should be aligned with the communication tools within the EUSAIR.

In addition, the challenges and opportunities in the field of **decarbonisation, digitalization and optimisation of maritime transport** could be further elaborated in relation to the smart and green ports flagship.

EU member states are promoters of an ambitious agenda for the decarbonisation of **(1) Maritime Transport** both at EU and at multilateral level. The development of smart and green ports should become a driving force within the Adriatic and Ionian region. More focus should be given to the activities related to **improving efficiency and connectivity** of all regional maritime ports, whilst following the path of **decarbonisation** of maritime transport, as outlined by existing EU legislation and the novel FIT for 55 legislative package.

Taking into account the recent legislative developments and obligations, more focus should be given to improving cooperation and sharing of best practices within the EUSAIR region on **ensuring on-shore power supply in TEN-T ports**. Moreover, possibilities for cooperation to provide **sufficient supply of alternative e-fuels for maritime transport** in the region should be encouraged. Due to safety and environmental risks related with the use of alternative fuels in maritime transport (i.e. LNG, hydrogen, ammonia), especially in semi-enclosed seas such as the Adriatic Sea, and the lack of research in this respect, Slovenia believes that planning of fixed (or mobile) infrastructure for such fuels should be done in careful and close consultation with neighbouring countries in order to adequately assess and mitigate cross-border risks.

We believe that **safety of maritime transport** must remain in focus of the Action plan and that the EUSAIR countries need to continue with their efforts to harmonize reporting standards, information sharing and vessel traffic-monitoring services within the region in order to provide the highest levels of safety and environmental protection. Slovenia will continue to support the efforts of EUSAIR countries in achieving their potentials regarding **digitalization and optimisation of maritime transport**.

Regarding optimisation of maritime transport and exchange of data (which are not classified as confidential or business secret) through maritime single windows or port community systems, we believe that there is merit in such projects, and that cooperation within the EUSAIR should be further promoted. In this regard, we should promote the concept of the **European Maritime Space** on the implementation of Motorways of the Sea and Short-sea shipping within the EUSAIR and the wider Eastern Mediterranean. This could reduce the pressures on the mainland transport routes, which would contribute to better connectivity of Adriatic and Ionian region of the east-west axis. Taking into account the current Action Plan we do not see major modifications would be needed in order to address the above-mentioned topics.

Slovenia is of the opinion that the **(2) Intermodal connections to the hinterland topic** is well described in the EUSAIR Action plan (dated 17.6.2014). It only needs to be up-dated to reflect better to present situation with regard to the current EU transport policy<sup>1</sup>. The main existing topics that should also be

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2014 several new key documents have been adopted by the Commission, such as:

- The European Green Deal (2020): targets laid down in the Fit for 55 package (July 2021);



addressed in the future are improved connectivity, enhanced interoperability, border crossings issue and efforts for deployment of ITS (digitalisation). Development of **resilient infrastructure** should be one of the priorities for all transport projects related to missing links and removal of bottlenecks, as well as when implementing extension of TEN-T network to the non-EU countries.

In addition, micro-mobility, in particular cycling for commuting and pleasure, could be put on agenda of activities of TSG2 subgroup transport.

**Transport safety** is a matter of great concern in the region, given the huge human and economic cost of accidents and should therefore be addressed as a matter of priority.

To sum up, Slovenia encourages all efforts towards better-connected, enhanced and sustainable mobility in the Adriatic and Ionian region.

### **PILLAR 3: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY**

Slovenia believes that the pillar Environmental Quality is of vital importance for the EUSAIR region for ensuring economic and social well-being for its people. Nevertheless, there is a need to upgrade the topics of the existing Pillar.

The **(1) Maritime Environment topic** should in its objectives and activities include the coastal environment, therefore Slovenia proposes to change the title of the topic into "**The Marine and Coastal Environment**".

The EUSAIR region should contribute to the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 – a long-term plan for protecting nature and reversing the degradation of ecosystems. The strategy aims to put Europe's biodiversity on the path to recovery by 2030 with benefits for people, the climate and the planet. This goal is also in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and with the objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Hence, the maritime and coastal biodiversity should be addressed with the following objectives:

- Technical measures for **flood safety** of the coast and coastal cities;
- Planning **green infrastructure** in public investments and including these plans in investment documentation;
- **Preservation of coastal habitats.**

There is also the increasing challenge in **Climate Change adaptation** as the Mediterranean area is identified as a hotspot by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and waste and water treatment, especially due to the excessive use of chemical and pharmaceutical products. One of the actions to be added to the sub-topic Pollution of the Sea is also **reduction and prevention of pollutants and in particular micro plastics** with filtration and upgrading of treatment plants.

**(2) Transnational Terrestrial Habitats and Biodiversity topic** should address threats to **terrestrial biodiversity** and by that contribute to the aim of EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the 2030 Agenda

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- The renewed Territorial Agenda 2030 (adopted on 1 December 2020);
  - Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (COM(2020) 789 final; 9.12.2020).



for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Slovenia believes that the topic should focus on protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems, with particular attention to the **ecological connectivity of blue and green corridors/infrastructure**.

The actions to be included in the Action plan should include **upgrading of Green infrastructure and greening of cities** in connection with drinking water, and Farm to Fork strategy.

In addition, Slovenia proposes to add a new topic within Pillar 3 - **Ballast water and other releases in the sea and water**.

Topic 3	Ballast water and other releases in the sea and water
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reducing the introduction of non-native species and pollutants into the sea;</li> <li>- Ensuring a good environmental status;</li> <li>- Technical equipment on ships for cleaning ballast water;</li> <li>- Introduce ship tracking - by discharge CISE system at the Maritime Administration;</li> </ul>

Pillar 3 is encouraging that the topic **circular economy is addressed as a horizontal theme**. Moreover, this topic has already been introduced within TSG3 with the past activities, especially with the preparation of the Green Matrix in 2017, which was approved by Governing Board in 2018. That activity pathed the way to the development of EU Green Deal and Greener EUSAIR based on Circular Economy topic. Within Environmental quality pillar the topic of circular economy would encourage activities for **improving the state of the environment**, such as Greening of maritime transport and transport in general and Ecosystem services.

In this respect it is of vital importance to find **synergies and joint actions and topics with other existing EUSAIR Pillars** and is advocating systematic inter-pillar cooperation.

Here are some specific suggestions of inter-pillar cooperation:

A) **CONNECTING THE REGION** (Pillar 2):

- Connecting the existing infrastructure into more efficient systems;
- Advocating for soft mobility;
- Investing in renewable resources in terms of blue and green growth (i.e. geothermal water, modernization of the existing infrastructure for a possible upgrade to RES ...)

B) **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM** (Pillar 4):

- Increased promotion of local natural and cultural identity, with increased emphasis on environmental recognition;
- Reduction of mass tourism and reorientation of tourism from coastal cities to rural areas.

In addition, **social topics** could be integrated into Pillar 3 by addressing the topics of raising the quality of living, addressing favourable microclimate and ensuring soft mobility.

#### **PILLAR 4: SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

Pillar Sustainable Tourism, addressing Diversified Tourism Offer and Sustainable and Responsible Tourism Management, is relevant for the EUSAIR. Nevertheless, Slovenia believes that the focus should be oriented towards the **resilience challenges, emerging social challenges and long-term sustainable tourism potentials**.



Currently, the EUSAIR area is witnessing the growing classical mass tourism, which is already causing negative effects on the environment. In the upcoming years, additional pressure might also be caused by the unstable conditions in the Eastern Europe.

In this respect, tourism in the Adriatic and Ionian region should not be driven only by the economic reasons, but should also take into account its prosperity in a way to become more **responsible and respectful towards the Adriatic Sea, hinterland and local communities**.

Slovenia encourages the development of the Pillar towards addressing the **challenges of the labour market in tourism, monitoring of trends** in tourism in relation to the current political situation, and addressing the management of emerging challenges due to **climate change** (i.e. the growing struggle of extreme, increasingly frequent and increasingly unpredicted extreme events of natural disasters like drought and fires, lack of water supply during the pick of touristic months, ...). Moreover, discussions and joint solution should be guided by **sustainable and carbon-neutral tourism** by also promoting accessibility towards public services. All these dimensions require shift towards new and alternative tourism concepts and long-term strategic approach.

Addressing these challenges are illustrated by the following examples/proposals/lines to take:

- Development of **"niche" tourism** in connection to the outdoor activities could encourage the extension of the tourist season from "summer" season to the whole year season. That could be supported by different gastronomic offers and cultural activities and with the inclusion of local population. This shift would also reduce the EUSAIR region form dependency on classical mass tourism.
- In order to ease the pressure of tourist flows during the peak season (classical mass tourism), the Adriatic and Ionian region should start **monitoring travel trends** in the region. In line with the Sustainable development goals, the UNWTO international network of sustainable tourism observatories is trending and in this respect also a macro-regional observatory or information centre could be developed in order to measure the impact of tourism on the cities/countries/region.
- Most of the tourist flows are still oriented towards tourism cities or centres, based around the coast of the Adriatic and Ionian region. In order to spread the tourist offer also to the hinterland of the Adriatic and Ionian region and rural areas a **strategy or masterplan** should be developed on how to attract and include local population in local tourism offer. The strategy also should take into account the **social and labour dimension**, such as permanent (not seasonal) workforce, tourist labour migration issues ... This kind of strategy could in the long run also contribute to the decline of the population in rural areas.
- The unavoidable **digitalisation solutions** in tourism and culture sector should also be addressed (i.e. in relation to tourism products, promotion, reservations ...), which would contribute to a balanced development of the Adriatic and Ionian region.
- There is also a decline or even lack of the **qualified labour force** in the tourism sector. In order to connect, involve and disseminate knowledge among all EUSAIR countries, Slovenia would propose to encourage (a) attracting local population to enter tourism sector and (b) capacity-building by organising **Annual forum of the main educational institutions in the field of tourism and hospitality** within the EUSAIR. The idea is to assemble young people and other population with the aim to showcase the essentials of working in tourism in an interesting, attractive way. These forums could also be an opportunity for discussions on how to promote **current and future professions in tourism and hospitality** (training, capacity building) in order to attract and motivate young people to be skilled and qualified in this sector. Finally, this might also lead to prevention of migration of labour market in tourism and increase the quality of the workforce.



## 2) SLOVENE PROPOSAL TOWARDS ADDRESSING OTHER TOPICS:

- **COMPETENCES AND SKILLS (*HORIZONTAL THEME OF ALL EXISTING PILLARS*):**

Slovenia advocates the promotion of competences and skills **within all existing EUSAIR Pillars**. Only proper addressing of this issue can give proper answers to the challenges of the modern society (transition to sustainable economy and society, de-population of aging society, brain drain, economic migration, digitalisation, green and blue transformation, inclusion of youth). Competences and skills are not only vital for the development of knowledge society, but also for institutional cooperation and sharing of experiences and best practices.

Constant investments in necessary competences and skills are crucial for capacity building of each individual through lifelong learning process. Nowadays, so-called competences of the future are becoming a necessity – from learning and gaining of "green skills" and digital skills to encouragement of developing creativity, innovative thinking and entrepreneurial skills throughout the educational system. Moreover, there is also growing trend of developing so-called soft skills.

**Slovenia strongly advocates the idea that social dimension should be properly addressed within the EUSAIR as a horizontal topic of all EUSAIR Pillars, especially focusing on development of competences and skills of the relevant institutions (universities, economic sectors, technological parks, competence centres ...) and stakeholders (students, existing labour force ...).**

- **CIRCULAR ECONOMY (*TO BE INCLUDED AS A HORIZONTAL THEME, ESPECIALLY INTO PILLAR 1 AND PILLAR 3*):**

Even though many topics are already covered within the EUSAIR, Slovenia believes that the highly relevant topic of **circular economy as a guiding tool for the transfer into green economy** is overlooked and should be integrated more specifically into EUSAIR Pillar 1 and Pillar 3 as the topic is related to the **climate changes mitigation** as well as achieving **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)**.

EUSAIR should also support its SMEs to transit to the circular economy through **digitalisation** and the **new green technologies** that enable them to make transition faster and in a more efficient way.

Slovenia strongly advocates EUSAIR to connect and cooperate with other macro-regional strategies that are supporting the circular economy topic (such as Circular4.0 community within EUSALP) to **enhance the value chains** within the relevant sectors of different EU macro-regional strategies.

Since Slovenia is not in favour of introducing new thematic pillars and different EUSAIR Pillars should cover the topic of circular economy horizontally, Slovenia encourages **Environmental quality pillar to take the role of the main coordinator of the activities**, related to circular economy topic. The activities should also pay attention to **skills and competences** development, and the **inclusion of young people** from the EUSAIR region.

**In line with the EU green deal and Digital Europe, Slovenia encourages a systematic approach to the circular economy development within the EUSAIR in order to speed up the process of economic transformation in the EUSAIR countries. Slovenia also encourages Environmental quality pillar to**



**take the role of the main coordinator on all EUSAIR Pillars activities, related to the circular economy topics and initiatives.**

- **INCLUSION OF YOUTH (*HORIZONTAL THEME OF ALL EXISTING PILLARS*):**

Systematic active inclusion of youth should become a priority within the EUSAIR, following the recommendations of the European Commission and the Youth Manifesto. EUSAIR should give young people from the region tools and mechanisms that would help them building their own capacities and allow them to develop innovative and entrepreneurial thinking in order to be properly equipped for tackling joint existing and future challenges within the EUSAIR region.

Slovenia is encouraging the approach, where the young people are involved on two levels that are interconnected – **(1) institutional level** (Youth Council) and **(2) implementing level** (within TSGs, POPRI project).

Slovenia strongly advocates inclusive and transparent process of inclusion of youth on the EUSAIR **institutional level** through establishing a Youth Council, whereby the youth genuinely represent younger generation from all EUSAIR countries. Nevertheless, by involving them on institutional level they would need support, guidance and assurance that their voice is not only noted, but also acknowledged at all possible governance EUSAIR levels (political declarations, EUSAIR revision of the Action Plan ...).

On the other hand, young EUSAIR generation should be involved on the **implementing level**, as well. They should be involved within all EUSAIR Pillars as co-creators of joint strategies, solutions and projects and as stakeholders, as well.

In order to keep them motivated, to give them a voice and to work on their **competences and skills**, Slovenia strongly supports continuing collaboration with the network of technology parks and the involvement of youth in the EUSAIR Thematic Steering Group discussions, where they should be given concrete challenges to work on. The young people have the motivation, the will and the energy to step-up to this responsibility and to start co-creating a sustainable future of the EUSAIR region.

Slovenia strongly advocates the already existing POPRI youth project<sup>2</sup> that helps (a) improving young people's skills and access to training opportunities, and (b) boosting employment for young people. The project has proven to be of great benefit for the young participants from the whole Adriatic and Ionian area, where they have gained knowledge also on regional cooperation and collaboration.

**Slovenia strongly advocates the inclusion of youth from the whole EUSAIR region on institutional level through Youth Council activities and on implementing level through youth inclusion into thematic discussions in order to develop their knowledge, skills and competences.**

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<sup>2</sup> The high representatives of EUSAIR have recognised the benefit of the EUSAIR POPRI youth project and adopted two political declarations, the Izola Declaration 2021 and the Tirana Declaration 2022.



- **ACCELERATING AND STRENGTHENING THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS**

EUSAIR represents an integrated framework for strengthening cooperation between countries, regions, communities and stakeholders living in them. Various reports have acknowledged that with successfully generated structures, networks, projects and processes, EUSAIR contributes to the EU's Enlargement policy. The Strategy brings a clear EU added value and also contributes to bringing Western Balkan countries closer to the EU by offering them opportunities for working closely with Member States, to address common challenges and opportunities in the Region.

EUSAIR can contribute to the enlargement process by easing the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* in the Western Balkan countries within each thematic pillar. Slovenia supports the processes and policies that could support the EU integration of the WB countries participating in the EUSAIR within each thematic pillar, however would prioritise **Blue Growth pillar** and within this pillar to encourage to focus on Smart Specialisation and the pillar **Environmental quality** in connection with circular economy and water management.

Slovenia is a strong supporter of the EU enlargement process and also strongly supports all mechanisms and initiatives, which would bring the region of the Western Balkans closer to the EU. Being involved in three macro-regional strategies (EUSAIR, EUSDR, EUSALP) that combine EU and non-EU countries gives Slovenia an additional **boost to find synergies and tools to accelerate the Enlargement process** to the Western Balkans. Hence, Slovenia would like to initiate **institutional exchange** with countries involved in the implementation of EUSAIR together with relevant EC Directorates-General to propose recommendations for possible improvements. We would like to focus on the needs and on possible solutions to unlocking the full potential of macro-regional cooperation. In particular, we would like to encourage future activities in **institutional capacity building** and effective coordination of all stakeholders, including the European Commission.

Slovenia also encourages future activities to be supported by the **active inclusion of young people from the whole Adriatic and Ionian region**, who would be representing the voice of the EUSAIR young generation. By that, they would get the opportunity to gain knowledge, skills and competences in order to co-create a sustainable Adriatic and Ionian future. Slovenia advocates the institutional capacity building and cooperation of the young people not only on joint EUSAIR thematic priorities (Blue growth, Connecting the region, Environmental quality and Sustainable tourism), but also on institutional priorities (governance, embedding ...).

**Slovenia is a strong supporter of the EU enlargement process. EUSAIR brings a clear EU added value for the Western Balkan countries and should contribute to the enlargement process by easing the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. EUSAIR should build on empowering cooperation of all countries in the region and on active inclusion of young people.**

- **PLATFORM FOR CONTINUOUS EXPLORATION AND EXPLOITATION OF POTENTIALS DERIVING FROM RESPECTFUL SMART SPECIALISATION STRATEGIES WITHIN THE EUSAIR (HORIZONTAL THEME OF ALL EXISTING PILLARS)**

Strategic areas and potentials on innovation and technology within the economic sector of EUSAIR countries have been developed through Smart Specialisation Strategies. Each country or region has



developed key strategic/priority areas based on the critical mass of the existing competences and economic potentials that have been identified through deep and overarching Entrepreneurial Discovery Process, involving all different stakeholders of quadruple helix. That helps and almost urges us to identify areas for further cooperation and specialisation not only within, but also outside our borders – on the level of macro regional cooperation.

Nevertheless, a joint model of potentials to be more recognised by the whole EUSAIR area is overlooked and should be developed by capitalisation and upscaling of existing results. By this approach, all governance structures within the EUSAIR would significantly contribute to the upscaling of productivity in the Adriatic and Ionian region and consequently to more productive and better use of cohesion funds within EUSAIR countries and regions in particular those for RDI, digitalisation, strengthening of SMEs and investments in knowledge and skills for Smart Specialisation strategies.

This approach will certainly have high positive impact to further strengthening of macro-regional cooperation (i.e. in the future by creating joint Smart Specialisation Strategy priorities).

**Since the basics of Smart Specialisation Strategies are necessary to be included into all existing EUSAIR Pillars, Slovenia would encourage this topic to become a horizontal topic of all EUSAIR Pillars. Slovenia is willing to coordinate this horizontal – Smart Specialisation Strategy topic.**