

A1.1. Report on current flagships and developed implementation formats

***EUSAIR Strategic project "Support to
Development and Implementation of
Strategic Implementation Formats –
SP4EUSAIR"***

October 2024

Contents:

1	Introduction.....	1
2	State of the art	6
2.1	Pillar 1 Blue Sustainable Economy	7
2.1.1	Scope of work	7
2.1.2	Implementation formats development path	9
2.1.3	Current state and implementation formats developed	10
2.1.4	Needs.....	14
2.2	Pillar 2 Connecting the Region – Transport.....	15
2.2.1	Scope of work	15
2.2.2	Implementation formats development path	17
2.2.3	Current state and implementation formats developed	18
2.2.4	Needs.....	20
2.3	Pillar 2 Connecting the Region - Energy.....	21
2.3.1	Scope of work	21
2.3.2	Implementation formats development path	23
2.3.3	Current state and implementation formats developed	25
2.3.4	Needs.....	28
2.4	Pillar 3 Environmental Quality	28
2.4.1	Scope of work	28
2.4.2	Implementation formats development path	31
2.4.3	Current state and implementation formats developed	32
2.4.4	Needs.....	35
2.5	Pillar 4 Sustainable Tourism	36
2.5.1	Scope of work	36
2.5.2	Implementation formats development path	38
2.5.3	Current state and implementation formats developed	39
2.5.4	Needs.....	42
2.6	Pillar 5 Improved Social Cohesion.....	43

SP4EUSAIR

2.6.1	Scope of work	43
2.6.2	Development path and current state	45
2.6.3	Needs.....	46
3	Best practices	48
3.1	EUSDR.....	48
3.1.1	Successful projects/initiatives	52
3.2	EUBSR.....	54
3.2.1	Successful projects/initiatives	56
3.3	EUSALP.....	57
3.3.1	Successful Projects/Initiatives	59
3.4	Interact	61
4	Conclusion	63
	Glossary of the EUSAIR structure:	65
	Literature	68
	Annexe 1	70

SP4EUSAIR

1 Introduction

The *European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region* – EUSAIR is a comprehensive macro-regional strategy focused on fostering multilevel and cross-sectoral cooperation to achieve economic prosperity, social inclusivity, better connectivity, and environmental sustainability within the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Given the fundamental limitations of its framework and the unique characteristics of macro-regional strategies, it has been evaluated with a focus on its role as a macro-regional strategy, its implementation mechanisms, operating mechanisms, and governance system. The *Evaluation of the EUSAIR*¹ was drafted in May 2022 and its main conclusions are:

- **Framework limitations and distinct features:** the EUSAIR operates under the constraints of no new legislation, funding, or institutions, which impacts its strategy fitness, delivery mechanisms, and governance structure.
- **Geographical and socio-economic disparities:** the Adriatic-Ionian Region is diverse, with significant disparities in institutional, social, demographic, cultural, and economic aspects. This heterogeneity affects the responsiveness to the Strategy and the speed at which concrete results can be achieved.
- **Common understanding and collaboration:** there is a lack of a unified vision and mission among key implementers. However, the Strategy has fostered dialogue, collaboration, and understanding among participating countries.
- **Strategic orientation and Policy Areas:** The Strategy's policy areas are considered adequate and flexible enough to accommodate updates. However, greater emphasis on digital and energy transitions, as well as themes related to EU enlargement, is needed.
- **Integration with European Policies:** the Strategy requires clearer and more operational links with key European policies like the Green Deal, RIS3, and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.
- **Territorial approach:** introducing a more pronounced territorial aspect could enhance the Strategy's effectiveness. This could involve adapting the Strategy to the specific needs of different regions (NUTS2 and NUTS3) and promoting a network of urban centres.
- **Action Plan and implementation:** the current Action Plan is broad and lacks prioritization, specific timelines, and defined funding sources. While significant work

¹ https://www.adriatic-ionician.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/EUSAIR-evaluation-v.3-final-delivery-CLEAN_F.pdf

SP4EUSAIR

has been done to narrow down priorities and identify projects, further refinement is needed.

- **Labelling and monitoring:** the labelling system for projects needs improvement and standardization across different Thematic Steering Groups - TSGs. The monitoring systems also vary, affecting the coherence of progress tracking.
- **Embedding and integration:** effective integration of EUSAIR priorities into mainstream national and regional programmes is crucial for progress. This requires robust documentation, project maturity, and alignment with financial programmes.
- **Governance structure:** the current governance structure is adequate but requires improvements, particularly at the country level. Stronger political backing and clearer roles and responsibilities for TSG members are essential.
- **Revision of the Action Plan:** A revision of the Action Plan is necessary to better reflect the Strategy's evolution and new EU strategic priorities. This should involve defining clear strategic objectives, standardizing TSG methodologies, and ensuring political support.

The Action Plan translates EUSAIR's objectives into tangible outcomes by identifying specific priorities for the Adriatic-Ionian Region. It addresses key challenges and opportunities in the Adriatic-Ionian Region through its structured Pillars and Topics. It outlines priorities and interventions, including policy coordination and networking, to be developed into concrete projects by TSGs and stakeholders. By operationalizing the EUSAIR, the Action Plan guides regional interventions and includes various implementation formats, such as projects and master plans, with cross-pillar initiatives promoting integrated approaches and collaboration.

In alignment with the *Evaluation of the EUSAIR* outcomes regarding the need for revision, the Revised EUSAIR Action Plan, developed between January 2022 and June 2023, is designed with a mid-term horizon extending to 2030. This plan highlights shortcomings of the old version of the Action Plan needed to adapt and improve to address emerging challenges and opportunities effectively, including:

- need for stronger mobilization of funds to effectively implement the strategy.
- improved monitoring tools to evaluate the impact of the EUSAIR and ensure its effectiveness

SP4EUSAIR

- the necessity for increased regional cooperation, particularly in equal opportunities, empowerment of women, youth engagement, and aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goals
- better alignment with evolving EU objectives and funding mechanisms, such as Structural Funds, IPA Funds, and Horizon Europe
- integration of New Pillar to address gaps related to social cohesion and ensure comprehensive coverage of social challenges.

Therefore, to address the challenges of the Adriatic-Ionian Region, the following pillars have been included in the Action Plan:

- **Pillar 1 – Blue Sustainable Economy**
- **Pillar 2 – Connecting the Region – sub-groups Transport and Energy**
- **Pillar 3 – Environmental Quality**
- **Pillar 4 – Sustainable Tourism**
- **Pillar 5 – Improved Social Cohesion.**

To facilitate the execution of the Strategy through targeted implementation formats and the strategic use of existing regional resources, aiming to foster more intelligent and efficient utilization, the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds of the Republic of Croatia has developed the *Support to Development and Implementation of Strategic Implementation Formats – SP4EUSAIR* project. This project and two other strategic projects (EUSAIR Facility Point and EUSAIR Stakeholders Point), aim to enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders to implement the EUSAIR by supporting its governance mechanisms. It will strengthen the EUSAIR governance structure, increase the impact of its actions in the Adriatic and Ionian Region, and promote regional cohesion through policy learning and multi-level governance. The main objective is to facilitate and enhance strategic project development to support cooperation and governance in the Adriatic and Ionian Region, aiding EUSAIR implementation. SP4EUSAIR will establish a quality and efficient framework for selecting strategic ideas based on existing EUSAIR flagships and developing implementation formats. It will also support the preparation of project proposals and facilitate the mapping process, enabling the capitalization and performance assessment of these proposals. The project's dynamic transnational approach will bring together policy-level and ground-level actors, fostering collaboration and multi-level solutions for the benefit of the entire Adriatic and Ionian Region.

This deliverable, developed within Work Package 1 *Development of Strategic Implementation Formats* and Activity 1.1 *Report on Current Flagships and Developed Implementation Formats*, presents a comprehensive report of existing documents and methodologies from the Facility Point and Facility Point Plus projects (2016-2023). These efforts are intended to define implementation formats and generate a list of selected formats to guide their development.

The deliverable will provide an overview of each Pillar, including the scope of work, implementation format development path, current state, and needs. The *Scope of Work* chapters will outline the primary focus areas of the Pillars, detailing the key challenges it aims to address, flagships, topics, and the targeted actions it will undertake to drive sustainable progress. As stated in the *Facilitating Strategic Project Development and Financial Dialogue Background Paper Work Package T.2 – Focused on Facilitating Strategic Project Development* document (July 2023, v.4), one of the most important missions of the EUSAIR is to involve a wide range of stakeholders to endorse the selected pillars and to point implementation formats under each pillar that appeared promising for responding to challenges shared by participating countries. The implementation format serves as a comprehensive framework that terminologically encompasses various projects and initiatives. These formats include diverse types such as strategic macro-regional projects, action plans, and master plans designed and developed by the TSGs to achieve their strategic goals. Chapters *Implementation Formats Development Path* and the *Current State and Implementation Formats* will detail how these formats are conceptualized, matured, and, where applicable, operationalized to ensure they effectively address specific needs and deliver measurable outcomes. Finally, the *Needs* chapter will assess the current requirements addressed by Pillar Coordinators to contribute to their objectives.

The description is based on information available from the Action Plan. Additionally, a mixed-methodology research approach was employed for a deeper understanding of the Pillars and implementation formats development. This research included both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative part involved an online survey, which preceded the qualitative component consisting of in-depth interviews with Pillar Coordinators. The purpose of the quantitative research was to collect data, while the qualitative research aimed to gain a deeper insight into the development of the Pillars and implementation formats. Also, the document will include the main conclusions from the Workshop – *Fostering Collaboration for Effective Development of Implementation Formats* and the interactive discussion with TSGs that was held as part of the 9th EUSAIR Annual Forum in Šibenik on May 16, 2024. This discussion aimed to exchange opinions on implementation formats included in the revised Action Plan (version 9, September 2024).

In addition, the document will provide an overview of best practice examples from other macro-regional strategies, such as the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region as well as insight into the *Policy-action process to deliver unique macro-regional value-added* input paper developed by Interact.

2 State of the art

The EUSAIR's Facility Point project 2016 – 2022² was funded under Priority Axis 4 – *Supporting the governance of the EUSAIR* of the Interreg Adrion programme with a total budget allocation of 11.501.170 EUR. It was coordinated by the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development of the Republic of Slovenia and has been designed to promote and facilitate the implementation of the Strategy. Its primary responsibility includes providing operational support to the EUSAIR's governance structures and supporting the EUSAIR Governing Board and the four TSGs, which involve ten countries from the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

In the early years, the EUSAIR Facility Point project focused on establishing the foundation for EUSAIR by organizing meetings, defining procedures and setting up document repositories. It included the following work packages (WP): *WPM Management*, *WP T.1 Assistance to Governing Board and Thematic Steering Groups*, *WP T.2 Facilitating strategic project development and financial dialogue*, *WP T.3 Building capacities for monitoring and evaluation of EUSAIR*, *WP T.4 Developing and managing the EUSAIR Stakeholder platform* and *WP C Communication* which were jointly implemented by partners and contributed to the Strategy implementation. Recognizing the importance of innovation in addressing regional disparities, external experts, engaged within the project, held capacity-building events, and produced thematic issue papers to guide the Action Plan and flagship projects. Key successes include establishing a robust governance support system, enhancing collaboration among eight participating countries, and providing operational assistance to EUSAIR's Governing Board and TSGs. The project facilitated strategic project development and financial dialogues, developed a comprehensive EUSAIR Stakeholder Platform to enhance regional engagement, and produced thematic issue papers and studies to guide actions within various Pillars. Additionally, the project organized over 30 thematic events and five national capacity-building initiatives, significantly contributing to capacity-building, strategic communication, and the alignment of macro-regional priorities with EU funding programmes. Collaboration between TSGs, stakeholders, and the Facility Point led to implementation formats' development, resulting in 25 outputs (strategic projects, action plans, master plans.) from 2016 to 2022. Moreover, during the EUSAIR Facility Point project, the EUSAIR Action plan was revised several times.

Facility Point Plus was an extension of the EUSAIR Facility Point project, designed to further enhance and support the implementation of EUSAIR, lasted from January 1st 2017 to December 31st 2021 and focused on improving the capacities of key actors involved in

² <https://www.adriatic-ionician.eu/about-eusair/facility-point/>, <https://eusairfacilitypoint.adrioninterreg.eu>

EUSAIR, strengthening coordination and cooperation among participating countries, and ensuring effective implementation of the strategy.

Building upon the key results, experiences, and lessons learned from the Facility Point implementation between 2016-2023, a new EUSAIR Facility Point strategic project, mentioned previously, with SP4EUSAIR and EUSAIR Stakeholders Point project represents a new phase of support for the EUSAIR governance structures, reinforced by an expanded partnership that integrated institutions across all EUSAIR participating countries while also addressing recent development related to the EUSAIR and Action Plan implementation.

2.1 Pillar 1 Blue Sustainable Economy

2.1.1 Scope of work

Due to the abundant water resources in the region, the blue economy, which integrates land-based and marine-based endeavours such as fish processing, sensor manufacturing, and utilization of fish by-products, is particularly developed in the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Given the significance of the sector for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, Pillar 1, coordinated by Greece and Montenegro, is dedicated to harnessing and enhancing the region's natural resources to foster innovation, sustainability, and economic resilience across coastal and inland sectors.

However, based on the information from the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*, the further progress of the blue economy sector in the Adriatic-Ionian Region is influenced by different challenges, including:

- **Imbalances in innovative capacity and research networks:** disparities in the ability to innovate and access to research networks hinder collaborative advancements across the region.
- **Differences in access to funding and administrative capacity:** varied access to funding and administrative resources between EU and candidate countries limits the region's overall research and development potential.
- **Obsolete technologies and support schemes:** candidate countries face challenges due to outdated technologies and insufficient support schemes, hampering their ability to innovate and compete effectively.
- **Overexploitation of national resources:** unsustainable exploitation of natural resources threatens local fauna and pollutes the environment with excessive nutrients, pesticides, and antibiotics.

SP4EUSAIR

- **Ineffective waste management:** inadequate waste management practices contribute to the accumulation of marine litter, posing environmental and economic challenges for the region.
- **Vulnerability to climate change:** The Adriatic-Ionian Region's sensitivity to climate change exacerbates existing environmental pressures, impacting ecosystems and livelihoods.

The EUSAIR initiative focuses on advancing sustainable resource use, innovation, and regional cooperation to strengthen the blue economy. Pillar 1 aligns with the Adriatic-Ionian Region's goals of leveraging water resources and biodiversity for sustainable development, addressing environmental challenges, and fostering innovation. Key flagships have been identified to support these objectives and enhance the blue economy sector:

- **Flagship 1.1.** Fostering quadruple helix ties in the field of marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnologies for advancing innovation, business development, and business adaptation in the blue bioeconomy
- **Flagship 1.2.** Promoting sustainability, diversification, and competitiveness in the fisheries sector through education, research and development, administrative, technological, and marketing actions, including the promotion of initiatives on marketing standards and healthy nutritional habits
- **Flagship 1.3.** Bolstering capacity building and efficient coordination of planning and local development activities for improving marine and maritime governance and blue growth services.

By addressing key challenges and seizing opportunities, the Adriatic-Ionian Region strives to ensure long-term prosperity, environmental integrity, and global competitiveness in blue economy sectors. In alignment with these goals, three strategic topics (Blue and Green Technologies, Fisheries and Aquaculture, Maritime and Marine Governance and Services) were defined to contribute to the flagship initiatives. The following table provides an overview of the state of these topics, including recent developments and actions.

Table 1 Pillar 1 Topics and Actions Overview

Pillar 1 Topics and Actions	
Topic 1.1 – Blue and Green Technologies	
Description	This topic aims to advance the region's technological expertise in green and blue (bio) technologies by fostering collaborative innovation ecosystems, thereby increasing patent filings and sustainable economic activities. By emphasizing novel technologies and strengthening research networks, the goal is to enhance global competitiveness in maritime, fisheries, and aquaculture markets while protecting aquatic environments.
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.1. Building Adriatic-Ionian Region innovation ecosystems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies
Topic 1.2 – Fisheries and Aquaculture	
Description	The core aim is to enhance the Adriatic-Ionian Region's fisheries and aquaculture sectors by making them more sustainable, resilient, and competitive through transparent information systems. Efforts also focus on meeting rising market demands sustainably, positioning the region as a leader in responsible fisheries management and aquaculture practices.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.2.1. Sustainable, resilient, and competitive fisheries in the Adriatic-Ionian Region 1.2.2. Sustainable, resilient, and competitive aquaculture in the Adriatic-Ionian region aims
Topic 1.3 – Maritime and Marine Governance and Services	
Description	Governance and service excellence are pivotal for the effective management of maritime and marine sectors. By strengthening institutional capacities and fostering international cooperation, the region aims to achieve resilient maritime governance, supporting economic development while safeguarding marine ecosystems.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.3.1. Institutional capacity to harmonise standards and regulations to improve sustainable governance and use of maritime and marine resources 1.3.2. Data exchange and knowledge sharing 1.3.3. Promote the development of skills and digital technological tools in the maritime industry and territorial spatial planning, governance and services

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan

The actions aim to foster common understandings, harmonized standards, and sharing of the best practices, thus enhancing maritime and marine services governance, improving policy and decision-making, and supporting the adoption of digital tools and skills in maritime and spatial planning.

2.1.2 Implementation formats development path

As its preferred implementation format, the TSG1 focused on mono-pillar projects. According to the information provided by Pillar 1 Coordinator and Deputy Pillar Coordinator through an in-depth interview, the development path followed a detailed process that transitioned from initial idea generation to project proposal submission. Initially, ideas were sourced from Greek partners and a diverse array of stakeholders via a public call issued as part of the Facility Point project. As stated in the online survey, stakeholders participated in focus groups designed to identify critical territorial challenges. These challenges were subsequently translated into ideas aimed at addressing key strategic priorities for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, specifically within the domains of the blue economy, fisheries, and aquaculture.

The TSG1 was integral in evaluating the ideas and selecting those for further development as mono-pillar projects, thus ensuring the alignment with the strategic objectives of Pillar 1. Following this, external consultant, contracted within the Facility Point project, took over the task of developing comprehensive project proposals. The consultant was responsible for drafting the project applications and identifying lead partners, thus converting selected mono-pillar projects into detailed proposals ready for submission.

The Pillar Coordinator (PC) stated that all selected projects were intended for submission under the Interreg IPA Adrion programme, as it supports initiatives that are specifically tailored to address the unique challenges and opportunities of the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

Based on the information provided by PC and Deputy PC during the interview, the following challenges have been identified:

- **Complex initial project development phases:** as noted at the EUSAIR Forum, the process of developing projects is lengthy and yields few results, likely due to the established procedures and typical durations involved. The PC and Deputy PC confirmed this, stating that transitioning from conceptual ideas to fully developed project proposals was notably complex and time-consuming. They suggested that simplifying the initial stages and implementing an unofficial pre-submission screening of projects could facilitate smoother development processes.
- **Monitoring:** the PC stated that monitoring project proposals development and application stages posed a significant challenge. Despite biannual updates to the PC and the TSG1, there is a recognized need for a more effective monitoring system. An online project management tool could enable real-time tracking and enhance oversight, addressing gaps in information flow and facilitating more efficient project management.
- **Stakeholders' engagement:** the PC stated that the involvement of both landlocked and maritime countries adds complexity, as the theme is primarily maritime. Therefore, they face significant difficulties in engaging member countries. Additionally, TSG1 members are often unfamiliar with the networking process with interested parties within their countries and how to engage them in the implementation formats development process.

2.1.3 Current state and implementation formats developed

As stated in the previous chapter, the TSG1 focused on developing strategic projects as their implementation format. Under Pillar 1, a total of five dedicated strategic projects have been developed. The following table provides an overview of the key strategic projects

developed to contribute to these goals, flagships, topics, and actions under which they are developed, as well as their current status.

Table 2 Pillar 1 Implementation Format Overview

Implementation format	
AIM-FRISH - Evaluating freshness and authenticity with real-time non-destructive methods to increase the value-added of Adriatic Ionian microregion-produced fish	
Description	The project aims to assess fish freshness and predict shelf life for Adriatic-Ionian Region fish using non-destructive methods and portable devices. It combines sensory, chemical, and microbiological analyses to enhance quality, safety, and market competitiveness while maximizing fish product value.
Flagships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1. Fostering quadruple helix ties in the field of marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnologies for advancing innovation, business development, and business adaptation in the blue bioeconomy 1.2. Promoting sustainability, diversification, and competitiveness in the fisheries sector through education, research and development, administrative, technological, and marketing actions, including the promotion of initiatives on marketing standards and healthy nutritional habits
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.1. Building Adriatic-Ionian Region innovation ecosystems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies 1.2.1. Sustainable, resilient, and competitive fisheries in the Adriatic-Ionian Region
Status	The project proposal has been submitted to the First Call for Proposals of the Interreg IPA Adrion Programme 2021 – 2027. The proposal did not pass the Admissibility and Eligibility Check phase and it will be resubmitted to the next Call
AMOS – Developing a cost-effective observatory system, tailored to the needs of Aquacultures with remote access, real-time data, and forecast capabilities	
Description	The project seeks to develop a cost-effective marine observatory system for aquaculture, featuring remote access, real-time data transmission, and forecasting capabilities. It will involve analysing existing systems, defining requirements, designing a unified architecture, and implementing the system to enhance monitoring, drive innovation, and integrate with aquaculture management.
Flagships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1. Fostering quadruple helix ties in the field of marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnologies for advancing innovation, business development, and business adaptation in the blue bioeconomy 1.2. Promoting sustainability, diversification, and competitiveness in the fisheries sector through education, research and development, administrative, technological, and marketing actions, including the promotion of initiatives on marketing standards and healthy nutritional habits
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.1. Building Adriatic-Ionian Region innovation ecosystems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies 1.2.2. Sustainable, resilient, and competitive aquaculture in the Adriatic-Ionian region aims
Status	The project proposal will be submitted to the next Call for Proposals of the Interreg IPA Adrion Programme 2021 – 2027.
EURYNOME – The Effects of anthropogenic pressures and climate change in the nutritional and commercial value of two small pelagic fish species of importance to ADRION region fisheries: Biodiversity and energy flow from the Ecosystem to the final product	
Description	The project investigates how climate variability impacts the diet and nutritional properties of key fish species, which are vital for marine energy and essential fatty acids. It aims to forecast effects on fisheries, enhance processing

Implementation format	
	efficiency, promote sustainable practices, and advance ecological understanding.
Flagships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.2. Promoting sustainability, diversification, and competitiveness in the fisheries sector through education, research and development, administrative, technological, and marketing actions, including the promotion of initiatives on marketing standards and healthy nutritional habits
Actions	n/a ³
Status	The project proposal will be submitted to the next Call for Proposals of the Interreg IPA Adrion Programme 2021 – 2027.
FishTourAIR – Fishing tourism and ichthyotourism diversification activities in the Adriatic-Ionian Region	
Description	The project aims to enhance fishing and ichthyotourism in the Adriatic-Ionian Region by addressing infrastructure, legal, and safety aspects across marine and freshwater environments. It will also assess training needs, broaden the tourism context, and improve operational capabilities, infrastructure, and legislative frameworks to support and diversify these activities.
Flagships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.2. Promoting sustainability, diversification, and competitiveness in the fisheries sector through education, research and development, administrative, technological, and marketing actions, including the promotion of initiatives on marketing standards and healthy nutritional habits
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.2.1. Sustainable, resilient, and competitive fisheries in the Adriatic-Ionian Region
Status	The project proposal will be submitted to the next Call for Proposals of the Interreg IPA Adrion Programme 2021 – 2027.
SeaSusPack – Sustainable packaging of fish and seafood based on marine bioresources	
Description	The project aims to revolutionize fish and seafood packaging for the EU market by developing eco-friendly, biodegradable materials derived from marine bioresources, improving product quality, and extending shelf life. It focuses on supporting Blue Growth objectives, enhancing food safety, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration to drive sustainability and operational efficiency in the seafood industry.
Flagships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1. Fostering quadruple helix ties in the field of marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnologies for advancing innovation, business development, and business adaptation in the blue bioeconomy 1.2. Promoting sustainability, diversification, and competitiveness in the fisheries sector through education, research and development, administrative, technological, and marketing actions, including the promotion of initiatives on marketing standards and healthy nutritional habits
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.1. Building Adriatic-Ionian Region innovation ecosystems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies 1.2.1. Sustainable, resilient, and competitive fisheries in the Adriatic-Ionian Region 1.2.2. Sustainable, resilient, and competitive aquaculture in the Adriatic-Ionian region aims
Status	The project proposal has been submitted to the First Call for Proposals of the Interreg IPA Adrion Programme 2021 – 2027. The proposal did not pass the Admissibility and Eligibility Check phase and it will be resubmitted to the next Call.

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan, TSGI1 Strategic Project Implementation document, in-depth interview

Out of the five selected strategic projects, two were submitted to the Interreg IPA Adrion programme calls. However, these proposals were rejected during the Admissibility and

³ Information is not available.

Eligibility Check phase. The PC also noted that the projects were overly focused on scientific research and technological innovations, which did not align well with the practical, region-specific criteria of the Interreg IPA Adrion programme. Additionally, they received advice from consultants to consider additional funding sources beyond Interreg IPA Adrion, but PC believes that other calls might not fully address the needs of the macro-region as effectively.

Consequently, the plan for the upcoming period (2024-2027) is to refine the two rejected proposals to enhance their alignment with funding requirements and the Programme expectations and resubmit them in the upcoming calls, as well as to develop proposals for the remaining three strategic projects. This approach aims to foster collaboration among Adriatic-Ionian countries and ensure that the strategic projects are more applicable and relevant to the region's needs.

Greek representatives of Pillar 1 continue to develop and advance the Pillar's objectives by assembling a dedicated team of stakeholders in blue technology, aquaculture, and fishery. This team, consisting of members from administration, project management, academia, and research, aims to access macro-regional data to collaboratively discuss and work on projects, offering advice and assistance throughout the development process. In addition, if relevant, the stakeholders will propose and discuss their own projects with the TSG1, and then seek interested collaborators.

Besides the mono-pillar projects, three cross-pillar projects were developed in cooperation with other TSGs to address interconnected strategic priorities and enhance integrated regional development. However, representatives from Pillar 1 were not actively involved in this process and consequently did not receive updates or feedback on their progress. The list includes the following projects:

- **BLUECULTURE** – Development of Macro-Regional Cluster on BlueCulture Technologies and creation of International Competence Centre (Pillars 1 and 4). Within Pillar 1 is developed under Flagship 1.1 Fostering quadruple helix ties in the field of marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnologies for advancing innovation, business development, and business adaptation in the blue bioeconomy (Action 1.1.1 Building Adriatic-Ionian Region innovation ecosystems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies). Also, the project was presented at 18th TSG1 meeting held on December 12th 2023
- **WAI-TP: WATERBORNE** – Adriatic-Ionian Technology Platform (Pillars 1 and 2 Transport). Within Pillar 1 is developed under Flagships 1.1 Fostering quadruple helix ties in the field of marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnologies

SP4EUSAIR

for advancing innovation, business development, and business adaptation in the blue bioeconomy (Action 1.1.1 Building Adriatic-Ionian Region innovation ecosystems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies) and 1.3 Bolstering capacity building and efficient coordination of planning and local development activities for improving marine and maritime governance and blue growth services (Action 1.3.1. Institutional capacity to harmonise standards and regulations to improve sustainable governance and use of maritime and marine resources).

- **ICZM&MSP** – Establishment a Community for the sustainable management of maritime activities in the AIR. Using high quality research to strengthen dialogues and institutional capacities for effective implementation of MSP/ICZM in support of inclusive and sustainable growth in the AIR. (Pillars 1 and 3). Within Pillar 1 is developed under Flagship 1.3 Bolstering capacity building and efficient coordination of planning and local development activities for improving marine and maritime governance and blue growth services (Action 1.3.1. Institutional capacity to harmonise standards and regulations to improve sustainable governance and use of maritime and marine resources).

2.1.4 Needs

Based on the information provided during the interview, the following needs have been identified as crucial for further development of Pillar 1:

- **New project development mechanism:** a flexible mechanism that connects stakeholders from the local level across different participating countries, reducing the time required for project development.
- **Enhanced collaboration:** encouraging cooperation between EU member and non-member states to foster closer ties and facilitate EU integration of non-member states.
- **Engagement and Responsibility:** due to the lack of specific skills in cooperating with stakeholders, TSG1 members should familiarize themselves with tools and strategies that encourage more active and engaged participation from participating countries and stakeholders. This includes specific responsibilities to ensure that the diverse needs and voices of different countries are recognized and addressed. As a result, the PC has concluded that future projects should be more practically oriented, to better meet the immediate needs of the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

SP4EUSAIR

- **Action Plan and Evaluation:** utilizing the new Action Plan as a tool, along with indicators and evaluation metrics, to respect differences between pillars and effectively address their unique challenges.

2.2 Pillar 2 Connecting the Region – Transport

2.2.1 Scope of work

The Adriatic-Ionian Region, characterized by its diverse geography – including coastal, mountainous, and insular areas – requires substantial investments in technical infrastructure due to its uneven connectivity. To address these issues, it is imperative to improve governance in transport and digital mobility systems. Therefore, through Pillar 2 sub-group Transport, coordinated by Italy, Serbia, and North Macedonia, the main focus is on advancing transport connectivity and infrastructure within the Adriatic-Ionian Region. This pillar addresses the critical need to modernize and integrate transport systems across the diverse geographical landscape of the region. Key flagships and its components supporting the sup-group Transport are:

- **Flagship 2.1:** The Adriatic-Ionian multi-modal corridors and components Green and Smart Ports and Adriatic-Ionian Cycle Routes
- **Flagship 2.4.:** Development and operation of logistics for direct LNG use as clean fuel for the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Based on the information provided in the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*, the following have been identified as the main issues regarding the transport systems:

- **Underdeveloped railway infrastructure:** railway transportation is lagging behind the EU average both in terms of infrastructure, as well as in service provision both for freight and passengers; this reflects also on the shift of travel demand flows to rail transport.
- **Deficient road transport systems:** The Adriatic-Ionian Region countries face significant shortcomings in road infrastructure, lagging behind the EU average in terms of modernization and capacity, impacting freight and passenger transport efficiency. Unsafe roads further compound transportation challenges, necessitating substantial investments in infrastructure upgrades and safety measures to enhance regional connectivity and economic development.
- **Inadequate airport capacity and city connections:** the network of airports has inadequate capacity to sustain tourism development and connectivity in general, mostly due to issues concerning the economy of scale of the related catchment area.

By targeting improvements in key areas of transport and infrastructure (Maritime Transport, Intermodal Connectivity, Urban Nodes), the main objective is to create a more cohesive and efficient regional transport network. These initiatives are pivotal for improving regional connectivity and fostering sustainable economic development.

To achieve its overall objective and specific objectives Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport identified three topics including a range of targeted actions and projects designed to tackle the core challenges and seize the opportunities within the transport sector.

Based on the information from the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*, the following table provides insights into how the region is addressing its transport and infrastructure needs and the progress made toward contributing to the strategic objectives of Pillar 2.

Table 3 Pillar 2 (Transport) Topics and Actions Overview

Pillar 2 (Transport) Topics and Actions	
Topic 2.1 Maritime transport	
Description	In the Adriatic-Ionian Region, initiatives aim to invest in advancing port safety, efficiency, and sustainability achieving EU standards. Key actions include implementing advanced monitoring systems, improving green port infrastructure, promoting IT system interoperability, and increasing environmental certifications for ports to support economic growth and environmental stewardship.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1.1. Improving and harmonising traffic monitoring and management by expanding the use of vessel traffic monitoring and information system (VTMIS) 2.1.2. Improvement of the interoperability of IT systems and solutions in ports including the development and/or improvement of the Port Community System (PCS) 2.1.3. Monitoring emissions, water quality, and air quality
Topic 2.2 Multimodal connectivity	
Description	The objective is to enhance multimodal transport connections across the Adriatic-Ionian Region by integrating maritime, rail, road networks, and airports. This involves investing in ICT infrastructure, enhancing rail connectivity, and upgrading transport facilities to address bottlenecks and align with TEN-T standards, thus fostering regional economic growth and sustainability.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.2.1. Support the implementation of ICT infrastructure at nodes and along logistics chains, as well as systems interoperability in the Adriatic-Ionian Region 2.2.2. Upgrade of the network to provide continued and interoperable international rail links between countries, also by elaborating integrated planning for infrastructure developments and defining joint roadmaps for investments 2.2.3. Increase rail and road transport capacity and quality (remove missing links and bottlenecks; complete rail reforms) in Strategy countries and upgrade the rail and road network of the region to TEN-T standards
Topic 2.3 – Urban nodes	
Description	The goal is to advance urban mobility by promoting low-emission transportation and sustainable practices across borders. This includes encouraging Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP), enhancing integrated public transport services, and improving cycling infrastructure in urban areas throughout the region.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.3.1. Boost the uptake of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) initiatives, especially in urban nodes with strong urbanisation trends, including co-design of solutions for local mobility 2.3.2. Promote the diffusion of integrated fare and single ticketing solutions 2.3.3. Support the realisation of cycling lanes and networks and other measures for the promotion of cycling mobility

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan

Example of actions to foster a more connected, resilient, and environmentally responsible Adriatic-Ionian Region are: a) optimizing transport efficiency through improved ICT infrastructure and interoperability across maritime, rail, road, and air transport, and b) advancing urban mobility with Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans and expanded cycling infrastructure.

2.2.2 Implementation formats development path

During an in-depth interview, the PC leading the sub-group for transport stated that this Pillar represents a comprehensive approach to creating integrated transport routes that facilitate the efficient movement of goods and people across the region. Due to transport projects' complexity, the Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport has followed a distinct approach compared to other pillars in the implementation formats development process:

- 1. Development of the Adriatic-Ionian Master Plan of Transport:** The Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport prioritized the creation of a strategic master plan including strategic projects conceived to bridge up the accessibility gaps in the Region. The plan required extensive data collection and the engagement with Stakeholders such as Ministries, port authorities, railway operators, etc. It aims to integrate the macro-regional dimension into national planning and ensure coherence across the region.
- 2. Creation of a List of Strategic Projects:** In 2016 the Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport initiated the "labelling" process – identifying strategic projects deemed of interest for countries of the Adriatic-Ionian Region, the European Commission, and different stakeholders. The labelling strategy focused on ensuring that the strategic projects were relevant to the macro-region, transcending national levels, and pertinent to all countries participating in the development of EUSAIR. During the period 2017-2023, about 50 projects received the EUSAIR-label.

Additionally, in 2022, the Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport began identifying flagships as part of an exercise directed by the Governing Board. The focus was on embedding EUSAIR priorities in European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes, i.e., Interreg programmes. Flagship projects, such as the Adriatic-Ionian cycling route and green and smart ports, were defined to guide funding priorities in Interreg programmes. This process involved joint discussions and the development of priorities between TSG2 on Transport and managing authorities of Interreg programmes through Action Labs. Consequently, managing authorities of Interreg programmes identified specific actions within their calls for proposals to align with these flagship initiatives.

Based on the interview with the PC, the following challenges have been recognized as crucial for the Pillar 2 (Transport):

- **Updated data on transport demand-supply:** The Adriatic-Ionian Master Plan of Transport is based on pre-pandemic data (2017), which is no longer accurate due to significant changes such as the revision of the TEN-T network and the completion of important infrastructure projects.
- **Lack of financial resources:** Financing transport projects are expensive, which adds complexity to project development and necessitates careful prioritization and resource allocation. Additionally, the Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport lacks the financial resources required for development and implementation of specific transport projects.

2.2.3 Current state and implementation formats developed

In alignment with the strategic objectives, one Master Plan and one strategic project have been developed. Together, they are designed to address critical needs in the region's transport infrastructure, enhance intermodal connectivity, and promote sustainable transport practices. They aim to support economic growth, improve regional cohesion, and advance the overall goals of Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport.

The following table provides a detailed examination of the Master Plan and strategic project, outlining their objectives, anticipated impacts, and their role in advancing the transport and connectivity agenda of Pillar 2 (Transport).

Table 4 Pillar 2 (Transport) Implementation Formats Overview

Implementation formats	
Adriatic Ionian Region Master Plan for Transport	
Description	Master Plan is designed to enhance transport interconnectivity in the Adriatic-Ionian Region, aligning with the EU's Single European Transport Area policies, enlargement goals, and Cooperation with Neighbouring Countries. It aims to identify and support macro-regionally significant projects, focusing on creating a competitive, resource-efficient transport system that emphasizes maritime transport and green, multimodal accessibility. The Master Plan provides a long-term strategy and vision for the development of the transport system in the Adriatic-Ionian region until 2030, shared among the EUSAIR Countries. The EUSAIR Master Plan of Transport comprises seven volumes, each addressing a mode of transport.
Flagships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.1. The Adriatic-Ionian multi-modal corridors
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.1.1. Improving and harmonising traffic monitoring and management by expanding the use of vessel traffic monitoring and information system (VTMIS) • 2.1.2. Improvement of the interoperability of IT systems and solutions in ports including the development and/or improvement of the Port Community System (PCS) • 2.1.3. Monitoring emissions, water quality and air quality • 2.2.1. Support the implementation of ICT infrastructure at nodes and along logistics chains, as well as systems interoperability in the Adriatic-Ionian Region

Implementation formats	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.2.2. Upgrade of the network to provide continued and interoperable international rail links between countries, also by elaborating integrated planning for infrastructure developments and defining joint roadmaps for investments 2.2.3. Increase rail and road transport capacity and quality (remove missing links and bottlenecks; complete rail reforms) in Strategy countries and upgrade the rail and road network of the region to TEN-T standards 2.3.1. Boost the uptake of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) initiatives especially in urban nodes with strong urbanisation trends, including co-design of solutions for local mobility 2.3.2. Promote the diffusion of integrated fare and single ticketing solutions 2.3.3. Support the realisation of cycling lanes and networks and other measures for the promotion of cycling mobility
Status	Given the TSG's lack of financial resources for implementing specific transport projects, Pillar 2 (Transport) leveraged the Facility Point project for technical assistance. This support enabled the preparation of feasibility studies for three key projects: Multimodal Corridor VIII, Blue Motorways projects, and Adriatic-Ionian Cycle Tour. These studies aimed to enhance the attractiveness of these projects for funding from both private investors and public bodies.
GraSP Study - Green and Smart Ports Study	
Description	The GraSP Study supports the EU's climate neutrality goal by 2050 through the development of Green and Smart Ports, crucial for reducing transport emissions as outlined in the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy and the Fit for 55 packages. It aims to enhance stakeholders' capacity to implement sustainable practices and smart technologies in ports.
Flagships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1. The Adriatic-Ionian multi-modal corridors
Actions	n/a
Status	The study, providing recommendations for the TSG members, ETC programme managing authorities, regional and local authorities, and the port sector industry to develop and implement the Green and Smart Ports Project, has been developed.

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan, TSG2 Strategic Project Implementation document, in-depth interview

The PC stated that the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and National Bodies are central to the achievement of the Master Plan's vision. They facilitate the alignment of large-scale infrastructure projects with the strategic objectives outlined in the Master Plan, ensuring that investments are coherent with both national and regional priorities. The Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport members were included in the national programming phase, allowing them to align the national infrastructural investment programmes with the Master Plan vision. In addition, Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport regularly collaborates with the Managing Bodies of WBIF, who are always invited to TSG meetings. The WBIF Transport Community included Pillar 2 (Transport) on its list and regularly monitors them.

In cooperation with other TSGs, two cross-pillar projects were proposed within the Facility Point Plus project. The project developed in cooperation with TSG4, aimed at enhancing transport accessibility and tourism along the Adriatic-Ionian cycling routes, was not funded and later developed as a mono-pillar project. The project developed in cooperation with TSG1, which focused on energy and economic aspects, was not pursued, and the allocated

funds were returned to the European Commission. Currently, there are no active cross-pillar projects.

The following cross-pillar projects have been developed:

- **WAI-TP: WATERBORNE** - Adriatic-Ionian Technology Platform (Pillars 1 and 2 Transport). Within Pillar 2 is developed under Flagship 2.4 Development and operation of logistics for direct LNG use as clean fuel for the Adriatic-Ionian region. The project has been developed only at the ideation phase and submitted to Facility Point Plus call on April 10th 2019.
- **ADRIONCYCLETOUT** - ADRIatic IONian CYCLE route for sustainable TOURism (Pillars 2 – Transport – and 4). Within Pillar 2 is developed under Flagship 2.1 The Adriatic-Ionian multi-modal corridors component Adriatic-Ionian Cycle Routes (Action 2.3.3. Support the realisation of cycling lanes and networks and other measures for the promotion of cycling mobility).

2.2.4 Needs

Based on the interview with the PC, the following needs for further Pillar 2 (Transport) development have been identified:

- **Updating the Master Plan:** The Master Plan, based on pre-pandemic data, requires updating to reflect significant changes, such as the revision of the TEN-T network and the completion of critical infrastructure projects. This involves collecting new data on transport mobility and current projects. Furthermore, the strategy included in the Master Plan needs to be aligned with new data and EU enlargement policies. Each component of the Master Plan needs updating to reflect developments from 2017 (which was set as baseline year) to 2024 and adapt to evolving EU strategic policies.
- **Engagement with experts:** The PC believes that the Master Plan is a strategic document at the macro-regional level, and each country should develop a transport system development plan aligned with the macro-regional Master Plan to ensure coherence and synergy with other Countries and with the EU objectives. Effective implementation requires engagement with transport sector representatives, notably port authorities and railway operators. Thus, PC believes they need to cooperate with experts who could update data for various modes of transport (e.g., traffic flow, network data, project development in the region), as well as experts who will help update the strategy related to specific modes of transport (e.g., for railway interoperability). This process should focus on involving experts who could support the Master Plan updating, working either on a specific mode of transport or at the

SP4EUSAIR

strategic policy level. Their involvement depends on the specific mode of transport. He also stated that for investments in transport infrastructure, such as port investments, it is crucial to include representatives from all relevant port authorities in the region to address developmental needs comprehensively. On the other hand, for railway corridors, involving operators specific to each corridor is necessary to tailor solutions to particular needs, rather than involving all regional operators.

- **Strategic vision sharing:** The Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport should disseminate the EUSAIR strategic vision embedded in the Master Plan to national bodies, the European Commission, and the WBIF. The aim is to collaboratively improve connectivity and accessibility within the Adriatic-Ionian region.

2.3 Pillar 2 Connecting the Region - Energy

2.3.1 Scope of work

The energy systems across the Adriatic-Ionian Region are characterized by fragmentation and obsolescence, highlighting a pressing need to expedite the transition towards sustainable practices in response to global climate change and security of energy supply. Therefore, Pillar 2 TSG on Energy, coordinated by Italy, Serbia, and North Macedonia, is focused on establishing a well-interconnected and efficient internal energy market that aligns with EU energy policy objectives, including tackling climate change, enhancing the security of energy supply, and bolstering competitiveness. Additionally, it will confront the challenges posed by the energy transition towards decarbonized and resilient energy systems. This involves promoting renewable energy sources and improving energy efficiency across the Region.

In the field of energy, several challenges hinder progress towards decarbonized systems in the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Based on the information from the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*, the following challenges have been identified:

- **Grid capacity constraints for renewable energy dispatch:** the Region faces limitations in grid capacity, which restrict the distribution of fluctuating energy from renewable sources like solar and wind power.
- **Underutilization of solar and wind energy potential:** despite having significant potential for solar and wind energy development, a number of countries of the Region are performing below the EU average in harnessing these renewable sources. This underperformance affects eco-innovation and overall energy efficiency goals.

SP4EUSAIR

- **Low energy efficiency:** the energy systems of a number of EUSAIR participating countries are characterized by inefficient energy use and delivery when compared with the average standards through the EU. Waste of energy should be contained to reduce costs for the customers, improve competitiveness and security of energy supply.
- **Alignment with national energy and climate plans:** ensuring coherence with the National Energy and Climate Plans of EUSAIR participating countries states poses a challenge. The Strategy needs to navigate varying national priorities and regulatory frameworks to achieve unified goals in energy transition and sustainability.

To contribute to the objectives and the challenges, three flagships have been defined:

- **Flagship 2.2.** Power networks and market for a green Adriatic-Ionian Region
- **Flagship 2.3.** Integrated natural gas corridors and market for a green Adriatic-Ionian Region
- **Flagship 2.4.** Development and operation of logistics for direct LNG use as a clean fuel for the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

By focusing on these challenges, Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy will contribute to enhancing power and gas grid infrastructure, optimizing renewable energy utilization, improving energy efficiency and fostering harmonized policy frameworks across the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

EUSAIR Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy is dedicated to transforming the energy landscape of the Adriatic-Ionian Region by addressing critical challenges and enhancing sustainability. To address these issues, Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy concentrates on key themes and two strategic Topics – Energy networks and Green energy.

These two Topics aim to support the Region's energy objectives. The following Table 1 provides an overview of the Topics and actions aimed at contributing to the goals of Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy.

Table 5 Pillar 2 (Energy) Topics and Actions Overview

Pillar 2 (Energy) Topics and Actions	
Topic 2.4 "Future-proof" energy networks	
Description	The topic aims to develop interconnected electricity and natural gas systems in the Adriatic-Ionian Region to enhance energy security, and competitiveness, and support the transition to decarbonized systems. Focus areas include expanding renewable energy, improving energy efficiency, and fostering "future-proof" energy infrastructure resilience while promoting collaborative infrastructure development and market integration among the EUSAIR participating countries.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.4.1. Integrated power networks and market supporting the green transition and security of energy supply of the Adriatic-Ionian Region

Pillar 2 (Energy) Topics and Actions	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.4.2. Integrated future-proof energy corridors, infrastructure and market supporting the energy transition and security of the energy supply of the Adriatic-Ionian Region 2.4.3. Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) direct use, logistics and infrastructure, for marine and road transport, as well as other uses (notably in the process industry)
Topic 2.5 Renewable energy sources	
Description	The Adriatic-Ionian Region aims to transition to decarbonized energy systems, enhancing energy security and equitable access. By increasing renewable energy deployment, improving energy efficiency of the economies in the Region, and integrating hydrogen and advanced technologies, the Region seeks to create resilient energy networks and foster sustainable, inclusive development of energy communities, ensure affordable energy supply by fighting energy poverty and protecting energy consumers.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.5.1. Cooperation in the deployment of renewable energy sources in the Adriatic-Ionian Region 2.5.2. Improving energy efficiency in the Adriatic-Ionian Region through action and cooperation 2.5.3. Promoting advancements on energy technologies and hydrogen economy

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan

The outlined actions are crucial for creating cohesive and sustainable energy systems in the Adriatic-Ionian Region by enhancing market integration, increasing renewable energy use, improving energy efficiency and energy security. They will facilitate the shift from LNG to hydrogen and non-carbonated gases, drive the deployment of renewables such as photovoltaics, wind, biofuels, and geothermal energy, and align energy efficiency with EU standards. These efforts will also promote hydrogen adoption and foster innovation in advanced energy technologies, ensuring a sustainable energy future for the Region.

2.3.2 Implementation formats development path

According to the in-depth interview with the Pillar 2 Coordinators (PCs) of the TSG2 on Energy, EUSAIR can play a crucial role by engaging countries with a long-term vision for the Region and fostering discussions on potential developments. Therefore, the role of the TSG2 on Energy is primarily strategic, focusing on working with national governments to align national projects with the EUSAIR and working with the European Commission to facilitate the development of international projects.

Due to the substantial funding resources required for energy-related initiatives, the TSG2 on Energy has prioritized actions like the EUSAIR Master Plan on Energy, the Action Plan for Energy Market Integration, the Road Map for Renewable Energy, and other strategic projects as their preferred implementation format. Their key criterion in prioritizing the implementation formats was to contribute to the transition towards a decarbonised energy system.

The PCs stated that master plans, action plans, road maps, and strategic studies are essential for governance and policymakers, designed to provide strategic guidance for

effective decision-making. Furthermore, PCs emphasized that, in developing strategic projects, it is essential to consider time horizons and scenarios to plan effectively. These scenarios require consensus within the governance structure. This discussion is of great interest, as it seeks to identify relevant scenarios that should be referenced. Pillar 2 TSG2 on Transport would also be associated to the analysis and evaluation of the context.

Therefore, through focus groups and networking events, the TSG2 on Energy involved and is involving various stakeholders (government bodies, regional/local authorities, public institutions, industry, business support organizations, associations, NGOs, and the public) in the ideation phase of their implementation formats. This process allowed them to gain insights in key territorial challenges and funding opportunities.

The PCs are pointing out that the Master Plan on Energy is a prime example of this approach as it shares a long-term vision of the energy developments in the Adriatic-Ionian Region (until 2030 and 2050). The PCs are adding that it took almost two years of discussions within the TSG2 on Energy to gain consensus and approval of the terms of reference for the Master Plan on Energy from all the Standing Members. Eventually the Master Plan was developed and completed by the year 2023 and it is now representing a significant success for the EUSAIR. For the first time EUSAIR participating countries were happy to receive a shared vision regarding their future priorities and projects in their best interest.

Building upon the experience of the Master Plan on Energy and basing upon the strengthened cooperation which was developed between and amongst Standing Members other strategic projects were under consideration by the Pillar 2 on Energy. Notably, the Action Plan (Road Map) for Energy Market Integration while further strategic projects were receiving endorsement with two major ones, one focusing on the deployment of renewable energy sources and another on energy efficiency.

More recently, a complex discussion developed on the role of natural gas during the energy transition towards decarbonised energy systems. The PCs and the TSG Standing Members appeared to believe that natural gas would play a crucial though transient role in the transition towards decarbonised energy systems through the Adriatic-Ionian Region due to the significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions by natural gas compared to other fossil fuels. However, despite the recognised importance the European Commission has been asking for caution while suggesting time limitations regarding new gas infrastructures whose construction and operation should be hydrogen-ready. These concerns are represented in the Revised EUSAIR Action Plan.

Based upon the PCs views and insights from the interview, the following main challenges have been identified:

SP4EUSAIR

- **Disagreements:** in the first two years within the TSG2 on Energy discussions primarily centred around determining what to prioritize first. There were significant disagreements among the Standing Members at the beginning. Despite the initial challenges, the Standing Members developed a shared approach and view by becoming very cooperative and convergent.
- **Lack of knowledge and recognition:** institutions, administrations, and ministries generally lack knowledge of EUSAIR and do not recognize its value.
- **Outdated Action Plan:** the initial EUSAIR Action Plan became outdated as it did not address critical issues such as climate change, renewable energy, and energy efficiency. Furthermore, it was developed with limited expertise in the relevant subjects.
- **Lack of financial resources:** currently the energy-related initiatives and strategic priority projects require substantial financial resources. Therefore, there is a significant need for assistance to secure international financing.
- **Lack of technical assistance:** under the present circumstances the PCs note that the TSG2 on Energy and the proposals which have been conceived are not receiving adequate technical assistance, while the PCs have limited time and support dedicated to the projects. This has led to ineffective meetings since June 2023.

2.3.3 Current state and implementation formats developed

As mentioned previously, the TSG2 on Energy would like to launch a few strategic projects which are foreseen by the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*.

A new EUSAIR Master Plan on Energy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region and a new Action Plan (Road Map) on Energy Market Integration represent clear priorities. Their accomplishment would contribute to the critical challenges and opportunities in the energy sector, ensuring that the Adriatic-Ionian Region meets its energy and environmental goals effectively.

The following Table 2 provides an overview of Master Plan and Action Plan as they would be developed Under Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy.

Table 6 Pillar 2 (Energy) Implementation Formats Overview

Implementation formats	
EUSAIR MPE – Master Plan of Energy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region	
Description	The Master Plan aims to develop a long-term energy strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region by focusing on the integration of electricity and natural gas systems and promoting clean fuels for transport. It prioritizes projects, identifies synergies, and addresses gaps to support energy cooperation and decarbonization in the Region.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.2. Power networks and market for a green Adriatic-Ionian Region
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.5.1. Cooperation in deployment of renewable energy sources in the Adriatic-Ionian Region
Status	The proposed EUSAIR Master Plan of Energy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region should be completed and delivered by the year 2027. Preparatory work would be performed during the years 2025 and 2026.
EUSAIR AP - Action Plan (Road Map) towards a EUSAIR Power Exchange and Natural Gas Trading Hub	
Description	The Action Plan aims to enhance cooperation in the power and natural gas sectors of the Adriatic-Ionian Region by analyzing market dynamics and proposing efficient mechanisms. It focuses on harmonizing national markets and integrating low-carbon energy resources to boost cost competitiveness and sustainability.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.2. Power networks and market for a green Adriatic-Ionian Region
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.5.2. Improving energy efficiency in the Adriatic-Ionian Region through action and cooperation
Status	The proposed Road Map 2026 for Energy Market Integration in the Adriatic and Ionian Region should be completed and delivered by the year 2026. Preparatory work would be performed during the year 2025.

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan, TSG2 on Energy Strategic Project Implementation document, in-depth interview

In addition, beyond the EUSAIR Master Plan on Energy and the EUSAIR Action Plan (Road Map) for Energy Market Integration, the PCs are mentioning and stressing the importance of other strategic priority projects which were discussed by the Standing Members while receiving a broad support.

These priority projects include:

- **The EUSAIR Conference on Confronting the Global Climate Challenge** (Activity within Action 2.5.1 of the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*) aims at coordinating and strengthening the position of the EUSAIR participating countries before the recurrent COP of the UN and other international events regarding the fight against climate change. The EUSAIR Conference on Confronting the Global Climate Challenge would build upon the National Plans for Energy and Climate and other documents on long-term energy policies by EUSAIR participating countries. EUSAIR Conference on Confronting the Global Climate Challenge is to be first convened during late Spring 2025. Depending upon its outcomes the EUSAIR Conference might be repeated every two years or so.
- **Renewable Energy Road Map for the Adriatic-Ionian Region** (Activity within Action 2.5.1 of the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*) aims at presenting actions, projects

SP4EUSAIR

and measures to accelerate and facilitate the development and deployment of renewable energy sources through the Region. Actions refer to the time horizons 2030 and 2050 with a view at the goals proposed by the European Union. Road Map will be possibly developed and completed by end 2026.

- **EUSAIR Forum on Energy Efficiency** (Activity within Action 2.5.2 of the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*) aims at promoting action and measures to improve energy efficiency while mobilizing relevant actors and stakeholders. Focus is foreseen on the residential and housing sector, industry and service sectors and transport. The Forum on Energy Efficiency would be first convened towards the end of year 2027 while preparatory work would develop along the year 2026.
- **Hydrogen Production and Deployment Road Map (Hydrogen Production and Deployment Valley from the Western Balkans Region)** (Activity within Action 2.5.3 of the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*) aims to provide means, technologies and practical solutions for the production, delivery and use of hydrogen and hydrogen-derived fuels by enhanced cooperation of countries from the Western Balkans area. In this context, it is assumed that the design of a Hydrogen Valley for the Western Balkans Region would represent a key element and investment for the energy transition. Such a Hydrogen Valley would require an unprecedented degree of cooperation between and amongst Western Balkans countries towards shared goals. The design of the proposed Hydrogen Production and Deployment Valley should be ready by the year 2026.

The TSG2 on Energy discussed the financing, noting that some require substantial funding. The PC stated that one of the major problems is that most of the projects prepared by the countries are insufficiently detailed and cannot be funded due to a lack of clear definitions, as well as cost benefit analyses. Therefore, the role of the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is crucial in this context. As stated in the survey, a list of EUSAIR-labelled projects and measure on Energy Networks has been submitted and approved by the European Investment Bank. Also, the TSG2 on Energy proposed to the European Investment Bank to establish a facility that would provide financial services to the Region. Although it found the concept interesting, suggesting it could become a branch of the Bank, offering support to EUSAIR participating countries, this idea has not made any further progress. It is now suggested that the Marche Region of Italy as the Project Leader of EUSAIR Project no. 2 may wish to support and try to advance the idea.

In addition to the mono-pillar projects, one cross-pillar project has been developed in cooperation with TSG4:

SP4EUSAIR

- **STETAI** - Sustainable Tourism through Environmental Energy Technologies in Buildings of High Architectural Interest (Pillar 2 Energy – 4). Within Pillar 2 is developed under Flagship 2.2 Power networks and market for a green Adriatic-Ionian Region.

However, the TSG2 on Energy Standing Members were not involved directly in the process.

2.3.4 Needs

Basing upon the views by the PCs of EUSAIR Pillar 2 TSG on Energy and upon on the review the following needs have been identified:

- **Technical assistance:** there is a critical need for technical assistance to support EUSAIR Pillar 2 and the TSG2 on Energy in the work aimed at implementing the activities which are foreseen by the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*. Technical assistance provided by the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region under Facility Point project is limited to the sole organisation of TSG Meetings.
- **Framework:** the delayed approval of the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan* by the European Commission and the ongoing consolidation process are creating uncertainties in the course of action to follow while a solid background is needed for initiative and cooperation within EUSAIR Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy.
- **Project support:** a key role is expected from the SP4EUSAIR Project to support the implementation of the priority strategic projects (Master Plan, Road Maps, other studies, conference and forum) which have been defined and proposed by Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy in the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*. PCs and Standing Members intend to support SP4EUSAIR Team Leader, the proposed work plan to finalise and activate the implementation formats.
- **Interaction:** in general, the priority strategic projects which have been identified and proposed by the Pillar 2 TSG2 on Energy in the *Revised the EUSAIR Action Plan* foresee close interactions with other EUSAIR pillars, the European Commission, Energy Community and key stakeholders. Interactions should be prepared in advance through proper involvement and participation.

2.4 Pillar 3 Environmental Quality

2.4.1 Scope of work

The Adriatic-Ionian Region faces significant environmental challenges requiring a coordinated, transnational approach to sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. Pillar 3, coordinated by Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, focuses on enhancing the marine and coastal environment, transnational terrestrial habitats, and

biodiversity. The Pillar emphasizes experience exchange, innovation for climate change resilience, and the dissemination of existing cooperation efforts.

Acknowledging the World Economic Forum's identification of environmental risks as the most significant long-term threats, the Pillar addresses issues such as:

- **Climate change vulnerability:** the Adriatic-Ionian Region faces increasing vulnerability due to climate change effects such as rising sea levels, erosion, droughts, and biodiversity loss
- **Coastal zone strain:** coastal zones and their communities are under escalating strain from human expansion and environmental changes, impacting both national and cross-border areas
- **Ecosystem health:** is crucial for ensuring human health, water, food, energy, climate, and biological safety, all of which are essential for sustainable growth and blue economy
- **Maritime transport impact:** high-traffic maritime pathways pose significant threats to marine habitats due to accidents, oil spills, and general marine life disruptions
- **Overfishing:** overharvesting of marine resources disrupts marine food chains, leading to dwindling numbers of marine mammals, birds, and other species due to accidental catches and excessive fishing practices
- **Pollution from terrestrial sources:** coastal human activities often discharge contaminants into the seas, causing harm to marine organisms and highlighting the need for effective waste management
- **Invasive species:** invasive foreign species threaten marine environments by dominating or preying on indigenous species and introducing illnesses, leading to major ecosystem shifts
- **Temperature increases:** the region is heavily affected by rising temperatures, with projections indicating an increase of up to 5.0 degrees by the end of the century if global greenhouse gas emissions are not significantly reduced
- **Migratory bird threats:** the Adriatic flyway, an essential route for migratory birds, is threatened by a lack of protected wetlands, inadequate hunting regulations, and poor enforcement, resulting in the killing of vulnerable species.

In response to the identified challenges and to enhance environmental quality in the Region, the following flagship initiatives have been established:

SP4EUSAIR

- **Flagship 3.1.** Development and implementation of Adriatic – Ionian sub/regional oil spill contingency plan
- **Flagship 3.2.** Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems
- **Flagship 3.3.** Promotion of sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona Convention and the monitoring and management of Marine protected area.

To support flagship initiatives, topics and actions were designed to improve environmental quality, enhance climate resilience, and conserve biodiversity in the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Furthermore, Pillar 3 is divided into two topics, each with specific actions designed to contribute to the objectives outlined for each topic. The table below presents the name of each topic, its corresponding description, and defined actions.

Table 7 Pillar 3 Topics and Actions Overview

Pillar 3 Topics and Action	
3.1 - Marine and Coastal Environment	
Description	The topic aims to enhance regional collaboration to improve marine and coastal environments, biodiversity, and ecosystem service through joint efforts in risk analysis, monitoring, and action. Key objectives include improving biodiversity and water quality by better managing coastal and marine ecosystems, coordinating maritime spatial planning, reducing pollutants and microplastics, and addressing climate change impacts while promoting blue and green corridors.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.1.1 Enhancing marine and coastal biodiversity • 3.1.2 Reduction of the pollution of the sea and inland/transition waters • 3.1.3 Reduced environmental problems deriving from ballast water and other releases at sea from inland/transition waters
3.2 – Transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity	
Description	The topic addresses threats to terrestrial biodiversity by protecting natural habitats, especially blue and green corridors, and mitigating human-large carnivore conflicts. It includes restoring habitats for migratory water birds, enhancing the management of protected areas, harmonizing policies, promoting sustainable farming, and implementing climate risk mitigation and adaptation measures
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.2.1 Joint population management for large carnivores and awareness-raising activities, protecting the habitats and working towards the quality of life and coexistence • 3.2.2 Conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats: Support for implementation and enforcement of the Agreement of the Conservation of African - Euroasian migratory waterbirds (AEWA) • 3.2.3 Improve interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan

The actions will directly contribute to the achievement of the topic's goals by enhancing biodiversity, water quality, and ecosystem resilience across marine, and terrestrial environments. Through joint efforts in risk analysis, monitoring, and pollution reduction, these initiatives will lead to healthier and more resilient ecosystems.

2.4.2 Implementation formats development path

According to the in-depth interview with the PCs, strategic projects were selected as the preferred implementation format due to the specific nature of the themes addressed by Pillar 3 and the extensive range of strategies, actions, and priorities at the EU level dedicated to enhancing environmental quality and protection.

The strategic projects' development within Pillar 3 followed a structured and chronological process. The process began with pre-screening of existing projects that were common to all Pillars and had macro-regional value. The second phase included individual countries proposing project ideas based on input from a diverse range of stakeholders, including government bodies, academic institutions, and NGOs, whose valuable contributions provided insights into key territorial challenges and best practices at local, regional, and national levels, who were gathered through workshops and networking events. All project ideas gathered from stakeholders were presented to TSG3 members who assessed them based on the guidelines outlined in Annex 1 and Annex 2 – *Facilitating Strategic Project Development and Financial Dialogue Background Paper Work Package T.2 – Focused on Facilitating Strategic Project Development*⁴. Furthermore, the PCs emphasized that TSG3 members developed a comprehensive project matrix designed to systematically assess the alignment of each project idea with the objectives of Pillar 3, to evaluate the potential for cross-pillar synergies.

After the strategic project ideas were drafted, TSG3 members presented them to the Facility Coordinator, whose role was to find a consultant (external expert) to further the projects' development. To ensure that TSG3 members remained informed about the progress of each strategic project, the consultant responsible for drafting proposals and applying for funding provided regular updates. Moreover, as PCs stated, TSG3 members distributed a concise questionnaire to the consultant to evaluate each project's current status, including its phase and whether it had been submitted for funding. This approach facilitated clear and ongoing communication and kept all parties well-informed and aligned. Aside from the consultant, lead partners, who were appointed on the TSG3 level, took the primary responsibility for further developing and submitting the projects. Additionally, to facilitate further development of project ideas, TGS3 members publicly announced application forms of project ideas, inviting all interested parties to contribute to the development and submission of project proposals for funding.

The overall monitoring system is based on the monitoring system developed by Greek partners in the Facility Point project 2016 – 2023, and on quantitative indicators based on

⁴ <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/intranet/?cat=background-paper-focused-on-facilitating-strategic-project-development>

the *European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion* (ESPON) indicators integrated in the Programme Macro-regional territorial monitoring tool⁵. Additionally, TSG3 members developed a specific questionnaire about flagships and funding of flagship projects submitted to managing authorities. Moreover, PCs have indicated that, in the upcoming programming period, they will work on developing a new methodology.

According to the interview with PCs, the following challenges have been identified:

- **Methodology shortcomings in EUSAIR Strategy implementation:** initial lack of organization and clear methodology at the beginning of the EUSAIR strategy, leading to the development of various implementation formats across pillars.
- **Lack of financial resources:** the challenges related to funding within the EUSAIR Pillar 3 framework primarily revolve around the difficulty of securing suitable funding sources that align with the goals and priorities of strategic projects.
- **Cross-pillar collaboration difficulties:** The main challenges include difficulties in securing suitable funding sources that align with the multi-sectoral nature of these projects, as well as challenges in coordinating responsibilities among diverse stakeholders from different pillars. Additionally, embedding these projects is difficult because they are linked to multiple themes, while funding sources often require operations to be strictly within a single priority or specific theme.

2.4.3 Current state and implementation formats developed

As previously mentioned, strategic projects were selected as the preferred implementation format. Within Pillar 3, a total of 14 projects (mono-pillar) were developed out of which four were funded. The following table provides an overview of the projects⁶ that have been developed but not yet funded, detailing their scope, goals, anticipated impacts, and contribution to flagship, topics, and actions.

Table 8 Pillar 3 Implementation Formats Overview

Implementation formats	
ASOSCoP - The Adriatic-Ionian Regional Contingency Plan for Emergency Oil Spills in the Adriatic Sea	
Description	The flagship project aims to mitigate the risk of natural disasters like oil spills by implementing a comprehensive Contingency Plan and establishing a framework for mutual assistance among EUSAIR countries. It focuses on enhancing regional capacity for pollution prevention, preparedness, and response while raising awareness and defining operational procedures for stakeholders

⁵ <https://archive.espon.eu/tools-maps/mrs-espon#:~:text=ESPON%20tool.%20The%20ESPON%20European%20and%20Macro-regional%20Territorial,patterns%20taking%20place%20in%20Europe%20and%20its%20macro-regions>

⁶ In the table, eight out of the 10 projects are presented, as no information was available for the remaining projects in the provided documentation. According to the Revised Action Plan the projects NEATNESS – clean the Adriatic and the Ionian sea from the plasticS and ICZM and MSP - To promote a sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona convention were also developed as mono-pillar projects but no further information was provided.

Implementation formats	
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1 Development and implementation of Adriatic-Ionian sub/regional oil spill contingency plan
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1.2 Reduction of the pollution of the sea and inland/transition waters
Status	Recommended for funding – Interreg IPA Adrion
3MPS - Monitoring and management of marine protected species	
Description	The project addresses biodiversity threats in the Adriatic-Ionian region by establishing networks for the protection and monitoring of marine species, particularly sea turtles and cetaceans, and enhancing knowledge about the impacts of marine litter and microplastics. It aims to implement concrete measures for marine litter disposal and prevention, create a monitoring network to assess impacts on threatened species and adopt regional management measures to protect marine biodiversity.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2 Promotion of sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona Convention and the monitoring and management of marine protected areas
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1.1 Enhancing marine and coastal biodiversity
Status	n/a
PET HAB ECO - Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystem	
Description	The flagship project aims to establish green corridors in the Adriatic-Ionian region to enhance ecological connectivity and safeguard natural habitats. It focuses on protecting terrestrial ecosystems, conserving large carnivore populations, and promoting sustainable tourism practices to improve regional quality of life.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2 Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2.2 Conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats: Support for implementation and enforcement of the Agreement of the Conservation of African - Euroasian migratory waterbirds (AEWA) 3.2.3 Improve interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats
Status	Recommended for funding – Interreg IPA Adrion
Bio-Shelters: Botanical Gardens as Biodiversity Shelters and Nurseries	
Description	The project aims to establish and expand a network of Botanical Gardens across EUSAIR countries to preserve biodiversity through in-situ and ex-situ conservation methods. It focuses on creating protected natural areas, establishing seed banks for endangered species, and promoting sustainable reforestation and botanical tourism while enhancing educational opportunities and public awareness about climate change impacts.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2 Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2.3 Improve interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats
Status	Adopted on the last TSG3 meeting
FOREST READAPT + SEC-DIV-CONIFERS - Renewal of the adoption of coppice forest in a drastically changing environment - Secure diversity through a holistic approach for the most threatened Mediterranean conifer ecosystems: combining genetic, physiology, biodiversity indexes, germination, and restoration	
Description	The project aims to protect forest biodiversity and address adaptation challenges by analysing the genetic diversity of coppice and seedling forests. It focuses on assessing resilience to climate and environmental changes, identifying local adaptation differences, and formulating sustainable management guidelines for coppice forests. The project aims to safeguard biodiversity in Mediterranean conifer ecosystems essential for carnivore habitats by integrating genetic, epigenetic, biodiversity, physiological, and germination studies. It focuses on conducting a SWOT analysis, assessing genetic and physiological traits, and developing conservation guidelines while contributing to policy recommendations for sustainable habitat protection in transboundary areas
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2 Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems

Implementation formats	
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2.3 Improve interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats
Status	Adopted on the last TSG3 meeting
COFI-MAR – Towards the long-term in-situ conservation, sustainable fisheries, and improving the marine environments in the Adriatic-Ionian region	
Description	The project addresses environmental challenges by focusing on biodiversity preservation, pollution elimination, climate change mitigation, and sustainable mobility. It prioritizes in-situ conservation of threatened species, habitat protection, and sustainable fisheries while developing a robust framework for climate mitigation and adaptation and using key performance indicators to monitor progress in ecosystem restoration and pollution mitigation.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.3 Promotion of sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona Convention and the monitoring and management of marine protected areas
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1.2 Reduction of the pollution of the sea and inland/transition waters
Status	n/a
Security and safety of blue and green infrastructure as a key factor of sustainability of the blue and green corridors regarding climate changes	
Description	The project aims to directly indicate the impact of Climate changes on Blue and Green Infrastructure to prevent and reduce negative impacts and to ensure the Safety and Security of Blue and Green Infrastructure as a key factor of sustainability of the Blue and Green Corridors, through the use of existing and the collection of missing knowledge, cross-border cooperation, building capacity and awareness raising.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.2 Promotion of sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona Convention and the monitoring and management of marine protected areas
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1.1 Enhancing marine and coastal biodiversity
Status	Proposed to TSG3.

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan, TSG 3 Strategic Project Implementation Document, in-depth interview

Although all projects were submitted for funding to various sources (Interreg programmes, LIFE, DG ECHO direct funding, and DG ECHO centralized funding), only four were approved:

- **NAMIRS - North Adriatic Maritime Incident Response System** that adopts a holistic approach to marine pollution incident management, at sea and onshore and will contribute to the prevention of and protection from the effects of maritime disasters in the North Adriatic Sea. (Flagship 3.1 Development and implementation of Adriatic-Ionian sub/regional oil spill contingency plan, Action 3.1.2 Reduction of the pollution of the sea and inland waters, DG ECHO – Union Civil Protection Mechanism)
- **TETI - Strengthen cooperation to support the development of trans-boundary marine protected areas in the Adriatic Ionian Region** (Flagship 3.3 Promotion of sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona Convention and the monitoring and management of marine protected areas, Interreg IPA Adrion)
- **4PETHABECO - Strengthening cooperation to address socio-environmental challenges of EUSAIR flagship PET HAB ECO** (Flagship 3.2 Protection and

SP4EUSAIR

enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems – PET HAB ECO, Interreg IPA Adrion)

- **ASAP – Adriatic Sensitive Areas Protection mechanisms**, which represent the extraction of NAMIRS project (Flagship 3.1 Implementation of Adriatic – Ionian Sub/Regional Oil Spill Contingency Plan – ASOSCoP, Interreg IPA Adrion).

In addition to mono-pillar projects, two cross-pillar projects were developed within the pillar, that were designed to address issues relevant to both sectors.

In coordination with other TSGs the following projects have been developed:

- **ICZM&MSP** – Establishment a Community for the sustainable management of maritime activities in the AIR. Using high quality research to strengthen dialogues and institutional capacities for effective implementation of MSP/ICZM in support of inclusive and sustainable growth in the AIR (Pillars 1 and 3). Within Pillar 3 is developed under Flagship 3.3 Promotion of sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona Convention and the monitoring and management of marine protected areas (Action 3.1.1 Enhancing marine and coastal biodiversity).
- **ADRIONet** - Managing Tourism Flows in Protected Areas (Pillars 3 and 4).

2.4.4 Needs

Based on the interview with PCs, the following needs have been identified as crucial to address for the further development of Pillar 3:

- **Enhanced collaboration**: there is a need to increase the involvement of participating countries in the project development process. This involves actively encouraging countries to propose new project ideas/proposals and submitting them for funding.
- **Effective project implementation**: ensuring the successful execution of projects is a priority. This includes addressing challenges related to the practical implementation of strategic projects to achieve intended outcomes.
- **Strategic development of new projects**: further development of existing projects and the creation of new initiatives that address emerging issues, such as climate change adaptation, are needed. This requires proactive engagement from member countries in proposing new project ideas.
- **Enhanced cross-pillar collaboration**: there is a need to improve coordination and allocation of responsibilities across different pillars to support the development of cross-pillar projects. Clear guidelines and better communication channels are essential to address these coordination challenges.

- **Identifying suitable funding sources:** there is a need to explore diverse funding options and align them with the goals of Pillar 3 activities.

2.5 Pillar 4 Sustainable Tourism

2.5.1 Scope of work

Pillar 4, coordinated by Croatia and Albania, aims to harmonize economic, environmental, cultural, and social sustainability in the Adriatic-Ionian Region by prioritizing the digital and green transformation of the tourism sector involving diverse stakeholders. The Pillar advocates for innovative tourism practices to maximize the Region's potential through sustainable, responsible, and high-quality tourism initiatives. Therefore, key objectives include diversifying tourism offerings, mitigating seasonality issues, and enhancing resilience against challenges like conflicts, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

Based on the information from the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan*, Pillar 4 addresses the following identified challenges:

- **High seasonality and over-tourism:** the Region heavily relies on tourism, leading to mass tourism during the peak season, which creates issues such as overcrowding, strain on local infrastructure, and environmental degradation.
- **Climate change and natural disasters:** the Region faces increasing threats from climate change, including floods, heatwaves, and other natural disasters, which can pose risks to both tourism infrastructure and the natural environment.
- **Development disparities:** there are disparities in tourism infrastructure across the region, with EU candidate countries often lagging in marketing, promotion, and accommodation quality standards which affects their competitiveness and ability to attract sustainable tourism investments.
- **Innovation and digitalization:** despite the new opportunities digitalization brings to tourism, such as marketing new products and enhancing customer experience, there is insufficient investment in these technologies.
- **Sustainable destination management:** is crucial for achieving a shared understanding and effective implementation of sustainable practices. It includes gaining insights from more established destinations within the region, establishing macro-regional routes, and cultivating cross-border networks to unify the Adriatic-Ionian Region as a cohesive tourism destination.

To ensure the continued development of sustainable tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian Region, the following flagship initiatives have been defined:

SP4EUSAIR

- **Flagship 4.1** Research & development for the improvement of SME's performance and growth diversification
- **Flagship 4.2** Training and skills in the field of tourism businesses (vocational and entrepreneurial skills)
- **Flagship 4.3** Expanding the tourist season to all-year-round
- **Flagship 4.4** Development of sustainable and thematic cultural routes/connecting cultural routes in EUSAIR
- **Flagship 4.5** Development of the network of sustainable tourism businesses and clusters; green mapping for the AI region – supporting development and market access for responsible and sustainable tourism destinations (management) and micro/SME operations in the EUSAIR region.

Flagship initiatives target key areas such as diversifying tourism offerings, addressing seasonality, and building resilience against challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss. To contribute to the flagship initiatives and address abovementioned challenges, two topics with relevant actions were developed. A description of topics and a list of actions is provided in the table below.

Table 9 Pillar 4 Topics and Actions Overview

Pillar 4 Topics and Action
4.1 - Facilitating digital and green transition of the tourism and cultural heritage offer

Description	The topic aims to advance digital and green practices in tourism across the Adriatic-Ionian Region by promoting collaborative governance, enhancing tourism data systems, and integrating sustainability objectives into tourism strategies.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.1.1 Collaborative governance and sustainable innovation in tourism destinations • 4.1.2 Promoting the use of smart and sustainable indicators for tourism • 4.1.3 Promoting the green and digital transition in tourism strategies
4.2 - Preparing for the future: knowledge, skills and management	
Description	The topic addresses knowledge gaps in sustainable destination management and developing green and digital skills within the Adriatic-Ionian Region's tourism sector. It focuses on raising awareness of the twin transition's opportunities and enhancing education and training to align tourism skills with new trends and needs, particularly through relevant university courses and training programmes.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.2.1 Promotion of sustainable and smart tourism management and services • 4.2.2 Knowledge and skills for the future
4.3 Greening of Tourism products and services	
Description	The strategy for greening tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian Region aims to integrate environmental sustainability into all tourism operations, promoting eco-friendly initiatives that conserve natural and cultural landscapes. By fostering collaboration it seeks to enhance resilience to climate change, promote sustainable resource management, and support inclusive economic growth through nature-based tourism and environmental education.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.3.1 Promoting Agrotourism, Ecotourism and fishing tourism • 4.3.2 Promoting the Rural tourism • 4.3.3 Promotion of the Mediterranean Diet and local organic and origin production

Source: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan

Topics and actions will drive the digital and green transformation of tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian region by fostering collaborative governance, promoting smart and sustainable indicators, and integrating green and digital practices into tourism strategies.

2.5.2 Implementation formats development path

According to the in-depth interview PCs, strategic projects were selected as the preferred implementation format due to the specific nature of the themes addressed by Pillar 4.

The PCs stated that the project development process began with the projects' screening phase at the beginning of EUSAIR establishment, where TSG4 members collected and evaluated existing projects aligned with the Pillar 4 priorities and with a macro-regional impact. Moreover, each country representative within the TSG4 proposed project ideas relevant to their interests, strengths, and challenges. All project proposals were presented at the regular TSG4 meeting and accepted through consensus. Strategic projects' development was closely monitored by the PCs, following the guidelines outlined in the *Facilitating Strategic Project Development and Financial Dialogue Background Paper Work Package T.2 – Focused on Facilitating Strategic Project Development*, known as Annex 1 and Annex 2.

After TSG4 members agreed on the project ideas for further development, a public call was issued to hire a consultant to draft project proposals for a suitable funding programme.

PCs stated that throughout the proposal development process, the consultant collaborated closely with the PCs and thematic experts in sustainable tourism. The consultant was also given access to the contact information of all TSG4 members to facilitate the identification of lead and project partner organizations to take part in the proposals. TSG4 members also linked consultant to key stakeholders across participating countries. These stakeholders included government bodies, regional and local authorities, public institutions, academia, industry, business support organizations, associations, and the general public. Their involvement began in the project ideation phase through networking events and individual consultations. This stakeholder engagement process ensured that the projects were comprehensive and inclusive, reflecting a diverse spectrum of regional interests and expertise.

According to the PCs, the most significant challenges are:

- **Lack of financial resources:** This challenge refers to the difficulties with identifying funding sources that were accessible and aligned with the needs of all participating countries. This complexity arose from the diverse eligibility criteria, priorities, and financial capacities across different regions, which often constrained the availability of suitable funding options for supporting collaborative initiatives.
- **Cross-pillar collaboration difficulties:** There are no established rules or procedures for the development of cross-pillar projects, making it challenging to coordinate and align goals and priorities among different pillars.

2.5.3 Current state and implementation formats developed

To address identified challenges within the Pillar 4, a total of 7 strategic projects have been developed:

Table 10 Pillar 4 Implementation Formats Overview

Implementation formats	
LIVING THE SEA 4.0 - Digitalisation of the cultural heritage of fishing traditions and fish industry for the creation of virtual	
Description	The project aims to diversify tourism in the EUSAIR region by digitally preserving and showcasing its fishery heritage, enhancing existing attractions and creating new ones through interactive technologies. It focuses on promoting accessible tourism for various groups and establishing a network of year-round accessible destinations to boost tourist attraction and sustain tourism during low seasons.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.5 Development of the network of sustainable tourism businesses and clusters, green mapping for the AI region - supporting development and market access for responsible and sustainable tourism destinations (management) and micro/SME operations in the EUSAIR region
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.2.1 Promotion of sustainable and smart tourism management and services
Status	Submitted for funding but didn't pass due to the admissibility/eligibility reasons
ProDestAir Strategy (MIQS) - Adriatic-Ionian Strategy and Solutions for Smart Integrated Destination Management based on Multiple Intelligence Systems	

Implementation formats	
Description	The project aims to improve destination management in the Adriatic-Ionian region through a Smart Integrated Destination Management approach. It addresses key challenges such as crisis management and tourism adaptability and seeks to establish a replicable open-innovation standard to enhance economic diversity and sustainability while mitigating environmental, social, and cultural impacts.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.5 Development of the network of sustainable tourism businesses and clusters, green mapping for the AI region - supporting development and market access for responsible and sustainable tourism destinations (management) and micro/SME operations in the EUSAIR region
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.2.1 Promotion of sustainable and smart tourism management and services
Status	Developed but not submitted for funding
AIR Cultural Routes - Adriatic-Ionian Region Cultural Routes Tourism Governance Model: An Opportunity for the EUSAIR Area	
Description	The project aims to create an innovative governance model for Cultural and Tourist Routes across EUSAIR countries by developing a unified methodology, integrating local development models, and implementing a pilot Cultural and Tourist Route. Key elements include establishing "paths of excellence" and "Heritage Interpretation Centres," with expected outcomes involving new governance methods, product development and enhanced cultural tourism through sustainable practices and regional cooperation.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.4 Development of sustainable and thematic cultural routes/connecting cultural routes in EUSAIR
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1.1 Collaborative governance and sustainable innovation in tourism destination 4.1.2 Promoting the use of smart and sustainable indicators for tourism
Status	Developed but not submitted for funding
CruiseAir - Destination Management Plan's preparation for Cruise destinations within the Adriatic-Ionian Region	
Description	The project aims to develop Destination Management Plans for sustainable tourism across Cruise, River, and Lake destinations in the AIR region. It focuses on extending the tourism season year-round, addressing market dynamics and community needs, and promoting sustainable growth through stakeholder engagement, congestion management, and tourism product diversification.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.3 Expanding the tourist season to all-year round
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1.1 Collaborative governance and sustainable innovation in tourism destinations 4.1.2 Promoting the use of smart and sustainable indicators for tourism
Status	Developed but not submitted for funding
CultTourAIR - Survey on cultural tourism demand in the Adriatic-Ionian Region	
Description	The project aims to improve cultural tourism statistics in the Adriatic-Ionian Region by collecting detailed data on visitor profiles, preferences, and expenditures at cultural attractions and events. It seeks to support sustainable management decisions and enhance marketing strategies through a unified framework for monitoring tourism demand, assessing economic impacts, and evaluating sustainability issues.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1 Research and development for the improvement of SME's performance and growth diversification
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1.1 Collaborative governance and sustainable innovation in tourism destinations
Status	Developed but not submitted for funding
DES_AIR - Integrated Sustainable Management of Tourism Destination in AIR	
Description	The project aims to advance education in sustainable destination management to enhance the competitiveness of EUSAIR countries by driving smart specialization and diversifying tourism offerings. It focuses on developing tools and pilot actions for human capital development, fostering collaboration among SMEs, research institutions, and higher education institutions, and upgrading tourism practices to improve sustainability and regional branding.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.2 Training and skills in the field of tourism businesses (vocational and entrepreneurial skills)

Implementation formats	
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.2.2 Knowledge and skills for the future
Status	Developed but not submitted for funding
TG AIR - Green Mapping for the Adriatic-Ionian Region - Supporting Development and Market Access for Responsible and Sustainable Tourism Destinations and Micro/SME Operations in the EUSAIR Region	
Description	The project aims to enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of Micro and SME tourism operations in the Adriatic-Ionian region through ICT-based innovation and knowledge networking. It focuses on empowering local entities with training on environmentally and socially responsible practices, establishing a Sustainable & Responsible Tourism Knowledge Alliance, and launching the Travel Green Adriatic-Ionian Region Portal and App to promote ecotourism and improve regional visibility.
Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.5 Development of the network of sustainable tourism businesses and clusters, green mapping for the AI region - supporting development and market access for responsible and sustainable tourism destinations (management) and micro/SME operations in the EUSAIR region
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.2.1 Promotion of sustainable and smart tourism management and services
Status	Developed but not submitted for funding

Sources: Revised EUSAIR Action Plan, TSG 4 Strategic Project Implementation document, in-depth interview

PCs stated that the development process predominantly focused on aligning with objectives of the Interreg Adrion programme, with no consideration given to other funding programmes. Furthermore, as earlier mentioned, seven projects were developed, of which only one was submitted for funding but did not pass the Admissibility and Eligibility Check phase.

In addition to the mono-pillar projects, within Pillar 4, cross-pillar projects were also developed through collaborative efforts involving TSGs from different pillars. When TSG members agreed upon common goals and priorities, a consultant was hired to further project development, with the responsibility of identifying potential partners and stakeholders and presenting the project ideas to the TSG members for approval. Even though Pillar coordinators were not aware of the established rules and procedures for cross-pillar projects development, defined within Facility Point Plus project (document How to apply for the Facility Point Plus support for macro-regional projects development – Guidance note, 2019), significant progress was achieved through proactive engagement and dialogue. A collaborative environment was cultivated through cross-pillar meetings, workshops, roundtables, and consultations, leading to the successful development of four cross-pillar projects that are well-aligned with the broader goals of the EUSAIR initiative.

The following cross-pillar projects were developed:

- **ADRIONCYCLETOUR** - ADRIatic IONian CYCLE route for sustainable TOURism (Pillars 2 Transport - and 4). Within Pillar 4 is developed under Flagship 4.3 Expanding the tourist season to all-year-round and Actions 4.1.1 Collaborative governance and sustainable innovation in tourism destinations and 4.1.2 Promoting the use of smart and sustainable indicators for tourism.

SP4EUSAIR

- **ADRIONet** - Managing Tourism Flows in Protected Areas (Pillars 3 and 4). Within Pillar 4 is developed under Flagship 4.2 Training and skills in the field of tourism businesses (vocational and entrepreneurial skills) and Action 4.2.1 Promotion of sustainable and smart tourism management and services.
- **BLUECULTURE** - Development of Macro-Regional Cluster on BlueCulture Technologies and creation of International Competence Center (Pillars 1 and 4). Within Pillar 4 is developed under Flagship 4.5 Development of the network of sustainable tourism businesses and clusters; green mapping for the AI region – supporting development and market access for responsible and sustainable tourism destinations (management) and micro/SME operations in the EUSAIR region (Action 4.1.3 Promoting the green and digital transition in tourism strategies).
- **STETAI** - Sustainable Tourism through Environmental Energy Technologies in Buildings of High Architectural Interest (Pillars 2 Energy - and 4). Within Pillar 4 is developed under Flagship 4.5 Development of the network of sustainable tourism businesses and clusters; green mapping for the AI region – supporting development and market access for responsible and sustainable tourism destinations (management) and micro/SME operations in the EUSAIR region (Action 4.1.3 Promoting the green and digital transition in tourism strategies).

2.5.4 Needs

Based on the interview with PCs, the following needs have been identified as crucial for further Pillar 4 development:

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** there is a need to establish a robust monitoring mechanism for current and future strategic projects to track progress and impacts, both for national and cross-border projects, especially those involving non-member states.
- **Strategic project funding:** identifying and accessing funding sources that are available to all participating countries is crucial. It also includes the need of regularly reviewing and adjusting projects to meet funding eligibility criteria and continuous monitoring of funding opportunities and collaboration with potential lead partners, ensuring that projects are successfully implemented.
- **Enhanced collaboration:** There is a need for better coordination between different bodies, such as ministries and agencies, to enhance project management and ensure effective implementation across participating countries.
- **New project development mechanism:** adapting existing projects to incorporate new changes and data is essential for addressing issues identified by member countries, ensuring that all concerns are managed and resolved effectively.

2.6 Pillar 5 Improved Social Cohesion

2.6.1 Scope of work

Established in 2023 as a result of the EUSAIR Action Plan revision, Pillar 5 aims to tackle key social and economic challenges in the Adriatic-Ionian Region, including demographic shifts and labour market imbalances. The Pillar focuses on preserving and promoting the European social model while supporting EU candidate countries. Coordinated by Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pillar 5 promotes social progress by enhancing labour market opportunities, empowering women, engaging youth, and addressing cross-border social issues. It seeks to achieve equal opportunities and ensure fair working conditions and social protection by integrating social transitions with green and digital transformations. Participating countries will collaborate by sharing experiences, coordinating policies, and standardizing approaches to effectively address these transnational challenges.

Common challenges related to Pillar 5 identified in the *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan* are:

- **Aging population:** the Adriatic-Ionian Region faces challenges related to its aging demographic, impacting workforce dynamics and social welfare systems
- **Labour market disbalances:** there are significant disparities in the labor market, affecting employment opportunities and economic participation
- **Social exclusion:** vulnerable groups face marginalization, hindering their access to social services and opportunities for economic participation
- **Inflow of refugees:** the region grapples with managing the integration of refugees, posing additional strains on social services and community cohesion
- **Poverty pockets:** certain areas within the region suffer from concentrated poverty, exacerbating social inequalities and limiting economic mobility
- **Brain drain:** talented individuals leaving the region in search of better opportunities abroad further exacerbate skill shortages and economic development
- **Dependency on tourism:** the region's heavy reliance on tourism makes it vulnerable to economic downturns, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting employment and income stability.

The Pillar's initial flagship has been decided:

- **Flagship 5.1** Further support and development of the EUSAIR POPRI youth process as a mechanism for knowledge transfer and improving employability of young people in the Strategy.

Other possible flagships could build on transnational projects aiming to harmonize curricula in VET and adult education and on the existing state within EU and national frameworks in the field of social innovations/social economy and include a vast number of potential activities between included stakeholders on all levels, local, regional, national and cross national.

Concerning the Pillar being newly established, other possible flagships could be built on:

- transnational projects aiming to harmonize curricula in VET and adult education
- existing EU and national legal frameworks and regulations in the fields of gender equality, decent work and the fight against labour discrimination, the development of cooperation actions and networks, including exchange of best practices between EUSAIR institutions and stakeholders, notably social partners, and the inclusion of such cooperation in broader implementation of the EUSAIR
- existing state within EU and national frameworks in the field of social innovations/social economy and include a vast number of potential activities between included stakeholders on all levels, local, regional, national and cross national.

Within the Pillar, four topics with actions have been defined, as showcased in the following table:

Table 11 Pillar 5 Topics and Actions Overview

Pillar 5 Topics and Actions	
5.1 – Further development of the Pillar Improved Social Cohesion	
Description	The topic/action is focused on the establishment of effective new pillar aligned with the expectations and needs of the macro region through the strategic and thematic consultations with relevant stakeholders.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5.1.1 Further development of the Pillar Improved Social Cohesion
5.2 - Youth engagement and employment	
Description	The topic focuses on empowering the youth in the Adriatic-Ionian Region to actively engage in social and economic life, particularly in education, employment, cultural exchange, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship. Central to this effort is EUSAIR's goal of equipping young people, including those in rural areas, with innovative and entrepreneurial skills to effectively address regional challenges.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5.2.1 Promoting empowerment and involvement of youth • 5.2.2 Boosting youth employment
5.3 - Promoting skills acquisition for future labour markets	
Description	The topic focuses on enhancing lifelong learning and improving labour market access in the Adriatic-Ionian Region by addressing skills mismatches, brain drain, and underemployment through harmonized skills policies and vocational education. Emphasis is placed on sector-specific skills for key areas such as the blue economy and tourism, but also on targeting skill policies for disadvantaged groups.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5.3.1 Development of harmonization of skills policies • 5.3.2 Promoting employment opportunities through upskilling/reskilling for disadvantaged groups on the labour market
5.4 – Equal opportunities in the labour market	
Description	The topic focuses on gender equality and improving labour conditions across the Adriatic-Ionian Region and addresses pressing issues such as gender inequality, discrimination, gender pay gaps, irregular and precarious work, and labor

Pillar 5 Topics and Actions	
	exploitation in sectors like tourism, agriculture, aquaculture, transport services, and home care.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5.3.1 Enhance Strategy cooperation and exchange of best practices on Gender Equality and Quality and of Employment
5.5 - Social Innovations	
Description	The topic focuses on promoting social innovation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region by enhancing collaboration and knowledge transfer to address issues such as active aging and the well-being of vulnerable groups. Objectives include strengthening decision-maker capacities, fostering an active social economy, and creating inclusive environments for sustainable social inclusion and regional development.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5.4.1 Adriatic-Ionian Ecosystem for Social Innovation

Source: Revises EUSAIR Action Plan

Above mentioned topics and actions will advance social innovation by boosting collaboration and knowledge transfer among stakeholders, enhancing social innovation and social economy initiatives. By supporting effective solutions for issues like active aging and the well-being of vulnerable groups, the action will contribute to the topic's objectives achievement.

2.6.2 Development path and current state

The insights into the development path are based on in-depth interviews with PC. As the PC stated, the development process of Pillar 5 was linked to its potential to integrate EUSAIR with European Social Fund Plus and macro-regional policies. The Pillar 5 development was supported by the Tirana Declaration⁷ from 2022, after which the amendment of the Action Plan had begun. To support the Pillar 5 development, PC held two workshops in Sarajevo. In collaboration with the Facility Point project and the Governing Board, the PCs developed the framework for Pillar 5, which was submitted to the European Commission for review.

The PCs guided the selection of topics for Pillar 5 based on its scope of work and aligned with the European Pillar for Social Rights, with active participation from all member countries of the Governing Board, for example, TSG members from Italy introduced the concept of gender equality.

Although definitive stakeholders have not been identified yet, the PCs considered several potential ones, including the employment services, the pension insurance institutes, civil society groups, the Youth Council, and the chambers of commerce.

Based on the information provided during the interview, the following challenges have been identified as the most important during the development process:

⁷ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60549/tirana-declaration-01.pdf>

SP4EUSAIR

- **Lack of Organization and Structured Format of the Pillar:** The Pillar faced challenges due to the absence of a clear organizational structure and format, which hindered the development process.
- **Difficulties in Defining and Aligning Indicators:** There were significant challenges in defining indicators that aligned with those of Interreg, complicating the measurement and evaluation of Pillar activities.
- **Determining Appropriate Funding Sources:** Identifying suitable funding sources for Pillar activities proved challenging, affecting the planning and execution of strategic projects.
- **Integration Challenges:** As Pillar 5 is newly established, efforts are ongoing to better integrate Pillar 5 into the broader strategic discussions, ensuring smooth collaboration moving forward.

Concerning Pillar 5 is still in the development phase, the pillar-specific criteria for strategic project selection and the definition of strategic and cross-pillar projects have yet to be established. It is expected that these aspects will be addressed in the upcoming period (2024 – 2027).

2.6.3 Needs

Based on the interview with PCs, the following needs for further Pillar 5 development have been identified:

- **Criteria and Rules of Procedure Establishment:** There is a need to establish pillar-specific criteria for project selection and finalize the Rules of Procedure. Work on these elements is expected to commence in September 2024, while the ROP's elements will be presented during the first in-person meeting of TSG5 members.
- **Establishing Continuous Collaboration and Communication Among TSG Members:** The primary goal is to hold an inaugural official TSG meeting, which will focus on the next steps. This includes setting criteria for implementation formats' development, finalizing the Rules of Procedure, and discussing potential flagship initiatives and available funding opportunities. After the first TSG meeting, it will be necessary to enhance continuous collaboration and communication among TSG members to ensure alignment and efficiency in implementing Pillar initiatives, as well as to enhance the collective ability to address challenges, streamline decision-making processes, and support the successful execution of strategic goals.
- **Engaging Stakeholders through Workshops and Roundtables:** To effectively enhance the Strategy and inform the activities of Pillar 5, there is a need to organize workshops and roundtables, if possible, by the end of 2024. These events will serve as a platform for sharing best practices among stakeholders.

SP4EUSAIR

- **Enhancement of Further Collaboration with Youth Council:** To strengthen ties with the Youth Council and align efforts with broader strategic objectives, the second TSG5 meeting, planned for spring 2025, will focus on preparing activities for the EUSAIR Forum. This meeting will serve as a platform to deepen collaboration, integrate youth perspectives into strategic discussions, and ensure that their contributions are effectively incorporated into future initiatives. The goal is to foster a more inclusive approach that actively engages young stakeholders in the ongoing development of Pillar activities.
- **Structured Organization and Pillar's Framework Development:** There is a need to establish a well-defined organizational structure and format for the Pillar to address existing challenges and streamline the development process. Establishing a coherent organizational structure, with defined roles, responsibilities, and processes, will provide the necessary foundation for coordinated actions, improved decision-making, and successful implementation of pillar activities. This structured approach will ensure that efforts are aligned, resources are efficiently utilized, and strategic goals are more easily achieved.
- **Identification of Suitable Funding Sources:** There is a need to identify appropriate funding sources for Pillar activities. Addressing this need will involve exploring funding opportunities, aligning project requirements with available financial resources, and establishing clear strategies for securing the necessary funds. This will ensure that projects are adequately supported and can progress effectively toward their objectives.

3 Best practices

This chapter aims to present an overview of other macro-regional strategies with an emphasis on showcasing best practices in the development of implementation formats within each one. While best practices provide a helpful framework, they aren't one-size-fits-all solutions. What works well in one context may not be suitable or effective in another, highlighting the need for flexibility and adaptation to specific circumstances. Thus, best practices comprise, not only strategic projects and initiatives implemented or ongoing but also, different examples of how effective governance, monitoring, evaluation and internal collaboration contributed to the macro-regional objectives.

Additionally, the insights are drawn from the *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies* from 2022⁸ and from an in-depth interview conducted with Interact representatives, as well as from literature on macro-regional strategies provided by Interact representatives. Moreover, the chapter provides insight into the *Policy-action process* input paper, developed by Interact, which introduces the policy-action process as a new, innovative implementation format that macro-regional strategies can use to enhance implementation. Through a comparative approach, the chapter aims to draw lessons from the experiences of other macro-regional strategies, offering practical advice for enhancing the effectiveness and impact of the EUSAIR strategy moving forward.

3.1 EUSDR

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), approved in 2010, is EU macro-regional strategy encompassing 14 countries which vary significantly in their development levels and relationship with the EU. This group includes nine EU member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia), and five EU accession countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine). Over the years, EUSDR has played a crucial role in initiating new projects and processes of macro-regional importance across the region and sharing experiences and best practices within the macro-region.

The EUSDR is organized around four main pillars: **Connecting the Region** (focuses on enhancing inland navigation along the Danube and promoting culture and tourism), **Protecting the Environment** (aims to restore and maintain water quality, among other environmental concerns), **Building Prosperity** (seeks to advance the knowledge society) and **Strengthening the Region** (aims to improve decision-making capacities and

⁸ [swd_2022_397_fin_en_txt.pdf \(eusbsr.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022_397_fin_en_txt.pdf&from=doctr&directAccess=true)

structures in both the public and private sectors). These four pillars are further divided into 11 priority areas: 1a Waterways Mobility, 1b Rail-Road Air Mobility, 2 Sustainable Energy, 3 Culture & Tourism, 4 Water Quality, 5 Environmental Risks, 6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality, 7 Knowledge Society, 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises, 9 People & Skills, 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation and 11 Security.

Thus, the EUSDR best practices examples include:

- **Joint Statement of Ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region**

The EUSDR's annual ministerial meetings and forums have consistently provided strong political support for the strategy. These events have enabled high-level discussions on key themes, such as sustainable regional development and digital transformation, resulting in important declarations and strategic directions. For example, the 2021 annual forum, held in Bratislava, led to a joint declaration on digitalization⁹ and the strategic use of Cohesion Policy Funds, demonstrating the forum's role in shaping the region's development trajectory. Moreover, the joint declaration calls for continued support from the European Commission, national authorities, and the private sector to keep research, innovation, and digitalisation at the forefront of the EUSDR agenda. The insights outlined above highlight a significant potential for developing future strategic projects aimed at addressing the key challenges of the Danube Region.

- **Danube Civil Society Forum and Network for Learning in Later Life, Social Participation and Intergenerational Dialogue**

The Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF), founded in 2011, is the platform for civil society dialogue and networking in the Danube basin. It serves as a platform for structured consultations between civil society and public and private authorities at regional, national, and EU levels, as well as with international and intergovernmental organizations active in the Danube region. DCSF is dedicated to supporting civil society organizations (CSOs) within the Danube basin, aiming to strengthen their participation and networking in alignment with the EUSDR. Alongside the DCSF, DANET has also been developed. DANET is Network for Learning in Later Life, Social Participation and Intergenerational Dialogue along the Danube, that initiates local, regional, and transnational educational and learning activities and projects supporting the development of the EUSDR and has facilitated participatory planning, community-building, and cross-cultural dialogue. The engagement

⁹ https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Joint-Statement-of-Ministers_EUSDR-Annual-Forum-2021_final_amended.pdf

of CSOs, particularly through initiatives like the Shadow Report¹⁰, has enhanced decision-making by bringing local and regional perspectives closer to macro-regional strategies, which is particularly important in the context of post-pandemic recovery, where the reintegration and empowerment of CSOs are critical for sustained regional development.

- **Multilateral Scientific and Technological Cooperation in the Danube Region**

The joint funding instrument, *Multilateral Scientific and Technological Cooperation in the Danube Region*¹¹, was established to enhance scientific collaboration among EUSDR countries by leveraging existing bilateral cooperation programmes. This initiative aims to advance scientific research in the region by supporting researchers' mobility, fostering cross-border research cooperation, and providing opportunities for young and female researchers to engage in international collaborations. By reducing bureaucratic burdens through established application and evaluation processes, the Programme seeks to strengthen research capacities, promote participation in European research projects, and integrate Danube countries into the European Research Area. The anticipated impact includes increased submission of joint cross-border projects across national and EU funding schemes, thereby raising scientific excellence in the Danube Region

- **Establishment of the Embedding Task Force and Development of Guidance Paper for Embedding**

The establishment of the EUSDR Embedding Task Force in 2019, initiated by the Croatian presidency, has represented a crucial step in enhancing the Strategy's access to a wider range of financial resources. The task force was created to address the limitation that the Interreg Danube Region alone could not meet all funding demands for EUSDR projects. By assembling key stakeholders from various levels, including national and regional authorities, the task force has successfully facilitated the integration of EUSDR priorities into mainstream Cohesion Policy Programmes, as well as other funding mechanism, such as the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). As the result of initiatives and tools developed related to embedding, in 2024, the *Guidance Paper for Embedding the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) into EU Programmes*¹² was published. It is focused on enhancing the alignment of EUSDR activities with EU funding mechanisms, such as Interreg programmes. The paper emphasizes the importance of active embedding

¹⁰ Emphasize that CSOs play an important role in contributing to better decision-making by bringing local and regional communities closer to the macro-regional strategies.

¹¹ <https://danube-region.eu/multilateral-scientific-and-technological-cooperation/>

¹² https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Guidance_Paper_EUSDR_embedding_process_08.2024_final.pdf

through improved communication, cooperation among stakeholders, and the integration of macro-regional strategies with programme cycles. It highlights lessons learned from previous efforts and outlines a forward-looking approach to prepare for post-2027 scenarios. The guidance underscores the need for ongoing stakeholder engagement, clear communication, and collaborative platforms to maximize synergies between EUSDR objectives and EU funding opportunities, aiming to strengthen the Danube Region's development strategies.

- **Utilization of EU Directly Managed Programmes**

The effective use of EU-directly managed programmes to fund EUSDR projects resulted in diversifying funding sources and maximizing resource allocation. Programmes such as the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Horizon 2020, LIFE, and Erasmus+ have played a pivotal role in supporting EUSDR initiatives. For instance, the CEF provided funding for the Komárom-Komarno cross-border bridge project, which improved connectivity between Hungary and Slovakia. Additionally, Horizon 2020 supported key projects in environmental management and the knowledge society, including initiatives such as DAREnet¹³ and OPTAIN¹⁴ (proposes a social and scientific journey towards the increase and better understanding of the multiple benefits of Natural/Small Water Retention Measures (NSWRMs)). Similarly, LIFE funded environmental projects such as LIFE SendBoil¹⁵ (aims at developing an innovative, sustainable, natural-based and cost-effective engineering solution for the mitigation of backward eroding pipping) and LIFE WILDisland¹⁶ (aims to establish a best-practice example for an EU ecological corridor, supported by the EU Commission and strategic partners), while Erasmus+ contributed to educational and training programmes under the COMPETING project that aimed to ensure the highest quality standards in the implementation of future-proof Inland Waterway Transport (IWT) education and training across the EU. These examples highlight the EUSDR's strategic approach to leveraging a diverse range of EU funding instruments, enhancing the strategy's capacity to achieve its regional development objectives and address various priorities effectively.

- **Thematic Workshops and Focused Strategic Priorities**

The organization of thematic workshops highlighted an effective approach for aligning EUSDR priorities with available funding opportunities. This method emerged from the need to address the broad scope of the EUSDR's action plan, which initially included 85 actions but in 2020 Priority Area Coordinators and their Steering Groups narrowed it down to five

¹³ <https://codanec.eu/about-us/danet/>

¹⁴ <https://www.optain.eu/>

¹⁵ <https://lifesandboil.eu/>

¹⁶ <https://wildisland.danubeparks.org/>

areas. By narrowing the focus to five key areas, the workshops facilitated more targeted discussions and the development of actionable plans that align with funding priorities. This targeted approach has proven successful in enhancing the clarity and feasibility of project proposals, thereby improving the chances of securing funding and ensuring more effective implementation of EUSDR initiatives.

- **Implementation of the Updated Evaluation Plan**

The EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028 outlines the process and objectives for evaluating the implementation of the EUSDR, particularly focusing on strategic projects. The evaluation seeks to assess the effectiveness of funding absorption during the 2021-2027 programming period and aims to enhance the operation of EUSDR managing authority networks (ESF, CF/ERDF, IPA/NDICI) to support the embedding of EUSDR into funding programmes. It emphasizes the importance of cooperation among national, regional, EU, and non-EU actors to monitor outcomes, foster synergies, avoid overlaps, and ensure efficiency. Additionally, the plan highlights the need for developing synergies for strategic projects and improving information flow on implemented projects across twelve thematic fields to enhance awareness and strategic alignment.

- **Rivers of Europe**

Rivers of Europe¹⁷ (RIVE) is an international artistic, civic, and educational initiative that explores the current and future significance of rivers as vital sources of life and human interaction. Beginning its journey in 2014, RIVE travelled the length of the River Danube, from the Black Forest to the Black Sea, engaging communities with a diverse cultural program that examines themes such as stability and change, longing and belonging, and sediment and sentiment. The initiative includes floating venue features daily exhibitions, performances and workshops led by dancers, musicians, artist and designers.

3.1.1 Successful projects/initiatives

In addition to the aforementioned strategic projects (DAREnet, OPTAIN, LIFE SendBoil, LIFE WILDisland), the following strategic projects and initiatives have also been developed under the EUSDR. This is not a final list of strategic projects¹⁸, but examples of successful ongoing projects/initiatives.

¹⁷ <https://riversofeurope.org/#about>

¹⁸ The whole list of strategic projects is available at: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/projects/>

Table 12 EUSDR Successful Projects/Initiatives

EUSDR Successful Strategic Projects/Initiatives	
SYNERGETICS – Accelerating the Green Transformation of Inland and Coastal Shipping	
Description	The inland and coastal shipping sectors face significant challenges in reducing greenhouse gas and air-pollutant emissions, driven by the European Green Deal and the Taxonomy Regulation, as well as the increasing demand for improved environmental performance to maintain competitiveness. The SYNERGETICS project aims to unlock the greening potential of the existing fleet on European inland waterways and coastal areas through retrofitting, by consolidating relevant knowledge and solutions from various sectors, particularly the waterborne sector.
Duration	January 2023 – June 2026
Funding Source	The project was funded by the Horizon Europe.
Contribution to EUSDR	The project contributed to the following EUSDR PAs: PA02: <i>To encourage more sustainable energy</i> , PA07: <i>To develop the knowledge society through research, education, and information technologies</i>
Preparing FAIRway 2 works in the Rhine Danube Corridor	
Description	The project aims to address critical infrastructure shortcomings along the Danube corridor to enhance the performance and reliability of inland waterway transport, which is vital for achieving European transport policy goals. The project focuses on reducing infrastructure quality gaps and improving efficiency by preparing interventions to eliminate bottlenecks on the Serbian-Croatian Danube stretch and planning investments in high-quality mooring places.
Duration	July 2020 – December 2024
Funding Source	Connecting Europe Facility of the European Union
Contribution to EUSDR	The project contributes to the following PAs: PA 1b: <i>To improve mobility and multimodality – Road, rail and air links</i> , PA02: <i>To encourage more sustainable energy</i> , PA05: <i>To manage environmental risks</i> , PA06: <i>To preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils</i> , PA08: <i>To support the competitiveness of enterprises, including cluster development</i> , PA10: <i>To step up institutional capacity and cooperation</i> , affiliation to TWG of PA 1a: <i>Waterways and port infrastructure & management</i>
Galati Multimodal Platforms – Stage I – Upgrading of the waterside infrastructure	
Description	The project “Galati Multimodal Platforms – Stage I – Upgrading of the waterside infrastructure” is the initial phase of the broader “Multimodal Platform Galati” initiative, which aims to remove major bottlenecks by significantly upgrading existing infrastructure and bridging missing links along the Rhine – Danube / Alpine Core Networks Corridor. This stage focuses on upgrading the waterside infrastructure at the Port Bazinul Nou area within the port of Galati. Key actions include developing technical designs and execution details for the quay/unloading area, multimodal platforms, infrastructure and superstructure enhancements, and improving road and rail access to the multimodal platforms. The project also involves capital dredging works in the basin to ensure safe vessel entry, upgrading the existing quay for direct loading and unloading operations of Intermodal Loading Units (ILUs), and partially filling the port basin to create additional berthing space for future handling operations. The project resulted in enhanced integration of Danube inland waterway transport into logistics chains through digital data and fleet operations efficiency increased
Duration	July 2017 – December 2021
Funding Source	The project was funded through CEF “Connecting Europe”
Contribution to EUSDR	The project contributed to the following PAs: PA1b: <i>To improve mobility and multimodality – Road, rail and air link</i> (Action 1: <i>Contribute to improve waterway and port infrastructure & management</i> Target: <i>Achieve a notable improvement of the fairway conditions and shore-</i>

EUSDR Successful Strategic Projects/Initiatives	
	<i>side infrastructure along the Danube and its navigable tributaries, confirmed by the waterway users by means of an annual user survey.</i>
COMPETING – Competence Based Education and Training for Inland Navigation	
Description	Within the COMPETING project, fifteen partners from eight different EU member states will collaborate to develop curricula and lesson materials, along with a Quality Assurance and Quality Control (QA/QC) system. This initiative aims to ensure the highest quality standards in the implementation of future-proof Inland Waterway Transport (IWT) education and training across the EU. The project resulted in development of Quality Assurance & Quality Control system for Inland Waterway Transport Education & Training which is currently in use.
Duration	January 2019 – December 2021
Funding Source	The project was funded under the Erasmus+
Contribution to EUSDR	The project contributed to the following PA: PA09: <i>To invest in people and skills</i> , affiliation to the TWG of PA 1a: <i>Education and jobs</i>
GRENDEL – Green and efficient Danube fleet	
Description	The overall objective of the project was to support Danube fleet operators as well as public bodies (like ministries & relevant authorities) which are relevant for regulatory and policy actions in their efforts to set up a comprehensive strategy and concrete actions for launching a targeted long-term Danube fleet modernisation process on a transnationally harmonised basis. GRENDEL addressed the following fleet modernisation aspects: [i] use of low carbon & alternative fuels, [ii] reduction of air pollutant emissions (CO ₂ , NO _x , PM) and [iii] reduction of overall energy consumption. Besides this, [iv] transport & logistics management processes have been addressed to ensure better integration of the Danube IWT into logistics chains through new services (including RIS), digital data provision as well as dedicated tools to improve efficiency of fleet operations. The project resulted in know-how knowledge transfer for Danube fleet operators, innovative technical inland vessels' concepts, improved transport & logistic management processes of fleet operators and model state aid scheme & innovative financial instruments.
Duration	June 2018 – November 2020
Funding Source	The project was funded by the <i>Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) 2014 – 2020</i>
Contribution to EUSDR	The project contributed to the following EUSDR PAs: PA09: <i>To invest in people and skills</i> , PA10: <i>To step up institutional capacity and cooperation, Compliance with targets of the Danube Region Strategy: Increase the cargo transport on the river by 20% by 2020 compared to 2010., Implement harmonised River Information Services (RIS) on the Danube and its navigable tributaries and ensure the international exchange of RIS data preferably by 2020., Solve the shortage of qualified personnel and harmonize education standards in inland navigation in the Danube region by 2020, taking duly into account the social dimension of the respective measures</i>

Source: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/projects/>

3.2 EUSBSR

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) is the first-established macro-regional strategy, fostering cooperation and coordination among EU Member States bordering the Baltic Sea (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden). The EUSBSR was approved in 2009 by the European Commission and it aims to tackle regional challenges and seize opportunities through collective efforts. EUSBSR is centred

around three main objectives: **Save the Sea, Connect the Region, and Increase Prosperity.**

To achieve the objective, the EUSBSR is accompanied by an Action Plan, which identifies key actions organized into Policy Areas (PA). Each PA is responsible for developing actions that contribute to these objectives by translating them into tangible results. These actions, crucial for achieving the PA's goals, can take various forms, such as policy recommendations, new approaches, enhanced policy coordination, ongoing process support, or networking initiatives. In total, the EUSBSR consists of 14 PAs - *Nutri, Hazards, Bio-economy, Ship, Safe, Transport, Energy, Spatial Planning, Secure, Tourism, Culture, Innovation, Health and Education*. The Action Plan is regularly revised, the last time being updated in 2021.

The EUSBSR best practices include:

- **Adaptive and Collaborative Approach to EUSBSR Policy Implementation¹⁹**

Each EUSBSR PA operates using a structured approach of Actions and Activities. PAs develop Actions that align with the overall goals of the EUSBSR, and these Actions are further operationalized through various Activities. This method ensures that the strategy remains focused, adaptable, and effective in addressing regional challenges. The EUSBSR encourages innovative ideas and initiatives, aiming to broaden the involvement of diverse stakeholders while enhancing successful existing partnerships. It remains open for Activities beyond established structures, offering flexibility in formats to meet the varying needs of each PA. Activities can include projects, processes, networks, or platforms, with no strict preference for any particular format. PAs can also use the flagship concept, with decisions on flagship designation made by the respective PA Steering Groups. To ensure alignment and effectiveness, Activities must directly support the implementation of one or more Actions within the PAs and involve transnational cooperation, typically engaging at least three EUSBSR member states or two member states along with a neighbouring country. They should have a realistic implementation timeline with clear milestones that are monitorable and evaluable. Regular progress reports are required to be submitted to the PA Coordinators. Activities designated as flagships must address key aspects of one or more Actions and PAs, delivering significant added value.

- **Utilization of EU Directly Managed Programmes**

EUSBSR projects also receive funding from other EU programmes managed by the European Commission, such as CEF, Erasmus+, LIFE, and Horizon 2020/Europe. For

¹⁹ <https://eusbsr.eu/wp-content/uploads/eusbsr-modes-of-operation-20210511-final-layout-version-20210520.pdf>

instance, in the PA *Safe*, the *Community Safety Action for Supporting Climate Adaptation*²⁰ (CASCADE) project was funded by Horizon 2020, focusing on crisis management and safety. In *Bioeconomy*, the project *Life Taiga* was supported by LIFE, targeting nature and biodiversity conservation. Meanwhile, the *Knowledge Alliance for Human Resources and Organizational Development*²¹ (KAforHR) project in the PA *Innovation*, which supports SMEs, was funded through Erasmus+. To enhance access to these funding opportunities, some national authorities have strengthened coordination between National Coordinators and specialists in ministries responsible for EU funding instruments.

3.2.1 Successful projects/initiatives

The EUSBSR has transformed from a regional cooperation platform into a key hub for addressing shared challenges in the Baltic Sea region, a shift accelerated by the pandemic. The 2021 Action Plan significantly advanced the strategy by aligning it with global challenges, including the European Green Deal and digital transition goals, emphasizing a commitment to a green, low-carbon, and resilient economy. The strategy encourages cross-sectoral actions within Policy Areas, particularly for green and digital transitions in key sectors like shipping, maritime industries, the blue economy, and tourism. It also increasingly addresses social change, emphasizing civil society involvement, resilience, and active ageing.

The table below provides several examples of strategic projects that support EUSBSR's PAs.

²⁰ <https://www.cascade-bsr.eu/>

²¹ <https://ka4hr.eu/>

Table 13 EUSBSR Successful Strategic Projects/Initiatives

EUSBSR Successful Projects/Initiatives	
Reducing nutrient leakage from farmland with gypsum	
Description	The project GYPREG brings together national and public authorities, NGOs, farmers and farmers' associations to increase the uptake of gypsum treatment of agricultural fields that allows to reduce phosphorus losses from agriculture. The main objective is to reduce nutrient runoff into the Baltic Sea by promoting gypsum treatment, which enhances water quality and aligns with EU and HELCOM environmental goals. The project aims to significantly lower phosphorus levels, thereby improving water quality and reducing eutrophication, with effectiveness demonstrated through pilot projects and studies.
Duration	November 2023 – October 2026
Funding Source	The project is funded by the INTERREG Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 under Priority 2 <i>Water-smart societies</i> and Objective 2.1 <i>Sustainable waters</i> .
Contribution to EUSBSR	The project supports the following PAs: PA Nutri and PA Bioeconomy.
Baltic Sea Region Cultural Pearls	
Description	The BSR Cultural Pearls project aims to make smaller towns, cities, and municipalities in the Baltic Sea Region more attractive and liveable by enhancing social resilience through cultural engagement. By involving citizens in cultural activities, such as music, dance, theatre, and visual arts, the initiative fosters a sense of community, belonging, and trust, improving the quality of life and strengthening the ability of these communities to adapt to challenges like climate change, urbanization, economic downturns, segregation, ageing populations, and political tensions.
Duration	January 2023 – December 2025
Funding Source	The project is funded by the INTERREG Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 under Priority 2 <i>Innovative societies</i> and Objective 2.1 <i>Resilient economies and communities</i> .
Contribution to EUSBSR	The project supports the following PAs: PA Culture, PA Tourism, PA Spatial Planning.

Source: Official EUSBSR web page, Official Interreg Baltic Sea Region web page

3.3 EUSALP

The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) was approved in 2015 by the European Commission. The general objective is to promote sustainable economic and social prosperity of the Alpine Region, which includes 5 member states and (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia) and Liechtenstein and Switzerland, through growth and job creation, by improving its attractiveness, competitiveness, and connectivity, while at the same time preserving the environment and ensuring healthy and balanced ecosystems. The EUSALP covers the following PAs: **Economic growth and innovation, Mobility and connectivity, and Environment and energy**.

The Action Plan, developed in 2015, serves to translate the identified common challenges in actions. The following objectives have been identified and under each of them several actions have been defined:

- *Fair access to job opportunities by building on the high competitiveness of the Region*

- *Sustainable internal and external accessibility*
- *A more inclusive environmental framework and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future.*

In addition, the Action Plan includes a cross-cutting objective – *A sound macro-regional governance model for the Region (to improve cooperation and the coordination of action).*

The EUSALP best practices include:

- **Unique Cooperation and Governance**

Unlike other strategies, EUSALP features a distinctive governance structure that clearly separates strategic and operational roles. This structure includes the General Assembly, the Executive Board, and Action Groups (AGs), each playing a crucial part in the strategy's success:

Political: The General Assembly represents the political leadership of EUSALP, composed of high-level political representatives from participating states and regions, the European Commission, and the Alpine Convention as an observer. This body sets the overall political direction and provides strategic thematic guidance, making key decisions on actions. The Assembly emphasizes strong political support, with ministers playing a pivotal role in determining the strategy's direction, taking ownership, aligning policies and funds, and ensuring the necessary resources and authority for decision-making. To maintain balanced representation, a rotating presidency is established, open to all participating states and regions with the agreement of the European Commission.

Coordination: The Executive Board consists of state and regional representatives, the European Commission, and observers from the Alpine Convention and the *Interreg Alpine Space Programme*. It is responsible for the overall coordination of EUSALP, ensuring substantial dialogue and coordination across all decision-making levels and sectors within each state and region, as well as between participating states and regions. This helps to reduce fragmentation, enhance the realization of actions, and encourage effective participation from all involved actors. The Executive Board also plays a crucial role in exchanging information and identifying policy gaps as they arise, thus supporting cohesive strategy implementation.

Implementation: The core of EUSALP's implementation lies with the AGs, which are responsible for the day-to-day execution of the strategy. There are nine AGs, each focused on specific thematic areas that align with EUSALP's objectives. AG leaders and members are instrumental in translating strategic goals into concrete actions and projects, facilitating effective operational delivery at the macro-regional level. This operational focus is critical, as the outcomes of joint actions and projects conducted by the AGs inform political

decisions and enhance the efficiency of policies related to the strategy. Active engagement, particularly by EU member states in leadership roles, is crucial to maintaining EUSALP's prominence on political agendas, including in non-EU countries.

• **Monitoring Matrix**

The Executive Board and the AGs oversee the monitoring and evaluation of EUSALP. A specialized monitoring matrix is used to track the strategy's complexity, with targets and indicators defined for effective monitoring. This Matrix was created as an extended reporting tool within a detailed monitoring system, designed to be forward-looking, user-friendly, and low-maintenance. Rather than focusing on broader policy impacts and long-term goals for EUSALP, the approach shifted towards indicators and targets directly linked to the projects. The Monitoring Matrix aims to help AGs and the governing Presidency track the progress of strategic initiatives, linking political declarations and goals to concrete projects in the Alpine Region, thus facilitating the evaluation of EUSALP activities. The Matrix and its indicators are intended to evolve over time, adapting to changing political priorities, policy contexts, and emerging challenges and opportunities. The *Enhancing the Governance Mechanisms of the EUSALP* (AlpGov 2) project, based on the review of the Monitoring Matrix and feedback and inputs from AGs, set a 13 common output and results indicators, including:

- Awareness-raising/communication
- Stakeholder participatory engagement
- Knowledge Building & Transfer, Capacity Building
- Transnational cooperation and coordination
- Trans-sectoral coordination
- Information/Knowledge Platform
- Political commitment
- Policy Recommendations & Guidelines
- Strategic Framework/Planning
- Common Framework for recognition /certification /standardisation /code of ethics /quality label
- Testing and piloting
- Embedding and programming.

3.3.1 Successful Projects/Initiatives

Current geopolitical, environmental, and macroeconomic shifts intensify existing regional challenges like territorial polarisation, energy poverty, and unemployment while complicating issues such as digitisation, human capital development, and risk governance. Initiatives under EUSALP, such as the *Green Hydrogen for the Alpine Region*, provide a

strong foundation for addressing these pressing challenges, particularly in energy transition and security.

Table 14 EUSALP Successful Projects/Initiatives

EUSALP Successful Projects/Initiatives	
AlpTextyles - Collaborative solutions for a heritage & consumer sensitive relocalization of sustainable, circular, and innovative Alpine textile value chains	
Description	Textile value chains are among the most polluting industries, yet they hold significant potential for CO2 reduction. The rich textile heritage of the Alps, characterized by unique aesthetics and expertise rooted in circularity and a sensitivity to local resources, offers a valuable opportunity. As consumers increasingly critique globalized value chains and seek sustainable lifestyles, Alpine heritage can play a key role in revitalizing local textile value chains that have been disrupted by global sourcing and offshore production. This approach not only leverages local natural resources but also enhances the appeal and value of Alpine products. AlpTextyles, with its 12 partner organizations from 6 Alpine countries, brings together vital textile ecosystems to establish a shared foundation of expertise in research and innovation. The initiative aims to foster regional development, create jobs, and preserve cultural heritage while promoting circularity in the textile sector.
Duration	November 2022 – October 2025
Funding Source	The project was funded by the Interreg Alpine Space Programme 2021 - 2027 under Priority <i>Carbon neutral and resource sensitive Alpine region</i> and Specific Objective 2.2 <i>Promoting the transition to a circular and resource efficient economy</i> .
Contribution to EUSALP	The project contributed to the following EUSALP AGs: AG3 and AG6.
TranStat - Transitions to Sustainable Ski Tourism in the Alps of Tomorrow	
Description	Mountain resorts are currently facing a significant challenge - adapting to the impacts of climate change without a well-defined reference framework to guide their actions. The TranStat project aims to support the development of co-constructed transition processes in mountain resorts, specifically ski resorts and their surrounding areas. TranStat focuses on a participative and inclusive approach, engaging not only elected officials and tourism industry stakeholders but also all economic players and local residents. The project's goal is to collaboratively develop transition scenarios and propose solutions to the challenges faced by these resorts. To achieve this, TranStat is creating a network of transitioning resorts, both physical and digital, to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences, and to collectively explore future-oriented solutions.
Duration	November 2022 – October 2025
Funding Source	The project was funded by the Interreg Alpine Space Programme 2021 - 2027 under Priority Climate resilient and green Alpine region and Specific Objective 1.1 <i>Promoting climate change adaptation and disaster risk prevention, resilience, taking into account eco-system based approaches</i> .
Contribution to EUSALP	The project contributed to the following EUSALP AGs: AG1, AG2, and AG6.
SmartVillages – Smart digital transformation of villages in the Alpine Space	
Description	Alpine rural communities often face inadequate service provision and lack a supportive environment for entrepreneurship and social innovation. While digitalization offers a promising solution, its potential remains largely untapped. The SmartVillages project empowered local actors to enhance their region's attractiveness as a place to live and work by fostering new forms of stakeholder engagement, uniting policymakers, businesses, academia, and civil society. Ultimately, the project's outcomes were transferred to the policy level, helping to improve the political framework for digital innovation, addressing both organizational and societal aspects as well as technical components. The main outcomes included <i>Open Digital</i>

EUSALP Successful Projects/Initiatives	
	<i>Smart Village Exchange Platform and Smart Villages Digital Toolbox (a digital tool that helps resolving local challenges by supporting communities in development and decision processes), SmartVillages Policy Recommendations, and Compendium of the SmartVillages project.</i>
Duration	April 2018 – October 2021
Funding Source	The project was funded by the Interreg Alpine Space Programme 2014-2020 under Priority <i>Innovative</i> and Objective <i>Improve the framework conditions for innovation in the Alpine Space</i> .
Contribution to EUSALP	The project contributed to the following EUSALP AGs: AG1 (<i>To develop an effective research and innovation ecosystem</i>), AG3 (<i>To improve the adequacy of labour market, education and training in strategic sectors</i>), AG5 (<i>To connect people electronically and promote accessibility to public services</i>) and AG9 (<i>To make the territory a model region for energy efficiency and renewable energy</i>).
AlpGov 2 – Enhancing the Governance Mechanisms of the European Strategy for the Alpine Region	
Description	The Alpine area is characterized by diverse demographic, social, and economic trends, along with a wide range of governance systems and traditions. The EUSALP seeks to enhance cooperation and synergies among Alpine countries and regions. The project supported the establishment of EUSALP by developing standardized mechanisms for organizing action groups, mapping institutional frameworks, key actors, and funding schemes, and identifying actions with high potential impact. This approach allows common challenges in the Alpine region to be tackled more effectively.
Duration	January 2020 – December 2022
Funding Source	The project is funded by the Interreg Alpine Space Programme 2014-2020 under Priority 2 <i>Well-Governed</i> and Objective <i>Increase the application of multilevel and transnational governance in the Alpine Space</i> .
Contribution to EUSALP	The project contributed to the following AGs: AG1 (<i>To develop an effective research and innovation ecosystem</i>), AG2 (<i>To increase the economic potential of strategic sectors</i>), AG3 (<i>To improve the adequacy of labour market, education and training in strategic sectors</i>), AG4 (<i>To promote intermodality and interoperability in passenger and freight transport</i>), AG5 (<i>To connect people electronically and promote accessibility to public services</i>), AG6 (<i>To preserve and valorise natural resources, including water and cultural resources</i>), AG7 (<i>To develop ecological connectivity in the whole EUSALP territory</i>), AG8 (<i>To improve risk management and to better manage climate change, including major natural risks prevention</i>), AG9 (<i>To make the territory a model region for energy efficiency and renewable energy</i>).

Source: Official EUSALP web page, Official Interreg Alpine Space web page

3.4 Interact

The EU's macro-regional strategies aim to enhance cooperation and address cross-border challenges such as pollution, climate change, unemployment, and lack of connectivity. These strategies serve as platforms for long-term coordination and collaboration across various sectors, connecting policy work, funding, and practical actions. The strategies are built on five core elements: long-term policy impact, cross-sectoral collaboration, multi-level governance, flexible action scope, and alignment of funding resources. These elements are crucial for addressing shared challenges effectively. Traditional macro-regional strategies' implementation formats include single projects, project chains, flagship initiatives, working groups, and stakeholder dialogues. However, as strategies mature, there is a need for more strategic and impactful formats to achieve long-term regional impact.

Therefore, the Interact, as the support structure for Interreg programmes and macro-regional strategies, developed the *Policy-action process to deliver unique macro-regional value-added* input paper that introduces the policy-action process as a new, innovative implementation format for macro-regional strategies. This approach combines policy work and on-the-ground actions, aiming to align existing institutions, policies, and funding at various governance levels. It is designed to be flexible, inclusive, and capable of adapting to changing contexts and emerging challenges. The policy-action process is an agile, inclusive, and engaging transnational development framework established within or across thematic areas of the macro-regional strategies to achieve strategic objectives. Its scope can be tailored to specific actions or sub-actions, with thematic area coordinators and steering groups determining the most suitable design and implementation level based on the desired impact and available resources.

While each policy-action process is uniquely designed and implemented, they all adhere to common principles: they must be relevant at the macro-regional level, foster transnational collaboration and impact, be complementary by integrating various policies and perspectives, and function efficiently through coordinated efforts and clear task divisions among stakeholders. These processes are embedded in the regional context, driven by stakeholder ownership, and ultimately aimed at benefiting citizens within the macro-region.

Overall, the policy-action process is positioned as a transformative approach that can significantly enhance the implementation and impact of macro-regional strategies by fostering coordinated actions and aligning resources towards common goals. By offering a flexible framework that aligns existing institutions, policies, and funding sources, the policy-action process aims to provide a cohesive approach that coordinators can leverage to achieve impactful results across the macro-region. This structure serves as an adaptable guide, encouraging coordinated efforts without imposing rigid requirements, allowing for customized application based on the unique needs of the strategy. Therefore, this support framework was developed specifically to assist stakeholders in implementation, offered on a *take it or leave it* basis. This means stakeholders had the flexibility to use the support tools and resources if they find them beneficial, allowing them to decide whether or not to incorporate them into their strategic efforts.

4 Conclusion

This deliverable offers a comprehensive analysis of the current state, challenges, and needs across the five Pillars of EUSAIR, based on the Facility Point and Facility Point Plus projects (2016-2023) and in-depth interviews conducted with PCs, ensuring a participatory approach in its drafting. The insights gathered herein highlight the complex landscape of implementation formats development, emphasizing the critical need for streamlined processes, enhanced collaboration, and targeted resource allocation to address macro-regional priorities effectively.

Key findings reveal persistent challenges such as the complexity of initial project development phases, and gaps in stakeholder engagement and coordination across Pillars. TSG1 experiences significant difficulties in transitioning from conceptual ideas to fully developed project proposals, indicating complexities in the initial stages of project development. TSGs within Pillar 2 have highlighted the outdated nature of their implementation formats, necessitating updates to reflect current needs and priorities.

Across all Pillars, there are observed challenges related to monitoring mechanisms and structured stakeholder engagement, including the involvement of non-EU member states, which are crucial for fostering inclusive development. TSGs 3 and 4 demonstrate ongoing difficulties in securing suitable funding and coordinating cross-pillar projects, highlighting the complexity of managing projects that require alignment across various domains.

TSG5, as the newest addition, faces distinct integration challenges, including the absence of defined criteria for project selection and the need for a structured organizational framework. These challenges affect its alignment with broader EUSAIR strategic objectives and the ability to maintain continuous collaboration among stakeholders, including the organization of targeted workshops and roundtables.

Lastly, the analysis underscores the necessity for a cohesive approach that can be drawn from best practices examples of other macro-regional strategies (EUSDR, EUSBR and EUSALP).

Moving forward, the focus should be on developing an agile and flexible project development mechanism that enhances collaboration, ensures effective engagement, and aligns with evolving EU policies. Thus, this deliverable serves as a crucial foundation for the next phase of capacity-building activities under the SP4EUSAIR initiative. By addressing identified needs through tailored capacity-building workshops, there is an opportunity to directly tackle identified challenges which will be instrumental in refining implementation formats and building new ones, maturing specific strategic project proposals, building a

robust platform for strategic dialogue and cooperation and thus strengthening stakeholder networks, and ultimately driving sustainable progress in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Glossary of the EUSAIR structure:

- **Action:** Actions within each Topic are the specific interventions planned by EUSAIR governance structures and stakeholders to achieve the defined objectives and targets. These actions may include new approaches, enhanced coordination in policy-making, policy reviews, support for ongoing processes, and networking initiatives. The Thematic Steering Groups, supported by the EUSAIR governance structure, will work to translate these actions into concrete project development processes, collaborating with stakeholders to bring added value to the region.
- **Action Plan (Implementation Format):** An Action Plan is a type of implementation format used in EUSAIR that includes a detailed list of tasks that must be completed prior to designing a project or establishing its objectives.
- **Action Plan (EUSAIR):** The *Action Plan* was developed to translate EUSAIR's objectives into tangible outcomes by identifying specific priorities for the Adriatic-Ionian Region. It addresses key challenges and opportunities in the Adriatic-Ionian Region through its structured Pillars and Topics. It outlines priorities and interventions, including policy coordination and networking, to be developed into concrete projects by TSGs and stakeholders. In alignment with the *Evaluation of the EUSAIR* outcomes regarding the need for revision, *Action Plan* was revised between January 2022 and June 2023.
- **Cross-pillar project:** Cross-pillar project is a type of implementation format in EUSAIR that refers to projects that are proposed by two or more EUSAIR Pillars, aiming at two or more Pillar's objectives.
- **Embedding:** Embedding is a process aiming on the use of existing funding sources (EU, national, regional, private, etc.) and the alignment with and of relevant programmes with macro-regional priorities and targets.
- **Flagship:** Flagship is a high-priority initiative within a macro-regional strategy that addresses key challenges and opportunities, delivering significant added value to the region.
- **Flagship Projects:** High-priority initiatives transformed into projects within EUSAIR that address key challenges and opportunities, delivering significant added value to the region.
- **Implementation formats** The implementation format serves as a comprehensive framework in EUSAIR that terminologically encompasses various projects and initiatives. In terms of SP4EUSAIR and this document, these formats include strategic projects (mono-pillar or cross-pillar), action plans, and master plans designed and developed by the TSGs to achieve its strategic goals or other types of formats that could potentially be developed in future besides the identified ones

SP4EUSAIR

(e.g. policy-action processes/initiatives, inter-sectorial and inter-institutional initiatives, collaboration platforms, etc.). The *policy-action process* has been defined as a separate term in the Glossary

- **Labelling:** The labelling process as the selection of the project ideas for its further development is defined by the TSGs and is to be understood as a continuing, dynamic process whereby project contributing to the overall objectives of the EUSAIR and to the specific objectives set out for each pillar in the EUSAIR Action Plan are identified by consensus. For the process, several guiding principles (pre-screening of the candidate projects against the six broad criteria used in EUSAIR Action Plan, following a protocol and specific criteria/guiding principles set by each TSG, and resulting in assigned EUSAIR label if passed) were proposed to be followed and were adopted by Governing Board in 2018. Labelled projects receive special attention and support by Facility Point project with a view of being further developed and funded under EU funded projects.
- **Macro-regional strategy:** A macro-regional strategy is 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.
- **Master plan:** A master plan is type of implementation format in EUSAIR that refers a dynamic, long-term planning document that provides a conceptual framework to guide future growth and development in a specific field. It connects various aspects such as underfunded actions or projects, cultural environments, and settings that are not fully addressed by the EUSAIR Action Plan or Flagship projects. A master plan includes analysis, recommendations, and proposals for the development of macro-regional strategic projects.
- **Mono-pillar project:** Mono-pillar projects are type of implementation formats in EUSAIR that focus on addressing challenges or opportunities within a single Pillar. These projects are specifically designed to contribute to the objectives of one Pillar without crossing into the thematic areas of others.
- **Pillar:** Pillars focus on the key challenges and opportunities that are critical for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, forming the core of the Strategy and playing a vital role in its success and communication.
- **Pillar Coordinator (PC):** Pillar Coordinators are responsible for overseeing the work of their respective EUSAIR Thematic Steering Groups. Typically, the

SP4EUSAIR

coordination for each Thematic Steering Group is managed by at least two coordinators, ideally from two different participating countries. Whenever possible, this includes one coordinator from an EU member state and another from either an EU candidate country or San Marino.

- **Policy-action process:** The Interact, as a support structure for Interreg programmes and macro-regional strategies, developed the *Policy-action process to deliver unique macro-regional value-added* input paper that introduces the policy-action process as a new, innovative implementation format for macro-regional strategies. This approach combines policy work and on-the-ground actions, aiming to align existing institutions, policies, and funding at various governance levels. It is designed to be flexible, inclusive, and capable of adapting to changing contexts and emerging challenges.
- **Strategic projects:** Strategic projects are type of implementation formats in EUSAIR. The primary goal is to implement the Flagship project by outlining the tasks necessary to achieve the specific goals or outcomes anticipated in the Flagship. A strategic project is structured into Work Packages, which are groups of activities required to meet the macro-regional objectives outlined in the Action Plan and Flagship projects. These projects must have a defined budget, a partnership framework, involve at least six EUSAIR countries, and clearly identified stakeholders and deliverables. In some EUSAIR Pillars, upon the request of TSG members, additional activities and strategic planning can be conducted when defining a strategic project. In such cases, it is possible to develop an Action Plan or a Masterplan as the strategic project. These tools have proven particularly beneficial in Pillars where EU strategies are not yet agreed upon or commonly implemented, and have been especially useful for aligning strategies between EU and non-EU countries in the relevant field.
- **Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs):** TSGs are responsible for coordinating and driving the implementation of activities within their respective Pillars in EUSAIR, with one TSG assigned to each Pillar.
- **Topic:** Topics highlight the main areas where the macro-regional strategy provides added value. For every Topic, the Action Plan outlines the issue and specifies the unique contribution it aims to deliver.

SP4EUSAIR

Literature

Literature used includes internal documents provided by the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds of the Republic of Croatia, PCs and Interact representatives and the following publicly available documents/sources:

1. https://www.adriatic-ionic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/EUSAIR-evaluation-v.3-final-delivery-CLEAN_F.pdf
2. *Revised EUSAIR Action Plan, version 8, from 17 April 2024*
3. *Facilitating Strategic Project Development and Financial Dialogue Background Paper Work Package T.2 – Focused on Facilitating Strategic Project Development document (July 2023, v.4),* <https://www.adriatic-ionic.eu/intranet/?cat=background-paper-focused-on-facilitating-strategic-project-development>
4. *Interactive discussion with TSGs – Framework for the implementation of the Action Plan through Implementation Formats, EUSAIR Annual Forum, June 2024*
5. <https://www.adriatic-ionic.eu/about-eusair/facility-point/>
6. <https://eusairfacilitypoint.adrioninterreg.eu>
7. <https://archive.espon.eu/tools-maps/mrs-espon#:~:text=ESPON%20tool.%20The%20ESPON%20European%20and%20Macro-regional%20Territorial,patterns%20taking%20place%20in%20Europe%20and%20its%20macro-regions>
8. *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, December 2022,* https://eusbsr.eu/wp-content/uploads/swd_2022_397_fin_en_txt.pdf
9. <https://danube-region.eu>
10. *Joint Statement of Ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, October 2021,* https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Joint-Statement-of-Ministers_EUSDR-Annual-Forum-2021_final_amended.pdf
11. *Guidance Paper for Embedding the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) into EU Programmes, August 2024,* https://danube-region.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2024/08/Guidance_Paper_EUSDR_embedding_process_08.2024_final.pdf
12. <https://danube-region.eu/multilateral-scientific-and-technological-cooperation/>
13. <https://wildisland.danubeparks.org/>
14. <https://www.optain.eu/>
15. <https://lifesandboil.eu/>
16. <https://wildisland.danubeparks.org/>

SP4EUSAIR

17. <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/projects/>
18. <https://alpine-region.eu>
19. *Guidance on Modes of Operation for EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region Policy Areas based on the EUSBSR Action Plan (SWD(2021) 24 final) and approved by the National Coordinators Group on 11 May 2021, <https://eusbsr.eu/wp-content/uploads/eusbsr-modes-of-operation-20210511-final-layout-version-20210520.pdf>*
20. <https://www.cascade-bsr.eu/>
21. <https://ka4hr.eu/>
22. <https://alpine-region.eu>
23. *Policy-action process to deliver unique macro-regional value-added, July 2021, input paper*
24. *Tirana Declaration, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60549/tirana-declaration-01.pdf>*

Annexe 1

Annexe 1 is the appendix to the document comprising only the chapter *Current state and implementation formats developed* for each pillar, excluding Pillar 5.