

10th Adriatic Ionian Council / EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting

Crete Declaration

6 May 2025

We, the Representatives of the Governments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, San Marino, Serbia and Slovenia, meeting in Crete, with the participation of the **European Commission**, in the framework of the Adriatic Ionian Council/EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting and 10th Forum of the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR):

[Preamble]

GUIDED by the Ancona Declaration of 20 May 2000 and its basic principles, and **RECALLING** the principles expressed in the subsequent Adriatic and Ionian Council (AIC) declarations and in the joint AIC/EUSAIR Ministerial Declarations;

RECALLING the Conclusions of the EU General Affairs Council of 29 September 2014 and those of the European Council of 23-24 October 2014 which endorsed the EUSAIR, on the basis of the Commission's Communication of 17 June 2014 and subsequent addendum (COM(2020) 132) adopted by the Commission on 2 April 2020, including North Macedonia in the EUSAIR, and the addendum (COM(2022) 44) adopted by the Commission on 14 February 2022, including San Marino in the EUSAIR;

EXPECTING the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the revised Action Plan of the EU Macro-Regional Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region to be approved tomorrow, on 7 May 2025;

ACKNOWLEDGING that the long-term experience of cooperation among Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AII) Governments and the cooperation within the EUSAIR contributes to the stability and security of the area;

RECALLING the 2003 European Council in Thessaloniki and the subsequent AII/EUSAIR Declarations in which the EU reconfirmed its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkans participating countries of the EUSAIR and recognized that progress is dependent on implementing major reforms;

WELCOMING the EU-Western Balkans Summit held on 18 December 2024 in Brussels, which reconfirmed the European Union's political engagement with the Western Balkans, supporting their EU accession perspectives;

REAFFIRMING our commitment to good-neighbourly relations, in full respect of International Law, including the UNCLOS, and regional cooperation with the objective of a peaceful, strong, stable, prosperous and united Europe and **RECOGNISING** that the AII/EUSAIR's role has become even more important now, in the presence of pressing international challenges;

[Ukraine-Russia]

EXPRESS concern about the increasingly complex geo-strategic environment that the world is facing, caused by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, by the current crises in the Middle East and by other sources of instability, including provocative acts against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, endangering European and global security;

REITERATE the condemnation of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine which constitutes a grave violation of International Law, against the foundations of international security and stability;

UNDERLINE the need to put an end to the war through a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the international law and the principles of the UN Charter, including the respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, and **EXPRESS** their hope that this goal might be reached soon;

[Gaza Strip]

REITERATE our condemnation of the terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023; **EXPRESS**, at the same time, our grave concern about the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and **REITERATE** our strong commitment to a lasting and sustainable peace based on the two-state solution;

[Enlargement]

ACKNOWLEDGE that the EU enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity in the Adriatic-Ionian region and **UNDERLINE** the necessity for candidates to deliver on internal reforms, enhance reconciliation efforts, political dialogue, regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations and make swift and sustained progress towards EU membership; and **WELCOME** that enlargement has been made a horizontal topic of EUSAIR;

COMMEND the important milestones by the candidate countries on the EU integration process, confirming that the process is based on the principle of own merits, and on the adherence to the established criteria and fundamental European values, as well as on the capacity of these countries to implement the EU-related reforms;

WELCOME the progress made by the All/EUSAIR participating EU candidate countries and **ENCOURAGE** them to remain focused on reforms aimed at advancing alignment with the EU acquis and adherence to European values, standards and principles, also through CFSP alignment, and **EMPHASIZE** that cooperation in the framework of the All/EUSAIR can further facilitate EU candidate countries' paths towards EU integration;

ALSO ACKNOWLEDGE the progress made by All/EUSAIR participating countries, non-candidate to EU membership, engaged in an association process with the EU;

CALL for the acceleration of the EU integration process for All/EUSAIR participating EU candidate countries in a merit-based and reversible manner, also through the implementation of measures of gradual integration in the context of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, aimed at supporting

integration into the EU Single Market and closing the socio-economic gap between the beneficiaries and the EU and to achieve higher social, environmental, and consumer standards, political stability, cultural diversity and ensure prosperity in various fields;

APPRECIATE the intensified political dialogue and EU enhanced policy engagement in the region and **WELCOME** the EU support to help mitigate the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on the Western Balkan participating countries of the EUSAIR, especially the impact on their economies, societies, and security. The EU support is offered through the Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance, the Energy Support Package, and the European Peace Facility, and **APPEAL** to profiting from the implementation of these instruments via the use of the EUSAIR territorial capital and potential;

[Regional Cooperation]

CONFIRM that the AII/EUSAIR represents a valuable regional platform for dialogue and cooperation, as well as a facilitator of know-how transfer between the EU and candidate countries - on EU accession -related reforms, and **RECOGNIZE** that, given this feature, it represents a reliable partner for the EU in the implementation of its enlargement policy;

CALL upon European institutions and the EUSAIR participating countries and stakeholders to strengthen their commitment to the implementation of successful macro-regional projects with necessary political support, guaranteed funding and recognized added value, also under the Western Balkans Investments Framework (WBIF) tool;

[EUSAIR]

RECALL the current socioeconomic reality and geopolitical context in Europe, demanding strong political will, upgraded Strategies and Initiatives, and rapid reactions to deal with potential challenges considering that EUSAIR as a macro-regional Strategy can play a beneficial and decisive political and operational role in this part of Europe;

COMMEND the efforts of the Hellenic Presidency towards the finalization and approval of the Revised Action Plan of the Strategy along with the Communication Plan of the Strategy both adopted by the Commission on 7 May 2025 and **ACKNOWLEDGE** the Hellenic Presidency's commitment to enhance the EU accession process of the Western Balkans participating countries of the EUSAIR through its priorities, while fostering capacity building, the governance structure and the civil society engagement of the EUSAIR implementers;

WELCOME the innovative components of the new Revised Action Plan of the Strategy, i.e. the introduction of the fifth pillar of improved social cohesion, the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the Strategy, the continental green component, the youth component and the new coherent system of indicators with a common methodology as elements of a modern macro-regional Strategy fully in compliance with the current socio-economic environment and the political demands of the European Union;

SUPPORT the results of the consultations for the Cohesion Policy and the INTERREG programmes post 2027 and the recognition of the MRS as fundamental tools of cohesion in the programming period 2028-2035 to benefit from and capitalize on the impact of EU-funded investments, **STRESS** that EUSAIR is an instrument to further enhance economic and social cohesion in the macro-region

and **CALL** for an upgraded, revised and substantial role of the EUSAIR in the post 2027 period **TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION** the formulation of the new MFF and the Cohesion Legislative Package in view of a stronger, safer and more competitive Europe; **UNDERLINE** the importance of continuing a strong EU cohesion policy beyond 2027 to strengthen cooperation within the EU and with candidate countries, and to support their successful integration;

RECALL the achievements of EUSAIR and its pillars in its 10 years of implementation and **ACKNOWLEDGE** that it represents a unique multi-level governance framework that builds trust and dialogue between countries, regions and stakeholders working together to address common challenges;

RECOGNIZE that the three EUSAIR governance support projects (namely FACILITY POINT, StEP and SP4EUSAIR) provide operational support to EUSAIR governance structures, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and promote alignment with EU funding instruments, including IPA III and Cohesion Policy programmes; **EXPECT** to see tangible results from the implementation of these projects that will aid the effective implementation of the Strategy's goals;

REAFFIRM the need for the commitment of policy makers and the establishment of EUSAIR networks of Managing Authorities of EU Cohesion programmes, as well as networks of National IPA Coordinators and other for the IPA III implementation relevant EU authorities, in view of supporting the implementation of EUSAIR priorities by Cohesion and IPA programmes, **ENCOURAGE** exploring further opportunities offered by EU, by shared management programmes and centrally managed programmes but also by the instruments of the pre accession and other funding mechanisms for the Western Balkans participating countries of the EUSAIR, providing a platform for transferring experience to candidate countries; **SUPPORT** the implementation of projects in the Western Balkans participating countries of the EUSAIR under the EU's delegated cooperation framework;

ACKNOWLEDGE the commencement of the work of the EUSAIR Youth Council following its establishment; **CALL** for continued strong support of its work, **ENCOURAGE** its work in complementarity with the Western Balkans Youth Labs and the European Commission's Youth Advisory Structures, and **LOOK FORWARD** to the support and insights of the EUSAIR Youth Council to the governance of the EUSAIR considering the enthusiasm and vision of the youngsters vital in the implementation of the Strategy within the dynamic, constantly changing, and highly challenging environment in the macro-region and the EU; **SUPPORT** existing and emerging youth initiatives and networks such as Adriatic Ionian Youth Network and EUSAIR POPRI; **COMMIT** to continue to support initiatives and projects that have proven instrumental in providing young people with entrepreneurial experiences and knowledge making a significant contribution to the creation of quality employment opportunities, the overall development of society and the region, and offer an effective response to pressing challenges, including brain drain;

ACKNOWLEDGE that EUSAIR provides an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council to address common challenges faced by the participating countries thus making critical the continuous monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy for strengthened cooperation and measurable results, and therefore **APPRECIATE** the impact model, the corresponding evaluation framework and the proposal for exemplary indicators that can be further explored and adapted by EUSAIR that was carried out by INTERACT;

COMMEND the further exploitation and recognition of the assets of the macro-region, profiting from its territorial capital and its natural and human resources, promoting the 'right-to-stay' in the

region and elaborating on the common values that build Europe leading to an inclusive Europe, while safe-guarding the quality of life and job creation in the macro-region;

COMMIT to supporting the upcoming Presidencies that are invited to implement the new Strategy based on the Revised Action Plan and the Communication Plan to have tangible results with added macro-regional value and projects that promote and bring out the potential of the macro-region

[All political and coordination role]

RECALL that in 2025 the Adriatic Ionian Initiative celebrates the 25th anniversary of the “Ancona Declaration” and **UNDERLINE** that - 14 years later – its longstanding activity laid the foundation for the establishment of the EUSAIR, further strengthening regional cooperation and integration;

REAFFIRM the role of the All as the “political anchorage” to the EUSAIR, reflecting on the complementarity between them and **COMMEND** the Permanent Secretariat on its efforts aimed at maintaining efficient links with the EUSAIR pillars as well as civil society;

APPRECIATE the traditional All connecting role between Governments, regional actors and civil society fora and their networks as a key element for the implementation of the EUSAIR, in line with the subsidiarity principle;

[Fora of Civil Society]

RECOGNISE the longstanding partnerships with academia, local authorities, businesses, NGOs and other actors initiated by the All as an irreplaceable key for addressing complex challenges in the region; and **ENCOURAGE** a growing involvement of civil society organizations, businesses, local and regional stakeholders and youth in the implementation of the Strategy;

COMMEND the Permanent Secretariat’s efforts aimed at maintaining and improving links with the Adriatic-Ionian “Fora” of Cities, Chambers of Commerce, Universities, **ACKNOWLEDGE** that civil society can provide added value to the EUSAIR and deliver tangible and beneficial results;

VALUE/APPRECIATE the contribution brought forward by the three Fora and **COMMEND** them on organizing significant events gathering large groups of stakeholders from various sectors of society helping to consolidate the relationship between civil society and local, regional, national and EU Institutions;

COMMEND the Forum of the Adriatic Ionian Chambers of Commerce for creating the DO-AIR Observatory and **ENDORSE** it as a tool aimed at guiding policymakers, businesses, and institutions in taking informed decisions that align with the objectives of the EUSAIR;

[Youth]

COMMEND the All-PS efforts in granting financial support for internships, scholarships and high schools projects for the benefit of Youth and **ENCOURAGE** them to generate positive synergies with IPAIH via the Civil Society Facility and other initiatives such as Erasmus+, the College of Europe in addition to other bilateral initiatives from other EU Member States;

[Regional organizations]

ACKNOWLEDGE the importance of interaction among the Secretariats of regional organizations and among other Macro Regional and Sea Basin strategies in order to further develop synergies and exchange experience, best practices and know-how; and **CONSIDER** the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding by the All Permanent Secretariat and the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) Bari a positive step in this direction;

[Parliaments]

UNDERLINE the importance of parliamentary cooperation among Participants and **RECOGNISE** that the close cooperation between parliaments advances regional reforms and strengthens parliamentary democracy, advancing good governance and institutional development in the region;

CONVINCED that the role of All Parliaments as direct representatives of the peoples is of capital importance and that their cooperation boosts the existing excellent neighbourly relations among our peoples, **RECOGNISE** the importance of the forthcoming 19th Conference of the Presidents/Speakers of All Parliaments on 22-23 May in Ioannina, focusing on the European Integration of the Western Balkans participating countries of the All/EUSAIR and on the diversification of the tourism offer in the Adriatic-Ionian region; and **COMMEND** the Hellenic Parliament on the revitalization of this dimension;

[Final operative clauses]

CONGRATULATE Greece on its successful chairmanship of the All and EUSAIR and on successfully delivering numerous achievements as outlined in the Annexes to this Declaration;

THANK Greece for the excellent organisation and hospitality offered in Crete (Georgioupolis) on the occasion of the AIC/EUSAIR ministerial meeting and the 10th EUSAIR Forum celebrating the 10 years of the implementation of the Strategy;

ENTRUST the incoming All/EUSAIR Chairmanship from 1 June 2025 to 31 May 2026 to North Macedonia, inviting it to use all instruments at its disposal with the aim of consolidating cooperation and leading the All/EUSAIR Region into a period of sustainable growth and prosperity.

ANNEX I

Achievements of the EUSAIR Hellenic Presidency

The Hellenic Presidency of EUSAIR for 2024-2025 has organised a series of open and invitation-only events with the aim of promoting its priorities and the EUSAIR Strategy in general. These achievements are listed below:

- Kick-off meeting of EUSAIR (October 2024, Corfu)
- Meeting of Coordinators and MAs of mainstream programmes and NIPACs (October 2024, Corfu)
- 20th Meeting of TSG for Pillar 1 - Blue Growth (December 2024, Piraeus)
- Conference "Blue Skills for a Sustainable Blue Economy in Adriatic and Ionian Region" (December 2024, Piraeus)
- Workshop "Unlocking Opportunities for Post-2027 Europe: EUSAIR, Interreg, and Cohesion Policy in Joint Action" (February 2025, Thessaloniki; in collaboration with the Managing Authority (MA) INTERREG 2021-2027)
- Technical Meeting of EUSAIR Pillar Coordinators (February 2025, Patras)
- Technical Meeting of EUSAIR National Coordinators (February 2025, Patras)
- 24th Governing Board Meeting of EUSAIR (February 2025, Patras)
- Presentation of the Priorities of the Hellenic Presidency of EUSAIR at the Hellenic Permanent Representation Office in Brussels (February 2025, Brussels)
- TSG1 Capacity Building On Line Workshop within the SP4EUSAIR project in collaboration with the Lead Partner of the project "SP4EUSAIR" (February 2025, online)
- Workshop "Promoting policies and practices for skills in the microregion" (March 2025, Athens)
- Workshop "Prospects for Energy networks, hydrogen market and offshore renewable development: challenges and solutions for the Adriatic-Ionian microregion" (March 2025, Athens; in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Energy)
- Workshop "Accelerating climate change adaptation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region" (April 2025, Corfu; in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Energy)
- 10th Annual EUSAIR Forum (May 2025, Crete)

The Hellenic Presidency of EUSAIR has also participated in other events, spreading awareness of its mandate, promoting its priorities and disseminating the EUSAIR achievements during its term. These events are presented right below:

- Posidonia 2024 (June 2024, Athens)
- Macroregional Strategies & Sea Basin Days 2024 (June 2024, Brussels)
- Aquaculture International Conference (June 2024, Athens)
- CPMR Adriatic-Ionian Task Force meeting (September 2024, on-line)
- Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week 2024 (September 2024, Izola)
- 3rd seminar of “Capacity building to further enhance monitoring and evaluation systems in EU macro-regional strategies, with a focus on capturing macro-regional change” (MRS M&E)” (December 2024, Brussels)
- Technical Meeting of EUSAIR Pillar Coordinators (October 2024, Brussels)
- 23rd EUSAIR Governing Board Meeting (October 2024, Brussels)
- Presentation of the EUSAIR Hellenic Presidency at the IPA ADRION 1st call projects Implementation Seminar & Post-27 Consultation Workshop (October 2024, Bled)
 - Presentation of the EUSAIR Hellenic Presidency to the Greek EGTCs (October 2024, on-line)
 - Presentation of the EUSAIR Hellenic Presidency at the IPA ADRION 1st call projects Implementation Seminar & Post-27 Consultation Workshop
- Presentation of the EUSAIR Hellenic Presidency at the eco-Committee EESC (November 2024, Brussels)
- Presentation of the EUSAIR Hellenic Presidency at the 3rd Meeting of the Interregional Group of the Adriatic-Ionian Region, European Committee of the Regions (November 2024, Brussels)
- Workshop on connecting the Adriatic Ionian Region through Advanced Technology and Training for the Energy Transition in the Port Sector (November 2024, Trieste)
- 20th meeting of the Energy Sub-Group of TSG2 EUSAIR (November 2024, Brussels)
- 1st Membership and Capacity Building Meeting of the EUSAIR Youth Council (November 2024, Dubrovnik)
- Presentation of the EUSAIR Hellenic Presidency at the EGTC Conference “Southeast Europe and Cross Border Cooperation: Challenges – Perspectives” (April 2025, on-line).

ANNEX II

Achievements of All Hellenic Chairmanship

- ❖ The All Hellenic Chairmanship organized the following Round Tables and Conferences:
 - The 5th International Congress on Applied Ichthyology, Oceanography, and Aquatic Environment (HydroMediT 2024) in the premises of the University of the Aegean, on 1-2 June in Lesbos (Greece).
 - The EUSAIR/All Presidency Kick-Off Conference on 1 October 2024 in Corfu (Greece);
 - The Webinar on "Enhancing Cooperation and Assistance in Case of Natural Disasters", organised by the Hellenic Ministry for Climate Crisis and Civil Protection, in cooperation with the All-PS, on 27 November 2024 (online);
 - The 5th Open day on Aquaculture in Mesolongi on 30 November, 2024, organised by the Hellenic Ministry of Rural Development and Food;
 - The Round Table on "UniAdrion in the Centre of Quadruple Helix for Ionian-Adriatic Sustainable Development", organised by UniAdrion in cooperation with the Permanent Secretariat and the Ioannina University on 18 December 2024 in Ioannina (Greece);
 - The Round Table on "Promotion of Connectivity as a Vital EU Enlargement Tool: Challenges and Opportunities of the Western Balkans – Eastern Mediterranean European Transport Corridor", organised by the Hellenic Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport in cooperation with the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Insular Policy, on 13 March 2025 in Athens (Greece);
 - The Workshop on "Decarbonisation of the Shipping Industry and the Role of Ports in the Adriatic-Ionian Region", organized by the Greek Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Insular Policy, on 29 April 2025 in Piraeus (Greece);
 - The Conference on "Climate Resilience Policies for Coastal Cultural Heritage in the Adriatic-Ionian Region", organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture in cooperation with the All-PS, on 16-18 May 2025 in Kastoria (Greece);
- ❖ The I All Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) meeting took place on 9 October 2024 in Brussels (Belgium), and the II All CSO took place in Patras (Greece) on 12 February 2025;
- ❖ The All Permanent Secretariat organised, under the Greek Chairmanship, and within the framework of the 18th ed. of the Adriatic Mediterranean Festival, 26-29 August in Ancona (Italy), a conference called "Greece, ancient thought, and its relevance today";
- ❖ The All Internships Programme, named Western Balkanship, organized by the Permanent Secretariat in cooperation with the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce and UniAdrion, financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, covering several scholarships. The programme intends to involve students

from universities in the Adriatic-Ionian region and companies, promoting student mobility in the Adriatic-Ionian Region and supporting the circulation of ideas and skills, involving universities and companies.

- ❖ The All Permanent Secretariat took part in the 18th Coordination Meeting of Regional Organizations held at the Central European Initiative (CEI) Executive Secretariat in Trieste, Italy, on 17 September 2024. The event offered participants the opportunity to exchange views on ongoing and future activities, share good practices, and explore ways to strengthen coordination and synergies among regional actors, with a particular focus on enhancing cooperation in support of European integration, sustainable development, and good governance, in line with the UN 2030 Agenda and EU priorities.
- ❖ The 19th Conference of Presidents/Speakers of Parliaments of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative was organised on 22-23 May 2025 in Ioannina (Greece) by the Hellenic Parliament, focusing primarily on the issues of the European perspective of the Western Balkans and on the diversification of tourism supply in the Adriatic Ionian region. The speakers also adopted a Joint Conference Statement, pointing out their views on future cooperation in the All region and the role of parliaments as directly elected representatives of the people.