

Council conclusions on the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)

General Affairs Council meeting
Brussels, 29 September 2014

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

- (1) RECALLING the European Council Conclusions of 13-14 December 2012;
- (2) ACKNOWLEDGING the Commission's Communication concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region¹ (hereinafter: EUSAIR or the Strategy), and COMMENDING the Commission on their extensive consultation process conducted when preparing the Communication;
- (3) TAKING NOTE of consultations with stakeholders conducted by the National Contact Points of the Strategy from September to December 2013, the outcomes of the public consultation launched by the Commission at the end of 2013, the results of the stakeholder seminar on Blue Growth in the Adriatic-Ionian Region held in Brussels on 14 November 2013, and the Athens High Level Stakeholder Conference that took place on 6-7 February 2014;
- (4) RECALLING the Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013 on the added value of macro-regional strategies, and that the Council recommended when considering the creation of new macro-regional strategies to ensure that: a) there are particular needs of strategic importance for the macro-regions for improved high level cooperation in solving common challenges as well as using opportunities, b) involvement of the EU is appropriate and existing EU horizontal policies would be reinforced, c) the appraisal of the added value at the EU and macro-regional level is evidence-based, d) there is clearly expressed political will from both the Member States concerned and their involved regions for such an approach;

¹ COM (2014) 357 final, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region.

- (5) TAKING NOTE that the Commission delivered on 20 May 2014 the Report concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies as requested by those conclusions;
 - (6) RECOGNISING that Member States participate in macro-regional strategies on a voluntary basis;
 - (7) RECOGNISING the innovative and integrated approach in addressing challenges of common aspiration within the EU taken by existing macro-regional strategies, and WELCOMING the potential for the same from EUSAIR, based on the experience gained from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region as well as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region;
 - (8) RECOGNISING the potential of macro-regional strategies, as an integrated framework relating to Member States and non-EU countries in the same geographical area in order to address common challenges and to benefit from strengthened cooperation, to contribute to the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU, therefore supporting the achievement of EU objectives and in particular the promotion of growth and job;
 - (9) NOTING in particular that existing and planned macro-regional strategies provide an important instrument to pursue the objective of territorial cohesion in the areas concerned, because of their integrated and place-based approach;
 - (10) STRESSING that macro-regional strategies are based on the principles of no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures and no new EU legislation, and therefore they call for optimal use of existing financial resources, better use of existing institutions and better implementation of existing legislation;
 - (11) REITERATING the need for coordination between relevant EU policies as well as between EU and national, regional and local policies having an impact on territorial cohesion, respecting the principle of subsidiarity,
- (A) ENDORSES the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region as proposed by the Commission's communication, and TAKES NOTE of the annexed Action Plan elaborated by the Commission on the basis of a consultation with the participating countries, involving all relevant partners and stakeholders;
 - (B) RECOGNISES the common challenges and the particular needs of strategic importance of the territories concerned as identified in the Strategy, and ACKNOWLEDGES its added value in line with the Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013 on the added value of macro-regional strategies;
 - (C) RECOGNISES that EUSAIR has the capacity to contribute to the achievements of the objectives of the EUROPE 2020 Strategy, to ensure smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and competitiveness of the European Union, and to contribute to the reinforcement of existing EU horizontal policies;
 - (D) STRESSES that EUSAIR is of interest to all EU Member States and has the capacity to contribute to further integration of the internal market, to the stability of the area, to foster cooperation between EU and non-EU countries, and while maintaining the EU feature of the Strategy to assist participating candidate and potential candidate countries on their path towards the EU;
 - (E) STRESSES that the Strategy is the expression of a clear political will, and the result of a long political, administrative and technical process among the eight countries participating in the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, and, taking note that the macro-regional strategies are dynamic processes, ACKNOWLEDGES that the Strategy remains open to future developments;

- (F) REITERATES that the Strategy is financially neutral, and through its coordinated approach aims at a more efficient and effective use of existing instruments and funds;
- (G) ACKNOWLEDGES that the Strategy benefits from:
- the long experience of the intergovernmental Adriatic-Ionian Initiative which created strong links between the participating countries, and generated regional co-operation between cities, chambers of commerce, universities and national parliaments;
 - the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas adopted by the Commission on 30 November 2012, which addresses, inter alia, Blue Growth opportunities for the sea basin;
 - coincidental timing of its launch and the start of the 2014-2020 programming period, which helps mobilising relevant policies and programmes in support of the Strategy;
 - the lessons learned from the existing macro-regional strategies, and in particular the need to focus on a limited number of challenges and opportunities, to strengthen institutional and administrative capacity based on existing structures, and to secure ownership, commitment and leadership from participating countries.
- (H) APPRECIATES that the Strategy, while concentrating on four pillars and focusing on the topics with the highest macro-regional relevance will be able to address major challenges of the Adriatic and Ionian Region, such as socio-economic disparities, significant transport infrastructure deficits, a fragmented energy market, intense pressure on water, land and biodiversity, natural and man-made hazards and risks entailed notably by climate change, administrative and institutional inadequacies;
- (I) RECOGNISES that actions in the areas of Blue Growth would bring about promotion of sustainable economic development and jobs and business opportunities, UNDERLINES the importance of improving transport infrastructure and intermodal connectivity of core and comprehensive network in the Region as well as of improving energy infrastructure, RECOGNISES the need to address environmental quality in the Region and to support coordinated efforts of the participating countries to this end which are beneficial for the Adriatic and Ionian Region and in line with the EU *acquis* and Barcelona Convention, RECOGNISES that the potential of the Adriatic and Ionian Region in tourism as the fastest growing economy sector has not been fully exploited and would benefit from coordinated activities that would enhance future tourism development based on the principles of the green economy, world-wide marketing of the Adriatic-Ionian "brand" of tourism products and services, all-year extension of tourism season, cultural and natural heritage enhancement, accessibility, with additional endeavour to include local communities in tourism activities;
- (J) APPRECIATES that capacity building - including communication - research, and innovation are cross-cutting elements within the Strategy, to support actions serving to boost high-skilled employment, growth and competitiveness and to promote links between the public, private and scientific-research sectors, while Small and Medium Sized Enterprises can benefit from developing and promoting new products and services and contribute to the success of the Strategy;
- (K) WELCOMES that climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as efficient disaster risk management including prevention, are recognised as horizontal principles underpinning all actions carried out under the four pillars;

- (L) WELCOMES the active cooperation of all interested international, national and regional organisations, regional and local communities in areas where actions of mutual interest can be identified, taking into account the initiatives of the civil society;
- (M) STRESSES the importance of due involvement of all EU Member States and all interested stakeholders on transnational, regional and local level, as appropriate, in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region;
- (N) STRESSES that the Strategy needs to be effectively result-oriented and to be able to show concrete and measurable achievements; UNDERLINES the needs to set credible targets and result indicators against which monitoring and evaluation can be conducted; to this end STRESSES the need to establish adequate reliable and comparable data bases at the appropriate statistical level;
- (O) RECALLS that the 2014-2020 legislative package paves the way for better embedding macro-regional strategies in the programming and implementation of relevant EU policies where appropriate;
- (P) INVITES the Commission to:
 - a) keep playing a leading role in strategic coordination of the Strategy, where its involvement brings a clear added value, in partnership with the participating countries and in accordance with the subsidiarity principle; and ensure that the Strategy is taken into account in relevant EU policy initiatives and programme planning, taking into consideration the specific needs of the Adriatic and Ionian Region;
 - b) support the aims of the Strategy and the implementation of the agreed actions by promoting the coordination of existing EU funds and instruments, including those assisting the participating candidate and potential candidate countries, and by cooperating closely with the relevant financial institutions necessary for the realisation and funding of the Strategy;
 - c) promote the full and effective involvement of the non-EU countries participating in the Strategy;
 - d) include the Strategy within the competences and activities of the High-Level Group with representatives of all EU Member States and non-EU countries participating in macro-regional strategies;
 - e) ensure the involvement of the other EU Institutions, in particular the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, all along the implementation of the Strategy, its monitoring and the evaluations of its results, in particular by regularly reporting to the Council and its relevant preparatory bodies and the other EU Institutions, on progress made towards the implementation of the Strategy, and towards the achievement of targets and relevant milestones, and on possible developments of the Strategy and its Action Plan, by the end 2016 in the first instance;
 - f) promote, also with the support of Eurostat, the collection of reliable and comparable data concerning the Region, at the adequate statistical level, and support the development of adequate monitoring and evaluation tools, in order that the development and implementation of the Strategy is evidence-based, relevant indicators are defined and measured, and progress in the implementation are appropriately monitored and evaluated;

- g) promote coordination and complementarities of actions and exchange of best practices between the Strategy and other existing and future ones, also making recourse, as appropriate, to Technical assistance funds directly managed by the Commission;
 - h) secure at EU level adequate visibility, communication and awareness rising regarding the Strategy's objectives and results, and encourage an effective participation of stakeholders and relevant partners in all steps of the Strategy's implementation.
- Q) CALLS upon the Member States participating in the Strategy to:
- a) ensure the establishment in their respective countries of key conditions for good implementation and exploitation of EU added value of the Strategy, including political support, ownership, leadership and responsibility, taking into account the views of the Council on the governance of macro-regional strategies;
 - b) safeguard the alignment of relevant policies and funds at national and regional level, including, where appropriate and in line with the Regulations, the embedding of the Strategy into the programmes co-financed by the ESI Funds for the 2014-2020 period, and ensure that the Strategy's objectives and actions are appropriately considered in the design and implementation of relevant national and regional policies and programmes, and *vice versa*;
 - c) set up by the end of 2014, in partnership with the Commission and the non-EU countries, an effective multilevel governance system and effective procedures for the implementation of the Strategy, in line with the views of the Council on the governance of macro-regional strategies, fully respecting the institutional architecture of the participating countries, and the specificities and competences of their administrative structures, in order to ensure a timely start of the Strategy;
 - d) encourage and facilitate the full and effective involvement of non-EU countries at all level at in all steps of the implementation of the Strategy, in particular in the definition of concrete actions and projects;
 - e) ensure that the partnership principle is respected and fully made operational, by promoting active participation of relevant partners and stakeholders, including the existing regional organisations, social and economic partners, the civil society, including through national and regional parliaments, and the private sector, in all steps of the Strategy's implementation;
 - f) secure adequate visibility at national, regional and local level, develop adequate communication and awareness rising regarding the Strategy's objectives and results, promote coordination and exchange of best practices with other existing and future Strategies, including the organisation of annual *fora* with the active involvement of the Commission; develop, in partnership with the Commission and the non-EU participating countries, reliable and comparable statistical data set, in order to develop territorial analysis at the adequate level, and to support the definition without delay of relevant indicators and baselines against which plausible targets and results can be set, monitored and evaluated;
 - g) ensure the most effective use of the support to the implementation of the Strategy that can be offered by the 2014-2020 Adriatic-Ionian transnational programme and consider how other 2014-2020 programmes, including INTERACT and ESPON as well as relevant cross-border programmes might be used, in line with the Regulations and taking into account their specific nature, objectives and governance.

- R) INVITES relevant Council preparatory bodies to:
- a) reflect on the progress of implementation of the strategy and its added value and to report to Ministers as appropriate;
 - b) invite participating non-EU countries to meetings with representatives of Member States in these Council preparatory bodies for informal exchange of views in relation to the Strategy."
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