

Implementation of macro-regional strategies

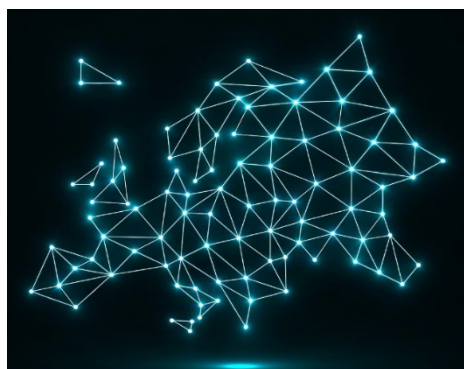
SUMMARY

While each macro-regional strategy is unique in terms of the countries it brings together and the scope of its policies, they all share the same common aim: to ensure a coordinated approach to issues that are best tackled together. Building on the success of the pioneering 2009 European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea region, this form of cooperation has since become firmly embedded in the EU's institutional framework, with four strategies now in place, covering a total of 19 Member States and 8 third countries.

Every two years, the European Commission publishes a report to assess the implementation of these strategies, most recently in 2019. With the views of stakeholders and other players helping to complete the picture, it is possible to identify a number of challenges common to all macro-regional strategies in areas such as governance, funding, political commitment and the need to be more results oriented. This, in turn, has helped focus discussions on the future role of macro-regional strategies within the post 2020 cohesion policy framework. For while recent months have seen the idea of a fifth macro-regional strategy resurface, with negotiations now under way on the cohesion policy architecture beyond 2020, the future position of macro-regional strategies within this framework looks set to be the key issue in the coming months for all actors involved in the EU's macro-regional strategies.

Parliament has actively taken part in this debate, through its participation in trilogues on the cohesion policy package, and its 2018 resolution on the implementation of macro-regional strategies. The current Croatian EU Presidency has also committed to focusing on achieving the goals of macro-regional strategies and ensuring their complementarity with cohesion policy as part of its programme, helping to keep the issue high on the political agenda. Much will depend, however, on the outcome of the ongoing multiannual financial framework (MFF) negotiations, which will be critical not only for macro-regional strategies but also for the future shape of cohesion policy in general.

This is an updated edition of a Briefing from September 2017.



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Background

One of the European Union's main instruments for promoting European territorial cooperation, macro-regional strategies (MRS) bring together regions from Member States and third countries confronted with a common set of challenges. Whether inspired by a sense of regional identity, a desire to engage in closer cooperation or to pool resources, all macro-regional strategies share a common aim: to ensure a coordinated approach to issues best tackled jointly. Strengthened by the introduction of a new requirement for Member States to take account of macro-regional strategies when programming structural funds during 2014-2020, this form of cooperation has become firmly embedded in the EU's institutional framework, with a total of 19 Member States and 8 third countries currently participating in macro-regional strategies.

The macro-regional concept

According to the [Common Provisions Regulation](#), a macro-regional strategy means 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'. While the issues involved differ from one geographical

area to another, priority is given to issues of strategic importance covering challenges where closer cooperation is vital, such as environmental protection, and opportunities, where cooperation is of mutual benefit, e.g. in research and innovation. The EU's first macro-regional strategy, the European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea region ([EUSBSR](#)) has acted as a model for a further three EU strategies: [the Danube strategy](#), [the Adriatic-Ionian strategy](#) and [the Alpine strategy](#).

Guiding principles

Macro-regional strategies are guided by three basic rules:

- No new EU funds,
- No additional EU structures,
- No new EU legislation.

The idea is to better align existing funds and policies at EU, national and regional level and to rely on existing bodies for implementation.

Overview of the strategies

EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region

Encompassing the eight EU Member States of the Baltic region and four neighbouring third countries, the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region was launched in 2009 following the adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#) by the European Commission. The Strategy has three key **objectives**: 1) **Save the sea**, which aims to protect the Baltic against such dangers as excess nutrient discharge into the sea (eutrophication), over-fishing, and pollution, and promote clean shipping; 2) **Connect the region**, which seeks to improve transport connections and energy security by integrating the region's transport systems and energy markets; and 3) **Increase prosperity**, which focuses on creating growth and improving competitiveness through more cooperation in R&D, stronger partnerships and completing the single market as well as ensuring the successful integration of refugees into the labour market and society. These three objectives are divided into 13 separate **policy areas** (PA), with the framework completed by four cross-cutting **horizontal actions** (HA). **Flagships** are a key delivery tool in the strategy alongside actions, and take the form of projects which put forward new solutions, methodologies or practices or involve investments of key importance for the region.

In terms of funding, the [Interreg Baltic Sea programme](#) has played a key role in financing the implementation of the EUSBSR from the outset. For the 2014-2020 period, the programme's priorities have been aligned with the three objectives of the EUSBSR, contributing some €278 million to help mobilise projects in the region, with a total programme budget of €344 million thanks to co-financing. Its governance system is based on three tiers, comprising a policy level, coordination level and an operational level. Work is currently underway on a new revision of the Action Plan, which is expected in the spring of 2020.

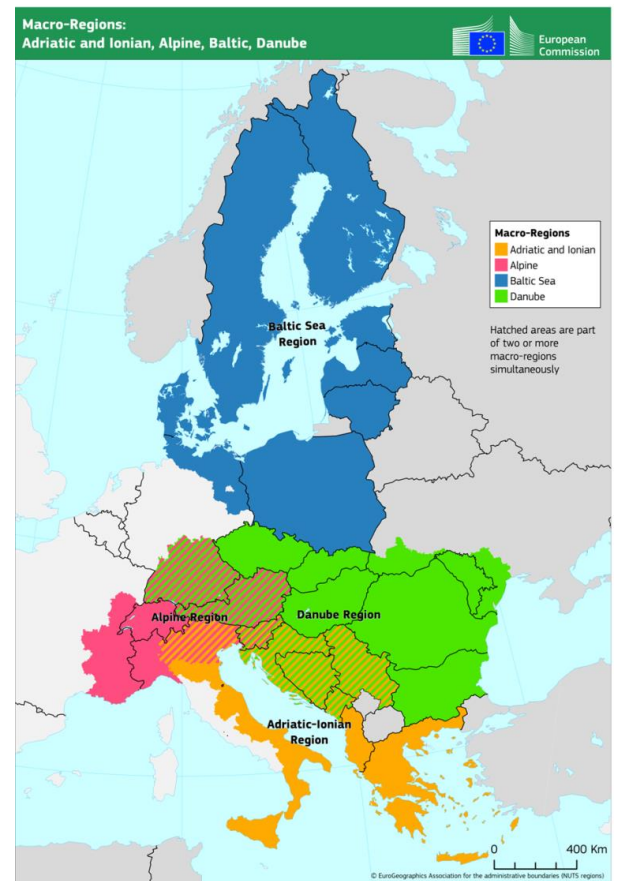
EU strategy for the Danube Region

Covering 14 countries that differ widely in terms of their development level and status in relation to the EU, the EU strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR) includes nine EU Member States and five third countries among its members. Initiated through the adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#) by the European Commission in December 2010, the EUSDR is organised around four main pillars. **Connecting the region** covers issues such as improving inland navigation along the Danube and promoting culture and tourism; **Protecting the environment** seeks to restore and maintain water quality, among other issues; **Building prosperity** aims to develop the knowledge society; while **Strengthening the region** focuses on enhancing decision-making capacity and structures in the public and private sector. These four goals are further divided into 12 priority areas. The strategy's governance structure comprises a policy level, which decides on main policy orientations, reports on progress and coordinates the participation of individual countries in the strategy, and an operational level, where priority area coordinators, appointed by the two countries responsible for each priority area, are in charge of implementation. Their work is supported by a steering group and project promoters, who identify partners and possible funding opportunities. On funding, support is available under the European structural and investment funds (ESIF), with the [Danube transnational programme](#) providing total EU funding of €231 million, including €202 million under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and an extra €20 million from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), used to fund projects in the region and co-finance activities carried out by Priority Area Coordinators. Other EU funding, such as Horizon 2020 or the [European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument](#), may also be drawn upon, depending on the policy and countries involved.

EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region

Bringing together eight countries, including the four EU Member States in the region and four countries from outside the EU, the EUSAIR was initiated on 17 June 2014 with the adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#) by the Commission. The strategy is structured around four main pillars: **Blue growth**, covering themes such as blue technologies or fisheries and aquaculture; **Connecting the region**, which examines areas including maritime transport or energy networks; **Environmental quality**, which focuses on issues such as the marine environment or sea pollution;

Figure 1 – Map of EU macro-regions



Source: European Commission.

and **Sustainable tourism**, which seeks, inter alia, to promote sustainable and responsible tourism management. The governing structure has two levels: a coordinating level, the **Governing Board**, in which each participating country has two delegates and which provides strategic guidance on the management and implementation of the EUSAIR and its action plan; and an implementation level, the **Thematic Steering Groups**, which bring together officials from participating countries to identify actions and projects to be included in the action plan. On funding, the ESIF for 2014-2020 can provide substantial financial resources for projects in areas such as energy, transport and ICT infrastructure, complemented by support under the IPA for non-EU countries, while funding for specific pillars is also available under funds such as Horizon 2020. Additional assistance is provided by the Interreg [ADRION](#) programme, allocating a total of €118 million to funding projects under the EUSAIR's four pillars, including support for EUSAIR governance under priority axis 4.

EU strategy for the Alpine region

Spanning five EU Member States and two non-EU countries, the process of setting up the EU's most recent macro-regional strategy began in July 2015, with the Commission's adoption of a [communication](#) and [action plan](#). The strategy has three thematic areas: **Economic growth and innovation**, which seeks to provide fair access to job opportunities; **Mobility and connectivity**, which aims to provide sustainable internal and external accessibility to all; and **Environment and energy**, whose objective is to achieve a more inclusive environmental framework for all. The three thematic areas are complemented by one cross-cutting policy area on **Governance**, which is tasked with ensuring a sound macro-regional governance model for the region. The governance structure comprises a **General Assembly**, whose role is to set general political guidelines, the **Executive Board**, which is responsible for horizontal and vertical coordination of the EUSALP action plan and ensuring guidance for EUSALP management and implementation, and **Action Groups**, who play a key role in the actual implementation of the strategy and ensure adequate resources and capacities. With a budget of €139 million for 2014-2020, the [Alpine Space](#) transnational cooperation programme provides funding for the EUSALP, contributing to furthering EUSALP governance via its priority axis on a well-governed Alpine space.

Towards a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region

Covering a landmass larger than the Alps, the Carpathians are central Europe's last great area of wilderness. In view of the region's unique natural resources, difficult socio-economic situation, poor accessibility and connectivity, there have been calls in recent years to establish a [macro-regional strategy](#) specific to the region to support its sustainable economic development, with a proposal submitted by the Polish government to the European Commission in October 2018. Supported by the governments of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine, the Carpathian MRS's main objective would be to strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Carpathian macro-region based on its unique natural and cultural heritage and internal development potential, and to increase local inhabitants' quality of life, while preserving the area's unique environmental resources.

As many of the countries involved are also covered by the Danube MRS, opinion is divided within the EU institutions as to whether there is a need to create a separate strategy for the Carpathians. A long-time advocate of a Carpathian MRS, the European Committee of the Regions adopted an [opinion](#) in December 2019 supporting the creation of a Carpathian strategy, which called specifically on the European Commission to establish an MRS for the region. For its part, the Commission is taking a rather more cautious approach, with former Commissioner Corina Crețu recommending in 2019 that all options be explored prior to launching a new strategy, including extending the Danube MRS. Although some MEPs have expressed support for a Carpathian strategy, the European Parliament's position remains more ambiguous; similarly, while Council remains open to the idea of establishing new macro-regional strategies, it has stopped short of actually endorsing a Carpathian MRS.

Assessing macro-regional strategies

European Commission

Noting clear results in terms of projects and more integrated policy-making, a June 2013 Commission report found that macro-regional strategies generate added value as they improve policy development, provide better value for money, ensure greater integration, tackle regional inequality and promote territorial cohesion. In December 2016, the Commission issued its first report providing an overall assessment of their state of implementation, which is now published every two years. On policy-making and planning, it considers that macro-regional strategies have strengthened cooperation in certain policy areas, stressing also their important role in developing links with non-EU countries. It emphasised, however, that many projects require stronger coordination within and between participating countries if they are to achieve results. While acknowledging positive developments in the area of governance, such as the creation of stakeholder platforms, the report pinpoints challenges, including ensuring efficient cooperation structures, empowering key players such as national coordinators, providing adequate human and financial resources and securing commitment from all countries, stressing that Member States need to take full responsibility for their implementation tasks. On funding, the Commission reports stronger links between programme managers and MRS implementers, yet notes the gap between strategies and funding opportunities is still a challenge.

European Commission 2016 assessment of individual macro-regional strategies

According to the Commission, the **Baltic Sea strategy** had given new impetus to new networks, consolidating multi-level governance in the region and contributing to the implementation of EU legislation. However, more effort was needed to address environmental challenges and ensure greater cooperation among countries on migration. As well as boosting cooperation by bringing together stakeholders, the report stressed that the **EU strategy for the Danube region** had made the governance system more effective and contributed to the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policy, improving regional stability. Alongside migration, inadequate administrative capacity remained a challenge. Noting that the **EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region** had developed ownership by providing dedicated resources for thematic steering groups, the Commission stressed the strategy's high-level political backing. Nonetheless, challenges remained, with the resources provided by countries largely insufficient. Implementation of the **EU strategy for the Alpine region** had begun quickly thanks to the region's high level of political and economic cooperation. Progress was needed, however, on governance, with more efforts to strengthen the link between the Executive Board and the Action Groups.

The European Commission's second [report](#) on the implementation of macro-regional strategies was published in January 2019. In terms of **policy-making and planning**, the Commission considers that MRS constitute political platforms which bring added-value to the cooperation aspect of cohesion policy, and provide an opportunity for multi-sectoral, multi-country and multi-level governance, emphasising also that the participation of non-EU countries in MRS takes place on an equal footing with EU Member States. On **governance**, the report stresses that a number of new political initiatives have taken place since 2016, such as the creation of a EUSALP network on deploying green infrastructure in urban areas, yet considers that there is room for improvement. In particular, it argues that the greater participation of civil society could strengthen the bottom-up dimension of the strategies, emphasising also that MRS could benefit from the political visibility provided by ministerial meetings and a ministerial declaration organised alongside annual fora.

While noting that all MRS have strengthened their **communication** activities since 2016, the Commission considers that further efforts are needed to improve internal and external communication. With regard to **funding**, the Commission highlights a number of good practices from current ESI funds programmes, such as targeted calls and direct support for strategy projects,

but notes that the issue of closing the gap between MRS and funding opportunities is likely to remain a challenge, with Interreg continuing to play a key role in supporting MRS implementation in spite of its limited funds. The Commission staff working [document](#) accompanying the 2019 implementation report provides more detail about the state of progress of the individual macro-regional strategies.

On the **Baltic Sea Strategy**, the document notes further efforts to strengthen ownership of countries involved through the adoption of rules of procedure for the Group of National Coordinators, and highlights that the implementation of actions under the EUSBSR has continued to support the implementation of relevant EU legislation. The Commission also recognises there has been good progress in the communication of the EUSBSR over the past few years, and notes positive developments in terms of funding, not least the signing of a financing agreement between the EU and Russia, making it a full partner in the Interreg Baltic Sea programme. However, challenges remain. Political commitment and leadership are an issue, with ministries insufficiently involved in strategy implementation, while, on governance, the strategy is too broad in scope. With funding also a challenge, there is a need to embed EUSBSR activities in mainstream ESI fund programmes.

Noting that several initiatives and projects developed within the **Danube macro-regional strategy** have a significant impact on key policies such as transport, the Commission considers that the EUSDR provides a reliable platform to help candidate and potential candidate countries pave their way to EU integration, and that the strategy contributes to effective multi-level governance. On governance, the report draws attention to the good results of the rotating presidency system and active civil society involvement in meetings and other events. Challenges include a decline in political momentum around the strategy, as well as unsatisfactory levels of participation in Priority Area steering groups, while funding remains unsatisfactory despite efforts to embed EUSDR priorities into mainstream programmes and funds. The report also highlights insufficiencies in terms of the staff and resources dedicated to the EUSDR.

With all four thematic steering groups having identified lists of priority actions and projects, the Commission considers that the **Adriatic and Ionian strategy** has achieved noteworthy progress in terms of cooperation and networking. A governance structure has been put in place, while the organisation of EUSAIR ministerial meetings alongside the annual fora has led to several ministerial declarations providing lines of action for national administrations, and helped raise awareness of the strategy. In terms of challenges, there is a persistent gap between the political commitment expressed in ministerial declarations and the actual administrative follow-up. There is a need to significantly strengthen ownership of the strategy by the countries involved while, on funding, there is a need to balance EU funds potentially available to EU and non-EU countries for EUSAIR projects. The possible accession of North Macedonia and the migration question are particular challenges.

Stressing that the **Alpine Strategy** has entered a phase of continuity and routine, the Commission notes that the creation of a Board of Action Group Leaders has greatly facilitated a common approach. The launch of the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund has been particularly helpful, strengthening implementation of the strategy, boosting cooperation and increasing the visibility of the EUSALP. In terms of challenges, it continues to be difficult to mobilise AG members and provide them with the required decision-making capacity, while national level representatives should be more involved. It is important for the Board of Directors to regularly take stock of the achievements of the strategy and evaluate whether the work of the AGs contributes to the strategy. On funding, the effective embedding of the EUSALP into other funding programmes continues to be a challenge, while, on communication, it is necessary to do much more on communicating EUSALP results.

European Parliament

Building on its previous resolutions covering individual macro-regional strategies such as the [Adriatic and Ionian strategy](#) and the [Alpine strategy](#), the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the implementation of macro-regional strategies in January 2018. While acknowledging that

problems remain in such areas as political commitment, ownership, resources or governance, the resolution emphasises that macro-regional strategies make a key contribution to cross-border, cross-sector and multi-level cooperation in Europe. Parliament considers that they are also useful instruments for making the benefits of European cooperation visible to citizens although access to EU funds for MRS projects does remain a challenge. It also encourages better coordination and partnerships among the various actors and policies at regional and national level and highlights the importance of sufficient human resources and administrative capacity for the competent national and regional authorities in order to ensure that the political commitment translates into effective implementation of the strategies.

The text welcomes the results achieved by the **Baltic strategy**, in particular its cooperation mechanisms, and praises its communication strategy, yet notes that challenges continue in areas such as the environment and connectivity, calling on the countries involved to redouble their efforts to address Baltic Sea pollution. While noting the **Danube strategy**'s positive impact on cooperation among participating countries, the resolution highlights the need to maintain political support and increase resources and capacity to tackle remaining challenges, identifying the prevention of damage caused by severe flooding as a key challenge for the environment. It considers that the **Adriatic and Ionian strategy** represents a great opportunity for the region, which could give impetus to the enlargement and integration process and help address migration challenges, if given the necessary instruments and resources, yet stresses continued problems with resources, governance and ownership. Highlighting that the **Alpine strategy** is proof that the macro-regional concept can also be applied successfully to more developed regions, the European Parliament welcomes its governance strategy and considers it could act as a template strategy for territorial cohesion. It stresses, however, that the Alpine region is delineated by many borders and that removing such barriers is a prerequisite for cooperation to work.

Council of the EU

On 25 April 2017, the Council adopted [conclusions](#) on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. It welcomed the progress and preliminary results of the strategies and their contribution to territorial cohesion, a more integrated implementation of EU sectoral policies, and closer links with third countries, yet noted that the strategies all faced common and individual challenges that could be developed further, particularly in terms of governance, result orientation, funding, communication and cooperation.

The Council adopted a second set of [conclusions](#) on the implementation of macro-regional strategies on 21 May 2019. Recognising the role of macro-regions in fostering socio-economic and territorial cohesion and regional cooperation through people-to-people contacts, it acknowledges the achievements and progress made in the last two years in areas such as implementing concrete projects aimed at improving quality of life or strengthening relations between participating countries and between the EU and non-EU countries. In particular, it observes the need to rekindle political momentum in support of macro-regional strategies, to increase involvement of local and regional partners and stakeholders and to make progress in communication activities. Taking note of the Commission's 2019 report and recommendations, it calls on participating countries to strengthen ownership and ensure appropriate political support at national level, and to empower key implementers by providing adequate staff and enhancing political support to ensure the fulfilment of their task and active participation in their groups. Looking to the future, the Council remains open to examining any commonly agreed initiative of Member States facing the same challenges in a defined geographic area, aimed at setting up a new macro-regional strategy.

Committee of the Regions (CoR)

Stressing that macro-regional strategies are a vital element in achieving the EU's strategic objectives, the Committee's 2017 [opinion](#) on the implementation of MRS welcomed the European Commission's 2016 report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, noting that the

EU needed a territorial vision that goes beyond borders. While emphasising the potential role of MRS for integrated development beyond the borders of the EU, particularly in view of the United Kingdom leaving the EU, it regretted that the added value of the MRS was not currently sufficiently reflected in sectoral policies and their financing programmes. The opinion also argued that the 'Three No's' should be replaced by 'Three Yes's', to improve the use of existing legislation, institutions and funding. Instead, the CoR would say yes to better synergies with funding instruments, yes to better embedding of existing structures in MRS and yes to better implementation of existing rules.

More recently, the CoR's June 2019 [opinion](#) on 'Macro-regional strategies, such as the Danube: a framework for promoting transnational clusters', stresses that MRS are an excellent bottom-up tool for territorial cooperation, providing opportunities for genuine multi-level governance without creating new red tape, bridging the gap between EU and local policy-making and directly involving representatives of cities and regions. At the same time, the CoR also urges greater coordination between the priorities of MRS and all EU funds and sectoral policy programmes, and calls for the further engagement of Member States and regions and the allocation of the necessary financial and human resources to enable MRS to fulfil their potential.

Stakeholders

Highlighting the frequent absence of any link between MRS and funding instruments, [Interact's](#) June 2017 [report](#) notes persistent problems in the extent to which strategies are embedded into EU funding programmes, such as a lack of information in EU funding programmes on how they can support the EUSDR and EUSAIR, and the limited involvement of EUSDR and EUSAIR stakeholders in implementing such programmes. The issue of embedding is also raised in a June 2019 research [report](#) by [CEPS](#) which notes there is a risk that the capacity of MRS to act is being restricted by the absence of specific MRS funding instruments, which complicates the integration of MRS into the strategies of ESI funds or other financing instruments. While recognising that MRS can act as a platform for the exchange of best practices, the study emphasises that the importance given to MRS by stakeholders depends on the level of involvement of central government, highlighting the need to ensure that MRS interests are taken seriously by central governments, particularly in larger Member States. It also stresses that each macro-regional strategy has different needs, noting that the lack of historical structures and frequent lack of capacity in the EUSDR and EUSAIR means that stronger EU intervention is required to ensure the development of these two strategies.

A November 2017 [study](#) on macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) identifies that there are three development phases for each macro-regional strategy, and calls for the roll-out of phase-specific monitoring systems and relevant indicators that can reflect the development of each strategy. It also sets out a number of recommendations on improving the links for aligning MRS with ESIF. In particular, it notes a need for more strategic alignment between MRS and ESIF at the programming stage to ensure sufficient ESIF funding for activities in key policy areas and to ensure a good match of activities between operational programmes and MRS policy areas through road maps and strategies. On funding, meanwhile, the study argues that it is important to establish new mechanisms and formats beyond traditional projects, and calls for additional flexibility in the planning of funding and when it comes to respecting regional competences and framework conditions.

Macro-regional strategies have also been the subject of much interest in the academic world. Stefan Gänzle, for instance, has [argued](#) that the diagnostic monitoring of implementation is the weak point of macro-regional strategies, while Franziska Siekler and Jorg Mirtl [stress](#) that a lack of resources for macro-regional strategies continues to be a major concern. The above assessment reveals a certain agreement among EU institutions and stakeholders as to the benefits of macro-regional strategies, yet a common set of challenges is also identifiable, with stakeholders pointing to shortcomings in governance, result orientation, alignment, funding, and political commitment

and ownership. As discussions on cohesion policy post-2020 are now under way, it is useful to examine the proposals made by the various players involved.

Macro-regional strategies and cohesion policy post-2020

European Commission

With the European Commission's 2016 [report](#) on the implementation of macro-regional strategies emphasising that cohesion policy reform should focus on how to strengthen synergies between MRS and ESIF programmes and align transnational programmes more closely with MRS, these ideas were developed further in the set of proposals published as part of the post-2020 cohesion policy package in May 2018. Within this package, macro-regional strategies are covered primarily by the [proposal](#) for a regulation on territorial cooperation (Interreg).

In this context, the ETC proposal includes a number of measures to strengthen Interreg programmes covering the same functional areas as existing MRS, and to increase alignment between funding and MRS priorities. One example is the introduction of thematic concentration requirements for Interreg programmes that support a macro-regional strategy, which provide that such programmes must allocate a minimum percentage of their ERDF resources to the related strategy (70 % or 100 %) depending on the type of cooperation. The ETC proposal also makes it compulsory for Member States to allocate at least 15 % of their ERDF resources to one of two new Interreg-specific objectives, one of which, Better Interreg governance, includes an action on enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders to implement macro-regional strategies.

Key elements of the European Commission's 2018 proposal for a regulation on European territorial cooperation

Shift from three to five cooperation strands (renamed 'components'). Under the proposal, cross-border cooperation focuses on land borders, transnational cooperation is extended to cover maritime cooperation, with new components also created: outermost region cooperation and Interregional Innovation Investments.

Definition of two additional Interreg-specific objectives, 'A safer and more secure Europe', which addresses external cooperation issues, and 'Better Interreg governance', which supports institutional capacity-building.

Decrease in the Interreg budget to €8.43 billion and smaller share for cross-border cooperation.

European Parliament

As co-legislator, the European Parliament has introduced a number of key amendments to the European Commission proposal on European territorial cooperation, including an increase in the ETC budget to €11.16 billion and a call for four instead of five cooperation strands. When it comes to macro-regional strategies, Parliament's [resolution](#) on the ETC regulation (March 2019) introduces greater flexibility in thematic concentration by easing the obligation to spend 15 % of the budget on one of the two Interreg-specific objectives. Parliament also introduces more flexibility for programmes supporting a macro-regional strategy or a sea-basin strategy, while the programmes themselves will cover transnational as well as cross-border cooperation. Furthermore, Parliament has also set out additional rules to ensure the involvement of macro-regional actors in the preparation of Interreg programmes covering macro-regional strategies.

Council of the EU

The text of Council's [partial mandate](#) for negotiations with the European Parliament has also established four strands of cooperation. As the Interreg Regulation is a proposal linked to the MFF, all provisions with budgetary implications have been set aside for now and excluded from the partial mandate, with clear differences emerging between the '[Friends of Cohesion](#)' countries and net contributor countries as regards the shape of the future budget for cohesion policy.

On the issue of macro-regional strategies, Council proposes that Interreg programmes covering the same geographical area as an MRS should allocate at least 75 % of their ERDF resources to the strategy in question but only for transnational cooperation. This stands in clear contrast to the European Parliament's suggested minimum figure of 80 %, which would apply to both transnational and cross-border cooperation programmes, implying that there is still some distance between the two institutions on this issue. When it comes to the two Interreg-specific objectives, Council recommends that at least 10 % of ERDF resources be allocated to either objective.

As the above provisions both have budgetary implications, they have yet to be discussed in the ongoing trilogue negotiations. However, a provisional common understanding has already been reached on a number of issues relating to macro-regional strategies. In particular, Council has agreed to Parliament's amendment to consult relevant macro-regional actors and to bring them together at the start of the programming period as part of the preparation of Interreg programmes covering macro-regional strategies. The agreed text has, however, stopped short of endorsing the European Parliament's proposal to involve these actors in actually deciding on the priorities for each programme. Overall, in light of the proposed thematic concentration requirements, new Interreg-specific objectives and new rules on the participation of MRS actors in the programming process, the proposed post-2020 cohesion policy architecture certainly has the potential to enable Member States to place greater focus on macro-regional strategies and to establish closer links between Interreg programmes, macro-regional strategies and the actors involved. As ever, however, the devil lies in the details, with the success of this process closely linked to the total amount of ERDF resources available and the level of the ERDF thematic concentration requirements determined within the framework of the ongoing trilogue negotiations.

Outlook

Although each macro-regional strategy is unique, it is nonetheless possible to identify a common set of challenges facing all four strategies in areas such as governance, political commitment and ownership, or the need to be more results oriented. This has helped frame discussions on the position of macro-regional strategies within the post-2020 cohesion policy framework, with the issue of funding in particular reflected in the proposal for the ETC regulation, which includes measures to strengthen synergies between MRS and ESIF programmes and align transnational programmes more closely with MRS. While the idea of a Carpathian macro-regional strategy has received renewed attention in recent months thanks to the adoption of a CoR opinion on the topic in December 2019, the focus for the year ahead will clearly be on the negotiations surrounding the post 2020 cohesion policy package. With the [programme](#) of the Croatian Council Presidency committed to focusing on achieving the goals of macro-regional strategies and ensuring their complementarity with cohesion policy, the issue of macro-regional strategies looks set to remain firmly on the agenda during the first half of 2020. Much will depend, however, on the outcome of the MFF negotiations, which will be critical not only for macro-regional strategies but also for the future shape of cohesion policy in general.

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