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**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

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Abbreviations

AII	Adriatic and Ionian Initiative
AG	Action Group
AGL	Action Group leader
ARPAF	Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund
BAGL	Board of Action Group leaders
BONUS	Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme
BSR	Baltic Sea Region
BSAP	Baltic Sea Action Plan
CBC	Cross-border cooperation
CPMR	Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe
CF	Cohesion Fund
DG	Directorate General
DSP	Danube Strategy Point
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EB	Executive Board
EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
EAFRD	European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESI Funds	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESF	European Social Fund
ETC	European territorial cooperation
EU	European Union
EUSAIR	European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
EUSALP	European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region
EUSBSR	European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	European Union Strategy for the Danube Region
FP	EUSAIR Facility Point
GA	General Assembly
GB	Governing Board
HA	Horizontal action
HAC(s)	Horizontal action coordinator(s)

HELCOM	Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – Helsinki Commission
ICPDR	International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River
IMO	International Maritime Organisation
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
JRC	Joint Research Centre
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MA	Managing authority
MRS	Macro-regional strategy (-ies)
MSP	Maritime Spatial Planning
NC(s)	National coordinator(s)
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OP(s)	Operational programme(s)
PA	Policy/Priority area
PAC(s)	Policy/Priority area coordinators
PC	Pillar coordinators
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
SG	Steering Group
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
TO	Thematic objective
TSG	Thematic Steering Group

Introduction

This document comes in support of the third report 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 ('MRS'): the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP). The report covers the period from mid-2018 to mid-2020.

It aims at providing more detailed information concerning the state of implementation of each MRS and future expectations. The document is based inter alia on contributions from MRS national and thematic coordinators (MRS 'key implementers') and experts.

The differences between the individual chapters on each of the four macro-regional strategy is due to the different maturity of each strategy (they have been adopted at different time) hence the differing availability of data and deliverables.

More information on the strategies can be found on their websites:

<http://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/>

<http://www.danube-region.eu/>

<http://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/>

<https://www.alpine-region.eu/>

European Union macro-regional strategies

The size and diversity of the European territory warrants a differentiated and strategic approach to its development.

Increasing interdependence between countries, the growing role of sub-national authorities, and borderless, territorially-relevant challenges such as climate change, ecological degradation, natural and man-made hazards, call for cooperative frameworks whereby groups of countries belonging to a wider geographical space can work together to address common challenges and opportunities.

Wanting to provide an effective and collective response to issues better handled by working together, a macro-regional approach arose in the Baltic Sea region with discussions launched in the European Parliament in 2006. This gained momentum overtime, to such an extent that there are now four European Union (EU) macro-regional strategies (MRS):

- EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR; 2009)
- EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR; 2010)
- EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR; 2014)
- EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP; 2016)

The MRS are accompanied by an action plan that should be regularly updated in light of new, emerging needs and changing contexts.

The 4 MRS cover 19 EU Member States and 9 non-EU countries. Some EU Member States (such as Germany and Slovenia) are involved in 3 MRS, and some EU Member States (such as Croatia, Italy and Austria) are in 2.

An MRS is a policy framework which allows EU and non-EU countries located in a defined geographical area to jointly address challenges and opportunities they have in common by setting a set of shared, long-term objectives to meet the needs of the macro-region. By doing this, they benefit from stronger cooperation, making their policies more efficient than if they had addressed the issues in isolation.

The MRS are an important innovation in territorial cooperation and cohesion. However, they differ in several respects from cross-border and transnational territorial cooperation. One key feature of macro-regional cooperation is its anchoring to integrated, strategic, longer-term and open-ended frameworks.

The MRS are initiated and requested by the relevant EU Member States via the European Council. The strategies cover a number of policy/thematic areas that have been jointly agreed by the participating countries and which reflect their strong political commitment towards joint achievement of common objectives. Following the European Council request, the MRS (Communication and accompanying action plan) are drafted by the European Commission in partnership with the participating countries. Therefore, their implementation relies heavily on the commitment and ambition of the participating countries that lead the process. The process is as important as the result: it must be inclusive and bottom up to ensure ownership.

In 2017, an independent study by COWI¹, mandated by the Commission, presented a three-phase MRS development model over time:

- Phase 1: setting up of the MRS (governance system) – the focus is on internal stakeholders – the results are internal;
- Phase 2: capacity developing – the MRS is understood by external stakeholders and starts to operate – the focus moves more towards external stakeholders;
- Phase 3: capacity developed – the strategy is mature and delivers tangible measures and results – the focus is on external performance.

The assessment made in this study, showed that the four MRS were between Phase 1-2. Since then, the four strategies have developed – especially the more recent MRS (EUSAIR and EUSALP) which have caught up with the older MRS (EUSBSR and EUSDR).

- In 2019, the OECD Synthesis report² assessed the **EUSAIR** as being between Phase 1 and 2; currently it is close to Phase 2. In the last 2 years, the Thematic Steering Groups have improved their cooperation and their awareness of their role as the link between stakeholders and the governance structures in the EUSAIR. The connection with the coordination level is provided by the by pillar coordinators, while the link with stakeholders has improved as a result of several initiatives and platforms.
- The **EUSALP** is the most recent MRS, but it builds on a strong existing regional cooperation. For this reason, its progress into Phase 2 happened faster than in other MRS. The Action Groups have been set up and are functioning (although not all participating countries have representatives in all Action Groups) and drive processes such as setting up platforms and initiatives. The issue of delineating responsibilities between coordination and implementation levels indicate a need to clarify governance structures.
- For the **EUSBSR**, the oldest of the strategies, many of the thematic areas are well into Phase 3, while a few remain in Phase 2. A broad thematic spread and a lack of participation in steering groups and involvement at national level have an impact on the more external effects of the MRS. Interestingly, a few policy areas may have gone back to Phase 1 due to reorganisation or a change in thematic coordinators. This leads to a renewed need to develop the necessary capacity in implementing the MRS.
- In the **EUSDR**, many priority areas are well into Phase 3, and have been there for some time. Other priority areas move around Phase 2 due to their broad thematic mandates, a lack of clear strategic framework and fluctuating (even decreasing) participation by national representatives (with unclear or no mandates) in the steering groups.

¹ COWI study ‘Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy’ – November 2017
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/mrs_links_cohesion_policy.pdf

² **Multi-level Governance and Cross-Sector Practices Supporting EUSAIR** (https://www.adriatic-ionician.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/OECD-EUSAIR-Synthesis-Report_FINAL.pdf)

Report on the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)

The EUSBSR was the first macro-regional strategy in the European Union (EU). Its origins date back to 2006 when the European Parliament in its resolution on a Baltic Sea Region Strategy for the Northern Dimension³ urged the European Commission to come up with a proposal for an EU Baltic Sea Strategy. The EUSBSR 10-year anniversary was celebrated in 2019.

The implementation of the EUSBSR has been progressing over the last years and results have been achieved, varying from one thematic area to another.

The EUSBSR brings together eight EU Member States (Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Germany (Berlin; Brandenburg; Hamburg; Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; Schleswig-Holstein), Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden) representing 80 million inhabitants. The Strategy welcomes cooperation with non-EU countries from the region, namely Belarus, Iceland, Norway and Russia, in actions and projects of common interest.

The EUSBSR's three main objectives are; Save the sea, Connect the region, and Increase prosperity.

- Save the sea objective is related to the poor state of the sea which threatens the quality of life of the inhabitants living around it. The overall aim is to achieve good environmental status for the sea. The policy areas (PA) under this objective are: PA 'Nutri(ent)', PA 'Hazards', PA 'Bioeconomy', PA 'Ship' and PA 'Safe'.
- Connect the Region is focussing on internal and external transport, accessibility, efficiency and security of energy markets and also with connecting the people in the region. The policy areas related to this objective are: PA Transport and PA Energy.
- Increase Prosperity includes actions to promote entrepreneurship, innovation, trade and digitally driven growth. This will improve business opportunities and make the internal market work better on the ground. Policy areas under this objective are: PA Secure, PA Tourism, PA Culture, PA Innovation, PA Health and PA Education.

In addition to policy areas listed above, there are four horizontal actions (HA). Horizontal action by its nature is an action having an impact on more than one or all policy areas within the Strategy. The horizontal actions are: HA Spatial Planning, HA Neighbours, HA Capacity and HA Climate.

RESULTS

Governance and administrative Capacity

General

The EUSBSR's governance structure is important to the successful implementation of its actions and the achievements of its objectives, targets and overall goals.

The participating countries have the main responsibility for implementing the EUSBSR, which requires a continuous political commitment by the countries. Each country nominates a national

³ European Parliament resolution on a Baltic Sea Region Strategy for the Northern Dimension (2006/2171(INI)): <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2006-0494+0+DOC+XML+V0/EN>

coordinator (NC) who represents their government in the national coordinators group (NCG). The ‘policy area focal points’ serve as a liaison at national level for all matters regarding each policy area (PA)/horizontal action (HA) in the Baltic Sea region countries. The policy area coordinators (PAC) and horizontal action coordinators (HAC) facilitate involvement of, and cooperation with, relevant stakeholders from the entire macro-region.

The European Commission plays a leading role in the strategic coordination of the key delivery stages of the EUSBSR.

The EUSBSR’s governance structure has been in place for a decade and is currently being examined as part of the extensive revision of the EUSBSR action plan that began in December 2018. The main principles set out in the EUSBSR Communication (COM (2009) 248) remain valid, including the overall principles of EUSBSR governance and the Strategy’s three main objectives. However, detailed governance issues are also being assessed with a view to simplifying and streamlining where needed. The action plan is considered a ‘rolling document’, which means that the Baltic Sea region countries should continuously assess its relevance and whether it needs adjustment.

The main aim of revising the EUSBSR action plan is to carry out a strategic review in order to develop more focused and streamlined policy areas and to strengthen coordination. This should also facilitate the inclusion of the EUSBSR’s priorities in the next generation of EU funding programmes, known as ‘embedding’. This revision has also been important in improving monitoring and reporting on results for the coming period and in assessing the Baltic Sea region’s contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The transnational cooperation programme for the Baltic Sea region (Interreg BSR) is strongly linked to the EUSBSR thematically, geographically, and in terms of support for its governance. The Interreg BSR is a key partner in implementing the EUSBSR objectives, and Interreg BSR-funded projects/activities have an important role in this respect. In terms of EUSBSR governance, the Interreg BSR provides financial support for PACs, HACs, and the organisation of the EUSBSR annual forum. The collaboration between the programme and the EUSBSR is enhanced by inviting the Interreg BSR Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat in the NC meetings, when relevant. The future support of the Interreg BSR to the EUSBSR will need to be specified during the Interreg BSR programming process 2021-2027.

Political level

The EUSBSR provides a unique platform for cooperation and coordination for its eight EU Member States and, to some extent, also for the non-EU countries in the region. The EUSBSR has been successful in generating structures, projects and networks to tackle common challenges faced by the region. There is a consensus among the Baltic Sea countries on the value added by the Strategy and the need to continue and improve this collaboration between countries in the future. In particular, many of the emerging new challenges – such as COVID-19, demographic changes and migration (of non-EU nationals) – are becoming more urgent and need to be addressed in a coordinated way across country borders.

On a rotating basis, the EUSBSR Chair is taken by the NC of a EUSBSR country for a 1-year period (beginning of July – end of June). This rotation follows the order agreed by the NC group and included in their rules of procedure. The Chair proactively coordinates the NCs, works with the European Commission, and strives to facilitate decision-making and cooperation.

Since 2010 an annual forum has been organised to communicate the Strategy’s work and results, stimulate policy discussion, and provide stakeholders with a networking opportunity. The annual fora take place in one of the eight EUSBSR country and aim to attract key policy

makers, stakeholders and active partners of the Strategy from local, regional, national and EU level. The order of hosting the annual forum is based on an agreed sequence set out in the rules of procedure for the NC group.

The recent annual fora have brought together close to 1 000 participants from governments, international organisations, NGOs, universities, local and regional administrations, business and media. The EUSBSR's 10th annual forum, entitled 'Circular and sharing economy as an answer to demographic changes and environmental challenges in the Baltic Sea region', was organised in Gdańsk, Poland in June 2019. The 2020 annual forum was planned to be held in Turku in June, but the COVID-19 crisis has affected the timing and format of the event. The aim of the Turku forum was to facilitate stronger dialogue among stakeholders from different countries and sectors by forming innovative groupings to address the Strategy's three main objectives.

Coordination level

National coordinators should facilitate the overall coordination of and political support for EUSBSR implementation in their country. This includes consulting with national institutions, facilitating the involvement of relevant stakeholders, and encouraging dialogue between financial instruments on the alignment of resources. Stakeholders find that the national coordinators group mainly monitor the progress of the EUSBSR and ensure that updates etc. are carried out. The NC group also approves 'flagship' project and processes implementing the EUSBSR.

Implementation level

Most policy areas in the Strategy cover a wide range of policies and are interlinked with and interdependent on the other policy areas. Typically, one EUSBSR country coordinates one of the policy area or horizontal action, and nominates the PAC/HAC. The assignment of the PAC/HAC varies between countries, with some PAC/HACs being national institutions and others pan-Baltic institutions.

The PAC/HACs are usually supported by a co-PAC/HAC and in some cases there are more than two. The PACs/HACs are supported by steering groups, which mainly consist of representatives from the EUSBSR countries ('focal points').

The PACs and HACs are responsible for implementing the action plan in their respective areas. One of their tasks is to facilitate the involvement by and cooperation of relevant stakeholders from the entire macro-region. This requires working closely with a variety of stakeholders regarding the policy area on: topics, updates to policy area indicators and targets, policy discussions, visibility, alignment of funding, monitoring and reporting on progress within the policy area.

The document on 'Roles and responsibilities of the implementing stakeholders of the EUSBSR and a flagship project concept' does not specifically mention the roles and responsibilities of the steering groups⁴. Nevertheless, a guideline was developed that each PA/HA should have a steering group chaired by the PAC/HAC. Steering groups have a number of functions that vary from PA/HA to PA/HA. Some have a broad range of functions and focus on policy implementation and dialogue; others are primarily a forum for discussing financing etc. Steering groups identify and decide on actions pertaining to implementing the policy area and cooperate with other PAs and HAs.

⁴ <https://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/action-plan?task=document.viewdoc&id=2>

The projects and processes implementing the EUSBSR are called ‘flagships’. They serve as pilot examples for desired change. A flagship is frequently the result of a policy discussion within a PA or HA. It fleshes out the ambition of a PA or HA in a specified field. It may, for example, develop key solutions, new methodologies or practises, or be a network looking at new forms of cooperation.

The Interreg BSR Programme supports the EUSBSR’s basic coordination work. A total amount of EUR 9.43 million ERDF was allocated to supporting PAC/HAC. They use Interreg BSR funding mainly for essential networking activities, such as organising steering committees, meetings with civil society groups, local and regional organisations or national ministries and agencies.

Civil society

The process of implementing and managing the EUSBSR is dynamic and changeable and therefore changes over time. Civil society organisations such as NGOs and private sector organisations have always played an important role in the EUSBSR. Higher education and research institutions make up the largest category of project partners in Interreg BSR-funded activities in the EUSBSR.

The policy areas involve civil society in a number of ways. For example, the PA ‘Education’ has a network of 1 085 stakeholders, of which an increasing number represent NGOs. They participate in stakeholder seminars in EUSBSR countries and they are members of flagships. Some of them actively contribute to developing policy briefings, new methods and new structures in flagships and their thematic working groups. Flagships in the ‘Nutri’ PA have been active in involving civil society via communication channels (social media, webpages, and newsletters) and meetings (for example in the ‘networking villages’ at the annual fora). These ‘networking villages’ are an integral part of the EUSBSR annual fora. They provide a place to find information and are where participants can meet with EUSBSR PACs and HACs, as well as other stakeholders.

The HA ‘Capacity’ organises a yearly Participation Day, back-to-back with the EUSBSR annual fora. This is an opportunity for local and regional actors and public and civil society to present project proposals and other ideas for cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. The PACs provide feedback and advice on getting involved in implementing the Strategy.

The Baltic Sea Youth Camp was organised in conjunction with the 10th annual forum in Gdańsk in 2019. The event was aimed at young people aged between 18 and 29 from 11 Baltic countries and Iceland. The goal of the meeting was to strengthen dialogue and solidarity between young people across the region, through seminars and workshops in the areas of culture, sport, politics, technology, art, human rights and economy.

Multi-level governance

EUSBSR has a multi-level governance system with different roles and responsibilities. The EUSBSR’s approach is that implementation should be carried out by national, regional and local authorities, intergovernmental and non-governmental bodies in close cooperation with the European Commission. Other stakeholders can be involved at many levels of the EUSBSR — including at the steering level and at the ‘operational level. To ensure overall coordination and support for EUSBSR implementation in each country, strategic approaches must be aligned across relevant stakeholders.

Pan-Baltic organisations operating at the macro-regional level, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – Helsinki Commission

(HELCOM)⁵, or Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea (VASAB), also participate in implementing the Strategy. For example, the joint HELCOM-UNESCO-EUSBSR status report on pharmaceuticals in the aquatic environment represents an information basis to develop measures to reduce pharmaceuticals in the Baltic Sea through the EUSBSR regional cooperation platform which was established by PA ‘Hazards’. The Pan-Baltic organisations, in addition, carry out the function as PACs and especially HACs. The involvement of the many Baltic Sea region organisation is generally regarded as a strength and reflects the extensive cooperation in the region since the beginning of the 1990s.

The role of the regional and municipal stakeholders in the Baltic Sea region varies. In general, many regional and municipal actors are interested in transnational cooperation, with many of them already active in cooperation across the region. Participation beyond immediate participation as a partner in a flagship could be further encouraged.

Policy and thematic priorities

Achievements

The EUSBSR is a successful initiative that has brought significant results in diverse areas such as innovation, safety and pollution prevention of maritime transportation, preparedness for maritime emergencies or reduction of plastic and air pollution in the Baltic Sea. The EUSBSR has also contributed to shaping and developing policy on energy, navigation, environment and climate change.

The EUSBSR action plan sets a number of goals, both ‘hard’ specific ones for which evaluation is easier, and ‘soft’ or more vague goals, which are often more difficult to assess. The Strategy’s implementation also brings side benefits, unintentional gains that should be viewed as an added value of the EUSBSR.

In the past 2 years, the implementation of actions under the EUSBSR has continued to support and further encourage the implementation of relevant EU legislation and policies, in particular relating to the environment. Tackling environmental issues in the Baltic Sea basin is one of the most successful areas of cooperation within the EUSBSR, especially in terms of creating synergy between different policy settings and implementing platforms.

The EUSBSR also facilitates cooperation between sectors, such as in relation to the environment and agriculture. The Strategy’s stakeholders confirm that more cooperation has developed in water projects, as the EUSBSR provides an opportunity to focus more on tangible solutions and to target objectives specific to the Baltic Sea region.

Of 105 cooperation projects co-financed by the Interreg BSR to date, 60 projects were labelled as ‘flagship project of the EUSBSR’. The total budget of those flagship projects amounts to EUR 181.9 million, of which ERDF funding was EUR 135.8 million. The PA ‘Innovation’ received funding for six flagships, including on smart specialisation, blue growth or product innovations for senior citizens. The PA ‘Transport’ had four finalised flagships. These projects advanced transport corridors in the region, including inland waterways and multimodal transport. In the PA ‘Bioeconomy’, the three flagships contributed to recycling manure and water management in forests. Flagships were also finalised in the PAs ‘Culture’, ‘Education’, ‘Energy’, ‘Hazard’, ‘Nutri’, ‘Safe’, ‘Secure’ and ‘Ship’ and in the HA ‘Spatial Planning’.

Project examples

⁵ <https://helcom.fi/>

1. 'Save the sea' objective

NutriTrade⁶ (<https://nutritradebaltic.eu/>) developed innovative methods to extract nutrients from the Baltic Sea. The aim was to create fast, effective and economically efficient measures through different pilots tested on land, sea and online. The project created a crowdfunding platform 'Nutribute' to support or launch a campaign for saving the sea.

DAIMON⁷ flagship project: In March 2020 an amendment to the Helcom Baltic Sea Action Plan was produced, aiming to integrate data about and management of munition dumping grounds in the Baltic with important input from the DAIMON flagship project.

2. 'Increase prosperity' objective

The **HAZARD**⁸ project developed and tested ways of mitigating the effects of emergencies in major seaports in region. It addressed challenges related to exposing a large number of people to accidents such as leakages of hazardous materials, fires on passenger ships at ports, oil spills in port areas and explosions of gases or chemicals. HAZARD is also part of the Interreg platform ResQU2, a flagship of the PA 'Secure', to promote the dissemination and impact of the project's results.

The **BSR S3 Ecosystem platform**⁹ aligns smart specialisation initiatives to better direct investments across the Baltic Sea region. By sharing best practices, it activates research and academic communities, industry and public sector organisations to strengthen the regional innovation ecosystem. The platform builds on the experiences of Interreg Baltic Sea Region's projects 'LARS', 'BSR Stars S3', 'Smart-up BSR' and 'GoSmart BSR', and the 'S34 Growth', 'BIOREGIO', 'ClusterFy' and 'TraCS3' projects, co-funded by Interreg Europe.

3. 'Connect the region' objective

The project **Scandria@2Act**¹⁰ followed an initiative of regions, located along the Baltic Sea region stretch of the Scandinavian-Mediterranean core network corridor to harmonise understanding and actions on different policy levels for the benefit of corridor development. One result was the creation of a multi-level governance mechanism, the Scandria@Alliance.

NSBCoRe – North Sea Baltic Connector of Regions¹¹ – The project aimed to improve the accessibility of the Eastern Baltic Sea region (EBSR) for freight and passenger transport. The project contributed to the EU TEN-T transport infrastructure policy, that connects the continent between east and west, north and south, by connecting the North Sea Baltic TEN-T core network corridor to its catchment area and access routes in EBSR at regional and local level.

4. Horizontal objectives

⁶ <https://nutritradebaltic.eu/>

⁷ <https://www.daimonproject.com/>

⁸ <https://projects.interreg-baltic.eu/projects/hazard-25.html>

⁹ <https://projects.interreg-baltic.eu/projects/bsr-s3-ecosystem-214.html>

¹⁰ <https://projects.interreg-baltic.eu/projects/scandriaR2act-2.html>

¹¹ <https://projects.interreg-baltic.eu/projects/nsb-core-19.html>

The **BEA-APP**¹² project gathered experience from eight countries around the Baltic Sea to help regional planning authorities accelerate the setup of windfarms, solar parks, biogas plants and the like.

The **Baltic Smart Water Hub**¹³ connects water experts from companies, associations, authorities, academia and NGOs. The BSR WATER project platform provides the hub with knowledge on managing smart sludge, storm and waste water, manure and energy efficiency. BSR WATER builds on the Interreg Baltic Sea Region's IWAMA, Manure Standards, Village Waters, BEST and Baltic Blue Growth projects as well as Interreg Central Baltic's iWater, NutriTrade, Blastic and Waterchain and South Baltic's RBR projects.

Policy impact

The EUSBSR has increased cooperation and networks across the region, for example HELCOM, CBSS and Northern Dimension. The EUSBSR also has strong links with the Nordic cooperation, Arctic cooperation and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council.

The implementation of the EUSBSR has contributed to the achievement on several EU level, including macro-regional, national and local policy goals. The EUSBSR helps implement policies developed by other platforms, such as HELCOM or CBSS. Some good examples are the 'Secure' and 'Safe' PAs, where there is a strong connection between general policy goals and actions with clearly defined projects and solid results. For example, some projects of common interest under the EUSBSR have made substantial contributions to the implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) of HELCOM, towards a clean and healthy Baltic Sea.

PAs/HAs have a variety of wider effects on policy in the region, either by feeding into regional or national strategies, supporting decision making at ministerial/agency level, or by providing tools and advice that support decision-making processes. Overall, it is assessed that all PAs/HAs support project development through their activities.

Work carried out through the EUSBSR has also helped increase policy dialogues within the region and implement new EU regulations, including the strategy on the use of plastics. Project clusters and platforms have been set up to coordinate activities, further communicate and develop results following policy recommendations. For example, the 'Innovation' PA's projects have had an impact on smart specialisation strategies in Finnish regions.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring

An overall macro-regional territorial monitoring tool has been developed by the ESPON programme to observe development trends and patterns at the level of the four EU MRS, including the EUSBSR, and for the whole of the EU. The ESPON tool focuses on identifying development opportunities and territorial challenges. This insight is provided to the MRS in order to improve or re-focus their objectives and policies, bringing together statistical information and policy objectives.

Currently, the annual implementation reports of the performance of PAs/HAs are the EUSBSR's main monitoring tool. The indicators and monitoring framework used by each PA/HA are found in the action plan. It is expected that the revised action plan will further

¹² <https://www.balticenergyareas.eu/>

¹³ <https://www.balticwaterhub.net/>

develop indicators and targets for each PA, which will enable improved monitoring and evaluation.

Evaluation

The EUSBSR has delivered numerous achievements, but these are difficult to aggregate in order to provide an overview. A 2017 study found that although there are clear differences between the policy areas, results had been achieved both in terms of content and process in all of the policy areas analysed. When comparing the achievements with the objectives set, all PAs showed progress. However, the 2017 study concluded that while technical cooperation has developed, the policy part is still somewhat lagging behind¹⁴.

In addition to the study, various PAs/HAs have carried out evaluations of their specific areas. For example PA ‘Health’ carried out an evaluation in 2018 in the framework of a grant received.

Funding

Funding mobilisation

Availability of funding has been one of the most discussed aspects of the EUSBSR. Achieving the Strategy’s goals without assigned own funding has always been a challenge. One of the Strategy’s core principles is that its implementation is based on mobilising and bundling existing public and private funding at EU, national, regional and local levels.

At EU level, the EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) are one of the key sources of funding. Other EU level instruments (e.g. Horizon 2020, LIFE, and Erasmus+) also support projects. Funds from the European Investment Bank or other International Financial Institutions could be used. There are 86 mainstream, Interreg and ENI-CBC programmes are relevant for the EUSBSR.

The key funding mechanism for projects within the PAs/HAs to date has been the Interreg BSR programme and the various cross-border cooperation (Interreg) programmes in the Baltic Sea region. Interreg BSR has been the key source of funding for PAs ‘Nutri’, ‘Innovation’, ‘Energy’, and HA ‘Neighbours’. The PA ‘Education’ receives funding from the Interreg BSR and South Baltic programmes, from the ESF for larger projects, and seed funding for other activities. The funding sources for HA ‘Spatial Planning’ are also quite diverse and include the Interreg BSR and Central Baltic programmes, other EU programmes, Maritime and Fisheries fund programmes, and seed funding sources. The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) is a significant funding source for PA ‘Health’, in addition to Interreg BSR, and the policy area is relatively well-funded regarding seed funding activities. Other CBC funds – for example the Interreg Central Baltic and South Baltic programmes – are the main sources of funding for PAs ‘Hazards’ and ‘Tourism’, respectively. EU programmes such as BONUS, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), and Horizon 2020 are key for the PA ‘Safe’, and the PA also depends on Interreg BSR for a variety of activities. There are a number of other PAs that receive funding from these EU programmes. However, EU programmes are not limited to these. Erasmus+ provides support for the PA ‘Culture’, and the DG MARE supports the PA ‘Spatial Planning’. Funding sources in the ‘other’ category mainly include national-level institutions, such the Swedish Institute and Uppsala University, or intergovernmental organisations such as the Nordic Council of Ministers.

¹⁴ COWI study ‘Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy’ – November 2017
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/mrs_links_cohesion_policy.pdf

The Interreg BSR links projects from different EU funding sources by creating project platforms. Project platforms, a funding instrument from Interreg BSR set up in the 2014-2020 programming period, support EUSBSR PAs and HAs by linking the results of EU-funded projects and feeding them into policy development in their thematic areas. To date, nine platforms have been set up. All nine project platforms selected by the Interreg BSR's Monitoring Committee support the EUSBSR's three main objectives. The platforms help structure new knowledge for public authorities and other target groups for the EUSBSR, bringing together results of different EU-funded projects in one particular field.

During the reporting period the use of the 'mainstream' ESI Funds programmes has remained relatively limited, and participants in the EUSBSR do not yet consider that ESI Funds programmes and the EUSBSR are aligned.

Embedding

Until now, the main funding source for the EUSBSR has been the territorial cooperation (Interreg) programmes, even though the Interreg programmes have limited financial resources and cannot on their own cover all of the Strategy's needs. Therefore, the use of the national and regional cohesion policy programmes (known as 'mainstream' programmes) to support the priorities of the MRS and cooperation activities is being facilitated for the 2021-2027 programming period in the draft legislation proposed by the Commission. It is important to ensure that the MRS priorities are included in the mainstream cohesion policy programmes that are already being drafted. This process is known as 'embedding'.

In the Baltic Sea Region, networks of ESI Funds programmes' managing authorities have been created on a voluntary basis for all funds (ESF, ERDF, EAFRD and EMFF), reflecting the need and desire for stronger macro-regional cooperation in the region, by providing funding.

The first managing authorities network, created in 2011, was the ESF managing authorities network, the 'Baltic Sea Network - European Social Fund' (BSN-ESF). An important aim for the network was to coordinate activities between national ESF programmes during the 2014-2020 programming period and to identify possible areas for cooperation. The BSN-ESF network has created a forum for discussion among the countries and the relevant PAs. The flagship 'School to Work' was also created as a result of the BSN-ESF network. The BSN-ESF has organised their meetings back-to-back with the thematic network on Youth Employment (and Inclusion), which has facilitated carrying out coordinated calls.

Following the example of the ESF-network in the Baltic Sea region, the EUSBSR NC group created an ERDF network of managing authorities in 2016. It aims to facilitate, on a voluntary basis, the funding of transnational collaboration by ERDF regional/national programmes in order to support the EUSBSR's activities. As a first step, pilot projects were developed, focusing on innovation in clean-tech to help regions implement their smart specialisation strategies. The process is coordinated by the EUSBSR 'Innovation' policy area.

A programme has been developed in the EUSBSR for capacity building (by the HA 'Capacity') for and with the managing authorities (ERDF and ESF) in preparation for the 2021-2027 programming period. The programme is designed to meet the needs for coordination between the ERDF/ESF, with their Baltic Sea region networks and the PACs/HACs flagship leaders. The programme consists of three round tables and five modules.

Communication

Recent years have seen some progress on communicating about the EUSBSR, in particular with the implementation of the 'Let's communicate!' project. However, challenges remain. Various

activities have been carried out as part of the project, leading to increased visibility of the Strategy and better internal and external communication. These include — but are not limited to — creation of a blog platform on the EUSBSR website, actively using social media channels (for example Twitter @EUSBSR with over 3200 followers, Facebook with almost 2000 followers, Flickr), organisation of thematic events with various EUSBSR stakeholders (including business representatives), producing a series of promotional videos on the EUSBSR, launching communication toolkits for EUSBSR implementers (national coordinators, thematic area coordinators and flagship leaders), etc.

The ‘Let’s communicate!’ project aims to maintain and further develop the EUSBSR’s communications. The project gathers current information about EUSBSR developments and shares them through its communication channels, promotes the use of the EUSBSR visual identity and provides with communication support and tools to EUSBSR stakeholders. The project will also reach out to new target groups to attract new stakeholders to take part in actions.

The Interreg BSR Programme is co-financing the ‘Let’s communicate!’ project, providing almost EUR 780 000 between 2016 and September 2021. The lead partner is Centrum Balticum. Beyond the PACs/HACs, institutions eligible to receive financing include international bodies and national ministries and agencies acting as coordinators.

The key annual event for the EUSBSR is the annual forum, which has brought together up to a 1 000 participants and provides good opportunities for increasing visibility and communication of the strategy and its results. The Interreg BSR provided the EUSBSR annual fora with funding of nearly EUR 930 000 between 2016 and 2019. An additional EUR 255 000 has already been committed for the 2020 forum in Turku, Finland, plus an amount of EUR 255 000 for the 2021 annual forum.

Cooperation within and across Strategies

Cooperation within the EUSBSR

Many PAs/HAs have taken advantage of the potential for cooperation within the EUSBSR, working across themes or PAs/HAs. Cooperation can take the form of workshops, seminars, and the development of joint implementation strategies and joint development of flagship projects, as well as ‘flagship processes’. PAs/HAs vary in their current and planned cooperation but, in general, they are well aware of the potential and necessity for inter-PA/HA cooperation in terms of sharing ideas, transferring of know-how and sharing resources. A key mechanisms for doing this is participating in the steering groups of other PAs/HAs. For example, the networks of both ‘Secure’ PA and ‘Climate’ HA have been used as bases for developing the Community Safety Action for Supporting Climate Adaptation and Development (CASCADE) project¹⁵.

Cross-sectoral/thematic cooperation may be more relevant for some areas than for others, and that cross-sectoral cooperation may happen at different levels in the PA/HA. The extent and forms of cooperation thus vary depending on the type of initiatives pursued by the PA/HAs. The key issue is still how to ensure that the results of this cooperation are used for policy development/implementation and disseminated to relevant stakeholders.

Cooperation across MRS

¹⁵ <http://www.bsr-secure.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CASCADE-INFO.pdf>

The cooperation between the EUSBSR and the other three MRS has been further developed to increase alignment and maximise mutual benefits, impacts and synergies. This cross-strategy cooperation has taken different forms, such as implementing joint projects and sharing best practices and experience. Cross-strategy cooperation is facilitated by Interact, a programme that has organised thematic meetings among stakeholders/project partners coming from different macro-regions (for example on climate change and disaster risk prevention issues, transport-related issues, capacity building, etc.).

The HA ‘Capacity’ works with similar structures in the other three MRS and with the Interact programme. The collaboration covers exchange of good practice in capacity building/stakeholder involvement and joint development of measures for capacity building.

CHALLENGES

Governance and administrative capacity

In spite of the high levels overall of interest and support for the EUSBSR in the Baltic Sea countries and the wider region, high-level political commitment to EUSBSR still remains a challenge. Some of the reasons for this are that the deliverables and results are often not tangible or simple to communicate. The need to secure increased political commitment is also evident in the lack of national resources made available to finance the EUSBSR governance. The EUSBSR is at times perceived too bureaucratic and technical.

The on-going work to strengthen EUSBSR governance should clarify what is essential for the EUSBSR’s success, including stronger ownership of the Strategy by countries. Areas that require increased focus include stronger political leadership and continued commitment, effective decision making and greater clarity in organising work. The main goals are to improve coordination and cooperation to further increase commitment to the EUSBSR and its effective implementation and to build the necessary administrative capacity to ensure that political commitment translates into effective implementation. A renewed focus on the role of the NCs will be important to improve coordination. The key is to empower relevant implementers (PACs/HACs, steering groups) and increase ownership by the relevant line ministries at national level. The relationship between the NC group and PACs/HACs needs to be clearly delineated.

The degree to which the countries participate in PA/HA steering groups varies. Some PAs/HAs consider the majority of countries to be active, while others identify only a few active countries. The extent to which other participants are included also varies across PAs/HAs – some include a broad range of macro-regional and EU stakeholders, and Pan-Baltic organisations, while others include non-EU countries representatives to a lesser degree. This makes the management of PA/HA steering groups a challenge for all actors involved.

The current EUSBSR governance and annual forum support mechanisms are seen as too time consuming and putting too much administrative burden on the PACs/HACs and organisers of the annual fora. The support mechanisms therefore need to be reconsidered and simplified to better utilise existing resources and reducing administrative burden.

Policy and thematic priorities

The Strategy’s broad scope remains an issue and this is being addressed in the revision of the EUSBSR action plan currently underway. A tighter focus, especially on the areas where macro-regional cooperation can bring clear added value, will increase the Strategy’s effectiveness and impact. This is also in line with the Council Conclusions on the first report on the

implementation of MRS from April 2017, stressing that a stronger focus on results and relevant priorities is likely to increase overall performance and improve the visibility of the MRS.

The Baltic Sea itself is the uniting element for the region: It serves as a source of common identification across the region and constitutes a joint environmental and economic asset. It also highlights challenges, e.g. in relation to environmental protection and transport routes across the sea. The region includes a large amount of coastal areas and islands that are very attractive to residents, as well as significant biodiversity that is vulnerable to economic uses and climate change. The Arctic regions, in the northernmost part of the region, present specific challenges and opportunities in respect of their remoteness, geography and climate conditions.

The EUSBSR's three overall objectives ('Save the sea', 'Connect the region' and 'Increase prosperity') and the sub-objectives remain relevant. There is a need to streamline policy areas and link these more strongly to the strategic context. In addition, the role of climate change is a core element that affects all parts of the Strategy. Climate change and sustainable development should therefore be a key part of all policy areas.

Many stakeholders consider that there is room for even more involvement of NGOs, civil society and young people in the EUSBSR's work. For example, in a recent survey of Swedish stakeholders, respondents cited a need for increased public engagement and greater involvement from the business community and other societal actors. Respondents noted that greater involvement of the private sector is needed to address climate change.

Monitoring and evaluation

A general issue with the EUSBSR is that it is difficult to measure, report and communicate its achievements. Part of the reason for this is that many of the achievements are very technical or administrative and are difficult to relay to the broader public outside the topic or area.

Monitoring therefore remains an area that needs further development in the EUSBSR. It is difficult to collect information about outputs, progress and results. Many indicator targets are broadly formulated, with limited monitoring and milestones used. Reporting by the PAs/HAs is often focused on projects/flagships and less on policy impact. In addition, very few PAs/HAs report on their current indicators, which means that these are generally not used for measuring or monitoring progress. PACs/HACs have not been consistently successful in measuring their performance with quantitative and/or qualitative indicators. This is mainly due to the fact that very few PAs/HAs have, so far, developed a robust strategy with goals, targets and indicators of their action. Therefore, it is difficult to capture the full scope and character of their work, meaning that there is a risk that the many effects and results described above go underreported. Further development and monitoring of indicators in the EUSBSR is needed. The revised action plan will further develop indicators and targets for each PA that will in turn enable improved monitoring and evaluation.

The lack of a robust and clear indicator system for the individual policy areas and horizontal actions also makes it difficult for Interreg BSR to judge how the actions financed by the programme have contributed to achieving the EUSBSR's objectives.

A more strategic approach, particularly with regard to monitoring the impact and added value of the PAs/HAs, would benefit from the further development of appropriate indicators, target setting and monitoring. Only a few PAs/HAs, so far, have developed a robust strategy with goals, targets and indicators for their actions. Most PAs/HAs use their section of the action plan as their main 'strategic document'.

Funding

Funding for the EUSBSR remains a concern among many of the Strategy's stakeholders. The EUSBSR does not have any 'own' funding and is based on effective and coordinated mobilisation of existing funding sources, and the promotion of synergies and complementarities. However, embedding the EUSBSR priorities into relevant existing funding frameworks remains an issue.

A study in 2017 (COWI) found that a relatively high percentage of survey participants agree that it is difficult to find/obtain funding for specific projects and activities, and that funding for the administration and coordination of the Strategy is limited. The survey respondents also found that competition for funding in EU programmes is high¹⁶.

Until now, the main source of funding for the EUSBSR has been the Interreg programmes, and in particular the Interreg BSR programme. Funding from the 'mainstream' national and regional ESI Funds programmes has been fairly limited. However, in light of the magnitude of EUSBSR actions needed to effectively deliver the Strategy's three main objectives, the Interreg BSR programme can only be a suitable funding source for governance support and to initialise and catalyse smaller pilot projects and processes. Interreg funding is too limited to finance the substantial actions or infrastructure investments to bring real change to the region.

It is therefore vital to ensure that the EUSBSR priorities are included into mainstream national and regional programmes under ESI Funds in the upcoming 2021-2027 budgetary period, known as 'embedding'.

In line with the Council Conclusions on the second report on the implementation of the MRS, better integration of the EUSBSR priorities with the relevant EU, regional, national and local policy frameworks in the next programming period 2021-2027 is needed in order to better utilise the potential provided by the Strategy.

This process has been facilitated by the draft cohesion policy legislation proposed by the Commission. However, the NC group and PACs/HACs need to be active in encouraging programme authorities to take the EUSBSR priorities into account from the early stages of the drafting process. The existing managing authorities networks can be particularly useful tools to identify common EUSBSR actions to be promoted within the next generation of ESI Funds programmes.

Communication

Communication is a recurring issue, and a key weakness, in the reporting on EUSBSR activities and results. Although progress has been made on communication, further work is needed to strengthen it, especially at national level and in national languages, as most of communication to date has been done in English. Additional work is needed on using clear and simple language that is easy to understand, including for those not familiar with EU and/or MRS terminology. Ensuring transparency and ease of access to information for stakeholders and interested parties is an important way of demonstrating the progress and achievements of the EUSBSR. Better communication also helps to encourage future cooperation.

While communication on active flagships is generally good for most PAs/HAs, reporting on results of completed flagships needs improvement.

One area to further develop in terms of communication is to improve the online communication of the PAs/HAs, as some of these completely lack an online presence and many fall short in

¹⁶ COWI study 'Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy' – November 2017
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/mrs_links_cohesion_policy.pdf

promoting their activities and progress. While some webpages are up-to-date and provide useful content, all would benefit from better and continuous communication of the achievements of PAs/HAs. Likewise, the webpages would improve transparency if they made steering committee minutes and meeting information more readily available.

Stakeholders note that there are limitations with the 'Let's communicate' project, in part because it only involves a limited number of partners, rather than all EUSBSR countries. Stakeholders have highlighted that it is mainly project results that are promoted whereas communication regarding the 'work' of the PA/HAs and policy development is limited. Several countries suggest that creating a EUSBSR technical support structure or focal point would help coordinate and streamline communication efforts, which would improve communication among PAs and HAs, with countries and stakeholders.

Cooperation within and across Strategies

There have been increased exchanges of information and experience between regional actors involved in the four MRS. The annual High Level Group¹⁷ meeting and the first Macro-Regional Strategies Week (organised by DG REGIO in February 2020 in Brussels) have provided useful opportunities for dialogue and exchange of experience and best practices with other MRS. Nevertheless, countries and stakeholders indicate that different terminologies and structures in the MRS complicates exchange. There are also issues with lack of financial means or other administrative processes in the MRS, preventing improvements to exchanges at regional and/or national levels..

While some interactions exist between the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the WestMED initiative¹⁸, and relevant Interreg programmes, it would be useful to strengthen cooperation and synergies between those MRS that have a strong maritime component¹⁹. These MRS, such as the EUSAIR and EUSBSR, and sea basin strategies would benefit from identifying best practice and knowledge sharing.

THE WAY FORWARD

Lessons learnt

Ten years after it was launched, the EUSBSR is a well-established macro-regional strategy in the EU. It is one of the key tools for promoting territorial cooperation. It is a developing framework in terms of substance, finance and management. Improving links with the existing funding instruments needs to continue to be able to realise the Strategy's full potential. The EUSBSR's significance goes beyond meeting the objectives set 10 years ago. Its future depends on the extent to which it will be able to adjust to meet the new challenges that Europe and the world are facing, and on the continued commitment and ownership of the participating country to invest in the Strategy and cooperation with their partner countries.

Governance and administrative capacity: The governance of the EUSBSR plays a strategic role in the successful implementation of its actions and the achievement of its objectives. The

¹⁷ The High Level Group meeting brings together EU 27 Member States, non-EU countries part of the MRS, and the EU Institutions. This is an annual meeting to discuss the state of play of MRS and their future.

¹⁸ WestMED Initiative - Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the Western Mediterranean.

¹⁹ For example cooperation with the EUSAIR on the creation of an Emission Control Area for cleaner shipping in the Mediterranean Sea, which is under consideration of the contracting parties to the Barcelona Convention in view of a formal submission in 2022 for the consideration by the International Maritime Organisation in view of the declaration on such a protected area under international maritime transport rules.

EUSBSR's governance structure has been in place for almost a decade and feedback from Member States and stakeholders confirms that there is a need for improvements. The areas that need further development include stronger political leadership and commitment, more effective decision making and greater clarity in roles and responsibilities in organising work.

Stakeholders have highlighted the importance of the role that European Commission plays in providing strategic coordination of the Strategy, in partnership with the participating countries and regions. Nevertheless, even though the Commission has an important facilitating and supporting role, the commitment and engagement of all relevant stakeholders at national, regional and local levels in the participating countries remains vital for the Strategy's success.

Policy and thematic priorities: EUSBSR creates a unique platform for cooperation and coordination for its eight EU Member States and the non-EU countries of the region, and has successfully generated projects, and networks to tackle common challenges. There is a consensus among the Baltic Sea countries that this positive cooperation has to be continued. The Strategy's three overall objectives: 'Save the sea', 'Connect the region' and 'Increase prosperity' remain valid. However, the EUSBSR has to adapt to and take account of new challenges – such as the climate change, COVID-19 crises, demographic changes and migration (of non-EU nationals) – which are becoming more urgent and which need to be addressed in a coordinated way across borders. There is also a need to streamline some of the current 13 policy areas and 4 horizontal actions so that they fit more clearly into the strategic context and facilitate the embedding of the EUSBSR priorities and activities into other programmes.

Many EUSBSR stakeholders find that some of the current objectives and sub-objectives have limited relevance to implementing the Strategy and say very little about what actually goes on in the Strategy. Better formulation and restructuring may help to create a stronger link between the Strategy and its action plan.

Funding: The Interreg BSR programme remains a key partner for implementing the EUSBSR objectives and supporting its governance. The support to EUSBSR governance by the Interreg BSR will have to be specified in the cooperation programme 2021-2027.

In addition, projects and activities funded by the Interreg BSR also need to be aligned with the EUSBSR. Even closer collaboration between the EUSBSR and Interreg BSR could be helpful during the preparation of the new programming/funding period.

Main issues

The MRS do not come with their own funding, hence the aim is to mobilise all relevant EU (including ESI Funds, Horizon Europe, CEF, Erasmus+, EAFRD, LIFE, etc.), national and regional funding sources, to invest in the MRS priorities. No country or region can address the major challenges in a globalised world on its own, whether these are climate change, the COVID crisis, energy issues, global competitiveness, peace and security, fighting terrorism, or managing refugee flows. Cooperation between EU Member States, non-EU countries and regions is vital. The projects to be supported within the framework of EUSBSR must be aligned with the relevant action plan and respective policy areas.

In the 2021-2027 period, the Commission's proposals aims to facilitate and increase cooperation between regions and countries within the 'mainstream' cohesion policy programmes. This means ensuring that actions and investments that have a higher EU added value when implemented jointly should be promoted. This can be done through, for example, synergies and alignment with the priorities of the macro-regional strategies and sea-basin strategies/initiatives. At the heart of macro-regional cooperation is translating overarching

European policies and priorities into bottom-up initiatives by smaller/non-governmental/local institutions that work together macro-regionally on finding joint solutions to shared challenges.

The EU's multi-level governance of the Strategy's implementation involves several institutional and non-institutional actors, in line with the EU's regional policy goals..

The debate among the Baltic Sea region's stakeholders and experts confirms the increasing willingness to strengthen the key implementers of the Strategy, to make the Strategy more coherent, and to simplify its governance mechanism. The delays in the revision process for the action plan highlighted the lack of technical resources available. The potential for creating a technical support structure should be urgently considered.

Future development

The EUSBSR creates a unique platform for cooperation and coordination for its eight EU Member States and the non-EU countries in the region. The Strategy has successfully generated projects and networks to tackle common challenges. No country or region can address the major challenges in a globalised world on its own, whether this is COVID-19, climate change, or energy and connectivity issues. Cooperation between EU Member States, non-EU countries and regions remains indispensable.

In order to ensure long-term effects and a bigger impact, it is important to build on existing capacities and results. There is further potential to identify complementarities and synergies in results and to explore methods of combining different funding sources. The networks and platforms are important tools that maximise the benefits of cooperation for greater effectiveness. 'Flagships' are an example of this development and they remain a feature of implementing the EUSBSR. Project platforms, as developed by Interreg BSR, are another tool to interlink and connect similar activities and results from projects under different funds, better structure these and communicate results in a coordinated way.

EUSBSR's structure is complex and difficult to understand for stakeholders and those not closely involved in the Strategy. The revision currently underway of the EUSBSR action plan aims to streamline the implementation of the EUSBSR, including by simplifying the governance structures and ensuring effective decision making and distribution of tasks and responsibilities. The revision of the EUSBSR action plan is also an effective mechanism for taking into account changing needs/priorities. The action plan's relevance should be reviewed more frequently and plan should be regularly updated (for example linked to the Commission's term) on the basis of an appropriate evaluation. To improve the implementation process for the EUSBSR, it should be considered whether administrative and technical support for the Strategy should be created, such as the Danube Strategy Point in the EUSDR.

The EU macro-regional and sea basin strategies and initiatives provide a framework for focusing cooperation activities between the participating countries and regions to tackle commonly identified challenges in a particular functional area. The strategies do not come with their own funding, hence the aim is to mobilise all relevant EU, national and regional funding sources, to invest in the MRS priorities. The programming exercise for the 2021-2027 period should be used to further embed selected EUSBSR priorities in mainstream EU funding programmes as cooperation elements (in the proposed regulations, cooperation is introduced as a cross-cutting objective for the cohesion policy).

Monitoring and evaluation needs to be strengthened so as to better link the activities and objectives in the EUSBSR to overall development in the region, but also to better monitor progress in the different policy areas and horizontal actions. This could help stakeholders to see how the EUSBSR can support the region and what the real results of the Strategy are. Additional

work on communication is also needed to increase the Strategy's visibility and better communicate its results thereby increasing interest in and commitment to the EUSBSR. Emphasising and clearly communicating the potential benefits of the EUSBSR can help strengthen the ownership of and commitment to the Strategy by participating countries and stakeholders.

The EUSBSR, as the other MRS, has already showed that it can play an important role in the implementation of the European Green Deal in the Baltic Sea region. In this regard, it is important that the actions developed in the framework of the EUSBSR continue to ensure synergies with HELCOM and, as all the other MRS, to be linked with the EU Acquis and its implementing documents (e.g. actions in the field of energy and transport are linked with National Energy and Climate Plans and National Air Pollution Control Programs required by EU *Acquis*).

Report on the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

The EUDR is currently celebrating its 10-year anniversary. Dating from 2010 it was the second macro-regional strategy (MRS) to be launched after the adoption of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), and over the years the Strategy has provided stimulus to start new projects and processes of macro-regional relevance. The access to know-how and best practices within the macro-region has been of great benefit to many actors at various levels who were looking for different approaches and solutions when designing and implementing policy.

Covering 14 countries that differ considerably in terms of their development level and position in relation to the EU, the EUSDR includes nine EU Member States, two candidate countries, one potential candidate country and two neighbouring countries. The EUSDR is organised around four main pillars:

- ‘Connecting the region’ focuses on 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, among other things, to develop the knowledge society.
- ‘Strengthening the region’ focuses on improving decision-making capacity and structures in the public and private sector.

The four pillars are divided into 12 priority areas.

RESULTS

Governance and administrative capacity

General

The governance structure of the EUSDR consists of the following levels:

- the national coordinators;
- the presidency;
- the ‘Trio presidency’ (consisting of the incumbent, past and future presidencies);
- the priority area coordinators;
- the steering groups and their working groups.

Annual ministerial meetings in the EUSDR are held within the framework of the annual forum that normally takes place in October.

A major development during the reporting period was the revision of the EUSDR action plan. The revision mobilised EUSDR stakeholders on all levels and provided an opportunity to re-energise political commitment and facilitate convergence between the EUSDR and policies in the participating countries and regions. The result is an action plan that is better suited for the future, in particular with respect to the 2021-2027 programming period. Content-wise, the plan links the Danube macro-regional actions with the new Commission’s priorities, such as the Green Deal, sustainable development, digitalisation, migration (of non-EU nationals) and demographic change. It also sets out new measures to support small and medium-sized enterprises and has specific actions for the tourism sector, which is highly topical given that both of these groups have been severely hit by the COVID-19 crisis.

Another key event during the reporting period that actively contributed to the Strategy's success was the re-establishment of the Danube Strategy Point (DSP)²⁰. The former DSP ceased its activities in 2017, and as a result, the Strategy lacked a coordination body. This hampered implementation of the Strategy, in particular in coordinating between the different priority areas. To address this, during the second half of 2018 the 'new' DSP was set up. It is run as a single project with two partners, the city of Vienna as Lead Partner, together with the Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration. Key tasks for the DSP include supporting EUSDR stakeholders, internal and external communication, coordination between EUSDR stakeholders and financing/funding instruments, monitoring and evaluation and capacity building for priority area coordinators (PACs) and non-EU countries.

In 2019, the Croatian Presidency of the EUSDR took the initiative to draft two documents: a paper on EUSDR governance, clarifying the roles of various key actors, and an update of the EUSDR rules of procedures. Both of these will be finalised during 2020.

The level of maturity of the various priority areas differs. While some are still busy building their implementation machine (with a focus on roles and responsibilities, and ensuring institutional commitments to the macro-regional work), others have reached a level where their key focus is on producing results and outcomes.

Political level

The countries that participate in the EUSDR are the Strategy's backbone. Each year, the EUSDR presidency is handed over to the subsequent country at the annual forum. Within the reporting period the Strategy was chaired by Bulgaria in 2018, by Romania in 2019 and by Croatia in 2020. The presidency is assisted by the 'Trio presidency' which includes also the current presidency and the former and next presidencies. As it was proving difficult to find a country to voluntarily take over the presidency (following Croatia in 2021), the national coordinators decided in the new governance paper to move to a system where the presidencies are determined in alphabetical order.

To support cooperation in the Danube region at political level, annual conferences of Danube parliamentarians take place periodically. These conferences are held to keep national and regional parliaments in the countries along the Danube closely involved with the EUSDR and to support transparent decision making. The fifth conference, on 4-5 October 2018 in Budapest, focused on preventing climate change effects on agriculture, water management and the system of water use. The sixth annual conference was organised in Bucharest on 20-21 March 2019, on the topic of the Danube as a tourist brand and developing cooperation between the countries in the Danube region by stimulating the development of the knowledge society and information technologies. High-level political dialogue is also organised within the Bled Strategic Forum²¹, which is one of the major regional conferences that deals with current questions relating to all aspects of society.

The EUSDR annual forum provides an opportunity for the governments in the EUSDR countries to express their continued commitment and to give strategic direction to key implementers. A ministerial meeting is held relating to each annual forum. The seventh EUSDR annual forum in 2018, took place in Sofia with a focus on developing tourism as a precondition for economic growth and territorial cohesion. A joint statement by ministers responsible for

²⁰ <https://danube-region.eu/contact/danube-strategy-point/>

²¹ <https://bledstrategicforum.org/>

tourism in the EUSDR countries was issued²². The eighth EUSDR annual forum on the theme of ‘building cohesion for a shared prosperity in the Danube region’, went ahead in Bucharest in 2019. A Danube Participation Day was held, linked to this annual forum, on the theme of ‘Youth – Participation – Empowerment’ to improve engagement by the public and civil society with the Strategy’s work. This addressed challenges and opportunities for boosting the Danube strategy in light of the changes to the EUSDR action plan. The 2020 annual forum is expected to take place in Zagreb in October.

Additionally, several priority areas are seeking to more closely involve their line ministers to gain broader policy support.

Coordination level

The national coordinators (NCs) are the focal point at national level and the decision-making body for the Strategy. Their primary task is to oversee implementation of the Strategy in their countries and ensure that the Strategy is firmly anchored in the national political environment. Together, the NCs form the ‘group of NCs’ which meets regularly.

Each participating country has to officially nominate a NC and one or more deputies. The NCs keep the current EUSDR presidency and the European Commission updated on an continuous basis.

As the participating countries govern the EUSDR and are the Strategy’s sole owners, the key role of NCs, with DSP support upon request, is to coordinate, guide and monitor participation in the implementation of the EUSDR. This includes engaging with all 12 priority areas (including participation in steering group meetings,), and liaising with national line ministries and other relevant organisations to encourage them to consider and implement EUSDR actions in their policy field.

In order to facilitate involvement at political level, all participating countries have set up mechanisms at national level to coordinate EUSDR issues. To illustrate, cross-sectoral national platforms were set up in several Danube countries — such as Romania, Austria and Hungary — to support continuous dialogue by the relevant national/regional/local stakeholders in key development areas and about on-going initiatives. They aim to coordinate EUSDR issues and involve a wider range of actors, including stakeholders in charge of cohesion policy operational programmes.

Implementation level

The EUSDR participating countries are responsible for coordinating each priority area. Each priority area is managed by at least two Priority area coordinators (PACs), working with their steering group (SG) members. Having an overview of the sector, the PACs’ main role is to identify key processes that will achieve the Strategy’s goals through different actions and identifying how to best implement solutions.

The EUSDR steering groups are the central executive and decision-making bodies at priority area level for objectives and actions, formats, key areas of cooperation, and future developments. The steering groups meet, in principle, twice a year, a requirement met by most priority areas. However, participation by steering group members at the meetings greatly varies between priority areas. Certain countries record very high participation levels, while others participate more sporadically.

²² <https://danube-region.eu/about/key-documents/>

Some priority areas report that there is continuity in terms of activities developed. Some also indicate that the quality of contributions and discussions is very good and that all participants are committed to the work. Others however, have noted a decrease in the level of participation. In some cases, steering group members have not been empowered with the necessary mandate and authorisation to implement effective actions at national level. Additionally, in certain cases regular attendance is hampered by limited human resources. In particular, it is important to facilitate the participation of steering group members from non-EU countries. Limited financial resources is one reason for the low level of participation although several priority areas cover travel and accommodation costs.

As a follow-up to the operational evaluation of the EUSDR, the DSP developed a needs assessment regarding closer cooperation in steering groups to improve participation by different stakeholder groups from the participating countries.

Civil society

Civil society organisations in the Danube region act through platforms based on participatory planning, community-building and empowerment. An example of such a platform is DANET - Danube Networkers for Europe²³. DANET promotes exchanges and working together in the areas of lifelong learning, social participation, dialogue and co-operation between generations and cross-cultural dialogue in Europe and particularly in the Danube region. Other examples include Transdanube.Pearls²⁴, which focuses on sustainable mobility in tourism by developing socially fair, economically viable, environmentally friendly and health promoting mobility services for visitors to the Danube region, and the network of Danube Transfer Centers²⁵, which includes partners from across the region.

Efforts to involve civil society have been made across all EUSDR priority areas. In particular, Priority Area 10 (institutional capacity & cooperation) focuses on the involvement of civil society in public governance. Key outputs include the Agenda for Participation²⁶ drafted by the priority area and the Danube Civil Society Forum²⁷ (DCSF). The DCSF is a member of the steering group for this priority area and it also has a working group, the Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP), which consists of representatives from civil society, cities and municipalities.

In the other priority areas, civil society has been actively included in the meetings of some steering groups and in events and annual fora. Some priority areas rely heavily on technical input by civil society organisations, such as environmental and nature protection within the task forces in Priority Area 6 (biodiversity). Other priority areas, such as Priority Areas 4 (water), 5 (environmental risks) and 9 (people & skills), focus on stakeholder meetings, conferences and events. Priority Area 9 organised several thematic workshops e.g. involving teachers with the goal of empowering people with disabilities and young people who are not in education or employment.

Finally, representatives of civil society organisations are key partners in arranging and implementing the National Participation Days and Danube Participation Day, which are

²³ <http://www.foragenetwork.eu/database/item/702-danet-danube-networkers-for-europe/DANET%20-%20Danube%20Networkers%20for%20Europe>

²⁴ <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/transdanube-pearls>

²⁵ <https://steinbeis-austria.eu/danube-transfer-center>

²⁶ <https://www.danube-capacitycooperation.eu/files/255>

²⁷ <https://dcsf.danubestrategy.eu/>

important platforms that bring together public administration representatives and civil society organisations and coordinate the implementation of the EUSDR at national/regional level.

Multi-level governance

Actors from different administrative levels are involved in the Strategy's governance structure, although to varying degrees. The participating countries have put structures in place to encourage multi-level involvement. Priority Area 10 (institutional capacity & cooperation) deals with institutional capacity-building at local, regional and national level. In order to provide an inclusive platform to support exchanges and cooperation by local actors in the Danube region, Priority Area 10 created the Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP) mentioned above.

Actions have also been taken at national and regional level. In Austria, a coordination platform was set up at national level. It functions as a platform for actors from national, regional and local levels, social and economic partners, and NGOs. Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is a particular format for the inclusion of local stakeholders, conducted by Local Action Groups (LAGs) based on local integrated development strategies. In Bulgaria, conservation measures for habitats and species in the Natura 2000 network which fall within the scope of the EUSDR, are implemented through such CLLD LAGs.

In Baden-Württemberg, the Minister responsible for policy coordination has been appointed special envoy for the implementation of the EUSDR. This special role allows for cross-sectoral coordination of Danube activities across all issues and levels of government. Different levels of government are involved in implementing the EUSDR in Baden-Württemberg, such as the city of Ulm, as well as other smaller municipalities. Other levels of government, e.g. Regierungspräsidium Stuttgart, have also been involved in partnerships on many issues.

Policy and thematic priorities

Achievements

A key added value of the EUSDR is that it brings together new actors across sectors, countries and levels. Macro-regional cooperation stimulates policy learning at all levels. EUSDR has proven to be a useful tool for focusing the attention of politicians, administrations, cluster organisations, educational and cultural institutions and civil society organisations on the Danube region.

During the reporting period, actions with a distinct macro-regional added value continued to be implemented, as shown by the examples provided below (see box).

Implementing the Strategy also brings 'side benefits' and unintentional gains. MRS activities very often complement formal policy processes and/or the implementation of tangible projects by adding a soft policy element. This is illustrated by the following examples:

- Promoting actions to put harmonised border control procedures in place for navigation while implementing the EU regulatory framework of border control at the EU's external borders (joint working group for Priority Area 1A - navigation and Priority Area 11 - security).
- Thematic agenda setting and pilot initiatives by Priority Area 9 (people & skills) in relation to the labour market and education policy, as part of social policy processes complementing activities at national and European level.

- Priority Area 1B (land transport) serving as a valuable format for macro-regional exchanges on transport issues in the Danube region - complementing existing forms of EU and international cooperation on transport and infrastructure policy issues.

Finally, there is a specific added value in involving non-EU countries in managing priority areas as a way of supporting the preparations and initiatives the countries are taking in connection with their aspirations to EU membership.

Project examples:

Pillar 1 - Connecting the Danube region

The key focus of Priority Area 1A (navigation) has been on implementing the **Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan** and rolling out harmonised border control procedures for Danube navigation. At present, more than EUR 70 million have been invested through EU co-financed projects within the Connecting Europe Facility, the ESI Funds national operational programmes and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) between 2014 and 2020. Key projects — **FAIRway Danube**²⁸ and other EU co-financed initiatives — constitute a major proportion of the necessary investments. As a result, fairway conditions are improving at several critical waterway sections. The **DARLINGe** project²⁹ was initiated and supported by Priority Area 2 (energy), based on an earlier study of the geothermal potential of the region. In this project 15 partners representing geological surveys, universities, industry, regional energy and development agencies, ministries and municipalities, assisted by 7 associated strategic partners from Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Romania worked together to improve energy security and efficiency by promoting the sustainable utilization of the existing, however still largely untapped deep geothermal resources in the heating sector.

Pillar 2 - Protecting the environment in the Danube region

The **JOINTISZA** project³⁰ of Priority Areas 4 (water) and 5 (environmental risks) was a project financed by the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme for EUR 2.3 million between 2017 and 2019. It aimed to improve the status of the waters of the Tisza river basin and save its ecosystem for future generations, including the Tisza mayfly. The project was a joint effort by the institutions of all the five countries that share the Tisza river basin (Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine) and other stakeholders and sectors. The results of the project were endorsed by ministers from all the Tisza countries in September 2019, signing a memorandum of understanding to ensure the joint implementation of the plan produced in the framework of the JOINTISZA project.

Pillar 3 - Building prosperity in the Danube region

Priority Area 7 (knowledge society) has been actively working on **RIS3**³¹ development in the Danube region. These activities have strong support from the Joint Research Centre (JRC). The Serbian co-priority area coordinator (PAC) is a leader of the Serbian RIS3 team and is also a member of the JRC Board of Governors. In 2019, Montenegro finalised its Smart Specialization Strategy, while Serbia is in the final phase of finalising its strategy. Bosnia

²⁸ <http://www.fairwaydanube.eu/>

²⁹ <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/darlinge>

³⁰ <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/jointisza>

³¹ National/Regional Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3).

and Herzegovina, Moldova and Ukraine have also started the process of drafting their RIS3. The **Danube Funding Cooperation Network (DFCN)**³² continued to coordinate and synchronise national, bilateral and regional efforts to support multilateral cooperation in research and innovation in the Danube region. Achievements included starting to work with the **COST Association**³³ including organising a ‘Cost-Connect’ event on sustainable energy in the Danube region in October 2018 in Belgrade, and opening a second call to support multilateral scientific cooperation in the Danube region.

Pillar 4 - Strengthening the Danube region

Work carried out by Priority Area 10 (institutional cooperation) has mobilised NGOs, individuals and volunteers to engage directly with their neighbours across borders. This has generated several interesting projects. An example is **Tastes of Danube – Bread Connects**³⁴, run by DANET. The idea is to have people experience bread as a form of cultural heritage that they all share and that unites them in their diversity. In 2018, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) awarded its civil society award (first prize) to the project.

Policy impact

The Strategy has been important in mobilising political capital within the region and institutionalising networks of stakeholders on many levels, which would not have materialised otherwise. It has helped to encourage better policy dialogue, greater visibility of and engagement from actors and has been instrumental in supporting better cooperation and information exchange. In addition, it has helped develop innovative funding solutions and rejuvenate the role of existing regional initiatives along the Danube River. Furthermore, it has contributed to the implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements relevant for the EUSDR territory, such as the Danube River Protection Convention³⁵, e.g. in the field of water quality, and the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention)³⁶, e.g. in the field of biodiversity.

The following examples demonstrate the different types of activities:

Political commitment to coordinate planning: activities in Priority Area 1A (navigation) have brought about a series of ministerial conclusions. Following the invitation from Commissioners Elisa Ferreira (Cohesion and Reforms) and Adina Vălean (Transport), on 30 June 2020 10 transport ministers of Danube riparian countries reconfirmed their commitment to implementing the Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan for the Danube and its navigable tributaries, as adopted in December 2014. In their conclusions, ministers announced the necessary national budgets and that they would make full use of EU co-financing opportunities to implement required measures. They also welcomed the proposed harmonised border control forms (arrival and departure reports, crew lists and passenger lists) – the result of the joint working group of EUSDR Priority Area 1A (navigation) and Priority Area 11 (security). They support the embedding of national thematic priorities in line with the ‘Council Conclusions on Inland Waterway Transport of 3 December 2018’ in the ongoing national programming processes for the ESI Funds post 2020, where applicable. They also stress the

³² <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/working-groups/wg-3-newly-established-danube-funding-coordination-network-dfcn/>

³³ <https://www.cost.eu/>

³⁴ <https://sharingheritage.de/en/projects/tastes-of-danube-bread-connects/>

³⁵ <https://www.icpdr.org/main/icpdr/danube-river-protection-convention>

³⁶ <http://www.carpathianconvention.org/>

need to pursue the implementation of important flanking measures, such as the reduction of administrative barriers in cross-border Danube navigation, the development of land-side infrastructure (in particular mooring places) and the further greening of the inland fleet in order to reach the ambitious targets of the ‘European Green Deal’.

They encourage the further digitalisation of border control processes, amongst others with the help of the CEF co-financed RIS COMEX project. That project also facilitates cross-border control procedures and encourage all Danube riparian states to engage in the development of digitalised waterway infrastructure and traffic management systems in line with the Digital Inland Navigation endeavour.

Hungary, Croatia and Serbia have already started using the so called DAVID forms in their border control procedures, replacing their national forms. Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Moldova – the four other Danube riparian countries – intend to follow by the end of 2021. Another policy topic discussed is the greening and modernisation of the Danube fleet. A workshop with stakeholders and policy makers was organised in spring 2019, resulting in a consolidated policy recommendation on fleet modernisation.

Development of the task force: Within the framework of Priority Area 6 (biodiversity), the Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF)³⁷ has become a recognised player in relation to sturgeon conservation in the Danube region. As a result of its work, the WePass³⁸ projects was launched to facilitate fish migration in the Danube river basin. Preparation and planning for a ministerial conference on Priority Area 6 (biodiversity) related topics started in 2019. As a result, the Bavarian State Minister for Environment and Consumer Protection has invited all Environmental Ministers from the Danube countries and the European Commission’s Commissioner for the Environment to a ministerial conference to be held in Munich in October 2020. Starting from the revised EUSDR action plan, the conference will express its commitment to the revised targets and activities and draw strategic conclusions on the further need for action at different levels (topics, governance mechanisms, funding requirements). The aim is to adopt a joint declaration.

Policy brief: Priority Area 9 (people & skills) has set up a constant exchange process with all of the Danube region countries regarding national developments in the fields of education and the labour market. As part of this, the priority area published the ‘Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills’ report to demonstrate developments in the countries with respect to labour market and education. The report includes detailed information and statistics on recent developments in the labour market and education systems of the Danube region. It can be used by the authorities in all of the Danube region countries as a basis for further policy work in relation to the labour market and education.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring

Progress on implementing EUSDR actions is monitored through reporting on targets. National coordinators (NCs) and priority area coordinators (PACs) have important roles to play in this reporting. At national level, monitoring is carried out by the NCs through coordination structures set up between the relevant ministries. At the level of the priority areas, the steering groups are crucial in monitoring the progress of their areas. In addition, each PAC reports regularly on implementation of the priority area to the DSP. In addition, as all PACs are funded

³⁷ <https://dstf.info/about/>

³⁸ <https://www.icpdr.org/main/activities-projects/we-pass>

as projects under the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme (DTP), each PAC also reports its activities according to the rules for reporting under this programme. Monitoring at project level is done at the level of each priority area but also by the programmes under which the projects are funded.

Monitoring and reporting of progress and achievements by priority area activities has been the subject of discussion since 2014. In 2016 the former DSP introduced a plan for a monitoring system that did not become operational. The EUSDR NCs decided in September 2017 in Budapest that the current DSP should be tasked with preparing a new monitoring system.

In addition, specific initiatives were taken by several priority areas. To illustrate, Priority Area 1A (navigation) carried out a gap analysis during the autumn of 2018. The aim was to identify themes and geographic locations for additional project initiatives, in the light of targets that had been set. In 2019, Priority Area 6 (biodiversity) commissioned a study on opportunities and proposals for a revised roadmap. The study provides further recommendations on how to improve and generate a tool that can serve as the basis for improving the governance of the priority area. It also provides proposals and guidance on how to implement more output-based and added value actions to reach the EUSDR goals in future.

Alongside EUSDR monitoring, cooperation with initiatives that generate evidence of territorial dynamics and trends will remain beneficial and may ease the (re-definition of future focuses (e.g. the ESPON Macro-Regional and Territorial Monitoring Tool (EMTM) that will be prepared during 2020).

Evaluation

As a first step, in June 2019 the DSP commissioned an operational evaluation with a focus on EUSDR governance, communication and stakeholder involvement. This evaluation provided valuable input for the revision of the action plan. An impact evaluation is planned for 2021. No systematic evaluation of the priority areas has been carried out at Strategy level to date.

Funding

Funding mobilisation

The Interreg Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) continues to be the most utilised source of funding for implementing projects under the EUSDR action plan. Over the years, integration and alignment of the EUSDR with the DTP has greatly helped in conceiving, developing and co-financing EUSDR projects. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that DTP not only contributes to implementing the Strategy but also funds the DSP and all PACs.

However, as the budget of the DTP is rather small and is therefore limited to projects/activities with a relatively small budget, additional funds are needed to finance larger projects/activities. Important additional sources are other Interreg programmes in the region, including ERDF, IPA and ENI cross-border cooperation programmes. Furthermore, the Interreg Central Europe transnational programme provided financial support to several projects under Priority Area 4 in the field of water management.

Although there is still room for improvement, funding has also been secured from ‘mainstream’ (i.e. regional and national) ESI Funds programmes. To illustrate, the 2014-2020 Bulgarian operational programme ‘Environment’ contributes to the achievement of the objectives in the priority areas under Pillar 2 (Protecting the environment in the Danube region) of the EUSDR, while the Hungarian ‘Environment and Energy Efficiency’ operational programme contributes more than EUR 2.5 billion to implementing Priority Areas 2 (energy), 4 (water), 5 (environmental risks) and 6 (biodiversity).

Several ESIF programmes allocate extra points in the selection process to projects that support the EUSDR. The Romanian ‘Large Infrastructure Programme ERDF/CF’ allocated extra points to biodiversity and energy projects with a macro-regional dimension. The monitoring committees for three programmes (‘Human Resources Development in Bulgaria (ESF)’, ‘Research and Innovation in Slovakia (ERDF)’, and ‘Interreg V-A – Romania-Hungary’) allocate funds to EUSDR objectives through targeted calls for proposals.

EUSDR projects have also been co-financed by other EU funding instruments, such as the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Erasmus, LIFE, COSME and Horizon 2020. The CEF has been of particular importance to projects in Priority Areas 1A (navigation) and 1B (land-transport). COSME funded several projects in Priority Area 3 (tourism & culture)³⁹, while Horizon 2020 supported projects in Priority Areas 4 (water), 5 (environmental risks) and 7 (knowledge society), notably the DAREnet project⁴⁰ (to strengthen flood resilience in the Danube region). Erasmus funding was also explored by Priority Area 7 (knowledge society). As an illustration, the INVET project⁴¹ in Slovakia introduces elements of vocational education and training, using experience and best practice from Germany and Austria. The project LIFE Sterlet⁴² supports the conservation of sturgeons.

A number of other initiatives have also been taken in order to facilitate the funding of projects. The Danube Project Support Toolkit is a first step towards setting up and improving funding instruments relevant to the Danube region. EuroAccess Macro-Regions already provides practical guidance on funding, including an overview of all financing possibilities in the Danube region and the other MRS.

Finally, in addition to looking for new funding, on-going projects such as LIFE Integrated Projects (e.g. for clean air in Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria) could also provide useful building blocks for closer cooperation and exchange of best practice on shared problems in the EUSDR area.

Embedding

As discussed above, the DTP alone cannot cover, by far, all requests for funding to implement the revised action plan. That is why, it is necessary to embed the Strategy in other funding programmes. In November 2019, on the initiative of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency, the EUSDR embedding task force was set up with the aim of facilitating access to other financial sources, notably ESI Funds mainstream national and regional programmes. The focus is on facilitating the embedding of the Strategy’s priorities in mainstream programmes of the upcoming 2021-2027 programming period. The revised EUSDR action plan provides a good starting point for the exercise.

To date, two meetings of the task force have been held (Vienna, January 2020 and Brussels, February 2020). The revised action plan contains 85 actions. As a first step, it was agreed to shortlist 2-3 strategic topics per priority area for embedding. To help streamline the process and to coordinate the next steps by key stakeholders in the process (e.g. PACs and NCs), a ‘Guidance paper for embedding the EUSDR into EU programmes’ was provided, along with a tool to support stakeholders in identifying strategic topics. These identified strategic topics are

³⁹ <http://danubecc.org/dcc-projects/supporting-the-promotion-and-development-of-transnational-thematic-tourism-products-linked-to-cultural-and-creative-industries-sditoroman/>
<http://danubecc.org/europe-invites-danube-connects-joint-marketing-campaign-on-chinese-market/>

⁴⁰ <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/740750>

⁴¹ <https://www.project-invet.eu/about/>

⁴² <http://life-sterlet.boku.ac.at/index.php/home.html>

considered as fundable topics for the tentative second DTP Seed Money Facility call. The aim is to raise awareness at national level (e.g. by organising thematic events) in the authorities responsible for the ESI, IPA and NDICI funds and to increase coordination with them.

The EUSDR countries are at different stages in the embedding process and start from different levels. However, everyone agrees that the ambition should be to strive for an embedding that goes beyond the identification of strategic projects with macro-regional relevance (project labelling). It is also noted that in addition to the ESI and IPA programmes, the previous ENI (now NDICI) programmes need to be taken into account as they are relevant for some EUSDR participating states and their neighbouring regions. Most participating countries have initiated some kind of ‘embedding’ structured dialogue between MRS and EU programmes authorities.

At the level of EUSDR priority areas, the picture varies. Priority Area 7 (knowledge society) contributed to the preparation of the joint proposal by Priority Areas 7 – 8 – 9 on ‘Better embedding of the EUSDR’s Prosperity pillar into suitable funding instruments’⁴³. Priority Area 9 (people & skills), working with Priority Area 10 (institutional cooperation), organised several network meetings of the ESF managing authorities in the Danube Region. The aim of these meetings was to identify relevant policy areas and necessary factors for successful transnational cooperation in the ESF in 2021-2027 in the Danube region. During these meetings a common text module was prepared for the 2021-2027 operational programmes supporting transnational cooperation.

Communication

The DSP is the coordinating and connecting structure between countries and key implementers of the EUSDR acting as a communication hub. During the reporting period important actions were taken to improve EUSDR communication with the DSP, as a key coordinating actor. The results include a success story brochure, a new, interactive promotion video, an almost final version of the EUSDR communication strategy and a communication guide. More specifically, the EUSDR communication guide aims to support all parties involved in spreading information on EUSDR effectively. The annual EUSDR communication plan was endorsed and is currently being implemented. EUSDR social media platforms have become reliable sources of information and are keeping a growing EUSDR online community up-to-date on the Danube strategy. The latest news are shared on Twitter (@EUSDR with over 1100 followers), LinkedIn (over 1000 contacts) and Facebook (over 3300 followers) on an ongoing basis.

Communication activities are also carried out at the level of the priority areas, who run their own websites through the DSP platform. The priority areas are also active on social media and sometimes produce their own information brochures. They also provide information on their activities to the DSP, as the coordinator of EUSDR communication activities.

At national level, the NCs have a key role to play in communicating about the Strategy and information is provided through various means. Several national administrations run dedicated web pages for the EUSDR that provide information on activities related to the Danube strategy. In addition, some have launched information campaigns on national television, carried out open-door events and produced promotional materials. In Austria, the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK) plays a key role in disseminating information to interested stakeholders.

⁴³ <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/joint-proposals-of-the-priority-areas-7-8-9-of-the-eusdr-on-better-embedding-of-the-eusdrs-prosperity-pillar-into-suitable-funding/>

A key annual communication event is the EUSDR annual forum, usually held in October each year. As noted above, the seventh EUSDR annual forum in 2018 took place in Sofia with a focus on tourism development as a precondition for economic growth and territorial cohesion. The eighth EUSDR annual forum on the theme of ‘Building cohesion for shared prosperity in the Danube Region’ went ahead in Bucharest in 2019 and attracted almost 900 participants. The 2020 annual forum is expected to take place in Zagreb. Another annual event is the Danube Region Cooperation Forum held in Galați, Romania.

In order to further strengthen the stakeholder capacity in the field of communication, the DSP organised a communication workshop in December 2019 in Zagreb, focusing on key messages and stakeholder involvement..

Cooperation within and across Strategies

Cooperation within the EUSDR

Cooperation takes place between priority areas in the same pillar and globally within the Strategy. Several exchange workshops and meetings were organised for all Pillar 1 PACs (Priority Areas 1, 2, 3) to lay the basis for cooperation and to harmonise administrative processes. Together with Priority Area 11 (security), Priority Area 1A (navigation) organised six working group and coordination meetings on administrative processes in the reporting period and the two priority areas cooperated on developing harmonised border control forms.

Priority Areas 4, 5 and 6 organised several joint events, focusing on funding and on thematic knowledge sharing and exchange. A joint workshop with priority areas from Pillar 3 was organised on flood protection education in the Danube river basin. Priority Area 4 (water) closely cooperates with Priority Area 6 (biodiversity) on migratory fish in the framework of the Danube Sturgeon Task Force.

Furthermore, Priority Areas 4, 5 and 6 have cooperated with organizations relevant for the EUSDR territory, such as the International Commission for the Protection of the River Danube (ICPDR)⁴⁴ and the Carpathian Convention. For example, the Carpathian Convention actively participates in EUSDR PA6 (biodiversity) steering group meetings and, on 6-7 November 2019, the PA 4 (and the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Interior) organized together with ICPDR a workshop on water and agriculture in Budapest. In there, among other topics, the Guidance Document on Sustainable Agriculture in the Danube River Basin was introduced.

The DTP capitalisation strategy is very much appreciated and has been used to identify cross-cutting topics, for instance by means of a capitalisation workshop. Several joint steering group meetings for Priority Areas 7 (knowledge society), 8 (competitiveness) and 9 (people & skills) supported thematic exchanges between these priority areas.

Priority Area 10 (institutional cooperation), in cooperation with EuroVienna, aligned Danube Strategic Project Fund projects with all other EUSDR priority areas.

As mentioned above, the DSP is currently developing a needs assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and relevant stakeholders (funding institutions, civil society fora, regional/local authorities etc.)

⁴⁴ <https://www.icpdr.org/main>

Cooperation across MRS

Several EUSDR priority areas cooperate with other MRS. Priority Area 1B (land transport) works with EUSAIR (Thematic Steering Group 2) and EUSALP (Action Group 4). In the field of biodiversity, ecological connectivity and green infrastructure, EUSDR priority areas work with the EUSALP and the EUSAIR. In particular, Priority Area 6 (biodiversity) initiated an exchange with the relevant priority area coordinators in the other MRS working with issues related to biodiversity to explore ways on how to strengthen synergies and avoid duplication of actions and funding and increase the efficiency of limited national capacity.

Exchanges of views on implementation and links to similar activities within the EUSBSR were produced during the meetings of MRS transport coordinators organised by Interact. Cooperation is in place with the EUSBSR on detecting pharmaceuticals in water, and EUSBSR representatives participated in a steering group meeting of Priority Area 2 (energy).

Finally, several members of the EUSDR steering committees are also members of similar groupings in other MRS which allows for grater synergy, connecting similar activities and exchange of good practices.

CHALLENGES

Governance and administrative capacity

The main challenge for the EUSDR is that political commitment is still weak and has been losing momentum over time. This can be illustrated by the fact that it has been difficult to encourage participating countries to apply for the presidency of the Strategy. As the Strategy is a long-term process, it is vital that capacity and resources continue to be provided to implement the Strategy and strengthen national coordination mechanisms.

Implementation of the Strategy is hindered by a lack of formalised cooperation between EUSDR stakeholders (NCs, PACs, SG members) and the programme (managing) authorities of national/regional EU funding programmes. Horizontal exchange among priority areas is still limited and the work of SG often appears limited to the sectorial theme.

In addition, the issue of administrative capacity of PACs and SG members is still a challenge that requires an appropriate response at national and regional level – mainly, but not only in the candidate and neighbourhood countries. As highlighted by Montenegro, it is necessary to ensure the continuity and stability of national structures implementing this complex EU policy: *‘We need MRS experts, who will help us to boost up the implementation of the Strategy and programme. For the IPA countries, MRS represents in a way also the possibility to know more about the EU and the way is functioning’*.

The position of individual PACs remains rather difficult, as in many cases they have neither the funds nor the political and administrative support and backing to implement a broad set of targets. In addition, steering group members that should be mandated and able to take strategic decisions, often lack the necessary project development and implementation skills. Furthermore, project experts do not always have overarching strategies in mind, but mainly focus on the interests of their organisation or individual project. Steering group meetings become fora for distributing information instead of platforms for real debate and policy development. On top of this, there is a lack of continuity of staff, in particular at steering group level, which hampers the work.

The situation could be illustrated by the following examples:

The challenge for Priority Area 8 (competitiveness) is to ensure the continuous involvement and participation of competent representatives from the relevant key ministries and business organisations. Stronger coordination of the complex structure of decision-makers, business supporters and other stakeholders has to be ensured as their input and identification with Priority Area 8 targets is an important success factor. In addition, staff turn-over entail a certain change of working culture and influence the whole process. In 2019, the PACs for Priority Area 8 tried to contact the NCs to receive new nominations for the SG without success.

Priority Area 6 (biodiversity) reports that although the SG works well, it remains unclear why certain participating countries do not send representatives to the meetings, even though funding for travel and accommodation costs is available from the SG budget. The main challenge is to encourage those countries that regularly do not participate in the meetings and do not reply to e-mails from the PACs to take a more active role.

Representation of the EUSDR countries in the Priority Area 7 (knowledge society) SG is not at a satisfactory level. Since PACs do not have the proper means to motivate SG members into more actively contributing to the priority area, stimulating activities at national level may have the required effect.

In addition, several stakeholders stress that guidance and support by the European Commission remains critical to ensuring stability and continuation in the whole process. Some argue that the need for active support by the European Commission is particularly crucial for the Danube region. In comparison to other macro-regional strategies, the EUSDR has a far more diverse partnership (e.g. many non-EU countries and high disparities in terms of prosperity and development). PACs reported that while representatives from DG REGIO would occasionally contribute to and follow discussions at SG meetings, some line-DGs did not participate at all, and it was very difficult to get speakers from the European Commission at events.

There is also still room for improvement in involving civil society in some priority areas. Although its involvement is one of the EU's core principles and is widely supported in official statements, there is still a certain reluctance to initiate participatory governance. The structured involvement of and support for civil society in the EUSDR governance structures and respective supporting instruments at a broad level is still a challenge.

Policy and thematic priorities

There is still room to improve policy coherence. The Strategy's objectives do not translate into the work of SG and their work does not generate enough tangible projects/activities and outputs. In addition, there is a lack of continuity in the political priorities of each presidency. Some stakeholders argue that there is a need for a more strategic vision for implementing the Strategy. They also call for the application of a strategic approach through strategic projects/initiatives, which could help to increase the EUSDR's effectiveness and visibility. Future development plans should be better highlighted in the thematic work. Imaginative projects like ESPON territorial visions could provide helpful input.

Monitoring and evaluation

Following the 2016 update of EUSDR targets, the revision of the EUSDR action plan has revived the discussion about a monitoring and evaluation system for the Strategy. As part of this, identifying indicators and baselines in the course of revising of the action plan has been a challenge. Indicators should be impact orientated. However, it is often not possible to establish causal links between potential indicators and EUSDR activities. Hence, the challenge lies in striking a meaningful balance. However, during the revision of the action plan, some priority areas were not able to provide any indicators or measurable targets at all.

Another issue is the current reporting system in place, which has been criticised by PACs for increasing administrative workload while not being sufficiently systematic.

Funding

Quite a lot of concern has been expressed regarding the lack of financial resources and commitment and a gap in alignment of funds. The need to reduce the gap between the Strategy's needs and funding opportunities is underlined, as the DTP's budget — despite the growing number of projects and initiatives being financed — is considered by far too small to support the Strategy's objectives. Difficulties in securing funding from mainstream national/regional programmes have been particularly highlighted.

Although the EUSDR is mentioned in many of the national/regional operational programmes for the 2014-2020 period and EUSDR aspects are present in some calls, there is no clear pattern to the correlation. Some programmes do not refer at all to the MRS. Looking specifically at the project selection process, all projects are subject to competition based calls and criteria. In this process, whether a project contributes to implementing an MRS is rarely recognised as a positive selection criterion. Consultations have been carried out between national coordinators and managing authorities on how to better embed the EUSDR in ESI Funds programmes. However, no substantial results were reached and further efforts were postponed until the first drafts of programming documents for 2021-2027 are available. Candidate countries regard the lack of funds as the main challenge in implementing the Strategy.

Currently, priority areas are working with their national coordinators (who take part in programming task force meetings) on embedding their priorities. However, some stakeholders note the limited influences of national coordinators on the embedding process as they do not always have the capacity to participate in and follow all mainstream operational programmes, CBC and transnational cooperation programmes. Moreover, cooperation between priority areas and NCs tend to follow national lines. Limited information is available in relation to how PACs ensure that the embedding is taken forward by SG members. Some priority areas note that no structured dialogue takes place in the steering group. Others note that the embedding process highlights the need for further capacity building in relation to EU funding and the added value of the MRS, specifically focused on ministries and other stakeholders.

Embedding into EU centrally managed programmes remains for many a particular challenge. A generally expressed view is that funds directly managed by the Commission (such as Horizon 2020, COSME, Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), LIFE, Erasmus+ and Europe for Citizens) could be better utilised, and more could be done in order to inform people about their existence. However, it is worth noting that calls within such programmes are highly competitive. This is why some stakeholders call on the Commission to promote the participation of the MRS in directly managed EU funding programmes, in particular by formulating specific calls and actions in a way which allows for applications from macro-regional strategies (positive discrimination).

Communication

With the establishment of the new DSP in 2018, the Strategy now has a dedicated body in charge of communication activities for the whole EUSDR. It is expected that this will be beneficial in developing the EUSDR.

No overall coordination difficulties in implementing a coherent approach to communication has been signalled by NCs or PACs. However, there are cases where internal communication from the priority area to steering group members regarding meetings, events, workshops etc. have been less than optimal.

There is also a need for a consolidated effort to ensure all websites for the EUSDR priority areas are kept up-to-date, as currently the frequency of updates varies.

In addition, there is still a perception that the broad public receive very little information about macro-regional cooperation in general. Many public authorities also have very little information about macro-regional cooperation. Better communication with potential beneficiaries would strengthen the alignment of the needs for territorial cohesion with the goals of the EUSDR.

Cooperation within and across Strategies

Although overall cooperation within the Strategy works relatively well, there is still a need for more interaction between different themes and disciplines. More cross-cutting work between steering groups seems necessary, and in particular the political level should provide guidance on how to achieve this objective.

There are many topics where an exchange across strategies could be fruitful, e.g. governance, communication or administrative support structure. However, some stakeholders argue that the usefulness of ‘cross-cutting cooperation among macro-regional strategies’ is limited to an expert-level exchange on the practicalities and structures of governance of the MRS.

THE WAY FORWARD

Lessons learnt

Three important lessons follow from the experience gained in implementing the EUSDR to date:

- The need to have appropriate governance mechanisms in place: As explained above, PACs play an essential role in connecting the policy with the project level. In order to be able to carry out their tasks, they need to be supported by dedicated steering group members who are empowered to take decisions in their policy fields. Finally, a complex task like steering and governing an MRS needs a joint technical support with appropriate resources for this task. The work of the DSP proved to be very helpful in this respect.
- The need to further align national strategies with the EUSDR: National and regional strategies, policy initiatives and programmes should be aligned with the EUSDR in order to create stronger synergies. The EUSDR should act as ‘umbrella’ for all other strategic documents in the region, while also continuing to tap into relevant strategies of macro-regional relevance, like the updated ICPDR strategy on adaptation to climate change⁴⁵.
- The need to concentrate activities strategically. In the context of financial restraints, it is crucial to better target and focus the limited available resources. That is why the concept of embedding needs to be taken further at all levels. The EUSDR may continue exploring the concept of strategic projects, aiming to better concentrate the resources on priority activities in order to show tangible results in a reasonable timeframe.

Main issues

Increasing political involvement in the EUSDR is perhaps the first issue that needs to be addressed, and the extent to which this is managed will also have an impact on other issues. In addition, the administrative capacity at all governance levels needs to be increased and steering group members should be further empowered. As PACs have an essential role to play in

⁴⁵ <https://www.icpdr.org/flowpaper/app/#page=1>

connecting the policy and project levels, the cross-cutting cooperation with other priority areas will have to be further developed. Participation by civil society organisations also needs strengthening.

One key task is to develop a more strategic vision for implementing the Strategy and to apply a strategic approach through strategic projects and initiatives which could help to improve the EUSDR's effectiveness and visibility. Additionally, as the Strategy's objectives are not integrated enough in the work of steering groups and their work does not generate sufficient tangible projects and outputs, policy coherence needs to be increased. More specifically, the EUSDR requires a more coordinated and integrated way of working that allows for the implementation of joint projects which will have a significant impact and ensures the delivery of tangible results. The revised EUSDR action plan provides a clearer strategic framework, helping to link it with the concrete actions. The reporting system in place has been criticised by PACs for not being systematic enough, while increasing the administrative workload. The system is however now being simplified while initiatives to evaluate the Strategy continue. As a step in this process, a new format for monitoring the EUSDR with the aim of improving and simplifying reporting was presented in February 2020. Complementary to this, cooperation with initiatives that generate evidence of territorial dynamics and trends will remain beneficial and may ease the (re-)definition of future focuses (e.g. the ESPON Macro-Regional and Territorial Monitoring Tool (EMTM) to be prepared in the course of 2020; JRC; Attractive Danube; DTP Territorial Analysis).

European funds and programmes including cross-border and transnational cooperation programmes and centralised programmes all need to contribute to implementing the EUSDR. For this to happen, there needs to be more cooperation between EUSDR stakeholders (NC, PAC, SG members) and managing authorities of national/regional operational programmes; this could take place in the form of networks of managing authorities at EUSDR level, as is already the case for the ESF. The coverage of the Connecting Europe Facility should be extended to projects in the non-EU countries of the EUSDR.

Although communication activities have been improved, notably by the creation of the new DSP, it is still observed that the general public and many public authorities have very little information about macro-regional cooperation in general and about the EUSDR in particular. Communication has to be professional and targeted, addressing all levels of governance. Further investing in developing a comprehensible and tangible narrative to illustrate EUSDR achievements in the region is also a way to bring the Strategy closer to the territory (civil society, local and regional governments). Better visibility could also help to raise the profile of the EUSDR internationally.

Future development

As the implementation of the EUSDR has been on-going since 2011, a wealth of experience has been gathered to critically reflect on the implementation process, which should be drawn upon. Several pressing challenges facing the Danube region are of a cross-cutting nature. Improving cross-sector policy coordination to address emerging major challenges such as digitalisation or migration (on non-EU nationals) could help to improve the EUSDR's overall performance. This should also be reflected in the ongoing process of embedding the MRS into the post-2020 programming process.

All governance levels have roles to play in further developing the Strategy, including networks of ESI Funds programme managing authorities. Since 2018, the EUSDR ESF network has supported transnational cooperation and thematic coordination among ESF operational programmes in the Danube Region to contribute to the realisation of projects with macro-

regional impact and the improvement of capacities at macro-regional level. However, these networks would be necessary also for the ERDF/CF and other relevant funding programmes, including for the funding instruments that apply to the non-EU countries covered by the Strategy.

In addition, future priority topics should be carefully selected in order to secure widespread interest in all 14 EUSDR participating countries and help reduce the gaps between these countries. As a complement to focusing on traditional projects, an option could be that PACs emphasise development of processes to ensure exchange of knowledge, coordination and cooperation between all stakeholders in the macro-region, along the lines of EU policies. Involving young people through various forms of cooperation provides a strong impetus to the Strategy and could help to increase its visibility. In the context of the wider European and societal value of EUSDR activities and their tangibility and visibility for a wider public, the inclusion of these target groups could prove valuable.

On a more global level, implementation would be facilitated if EUSDR actors were to further raise the understanding of the broader political agenda setting. That is why capacity building in terms of how to run the policy cycle and how to boost the EUSDR topics is important. Not least, there should be more emphasis on the role of the Strategy as a tool to promote European integration initiatives coming from Brussels and national capitals to regions and local communities, in the interest of people in EU Member States and other participating countries.

Looking ahead, macro-regional strategies could address European priorities in several ways. They are tools to support the European way of life for European people and to develop social fairness and prosperity between European regions, not least in order to stop the brain drain in many EUSDR regions. The Strategy could help facilitate cooperation and exchange of information and good practice between those countries that are already fit for the digital age or getting close, and those that are lagging behind. Similarly, macro-regional strategies are vehicles that could be used to boost a dialogue on strengthening democracy in macro-regions at national, regional and local level.

Last but not least, the strategies could become key actors in the EU Neighbourhood policy and could be used as frameworks to facilitate enlargement. In particular, the EUSDR should continue to support the enlargement policy in the Western Balkans.

Cross-cutting issues among priority areas should be strengthened both at policy and project level, and the results of transnational projects should be better channelled into and adapted by CBC and mainstream national/regional ESI Funds programmes.

It is also essential to align the EUSDR with national strategic and development documents in all participating countries, such as policy implementation plans and programmes required by EU acquis for Member States and accession countries. The Strategy should act as an umbrella for all other strategic documents in the region.

Furthermore, better links with policies relevant for regions geographically connected with the Danube River, such as the Black Sea, are encouraged. Joint actions in environment, transport and energy areas are especially relevant. The connection with a bridging role of the Black Sea basin in terms of interconnectivity should be further developed.

To conclude, the EUSDR has proved able to contribute to providing solutions to common challenges. But in order for the Strategy to become a game changer, greater political ownership and visibility are needed. This is also the case in relation to new or emerging policy initiatives and challenges like the European Green Deal or COVID-19. What appears clear is that such

challenges require coordinated joint actions which could be facilitated through the EUSDR framework.

Report on the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)

In October 2014⁴⁶, the European Council endorsed the EUSAIR on the basis of the Communication on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region adopted by the Commission in June 2014⁴⁷ and its accompanying action plan⁴⁸. The Strategy incorporates the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, that was adopted by the Commission in November 2012⁴⁹.

On the 2 April 2020, the Republic of North Macedonia became the ninth country to participate in the EUSAIR. This followed the country's request to be included in the EUSAIR and the Conclusions of the Council of the European Union of 9 April 2019⁵⁰, which welcomed and accepted the request and invited the Commission to 'take the necessary steps to include North Macedonia in the EUSAIR'. On this basis, the Commission published an amended Strategy on 2 April 2020⁵¹ to reflect this development.

After more than six years of implementation, the EUSAIR has yielded significant results in terms of establishing stable and efficient governing structures, increased regional cooperation in its priority sectors, support in the enlargement process of Western Balkan countries and more. Now MRS key implementers, stakeholders and the public expect meaningful progress in putting in place joint actions and projects that aim to improve the attractiveness, competitiveness and connectivity of the region.

RESULTS

Governance and administrative capacity

General

The EUSAIR governance architecture has three interrelated levels: (i) the political level represented by the 'Adriatic-Ionian Council/EUSAIR ministerial meeting'⁵², (ii) the coordination level led by the Governing Board (GB)⁵³, and (iii) the implementation level represented by the four Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs).

In the initial phase of implementation, the EUSAIR governance had some difficulties starting activities, mainly due to the differences in administrative capacity between EU Member States and 'enlargement' countries. After six years, the governing structures have stepped up their ability to cooperate. Enlargement countries have benefited and learned from working on an

⁴⁶ Conclusions of the General Affairs Council, 29 September 2014 and Conclusions of the European Council, 23-24 October 2014.

⁴⁷ COM(2014) 357 final.

⁴⁸ SWD(2014) 190 final.

⁴⁹ COM(2012) 713 final.

⁵⁰ [General Affairs Council, 09/04/2019](#)

⁵¹ With the adoption of the Addendum to the EUSAIR Communication by the Commission - COM(2020) 132 final.

⁵² Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers in charge of EU Funds, with the participation of the European Commissioner. The EUSAIR political level merged with the already existing higher political level event of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII).

⁵³ The standing members of the GB are: national coordinators, pillar coordinators, Commission services, European Parliament, Committee of the Regions, Economic and Social Committee, the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative Permanent Secretariat, ADRIION Managing Authority, EUSAIR Facility Point.

equal footing with EU Member States. While the OECD Synthesis report (published in 2019)⁵⁴ evaluated the EUSAIR as being between phase 1 and 2 of macro-regional strategy development according to the COWI study⁵⁵ classification, currently the EUSAIR could be associated to phase 2. Institutions have built their capacities to work in a macro-regional framework and are able to implement their action plan, while stakeholders gained better understanding of the EUSAIR and what is expected from them. The intensive work of the institutions of the nine countries to embed EUSAIR priorities in ESI and IPA funds national/regional ‘mainstream’ programmes⁵⁶ is a clear sign of such development. North Macedonia’s request to accede the EUSAIR, and the interest of other countries, demonstrates that the EUSAIR is seen as an attractive instrument with a potential to enable economic and social growth in the region.

While the Commission (DG REGIO) continues to act as the strategic advisor to the EUSAIR governing bodies, after stepping back from co-chairing the EUSAIR (GB) in 2018, subsequent presidencies and participating countries are gradually becoming more confident in managing the Strategy. The organisation of the biannual technical meetings of national coordinators and of pillar coordinators, back-to-back with GB meetings, expresses the will of participating countries to take ownership and leadership of governing processes including by simplifying the decision-making process. Also, the ‘Trio presidency’ meetings (former, current and future EUSAIR presidency), established in 2018, with the aim of coordinating and giving continuity to each presidency’s action, has been beneficial.

Political level

The political level of the EUSAIR is represented both by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Ministers/national authorities responsible for EU funds, who gather annually at the ‘Adriatic Ionian Council / EUSAIR Ministerial meeting’. This reinforces both the geopolitical and funding / implementation dimension of the Strategy.

The annual forum and the ministerial meeting closing each yearly rotating presidency in May, is an opportunity for governments to express their continued commitment and to give strategic direction to the Strategy’s key implementers. One EUSAIR forum⁵⁷ took place during the reporting period (Budva, 7-9 May 2019) under Montenegrin chairmanship⁵⁸. The attendance of high-level politicians such as the Prime Minister of Montenegro increased media interest and resulted in media coverage across all EUSAIR participating countries. In line with the ‘Catania Declaration’, ministers gathering in Budva gave impetus to including EUSAIR priorities into mainstream (national/regional) 2021-2027 ESI and IPA programming documents (‘embedding’). MRS key implementers were asked to work closely with the relevant programmes authorities in the macro-region, to agree on a selected number of priorities and to engage in coordinated action from planning to implementation of macro-regional projects. This resulted in further efforts by MRS key implementers who, even in a lockdown situation imposed

⁵⁴ OECD (2019), Synthesis Report, Multi-level Governance and Cross-sector practices supporting EUSAIR, OECD.

⁵⁵ COWI study ‘Macro-regional strategies and their links with cohesion policy’ – November 2017 http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/mrs_links_cohesion_policy.pdf

⁵⁶ In line with the political request established in Article 6 of the ‘Catania Declaration’ adopted at the EUSAIR ministerial meeting/ Adriatic and Ionian Council of 24-5-2018 calling on a coordinated planning and programming of national/regional ESI and IPA funds for the implementation of EUSAIR actions and projects.

⁵⁷ The EUSAIR Forum of Belgrade, under Serbian Presidency, foreseen for May 2020 is postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis.

⁵⁸ Montenegro has been the first non-EU country to hold the Presidency of a Macro-Regional Strategy.

by the COVID-19 crisis, finalised a list of EUSAIR flagships/emblematic projects to be included in 2021-2027 programme documents.

Furthermore, ministers gave instructions to national administration on:

- a) strengthening the alignment between EUSAIR objectives and the post-2020 Adriatic-Ionian Transnational Cooperation (ADRION) programme also asking for more balanced financial support between EU Member States and IPA countries;
- b) continuing to ensure the effective implementation of the Strategy by strengthening administrative capacity with the support of line ministries at the political level; and
- c) increasing efforts to deliver on the EUSAIR Facility Point (FP) strategic project to facilitate project development, monitoring and evaluation, and the implementation of the Stakeholders Platform.

The EUSAIR Forum closing the EUSAIR Serbian Presidency planned in May 2020, was postponed due to restrictive measures on large gatherings imposed by the COVID-19 crisis. However, a virtual ministerial meeting took place on June 2020 and resulted in the adoption of the Belgrade Declaration⁵⁹ providing further guidance for the EUSAIR.

North Macedonia's request to join the EUSAIR is a clear signal of the rising importance and deeper understanding of the Strategy's potential. North Macedonia officially became a participating country in the EUSAIR on 2 April 2020. Its inclusion will strengthen regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries and will strengthen the political dimension of the EUSAIR, as well as its role in facilitating the enlargement process of candidate and potential candidate countries.

Coordination level

The GB is the main driving force of the EUSAIR governance, acting as the interface between the political and the operational level. Under the rules of procedures, it gives strategic guidelines to the TSGs to implement and manage the EUSAIR and its action plan, coordinate their work and ensure link between them.

Last year, the GB's work, supported by a technical/informal meeting of national coordinators, focused on the embedding process, which is currently considered the most important priority that potentially would take cooperation under the EUSAIR to a higher level, allowing the implementation of strategic macro-regional projects.

Implementation level

The implementation level in the EUSAIR is represented by the TSGs. Each TSG is led by two pillar coordinators⁶⁰ who fulfil an intermediate level role, connecting the coordination level (GB) with TSGs. TSGs have the crucial role of making the Strategy work under each thematic area, to identify key processes, priorities and projects in line with the EUSAIR's objectives and to help match-making between project proposals and available funds.

TSGs meetings are held at least twice a year. While meetings were continuously held in the last two years, the participation of TSG members has varied according to thematic areas. This concerned the representation of individual countries as well as participation over time. Certain countries record very high participation rates while others are more selective in their

⁵⁹ https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BELGRADE_DECLARATION.pdf

⁶⁰ Now three for Pillar II with the inclusion of North Macedonia coordinating Transport and Energy Networks TSGs along with Italy and Serbia.

participation. While travel and accommodation costs are covered by the EUSAIR FP, regular attendance, in some cases, is hampered by limited staff.

TSGs play a crucial role in the EUSAIR annual forum mainly in relation to the organisation of thematic sessions where they are in charge of the coordination. TSGs have identified project ideas of EUSAIR relevance and developed them into project concepts or bankable projects with the support of the EUSAIR FP for single-sector projects and the EUSAIR FP Plus⁶¹ for cross-sector ones.

In the last two years, TSGs have improved their cooperation and awareness of their role as a link between stakeholders and the EUSAIR governance. The link with stakeholders has improved both thanks to the cooperation with the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII) 'Round Tables'⁶² and to the improved working of the EUSAIR Stakeholder Platform⁶³.

Cooperation with ADRION has also improved as well, to the point that the objectives and criteria of a targeted call for proposal launched in 2019 have been defined in collaboration with EUSAIR TSG members.

Civil society

The EUSAIR annual forum, the final event of each rotating presidency, is primarily dedicated to civil society and stakeholders. This is one of the opportunities for civil society organisations to get updated on the implementation of the EUSAIR and to make their voice heard with EUSAIR governing structures. Civil society representatives attend sessions, side events, workshops and debates during the annual forum, both as audience members and speakers. Among other events, business-to-business (B2B) meetings, organised by the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) in cooperation with the European Commission (DG GROW), gather hundreds of stakeholders⁶⁴ to share knowledge and to create business opportunities and new partnerships for macro-regional initiatives. More than 100 stakeholders participated in bilateral meetings at the EUSAIR Forum in Budva (May 2019).

The EUSAIR Stakeholder Platform, established under the EUSAIR FP strategic project, is the main tool for stakeholder engagement. The platform, conceived as an online platform to support communication and interaction between stakeholders, is now operational.

Together with the Stakeholders Platform, the Round Tables of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII) provide an opportunity for stakeholders to cooperate. Following the thematic alignment of AII Round Tables to EUSAIR TSGs, these meetings have usually been held back-to-back with TSG meetings and coordinated by pillar coordinators or TSGs members. This has made it possible for TSG members to get fresh information on events, activities, and projects taking place at civil society level, and for stakeholders to be updated on the latest decisions of the EUSAIR governance.

⁶¹ FP Plus is a project financed by the European Commission with the aim to foster capacity building and cross-pillar cooperation in the EUSAIR, with particular focus on developing cross-pillar project ideas into project concepts and bankable projects.

⁶² AII Round Tables gather representatives of EUSAIR stakeholders on specific topics in line with the priorities of the EUSAIR. Meetings of the Round Tables are normally held back-to-back with TSG meetings in order to facilitate the exchange between the two instruments.

⁶³ The Stakeholders Platform is managed by Region Marche and financed by ADRION as a working package of the EUSAIR FP.

⁶⁴ Entrepreneurs, Chambers of commerce, NGOs, Commission services, etc.

The fora of Chambers of Commerce, Universities and Cities in the Adriatic and Ionian region, working under the umbrella of the AII, have continued to play an important role. Together with the Adriatic and Ionian Euroregion, they have raised general awareness about the EUSAIR's work with the public and stakeholders. These organisations are very active on the ground and thanks to their historically established partnerships across sea and land borders they are flexible mechanisms. This makes them able to quickly establish project partnerships to apply to calls for proposals relevant for the development and implementation of macro-regional projects. The 'Adriatic and Ionian network of Marine Protected Areas' (ADRIAPAN) played a similar role with a specific focus on the environmental quality of the sea. It may also play a role in the context of upcoming initiatives in the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean (Barcelona Convention)⁶⁵ and International Maritime Organization (IMO) frameworks.

These networks and fora have promoted and implemented several projects and initiatives such as:

- the AI-NURECC⁶⁶ initiative, led by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe (CPMR), delivered results in youth action, smart specialisation strategies, and training. This led to the establishment of the 'Adriatic and Ionian Youth Organisations Forum' (AIYOF), (Tirana, November 2019), and the establishment of the 'Adriatic-Ionian Cultural & Creative Industry Innovation Quest'⁶⁷;
- the 'Adriatic Ionian Games for Social Inclusion' (A.NI.M.US)⁶⁸, a macro-regional sporting event for young people focusing on social inclusion; and
- the SEA-UNITED⁶⁹ project financed under ERASMUS+, to strengthen university cooperation within the Western Balkans and the Adriatic and Ionian region, and to develop an internationalisation strategy at macro-regional level⁷⁰.

Multi-level governance

Despite different approaches, each country's administration has established an internal cooperation mechanism between the coordination ministries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and authorities responsible for EU funds) and the relevant line ministries. However, due to the centralised administrative structure of most participating countries, local and regional levels are involved only to a limited extent. Only Italian regions are structurally included in the EUSAIR's governance. In fact, this is the only case of sub-national bodies that contribute to policy design and implementation, particularly in sectors that fall under their remit (e.g. tourism). Italian regions participate in both the national EUSAIR coordination system with central and sectoral

⁶⁵ <https://www.unenvironment.org/unepmap/who-we-are/barcelona-convention-and-protocols>

⁶⁶ Adriatic Ionian Network of Universities, Regions, Chambers of Commerce and Cities Initiative (AI-NURECC) is led by the CPMR and implemented with funds of the European Parliament managed by the European Commission through a Pilot Project.

⁶⁷ A new thematic area on Cultural and Creative Industries within the 'Thematic Smart Specialisation Platform for Industrial Modernisation' supported by the JRC (the first at MRS level).

⁶⁸ Organised by the municipality of Ancona (ITA), and co-financed by the European Union (ERASMUS+). and open to participants from the four existing Macro-Regional Strategies.

⁶⁹ With the participation of UNIADRION and the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce (FAICC). Implementation will start in 2021.

⁷⁰ Project funded under the Erasmus+ programme, KA2 – Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices – Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education – Call for proposals 2020 – EAC/A02/2019, with a budget of €989,183.

administrations (*Cabina di Regia*), and in the meetings of TSGs, but they are not involved at the coordination level. Other local administrations have specific responsibilities in the EUSAIR FP supporting the EUSAIR governance (Region Marche - IT, Municipality of Izola - SI).

Policy and thematic priorities

Achievements

In the last two years, the awareness and visibility of the EUSAIR has increased. Internal and external communication efforts, particularly in the occasion of the annual fora have played an important role. Awareness has been raised both within national and regional administrations in the whole region and with stakeholders in general.

All four TSGs have continued to identify priority actions and projects having a distinct macro-regional value and contributing to the implementation of the action plan, with the support of the EUSAIR FP and FP Plus. Actions and projects are at a different stages; from project ideas to be further developed, to project concepts that have already presented to call for proposals, and projects that have already received funding, including under the ADRION programme.

By way of example, a project identified by TSG 3 on preventing pollution caused by ships and other maritime objects, was presented under the last call for proposals for the ‘Union Civil Protection Mechanism’. This shows that EUSAIR implementers are trying to use all relevant funding mechanisms that allow cooperation under EUSAIR objectives in the region. If approved, the project would also support efforts to prepare a sub-regional oil spill contingency plan.

TSG 4 established productive cooperation with the Routes4U programme, financed by the Council of Europe and the Commission, that resulted in the development and funding of two cultural routes in the EUSAIR⁷¹.

The process of providing projects with a EUSAIR label (labelling process) has experienced mixed success. In some thematic areas (Pillar 2 and 4), it has been widely used, ex ante or ex post, to identify projects that contribute to the objectives of the EUSAIR, while in other cases the labelling system has not been considered an appropriate tool. Some key implementers consider that the guidance approved by the GB on labelling is not binding and that projects that have been labelled do not receive more prominence than others by operational programmes.

Project examples:

Pillar 1 – Blue Growth

PoWER (Ports as driving Wheels of Entrepreneurial Realm)⁷², financed by ADRION, supports the development of ports into innovation hubs to exploit their untapped business potential to boost collaboration between key actors in the Innovation Supply Chain (ISC).

BEAT (Blue Enhancement Action for Technology Transfer)⁷³, financed by Interreg CBC Italy-Croatia, aims at creating opportunities for knowledge transfer between businesses and universities in the blue technologies cross-border cluster in the shipbuilding sector.

Pillar 2 – Connecting the region (Transport)

⁷¹ The ‘Olive Tree route for the EUSAIR’ and the ‘Roman Heritage Route for the EUSAIR’ .

⁷² <http://www.powerports.eu/>

⁷³ <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/beat>

MULTI-APPRO (Multidisciplinary approach and solutions to development of intermodal transport in the region)⁷⁴, financed by ADRIION, aims at developing intermodal transport in the Adriatic and Ionian region focusing on providing solutions to bottlenecks, contributing indirectly also to improve air quality.

COMOBILION and COMOBILION+, financed by Interreg IPA CBC Greece-Albania, helps to improve connectivity and accessibility between the road transport networks of southern Albania and northern Greece.

Pillar 2 – Connecting the region (Energy networks)

EUSAIR Power Exchange (EIB, national and private funds). The project cluster is under development and aims at creating an integrated wholesale power market for the region by harmonising transmission tariffs, removing regulatory barriers, market-coupling initiatives and promoting the convergence of national wholesale power markets.

SUPER-LNG (Sustainability PERFORMANCE of LNG-based maritime mobility)⁷⁵, financed by ADRIION. The overall objective of the project is to increase the level of safety, environmental quality and sustainability of LNG maritime transportation in the Adriatic sea, with also positive assets for air quality. It also aims at providing a common set of rules to support the implementation of technical systems for the distribution and supply of LNG in port areas, in line with the Seveso Directive (Directive 2012/18/EU).

Pillar 3 – Environmental quality

DINALPCONNECT (Transboundary ecological connectivity of Alps and Dinaric Mountains)⁷⁶, financed by ADRIION, strengthens transnational and sectoral cooperation, connecting the Dinaric Mountains with the Alps enabling the long term protection of biodiversity to mitigate climate change and to establish a network of Natura2000 sites and protected areas in the region.

SEAVIEWS (SEctor Adaptive Virtual Early Warning System for marine pollution), financed by ADRIION, aims to develop a transnational repository network that will receive, store and analyse data about sea water quality from smart sensors. Individuals will be able to post real time observations regarding marine pollution using an application. Big data analytics tools will be used making this an innovative virtual early warning system for preventing and managing marine pollution.

Pillar 4 – Sustainable tourism

DUE MARI (Next generation tourism development)⁷⁷, financed by Interreg IPA CBC Italy-Albania-Montenegro, promotes the unique cultural and natural assets of the programme area, by developing a joint web platform and innovative services for new tourist routes while promoting lesser-known destinations and typical local products.

The Rout_Net (Thematic routes and networks), financed by Interreg CBC Greece-Italy, aim to establish a strategy for slow tourism and cultural and historical paths through a structured plan of material and immaterial interventions, particularly in terms of cultural routes, in close

⁷⁴ <https://multiappro.adrioninterreg.eu/>

⁷⁵ <https://superlng.adrioninterreg.eu/>

⁷⁶ <https://keep.eu/projects/23245/>

⁷⁷ <https://keep.eu/projects/22566/>

collaboration with municipal administrations, territorial institutions and private organisations.

Policy impact

One of the key goals of the EUSAIR has been to enable the enlargement process for the Western Balkans. With the inclusion of North Macedonia, the EUSAIR becomes the MRS with more candidate/potential candidate countries than EU Member States cooperating with each other. This cooperation on a level playing field provides the possibility to gradually access relevant EU policies and/or political platforms.

The subgroup on Transport of TSG 2 is developing a ‘Master plan for transport in the Adriatic and Ionian region’, which aims at making the region more integrated and interconnected with the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean, and to support the EU transport policy in the EUSAIR. The master plan would ensure free movement of people and goods across the region by means of integrated networks using all modes of transport (road, rail, water and air), in line with the TEN-T networks in South Eastern Europe. Under this framework, TSG 2 produced the EUSAIR Multimodal Transport Model (EMTM) which aims at promoting harmonization of EU transport *acquis* in Western Balkan countries. Strong links have been established with the Transport Community Treaty⁷⁸ in order to reinforce each other’s objectives, focusing on supporting the extension of EU transport principles and policies in the enlargement countries.

The governance of the maritime space is an issue that has been addressed by EUSAIR Pillar 1 and Pillar 3 with the aim to implement the Marine Spatial Planning Directive (MSP) in a consistent way in the Adriatic and Ionian basin. A few projects, such as ADRIPLAN⁷⁹, SUPREME⁸⁰ and PORTODIMARE⁸¹ contribute to improving maritime governance in the region. Among other things, they facilitate the adoption of national strategies on Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), in line with the UNEP/MAP common regional framework on ICZM. A new project has been put forward by Pillar 1 and Pillar 3 on ‘Improving the governance of marine space, uses and resources in the Adriatic and Ionian region’.

⁷⁸ The Transport Community is an international organisation composed of the EU and the six Western Balkan Parties (Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Republic of Serbia). Its key objective is to extend the EU transport market rules, principles and policies to the Western Balkan Parties through a legally binding framework.

⁷⁹ ADRIatic Ionian maritime spatial PLANning (ADRIPLAN), funded by the European Commission – DG MARE under the theme ‘Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) in the Mediterranean Sea and/or the Black Sea’. Budget: €1,250,000; Implementation: from 2013 to 2015.

⁸⁰ The Supporting maritime spatial Planning in the Eastern Mediterranean (SUPREME) supported the implementation of Maritime Spatial Planning in the Adriatic, Ionian, Aegean and Levantine Seas and launched and carry out cross-border MSP cooperation initiatives. Budget: €1,999,996 (co-funded by the EMFF); Implementation: from 2016 to 2018.

⁸¹ PORTODIMARE aims to create a common platform (Geoportal) for data and information related to coastal and marine areas of the Adriatic-Ionian Region, by integrating existing databases, portals and tools developed by previous EU-funded projects. Budget: €1,581,219 (co-funded by ADRION); Implementation: from 2018 to 2020.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring

In their annual reports to the GB, the TSGs carry out progress assessments on the implementation of the EUSAIR action plan, which give an overview of the activities, achievements, results and challenges encountered during the reporting year.

A more structural monitoring system by the EUSAIR FP strategic project is planned under the working package on 'building capacities for monitoring and evaluation of the EUSAIR'. Currently, EUSAIR FP project partners are in the process of hiring experts that will produce 'Annual monitoring reports' (one report per Pillar) that will inform the evaluation of the Strategy.

In addition, the ESPON programme has given support to monitoring the EUSAIR by developing analysis and methodological tools to provide evidence of key development trends and contributing to policy objectives.

Evaluation

A call for tender to evaluate the EUSAIR has been launched recently by the EUSAIR FP. The evaluation (Synthetic report) will analyse the EUSAIR's strengths and weaknesses, its successes and its failures, the effectiveness of its action plan as well as the human and financial resources involved. It will also serve to improve the monitoring and evaluation system by establishing baselines, indicators and targets needed for future monitoring and evaluations purposes.

Funding

Funding mobilisation

The ADRION programme was devised in 2014 to support the governance and the implementation of the EUSAIR. Therefore almost the totality of its funds serves the objectives of the EUSAIR. It not only contributes to EUSAIR implementation under the three programme's priority axes that are closely aligned with EUSAIR priorities (Innovative and Smart region, Sustainable region, Connected region), but it also funds the EUSAIR FP strategic project supporting the governance of the Strategy.

The objectives of other Interreg programmes in the region, particularly CBC and IPA CBC maritime programmes, are broadly aligned with the EUSAIR. In fact, they provide specific selection criteria for projects or invite EUSAIR national coordinators to their monitoring committees. A few projects under the Interreg transnational programmes 'Mediterranean' and 'Central Europe' have also contributed to the EUSAIR objectives.

The main source of available funds are EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). The EUSAIR was launched in autumn 2014, when 2014-2020 ESI Funds operational programmes had already been prepared. Therefore, support to the EUSAIR had not been taken into account. Yet, after six years of implementing the EUSAIR, awareness about it has increased among national/regional (mainstream) ESI Funds and IPA programmes. The analysis of their contribution to the MRS objectives, included in their Annual Implementation Reports (2019) shows that:

- 9 programmes opened their monitoring committees to EUSAIR key implementers;
- 14 ESI Funds programmes attributed extra points to EUSAIR labelled projects;

- 7 ESI Funds programmes and one IPA II programme invested funds in actions contributing to the implementation of the EUSAIR.

This is certainly an encouraging sign, but the embedding process should bring more meaningful results in 2021-2027. A good method for aligning mainstream funds to the EUSAIR has recently been tested by the Italian Region Basilicata. The managing authority of the regional ESI Funds programme 2014-2020 launched a call for proposals on Research and Innovation with a budget of EUR 3.1 million. This call included dedicated evaluation and selection criteria giving additional points to proposals contributing to EUSAIR objectives and including cooperation with partners from other EU Member States.

Being dedicated to all EU-27 Member States, EU directly managed funds are more difficult to intercept. However, a few good examples of EUSAIR projects have been implemented (e.g. SUNBEAM, A.N.I.M.US and SEA-UNITED), all co-financed by Erasmus+. Furthermore, some projects agreed by EUSAIR TSGs and developed into project concepts by the EUSAIR FP, are currently under evaluation, while others will be soon presented to calls for proposal under EU direct funding programmes (e.g. LIFE).

Finally, in addition to looking for new funding, also on-going projects such as LIFE Integrated Projects (e.g. for clean air in Italy/Slovenia) could provide useful building blocks for closer cooperation and exchange of best practice on shared problems in the EUSAIR region.

Embedding

The process of embedding EUSAIR priorities in the next generation (2021-2027) of ESI and IPA funding programmes has been central among the EUSAIR governance structures following the request of EUSAIR ministers (in the Catania Declaration, 24 May 2018). Governance structures jointly agreed on common priorities and to identify macro-regional measures and projects to be implemented through coordinated planning and programming of national/regional ESI and IPA funds ‘mainstream’ programmes.

The process has proved to be challenging, yet, TSGs have identified a set of macro-regional priorities that have been further reviewed and agreed by national coordinators. The TSGs worked further on identifying flagship / emblematic projects to be included in ESI and IPA mainstream programmes (presented to and approved by the NCs during the GB meeting in June 2020).

In parallel, all EUSAIR participating countries have worked intensively with their own national authorities in charge of planning and programming EU funds, to ensure that EUSAIR priorities are taken on board in their post-2020 programming documents. These activities have already yielded positive results in all EU Member States where the EUSAIR priorities selected by TSGs are discussed in the programming of ESI Funds. A dialogue for embedding EUSAIR priorities is also held within IPA countries, where national EUSAIR structures cooperate with National IPA Coordinators (NIPAC) offices and relevant Commission departments.

A step forward was made with the meeting of EUSAIR key implementers and ESI Funds-IPA programme authorities held in September 2019 in Slovenia in the context of the ‘Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week’. This was a good way to bring together the EUSAIR and the mainstream programmes’ world, to promote the benefits of cooperation between funding programmes in the framework of the EUSAIR, and to establish a dialogue between authorities managing the ERDF and IPA funds and the representatives of the EUSAIR governance.

Communication

The activity plan and the annual communication plan, both prepared by the EUSAIR FP, include all communication activities. Specific plans for TSGs and for the rotating EUSAIR presidency (also for the annual forum) are prepared to improve communication with media and stakeholders. The EUSAIR FP invested in capacity building activities for EUSAIR key implementers and issued key publications such as the ‘Communication Manual’ aimed to increase key implementers’ knowledge about communication tools and techniques (e.g. storytelling, how to approach media).

Awareness raising, communication activities and the organisation of events at macro-regional and national level have been high on the agenda of the EUSAIR FP to boost visibility among stakeholders and the public, as well as to increase communication capacities of EUSAIR key implementers. The EUSAIR website contains information about the Strategy’s achievements, events, opening of calls for proposals and EU policy developments. A new feature of the EUSAIR website is in progress to include subpages in the languages of each EUSAIR participating country. A newsletter is sent out at least twice a year, reaching over 4 500 subscribers.

The social media accounts on Twitter (@EusairPoint, almost 1900 followers), Facebook (EUSAIR FP, almost 400 likes) and YouTube (EUSAIR FP, 29 subscribers) multiply the most relevant messages and activities. The number of followers are on the rise, demonstrating stakeholders’ interest in being up-to-date with EUSAIR’s developments.

The most successful events in terms of media coverage in the EUSAIR are the annual fora. The 4th EUSAIR annual forum (Budva, 6-9 May 2019), co-organised by the Montenegrin Presidency and the European Commission, attracted over 600 participants. A high number of journalists attended the forum with the support of the EU MEDIA programme promoting the participation of international journalists. The EUSAIR was brought closer to young people through a workshop for journalism students, organised by the EUSAIR FP that resulted in recommendations on how to communicate smartly on the objectives and results of the EUSAIR on social media.

The ‘Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week’ organized by Slovenia on 18-28 September 2018 and 17-28 September 2019 at the Slovenian coast, was another important annual occasion to communicate about MRS. In 2018, the initiative ‘Draw the Coast’ encouraged over 600 individuals to share their ideas and vision on the future of the region by drawing on a 2,24 km long paper roll. In 2018 and 2019, the event included a session on communication aimed at exchanging experience and streamlining activities among all MRS with the support of the Interact programme.

The EUSAIR Stakeholders Platform, has been developed to facilitate communication, partnership creation and exchange of project ideas. The Platform is important in supporting the implementation of the EUSAIR action plan, but it is still modestly used. Its communication tools have proved particularly beneficial for the organisation of online official meetings of the EUSAIR governance during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More benefits for the implementation of the Strategy will emerge when a higher number of stakeholders and implementers will engage with the Platform. In that context, the EUSAIR FP has developed an Engagement and a Marketing Plan to increase engagement and attract more stakeholders.

Cooperation within and across strategies

Cooperation within the EUSAIR

As a general rule, EUSAIR actions and projects are coherent and mutually supportive and they should complement and reinforce each other's impact⁸². Many projects identified by TSGs, particularly on environmental protection, cannot be restricted to one pillar as they are by nature cross-cutting.

Coordination between pillars continues to be ensured through the 'Technical meetings of pillar coordinators' facilitated by the Commission and preceding all GB meetings.

At the implementation level, the EUSAIR FP Plus facilitates the development of cross-pillar project ideas and their presentation to calls for proposals under Interreg or other funding sources. Examples of projects under development by EUSAIR FP Plus are the 'Water borne Adriatic-Ionian Technological Platform' (Pillars 1 and 2) aimed at creating a blue economy cluster in ship and boat building, logistics, marine robotics, etc., and ADRIONet (Pillars 3 and 4), which will develop a system of management and control of tourist flows in marine protected areas.

Considering complementarities between sectors, TSGs engaged in joint events on specific topics relevant for more than one Pillar. The Joint conference of Pillars 3 and 4 on 'Evaluation and Preservation of Environment for Tourism' was organised in the context of the 'Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week' on 26-27 September 2019 in Slovenia. The conference, aimed at developing sustainable tourism, was organised in cooperation with the Interreg transnational programmes 'ADRION' and 'Mediterranean'. Also, the Stakeholder Platform aims at improving cooperation within the Strategy, particularly between stakeholders and key implementers.

Cooperation across MRS

Coordination, cooperation and sharing information with other MRS is essential for coherence and development of the EUSAIR. This is supported by Interact with the organisation of thematic cross-MRS meetings, workshops and events (e.g. on governance, communication, climate change and disaster risk prevention issues, biodiversity, energy, etc.).

Bringing in the experience of other MRS is also the role of key implementers from countries included in two or more MRS. In June 2019, macro-regional strategy cooperation was brought to the highest political level in Europe at the occasion of the Three Seas Initiative Summit and the Three Seas Business Forum under the Slovenian Presidency. In this context, the EUSAIR FP Plus organised the EU Macro-regional Strategies Breakfast to exchange views on common challenges and building links between the EU MRS and the Three Seas Initiative. The EUSAIR was actively involved in the event, with the participation of the coordinators of Pillar 2 and Pillar 3, as well as the Slovenian national coordinator.

In February 2020, the GB meeting was organised back-to-back with the 'EU Macro Regional Strategies Week' in Brussels, and in parallel to numerous workshops, meetings and seminars of all four MRS. The event aimed at improving coordination between MRS countries, to strengthen interactions between them and Brussels stakeholders⁸³, and to accelerate the embedding process. Almost 700 stakeholders from all four MRS and from Brussels attended the event that was assessed by participants as a unique and successful networking occasion.

⁸² Broad criterion 'I' common to all pillars to guide project pre-screening processes.

⁸³ European Institutions, embassies, representations, missions in Brussels, regional representations, think tanks, etc.

At bilateral level, Pillar 3 of the EUSAIR cooperates with the EUSALP on the project 'PET HAB ECO – Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems'. Another strengthened cooperation is planned with the EUSDR on energy networks.

CHALLENGES

Governance and administrative capacity

At political level, commitment to the objectives of the EUSAIR is expressed through the annual ministerial declarations that indicates the way forward for national administrations, EUSAIR governing structures and stakeholders in order to maximise the impact of the Strategy. Yet, there is still a gap between official political commitments and the ability of national administrations to follow up on them.

The EUSAIR FP provides practical contribution to the work of EUSAIR's governing structures and supports them through the implementation of the EUSAIR. In particular, it deals with strategic project development, monitoring and evaluation, communication and the relations with stakeholders. Bottlenecks and delays are due mainly to the complex organizational structure of the FP project and to the different working methods between EUSAIR governing structures and the FP.

On the multi-level governance of each country, a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), provides an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the administrative arrangements for the implementation of the EUSAIR action plan. The study found a variety of different approaches to the internal coordination of relevant sectors and levels of government, including ministries of foreign affairs, authorities in charge of EU funds, sectoral ministries and regional and local administrations. Even though such mechanisms are established, the study pointed to barriers to the success of the Strategy come from difficulties in developing ownership among national and local stakeholders, complexity of governing structures, lack of clear mandates for key implementers and difficulties with funding mechanisms.

At stakeholders' level, the Adriatic and Ionian Fora and networks⁸⁴ have aligned their geography and priorities to the EUSAIR. They are generally very active in contributing to the EUSAIR annual fora, participating in several of the macro-regional initiatives (e.g. AI-NURECC project and the EUSAIR Stakeholders Platform) and applying for EU calls to finance actions in line with EUSAIR objectives. Yet, more coordination and exchange of information between them and the governing structures of the EUSAIR is needed.

Although they are very committed, these organisations represent only a part of the Adriatic and Ionian civil society. The EUSAIR should reach out more to NGOs, associations, and businesses that are only occasionally involved, for example at B2B meetings in connection with the EUSAIR annual fora.

The Stakeholder Platform under the EUSAIR FP, could play a significant role in this objective. However, even if its functionalities have been improved, it is still far from exploiting its full potential as a tool to raise awareness among stakeholders, facilitate communication, share information and to support project development.

⁸⁴ AI Forum of Chambers of Commerce, UniAdriion (the network of AI Universities), AI Forum of Cities.

Policy and thematic priorities

Efforts by key implementers and stakeholders are needed to increase EUSAIR's impact on policies. A more strategic vision for implementing the Strategy is needed. On the one hand, a stronger political guidance is needed to mobilise relevant administrative structures in all participating countries. On the other hand, wider participation of civil society needs to be sought through extensive consultations for governing structures to get better acquainted with the needs at grassroots level.

Line Ministers have little involvement in implementing the EUSAIR, which needs a coordinated approach to yield meaningful results. This has consequences at implementation level, where a low level of ownership and staff constraints, poor awareness in sectoral administrations and lack of participation to TSG meetings affect the overall decision-making capacity of these bodies and impacts on the desired objectives.

More capacity building is needed for EUSAIR key implementers to improve strategic planning and to make the EUSAIR a place for regional discussion on key challenges and opportunities, and to adapt actions to relevant EU policies. This would not only support the development of macro-regional projects, but would also help key implementers to focus on processes and increasing cooperation from the political level down to civil society. Proposals on how to change the EUSAIR approach have been made in the study on implementation formats mandated by the EUSAIR FP⁸⁵. The study argues for the need to go beyond projects and move towards a new format of 'collaborative for policy and action' (similar to flagships in the EUSBSR) as more strategic, inclusive, and sustainable format. These formats support systemic solutions to macro-regional challenges and have a clearer policy dimension and facilitate the use of multiple sources of funding for their implementation.

The difference in administrative capacity and availability of human resources as well as the disparities in the internal organisation of the administration has an impact on the level of involvement of actors in national EUSAIR governing structures. As a consequence, the ability to achieve the objectives of the EUSAIR under each pillar and to align to EU policy differs from country to country.

There is a need to liaise more with initiatives at European and international level, to define responsibilities, avoid overlapping and looking for complementarities. Some cooperation exist between the EUSAIR and the Barcelona Convention, which is part of the EU *Acquis*, and a number of relevant multilateral organisations, such as the Energy Community, the Transport Community, the Council of Europe, but a more structured coordination and clearer division of responsibilities would support the efforts of all organisations concerned.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation systems have been delayed and still are at the development stage. Apart from examples of indicators and targets that exist in the EUSAIR action plan, no list of common indicators has been agreed and no baselines exists to measure progress towards targets. The EUSAIR FP should be able to develop them by the end of 2020.

A first evaluation (synthetic report) helping EUSAIR key implements better understand weaknesses and strengths of the EUSAIR should be ready by the end of 2020. This could kick-off a discussion over a revision of the Strategy that would adapt it to the new challenges for the programming period 2021-2027.

⁸⁵ The EUSAIR: delivering the macro-regional added value. Implementation formats today and tomorrow. Issue Paper, Anastasia Nekrasova, February 2019.

Funding

Raising funds for the implementation of genuine macro-regional projects is one of the main concerns of EUSAIR key implementers. The MRS come with no new funds, meaning that stakeholders or beneficiaries need to look at a variety of available EU, international, national and private funding instruments in order to finance their activities. The EUSAIR key implementers should support and provide guidance on funding opportunities. Emphasis should be given to the development of capacity to matching funds, project ideas and proposals. The Stakeholder Platforms could play a role in helping to identify funding opportunities and connecting EUSAIR governance and stakeholders.

EUSAIR key implementers and stakeholders/beneficiaries consider the EU funding sources as the most important financial tool to implement the Strategy. However, there is a difference between access to EU funding between EU Member States and non-EU countries⁸⁶. A balanced implementation throughout the Adriatic and Ionian region of EUSAIR actions and projects is a challenge due to a lower of financial capacity in IPA countries. Beside the ongoing activities of embedding EUSAIR priorities into ESI and IPA Funds mainstream programmes, a discussion regarding the use of EU directly managed funds (HORIZON 2020, LIFE, COSME, CEF, ERASMUS+, etc.), as well as on seeking support from International Financial Institutions and private funds should be initiated. This also involves representatives of the Commission departments dealing with directly managed funds, the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and other funding and financial instruments relevant to EUSAIR TSGs.

The EUSAIR has a special focus on cooperation between EU Member States and enlargement countries. Bringing enlargement countries closer to EU values and policies is an added value. However, it poses practical difficulties in terms of embedding EUSAIR priorities in ESI and IPA funding programmes. Different structures, regulations, methodologies, timing and available amounts have to be addressed. This makes it challenging to devise joint, parallel or coordinated actions and projects implementing the EUSAIR action plan.

The EUSAIR has been the frontrunner in establishing a financial dialogue on embedding as a follow up of the Catania Declaration in 2018. Discussions on how to use post-2020 ESI and IPA funds to implement the EUSAIR have started rather quickly at the level of EUSAIR governance (GB and TSGs) with the support of the Commission (DG REGIO and DG NEAR) and internally, within the administration of each country. Nonetheless, the challenges of governance and administrative capacity mentioned earlier (complexity of governing structures, lack of clear mandate) affect the speed of the decision-making process on the selection of a limited number of emblematic projects and actions to be included in the post-2020 ESI and IPA funds programming documents.

Communication

The complex structure of the EUSAIR makes it cumbersome for its governing bodies and implementers to communicate to external stakeholders in a simple and direct way about results and the added value of the Strategy. Although much has been done in this respect, continuous capacity building activities are needed. The work of the EUSAIR FP on the narrative of the EUSAIR mission and vision needs further development in terms of defining targeted messages

⁸⁶ Funds directly managed by the EU Commission such as Horizon 2020, CEF, LIFE, COSME, ERASMUS+ only envisage a very limited participation of third countries; there is a huge difference in size between mainstream ESI funds available for Member States and IPA funds available for enlargement countries; the amount of IPA funds (€15.7 million) in ADRION programme is much lower compared to ERDF (€83.5 million).

for stakeholders. The strategic workshop for Pillar 2 was a pilot project to define pillar specific needs for communication activities. Such initiatives could be replicated and bring benefit to the overall communication outcomes of the EUSAIR.

At national level, the involvement of EUSAIR key implementers in communication activities (as outlined in the annual communication plan) differs from country to country, mirroring the level of ownership and capacity.

Communication across MRS is improving but with varying levels. So far, the Interact working groups on communication have proven a good instrument for sharing experiences and cooperating between MRS. However, developing common strategies remains a challenge.

THE WAY FORWARD

Lessons learnt

Having started the discussion to embed EUSAIR priorities in ESI and IPA funding programmes at an early stage (already in 2018), awareness over the potential of EUSAIR and the necessity to include measures, actions and projects supporting its implementation in post-2020 programming documents, has risen among national and regional authorities in charge of planning and programming. The challenge remains to make sure that those measures, actions and projects are coordinated between all EUSAIR participating countries.

Many countries have implemented projects in line with EUSAIR's objectives (using ESI, IPA or other funds). However, a coordinated approach under the EUSAIR governance framework is often lacking. The labelling process (ex-post) in Pillar 2 has proved to be useful for developing projects in the energy and transport sectors which contribute to EUSAIR's objectives. However, a more structured cooperation between EUSAIR key implementers and the organisations, institutions and businesses supporting those projects could be established in order to tie in with EUSAIR's actions and projects.

In the current programming period, most priority axis of Interreg programmes (Transnational, CBC, IPA-CBC) in the Adriatic-Ionian region are in line with EUSAIR's priorities. Yet, cooperation between them has been limited to sharing experiences and information. By way of example, all maritime CBC programmes in the region (Interreg CBC Italy-Croatia, Greece-Italy and Interreg IPA CBC Italy-Albania-Montenegro) invest in maritime transport, but there is no coordination between them that has been established on this topic. In order to make sure that 2021-2027 EU funds in the region are used coherently and to maximise their impact, cooperation between those programmes is paramount from the planning to the implementation phase, with a view to engage in coordinated or parallel projects maximising the impact of each Interreg programme.

Attracting media attention is a challenge for the Strategy. So far, two main aspects have proven as a guarantee for media coverage of the EUSAIR: (i) the attendance of high-level politicians at events, and (ii) EU funded initiatives. It is important to showcase the progress and achievements of the EUSAIR key implementers in their daily work. Further support from external experts shall be sought to improve the promotion of EUSAIR's work. To overcome this challenge, the EUSAIR FP cooperated with several media and communication experts, which led to positive results. Good communication on national media about the EUSAIR also depends from the cooperation dynamics between the EUSAIR FP and EUSAIR key implementers in each country.

Main issues

A well-functioning and efficient multi-level governing structure is the prerequisite for reaching the objectives set in the EUSAIR action plan. While EUSAIR key implementers, with the support of the Commission, have been able to establish stable cooperation in the framework of its governing structures, there still room for improvement.

Key implementers (both at coordination and implementation level) are the EUSAIR representatives in their own countries. One of their tasks is to involve national and regional administrations in the macro-regional governance, to the benefit of the multi-sectoral and multi-level nature of the Strategy. Something has been done to improve awareness and ownership of the EUSAIR by all countries concerned, but a more systematic approach, supported by the political level (also sectoral), is needed to achieve more meaningful results.

In practice, political support needs to be translated into more stable participation in governing structures, particularly in TSGs, where on some occasions it has been impossible to reach the quorum needed to take decisions.

EUSAIR governing structures should continue investing in capacity building, focusing on strengthening the liaison between stakeholders / beneficiaries and all available funds at EU, international, national and private level. Capacity building should aim at improving TSG's ability to navigate through the large number of available funds and to direct proposals coming from stakeholders towards the best funding solutions.

All EUSAIR key implementers should reach out more to stakeholders, civil society and the public in general by communicating on the potential and added value of the EUSAIR and consulting them more frequently on EUSAIR issues, challenges, priorities, initiatives, etc. The Stakeholders Platform could be a key tool to build a more open and inclusive macro-regional strategy. Furthermore, instruments as the 'Communication Manual' developed by the EUSAIR FP to harmonise communication activities and techniques across the macro-region should be used more widely by EUSAIR key implementers.

The EUSAIR FP has proved to be a necessary tool to support EUSAIR governing structures in many aspects, such as offering valuable assistance to the EUSAIR presidencies in running the complex embedding process. Continuity for the EUSAIR FP's activities should be ensured by simplifying and adding more flexibility to its operations.

As far as the monitoring and evaluation processes are concerned, there is an urgent need to develop baselines, indicators and targets necessary to monitor and evaluate the Strategy in the future.

Future development

So far, EUSAIR key implementers have carried out good work on 'embedding'. Now they have the responsibility to maintain the momentum. The embedding process will not be over once the EUSAIR priorities and emblematic projects/actions are included in ESI and IPA funds 2021-2027 programmes, but it will be particularly important to follow-up during the implementation of programmes. EUSAIR key implementers should establish efficient and effective collaboration mechanisms with authorities managing ESI and IPA funds programmes and look for practical solutions to combine different methodologies for the use of these funds in both the EU Member States and in the enlargement countries.

As a follow-up to the first meeting of the managing authorities, NIPAC offices and EUSAIR key implementers, held in Slovenia in September 2019, establishing networks of managing authorities (ERDF, EMFF, ESF) in the macro-region would be essential. This would help to

implement joint, coordinated or complementary/parallel actions and projects in line with EUSAIR's objectives. These networks should involve IPA countries, taking into account the differences in timeframe, regulations and methodologies for investing IPA III funds.

As far as available funds under the IPA III Strategic Framework, priority should be given to those actions that contribute at once to the EUSAIR's objectives and to the enlargement process.

Particular support should be given to IPA countries to increase their efforts and capability to embed EUSAIR priorities into IPA III Strategic framework. To this aim, financial dialogue meetings should be organized regularly in each country to improve cooperation between EUSAIR key implementers (NCs, PCs, TSG members), NIPAC offices, EU local delegations and relevant Commission departments (DG REGIO, DG NEAR, other relevant line DGs).

EUSAIR key implementers should be able to seize the opportunities in the near future to make *a quantum leap* in implementing the EUSAIR. The ongoing preparations for the new programming period (2021-2027) for EU funds, the new Commission political priorities, the new enlargement methodology, together with the ongoing evaluation of the EUSAIR, are all elements to take into account when revising the action plan.

A revision of the EUSAIR action plan should ensure its contribution to national and EU policies (for EUSAIR relevant sectors) and priorities ('A stronger Europe in the world', the 'European Green Deal', 'an economy that works for people') and add the flexibility needed to allow for prompt reactions to crisis and to keep abreast of changing needs. The need for such flexibility became clear in March 2020 with the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis.

In the second semester of 2021, Slovenia will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union immediately after holding the yearly presidency of the EUSAIR. The Slovenian Parliament proposed to include the MRS in the priorities of the Presidency of the Council. This is a unique opportunity to boost the implementation and visibility of the EUSAIR and to launch a strategic discussion on the future of the Strategy in line with the current challenges and to connect it with the enlargement process in a more practical manner.

Together with advancing in the embedding process, a closer link to the enlargement process will be of utmost importance to reaffirm the European perspective in the Western Balkans, in line with the new Commission objective of 'a stronger Europe in the world'. The EUSAIR, as a flexible instrument, should adapt its activities to the reform of the enlargement methodology (COM (2020) 57 final)⁸⁷ and should 'go from words to actions' by practically supporting the enlargement process operationally. By allowing cooperation on a level playing field, the EUSAIR is the ideal instrument to open gradually EU policies (those related to the four EUSAIR pillars) to candidate and potential candidate countries. At political level, sharing knowledge and cooperating should be established through high-level political initiatives in the region such as the EU-Western Balkan Summits and relevant regional cooperation initiatives. This will reduce overlaps, allow for better coordination and increase regional cooperation with the end goal of having a stronger, more positive impact on people living in the region.

'Climate change mitigation', as a horizontal objective of the EUSAIR, contributes across all the pillars to achieving the goals of the 'European Green Deal'. In the future programming period, commitments to reducing the carbon footprint in the region needs to be boosted, particularly for the transport, energy and tourism sectors. To maximise the impact of the European Green Deal, the entire Europe, including the Western Balkans, should put mitigation

⁸⁷ Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans – COM(2020) 57 final.

of climate change high in their national agendas. Together with the ‘Green Agenda for Western Balkans’, which is currently under preparation, the EUSAIR is the ideal instrument to enable cooperation on joint actions, projects and processes supporting decarbonisation efforts in the Adriatic and Ionian region.

Any revision of the EUSAIR action plan should embed the EU target to make Europe a climate-neutral continent by 2050 and the connected targets of a toxic-free environment by combating pollution, enhancing the circularity of the economy and preserving and restoring biodiversity. It is also essential to align the EUSAIR to national strategic and development documents in all participating countries such as policy implementation Plans and Programmes required by the EU acquis.

Macro-regional strategies offer to its constituencies a flexible instrument for cooperation, not bound by EU funding regulations or international financial instrument conditions. In these particularly unprecedented times, participating countries should use the EUSAIR as an appropriate tool to respond to the COVID 19 crisis in cooperation with their neighbours. Any future revision of the Strategy should envisage mechanisms that allow swift reactions to crises and sudden challenges, be they at regional level, as in the case of migration (of non-EU nationals), or at global level, as in the case of the COVID-19 crisis.

Report on the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP)

The EUSALP was endorsed by the Council on 27 November 2015 and by the European Council on 28 June 2016, on the basis of a Communication adopted by the Commission in July 2015, and its accompanying action plan.

The Strategy was developed around the ‘Alpine Region’ seen as a functional area, inhabited by about 80 million people (16% of the EU’s population) and covering seven countries (five EU MS - Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia - and two non-EU countries - Switzerland and Liechtenstein) and 48 regions. It builds upon a high level of existing cooperation in the region.

RESULTS

Governance and administrative capacity

General

The EUSALP’s governance structure has three inter-related levels:

- the political level (leadership and ownership), represented in the General Assembly;
- the coordination level, represented by the Executive Board (EB); and
- the implementation level, represented by the nine thematic Action Groups (AGs).

After its initial years where an effective governance structure and supporting instruments were established, the first results of actions with added value at macro-regional level are coming up and AGs, in a non-homogeneous way, are implementing the action plan and its objectives.

Two major innovations in the EUSALP governance structure, compared to the three other MRS, are (i) the presence of the regions at all three levels of governance, and (ii) the existence of a specific Strategy’s objective focusing on governance.

A suitable governance can determine the success (or failure) of a MRS. Accordingly, governance-related issues are still central in the EB discussions as they are preventing the Strategy from taking off, or at least, from developing its full potential. In June 2019, a specific Task Force on governance was established, to reflect on and make proposals to improve the effectiveness of the current EUSALP governance.

Political level

The role of the rotating MRS presidency is growing, as the participating countries realise its importance in driving the strategic direction of the MRS. In parallel, a ‘Trio presidency’ arrangement was established and its role has been increasingly strengthened. Moreover, in February 2020, to strengthen political participation in the strategic management of the EUSALP, the General Assembly created a ‘political steering committee’. This committee will gather politicians and will prepare the General Assembly’s meetings to give them more politically-oriented content. Politicians from the Lombardy and Bourgogne Franche-Comte regions are already volunteering to pilot this process.

During the period covered by this report, two Joint Declarations (Innsbruck 2018 and Milano 2019)⁸⁸ were delivered. Under the current French Presidency, a Manifesto ‘Together to shape a sustainable and resilient Alpine region’ was produced⁸⁹.

The annual fora, the presidencies kick-off events and the EUSALP General Assembly meetings are occasions for the political level to show their political steering, continued commitment and their belief that the EUSALP brings significant added value to cooperation in the region. However, and contrary to the other MRS, so far no dedicated thematic ministerial meetings have been held back-to-back with the EUSALP annual fora.

The 2018 and 2019 EUSALP fora, respectively in Innsbruck (20-21 November 2018, under the Tyrolean Presidency) and Milano (27-28 November 2019, under the Italian Presidency), offered major opportunities to raise awareness of the Strategy and to increase its visibility. The 2020 annual forum, under the French Presidency, should take place in Nice (10-11 December).

The 2018 EUSALP forum focused on giving a stronger voice to young people in the EUSALP area as laid down in the political declaration of Innsbruck. As far as the 2019 EUSALP forum is concerned, special attention was paid to the green economy, young people and stakeholder involvement in the EUSALP process, together with boosting of the Alpine cultural dimension. Political declarations put the accent on how the EUSALP can help to build a Europe closer to the people and a 'bottom-up' Europe. Moreover robust links between the EUSALP and the new Commission priorities have been made. A very strong message on the importance of the ‘embedding’ (i.e. aligning ESI Funds 2021-2027 programmes with the EUSALP priorities) was adopted in the joint declaration. The Italian Presidency (2019) stressed the need to further strengthen the Strategy’s governance and highlighted the need for increased awareness of the EUSALP at the political level. This led to the Italian Prime Minister participating in the EUSALP annual forum in Milano (November 2019).

Along the same lines, the Minister of Cohesion of Territories as well as the Presidents of the three French regions participating in the EUSALP (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, and Bourgogne-Franche-Comté) attended the kick-off event of the French Presidency (Lyon, February 2020).

Coordination level

The main responsibilities of the EB are to:

- a) endorse proposals for actions ensuring an effective implementation of the EUSALP;
- b) endorse the selection criteria, work plans and actions proposed by the Action Group Leaders (AGLs); and
- c) collect of the AGs’ reports and monitor implementation (EUSALP EB Rules of Procedure).

However, in the past 2 years, the EB’s agenda was mainly focused on preparing the Joint Declarations and on the administrative and the housekeeping tasks. Accordingly, the EB’s core tasks were not executed properly.

There is unanimity among all participants (at both EB and AG levels) that it is necessary to improve the relations between EB and AG. Some of the EB’s roles, at coordination level, are to give operational guidance to those operating at the implementation level (AG), report on and

⁸⁸ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/official-documents-guidelines>

⁸⁹ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/news/eusalp-manifesto>

evaluate performance, facilitate cross-cutting issues, coordinate at a national/regional/thematic level and facilitate major events.

In relation to national coordination, several national coordinators highlight that the EUSALP's structure helps to streamline and improve horizontal (cross-sectorial) and vertical coordination within and between national and regional administrations in each country. A number of participating countries have established internal coordination systems involving ministries of foreign affairs, authorities in charge of EU Funds, sectoral ministries and regional/local administrations.

For example, in Austria, a coordination platform was established at the beginning of the EUSALP process and still functions well. Social and economic actors at national and regional level, as well as many relevant NGOs, are involved in this platform. While a number of relevant institutions regularly participate, involving all actors remains challenging.

The Italian EUSALP Steering Committee ('Cabina di Regia EUSALP') is a permanent working group responsible for coordinating the national position prior to the EUSALP Executive Board meetings. This Committee includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Department for Cohesion Policies of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, sectoral Ministries, and the Italian regions concerned.

In Bavaria, regular meetings involving the national coordinators with representatives from line ministries as well as Bavarian AG leaders have taken place.

Implementation level

The role of the nine AG has grown noticeably, as they are the drivers of the day-to-day implementation of actions. However, the position of many MRS implementers remains rather challenging, as neither the financing nor the political and administrative support to implement a broad set of targets is continuously present.

New subgroups have been established, work plans have been further developed, and regular meetings of both the AGs and the Board of Action Group Leaders (BAGL) have taken place.

The Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region became co-leader of AG 9 and the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Region became co-leader of AG 4. Baden-Württemberg is no longer the co-leader of AG 2. The leader of AG 3 also changed and the Piedmont region volunteered to co-lead this AG together with the Trento autonomous province.

As regards representation at national and regional level in the AGs, the picture is (still) quite diverse, although slightly improving. Some AGs still lack a sufficient number of members in order to have the necessary country quorum for taking decisions. Other AGs are composed of members who have neither the appropriate technical expertise nor the mandate to take decisions. In other cases, the AGs have too many participants at the meetings. This makes implementation processes in the AGs and consensual decisions challenging.

The reports from the AGs show that almost all AGs are systematically implementing and continuously adjusting their work plans along the topics of the EUSALP's action plan, and in some cases, even taking new topics on board. The EB and the AGs acknowledged in the meeting of June 2019, that the EUSALP Action Plan is still appropriate and no revision is needed, so far.

An increasing number of projects have been developed by AGs. These projects are providing more and more of a transnational added value, showing big improvements and an increasing professionalisation.

In order to help AG leaders and members to address and implement the policy cycle and improve efficiency, the AlpGov 2 project, funded in 2019 by the Interreg Alpine Space transnational programme, has introduced a special work package called ‘learning environment’. This is due to start in 2020 and is led by Bavaria.

Civil society

Stakeholders have been involved since the beginning of the EUSALP and civil society is playing an increasing role in implementing the Strategy. Several AGs include representatives from the civil society organisations among their members. Civil society is also involved by participating in different AGs events, for example the AG 4’s annual mobility conference and the AG 9’s energy conference. A successful test case was the stakeholder involvement during the preparation of the Joint Declaration on soil, where Bavaria actively identified and involved – via its line ministries – relevant stakeholders including in meetings to develop positions.

Civil society also participates in events, like e.g. the annual fora. More than 1 000 participants attended the two-day annual forum in November 2018 in Innsbruck, and around 600 attended the annual forum in November 2019 in Milano. The networking village organised by the Tyrolean Presidency and the workshops offered the general public the chance to exchange views with the experts working on implementing the Strategy.

For the ‘youth.shaping.EUSALP’ process, an ongoing task force (Tyrol, Switzerland and Liechtenstein) is designing a sustainable model for young people to participate in the Alpine region, which can represent good practice for getting young people involved. Moreover, this exchange had a positive effect on foreign relations with those entities overall. Networks that were established by Swiss partners for the EUSALP have also been mirrored in Interreg project partnerships. The annual competition ‘Pitch your project’, the EUSALP summer camps programme and the future participative online platform also aim to broadly involve young people and the existing youth structures.

The French Presidency began to develop a digital participatory platform to boost sustainable initiatives, dissemination, and involvement of stakeholders from the ground (sub-regional authorities, SMEs, NGOs, young people and members of the public). With this initiative, initially envisaged in the EUSALP’s action plan, there has been a boost in strengthening civil society and youth involvement in implementing the EUSALP.

Multi-level governance

The MRS multi-level governance approach requires dialogue and enduring coordination across all decision-making levels and sectors in each country and region as well as between participating countries and regions. To reduce fragmentation and increase the number of actions being successfully completed, effective participation needs to be encouraged from the actors involved. The multi-level governance approach also requires the capacity to exchange information and to detect policy gaps or dysfunctionalities when they arise.

At the annual fora, a significant number of participants from national, regional and local administrations, universities, the business sector as well as youth representatives and media took stock of progress achieved. The discussion focused on challenges facing the EUSALP region and exchanged ideas and experience on projects, actions or activities of macro-regional relevance.

EUSALP is based on and rooted at the regional level. In light of this, it has opened a new ‘policy channel’, establishing a more direct link between the regional and EU level, not by bypassing the national level, but by acting at the same level in partnership. Following the establishment

of the EUSALP, politicians can discuss Alpine issues at the General Assembly, the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions. This flattened hierarchy has the potential to bring the EU closer to the people .

At regional level, EUSALP projects contributed to the exchange of experience, networking and cooperation between actors. For example, under the EUSALP French Presidency, a systematic collaboration, on an equal basis has been established between the state and the three regions (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Provence-Alpes-Côte-d’Azur and Bourgogne-Franche-Comté). Furthermore, sub-regional authorities, like the ‘Départements’ and Metropolises, and NGOs, have become increasingly involved in the macro-regional related processes.

At national level the facilitator/informer role is being taken seriously. In France, seminars and conferences are regularly held to inform and enable civil society to participate, notably in Interreg programmes and seminars and in meetings of both Alpine and Jura Massifs Committees. Switzerland regularly informs interested stakeholders and sets up meetings (when necessary) to discuss involvement of new parties.

Policy and thematic priorities

Achievements

The EUSALP, within this reporting period, has been a driving force for boosting and implementing both long term processes and short-term specific projects/initiatives which have a positive impact on the EUSALP region.

In terms of long-term cross-cutting processes, the Strategy has contributed in particular to strengthen:

- the dialogue between different sectors;
- the coordination and cooperation within the countries participating in the Strategy and between different key organisations acting in the region; and
- the establishment of new stable networks for exchanges and joint actions.

EUSALP has also helped to establish and strengthen new processes and networks between experts and policy actors. The exchange of best practices to tackle similar challenges, such as climate change and extreme weather events, have proven valuable in developing sustainable and effective responses on local, regional, national and transboundary scales.

In terms of specific projects/initiatives implemented, the Strategy offers a wide range of tools aimed at dealing with the main common challenges in the fields of:

- economic growth and innovation (EUSALP objective: fair access to job opportunities, building on the high competitiveness of the region);
- mobility and connectivity (Objective: sustainable internal and external accessibility to all); and
- environment and energy (Objective: a more inclusive environmental framework for all and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future).

The examples below related to this reporting period, sufficiently represent the diverse character of these projects/initiatives where the EUSALP has played a key role as a platform for coordination and cooperation between sectors (horizontal coordination) and governance levels/stakeholders (vertical coordination). They form part of long-term processes aimed at achieving the long-term EUSALP objectives and strengthening cooperation and coordination across different fields.

Objective: fair access to job opportunities, building on the high competitiveness of the region

In the field of economic growth and innovation, for example, EUSALP helps to:

- promote the use of wood as a sustainable building material⁹⁰;
- create a common level of understanding and a common scientific base in dual education⁹¹; and
- facilitate the knowledge process regarding the Research & Innovation Centres operating in the Alpine macro-region.

Project example:

The project **Re-Search Alps**⁹² (completed) was led by AG 1 ‘To develop an effective research and innovation ecosystem’ and was funded by INEA CEF-TELECOM. The project developed a wide database with information concerning laboratories, research centres, SMEs and start-ups operating in the Research & Innovation field and located in the 7 EUSALP Countries. It is now possible to enable the knowledge process regarding the Research & Innovation Centres operating in the EUSALP region as well as improve the networking across different competence centres. The initiative has achieved important recognitions at European level, as since March 2019 the Re-Search Alps dataset has been implemented in the European Data Portal and included in the ‘good practices’ section of the Interreg Europe’s Policy Platform.

Objective: Sustainable internal and external accessibility to all

In the field of mobility and connectivity, the EUSALP helps the Alpine macro-region to address key challenges, such as cross-border mobility and digital connectivity in the Alpine villages. For example, the EUSALP helps to develop more sustainable mobility options in cross-border commuting hotspots⁹³ and to support the Smart digital transformation of Alpine villages.

Project example:

The project **Smart Villages**⁹⁴ (ongoing) is led by AG 5 ‘To connect people electronically and promote accessibility to public services’ and is funded by the Interreg Alpine Space programme. The project aims to apply the Smart villages approach and bring together - in regional stakeholder groups - policy makers, businesses, academia and civil society to improve the framework for innovation through new forms of stakeholder involvement enabled by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The project is user-orientated, which aims to highlights the opportunities and potentials that digitalisation brings for rural communities. The active involvement of this population into the elaboration of the project in the various test areas is therefore crucial. The Smart villages approach was

⁹⁰ ARPAF I project ‘Triple Wood – Sustainable Wood Building Culture in the Alpine Region’, led by AG 2 ‘To increase the economic potential of strategic sectors’: <https://www.triplewood.eu/>

⁹¹ Alpine study ‘Dual Systems in the Regions of the Alpine Space’, developed under the leadership of AG 3 ‘To improve the adequacy of labour market, education and training in strategic sectors’: https://www.alpine-region.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/activity/2156/attachments/book_en.pdf

⁹² <https://www.alpine-region.eu/projects/re-search-alps>

⁹³ ARPAF I project Cross-Border, led by AG 4 ‘To promote inter-modality and interoperability in passenger and freight transport’: <https://www.alpine-region.eu/projects/arpaf-crossborder>

⁹⁴ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/projects/smart-villages>

presented at the EUSALP annual forum in November 2017 and at a major event in May 2019 in Courmayeur, organized by Aosta Valley Autonomous Region as part of the Italian Presidency of EUSALP.

Objective: a more inclusive environmental framework for all and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future

In the field of environment and energy, the EUSALP helps the Alpine macro-region to face key challenges, such as ensuring a balance between economic growth and environment, climate change and environmental risks, and habitats loss and fragmentation. For example, the EUSALP has helped to:

- develop territorial brands for local sustainable growth in the agri-food sector⁹⁵;
- establish a climate adaptation knowledge portal covering the entire Alpine macro-region⁹⁶;
- promote energy efficiency in SMEs⁹⁷; and
- strengthen ecological connectivity.

Project example:

The EUSALP ‘**star initiatives**’ (ongoing) are led by AG 7 ‘To develop ecological connectivity in the whole EUSALP territory / Green Infrastructure’ and aim to:

- (i) implement the political declaration of Alpine States and Regions ‘Alpine Green infrastructure – joining forces for nature, people and the economy’⁹⁸; and
- (ii) strengthen the development of green infrastructure in the Alpine macro-region.

They are financed by different sources of funding:

- LUIGI (Linking Urban and Inner-Alpine Green Infrastructure - Multifunctional Ecosystem Services for more liveable territories), financed by the Interreg transnational programme Alpine Space⁹⁹;
- INNSIEME (Artenschutz und Umweltbildung am Inn von der Quelle bis zur Mündung) financed by the Interreg cross-border cooperation programme Austria-Bavaria¹⁰⁰;

⁹⁵ International conference ‘*Territorial Brands in the Alpine Region, A chance for a better valorisation of regional and local agri-food products!*’, organised by Group 6 ‘To preserve and valorise natural resources, including water and cultural resource’ and its follow-up ARPAF II project ‘100%Local!’: <https://www.alpine-region.eu/projects/100-local>

⁹⁶ Climate Change Adaptation Platform for the Alps – CAPA, developed by AG 8 ‘To improve risk management and to better manage climate change, including major natural risks prevention’: <https://www.capa-eusalp.eu/home>. It is integrated in the European Climate Adaptation Platform Climate-ADAPT: <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/>

⁹⁷ Conference ‘*Energy efficiency in enterprises*’, organised by AG 9 ‘To make the territory a model region for energy efficiency and renewable energy’ and its follow-up ARPAF II project ‘CAESAR – Capacitating Energy efficiency in Small Alpine enteRprises’: <https://www.project-caesar.eu/>

⁹⁸ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/results/28-alpine-states-and-regions-adopted-political-declaration-.,alpine-green-infrastructure—>

⁹⁹ <https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/luigi/en/home>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.innsieme.org/>

- Rediafor (Multifunctional forest in the Alps: reinforcing dialogue) and Impuls4Action (From Intelligent Land Use to Sustainable municipalities), financed by the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund (ARPAF II)¹⁰¹.

Policy impact

The EUSALP's overall policy aim, is to strengthen the coordination of policies and funds in the Alpine macro-region through cooperation between different sectors, governance levels and stakeholders. Furthermore, it helps implement multilateral agreements, EU sectoral policies and national/regional policies in the Alpine region.

In the last reporting period, the EUSALP has further helped to strengthen the dialogue between the EU and the regional/territorial level and to increase political awareness of some key Alpine topics.

The EUSALP has proven to be a useful tool to direct the attention of politicians, administrations, and others e.g. cluster organisations, educational and cultural institutions and civil society organisations, towards the Alpine region. More specifically, the EUSALP has helped raise the political awareness of key actions for the region. For example, (i) it has contributed to increase the awareness of the importance to implement a more bioeconomy focused industrial approach; (ii) of the potentials of wooden constructions as well as of the digitalisation of industry. In some cases the EUSALP also helps to add an international dimension to the related policies (for example in the sector of wooden constructions).

Furthermore, the EUSALP has helped to implement the sectoral EU policies by better linking the different levels of public action: EU level, national level and regional level.

In this last reporting period, there are several examples of how the EUSALP helped to implement EU sectoral policies, and how it contributed to the Convention on the Protection of the Alps (Alpine Convention¹⁰²) and to national/regional policies.

The Declaration on sustainable land use and soil protection¹⁰³ sufficiently illustrates how the EUSALP has contributed to all these three policy levels. The Declaration, supported by 20 Alpine regions and 6 states, as well as the series of awareness-raising events on reduced land take and on soil consumption (both run by AG 6) helped strengthen the focus of political decision-makers and helped to implement policies at different levels. This has reinforced the implementation of the Soil Protection Protocol of the Alpine Convention, which is also part of the EU *Acquis*. It also helped to achieve the objectives of the EU soil thematic strategy and the Roadmap to a resource efficient Europe with its 'no net land take by 2050' initiative, which is also connected to ongoing climate change.

Monitoring and evaluation

The EB and the AGs are in charge of monitoring and evaluation. Although initiatives are ongoing in some AGs, a real monitoring system adapted to monitor the complexity of an MRS, has so far not been established. Apart from individual examples of indicators and targets included in the action plans, no list of common indicators has been agreed upon yet, nor do

¹⁰¹ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/publication/2239/publications/arpaf.pdf>

¹⁰² <https://www.alpconv.org/en/home/>

¹⁰³ https://www.alpine-region.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/result/2257/attachments/EUSALP_ag6_declaration_land_usesoil_finlogos_181107_en.pdf

baselines exist to measure progress towards targets. Currently, the AGL's annual reports are the main source of information, reporting on activities, achievements, results and challenges encountered during the year.

In this context, a practical and operational macro-regional Territorial Monitoring Tool was developed by the ESPON programme to continuously observe the development trends and patterns at the level of the four EU MRS and for the whole EU. The tool aims to support European, macro-regional, national and regional policy makers and other stakeholders with territorial information, data, maps, graphs, analytical features and short reports.

This tool will allow for better monitoring of the progress made in implementing the Strategy towards the set objectives, targets and indicators. Better monitoring will also provide a more solid basis for changes, where necessary to improve the performance of the Strategy and adapt it to developments and needs.

At national level, some initiatives have also been deployed. For instance, in Italy, the Department for Cohesion Policies and the Agency for Territorial Cohesion issues a yearly 'Summary Report on the Italian Participation in Territorial and European Cooperation Programmes, ENI and IPA II for 2014-2020', which is shared with, and endorsed by, the regions. This report includes a specific focus on MRS and is an important instrument for monitoring the progress made in implementing the Strategies. The 'Cabina di Regia of EUSALP' (Italian national steering committee for EUSALP) is also involved in monitoring the progress made in implementing the EUSALP Strategy.

In France, monitoring is based on the activity report from the AGs and shared feedback from the members and co-leaders of French AGs. In Bavaria, joint meetings of the national and regional coordinators of all MRS in Germany, helped to monitor the implementation. In Baden Württemberg, monitoring mainly takes place at project level (within the framework of the obligatory programme / project monitoring) or in a more informal or less structured way, e.g. by means of inter-ministerial meetings or reports to the Council of Ministers. In Baden Wurttemberg there is no regular regional EUSALP monitoring system in place.

In Austria, progress is followed in qualitative ways by continuous exchange and dialogue between the stakeholders, for example: on national coordination platforms, involving all relevant stakeholders from national and regional level, as well as economic and social partners and relevant NGOs. This exchange is based on available information and aspects such as information provided by EB and AGs (based on the AGs' work programmes). In Switzerland, progress is mainly monitored through direct contact with the AG members.

Funding

Funding mobilisation

The Strategy has attracted funding from different funding sources. The hit rate with programmes within the EUSALP territory has risen considerably, with more and more programmes integrating EUSALP implementers into their decision-making mechanisms. Thus, the ability of the Strategy implementers to address relevant authorities and to promote macro-regional cooperation has increased, as has the notion of macro-regional action and its benefits to the programmes.

National coordinators are involved in programming process in several programmes. For instance, NCs in their capacity as official observers joined a German task force contributing to the programming of the future Interreg transnational Alpine Space programme. In the ERDF mainstream programme, one NC is a member of the monitoring committee and has ensured the

link to the EUSALP and at the same time proposed concrete activities in line with EUSALP activities. Furthermore, regional information events and online surveys held by cross-border Interreg programmes have been used to highlight EUSALP topics.

The mobilisation on funding not only from Interreg and mainstream ERDF funds, but also the CF and EAFRD, shows the Strategy's ability to pool and combine different components for macro-regional benefit.

The Interreg Alpine Space transnational programme, in the beginning the biggest contributor to the Strategy and often its sole source of funding, continues to be one of the cornerstones of the Strategy's implementation. Although the programme does not cover the administrative cost of the Strategy (e.g. direct grants to AGs, technical secretariats or meetings), it coordinates well with Strategy, and the two participates in each other's decision-making processes. An important part of the governance of the Strategy is supported by the Alpine Space programme's AlpGov projects (AlpGov1 and AlpGov2).

Furthermore, the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund (ARPAF) from the European Parliament, has supported important EUSALP implementation activities on the ground during the last reporting period.

In mid-2019, the first reflections on the possibility of launching an integrated LIFE project on Alpine peatlands started, based on the Impuls4Action project. As a specific approach, the project began a needs assessment at local level and following an approach being inspired by community-led local development (CLLD). At the end of 2019, a feasibility study was launched to prepare a road map for a large-scale follow-up project, funded either under the current or future LIFE programme.

Finally, in addition to looking for new funding, on-going projects such as LIFE Integrated Projects (e.g. for clean air in Italy/Slovenia) could also provide useful building blocks for closer cooperation and exchange of best practice on shared problems in the EUSALP area.

Embedding

Several initiatives have been launched to improve the situation and mobilise the almost 100 ESI Funds programmes covering the Alpine region in order to support priorities and objectives of the Strategy, the most recent example being the Embedding Workshop in Brussels, 19-20 February 2020.

At the political level, regions, Member States and non-EU countries involved in the Strategy have repeatedly highlighted the need to integrate the Strategy into the available funding programmes. The latest declaration of Milan in November 2019, also supported by Italian PM Conte during the annual forum, gives additional weight to this point.

The November 2019 Milan Declaration states: *'We are convinced that making best use of the future EU funding programmes 2021-2027 is highly important for implementing EUSALP priorities. To that purpose, we underline as crucial to join forces of EUSALP with programme actors in preparation and implementation of programmes by supporting the identification of potential fields of interventions and by further developing appropriate cooperation mechanisms. We ask the Executive Board to take an active role in this process'*.

Meetings organised under the Bavarian and Tyrolean presidencies have prepared the ground for this process. Under the French Presidency of the EUSALP and in close cooperation with the region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA), the Commission organised a workshop in Brussels to structure the process, with the participation of Commissioner Elisa Ferreira and President of PACA Region. Around 150 key EUSALP implementers (NCs and AGs) and

several managing authorities of ESI Funds programmes (ESF/ERDF mainstream, Interreg programmes) as well as representatives from Commission directly managed programmes) engaged in discussions at the event. The feedback from participants was positive and showed the benefit of coordination not only for EUSALP, but also for all operational programmes active in the region. As follow-up of this event, a table with the priority project ideas presented by the EUSALP AGs and the corresponding cohesion policy national and regional operational programmes (which potentially could contribute to finance these project ideas) and a list of contacts of EUSALP governance and EU funding representatives have been elaborated and will be updated in order to continue the dialogue started at the Workshop.

Concrete options that were discussed as regards embedding included:

- systematic participation of EUSALP key implementers in the monitoring committees of ESI Funds mainstream and Interreg programmes in the EUSALP region;
- the creation of one (or more) network(s) of managing authorities in the EUSALP region; and
- the coordination of all calls for projects relevant to implementing EUSALP priorities and specific calls for EUSALP projects .

On a Member State level, coordination mechanisms have evolved significantly. The Italian Department for Cohesion Policies produced a document late in 2019 ('Embedding the Priorities of Macro-Regional Strategies and the WestMED Initiative in the ERDF 2021-2027 Programming'), which aimed to help representing EUSALP priorities and assist Italian managing authorities of ESI Funds programmes in drafting the operational programmes for 2021-2027. The relevant committee of the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning has commissioned its Partners/Constituents to reconsider the current national governance structure on transnational and cross-border funding programmes with a view to more effectively embedding the MRS.

Also on a regional level, actors promote the embedding of the MRS. In some regions, a structured dialogue has begun initiated, involving authorities in charge of MRS and other cross-border strategic activities as well as representatives of managing authorities (ERDF, ESF). In the case of Baden-Württemberg, regular meetings have been taking place every 3-4 months. On 15 July 2019, a larger information day event was organized in Baden-Württemberg, involving also representatives of other programmes e.g. LEADER and EMFF. Several Italian regions adopted measures aimed at promoting synergies between the calls of ESI Funds mainstream and Interreg programmes and the Strategy, through specific selection criteria or additional scores.

On a more general level, the report produced by the EUSALP AGs 'Funding Requirements from Future EU Funding Programmes post 2020', formally endorsed by the EUSALP EB, clearly highlighted the funding needs of the AGs to the various EU funding programmes

Communication

The EUSALP Strategy has made increasing efforts on communication. Three dedicated workshops – co-organised by the European Commission and the Trio presidencies – took place in 2018 and 2019. Members of the EB and members and leaders of the AGs, developed together the EUSALP mission, vision and main target audience. As a result, a strategic paper on communication was issued, subsequently endorsed by the EB in early 2019. The last workshop aimed to provide key implementers of the EUSALP with core communication tools to explain the mission and vision agreed.

These communication tools include a common visual identity (logo as well as the colour code/graphic chart of the EUSALP) which is now widely used. In addition, a number of brochures, publications, infographics as well as a bi-monthly newsletter were issued. Furthermore, other communication tools comprise the website, social media (Facebook: 1300 followers; Twitter: with almost 600 followers; Instagram: with almost 500 followers), footage of case study videos, and press related activities.

The annual fora have been successful communication actions, gathering around 800 participants each year. Each EUSALP Presidency managed to mobilise high-level politicians, triggering high public and media interest. For example, present at the kick-off event of the Tyrolian Presidency were Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurtz, Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen and several presidents of Alpine Regions. The Italian Presidency ensured the Italian Prime Minister participated at the annual forum in 2019. The French Presidency organised its kick-off events with three presidents of regions and Ministers.

The AGs also organise events in the Alpine region to promote their activities and most AGs participate in other events, helping to circulate information about the EUSALP. For example, the EUSALP was represented at the European Vocational Skills Week, the annual forum on Dual Education in the Alpine region, and the EU Sustainable Energy Week in Brussels in June 2019.

Inevitably, events also raise awareness at national and regional levels thanks also to the role played by NC in highlighting the EUSALP. In Austria, information is regularly provided in several relevant working formats in the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK). In Germany, the Baden Württemberg region ensures several political delegations from the region visit other Alpine countries and regions. Each year the Slovenian authorities organise the Mediterranean Coast and EU Macro-regional Strategies Week. The French Presidency (2020) has been increasingly communicating through national and regional institutional websites, specialised ESI Funds websites (Europe en France, Europe en Région) as well as through documentation (brochures) during the EUSALP events. In Switzerland, regular discussion between AG members, interested parties and political representatives is promoted.

In Brussels, the European Commission helped to promote the EUSALP by co-organising two *let's talk to your neighbours* events in cooperation with and at the representing offices of Lombardia and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur regions in Brussels. These networking events aimed at gathering together stakeholders based in Brussels (PERM REP, MEPs, Regional Offices, European Commission DGs, etc.) to exchange information about the EUSALP. More recently, the EU Macro Regional Strategies Week (Brussels) gathered hundreds of participants from all participating countries, and mobilised officials from European institutions raising awareness of the MRS in general, and the EUSALP in particular through the embedding workshop.

Reaching out to young people – communicating with young people through young people youth by youth: Among the many target audiences of the EUSALP communication strategy, efforts are particularly focused on reaching out to the younger generations. Tyrol launched, in cooperation with DG REGIO, the initiative 'youth.shaping.EUSALP', promoted via social media (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube). A wide network of youth organisations, projects and centres have been targeted to inform young people about the EUSALP initiative, the competition 'Pitch your project' and the summer programme. Communication about EUSALP and youth activities was carried out during meetings organised in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region aimed at to raising interest for EUSALP and for its thematic area youth among stakeholders. This will be further developed with a Stakeholders Platform.

Cooperation within and across strategies

Cooperation within the EUSALP

There are different forms of cooperation within the Strategy..

The EUSALP, as a cross-sectorial platform, has managed to accelerate better policy integration leading to a cross-sectoral approach on a national level. For example, Swiss members in ARPAF projects have developed initiatives (smart villages, cross-border mobility) involving several federal ministries which has led to better cross-sectoral exchanges and action on these topics.

EUSALP AGs have cooperated in the framework of the projects funded by the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund from the European Parliament (ARPAF I and II) covering at least two respectively three EUSALP AG. For example, AG 6 and AG 3 have worked together in the ‘AlpJobs’ project, which aims at forecasting future jobs in Alpine remote areas and developing corresponding job profiles¹⁰⁴. AGs 2, 6, 7, 8 and 9 have established a task force on the topic ‘sustainable forestry and timber production in Alpine region’. This task force organised a joint thematic workshop at the EUSALP annual forum in Milano (November 2019). Furthermore, outside of established task forces, AGs have cooperated in cross-sectoral workshops, such as the ‘Smart Villages – a common perspective through different visions’ event, organised in Valle d’Aosta (Italy) in May 2019 by AG 5, with support from AGs 3, 4 and 9.

At national level, for example, the Swiss Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE) has established and facilitates a Network of Swiss AG members. Through this network, several project ideas and partnerships have been created.

Moreover, the EUSALP has enabled coordination and synergies between the countries/regions participating in the Strategy and the Alpine Convention, of which the EU is Contracting Party and which is part of the EU Acquis. Furthermore, it creates coordination and synergies also with other cross-border and transnational key actors operating in the region and also some Interreg projects. These actors include among others, the International Lake Constance Conference, the cooperation of the Four Motors for Europe (Baden-Württemberg, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Lombardy, Catalonia), Arge Alp, the Suivi de Zurich Process.

Cooperation across the MRS

There are several examples of cooperation between the EUSALP and the other three MRS in several topics and sectors.

EUSALP representatives have participated in several events with all four MRS, such as the Meeting of the four MRS Presidencies and Trio, organised by the Croatian Presidency of the EUSDR in February in the framework of the Macro-regional strategies Week in Brussels.

EUSALP representatives have also participated in a series of events on cross-cutting issues (communication, capacity building and ESI Funds programmes post 2020) and thematic issues (innovation, smart specialisation, Research & Development; energy; biodiversity and ecological connectivity) organised by the Interact programme.

EUSALP representatives were actively involved in the 2018 and 2019 Mediterranean Coast and EU Macro-regional strategies Weeks in Slovenia. For example, a cross thematic exchange between EUSAIR and EUSALP on environment & green infrastructure was organised in 2019.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/projects/alpjobs>

The case of AG 4 is a good example of how these exchanges provide added value. The development of an assessment methodology for identifying and labelling strategic transport projects, in the Alpine region, was largely informed by the experiences and recommendations of other MRS transport coordinators.

EUSALP has also established bilateral cooperation with other MRS on some cross-cutting and sectoral issues. For example, the project ‘youth.shaping.EUSALP’ cooperates with similar projects that involve young people in the EUSDR that are carried out by the foundation AGAPEDIA.

CHALLENGES

Governance and administrative capacity

At political level - The role of the rotating MRS presidency is growing, which allows for smooth transition between presidencies. However, the sequencing of annual presidencies is not yet formally established, creating uncertainty as to who will hold the presidency. This hampers a prompt preparation and weakens its role.

In practise, there is still a gap, between political commitment as expressed by participation in major events (annual fora, launch events) and Joint Declarations and the follow-up at the day-to-day implementation level. Each country/region should show its commitment, in particular by making sure that the key implementers of the Strategy (such as coordinators and implementers at AG level) get the necessary recognition and legitimacy to fulfil their tasks.

At coordination level (Executive Board) - There is unanimity among all participants (at both EB and AGs levels) about the need to improve the interactions between the EB and AGs as their relations should enter in a new phase. The EB needs to provide more guidance to the AGs, as has been repeatedly requested. The EB needs to focus more on its core tasks, in particular on implementing the political decisions of the General Assembly, and on monitoring the implementation of the EUSALP action plan by putting in place an effective MRS monitoring system.

It is crucial to strengthen the way the EB coordinates and monitors the work of the AGs. In order to ensure that the projects proposed by the AGs are consistent with the ambitions of the Strategy, the macro-regional impact of each project should be assessed. It is also crucial to support the move from a ‘project driven approach’ to a more ‘process approach’. The EB should also play a role in facilitating cross-cutting issues, national/regional/thematic coordination and major events.

At implementing level (Action Groups) - With regard to the participation of countries and regions in the AG, progress has generally been made. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to mobilise AG members with the necessary decision-making power and/or technical competence and there is still potential to improve the involvement of national-level representatives from some countries. It would also be highly welcome if line DGs of the European Commission were to participate more actively .

To support the AGs work, members must be empowered with an appropriate mandate and the position of each country must be coordinated between the representative of that country . To preserve a balanced composition, stability, and an effective working pattern, the number of participants should remain representative of all countries and regions as well as remain manageable.

The EUSALP action plan expressly sets out that the composition of AGs must be reviewed and its members changed (or reconfirmed) every 3 years. However, in practice, this didn't take place as the EB decided not to make any changes to the current leaders and members of the AGs. This has a positive effect on the continuity and the stability of the AGs' work. On the negative side, it prevents rotation among countries and regions on the thematic topics. In the end, this may lead to an 'appropriation' of some thematic topics by some countries/regions, which risks other countries/regions becoming detached from the process.

AGs highlighted that maintaining the EUSALP governance, at AG level, by means of an Interreg Alpine Space project remains a big challenge and produces high administrative burdens. A solution is being sought to find a stable financing mechanism for supporting the governance of the EUSALP, and to reduce the bureaucratic burdens and non-strategic tasks in the AG core business.

Moreover, the AlpGov project only provides support to the AGs, leaving out the EB, the General Assembly, the annual fora and the rotating presidency. Aiming to address this issue, the General Assembly (Lyon, 4 February 2020), following the example of the EUSDR and EUSAIR, decided to establish a Technical Support Structure/Secretariat. A mandate was given to the EB to define in detail the operational and administrative support to the EB, the AGs and the presidencies as well as the EUSALP annual forum.

Finally, the role of the Board of Action Group Leaders (BAGL), established within the 'AlpGov I' project, in the EUSALP framework must be clarified. If the General Assembly decides to maintain it, its composition, role and tasks should be properly integrated in the governance structure of the EUSALP.

Policy and thematic priorities

A key challenge is aligning the AGs tasks/objectives with high-level policy strategies and objectives, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement or the EU's strategic initiatives and objectives. Adding to this, another key challenge is the absence of a system to monitor the policy impact of the EUSALP. In order to have a more positive impact on the policy level and to facilitate the policy implementation process, improved cooperation between the different governance levels and improved engagement of decision-makers within regional/national ministries will be crucial.

Monitoring and evaluation

At present, the monitoring of the EUSALP is done in a subjective manner, without using the appropriate tools to ensure that the monitoring and evaluation is a credible process. Consequently, the results are often not tracked in a consistent manner. In this context, it is crucial to develop a phase-specific monitoring mechanism for the EUSALP. Otherwise, there is a risk that the EUSALP's performance and results will be evaluated with inappropriate indicators, thus providing incorrect/misleading information. In addition, a monitoring system reflecting the EUSALP's development would show relevant and realistic results for each phase, which would help maintain political support.

The appropriate monitoring of AGs' actions should also ensure that the projects are adequately responding to the level of the ambitions of the macro-regional strategy. In this discussion, the macro-regional impact of the project should be assessed, as well as the possibility to promote regulatory alignment of actions, directives or regulations.

Funding

During the current programming period, the alignment between EUSALP and ESI Funds programmes suffered from a timing problem, as the Partnership Agreement and operational programmes had already been drafted and adopted when the EUSALP was adopted in December 2015.

The operational links between national operational programmes and the EUSALP were relatively weak. Only, two Italian regions, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, have adopted specific selection criteria or additional scores to promote EUSALP sponsored projects. Furthermore, no programmes launched specific calls targeted towards the implementation of the Strategy. As far as financing is concerned, the contribution from ESI Funds or other national funds to the EUSALP cannot be easily quantified ex-post where identification of macro-regional added value was not provided when the project was approved.

Strategy actors lack a clear overview of MRS actions/projects that have been financed by EU directly managed instruments, notably because the EUSALP does not have any technical support structure to monitor it.

AGs state that financing for projects was an issue (i.e. it was difficult and current rules are not appropriate). As result, almost all projects proposed by the AGs and adopted until now, have been financed under the Interreg Alpine Space transnational programme or under the ARPAF.

Although progress has been made, the current preparation phase of the next programming period is a crucial time for addressing one of the biggest challenges: embed MRS objectives in programme's priorities to enable access to different funding sources and structured dialogue with authorities responsible for prioritising funding.

Numerous regions have carried out structured consultations on their future programmes and have invited active participation from actors implementing the Strategy. This is a good step in ensuring national coherence. However, it remains a major challenge to define joint projects that ultimately require transnational and interregional cooperation. AGs need to be ready to give input to these discussions. The new proposed cohesion policy regulations envisage measures that should facilitate this process.

Communication

Despite the encouraging results from EUSALP communication activities and the progress made so far, there are still challenges that should be tackled to improve the communication actions but also to ensure a positive impact at all levels.

One of the biggest challenges for the EUSALP is its ability to communicate its results and to attract new stakeholders. This difficulty is mainly related to the EUSALP structure, which need to be solved quickly. For example, there is a need for internal coordination of the overall communication activities, with clearly defined roles and tasks of all three levels of governance. The EB has an important role to play in steering this process. The new lead partner of the AlpGov project in charge of the communication package should carry out this task and propose measures to be adopted and implemented as soon as possible to the EB. A communication advisor in each AG needs to be appointed. In addition, the continuous flow of information between NCs and AGs should be improved in order to have a strategic communicable approach towards actions carried out by AGs and those carried out by NCs.

On social media management, it is important to address issues with social media accounts to increase the number of followers on Twitter and Instagram. There is also a need to collect more stories, attain good practices, and provide tangible examples as showcases for EUSALP's achievements. A rethinking of EUSALP's communication methods in order to make it 'greener'

(e.g. no more hard copies of publications) should also be considered. Finally, the current funding of communication actions via the AlpGov project should be better adapted to the actual communication needs.

Cooperation within and across Strategies

Concerning cooperation within the EUSALP, on the positive side, cooperation among AGs is going more and more beyond the pure technical cooperation and is developing into real cross-sectoral cooperation. However, AGs would greatly welcome a better link to the EB in order to get better backing from it and the presidency on priority topics as well as to bring about concrete outcomes at the EB level for supporting increased and sustainable political capitalisation (e.g. within presidency activities).

Concerning cooperation between the EUSALP and other MRS, the administrative capacity of some EUSALP implementers is not sufficient to engage in exchanges with other Strategies. Increasing the political ownership of the Strategy could lead to a better allocation of human resources to the AGs, which would be crucial in order to overcome this challenge.

THE WAY FORWARD

Lessons learnt

As regards lessons learnt, it is important that the Strategy concentrate on a limited number of 'lighthouse initiatives' (e.g. political agreements but also major projects' developments with macro-regional scope) and on projects that have an impact at a local level but require a macro regional approach. The topics of some AGs which have too wide a scope need to be concentrated on the core MRS added value actions. It is clear that to make the EUSALP work, the involved actors, at all levels of governance, need to become more determined in the hunt for funding EUSALP macro regional projects. In this process, the embedding of EUSALP priorities and objectives in the 2021-2027 national and regional programmes, is of the utmost importance.

Experience to date with the EUSALP and all MRS in general, shows that streamlined governance mechanisms are a key element for effective implementation and that the way as the interaction between the political decision makers and implementers is organised, is crucial. Experience also shows that efficient trans-border governance systems are complex and that the process of setting these up is inevitably slow and takes time.

Sound governance requires that roles be clearly defined: who implements the Strategy and how, and who initiates and finances joint actions and how. Limited human resources, inadequate experience/skills and lack of empowerment as well as lack of clear mandates, are critical issues in several AGs. Accordingly, providing the resources and status for decision-making, is a crucial factor in attaining more results.

Main issues

Macro regional cooperation represents a powerful tool to support economic development and competitiveness as well as territorial, economic, and social integration, and to foster good neighbourhood relations. There is no doubt that macro-regional approach can pave the way towards a more innovative, sustainable and greener Europe. However, this new type of cooperation still has weaknesses that need to be addressed.

Based on the experience and on the information gathered from EUSALP key implementers, the following areas have been identified as needing further improvement.

Strengthen the ownership and commitment of line Ministers and Presidents of Regions:

The way the General Assembly works should be re-thought and its current format revised. Political participation must go beyond the adoption of joint declarations. The General Assembly should become an arena where important topics for the macro-region are discussed, even if controversial. Thus, the General Assembly should be responsible for laying down the general political guidelines for the Strategy.

Efforts should also be made to make members the General Assembly aware of the potential benefits which the EUSALP may bring and invite them to duly empower the officials representing their ministries/regions at AG meetings.

Achieve greater policy impact through strategic activities: alignment of policymaking and alignment of funds, macro-regional projects and flagship processes:

The EUSALP projects remain moderately sized, and a great part of them take the format of a typical Interreg programme. Delivering the macro-regional added value is not achieved with such type of projects, as they can easily be financed by a programme, without the need of a MRS. No innovative ‘processes’ or harmonisation of laws or regulations have (yet) been proposed (e.g. a common online platform for booking trains, as already exists in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, etc.).

Most of the AGs’ focus was, up to now, on pilot projects. The results of these projects now need to be disseminated throughout the whole Alpine area to all countries, regions and municipalities. Therefore, a strong focus should lie, in the upcoming years, on capitalising what has been achieved.

Finally, the tendency to develop a number of cross-sectoral policy areas with the aim of bundling efforts and improving effectiveness of the work of EUSALP actors and ensuring the EUSALP is implemented correctly.

Greater clarification of roles and responsibilities of actors:

Due to different roles and engagement possibilities, a clear view is needed on the mandate of AG Leads, AG members or other EUSALP actors. Clarification of roles, empowerment and skills improvement/development are planned within the AlpGov2 project for AGs and are expected to be implemented in coming two years. However, EB members should also benefit of this type of projects

Strengthen the role of the Trio presidencies:

To ensure continuity between the annual rotating presidencies, the ‘Trio’ format should be strengthened. Introducing new priorities by presidencies during their mandate should be done in close liaison and endorsed by the GA.

An important decision should be taken on establishing a fixed order for annual presidency rotation (e.g. an alphabetical order, by name of the country in English or in the original language, or other type of order). This decision would eliminate an element of randomness and uncertainty that results from the need to choose each year who will hold the presidency in two years. This would also serve to strengthen the role of the annual presidency, which would certainly see greater care being applied in its preparation.

Ensure impactful actions through monitoring and evaluation:

Monitoring tasks should be deepened and professionalised through common tools and support from coordinating/supporting structures of the MRS. Furthermore, the EB and AGs should, without any further delay, develop an in-depth monitoring and evaluation system that will focus on collecting data, building a knowledge base, establishing baselines, impact-aimed targets and

indicators and working on an annual monitoring report. An impact driven evaluation should be launched.

Facilitate and strengthen the stakeholders dialogue:

Successful implementation requires broadening the involvement to actors other than just public administrations and bodies as this can contribute to boosting public efforts. The private sector, the business community and people living in the EUSALP region should be actively involved to ensure engagement with and ownership of the Strategy.

Making the Stakeholder Platform operational must be achieved without any further delay so as to facilitate regional and local stakeholders' contributions to the Strategy in order to raise their awareness of the opportunities offered by the EUSALP and improve communication. A specific section on young people should be planned for as well.

The inclusion of young people, a key group of stakeholders in implementing the EUSALP, is a long-term strategy process and should lead to them permanently contributing to the MRS.

Strengthen communication:

EUSALP actors should be provided with a clear communication strategy/plan. Much work has already been done but an comprehensive communication strategy and the corresponding key messages still need to be finalised. The endorsement of the strategic paper on communication by the EB is not sufficient. The communication strategy has to be complemented with an action plan with clear guidelines on communication actions, a dedicated timeline, indicative priority target audience and the setup of some communication requirements. This should be done for a short-term period – for example a year (even up to three) and should be designed as soon as possible to ensure a strategic impact.

Communication tasks should be regularly undertaken by professionals. The appointment by the French Presidency of a communications officer is a positive step and should help in structuring communication actions.

The use of case study videos is good practices, which should be repeated. The policy impact/results of EUSALP actions should be attained more quickly and should be more tangible, in order to communicate the Strategy's achievements.

Quickly operationalise on a support structure to the governance:

After the decision taken by the General Assembly held in Lyon (France, 4 February 2020) to establish a Technical Support Structure (TSS)/Secretariat, the EB has been given the mandate to define and find a different and, if possible, more stable and less complex solution than the AlpGov one.

Future development

EU funding programmes 2021-2027: All mainstream ERDF and ESF national/regional programmes and the Interreg programmes relevant to the EUSALP region will need to strengthen their contribution to the Strategy objectives and actions for the 2021-2027 programming period.

To this end, there is a need for the EUSALP to coordinate with the various programmes from the very early phases of their preparation, and after, during their implementation. The establishment of a network of managing authorities is key for coordination both in the programmes preparation phase, but also in the subsequent implementation phase.

In this context, the link between the programmes and the EU priorities can play an important role. For example, climate priorities could represent an important leverage in the effort to align

EUSALP, and the other MRS, with the EU funding priorities. While climate challenges could be local and specific, solutions are just as often widely applicable on a regional, national or transnational scale. Moreover, there is a strong cross border dimension of many climate change impacts, and the EU macro-regions are sharing common climate risks, such as the Alpine mountainous areas.

Furthermore, it is important to increase awareness among EUSALP implementers of the opportunities offered by the EU's centrally managed programmes such as LIFE and Horizon Europe. By using these programmes the Strategy can gain access to funding sources and increase competitive solution funding. At the same time these programme can increase their regional impact. Additionally, the future CEF Digital programme, on the basis of the current Commission proposal, will give the opportunity to support cross-border Gigabit backbone networks of strategic importance like 5G transport corridors and submarine cables.

Strategy impact: In order to further increase the EUSALP's impact, it is crucial to quickly establish a technical support structure, as decided by the General Assembly in February 2020. This structure should facilitate the Strategy's implementation, support the rotating presidencies, strengthen the dialogue between the EB and AGs , animate and support the network of managing authorities, propose a monitoring system, and improve and bundle the communication activities. This would help develop a stable basis for all activities, including the work of AGs, and would be a more sustainable (in terms of time and resources) solution than current Interreg project support to the governance structures.

EU priorities: The EUSALP could help in transforming the COVID-19 crisis into something that will help to achieve long-term goals. It can play a key role in particular in implementing the European Green Deal, which could be the cornerstone for a resilient recovery after the crisis.

Macro-regional cooperation is instrumental in protecting the environment, preventing and withstanding the risks and shocks driven by climate impacts, and increasing solidarity and fairness across and within the participating countries. These role and efforts are even more important against the background of the severe socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that policies aim from the start at the mutually reinforcing objectives of social and environmental sustainability.

The EUSALP covers important key sectors of the European Green Deal, such as climate action, clean energy and circular economy, which is a paradigm-shift identified in the European Green Deal as the recipe to protect the environment while at the same time boosting local jobs creation and economic growth. The EUSALP has already proven that it can play a key role in implementing the European Green Deal on a regional scale, e.g. towards the transition to climate neutrality and circular economy in the macro-region. This requires regular dialogue between key implementers of the EUSALP and the European Green Deal as well as stakeholders in both. The green priorities for recovery should also be a cornerstone of the work of AGs.

Furthermore, the EUSALP has already proven that it can play a significant role in the twin green and digital transition by also supporting the implementation of the European Digital Strategy, in particular, through strategic initiatives aimed at fostering smart, digital transformation in Alpine villages which should become full players in the new digital world.

Changing needs: the role of the EUSALP in shaping response measures to economic challenges, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, economic recovery and mitigation of negative impacts will be crucial. The Strategy, as a cooperation platform already in place, should coordinate the efforts across funds and borders. As the Alpine region has been

strongly affected by the crisis, both the ESF and ERDF funds together with funding instruments need to maximise their input. Action should be taken immediately. The EUSALP EB extraordinary COVID-19 crisis meeting of 18 May 2020, and the follow-up actions proposed by the EUSALP French Presidency, is already a significant step in that direction.

Contribution of programmes to macro-regional strategies

1. The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

Eighty six mainstream, Interreg and ENI-CBC programmes are relevant for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR).

Sixty two¹⁰⁵ out of the 86 programmes provided replies to the questionnaire included in the Annual Implementation Report, representing 72% of the EUSBSR relevant programmes, which is a satisfactory reply rate; These programmes are composed by:

- ✓ 46 mainstream ESI Funds programmes;
- ✓ 16 Interreg programmes (14 cross-border, and 2 transnational programmes).

Aggregated data are provided in the table below:

Country	Number of relevant OPs	Number of OPs that replied	Percentage of OPs that replied
Germany	13	9	69%
Denmark	4	3	75%
Estonia	3	2	67%
Finland	6	2	33%
Latvia	3	3	100%
Lithuania	3	1	33%
Poland	23	21	91%
Sweden	12	5	42%
Interreg TN	4	2	50%
Interreg CBC	15	14	93%
Total	86	62	72%

The operational programmes have committed to contribute to the EUSBSR in several ways, the most frequent described below:

- ✓ Eighteen programmes out of the 62 indicated that extra points have been attributed to specific measures supporting the EUSBSR. Of these, 10 programmes have carried out targeted calls for proposals for macro regional relevant projects, and 7 have given extra points to projects/actions with high macro-regional significance or impact;
- ✓ Two programmes: ‘Pomorskie Voivodeship – ERDF/ESF programme’ and ‘Interreg V-B Baltic Sea’, have underlined that although they have not given bonus or extra points to macro-regional relevant projects, they have encouraged flagship actions with a positive macro-regional impact. Further details would be needed in order to obtain more clarity on those actions;
- ✓ Nine out of 62 programmes associate EUSBSR key implementers (e.g. national coordinators, policy area coordinators; flagship leaders) in their monitoring committees;

¹⁰⁵ENI programmes are also relevant for the EUSBSR. However 2018 was a transitory year with the closure of ENPI programmes and launch of the ENI programmes which have yet to be implemented.

- ✓ Regarding EUSBSR related projects, the programmes that replied have supported so far, 5.377 projects. However, three programmes claimed having financed 91,5% of these projects:
 - (i) 'EU Structural Funds Investments - LT – ERDF/ESF/CF/YEI programme' (2.276 projects);
 - (ii) 'Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship – ERDF/ESF programme' (1.507 projects);
 - (iii) 'Infrastructure and Environment - PL – ERDF/CF programme' (1.140 projects).
- ✓ Two programmes, 'Hamburg – ESF programme', and 'Infrastructure and Environment - PL – ERDF/CF programme', have supported other actions, especially strategic projects. Here are three examples of projects supported by the 'Hamburg ESF programme': 'Come in', 'School mentors', and 'Jugend Aktiv Plus'.

Thirty-six ESI Funds programmes reported that they have already invested funds into the EUSBSR's implementation.

The aggregated financial data per fund are provided in the table below:

ERDF	EMFF	CF	ESF	EAFRD*	ENI	Other Funds
22.774.737.736	29.427.133	10.579.554.13	3.165.026.780	0	1.124.144**	683.469.632
Total in €: 37.233.339.556						

* No response from the EAFRD programmes

** ENI share of the Interreg Baltic Sea programme

Countries reporting the largest investments			
EU Member States	ERDF total amount	CF total amount	ESF total amount
PL	21.159.777.676	10.269.161.507	3.106.324.876
LV	395.562.596	288.369.358	3.341.903
DK	558.476.658	0	0

It is worth noting that the above table comprises figures as reported by the programmes in their Annual Implementation Report 2018 (submitted in 2019). There is no other evidence that the programmes have invested the reported amounts to support the macro-regional strategy. In fact, in some cases the managing authorities of mainstream programmes considered that the full amount of their programme contributes to fulfilling the macro-regional strategy's objectives. This is a point to further explore with specific programmes, in order to receive more realistic data and information. In addition, a list with the specific investments would be needed for further use.

The question: 'Please indicate the obtained results in relation to the EUSBSR' aims to explore which programmes deem themselves to be compatible with the macro-regional strategy.

Twenty-nine programmes acknowledge their compatibility with the EUSBSR priorities. This could lead to an understanding on whether synergies between programmes and the Strategy have been identified, and whether the managing authorities consider that a contribution to the EUSBSR will result in win-win opportunities. The results are satisfactory, since 27 programmes

consider that directly investing in specific EUSBSR priority areas implies an added value. Two programmes underlined that they only indirectly contribute to the Strategy, albeit they benefit from the EUSBSR added value. However, nine additional programmes claimed that either they cannot assess any results, so far, or they are not concerned by the EUSBSR.

However, when we posed the following questions to the programmes: ‘Please specify the objective (s), policy area(s), and horizontal action(s) of the EUSBSR that your programme is relevant to’, all 62 programmes replied by indicating at least one out of these three options. This shows us that even if the programmes do not see any direct link to the macro-regional strategy, there is potential to further explore synergies through common themes, or through mainstream cooperation.

In order to analyse these data, we have to explain the methodology, which gives the programmes that replied the opportunity to choose as many topics as they deem relevant. Therefore, a programme might opt for two or more objectives, policy areas or horizontal actions.

Further to the analysis, all 62 programmes have pointed out relevant topics, which result in the following being the most popular themes of the EUSBSR.

Most popular objective: ‘increase prosperity’ with 51 replies; the two other objectives ‘save the sea’ and ‘connect the region’ got the same number of replies (40 replies each)

Most popular policy areas: ‘innovation’ with 43 replies, ‘bio economy’ with 34 replies, and ‘education’ & ‘culture’ with 33 replies each.

The most popular horizontal actions: ‘climate’ with 30 replies.

2. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Ninety-five programmes (ESI Funds mainstream, Interreg and IPA-CBC programmes, and IPA II mainstream) are relevant for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR).

Sixty-two out of the 95 programmes provided updated replies¹⁰⁶ to the questionnaire included in the Annual Implementation Report 2018 (submitted in 2019). This corresponds to a 65% of the EUSDR relevant programmes replying to the questionnaire, which is a satisfactory reply rate. These programmes are composed of:

- ✓ 37 mainstream ESI Funds programmes;
- ✓ 18 Interreg programmes (15 CBC programmes and 3 transnational programmes)
- ✓ 4 IPA-CBC programmes
- ✓ 3 IPA-IPA CBC programmes

The aggregated data are provided in the table below:

Country	Number of relevant OPs	Number of OPs that replied	Percentage of OPs that replied
Austria	4	1	25 %
Bulgaria	10	7	70 %
Croatia	4	2	50 %
Czechia	9	6	66 %
Germany	9	5	56 %
Hungary	9	7	77 %
Romania	8	5	62 %
Slovakia	8	3	38 %
Slovenia	3	1	33 %
Interreg TN	3	3	100 %
Interreg CBC	18	15	83,3 %
Total	84	55	65,4%
IPA-CBC (HU-RS, RO-RS, HR-RS, HR-BiH-MNE)	5	4	80%
IPA-IPA CBC (BiH-MNE, RS-MNE, RS-BiH)	5	3	60%
IPA mainstream BiH, RS, MNE	3	0	0
IPA multi-country 2018	1	0	0
Total	14	7	50%
Grand total (ESI Funds+IPA II)	95	62	65%

¹⁰⁶ENI programmes are also relevant for the EUSDR. However 2018 was a transitory year with the closure of ENPI programmes and launch of the ENI programmes which have yet to be implemented.

The operational programmes have committed to contribute to the EUSDR objectives in several ways, as described below.

- ✓ Nineteen out of the 62 programmes work with key implementers of the EUSDR in their monitoring committees (11 ESI Funds programmes, 5 Interreg programmes, 2 IPA-CBC programmes, 1 IPA-IPA CBC programme);
- ✓ Sixteen programmes out of the 62 indicated that they gave extra points to specific measures supporting the EUSDR. Of these, 10 programmes have carried out targeted calls for proposals for macro-regional relevant projects, and 11 have given extra points to projects/actions with high macro-regional significance or impact;
- ✓ In addition, the Romanian ‘Large Infrastructure Programme - RO – ERDF/CF’ has given bonus points to ‘biodiversity’ and ‘energy’ projects that have a macro-regional dimension;
- ✓ Furthermore, the monitoring committees of 3 programmes (‘Human Resources Development in Bulgaria –ESF’, ‘Research and Innovation in Slovakia-ERDF’, and ‘Interreg V-A – Romania-Hungary’) decided to directly invest funds on EUSDR objectives through targeted calls for proposals;
- ✓ In matters of EUSDR related projects, a total of 718 projects have been supported so far. However, 3 programmes claim to have financed 68,2% of these projects:
 - (i) Romanian ‘Large Infrastructure Programme - RO – ERDF/CF’ programme (226 projects);
 - (ii) ‘Interreg V-A – Romania-Bulgaria’ programme (166 projects);
 - (iii) ‘Bayern – ERDF’ programme (98 projects).
- ✓ 3 programmes have supported other actions, especially strategic projects, for example the programme ‘Investments in Growth and Employment - AT – ERDF’ financed the project ‘Dream’, coordinated by Austria, ‘IPA CBC Romania – Serbia’, and the ‘Interreg V-B – Danube’.

Twenty-three ESI Funds programmes reported that they have already invested funds into the EUSDR’s implementation.

The aggregated financial data per fund are provided in the table below:

ERDF	EARFD	EMFF	CF	ESF	IPA	ENI	Other Funds (national)
4.849.347.834	4.886.562.548	4.326.918	5.830.567.940	45.014.378	87.244.816	10.000.000	11.986.766
Total in €: 15.725.051.223							

Countries reporting the largest investments				
EU Member States	ERDF Total Amount	CF Total Amount	ESF Total Amount	EAFRD Total Amount
RO	0	0	0	4.886.562.548
HU	1.780.778.635	2.091.200.000	42.514.376	0
HR	1.479.856.591	1.220.429.352	0	0

SK	563.825.806	1.745.759.763	0	0
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It is worth noting that the above table comprises figures as reported by the programmes in their Annual Implementation Report 2018 (submitted in 2019). There is no other evidence that the programmes have invested the reported amounts to support the macro-regional strategy. In fact, in some cases the managing authorities of mainstream programmes considered that the full amount of their programme contributes to the objectives of the Strategy. This is a point to further explore with specific programmes, in order to receive more realistic data and information. In addition, a list with the specific investments would be needed for further use.

There is probably, among some OPs, still a lack of understanding on what determines a project with macro-regional added value.

The question ‘Please indicate the obtained results in relation to the EUSDR’ aims to explore which programmes deem themselves to be compatible with the macro-regional strategy.

Twenty-five programmes acknowledge their compatibility with the EUSDR priorities. This could lead to an understanding on whether synergies between programmes and the Strategy have been identified, and whether the managing authorities consider that a contribution to the EUSDR will result in win-win opportunities. The results are satisfactory, since 25 programmes consider that directly investing in specific EUSDR priority areas implies an added value.

Fifteen additional programmes, however, claimed that either they cannot assess any results, so far or they are not concerned by the EUSDR.

However, when we posed the following question to the programmes: ‘Please specify the Pillar (s) and Priority Area(s) of the EUSDR that your programme is relevant to’, all 62 replied by indicating at least one of these options. This shows us that even if the programmes do not see any direct link to the macro-regional strategy, there is potential to further explore synergies through common themes, or even through mainstream cooperation.

In order to analyse these data, we have to explain the methodology, which gives the programmes that replied the opportunity to choose as many topics as they deem relevant. Therefore, a programme might opt for two or more pillars, and priority areas.

Further to the analysis, all 62 programmes have pointed out relevant topics, which result in the following being the most popular themes of the EUSDR.

Most popular Pillars:

- Pillar 3: ‘Building Prosperity in the Danube Region’ with 83 replies;
- Pillar 2: ‘Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region’ with 75 replies;
- Pillar 1: ‘Connecting the Danube Region’ with 59 replies; and
- Pillar 4: ‘Strengthening the Danube Region’ with 23 replies.

Most popular Priority Areas:

- ‘Competitiveness’ with 31 replies;
- ‘Biodiversity, landscapes, air and soil quality’ with 28 replies;
- ‘People & skills’ with 27 replies; and
- ‘Culture and tourism’ with 25 replies.

3. The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region

Some 111 programmes (ESI Funds mainstream, Interreg, IPA-CBC, IPA II mainstream and IPA-IPA CBC) are relevant for the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR).

Among them, four Interreg programmes - three transnational (Mediterranean; Balkan-Mediterranean, Central Europe) and one CBC (Italy-Austria) - marginally covering the EUSAIR region could be considered as relevant and as contributing to it.

Forty five out of the 111 programmes provided updated replies to the questionnaire included in their Annual Implementation Report 2018 (submitted in 2019) . This corresponds to a 40% of EUSAIR relevant programmes replying to the questionnaire, a sufficient reply rate. These programmes are composed of:

- ✓ 30 country-specific mainstream programmes covering ESI Funds (21 regional and 9 national programmes);
- ✓ 10 Interreg programmes (4 cross-border, 2 transnational, 4 IPA-CBC with EU Member States);
- ✓ 5 IPA-IPA CBC programmes.

The aggregated data are provided in the table below:

EU Member States	Number of relevant OPs	Number of OPs that replied	Percentage of OPs that replied
Croatia	4	2	50%
Greece	23	6	26%
Italy	57	20	35%
Slovenia	3	2	66%
IPA-CBC (with EU MSs)	4	4	100%
Interreg CBC	5	4	80%
Interreg TN	3	2	66%
Total	99	40	40%
IPA countries (IPA mainstream + IPA-IPA CBC)	Total IPA II programmes	Total number of programmes that replied	Percentage of programmes that replied
Albania	2	0	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	1	50%
Montenegro	2	1	50%
Serbia	4	3	75%
Multi- country programmes 2018	2	0	
Total	12	5	42%
Grand Total (ESI Funds+IPA II)	111	45	40%

The operational programmes have committed to contribute to the EUSAIR objectives in several ways, which do not automatically involve the implementation of macro-regional projects or actions, but have the potential to promote the EUSAIR and signal a strong interest to it, notably :

- Thirteen programmes opened up participation in their monitoring committee to EUSAIR key implementers (9 ESI Funds programmes and 4 IPA-IPA CBC programmes);
- Fourteen ESI Funds and 4 IPA-CBC programmes gave extra-points to EUSAIR labelled projects;
- the monitoring committees of three ESI funds, two IPA-CBC programmes, one IPA II programme and one IPA-IPA CBC programme decided to directly invest funds on EUSAIR objectives, opening targeted calls for proposals;
- Seven ESI Funds' operational programmes, one IPA-CBC programme, one IPA II programme and one IPA-IPA CBC programme reported that they have invested funds, which contribute to the EUSAIR's implementation.

The aggregated financial data per fund are provided in the table below:

ERDF	CF	ESF	EAFRD	EMFF	IPA II	Other Funds
1.547.650.085	1.165.356.996	0	119.776.264	0	36.927.437	0
Total in €: 2.869.710.782						

It is worth noting that the above table comprises figures as reported by the programmes in their Annual Implementation Report 2018 (submitted in 2019). There is no other evidence that the programmes have invested the reported amounts to support the macro-regional strategy. In fact, in some cases the managing authorities of mainstream programmes considered that the full amount of their programme contributes to the objectives of the Strategy on the basis that policy areas correspond to the EUSAIR pillars. In some other circumstances managing authorities reported on projects that are in line with the EUSAIR objectives but did not report the funds invested, which leads to an underestimation of funds invested in the Strategy. There is still clearly, among some OPs, a lack of understanding on what determines a project with macro-regional added value.

Even though only 10 programmes in 2018 - a small number - have claimed to have invested directly in the EUSAIR, this has increased from 7 in the previous year.

This is certainly a positive development for the future of the Strategy with the potential to effectively boost its implementation. However, clearer advice should be given to managing authorities on how to determine their contribution to achieving EUSAIR objectives.

The compatibility of programmes to the EUSAIR priorities is a very important factor that may indicate where there is still scope for cooperation and where programmes may, in the future, contribute to the EUSAIR. In this sense, 37 out of 40 ESI Funds programmes have replied that their priorities are compatible with the following EUSAIR pillars:

- Blue Growth (23)
- Connecting the region (20)
- Environmental quality (29)
- Sustainable tourism (31).

Also EUSAIR cross-cutting themes have been often mentioned as compatible with these programmes, the most supported being in the following order 'Strengthening R&D, innovation', 'SMEs development', 'Capacity building'.

4. The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region

Following a very strict geographical approach (which aimed to include all programmes that touch the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) perimeter) 98 programmes can be identified as relevant for the EUSALP. This concerns country-specific (mainstream) as well as Interreg programmes. However, from a functional point of view only 78 programmes are de facto relevant for the EUSALP. This excludes programmes like e.g. the transnational ADRION programme that primarily focuses on the EUSAIR or cross-border cooperation programmes like Interreg V-A Slovenia-Hungary.

Twenty-nine out of 78 programmes provided replies to the questionnaire included in their Annual Implementation Report 2018 (submitted in 2019):

- ✓ 21 ESI Funds mainstream programmes
- ✓ 8 Interreg programmes (7 cross-border and 1 transnational)

Aggregated data:

Country	Number of relevant OPs	Number of OPs that replied	Percentage of OPs that replied
Austria	4	1	25%
France	11	5	45%
Germany	9	5	55%
Italy	38	9	24%
Slovenia	3	1	33%
Interreg TN	3	1	33%
Interreg CBC	10	7	70%
Total	78	29	37%

Operational programmes have committed to contribute to the EUSALP in several ways, the most important of which are the following:

- ✓ Eight programmes indicated that extra points have been attributed to specific measures supporting the EUSALP.
- ✓ In total, 1196 projects were supported by the 29 programmes that replied to the questionnaire. However, one programme alone provides 78,3% of the projects: the Veneto - ERDF program (936 projects).
- ✓ Seven programmes opened up participation of EUSALP key implementers (e.g. national coordinators, policy area coordinators, flagship leaders) in their monitoring committee.

Four ESI Funds operational programmes reported to have already invested funds which contribute to EUSALP's implementation.

The aggregated financial data per fund is provided in the table below:

ERDF	CF	ESF	EAFRD
181.645.842	377.097.742	0	215.461.813
Total in €: 784.205.397			

Countries reporting the largest investments			
EU Member States	ERDF total amount	CF total amount	EAFRD total amount
SI	44.587.451	377.097.742	0
FR	0	0	215.461.813
DE	10.777.298	0	0

It is worth noting that the above table comprises figures as reported by the programmes in their Annual Implementation Report 2018 (submitted in 2019). There is no other evidence that the programmes have invested the reported amounts to support the macro-regional strategy. In fact, in some cases the managing authorities of mainstream programmes considered that the full amount of their programme contributes to the objectives of the Strategy on the basis that the programmes' policy areas correspond to the EUSALP priorities. This is a point to further explore with specific programmes in order to receive data that are more realistic.

The question: 'Please indicate the obtained results in relation to the EUSALP' aims to explore which programmes deem themselves to be compatible with the macro-regional strategy.

- ✓ Eight programmes acknowledge that compatibility with the EUSALP priorities is a very important factor. This could lead to an understanding about whether there has been scope for cooperation and where programmes have contributed to the EUSALP.
- ✓ The results are satisfactory, since eight programmes consider that they have received visible added value from contributing to the EUSALP.
- ✓ Nine other programmes, however, claimed that they are not concerned by the EUSALP.

Annex 1: map of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region



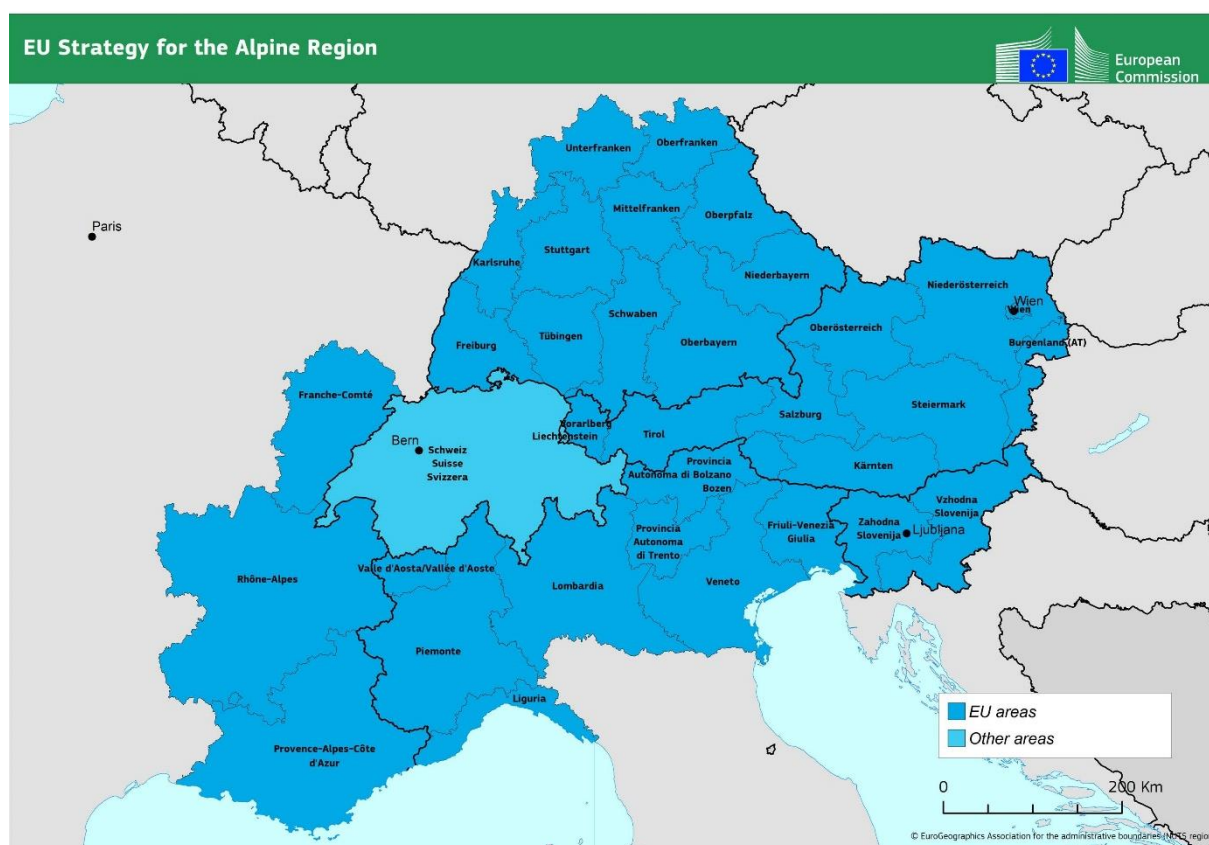
Annex 2: map of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region



Annex 3: map of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region



Annex 4: map of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region



Annex 5: map of the four EU macro-regional strategies

