



EU Strategy for the
Adriatic and Ionian Region
Croatian Presidency 2023-2024

a blue-green Strategy for the future

PROGRAMME OF THE PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA OF THE EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGY FOR THE ADRIATIC AND IONIAN REGION AND THE ADRIATIC AND IONIAN INITIATIVE

1 June 2023 – 31 May 2024

I. INTRODUCTION

The Croatian Presidency of the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (the Strategy) and the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (the Initiative) coincides with the 10th anniversary of the launch of the Strategy and the 24th anniversary of the founding of the Initiative, as well as the 10th anniversary of the Republic of Croatia's membership in the European Union. So far, Croatia has chaired the Strategy once (2015-2016) and the Initiative three times (2000-2001; 2007-2008; 2015-2016).

The goal of the Croatian Presidency is to continue working in the vein of previous Presidencies, and build upon good practices and experience established during the years of implementation of the Strategy and the Initiative. Furthermore, the goal of the Presidency is also to create space for integration of novel ideas into the Strategy, within the ongoing revision process.

The beginning of the Presidency is strongly tied with the beginning of implementation of a new programming period of the Interreg IPA ADRION Programme (2021-2027), which will ensure support for the management of the Strategy in the upcoming period. Croatia will participate in the management of the Strategy through the project entitled *Development of strategic implementation formats*, where it will have the role of the leading partner.

The Presidency has been prepared and is being held in a time of significant social, political and economic challenges caused by two consecutive global crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and the aggression on Ukraine. The effects of these crises are manifold, deep and long-term, and affect policymaking across Europe and beyond. Croatia will endeavour to shape and adapt the priorities and activities of its Presidency also to a wider context, assessing new challenges through the prism of macro-regional cooperation.

II. PRESIDENCY OF THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE ADRIATIC AND IONIAN REGION

One of the key objectives of the Croatian Presidency is the successful revision of the Strategy and its re-evaluation in the context of new circumstances in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region and the European Union, so that it becomes better fit for the future. Croatia will encourage putting a more consistent emphasis on the continental (green) component in relation to the maritime (blue) component of the Strategy in its future development, and will readily consider all initiatives that may lead in that direction. Furthermore, Croatia will promote a discussion on how to make the Strategy a more meaningful contributor to the EU enlargement process.



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Following these basic guiding principles, the motto of the Croatian Presidency of the Strategy is “**A blue-green Strategy for the future**”. The Presidency programme is founded on the following political and thematic priorities:

A. Political Priorities

- **Transformation of the Strategy in a new macro-regional environment**
- **Completion of the revision process – towards a more social EUSAIR**
- **Institutional linkages in the framework of macro-regional strategies**

B. Thematic priorities:

- **Greater resilience through better connectivity**
- **Sustainable growth and tourism**
- **Social cohesion**

A. POLITICAL PRIORITIES

Transformation of the Strategy in a new macro-regional environment

The need to transform the Strategy stems from a number of factors, the two most obvious being the expansion of membership in 2020 to the Republic of North Macedonia and in 2022 to the Republic of San Marino, and the beginning of the new financial period of the EU for 2021-2027. Within this political priority, Croatia will promote the following two ideas during its Presidency:

Finding a better balance between the blue and green components of the Strategy

A third of participating countries does not have access to either the Adriatic or Ionian Sea, while at the same time most of them have a very prominent inland/hinterland (green) dimension and identity. In the Action Plan of the Strategy currently in force, specific objectives/topics of the pillars are mostly oriented towards the maritime (blue) dimension of the Strategy and only one can be considered explicitly oriented towards the inland part of the macro-region (Pillar 2, topic 2: Intermodal connections to the hinterland).

In order to contribute to the desired greater sense of ownership of the participating countries over the Strategy – especially landlocked countries – and thus to a greater dedication to the Strategy, and thereby to a more successful implementation, it is important to ensure, through the current revision process, strengthening of its green dimension and a broader interlinking between blue and green dimensions. Croatia therefore welcomes all proposals of the participating countries that lead in this direction, specifically, the introduction of new pillars, sub-pillars or topics and actions to existing pillars, and will actively promote them during its Presidency.



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Contribution to the EU enlargement process and inclusion of new participating states in all processes during the new EU financial period

Due to its specific geography, Strategy is a framework with a pronounced link to the process of European integration, i.e. the enlargement of the EU. Since its establishment, it has been a macro-regional strategy with the largest number of countries aspiring to the EU membership and participating in the EU enlargement process. With the expansion of membership in 2020 and 2022, it became the macro-regional Strategy with the largest number of non-EU members and the only one in which there are more EU aspirants than EU members. The Interreg ADRION Programme has clearly recognised this reality so in the current financial perspective it is called “IPA ADRION”, and aims to ensure a greater participation of non-EU members.

Croatia views the EU enlargement process as a matter of great importance for the Strategy. It is continuously advocating and will continue to advocate for the entry of Strategy participating countries into EU membership, in accordance with the set criteria and based on individual achievements in their implementation. Croatia will strive to give this topic greater visibility, seeing mutual cooperation within the Strategy as an important contribution to fulfilling the criteria for EU membership.

Completion of the revision process – towards a more social EUSAIR

The action plan that operationalises the Strategy was developed more than ten years ago. Since then, the needs of the macro-region and various EU policies have evolved, and priorities have been redefined. Participating countries agree that revision is necessary to adapt the Strategy to new circumstances. In practical terms, this means revising and updating the Action Plan and the relevant Communication of the European Commission – i.e. two documents that together make up the Strategy.

During its Presidency, Croatia will aim to accelerate the revision process so that the expectations of the participating countries are met, and agreed roadmap and deadlines respected. Additionally, Croatia will continue the ongoing work on the establishment of a new social pillar in the Strategy.

Institutional linkages in the framework of macro-regional strategies

Periodic meetings of the four trio Presidencies of the EU macro-regional strategies facilitate a very important process of sharing of good practices and simplify access to processes and horizontal themes relevant to all four macro-regions. The practice of holding regular meetings in this format was proposed and initiated in 2020 by the Croatian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

Given the “3 NOs” principle of macro-regional strategies, the financial dialogue between Strategy stakeholders and relevant national bodies needs to continue. Such a dialogue enables vitally important exchange of information on the support of EU funds for the implementation of the Strategy, and interlinks national and regional bodies responsible for European structural



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and investment funds and IPA III funds, as well as EU funds under shared management, thereby strengthening the essential process of embedding.

B. THEMATIC PRIORITIES OF THE PRESIDENCY

Greater resilience through better connectivity

Transport connectivity

As a main challenge in the transport connectivity of the Adriatic-Ionian region, Croatia highlights the further development of the original *Adriatic-Ionian transport route*. This transport route, along with the associated linking of seaports along its way, is a project of permanent importance for the region. Croatia will strive to promote continued discussion on this important multimodal corridor with the aim of defining the guidelines for its establishment.

Of equal importance is the support for the establishment of the new *European transport corridor Western Balkans – Eastern Mediterranean*, which connects all the countries participating in the Strategy and as such is an epitome of macro-regional cooperation. Croatia will place special focus on developing and equipping the corridor infrastructure for the use of alternative fuels for the decarbonisation of transport, i.e. the transition to zero-emission mobility.

Energy connectivity

Together with increasing transport capacities/infrastructural network between countries, an important element of energy independence is the diversification of resources, as well as joint work and solving challenges regarding achievement of climate neutrality by 2050 in the energy sector. Croatia will focus its attention to promoting EU goals clearly defined by the REPowerEU Programme.

During its Presidency Croatia will promote discussion on geothermal energy potentials, as well as two important projects that potentially have a very powerful macro-regional effect, i.e. the *North Adriatic Hydrogen Valley* and the *Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline*.

Digital connectivity

Digitalisation is a precondition for all-encompassing improvement of economy, industry, science and the society as a whole. In today's world, adequate functioning of many sectors of social activity is no longer possible without digitalisation and digital transformation.

At present, one of the most important initiatives in the EU in the field of digitalisation is the development of a *European processor for high-performance computers*, which will be equipped to efficiently process very large quantities of data. With the aim of strengthening strategic technological resilience in this important area, the EU launched a project to develop such processors – *the European Processor Initiative (EPI)* – which is followed by a series of



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related regulatory and organisational activities. Some of the EUSAIR participating countries are already actively involved in the EPI. Croatia wishes to further strengthen awareness of this important topic at the level of the countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region and encourage further development of cooperation.

Sustainable growth and tourism

Promoting the application of measurable indicators of sustainable tourism

For the countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region, tourism is one of the largest GDP contributors. Planning and developing sustainable and green tourism are important measures for fighting climate change. Some of the key challenges for tourism sector in the Adriatic-Ionian region are temporal and spatial imbalance of tourism activities, imbalanced distribution of burden between geographical areas, and a very distinct seasonal nature of business operations.

Croatia will promote the *application of measurable indicators of sustainable tourism*, stressing the importance of a clean sea as a common resource. Considering the importance of tourism for the participating countries, responsible management of tourism and tourist destinations should remain one of the priority goals of the Strategy.

Protection of biodiversity through sustainable fisheries

Biodiversity is the source of health of every ecosystem, and healthy and preserved ecosystems are recognised as the basis of social wellbeing, sustainable development and healthy economy. The state of biodiversity is undoubtedly better in protected areas, and the model of focused area protection has repeatedly proved successful, with a very good example being the Jabuka/Pomo pit in the Adriatic Sea.

During its Presidency Croatia will focus on the *protection of biodiversity in the context of development of sustainable fisheries*, so to contribute to better understanding and definition of further cooperation, towards establishing additional spatial protection in the maritime environment.

Marine robotics and advanced technologies in the blue economy

Croatia will encourage *the development of marine robotics and advanced technology* with application in the recognised and well-established blue technology sectors defined in the EU Blue Economy Report of 2022, as well as the emerging ones, in order to ensure technological development and connection with the industry sector through cooperation programmes and the transfer of knowledge and technology.

Furthermore, Croatia emphasises the development of *smart marinas* as a topic of special interest and will encourage the development of smart marinas equipped with innovative technologies, in order to ensure the sustainability of nautical tourism.



Reduction of micro-plastics in the environment and protection of the sea from sudden pollution

One of the burning environmental issues in the Adriatic-Ionian region is the *pollution of inland waterways and seas with waste plastics and micro-plastics*. In addition to the waste that reaches seas from the coast, a further problem is the waste carried by sea and wind currents between the neighbouring Adriatic-Ionian countries during unfavourable meteorological and hydrological conditions. Croatia will continue to encourage exchange of good practices and strengthening cooperation of the Adriatic-Ionian countries in facing this problem.

The need for *protection of the sea from sudden pollution* imposes an obligation on coastal states to constantly develop protective measures and improve incident preparedness. Croatia emphasises the importance of transborder regional cooperation in the event of sudden sea pollution events as a topic of particular international importance. It will also encourage further cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region with regard to electronic data exchange, with an emphasis on public services for navigation safety and protection of the sea from sudden pollution from ships.

Social cohesion

Social and economic environment in Europe is continuously changing. Extraordinary events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the aggression on Ukraine, and the unpredictable environment they have created, have further emphasised the need to maintain and strengthen social cohesion.

Numerous recommendations, initiatives and strategic frameworks relevant for employment, education and social policies have been adopted at the level of the European Union. In the context of the ongoing revision of the Strategy, Croatia has proposed to start cooperating on these topics, in order to achieve stronger contribution to European initiatives in the areas of employment, skills development, social entrepreneurship, social inclusion of vulnerable groups, empowering women in the workforce, among others. These topics are of great relevance and should also be viewed in the context of demographic challenges Adriatic-Ionian region faces.

Since its establishment, the Strategy has served as an important political framework for jointly resolving common challenges in the macro-region. Croatia welcomes the *introduction a new social pillar* into the Strategy, as this will be a step forward towards creating a prosperous macro-region where the needs of the people are placed at the centre of social policies.

III. CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE ADRIATIC AND IONIAN INITIATIVE

Cooperation within the framework of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative is based on strengthening cooperation towards encouraging development and prosperity, including the knowledge and information exchange processes. It is a valuable platform for defining joint challenges, as well as for successfully promoting the principles and values of democracy, good neighbourly relations and equality without exception. The Initiative has always been a forum with a clearly expressed link to the European integration process.



One of the goals of the Croatian Chairmanship of the Initiative will be to continue with the good practices of past chairmanships, especially in certain areas that have gained in importance during the long years of Initiative's activities, such as EU enlargement, empowering women, youth inclusion, and cooperation within the framework of Initiative's traditional three Fora (universities, chambers of commerce, cities).

The Croatian Chairmanship of the Initiative will focus on the following issues:

- **EU enlargement** – Croatia sees the EU enlargement process as very important for the Initiative and supports the accession of participating countries to EU membership, in accordance with the conditions and set criteria, and based on individual achievements. Croatia will continue, in cooperation with the participating countries and the Permanent Secretariat of the Initiative, to advocate for swift entry of all participating countries into EU membership.
- **Empowering women** – In recent years, this topic has gained importance and is woven into numerous regulations and programmes, but results still lag behind the set goals. During its Presidency, Croatia will continue with previous good practices, and initiate and support all efforts aimed at raising awareness of this topic as well as improving the current situation, with an emphasis on education, the position of women in the labour market and inclusion.
- **Youth** – the European Commission designated year 2022 as the European Year of Youth, while 2023 is proclaimed as the European Year of Skills. The Initiative recognised the importance of this issue in participating countries which are particularly affected by brain drain and demographic problems. During its Presidency, Croatia will continue working with young people, promoting inclusiveness, importance of education, equal opportunities – recognising the problems of young people as one of the most important issues for the overall prosperity of the region.
- **University cooperation – civil society Fora** – the three Fora of the Initiative have traditionally been its very important partners. Croatian Presidency will encourage raising awareness and increasing the visibility of these Fora and of the Initiative itself to a wider audience. Croatia sees the *European Universities initiative* as an ambitious long-term vision of increasing academic excellence and creating universities of the future.

IV. CALENDAR OF ACTIVITIES

In order to promote the priorities stated in this Programme, during its Presidency/Chairmanship Croatia will organise a series of activities at different levels. The final dates and venues for some events will be confirmed and communicated at a later time.

- **19-20 June 2023:** Launching Conference of the Presidency, with an extraordinary meeting of the EUSAIR Governing Board (Zagreb)
- **20-21 June 2023:** Workshop on EU-funded Marine Robotics and Applications - *EMRA 2023* (Šibenik)



- **21 June 2023:** Conference on sustainable nautical tourism (Zagreb)
- **4-5 July 2023:** Conference *Stronger women for stronger Adriatic-Ionian Region* (Zagreb)
- **September 2023:** Conference on the implementation of Biodiversity Strategy in the Adriatic Sea through joint solutions for nature and fisheries (venue tbd)
- **September 2023:** Conference on hydrogen and geothermal energy (Zagreb)
- **October 2023:** Meeting of the EUSAIR Governing Board (venue tbd)
- **October 2023:** Meeting of the AII Committee of Senior Officials (venue tbd)
- **October 2023:** Meeting of the EUSAIR National Coordinators with Managing Authorities of the Adriatic and Ionian Region (Zagreb)
- **October 2023:** Inaugural conference of the three EUSAIR governance projects (Zagreb)
- **October 2023:** Workshop on Integrated Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) (Zagreb)
- **October/November 2023:** TSG-4 Meeting (venue tbd)
- **October/November 2023:** Round table on development of balanced tourism and green tourism products (venue tbd)
- **October/November 2023:** Conference on protection against pollution of waters and seas from plastics and micro-plastics (venue tbd)
- **October/November 2023:** Meeting of the 4 MRS Trio Presidencies (venue tbd)
- **November 2023:** Conference on skills (venue tbd)
- **November 2023:** Round table on inter-university cooperation (Split)
- **November 2023:** Youth conference (Split)
- **February 2024:** Ministerial conference on the future of EUSAIR (tbc)
- **March 2024:** Conference on social issues (venue tbd)
- **March 2024:** Rectors' conference on blue growth, research and innovation (venue tbd)
- **April 2024:** Meeting of representatives of Croatian counties and one Italian region (venue tbd)
- **April 2024:** Conference on transport connectivity in the Adriatic-Ionian region: *Western Balkans-Eastern Mediterranean Corridor* (Zagreb)
- **April 2024:** TSG-4 meeting (Zagreb)
- **Spring 2024:** EUSAIR Governing Board meeting (Brussels)
- **Spring 2024:** Meeting of the AII Committee of Senior Officials (Brussels)
- **Spring 2024:** Meeting of relevant stakeholders for development of EUSAIR strategic projects (Brussels)
- **Spring 2024:** Meeting of four macro-regional strategies with TSG coordinators (Brussels)
- **Spring 2024:** Meeting of representatives of four macro-regional strategies for the field of tourism (Brussels)
- **May 2024:** Conference of the Speakers of Parliaments of AII countries (venue tbd)
- **May 2024:** EUSAIR Annual Forum (venue tbd)