

Interreg



Co-funded by
the European Union

IPA ADRION

FACILITYPOINT



EU Strategy for the
Adriatic and Ionian Region
EUSAIR



EUSAIR
Greek Presidency 2024 - 2025

FINAL REPORT

EUSAIR PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF MACRO-REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FUTURE COHESION POLICY

March 2025

EUSAIR Facility Point
Ministry of Cohesion and Regional
Development (MCRD)
Kotnikova Ulica 5
Ljubljana 1000
Email: gp.mkrr@gov.si

**EU STRATEGY FOR THE ADRIATIC-IONIAN REGION (EUSAIR) PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE
OF MACRO-REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FUTURE COHESION POLICY**

Vienna, March 2025

Client:

*EUSAIR Facility Point
Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development (MCRD)
Kotnikova ulica 5
Ljubljana 1000
email: gp.mkrr@gov.si*

Contractor:

*Christine Hamza, Filip Bojic, Elona Goma
M&E factory GmbH
Silbergasse 25
1190 Vienna, Austria*

Content

1	Introduction	4
2	EUSAIR challenges and opportunities	6
2.1	EUSAIR current internal challenges and opportunities	6
2.2	Territorial and external challenges facing the EUSAIR	9
3	Recommendations for the current EUSAIR	10
3.1	Preconditions	10
3.2	EUSAIR in the current Cohesion Policy framework	13
4	EUSAIR in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework	19
4.1	Cohesion Policy	19
4.2	EUSAIR as a “laboratory for EU enlargement”	20
4.3	Macro-regional thematic relevance	22
4.4	Synergies and embedding	23
4.5	Description of the post-2027 scenarios	23
5	Key messages	32
6	Summary Recommendations	33
7	Annex	37
7.1	References	37
7.2	Survey respondents	39
7.3	Specific recommendations following each enlargement scenario	41

List of abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CBC	Cross-Border Cooperation
DG ENEST	Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
EEMAF	European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund
EGP	EUSAIR Governance Point
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESP	EUSAIR Stakeholders Platform
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
EU MSs	EU Member States
GB	Governing Board
HLG	High-Level Group
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IPA ADRION	IPA Adriatic-Ionian Programme
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investment
LIFE	Programme for the Environment and Climate Action
MAAs	Managing Authorities
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MRS	Macro-Regional Strategy
NC	National Coordinator
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NIPAC	National IPA Coordinators
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
PC	Pillar Coordinator
PCY	Presidency
RGFWB	The Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SBS	Sea Basin Strategies
TSG	Thematic Steering Group
WB	Western Balkans

1 Introduction

Background

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) has initiated a consultation process to collect opinions, comments and suggestions on the future direction of Interreg, macro-regional strategies and Cohesion Policy as part of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The ongoing reflection on the future of Cohesion policy is underway across the EU, involving various experts and stakeholder groups. In this context, the EUSAIR Facility Point launched a consultation to gather input on the **future of macro-regional cooperation within the post-2027 Cohesion Policy**. The report summarises the results of the consultation and adds information from papers and reports currently developed to prepare the future Cohesion Policy.

Purpose of the report

The consultation serves as a foundation for EUSAIR development in the context of next Cohesion Policy. This report targets both EUSAIR stakeholders and EU and national policymakers. It aims to:

provide recommendations for EUSAIR's development during the current Cohesion Policy programming period, addressing primarily the EUSAIR stakeholders,
offer ideas on EUSAIR's future implementation and positioning in the future Cohesion Policy, addressing primarily the policy makers at EU and national level.

Methodology

The report is based on desk research and field research.

Desk research covers the current policy papers at EU level as well as documents initiated by other Macro-Regional Strategies and Interact¹.

The field research covers stakeholders' consultation during July and December 2024:

- Survey covering EUSAIR Governance structures (38 responses),
- Survey covering EUSAIR Stakeholders (government, industry, academia, civil society) (88 responses),
- Interviews: 4 Interreg programmes (Interreg IPA ADRION, Interreg IPA South-Adriatic, Interreg CBC IT-HR and Interreg CBC IT-SI), as well as one interview with Joannis Firbas (Former General Director of Coordination Authority of mainstream programmes²),
- Workshop at Corfu, Greece with Coordination and Managing Authorities of EU Cohesion Policy funds (MAs, NIPACs),
- Focus group with representatives of Pillar Coordinators, Facility Point, National Coordinators, PC ESF MA, IPA ADRION MA, NC North Macedonia, Former General Director of Coordination Authority of mainstream programmes, DG REGIO, Interact).

This final report incorporates the inputs received from all EUSAIR governance bodies throughout December 2024 and February 2025.

¹ See the list of references in Annex 7.1

² Regional/national programmes or Investment for Jobs and Growth programmes (hereinafter referred to as mainstream programmes)

Mitigation of limitations

The consultation results provided only a snapshot, rather than a comprehensive view of the full complexity of the EUSAIR. The EUSAIR stakeholders' survey results were somewhat limited, as not all respondents provided in-depth responses. The interviews with some Interreg programme representatives offered valuable perspectives, but the number of interview partners did not fully represent the entire macro-region. The gaps, especially regarding the future outline of the macro-regional strategy, have been filled with targeted interviews.

Structure of the report

The report has the following structure:

Section 1: Introduction,

Section 2: EUSAIR challenges and opportunities outlining the main internal, territorial and external challenges and opportunities for the EUSAIR.

Section 3: Main recommendations for EUSAIR in the current Cohesion Policy framework.

Section 4: Main recommendations for EUSAIR in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework.

Section 5: Key messages summarising the main conclusions from the report relevant for EUSAIR stakeholders and strategy implementation.

Section 6: Summary of recommendations for EU policy makers on EU and national level shaping the future Cohesion Policy framework.

2 EUSAIR challenges and opportunities

This section presents a synthesis of the consultation results outlining the current state of the EUSAIR in 2024. It describes the internal, territorial and external challenges and opportunities for the EUSAIR. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing and implementing effective approaches to enhance EUSAIR's impact and ensure its long-term sustainability.

2.1 EUSAIR current internal challenges and opportunities

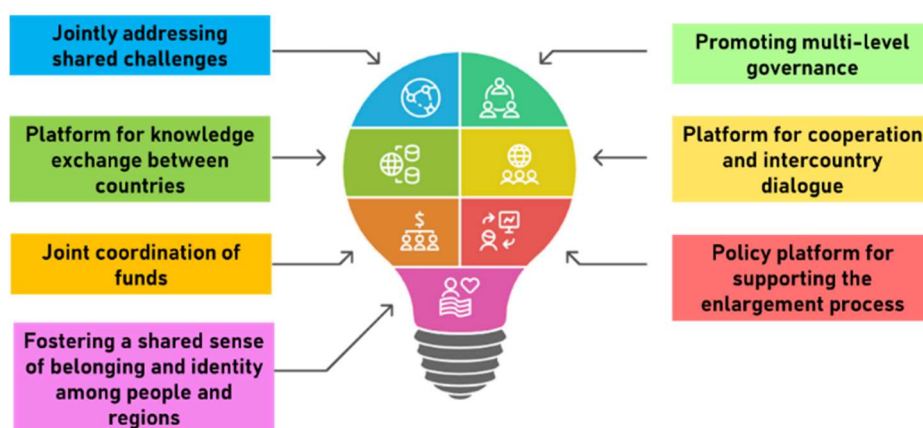
Strategic framework

Studies and position papers³ have confirmed the value added of the Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS) and Sea Basin Strategies (SBS) as strategic frameworks that **help to align regional needs and potential**, leveraging synergies to more effectively address territorial challenges.

Thus, the EUSAIR offers a shared strategic framework and a platform for stakeholders across participating countries to work together on developing and implementing joint solutions to address common challenges in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

EUSAIR stakeholders stated that the EUSAIR contributes to strategic discussions which serve trust-based agreements, policy alignment and joint development of projects. Thus, it provides a sense of ownership and opportunity to operate in the EU processes, especially for the EU candidate countries. The following figure illustrates key unique values of the EUSAIR as identified by the EUSAIR stakeholder during consultation (see figure below).

Figure 1: Unique values of the EUSAIR



Source: Stakeholders' consultation during July and December 2024

Implementation

Various **implementations mechanisms** have been exploited, with some proven to be particularly fruitful for further instalment:

flagships,

capacity building initiatives, and

development of cooperation frameworks and implementation formats (e.g. masterplans).

Flagships are considered by stakeholders as the main implementation method, which can generate and increase the interest in the Strategy from the EU programmes and trigger the integration of the EUSAIR into synchronised calls of MAs and combination of Interreg, centrally and nationally managed funds such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF),

³ Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. Synergies and cooperation. Improving synergies among Interreg and other funds and policies; Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. Executive Summary, Evaluation reports of MRS (e.g. EUSDR, etc.)

European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Connecting Europe Facility. This supports the effective embedding of the EUSAIR.

Good examples and experience from previous works must be leveraged, such as the work undertaken by the EUSAIR Pillars, EUSAIR Facility Point (2016-2023) and the EUSAIR Governance Point (2023-2027) SP4EUSAIR project in securing and facilitating funding for flagships.

Implementation support

The contribution of programmes to EUSAIR is currently fragmented, with overlapping areas, objectives and a variety of funding instruments that can confuse stakeholders. This issue cannot be resolved by the EUSAIR alone; higher-level decisions are needed to ensure better harmonisation across programmes.

Stakeholders in the Adriatic-Ionian region, as revealed by the EUSAIR stakeholder consultation, face several constraints to cooperation. These challenges must be addressed primarily by EUSAIR stakeholders involved in the implementation, including Pillar Coordinators, their respective TSG members and the EUSAIR Governance Point (hereafter referred to as the EGP).

Specific constraints include:

insufficient consultation with project promoters on potential macro-regional initiatives by the EUSAIR Pillar Coordinators can lead to missed opportunities or duplication. This needs better support and communication of Pillar Coordinators with potential project promoters.

difficulties of EUSAIR stakeholders in finding interested project promoters. This could be addressed by matchmaking activities involving EUSAIR and Interreg, ERDF, EMFAF and ESF stakeholders, among others.

poor communication due to a lack of communication channels and language barriers: This can be addressed through rigorous implementation of the EUSAIR Communication Strategy. An evaluation of this Communication Strategy may help to identify necessary improvements.

different national procedures and systems: This requires better promotion of cross-border and transnational agreements, and improved information sharing about these differences.

different programme systems, which should be harmonised at EU level among DGs.

staff changes in the ministries or agencies in different EUSAIR countries: This demands a good knowledge management and institutional memory within the EUSAIR and at national level. Standard, ready-to-use information/training modules for newcomers are important.

negative mindsets of EUSAIR countries perceiving macro-regional cooperation as a drain on national resources and **different political agendas.** Examples to address these can be:

- organising or participating at events showcasing successful projects within EUSAIR and highlighting how cooperation led to tangible benefits and to addressing national needs more effectively than a purely national approach could have (e.g. programme events, EU-Western Balkans Summits, etc.)
- staff exchanges between relevant ministries or agencies in different EUSAIR countries to build personal relationships, learn about each other and develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the macro-region as a whole.

Embedding

Embedding of the EUSAIR goes beyond 'purely financial' activities (e.g. programmes providing funding for EUSAIR activities or flagships) but also includes governance, coordination and communication measures. This requires better coordination between EUSAIR and various programmes throughout the programme life cycle and clearer guidance to the programmes on the benefits and support needed, especially in IPA countries and mainstream programmes.

Programming phase: The involvement of EUSAIR Pillar Coordinators during the programme preparation phase is considered valuable and beneficial to Interreg and other programme MAs. While Interreg programme documents refer to EUSAIR in one or other way (through thematic alignment, or through planning specific activities for MRS support), this is less common in mainstream programmes.

Implementation phase: For the ETC/Interreg programmes, the [Action Lab](#) exercise⁴ (EGP StEP project) serves as a key embedding tool. Through group work and networking, it facilitates information sharing and co-creation of embedding solutions, encouraging the MAs to think critically and work collaboratively. On the other hand, the mainstream programmes find the implementation of embedded priorities challenging, partly due to a lack of clarity of the EUSAIR, which makes it difficult to understand the benefits from EUSAIR and maintain their interest. Although the revised EUSAIR Action Plan is more focused and includes the flagships embedded into the mainstream programmes, its effectiveness depends on ensuring a good follow-up through financed operations (e.g. securing funding for flagships/initiatives).

Furthermore, mainstream programmes' focus on national and regional interests, while aligned with the regulatory requirements, presents a key challenge for EUSAIR embedding. This lack of mandatory requirements for mainstream programmes to actively support EUSAIR's embedding⁵ makes securing funding for EUSAIR-related projects (flagships) difficult.

The absence of regulatory “drivers” and insufficient resources also hinder the establishment of a sustained and in-depth dialogue between mainstream programme MAs, NIPACs and the EUSAIR. The need to maintain legal provisions supporting MRS/SBS through the ERDF, IPA, NDICI, and other funds is also stated by Interreg programmes (currently the main instrument supporting EUSAIR activities).⁶

Capitalisation

Ideally the EUSAIR supports the transfer of best practices, mutual learning, particularly between EU MSs and candidate countries, contributing to integration efforts and regional development.

The pilot projects, such as the Interreg Mediterranean Multiprogramme Coordination Mechanism⁷ and the Synergies pilot⁸, present good examples of capitalisation efforts. The former promotes capitalisation among the Interreg programmes, while the latter fosters a collaborative approach between the Interreg and mainstream programmes.

While coordination between transnational (TN) and cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes, including through initiatives like Interact's MED Lab⁹ and Index tool¹⁰, exists, further improvement is needed, especially in capitalising on each other's results. Coordination between Interreg and mainstream programmes also requires strengthening.

The EUSAIR programme cooperation formats (e.g. MA networks) are planned in the EGP StEP project but not fully explored yet. This includes upscaling projects to the policy level (e.g., using project results to inform and improve policy frameworks/strategies at national and macro-regional levels) and, conversely, aligning projects with macro-regional policy objectives. Upscaling and alignment are also important for supporting the EU accession (e.g., increasing capacity on EU Directives, Strategies).

⁴ The outcomes of the first event of the new Action Lab cycles will be soon published in the EUSAIR Stakeholders' Platform (ESP) by the contracted technical assistance. A dedicated working group is established in the ESP and is available [here](#).

⁵ Unlike Interreg programmes (e.g., IPA Adrion) which have this regulatory requirement

⁶ Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. 2b MRS and SBS. Interreg, EU macro-regional and Sea basin strategies – frameworks unlocking mutual benefits.

⁷ <https://interreg-euro-med.eu/en/multiprogramme-sustainable-tourism/>

⁸ https://www.politichecoesione.governo.it/media/qsdljhs50/dpcoes_synergies-pilot-project.pdf

⁹ Med Lab brings together 17 programmes in the Mediterranean region, highlighting both frameworks relevant for the work of programmes: EUSAIR and WestMed.

¹⁰ Interact has developed an automated data transfer tool (Index) that allows CBC and TN programmes to see each other's applications and data, so they can support stronger synergies between the programmes and projects.

2.2 Territorial and external challenges facing the EUSAIR

The Adriatic-Ionian region faces several challenges, which have intensified in recent years. The challenges, outlined below, underscore the need for a coordinated, strategic approach across the EUSAIR countries both within the current and the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework.

Environmental challenges

Climate change is particularly pronounced in the region. Coastal areas face rising sea levels marine pollution, eroding coastal and maritime ecosystems. Inland areas, meanwhile, are experiencing an increase in heatwaves, droughts and wildfires, alongside a heightened risk of floods. These impacts have severe consequences for human health, water resources and the macro-regional economy.

Socio-economic challenges

The Adriatic-Ionian region still faces economic disparities especially in terms of GDP per capita and challenges related to infrastructure, labour market mismatch, demographic changes and migration. The economy, in some regions, lacks an innovative boost and deals limited opportunities for youth¹¹.

While some regions experience a dearth of tourism, others, especially along coastal areas, are facing the consequences of overtourism. While tourism is a significant economic driver, it can lead to environmental degradation, social tensions, and the erosion of local culture. Balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the need for sustainable development is a critical challenge.

Technological transition

Digital divide, uneven digital infrastructure, a lack of digital skills, and limited investment in research and development hinder the region's ability to fully harness the potential of technological advancements. Addressing these challenges requires significant investments in digital infrastructure, skill development, innovation ecosystems, and cybersecurity measures in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Geopolitical tensions and migration

Geopolitical tensions and instability in neighbouring regions also pose significant risks. The ongoing migration pressure on the borders, exacerbated by the conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, has placed a significant burden on many countries in the macro-region. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has heightened security concerns and disrupted supply chains, impacting the region's economy.

EUSAIR countries are major transit routes for illegal migration and host a significant number of migrant camps. Increasing migration waves pose a significant challenge to the EUSAIR region, particularly in areas experiencing high influx. The lack of a unified EU-wide political consensus on migration policy further complicates the situation.

EU policy change and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans

Cohesion policy aims to reduce regional disparities within the EU, necessitating cooperation on investments, innovation, and social inclusion. However, its future direction remains uncertain. Shifting political priorities may lead to lesser “regional development and cooperation” in favour of “security”. This would significantly weaken the position of EUSAIR as a strategy for transnational development. Furthermore, the existence of several platforms and fora for the Mediterranean Sea requires enhanced coordination and synergy among them.

The new Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans presents another challenge and opportunity for EUSAIR. While it incentivises EU candidate countries’ preparations for EU integration and provides new funding instrument¹², it requires careful consideration of how the EUSAIR can effectively support and complement these efforts.

¹¹ See European Commission 2023: Ninth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion

¹² A new 6 billion EU financial instrument (the Reform & Growth Facility for the Western Balkans) was adopted for 2024-2027.

3 Recommendations for the current EUSAIR

This section offers recommendations, structured under the following subsections:

Preconditions: This subsection refers to the essential aspects that must exist for the EUSAIR to be effectively implemented and achieve its desired outcomes in the current and future Cohesion Policy framework.

EUSAIR in the current Cohesion Policy framework: This subsection focuses on the immediate tasks that need to be addressed by the Strategy and participating countries in the current programming period 2021-2027.

3.1 Preconditions

Successful implementation of EUSAIR activities and objectives requires four preconditions:

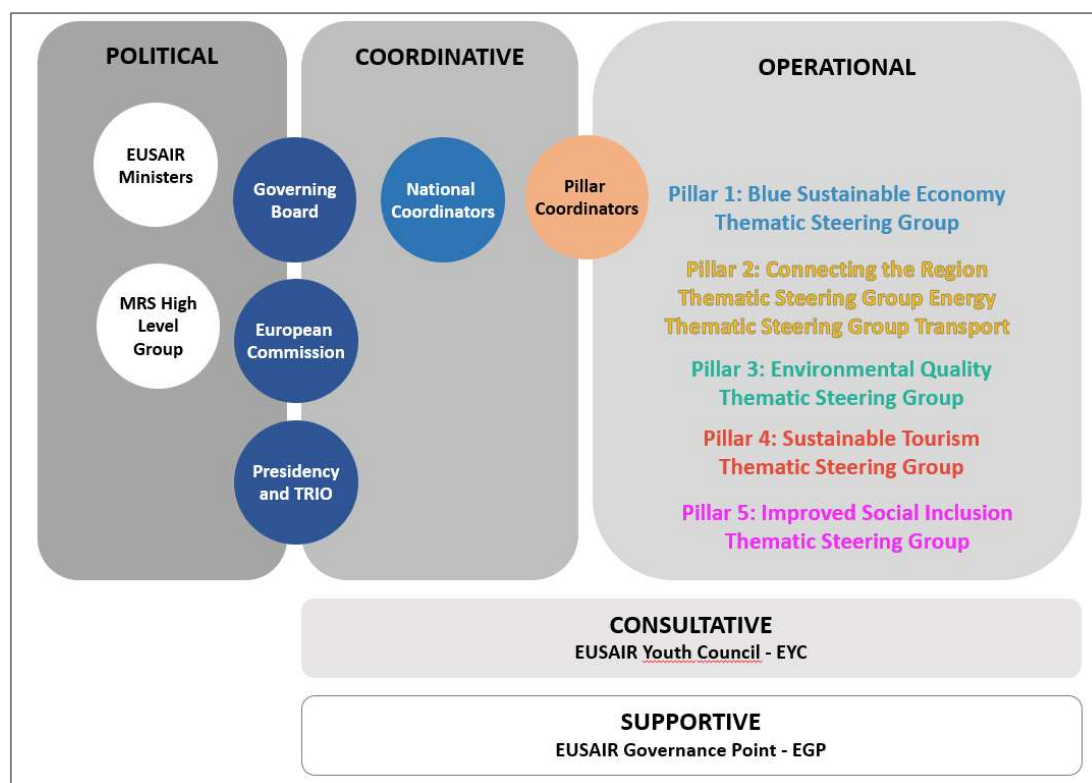
- a functional governance system,
- an Action Plan,
- an adequate monitoring and evaluation system, and
- effective communication.

Functional governance system with clear decision-making processes and coordination

A functional governance system is paramount to the success of EUSAIR and needs considerable improvement regarding the decision-making process and coordination.

The EUSAIR Governance Architecture Paper is a key document outlining the roles and responsibilities of the EUSAIR governance structures: National Coordinators, the EUSAIR (TRIO) Presidency, the Pillar Coordinators, the Thematic Steering Groups, the Working Groups, the European Commission, EUSAIR Governance Point (EGP) and the EUSAIR Youth Council (see below).

Figure 2: EUSAIR governance architecture



Source: EUSAIR Governance Architecture Paper

Regarding governance and decision-making, the following aspects need to be considered:

fostering the cooperation mindset across governance structures (e.g. when bringing national positions to the Governing Board (GB) and Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs)).

streamlining decision-making processes within the GB, TSGs, including clear rules of procedures, timely information flow, use of written procedures to facilitate constructive dialogue during the meetings as well as timely decisions.

a strong EUSAIR (TRIO) Presidency, with agendas focused on long-term priorities extending beyond a single EUSAIR Presidency cycle. These priorities should reflect a multi-annual agenda for macro-regional cooperation and current developments (e.g., EU enlargement, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, embedding, etc.).

strong coordination between the EUSAIR governance structures, facilitated by the EGP EUSAIR Facility Point project. Additionally, the **strategic projects within the EGP must be well-coordinated and harmonised** to ensure a unified and coherent approach. The EGP should also serve as a key coordination support for the EUSAIR Presidency, with close cooperation between the two being essential.

Well-resourced and stable funding for the EGP: a well-resourced EGP is needed to provide coordinated and swift support for a leaner, more functional governance system. However, the lack of stable and sufficient financial sources for the EGP remains a significant challenge, limiting its capacity to consistently support and engage EUSAIR stakeholders (governance structures and stakeholders outside EUSAIR's governance architecture).

These points, particularly a well-functioning governance system and robust coordination, are also crucial for the success of the newly established **EUSAIR Youth Council**. **The EGP Facility Point shall play a key role in facilitating effective interaction between the Youth Council and the EUSAIR Governing Board and the Thematic Steering Groups**. Learning from other MRSs demonstrates that meaningful youth engagement requires clearly defined roles and responsibilities and good tracking of the youth contribution to the Strategy.

Action Plan as a roadmap for an impactful strategy

The soon to be adopted revised EUSAIR Action Plan is a key milestone for the Strategy's success within the current and future Cohesion Policy. It aims to address shared challenges (as detailed in section 2.2 on territorial and external challenges), and pool resources and expertise across sectors and territories, amplifying the impact of cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region¹³.

While the revised Action Plan¹⁴ is considered as a 'rolling document', implying that the Governing Board and TSG should remain attentive and adopt adequate actions if there is a need for adaptation, **it should overall provide a stable framework for the EUSAIR**. Moreover, frequent revisions are impractical due to the time required for the revision and the long-term perspective the EUSAIR has.

In this context, the Presidency agenda should ensure that the EUSAIR Action Plan and its actions remain aligned with the evolving needs of the region and responsive to changing contexts, potential crises, challenges and opportunities ("relevance/reality check" on the Action Plan).

Adequate monitoring and evaluation systems supporting the EUSAIR achievements

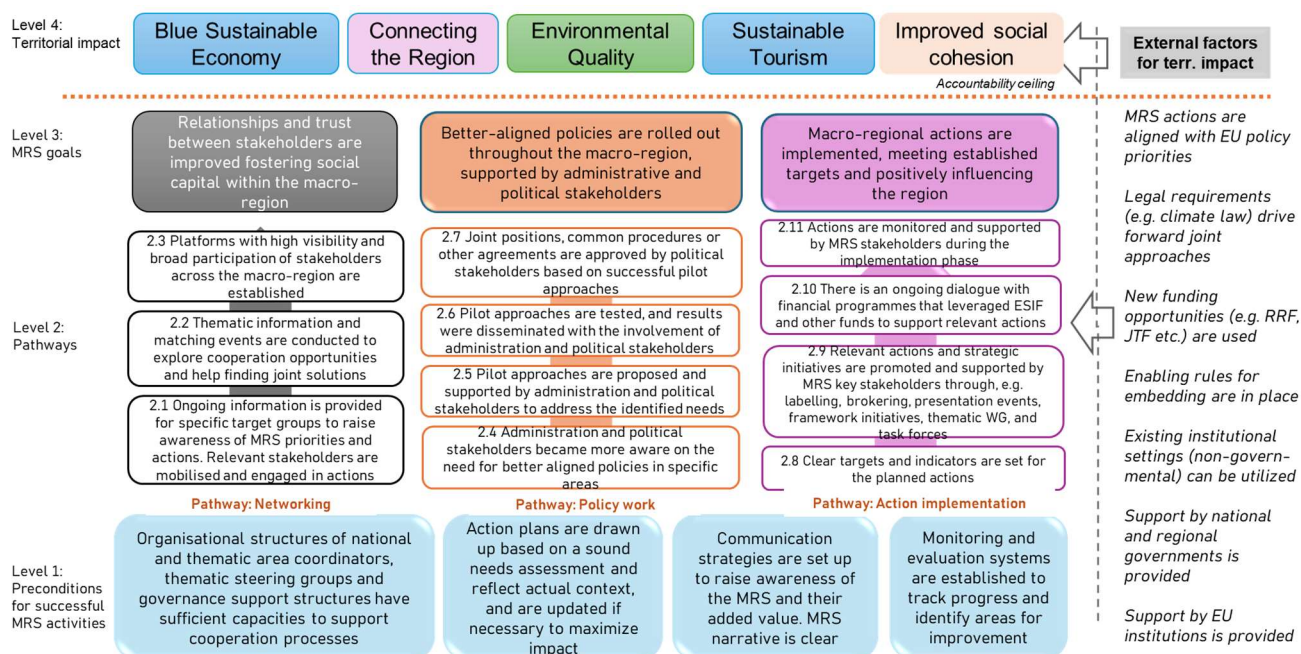
To ensure the effectiveness of the EUSAIR, a Theory of Change model could be deployed. The figure below presents a simplified Theory of Change model for EUSAIR to achieve a shared understanding of the Strategy's impact and serves as a framework for evaluation. This model is based on a Theory of Change model that has been jointly discussed and developed by the representatives of four macro-

¹³ Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. 2b MRS and SBS. Interreg, EU macro-regional and Sea basin strategies – frameworks unlocking mutual benefits. Interact Consultation reports represent the consolidated views from the Interreg programmes.

¹⁴ 9th draft of the revised Action Plan, version 9 September 2024

regional strategies and DG REGIO representatives during the Interact capacity-building service to enhance MRS monitoring and evaluation systems¹⁵. Such an EUSAIR impact model should be based on the EUSAIR Governing Board's request to monitor the EUSAIR's performance.

Figure 3: EUSAIR impact model



Source: M&E Factory 2024

A robust monitoring and evaluation system is essential for several reasons:

demonstrating the impact of the EUSAIR by keeping track of the progress towards the objectives set in the Action Plan. While the proposed indicators in the revised Action Plan measure tangible results (e.g. pilot actions, joint solutions, etc.), they do not fully capture the less tangible, yet crucial, results related to coordinated policy work and networking (e.g. increased social capital across stakeholders). These intangible results represent a key added value of a macro-regional strategy compared to a traditional project-oriented programme.

identifying successful approaches and areas for improvements,

improving the position of EUSAIR by demonstrating that the strategy is delivering results (e.g. to stakeholders, including policymakers, programme bodies, and the public).

The monitoring and evaluation system **should be aligned with the monitoring and evaluation systems of the Cohesion Policy and pre-accession instruments**, and should inform the post-27 EUSAIR actions by addressing:

- effectiveness (% of objectives achieved),
- efficiency (input of financial and human resources/ output and result indicators),
- relativeness,
- institutional capacity building,
- qualitative analysis and
- relevance and coherence with EU policies and emerging priorities.

¹⁵ Interact capacity-building service to enhance MRS monitoring and evaluation systems was implemented between February and December 2024. It is up to the EUSAIR governance bodies to choose the approach and adjust the model to the EUSAIR.

For example, the impact assessment recommendations could be the input for a "relevance/reality check" on the Action Plan to streamline its activities for the post-2027 programming period, guide potential readjustments in the Action Plan and inform future revisions.

Effective communication

Effective EUSAIR communication should clearly demonstrate the EUSAIR's added value to the EU MSs and candidate countries.

The EUSAIR Communication Strategy¹⁶ is a key tool to emphasise how the EUSAIR is being communicated to stakeholders. If the MSs and candidate countries can see how the EUSAIR is supporting their unique priorities, they are also more likely to see its importance.

To enhance the understanding of the EUSAIR's added value, the Strategy should communicate:

successful projects and initiatives launched, coordinated or facilitated by EUSAIR that have directly contributed to economic growth, environmental sustainability or social cohesion in the region. While many results are intangible, concrete examples exist and can be used to demonstrate EUSAIR's impact. The Action Plan's indicators can serve as a starting point.

addressing shared challenges: It is important to highlight how the EUSAIR fosters regional cooperation, enabling EU MSs and candidate countries to develop coordinated actions to tackle shared challenges—such as climate change, biodiversity loss, accessibility and connectivity—more effectively than they could alone. Representatives from other strategies (e.g., EUSDR) could also be invited to share best practices.

achieving EU objectives: It should be emphasised how the EUSAIR contributes to overarching EU objectives like sustainable development, green transitions, and cohesion. Positioning it as a vital tool for accessing EU funding and expertise can enhance its perceived value. EU MSs and candidate countries need to understand that achieving EU policy goals requires joint effort, not solely national instruments, and that only a joint effort will lead to better results. In the future this will be increasingly important to justify regional funding in Europe.

Additionally, the technical assistance and capacity building in place by the EGP Facility Point shall further support countries in leveraging EUSAIR resources and aligning their national strategies with EUSAIR's objectives. Furthermore, improved communication about EUSAIR to Interreg, mainstream, and other programmes is essential. This involves not only the actions outlined in the EUSAIR Communication Strategy (e.g., interconnection between the EUSAIR and ESP, dedicated social media channels) but also targeted communication and capacity building tailored to each programme type.

3.2 EUSAIR in the current Cohesion Policy framework

This section outlines key areas for immediate improvement in terms of:

promoting a shared vision and mutual understanding of the EUSAIR,
promoting EUSAIR ownership at all levels: multi-level governance,
linking EUSAIR to regional planning ensuring a place-based approach,
active embedding throughout the programme lifecycle,
triggering synergies between different programmes and
triggering synergies among macro-regional strategies.

Promoting a shared vision and mutual understanding of the EUSAIR

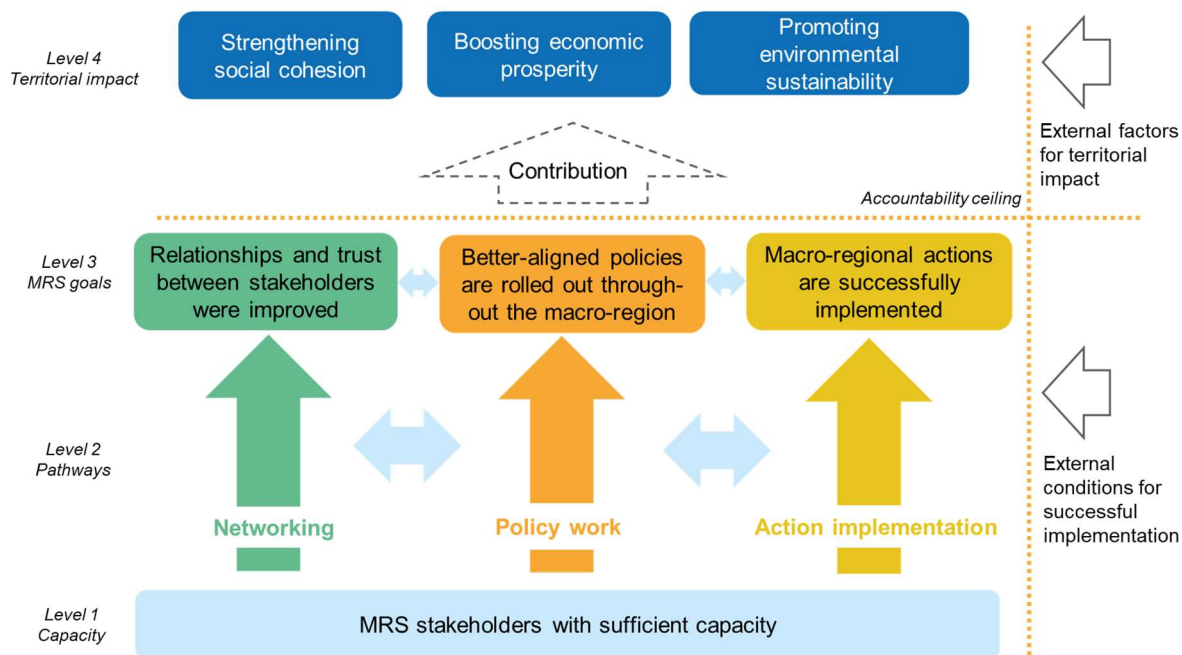
The impact of MRSs is sometimes not well understood by stakeholders at various levels. While the 3NOs (no new institutions, no new EU funds, no new legislation) make the MRSs unique compared to

¹⁶ Draft EUSAIR Communication Strategy 2024, v.1

traditional EU or national programmes, they are sometimes perceived as limitations. This can lead EUSAIR to become overly project-oriented in the pursuit of funding and potentially confusing the stakeholders, particularly those unfamiliar with the EUSAIR framework.

The three pathways in the impact model below demonstrate EUSAIR's (and all MRS) long-term, visionary and comprehensive approach, distinguishing it from a typical project-focused programme.

Figure 4: Impact model of a MRS



Source: M&E Factory 2024, Model for MRS evaluation developed by M&E Factory for Interact, Final report 2024

Developing and communicating a shared vision of the EUSAIR must go beyond **action implementation** (flagship/project-oriented actions). While important, projects/action implementation is only one of three key pathways for EUSAIR implementation and impact. The other two pathways, **networking** and **policy work**, although "less tangible," are equally essential for achieving EUSAIR's strategic objectives.

Promoting EUSAIR ownership at all levels: multi-level governance

The EUSAIR consultation confirmed that participation in the EUSAIR ensures equal and inclusive involvement of all countries (EU MSs, EU candidate countries, non-EU country). However, improvement is necessary in involving stakeholders at different levels, particularly at regional and local level.

EUSAIR should emphasise not only **multi-level governance** but **foster long-term partnerships** among stakeholders. Strengthening these partnerships over time will help build a **resilient and collaborative network**, ensuring the **sustainability** of territorial development efforts in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Low involvement also influences the commitment and hinders the embedding of the Strategy's objectives at sub-national level, where implementation is most impactful. Without stronger engagement and integration of local and regional stakeholders, the EUSAIR risks overlooking the unique needs, challenges and opportunities within these communities. Bridging this gap is essential to ensure that the EUSAIR's objectives are translated into regionally adapted actions that foster inclusive growth and cooperation across its territories.

Engaging local and regional level requires a **bottom-up as well as a top-down approach**. At national level, this requires more coordination that could be triggered by national coordination platforms¹⁷. At macro-regional level, EUSAIR can facilitate thematic dialogue and collaboration through targeted intergovernmental and multi-level consultations, resulting in binding macro-regional agreements.

Linking EUSAIR to regional planning ensuring a place-based approach

A more place-based approach, driven by robust regional development data, maximizes the effectiveness of EUSAIR and Cohesion Policy and strengthens EUSAIR's role in promoting a sustainable and prosperous region. EUSAIR can better address local needs and challenges, further cementing its strategic importance. This requires a more systematic approach to data exchange and collection at the NUTS 3 level, as well as enhanced cooperation among EUSAIR countries to foster a shared understanding of this need. Overcoming traditional perceptions of national economic statistical data (e.g., GDP, employment) is crucial, as cooperation data necessitates new indicators. EUSAIR can define tailored data requirements and drive targeted cross-sectoral discussions for transnational regional development.

EUSAIR can play a crucial role in defining tailored data requirements for macro-regional development and cooperation, and in driving targeted cross-sectoral and cross-pillar processes and discussions.

Active embedding throughout the programme lifecycle

The ultimate aim of the EU Cohesion Policy is to reduce disparities between the levels of development of its various regions by strengthening the economic, social and territorial cohesion¹⁸. By embedding the Cohesion Policy instruments within EUSAIR, it is possible to:

- combine the strengths of different programmes and strategies,
- achieve greater impact through a more coordinated approach,
- streamline processes and reduce duplication of effort,
- strengthen regional cooperation by foster stronger ties between regions and stakeholders.

Successful EUSAIR embedding requires a holistic approach, integrated across a programme life cycle, encompassing Interreg, mainstream and other EU/national programmes.

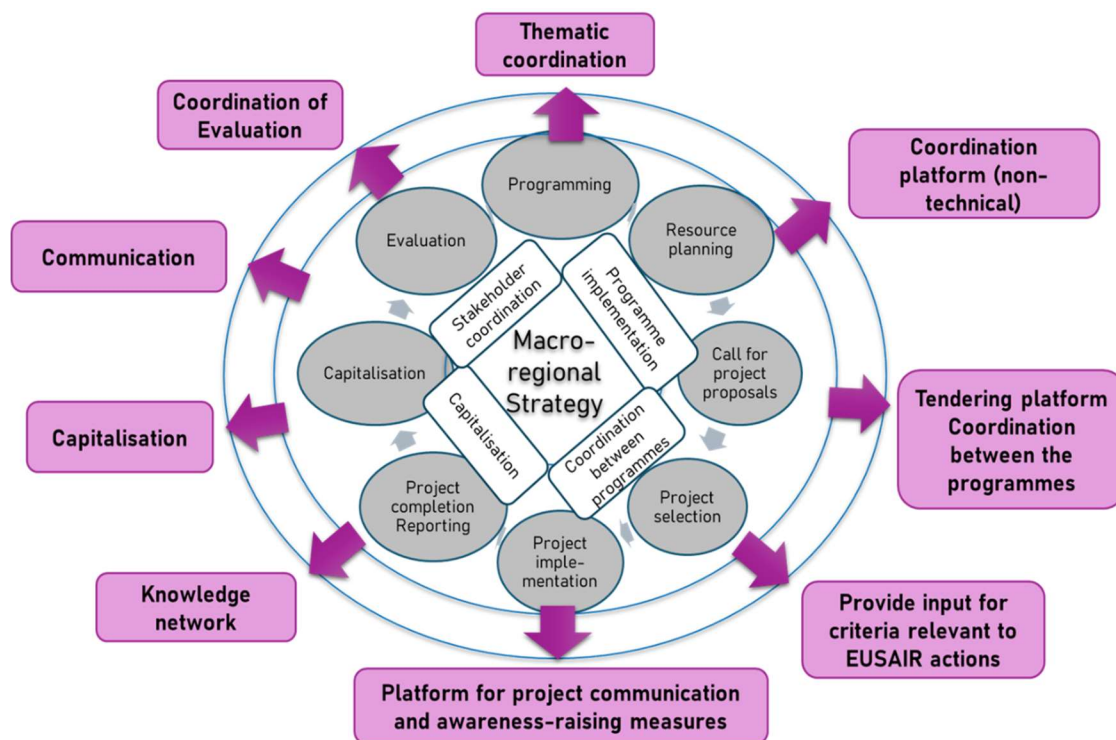
EUSAIR should serve as a platform for facilitating cross-sectoral and stakeholder coordination in the Adriatic-Ionian region. This platform should facilitate the effective integration of EUSAIR priorities into relevant EU and national policies and programmes while simultaneously preventing duplication and maximising synergies. The [Action Lab](#) exercise is a good basis for such an embedding platform.

To further develop and make this platform effective, various aspects need to be considered (see Figure 5).

¹⁷ e.g. ÖROK in Austria is an organisation established by the Austrian federal government, states and municipalities to coordinate spatial development on national level

¹⁸ [Economic, social and territorial cohesion | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament](#)

Figure 5: EUSAIR as an embedding platform



Source: M&E Factory 2024

1. **Programming:** EUSAIR should serve as an overarching framework for the Adriatic-Ionian region, with individual programmes tailored to the specific needs of participating countries. To ensure alignment, the EUSAIR Action Plan revision must overall synchronise with the development of other EU programmes (Interreg, mainstream, IPA, etc.), enabling the integration of EUSAIR objectives into their documents.
2. **Partner search:** EUSAIR can serve as a platform for identifying partners and coordinating efforts among different national and regional programmes aiming to cooperate.
3. **Call for proposals:** While each programme has its own calls, a more strategic approach is to publish strategic calls funded by different national programmes on the EUSAIR platform (e.g. EUSAIR becoming a central hub for announcing and promoting calls that are strategically aligned with the EUSAIR objectives, even if the funding comes from various national, regional or EU programmes). Moreover, EUSAIR can coordinate the creation of cooperation calls in mainstream programmes addressing EUSAIR needs, or specific calls dedicated to support EUSAIR flagships, as it is done in some cases (e.g. in Interreg IT-HR, IPA ADRION). EUSAIR can also support the design of the programme calls, highlighting key macro-regional topics. These actions can simplify procedures for applicants and ensure alignment with macro-regional goals.
4. **Project selection:** Selection criteria are typically programme-specific, but there is an opportunity to consider macro-regional cooperation as a selection criterion in the Cohesion Policy. This is especially important for strategic or coordinated calls.
5. **Project implementation and reporting:** Interregional, cross-border, transnational and mainstream projects can integrate EUSAIR into specific work packages, particularly in communication and outreach activities. Project results can be disseminated through the EUSAIR platform, expert groups and reaching a wider audience through communication channels.

6. **Capitalisation:** EUSAIR can help identify potential users of project results and facilitate the creation of follow-up projects (including pilot actions), as well as contribute to building more sustainable, focussed and coordinated change in the territory. EUSAIR can link individual project results to wider policy processes and other similar initiatives in the Adriatic-Ionian region for a coordinated response to challenges. Harmonisation of existing or future capitalisation strategies of various programmes with the EUSAIR's capitalisation actions is also important.
7. **Evaluation:** A coordinated evaluation approach can assess the effectiveness of projects aligned with EUSAIR objectives. Specific evaluation criterion or indicator related to the EUSAIR can be proposed by/to the MAs when evaluating their programmes.
8. **Capacity building:** Knowledge and experience gained from interregional, cross-border, transnational and mainstream programmes and EUSAIR can be combined to build the capacity of actors involved. The knowledge exchange could be coordinated by Interact. Without training and communication, the benefits of this embedding platform would be limited and short-lived.

Triggering synergies between different programmes

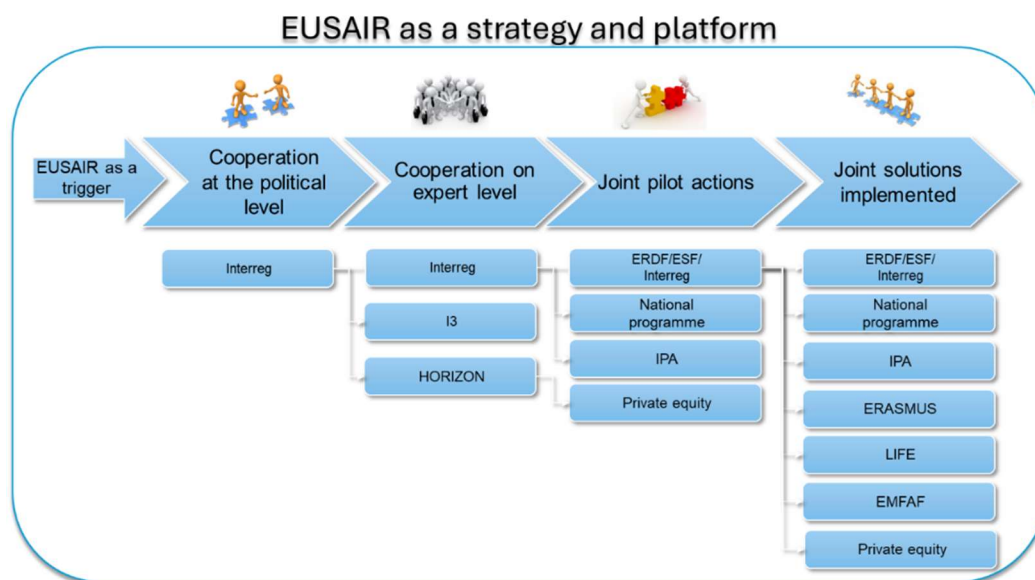
EUSAIR as a platform for macro-regional cooperation should make use of different financial sources:

Cooperation in research, development and innovation could seek synergies with Horizon,

Cooperation to protect natural heritage, biodiversity may seek synergies with LIFE,

Infrastructure projects in Interreg, such as those in transport, cultural and natural heritage, energy transition, and climate change adaptation, could enhance their impact by seeking synergies with ERDF, Connecting Europe and Cohesion Fund mainstream programmes in participating countries to achieve cross-border and transnational benefits.

Figure 6: EUSAIR as a platform for synergies



Source: M&E Factory 2024

The **EUSAIR MA networks** can serve as a key tool to promote this coordination and explore synergies during the programming and implementation phases (e.g. regular meetings with the MAs or with the line DGs for EU centrally managed programmes to facilitate the exchange of information, identification of potential synergies, development of coordinated calls, increased visibility of the EUSAIR, capitalisation of programme results, etc.).

Synergies among macro-regional strategies

Synergies with other MRS are essential to avoid overlaps. Moreover, the use of MRS mechanisms such as the high-level group (HLG) or cross-MRS TRIO presidencies meetings can be better utilised to discuss and share experiences on a strategic and technical level. By aligning with other MRS (EUSDR in particular), SBS (WestMED in particular) and Cohesion Policy instruments, EUSAIR can also contribute to a more cohesive and sustainable region.

The main inputs discussed during the HLG meetings (good practices and challenges) can be further discussed at the NCs/Pillar Coordinators' meetings to explore the possibilities of applying them in the EUSAIR context (e.g. tools other strategies use to promote stakeholder involvement, embedding, etc.).

In addition to the meetings, Interact as a shared knowledge exchange platform, was used in the past and should be further utilised to deepen knowledge and experience sharing, to provide capacity building for public administrations (e.g. on monitoring and evaluation, embedding), as well as to promote synergies and coordination across the MRS.

Interact and DG REGIO can also support the MRS/SBS to promote these frameworks **as a joint long-term vision** for their respective geographical areas, fostering the political ownership and aligning this vision with future collaboration with Interreg and other EU funds and programmes.

MRS/SBS stakeholders could also assume their active role in further intensifying **structured dialogues/networks** with the MAs of various programmes, reinforcing collaboration on projects to create synergies, and ensuring the policy-level uptake, sustainability, and visibility of project results.

4 EUSAIR in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework

The future of Cohesion Policy is uncertain, influenced by political conflicts, rising nationalism, and natural crises. The following section outlines recommendations for post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework that could foster a more integrated and cooperative approach to macro-regional territorial development.

These recommendations address:

- Cohesion Policy
- Enlargement process.
- Macro-regional thematic relevance and synergies
- Synergies and embedding

4.1 Cohesion Policy

Strengthening territorial cohesion in the post-2027 period

To maximize the impact of Cohesion Policy and address the complex challenges facing Europe, a shift towards a more European perspective is necessary. As the High-Level Group on Cohesion Policy Reform emphasized, *"Cohesion is the glue that binds Europeans together. It creates a unified, inclusive Europe where every citizen can feel a sense of belonging and engagement with its objectives."*¹⁹

This requires a shift from a purely national focus of mainstream programmes to a more integrated territorial approach that fosters cooperation and synergy between different regions and countries.

Therefore, EUSAIR (and all MRS) in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy should be more strongly and clearly promoted as a **tool fostering EU integration among Member States and candidate countries**, facilitating the implementation of the Cohesion Policy in the regions falling behind.

- By working together, **shared challenges** such as climate change, biodiversity loss, economic recession, migration, and security threats can be addressed more effectively.
- Strengthening macro-regional cooperation is essential to **stimulate innovation, knowledge sharing**, economic growth and boost competitiveness.
- EUSAIR (and MRS including EU candidate countries) should be given a more active role as a **"laboratory for EU enlargement"**²⁰ in the post-2027 period. This involves supporting candidate countries in fulfilling EU integration requirements more effectively and efficiently, while also fostering a **sense of European identity**. This is particularly crucial given current geopolitical challenges and rising EU scepticism.
- Integrated approach to policymaking and programme implementation can help to **avoid duplication** and ensure the efficient use of resources.
- To ensure sustainable and balanced economic growth across Europe, it is imperative that the post-2027 Cohesion Policy maintains a **strong territorial approach and multi-level governance**. By focusing on cross-sectorial and stakeholder cooperation in various regions and countries, Cohesion Policy can address regional disparities and unlock the full potential of less developed regions. While global challenges such as security and geopolitical economic competition are important, it is crucial to avoid neglecting the vital role of territorial cohesion for ensuring prosperous and resilient Europe.

¹⁹ European Commission 2024, Forging a sustainable future together: cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe

²⁰ This term is often used in the EUSDR

Cohesion Policy instruments need to truly embed the EUSAIR

Mainstream programmes (e.g. ERDF, ESF, EMFAF), IPA programmes as well as other EU programmes (e.g. Common Agricultural Policy, Connecting Europe Facility, etc.) should be required in the future regulation frameworks to include macro-regional cooperation component contributing to EU wide and macro-regional objectives, such as:

- Specific provisions in the regulation explicitly stating that a portion of the funding or a specific number of projects must address macro-regional cooperation (EUSAIR). In line with this, regions/countries should be asked to clearly define and select priorities on regional/national level that could bring better results on regional/national level through macroregional/interregional cooperation.
- Clear selection or even eligibility criteria for projects involving macro-regional cooperation.
- Define mechanisms to better monitor and demonstrate added value of macro-regional cooperation (e.g. indicators, evaluation criterion included in the Terms of References for programme evaluations etc.).
- Mandatory involvement of EUSAIR governance stakeholders in the programming activities as well as in the implementation phase (e.g. during the project selection as an advisor, particularly on topics relevant to EUSAIR objectives).

Positioning of EUSAIR

The evolution of EU funding instruments post-2027 could significantly impact the resources available to macro-regional strategies like EUSAIR. Possibility of reduced EU funding, driven by broader budgetary constraints or shifting policy priorities, underscores the urgent need to strengthen EUSAIR's positioning within national strategies.

- This positioning must be supported by EU officials and reinforced through **regulatory requirements**. To further strengthen EUSAIR's role, line DGs (especially DG NEAR) should recognise its potential and integrate it into broader policy frameworks.
- **Greater flexibility and enhanced financial resources** through restructured instruments could explicitly empower EUSAIR to implement macro-regional flagship projects that cannot be implemented by other programmes (or at least not as efficiently, given EUSAIR's established networks) in order to foster sustainability, innovation and regional integration.

EUSAIR's positioning as an indispensable strategic tool in the Adriatic-Ionian region can help to secure financial resources from diverse sources, demonstrating its unique value in addressing regional challenges. This scenario would empower EUSAIR to align better with EU-wide priorities and deliver tangible benefits.

By demonstrating its added value and aligning closely with key EU and national objectives (also through monitoring mechanisms), EUSAIR can solidify its role as a critical driver of territorial cohesion, even in scenarios with tighter financial constraints. This strategic positioning will be essential to sustain momentum and address the macro-region's challenges effectively.

4.2 EUSAIR as a "laboratory for EU enlargement"

With five of EUSAIR's participating countries being EU candidate countries, it is essential to explore how EUSAIR can further contribute to facilitating the enlargement process.

"Enlargement" is considered as a horizontal topic in the revised EUSAIR Action Plan, with actions supporting (non-exhaustively):

- compliance of candidate countries with the EU acquis through the harmonisation of standards and regulations in various areas such as EU maritime and marine policies, environmental protection, education, transport, energy

- enhancing and harmonisation of monitoring systems for emissions, water quality and air quality, implementation of advanced technologies within the ports of the Adriatic-Ionian region such as Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems and IT solutions, etc.
- knowledge exchange and training to strengthen institutional capacities.

While EUSAIR serves as a bridge, helping EU accession countries integrate EU standards and practices through collaborative projects and knowledge sharing (as listed in the EUSAIR Action Plan) various challenges hinder its contribution to this process such as low awareness of EUSAIR's benefits and purpose, limited resources and institutional capacities to support EUSAIR and limited cooperation among DGs.

EU candidate countries need a clearer understanding of the benefits and purpose of EUSAIR

The complexity of the MRS framework makes it difficult for the EU candidate countries to understand the purpose and benefit of EUSAIR. This is strongly linked with lack of a clearly articulated long-term EUSAIR vision (as mentioned in section 3.2). This vision, highlighting EUSAIR's unique value proposition and differentiating it from typical project-focused programmes, must be clearly developed and communicated. This is it is crucial to provide adequate support to ensure the commitment and participation of EU candidate countries.

This requires capacity building at national, regional, and local levels, facilitated by all relevant policy instruments, to foster a deeper understanding of EUSAIR's purpose and benefits. This communication effort should not rely solely on the EUSAIR strategy itself but must be reinforced by the EU policy framework. The post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework should explicitly recognize EUSAIR's role in accelerating Western Balkan integration into the EU, promoting stability, prosperity, and alignment with European values.

For example, DG ENEST should acknowledge EUSAIR's potential as a valuable framework for coherent regional development. EUSAIR could then serve as a platform for knowledge sharing and capacity building among stakeholders within the EUSAIR Action Plan's scope. Therefore, by helping candidate countries grasp the benefits and purpose of joint strategies, DG REGIO and DG ENEST can empower them to actively contribute to shared goals and strengthen their EU integration.

Better leverage existing resources and expertise to support EUSAIR

While funding instruments like the IPA programming framework (including the Western Balkans Investment Framework²¹ and the Growth Agenda) are directly linked to the engagement process, other programmes could also contribute.

Although Cohesion Policy mainstream programs (e.g., EMFAF, ESF), EU centrally managed programmes (e.g., Horizon Europe, Erasmus+), and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) are not primarily focused on EU enlargement, they represent significant financial and knowledge resources that could support EUSAIR activities outlined in the revised Action Plan.

For example, EU territorial tools like Community-Led Local Development, Local Action Groups (under the CAP and EMFAF), smart village initiatives are important approaches that the revised Action Plan should mobilise through the above-mentioned programmes to support capacity building for EU candidate country stakeholders.

Furthermore, building stronger partnerships between EU Member States and candidate countries can leverage existing resources and attract alternative funding, including private investment and international donors. EUSAIR National Coordinators must take a leading role in driving this alignment.

²¹ The Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) is a joint initiative of the EU, financial institutions (IFC, EIF, EBRD, CEB, KfW, WB, AFD), bilateral donors (Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and Norway) and beneficiaries (Western Balkans countries), aimed at enhancing harmonisation and cooperation in investments for the socio-economic development of the region and contributing to the European perspective of the Western Balkans.

Stronger alignment between DG REGIO and line DGs

To fully harness the potential of EUSAIR, it is crucial to cultivate a shared understanding and commitment among DG REGIO, DG ENEST, and other relevant line DGs. This shared understanding must encompass EUSAIR's overarching goals and objectives, as well as the specific challenges and opportunities within the macro-region.

This entails that all relevant policy instruments should be linked to and integrated within EUSAIR. DG REGIO and line DGs should collaborate closely to identify such synergies and opportunities for joint action.

Enhancing coordination and cooperation between EUSAIR and EUSDR

Both EUSAIR and EUSDR are vital to the EU enlargement process, as they both include EU candidate countries. Maximising their impact requires prioritizing alignment, which necessitates improved and more coordinated collaboration between EUSDR and EUSAIR stakeholders. This however requires a better and more aligned coordination among EUSDR core stakeholders and EUSAIR governance stakeholders.

DG REGIO and DG ENEST can support this cooperation and ensure both strategies further advance the enlargement agenda within the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework.

4.3 Macro-regional thematic relevance

EUSAIR should focus on those topics with a transnational relevance

EUSAIR should provide a platform for the political level and accelerate the political engagement of topics which are particularly important in the specific thematic areas in the EUSAIR region. ***To ensure the success of macro-regional strategies, it is essential to focus on topics with a clear transnational relevance that require macro-regional cooperation.***

EUSAIR faces unique challenges in the Mediterranean Sea, as described in section 2.2 on territorial and external (e.g. environmental protection, climate change, migration, political instability in certain regions, socio-economic challenges, etc.). Those challenges as well as the opportunities (e.g. in the blue economy) requires a united and collaborative effort.

Rather than attempting to address all challenges, EUSAIR should focus on addressing shared challenges. Interventions could build on each other, following a cascade approach:

- starting with policy reforms and harmonisation of policies,
- followed by strategic projects at macro-regional level,
- mobilise stable or evolving networks of stakeholders around priority topics,
- then specific interventions addressing particular thematic or geographic areas,
- and finally, small projects addressing citizens in the macro-region region.

As mentioned under preconditions, the EUSAIR Action Plan serves as a valuable tool for fostering regional collaboration. However, its future effectiveness depends on prioritizing truly macro-regional actions that can drive significant transformation and generate measurable benefits for the Adriatic-Ionian region. The EU's shift towards policy-oriented budget planning, such as the RRF and growth plans for the Western Balkans, provides a framework that EUSAIR could align with to maximize its impact.

Promote a shared EUSAIR vision for long-term sustainable cooperation initiatives and impact

A shared vision for EUSAIR involves fostering a common understanding and commitment among all stakeholders to the strategy's long-term goals and objectives (as also highlighted in the previous sections). It is necessary to support those initiatives which have the potential to drive economic, environmental and social progress in the Adriatic-Ionian region as well as engaging relevant stakeholders committed to pursuing EUSAIR-driven initiatives.

4.4 Synergies and embedding

Focused and coordinated action for greater impact

Better results can be achieved when regions and countries work collaboratively within a coordinated framework rather than in isolation. However, this level of coordination is currently lacking in Cohesion Policy and its regulations, where regions and countries often operate independently. While Interreg and EUSAIR initiatives promote cooperation, their impact is limited due to challenges in convincing programme authorities, especially in mainstream programmes, of the value of macro-regional cooperation and being open to new ways of working.

To ensure that mainstream programmes contribute to the overarching goals of EUSAIR, a shift in mindset is necessary. Programme authorities should be encouraged to consider the broader regional context and identify opportunities for interregional, cross-border and transnational actions. This can be achieved through various mechanisms, such as joint calls for proposals, thematic priorities aligned with macro-regional strategies, and dedicated funding streams for macro-regional projects. By fostering a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, the post-2027 programming period can further strengthen the impact of EUSAIR and contribute to a more cohesive Adriatic-Ionian region.

Overlapping macro-regional strategies must align their actions

To maximize the impact of macro-regional strategies and avoid duplication of effort, overlapping strategies must align their actions. Coordination and the sharing of best practices will create greater synergy and effectiveness.

Regular dialogue and cooperation between different transnational initiatives (sea basin strategy, blue economy platform, etc) can help identify shared priorities, harmonize approaches, and identify and optimise available resources. While MRS TRIO Presidencies meetings organised by the four MRS TRIO Presidencies and cross-MRS Working Group meeting organised by Interact offer an opportunity for all MRS to discuss and share experiences their potential has not been fully utilised and more awareness would enhance the MRS visibility and political commitment.

On strategic level, MRS TRIO Presidencies meetings can be **leveraged to develop common requests** for the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy framework, and for the EU Enlargement regulatory framework (especially through enhancing cooperation between EUSAIR and EUSDR, as they both include EU candidate countries).

On technical level, Interact MRS working groups should be utilised to enhance the capacities of the governance stakeholders at MRS and national levels to facilitate the strategy implementation.

4.5 Description of the post-2027 scenarios

This chapter outlines potential scenarios and recommendations for EUSAIR within this evolving context. It specifically considers the implications of EU enlargement and potential changes (or lack thereof) in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy.

Given that five of the ten EUSAIR participating countries are EU candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia), the EU enlargement in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will significantly shape the EUSAIR and the Adriatic-Ionian region.

This chapter, therefore, analyses the implications of three potential enlargement scenarios for EUSAIR within the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework, drawing from the European Parliament study “Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements”²².

²² European Parliament (2025) Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements, Study requested by the Budgetary Support Unit PE 769.193 – January 2025

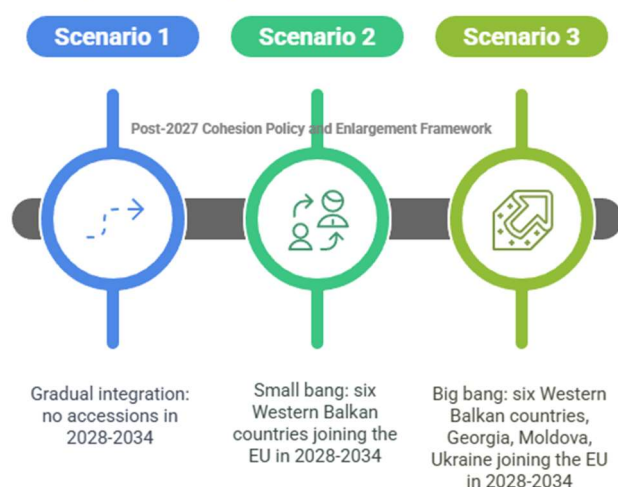
Scenario 1: “gradual integration”, assuming no accessions during the next MFF 2028-2034 but maintaining a credible EU commitment to enlargement (pre-accession assistance).

Scenario 2: “small bang”, with the six Western Balkan (WB) countries joining the EU during the programming period 2028-2034.

Scenario 3: “big bang”, with the six WB countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine joining the EU during the programming period 2028-2034.

These three scenarios are explored in the context of the post-2027 Cohesion Policy (status quo or sectorial approach), looking at thematic priorities, funding and implementation modalities (see figure and sections below). A sectoral Cohesion Policy approach could prioritise sectors over horizontal issues and allocate funding to areas with the highest growth potential, potentially sidelining cohesion and regional development objectives.²³

Figure 7: Enlargement scenarios in 2028-2034



Source: European Parliament, adapted by M&E Factory 2025

Scenario 1: gradual integration - no accessions during the programming period 2028-2034

Scenario 1 “gradual integration” assumes no EU accessions during the programming period 2028-2034 but maintains a credible EU commitment to enlargement through pre-accession assistance.

The following table and sub-sections analyse this scenario within the context of the post-2027 Cohesion Policy (status quo or sectorial approach), examining thematic priorities, funding, implementation modalities, and respective implications for the EUSAIR.

Scenario 1: gradual integration - no accessions during the programming period 2028-2034	
No changes in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy	Implications for the EUSAIR
Thematic priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation of existing Cohesion Policy topics (e.g. climate change, green and digital transition, territorial cooperation) Increased emphasis on competitiveness Growing relevance of security and defence Funding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expected decrease in Cohesion Policy share 	Thematic priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential need for revising the Action Plan (e.g. covering security, competitiveness) Funding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential negative budgetary implications for EUSAIR countries, especially current MSs Non-budgetary costs: increased external geopolitical influence, erosion of past EU funding

²³ European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). The future of EU cohesion: Scenarios and their impacts on regional inequalities – Cost of non-Europe, PE 762.854 – December 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction • Repayment for NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt • Non-budgetary costs linked to the EU losing commitment to enlargement <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuation of administrative burden, complexity in accessing funding and reporting • Overlapping between instruments • Differences between Cohesion Policy and pre-accession assistance implementation modalities 	<p>benefits, decrease of interest in EUSAIR/EU integration</p> <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuation of difficulties in embedding the EUSAIR in different programmes and in accessing funding • Difficulties in dealing with the different implementation modalities of the Cohesion Policy and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans (RGFWB)
Sectorial post-2027 Cohesion Policy	Implications for the EUSAIR
<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased emphasis on competitiveness jeopardising territorial cohesion and cooperation across the EU • Growing relevance of security and defence • Fragmented, sectoral approach undermining EU integration <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased EU spending in areas like EU external competitiveness and industrial transformation, security, defence, migration • Funding for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction • Repayment for NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt • Non-budgetary costs linked to the EU losing commitment to enlargement <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance-based Cohesion Policy • Efforts to increase EU budget agility and flexibility 	<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential need for revising or refocusing the Action Plan (e.g. covering security and topics with the highest transnational relevance) • The need for balanced development across the EUSAIR region becomes even more critical <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential negative budgetary implications for EUSAIR participating countries, with reduced funds for territorial cooperation • Non-budgetary costs: increased external geopolitical influence, erosion of past EU funding benefits, decreased interest in EUSAIR/integration <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for optimisation of EUSAIR's governance and coordination to do more with less • Efforts to increase budget agility and simplify access to funds could help EUSAIR embedding • A performance-based approach would require EUSAIR to demonstrate clear results

Source: M&E Factory 2025 based on desk research and M&E expert opinion

No changes in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy

Thematic priorities: If no new accessions occur and the current Cohesion Policy rules remain in place, the post-2027 Cohesion Policy would largely maintain its focus on topics related to climate change, improving the capacities of regions to reap the benefits of the green and digital transitions, and territorial cooperation, among others. However, a shift is anticipated: first, towards enhanced competitiveness driven by the recent Clean Industrial Deal²⁴ and second, a growing emphasis on security and defence.

For EUSAIR, this shift may necessitate revising the EUSAIR Action Plan, for example, to incorporate security and emphasize competitiveness in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Funding: Despite expanding thematic demands, the share of Cohesion Policy in the post-2027 EU budget is expected to decrease. This is due to the asymmetric impact of caps and safety nets, which impose major cuts to Cohesion Policy allocations on MSs whose economic situation has improved but set a strict upward limit for those facing an economic decline. Ukraine's post-war reconstruction will also require special attention, regardless of its membership status. Moreover, about EUR 25-30 billion per year may be needed over the post-2027 MFF to repay the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt, which

²⁴ [Clean Industrial Deal – European Commission](#)

is almost 20% of the current annual EU budget. This is twice the annual budget for Horizon Europe, and twice the total budget for security and defence under the current MFF budget for 7 years.²⁵

For EUSAIR, these budgetary pressures would have direct implications for the participating countries, especially for the MSs that rely heavily on Cohesion Policy funding. Moreover, a weakened EU commitment to enlargement may have critical non-budgetary costs in the Adriatic-Ionian region. For example, this may lead to a reform backsliding and increased vulnerability of candidate countries to the influence of other geopolitical actors, such as Russia and China. Growing external influence would threaten and destabilise their EU integration and democratic reforms. A rise of populism, corruption and weak governance may also significantly erode the positive effects of EU funding over the past decades²⁶, and a possibly decreased interest in the EUSAIR and EU integration.

Implementation framework: Challenges related to administrative burden in accessing funding, differences and complexity of various instruments, as well as potential overlapping are expected to persist. Furthermore, the differences between both types of frameworks (Cohesion Policy and Enlargement) might be amplified considering the implementation modalities of the two new pre-accession assistance instruments introduced by the EU in 2024: the Ukraine Facility and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans (RGFWB). These facilities differ from classic IPA III²⁷ (and Cohesion Policy) in various ways. They align more closely with a logic of “gradual integration” linking the EU fund disbursement to the implementation of national reform plans.

For EUSAIR, these differences in the implementation modalities could further hinder EUSAIR stakeholders' ability to secure political support, access funding and thus implement macro-regional initiatives.

Sectorial post-2027 Cohesion Policy

Thematic priorities: If no new accessions occur and a more sectorial approach for the Cohesion Policy is applied, the EU might increase its competitiveness and global presence, but this might happen at the cost of territorial cohesion and cooperation. A reduction of a territorial cohesion approach and a fragmented, sectoral approach may threaten EU integration and solidarity and increase the risk of EU turning into a collection of national states, rather than a unified entity. Moreover, the EU policies and related instruments (including Cohesion Policy) might all operate in isolation without clear policy coordination or shared (cohesion) objectives²⁸.

For EUSAIR, this means that it would risk operating within a landscape of isolated EU policies, lacking clear coordination and shared cohesion objectives. Reduced or absent funds for cooperation would diminish the added value of macro-regional cooperation, necessitating the optimisation of EUSAIR's governance and coordination to do more with less. A revision or refocusing of the EUSAIR Action Plan, such as incorporating security and prioritising high-impact transnational topics, may also be required.

Funding: Increased EU spending is expected in new areas such as security, defence, migration and for strategic projects enhancing the EU's external competitiveness and transforming the industry. Substantial funding will be also required for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and the repayment of NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt.

For EUSAIR, increased EU spending in new areas and reduced funding for cooperation would intensify competition for funding, limiting access to funding. Furthermore, the non-budgetary costs associated with a weakened EU commitment to enlargement, as previously mentioned, would also increase.

²⁵ European Commission (2025). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The road to the next Multiannual Financial Framework COM(2025) 46 final – February 2025.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Since the adoption of the IPA III for the 2021–2027 period, three new countries—Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine—have been granted candidate status.

²⁸ European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). The future of EU cohesion: Scenarios and their impacts on regional inequalities – Cost of non-Europe, PE 762.854 – December 2024

Implementation framework: Discussions on various levels are underway on how to make the EU budget more agile and flexible, simplify the access to EU funds and more private investment through financial instruments and guarantees²⁹. A performance-based Cohesion Policy is being emphasised to enhance its efficiency, building on lessons learned from other EU instruments and its strengths (shared management, multi-level governance, place-based approach, partnership principle)³⁰.

For EUSAIR, the ongoing efforts to increase budget agility and simplification present potential advantages for its stakeholders. However, the adoption of a performance-based approach of Cohesion Policy would require them to clearly demonstrate results and impact, as well as increase the capacities of stakeholders to adapt to such an approach.

Scenario 2: small bang - six Western Balkan countries joining the EU during the programming period 2028-2034

Scenario 2 “small bang” anticipates the integration of six Western Balkan countries during the programming period 2028-2034.

The following table and sub-sections analyse this scenario within the context of the post-2027 Cohesion Policy (status quo or sectorial approach), examining thematic priorities, funding, implementation modalities, and respective implications for the EUSAIR.

Scenario 2: small bang - six Western Balkan countries joining the EU during the programming period 2028-2034	
No changes in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy	Implications for the EUSAIR
<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued focus on existing topics of the Cohesion Policy Increased emphasis on competitiveness Growing relevance of security and defence <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modest increase in the Cohesion Policy budget Funding for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction Repayment for NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential overlapping between instruments Varying implementation speeds across the MSs 	<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential need for revising the Action Plan (e.g. covering security, competitiveness) <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Varied budgetary implications for EUSAIR participating countries, with potential gains for new MSs and losses for existing ones. <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requirement for strong administrative capacities in new MSs in the EUSAIR to implement Cohesion Policy instruments Need for good coordination at macro-regional and EU level
Sectorial post-2027 Cohesion Policy	Implications for the EUSAIR
<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased emphasis on competitiveness, security and defence Increased risk of reduced territorial cohesion, undermining EU integration 	<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential need for revising or refocusing the Action Plan (e.g. security, topics with the highest transnational relevance)

²⁹ European Parliament (2025) Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements, Study requested by the Budgetary Support Unit PE 769.193 - January 2025

³⁰ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (2025). The road to the next multiannual financial framework, COM (2025) 46 final

Scenario 2: small bang – six Western Balkan countries joining the EU during the programming period 2028-2034	
No changes in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy	Implications for the EUSAIR
Funding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased EU spending in areas like EU external competitiveness and industrial transformation, security, defence, migration Funding for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction Repayment for NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt Implementation framework: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance-based Cohesion Policy Increased EU budget agility and flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The need for balanced development across the EUSAIR region becomes even more critical Funding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Varied budgetary implications for EUSAIR participating countries, with potential gains for new MSs and losses for existing ones, compared to gradual integration scenario. Implementation framework: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efforts to increase budget agility and simplify access to funds could benefit EUSAIR stakeholders and support embedding A performance-based approach would require EUSAIR to demonstrate clear results Need for strengthened capacities at new and existing MS level

Source: M&E Factory 2025 based on desk research and M&E expert opinion

No changes in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy

Thematic priorities: Under a “small bang” scenario with unchanged Cohesion Policy rules, the post-2027 Cohesion Policy would maintain thematic priorities similar to the “gradual integration” scenario, including the shift towards enhanced competitiveness, security and defence.

For EUSAIR, this shift may necessitate a revision of the Action Plan, such as incorporating security and stressing macro-regional competitiveness driven by the Commission's Clean Industrial Deal.

Funding: A slight increase in the overall CP budget is expected (+ EUR 20 billion or 5% in the CP budget compared to today's MFF or + EUR 15 billion compared to a scenario without new accessions³¹). This would have important negative effects on a few current MSs but positive effects on the new MSs (e.g. Serbia would be the ninth-largest beneficiary of the 2028-2034 Cohesion allocations in the EU). Additionally, if the EU budget is kept at 1% of EU GDP, there would be EUR 351 billion available (~ EUR 50 billion per year) to be used either to smooth the negative impact of enlargements or to finance new spending needs.

For EUSAIR, this scenario presents varying budgetary implications for its participating countries, potentially resulting in positive effects for the new MSs and negative effects for existing ones.

Implementation framework: A continuation of the current Cohesion Policy rules under various EU funding instruments leads to overlapping objectives and actions. Initial implementation delays and inefficiencies are also expected in the new MSs.

The continuation of current Cohesion Policy rules across various funding instruments would likely result in overlapping objectives and actions. Initial implementation delays and inefficiencies can be anticipated, particularly in new MSs.

For EUSAIR, this requires strong administrative capacities in the new MSs to implement the different Cohesion Policy instruments. Without enhanced coordination at the EU level, the risk of overlapping is likely to persist or even increase. On the other hand, with the accession of six Western Balkan countries to the EU, aligning funding to address the Adriatic-Ionian challenges and priorities could become more seamless due to similar funding systems (no need for pre-accession instruments).

Sectorial post-2027 Cohesion Policy

³¹ Budget implications of the CAP is not considered for this paper, but could be found in the study of the European Parliament (2025) “Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements” PE 769.193 – January 2025

Thematic priorities: A sectoral Cohesion Policy approach may prioritise sector-specific reforms and investment over regional development and territorial cohesion and cooperation. This could lead to a concentration of resources in specific areas, leaving other regions behind and exacerbating existing disparities, especially between existing and new MSs.

For EUSAIR, similar to the “gradual integration” scenario, a revision or refocus of the Action Plan may be necessary, such as incorporating security and prioritising the highest-impact transnational topics that contribute to macro-regional development and territorial cohesion.

Funding: Increased EU spending is expected in new areas such as competitiveness and transforming the industry, security and defence and migration, as well as to repay the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt and support Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction.

For EUSAIR, this scenario presents varying budgetary implications for its participating countries, potentially resulting in positive effects for new MSs and negative effects for existing ones. However, budget constraints and challenges will likely be greater, since the EUSAIR would need to demonstrate tangible achievements in macro-regional cooperation.

Implementation framework: A more agile and flexible EU budget will be essential to deal with potential implementation delays and challenges in the new MSs. Simplified access to EU funds and a performance-based Cohesion Policy are also expected to be applied.

EUSAIR would benefit from a more agile EU budget to address its implementation challenges. Alignment of funding for addressing the Adriatic-Ionian challenges and priorities may be easier due to a similar performance-based logic. However, simplified fund access and a performance-based Cohesion Policy would require good capacities of EUSAIR stakeholders as well as robust monitoring and control systems, particularly for stakeholders from new MSs. Furthermore, in the case of sectorial policies being less coordinated at EU level, MSs (new and existing) may take a more prominent role in coordinating policies and related instruments at national level³², including Cohesion Policy and integrated territorial development, which would require technical assistance for the MSs.

Scenario 3: big bang – six Western Balkan countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine joining the EU during the programming period 2028-2034

Scenario 3 “big bang” envisions a significant expansion of the EU during the period 2028-2034, encompassing the integration of six Western Balkan countries and the accession of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The main implication for EUSAIR, compared to the second scenario, is the magnified (financial and non-financial) impact resulting from such a large-scale enlargement.

The following table and sub-sections analyse this scenario within the context of the post-2027 Cohesion Policy (status quo or sectorial approach), examining thematic priorities, funding, implementation modalities, and respective implications for the EUSAIR.

Scenario 3: big bang – six Western Balkan countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine joining the EU during the programming period 2028-2034	
No changes in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy	Implications for the EUSAIR
Thematic priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security as well as some priorities given for new MSs’ economic integration such as basic infrastructure and energy Funding:	Thematic priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential need for revising or refocusing of the Action Plan (e.g. security, topics with the highest transnational relevance contributing to the new MSs’ economic integration) Increased disparities and discontent across MSs

³² European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). The future of EU cohesion: Scenarios and their impacts on regional inequalities – Cost of non-Europe, PE 762.854 – December 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohesion Policy budget increase of EUR 40 billion compared to "gradual integration", but would affect some existing MSs • Funding for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction • Repayment for NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened conditionality mechanisms in the new MSs • Overlapping between various instruments 	<p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied budgetary implications for EUSAIR participating countries, with potential gains for new MSs (however lower than in "small bang" scenario) and losses for existing ones (higher losses compared to scenario "small bang") <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requirement for strong administrative capacities in the new MSs to implement the Cohesion Policy
Sectorial post-2027 Cohesion Policy	Implications for the EUSAIR
<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced territorial cohesion and cooperation, undermining EU integration • Increased emphasis on competitiveness, security and defence • Dedicated priorities for new MSs (e.g. institutional capacity, basic infrastructure) <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased EU spending in areas like EU external competitiveness and industrial transformation, security, defense, migration, and specific priorities for the new MSs • Funding for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction • Repayment for NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance-based Cohesion Policy • Stricter conditionality and enhanced monitoring and control • Increased EU budget agility and flexibility 	<p>Thematic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential need for revising or refocusing of the Action Plan (e.g. security, topics with the highest transnational relevance contributing to the new MSs' economic integration) • The need for balanced development across the EUSAIR region becomes even more critical <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied budgetary implications for EUSAIR participating countries, with potential gains for new MSs (however lower than in "small bang" scenario) and losses for existing ones (higher losses compared to scenario "small bang"). <p>Implementation framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensified focus on strengthening administrative capacity of stakeholders • Revision of embedding efforts to align with a sectoral, performance-based approach that require EUSAIR to demonstrate clear results • Need for enhanced internal and external coordination between EU institutions (DG REGIO, line DGs) and EUSAIR stakeholders

No changes in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy

Thematic priorities: In a "big bang" scenario, the likelihood of maintaining the current Cohesion Policy framework is drastically lower compared to the other two scenarios. With nine new MSs joining the EU, territorial and social fragmentation would significantly increase. Moreover, growing disparities within and across MSs would fuel discontent, which may require a more focused and flexible approach in addressing territorial and social cohesion and economic integration. Consequently, priority would need to be given to key topics such as infrastructure, energy, etc. to facilitate economic integration of the new MSs. Moreover, the geographic location of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine would demand specific attention to security, defence and the protection of EU external borders.

For EUSAIR, this would probably imply a larger focus of the Action Plan on economic integration, infrastructure, energy, etc. to facilitate the integration of new MSs, as well as on security.

Funding: If the current Cohesion Policy allocation rules are maintained, the accession of the nine countries would increase the Cohesion Policy budget by EUR 40 billion compared to a "gradual integration" scenario. The accession of new (less developed) MSs would have important negative effects for some current MSs, which may suffer reductions of their national cohesion allocations compared to the 'gradual integration' scenario³³.

³³ Budget implications of the CAP is not considered for this paper, but could be found in the study of the European Parliament (2025) "Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements" PE 769.193 – January 2025

If the EU budget remains at 1% of EU GDP, there would be EUR 355 billion available to either smooth the negative impact of enlargements or finance new spending needs. The 2.3% GDP capping rule would significantly limit the amount of Cohesion funds allocated to the new MSs.

For EUSAIR, similar to the “small bang” scenario, this scenario would result in varying budgetary implications for its countries, potentially positive effects for new MSs (e.g. for the six Western Balkan countries) and negative effects for existing ones (e.g. Italy, etc.). However, the magnitude of positive effects for the new MSs may be less pronounced compared to the 'small bang' scenario due to the inclusion of additional, less developed countries. At the same time, the negative effects for existing Member States could be more substantial compared to the "small bang" scenario.

Implementation framework: In a “big bang” scenario, the Cohesion Policy would need to allocate sustainable resources to strengthen public administration and capacities in the new MSs, as well as to strengthen conditionality mechanisms to ensure the effective use of EU funds. Moreover, since many of these countries (especially Ukraine) have large agricultural sectors, the interaction between Cohesion Policy and the Common Agriculture Policy would become even more critical.

For EUSAIR, this would translate to a need for strong administrative capacities and technical assistance for the new MSs to implement the different Cohesion Policy instruments. Additionally, similar to the “small bang” scenario, the accession of six Western Balkan countries to the EU could streamline funding alignment for Adriatic-Ionian challenges and priorities, eliminating the need for pre-accession instruments. Opportunities may also arise for the EUSAIR in capacity building (existing strong involvement of EU funds ministries) and fostering embedding activities. However, the results of these efforts may be less effective due to the lower EU funding allocated to the Adriatic-Ionian region compared to the "small bang" scenario.

Sectorial post-2027 Cohesion Policy

Thematic priorities: With nine new accessions and a more sectorial approach for the Cohesion Policy which may prioritise sectoral reforms over territorial cohesion and cooperation, the risk of reduced territorial cohesion will significantly increase.

For EUSAIR, this makes fostering economic integration essential to help new MSs' economies in the Adriatic-Ionian region catch up with the EU average. Such a focus may require a revision or refocusing of the Action Plan and adjustments to the existing embedding actions. Furthermore, security would need to be incorporated in the Action Plan. Additionally, the need for dedicated priorities for new MSs, such as institutional capacity and basic infrastructure, are highly probable.

Funding: There will be increased EU spending in new areas such as security and defence, migration and competitiveness, as well as to repay the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt and support Ukraine's post-war reconstruction.

For EUSAIR, the likelihood of having specific priorities dedicated only to the new MSs would have positive implications for the new MSs but negative implications for the current ones.

Implementation framework: A sectorial approach and a large expansion of the EU would require stricter conditionality and enhanced monitoring and controlling, including transparency, accountability and the fight against corruption. While conditionality would increase, there would also be a need for simplification and flexibility in the implementation framework to adapt to the needs and challenges of new MSs and allowing for quicker adaptation to changing geopolitical contexts.

For EUSAIR, this would necessitate an intensified and ongoing focus on strengthening administrative capacity of its stakeholders and revising embedding efforts to align with a sectoral, performance-based approach. Enhanced internal and external coordination between the EU institutions (DG REGIO, line DGs) and EUSAIR stakeholders would also be essential.

5 Key messages

The following key messages summarise the main conclusions from the Report.

1

EUSAIR operates within a **complex landscape of territorial and external challenges** such as environmental challenges, socio-economic challenges, geopolitical tensions and migration that transcend national borders and capacities. These challenges **demand comprehensive and well-coordinated macro-regional responses** to ensure the Adriatic-Ionian region's stability and prosperity.

2

Four preconditions should be fulfilled by the EUSAIR governance structures to ensure the success of EUSAIR in the current and post-2027 Cohesion Policy:

a functional and well-coordinated EUSAIR governance system. This also includes strengthening multi-level governance and ensuring active engagement of local and regional stakeholders in the EUSAIR implementation.

a stable yet flexible EUSAIR Action Plan that is focused, realistic and aligned with the EU priorities and needs in the Adriatic-Ionian region. This includes the potential introduction of new priorities such as security-related cooperation given its increasing importance, and/or refocusing on key topics aligned with the post-2027 EU priorities. If new EUSAIR countries join the EU, particularly those with more pronounced territorial disparities, prioritising the economic integration of new Member States will be essential.

an adequate EUSAIR monitoring and evaluation system, which is harmonised with the monitoring and evaluation systems of the post-2027 Cohesion Policy and pre-accession instruments.

effective communication that fosters a shared vision and understanding of EUSAIR's objectives and added value within the Adriatic-Ionian region.

3

EUSAIR in the **current Cohesion Policy framework** should focus on:

promoting a shared vision and mutual understanding of the EUSAIR,
promoting multi-level governance by engaging stakeholders across all levels, particularly regional and local actors,
ensuring a place-based approach guided by robust macro-regional development data and cross-sectoral dialogue,
embedding the EUSAIR priorities throughout the entire programme lifecycle.

4

The post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework should explicitly recognize and better integrate EUSAIR (and other MRS) as a crucial instrument for

shifting from national to European perspectives to address transnational challenges and strengthen territorial cohesion,

triggering synergies along the cooperation value chain,

accelerating EU enlargement.

6 Summary Recommendations

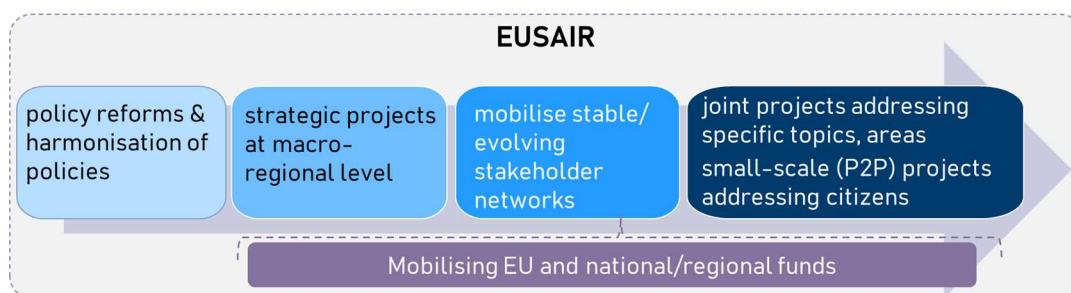
Recommendations for EU policymakers at EU and national level

1. **A shift towards a more European perspective is needed.** The post-2027 Cohesion Policy should:
 - maintain a **strong territorial approach** and **multi-level governance**. It needs to be recognised that this requires shifting towards European-oriented approach fostering cooperation, synergy and inclusivity, addressing shared challenges like climate change, socio-economic issues and security threats more effectively.
 - **embed EUSAIR (and other MRS) objectives into the regulatory framework** of future Cohesion Policy instruments and ensure continued relevance and access to funding within the evolving EU policy landscape. To ensure that Cohesion Policy and any future pre-accession instruments effectively support macro-regional strategies like EUSAIR, it is crucial to integrate MRS objectives into the regulatory framework. This can be achieved by introducing mandatory regulatory requirements for programme authorities to consider EUSAIR priorities during programme design, project selection and implementation. By aligning funding decisions with EUSAIR goals, the EU can maximize the impact of its investments and foster greater regional cooperation. Furthermore, the regulatory framework should encourage stronger collaboration between different funding instruments and programmes, promoting a more holistic approach to regional development.
 - ensure **strategic prioritisation of EUSAIR as a driver of regional development and territorial cohesion and cooperation**: Regardless of the final structure of the next Cohesion Policy, EU policymakers must ensure EUSAIR's objectives are strategically prioritised in the Cohesion Policy to mitigate the risk of increased territorial and social fragmentation resulting from new accessions. Sectoral reforms or interventions should prevail over territorial cohesion and cooperation. One option would be that the EUSAIR is designated as a horizontal mechanism in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy and across EU funding.
 - **in case of a sectorial Cohesion Policy, ensure the national reform plans incorporate macro-regional approaches**, especially in topics of key transnational relevance such as climate change, biodiversity loss, migration and security. Strengthening European value chains through macro-regional cooperation is also essential to stimulate innovation, economic integration and boost competitiveness.
 - ensure **strategic utilisation of EUSAIR as a key instrument for capitalisation, particularly in scenarios where sectoral reforms outweigh territorial cohesion and cooperation**: EUSAIR's role in capitalisation (upscaling national project results and downscaling EU/macro-regional policies/agreement) is crucial for maximizing the impact of EU-

funded investments and policies, especially in addressing critical transnational challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, migration and security.

- **harmonise of monitoring and evaluation systems** between the Cohesion Policy, pre-accession instruments and the EUSAIR for better macro-regional impact monitoring (e.g. similar indicators, similar methodologies in measuring indicators, aligning performance-based milestones and targets in case of a performance-based Cohesion Policy, etc.)
- ensure **meaningful simplification and streamlined procedures** across Cohesion Policy instruments to facilitate the absorption of funds.
- **prioritise building administrative capacity at national level, with a specific focus on candidate countries and new MSs:** Regardless of the next Cohesion Policy framework, the EU policymakers should invest in building the administrative capacity of EUSAIR countries and stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of Cohesion Policy, particularly under a performance-based approach (e.g. through technical assistance, twinning programmes).
- ensure **participation of programme authorities in the EUSAIR MA networks.** This may be triggered through mandatory reporting for participation of programme authorities in networks, performance indicators within the Cohesion Policy linked to participation in the EUSAIR (MRS) MA networks.
- **enhance direct communication between the EUSAIR and line DGs,** especially DG ENEST, to fully harness the potential of macro-regional cooperation in the region.
- **proactively communication initiatives on the EU level** to demonstrate the purpose and benefits of the EUSAIR (and other MRS). This should also include strategic and more visible recognition of macro-regional cooperation in the next Cohesion Policy and Multiannual Financial Framework, and by the high-level representatives in the Commission and other EU stakeholders.
- strategically leverage **EUSAIR as a platform for exploring synergies throughout the territorial cooperation value chain** (see figure below).

Figure 8: EUSAIR as a platform that triggers synergies along the cooperation value chain



Source: M&E Factory 2025

- **strategic alignment and coordination between the EUSAIR and EUSDR** given their overlapping countries (Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia). Maximising their impact and optimising the resources requires better coordination between both MRS. For example, enhanced coordination, supported by DG REGIO and DG ENEST, ensure both strategies advance the enlargement agenda in the next period. The existing cross-MRS formats (e.g. 4 MRS TRIO Presidencies, Interact cross-MRS Working Group) should be also fully utilised.
2. **EUSAIR as a "laboratory for EU enlargement"**, fostering a sense of European identity while facilitating the accession process: The strategy must actively support the compliance with the EU

acquis in various topics such as maritime policies, environmental protection, transport, energy, and education. This requires:

- **Strategic prioritisation of EUSAIR within enlargement**, given the significant number of EU candidate countries within EUSAIR.
- **Ensuring continued EU commitment, regardless of accession timelines**: To counter the risk of backsliding reform and increased vulnerability to external influence, the EU must demonstrate its long-term commitment to the Adriatic-Ionian region and highlight the strategic role of EUSAIR in the enlargement process.
- **Better leveraging existing resources and expertise** to support EUSAIR, including not only IPA programming framework (including the Western Balkans Investment Framework and the Growth Agenda) but also other programmes (e.g. mainstream programs, Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, the Common Agricultural Policy, etc.). EU territorial tools like Community-Led Local Development, Local Action Groups, smart village initiatives (under the Common Agriculture Policy, EMFAF, etc.) are also important approaches to support capacity building for EU candidate countries.
- **Aligning the EUSAIR with WBIF and the Regional Blending Platform**, considering its role in funding infrastructure investments in connectivity, energy, decarbonization, and digital transitions. In this context, the macro-regional actions indicated in the Action Plan such as enhanced monitoring systems, advanced technologies in Adriatic-Ionian ports, need to be strongly promoted.
- **Assessing how the WBIF mechanisms influence EUSAIR's** funding strategy and embedding process to ensure alignment with new EU financing instruments.
- Strengthening **policy linkages with the Reform and Growth Facility** to adapt EUSAIR's strategic direction to support infrastructure investments in the five EUSAIR pillars, ensuring coherence with EU objectives in the Western Balkans.
- Prioritising **capacity building and knowledge exchange** to strengthen institutional capabilities in EU candidate countries.
- **Providing adequate resources for EUSAIR governance structures**, even with potential budget reductions, through earmarked technical assistance/resources for macro-regional cooperation and sustained funding of governance projects within the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework.
- **Exploring a pilot "Multi-Country Project Facility"** in an EUSAIR EU candidate country to pool funds for EUSAIR projects and to leverage other EU programmes beyond the IPA assistance and Cohesion Policy to build capacity, such as the use of territorial tools like Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), Local Action Groups (LAGs) and smart village initiatives within the Adriatic-Ionian region.

These can be only achieved with the support of relevant stakeholders at EU level. This includes not only DG REGIO but also DG ENEST and possibly other DGs, with dialogue facilitated by the EUSAIR Facility Point. This effort can be further supported by the activities of the StEP project, which aims to provide a common framework for coherence between EUSAIR and national and multinational IPA programming, while also fostering constructive dialogue with DG ENEST, EU Delegations, and the NIPACs of EUSAIR countries regarding financing, methodologies, practices and capacities.

3. **Addressing key challenges and opportunities in the Mediterranean: To ensure EUSAIR's success, it is essential to focus on topics with a clear transnational relevance that require macro-regional cooperation across borders** such as environmental protection, climate change, socio-economic

challenges, geopolitical tensions/security, among others. Those challenges as well as opportunities (e.g. in the blue economy) require a united and collaborative effort. EUSAIR should further develop and adopt a cascade approach for addressing challenges, starting with policy reforms, followed by macro-regional strategic projects, stakeholder mobilisation, targeted interventions, and small local projects addressing citizens.

4. Greater impact requires focused and coordinated action within the Cohesion Policy framework and among overlapping macro-regional strategies:

The current Cohesion Policy programmes lack sufficient coordination, often operating independently. While Interreg and EUSAIR promote cooperation, their impact is limited by difficulties in convincing mainstream programme authorities of the value of macro-regional collaboration and new ways of working. To better align the Cohesion Policy programmes with EUSAIR goals, a shift in mindset is needed, encouraging programme authorities to consider the broader regional context and support interregional, cross-border, and transnational actions through mechanisms like joint calls and dedicated funding.

Furthermore, overlapping macro-regional strategies must align their actions to avoid duplication. While platforms like Interact and MRS TRIO Presidency meetings exist, their potential for coordination and knowledge sharing needs to be better utilized. Strategically, MRS TRIO Presidencies meetings should be used to develop joint recommendations for the post-2027 Cohesion Policy and enlargement frameworks. Technically, Interact MRS working groups could further enhance the capacity of EUSAIR (and other MRS) and national governance stakeholders to support their strategy implementation.

7 Annex

7.1 References

European Commission (2025). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The road to the next Multiannual Financial Framework COM (2025) 46 final – February 2025. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_486

European Parliament (2025) Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements, Study requested by the Budgetary Support Unit PE 769.193 – January 2025 Available at: https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/BUDG_STU2025769193_EN.pdf

Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. 2b MRS and SBS. Interreg, EU macro-regional and Sea basin strategies – frameworks unlocking mutual benefits. Available at: <https://www.interact.eu/library/367>

Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. Synergies and cooperation. Improving synergies among Interreg and other funds and policies. Available at: <https://www.interact.eu/library/367>

Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. External Cooperation. Interreg and its role in EU external cooperation. Available at: <https://www.interact.eu/library/367>

Interact (January 2025). Post 2027 Consultation Report. 2a Capitalisation. Capitalisation in Interreg – towards greater impact. Available at: <https://www.interact.eu/library/367>

European Commission (2024). Forging a sustainable future together: Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe report of the High-level Group on the future of Cohesion Policy- February 2024 Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c6e97287-cee3-11ee-b9d9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). The future of EU cohesion: Scenarios and their impacts on regional inequalities – Cost of non-Europe, PE 762.854 – December 2024

Available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU\(2024\)762854#:~:text=Cohesion%20policy%20plays%20a%20crucial%20role%20in%20promoting,identifies%20three%20main%20challenges%20in%20addressing%20regional%20inequalities.](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2024)762854#:~:text=Cohesion%20policy%20plays%20a%20crucial%20role%20in%20promoting,identifies%20three%20main%20challenges%20in%20addressing%20regional%20inequalities.)

European Commission (2024). EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/adriatic-ionian_en

European Commission (2024). Macro-Regional Strategies. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies_en

EUSAIR (2024). Adriatic-Ionian Region (online). Available at: <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/about-eusair/adriatic-ionian-region/>

EUSAIR Revised Action Plan (9th version from 30.9.2024)

European Commission (2022). 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 (SWD (2022)397 final). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0705>

OBC Transeuropa & Cespi (2021). EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) facilitating the enlargement process of Western Balkans. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/adriatic-ionian/eusair_enlarg_west_balkans.pdf

European Commission (2020). 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 (SWD (2020)186 final). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0578>

Böhme, K., Tóptsidou, M. (2019). Macro-regional integrated territorial investments: How to break out of Interreg. Spatial Foresight Brief. Available at: https://www.spatialforesight.eu/files/spatial_theme/spatial/publications/Brief-2019-12_191211.pdf

European Commission (2019). 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. (SWD (2019)6final). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0021>

European Parliament Research Service (March 2022). Implementation of macro-regional strategies: Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608717/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)608717_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608717/EPRS_BRI(2017)608717_EN.pdf)

7.2 Survey respondents

Figure 9: EUSAIR Governance survey responses: Type of respondent

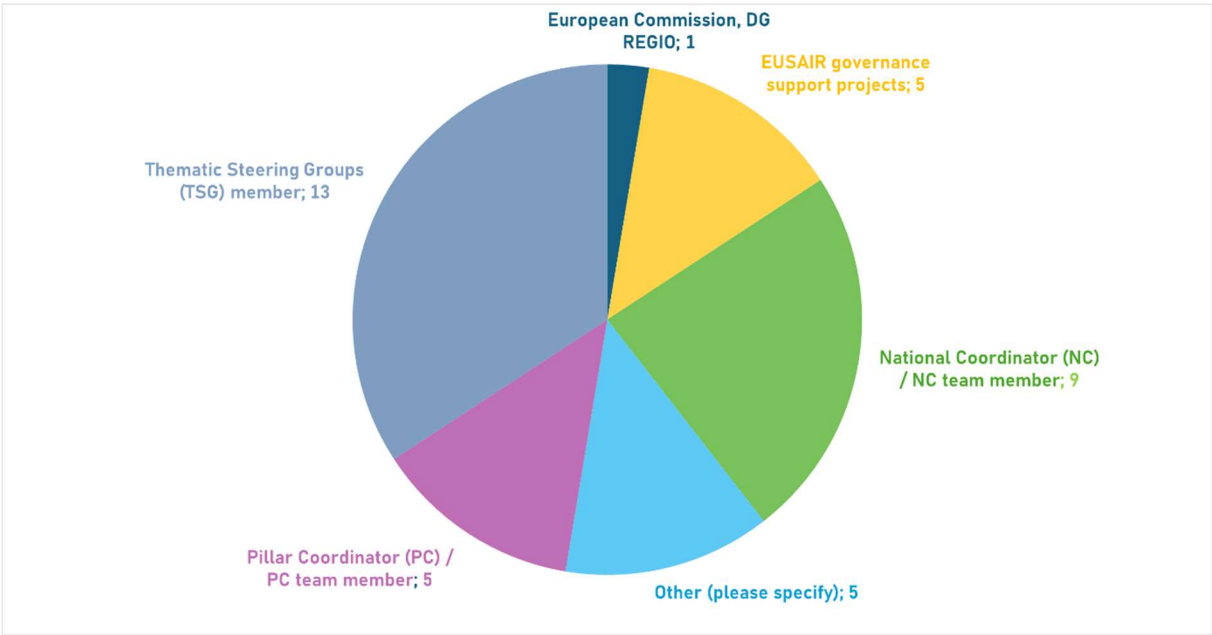


Figure 10: EUSAIR Governance survey responses: Origin of respondents

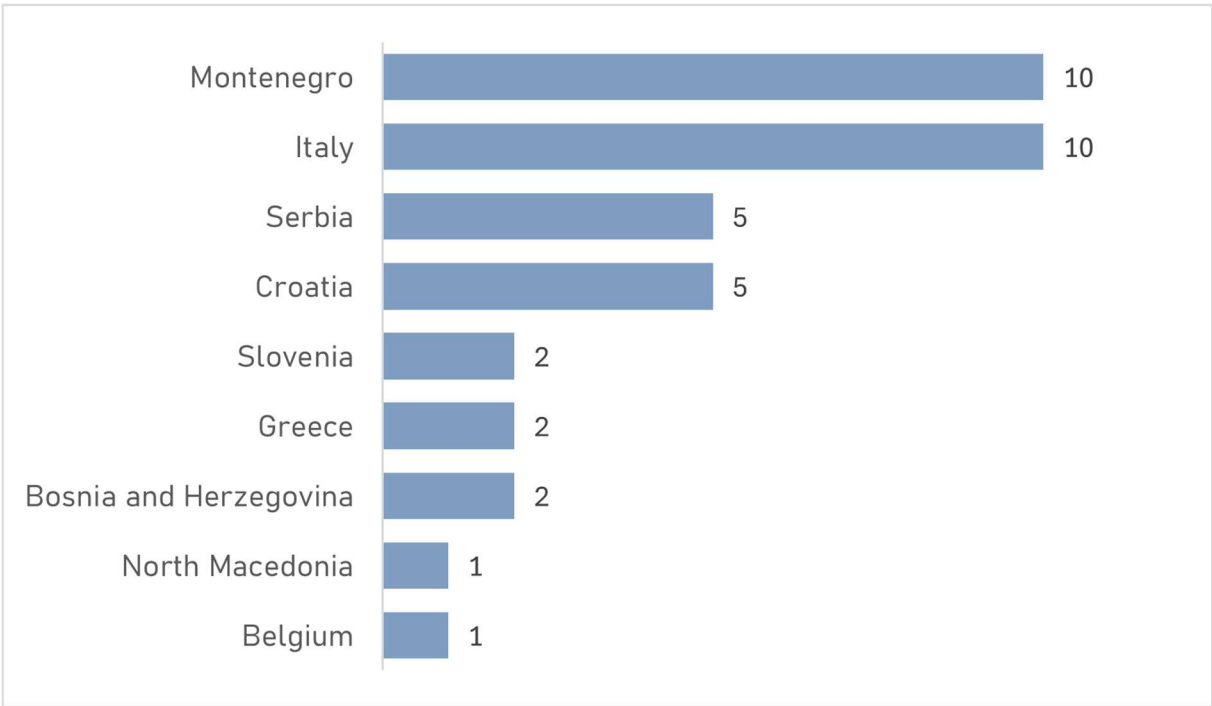


Figure 11: EUSAIR Stakeholders survey responses: Types of respondent

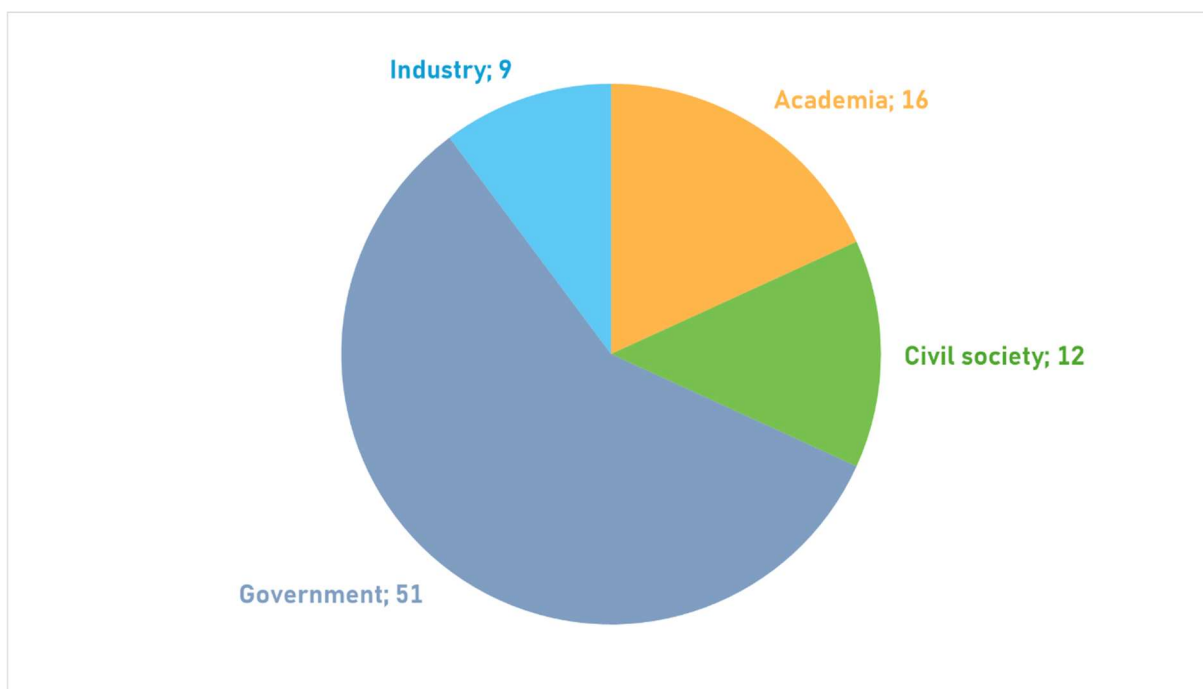
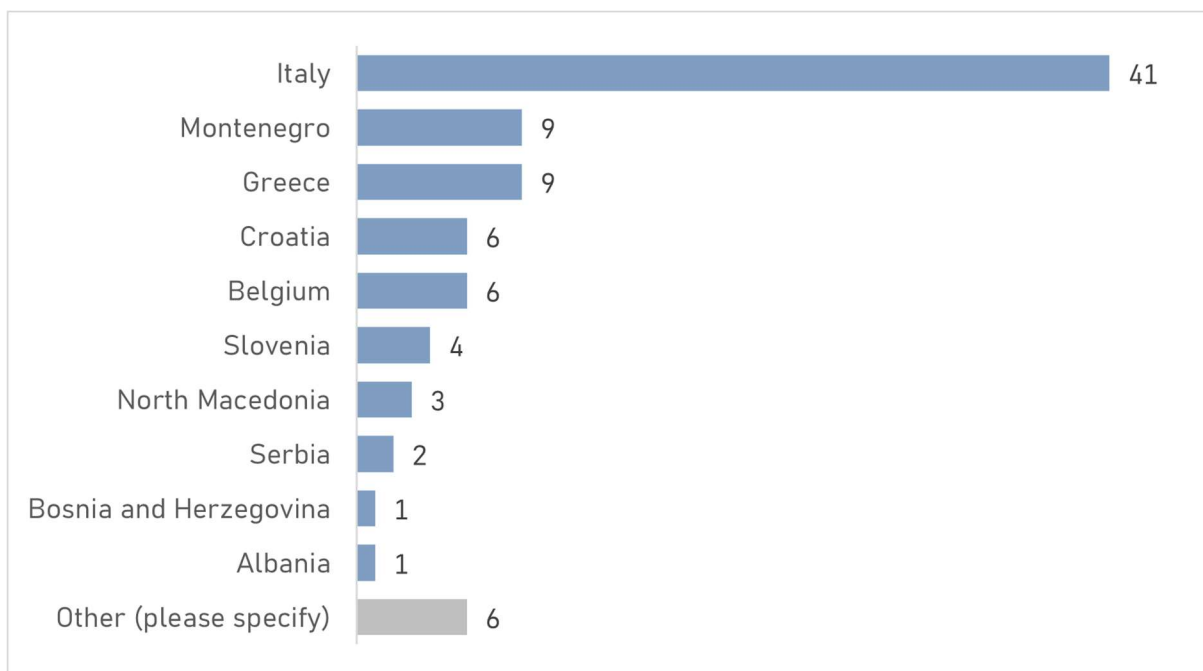









Figure 12: EUSAIR Stakeholders survey responses: Country of respondents



7.3 Specific recommendations following each enlargement scenario







The table below presents scenario-specific recommendations for policymakers, indicating the relevant scenario (S) from Chapter 4.5.

Table 1: Specific recommendations for each scenario

EU-decision makers should...	S1	S2	S3
strategically prioritise the EUSAIR within enlargement, given the significant number of EU candidate countries within EUSAIR. The post-2027 Cohesion Policy (and Multiannual Financial Framework) should integrate EUSAIR objectives into broader enlargement strategies and budget planning. This would also enhance candidate countries' understanding of EUSAIR's value and strengthen their engagement in the EUSAIR.			
maintain credibility within the candidate countries in the Adriatic-Ionian region, if no new accessions occur in the programming period 2028-2034. This includes sustained support for pre-accession assistance and continued policy dialogues. To counter the risk of backsliding reform and increased vulnerability to external influence, the EU must demonstrate long-term commitment to the Adriatic-Ionian region and highlight the strategic role of EUSAIR in the enlargement process. Given the high number of EU candidate countries within EUSAIR, it is essential to explore how EUSAIR can further contribute to facilitating the enlargement process and maintain the credibility to this process.			
ensure the EUSAIR governance structures have adequate resources to perform their tasks amidst potential Cohesion Policy budget reductions. This can be achieved through earmarked technical assistance/resources for macro-regional cooperation and funding of strategic projects within the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework.			
establish clear guidelines and coordination for the implementation of the Ukraine Facility, the RGFWB and the Cohesion Policy within EUSAIR. This would minimise potential overlaps and inconsistencies with the pre-accession instruments and post-2027 Cohesion Policy. Clear guidelines and coordination mechanisms are also vital if Cohesion Policy and pre-accession instruments follow different implementation approaches, to prevent further divergence between the frameworks.			
explore the possibility of a pilot 'Multi-Country Project Facility' based in a candidate country to pool EU and national funds for macro-regional projects within EUSAIR (Cohesion Policy, pre-accession assistance instruments, etc.). This facility could help to develop joint calls for proposals for targeted interventions in the Adriatic-Ionian region, ensuring efficient resource utilisation and avoiding duplication. Furthermore, this facility could help EUSAIR to leverage resources and expertise beyond the IPA assistance, the Western Balkans Investment Framework³⁴ and Cohesion Policy instruments . For example, the use of territorial tools like Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), Local Action Groups (LAGs) and smart village initiatives in the Adriatic-Ionian region through other EU programmes would help to develop candidate country capacity in such tools.			
explore lessons learned, challenges and experience from previous enlargements to inform future enlargements and adapt them to current challenges³⁵. Focus should be put on current or future topics covered by the EUSAIR, such as environment, blue economy, social cohesion, connectivity, among others.			
clearly communicate on the budgetary costs and economic returns of enlargement for the EUSAIR to mitigate the negative impacts of budget reallocation on existing MSs, while ensuring adequate funding for the new MSs.			

³⁴ The Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) is a joint initiative of the EU, financial institutions (IFC, EIF, EBRD, CEB, KfW, WB, AFD), bilateral donors (Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and Norway) and beneficiaries (Western Balkans countries), aimed at enhancing harmonisation and cooperation in investments for the socio-economic development of the region and contributing to the European perspective of the Western Balkans.

³⁵ European Commission (2024). Forging a sustainable future together: Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe report of the High-level Group on the future of Cohesion Policy- February 2024

EU-decision makers should...	S1	S2	S3
This would include “phasing out” and “phasing-in” assistance to the MSs affected by the enlargement. A 5-year Multiannual Financial Framework or specific ‘accession-related’ reserves outside the MFF could help to manage accession costs. ³⁶			
consider a component-based approach within the next Cohesion Policy to enable flexible ‘phasing-in’ of new MSs (similar to the IPA I and IPA II frameworks).			
This approach could be particularly relevant due to increasing regional disparities, diverse administrative capacities and varied implementation speeds across MSs.			
develop a comprehensive EU-wide communication strategy to promote a cohesive European identity.			
This would help to proactively counter potential discontent arising from small or big enlargement in the Adriatic-Ionian region and across the EU.			
support the new MSs in establishing good monitoring and controlling systems, which are also aligned with the EUSAIR monitoring system. Ad-hoc support should be provided to prevent duplication of EU instrument management structures in the new MSs.			

Source: M&E Factory 2025

³⁶ European Parliament (2025) Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements, Study requested by the Budgetary Support Unit PE 769.193 – January 2025