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SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FINAL REPORT

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

March 2025

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

Vienna, March 2025

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Summary Recommendations

These recommendations are part of a Final Report which can be found on EUSAIR website and summarises main findings from EUSAIR consultation concerning post 2027 Cohesion Policy.

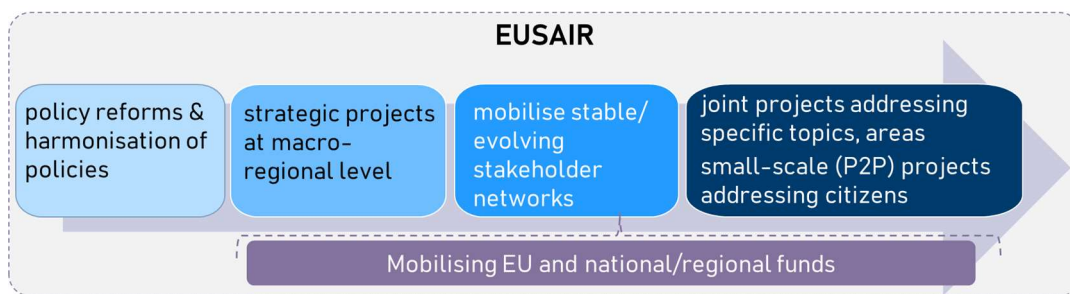
Recommendations for EU policymakers at EU and national level

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 1: 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 Adratic-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.