



Programme of the Italian Presidency of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII) and of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), June 2026 – May 2027



Strategic vision: a macro-regional platform for integration, cohesion and territorial transformation

The Italian Presidency of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (All) and of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) for the period 2026–2027 is grounded in a strong commitment to reinvigorating regional cooperation and advancing the European integration process in the area. Italy assumes the Presidency at a pivotal moment for the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region, marked by profound geopolitical transformations, accelerating climate change, increasing pressures on ecosystems, environmental quality and territorial resilience, persistent socio-economic disparities, and renewed momentum for EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans.

In this context, Italy conceives EUSAIR as a strategic infrastructure for stability and connectivity, capable of translating the values and policies of the European Union into tangible benefits for citizens, the territories in which they live, and future generations. The Presidency will strengthen EUSAIR as a bridge between EU Member States and candidate countries, fostering mutual trust and shared responsibility. A guiding principle of the Presidency's action will be the promotion of territorial cohesion as both a working method and a cross-cutting tool to facilitate territorial integration, improve accessibility to transport and energy networks, reduce inequalities and trigger convergence processes, and support competitiveness for regional development. This will be pursued through the combination of funding sources to overcome fragmentation and support integrated projects (synergies between funding sources – embedding).

The Italian Presidency will focus its action on a limited set of operational priorities, selected to strengthen EUSAIR's delivery capacity and its contribution to the European convergence of the Adriatic-Ionian area. Within this framework, the Presidency will structure its programme around closely interconnected priority strands, with an approach aimed at delivering concrete results, enhancing coordination across levels of governance, and more effectively leveraging cooperation and funding opportunities.

Method and guiding principles

The preparation of the Presidency programme constitutes an open and inclusive process of consultation and synthesis, promoted by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department for Cohesion Policies (DPCoe), in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation – Directorate-General for the European Union (DGUE), and involving all actors of the national EUSAIR governance. Particular attention is given to Pillar Coordinators and national and regional focal points, with the aim of capturing inputs from all Italian territories within the EUSAIR area.

In line with the Presidency's approach, the working method will be geared not only towards the shared definition of the programme's content, but also towards its translation into visible initiatives, meaningful opportunities for dialogue, and feasible implementation pathways. In this perspective, for each thematic area, a preliminary dialogue will be launched with the main EUSAIR governance actors (including national coordinators, Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs), the EUSAIR Governance Point (EGP), and the Youth Council), with a view to initiating a joint process and identifying tangible results consistent with the objectives of the Action Plan and the ongoing actions/flagships. This participatory process will also contribute to the mapping of relevant transnational and thematically aligned events,

with the objective of establishing a calendar that supports the Presidency's priorities while enhancing visibility, coordination and the dissemination of results.

Communication activities will be regarded as an integral part of the Presidency's action and as a cross-cutting component of all programme priorities. They will aim to strengthen the political readability of initiatives, their territorial anchoring and the long-term sustainability of the results achieved.

The Presidency programme is therefore conceived as a dynamic working document, to be progressively refined and enriched in light of developments within the EUSAIR governance, contributions from partners, and the evolution of ongoing projects and initiatives.

In implementing the programme, the Presidency will be guided by the following principles:

- Coherence and selectivity, by focusing the Presidency's action on a limited number of priorities and areas of intervention, in order to enhance political clarity, implementation capacity and macro-regional added value;
- Multilevel coordination and territorial integration, by promoting alignment between political, technical and territorial levels, while fostering complementarities among territories, instruments and cooperation stakeholders;
- Delivery capacity and leverage of opportunities, by strengthening the link between strategic priorities, project initiatives, cooperation instruments and available funding sources;
- Communication and visibility, as cross-cutting dimensions of the Presidency's action, essential to maximise the impact of initiatives, reinforce their institutional recognition and ensure the sustainability of achieved results.

PRIORITIES OF THE ITALIAN PRESIDENCY

The priorities of the Presidency will be pursued with territorial cohesion as a cross-cutting guiding principle for action. In this perspective, the Presidency will promote initiatives aimed at strengthening the functional integration of the macro-region, enhancing complementarities among territories, reducing disparities in capacity and accessibility, and fostering a more effective link between strategic objectives, administrative cooperation, investments and tangible benefits for citizens. Environmental sustainability and quality will represent an additional horizontal and integrated dimension, to be operationalised through specific territorial actions within the four identified priorities.

Priority 1 – European integration and regional administrative capacity

The Italian Presidency intends to reinforce the role of EUSAIR as a macro-regional platform supporting the European integration of EU candidate countries and strengthening regional cooperation, by enhancing its contribution to stability, administrative convergence and territorial cohesion in the Adriatic-Ionian area. Enlargement remains a key instrument to promote peace, political dialogue, stability, prosperity and security in EU candidate countries, in line with Italy's strategic priorities in the region. This is particularly relevant in the current geopolitical context, marked by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the challenges of post-pandemic economic recovery, and persistent migration pressures.

Areas of intervention

Within this framework, the Presidency will pay particular attention to strengthening administrative capacity and fostering gradual alignment with EU tools and working methods, including with regard to Chapter 22 – Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments, as a key area for institutional and territorial convergence of candidate countries. Synergies with the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) will also be pursued, particularly on projects of common interest, with a view to enhancing coordination among macro-regional strategies and ensuring broader representation of candidate countries' needs.

The Presidency also aims to enhance the role of border regions as key spaces for European integration and practical cooperation, acknowledging that these territories continue to face linguistic, cultural, administrative and regulatory barriers that limit their development potential. In this context, EUSAIR will be promoted as an integration accelerator, including through the strengthening of existing and newly established European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), as well as other local and territorial partnership instruments capable of reinforcing cohesion, mutual trust and cross-border cooperation.

In the field of regional cooperation, particular emphasis will be placed on implementation support tools, including facilities and accompanying mechanisms designed to support project preparation, strengthen administrative capacity, and ensure a more effective integration of EUSAIR priorities into programmes and available funding opportunities. Specific areas of action may include capacity-building related to first-level control of Interreg projects and to procurement procedures shared across countries in the region. The concept of embedding will also be further promoted as a key lever to enhance the Strategy's ability to translate political orientations into implementation pathways and tangible results.

Expected technical output: Technical roadmap for administrative convergence and European integration in the EUSAIR area

The technical document will aim to strengthen EUSAIR's contribution to the European integration process of candidate countries, with a particular focus on administrative convergence and institutional capacity. The output will take the form of an operational technical guidance document, designed to detail the needs of candidate countries emerging from ongoing EUSAIR activities, and to identify common lines of action for capacity-building. It will build on the exchange of knowledge and administrative practices made possible by the presence, within EUSAIR, of both EU Member States and candidate countries.

Priority 2 – Connectivity, security and territorial integration

Under the Italian Presidency, the aim is to strengthen the implementation dimension of EUSAIR through a more integrated approach to connectivity across the area, recognising its strategic value for territorial cohesion, competitiveness and stability in the Adriatic-Ionian region. This includes, inter alia, the strengthening of the port and dry port system, together with the development of strategic intermodality actions to connect inland and coastal areas. In this perspective, connectivity will be understood not only as infrastructure development, but also as a lever for more effective functional integration among territories, for reducing accessibility gaps, and for reinforcing cooperation between Member States and partner countries.

Areas of Intervention

Within this framework, particular attention will be devoted to the maritime and land intermodal transport system, constituting a key sector of passenger and freight transport infrastructure, essential for promoting economic development, regional integration, and choices aligned with the objectives of the green transition.

Transport policy plays a central role in fostering economic development, strengthening regional cohesion, and supporting environmentally sustainable choices throughout the Adriatic-Ionian area. Actions under Pillar 2, within the framework of the development of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) in the Western Balkans, focus on enhancing transport connectivity and the integration of mobility services among the countries of the area, while simultaneously promoting territorial cooperation for the development of projects—particularly in the maritime, intermodal, and urban sectors—as drivers of economic growth and social cohesion.

In this context, the Transport Masterplan, developed within the framework of EUSAIR, provides a solid basis for a shared understanding of transport policy in the area, with the objective of developing and strengthening connections with the European infrastructure system. Adopting a medium- to long-term perspective, it analyses opportunities, challenges, and ongoing actions, while proposing a common vision of an interconnected, sustainable, and inclusive regional transport system. During the Italian Presidency, the Masterplan will be further updated, reinforcing its holistic methodological approach and strengthening transnational cooperation capacities in the planning, construction, and modernisation of the intermodal transport infrastructure system (roads, railways, ports, and airports), with the aim of improving connectivity and accessibility and fostering economic growth across the Adriatic-Ionian territories.

Energy policies and programmes also constitute a central component of EUSAIR cooperation. Improved coordination and enhanced integration of energy initiatives and projects can provide renewed momentum to EU enlargement, particularly with regard to the Western Balkans. Strengthened energy cooperation provides a solid foundation for addressing key challenges such as climate change, security of supply, and access to affordable and competitive energy, also in light of the recent geopolitical developments that have affected energy supplies in the Western Balkans area.

In this context, the Master Plan of energy networks for the Adriatic-Ionian Region has been conceived, developed, and completed as a strategic project aimed at identifying opportunities for cooperation among participating countries, as well as defining priorities, initiatives, and recommendations in both the short and long term. It promotes the energy transition towards decarbonised energy systems (zero-carbon energy systems), in order to jointly address, together with EU Member States, the global challenge of climate change and to improve the environmental quality of the territories.

The Italian Presidency will focus on updating and further strengthening the energy dimension of the Masterplan, fostering coherence and synergies across the macro-region. It will continue to support already initiated and discussed projects (such as TAP₂, GRITA₂, and MONITA₂), as well as promote financial dialogue.

Expected Technical Output: EUSAIR Paper on Connectivity, Transport and Energy

The Italian Presidency will promote the preparation of an operational guidance document, including recommendations addressed to Governments, agreed priorities, and projects discussed within the framework of TSG2 and already advanced through the two Masterplans.

In addition, new regional agreements for the area will be promoted and supported, in cooperation with the regulatory authorities of the participating countries, with a leading role played by the Italian Regulatory Authority for Energy, Networks and Environment (ARERA).

Priority 3 – Social, cultural and demographic cohesion

The Italian Presidency intends to assign greater prominence to the social, cultural and demographic dimension of macro-regional cooperation, as a key condition for fostering a more inclusive and attractive region capable of offering opportunities to its citizens, in particular young people. In this perspective, social cohesion will be promoted as a factor underpinning territorial resilience, strengthening the bond between communities and supporting ongoing transitions, including in areas most affected by depopulation, marginalisation and loss of human capital.

Areas of intervention

The Presidency promotes a vision of social cohesion that combines equal opportunities, active participation and recognition of local specificities as core elements of macro-regional cooperation. This vision is based on a broad understanding of human and social development, in which economic, cultural and community dimensions mutually reinforce each other, while also taking into account environmental sustainability aspects, particularly in relation to territorial resilience to droughts and floods.

In this context, strengthening social cohesion entails addressing depopulation and brain drain as closely interconnected challenges. This requires the adoption of an integrated approach centred on the active involvement of younger generations, enhancing territorial attractiveness, and fostering stable links between territories and communities. This will also be pursued through the expansion of educational and training opportunities (e.g. cooperation in the fields of culture, higher education, research and advanced training, including through the establishment of regional EUSAIR contact points), and more broadly through the promotion of conditions that make the right to stay a viable and sustainable option, particularly in more fragile territories, including from an environmental perspective.

Ongoing activities under Pillar 5 will be supported, including the development of a monitoring system in the framework of the European Social Scoreboard, the analysis of training needs, the definition of an EUSAIR skills taxonomy, and the establishment of a compendium of good practices in social innovation.

Expected technical output: Cross-pillar training laboratory on youth, skills and the right to stay in the EUSAIR area

The initiative will identify pilot areas for experimentation aimed at promoting the integration of social inclusion, employability and territorial attractiveness, with a particular focus on young people, skills development, and tackling depopulation and brain drain. The output will take the form of a reference framework, designed to consolidate shared priorities, outline possible lines of action, and capitalise on experiences already developed at territorial level (e.g. Territorial Strategies under Policy Objective 5, as

well as specific flagships under TSG 5 such as the EUSAIR Skills Alliance for the Future, Social Innovation for an Ageing Population, and the EUSAIR Youth Entrepreneurship Alliance).

Its development will be supported by a cross-pillar approach, involving in particular Pillar Coordinators, representatives of sectoral administrations within the TSGs in the fields of social policy, education and labour, and the EUSAIR Youth Council. In addition, the reflection will be enriched by building on the results achieved and initiatives promoted by the EUSAIR Governance Points (EGPs), with a view to ensuring broader stakeholder engagement (including universities, research organisations and territorial stakeholders active in the fields of inclusion and territorial attractiveness).

Priority 4 – Strengthening value chains and SME networks for territorial cohesion

The Presidency will devote particular attention to the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), recognised as key drivers of productivity, employment and the economic vitality of territories. In this perspective, enhanced integration between innovation policies, cooperation instruments and investment opportunities will be promoted, with a view to strengthening the capacity of enterprises to participate in macro-regional networks, partnerships and value chains.

SMEs represent the vast majority of enterprises in the EU and play a crucial role in productivity diffusion, export capacity and local employment. Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) constitute a key instrument for promoting innovation-driven competitiveness, regional convergence and territorial cohesion in the Adriatic-Ionian area.

Areas of intervention

S3 focused on the blue economy offer significant opportunities to connect emerging innovation ecosystems and technological clusters, while strengthening SME cooperation. In this context, the use of artificial intelligence represents a cross-cutting accelerator, capable of supporting the S3 Entrepreneurial Discovery Process, improving territorial and market data analysis, and fostering SME innovation through scalable and collaborative solutions.

The experience gained through the Interregional Innovation Investments Instrument (I3) and the S3 Thematic Platforms provides concrete opportunities for interregional matchmaking and for the development of SME networks, clusters and shared value chains.

Another key area of focus will be skills development, with particular attention to blue skills and the related Pact for Blue Skills, in line with the European Skills Agenda (2020). Efforts will focus on supporting upskilling and reskilling of the workforce, while emphasising the role of public–private partnerships at both regional and large scale, in order to ensure more effective and coordinated responses to the challenges facing the region, including technological transformation, climate change and shortages of specialised labour in this sector.

Expected technical output: EUSAIR guidelines for innovation ecosystems – orientations for post-2027 cohesion policy programming

The objective is to support the identification of priority thematic areas capable of leveraging the macro-regional approach to strengthen the economic and social cohesion of territories. This includes links with Smart Specialisation Strategies, the blue economy, the strengthening of blue skills, and the development

of value chains capable of generating stronger territorial anchoring, cooperation among proximate actors, and widespread spillovers across local systems.

The output will take the form of a policy guidance document for cooperation and policy alignment, aimed at informing priorities, partnerships and potential embedding pathways with national mainstream programmes and EU direct management programmes. It will build on the work already carried out within EUSAIR on these themes, particularly under Pillars 1 and 5. Its preparation will require the active involvement of relevant thematic coordinators, in connection with ongoing stakeholder engagement initiatives (including S3 managing authorities, regional and local administrations, business networks, clusters, research and innovation actors, and stakeholders involved in EU-funded programmes).

Presidency documents

Within the framework of its mandate, Italy will facilitate political dialogue among the Ministers responsible for EU funds within EUSAIR, with a view to promoting the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding supporting the 2028–2034 programming period.

At the end of its Presidency, Italy will promote the preparation of a single final document aimed at consolidating the orientations developed during the mandate and at presenting, within a coherent framework, the main technical outputs delivered.

Cross-cutting communication and thematic campaigns

Communication activities will be considered an integral part of the Presidency's action and a horizontal component across all programme priorities. In this perspective, communication will not be conceived solely as a tool for disseminating initiatives, but also as a lever to enhance their political visibility, territorial anchoring and the long-term sustainability of results.

To this end, the Presidency will promote dedicated communication and awareness-raising campaigns linked to the main thematic priorities of the programme, with a view to accompanying policy and technical initiatives with a clearer public narrative of their value for territories, communities and citizens in the Adriatic-Ionian area. These campaigns will aim to highlight—through differentiated languages and tools—the contribution of the Presidency priorities in the fields of European integration, connectivity, social cohesion, innovation and territorial development.

In this context, the Mediterranean diet will be identified as one of the main drivers of the Presidency's communication, including through support for networking initiatives among Food Authorities operating in the Adriatic-Ionian area. It will serve as a cultural and relational key capable of making visible—in an accessible and shared manner—the links between communities, territories, environment, knowledge and practices of conviviality. In line with its recognition by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, the reference to the Mediterranean diet will enable the concept of territorial cohesion to be articulated not in abstract terms, but through practices, relationships and processes embedded in the everyday life of the Adriatic-Ionian area. In this sense, it will be framed as the expression of practices, knowledge, conviviality, relationships between communities and the environment, and ways of life developed over time in the Mediterranean space. From this perspective, food is not regarded merely as a sector, but as a diffuse cultural infrastructure, capable of connecting social, environmental, economic and identity-related dimensions, and of rendering the principle of cohesion tangible and widely shared.



EU Strategy for the
Adriatic and Ionian Region
EUSAIR



EUSAIR
EU Strategy for the
Adriatic and Ionian Region
Italian Presidency 2026-2027

Interreg



Co-funded by
the European Union

IPA ADRION

FACILITYPOINT



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri
Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione



Ministero degli Affari Esteri
e della Cooperazione Internazionale

www.adriatic-ionian.eu

eusair.italianpresidency@governo.it

For a Prosperous and Integrated Adriatic and Ionian Region

Strategic project EUSAIR FACILITY POINT is co-funded by the European Union through the Interreg IPA ADRION Programme 2021-2027.

This has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of the INSERT BENEFICIARY'S NAME/NAME OF PP/LP and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union and/or IPA ADRION Programme authorities.

Ver. 2.0 of June 25, 2026