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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
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on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

EU macro-regional strategies (“MRS”) are political frameworks initiated by EU and non-EU countries located in a defined geographical area. These frameworks address common challenges and opportunities through setting shared, long-term objectives like “Saving the Baltic Sea”. Contrary to classical projects in traditional Commission funding programmes, the focus of the MRS is not on one-time activities with a predetermined beginning and a fixed end date. The MRS are essentially cooperation frameworks establishing networks of stakeholders that form a transnational, cross-sectorial mosaic of expertise with a potential for further cooperation, value and prosperity creation. The aim is to improve institutional capacities with the ability to create innovative and inclusive services that can empower people and stakeholders, making them actively contributing to the development of prosperous and open macro regions in the medium to long term.

MRS address issues requiring several countries to cooperate based on a cross-sectoral and multi-level governance approach. The MRS sharpen the identity of their areas while increasing responsibility and active involvement of citizens. The soft character of MRS cooperation is an advantage as it opens for solutions that often are difficult to achieve in more formalised contexts characterised by competing national interests. This is why the MRS have been successful in helping to clean up the Baltic Sea, in improving the navigability of the Danube through fairway rehabilitation and maintenance, in creating the conditions for developing hydrogen as an alternative green fuel in the Alps and in strengthening the Adriatic and Ionian region as a top-class tourism destination.

MRS also facilitate the implementation of core European political initiatives across their territories aligning and coordinating them with regional and local initiatives. Similarly, the MRS bring a territorial dimension to the green, digital and social transition, including in addressing the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the recovery from the pandemic. Finally, the MRS provide a good introduction to how the European Union works for Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkan countries and others aspiring to join the EU.

The four MRS involve 19 EU and 10 non-EU countries. They are:

- the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR, 2009);
- the EU strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR, 2011);
- the EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR, 2014); and
- the EU strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP, 2016).

From 2016, as requested by the Council¹, every second year the Commission has published an implementation report of the four MRS. This is the fourth report, covering the period from mid-2020 to mid-2022. It assesses the state of play and progress on implementing the MRS and examines ways forward. It is complemented by a staff working document (SWD) which provides specific information on each MRS. Both documents are based mainly on contributions

¹ Council conclusion on the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), point (32):
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/eusalp_council_conclusions_27112015.pdf

from the MRS national coordinators (NCs) and thematic coordinators (TCs) (“MRS key implementers”) and experts. The three first reports were followed by Council Conclusions highlighting key areas of priority for Member States.

The MRS are implemented in a political context where the European Green Deal (EGD) and the digital transition set new strategic orientations for the European Union. All MRS are expected to deliver on these topics, as well as on the inclusion of civil society and youth, notably in the context of the 2022 European Year of Youth.

This report is published at a time when war is once again ravaging Europe. Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, the country currently holding the presidency of the EUSDR, has shocked the entire world. The consequences of this war including – but not limited to - the inflow of refugees and energy security will feature high on the agenda in the years to come. To this should be added the unprecedented pandemic which is not yet over and where MRS stakeholders across Europe and beyond struggle to address the severe economic, fiscal and social impacts.

2. THEMATIC PRIORITIES DRIVEN BY THE GREEN AND DIGITAL TRANSITION

The MRS are strongly committed to the European Green Deal (EGD) by providing a cross-sectoral approach based on multi-level governance and a wide stakeholder involvement. They also facilitate the participation of Western Balkans and other accession countries in this initiative and also related initiatives such as the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. In particular, the revised EUSBSR (2021) and EUSDR (2020) action plans further aligned the strategies with the EGD. Key strategic documents related to the EGD, and going even beyond the EGD, refer explicitly to the contribution brought by the MRS.

The Commission Communication on a new approach for a Sustainable Blue Economy of 2021², also refers specifically to the role of MRS and the embedding process of MRS into the national programming of funds. This is particularly relevant for the MRS with a strong maritime dimension. This is also the case for the EU offshore renewable energy strategy³ and the REPowerEU Plan⁴. The EU offshore renewable energy strategy states that, to ensure the success of large-scale offshore renewable energy planning and deployment, it will be necessary to boost regional cooperation, through MRS⁵. The REPowerEU Plan⁶ recognises the role of the MRS in promoting cooperation in investments in hydrogen infrastructure.

The MRS have already triggered important achievements in strategic sectors related to the EGD Action “Clean, affordable and secure energy”⁷. The Baltic Sea region⁸ developed a professional network and provided fora for expertise exchange and state-of-the-art interdisciplinary research on the optimisation of offshore wind energy⁹. In the Alpine region conditions were created for

² COM(2021) 240 final.

³ https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/renewable-energy/offshore-renewable-energy_en

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/repowereu-affordable-secure-and-sustainable-energy-europe_en

⁵ COM(2020) 741 final - <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0741&from=EN>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3131

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/energy-and-green-deal_en

⁸ <http://www.baltic-integrid.eu/>

⁹ <http://www.baltic-integrid.eu/>

coordinated investments in the field of hydrogen¹⁰ and the Danube region¹¹ has been provided with a comparative assessment of the National Energy and Climate Plans¹². The MRS have promoted the use of electric vehicles in existing regional and local transport systems of the Adriatic and Ionian region¹³.

The green and digital transitions are interlinked, and the MRS have played a significant role in the latter, supporting the implementation of the European Digital Strategy. Digital transformation is a cross-cutting objective both in EUSBSR and EUSDR. To connect people electronically and promote accessibility to public services from remote areas is a key action of EUSALP. Innovation and digital transformation were among the thematic priorities under the Slovak presidency of EUSDR in 2021.

As a result, the MRS have developed several innovative projects and approaches in this area. EUSBSR has increased eco-efficiency in the maritime sector in the Baltic Sea by creating and piloting digital solutions developed jointly by industry end-users and research organisations¹⁴. EUSDR has been instrumental in cutting red tape for the shipping industry by the introduction of harmonised and digitalised control documents and has fostered transnational cooperation among schools in order to strengthen the digital skills of teachers in the Danube Region¹⁵. EUSAIR has supported the development of a network of sustainable tourism business and clusters in the Adriatic-Ionian region. The aim of the network is to adopt and implement the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), the European Tourism Indicators System for sustainable destination management (ETIS) and other green (sustainable) Certification Schemes. Finally, the EUSALP has initiated the smart digital transformation of villages in the Alpine region¹⁶. This support to rural communities highlights the territorial dimension of the MRS as well as the social angle of digitalisation by providing digital services and tools to social groups which do not easily have access to them.

Examples of projects and processes

*The Baltic Sea is among the most polluted waters in Europe and “Save the Sea” is a key objective of EUSBSR. The **BEST**¹⁷(**Better Efficiency for industrial Sewage Treatment**) project tackled both eutrophication and risks posed by hazardous substances by improving industrial sewage treatment in the Baltic Sea Region. At Latvijas Piens diary and cheese factory (Latvia) a better pre-treatment of wastewater improved the treatment results at the nearby municipal waste water treatment plant. The municipality of Doruchów (Poland) built a new treatment line for industrial wastewater that helps preventing eutrophication.*

Universities and Research & Innovation Centres are essential actors of territorial development in facilitating the implementation of sustainable models and to foster the implementation of the European Green Deal in the Alpine Region. The EUSALP is helping

¹⁰ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/news/financial-dialogue-networks-workshop-taking-embedding-process-one-step-further>

¹¹ [NECP Danube Region REKK 2020 final 0215logo.pdf \(danube-region.eu\)](https://www.danube-region.eu/NECP_Danube_Region_REKK_2020_final_0215logo.pdf)

¹² [NECP Danube Region REKK 2020 final 0215logo.pdf \(danube-region.eu\)](https://www.danube-region.eu/NECP_Danube_Region_REKK_2020_final_0215logo.pdf)

¹³ <https://enmob.adrioninterreg.eu/>

¹⁴ <https://ecoprologi.eu/>

¹⁵ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/online-thematic-conference-school-cooperation-in-the-danube-region/>

¹⁶ <https://www.alpine-space.org/projects/smartvillages/en/home>

¹⁷ <https://bestbalticproject.eu/>

to facilitate the establishment of an Alpine Universities Alliance/Network by identifying universities from six EUSALP countries¹⁸.

3. STRONGER FOCUS ON SOCIAL CHANGE, INCLUDING CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The green and digital transition is paired with a social transition. Technological development, globalisation and a drive for rationalisation profoundly changes the European labour market and creates a demand for new skills, swift adaptation and increased resilience while many traditional professions are losing ground. Demographic change, the pandemic, the inflow of refugees and a general trend where European societies become more polarised with pockets of poverty and social exclusion are all part of this social transition. In this process the MRS can mobilise stakeholders at all levels to help ensuring that no one is left behind.

In the EUSDR, the Social Entrepreneurship Education and Development Hub (SIPLUS) boosts social innovation. The Baltic Sea Labour Forum for Sustainable Working Life¹⁹ addresses demographic challenge, and promotes active ageing and lifelong learning in the EUSBSR. The Alpine Social Innovation Strategy aims at defining a new vision of social innovation to increase the innovation capacity of EUSALP regions by answering to new challenges. The EUSAIR has promoted investment in skills and education for a more sustainable blue economy in the Adriatic-Ionian Region. It identified vocational and entrepreneurial skills and training as main priorities addressed in a flagship, DES_AIR, under the Sustainable Tourism Pillar.

Refugees from the war in Ukraine seek shelter across Europe. This calls for action in all four MRS. EUSBSR and EUSDR are particularly concerned by an additional strain on health and social systems already affected by the pandemic. Many MRS stakeholders help refugees and support humanitarian aid initiatives. Most recently, these MRS activities have focused on the integration of Ukrainian refugees and on establishing safe corridors for freight.

At the same time, the pandemic has had negative effects on MRS participating countries. On the positive side, it triggered new ways of working, boosted new initiatives such as innovation clusters helping SMEs to adjust to a new post-COVID conditions, enhanced a shift to a more sustainable tourism and digitalisation of the labour market.

¹⁸ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/news/AG1-workshop-2022-with-26-alpine-universities>

¹⁹ <https://bslf.eu/sustainable-working-life/>

Examples of projects and processes

Steering group members of EUSBSR policy area Secure – most of them coming from civil protection agencies across the Baltic region - shared their experience in gathering and distributing aid to Ukraine and responded to emerging needs for equipment such as fire trucks. EUSDR Priority area 10 (Institutional capacity and cooperation) used their networks of civil society organisations to coordinate initiatives to support people in Ukraine and refugees fleeing the war.

4. PROMOTING COHESION AND PLACE-BASED DEVELOPMENT

All four MRS are well aligned with the overall objective of cohesion policy to contribute to strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union and to correct imbalances between countries and regions.

An added value of the strategies is to bring a place-based approach to cohesion policy by supporting initiatives emerging at local and regional level that could benefit from cooperation at macro-regional level. In the four MRS a wide range of processes and projects currently bridges local and regional action with European political priorities. This includes initiatives to manage risks climate change risks by i) enabling interaction between local administrations and national civil protection authorities²⁰, ii) using digitalisation to overcome natural handicaps and strengthen the resilience of mountain and rural villages²¹, and iii) developing small-scale territorial brands in the agri-food sector²². The activities carried out have promoted participatory and bottom-up approaches to support i) entrepreneurship²³, ii) transnational clusters and digital innovation hubs²⁴, and iii) equality between women and men in innovation and entrepreneurship²⁵.

These achievements are very promising but there is still scope for the MRS to further increase their role, in particular by reinforcing the link to the local level.

5. THE PARTNERSHIP – INVOLVING CIVIL SOCIETY, LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS AND YOUTH

As set out by the cross-MRS Shadow Report²⁶ coordinated by the Budapest-based European House, civil society organisations play a vital role in contributing to better decision-making, in particular by bringing local and regional communities closer to the MRS.

In both EUSAIR and EUSDR, civil society is involved through platforms based on participatory planning, community building and empowerment. In EUSAIR, the forum of the Adriatic Ionian Chambers of Commerce (Forum AIC)²⁷, the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities (FAIC)²⁸ and the Association of the Universities of the Adriatic and Ionian region (UNIADRION)²⁹ represent a network of more than 120 bodies and institutions. In the EUSDR,

²⁰ <https://www.cascade-bsr.eu/toolbox>

²¹ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/publications/smart-villages-using-potential-digitization-alpine-villages>

²² <https://www.alpine-region.eu/mapping-territorial-brands>

²³ <https://www.zsi.at/en/object/project/5803>

²⁴ <https://inerrant.italy-albania-montenegro.eu/>

²⁵ <http://www.balticsearegion.org/web/page.aspx?refid=134>

²⁶ <https://europeanhouse.hu/the-shadow-report/>

²⁷ <https://www.forumaic.org/?lang=en>

²⁸ <https://www.faic.eu/en/home-e/>

²⁹ <https://www.uniadrion.net/>

civil society platforms include the Danube Civil Society Forum³⁰ (DCSF) with its working group, the Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP), DANET - Danube Networkers for Europe³¹ and the European House that coordinated the Shadow Report.

EUSALP stakeholders have been involved since the beginning and civil society is playing an increasing role in implementing the strategy. Several action groups include representatives from civil society organisations and civil society is also involved in different action group events. Civil society organisations are also playing a role in the EUSBSR. They are particularly active in the policy areas of Education, Culture, Health and Tourism.

Examples of projects and processes

*Held back to back with the EUSDR Annual Forum, the **Danube Participation Days**³² bring together representatives of local, regional and national public administrations, civil society, the EU and EUSDR governance and other interested stakeholders of the EUSDR. The objective is to strengthen trust between public and private stakeholders and to co-create sustainable solutions for regional development in the Danube Region. The 2021 edition looked at preconditions for a people-centred digitalisation and why this matter.*

All MRS recognise the importance of bringing youth into their governance and more broadly to reach out to young people, empower them and enable them to carry out activities dedicated to their interests and concerns. The year 2020 marked the launch of the Youth Manifesto for Interreg³³. During the past years, all four MRS invited young people to the Annual Fora, to actively take part in the discussion with decision-makers. The inclusion of young people was stepped up in view of the 2022 European Year of Youth.

The EUSALP is a frontrunner as regards the inclusion of young people and, in 2021, was the first MRS to establish the Youth Council. It has involved young people not only in the governance of the strategy, but also in preparing and conducting activities which are important for the macro-region. In addition, the annual competition Pitch your project³⁴, the EUSALP summer camps programme and the future participative online platform involve young people and existing youth organisations.

The EUSDR decided to establish the Danube Youth Council and Youth Organisations' Network (DYC). It will be included in the governance structure of the EUSDR with a role to advise the core decision-making bodies on all relevant topics. In addition, the EUSDR supports young people through annual events such as the Young Bled Strategic Forum³⁵.

In the EUSBSR youth is involved through the Baltic Sea Youth Forum (BSYP)³⁶. The experience from the Baltic Sea Youth Camps 2020 highlights the need to further institutionalise the BSYP and coordinate youth involvement in all EUSBSR policy areas. Also, EUSAIR puts youth high on its agenda and a youth council is in the process of being established. The Albanian EUSAIR presidency highlighted many youth-related activities during the 2022

³⁰ <https://dcsf.danubestrategy.eu/>

³¹ <http://www.foragenetwork.eu/database/item/702-danet-danube-networkers-for-europe/DANET%20-%20Danube%20Networkers%20for%20Europe>

³² <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/participation-day/>

³³ [Manifesto for Young People by Young People to Shape the European Cooperation Policy](#) in October 2020.

³⁴ <https://eusalp-youth.eu/about-pitch-your-project-en/>

³⁵ <https://bledstrategicforum.org/young-bsf-2021/>

³⁶ <https://bsyp.eu/>

Annual Forum held in Tirana - which also is the 2022 European Capital of Youth – such as the EUSAIR POPRI youth 2022 contest.

The role of civil society organisations has been growing over time. However, it is still necessary to increase the involvement of these organisations in the MRS and more broadly to mobilise local stakeholders around common goals. The establishment of an institutionalised citizen's dialogue across macro-regions could help in this respect. Ways for the MRS to address recommendations stemming from the Conference on the Future of Europe could also be explored. In addition, the focus on youth has to continue once the European Year of Youth is over and that youth councils should be set up in each MRS. Intensified exchanges between MRS as well as other regional cooperation networks could help to increase synergies.

Examples of projects and processes

*The **EUSAIR POPRI youth competition**³⁷ is a Slovene-led initiative searching for the best entrepreneurial ideas from young people from the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Starting in 2021, the competition draws in some 3500 business-minded youngsters eager to present their creative and innovative ideas from inception to complete pitch to the judges. The competition is open to high school students aged 14-18 and university students from 18-29 years of age.*

6. IMPROVING GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY

MRS is an attractive way to cooperate and new countries continue to show interest to join the strategies. EUSAIR welcomed North Macedonia on 2 April 2020 and San Marino on 14 February 2022. This strategy now includes 10 countries of which only four are EU Member States³⁸ that makes it particularly focussed on the enlargement.

Published on 15 February 2021, the revised action plan of the EUSBSR aligns the strategy with the green and digital transition, introduces a simplified coordination and management system and establishes a Baltic Sea Strategy Point to coordinate capacity building and knowledge sharing and improve the communication capacity.

Russia's war in Ukraine has affected the MRS in several ways. Many of those involved in MRS activities now find themselves supporting refugees and ensuring the continuity of the Ukrainian state. The Ukrainian presidency of the EUSDR was temporarily unable to carry out its tasks and the remaining members of the Danube Trio presidency – Slovakia and Slovenia – agreed to temporarily step in.

In all four MRS, the political level is represented by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and, in some cases, the ministers or authorities in charge of EU funds. For the MRS involving accession countries and potential accession countries, the National IPA Coordinators are closely involved and provide the political and strategic direction. In EUSALP, regional authorities play a significant role in the political/strategic discussions at all governance levels. The EUSAIR Governing Board includes two NCs of each country, one from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and one from the Ministry in charge of EU Funds.

The role of the rotating presidency is growing in all strategies. This concerns both EU and non-EU countries, as all the three MRS with non-EU countries (Danube, Adriatic-Ionian, Alpine) had or will have a presidency held by a non-EU country. Fixed rotating orders of presidencies as well as a trio format of consecutive presidencies (predecessor/incumbent/successor) is now

³⁷ <https://popri.si/en/>

³⁸ EUSAIR covers ten countries of which four EU Member States (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia) and six non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, San Marino, Serbia).

in place in all four MRS. Its role has increased, notably through the establishment of a “4 Trio Presidencies group”, which meets regularly and always back-to-back with the yearly EU MRS Week.

To promote an exchange of experience and transfer of best practice, the MRS presidencies, together with the Commission and with the support of the Interact programme³⁹, have continued the development of cooperation networks, training courses, methods, and tools to embed the MRS into 2021-2027 EU funding programmes. Interact, with the support of the Commission, continued to promote the macro-regional concept and strengthen the capacity of the implementing bodies. For those MRS with a maritime component, dialogue with sea-basin strategies is essential.

The MRS Annual Fora are important political gatherings with high political representation. The EUSBSR 2021 Annual Forum was opened by Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, four Prime Ministers and the Secretary-General of the OECD. However, in order to reap the full benefit, annual fora should be combined with regular ministerial meetings - at MRS or thematic level - and regular meetings between parliamentarians at all levels. Moreover and although progress has been recorded, to ensure continuity, it should be secured that issues brought up by one MRS presidency are followed up by the next presidency.

The role of the thematic/priority/policy steering or action groups who are the drivers of the day-to-day implementation of MRS action plans has grown noticeably. Further work is nevertheless required to empower these key MRS implementers with clear mandates, effective decision-making capacity and a clear vision on how their fields of work contribute to the broader policy context, while ensuring a stable environment with access to the resources, technical capacity and skills needed. A balance has to be found between frequent, targeted online meetings for coordination and information exchange and in-person meetings that are effective in enabling direct exchange and joint development of new ideas.

Progress is reported on the technical support structures that facilitate the implementation of the MRS. The EUSDR Danube Strategy Point (DSP) set up in 2018 is a success and the key element of the well-functioning EUSDR governance system. The EUSAIR Facility Point is an essential element for the functioning of the EUSAIR governance. In both EUSALP and EUSBSR, new technical support structures are being set up in 2022. It will be crucial that these technical support structures, soon operational in all MRS, are empowered with sufficient resources so that the work can be properly carried out and continuity ensured.

7. BETTER ACCESS TO FUNDING AND EMBEDDING

The four Interreg transnational programmes covering the MRS have played a positive catalytic role in supporting the strategies and will continue to do so during the programming period 2021-2027, also thanks to the provisions included in the new Interreg regulation⁴⁰. However, these Interreg programmes have neither the resources (very limited budgets) nor the thematic coverage to be able to address all MRS objectives and priorities.

During the reporting period, the process to align 2021-2027 national/regional EU funding programmes with relevant MRS priorities (embedding) was stepped up in all four MRS. An

³⁹ <https://www.interact-eu.net/>

⁴⁰ Article 15(3) of Regulation (EU) 2021/1059: “Where an Interreg B programme supports a macro-regional strategy or a sea-basin strategy, at least 80 % of the ERDF contribution and, where applicable, part of the external financing instruments of the Union allocations under priorities other than for technical assistance shall contribute to the objectives of that strategy.”

EUSDR Managing Authority Network for the European Social Fund (ESF) exists since 2015. In 2021, new networks for the managing authorities of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)/Cohesion Fund (CF) and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)/the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) programming authorities' network were set up. Based on the revised EUSDR action plan, five areas were established on which thematic workshops are held during 2022. Guidance documents were prepared, notably by the Croat, Slovak and Ukrainian Presidencies, together with the EUSDR Embedding tool⁴¹ prepared by the Danube Strategy Point.

In 2021, three EUSALP financial dialogue networks (on energy transition and specifically hydrogen, sustainable mobility and digital technology) were set up to facilitate the connection between EUSALP activities and available funding. The work on embedding within the Action Labs for the EUSAIR European Territorial Cooperation programmes is successful. It should be extended to mainstream cohesion policy and IPA III programmes. The outcome should be the establishment of a network of Managing Authorities and National IPA Coordinators that would cooperate on the definition of terms or references, preparation of call for proposals, information to beneficiaries and on supporting the implementation of joint or parallel projects contributing to pre-defined EUSAIR flagships. In the EUSBSR, managing authority networks already exist for ESF, ERDF, European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF). A more systemic approach to the embedding is expected in both EUSALP and EUSBSR once the new technical support structures become fully operational.

As the MRS do not have their own resources, similarly to sea-basin strategies, their implementation depends on synergies with other instruments and on bringing together funding from different sources. That is why the success of the MRS is ultimately linked to their capacity to ensure that EU, national, regional, and other public and private funds are aligned with the priorities of the strategy and finance the MRS activities/support the MRS.

A big challenge for EUSAIR and EUSDR is to combine several sources of EU funding (Cohesion Policy Funds, IPA III, NDICI and IPARD⁴² III) which work according to different regulations, methodologies, timing, and with different structures. MRS key implementers should increase efforts to make these different worlds communicate more with each other and develop more synergies for the implementation of macro-regional actions and projects.

For the future it is important that political commitments made at ministerial meetings in relation to the embedding are turned into action. In addition, it would be beneficial to involve businesses and SMEs to identify cases and potential (clusters, smart specialisation platforms etc.) for the four macro-regions. For example, in the field of blue economy, smart specialization strategies are a key tool achieving innovation, towards the axes of decarbonisation and digitalisation. Exchange of best practice between and across MRS could help in this respect. The role of the “4 Trio Presidencies group” and Interact should be explored to facilitate the process. Networks of programme (managing) authorities should be set up in all MRS. These networks have a significant role to play and should operate throughout the 2021-2027 period and beyond.

Following the call by the Council in its conclusions on the third report on the Implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, the Commission organised a series of workshops dedicated to the directly managed EU programmes during the 2021 EU MRS Week. In addition, MRS contact points were established in all Commission DGs. As a result of the dialogue within the Commission, references to MRS are included in some of the work programmes of the directly

⁴¹ <https://danube-region.eu/projects-and-funding/embedding-2021-2027/>

⁴² The instrument for pre-accession assistance for rural development (IPARD).

managed programmes and there are cases of calls specifically targeting MRS. The 2021-2024 work programme for the LIFE programme encourages the use of the MRS for Strategic Integrated Projects at transnational scale and for the coordinated implementation of Strategic Nature Projects. In 2021 the LIFE sub-programme “Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation” launched a first call for projects targeting the MRS. Two Horizon Europe work programmes 2021-2022 (“Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area” and “Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment”) refer to the MRS and to macro-regional thematic networks.

To increase further uptake, MRS NCs and TCs should encourage project promoters (e.g., macro-regional actors) to participate in calls for projects published by the directly managed EU instruments, including new funds such as the new direct funds of the CEF Digital programme. The Technical Support Instrument⁴³ could support MRS, to the extent they involve the design and implementation of reforms. The support is provided to Member States upon request across a wide range of policy areas, including cohesion and the green and digital transitions and can be delivered as a multi-country or multi-regional project. Finally, the MRS should also contribute to implementation of Horizon Europe EU Missions⁴⁴, particularly those with a strong regional dimension, such as the EU Mission for restoring our Ocean and Waters.

8. MONITORING AND EVALUATION – WORK IN PROGRESS

The MRS are delivering a substantial number of results, ranging from internal capacity effects and coordination/cooperation processes among countries and regions, to concrete transnational projects/activities being implemented or facilitated. However, in practice, it is challenging to measure and report on these achievements.

This is why initiatives to develop monitoring systems are on-going in all MRS. The overall macro-regional territorial monitoring tool developed by the ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) to observe development trends and patterns in all four MRS should be explored by all these strategies when assessing options to improve or re-focus their objectives and policies. Additionally, the ESPON Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and Adriatic Ionian Macro-regions provides valuable input.

A monitoring matrix was developed by and for EUSALP in 2021 with targets and indicators defined. The revised 2021 action plan for EUSBSR sets out its monitoring and evaluation framework, which the National Coordinators Group has endorsed and published on the EUSBSR website. In the EUSDR, a new monitoring system was introduced in 2022.

Thus, although achievements were recorded in the fields of monitoring and evaluation, activities need to be stepped up. This is crucial to get better and more robust data on the impact of the MRS, including in terms of funding mobilised for the implementation of the strategies. Comprehensive monitoring mechanisms would also be helpful in maintaining political support and would help key implementers to better understand each strategy’s weaknesses and strengths.

9. BETTER COMMUNICATING THE MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES

⁴³ [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/technical-support-instrument/technical-support-instrument-tsi_en#:~:text=The%20Technical%20Support%20Instrument%20\(TSI,co%2Dfinancing%20from%20Member%20States.](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/technical-support-instrument/technical-support-instrument-tsi_en#:~:text=The%20Technical%20Support%20Instrument%20(TSI,co%2Dfinancing%20from%20Member%20States.)

⁴⁴ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe_en

Overall, communication activities of the four MRS focused on messages of solidarity and cooperation in times of war and pandemic. In 2020 a common narrative was developed by MRS communication and policy officers together with the support of Interact. It was the result of a discussion about mission, vision, and key messages common to the four strategies to explain MRS' *raison d'être* to a large audience. The narrative turned into a video⁴⁵ which explains the challenges in Europe, and the role of the MRS in overcoming them.

All strategies adapted their communication means, putting emphasis on digital formats and social media. EUSALP put in place a series of YouTube videos about solidarity within the Alpine region. The work done to deliver mission, vision and key messages with dedicated financial means for each strategy paid off, with noticeable results on communication activities. A more targeted audience has helped to set out key messages and these have been turned into concrete digital campaigns.

The EU MRS Week usually organised in the beginning of each year has become the biggest Brussels-based event dedicated to connecting MRS stakeholders at all levels with representatives of EU institutions, research and academia, civil society organisations and citizens. The 2021 MRS Week included sessions on support to the COVID-19 recovery, the embedding process and EU funding programmes directly managed by the European Commission. In 2022 the MRS Week had a focus on youth, the European Green Deal and social change. The opening included an expression of solidarity with Ukraine.

The Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week⁴⁶ is a Slovenian-led initiative which brings together key implementers from the four MRS. It has become a successful tool to reach both national media and the wider public.

Looking ahead, the work to communicate the MRS to stakeholders and the wider public should be continued and expanded within and across MRS, notably by more targeted communication, exploiting synergies, improving coordination and harmonisation.

10. THE WAY FORWARD AND CONCLUSIONS

The MRS contribution to the green, digital and social transitions is important. All MRS are accelerating their delivery on these topics, and if their ability to deliver is strengthened then the MRS will become more politically relevant. Activities that help addressing current challenges such as the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis and the recovery from the pandemic further reinforces the relevance of the strategies.

However, the MRS should also increase their efforts to support new activities in fields where cooperation at macro-regional level provides an added value, also exploring synergies with sea-basin strategies, and where the MRS could open for solutions that are difficult to achieve in more formalised contexts, such as energy. The war in Ukraine has put energy security on top of the political agenda in the European Union, notably with the REPowerEU Plan⁴⁷. It aims to diversify gas imports and increase energy efficiency and the use of renewables to achieve independence from Russian fossil fuels by 2030. The REPowerEU SWD⁴⁸ specifically refers to the role of MRS as cooperation frameworks to promote investments in hydrogen

⁴⁵ (193) EU Macro Regional Strategies, cooperation solutions in time of transition - YouTube

⁴⁶ <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/2022/06/10/save-the-date-for-the-mediterranean-coast-and-macro-regional-strategies-week-2022/>

⁴⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_3131

⁴⁸ SWD(2022) 230 final, 18.5.2022.

infrastructure in a cross-border, interregional and transnational context. These are areas where the MRS will need to turn their attention in the years to come.

The fact that Ukraine took over the presidency of the EUSDR in 2021 triggers new activities and contributes to the deepening of cooperation in the Danube region. In the enlargement process the MRS are well suited to help in the adoption of EU law while building administrative capacity on various EU policies, including cohesion policy and the principle of shared management. In the Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina took over the EUSAIR presidency in 2022. A task for the EUSDR will be to support the ambitions for EU membership of Ukraine and Moldova.

To conclude, MRS are powerful tools to support economic, social and territorial development, build macro-regional identity and aspirations and in building trust and confidence among neighbouring countries. The strategies are flexible tools to respond to new and emerging challenges. MRS also tailor key EU initiatives to the reality and specificities of a functional area and can help bringing the European Union closer to the citizens and young people. The efforts to embed the priorities of the MRS in relevant EU funding programmes 2021-2027 are progressing well, and they are showing encouraging initial results. However, ensuring implementation of these priorities will require continuous attention up to 2027.