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*Accompanying the document*

**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**

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## Abbreviations

<b>AII</b>	Adriatic and Ionian Initiative
<b>AG</b>	Action Group
<b>BSR</b>	Baltic Sea region
<b>CBC</b>	Cross-border cooperation
<b>CF</b>	Cohesion Fund
<b>DG</b>	Directorate General
<b>DSP</b>	Danube Strategy Point
<b>EAFRD</b>	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
<b>EB</b>	Executive Board
<b>EMFAF</b>	European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund
<b>ENI</b>	European Neighbourhood Instrument
<b>EAFRD</b>	European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>ETC</b>	European territorial cooperation
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUSAIR</b>	European Union strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region
<b>EUSALP</b>	European Union strategy for the Alpine region
<b>EUSBSR</b>	European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea region
<b>EUSDR</b>	European Union strategy for the Danube region
<b>FP</b>	EUSAIR Facility Point
<b>GB</b>	Governing Board
<b>HELCOM</b>	Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – Helsinki Commission
<b>IPA</b>	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
<b>JRC</b>	Joint Research Centre
<b>MA</b>	Managing authority
<b>MRS</b>	Macro-regional strategy (-ies)
<b>MSP</b>	Maritime Spatial Planning
<b>NC(s)</b>	National coordinator(s)
<b>NDICI</b>	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
<b>PA</b>	Policy/Priority area
<b>PAC(s)</b>	Policy/Priority area coordinators
<b>PC</b>	Pillar coordinators

<b>SMEs</b>	Small and medium-sized enterprises
<b>SG</b>	Steering Group
<b>TEN-T</b>	Trans-European Transport Network
<b>TSG</b>	Thematic Steering Group

## Introduction

This document comes in support of the fourth report to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, on the implementation of the four EU macro-regional strategies (“MRS”): the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR), the EU strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR), the EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region (EUSAIR) and the EU strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP). The report covers the period from mid-2020 to mid-2022.

It aims at providing more detailed information concerning the state of implementation of each MRS and future expectations. The document is based inter alia on contributions from MRS national and thematic coordinators (MRS “key implementers”) and experts.

The differences between the individual chapters on each of the four macro-regional strategy is due to the different maturity of each strategy (they have been adopted at different time) hence the differing availability of data and deliverables.

More information on the strategies can be found on their websites:

<http://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/>

<http://www.danube-region.eu/>

<http://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/>

<https://www.alpine-region.eu/>

## European Union macro-regional strategies

The size and diversity of the European territory justifies differentiated approaches to its development through specific strategies for functional macro-regions.

Increasing interdependence between countries, the growing role of sub-national authorities, and borderless, territorially-relevant challenges such as climate change, ecological degradation, natural and man-made hazards, all call for cooperative frameworks whereby groups of countries belonging to a wider geographical space can work together to address common challenges and opportunities.

With a view to provide an effective and collective response to issues better handled by working together, a macro-regional approach arose in the Baltic Sea region with discussions launched in the European Parliament in 2006. This gained momentum overtime, to such an extent that there are now four European Union (EU) macro-regional strategies (MRS):

- EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR; 2009)
- EU strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR; 2010)
- EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region (EUSAIR; 2014)
- EU strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP; 2016)

Each MRS is accompanied by an action plan that should be regularly updated in light of new, emerging needs and changing contexts.

The four MRS cover 19 EU Member States and 10 non-EU countries. Some EU Member States (such as Germany and Slovenia) are involved in three MRS, others (such as Croatia, Italy and Austria) are in two MRS.

A MRS is a policy framework which allows EU and non-EU countries located in a defined geographical area to jointly address challenges and opportunities they have in common by setting a set of shared, long-term objectives to meet the needs of the macro-region. By doing this, they benefit from stronger cooperation, making their policies more efficient than if they had addressed the issues on their own.

The MRS are an important innovation in territorial cooperation and cohesion. However, they differ in several aspects from cross-border and transnational territorial cooperation. One key feature of macro-regional cooperation, similarly to sea-basin strategies is its anchoring to integrated, strategic, longer-term and open-ended frameworks.

The MRS are initiated and requested by the relevant EU Member States at the level of the European Council. The strategies cover a number of policy/thematic areas that have been jointly agreed by the participating countries and which reflect their strong political commitment towards joint achievement of common objectives. Following the European Council request, the MRS (Communication and accompanying action plan) are drafted by the European Commission in partnership with the participating countries. Therefore, their implementation relies heavily on the commitment and ambition of the participating countries that lead the process. The process is as important as the result: it must be inclusive and bottom up to ensure ownership.

## **Report on the implementation of the European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR)**

The EUSBSR is the forerunner of the four EU macro-regional strategies, approved by the European Council in 2009. It brings together eight EU Member States: Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Germany (Berlin; Brandenburg; Hamburg; Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; Schleswig-Holstein), Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. It stretches from Lapland to the south of Poland, being home to around 85 million inhabitants, or nearly 16% of the EU population. The Strategy also welcomes cooperation with the neighbouring countries (Iceland and Norway, and until 2022 Russia and Belarus).

The EUSBSR has three main objectives, which represent the three key challenges of the Strategy:

- Saving the sea;
- Connecting the region; and
- Increasing prosperity.

These objectives are complemented by sub-objectives, which are mostly related to more than one objective and being also interlinked and interdependent:

- Clear water in the sea
- Rich and healthy wildlife
- Clean and safe shipping
- Reliable energy markets
- Good transport conditions
- Connecting people in the region
- Better cooperation in fighting cross-border crime
- Improved global competitiveness of the Baltic Sea region
- Climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management

The work within the EUSBSR is thematically divided into 14 policy areas, each of which develops between two and four actions. The EUSBSR is implemented through a revised action plan from February 2021.

### **RESULTS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

#### ***Main policy developments, including the pandemic and the war in Ukraine***

Over more than a decade, the experimental multi-level and cross-sectoral cooperation model of the EUSBSR has successfully engaged a wide range of stakeholders around the Baltic Sea to network and cooperate. It has empowered the stakeholders and increased their ownership by providing clear cooperation roles and responsibilities, effective decision-making and reinforced results-orientation. Its cooperation model and platform itself adds value by connecting people, creating networks, improving coordination and enhancing synergies. The EUSBSR stimulates policy learning at all levels by bringing together actors to solve common issues and challenges that cannot be tackled effectively by a single country or stakeholder alone.

The strategy has provided stimulus for new projects and processes of macro-regional relevance all over the region with significant results in areas such as innovation, safety and pollution prevention of maritime transportation, preparedness for maritime emergencies and reduction of plastic and air pollution in the Baltic Sea. It is furthermore contributing to shaping and developing policy on climate change and environment, energy and navigation in the region. To

this end, the strategy serves as a policy and coordination tool on the ground, delivering on the key European policy objectives such as the twin green and digital transition, social change and youth and civil society inclusion, while taking into account the territorial specificities of the Baltic Sea region.

The strategy is operationalised by an action plan that was revised during the reporting period and adopted by the Commission in February 2021. In particular, it considers emerging global challenges - i.e. the climate change, pandemic, demographic changes and migration – and the EU's new strategic frameworks and budget, as well as the governance challenges of the strategy.

The 2021 action plan streamlines policy areas and places them in a strategic context as well as assesses their contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and provides links to embed the EUSBSR into EU policies and funding programmes. It furthermore increases the involvement of NGOs, civil society, youth organisations and the business community within the strategy, and generally empowers stakeholders, providing clearer roles and responsibilities.

The revised action plan does not modify the main objectives of the strategy, nor the multi-level and cross-sectoral cooperation model. It reduces the number of actions from 73 to 44 and establishes a simplified structure with 14 thematic policy areas (instead of the previous 13 policy areas and four horizontal actions). Each policy area develops actions that contribute to achieving the main objectives. Activities under an action can be - but are not limited to - projects, processes, networks or platforms, which can be funded from different public and private sources. The policy areas are to ensure that horizontal aspects, notably addressing climate change and cooperation are integrated into the actions.

During the reporting period, the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic has been a key challenge both in terms of governance as well as operational, especially in certain policy areas. The 2020-2021 period was very difficult for the tourism sector around the Baltic Sea, and the international and domestic travel in the regions bordering Ukraine and/or Russia was further affected by the war in 2022. This also meant that the work within the policy area Tourism slowed down considerably during this period.

As for the cooperation, all the EUSBSR live events and meetings were cancelled after mid-March 2020, and most of the planned events migrated online instead. Lack of live events and related social interaction and exchange brought about some challenges, particularly in the context of creating and facilitating new initiatives and partnerships. At the same time, for established partnerships, the online events were mostly both effective and efficient, often attracting wider participation than live events before.

The pandemic also brought about new and innovative initiatives on recovery, including enhanced cooperation across the macro-regional strategies and strengthened joint initiatives. During the spring-summer of 2020, the four EU macro-regional strategies started planning for the Innovation Express 2021, a cross-MRS pilot on organising a joint call, based on the model of the EUSBSR project BSR Stars Innovation Express. It offers SMEs across the four strategies the possibility to widen their markets and develop new products and services with partners in Europe. The first call in the summer of 2021, presented a common approach for supporting SMEs at international matchmaking and joint R&D projects in such fields such as digital solutions in sustainable industry.

As a response to Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, the National Coordinators' group of the EUSBSR issued a statement on 10 March 2022, declaring the suspension of all cooperation with Russia and Belarus.

The war in Ukraine affects the geopolitical situation of the Baltic Sea region, as well as the policy context in which the EUSBSR is carried out. The issues of security, safety and resilience have moved up on the political agenda in the region, which is clearly seen also within the EUSBSR, especially within policy area Secure (see below the section regarding social change, including the inflow of refugees and other war related issues). The impacts of the war are also detected within policy areas linked to the key objective of saving the sea as Russia has played an important role in the region when it comes to combatting pollution of the Baltic Sea.

### ***EUSBSR thematic priorities and their interrelation with the European Green Deal***

The policy objective “Save the Sea” has been the principal objective of the EUSBSR since the beginning, given the particular challenge of eutrophication of the Baltic Sea arising from the excessive agricultural nutrient loads of nitrogen, phosphorus and ammonia emissions. Other forms of hazards include large quantities of underwater ammunitions and chemical munitions containing hazardous substances (dumped in the sea in the aftermath of the WWII). The Baltic Sea also continues to be one of the busiest seas in the world, prone to maritime accidents.

Under the 2021 action plan, “Save the Sea” continues as the key objective, so that the majority of planned actions under the 14 policy areas are contributing towards this objective, in particular policy areas such as Nutri, Hazards, Bioeconomy, Safe, Ship, Transport, Energy, Spatial Planning and Secure.

The revised action plan of 2021 further aligns the EUSBSR with the European Green Deal and the objective of making the EU climate neutral by 2050, by requiring that all policy areas must consider EU climate and environmental policy objectives. It also integrates into the strategy the principles of “do no significant harm”, climate-proofing, resilience building, prevention and preparedness and outlines how the different policy areas contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The action plan thus mainstreams the former horizontal actions on climate change as well as cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries as essential elements into all 14 policy actions.

At the same time, as the EUSBSR continues to evolve, the policy areas are becoming increasingly interlinked and interdependent. Energy security is moving up on the agenda in the light of the war in Ukraine and the RepowerEU Plan<sup>1</sup>, adopted by the Commission on 18 May 2022 in response to the hardships and global energy market disruption caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The actions under different policy areas are therefore often cross-sectoral and their scope serves several objectives and sub-objectives, a feature which is strongly encouraged under the revised action plan. This is in particular true for the twin green and digital transition, where the relevant actions are strongly interlinked and regionally tied – in particular in the areas of shipping and maritime industries, blue economy and tourism (see also the next section on the digital transition).

For instance, while the policy area Tourism previously focuses on promoting the Baltic Sea region as a tourist destination through improved cooperation and coordination, the renewed actions envisage more concrete and streamlined measures to address environmental and eco-systems protection, to promote sustainable production and consumption, to foster the digital transformation of tourism, and to ensure the preservation of the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_3131](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_3131)

### **Examples of projects and processes:**

The **CASCADE**<sup>2</sup> project (policy area Secure) addressed climate change risk management in the Baltic Sea region by increasing connections between local administrations and national civil protection authorities and fostering closer contacts between practitioners and climate change and/or risk management experts, creating mutual learning processes. Its objectives also included improving the capacity to assess and treat current and future climate change related risks at the local level, and increasing practical risk management capabilities of local authorities. A key result was a comprehensive online toolbox for climate change preparedness: <https://www.cascade-bsr.eu/toolbox>.

The **BEST**<sup>3</sup> - Better Efficiency for Industrial Sewage Treatment project (policy area Nutri) tackled both eutrophication and risks of hazardous substances by improving industrial sewage treatment in the Baltic Sea region. It helped municipal waste water treatment plants to handle industrial waste water by enhancing collaboration and best practices between municipalities, industries and water works.

The **CSHIPP**<sup>4</sup> - Clean Shipping Project Platform project (policy area Ship) brought together projects and organisations focused on enhancing clean shipping in the Baltic Sea region to increase the impact by linking several projects working for clean shipping. As the involved projects address at the topic from different angles, CSHIPP synthesised their results in a concise and easily comprehensible format. Furthermore, to bring research results to policy makers and maritime industry, the project established an online portal (<https://www.shipemissions.eu/>), an inventory of data on shipping emissions and the impact on the region. The project results were taken forward by the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM) Maritime Working Group towards developing HELCOM clean shipping-related recommendations.

The **COMPLETE**<sup>5</sup> project (policy area Ship) contributed to the reduction of the uncontrolled spread of invasive species in the Baltic Sea region by developing practical tools and proposals for prevention. The introduction of alien species has severe environmental and economic consequences, including loss of native species, habitat change and threat to the biodiversity and natural ecosystems. Shipping is one of the key contributors to the introduction of alien species to the Baltic Sea. The project also elaborated a proposal for a Regional Baltic Biofouling Management Roadmap that serves as a recommendation for policy makers to implement sustainable biofouling management strategies in shipping and boating. With the **COMPLETE PLUS**<sup>6</sup> project this roadmap as well as other tools and guidelines developed under COMPLETE were brought into practice by partners from six countries around the Baltic Sea.

The goal of the **Effect4buildings**<sup>7</sup> project (policy area Energy) is to increase the number of energy efficiency measures implemented in the existing public buildings. Its target group is public building managers, with knowledge of technically possible actions and calculations

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cascade-bsr.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://bestbalticproject.eu/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/cshipp/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/complete/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/complete-plus/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.effect4buildings.se/>

proving that investments are profitable, but who fail to implement the measures due to financial barriers. The project will result in a toolbox of financial methods that can improve profitability, facilitate funding and reduce the risk of energy investment in public buildings.

The ongoing **eMSP NBSR**<sup>8</sup> project (policy area Spatial Planning) aims to support coherence of maritime policy and maritime spatial plans (MSP) in the North and Baltic Sea regions and address present and future challenges and to develop the capacity of responsible authorities. The result will be project mechanism that supports maritime spatial planners to jointly develop approaches for MSP in the implementation phase of MSP and takes on board the ambitions of the European Green Deal and other EU initiatives.

The project **DAIMON 2**<sup>9</sup> (policy area Hazards), follow-up of the project DAIMON, brought together partners from Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden to create and apply a set of decision-aid-tools for maritime administrations, governments, academia and off-shore industry. In September 2021, the EU Parliament issued a Resolution on chemical residues in the Baltic Sea, which puts an imperative on the continuation of the DAIMON 2 project activities.

### ***EUSBSR thematic priorities and their interrelation with the digital transition***

Digital transformation is addressed throughout the revised EUSBSR action plan and several policy areas have increased focus and specific actions on digitalisation, such as Innovation (digital innovation & transformation), Safe (being a forerunner in digitalisation), Ship (digitalisation to reduce shipping emissions), Transport (facilitating innovative technologies & solutions) and Tourism (digital transformation, skills & technology).

As discussed above, the goals of the twin green and digital transition as well as innovation are also closely interlinked under the strategy, especially in the policy areas covering shipping, maritime industries and blue economy. Various projects have introduced cutting-edge digital solutions and processes to make shipping in the Baltic Sea safer, cleaner and more sustainable. Extended digital cooperation, i.e. a strong involvement of the private sector and collaboration between the public sector, industry and academia has turned out to be essential for the success, for example, for bringing in digital solutions to reduce the ecological footprint of transport vessels.

In the field of innovation, the EUSBSR has advanced digitalisation by boosting the development of the networks and digital policies and helping the SMEs, industry associations and policy makers to speed up the region's transition to a single digital market, as well as promoting ICT uptake in the business sector, developing digital public services, promoting transnational interoperability via innovative cross-border e-services and facilitating digital single market policy discussions at the regional level.

Regions in the Baltic Sea have been actively developing their smart specialisation strategies in line with the EU Green Deal and with increasing focus on interregional Baltic Sea cooperation. Various projects have facilitated the development of long-term strategic innovation cooperation and partnerships that can eventually lead to joint investments, as well as provided insights and

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.emspproject.eu/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/daimon-2/>

tools for regions to develop the smart specialisation strategies, with a strong focus on inclusive sustainability, green and digital transition.

The BSR Stars Innovation Express project provided the model for the Innovation Express 2021 - a cross-MRS call for proposals implemented across all the four macro-regions - as a response to the economic challenges brought about by the pandemic. Its first call in 2021 represented a common approach for supporting SMEs at international matchmaking and joint R&D projects in the fields of “Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare Applications” and “Digital solutions in sustainable industry”.

#### **Examples of projects and processes:**

**BSR Digi co-lab** and its sub-projects **DIGINNO**<sup>10</sup> and **DINNOCAP**<sup>11</sup> and (policy area Innovation) were umbrella-type initiatives to enhance digital cooperation between industry associations, government agencies, and knowledge institutions in the Baltic Sea region, focusing on SME’s digital innovation capacity to move towards the digital market. The main outputs are: company digitalisation toolkit for SMEs, four show-case models of G2B cross-border e-services (incl. feasibility analyses and proofs of concept), a White Paper with policy recommendations as well as an informal but active cross-sectoral industry digitalisation community of the Baltic Sea region.

The project **ECOPRODIGY**<sup>12</sup> (policy area Ship) increases eco-efficiency in the maritime sector by creating and piloting digital solutions in close cooperation between industry end-users and research organisations. It addresses both environmental and economic challenges by promoting eco-efficiency at all stages of the vessel lifecycle from design and build, to the use, maintenance, storage as well as the conversion processes. The project also improves the capacity of the maritime industry actors to enhance eco-efficiency in their operations by providing training and by designing a digitalisation road map for increasing eco-efficiency. ECOPRODIGI also strengthens the public support for digitalisation by providing policy workshops and recommendations addressing digitalisation gaps in the industry.

**The STM BALT SAFE**<sup>13</sup> (policy area Safe) increases the safety of navigation by introducing common Sea Traffic Management (STM) which enables maritime services to digitally exchange voyage plans of tanker traffic in the Baltic Sea, which experiences one of densest sea traffic in the world. With many tanker and passengers crossing routes as well as narrow passages, the risk of accidents is high. The STM services enable the exchange of voyage plans thereby improving an overall situational awareness between ships, and between ships and shore. The shore centres develop and test new digital services, for example automated reporting, which additionally improve speed and accuracy of ship-shore information exchange.

The **R-Mode Baltic**<sup>14</sup> (policy area Safe) project launched a technical system for a safer ship navigation, and placed the Baltic Sea as a first operational navigation test area for maritime terrestrial navigation on the global map. As Baltic Sea is known for frequent shipping accidents like groundings, collisions and other types of accidents, the challenge was to

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.diginnoobsr.eu/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.dinnocapbsr.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ecoprodigy.eu/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.seatraficmanagement.info/projects/stm-balt-safe/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/r-mode-baltic/>

prevent and minimise the accidents' frequency. The project brought together research institutions, national maritime service providers and industry partners. The partners further developed the R-Mode technology and verified R-Mode as a suitable approach for coastal navigation.

**Baltic DigiTour**<sup>15</sup> is a seed money project (policy area Tourism) that is supporting a five-member consortium from three Baltic Sea countries by conducting background investigations and thereby preparing for a fully-fledged main project providing an online distributed knowledge community on digitalisation in the Baltic tourism attractions (by embracing the concept of cMOOCs: connectivist Massive Open Online Courses).

### ***EUSBSR thematic priorities and social change, including the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

The EUSBSR has been addressing the issues of social change for several years especially in the area of education and labour market. Since 2014, the membership-based School to Work (S2W)<sup>16</sup> project has been improving its members' ability to smoothen the transition for youth from school to work. S2W aims to prevent early school leaving and to develop support for vulnerable groups of students and youth, early school leavers and recently arrived refugees. Its members include local and regional authorities, state agencies, schools, and civil society organisations all around the Baltic Sea.

The refugee inflow is having a strong impact on labour markets and education systems in the region, especially in Poland and the Baltic countries. In 2022, from 24 February up to 29 April, a total of 3.03 million people entered Poland from Ukraine. As of 20 April, around 976.000 foreigners were registered for "temporary protection" in Poland. The increasing number of refugees is creating new challenges and putting a further strain on health and social systems, which were already severely affected by the pandemic. There are also specific new challenges regarding education in terms of being able to provide an inclusive education process, Ukrainian distance learning programmes, examinations and education documents and recognition of previously acquired education (outside the EU). The 2021 action plan provides further possibilities to take actions on the social change-related issues - such as "Easing the way for migrants" – especially under the following policy areas:

- **Education:** i) Preventing early school leaving and improving transition from school to work: ii) International excellence and wider participation in science and research: iii) A labour market for all, using resources of longer lives; and iv) Recognising potential - Easing the way for migrants.
- **Health:** i) Promoting active and healthy ageing to address the challenges of demographic change: ii) Promoting health in all policies approach with focus on the impact of environmental factors, and especially climate change on human health, iii) Increasing stakeholder and institutional capacity to tackle regional health challenges.
- **Innovation:** i) Challenge-driven innovation: ii) Digital innovation and transformation: and iii) Co-creative innovation.
- **Spatial Planning:** Strengthening territorial cohesion through land based spatial planning, 2: Ensuring coherent maritime spatial plans throughout the Baltic Sea.

The impacts of the war have been also clearly felt in policy area Secure, since most of the members of its Steering Group are civil protection agencies directly involved in providing

<sup>15</sup> <https://lab.fi/en/project/baltic-digitour>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.s2wflagship.eu/>

support to Ukraine. In particular, the Steering Group members have shared their experience in gathering and distributing help to Ukraine and responded within the policy area Secure network to emerging needs for equipment such as fire trucks. Due to a high interest in addressing the refugee inflow, study visits are planned aimed at learning from the Polish experience, knowledge exchange and inventorying future needs of all actors involved.

During recent years, the EUSBSR framework has already been strengthening the role of civil society and civil society organisations, and the national actors in many policy areas have disseminated and showcased their models to other participating countries. The war has further underlined the key role that civil society organisations can play within the transnational Baltic Sea cooperation, by demonstrating that they can act with speed and creativity in relation to the war.

#### **Examples of projects and processes:**

The **ChYResilience**<sup>17</sup> project aims to empower children and youth to play an active role as contributors to societal resilience and to remove barriers to their active involvement in prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. To this end, project identifies initiatives and good practices that address or promote these factors and help prepare children and youth to play an active role in their safety and security. The primary project activity is a pre-study on preparing children and youth for prevention and effective action in the event of a crisis.

The **BSLF-SWL** - Baltic Sea Labour Forum for Sustainable Working Life<sup>18</sup> project (policy area Education) aims to improve working life conditions and lifelong learning provisions, systems and policies for an elderly labour force in order to promote active ageing and employability. The project addresses three issues crucial for the socio-economic development of the countries in the Baltic Sea region: the demographic challenge, active ageing and lifelong learning.

The **BSLF-SEA** - Support for longer working life<sup>19</sup> project (policy area Education) promotes the retention of the ability to work and employment of the elderly through, for instance, measures for raising awareness for promotion of a longer and better working life, targeted support measures, such as career consulting, mentoring, workplace adjustments and health promoting measures. Other activities include e.g. assessment of working environment and human resources potential and collective discussions on aging management issues.

The **EntreFox**<sup>20</sup> project (policy area Education) supports the careers and well-being of entrepreneurs and those interested in entrepreneurship over the age of 55, by providing them with digitisation, business expertise and new networks in order to improve their companies' competitiveness.

The **BaltCityPrevention**<sup>21</sup> project (policy area Health) brought together 14 SMEs specialised in IT and public health authorities from seven countries to strengthen their collaborationst and test a more participatory and user-oriented approach to develop and

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.bsr-secure.eu/chyresilience-how-do-our-partners-work-with-youth-participation-and-resilience-building/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://bslf.eu/sustainable-working-life/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.nva.gov.lv/en/department/esf-project-support-education-unemployed>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.entrefox.fi/about-entrefox/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://baltcityprevention.eu/>

implement prevention and health promotion interventions. The project developed a new approach helping public health authorities in prevention intervention planning by better tailoring the interventions to the needs of specific user groups applying participatory and co-creation methods in the planning procedure.

**ScanBalt Health Region (SBHR)**<sup>22</sup> – Cross-Sectoral and Transnational Projects for Innovation in Health and in Life Sciences project (policy area Innovation) aims to develop the Baltic Sea region into a globally leading and prosperous “Health Region” using the ScanBalt BioRegion<sup>23</sup> as a model. Its aims are related to: a) regional competences in these fields; b) smart specialisation strategies; c) promoting a trans-regional collaboration platform; d) collaboration and interaction within different health-related areas; and e) enhancing branding and visibility to attract and retain human, financial and industrial resources.

## *Governance and Administrative involvement and capacity*

### General

The governance structure of the EUSBSR consists of the following functions and levels:

- the national coordinators;
- the presidency;
- the Trio presidency (the incumbent, past and future presidencies);
- the policy area coordinators;
- the steering groups (of each policy area) and their working groups.

### Political level

Each year, the EUSBSR presidency rotates between the eight involved countries for a 12-month period between July and June (the rotation schedule is agreed by the National Coordinators’ group). In the reporting period, the Strategy was chaired by Germany in 2020-2021, Lithuania 2021-2022 and Sweden took over the chair in July 2022. The EUSBSR presidency is assisted by the Trio presidency that includes the incumbent, past and future presidencies.

In order to facilitate involvement at the political level, all participating countries have set-up mechanisms at national level to coordinate EUSBSR issues. Cross-sectoral national platforms have been established to support continuous dialogue amongst relevant national/regional/local stakeholders and about on-going initiatives. They aim to coordinate EUSBSR issues and involve a wider range of actors, including stakeholders in charge of cohesion policy programmes. A common challenge among the macro-regional strategies is the fluctuation of participants in these platforms and the variable involvement of actors from different levels (sub-national, regional and local).

Since 2010, an annual forum has been organised to communicate the EUSBSR’s work and results, stimulate policy discussion, and provide stakeholders with a networking opportunity. The annual fora take place in one of the eight involved countries, aiming to attract key policy makers, stakeholders and local, regional, national and EU level actors (who will host the forum is agreed by the National Coordinators’ group).

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<sup>22</sup> <https://scanbalt.org/projects/scanbalt-health-region/>

<sup>23</sup> ScanBalt BioRegion is an innovation network composed of the health and bio-economy communities in Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, northern Germany, and the northern Netherlands: <https://scanbalt.org/>

Due to the pandemic and the lockdown that followed, the 11<sup>th</sup> EUSBSR Annual Forum in 2020 was organised virtually from Turku, Finland, focusing on the themes of sustainability and innovation. The 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum - with the motto Revitalize-Recover-Recharge - was organised in hybrid format in the autumn of 2021, during the Lithuanian presidency. In addition, physical events took place in the Lithuanian cities of Kaunas and Klaipėda.

The annual forum of 2021 was opened by Ursula von der Leyen (the President of the European Commission) and four Prime Ministers (of Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden). The Secretary-General of the OECD also participated showing strong political support to the strategy. The main message from the high-level speakers was that the EUSBSR's goals go hand-in-hand with the EU priorities and the EUSBR has the potential to influence the agenda setting to increase the resilience of the EU, especially the economic and societal one, while leaving no person behind.

### Implementation level

The 2021 action plan re-defines the EUSBSR governance rules by enhancing the role of the steering groups of the policy areas and setting up a new organisational framework for the policy area coordinators (PACs). It also establishes a new Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP) that is meant to provide administrative and technical support for the strategy's management, development and communication. The BSP will be guided by and accountable to the National Coordinators' group that decides on its detailed tasks. The day-to-day work of the BSP is to be conducted in close contact with the presidency. The BSP is to be up and running in the course of 2022.

The national coordinators (NCs) – nominated by each participating country - are the focal point at national level and the decision-making body for the EUSBSR. Together, the NCs form the National Coordinators group' (NCG) which meets regularly. Their primary task is to oversee implementation of the strategy in their countries and ensure that the EUSBSR is firmly anchored in the national political environment. This includes engaging with all 14 policy areas (including participation in steering group meetings) and liaising with national line ministries and other relevant organisations to encourage them to consider and implement EUSBSR actions in their policy field. In most of the EUSBSR countries the strategy is coordinated by a ministry (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) that is different from the ministry in charge of the bulk of EU funding programmes. However, there are also cases where both the strategy and the EU funding are under the responsibility of the same ministry.

The countries and organisations participating in the EUSBSR are responsible for coordinating the policy areas. Each policy area is managed by at least one policy area coordinator (PAC), working with their steering group (SG) members. Having the overview of a particular policy area, the PACs' main role is to identify key processes that will achieve the EUSBSR goals through different actions and identify how to best implement solutions. The position of individual PACs remains rather difficult, as they often possess neither the funds nor the political and administrative influence to implement a broad set of targets.

The steering groups are the central executive and decision-making bodies at policy area level for objectives and actions, formats, key areas of cooperation, and future developments. The SGs meet usually twice a year, a requirement met by most priority areas. However, steering group members' participation in the meetings varies considerably between the policy areas.

### Civil society

Since the beginning, civil society organisations, such as NGOs, and private sector organisations have played an important role in the EUSBSR. This is in particular the case in policy areas such as Education, Culture, Health and Tourism. Furthermore, higher education and research

institutions continue to make up the largest category of project partners in Interreg-funded activities of the EUSBSR. The 2021 action plan included and increased the structured involvement of NGOs, civil society, youth organisations and the business community in the work of the strategy.

The policy area Education has a network of 1850 stakeholders with an increasing number of NGOs, who actively take part in the projects and stakeholder events. Examples of the projects with NGOs include School to Work - S2W and Baltic Sea Labour Forum - BSLF (see above). Education is one of the policy areas with the most potential to further engage with the civil society organisations, as NGOs play a key role in developing solutions in the area, such as reaching out to and building trust with vulnerable groups such as migrants and young unemployed.

In policy area Health, the EUSBSR actions allow for a wide participation of civil society, the representatives of which are regularly taking part in events and projects. Currently, the strongest representation of civil society actors is seen in active and healthy ageing, **AgeFLAG**<sup>24</sup>, through which the strategy has engaged with a variety of actors, such as the AGE Platform Europe.

### Youth

Youth involvement is well recognised by the EUSBSR and the 2021 action plan aims to involve more young people in the work of the strategy and policymaking. Youth is specifically especially addressed under the policy areas Bioeconomy, Secure, Education and Culture. The youth involvement is coordinated through different formats, in particular the Baltic Sea Youth Forum (BSYP) that aims to empower young people in the region and to make their voices heard at all levels. Several policy areas such as Culture, Education and Health is working together with the BSYP and are engaging the BSYP into their initiatives whenever possible. Policy area Culture has an active role in facilitating the Youth Camps and other youth events.

In 2020, the EUSBSR Youth Declaration was prepared by the participants of the Baltic Sea Youth Camps 2020 with the aim to institutionalise the BSYP and coordinate the youth involvement in the EUSBSR policy areas. The Declaration contains statements and expectations by the youth in the areas of environment, transport and social issues. These priorities do not only relate to the EUSBSR but are also in line with the NextGenerationEU and the European Green Deal.

An example of youth participation in the strategy is the South Baltic Bridge<sup>25</sup> that connects young people in Denmark, Germany and Poland aiming to develop skills in the green and blue sector. Another example is the ChYResilience project (see above) that deals with the role of children and young people in building resilient societies, aiming to model the possible involvement of both groups at each stage in response to hazards.

The EUSBSR Annual Forum of 2021 paid special attention to the youth-related topics - including the full-day closing event dedicated to the youth - and enhanced involvement of the youth, so that the panellists and participants included several representatives of youth organisations. One of the organisers of the Forum was Klaipėda, European Youth Capital of 2021.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://si.se/en/projects-granted-funding/ageflag-roadmap-to-improve-health-and-well-being-of-ageing-population-in-the-bsr/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://sbbridge.eu/>

## ***Access to funding and embedding:***

### General overview

The transnational cooperation programme for the Baltic Sea region (Interreg BSR funded by the ERDF) is closely linked to the EUSBSR thematically, geographically, and in terms of support for the governance (including the policy areas). It also continues to be the most utilised source of funding for projects under the strategy. Over the years, integration and alignment between the EUSBSR and the Interreg BSR has greatly helped in developing and co-financing the EUSBSR projects.

Other important funding sources include the cross-border cooperation programmes also funded by the ERDF, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) - such as the Interreg South Baltic and Interreg Sweden-Norway programmes) - as well as other EU funded instruments such as Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Horizon 2020 and Life, EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action (see also below on funds directly managed by the Commission). The “mainstream”, i.e. regional and national cohesion policy programmes as well as the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) in the region are also sources of funding, although there is still potential room for increasing the funding for the EUSBSR from these programmes (as described below).

### Cohesion policy programmes 2021-2027

As indicated above, the Interreg programmes alone cannot satisfy all the funding needs to implement the EUSBSR actions. That is why it is necessary to further embed the strategy in other EU funding programmes. The 2021 action plan sees that the managing authorities (MAs) of EU funding programmes play an important role by ensuring the embedding of the actions into their respective programmes. Close cooperation with the managing authorities and their networks is therefore essential. To this end, the national coordinators and members of steering groups need to cooperate with MAs at the national level, NCs at the strategic level and steering groups members at the operational level. At the operational level, PACs have the main responsibility for such cooperation in their respective policy areas.

To this end, in the EUSBSR, MA Networks were already set up for ESF, ERDF, EAFRD and EMFAF.

In order to strengthen the alignment of the cohesion policy programmes and the EUSBSR in the national planning for the 2021-2027 period, working groups responsible for the planning and coordination between ministries, social partners and regional authorities also included officials dealing with EUSBSR activities (such as NCs or PA steering group members).

The national authorities report that as the EUSBSR responds to challenges common for the countries in the region, their programmes for the 2021-2027 period do generally also take the strategy well in to account and align with its objectives. The specific objectives of these new programmes have often direct links to the EUSBSR policy areas. However, not all the policy areas of the strategy are covered as many of the cohesion policy programmes are focused on policy goals related to innovation, skills and SMEs.

Furthermore, the national regulations for the post-2020 implementation usually provide possibilities to organise joint international calls for proposals contributing to the implementation of the EUSBSR. Often, it is also possible to allocate additional funding for new project activities implemented together with international partners in accordance with the objectives of the EUSBSR. This includes using parts of the EU structural funds for projects outside the programme area.

### Funds directly managed by the Commission

As mentioned above, EUSBSR projects are also co-financed by other EU funding instruments directly managed by the European Commission, such as CEF, Erasmus, LIFE and Horizon 2020/Europe.

For example, in policy areas of Ship and Safe, most projects have been funded by the directly managed funds such as CEF and Horizon 2020. In the policy area Safe, examples of projects funded by Horizon 2020 are: NEEDS, CASCADE and FIRE-IN. Also in the policy area Transport, projects have received funding from the CEF and Horizon 2020 (e.g. EU ITS Platform, Shift2Rail, AiRMOUR and VitalNodes). CEF has also funded projects under policy area Energy.

In the area of Bioeconomy, projects have been funded by LIFE, in particular its Nature and Biodiversity sub-programmes (e.g. Life Taiga I and II, Life CONNECTS and Life IP Rich Waters). The policy area Education finds funding in Erasmus+ strategic partnerships. In the policy area Innovation, Erasmus+ has funded for instance the KAforHR project that aims supporting SMEs. Policy area Spatial Planning has an on-going project eMSP NBSR (see above) approved by CINEA (the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency) under the call EMFF-MSP-2020.

In order to promote directly managed funding possibilities within the EUSBSR, some national authorities have strengthened the relations between the NCG members and the respective specialists in the ministerial departments responsible for facilitating engagement with EU financing instruments. More knowledge of the EU funding possibilities is needed especially at the local and regional levels, in particular in relation to the application process and possibilities for international and interregional cooperation. This would facilitate that the EUSBSR evolve as a strategic framework for projects and funding.

### ***Monitoring and evaluation***

An overall macro-regional territorial monitoring tool was developed by the ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) programme to observe development trends and patterns at the level of the four macro-regional strategies (MRS). The ESPON tool focuses on identifying development opportunities and territorial challenges, and these are communicated to the four MRS to improve or re-focus the objectives and policies, bringing together statistical information and policy objectives.

The 2021 action plan sets out the monitoring and evaluation framework for the EUSBSR, and the NCG endorses the overall monitoring and evaluation framework and ensures that it is published on the EUSBSR website. The PACs monitor their policy areas and actions and prepare annual reports on the achievements for their respective steering groups. The SGs evaluate and endorse these annual reports and submit these to the NCG for information. The annual reports are reviewed by NCG and shared with the Commission. At the national level, monitoring is carried out by the National Coordinators through coordination structures set up between the relevant ministries. The MAs report on their programmes' contributions to the implementation of the strategy.

### ***Communication***

The 2021 action plan consolidates the functions of the Interreg-funded project Let's Communicate! and the former horizontal action Capacity. It envisages that communication, information and publicity for the EUSBSR and targeted capacity building for stakeholders are to be ensured by the NCG, supported by the Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP).

During the reporting period (i.e. prior to setting up the BSP), Let's communicate! Managed the [EUSBSR website](#), [Twitter](#), [Flickr](#) and [Youtube](#) accounts. The project has gathered information about EUSBSR developments for the communication channels, promoted the use of the EUSBSR visual identity and provided stakeholders with communication support and tools. Let's communicate! also organised outreach to new stakeholders groups. Furthermore, the project has been supporting the policy areas in addressing non-EU cooperation and in aligning the work, in particular EU with the climate policy objectives.

Communication activities are also carried out at the level of the policy areas, who provide information on their activities and manage their policy area specific websites through the EUSBSR online platform. The policy areas are also active on social media and occasionally produce their own information brochures. At national level, the NCs have a key role to play in communicating the strategy through various means. Several national administrations run dedicated website for the EUSBSR providing information on the EUSBSR activities. The NCs and other stakeholders also give e.g. interviews to national magazines and contribute with columns and articles on the strategy.

In the reporting period, a major communication campaign was conducted by all the key actors in order to prepare (and involve the relevant stakeholders), launch and ensure the visibility for the revised action plan.

The annual forum continues to be the main event for the EUSBSR and a key mean to raise awareness about the strategy. In 2021, the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum (with the motto of Revitalize-Recover-Recharge) was organised during the Lithuanian presidency between 27 September and 1 October in a hybrid format. Its agenda covered topics ranging from climate change, combatting pollution and digitalisation to culture and youth. The Forum was attended in total of ca. 1700 participants from governments, international organisations, NGOs, universities, local and regional administrations, business and media. As mentioned previously, it was opened by the President of the European Commission, five Prime Ministers and the Secretary-General of OECD. The organisers used a dedicated website as well as social media to communicate about the Forum. 42 posts were published through the EUSBSR Facebook site (that had 2 087 followers at the time of the Forum) and 45 posts through the EUSBSR Twitter account @EUSBSR (that had 3 462 followers) before, during and after the event. The total coverage of all Facebook posts was 14 834 while the total impression of all Twitter posts were 21 579.

According to the Flash Eurobarometer 497 of October 2021, the awareness of the EUSBSR varied between the eight surveyed countries. From 64% in Finland, 45% in Estonia, 44% in Sweden, 41% in both Lithuania and Latvia and to 39% in Poland. In Denmark and Germany (only some federal states are involved in the EUSBSR) awareness was at 17%.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

The EUSBSR institutionalises and operationalises networks of cooperation among the Baltic Sea stakeholders on many levels not addressed otherwise. The strategy is shifting from being a regional cooperation platform to a hub for identifying common challenges and common solutions for the region, a trend which has been further accelerated by the pandemic. The 2021 action plan was an important step forward both governance and policy-wise, by refocusing the strategy to tackle common global challenges in the Baltic Sea region context. Its full implementation is central to the success and achievement of the objectives in the years to come.

### ***The European Green Deal, the digital transition, social change including the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

Within the EUSBSR, the EU's green and digital priorities have traditionally been high in the agenda both politically and in terms of concrete actions. The 2021 action plan has further aligned the strategy with the objectives of the European Green Deal and the digital transition.

In general, the stakeholders perceive that while the pandemic has brought challenges in many fronts, it has also presented an opportunity to rethink the actions further promoting the green and low carbon transition needed to build a more robust, sustainable, resilient and green economy in the Baltic Sea region.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the strategy's principle objective to "Save the Baltic Sea" has become much more difficult to achieve after the cooperation with Russia and Belarus was suspended following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The future cooperation with Russia remains unclear.

It is evident that the efforts to integrate refugees fleeing Ukraine need to be reinforced in the region. The revised action plan provides several possibilities to support the integration of refugees under policy areas such as Health and Education, and especially through the action "Recognising potential - Easing the way for migrants". Similarly, the war in Ukraine highlights the issue of energy security and the need for the EUSBSR to help delivering on the REPowerEU Plan. Exchange of information and experience between EUSBSR stakeholders can further provide support in tackling these new common challenges.

#### ***EUSBSR governance (including monitoring, evaluation and communication)***

Overall, the governance of the EUSBSR works well and has shown its resilience during the time of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The revised action plan of 2021 sees the establishment of a new Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP) as a function providing administrative and technical support for EUSBSR management, development and communication. It will also have an important monitoring and evaluation role.

Establishing the BSP is a very welcome development, bringing the EUSBSR at level of the other macro-regional strategies in the terms of governance support as well as providing institutional memory. Therefore, finalising the setting up of the BSP and making it operational is a high priority for the EUSBSR.

It should be noted, however, that some of the national authorities find that the EUSBSR (or MRS in general) should be more flexible, in particular during times of crisis. This would mean providing the EUSBSR policy areas with more flexibility and independence, something which is already envisaged by the 2021 action plan.

The structured involvement of and support for civil society, civil society organisations and the youth has been strengthened by the revised action plan, the operationalisation of which needs to be closely monitored.

Although the high-level attendance at the Annual Forum in 2021 did raise the political profile and visibility of the strategy, the stakeholders generally find that the EUSBSR is still not getting the political attention and support it deserves. In some cases, this might be also reflected in the level of resources allocated to the EUSBSR-related work in the responsible national ministries. In general, the resources dedicated to the strategy at regional and local level are still considered rather limited, including the staff resources needed to follow and mobilise the available financing.

### ***Embedding, implementation and access to funds directly managed by the Commission***

The embedding process within the EUSBSR - i.e. aligning the new cohesion policy programmes with the EUSDR and creating adequate mechanism to facilitate contribution - is ongoing and needs to be finalised as soon as possible by the MA and the MA network together with the NCG.

A more systemic approach to the embedding is expected once the new Baltic Sea Strategy Point becomes fully operational. Learning from the experience of other macro-regional on embedding could also help. Furthermore, as is the case of all MRS, the challenge for the years to come is to move from the programming to implementation and to set up proper monitoring tools to capture the progress.

Some national authorities feel that because the strategy itself does not have funds for actions and projects, this leads to difficulties in embedding the strategy efficiently at the national level. In some policy areas, some national authorities also see that issues arise when an identified cross-sectorial and multi-modal project cannot be sufficiently funded by an Interreg programme, because it does not correspond with a priority of the said programme. Moreover, directly managed funds could do more to promote not only collaboration between countries, but also stress the macro-regional and cross-MRS aspects of partnerships.

### ***Coordination and cooperation between macro-regional strategies***

Cooperation and intensified exchanges between the EUSBSR and the other three MRSs are much welcomed by the stakeholders. Sharing good practices as well as participating in the other MRS' Annual Fora are considered very supportive. For example, the EUSBSR has benefitted from the EUSDR's experiences on the inclusion of youth in the strategy and on setting up a technical support function (i.e. BSP). The stakeholders do not see that the cooperation between the MRS needs to be further institutionalised as the existing regular Trio presidencies' meetings already provide for efficient exchange. It should be noted that the pandemic to some extent has affected the cooperation between the MRS negatively, due to the travel restrictions and because the operational focus was largely on crisis management.

### ***EUSBSR role in EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy***

Since launching of the strategy in 2009, one of the EUSBSR's goal has been strengthening regional collaboration and integration with the third EU neighbouring countries, i.e. Belarus, Iceland, Norway and Russia. Following Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, all cooperation with Russia and Belarus under the EUSBSR was suspended on 10 March 2022. The implications of this move, for the prime objective of the Strategy, "Save the Sea", will need to be carefully assessed. At the same time, the strategy continues to welcome cooperation with Iceland and Norway, which is also important in the context of the EU's Arctic and Northern Dimension collaboration. Finally, there might also be possibilities in the future for closer cooperation with Ukraine, which already participates in the EU strategy for the Danube region.

## **Report on the implementation of the European Union strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR)**

Dating from 2010, the EUSDR was the second macro-regional strategy (MRS) to be launched following the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR). Over the years, the Strategy has provided stimulus to start new projects and processes of macro-regional relevance all over the region. The access to know-how and best practices within the macro-region has been of great benefit to many actors at various levels who were looking for different approaches and solutions when designing and implementing policy.

The EUSDR covers 14 countries that differ considerably in terms of their development level and position in relation to the EU: it includes nine EU Member States, four EU accession countries and one potential EU accession country.

EUSDR is built around four pillars:

- “Connecting the region” focuses on improving inland navigation along the Danube and promoting culture and tourism.
- “Protecting the environment” seeks to restore and maintain water quality, among other issues.
- “Building prosperity” aims, among other things, to develop the knowledge society.
- “Strengthening the region” focuses on improving decision-making capacity and structures in the public and private sector.

The four pillars are divided into 12 priority areas.

### **RESULTS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

#### ***Main policy developments, including the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic***

The EUSDR has proven its usefulness in directing the attention of politicians, administrations, various institutions and civil society organisations towards the Danube region. A key added value of the strategy is that it brings together new actors across sectors, countries and levels. It stimulates policy learning at all levels by bringing together actors to solve common challenges that cannot be tackled effectively by one single country alone, be it plastic pollution in water bodies, inland navigation, disaster management or the protection of endangered species.

The EUSDR is a tool to deliver and bring a territorial dimension to key European political initiatives such as the green and digital transition, issues related to social transition, the inclusion of civil society and youth as well as responding to new challenges such as the pandemic and Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine. The strategy offers a cooperation platform for coordinating actions and funds based on a cross-sectoral and multi-level governance approach. Finally, the strategy provides a good introduction and training on how the European Union works for countries that are in the process of accessing or aspire to join the EU.

Ukraine took over the presidency of the EUSDR at the Annual Forum in October 2021 for a period of 12 months. This was the first time ever that a non-EU, non-accession country (at the time) took over the presidency of an MRS. However, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. The impact of the war had an immediate effect on the implementation and governance of EUSDR, as Ukraine temporarily was unable to perform the duties of the presidency. On the 23 March 2022 the EUSDR National Coordinators formally endorsed a temporary EUSDR presidency by the remaining members of the EUSDR Trio

presidency, Slovakia and Slovenia, supported by the Danube Strategy Point. The Temporary EUSDR presidency undertook the EUSDR presidency's duties and tasks until 19 May 2022 when the Ukrainian National Coordination announced that they were ready to once again take up the presidency.

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has hampered the implementation of several strategic projects, for example in the field of water management. It has become difficult to implement and further develop already started activities, while the planning of new projects and further inclusion of Ukrainian stakeholders is on hold. Many actors normally engaged in the activities of the priority areas of the EUSDR now find themselves heavily involved with tasks related to the war e.g. collecting and transporting donations or supporting refugees.

Apart from affecting the governance of the EUSDR, Russia's war against Ukraine has implications for the policy context of the strategy. Energy security has thus moved to top of the political agenda in a region where Russian supply more than 60% of the gas. Also, transporting goods into and out of Ukraine by waterway has become difficult as many shipping companies no longer provide transport to Ukrainian harbours due to the security situation. As a result, the traffic on the Danube is largely diverted to ports in Romania, which in turn experience congestion.

During the reporting period the recovery from the pandemic has been a key challenge. Apart from triggering new ways of working, the pandemic caused the postponement or cancellation of physical meetings (e.g. ministerial meetings, steering group meetings). The pandemic also boosted new initiatives such as innovation clusters targeting SMEs that needed to adjust to a new market situation post-COVID.

### ***EUSDR thematic priorities and their interrelation with the European Green Deal***

Overall, the potential contribution of the EUSDR to the objectives of the European Green Deal is high. The 2020 action plan aligns the EUSDR with the European Green Deal. The Green Deal and its relevant corollary measures are covered by several priority areas. This includes actions to mitigate climate change, improve climate adaptation and increase resilience. Examples include securing water supply for people and agriculture, coping with more frequent natural hazards and preserving and restoring biodiversity. Activities falling within the framework of the EUSDR include support to sustainable inland waterway transport, to integration of energy markets of non-EU countries and help in the implementation of the EU energy acquis. It also includes sharing experiences and best practices in climate change adaptation and initiatives on the development of green skills.

In 2020, the Croatian presidency made environmental protection and sustainable economic development a priority. This was followed up by the Slovak presidency focusing on climate change and the protection of biodiversity, issues with a broad cross-sectoral coverage. The EUSDR brings added value by facilitating coordination in decision-making and action, cross-sectoral approaches and stakeholder involvement. The strategy also plays an important role to promote the European Green Deal priorities and objectives with the EU accession countries of the region.

**Examples of projects and processes:**

With its activities, the **GRENDDEL**<sup>26</sup> project (Priority area 1A – inland navigation) aimed to achieve a higher acceptance and use of inland waterway transport (IWT) as a more sustainable transport mode contributing to economic growth and a more sustainable transport system in the Danube region. It addressed the Danube vessel fleet operators on aspects such as use of low carbon and alternative fuels, reduction of air pollutant emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub>, PM) and reduction of energy consumption.

The **SABRINA** project<sup>27</sup> (Priority area 1B – rail, road, air) focuses on a very sustainable mode of transport – biking – by increasing the safety for cyclists, one of the most vulnerable road users. The objective is to improve road bicycle infrastructure safety in the region by raising the capacities of all relevant national, regional, and local stakeholders to build and improve bicycle infrastructure in a safe and sustainable way.

The most important achievement of Priority area 2 (energy) during the reported period was a comparative assessment of the **National Energy and Climate Plans (NECP)**<sup>28</sup> of the Danube region countries. It resulted in four policy briefs and a policy recommendation to support the use of renewable energy sources in the region to help reaching the national emission reduction targets. The work is expected to result in the preparation of several projects in areas such as alternative fuels e.g. hydrogen which could help to deliver the REPowerEU Plan.

The **Disaster Management Working Group (DM-WG)**<sup>29</sup> established within Priority area 5 (environmental risks) is based on a concept developed with the Budapest Fire Fighter Association acting as lead partner. Since its establishment, 19 governmental and non-governmental civil protection organisations from nine countries joined the EUSDR DM WG. Their collaboration resulted in numerous projects, with differentiated funding, supporting the regional preparedness and response activities (approximately 1,5 M EUR).

The **Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF)**, set up within the framework of Priority area 6 (biodiversity), aims to coordinate and foster the conservation of highly endangered native sturgeon species in the Danube River Basin and the Black Sea by promoting the implementation of the Program **STURGEON 2020**. The DSTF functions as a platform for projects related to the protection of the sturgeon funded from cohesion policy programmes as well as LIFE<sup>30</sup>. New activities within the DSTF include the establishment of a Danube-wide sturgeon monitoring system.

**LIFE MICACC**<sup>31</sup> (Municipalities as integrators and coordinators in adaptation to climate change) following from Priority area 5 (environmental risks) explores possible solutions to face climate change issues of mountainous and highland villages with the design of an integrated natural water retention system of both the lower and upper watersheds. The objective is to retain water and sediment (coming with the flooding events) in the upper river basin before reaching the built environment.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/grendel>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/news-and-events/programme-news-and-events/5771>

<sup>28</sup> [NECP\\_Danube\\_Region\\_REKK\\_2020\\_final\\_0215logo.pdf \(danube-region.eu\)](https://www.danube-region.eu/NECP_Danube_Region_REKK_2020_final_0215logo.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/disaster-management-working-group/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://nature.danube-region.eu/projects/sturgeon-2020/>

<sup>31</sup> [Partners - LIFE-MICACC project \(bm.hu\)](https://www.bm.hu/partners-life-micacc-project)

### ***EUSDR thematic priorities and their interrelation with the digital transition***

Digitalisation is one of the horizontal objectives of the 2020 EUSDR action plan which was further boosted as an effect of the pandemic. Innovation and digital transformation were also among the thematic priorities under the Slovak presidency of the EUSDR in 2021. Thus, the ministerial meeting held during the 2021 Annual Forum included the ministers responsible for innovation and digitisation expressing their commitment to innovation and digitisation in the implementation of the EUSDR. Furthermore, in September 2021, Slovakia organised an event on how to boost innovation and digitisation in the Danube region<sup>32</sup>, and the 2021 Danube Participation Day<sup>33</sup> was dedicated to “Participation & Digitalisation”. The EUSDR has also a role to play in cooperating for a digital future with the accession countries.

Digitisation is covered by all priority areas. It is of particular importance to Priority area 7 (knowledge society), Priority area 8 (competitiveness) and Priority area 9 (education and skills), given the synergies between the priority areas with knowledge, innovation, skills and thematic application of digital tools, but is also a prime topic for other EUSDR priority areas.

Activities include the facilitation of cooperation among clusters and the creation of innovative digital ecosystems, support to increase the quality of education systems, promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation platforms of excellence as well as support to local innovation and the development of smart specialisation strategies.

#### **Examples of projects and processes:**

Priority area 7 (knowledge society) together with Priority area 9 (education and skills) led a task force in all four macro-regions focused on **home schooling**<sup>34</sup>. In the light of the pandemic the objective was to collect best practice of homeschooling and e-learning. The focus was on education of migrants, those children who can not attend schools (ill children, immobile, people in need) and marginalized communities.

Digitalisation impacts considerably the work of Priority area 8 (competitiveness). A dedicated working group - **Digital Danube** - addresses the issue and an action of the action plan is focussed on the establishment of an innovative digital ecosystem supporting SMEs tackling the challenges of a digitalised world.

Priority area 9 (education and skills) contributed to increased transnational cooperation among schools in the Danube region by co-organizing two **Danube Region eTwinning**<sup>35</sup> conferences. They brought together 37 teachers from 12 Danube Region countries in 2020, and 49 teachers from 13 Danube region countries in 2021. A total of 23 school cooperation projects were developed by participating teachers. The conferences support innovative approaches to teaching and learning and strengthen the digital skills of teachers through the use of the online eTwinning platform as well as other digital communication tools.

<sup>32</sup> <https://danube-region.eu/eusdr-thematic-conference-on-innovation-and-digitization/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://danubeparticipationday.eu/events/8th-danube-participation-day/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/dtp-capitalisation-strategy/mrs-good-practices/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/online-thematic-conference-school-cooperation-in-the-danube-region/>

With the **Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence**<sup>36</sup>, Priority area 9 (education and skills) started a new initiative developed through cooperation with the European Training Foundation. The platform aims to support innovation and smart specialization in the Danube region. It provides a regional forum for policy dialogue on VET excellence in going green and social inclusion and aims to promote cooperation between Danube region centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs).

Cross-thematic cooperation between Priority areas 1A (inland navigation) and 11 (security) simplifies for the shipping sector through harmonized **Danube Navigation Standard Forms (DAVID) forms** now used at all checkpoints at and outside the Schengen external borders. After Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Ukraine introduced the DAVID forms in 2020, also Romania and the Republic of Moldova followed in the first half of 2022 and thus completed the introduction process. The DAVID forms replace the three most commonly used border control forms (arrival & departure report, crew and passenger list) and therefore facilitates the border controls for the Danube shipping sector.

The first-ever IT summer camp for girls in The Republic of Moldova was supported by Priority area 9 (education and skills). The **GirlsGoIT**<sup>37</sup> project provides girls and young women with entrepreneurial start-up, digital tech and IT skills encouraging them to pursue a career in IT. GirlsGoIT organises in-demand technical and non-technical trainings and mentoring in IT, knowledge sharing events and workshops in partnership with companies and promotes relatable stories of people in IT. The project was presented during the 2022 EU MRS Week in Brussels.

### ***EUSDR thematic priorities and social change, including the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

As highlighted during the 3<sup>rd</sup> EU MRS Week in March 2022, Europe is confronted with major socio-economic and environmental challenges, and there is a rising demand to deploy new approaches in order to efficiently and effectively cope with these issues.

The EUSDR has a great potential for addressing the social transition. The action plan covers issues mainly related to fighting poverty, promoting social inclusion, vocational education and social entrepreneurship. With the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence, Priority area 9 (education and skills) started an important new initiative that was developed through intensified cooperation with the European Training Foundation. The platform aims to support innovation and smart specialization in the Danube region. It provides a regional forum for policy dialogue on vocational education and training excellence in going green and social inclusion and aims to promote cooperation between Danube region centres of vocational excellence.

Given current challenges, ways to address issues relating to the social transition were explored, not the least given the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine that affect many EUSDR stakeholders. Thus, established networks with civil society organisations were used to coordinate initiatives to support people in Ukraine or refugees fleeing the war. The setting up of corridors in the form of train routes between Ukraine and the European Union

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/events/kick-danube-region-platform-centres-vocational-excellence-regional-approach>

<sup>37</sup> <https://girlsgoit.org/en/despre/>

for refugees were supported. However, as the war moves on additional activities may need to be explored.

#### **Examples of projects and processes:**

During the reporting period, the **SEED-Hub (Social Entrepreneurship Education and Development Hub)**<sup>38</sup> funded through the cross-border Interreg AT-SK programme was launched (Priority area 7 - knowledge society). The project supports social enterprises and entrepreneurs, whose common feature is the assumption of social responsibility working with innovative and sustainable concepts. The aim is to develop long-term partnerships between social enterprises and entrepreneurs who carry out similar activities in the border regions of both countries.

**SI PLUS**<sup>39</sup> funded by the EaSI programme is a new project under Priority area 9 (education and skills) set up in a partnership between Austria, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Germany (Baden-Württemberg) and Slovenia with the aim to foster social innovation in the Danube region and beyond. It boosts social innovation, notably with a focus on employment and the labour market. The project organises mutual learning and transforms research results into practical approaches and tools for implementing ESF+ programmes. It also includes the establishment of National Competence Centres for Social innovation in the participating countries. This umbrella project brings together a diversity of actors, be it from the ESF+, the ERDF, or other funding schemes such as Leader.

**TALENTMAGNET**<sup>40</sup> is a project that addresses major societal (demographic and labour market) challenges caused by the outmigration of highly educated young people, primarily from small- and medium sized towns in the Danube region. The project intends to address these challenges by improved multilevel governance, targeted policy instruments and practical tools to attract and retain talent – tailored to the specific needs of small municipalities.

#### ***Governance and Administrative involvement and capacity***

The governance structure of the EUSDR consists of the following functions and levels:

- the national coordinators;
- the presidency;
- the Trio presidency (consisting of the incumbent, past and future presidencies);
- the priority area coordinators;
- the steering groups and their working groups.

Annual ministerial meetings in the EUSDR are held within the framework of the annual forum that usually takes place in October.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.zsi.at/en/object/project/5803>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.sofia-da.eu/en/news/2332-social-innovation-plus-%E2%80%93-competence-centres-si-plus-2.html>

<sup>40</sup> [Interreg Danube \(interreg-danube.eu\)](https://www.interreg-danube.eu/)

## Political level

Each year, the EUSDR presidency is handed over to the succeeding country at the annual forum. Within the reporting period, the EUSDR was chaired by Croatia in 2020, by Slovakia in 2021 and by Ukraine in 2022. Slovenia will chair the EUSDR in 2023 and Austria in 2024. The EUSDR national coordinators have decided to move to a system where the presidencies are determined in alphabetical order. This system will be operational from 2024.

The EUSDR presidency is assisted by the Trio presidency (predecessor/incumbent/successor). Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the EUSDR governance system proved its resilience, when the other two countries in the Trio, Slovakia and Slovenia agreed to temporarily take over the presidency until Ukraine was able to resume its responsibilities. Due to the pandemic and the lockdown that followed, the 9<sup>th</sup> EUSDR annual forum in 2020 was organised virtually from Zagreb during the Croatian presidency. The event was carried out under the headline Harmonious and sustainable development with a focus on the ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainable regional development in the Danube region. The ministerial meeting gave a strong political backing to the embedding process and to the further strengthening of the involvement of the Western Balkans in the EUSDR. The EUSDR annual forum provides an opportunity for the governments of the participating countries to express their continued commitment to the strategy and give strategic direction to key implementers. A ministerial meeting is held in connection with EUSDR annual forum.

In 2021, the 10<sup>th</sup> EUSDR annual forum was organised with the theme Towards a green and digital Danube region in hybrid format from Bratislava during the Slovak presidency. The ministerial meeting took place between the ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation. The result was a joint declaration on digitalisation and digital transformation and the relevance for a better and more focused use of Cohesion Policy funds. The 2022 annual forum was planned to take place in Ukraine. However, due to the war, the 2022 annual forum will be organised jointly by Ukraine, Slovakia and Slovenia in hybrid format from Košice, Slovakia on the theme recovery-development-unity.

To support the cooperation in the Danube region at the political level, conferences of Danube parliamentarians take place periodically. Due to the pandemic, however, no such conferences were held in 2020 and 2021. As one of the major regional conferences addressing current societal issues, high-level political dialogue is also organised in the framework of the Bled Strategic Forum, an annual event organised in the Slovenian city of Bled with focus on central and south-eastern Europe where participants exchange views and seek innovative solutions to contemporary and future political, security, strategic and developmental challenges<sup>41</sup>.

## Implementation level

The National Coordinators are the focal points at national level and form the decision-making body for the strategy. Their task is to oversee implementation of the EUSDR in their countries and ensure that the strategy is firmly anchored in the national political environment.

Each participating country officially nominates a National Coordinators (NCs) and one or more deputies. Together, the National Coordinators form the "group of NCs" which meets regularly. The National Coordinators keep the EUSDR presidency and the European Commission updated on a continuous basis. The key role of National Coordinators, with support from the Danube

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<sup>41</sup> <https://bledstrategicforum.org/>

Strategy Point upon request, is to coordinate, guide and monitor participation in the implementation of the EUSDR. This includes engaging with all 12 priority areas (including participation in steering group meetings), and liaising with national line ministries and other relevant organisations to encourage them to participate in the implementation of EUSDR actions in their policy field.

In order to facilitate the involvement of the political level, all participating countries have set up mechanisms at national level to coordinate EUSDR issues. Cross-sectoral national platforms were established in several EUSDR countries to support continuous dialogue with relevant national/regional/local stakeholders in key areas and initiatives. These platforms aim to coordinate EUSDR issues and involve a wider range of actors, including stakeholders in charge of cohesion policy programmes. One challenge is a strong fluctuation of members of the platforms and to ensure the involvement of actors from different levels (sub-national, regional, local).

The EUSDR countries are responsible for coordinating the priority areas and to nominate the Priority Area Coordinators (PACs). Each priority area is managed by at least two Priority Area Coordinators, working with their Steering Group members. The Priority Area Coordinators' main role is to identify key processes that will achieve the strategy's goals through different actions and identifying how to best implement activities to this end. The tasks of the PACs are challenging as funding and administrative structures (and political power) to implement a broad set of targets is limited.

The EUSDR steering groups (SGs) are the central executive and decision-making bodies at priority area level for cooperation objectives, actions to be implemented and future developments. Some priority areas (notably Priority area 6 - biodiversity) operate with several task forces as intermediate platforms for specific topics. Most steering groups meet, as required, twice a year. However, the participation of steering group members varies significantly between priority areas. For some countries a very high participation level is recorded, while others participate more sporadically. Notwithstanding the participation in the meetings, the engagement of the steering group member can be (very) limited. This may be the result of a high fluctuation of steering group members and the fact that steering group members lack the necessary project development and implementation competence to take strategic decision, when at all mandated to do this.

The Danube Strategy Point set up in 2018 as technical support structure has proven to be a success and the key element of the well-functioning EUSDR-governance system. It is run as a single project with two partners, the City of Vienna as Lead Partner, together with the Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration.

The pandemic affected the work of the priority areas, due the lack of physical meetings which limited the smooth running of MRS activities. At the same time, online meetings provide useful as a modality for the future as they are easier to organise, cost less and allow more people to participate. However, digital events cannot permanently replace conferences and meetings in EUSDR. Personal contacts between stakeholders, building trust and individual connections are important.

### Civil society

Civil society organisations in the Danube region act through platforms based on participatory planning, community-building and empowerment. Examples of such platforms include:

- Danube Civil Society Forum<sup>42</sup> (DCSF) with its working group, the Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP), which consists of representatives from civil society, cities and municipalities.
- DANET - Danube Networkers for Europe<sup>43</sup>. DANET promotes exchanges and working together in the areas of lifelong learning, social participation, dialogue and co-operation between generations and cross-cultural dialogue in Europe and particularly in the Danube region.
- Budapest-based European House that coordinated the work with the so called Shadow Report<sup>44</sup> - an initiative of civil society organisations from across Europe to prepare an implementation report on EU macro-regional policies from a citizens' perspective.

Efforts to involve civil society is made across all EUSDR priority areas. Representatives of civil society organisations are key partners in arranging and implementing the National Participation Days and Danube Participation Day that are important arenas to bring public administration representatives and civil society organisations together and to coordinate the implementation of the EUSDR at national/regional level.

The Shadow Report (mentioned above) emphasize that civil society organisations play an important role in contributing to better decision-making, in particular by bringing local and regional communities closer to the macro-regional strategies. This is important today as many civil society organisations have been severely affected during the pandemic and are only now about to restart their activities. It is therefore crucial to facilitate and systematically increase the involvement of civil society organisations on a partnership basis in the governance structure of the EUSDR.

### Youth

The inclusion of youth in the governance of the EUSDR is a key priority. Annual events such as the Young Bled Strategic Forum<sup>45</sup>, a capacity building and discussion forum for young leaders already exist. However, the involvement of youth is mainly driven by Priority area 10 (institutional capacity) and needs a broader cross-thematic coverage.

The 2020 Danube Participation Day discussed the draft Guidance Paper for Youth Participation in the Danube region, to start a debate on how to reinforce the participation of youth in the governance of the EUSDR<sup>46</sup>. In order to further advance on the issue and following the recommendation of the Manifesto for Young People by Young People to Shape the European Cooperation Policy<sup>47</sup>, the Danube Youth Council Task Force was set up during the Slovak presidency in September 2021.

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<sup>42</sup> <https://dcsf.danubestrategy.eu/>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.foragenetwork.eu/database/item/702-danet-danube-networkers-for-europe/DANET%20-%20Danube%20Networkers%20for%20Europe>

<sup>44</sup> <https://europeanhouse.hu/the-shadow-report/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://bledstrategicforum.org/young-bsf-2021/>

<sup>46</sup> Final version available here: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/topics/guidance-paper-for-youth-participation/>

<sup>47</sup> [youth manifesto interreg en.pdf \(danube-region.eu\)](https://youth-manifesto-interreg-en.pdf(danube-region.eu))

In February 2022, at the 4<sup>th</sup> meeting of the task force, national representatives of the participating states together with the Danube Strategy Point and DG REGIO finalised the proposal for the establishment of the Danube Youth Council. Inspired by the EUSALP Youth Council<sup>48</sup>, this proposal was initiated by the Slovak EUSDR presidency and further developed during the Ukrainian EUSDR presidency. The Danube Youth Council will provide a platform for institutional involvement of young people in all EUSDR bodies<sup>49</sup> to make ideas and viewpoints of young people heard and considered at the political level. The primary role of the Danube Youth Council is to provide the core decision-making bodies of the Danube region Strategy with advice and recommendations to enable dynamic exchange and learning processes. The council will have 28 members, two from each country participating in the EUSDR. The Danube Youth Council is expected to be established in September 2022.

### ***Access to funding and embedding:***

#### General overview

The Danube Transnational Programme (Interreg) continues to be the most utilised source of funding for implementing projects under the EUSDR action plan. Over the years, integration and alignment between the EUSDR and the Danube Transnational Programme has greatly helped in developing and co-financing EUSDR projects. This programme does not only contribute to implementing the strategy but also funds the Danube Strategy Point and the work of the PACs.

Additional funding sources are: other Interreg programmes in the region, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). Funding has also been allocated from mainstream regional and national cohesion policy programmes.

#### Cohesion policy programmes 2021-2027

The Danube Transnational Programme alone cannot, by far, cover all requests for funding to implement the action plan. That is why it is necessary to embed the strategy in other funding programmes. Thus, in November 2019, on the initiative of the Croatian presidency, the EUSDR embedding task force was set up. The task force brings together key EUSDR stakeholders at all levels with the aim to facilitate access to financial sources, notably mainstream Cohesion policy national and regional programmes. Moreover, embedding is not limited to EU funding programmes, also national and regional budgets as well as financial opportunities by other donors should be considered. During the reporting period, the work initiated by Croatian presidency in collaboration with National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators and the Danube Strategy Point was taken forward by the Slovak and Ukrainian EUSDR Presidencies.

The success of the embedding depends on the early involvement of national and regional programming authorities. Since 2015, the EUSDR has a European Social Fund Managing Authority (MA) Network. In 2021, networks for the European Regional Development Fund/Cohesion Funds Managing Authorities and the IPA/NDICI programming authorities' network were established.

The 2021 action plan plays a key role in the embedding process. This being said, the action plan (with over 85 actions) is difficult to be embedded due to its wide scope. Hence, in 2020, the Priority Area Coordinators and their Steering Groups drew up, based on the action plan, a shortlist of three strategic topics for each Priority area to be included in the relevant

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<sup>48</sup> <https://eusalp-youth.eu/eusalp-youth-council/>

<sup>49</sup> [EUSDR Governance Paper 07-2020 endorsed.pdf \(danube-region.eu\)](#)

national/regional programmes. National Coordinators had a priori gathered national managing authorities of the cohesion policy/IPA/NDICI funds, as well as other relevant stakeholders to explore ways to take the embedding process forward. An initial shortlist of 36 actions turned out to be too unfocused and was narrowed down to five areas<sup>50</sup> that matched with priorities of the funding programmes. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> trimester of 2022, thematic workshops for the five areas will be organised, bringing together relevant EUSDR key stakeholders and the programming/managing authorities.

During the reporting period numerous supporting documents for the embedding were prepared, such as the following:

- The Embedding tool<sup>51</sup> – Prepared by the Danube Strategy Point, it supports the PACs in the selection of strategic topics (shortlist). It is also used by NCs when approaching managing authorities and provided to authorities responsible for the strategic planning and programming of the ESI/IPA III/NDICI funds.
- EMBEDDING in a nutshell with the EUSDR EMBEDDING MA LEAFLET - A comprehensive and compact summary of EUSDR Embedding for managing/programming authorities, NC, PACs and other stakeholders working on EUSDR Embedding into EU programmes for the period 2021–2027.
- Guidance Paper on embedding the EUSDR into EU programmes<sup>52</sup>, drafted by the Croatian presidency setting out the principles for the embedding in the EUSDR.
- From Words to Action<sup>53</sup> – a discussion paper prepared by the Slovak EUSDR presidency outlining potential embedding activities to be used by managing/programming authorities to incorporate the EUSDR objectives into their actions. An example of such activities is synchronised calls explored within Innovation Express<sup>54</sup> (Priority area 8 - competitiveness), an initiative covering several MRS.
- From Actions to Funding – a discussion paper elaborated by the Ukrainian EUSDR presidency with support of the EUSDR Trio presidency and the Danube Strategy Point.

As the embedding now moves from programming to implementation, the focus shifts to monitoring where the key task will be to determine the concrete use of the embedding tools (calls, labelling, etc.). In this process, it will be crucial to scan calls relevant for the EUSDR via EuroAccess<sup>55</sup>, monitor projects via the Priority Area Coordinators Reporting Tool, monitor projects via managing/programming authorities) as well as keeping track of programme evaluations.

#### Funds directly managed by the Commission

In addition to cohesion policy programmes, EUSDR projects are also co-financed by other EU funding instruments, notably directly managed programmes such as the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Erasmus, LIFE and Horizon 2020/Europe. The number of activities that receive funding from these sources is increasing.

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<sup>50</sup> Based on specific objectives 1.1, 1.3, 2.1, 2.4 and 2.7 as set out in Article 3 of Regulation 2021/1059 of 24 June 2021

<sup>51</sup> <https://danube-region.eu/projects-and-funding/embedding-2021-2027/>

<sup>52</sup> [Guidance-Paper\\_EUSDR-embedding-process\\_04.2020\\_final.pdf \(danube-region.eu\)](#)

<sup>53</sup> <https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Embedding-Discussion-Paper-From-Words-to-Action.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> <https://danube-region.eu/innovation-express-2021-call-for-proposals/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.euro-access.eu/>

The CEF has been of particular importance to projects in Priority areas 1A (inland navigation)<sup>56</sup> and 1B (rail, road, air). The Komárom-Komarno cross-border bridge<sup>57</sup> (Priority area 1B) between Hungary and Slovakia, that included a new bridge and connecting highway sections across the Danube to connect the cities of Komárom and Komarno inaugurated in September 2020, was funded by CEF.

Horizon 2020 supported projects in Priority areas 4 (water), 5 (environmental risks) and 7 (knowledge society) such as DAREnet<sup>58</sup>, OPTAIN<sup>59</sup> and TRESCA<sup>60</sup>. At the end of 2021, a dedicated call under Horizon Europe for the establishment of the Danube river basin lighthouses was launched. The Horizon Europe work programme on Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area<sup>61</sup> is of particular interest to EUSDR stakeholders.

LIFE is used by Priority areas 5 (environmental risks) and 6 (biodiversity) to support several projects such as LIFE SandBoil<sup>62</sup>, LIFE-MICACC<sup>63</sup> and LIFE WILDIsland<sup>64</sup>. In addition, Priority area 5 (environmental risks) receives funding for DiMaND<sup>65</sup> (Disaster Management Network in the Danube region) and PROFOUND<sup>66</sup> (Flood response activities in the Danube region - macro-regional scale field exercise) from DG ECHO. Priority area 11 (security) gets support from the Internal Security Fund - Police (DG HOME) for a project aiming at the dismantling of illegal methamphetamine laboratories (drug meth labs) in the EU<sup>67</sup>. European Commission's Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) provides support to the SI PLUS project<sup>68</sup> (Priority area 9 – education and skills) while Priority area 1A (inland navigation) finances the COMPETING project (education and training for inland navigation crew members) under Erasmus+<sup>69</sup>.

### ***Monitoring and evaluation***

Progress on implementing EUSDR actions is monitored through the reporting on targets. At national level, monitoring is carried out by the National Coordinators through coordination structures set up with relevant ministries. At the level of priority areas, the steering groups are responsible for monitoring progress. In addition, as all PACs are funded as projects under the Danube Transnational Programme, and PACs reports their activities according to the rules of the programme. Monitoring of projects is done at the level of each priority area, but also by the programmes under which the projects are funded.

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.fairwaydanube.eu/cef/>

<sup>57</sup> [2014-EU-TMC-0485-W | Innovation and Networks Executive Agency \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/innovation-and-networks/en/2014-eu-tmc-0485-w-innovation-and-networks-executive-agency-europa-eu)

<sup>58</sup> <http://darenetproject.eu/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.optain.eu/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://trescaproject.eu/>

<sup>61</sup> European Commission Decision C(2022)2975 of 10 May 2022

<sup>62</sup> <https://lifesandboil.eu/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://vizmegtartomegoldasok.bm.hu/en>

<sup>64</sup> <https://danubeparks.org/news/life-wildisland-project-approved>

<sup>65</sup> <https://disastermanagement-danube.net/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://profoundexercise.eu/>

<sup>67</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to-participate/org-details/944699394/project/822773/program/31077817/details>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.seedeuproject.eu/project/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.iwt-competencies.eu/>

Until now, there has been no structured tool for monitoring progress and achievements that allows for an overview of developments of the EUSDR over time. Thus, in order to reinforce the monitoring and identify the impacts and achievements, the National Coordinators asked the Danube Strategy Point to develop a new monitoring system<sup>70</sup>. Introduced during 2022, the new monitoring tool brings together existing processes and information as well as includes topics and processes not covered to date. The timing of the regular EUSDR monitoring is aligned with the preparation of the Commission's report of the state of play of the MRS.

The updated EUSDR evaluation plan (2021)<sup>71</sup> specifies the evaluation activities to be carried out. The plan was developed by the Danube Strategy Point in close collaboration with the steering group for evaluation (SG DANUVAL). The evaluation plan is divided in two parts. In 2019, an operational evaluation was conducted with a focus on EUSDR governance, communication and stakeholder involvement. This evaluation provided valuable input for the revision of the action plan. An impact evaluation is carried out in 2022. Its focus is on the action plan and the embedding process. An updated version of the EUSDR evaluation plan is also expected during the year. In addition, ESPON is conducting Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and Adriatic Ionian Macro-regions (TEVI2050).

### ***Communication***

The principles of EUSDR communication activities are stated in the EUSDR Communication Strategy (2020), the EUSDR Communication Guide (2020) and the three annual EUSDR Communication Plans (2019, 2020, 2021). The Danube Strategy Point has a key role in the work acting as a communication hub.

Numerous communication activities were carried out during the reporting period such as:

- The success stories e-brochure was produced by the Danube Strategy Point on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EUSDR. This is an online interactive brochure<sup>72</sup> that provides information on important historical landmarks of the strategy as well as an overview on activities supported by the strategy.
- The EUSDR newsletter regularly informs about strategy developments. In November 2021, the EUSDR newsletter had 673 subscribers, of which 167 were a part of the EUSDR governance.
- Since April 2020, 31 videos were created and disseminated on the YouTube channel. These videos include 25 thematic clips on pillars or Priority areas of the Strategy (posted in series), two clips of general presentation, two interventions of Commissioner Elisa Ferreira, and two videos highlighting progress made during specific EUSDR presidencies.
- Between 16 April and 30 June 2021 (ten weeks), an ad campaign was conducted via Google ads and Facebook. The ad campaign ran on 28 web portals in the 14 Danube region countries and on relevant Facebook accounts.

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<sup>70</sup> The need for a new monitoring concept was defined by in the EUSDR NC Meeting of September 2017 in Budapest.

<sup>71</sup> [https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EUSDR-Evaluation-Plan\\_v2\\_20210531\\_final.pdf](https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EUSDR-Evaluation-Plan_v2_20210531_final.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> <https://danube-region.eu/communication-tools/multimedia/>

Moreover, in June 2021 the EUSDR SmartApp was introduced. It provides similar information to the Danube Strategy website, e.g., general information, news, events calendar, calls for projects, etc. By November 2021 it had 94 downloads, which overall is assessed as a relatively good result for a novelty.

In the wake of the pandemic, the 9<sup>th</sup> EUSDR annual forum gathered more than 700 participants online from Zagreb on 22 October 2020. The 10<sup>th</sup> annual forum took place on 26-27 October 2021 in Bratislava in hybrid mode with almost 700 participants, including 90 persons on-site.

A proxy for verifying the efficiency of the EUSDR communication is the increase in citizen's awareness of the EUSDR. The Flash Eurobarometer 497 published in October 2021, showed that on average, the awareness in the EUSDR Member States increased by 18% from 19 to 22, i.e. every fifth resident of the region is aware of the strategy.

Communication activities are also carried out at the level of the priority areas running their own websites through the platform of the Danube Strategy Point. The priority areas are also active on social media and at time produce information brochures. They provide information on their activities to the Danube Strategy Point, as the coordinator of EUSDR communication activities. At national level, National Coordinators have a key role in communicating about the strategy through various channels. Several national administrations run dedicated web pages that provide information on activities related to the EUSDR.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

The significant social and economic differences that continue to exist both between and within the individual countries in the EUSDR represent a challenge that was exacerbated by the pandemic. However, the strategy has proven to be a stable and resilient governance framework also in times of crisis and an important anchor for macro-regional cooperation in the Danube region. It has been useful in mobilising political support within the region as well as in institutionalising networks of cooperation among stakeholders on many levels that otherwise would not have taken place.

### ***The European Green Deal, the digital transition, social change including the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

In general, the potential for contribution of the EUSDR to the objectives of the green and digital transition is high. This is also reflected at political level and manifested through the priorities of the last EUSDR presidencies. However, crucial topics such as the EU missions<sup>73</sup>, e.g., climate-neutral and smart cities, water and ocean quality, healthy soils, adaptation to climate change, e-governance, social economy and long-term territorial governance are only partly covered by the action plan.

Moreover, fully integrating the principles of the European Green Deal and other strategic initiatives such as the REPowerEU Plan into the EUSDR action plan would mean that the priority areas dealing with energy, environmental risks, biodiversity and digitalisation could assume a more central and overarching role.

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<sup>73</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/missions-horizon-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/missions-horizon-europe_en)

Issues related to social transition are considered in the action plan and a number of initiatives were launched in this field. The war in Ukraine and the recovery from the pandemic put renewed spotlight on social issues.

The pandemic reversed an otherwise positive trend showing a decreasing number of young people not engaged in education, employment or training (NEETs) in the region. While refugees are seeking shelter across Europe, some of the countries participating in the EUSDR are particularly concerned. The refugee crisis differs from previous crises, as many of the refugees are young women with children, often well-educated but lacking practical working experience. As a result, many take jobs below their level of qualification due to difficulties getting their degrees formally recognised. Thus, future activities related to social transition most likely will have to be reconsidered and reinforced.

### ***EUSDR governance (including monitoring, evaluation and communication)***

Overall, the governance of the EUSDR has reached a certain level of maturity and has shown resilience during the times of crisis. However, for the future, the following issues need to be considered:

- The political commitment to the strategy needs to be strengthened. A reinforced role for the strategy in delivering on key European policy initiatives (i.e. the green and digital transition, social change), in responding to key challenges such as the recovery from the war in Ukraine and the pandemic, and in facilitating EU enlargement could help to make the strategy more politically relevant. The organisation of annual conferences of Danube parliamentarians should be resumed.
- The EUSDR would benefit from more cross-cutting work between priority areas. This could help to reinforce the capacity to deliver on key European political priorities as well as on new challenges such as the war in Ukraine and the recovery from the pandemic.
- Priority area steering groups need a stable composition of active members with the required competence and mandated to take strategic decisions. This calls for a reinforcement of human resources, administrative capacity and practical experience. New steering group members should be properly introduced to their roles. It is also important that they are made fully aware and have the full capacity to contribute to horizontal topics such as key European policy priorities. Capacity building with joint activities across priority areas could facilitate such processes.
- A balance should be found between frequent, targeted digital meetings for coordination and information exchange and in-person meetings that allow for direct exchange and joint development of new ideas.
- The Danube Strategy Point is playing a very important role in ensuring continuity and stability in the implementation of EUSDR. It is thus crucial for the strategy to continue to benefit from the continuity, professionalism and accountability of the Danube Strategy Point.
- The structured involvement of civil society and civil society organisations in the EUSDR governance structures is still a challenge. An institutionalised citizen's dialogue at macro-regional level could strengthen the participation. The new Danube Youth Council to be set up in 2022 is an important achievement that needs to be closely followed and assessed.

- Intensified exchanges with the other MRS and other regional cooperation networks should increase exchange and develop synergies. EUSDR can learn from other MRS, for example in relation to inclusion of youth (EUSALP). Similarly, EUSDR could provide valuable experience to EUSAIR on the revision of the action plan and to the three other MRS on the embedding.

### ***Embedding, implementation and access to funds directly managed by the Commission***

Overall, the EUSDR embedding process is assessed as comprehensive and well-developed. It has been built on continuous efforts to show the national and regional authorities' ways to align the new programmes with the EUSDR and create adequate mechanism to facilitate appropriate contribution. The challenge for the years to come is to move from programming to implementation, including progress monitoring tools to be introduced in 2022. It will thus be important that the work already done within the EUSDR embedding task force is properly taken forward by all key stakeholders, especially the Managing Authority networks.

Funds from centrally managed programmes already play a role in EUSDR and efforts to explore synergies between these programmes and the strategy have already been made at the level of priority areas. This work needs to be continued to ensure that an increasing number of EUSDR projects can benefit from such funding<sup>74</sup>.

### ***EUSDR role in EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy***

Covering a total of 14 countries of which four are accession countries (Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine) and one potential accession country (Bosnia and Herzegovina), the EUSDR serves as an interface between EU Member States and third countries. The strategy provides an excellent introduction to how the European Union works for countries in the process of accessing or aspiring to join the EU. It is especially in the enlargement and neighbourhood policies that the EUSDR has a significant role acting as a platform for capacity building and cooperation on an equal footing with non-EU countries.

The fact that Ukraine took over the presidency of the EUSDR triggered new cooperative activities within the strategy intensifying the cooperation in the Danube region and strengthening the European integration processes. Ukraine needs stronger cooperation, closer partnership, and peer-to-peer exchange to accelerate the process of European integration. The Ukrainian MRS presidency has the potential to further facilitate the development of common activities with tangible and sustainable results.

Thus, the EUSDR should continue to play a role in preparing accession countries to the EU. Similarly, the EUSDR together with the EUSAIR should continue to support EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans.

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<sup>74</sup> For example, in future the Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF) should consider integrating in its work the Horizon Europe Mission Danube river basin lighthouse on restoration of fresh and transitional water ecosystems.

## **Report on the implementation of the European Union strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region (EUSAIR)**

The EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region (EUSAIR) was adopted in 2014 as the third macro-regional strategy. Since its creation, the EUSAIR has provided a unique platform of cooperation for joint planning of processes, projects, and activities for the sustainable and harmonious development of the entire region. The region is a functional area primarily (but not exclusively) defined by the Adriatic and Ionian Sea basin. Home to more than 70 million people, the macro-region plays a key role in strengthening geographical continuity in Europe.

The macro-regional approach has proved attractive over the last few years in the region. In fact, following the inclusion of the Republic of North Macedonia in April 2020, the Republic of San Marino acceded to the EUSAIR almost two years later, in February 2022. This testifies the attractiveness of the macro-regional approach. *“The inclusion of San Marino in the EUSAIR will step up cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian region. It will also strengthen the EUSAIR partnership and the relations between San Marino and the EU”<sup>75</sup>*. Currently, the EUSAIR covers 10 countries, four EU Member States, five candidate countries and potential candidates and one third country. It includes both some of the most developed and some of the least developed regions in Europe. This makes it an important instrument for convergence.

The EUSAIR is built around four thematic pillars: Blue Growth, Connecting the Region, Environmental Quality, and Sustainable Tourism. It allows a sector by sector integration, and promotes European policies and investments in the Adriatic and Ionian region. As the EUSAIR partner countries are currently working on revising and updating the strategy, its thematic focus may slightly change in the future.

The region faces several challenges which can be tackled more successfully together than on a purely national or local level, for instance:

- socio-economic disparities (e.g. in terms of GDP per capita and unemployment rates);
- a lack of research-to-business networks;
- shortcomings in transport links (road, rail and air) and vessel traffic congestion;
- inadequate interconnections of electricity grids;
- unsustainability of fisheries;
- environmental threats such as marine pollution, the preservation of a highly diverse marine environment and the adverse effects of climate change (in the form of rising sea levels, flooding, drought, soil erosion and forest fires);
- and insufficient institutional and administrative capacity.

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<sup>75</sup> Addendum to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, COM(2022) 44 final.

## RESULTS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

### *Main policy developments, including the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic*

The EUSAIR has so far largely built on the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas adopted on 30 November 2012. The EUSAIR countries share the same geography, many challenges and the main growth and jobs opportunities of the Maritime Strategy, as well as adds a new dimension of cooperation between partners on the coastal hinterland. Crucially, EUSAIR's other fundamental goal is to contribute to the EU integration of the participating Western Balkans, by bringing together countries with much shared history and geography. Cooperation at different levels, on different sectors and on an equal footing allows countries of the Western Balkans to get acquainted with Cohesion Policy, as well as with other EU policies and EU strategies. This will facilitate the EU intergration processes, strengthen regional cooperation and help building capacities.

The EUSAIR territory is not directly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however its side effects, including the wave of refugees, inflation, rising food and energy prices, have an impact that requires joint actions of EUSAIR countries in close coordination with EU institutions. Following a meeting held on 28 February 2022, the Adriatic Ionian Initiative and the EUSAIR Trio presidency jointly issued a statement condemning the unjust aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, violating international law and threatening the regional, European and global security. EUSAIR's solidarity for Ukraine and its people was further cemented in the Tirana Declaration, adopted on 16 May 2022 by the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative/ EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting.

Even though signs of recovery are evident in the region, the negative effects of the pandemic are still felt, particularly on those economies that rely on tourism as significant part of GDP and growth (Greece, Croatia, Montenegro or Albania). In fact, due to the restrictions of international and internal travel and limits to non-essential travel, the tourism sector was the most affected by the pandemic. At the same time, the travel restriction affected many border areas in the region where people cross countries for work, education, healthcare, etc, putting the economy on standstill<sup>76</sup>. Due to the pandemic, in the region, EU member States as well as the Western Balkans were affected by transport restrictions resulting in financial difficulties for most transport companies.

Since its establishment, the support to EU enlargement for the candidate countries and potential candidates has been a priority of EUSAIR. This became even more important after the inclusion of North Macedonia, which made it the only EU macro-regional strategy with more EU aspiring countries than EU Member States. The adoption of the new methodology for the accession negotiations in February 2020, making the process more credible, predictable and political, was seen as an occasion by candidate countries and potential candidates to get early access to some EU policies and speed up their accession processes. In July 2022, the Czech presidency of the European Council announced the start of the accession negotiation process with Albania and North Macedonia, initiating the screening of the EU acquis enabling both countries to get more familiar with the rights and obligations of the EU. While these countries find themselves in the starting process, the role of the EUSAIR is even more important to help them on their path at sectoral level and to show political support. The report on the [EUSAIR facilitating the enlargement process of the Western Balkans](#) examined the complementarities between the EUSAIR and the enlargement process to make recommendation for strengthened actions

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<sup>76</sup> "Cohesion in Europe towards 2050, eight report on economic social and territorial cohesion", European Union, 2022, pag. 9.

towards enlargement. According to the report, the EUSAIR presents a number of opportunities such as:

- a regional dimension that connects the Western Balkans to the EU, fostering a regional sense of identity that goes beyond the region as well as a Europeanisation process;
- a convergence of interests on enlargement;
- a capacity-building approach, based on cooperation in different fields and at different levels;
- an emphasis on territorial cooperation that stimulates positive dynamics between local authorities, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders at the local, national, and transnational level;
- an inclusive approach that empowers stakeholders as active participants in the macro-region.

In this perspective, key EUSAIR implementers have realized that it is time to work on revising and updating the strategy taking into account new EU priorities and the above-mentioned crisis, the REPowerEU Plan, as well as the acceleration of the EU Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

### ***EUSAIR thematic priorities and their interrelation with the European Green Deal***

All countries of the EUSAIR are bound to the objective of a climate neutral Europe by 2050. This is enshrined in the EU Climate objectives, which aim to achieve this target through the EU Green Deal and through the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The EUSAIR aims to support these two catalysts for climate goals and economic recovery efforts through joint actions.

Pillar 3 of the EUSAIR is specifically dedicated to Environmental Quality to ensure a good environmental and ecological status of the marine and coastal environment, to contribute to the goals of the EU Biodiversity Strategy and to improve waste management. Nevertheless, all other EUSAIR pillars include horizontally the principle of sustainability aiming at making the Adriatic and Ionian region more climate resilient.

In the example of Pillar 2, connecting the region, needs for such horizontal approach are evident. The region relies too much on road transport, border crossing points suffer from a lack of coordination between EU Member States and non-EU countries and cross-border infrastructures are sub-optimal, to name a few challenges. To address these, there is a need to ensure connections and complementarities between large scale projects, actions and regional initiatives. The potential needs and gaps at regional are subject of Pillar 2 flagship *The Adriatic-Ionian multi-modal corridors*, as part of the European Green Deal.

Pillar 1 on Blue Growth focused on macro-regional cooperation under the concept of the Commission Communication on a new approach for a Sustainable Blue Economy, introducing innovation as a key aspect for ensuring sustainability through the implementation of smart specialization strategies, mobilizing the 4ple helix stakeholders for creating innovative value chains.

Other important cross-pillar and mono-pillar projects with an environmental horizontal approach are in the process of being developed to be submitted for calls to enhance blue and green corridors, circular economy and sustainable coastal development combined to tourism activities and environmental protection.

The successful application of the first ever EUSAIR project, under Pillar 3, was a key milestone. In February 2019 the thematic steering group members began the work towards the flagship ASOSCOP to develop an Adriatic Sea Oil Spill Contingency Plan for effective response to emergency marine pollution. After its development into a bankable project under work package two of the Facility Point Project, Pillar 3 submitted this flagship under the new project name NAMIR in June 2021. Four months later, it received co-financing under a call from DG ECHO in the framework of the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism and currently under implementation.

However, the exchanges of experiences and best practices is also an important learning factor for the participating countries. The cooperation within Pillar 3 on marine protected areas for example, assisted Montenegro in the preparation of declaring its first marine protected areas (Platamuni, Katič i Stari Ulcinj) as well as its monitoring in 2021.

#### **Examples of projects and processes:**

The **NAMIR** project (North Adriatic Maritime Incident Response System) co-financed by the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism is the partial realization of the first EUSAIR successfully submitted flagship. The project will establish cooperation mechanisms and measures ensuring a high level of preparedness and response to emergency marine pollution in Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy. To further strengthen the macro-regional approach, a complementary project proposal is planned under a call by the Interreg IPA ADRION Programme 2021-2027.

The project **ADRINET** financed by the Interreg IPA CBC Italy-Albania-Montenegro programme improved joint coastal management systems and focused on the protection of biodiversity, coastal ecosystems, tackling pollution and to reduce over-exploitation of fishing stocks and illegal fishery. These objectives were reached through investments in technology, mapping fishing routes, monitoring pollution, providing services, scientific support and improving skills for fisheries professionals. It also raised awareness with consumers to make fish consumption safer and in line with EU standards.

The study **EUSAIR bringing the Green Deal to the Region** aims to support the adoption of more sustainable practices in the governance of the EUSAIR and to raise environmental awareness in the daily work and life. More specifically, it promotes sustainable consumption, sustainability principles (e.g. restriction of single use plastic) the use of green public procurement, the reduction of a carbon and environmental footprint, capacity building and green transformation of the EUSAIR community.

The **ENERMOB** project, financed by the Interreg ADRION transnational programme 2014-2020, aims to propose solutions for electric transport systems by implementing pilot networks of charging infrastructures and assessing sustainable technologies to manage energy demand of electric mobility. The project promoted the use of electric vehicles in the existing regional/local transport systems of the Adriatic and Ionian and developed pilot actions to test longer connections between different cities with the use of electric vehicles, by checking possible problems in the driving and charging phases.

The **BLUEAIR** project, financed by the Interreg ADRION transnational programme 2014-2020 aims at enhancing institutional capacities of ADRION territories in the definition of a common S3 policy on Blue Growth guaranteeing the alignment of local initiatives with the EUSAIR strategy. Adopting a coordinated approach will improve administrative capacities, innovativeness and economic development for participating territories as well as for the whole ADRION area. It is focusing on improving competences of blue economy innovation players,

identifying sectors of macro-regional interest, exploiting potentials for transnational cooperation, supporting the development of a single Macro-Regional S3 on Blue Economy in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

The **Manual for recognising and planning green infrastructures** is a tool supporting decision-makers in the planning of green infrastructures in the Adriatic and Ionian region. Its aim is to improve the inclusion of the ecology systems and natural green and water areas represented by forests, inland waters, the sea, etc., in the planning processes. In a region with many political borders and administrative and physical obstacles to the protection of nature and biodiversity, joint planning and implementation of green infrastructures is key to reversing the loss of biodiversity. The initiative has been financed in the framework of the EUSAIR Facility Point.

### ***EUSAIR thematic priorities and their interrelation with the digital transition***

A strong social Adriatic-Ionian region is based not only on its citizens' prosperity and well-being, but also on a competitive economy. Skilled innovative workforce capable of shaping and adapting to the green and digital transitions will be the key to guaranteeing accessibility to the labour market and tomorrow's society. The ongoing revision of the EUSAIR communication and action plan will take account of the new, post-Covid reality.

The green and digital transition are interlinked, and the EUSAIR can play a significant role also in the digital transition, supporting the implementation of the European Digital Strategy in the region. For instance, one EUSAIR flagship will support the development of a network of sustainable tourism business and clusters in the Adriatic-Ionian region through: networks of creative industries, networks promoting and sharing best practices in environmental quality management and tourism clusters for the implementation/adoption of the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), the European Tourism Indicators System for sustainable destination management (ETIS) and other green (sustainable) Certification Schemes.

### **Examples of projects and processes**

**Port of Koper.** In the field of digitalisation and digital transformation, the Port of Koper is working in the direction dictated by industry trends: the introduction of automated work processes and an expansion of the use of new technologies such as the Internet of Things and blockchain. In relation to the ports in the region, digitalisation will speed up the process of building a single customs entry window benefitting both shipowners and port operators.

**FUTURE 4.0 PLUS project** (financed by the Interreg Adrion transnational programme 2014-2020). The Naval Industry, shipbuilding and the related supply chain in the Adriatic-Ionian region are facing great challenges. The significant transformation of manufacturing industry, the fourth industrial revolution involving the entire value chain will affect production processes, intercompany relations and human capital development and requires technology brush-ups. The FUTURE 4.0 project developed an experimental methodology of knowledge transfer addressing companies operating in the sector supporting their transition toward an industry 4.0 and reducing barriers to innovation between university, center of research and enterprises.

**INERRANT project** (financed by the IPA CBC Italy-Albania-Montenegro programme). The main goal of the project INERRANT is to create an innovative ecosystem, inter-linked with research and entrepreneurial actors in public-private partnerships, able to foster dialogue between different territories, strengthen collaborative research actions, and enhance the ability to attract private sector financing. This ecosystem, through the International Digital

Innovation Hub, will guarantee support to SMEs, facilitate knowledge sharing, support talent mobility and improve international competitiveness by developing systemic cooperation between institutions, businesses, universities, research centers and other key territorial actors.

***EUSAIR thematic priorities and social change, including the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

The Recovery and Resilience Plans of the EU Member States together with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans are powerful instruments for mitigating the negative social and economic impacts of the pandemic and the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The Reskill and Upskill flagship component in the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, and the Human Resources - the Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan both aim at supporting high-quality employment opportunities, continued education, and apprenticeships or traineeships by providing investment and reforms that could be brought together and targeted specifically at promoting growth in the region's maritime sector. EU cohesion policy and IPA in combination with the EU sectorial programmes are complementing such responses to better tackle the needs after the crisis and support job creation, in line with the new built economic paradigm.

The EUSAIR has promoted investment in skills and education for a more Sustainable Blue Economy in the Adriatic-Ionian region and identified vocational and entrepreneurial skills and training as a main flagship, DES\_AIR, under the Sustainable Tourism Pillar.

With view of the refugee crisis, projects such as the *Refugees' Economic Integration Through Social Entrepreneurship* (REINSER) are further needed to give refugees the chance to contribute to economic development in the hosting country. Financed by the Interreg ADRION transnational programme (2014-2020), REINSER has set up a network to encourage the participation of refugees in social entrepreneurship and thus support their inclusion into the labour market.

**Examples of projects and processes**

**AI-NURECC PLUS** is a preparatory action and spin-off of the AI-NURECC Initiative, which capitalises on the results of the latter. Its aim is to enhance regional and local authorities' appropriation of EUSAIR's main objectives and opportunities, by promoting an efficient participatory and bottom-up approach. The project focuses on the implementation of the EUSAIR cross-pillar topics: Research and Innovation, SMEs Development and Skills Development to support entrepreneurship, transnational clusters, and digital innovation hubs activities in the region. Special attention has been paid to youth for the sustainable development of the EUSAIR area, also through initiatives that are expected to further encourage community cohesion and solidarity in the area such as sport, integration or social inclusion.

**Boost Environmental Guardianship for Inclusion (BEGIN)** – is a project financed by the Interreg Adrion transnational programme (2014-2020). The innovative feature and main objective of BEGIN is the creation of tools to encourage the establishment and development of social start-ups active in safeguarding environmental protection for social work inclusion and employment of disadvantaged people.

**Social Innovation for Integrated Health Care of Ageing Population in Adriatic Region (SI4CARE)** - financed by the Interreg Adriatic transnational programme 2014-2020. SI4CARE addresses the need of the healthcare industry which consumes three to nine percent of GDP in the Adriatic-Ionian region and it is often marked by increasing inequalities. To this end, SI4CARE has focused on the elderly population by supporting public administrations to act as social innovators, promoting cooperation between research centres and enterprises.

### ***Governance and Administrative involvement and capacity***

The governance structure of the EUSAIR consists of the following functions and levels:

- The EUSAIR presidency
- The Trio presidency (consisting of the past, incumbent and future presidencies)
- The national coordinators
- The pillar coordinators
- The thematic steering groups

#### Political level

The yearly rotating system of the EUSAIR presidency allows the participating countries to provide guidelines on the actions and priorities of the strategy. This, together with the establishment of the Trio presidency system, ensures continuity, exchange of best practices and on the tasks and responsibilities the EUSAIR presidency upholds, such as for the EUSAIR Annual Forum. On that occasion, a Ministerial meeting including Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers responsible for EU funds is regularly organized. This meeting represents the political level of the strategy, adopting a political declaration including the biggest achievements of the incumbent chairmanship while providing guidelines for the future one. The National IPA Coordinators are working closely together with EUSAIR and provide political and strategic direction.

The Governing Board (GB) meets biannually and acts as the main driving force of the EUSAIR Governance, being the interface between the political level of national coordinators and the operational level of pillar coordinators. According to the rules of procedures, it gives strategic guidelines to Thematic Steering Groups for the implementation and management of the EUSAIR and its action plan, coordinates their work and ensures linkages between them.

During the last year, the works of the GB, supported by a technical/informal meeting of national coordinators, focused on the embedding process. This is currently considered the most important priority with the possibility to take cooperation in the EUSAIR framework to a higher level, allowing for the implementation of strategic macro-regional projects.

Also pillar coordinators meet for a technical meeting prior to the GB to exchange their work process. However, these meetings developed as a reporting character and should be restructured to serve as the basis for brainstorming and exchange of cross-pillar ideas.

Notwithstanding the pandemic, EUSAIR countries have shown their commitment to continue the cooperation. After an initial period of uncertainty, it was decided to transfer most of the

regular meetings to online formats, including the EUSAIR Annual Forum and the Adriatic and Ionian Council / EUSAIR Ministerial meeting. The pandemic disrupted the plans of the Serbian presidency (June 2019 – May 2020) to organize its 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum and Ministerial meeting in Belgrade. However, the will to continue cooperating regardless of the situation was demonstrated by the successful organization of the Ministerial meeting in June 2020 and the first fully online EUSAIR Annual Forum in January 2021<sup>77</sup>.

The same amounted for the Slovenian presidency (June 2020 – May 2021), finishing its chairmanship with an online annual forum in May 2021. With improved sanitary conditions, the Albanian presidency (June 2021-May 2022) organized a hybrid EUSAIR forum with the possibility allowing for online presence as well as for the return to physical participation in Tirana after two years.

### Implementation level

The implementation level in the EUSAIR is run by the Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs) which have the important role to implement the strategy' work under each priority sector, including identifying key processes, priorities and projects in line with the objectives of the EUSAIR and to “match-make” between project proposals and available funds. Each TSG is led by at least two Pillar Coordinators, one from an EU Member State and one from a non-EU country. Following the inclusion of North Macedonia, TSG 2 - Connecting the Region, includes three coordinators, one EU Member State (Italy) and two Western Balkans countries (Serbia and North Macedonia). This is both the case for its Pillar sub-groups transport and energy.

Meetings of the TSGs are held at least twice per year and have taken place continuously even during the pandemic, with varying participation of TSG members depending on the priority area. Certain countries record a very high participation level while others are more uneven in terms of their participation. While travel and accommodation costs are provided by the EUSAIR Facility Point, regular attendance, in some cases, is hampered by limited human resources. There is little doubt that TSG are important venue for the exchange of best practice, however it is paramount that these meeting have to be used to brainstorm on concrete actions as done for the development of cross-pillar and mono-pillar project ideas into bankable projects.

In the organisation of the EUSAIR Annual Fora, TSGs oversee selecting the topics of discussion and the speakers from different stakeholder groups. In some pillars most of this work is undertaken by the Pillar Coordinators and in some cases, only by one Pillar Coordinator and should move towards being a fully joint exercise.

The annual reports of the four pillar demonstrates that most countries have strengthened their internal mechanisms and structures supporting the governance and the implementation of the EUSAIR by enlarging their multi-level, multi-sectoral teams engaging more relevant ministries and regional administrations, which normally cooperate with the offices in charge of the European Territorial Cooperation.

### Civil society

As mentioned under the section of the EUSDR, the Shadow Report revealed the importance of civil society participation for EU macro-regional strategies. When it comes to EUSAIR, parts of the Adriatic and Ionian civil society is well engaged, particularly through the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII) and its networks. Civil society gets involved through platforms based on

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<sup>77</sup> Both events were held during the period of the Slovenian presidency of the EUSAIR.

participatory planning, community building and empowerment. In EUSAIR three fora are very active: the forum of the Adriatic Ionian Chambers of Commerce (Forum AIC)<sup>78</sup>, the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities (FAIC)<sup>79</sup> and the Association of the Universities of the Adriatic and Ionian region (UNIADRION)<sup>80</sup>. These three fora represent a network of more than 120 bodies and institutions and referred to as important contributor in the the Tirana Declaration of 16 May 2022 in Tirana.

A good step into a broader civil society involvement took place during the Mediterranean Coastal and Macro-Regional Strategies Week in November 2021. This event, jointly co-organised by Slovenia and North Macedonia held a roundtable on *Youth and protection of the environment* in Skopje with the participation of youth environmental NGO's as important actors in the fight against climate change.

It is furthermore important to recognise the contribution of civil society both in terms of implementation (through the participation to actions and projects) and in terms of inclusion into policy discussions and consultations. Whereas the recognition of the three fora as a main bottom-up actors for the implementation of the EUSAIR has repeatedly been mentioned in the past by high-ranking officials, EUSAIR needs to reach out to more civil society organizations in order to raise the involvement in events and actions and the awareness of the opportunities.

### Youth

EUSAIR has put youth early on on its agenda, dating back to the Annual Forum 2018 in Italy. The strategy recognises the importance of bringing youth into the governance and to give them a platform for their ideas to improve their region. In this context of this reporting period, online workshops were organised with students, researchers and youth organisations on environmental topics, circular economy or enlargement within the past two years.

One of the main platforms was launched during the 6<sup>th</sup> EUSAIR Annual Forum under the Slovenian presidency in form of EUSAIR Popri youth event. Organized by Primorski tehnološki park in close cooperation with its network, accelerators and incubators of EUSAIR countries, it awards the best entrepreneurial ideas of high school students and students from the Adriatic-Ionian region. What is more, young people were invited at opening and plenary sessions of EUSAIR Annual Fora, to actively take part in the discussions with decision-makers. This year, the Albanian EUSAIR presidency highlighted many youth-related activities during the 2022 Annual Forum held in Tirana - which coincided with the Tirana European Capital of Youth 2022, the European Year of Youth – such as the continuation of EUSAIR POPRI youth 2022 competition or the Forum of Adriatic-Ionian Youth Organizations.

EUSAIR will continue placing young people high on the agenda and a Youth Council is in the process of being established. Beyond that, call for papers complement youth engagement through concrete proposals to promote economic development and regional integration. One example is the paper competition *Present and future challenges in regional development in the Adriatic-Ionian Region* by the 9<sup>th</sup> REDETE conference with support of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative. Another action is EUSAIR4Youth, which started its planning phase in the first half of 2022 and will be launched towards the end of the year. The initiative, funded by technical assistance from the European Commission, includes two activities: a student paper competition to decide on the possible future of EUSAIR and EUSAIR olympic games for social inclusion.

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<sup>78</sup> <https://www.forumaic.org/?lang=en>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.faic.eu/en/home-e/>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.uniadrion.net/>

However, the launched stakeholder consultation for the revision of the EUSAIR strongly encouraged young people from the region to share their views and opinion. The results of the consultation were not available during the time of this report, however communication matter concentrated also on making this groupe the owners of their future.

### *Examples of projects and processes*

**Young EUSAIR Communication Academy** – is a communication capacity building programme for young people between 18 and 35 interested in the EUSAIR and macro-regional cooperation in general. It took place online (21 – 22 April 2022 and 2 – 3 June 2022) as well as in-person (in October 2022 in Slovenia). It is an in-depth, and hands-on course on communication with a special emphasis on digital communication organised by EUSAIR Facility Point Lead Partner (Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy of the Republic of Slovenia) and Centre for European Perspective.

**#Youth4Coop** - During the Adriatic Ionian Youth Organisations forum – AI NURECC in Tirana, youth engagement in the EUSAIR and other topics related to youth issues in the region, such as brain drain, were raised. The discussion showcased interesting projects like: Interreg volunteering opportunities (IVY), AI-NURECC PLUS opportunities for EUSAIR youth and the Adriatic Ionian Youth Network adhesion campaign (AIYN).

**Many generations – one future!** – was a webinar for students, researchers and professors aiming at improving the knowledge about the cooperation framework of macro-regional strategies and the EUSAIR in particular. The aim was to put the participants into the role of identifying challenges in the Adriatic-Ionian region and mechanisms to solve them jointly. The event took place on 5 May 2021 in advance of the EUSAIR Annual Forum.

**EU-Balkan Youth Forum (EBYF)** - The Forum included a special session dedicated to inclusion of youth within the EU policies set up by DG NEAR and DG REGIO, with a special emphasis on MRS and EUSAIR particularly. The EBYF conveyed its original recommendations to the Conference on the future of Europe, to keep its promises to be a “unique and timely opportunity for European citizens to debate on Europe’s challenges and priorities” and “the place to think about what future you want for the European Union”. The event was organised by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in Rome on 22-26 November 2021.

### *Access to funding and embedding:*

#### General overview

Access to funds for the implementation of EUSAIR projects is one of the main concerns of both key implementers and stakeholders. After eight years of implementation, the EUSAIR is becoming more and more popular among Adriatic and Ionian stakeholders and project beneficiaries. Over the past two years, important steps have been undertaken to accelerate the embedding process, supported by visibility campaigns during the time of the pandemic. The most important but not exclusive source of funding for the EUSAIR are Cohesion Policy programmes for EU Member States and IPA III for candidate countries and potential candidates.

The approved [EUSAIR flagships](#) from the extraordinary meeting in June 2020, prioritize actions under each EUSAIR sector that would be embedded into national and regional Cohesion

Policy funds and IPA III. This was an important step in order to provide guidance to funding programmes for the 2021-27 preparation.

#### Cohesion policy programmes 2021-2027

The embedding process in the EUSAIR is based on an internal and external process. National Coordinators are responsible for the internal process in terms of making sure that funding programmes integrate EUSAIR priorities and flagships. All countries engage in internal preparations and financial dialogues in order to promote the EUSAIR with its programming authorities. At the same time, pillar coordinators supported to spread awareness about the EUSAIR flagships in countless meetings. However, a harmonized approach on how to communicate with programming authorities was not developed which would have also helped the implementation level to better steer the embedding process.

The external process concerns the establishment of networks of Managing Authorities (MAs) of Cohesion Policy funds and NIPACs responsible for IPA III, to enhance cooperation during the programming cycle. This entails specific selection criteria and collaboration in the preparation of calls, increased exchange of information at programme level and the implementation of coordinated/ complementary projects in the region. During the reporting period, a number of meetings were organized, e.g. by the EUSAIR Facility Point in order to further engage programming authorities such as:

- Mainstream, Transnational & Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes meet EUSAIR, organised by the Slovenian FP Lead Partner - April 2021.
- Financial Dialogue meetings held in Croatia (September 2020), Montenegro (July 2021) and Slovenia (September 2021) organised by the Facility Point.
- EUSAIR Action Labs “Networking and complementarities for embedding of EUSAIR”, jointly organised by the Italian national authorities in charge of Cohesion Policy and the EUSAIR Facility Point - July, October November 2021 and April 2022.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting among EUSAIR key implementers and programming authorities (MA/NIPAC) during the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week - November 2021.
- Presentation of flagship projects at Interreg Italy-Croatia Workshop - April, August, October 2021.

The preparation of networks of mainstream MAs and NIPACs is still at an early stage and will need to be further strengthened. In the case of NIPACs, the EUSDR provides a good example which could be relevant for the EUSAIR as well. However, a big challenge for the EUSAIR remains the necessity to combine two sources of funding (Cohesion Funds and IPA III) which are implemented according to different regulations, methodologies, and timelines and through different structures. It is paramount that EUSAIR key implementers make further efforts to synchronize these two different frameworks and find viable solutions for the implementation of macro-regional actions and projects.

In addition, a series of national embedding meetings were organised, leading to exchanges between managing authorities of ESIF programmes or NIPACs and EUSAIR key implementers.

The creation of partnerships to plan joint activities and projects has become more common, not only with Interreg programmes in the region, but also with funding programmes directly managed by the Commission and with possible cooperation actions under the Cohesion Policy funds. EUSAIR key implementers must continue to make efforts to keep the momentum and to improve their capacity to match-make between funds and project ideas. Some EUSAIR project

ideas have already been developed into bankable pillar projects with the support of the EUSAIR Facility Point. However, the number of successfully developed bankable projects vary among pillars. Given the start of the implementation period 2021-2027 and the launch of new calls, it will be important to speed up the process to benefit from the many funding opportunities.

The current Interreg Adriatic transnational programme is an integral contributor to both the governance structures and to the implementation of the EUSAIR and continues to be. During the programming process 2021-2027, the Interreg Adriatic transnational programme has grouped its projects into thematic clusters in line with EUSAIR priorities. Each cluster is currently engaged in capitalisation activities to increase synergies between projects, to develop thematic analysis for the identification of new actions and to increase their visibility, dissemination and transferability of results.

Other Interreg IPA CBC Programmes have also significantly contributed to the implementation of the EUSAIR. Some are aligned in terms of objectives and priorities and include specific selection criteria allowing the participation of EUSAIR NCs in their Monitoring Committees. By way of example, the Interreg IPA-CBC programmes contribute widely to the EUSAIR objectives. The project LASPEH of the Interreg IPA CBC Italy-Albania-Montenegro programme, for example, contributes to Pillar 3 objectives by reducing the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services, and by addressing threats to marine and terrestrial biodiversity.

#### Funds directly managed by the Commission

Following the Council Conclusions of 2 December 2020 on the 3rd report on the Implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, the Commission organised a series of workshops dedicated to the directly managed EU programmes. In addition, MRS contact points were identified in all Commission DGs during the 2021 EU MRS Week. In order to improve the alignment of MRS with directly managed funds by the European Commission more information will be needed to address the specific needs of EU and non-EU countries for future calls.

Moreover, as a result of the consultations within the Commission, references to MRS have been included in some key frameworks like the IPA III Programming Framework or the Joint Declaration on a Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport of May 2021.

#### ***Monitoring and evaluation***

Initiatives to develop monitoring systems are on-going in all MRS, notably by determining indicators and targets for the priorities included in the action plans. The overall macro-regional territorial monitoring tool developed by ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) observe development trends and patterns in all four MRS. These observations should be explored when assessing options to improve or re-focus their objectives and policies. Additionally, for EUSDR and EUSAIR, the ESPON Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and Adriatic Ionian Macro-regions provide valuable input.

Monitoring specific EUSAIR activities began with some delay in autumn 2020 when an initial monitoring system of the EUSAIR was kicked-off by the EUSAIR Facility Point at pillar level.

An evaluation of the EUSAIR was presented to the GB in March 2022. The evaluation assesses the EUSAIR results, the appropriateness of the action plan to support its strategic objectives, as well as the quality of the implementation mechanisms and its governance system. The results of the evaluation will provide inputs for the revision process of the EUSAIR launched during

the Albanian presidency at the beginning of 2022. The findings showed that there is a need to revise the action plan by expanding the flagship concept and focus on fewer and more strategic priorities. The evaluation also identified a need to define a coherent system of indicators with a common methodology for the pillars and standardizing the working methodologies of TSGs. In terms of active involvement, the evaluation finds MAs, the European Commission and a stronger political backing of TSGs crucial.

More specifically the evaluation findings are as follows:

- At strategy dimension
  - It is important to move concrete results and outcomes
  - Link the strategy with funding programmes
  - To make outcomes and results more visible and create a leverage effect on stakeholders
  
- At territorial dimension
  - Increase territoriality of pillars, involving more the regional level
  - Promote a network of urban centres
  - Use of integrated territorial investment tools in the region
  
- At governance level
  - Match EUSAIR thematic areas with policy and specific objectives of Cohesion funds
  - Use of appropriate fields of intervention to implement flagships

### ***Communication***

During the pandemic, the EUSAIR had to move from physical activities to purely online ones, which created challenges for planned events as well as for communication and capacity building workshops in particular during 2020. However, after the initial adjustment, the year of 2021-2022 witnessed a comeback of activities and initiatives. The online meeting tool provided by the EUSAIR Stakeholder Platform was useful for the continuation of online meetings for both the governance structure and stakeholder workshops with over 400 organised meetings in total. Whereas the support for online meetings has been substantial, the EUSAIR stakeholder platform per se still needs to unleash its potential a.o. by developing a stronger community engagement strategy to be a tool for the development of project ideas and match-making for project partners.

Over the course of two years, EUSAIR organised two annual fora (Serbian presidency in January 2021 and Slovenian presidency in May 2021), numerous embedding workshops, stakeholder conferences and youth workshops. The Mediterranean Coastal and Macro-Regional Strategies Week continued in digital format in 2020 under the Slovenian EUSAIR presidency. The 2021 edition was organised jointly by Slovenia and EUSAIR's ninth member, North Macedonia. In May 2022, the hybrid 7<sup>th</sup> EUSAIR Annual Forum under the Albanian presidency brought back the possibility for physical exchanges with more than 500 on-site stakeholders. The return to physical meeting and attendances of high-level politicians attracted the highest

number of media representation at an EUSAIR annual forum, from all ten countries, including the newest member San Marino.

The Facility Point Lead Partner, in charge of the communication work package of the EUSAIR, made an important step by creating a dedicated EUSAIR section on the website of the Interreg IPA ADRION programme. In addition, digital communication via the website, newsletter and especially the social media accounts, continued to be a key way to inform stakeholders on Twitter, Facebook and Youtube about developments and milestones of the strategy. The *Do you know?* campaign was launched in the second quarter of 2021 to engage the audience in cultural, historical or geographic questions on the participating countries and the EUSAIR itself. Activities extended also to LinkedIn as the main tool for business communication and networking. Besides the main EUSAIR account, a networking group for the innovation community has been opened for targeted community engagement.

The Facility Point Lead Partner is the main coordinator for communication activities with support of the eight Project Partners. However, communication about the EUSAIR is everyone's business including the key implementers. In that context, the EUSAIR communication academy, launched by the Facility Point, took these actors into focus together with young people and government communicators. As the interest exceeded the number of available places a second edition is being considered. Complementing the communication work of the Facility Point Lead Partner, four Project Partners started publishing newsletter, promoting EUSAIR on their Ministry's websites and created social media accounts in the respective native language to improve the country-related visibility and understanding of the strategy. Whereas efforts at national level have increased, varying results in the countries are noticeable, especially among the Western Balkan countries. Six out of ten countries engage communication experts to produce content or to launch articles around the strategy and pillars in national media. Successful undertakings led to the invitation of the Montenegrin Facility Point Project Partner at Radio Crne Gore, the Croatian Ministry of Tourism and Sport to talk about EUSAIR's Sustainable Tourism Pillar at the morning show *Dobro Jutro Hrvatska* and various articles being published on national online outlets. In Croatia for example, 46 national stories and articles have been written and a total of three television show appearances took place.

The aim for the next years is to promote awareness of the EUSAIR at the different levels, from local to international, build on the multi-level governance and ensure the involvement of public, economic, civil society and environmental partners, all this compiled into a strong and coherent (digital) communication strategy.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

In the eight years of its existence, the EUSAIR has been able to establish and reinforce networks of cooperation among stakeholders; it has incentivized the creation of new partnerships in different sectors that have engaged in a large number of initiatives, actions, processes and projects, and it has strengthened regional cooperation. Due to its geography on the EU external border and the participation of candidate countries and potential candidates, the EUSAIR has focused more and more on supporting the EU enlargement process.

The Adriatic and Ionian region benefits from its unparalleled natural and cultural heritage, which makes it one of the most attractive regions in Europe in terms of tourism, and it has a large potential for developing renewable energy and blue economy. However, the region faces substantial challenges such as socio-economic disparities, territorial fragmentation, a lack of

connectivity and climate change. EUSAIR countries must better exploit the potentials and opportunities of the region and address challenges through reinforced cooperation. The ongoing revision of the EUSAIR is an opportunity to make the strategy more fit for this endeavour. Finalising the revision will be one of the key challenges for the upcoming EUSAIR presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (June 2022-May 2023). The stakeholder consultation has been launched (16 May - 30 June 2022) resulting in more than 600 contributions currently being analysed. Whereas key implementers agree on the need to strengthen enlargement as a priority, it remains to be seen whether the stakeholder consultation will show new priorities or a stronger concentration on the existing ones.

According to the evaluation of the EUSAIR delivered in March 2022, the twin digital and green transition together with a stronger focus on supporting the EU enlargement process should feature more prominently in the strategy, especially given the new momentum. In the evaluation report, it was noted that the EUSAIR might not be an appropriate tool to respond to global crisis and emergencies. However, the revision can certainly be used to make this a stronger reality.

At the same time, the EUSAIR could become more political and improve its positioning in the realm of many initiatives, international organizations and processes of the region. Being an intergovernmental platform, it promotes cooperation on equal footing, has strong links with EU Cohesion policy and has the potential to bring back South Eastern Europe to the attention of EU decision-makers.

### ***The European Green Deal, the digital transition, social change including the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

Since the beginning, sustainability has been a prominent theme in the EUSAIR. Together with Pillar 3 on Environmental Quality, all other pillars feature sustainability as a horizontal aspects of their actions.

Nevertheless a “quantum leap” is now needed. Acting on mitigating and adapting to climate change has become even more urgent and the objectives and targets of the EU are now much more ambitions to make Europe the first climate neutral continent in the world by 2050. The EUSAIR must adapt to such objectives and can set the example, starting by aligning its action plan with the main sectoral strategies in line with the EU Green Deal. These include the new approach for a Sustainable Blue Economy in the EU, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the Smart and Sustainable mobility strategy, the Farm to Fork Strategy, the Transition Pathway for Tourism, etc. or also other key strategic initiatives, going beyond the European Green Deal, such as the RepowerEU Plan.

However, as repeatedly mentioned that the green and digital transition are interlinked, digitization should also be stronger considered as a horizontal aspects for all pillars. Some EUSAIR flagships already include actions to digitize multi-modal transport operations, smart grids, or tourism services. However this can be expanded and better included to connect people, business, administrations through the newest available technologies.

The EUSAIR region faces important social and economic challenges going from brain drain, major emigration flows, ageing population which could be considered. Although social change and social issues are not a key priority in the current EUSAIR, these issues can only be tackled through a stronger attention to investments that would benefit job creation in sectors such as blue economy, green economy and sustainable tourism that have a large potential in the region.

### ***MRS governance (including monitoring, evaluation and communication)***

Over the last two years, the EUSAIR governance has been resilient. Key implementers have shown continuous willingness to cooperate in times of the pandemic, promptly switching to the new digital formats amidst a changed reality. Efforts were made to strengthen the political commitment. However, more must be done, particularly at sectoral level, in order to be more effective in delivering relevant sectoral policies. In some cases, human resources are still not adequate to facilitate the well-functioning of a multi-level and multi-sectoral strategy like the EUSAIR. Capacity building activities should be extended further that the key implementers, reach relevant local, regional and national authorities, potential beneficiaries of projects, etc., especially now that physical meetings are possible again. The case of the embedding process demonstrated the need for clearer communication and responsibilities of key implementers to avoid delays and to explain what is expected from the national level. Furthermore, it could be considered to form task forces e.g. for the establishment of the EUSAIR Youth Council, to advance faster on a topic instead of taking it from GB meeting to GB meeting.

In order to make the governance more efficient, key implementers have expressed the necessity to improve the engagement of all countries in the EUSAIR objectives and governance. An important step is to improve cross-pillar coordination as well as the dialogue between TSGs and the GB and to engage more the Commission (in particular DG NEAR and EU Delegations) in the Western Balkans countries. Monitoring and evaluation are also considered crucial to have up-to-date impression on the efficiency of the strategy and its capacity to deliver results.

The EUSAIR Facility Point has proven to be an essential element for the functioning of the EUSAIR governance and has played a key role in ensuring continuity of action, supporting the organization and follow-up of meetings, capacity building, communication, etc. Notwithstanding its crucial role, some key implementers express a wish to better specify the duties and mandate. Concerns have also been raised with regard to the complexity of the Facility Points' organisation that may hinder efficient implementation of some actions. It is important that the new setup financed under the Interreg IPA ADRION programme 2021-2027 will reflect the need for simplification.

As for communication, the improved communication tools and the strengthened use of existing channels allow for a broadening of the scope about its potential and variety of actions. In this respect, the move to LinkedIn was well chosen and enhanced communication efforts in national language contributing to greater awareness. However, it will be crucial to secure the human resources to implement and maintain the communication strategy. In the next programming period, it will be decisive to boost (digital) communication as part of an improved communication plan and to improve the communication flow between all partners, also through existing facilitating online sharing tools accessible to e.g. better capitalise on communication materials already developed.

### ***Embedding, implementation and access to funds directly managed by the Commission***

Embedding is widely considered as a critical process for the implementation of the EUSAIR. The challenge in the EUSAIR is to combine different funding systems, Cohesion Funds and IPA III funds and different levels of funding between EU Member States and candidate countries and potential candidates.

The role of National Coordinators is to keep the dialogue with their programming authorities thriving during the entire programming period 2021-2027. To this aim, financial dialogues meetings must be continued and strengthened. Once EUSAIR priorities have been embedded, cooperation and coordination must be implemented at programme and project level in order to fully exploit the potential of macro-regional strategies. The inclusion of IPA III funds in this process is certainly challenging, therefore both financial dialogue and capacity building should be strengthened. In this perspective, it is crucial to raise awareness regarding the financing issues within Commission services (particularly DG NEAR and EU Delegations) and NIPAC offices in the region. The role of the IPA Monitoring Committee to support the embedding process should also be considered.

The experience of the Action Labs for the EUSAIR ETC programmes is very positive, however, it should be extended to mainstream operational programmes and to IPA III programmes. The outcome should be the establishment of network of Managing Authorities and National IPA Coordinators that would cooperate through all phases of the programme implementation including preparation of calls for proposals, information to beneficiaries and on supporting the implementation of joint or parallel projects contributing to EUSAIR flagships. Lessons learnt from the EUSDR, who are in the midst of this process, should be explored.

Funds directly managed by the Commission are a key source of funding for the EUSAIR. In most cases, candidate countries and potential candidates are included in these programmes with specific agreements (Horizon Europe, LIFE, etc.). The existing experience with development of project ideas in the EUSAIR together with the potential to create new thematic and if possible quadruple helix collaborations through the EUSAIR Stakeholders Platform, must be used to apply for projects under programmes directly managed EU programmes. Also countries and regions should make the best possible use of the S3 platforms of the JRC for this purpose.

### ***EUSAIR role in EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy***

The EUSAIR can become a key tool supporting the Enlargement process of its candidate countries and potential candidates. The report “*EUSAIR facilitating the enlargement process of the Western Balkans*” highlighted different features of the EUSAIR that are already helping candidate countries and potential candidates in their accession process and that can be further strengthened in the future, particular in the revision process of the strategy. The EUSAIR in fact:

- Eases the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* in the Western Balkans;
- Fosters administrative capacity on different EU policies, including cohesion policy;
- Offers a platform for cooperation where different levels of governance, processes, strategies and funds may converge;
- Promotes a stronger involvement of stakeholders and increases accountability of governments also consolidating democratic processes.

The EUSAIR can support the enlargement process at sectoral level for the relevant negotiating chapters. Cooperation actions can act as peer-to-peer learning relevant for candidate countries and potential candidates (as seen under Pillar 3) in order to align their legislations and practices to EU standards. With the takeover of the EUSAIR presidency by Bosnia and Herzegovina, the

fourth participating country of the Western Balkans has been given the responsibility to guide the region towards a better future at a time when the revision of the action plan and the embedding process are at a decisive stages. Moreover, the EUSAIR is a political platform guided by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and for EU funds, which, together with the technical support can give an early access to some critical EU strategies and policies.

## **Report on the implementation of the European Union strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP)**

The EUSALP was endorsed by the Council of the EU on 27 November 2015 and by the European Council on 28 June 2016, on the basis of a Communication adopted by the Commission in July 2015, and its accompanying action plan.

The strategy was developed around the Alpine region seen as a functional area, inhabited by about 80 million people (approximately 18% of the EU's population) and covering seven countries (five EU MS - Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia - and two non-EU countries - Switzerland and Liechtenstein) and 48 regions. EUSALP builds upon a high level of existing cooperation in the region, among others thanks to the Alpine Convention, signed in 1991.

As its main objective, the EUSALP aims to ensure that this region remains one of the most attractive areas in Europe, taking better advantage of its assets and seizing the opportunities for sustainable and innovative development in a European context.

The strategy focuses on areas of (macro) regional mutual interest. Therefore, the priority areas and specific objectives selected should reflect genuine commitment to working together to achieve common solutions to challenges or unused potential. The EUSALP has three thematic policy areas and objectives, which are also key challenges of the strategy:

- Economic Growth and Innovation: fair access to job opportunities by building on the high competitiveness of the region;
- Mobility and connectivity: sustainable internal and external accessibility;
- Environment and energy: a more inclusive environmental framework and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future.

In addition, there is a cross-cutting objective aiming to build a sound macro-regional governance model for the region namely to improve cooperation and the coordination of action.

### **RESULTS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

#### ***Main policy developments, including the pandemic and war in Ukraine***

The EUSALP has been a valuable tool to draw the attention of politicians, public administrations, private organizations, SMEs, cluster organizations, educational and cultural institutions and civil society organizations towards the Alpine region. A key added value of the EUSALP is its continuous efforts to bring governance closer to the citizens of the region. The strategy is strongly focused on youth with the creation of a Youth Council in 2021 under the French presidency, gathering 28 young people, representing the diversity of the Alpine region: This council gives a voice to the Alpine youth in all EUSALP governing bodies, from the thematic Actions Groups (implementing the strategy) to the General Assembly, through to the Executive Board.

The EUSALP is a tool to deliver in a territorial dimension, core European policy initiatives like the green and digital transition, issues related to social change as well as the inclusion of civil

society and youth. During the 2021 European Year of Rail, joint political positions were elaborated within the framework of EUSALP. The EU concept of Smart Villages has been taken up as initiatives on both political and administrative levels, and developed as an INTERREG project (Alpine Space Programme) as well as an alpine-wide conference on digitalisation (Digital Alps) in 2022.

During the reporting period, the pandemic had a strong impact on EUSALP activities and significantly restricted the cooperation. Priority was given to crisis management by many authorities, rather than cooperation and this has slowed down some activities and delayed programming of the new EU funding programmes.

The pandemic resulted in postponement or cancellation of physical meetings (e.g. ministerial meetings) however, it also generated new ways of working and boosted new initiatives. EUSALP adopted a post-pandemic plan to be implemented by the Action Groups to strengthen the EUSALP resiliency and finalised a Manifesto of the States and Regions involved in EUSALP promoting sustainability and resiliency.

In 2020 and 2021, the EUSALP Action Groups were urged by the Lombardy region, as leader of the AlpGov2 project, to give priority to activities and projects in favour of a green recovery and resilience of the Alpine region, with a view to alleviate the economic and social effects of the pandemic. The Italian presidency 2022 designed its programme with a strong focus on climate resilient energy strategies, including a strong link to the New European Bauhaus Initiative.

Across the EUSALP area, the local, regional and national authorities are facing the challenge of supporting refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. In the future they may be confronted with new sources of pollution, and the need for energy diversification has already triggered new national and regional policies. Increasing inflation and unemployment are concrete risks to be addressed also in the EUSALP region. This can also be an opportunity for better cooperation. A coordinated vision to meet these challenges could be envisioned at a macro-regional level and could be facilitated through structures such as the new Technical Support Structure (TSS) that ensures stability and continuity and a timely exchange of information with all implementers of the strategy.

Especially in the current situation (pandemic, the war in Ukraine), the EUSALP offers added value and the possibility to involve new actors in the cooperation and to address some strategic challenges such as supply chain resilience, the Green Deal, digital transition and transport issues.

### ***EUSALP thematic priorities and their interrelation with the European Green Deal***

Addressing climate change is an important objective for the EUSALP and within this current reporting period EUSALP has put the environmental protection high on the agenda. Several of the actions of the EUSALP action plan contribute to the European Green Deal's objectives. In 2020-2021, the main objective of the French presidency was to contribute to accelerating the green transition of the Alpine region, in order to fight against climate change. The Italian presidency 2022 (held by the Autonomous Provinces of Bolzano/Bozen and Trento) is inspired by the ambition of making the EUSALP region the first European carbon-neutral macro-region in line with the EU Climate Action and the European Green Deal, promoting the roll-out of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency measures.

Overall, the potential contribution of the EUSALP to the objectives of the European Green Deal is high. As already proven, EUSALP can mobilize institutions/stakeholders and funds for the implementation of the European Green Deal in the Alpine region. It can facilitate coordination in decision-making and action, cross-sectoral approaches, multi-level governance and stakeholder involvement, all very important elements for the implementation of the European Green Deal on the ground.

Several projects and processes of the Action Groups contribute to the implementation of different European Green Deal actions on the ground and also of key strategic initiatives going beyond the EGD such as the RepowerEU Plan

### **Examples of projects and processes**

**Facilitating the establishment of an Alpine Universities Alliance/Network (AG1-Research and Innovation):** Universities and Research & Innovation Centres are essential agents of territorial development able to promote a beneficial interaction between mountain regions and lowlands, to facilitate the implementation of sustainable models and to foster the implementation of the European Green Deal in the Alpine region. In order to do so a preliminary set of identified universities coming from the seven Alpine region countries were invited. The meeting, held online on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January, 2022 saw the participation of 26 Universities coming from six Alpine region's countries. A questionnaire was issued to all the participating institutions collecting feedback from 18 Universities concerning the possible connection with EUSALP and the establishment of an informal network. A second meeting is being organised to start-up three preliminary projects to be submitted to different funding calls.

**“Green Hydrogen for the Alpine Region” initiative (AG2-Economic Development and AG9-Energy):** Nine alpine regions, represented in six different EUSALP AG, declared and formalised their intention to cooperate on hydrogen projects in the transport sector, in innovation and training, by signing a formal Letter of Intent. A Focus Group was established, holding regular meetings at least three-monthly since September 2020. The regions and experts involved are cooperating to explore potential opportunities for collaboration, and to develop new project proposals for funding e.g. SPIRALPS (Horizon 2020), AMETHYST (ASP 2021-27). The group also functioned as a Financial Dialogue Network hub working towards the integration of the hydrogen topic into the current MFF.

**Project Assessment Methodology for Individual Projects & 2nd call for project proposal 20/21 (AG4-Mobility):** The Assessment Methodology for Individual Projects serves to identify projects with a relevance for the fostering of sustainable mobility solutions in the Alpine region from a macroregional perspective. In 2020, 14 EUSALP projects were labelled, and the AG4 Lead launched a second project call in 2021 (a total of 16 submissions and six labelled projects). The label helps the project promoters to communicate the projects' endorsement by the macro-region towards decision-making authorities who are in the position to promote the implementation of the respective project and/or to provide adequate financial support. AG4 promotes the visibility of the projects, as for example the Alpine Platform of Knowledge for Mobility and Transport or in virtual and physical exhibitions (EU Week for Cities and Regions 2021, EUSALP Mobility Conference 2022, EUSALP Roadshow stop on spatial planning 2022).

**Second international conference “Territorial Brands in the Alpine Region” (AG6-Resources):** Conference with more than 90 practitioners from the agri-food sector and experts on local development focusing on small scale territorial brands in the Alps. The participants met online to discuss ways of creating a successful territorial brand and the framework conditions underpinning such processes, as well as the impact of a territorial brand on the sustainable development of the corresponding territory.

**“GI goes business” competition (AG7-Green Infrastructure):** In 2021/2022, a new competition to support innovative ideas, products and services for a Green Economy in the Alpine region was launched. Almost 40 start-ups, established enterprises and creative minds from Austria, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland submitted their products, services and ideas in the first GI goes business award. Six winners and two special recognition teams were identified and invited to an individual coaching series to bring the ideas further. The official ceremony for the GI goes business award took place under political EUSALP presidency patronage on 13 May 2013 in Bolzano.

**Interactive physical natural hazard model and the accompanying study on didactic principles and educational support of natural hazard models (AG8-Risk Governance):** The study provides an assessment of existing models from the Alpine region. Based on the results of the study a new model prototype was created. More information and an accompanying video can be found here: <https://www.alpine-region.eu/Study-physical-natural-hazard-models-Finalreport>

### ***EUSALP thematic priorities and their interrelation with the digital transition***

To implement the EUSALP action “to connect people electronically and promote accessibility to public services”, activities of the Action Group 5 - Connectivity and Accessibility have been boosted the past two years, especially in response to the pandemic and its consequences with regard the new ways of working and communicating. Overall, the EUSALP has a great potential to continue to be a digital laboratory by exploring: concrete ways to develop smart SMEs, E-health systems for the basic medical care, or the new delivery of service for general interest. The EUSALP French presidency (2020-2021) and the EUSALP Italian presidency (2022) have also made connectivity and digitalisation a priority accompanying the green transition. The political vision based on the capacity of the Alps to be forerunners of digitalisation has led to the implementation of a series of activities for the Alpine region. Since 2016, the concept of “Smart Villages” has been considerably improved, as the Smart Villages project received funding from the Interreg Alpine Space Programme. The years 2020-2022 delivered outputs such as policy recommendations for digitalisation, the creation of the Digital Exchange Platform, and the development of the Smart Alps Network.

### **Examples of projects and processes**

**Smart Villages - Using the potential of digitization in Alpine villages (AG5-Connectivity and Accessibility).** The Interreg Alpine Space project aims at gathering actors on different levels to initiate a transformation into a smart village or smart region. By exchanging good practices, digitalisation helps to overcome the natural handicaps of mountain and rural areas, to develop new business models and to strengthen the resilience of the mountain and rural villages. The projects has made come true [Smart Alps Network](#) and the [Digital Exchange Platform](#).

**Smart SMEs (AG5)** The aim of the Smart SMEs project is to understand to what extent SMEs that produce, process and apply natural fibres use digitalization tools and approaches. The project also evaluates obstacles that prevent SMEs from exploiting the full potential of digital solutions. The report of policy recommendations based on findings can be found here : <https://www.alpine-region.eu/publications/report-policy-recommendations-based-findings>.

**Reporting the chances of E-Health in the basic medical care (AG5).** A lack of General Practitioners (GPs) and other health care providers is a growing problem in rural areas of the alpine countries. The problem is becoming even more acute with demographic change which results in a higher demand for basic health care services per inhabitant. With the long distances between patients and service providers, e-health can offer even greater benefits to the rural than in urban areas. The [report](#) gives examples of how the problem is being addressed in different regions.

**How digitalization changes the delivery of Services of General Interest SGI (AG5).** In a news set up Think Tank composed of experts from all Alpine countries, [good practices](#) on the potentials of digitalisation to improve the access to Services of general interest are collected.

**Digital Alps Conference (AG5).** The first [Digital Alps Conference](#) took place in 2021 (250 participants) and the second in May 2022. This annual conference brings together all actors and initiatives dealing with the topic on digitalization in the Alpine area. The 2022 conference saw cooperation with AG3 to explore synergies across topics such as digitalization, education, labour market and smart villages.

### ***EUSALP thematic priorities and social change, including the inflow of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

The pandemic had put significant stress on the labour market and education systems and institutions in the Alpine region. Moreover, the Alpine region is as other regions receiving refugees that will have an impact the labour market and education systems. This will require development of responses in education and access to the labour market (upskilling and reskilling, recognition of diploma, access to public and social services).

Projects under AG3-Labour Market, Education and Training aim to foster the creation of a common labour market and learning space in the EUSALP area. Education is considered as a high priority to cope with the global challenges and a condition for the Alpine region to stay competitive and synergies/complementarities especially with AG1 and AG5 are sought. To implement the EUSALP action “to improve the adequacy of labour market, education and training in strategic sectors”, the AG3 has started new activities the past two years aimed at equipping the young generation with the skills and education necessary to cope with the twin transition and societal challenges.

Financed by the Interreg Alpine Space (Interreg) programme, many projects related to social innovation, social change have been implemented. These projects aim to improve the framework for social innovation and to produce innovative solutions in order to develop the Alpine region into a more attractive place to live and work.

## Examples of projects and processes

**AlpGov2 and AG3:** In the AlpGov 2 project it was developed a Work Plan for AG3 for the three-year period 2020-2022 to support the following main areas of action: soft skills, green and digital jobs, mutual recognition of Higher Vocational Education and Training (HJET) title and competences.

**Study on Soft Skills:** AG3 launched a study to develop the theme of soft skills with the final objective to create a common framework of tools for the monitoring and assessment of soft skills. A standardised set of soft skills related to work-based learning is useful to the development of the Alpine economy. The results will be presented at the Annual Forum 2022. This process can facilitate the recognition of competences acquired in an informal way and help the re-integration in the labour market of unemployed people and the support the mobility into other EUSALP countries.

**Dual Training Systems** (a mode of training delivery which combines theoretical and practical training): During the period a process was started to produce a quality assurance guidelines for dual training systems, aiming at developing a legal framework for dual training in line with the evolution of the labour market and request for new skills such as green and digital competences. The document aims at simplifying the dual training process and will define quality criteria and guidelines for effective dual training (dual systems) in the Alpine region and it will also include examples of best practices. The results will be presented at the Annual Forum 2022.

**Fostering Cooperation in Higher Vocational Education and Training (HJET) in the EUSALP” conference:** The Conference held in Brussels as part of the European Vocational Skills Week 2022 was the starting point for a mutual recognition of HJET titles and qualifications in the EUSALP area to the mobility of students and workers. The aim is to launch the debate towards a future adoption of a pact for HJET in line with the European Skills Agenda and the European Strategy for Higher Education. The mutual recognition of HJET titles can be a useful instrument to ensure a more inclusive and social Europe. A technical panel discussed the added value of cooperating on higher education for its implications in terms of inclusion, mobility, digitalisation, lifelong learning, knowledge transfer and sharing.

**ASIS (Alpine Social Innovation Strategy):** The project ASIS (2018-2021) aims at defining a new vision of social innovation in order to increase the innovation capacity of Alpine space regions by addressing new challenges. The underlying idea of ASIS is that all forms of innovation are concerned by societal challenges (socio-economic and environmental). ASIS develops a strategic approach to promote social innovation in the region and increase cooperation between actors. ASIS has proposed new tools and methodologies, an innovative platform, new strategic policies & recommendations to public actors through a white book, simulation models and many other materials ([White-book-online.pdf](#) ([socialinnovationstrategy.eu](#))).

## ***Governance and Administrative involvement and capacity***

The governance structure of the EUSALP consists of the following functions and levels:

- The General Assembly gathers the high-level political representatives of states and regions involved in the strategy, the Commission, and the Alpine Convention as observer. It should mainly be responsible for laying down the general political guidelines for the strategy.
- The Executive Board is formed by representatives of states and regions and representatives from the Commission and, as observers, the Alpine Convention and the Interreg Alpine Space Programme. It oversees the implementation of the EUSALP and it is meant to provide strategic guidance with respect to management and implementation of the EUSALP and its action plan.
- The core of the implementation level is the Action Groups and Action Group leaders. The Action Group leaders are the drivers of day-to-day implementation. Their role, capacities, resources and engagement is a key element to the success of the strategy.

### Political level

The rotating presidencies mechanism has been established to ensure that all partner states get involved in governance and presidency of the strategy. After two years of French presidency, extended due to the pandemic, Italy has agreed to take over the presidency of 2022 and Switzerland is planning to hold the presidency in 2023. Slovenia has proposed to take over the presidency in 2024. The role of the rotating MRS presidency is increasing, as the participating countries realise its importance in steering the strategic direction of the EUSALP. In parallel, a Trio presidency (previous, current and future presidencies) was established and its role has been increasingly strengthened.

The annual fora, the presidencies kick-off events and the EUSALP General Assembly meetings are occasions for the political level in the Alpine region to show political commitment and to show how the EUSALP brings significant added value to cooperation in the region. However, in contrast to other MRS, so far no dedicated thematic ministerial meetings have been held back-to-back with the EUSALP annual fora.

Due to the pandemic, the 2020 Annual Forum took place online (French presidency). In 2021, annual forum took place in Nice in hybrid format (on 14 December 2021 under French presidency), and offered an opportunity to raise awareness of the strategy and to increase its visibility. The 2022 annual forum and General Assembly (Italian presidency) is planned to take place in Trento (23-25 November).

However, political awareness and commitment need to increase further. Communication of success stories to the political level seems to be key to support this. The current political steering of EUSALP by the Ministers responsible for coordination, needs to be complemented by initiatives from the sectorial ministers to strengthen the links between sector policies and AGs and increase legitimacy and visibility.

## Implementation level

The seven participating countries are represented in the nine Action Groups (AGs) with varying levels of involvement of the participating states and regions. The EU member states are well-engaged in the strategy with Italy co-heading 5 AGs, France heading 3 AGs, Austria also heading 3 AGs. It is important to ensure that the EUSALP is high on the political agenda, especially in the non-EU members, through active participation in the AGs. In 2020, EUSALP had entered into its 2<sup>nd</sup> implementation period. The focus has been on the EUSALP AGs and these becoming key players in policy-making. One of the central objectives of the current action plan is to enhance the cooperation between the 9 AGs.

In order to better implement and monitor the actions and projects of the strategy, different mechanisms have been put in place, including a Technical Support Structure (TSS) ensuring continuity between rotating presidencies and bringing support to all governing bodies of EUSALP. The strategy has also established its first Financial Dialogue Networks (to bridge the gap between the Action Groups and the EU funding programmes). Last but not least, a monitoring and evaluation tool (matrix with indicators) was elaborated in order to improve and facilitate the follow up of the EUSALP implementation in the future, in line with the continuous effort to evaluate the results of the strategy.

The reports from the AGs show that almost all AGs are systematically implementing and continuously adjusting their work plans along the topics of the EUSALP's action plan, and in some cases, even taking new topics on board. An increasing number of projects have been developed by AGs. These projects are providing more transnational added value, showing important improvements and an increasing professionalisation. The AlpGov 2 project, funded until 31 December 2022 by the Interreg Alpine Space transnational programme set up a special work package to assist AG leaders and members to address and implement the policy cycle and improve efficiency.

The national coordinators (NCs), nominated by each participating country, are the focal point at national level and part of the Executive Board, which is the decision-making body of the strategy. Their primary task is to oversee implementation of the strategy in their countries and ensure that the EUSALP is firmly anchored in the national environment. This includes engaging with all AGs, and liaising with national line ministries and other relevant organisations to encourage implement EUSALP actions in their policy field.

In relation to national coordination, several national coordinators highlight that the EUSALP's structure helps to streamline and improve horizontal (cross-sectorial) and vertical coordination within and between national and regional administrations in each country. A number of participating countries have established internal coordination systems involving ministries of foreign affairs, authorities in charge of EU Funds, sectoral ministries and regional/local administrations. In most of the EUSALP countries, the strategy is coordinated from a ministry (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) which is different from the ministry in charge of the bulk of EU funding programmes.

In 2020 and 2021, EUSALP entered into an important phase of its operations. The Joint Ministerial Declaration of Milan of November 2019 emphasized the need to strengthen the governance of the strategy and called for adequate representation of the priorities of EUSALP in the programming of European and national funds. Since then, EUSALP has been paying increasing attention to the advancement of operational procedures, alignment of governance

levels, and development of methods for implementation including a focus on macro-regional priorities and identification of result indicators. By seeking concrete implementation for macro-regional projects, EUSALP has entered a new and more mature phase of operation and visibility.

The milestones of this process were represented by the adoption of the EUSALP Manifesto (June 2020), the approval of the cross-cutting Strategic Initiatives (September 2020), the progressive setting-up of a Monitoring Matrix (since November 2020), the establishment of Financial Dialogue Networks (July 2021), and the start of the implementing phase of a Permanent Secretariat (Technical Support Structure) at the service of the rotating presidencies and thematic AGs.

The EUSALP members agreed to set up a Technical Support Structure (TSS) in 2021 which will support EUSALP in communication, support to the AGs, monitoring, etc. The exact and full scope of the TSS tasks is currently under discussion. The setting up of the Technical Support Structure (TSS) aims at also helping the presidencies and the transition between them. Establishing these new processes and enhancing existing ones has been very helpful in various partner states to generate greater awareness and consideration of EUSALP priorities in both mainstream and Interreg ERDF programmes during the 2021-2027 programming phase.

### Civil society

Under the French presidency, many professional, economic and environmental associations have been supported to organise thematic events. In the framework of the AG's work actions and events have been implemented, during for example the annual mobility conference (AG4), the energy conference (AG9), the Digital Alps Conference, (AG5), or the Conference on Education and labour market (AG3). Civil society is systematically involved at the Annual Fora of the EUSALP. At these annual fora, a significant number of participants from national, regional and local administrations, universities, the business sector, youth representatives and media took stock of progress achieved. The discussion focused on challenges facing the EUSALP region and exchanged ideas and experience from projects, actions or activities of macro-regional relevance.

During the French presidency, there was a specific effort to involve French sub-regional authorities and NGOs. In France and Italy, seminars and conferences are regularly held to inform and enable civil society to participate, notably in Interreg programmes and seminars and in meetings of both Alpine and Jura Massifs Committees. On an on-going basis, Switzerland informs interested stakeholders and organise meetings (when necessary) to discuss involvement of new partners. This echoes the way European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) programmes located in the EUSALP area functioning in terms of involving civil society in the Monitoring Committees.

One of the concrete results under the French presidency was the development of a digital participatory platform to boost sustainable initiatives, dissemination, and involvement of various stakeholders (sub-regional authorities, SMEs, NGOs, young people and members of the public). With this initiative, initially envisaged in the EUSALP's action plan, there has been a boost in strengthening civil society and youth involvement in implementing the EUSALP. The Italian presidency continues this initiative. As part of the civil society, the focus group of young people was particularly involved in the EUSALP governance, and many activities were organised and a systematic participation in the EUSALP decision process.

## Youth

Youth became a top priority in 2018 with the objective to bring EUSALP closer to the citizens' needs, in particular to young people. The past years' objective was to better involve young people at all level of the strategy's governance. Many efforts through a variety of actions towards young people allow them to take part of the EUSALP activities, either from as project manager for the benefit of EUSALP, or by structuring a group of young people through an official governance body within the strategy. Therefore, the years 2020-2021 were marked by achievements in this field. The project Youth.Shaping. EUSALP gathered many activities for young people as escribed in the following.

Firstly, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Pitch Your Project competition in 2020 and 2021, have rewarded six youth projects at a total of EUR 20 000 (co-financed by the European Commission and Land Tyrol) for projects addressing a solution to EUSALP challenges.

Secondly, due to the pandemic, the first EUSALP Youth Camp took place in summer 2021 in an adapted format. In 2022, three camps will take place in France, Germany and Italy to allow young people to participate. Their aim is to make young people debate about EUSALP actions and to bring new format of civil society interactions within the EUSALP governance, similar to living labs.

Finally, 2021 marked the implementation of the 1<sup>st</sup> EUSALP Youth Council: 28 (4 persons/ country) young people between 18 and 29 years old, were selected to take part in the EUSALP discussions at all governance levels. The 28 councillors represent the EUSALP Youth Council, as a consultative body of the EUSALP governance. They have the possibility to participate in the implementation of the EUSALP during one year with the possibility of a one-time extension of their mandate. Two representatives are in the Executive Board and in the General Assembly as observers. The Youth Council also cooperate closely with the AGs.

EUSALP has improved its online communication and participation opportunities and the website <https://eusalp-youth.eu> informs young people about the different possibilities. Young people can apply there for the Youth Council, the camps or Pitch Your Project. youth.shaping.EUSALP also runs social media channels on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube and organizes regular online meetings where interested young people can learn more about EUSALP.

On the policy side, each member of EUSALP takes its responsibilities towards youth involvement. For example the Land Tyrol takes care of international networking with youth organizations and projects in the Alpine region to use synergies.

In Italy, the Youth Council is currently strengthening the links with youth organizations and networks and consultation bodies at national level. Youth empowerment is also a main axis of the 2022 Italian presidency, with several activities focused on the promotion of youth skills and active involvement in macroregional activities. Among the activities, a peer to peer training program delivered in cooperation with Fondazione Antonio Megalizzi is planned. Its first part was held in Brussels during the MRS week 2022, with a training session on specific topics such as mobility, economic development, environment with the aim to formulate proposals to be submitted to the COFE platform.

In addition, the Italian presidency, in cooperation with some Action Groups, planned three workshops where representatives of EUSALP Youth Council and other youth organizations of the Alpine regions work on shared visions of possible and desirable futures in the Alps on the following : jobs, digitalisation and the future order in the Alps.

At national level, communication towards citizens is also improving: the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation organised in Rome (22-26 November 2021) a Youth Forum dedicated to gathering 78 young students from all EU Member States and from candidate countries, to discuss the future of the European Union and to contribute to the the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Forum included a special session dedicated to the perspective of the inclusion of young people in EU policies set up by the Commission, with a special emphasis on MRS, raising awareness on macro-regional strategies among youth.

The results of the workshops will be presented to EUSALP bodies during the General Assembly and the Annual forum in November in Trento.

### ***Access to funding and embedding:***

#### General overview

The EUSALP countries, supported by the Commission, have initiated thematic financial dialogue networks in order to bridge the gap between the AGs and the EU funding programmes and to facilitate funding of EUSALP implementation. Currently, three such networks are operational: energy transition, especially hydrogen, digitalisation and sustainable mobility.

The current financial dialogue networks need reorientation. On one hand, they need to have a broader coverage of financing bodies (also including EU directly managed funds), on the other hand, a more focused but flexible approach working on concrete projects or initiatives is needed.

The strategy has further increased its capacity to attract funding from different funding sources. The success rate with programmes within the EUSALP territory has increased considerably, with more and more programmes integrating EUSALP implementers into their decision-making mechanisms, especially during the preparation for the new funding period. The strengthened involvement in decision-making bodies offers additional possibilities for Strategies and implementers alike.

National Coordinators are involved in programming processes in several programmes. For instance, NCs joined a German task force contributing to the programming of the future Interreg transnational Alpine Space Programme. In the ERDF mainstream programme, one NC is a member of the monitoring committee and has ensured the link to the EUSALP and at the same time proposed concrete activities in line with EUSALP activities. Furthermore, regional information events and online surveys held by cross-border Interreg programmes have been used to highlight EUSALP topics. The mobilisation on funding, not only from Interreg and mainstream ERDF funds, but also from the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), shows the strategy's ability to pool and combine different funding for macro-regional action.

The Alpine Space Programme (Interreg) has been since the beginning the main financing source for the strategy and often its sole source of funding. The new programme 2021-2027 will for

the first time cover the administrative costs of implementing the strategy (e.g. contribution to the cost of AGs and the new technical support structure as well as the support for the Annual Forum). The coordination between the strategy and the programme works well, and representatives of both participate in each other's decision-making processes. An important part of the governance of the strategy has been supported by the Alpine Space Programme, namely the AlpGov projects (AlpGov1 and AlpGov2).

In 2021, the LIFE programme launched a call for projects targeting EU Macro-regional strategies, further strengthening the relation between funding and coordination instruments.

#### Cohesion policy programmes 2021-2027

Concerning embedding, several initiatives have been launched to improve the situation and mobilise the almost 100 ESI Fund programmes covering the Alpine region. In order to support priorities and objectives of the strategy, the second EUSALP embedding Workshop and the Workshop on Financial Dialogue Networks were organised respectively in the framework of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Macro-Regional Strategies weeks in March 2021 and March 2022.

At the political level, regions, Member States and non-EU countries involved in the strategy have highlighted the need to integrate the strategy into the available funding programmes. This was a priority for both the French presidency (2020-2021) and the Italian presidency 2022.

In the participating countries, the coordination mechanisms have evolved significantly. For example, the relevant committee of the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning has commissioned its Partners/Constituents to reconsider the current national governance structure of transnational and cross-border funding programmes with a view to more effectively embedding the MRS.

Also on a regional level, actors promote the embedding of the EUSALP. In some regions, a structured dialogue has begun, involving authorities in charge of the strategy and other cross-border strategic activities, as well as representatives of managing authorities (ERDF, ESF).

On a more general level, a report produced by the EUSALP AGs "Funding Requirements from Future EU Funding Programmes post 2020", formally endorsed by the EUSALP EB, clearly highlighted the funding needs of the AGs to the various EU funding programmes. Some ERDF mainstream programmes going to be adopted for the 2021-2027 programming period explicitly refers to EUSALP and its priorities.

#### Funds directly managed by the Commission

Various partners indicated that very little information is provided in relation to these programmes. Some information is available on ERASMUS+ and the YAFA project (Youth Acts for Alps) was financed in the frame of ERASMUS+.

Therefore, more structured dialogue and networking should be promoted between these programmes and stakeholders in (relevant) AGs. In addition, communication on the projects financed under direct managed programmes should be improved, and these should be included in a comprehensive monitoring tool run at EUSALP level.

National Contact Points for EU-directly managed funds could be further involved in AGs and National Governance bodies. Commission line DGs managing a fund could appoint desk

officers referent for each strategy, who could be involved in thematic activities and as observer at governance level.

### ***Monitoring and evaluation***

The EB and the AGs are in charge of monitoring and evaluation. A monitoring matrix, adapted to monitor the complexity of EUSALP, was developed by and for EUSALP (Nomisma). Within this matrix, targets and indicators are defined for the EUSALP monitoring process. The indicators has been established within the AlpGov II project with the collaboration of AG1. Monitoring is also ensured through direct contact with the AGs members and through the regular exchange meetings (ex. Switzerland).

### ***Communication***

After the great efforts to organise the EUSALP communication activities, the communication strategy is now led by a dedicated communication officer as part of the TSS. Each year, the communication strategy is adapted to its target audience and objectives. The communication strategy implemented during the French presidency was mainly focusing on Institutional communication to relevant governing bodies, especially the French Alpine Massif Committee. Events with political representatives were also organised. EUSALP provided online services through the EUSALP website and institutional websites of the EUSALP states and regions, as well related social networks. EUSALP also disseminated promotional videos and radio podcasts, and communicated about youth activities through the website [eusalp.youth](http://eusalp.youth).

The year 2020 was marked by the pandemic and led to that communication went digital and that social media became the main channel for communication. Hence, EUSALP got a new YouTube channel, where a series of videos showing solidarity within EUSALP reached a large audience. The EUSALP YouTube channel has since become more attractive to the general public, promoting EUSALP events, conferences, achievement and Presidencies' agenda. In addition, the EUSALP twitter account now has 1031 followers (compared to 600 in 2019) and Facebook counts more than 1500 followers. To reach young people, EUSALP also opened an Instagram account with almost 800 followers. Resources are needed by the EUSALP TSS to engage a social media manager. As another important digital tool, the EUSALP website is now getting reviewed and updated to become more userfriendly.

The pandemic led to less events and the EUSALP meetings turned digital which allowed for more general public attendance (1000 participants for a hybrid Annual Forum). EUSALP is continuously present in the main EU events, like the European Year of Rails (AG4-Mobility High Level Conference on Mobility), the EU Green Week (AG7-Green Infrastructure, AG8-Risk Governance and AG9-Energy), the EU Regions Week (French presidency).

New innovative ways of communication have been developed as well as events to re-connect after the pandemic. Summer camps and road shows are ongoing. They should inevitably raise EUSALP awareness on the Alpine region.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

The EUSALP countries see great importance in having a good alignment of EUSALP with key EU strategies, as well as a robust, balanced and efficient governance support structure with all key functions organised within a single body to withstand current and future challenges.

## ***The European Green Deal, the digital transition, social change including the influx of refugees and other consequences of the war in Ukraine***

New pressing challenges arising because of current geopolitical, environmental and macroeconomic context, add a new intensity and layer of complexity to already existing territorial trends in the region. These include for instance, territorial polarisation, energy poverty and diversification through renewables, unemployment and depopulation, digitisation in remote areas, human capital development, risk governance. The current initiatives developed in the framework of EUSALP, such as the Initiative “Green Hydrogen for the Alpine Region”, present a solid basis to face some of these challenges, such as energy transition and energy security. These topics are tackled also by key strategic initiatives going beyond the EGD such as the REPowerEU Plan, which in its Staff Working Document<sup>81</sup> recognises the role of the MRS in promoting cooperation in investments in hydrogen infrastructure.

### ***EUSALP governance (including monitoring, evaluation and communication)***

One of the most pressing improvements need will be to focus on the overall transparency (with regard to working group and EB activities) and the structuring of decision making within the EB. In addition, the partners welcome the establishment of a predictable and stable rotation mechanism for EUSALP presidencies.

Also, political ownership of AG priorities should be increased via dialogue with EB.

Main issues and suggestions for the future:

1. Increase the involvement of the political level, including having regular meetings at ministerial level and communicating the benefits and opportunities of EUSALP to political decision-makers.
2. Improving identification of priorities and embedding utilising:
  - a. The monitoring matrix, linking EUSALP priorities to already financed projects/activities and new funding opportunities
  - b. Circular Thematic Dialogue among AGs and MAs of relevant programmes under consolidated and structured Financial Dialogue Networks (accessible to interested National coordinators) with a focus also on capitalisation of already funded projects results
  - c. Stable support to AGs and review/streamlining of priorities identification
  - d. Explore way to further coordinate/aggregate AGs activities from an integrated multi-sectoral perspective (assessing the Crosscutting Strategic Initiatives experience)
  - e. Further involvement of Commission line DGs desk officers and National Contact Points for directly managed funds.

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3. Presidency: clear political engagement, and stabilise and simplify the support to presidency (a recurrent activity), timely start of the TSS.
4. Increasing the engagement of new stakeholders via, among others: Stakeholder Platform development, developing synergies between the Youth Council and the AGs in order to reinforce the incubation of innovative projects and increasing youth involvement in Interreg and cohesion policy (also in monitoring and implementation).
5. The coordination and cooperation between EUSALP and other MRS can be improved, but ad hoc exchange on relevant issues is already working well (e.g. exchange between the EUSALP and the other MRS on youth participation).
6. There is a need to streamline and coordinate sectoral administrative approaches still restricting territorial cooperation. The variety of Euro-Alpine cooperation (Alpine Convention, Alpine Space Programme, EUSALP with their own activities, governances, rules, and staff), also generates a lack of consistency which discourages sectoral experts to participate.
7. The EUSALP should aim to develop a balance between more frequent, short digital meetings for coordination and information exchange, and high-quality in-person conferences such as the Annual Forum to allow for direct exchange and joint development of new ideas and strengthen networks.
8. The dialogues and exchanges of experiences/good practices among EUSALP and the other MRS could provide relevant inputs for their implementation, as they share common features. Cross-MRS activities run under INTERACT proved to be a good tool to promote this kind of exchange. A specific focus could be dedicated to topic such as monitoring and evaluation, embedding during implementation, communication and capitalisation, civil society involvement.
9. Structurally, more harmonization and unification across MRS would also help coordination and cooperation between the strategies. The Alpine partners would also encourage a more concrete and structured exchange across MRS on specific topics, such as: governance structures, capacity building, communication, etc., could prove beneficial.

### ***Embedding, implementation and access to funds directly managed by the Commission***

Embedding of EUSALP into programmes covering the EUSALP territory has been a priority for the Commission in the reporting period. The implementation has been facilitated by a streamlined process of priorities identified by the AG and endorsed by EB and GA. Specific typologies of action should be identified in order to facilitate their inclusion in funding instruments; standardisation and ranking among priorities would help to focus on the most important priorities.

Development of a digital information tool for matching between priorities and funding instruments (Monitoring Matrix 2.0) would support EUSALP's actors and particularly National Coordinators in the steering of the strategy. Specific support on cooperation actions with a particular view to administrative specificities of Member States is needed to ease cooperation actions implementation under mainstream programmes.

The projects financed under direct managed funds should be mapped in a comprehensive monitoring tool run at EUSALP level. Directly managed funds National Contact Points at national level could be further involved in Action Groups and National Governance bodies. EC line DGs managing a fund could appoint desk officers responsible for each strategy, who could be involved in thematic activities and as observer at governance level.

Reflections within the strategy has reached a level that allows the formal identification of concrete actions to be financed at a coordinated macro-regional level, although with the limitations that still need to be addressed. For example, regarding green hydrogen the importance of testing and training activities, of using hydrogen-powered vehicles in public transport and of the availability of a network of recharging stations, has been clearly identified. This will aim to favour the development of an infrastructural network from the west to the east (from France to Slovenia) of the Alpine area.

To conclude for the EUSALP, based on the experience and on the information gathered from EUSALP key implementers, the following areas have been identified as needing further improvement:

- Strengthen the ownership and commitment of line Ministers and Presidents of regions.
- Achieve greater policy impact through strategic activities: alignment of policymaking and alignment of funds, macro-regional projects and flagship processes.
- Strengthen the role of the Trio presidency.
- Ensure impactful actions through monitoring and evaluation.
- Facilitate and strengthen the stakeholders dialogue.
- Quickly operationalise the Technical Support Structure for the governance.
- More structured dialogue and networking between relevant AGs and the related funding instruments should be envisaged, in order to better embed the EU policy priorities and achieve a real impact through a territorial approach.
- Political awareness and commitment need to increase. Monitoring and communication of success stories to the political level seems key for this. The current political steering level of EUSALP – with the Ministers responsible for coordination – needs to be complemented by initiatives from the sectorial line ministers in order to increase dynamics, visibility, legitimation and interest by sector policies, represented by the AGs (mostly only on administrative level).
- The current role of AGs and their leaders are to a broad extent limited to own activities as “hands-on” implementers. In comparison to EUSDR or EUSBSR, the role as strategic coordinators of actions is underdeveloped and AGs should be transformed more towards this direction, resulting in a broader involvement of implementing actors, including civil society as well.
- The current financial dialogue network needs reconsideration. On one hand it needs to achieve a broader coverage of financing bodies (also including EU directly managed

instruments), on the other hand its activities need a more focused but flexible working approach along concrete projects or initiatives, which require a well coordinated funding approach through specific programmes from different (national, regional and EU) sources.

***EUSALP's role in EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy***

Contrarily to the other MRS, EUSALP is not concerned by enlargement and neighbourhood policy. Consequently, this section is not filled out for EUSALP.

## Contribution of programmes to macro-regional strategies

### 1. Introductory remarks

The tables presented in this section are based on the reported data in the Annual Implementation reports. There is no other data on what the programmes have invested to support the macro-regional strategies. It is also the understanding that some managing authorities still lack a complete understanding on what determines a project with macro-regional added value.

As Annual Implementation reports do not include a mandatory report on the contribution of programmes to macro-regional strategies, the response rate remains rather low and the quality of data may vary. In addition, due to different levels of detail in the information provided and interpretation of the term “contribution to macro-regional strategies” considerable differences are recorded between the four EU macro-regional strategies. This also helps to explain the substantial changes between the last report of 2020 and the current edition.

### 2. The EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region

Eighty-six programmes (Cohesion policy mainstream and Interreg programmes) are relevant for the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR).

Forty-six out of a total of 86 programmes provided replies to the questionnaire included in the Annual Implementation Report 2021 (submitted in 2022). This corresponds to a 53% of the EUSBSR relevant programmes replying to the questionnaire, which is a satisfactory reply rate (although lower than in the previous reporting period, when the response rate was at 72%). These responding programmes included:

- ✓ 30 mainstream ESI Funds programmes;
- ✓ 16 Interreg programmes (14 cross-border and 2 transnational programmes)

The aggregated data are provided in the table below:

Country	Number of relevant OPs	Number of OPs that replied	Percentage of OPs that replied
Germany	13	1	7%
Denmark	4	3	75%
Estonia	3	1	33%
Finland	6	3	50%
Latvia	3	2	67%
Lithuania	3	-	0%
Poland	23	19	83%
Sweden	12	1	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>42%</b>
Interreg A (Cross-border)	15	14	93%
Interreg B (Transnational)	4	2	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>84%</b>
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>53%</b>

Programmes committed to contribute can apply several approaches. The most important ways are:

- ✓ **Sixteen (16)** programmes indicated that **extra points** have been attributed to specific measures supporting the EUSDR.
- ✓ **Three (3)** of the programmes have carried out **calls for proposals** targeting the macro-region.
- ✓ **Sixteen (16)** have given **extra points** to a project/action with high macro-regional significance or impact.
- ✓ **One (1)** of the programmes have supported other actions.
- ✓ **Five (5)** out of 86 programmes in their Monitoring Committee include representatives of macro-regional strategies (i.e. national coordinators, policy area coordinators; flagship leaders).
- ✓ **Twenty-four (24)** ESI Funds operational programmes reported to have already invested funds, which contribute to the implementation of the EUSBSR.

The aggregated financial data per fund are provided in the table below:

ERDF	EARFD	EMFF	CF	ESF	ENI	Other Funds (national)
31.873.109.438	0	0	11.433.950.249	4.681.608.922	2.085.392	4.877.714

Countries reporting the largest investments				
EU Member States	ERDF Total Amount	CF Total Amount	ESF Total Amount	EAFRD Total Amount
PL	26.000.410.110	10.913.658.994	4.586.389.177	
LV	1.127.045.795	520.291.255	7.119.600	

The question “Please indicate the obtained results in relation to the EUSBSR” aims to explore which programmes deem themselves to be compatible with the macro-regional strategy. In total, 27 programmes acknowledge their compatibility with the EUSBSR priorities. This could lead to an understanding whether synergies between programmes and the strategy have been identified, and whether the managing authorities consider that a contribution to the EUSBSR will result in win-win opportunities. Additionally, four programmes stated that the question was not applicable to them.

### 3. The EU strategy for the Danube region

Ninety-five programmes (Cohesion policy mainstream, Interreg and IPA-CBC programmes, and IPA II mainstream) are relevant for the EU strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR).

Thirty-four out of a total of 95 programmes provided replies to the questionnaire included in the Annual Implementation Report 2021 (submitted in 2022). This corresponds to a 36% of the EUSDR relevant programmes replying to the questionnaire. These programmes are composed of:

- ✓ 21 mainstream ESI Funds programmes;
- ✓ 10 Interreg programmes (15 CBC programmes and 3 transnational programmes)
- ✓ 3 IPA-CBC programmes

- ✓ 0 IPA-IPA CBC programmes

The aggregated data are provided in the table below:

Country	Number of relevant OPs	Number of OPs that replied	Percentage of OPs that replied
Austria	4	1	25 %
Bulgaria	10	4	31%
Croatia	4	1	25%
Czechia	9	3	33%
Germany	9	1	11%
Hungary	9	7	78%
Romania	8	3	37%
Slovakia	8	1	12%
Slovenia	3	-	0
Interreg TN	3	2	67%
Interreg CBC	18	8	44%
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>37%</b>
IPA-CBC (HU-RS, RO-RS, HR-RS, HR-BiH-MNE)	5	3	60%
IPA-IPA CBC (BiH-MNE, RS-MNE, RS-BiH)	5	0	0
IPA mainstream BiH, RS, MNE	3	0	0
IPA multi-country 2018	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Grand total (ESI Funds+IPA II)</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>36%</b>

Programmes committed to contribute can apply several approaches. The most important ways are:

- ✓ **Ten (10)** programmes indicated that **extra points** have been attributed to specific measures supporting the EUSDR.
- ✓ **Three (3)** of the programmes have carried out **calls for proposals** targeting the macro-region.
- ✓ **Eight (8)** have given **extra points** to a project/action with high macro-regional significance or impact.
- ✓ **Three (3)** of the programmes have supported other actions, especially specific projects.
- ✓ **Fourteen (14)** out of 95 programmes in their Monitoring Committee include representatives of macro-regional strategies (i.e. national coordinators, policy area coordinators; flagship leaders).
- ✓ **Seven (7)** ESI Funds operational programmes reported to have already invested funds, which contribute to the implementation of the EUSDR.

The aggregated financial data per fund are provided in the table below:

ERDF	EARFD	EMFF	CF	ESF	IPA	ENI	Other Funds (national)
6.283.309.286,62	0	0	6.302.714.900,83	47.985.858,82	88.179.192,00	10.000.000	0
<b>Total in €: 12.732.189.238,27</b>							

Countries reporting the largest investments				
EU Member States	ERDF Total Amount	CF Total Amount	ESF Total Amount	EAFRD Total Amount
HR	3683902712	2787559347		
HU		2210750000		
SK	916000000			

In total 17 programmes acknowledge their compatibility with the EUSDR priorities. This shows that cases of synergies between programmes and the strategy have been identified, and could help to assess whether the managing authorities consider that a contribution to the EUSDR will result in win-win situations. Four additional programmes, claim that either it is not possible to assess any results this far, or that they are relevant in relation to the EUSDR.

#### 4. The EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region

One hundred twelve (112) programmes<sup>82</sup> (ESI Funds mainstream, Interreg, IPA-CBC and IPA II mainstream and IPA-IPA) are relevant for the EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region (EUSAIR).

Nineteen (19) out of the one hundred twelve (112) programmes provided replies within the Annual Implementation Reports 2021. This corresponds to a very modest reply rate of **17% of EUSAIR relevant programmes**, resulting in fewer responses from national and/or regional programmes as well as of IPA II programmes. The majority of information stems from Interreg programmes and Interreg IPA CBC according to the replies in percentage below. The breakdown is composed of:

- ✓ 13 country-specific programmes covering ESI funds (9 regional and 4 national programmes);
- ✓ 8 Interreg programmes (2 CBC, 2 transnational, 4 IPA CBC)

The aggregated data is provided in the table below:

<sup>82</sup> This includes three transnational Interreg (Mediterranean; Balkan-Mediterranean, Central Europe) and one Interreg CBC programme (Italy-Austria) - marginally covering the EUSAIR region. All this considered, 112 programmes are relevant for the analysis.

EU Member States	Number of relevant OPs	Number of replied OPs	Percentage of programmes replied
Croatia	4	0	0%
Greece	23	5	22%
Italy	57	6	11%
Slovenia	3	0	0
Interreg CBC	5	2	40%
Interreg TN	3	2	66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16%</b>
IPA Countries (IPA CBC, IPA mainstream + IPA-IPA) <sup>i</sup>	Total IPA II programmes	Total programmes replied	Percentage of programmes' replied
IPA CBC	5	4	80%
Albania	2	0	0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	0	0
Montenegro	2	0	0
Serbia	4	0	0
Multi- country programmes 2018	2	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24%</b>
<b>Grand Total (ESI Funds+IPA II)</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17%</b>

The Operational Programmes committed to contribute to the EUSAIR objectives in several ways, which does not automatically involve the implementation of macro-regional projects or actions, but has the potential to promote it and signal a strong interest to it, notably :

- Seven (7) programmes opened the **participation in their Monitoring Committee** to EUSAIR key implementers (4 ESI Funds programmes, 1 CBC and 2 IPA CBC programmes).
- Four (4) ESI Funds and eight (8) Interreg programmes (2 CBC, 1 transnational and 4 IPA CBC) attributed **extra-points to EUSAIR labelled projects**.
- One (1) IPA CBC Monitoring Committee decided to directly invest funds on EUSAIR objectives opening **targeted calls for proposals**.

- One (1) ESI Funds operational programme, one (1) CBC and two (2) IPA-CBC programmes reported to have **invested funds**, which contribute to the implementation of the EUSAIR.

The aggregated financial data per fund is provided in the table below:

ERDF	CF	ESF	EAFRD	EMFF	IPA II	Other Funds
1.199.649.303,4 0 €	1.420.452.213,6 2 €	0	119.776.26 4	0	7.239.061,3 4 €	34.462.669,19 €
<i>Total in M €:</i>						<b>2.661.803.247, 55€</b>

Countries reporting the largest investments				
EU Member States	ERDF Total Amount	CF Total Amount	ESF Total Amount	EAFRD Total Amount
HR	3.683.902.712	2.787.559.347€		

The highest compatibility of Cohesion policy programmes to EUSAIR priorities was reported to:

- Blue Growth (23).
- Connecting the region (20)
- Environmental quality (29).
- Sustainable tourism (31)

However, it can be positively noted that the responding programmes acknowledge synergize with the strategy with a strong focus among Interreg IPA CBC programmes where one programme even issued a dedicated call. In view of the embedding process, the number of ESIF and IPA III programmes is expected to increase for the upcoming reports on the implementation of the EU MRS.

## 5. The EU strategy for the Alpine region

Following a very strict geographical approach (which means to include all programmes that touch the EU Strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP) perimeter) **ninety-eight (98) programmes** can be identified that are relevant for the EUSALP. This concerns country specific as well as Interreg programmes. However, **from a functional point of view only seventy-eight (78) programmes** are *de facto* relevant for the EUSALP. This means to exclude programmes like e.g. the transnational ADRION programme that primarily focuses on the EUSAIR or cross-border cooperation programmes like Interreg V-A – Slovenia-Hungary.

**Sixteen (16)** out of 78 programmes provided replies to the checklist:

- ✓ Nine (9) mainstream programmes covering the ESI Funds
- ✓ Seven (7) Interreg programmes (6 cross-border and 1 transnational programmes)

Country	Number of relevant OPs	Number of replied OPs	Percentage of programmes' replied
Austria	4	1	25%
France	11	3	30%
Germany	9	1	11%
Italy	38	4	11%
Slovenia	3	0	0%
Interreg TN	3	1	33%
Interreg CBC	10	6	60%
<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>21%</b>

Programmes committed to contribute can apply several approaches. The most important ways are:

- ✓ **Five (5)** programmes indicated that **extra points** have been attributed to specific measures supporting the EUSALP.
- ✓ **None** of the programmes have carried out **calls for proposals** targeting the macro-region.
- ✓ **Six (6)** have given **extra points** to a project/action with high macro-regional significance or impact.
- ✓ **None** of the programmes have supported other actions, especially specific projects.
- ✓ **Seven (6)** out of 78 programmes in their Monitoring Committee include representatives of macro-regional strategies (i.e. national coordinators, policy area coordinators; flagship leaders).

**Three (3)** cohesion policy programmes reported to have already invested funds contributing to the implementation of the EUSALP.

The aggregated financial data per fund is provided in the table below:

ERDF	CF	ESF	EAFRD
39.753.168,96 €	0	0	0
<i>Total in M€:</i>			<b>39.753.168,96 €</b>

<b>Countries with the greatest investments reporting</b>			
Member States	ERDF Total Amount	CF Total Amount	EARFD Total Amount
DE	28,818,673.03	0	0

It is worth noting that the above table reports only on the reported data in the Annual Implementation reports. Only three programmes named a contribution in financial terms, whereas programmes such as the Alpine Space Programme simply added a descriptive part, in absence of a clear definition of the term mentioned above. For the previous reporting period, especially the large contribution of the EAFRD France increased the overall investment figures. This current reporting period shows no such statistical irregularity. This might point to a more cautious or qualitative reporting. The data situation is however unsatisfactory.

## Annexes: Maps of the macro-regional strategies

Annex 1: map of the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region



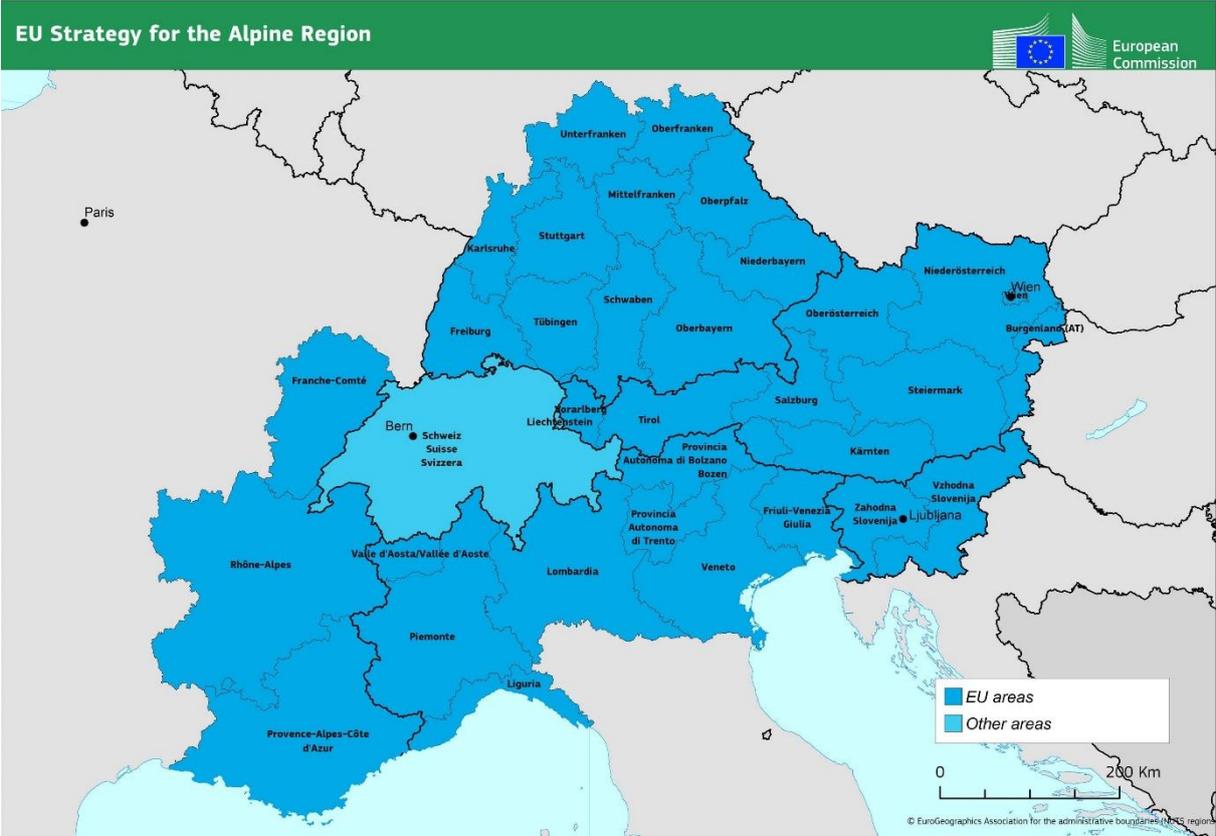
Annex 2: map of the EU strategy for the Danube region



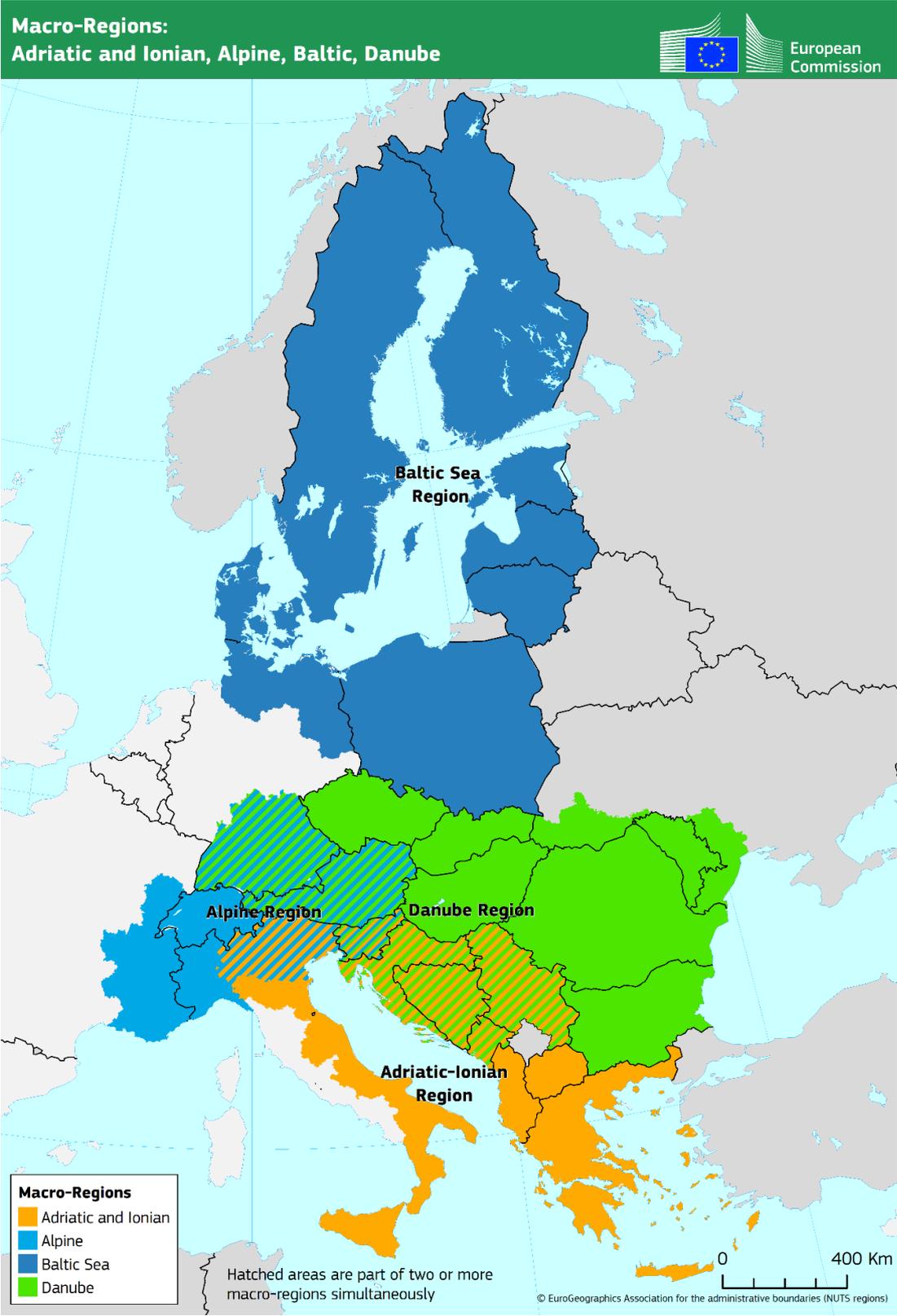
Annex 3: map of the EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region



Annex 4: map of the EU strategy for the Alpine region



Annex 5: map of the four EU macro-regional strategies



<sup>1</sup>Information on mainstream and cooperation programmes with North Macedonia will be part of the fifth report on the implementation of EU MRS.