

EU strategy for the Alpine region

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PURPOSE: to present an EU Strategy for the Alpine Region.

BACKGROUND: the Alpine Region is one of the richest areas in the world and among the economically most dynamic, innovative and competitive areas in Europe. However, it also faces important challenges requiring a joint response:

- economic globalisation that requires the territory to distinguish itself as competitive and innovative;
- demographic trends, characterised particularly by the combined effects of ageing, low population density in the mountain areas and new migration models;
- high vulnerability to climate change and its foreseeable effects on the environment,
- biodiversity and the living conditions of its inhabitants;
- the energy challenge in managing and meeting demand sustainably, securely and affordably;
- its specific geographical position in Europe, as a transit region;
- a high degree of seasonality, especially in some touristic areas.

The European Council of 19 and 20 December 2013 invited the Commission, working with

Member States, to draw up an EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) by June 2015, building on the solid background of cooperation in the region. The Strategy will affect around 80 million people living in 48 regions (map in Annex) in seven countries, of which five are EU Member States (Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia) and two are non-EU countries (Liechtenstein and Switzerland), being a macro-regional strategy for the sustainable development of the Alpine Region.

CONTENT : the Strategy will respond to the challenges above by covering the following thematic policy areas:

1. Fair access to job opportunities, building on the high competitiveness of the Region;
 2. Sustainable internal and external accessibility;
 3. A more inclusive environmental framework and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future;
- and a crosscutting objective, building a **sound macro-regional governance model** for the region to improve cooperation and the coordination of action.

Within each objective, a number of actions have been identified. These support EU policy objectives, including those with a territorial dimension.

1) Fair access to job opportunities: this objective focuses on improving the competitiveness, prosperity and cohesion of the Alpine region. The main actions are:

- develop an effective research and innovation ecosystem by stressing a system focusing on thematic issues of particular relevance to the region (such as agriculture and forestry, tourism, etc.);
- increase the economic potential of strategic sectors by supporting SMEs to maintain innovativeness and preserve a competitive edge by ensuring sustainable development (agriculture and forestry sector-based products and services);

- improve the adequacy of labour market education and training in strategic sectors by improving the right competences, and helping to cope with ‘brain drain’ in remote areas that suffer from depopulation.

2) Sustainable internal and external accessibility: the aim is to improve the sustainability of transport connectivity within the region and with the rest of Europe by:

- promoting inter-modality and interoperability in passengers and freight transport (facilitating the achievement of the trans-European transport network’s objectives and those of similar projects to shift traffic from road to rail);
- connecting people electronically and promote accessibility to public services (particularly land-based broadband connections).

3) A more inclusive environmental framework and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future: this aims to:

- preserve the environmental heritage of the Alps;
- help the region benefit from its resources in various ways, including energy; and
- cope with the changes predicted due to climate change, including preventing major natural risks.

The main actions are:

- preserve and valorise natural resources, including water and cultural resources;
- develop ecological connectivity in the whole EUSALP territory (promotion of ecological corridors and green infrastructure, including in unprotected areas);
- improve risk management as regards climate change, and carry out a comprehensive vulnerability assessment of the sectors and systems likely to be affected and developing a regional strategy on adapting to climate change;
- make the territory a model region for energy efficiency and renewable energy.

A macro-regional governance model: implementing the Strategy requires:

- setting up an efficient governance model involving the actors taking part in implementation and strengthening cooperation and the coordination among other relevant institutions and stakeholders in the region; and,
- changing the decision-making process, **avoiding fragmented governance**, increasing knowledge sharing and coordination, both between different levels of government and across local government organisations at the same level.

Experience to date with macro-regional strategies shows that streamlined governance mechanisms are crucial for effective implementation. Sound governance requires that **roles be clearly defined at an early stage:** how and by whom the Strategy will be implemented, and how and by whom joint actions will be initiated and financed. Governance must have both a political and operational dimension, with political leadership and ownership, coordination; and implementation. The Commission will act as an independent facilitator.

Financing: as the Strategy **does not have its own financing**, it will mainly be implemented by mobilising and aligning existing EU and national funding relevant to the objectives and actions. In particular, relevant country-specific, cross-border and transnational programmes from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for 2014-2020 can provide significant resources and a wide range of tools and technical options to support the Strategy. The trans-national Alpine Space programme will provide financial support for developing the governance arrangements for the Strategy.

The Strategy should focus on actions to identify supra-national priorities when choosing investment projects that could benefit from **joint programming and cross-border coordination in the region**.

Other EU funds and instruments relevant to the Strategy's objectives are available, notably with:

- Horizon 2020 (for all objectives);
- the COSME programme (for objective 1);
- the Connecting Europe Facility (for objective 2) and
- the LIFE programme (for objective 3).

Other funding is also available, particularly from the European Investment Bank.

A strong **monitoring and evaluation system** will be needed to check whether implementation of the Strategy is on track.