

Implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

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PURPOSE: to assess the state of progress of the implementation of the Union's macro-regional strategies.

BACKGROUND: several EU countries and regions have introduced macro-regional strategies to complement their traditional national policies for territorial management. These strategies are designed to address common challenges, such as innovation-driven growth, environment or climate change. Reducing regional disparities is part of their objectives, as is the synergies they create for growth and employment in the regions concerned.

The four macro-regional strategies developed so far concern:

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

These strategies, which involve 19 EU Member States and 8 third countries, are now an integral part of the Union's strategic framework. They reinforce the synergies between the various instruments and policies of the Union and add value to the cooperation dimension of cohesion policy. They can be supported through programmes under the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), and in particular Interreg.

Macro-regional strategies have become an important instrument in relations between the Member States and neighbouring countries, both with the accession countries and with those benefiting from the Neighbourhood Policy (Eastern Partnership), the northern periphery and of the Arctic region.

CONTENT: this report assesses progress in the implementation of these strategies, takes stock of the main findings and presents recommendations on possible further developments in the light of future cohesion policy.

The report concludes that although macroregional strategies have delivered their first results, they have not yet shown their full potential. Efforts are needed to ensure the effectiveness of governance systems and to focus on results, funding and the relationship with third countries. The Member States which have initiated the cooperation processes should also assume greater responsibilities.

The main recommendations contained in the report are as follows:

Better policy-making and planning: these strategies are gradually being taken into account in the EUs strategic fields, for example, research, climate and the environment. However, they are integrated to differing degrees in national or regional programmes, especially in programmes financed by the ESI Funds.

The strategies have strengthened cooperation in certain strategic areas, such as the Danube Navigability Master Plan or the extension of the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan.

However, the report calls for better coordination within and between the countries involved in order to produce the expected results, stressing that collective steering and a common sense of purpose based on a long-term perspective should remain the basis for macro-regional cooperation.

Improved governance: the strategies involve a governance structure at three levels: policy-making, coordination and operations. They emphasise the optimal use of existing financial sources (e.g. ESI Funds, Horizon 2020, COSME and LIFE), the better implementation of existing legislation and the better use of existing institutions.

The success of the strategies depends on their satisfactory implementation in the coming years, as well as their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, for example, the migration crisis. More progress needs to be made in the governance of macro-regional strategies to improve their effectiveness. This supposes :

- the regular assessment of the effectiveness of the governance systems of each strategy to make the necessary adjustments;
- sectoral ministries make a stronger commitment to achieving the objectives of the macro-regional strategies, which implies a periodic rotation of the thematic area coordinators;
- close cooperation between the steering group members and the programme management authorities supported by the ESI Funds or other instruments;
- the strengthening of the links between macro-regional strategies with support from the EUs INTERACT programme.

Focussing on results: in the absence of clearly defined indicators and objectives, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the planned objectives have been met.

The report calls for a robust monitoring system based on results-oriented action to enable each strategy to be measured, directed and summarised in order to guide decision-making. It is also necessary to: (i) improve the quality of projects and processes and ensure the sustainability of their results, as well as the link between project results and policy actions; (ii) increase awareness of the value-added and outcomes of strategies for critical review; (iii) further explore thematic platforms in order to strengthen strategies thematic focus.

Better use of funding mechanisms: where strategies do not have a specific budget, there is a need for better coordinated use of the funding mechanisms available at different levels.

The report recommends continuing the dialogue between ESI Fund programme authorities and those responsible for the implementation of macro-regional strategies in order to adapt funding in the most appropriate and cost-effective manner possible. In general, the Commission

believes that macro-regional strategies call for the creation of closer links between the EUs strategic areas and its funds.