

Minutes of the Meeting of the High-Level Group of Macro-regional Strategies 9 February 2017, Brussels

Welcome and introductory remarks by *Mr Marc Lemaître, Director-General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission*

Mr Lemaître welcomed the participants of the meeting and reflected on the report as a frank assessment of the implementation of the European Union (EU) macro-regional strategies, which highlights areas that require further improvement. Some progress has been made, such as in the environmental quality of the Baltic Sea, however, results are still scarce. Macro-regional strategies must be able to demonstrate the added value and benefit for the citizens and strengthen their confidence in the European project.

Presentation of the European Commission report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

Ms Lena Andersson Pench, Director, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission, briefly presented the report (e.g. background, scope of the report, state of play of each strategy, etc.). For more information please see the presentation attached.



Report HLG .pptx

Reflections on the report from the European Parliament

- **Ms Claudia Tapardel, Member of the European Parliament**

Ms Tapardel focused on the development of the Danube region and in particular the need to invest in the waterway transport. She noted that she is representing the views of stakeholders, in particular of those who participated in the Danube Transport event at the European Parliament. While projects on the modernisation of the industry and transport in the Danube are on-going, more actions are needed to expand ports (create intermodal logistics and industrial hubs), modernise fleets and remove obstacles to navigability. Waterway transport should be given more consideration in macro-regional strategies to avoid fragmentation of projects by developing stronger links between countries and with the private sector.

- **Mr Ivan Jakovčić, Member of the European Parliament**

Mr Jakovčić expressed hope that citizens' views will be heard by involving regions and cities in the report. He highlighted the differences between EU Member States (MS) and non-EU countries and the opportunity provided by the macro-regional framework to work together. He reflected on the importance of having the Facility Point structure in place to help coordinate the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR). While the report is critical of the EUSAIR, he has worked closely with governments in non-EU countries and sees that macro-regional strategies can help overcome communication and coordination problems and will continue to be their strong supporter. He indicated that there is an interest of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to join the EUSAIR and that the territory of Kosovo would like *in theory* to participate as well.

Discussion:

Slovenia: the report does not give enough evidence on the added value of macro-regional strategies. So far, no proper indicators have been developed; the existing ones focus too much on projects and their outcomes, more focus, however, should be put on processes which could be measured through their impact on policies. Furthermore, the report does not include information about the contribution of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) programmes to the implementation of macro-regional strategies. Slovenia would like to have this information and asked for data from all EU funds, not only ESIF. Council Conclusions on the

implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies should: 1) recognise that governance structures are in place; 2) ask the European Commission to report to the Council on financial support to macro-regional strategies from the ESIF, but also other EU level instruments; 3) future proposal of cohesion policy to be consulted with macro-regional strategies structures.

Greece: macro-regional strategies offer countries and regions a framework for deciding on common goals. This is why it is important that they are better taken into account when designing programmes and that relevant transnational programmes match the macro-regional strategies. Greece supported shared management as an added value of multi-level governance.

Sweden: is in favour of the '3 NOs' and is convinced that there were no new institutions created, but at least in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), a structure to make better use of synergies was created. Sweden agreed that stronger coordination is needed; however, the EUSBSR already has an impressive structure (coordinators of policy areas/horizontal actions and very committed group of national coordinators). Sweden also agreed that so far no proper monitoring tools are in place to measure the added value. National coordinators need adequate tools to identify areas in which they can support policy improvements. The European Commission can help in this regard.

European Commission (DG REGIO): agreed that process itself is very much important, and that there is a need to better communicate the added value and to find better indicators to measure policy impact.

Germany: participates in three macro-regional strategies; in addition to the Federal and the Länder level, a close cooperation with regions and local communities is crucial. Reflection should be launched on the number of thematic areas (17 in EUSBSR is too much). It is also important to avoid duplication of work, especially regarding international organisations. Macro-regional strategies should focus on areas which can only be solved at macro-regional level. It is very important to respect the '3 NOs' and to improve the coherence between macro-regional strategies and cohesion policy. Finally it is important to intensify cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries.

Austria: supported very much the idea of a single report on the implementation of four macro-regional strategies and this practice should be kept. The Council should ask the Commission for another report in two years. The report had too much focus on cohesion policy; a stronger link with other relevant EU policies is expected. More examples are needed to illustrate the value added to citizens. The next report should emphasize three aspects: (1) ownership: the challenge is to maintain sustainable support from political level; (2) implementation partnerships should be more effective; the picture is very heterogeneous among different strategies. Austria did not support the rotation principle for thematic areas (possibly for some situations) as continuity is important for sustainability, (3) the involvement of sub-national level and civil society is crucial.

Daniela Urschitz, Austrian coordinator for Priority Area 10, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR): mentioned the creation of a platform for civil society. Civil society and empowered local actors, regions and cities can be of big help for the stabilisation of the European idea and adequate leverage; therefore it should be included in the governance of the strategies. The report should mention progress made on participation of civil society. Most EU funding programmes are not designed to support small projects: many local communities and civil society organisations cannot participate as they do not have means. Funds need to support smaller cooperation initiatives as well. Recalling the Danube Ulm Declaration 2015, coordination and exchange of information should be enhanced to provide manageable and easy access to funding and tangible results. The rotation principle should be applied according to the needs of each strategy.

Poland: noted that it is good to have one report for all strategies and would like to see more project examples to better communicate the added value to citizens. Poland supported Slovenia concerning the information on financial contribution to macro-regional strategies and preferred to have more hard data, including number of projects. Some good practices which could be transferred from one strategy to another could have been

included in the report. Communication is important. There should be closer and stronger links between macro-regional strategies and cohesion policy in the future. The Commission and Member States should be supportive and open to new initiatives and strategies (e.g. Carpathian).

Joanna Wojtkowska, Polish National Coordinator of the EUSBSR, considered the bottom-up approach with so many areas of interventions positive, therefore, not in favour of reducing their number. While taking into account the imperfect nature of macro-regional strategies (variety of actors, difficulty to coordinate), national coordinators are putting in their best efforts to help coordinators of policy areas/horizontal actions to bring EU policies to citizens. She is not in favour of the rotation principle and would have liked to see more success stories of projects and processes in the report.

France: finds the report of very good quality, but agrees that it could have been more precise (more examples underlined with figures). The focus on key points is good; proves the need for more coherence in designing future programmes whilst taking into consideration the specific needs of the different regions. Supported Slovenia concerning the information of financial contribution to macro-regional strategies; but also national and private funds should be considered.

Italy: supported Slovenia that monitoring to prove evidence of macro-regional strategies' value added is necessary, also in order to convince policy makers other than those involved in macro-regional strategies. It is important to apply a result oriented approach and to improve monitoring, also on the availability of funds. Contribution of programme to implementation of macro-regional strategies should be an ex ante conditionality. Methodological guidelines on how the programmes and strategies fit together. Focusing on results should be the main element of both European Territorial Cooperation and macro-regional strategies. When it comes to governance, a strong role is to be played at EU level by the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council in order to avoid that macro-regional strategies become an inter-governmental exercise. A better understanding of what we expect from macro-regional strategies is needed, and a reflection on how to adjust governance accordingly should go hand in hand. Italy also strongly reconfirmed the rule of '3 Nos'.

Estonia: more information on good examples, results and funding sources is needed. Differences between macro-regional strategies and policy areas require a flexible approach. Macro-regional strategies should be better integrated into all EU policies and programmes. A reflection on the '3 NOs' is called for, and whether the principle maintains the same relevance compared to when it was formulated in 2009.

Hungary: considered the report a strong step in the right direction and appreciated that the issue of ownership was tackled. While participation in steering groups should be enhanced, Hungary is not in favour of reducing priority areas as all have value added, and did not support either the rotation principle.

European Commission (DG ENV): macro-regional strategies can help with the concentration of resources and implementation of environmental policies where cooperation is essential.

European Commission (DG CLIMA): a new report on climate change effects in Europe was recently published: effects (storms, floods, etc.) are increasing and are of macro-regional importance.

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC): has issued ten opinions on macro-regional strategies, and supports Austria's position to improve governance and financing and enhance the involvement of civil society. EESC offers its support in order to improve civil society participation in macro-regional strategies.

Ongoing/planned work of strategies' presidencies:

- **Bavarian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region, Dr. Katharina Hellmann, Bavarian State Chancellery**

Ms Hellmann presented the Bavarian Presidency's aims, work programme and upcoming events including the Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region. For more information please see the presentation attached.



Bavarian
Presidency HLG Meeting

- **Greek Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, Mr Vassilios Tselios, Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

Mr Tselios presented the Greek Presidency's aims and priorities, planned actions and challenges, as well as, the concept of the upcoming EUSAIR Forum in May. For more information please see the presentation attached.



EUSAIR - GR
Chairmanship Priorities

- **Hungarian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, Mr Felix Moldovan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade**

Mr Moldovan presented the Hungarian Presidency's programme and thematic focus of the EUSDR Annual Forum in October 2017. For more information please see the presentation attached.



EUSDR
Presidency.ppt

- **Swedish Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, Mr Erik Kiesow, Prime Minister's Office**

Mr Kiesow presented the priorities and activities of the Swedish Presidency of the EUSBSR. The Strategy Forum, organised in November 2016, focused on the future of the Baltic Sea region in a 2030 perspective. Stakeholders looked at how future trends and challenges can be met by macro-regional cooperation. Strategic foresight reports were commissioned to prepare the discussions. Stakeholders had the possibility to organise their own events during the Forum which was much appreciated. The Presidency currently focuses on supporting implementation of the Strategy, for example, by joint meetings of thematic coordinators and with national coordinators to be held in April 2017. It works closely with key macro-regional stakeholders to match their needs with support provided by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region. National coordinators meet regularly to discuss topics such as alignment of funding and ways of better translating project results into policy change. Mr Kiesow emphasised the need to be flexible in order to remain relevant. To respond to new challenges in the Baltic Sea region, the EUSBSR Action Plan was revised to include a new action on the integration of refugees (in the policy area 'Education'). Planned actions in the policy area 'Transport' were revised as well. Recalled project 'Let's communicate' aiming at promoting and communicating the EUSBSR and the results it delivers.

Closing remarks by Mr Jean-Pierre Halkin, Head of Unit, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission

Mr Halkin summarised the main conclusions and highlighted the issues that remain open for debate:

- Macro-regional strategies are important, notably in the current political context, they strengthen regional integration by involving non-EU countries;
- The Commission report was welcomed by all but more examples and figures are needed; the Commission will prepare information on the financial contributions;
- More needs to be done to translate the strategies into action, to speed up implementation and to increase efforts on communication;
- Tasks for the Commission include improving alignment and embedding of macro-regional strategies in all EU funds (beyond ESIF) and political guidance;
- Duplication of structures and a one-size-fits-all approach to governance of the strategies must be avoided;
- Different needs and challenges of each strategy and the respective regions have to be taken into account;
- The understanding of '3 NOs' needs to be clarified;
- How to speed up implementation remains a question (e.g. by focussing on fewer thematic areas or not?).