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***European Economic and Social Committee***

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| **ECO/362**  **Macro-regional strategies across Europe** |

Brussels, 18 February 2015

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| **OPINION** of the European Economic and Social Committee on a **Proposal to map macro-regional strategies across Europe** (own-initiative opinion) |
| \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Rapporteur: **Etele Baráth**  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |

On 27 February 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on a

*Proposal to map macro-regional strategies across Europe.*

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 3 February 2015.

At its 505th plenary session, held on 18 and 19 February 2015 (meeting of 18 February 2015), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 166 votes to 1, with 6 abstentions.

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**Introduction**

So far, European responses to the general crisis which arose from the financial crisis have proved unsatisfactory. Numerous analyses have highlighted the excessive focus of decisions on the financial sector and the strongly hierarchical nature of the EU's decision-making mechanism, preventing it from taking the necessary steps to resolve social tensions. There is also a serious mismatch between, on the one hand, the Europe 2020 strategy - the EU's long-term development strategy with its objectives and action plans - and, on the other, the available resources. Making the different economic policy measures more coherent is now of paramount importance.

Although some central and eastern European countries have managed to catch up, there are growing disparities between others in terms of both overall economic output and income and standard of living. This situation has been exacerbated by certain regional characteristics, and in some areas unsustainable tensions have emerged.

Both the changes in social policy needed to end the crisis and the new cohesion policy objectives and programmes make it essential to focus on the territorial dimension of European policies.

This need was recognised by the new Commission when it launched the *New Start* programme to boost economic growth, job creation and standards of living. The Commission programme brings both new opportunities and new responsibilities, in terms of not just a substantial increase in investment and development funds for 2015-2017 and removing legal and organisational obstacles, but also macro-regional strategies. The fact that the 10 priorities set out in the work programme directly or indirectly strengthen the connection between Europe’s macro-regions and their common development is also helping to change the role of macro-regional policy and the place and feasibility of strategies.

A new kind of development-oriented, strongly-devolved governance practice involving economic and social partners more closely and also bringing macro-regional strategies to bear could make a major contribution to launching growth and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of investment.[[1]](#footnote-3)

Thanks to new governance, macro-regional strategies are an excellent tool for accelerating development processes, strengthening territorial cohesion and helping to implement the Europe 2020 strategy, not least in terms of environmental protection. The "three NOs" are no longer an obstacle: the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework opens up financial opportunities, the Common Strategic Framework sets out the rules and in practice a small enforcement mechanism has been developed.

In drawing up this opinion, the EESC is implementing what was agreed at the Autumn 2013 plenary session, and analysing the impact of macro-regional strategies across Europe from the perspective of civil society in particular. It will also look at a way of integrating these strategies into European development policy.

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# **Conclusions and recommendations**

## The European Economic and Social Committee, having examined the situation of macro-regional strategies and the opinions and proposals relating thereto[[2]](#footnote-4), has come to the conclusion that, on the basis of the results obtained, it is clearly necessary to develop macro-regional strategies at European level. The aim of macro-regions is not to divide but to unite.

## The EESC recommends that the European Council advocate the integration of macro-regional policy into the EU's governance structure and call for EU-wide guidelines to be drawn up with a view to defining a macro-regional development strategy to support economic and social development.

## The EESC believes that the macro-regional strategies have an increasing role to play in the future of the EU. The existing macro-regional programmes:

* have in political terms helped to develop a currently lacking European intermediary level, able to bring about convergence between diametrically opposed federalist and national approaches;
* as governance instruments based on horizontal cooperation, have helped overcomeexcessively hierarchical and bureaucratic procedures;
* have helped to achieve systematic involvement of civil society, including the economic and social partners, throughout the strategy framing and implementation process.

## Macro-regional strategies can help improve economic competitiveness, give a much needed boost to GDP, and also increase European added value. Thanks to monitoring supported by an appropriate database, effective application of the partnership principle and a comparative analysis based on experience, these strategies have proved to be an effective policy. For example:

### in the context of the European Semester, achievement of the Europe 2020 targets could be given a higher profile at regional level;

### as part of the mid-term review of the general and specific targets and results of the Europe 2020 Strategy, it should be possible, in the interests of effectiveness, to integrate the environmental, urban planning and development aspects of macro-regional cooperation contained in the various partnership agreements;

### on the basis of the 11 cohesion policy thematic objectives set for 2014-2020, strengthening the macro-regional dimension of the planned measures included in the operational programmes could secure their added value, their effectiveness and their efficiency at European level;

### the macro-regional dimension of regional cooperation programmes adopted under the urban agenda concerning the EU's network of municipalities can facilitate social and cultural integration and foster the conditions necessary for social needs to be met;

### a new macro-regional instrument for environmental conservation and sustainable use of resources would come into being.

## The EESC recommends strengthening the European governance structure by involving civil society and municipal and regional authorities at each stage in the decision-making process, alongside the high-level coordination group made up of representatives of the 28 countries, which is responsible for macro-regional management.

# **Debate**

## Experience to date, as confirmed by the Commission's analyses, indicates that macro-regional strategies offer European added value in:

* strengthening European and regional identity;
* framing and implementing EU strategies; and
* coordinating resource use.

## Macro-regional strategies offer new instruments which meet an important need, as:

* responses to the crisis have not been complex, and a balance therefore has to be struck between various territorial and social aspects;
* the elections to the European Parliament have shown that there are still problems with relations between the EU and civil society;
* the EU's institutional system is in need of reform (boosting democracy and decentralisation, strengthening horizontal structures, and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of policy implementation and promoting socio-economic partnership).

## Macro-regional strategies are of topical relevance because:

* based on the election results, a new Commission is being formed with new priorities, whose prime objectives, those of boosting growth, employment and the impact of businesses' planned investment, depend to a large extent on regional adaptability;
* the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy is currently under preparation. In 2015 revised directives should be adopted - presumably this will involve strengthening the macro-regional approach;
* it has been shown that both in terms of governance and European added value - particularly as regards environmental conservation (seas) and disaster prevention (flood protection) and in the context of economic cooperation in the area of tourism and sectors exposed to innovation - the macro-regional strategies which have already been adopted and are now being implemented (Danube and Baltic regions) have identified new resources;
* European Commission initiatives (Adriatic and Alpine regions) are expanding into new areas, and are emphasising the need for Member States and regions to plan macro-regional links (focusing particularly on third country involvement in cooperation);
* there has been significant development of macro-regional cooperation opportunities - not least in political terms - as identified by the socio-economic sphere (Mediterranean region, Atlantic coast), which has also contributed considerably to coordination of maritime strategies and "inland" policies;
* long-established macro-regional cooperation is being stepped up along major cross-border and linear infrastructure, thanks in particular to the development of the macro-regional links under the Connecting Europe Facility;
* it has become obligatory to demonstrate macro-regional cooperation as part of partnership agreements for the 2014-2020 programming period.

## By their very nature, macro-regional strategies are development-oriented, and they can therefore contribute significantly to strengthening and implementing the EU's development policy, particularly in relation to bottom-up initiatives. This particularly applies to the following areas (functions):

* economic activity of small and medium-sized enterprises;
* research, education, language learning, cooperation on health and cultural matters;
* cooperation on energy, environmental protection, logistics and public services (water, sewage, and waste management);
* joint planning by government bodies, regional institutions, and local and regional authorities;
* cooperation on security and migration;
* practical measures to support market competition (specific cooperation on labour market measures, supporting SMEs, and establishing development funds);
* statistical cooperation.

Most of these are areas in which a primarily bottom-up approach to boosting integration is appropriate, given that European institutions only play a marginal direct regulatory role here.

## Participants in macro-regional strategies should cooperate as stakeholders with responsibility for their governments' cross-cutting tasks.

## Both in terms of its perspective and governance instruments, the macro-regional approach reflects the guidelines for the EU's renewal:

* it provides for political governance and strategic vision bringing together stakeholders on different levels without the need to create new large-scale institutions;
* it can integrate policies and programmes at different levels (EU, country-specific, on territorial cooperation, on associated and accession countries, sectoral and financial instruments, etc.);
* it coordinates policy, strategic and financial instruments in order to achieve efficient and effective implementation;
* it helps to overcome regional boundaries between territorial governance organisations and sectors; and
* it ensures clear ownership throughout the strategy framing and implementation process.

## The prerequisites for "good" macro-regional governance are for it to have:

* strategic planning capacity;
* a reliable database specific to the region concerned and analytical capacity;
* a suitable executive agency;
* a comprehensive system for monitoring both planning and implementation;
* adequate communication resources;
* the requisite adaptability; and
* transparency in its activities, in order to ensure accountability.

## According to the basic definition of macro-regional strategies, macro-regions:

* cover an area united by geographical, economic and cultural characteristics;
* encounter common challenges and opportunities; and
* are characterised by enhanced cooperation and resource coordination between various stakeholders with a view to achieving territorial cohesion.

## Two types of macro-region fit this definition in current European practice, both of which allow third country participation:

* linear macro-regions which are essentially linked to large-scale infrastructure, such as the Danube region or regions along corridors, and
* macro-regions covering large areas such as the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Alps, the Mediterranean region and the Atlantic coast.

## With the creation of the EU, Europe's historic borders have become virtual in functional terms. Taking a macro-regional approach enables new functional borders to be drawn on the map of Europe. Based on a macroregional concept, mechanisms for open cooperation that has been strengthened or is in the process of being strengthened already reflect the political approach of the 21st century, which in a democratic Europe should foster constantly-evolving cooperation to boost the economy and an inclusive society while sustainably preserving the environment.

# **General observations and recommendations on expanding the role of macro-regional strategies**

## It is possible to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the new focus of the Europe 2020 strategy and of financial and economic governance, and on the other, an approach which goes beyond GDP. This can be done by reducing regional disparities and aiming for harmonious development taking social needs and environmental aspects into account.

## Macro-regional strategies contribute to territorial cohesion by strengthening solidarity-based mechanisms. At the same time, taking account of specific circumstances in different regions, it is possible to coordinate development instruments more effectively.

## The proposals on coordinated macro-regional development and the economic benefits of closer macro-regional cooperation will help to attract more investment in innovation and large-scale production and supply capacity.

## Institutional and economic networks and links within regions can significantly mitigate the effects of the globalisation crisis by tapping into resources and helping to iron out disparities between regions at different levels of development. Metropolitan and other developed urban regions have a key role to play here by providing an impetus for development.

## Networks of metropolitan and polycentric regions offer considerable economic and innovative potential, and are drivers for job creation. At the same time they can present considerable environmental threats. Macro-regional strategies can compensate for the climate change threats posed by dense urban areas and facilitate planning to overcome them.

## Macro-regional strategies can also help ensure proportionate development of small and medium-sized towns, by strengthening links between them and thus promoting local and regional values.

## Macro-regional policy can help to narrow territorial and economic disparities by adapting the Europe 2020 strategy's flagship programmes to conditions in a given region.

## A macro-regional strategy can be an instrument for generating the critical mass needed to combine economic, social and environmental assets in the interest of development. This can be of particular relevance to cross-border transnational programmes.

## In view of their scale, macro-regional strategies can help to develop services of general interest in a fairer and more affordable way, at the same time as facilitating access to information and knowledge, and improving conditions for mobility.

Brussels, 18 February 2015.

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| The President  of the European Economic and Social Committee      Henri Malosse |  |

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1. [Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies - COM(2014) 284 final](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/gov_macro_strat_en.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
2. [Recent and Upcoming EESC Opinions on Macro-regional Areas and Strategies, and Related Horizontal Matters – Key Points](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/key-points---eesc-opinions-on-macro-regions.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)