

Proposal for an EU macro-regional civil strategy

Structure and outline

Introduction - the Shadow Report experience

An excellent point of reference for a proposal for a macro-regional civil strategy is the recently published Shadow Report, an initiative of the European House and 8 other civil society organisations reflecting to the European Commission's Implementation Report on macro-regional strategies (MRS). The strength of this initiative lies in bringing together, for the first time, civil society organisation from the four macro-regions - giving them the opportunity to work together on specific issues, well beyond the 'Brussels bubble'.

Creating an EU macro-regional civil strategy would renew this great experience of involving civil society organisations from all the macro-regions, as well as additional civil contributions. This civil strategy would not be a political analysis, but a public initiative - another outstanding example of the bottom-up approach, demonstrating the benefits of citizens' involvement in shaping a document with stimulating ideas.

1. Why do we need an MRS civil strategy?

The main objective of a macro-regional civil strategy, involving citizens from all the regions (the Baltic Sea, the Danube, the Adriatic-Ionian and the Alpine) is to promote the European project on the local/regional level, building a bridge between the EU institutions and citizens. As a consequence, such a strategy would strengthen the ownership feeling of those involved and pave the way for a structured involvement of CSOs in shaping and implementing macro-regional strategies.

The ownership feeling was also reinforced by the recent Conference on the Future of Europe, launched by the three most influential EU institutions (the Parliament, the Council and the Commission). This was a series of online and offline events where European citizens could share their ideas about the future of the EU. It would be beneficial to identify ways for the MRS to address recommendations stemming from the Conference.

Make your voice heard! This was the slogan of the European Year of Youth in 2022. Sharing ideas how the European youth can build a better - greener, more inclusive and digital - future could also be part of the EU macro-regional civil strategy.

Question: How would you argue for a macro-regional civil strategy in your environment? What are the benefits of bringing local and regional communities closer to macro-regional strategies.

2. The state of civil society in the four macro-regions

It has been a great challenge for civil society organisations to survive first in times of Covid, then of economic crisis. Even in these difficult times, it is the common interest of CSOs from the four macro-regions to play a more active role in shaping macro-regional policies - this attitude leading to an increased ownership feeling.

These organisations face several obstacles. They are usually connected to low financial stability (cash flow), language barrier (poor level of English command), lack of experience in administrative procedures for international projects, limited knowledge of international networks, and people working part-time or on a voluntary basis not to mention the frequently experienced shrinking civil space.

Question: What are the major challenges civil organisations in the macro-regions are faced with and how to address them?

3. The democracy game; values; bottom-up approach; ownership; institutionalised civil dialogue macro-regional identity; bringing Europe closer to citizens

Organised civil society participation is based on creating a structural dialogue in a bottom-up process. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen bottom-up cooperation, involving social partners, socio-economic agents, CSOs, and European citizens in general.

Bringing the European Union closer to its citizens – this is a well-known EU slogan, but it is rather difficult to turn it into reality. A macro-regional civil strategy would serve exactly this purpose: it would reduce the distance between EU institutions and people living hundreds of kilometres away from the ‘Brussels bubble’.

When we talk about “bringing Europe closer to citizens”, we must also make efforts to bring local and regional communities closer to the macro-regions in Europe. Communities must be aware of the benefits of being part of a macro-region. To demonstrate these benefits, civil society organisations from the four macro-regions must play a more active role in shaping macro-regional policies.

Question: How can civil society organisations in the macro-regions contribute to the promotion of a more resilient and democratic Europe?

4. The youth card including civic education and active European citizenship

The focus on youth must continue even after the 2022 European Year of Youth. As a specific step, youth councils should be set up in each MRS. The civic engagement of young people is crucial to prepare them to be active citizens in a democracy – young persons will be the leaders and the citizens of the future.

Youngsters have different, modern and fresh perspectives, in line with the modern political society in which they are growing up. Their exclusion from the regional and macro-regional policies would mean less representation of different ideas in the political system. Young people’s active contributions to the political debates, to the decision-making processes, and to discussions about socio-economic issues can bring democratic values to life.

Question: What are the value-added features of youth involvement in macro-regional strategies and how to develop them?

5. Capacity to address innovatively major challenges

The contribution of macro-regional strategies to the green, digital and social transitions is important. Technological development and globalisation profoundly change the European labour market, creating a demand for new skills and swift adaptation. Demographic change, the pandemic, the inflow of refugees and social exclusion are all part of the social transition. In this process the MRS can mobilise stakeholders at all levels to ensure that no one is left behind.

The war in Ukraine has also affected macro-regional strategies in several ways. The war has put energy security on top of the political agenda in the EU. The general aim is to diversify gas imports, increase energy efficiency and the use of renewables to achieve independence from Russian fossil fuels by 2030. The REPowerEU regulation specifically refers to the role of MRS as cooperation frameworks to promote investments in hydrogen infrastructure in a cross-border, interregional and transnational context.

Question: What concrete steps are needed to make the green, digital and social transition a success? How to involve citizens in these processes?

6. Governance: the benefits of CSO involvement, trustbuilding

Civil society organisations play a vital role in contributing to better decision-making, presenting new ideas and proposals for better governance on different levels. The best motivation for European citizens is to see the effects of their engagement in local/regional participation (for example when politicians discuss their decisions with citizens and invite them to local council meetings), and to see how their opinions have been taken into account, influencing decisions.

Civil society organisations often bring together professional research and project management teams with a good knowledge and clear understanding of particular issues in their macro-regions. MRS are thus powerful tools to support economic, social and territorial development, build macro-regional identity - and also to build trust and confidence between neighbouring countries.

Question: What are the benefits of civil society involvement in the governance structures of macro-regional strategies and how to achieve them?

7. EU enlargement

One of the most effective ways to build closer ties between EU and non-EU countries is to establish closer cooperation between specific organisations. A positive aspect is that cross-border or regional cooperation is usually not conditioned on being an EU member.

A big number of civil society organisations are already participating in macro-regional cooperation involving non-EU member states. Civil actors have obtained knowledge and skills to give further impetus to the accession process of candidate countries. CSOs in the European Union will continue this work and play a more active role in shaping macro-regional strategies - building closer ties with countries outside the EU.

Question: How would you argue for EU enlargement in a macro-regional context?

8. Funding

The process to align 2021-2027 national/regional EU funding programmes with relevant MRS priorities (embedding) was stepped up in all four macro-regions. As the MRS do not have their own resources, their implementation depends on synergies with other instruments and on bringing together funding from different sources.

That is why the success of the MRS is linked to their capacity to ensure that EU, national, regional, and other public and private funds are aligned with the priorities of the strategy and finance the MRS activities. For the future it is important that political commitments made at MRS ministerial meetings in relation to the embedding are actually turned into action.

Question: What are your proposals aimed at putting the activities of civil society organisations in the macro-regions on a stable financial basis?

9. Communication

Overall, communication activities of the four MRS have focused on messages of solidarity and cooperation in times of war and pandemic. All strategies adapted their communication means – putting emphasis on digital formats and social media.

Looking ahead, the work to communicate the MRS to stakeholders and the wider public needs to be continued and expanded, notably by more targeted communication. Besides traditional communications, direct experiences (site visits, exchange visits, excursions for ordinary citizens) should be organised too.

Question: Why communication using a human language is important? What are the most effective ways of communication with citizens on macro-regional issues?

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