

Working Group 1

THE FUTURE OF MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES

Discussion paper

prepared for the Second Macro-Regional Citizen Agora

Brussels, 17 December 2024

A. BACKGROUND, STATE OF PLAY

The EU macro-regional strategy is a relatively new policy-making framework that address common challenges faced by a specific geographical area composed of EU Member States and neighbouring non-EU countries/regions. They aim to promote cooperation, sustainable development and economic growth by tackling problems that are beyond national borders. It serves as an interface between EU and local level policy developments.

There are currently four macro-regional strategies:

- 1. EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)**
Adopted in 2009
Members: 8
Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden
- 2. EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**
Adopted in 2010
Members: 14
EU Member States: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia
Non-EU countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine
- 3. EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)**
Adopted in 2014
Members: 10
EU Member States: Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia
Non-EU countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, San Marino and Serbia
- 4. EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP)**
Adopted in 2016
Members: 7
EU Member States: Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia
Non-EU countries: Liechtenstein and Switzerland

Although the macro-regional strategies are government-led initiatives, all stakeholders agree that they can only be successful with the involvement of local actors, including civil society.

B. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Challenges

1. Political and institutional challenges

- Variable commitment, shifts in political priorities at the national or EU level can weaken support for strategies.
- External influences, geopolitical tensions can weaken cooperation.

2. Coordination complexity

- Diverse stakeholders, involvement of multiple countries (EU and non-EU), regions, and sectors can lead to difficulties in aligning priorities, policies, and actions.
- Fragmentation, varied levels of commitment and capacity among participating countries create disparities in implementation.

3. Limited funding

- No dedicated budget, competing priorities can limit resources for macro-regional projects/initiatives as MRSs rely only on existing EU funds.
- Complex access to funds: Navigating funding instruments can be cumbersome for stakeholders, especially at the local level.

Opportunities

1. Alignment with EU priorities

- MRSs can serve as key platforms for promoting and implementing EU policies. They can serve as an interface between EU-level policy making and local stakeholders/communities (narrowing the gap).

2. Strengthened regional cooperation

- Cross-border solutions: MRSs facilitate coordinated approaches to shared challenges like pollution in the Baltic Sea or connectivity in the Danube region.
- EU Enlargement and integration: For regions like the Western Balkans, MRSs provide a pathway to align with EU standards and foster pre-accession cooperation.

3. Increased visibility

- Showcasing impact: Improved communication and storytelling about successful projects can enhance the visibility and perceived value of MRSs, attracting greater public support.

C. THE FUTURE OF EU MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES

The future of EU macro-regional strategies (MRSs) is likely to be shaped by their capacity to remain relevant and effective in addressing regional and transnational challenges while aligning with the EU's broader strategic goals.

1. Enhanced role in EU integration

MRSs have become vital for fostering cooperation among EU Member States and neighbouring countries, particularly in areas that transcend borders, such as environmental protection, transport, and energy.

- **Deepening EU integration:** They will likely serve as platforms for pre-accession countries to align with EU policies and standards, especially in the Western Balkans.
- **Strengthening cohesion:** MRSs will help bridge disparities between core and peripheral regions by promoting shared growth strategies and cross-border projects.

2. Institutional strengthening and funding

- **Better governance:** MRSs will evolve with more robust governance structures to ensure better coordination among stakeholders and across sectors. In this process civil society organisations are ready to play a pivotal role.
- **Securing funding:** Ensuring alignment with EU financial frameworks, such as Cohesion Policy and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, will be crucial.

3. Expanding the macro-regional approach

- **Stronger involvement of neighbouring countries:** Strengthening cooperation with non-EU countries will remain a key goal, especially in addressing cross-border issues and fostering regional stability.

4. Measurable impact and visibility

To secure long-term political and public support, MRSs will need to demonstrate tangible results and increase their visibility. The ownership feeling of MRSs stakeholders, especially civil society organisations should be increased.

D. THE FUTURE OF MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

On policy level

Visionary approach

- The structured and intensified civil involvement with a visionary approach in shaping and implementing macro-regional level policy-making is recognised.
- The properly applied partnership and participatory principle greatly enhance coordinated and structured civil contribution to achieving MRSs general objectives.
- The importance and usefulness of citizens' dialogues on macro-regional level is recognised and practiced.
- MRSs are an important playing field for EU enlargement. CSOs both from Member States and applicant countries demand to overcome the current stalemate situation.

In-between

- Citizen-driven innovative ideas with a value-added character are embedded into mainstream macro-regional policy processes.
- With the application of the “in-between” macro-regional idea, the “Bringing the European Union closer to its citizens” slogan gets an additional dimension and reduces the distance between the EU institutions and the people.
- The cross-sectoral, transnational and multilevel macro-regional approach to co-create solutions is practiced.

Vox Humana

- The voice of citizens and their organisations is recognised as a value-added component in the trust-building process among the macro-regional stakeholders.
- Civil society organisations and local communities develop and demonstrate their pro-European identity through (macro) regional identity, thereby contributing to a more resilient and democratic Europe.
- “Vox Humana”, a citizen-centered non-conventional communication policy is developed and practiced.

This new policy arrangement with its broad potential and active civil engagement is used to reinvigorate and promote the macro-regional idea.

On operational level

The intention is to bring together civil society organisations and like-minded local groups/initiatives from the four macro-regions and even beyond using synergies.

Institutionalised citizens' dialogue

- Using synergies to address joint challenges like climate change, the energy crisis, the digital and social transition, or the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine by common actions, exchange of best practices, field visits and study trips, volunteer exchanges, capacity-building courses, training, seminars, and other forms of interactions.

- Establishing an inclusive, transparent and institutionalised citizens' dialogue system across macro-regions. It is based on dialogues organised on regional/national levels on commonly identified societal challenges. This broad framework arrangement includes holding citizens' panels and contributes to the development of the Civil Society Platform, a new initiative of the European Commission.
- Contributing to the elaboration of major macro-regional policy documents, e.g. the revision of MRS Action Plans, the biennial Report of the Commission on the implementation of macro-regional strategies, or the Cohesion Policy position beyond 2027.

Participation

- Strengthening citizens' engagement in macro-regional policy-making processes on various levels is a vital common task and an important precondition of success; part of this process is the elaboration of proposals for regulated and coordinated meaningful CSO participation in the MRSs governing structures and in other working bodies.
- Setting up a one-stop-shop type guidance/service provider arrangement in the participating countries facilitating contacts and interactions among CSOs and other stakeholders, with special attention to academic institutions.
- Building regular contacts among the youth structures of the four MRSs and initiate exchange of information and experience, joint programmes among them; making sure that their members are identified in a transparent manner.
- Initiating and organising a flagship event, the annual macro-regional meeting (Agora) of civil society organisations for stocktaking, policy development and evaluation.

Citizen's voice

- Working out a citizen-centered communication plan including a newsletter, a yearbook, an information toolkit and the use of social media to raise and maintain continuous public awareness.
- Contributing in a coordinated manner to major MRS events, e.g. the EU Macro-Regional Strategies and Sea Basin Days, the European Week of Regions and Cities, Annual Forums and others, articulating the concerns of civil society organisations and local communities from the macro-regions.
- Creating conditions for setting up a permanent MRSs civil presence in Brussels.

E. CONCLUSIONS

The future of EU macro-regional strategies is promising, providing they continue to adapt to changing local/regional priorities and challenges. They will remain an important component of regional cooperation, contributing significantly to the EU's priorities and bringing citizens closer to EU policies. To achieve this, involvement of civil society is crucial.

The establishment of a **macro-regional civil platform/network** serves this purpose well. It is an open and inclusive pro-European collaborative and legitimate arrangement with an advocacy function for civil society organisations, local and regional communities ready to assist the implementation of the EU macro-regional idea. The overall performance of the macro-regional civil strategy is regularly reviewed and assessed at the Agora, the annual macro-regional meeting of civil society organisations.

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12 December 2024
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