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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

{SWD(2020) 186 final}

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1. INTRODUCTION

EU macro-regional strategies ('MRS') are policy frameworks initiated by EU and non-EU countries located in a defined geographical area to jointly address challenges and opportunities they have in common through setting shared, long-term objectives.

The four MRS involve 19 EU and 9 non-EU countries. They are:

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

From 2016, as agreed with the Council¹, the Commission has published a report every 2 years on the implementation of the four MRS. This is the third such report, covering the period from mid-2018 to mid-2020. It assesses the state of play and progress on implementing the MRS and examines possible ways forward. It is complemented by a staff working document (SWD) which provides more details on each MRS. Both documents are based on contributions from the MRS national and thematic coordinators ('MRS key implementers') and experts.

This report is published at a time when the crisis caused by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic is having severe economic, fiscal and social impacts on European society. The Commission reacted quickly proposing immediate measures (e.g. CRII and CRII+²) and extensive proposals for the short to medium term, including the Next Generation EU recovery instrument³. On 21 July 2020, the European Council reached an agreement on the Next Generation EU.

As soon as the proposals were adopted by the Commission, MRS key implementers worked to identify the appropriate means for the strategies to help participating countries to respond to the crisis. The MRS provide a ready and operational cooperation framework to ensure better coordination of actions, investments and projects within their territories. The MRS are cross-sectoral, stakeholders inclusive and involve different governance levels. All these features can be of key importance in delivering EU priorities such as the European Green Deal⁴, the European Digital Strategy⁵, 'An economy that works for people'⁶ and 'A stronger Europe in the world'⁷.

¹ Council conclusion on the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), point (32):

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/eusalp_council_conclusions_27112015.pdf

² Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII) and Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus (CRII+): https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/coronavirus-response/

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/content/european-digital-strategy>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people_en

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world_en

The purpose of this report is twofold. First, it takes note of progress on the MRS and sets expectations for further improvements. Second, it explores possible development of the MRS post-COVID-19 crisis with the aim of securing a sustainable, competitive and socially inclusive economic recovery. In that respect, the report assesses the role of the MRS in delivering the new EU priorities for a green, digital and resilient future.

2. RESULTS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As already proved, the four MRS are highly relevant in delivering the EU priorities for 2019-2024 in their respective territories, in particular the European Green Deal, the European Digital Strategy, ‘An economy that works for people’ and ‘A stronger Europe in the world’.

The MRS have particularly helped to improve the state of the Baltic Sea environment⁸, to enhance the water status in the Danube and its tributaries and to improve the navigability of the Danube River. They have also helped increase the integrated and sustainable governance of the maritime space and coastal areas of Adriatic and Ionian Seas and improve the conditions for ecological connectivity in the Alpine region by deploying green infrastructure.

The platform provided by the MRS for policy coordination across countries and among funds, sectors, governance levels and stakeholders has been key in achieving these results.

However, even though the MRS have already delivered meaningful results, realising their full potential requires time and a bold change of mind-set among countries, ensuring they systematically consider the benefits of working together.

2.1 Main policy developments

The main developments since the previous MRS report are (i) the revisions of the action plans in the Danube and the Baltic strategies; (ii) the Republic of North Macedonia joining the Adriatic-Ionian strategy; and (iii) the ‘embedding’ process – ongoing in all MRS – aimed at aligning the relevant priorities of EU funding programmes 2021-2027⁹ with the MRS.

- (i) The revised action plan of the Danube strategy was published on 6 April 2020¹⁰. The revision aligns the strategy with the new priorities and challenges of the region and better links the Danube strategy’s actions with the new EU priorities like the European Green Deal, SMEs, as well as tourism and cultural heritage. The revision of the action plan of the Baltic strategy is progressing with the aim of focusing and streamlining policy areas and strengthening coordination. This revised action plan is expected to be published in 2020.
- (ii) On 2 April 2020, North Macedonia was officially welcomed as the ninth country to participate in the Adriatic-Ionian strategy. With North Macedonia, the strategy now encompasses five Western Balkan ‘enlargement’ countries, working on an equal footing with four EU Member States on common issues.

⁸ The HELCOM report on the state of the Baltic Sea (<http://stateofthebalticsea.helcom.fi/in-brief/summary-of-findings/>) clearly shows that the measures taken so far within the Baltic Sea strategy framework, such as cutting nutrient inputs (nitrates and phosphorus), fighting pollution and working to protect biodiversity, have made a difference to the state of the Baltic Sea environment.

⁹ European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

¹⁰ SWD(2020) 59 final - <https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EUSDR-ACTION-PLAN-SWD202059-final-1.pdf>

- (iii) Since 2018, the MRS have initiated or strengthened the embedding process that led to mutually beneficial interactions between strategies' and programmes' authorities in preparing post-2020 programming documents. This is to be continued during implementation throughout 2021-2027. Eventually, embedding is expected to increase programmes' impacts through better cooperation and coordination, in addition to providing the MRS with the means to achieve their objectives. It will also allow beneficiaries of EU funds to achieve better results with their action while contributing to the strategic objectives of the MRS.

2.2 MRS thematic priorities and their interrelation with the European Green Deal

While their priorities are shaped according to the specific challenges and opportunities of the relevant regions, all four MRS have three main, broad, interconnected priorities in common¹¹: environment and climate change; research & innovation and economic development; and connectivity (transport, energy, digital networks).

The following sections give information about some of the specific achievements – in the form of both processes and projects – within these three priority areas since the previous report, as well as their interrelation with key actions of the European Green Deal.

Due to their cross-sectoral and cross-thematic nature, these achievements also support 'An economy that works for people' and the European Digital Strategy.

Environment and climate change

Key actions in the European Green Deal include eliminating pollution for a toxic-free environment and preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity.

The MRS have delivered important achievements in the field of water quality, which are relevant for the European Green Deal key actions, and in the field of ecological connectivity, which are relevant for biodiversity.

For example, the MRS have helped improve the water quality of the Baltic and Adriatic-Ionian Seas respectively through better management of hazardous substances released into the Baltic Sea¹² and better monitoring of the water quality in the Adriatic-Ionian Seas¹³. The MRS have also helped improve the water status in the Danube through reinforced integration between river basin management planning and flood risk prevention¹⁴.

They have furthermore helped develop green infrastructure in the Alpine region through the 'star initiatives', which aim to convert the political declaration by the Alpine countries and regions 'Alpine green infrastructure – joining forces for nature, people and the economy'¹⁵ into tangible results.

Research/innovation and economic development

Research and innovation will play a central role in the European Green Deal.

¹¹ Full details on all priority areas of each MRS to be found in the staff working document accompanying this report.

¹² <https://www.syke.fi/projects/hazbref>

¹³ <https://www.adrioninterreg.eu/index.php/2019/08/02/funded-projects-under-s-o-2-2/#toggle-id-3>

¹⁴ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/tisza-ministerial-meeting/>

¹⁵ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/results/28-alpine-states-and-regions-adopted-political-declaration-%E2%80%9EAlpine-green-infrastructure-%E2%80%93joining-forces-for-nature-people-and-the-economy%E2%80%93>

In that respect, among others, the MRS support knowledge capitalisation and sharing research and innovation, in particular via ‘Centres operating in the Alpine Region’¹⁶ and the ‘Danube Funding Coordination Network’¹⁷. Furthermore, MRS promote Smart Specialisation Strategies by supporting transnational innovation platforms and SME clusters.

In the European Green Deal, sustainable blue economy is also playing an important role, in particular in alleviating the demands on the EU’s land resources and in tackling climate change.

In that respect, the MRS have supported the sustainable development of the blue economy (in a similar way as the sea basin strategies¹⁸). For example, they help increase knowledge of the ‘blue bio economy’ through a dedicated platform in the Baltic region¹⁹ and improve knowledge transfer on blue technologies in the Adriatic and Ionian region²⁰.

Connectivity

The European Green Deal encourages the acceleration of the shift to sustainable and smart mobility and the supply of clean, affordable and secure energy. In that respect, the MRS have achieved significant milestones, for example in the fields of sustainable and multi-modal transport and of sustainable energy supply.

In the field of transport, for example, on 30 June 2020 ten transport ministers from the Danube region reconfirmed their commitment to implement the ‘Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan’²¹ for the Danube and its navigable tributaries, adopted in December 2014. This is an important step for improving fairway conditions at several critical sections of the Danube River²² and, overall, for multi-modal transport in the region.

The MRS also support the sustainable development of transport corridors in the Baltic Sea region²³ and the distribution and supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) for maritime transport in the Adriatic-Ionian region²⁴.

The MRS have already proved that they can play a significant role in the so called ‘twin green and digital transition’ supporting the implementation of the European Digital Strategy, in particular in the Alpine Region through strategic initiatives aimed at fostering smart, digital transformation of Alpine villages²⁵.

2.3 Access to funding and embedding

As the MRS do not have their own resources, their implementation depends on bundling funding from different sources. Therefore, the success or failure of the MRS is ultimately

¹⁶ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/projects/re-search-alps>

¹⁷ <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/working-groups/wg-3-newly-established-danube-funding-coordination-network-dfcn/>

¹⁸ The Atlantic Maritime Strategy (<https://atlanticstrategy.eu/en>), the Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the Western Mediterranean - WestMED (<https://www.westmed-initiative.eu/>) and the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea (<https://blackseablueeconomy.eu/206/common-maritime-agenda-black-sea>).

¹⁹ <https://www.submariner-network.eu/blue-platform>

²⁰ <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/beat/about-the-project>

²¹ <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/danube-ministers-of-transport-sign-again-conclusions-on-effective-waterway-rehabilitation-and-maintenance/>

²² <http://www.fairwaydanube.eu/>

²³ <https://projects.interreg-baltic.eu/projects/scandriaR2act-2.html>

²⁴ <https://superlng.adrioninterreg.eu/>

²⁵ <https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/smartvillages/en/home>

linked to their capacity to ensure that EU, national, regional, and other public and private funds are aligned with the priorities of the relevant strategy.

Bridging the gap between the MRS's needs and funding opportunities will therefore be a critical challenge for 2021-2027.

The European Structural and Investment funds (ESI Funds) offer significant financial resources and a wide range of tools and technical options that could help ensure synergies and complementarity. Nevertheless, the coordination between the MRS and ESI Funds programmes has, so far, been limited and mainly concentrated on European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) programmes.

The four Interreg transnational programmes covering the MRS²⁶ have played a special role in supporting the strategies. They have been the most visible funding source of MRS projects/activities while sustaining – though to different degrees – the MRS governance structures. However, despite their very positive catalytic role, Interreg programmes have neither the size (very limited budgets) nor the features (type of projects) to address the ambitious MRS objectives and priorities.

The ESI Funds national/regional programmes, due to their comprehensive scope and their financial resources, could and should more effectively work hand-in-hand with the MRS for the mutual benefit of both the strategies and the programmes.

The priorities of the ESI Funds national/regional programmes are, to a large extent, consistent with those of the MRS. A growing number of 2014-2020 programmes report support for MRS projects²⁷, as indicated in the annual implementation reports submitted by the programmes' managing authorities²⁸. However, a proper coordination with the MRS and among programmes in the macro-regions would greatly increase the impact of this support.

In 2014, the majority of the ESI Funds national/regional programmes did not consider the MRS's objectives and activities. Very few of these programmes addressed cross-sectoral priorities, and cross-territorial aspects are lacking in almost all of them.

Cooperation among ESI Funds national/regional programmes from different countries is a new concept requiring a change in mind-set. These programmes are essentially inward-looking, even when cooperation/coordination with programmes in the macro-region could increase the effectiveness and the impact of actions. It will therefore be important to raise awareness of the benefits of cooperation between countries and regions.

For all these reasons, mobilising the next generation of national and regional EU funding programmes remains a vital exercise for the MRS. However, for this to happen, an overall political consensus that funds should be aligned with MRS priorities and objectives is paramount.

The proposed cohesion policy regulations for the 2021-2027 period include provisions designed to facilitate support for MRS projects/activities, as cooperation between countries and regions should become common practice. However, including the jointly agreed MRS priorities in the 2021-2027 EU funding programmes requires effective and continuous

²⁶ Interreg Baltic Sea (ERDF €264 million), Interreg Danube (ERDF €222 million), Interreg Adriatic-Ionian (ERDF and IPA €99 million), Interreg Alpine Space (ERDF €117 million) transnational cooperation programmes.

²⁷ E.g. by allocating extra points in call for proposals to projects with macro-regional significance or impact.

²⁸ During the reporting period, data provided by ESI Funds programmes on support for the MRS are not sufficiently consistent to be aggregated and should be used with caution. A synthesis is provided in the SWD.

cooperation between MRS's national and thematic coordinators and the national/regional authorities responsible for these programmes.

Positive signals have already emerged from the increasing and constructive dialogue between the MRS and ESI Funds national/regional programme authorities. All four MRS have taken initiatives to accelerate and strengthen this 'embedding' process. MRS key implementers are more and more active in promoting macro-regional cooperation with relevant programme authorities, expanding their understanding of the benefits of cooperating to find common responses to issues that go beyond national/regional boundaries. In turn, this also allows stakeholders to increase their capacity and improve their performance.

Several initiatives are currently ongoing to improve the mobilisation of ESI Funds programmes to support the objectives of the strategies. Macro-regional processes and flagship/emblematic projects/activities were identified in all MRS. Networks of the managing authorities of ESI Funds programmes are being developed/strengthened to facilitate the funding and implementation of transnational projects. Proposals are also being considered to:

- include MRS key implementers in programmes' monitoring committees;
- operationalise project ideas by (co-)developing proposals and selecting actions/projects for funding; and
- align content and actions, e.g. through the launch of thematic or specific/targeted calls.

The directly managed EU programmes (e.g. LIFE, Erasmus, Horizon 2020, Connecting Europe Facility - CEF) represent another potential funding source as these often promote transnational cooperation. MRS key implementers provided a limited number of examples of synergies between the MRS and some directly managed EU programmes, notably with LIFE, CEF and Horizon 2020. The strengthening of those synergies requires a case-by-case approach, as directly managed EU programmes cover the entirety of the EU-27 and are not geographically focused.

Finally, the Interreg, IPA and NDICI cross-border cooperation programmes within the MRS territories can also substantially contribute to delivering the MRS objectives. In that respect, close cooperation between the authorities responsible for these programmes and the relevant MRS key implementers is essential from the early phases of preparing programmes throughout their implementation in 2021-2027.

2.4 Governance and Administrative capacity

In all four MRS the governance structures are set up and running on the three inter-related levels²⁹: political level, coordination level and implementation level. As a well-functioning governance structure is critical to the success or failure of the MRS, the review and further improvement of governance issues remains central for all strategies to ensure they keep pace with developments. Over the last 2 years, there has been progress in the governance and administrative capacity of the four MRS, and a number of noticeable results can be reported.

In the Alpine strategy, a specific task force was set up to reflect and make proposals to improve the effectiveness of the governance. In the Danube strategy, a paper on governance, clarifying the roles of various key actors, and an update of the rules of procedure were produced. The governance structure of the Baltic Sea strategy is being reviewed as part of the revision of the action plan.

²⁹ COM(2014) 284 final, on the governance of macro-regional strategies.

Finally, the four MRS provide good examples of cooperation between their implementing bodies and the multilateral environmental governance structures that are relevant for the territories covered by the strategies³⁰.

Political level

In all four MRS, the political level is generally represented by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and, in some cases, the ministers or authorities in charge of EU funds. They provide the political and strategic direction. In the Alpine strategy, the regional authorities also have an important role in the political/strategic discussions.

The role of the rotating presidency is growing in all strategies, as the participating countries realise its importance in driving the strategic direction of the MRS. A ‘Trio presidency’ system has been put in place in the Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine strategies, and its role has been increased.

Strengthening political commitment is essential: the national and regional authorities of the countries involved should be able to provide more strategic leadership at ministerial level to bridge the gap between the strong political commitments and the ability of administrations to follow up on these.

Coordination level

The coordination of the MRS within and between participating countries is done by the national coordinators. Jointly, they act as an interface between the political level – to which they report on implementation and submit proposals – and the implementation level – to which they provide strategic guidance. Many participating countries have put in place multi-level coordination mechanisms at national level, which are providing encouraging results. However, more attention should be given to staff continuity and providing adequate administrative support.

Implementation level

The role of the implementing bodies (thematic/priority/policy steering or action groups) has grown noticeably, as these are the drivers of the day-to-day implementation of MRS action plans. The MRS key implementers need financial, political and administrative support to fulfil their tasks. Therefore, further work is required to appropriately empower them with clear mandates and effective decision-making capacity, while ensuring that they have the resources, technical capacity and the skills needed.

Progress has also been reported on the ‘tools’ supporting the implementation of the MRS. The new EUSDR Danube Strategy Point (DSP) has been up and running (again) since September 2018. The EUSAIR Facility Point has supported the strategy’s governance and key implementers since 2015. In February 2020, the EUSALP General Assembly decided to set up a technical support structure to support the strategy. The Baltic Sea strategy is also aiming to strengthen its administrative capacity and is drawing on the experiences of the other MRS.

The MRS presidencies, together with the Commission and the support of the Interact programme, have been developing cooperation networks, methods and tools to embed the MRS into post-2020 EU funding programmes.

³⁰ Examples: regional sea conventions, such as the Barcelona Convention for the EUSAIR and HELCOM for the EUSBSR, or regional mountain and basins’ conventions, such as the Alpine Convention for the EUSALP, ICPDR and the Carpathian Convention for the EUSDR.

Moreover, Interact, with the support of the Commission, continues to promote the macro-regional concept by building and consolidating networks between key implementers across the strategies (e.g. in governance, transport, environment or climate change areas), and by strengthening the capacity of the implementing bodies.

Civil society

The multi-level and multi-stakeholders governance system of the MRS involves, by definition, different types of transnational, cross-sectoral and cross-regional actors in different types of activities. The MRS approach has allowed new stakeholders to be involved and new dynamics and new ways of cooperating to be developed. All the MRS are making efforts to involve civil society in work on thematic areas. Implementing bodies are increasingly connected with civil society. Participation by local communities strengthens the bottom-up dimension of the MRS actions, especially those focused on increasing youth involvement in the MRS process, which are becoming more and more significant in all four MRS.

In the Danube strategy, civil society get involved through platforms based on participatory planning, community building and empowerment. Civil society representatives are key partners in implementing National Participation Days – the 2019 Danube Participation Day was attended by more than 1 000 people.

In the Baltic Sea strategy, civil society actors, predominantly from higher education and research institutions, are involved in many projects/activities. However, there is scope for increased involvement of the business community, NGOs and young people.

The EUSAIR stakeholder platform is operational and the Alpine strategy has begun developing a digital participatory platform to support the dissemination of sustainable initiatives and the involvement of civil society stakeholders.

Thus, the role of civil society organisations has been growing and should be further encouraged.

2.5 Monitoring and evaluation

The MRS are delivering a significant number of results, ranging from internal capacity effects and coordination/cooperation processes among countries and regions, to concrete transnational projects/activities being implemented or facilitated. However, in practice, it is challenging to measure and report on these achievements.

Initiatives to develop monitoring systems are on-going, notably by agreeing on indicators and targets for the priorities included in the action plans.

Further work is needed to capture the complexity of results that a MRS produces, including essential institutional and capacity development among countries and stakeholders. A comprehensive monitoring mechanism would also be helpful in maintaining political support and help key implementers to better understand each strategy's weaknesses and strengths.

The Interreg ESPON programme has developed a monitoring tool – the European Territorial Monitoring System (ETMS) – designed to serve, among others, the MRS. The tool provides MRS key implementers and other stakeholders with territorial information.

2.6 Communication

The last Eurobarometer (October 2019) shows a growing awareness of the four MRS among the EU public, most probably resulting from a noticeable increase in communication activities during the reporting period. Each of the MRS now has in place a fully operational body to increase awareness among stakeholders and individuals (EUSBSR: Let's communicate;

EUSDR: Danube Strategy Point; EUSAIR: Facility Point; and EUSALP: AlpGov). All of the MRS have set up dedicated websites, active social media accounts and newsletters, and the number of subscribers to these is growing. The Adriatic-Ionian and the Danube strategies already have common communication plans to ensure communication activities and messages are coordinated. In the Alpine strategy, the ‘Pitch.Your.Project’³¹ initiative allows young people to directly contribute to implementing the strategy.

There has been a clear increase in the number of national and macro-regional events to reach public authorities, funding programmes and the public during the last two years. The annual fora, supported along others by the Commission ‘Media programme’, are the main annual events for the MRS and they attract large numbers of participants. Participation by high-level politicians in the annual fora is crucial to increase media interest.

The ‘Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week’ is another key event bringing together key implementers of the four MRS. This Slovenian-led initiative has proven a successful tool to reach both national media and the wider public.

In February 2020, for the first time, a ‘MRS Week’ was organised in Brussels to bring together various meetings and workshops focused on each MRS. The ‘Week’ was welcomed by MRS stakeholders as an opportunity to coordinate and exchange experiences among the strategies, to exchange with representatives from the EU institutions, and to raise awareness.

At national level, all strategies have stepped up their awareness-raising events, but more work will be needed. Although English is currently the working language of all four strategies, communicating with the public in national languages should be encouraged.

3. THE WAY FORWARD

Macro regional cooperation is a powerful tool to support economic, social and territorial development and integration, and to foster good relations with neighbouring countries.

After more than 10 years of implementation, the MRS are an integral part of the EU territorial cooperation toolbox, though their potential has not been fully realised yet.

The world is changing at a fast pace, and the MRS should keep abreast with new priorities. For the MRS to continue providing solutions to common challenges, it is important that they are regularly reviewed and updated. They must ensure a balance between being responsive to emerging new needs and priorities, and ensuring continuity of work to achieve tangible results.

COVID-19 crisis, European Green Deal and European Digital Strategy

As soon as the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak became apparent, the MRS national coordinators took initiatives to consider how the MRS could help participating countries to tackle the crisis through coordinated actions. The extent of the role that the MRS could play became clearer in the light of the initiatives taken by the Commission notably with the proposed Next Generation EU recovery plan.

The MRS coordination bodies met to discuss what actions could be taken by each MRS to help participating countries and regions to recover and implement a medium to long term economic response. In addition, the Presidencies of the four MRS met on 17 June 2020 in order to identify potential topics, relevant for all MRS, where a reinforced cross-MRS cooperation could help to a sustainable and resilient recovery of the macro-regions, whilst supporting the Union’s green and digital priorities.

³¹ <https://www.alpine-region.eu/pitch-your-project-2020>

Following early initiatives by the MRS national coordinators, the political level for each strategy should now urge the MRS key implementers to coordinate their efforts with all of the relevant stakeholders across the macro-region in the areas in which the MRS have proved their added value. This should include the MRS's role in implementing the European Green Deal and the European Digital Strategy, which are the cornerstone of Europe's growth strategy, and areas such as sustainable tourism, SME transnational clusters or health.

Embedding and implementation

The process aiming to align 2021-2027 national/regional EU funding programmes with relevant MRS priorities ('embedding'), must be successfully completed. This is vital for the MRS to achieve their economic, social and territorial objectives, and for programmes to improve their effectiveness and increase their impact by cooperating and coordinating actions across the macro-region. To that aim:

- MRS key implementers and national/regional authorities responsible for 2021-2027 EU funding programmes should intensify their efforts before the programmes are finalised.
- In order to ensure an effective implementation across the macro-region of the MRS priorities included in 2021-2027 EU funding programmes, relevant networks of programme (managing) authorities should be set up for each MRS. These networks have a central role to play and should be well structured to operate throughout the 2021-2027 period and beyond. They will provide a meeting space for programme (managing) authorities to engage with MRS key implementers, to coordinate the implementation of the MRS measures included in their respective programmes, and to promote cooperation among programmes so as to ensure the expected macro-regional impact. Initial examples of such networks in the Baltic and the Danube regions are already delivering encouraging results.

Access to funds directly managed by the Commission

MRS national and thematic coordinators should encourage relevant project promoters (e.g. macro-regional actors) to participate in the competitive mechanisms (such as calls for projects) published by the directly managed EU instruments (e.g. Horizon Europe, Digital Europe programme, LIFE, Erasmus, Single-Market programme³²).

In order to maximise their chances of success, the MRS national and thematic coordinators should promote and facilitate access to national/regional expertise to support the development of high quality proposals for the calls for projects.

MRS governance

The political level should strengthen its leadership of the MRS, by:

- providing strong strategic guidance;
- ensuring coherence between the MRS and other territorial/sectorial national and transnational strategies and policies;
- ensuring that all MRS national and thematic coordinators are duly empowered and provided with a clear mandate and adequate resources;
- reinforcing multi-level governance through the effective involvement of regional/local stakeholders, civil society, including young people, in implementing the MRS.

³² On the basis of current Commission proposals for programmes 2021-2027.

The annual ministerial/political meetings that take place back-to-back with the annual fora, proved to be a valuable best practice which should be considered in all MRS. Annual ministerial meetings are very useful to ensure accountability, to take political decisions, and to provide strategic guidance, e.g. by adopting ministerial/political declarations. National and thematic coordinators should be mandated to implement the decisions taken and report back on achievements at the next annual ministerial meeting.

Building on the experience of the Danube and the Adriatic-Ionian strategies, all MRS should be assisted by a technical support structure responsible for tasks including: supporting rotating presidencies and ensuring continuity of actions; implementing communication activities; supporting thematic coordinators and steering groups; ensuring coordination within/across MRS and with sea basin strategies; facilitating the networks of programme (managing) authorities and MRS key implementers; and coordinating monitoring and evaluation. The technical support structure should have a stable source of financing to ensure continuity. The Interreg Transnational Cooperation programmes covering the MRS territory (Baltic Sea, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian, Alpine Space) should play a key role.

Communicating the MRS to stakeholders and the public is of utmost importance. Work in this area should be continued and expanded within and across MRS, by more targeted communication, exploiting synergies, improving coordination and harmonisation.

MRS role in the EU enlargement policy

Closer synergies with the enlargement process is key to supporting the EU perspective for the Western Balkans, in line with the EU priority ‘A stronger Europe in the world’ and the new enlargement methodology³³.

At political level, exchange and cooperation should be set up through high level initiatives in the region such as the EU-Western Balkan summits and other regional cooperation initiatives. This will avoid overlaps, allow for better coordination and increase regional cooperation with the final aim of having a stronger positive impact on the life of people in the region.

The current involvement on an equal footing of the Western Balkans in the Danube and the Adriatic-Ionian strategies should be further enhanced, including by ensuring their effective participation in implementing the twin green and digital transition. Authorities from Western Balkan participating countries should allocate sufficient resources to ensure their effective participation in the MRS governance and implementing structures.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the current exceptional circumstances triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent economic crisis, cooperation among countries and regions is needed more than ever. The crisis has economic, fiscal and social consequences that cannot be tackled by any single country alone. The EU is providing innovative tools and extraordinary financial means to ‘react and recover’: in the short term, to react and repair the damages caused to the European fabric by the outbreak of the pandemic; in the medium to long term, to recover through investing in a green, digital, resilient and socially inclusive economy. The recovery from the crisis represents a major opportunity for shaping the Europe of the future.

Against this background, the MRS have a significant role to play in helping participating countries and regions to tackle the economic crisis by implementing EU priorities such as the European Green Deal, the European Digital Strategy, ‘An economy that works for people’

³³ COM(2020) 57 final: Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans.

and ‘A stronger Europe in the world’ in a coordinated manner. Sustainable tourism, SME support, transnational innovation need particular attention.

Member States have now a unique opportunity to promote the inclusion of relevant MRS priorities in the 2021-2027 EU national and regional programmes (ESI Funds, EAFRD, IPA, NDICI). This is vital to ensure the coordinated implementation of programmes and MRS in the macro-regions.

For the MRS to substantially contribute to the mid-to-long-term economic recovery and prosperity of the participating countries, stronger political ownership and drive needs to be sustained.

Appendix: Map of EU macro-regional strategies

