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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

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1. INTRODUCTION

The EU macro-regional strategies are political cooperation frameworks in a defined geographical area that are endorsed by the European Council. All the countries within the geographical area concerned, whether EU Member States or not, participate as equal partners. The focus of the macro-regional strategies is not one-time activities with a predetermined beginning and a fixed end date. Instead, they aim to bring about change at policy level, taking a cross-sectoral perspective and implementing a variety of actions. To deliver on this approach, the strategies pool resources and bring together relevant stakeholders.

The four macro-regional strategies involve 19 EU and 10 non-EU countries. They are:

- the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (2009);
- the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (2011);
- the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014); and
- the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (2015).

From 2016, as requested by the Council¹, the Commission has published an implementation report on the four strategies every two years. This is the fifth such report, covering the period from mid-2022 to mid-2024. It is complemented by a staff working document that provides specific information on each strategy.

This report only concerns the macro-regional strategies, in line with the Council request. It does not cover the implementation of the four sea-basin strategies. These are cooperation frameworks of a similar type but with a focus on maritime activities. However, as there are similarities in approach between the two types of strategies, increased exchanges and coordination between them are essential and are referred to in this report.

2. LONG-TERM EVOLUTION

There is broad recognition of the value of reviewing the strategies and how they function, and of adjusting their action plans to reflect the changing environment and to adapt to new emerging needs and challenges. This is why the passage of time and recent crises have led the strategies to undertake revision processes. These processes include reviewing priorities, adding new elements and orienting the strategies more towards securing results. The strategies have taken their revision processes forward in different ways. There are no formal rules for such revisions, so each strategy has been able to develop its own procedures.

During 2023-2024, the **Adriatic-Ionian Strategy** conducted a first revision of its action plan. Since 2014, when the Strategy was adopted, the region has witnessed a decade marked by several crises including the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Additionally, the Adriatic-Ionian region has been identified as a global climate crisis hotspot, characterised by the impact of climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification,

¹ Council conclusion on the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region, point (32):
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/eusalp_council_conclusions_27112015.pdf

droughts and episodes of extreme weather. These threats have a negative impact on food security, on opportunities for development and on the well-being of the region's population. According to data recently released data from Eurostat, the countries of South-East Europe are facing serious population decline. This demographic shift poses significant economic and social challenges. This is also why the revised action plan introduces a social pillar with a focus on youth engagement and employment, on improved cooperation and coordination on working conditions, and on gender equality and social innovation.

In addition, enlargement has become one of the top priorities for the European Union. This is of particular relevance in a region with more candidate countries than EU Member States and is why enlargement has been included as a cross-cutting theme in all pillars of the revised action plan.

The revision process is currently nearing completion, and implementation of the new action plan will start in the first half of 2025.

In parallel, the **Alpine Strategy's** action plan is also being revised for the first time, to further align it with the EU's green and digital objectives as well as to simplify the Strategy's governance and create a technical support structure. The process began in late 2023 with the creation of a task force. The revised action plan is expected to be ready by end-2025.

In contrast, the countries participating in the **Baltic Sea Strategy** have taken a more incremental approach to updating their Strategy's action plan, with revisions being made every few years, with a view to ensuring that it remains relevant and responsive to evolving priorities, challenges, and opportunities. The latest version dates from 2021. A further revision process has begun, with finalisation planned for 2026.

The **Danube Strategy's** action plan was comprehensively revised in 2020. Recent presidencies of the Danube Strategy have launched a process to adapt the Strategy institutionally and thematically without the need for any further revision of the action plan at this time.

3. DELIVERING GREEN, DIGITAL AND FAIR TRANSITIONS

In its conclusions on the fourth report on the implementation of the macro-regional strategies², the Council acknowledged that the strategies are useful tools for delivering on the green, digital and fair transitions as well as for regional development and growth. From the beginning, sustainability has been a prominent theme of all four macro-regional strategies. The focus has been on the **green** transition and environmental sustainability including sustainable agriculture, improvements in waste management and wastewater treatment, biodiversity conservation, the circular economy, addressing environmental risks and climate action, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The strategies acknowledge the crucial role of **digitalisation** in stimulating economic growth and innovation. Support is channelled into developing digital infrastructure, skills and services to improve connectivity, competitiveness and efficiency by initiating activities to promote digitalisation across sectors such as education, maritime transport and better governance.

The green and digital transitions bring new opportunities and are necessary to maintain the competitiveness of the EU while ensuring a good quality of life for people in Europe. However, these processes also trigger structural changes that require supporting policies to ensure a **fair** transition with the most vulnerable people, companies and regions in mind. That

² 11060/23, Brussels 27 June 2023

is why the macro-regional strategies have initiated numerous initiatives in the social and economic fields.

Examples of projects and processes

The **ADRIONCYCLETOUTOUR**³ project (Interreg Italy–Slovenia, Friuli Venezia Giulia ERDF 21-27 Programme, Interreg Italy–Croatia) aims to make the area more attractive and accessible by promoting sustainable tourism linked to cycling.

AMETHYST⁴ (Interreg Alpine Space) aims to support the deployment of local Alpine green hydrogen ecosystems to pave the way for a post-carbon lifestyle in the Alps. Project partners are reinforcing the role of public authorities by increasing their capacity, designing support services to roll out green hydrogen solutions and including green hydrogen in local and regional energy strategies and plans.

The **Living Rivers**⁵ project (LIFE) contributes to the implementation of the third River Basin management plan for the Danube by implementing measures to eliminate hydro morphological pressures, by addressing the ecological targets of the Water Framework Directive and Habitats Directive via the management of protected areas and through sustainable forestry, land and fishery management.

The **Cuneo-Ventimiglia** and **Nice-Breil-sur-Roya railway lines** were recently incorporated into the Trans-European Transport Network, granting them access to funding from the Connecting Europe Facility.

The Baltic Sea **e-Nav**⁶ project (Interreg Baltic Sea Region) is creating the next generation of navigational products and services that are compliant with new international standards, enabling maritime authorities and organisations to ensure safer, more harmonised and eco-efficient navigation on the Baltic Sea.

The **Plan-C**⁷ project consortium (Interreg Danube Region) consisting of 14 partners from nine Danube countries aims to boost the transformation of the plastics value chain in the region towards circularity through the transnational cooperation of plastics processors/producers and the machine industry.

The **SI4CARE**⁸ project (Interreg Adrion) is focused on social innovation for integrated healthcare services for the ageing population in the Adriatic-Ionian region. It facilitates the creation of an effective transnational ecosystem through a collaboration network and a shared strategy, with pilots in telemedicine and accessibility to healthcare facilities.

4. SUPPORTING EU ENLARGEMENT

The integration of Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan candidate countries remains a top priority of the EU. That is why the Council conclusions on the fourth implementation report encourage all key stakeholders to further explore the use of the macro-regional

³ <https://www.ita-slo.eu/en/adrioncycletour>

⁴ <https://www.alpine-space.eu/project/amethyst/>

⁵ <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/life/publicWebsite/project/LIFE21-IPE-SK-LIFE-Living-Rivers-101069837/implementation-of-the-river-basin-management-plan-in-selected-river-sub-basins-in-slovakia>

⁶ <https://eng.gst.dk/danish-hydrographic-office/external-funded-projects/baltic-sea-e-nav>

⁷ <https://interreg-danube.eu/storage/media/01HWW4AXQ55QDGN5YV61J5N9Z3.pdf>

⁸ <https://si4care.adrioninterreg.eu/>

strategies to facilitate EU enlargement by supporting economic, social and territorial cohesion and resilience as well as by building trust and confidence between neighbouring countries.

A clear advantage of macro-regional cooperation is that it offers candidate countries the possibility to work on an equal footing with EU Member States. Additionally, cooperation within the strategies helps to accelerate the process of adapting national legislation to EU law. It facilitates institutional capacity building at all administrative levels and helps to familiarise candidate countries with the principles of EU funding instruments, notably the principle of shared management.

The Adriatic-Ionian and Danube Strategies focus on this issue in particular. The EU's commitment to the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans⁹ and the substantial investment through the Economic and Investment Plan¹⁰ and the more recent new growth plan¹¹ emphasise the importance of good environmental governance. At the same time, the accession process presents a unique opportunity to accelerate the transition to greener economies. That is why, in the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy's revised action plan, all pillars and topics will contribute to the EU enlargement process, helping candidate countries to prepare their accession and align with key EU policies.

The recent Danube Strategy presidencies of Ukraine, Slovenia and Austria mainstreamed enlargement into almost every key activity and the Strategy helps candidate countries to align with key provisions of EU law, for instance in water management, transport legislation and the green transition. It also supports these countries in meeting their obligations under their association agreements with the EU.

5. RESPONDING TO RUSSIA'S WAR OF AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

In its conclusions on the fourth report on the implementation of the macro-regional strategies the Council encouraged the structures set up by the strategies to support Ukraine and to contribute to its reconstruction without any delay. The Council also invited the countries participating in the strategies to look for opportunities for even closer cooperation with Ukraine and Moldova in practical terms.

As a response, several initiatives have been taken. The 2023 Slovenian Presidency of the Danube Strategy, together with priority area coordinators, the Danube Civil Society Forum and the 2022 Ukrainian Presidency organised a panel discussion at the 2023 annual forum on bottom-up recovery and transformation of Ukraine: The path of Ukraine and Moldova on their way to the EU. In addition, in 2023, Ukraine was invited to take part in the European Week of Regions and Cities for the first time, where the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics organised a session on skills together with the Danube and Baltic Sea Strategies.

In addition, several initiatives have been taken at the level of individual priority areas. This includes help to establish refugee corridors between the European Union and Ukraine, support in reopening railway lines and freight corridors and making natural gas phaseout in Danube countries a top priority. The People & Skills priority area chaired by Austria, Ukraine and Moldova puts a particular focus on addressing the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in the education, social and labour systems. Furthermore, the

⁹ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/56db6af6-92c2-4ff7-a1ba-7e8893d8e7a8_en?filename=green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf

¹⁰ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/30108255-efa8-4274-962a-c24faee32734_en?filename=communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf

¹¹ COM(2023) 691 final, 8.11.2023.

Danube Managing Authority Network of the European Social Fund was used to identify ways to meet the needs of Ukrainian refugees through European Social Fund projects.

Despite Ukraine's geographical location outside the Baltic Sea region, several events were held under the Baltic Sea Strategy during the second half of 2022 with the involvement of Ukrainian representatives to explore possible areas for cooperation. The Strategy launched its first cooperation initiatives with Ukraine in December 2022 and Ukrainian actors were invited to join projects funded by the Baltic Sea Region Interreg programme as associated partners.

6. PROMOTING COHESION AND PLACE-BASED DEVELOPMENT

As set out in the 9th Cohesion Report¹², over the last few years convergence between countries has not always been accompanied by convergence within countries and better cooperation between EU regions could help to achieve a more balanced territorial development. Regions and local authorities implement more than 70% of EU legislation. This calls for a place-based policy with a focus on local and regional best practices in providing quality jobs and fostering innovation, productivity, skills, green and digital transitions.

The macro-regional strategies not only support the objectives of EU cohesion policy but also ensure that these objectives are tailored to the specific needs and priorities of their regions. The Alpine Strategy helps to deliver on the concept of smart villages, which has promoted their visibility at European level and is also included in the long-term vision for rural areas. The cross-macro-regional SMART ERA project¹³, funded by Horizon Europe, aims to combat depopulation in rural areas by making them more attractive. In the Baltic Sea Strategy, projects such as BSR Cultural Pearls¹⁴, BaMuR¹⁵ and BALTIC UKH¹⁶ help to strengthen social resilience and skills in smaller towns, cities and municipalities. In the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy, the Green and Smart Ports event in Trieste in 2022 brought together local stakeholders in the port business with the aim of fostering integrated and sustainable business practices. The annual Mediterranean Coast and Macro-regional Strategies Week organised in Izola, Slovenia, brings together local and regional authorities, national governments, research institutions and businesses from the Adriatic-Ionian region and beyond.

However, much still remains to be done, notably in developing links and synergies with EU-funded territorial instruments (including LEADER). In addition, although some stakeholders report that actors at sub-national administrative levels are increasingly able to engage in the governance of macro-regional strategies, in some regions their capacity to act is still limited.

7. PARTNERSHIP – INVOLVING CIVIL SOCIETY, LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The active participation of civil society, local communities and young people in macro-regional strategies is essential. The Letta Report¹⁷ makes the case for the Single Market to empower people rather than create circumstances where they feel compelled to relocate in order to thrive and argues that opportunities must be available for individuals who wish to contribute to the development of their local communities.

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en

¹³ <https://smartera-project.eu/>

¹⁴ <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/bsr-cultural-pearls/>

¹⁵ <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/bamur/>

¹⁶ <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/baltic-ukh/>

¹⁷ Much more than a market. Enrico Letta, April 2024

All stakeholders in the macro-regional strategies recognise the importance of bridging the gap between local and regional actions and European political priorities and the role of civil society organisations in the strategies has been growing over time. This helps to increase their impact through trust-building and better decision-making.

In a few cases, and particularly in the Baltic Sea and Danube Strategies, civil society organisations are directly involved in strategy governance as thematic coordinators and members of steering groups. However, at present, civil society involvement in most cases is channelled through dedicated platforms such as the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative and its networks. In the Alpine Strategy, civil society is brought in through activities organised by action groups and presidencies.

Certain activities specifically address collaboration between public authorities and civil society organisations. Examples include the We Make Transition! initiative¹⁸ and the KidsLikeUs project¹⁹ in the Baltic Sea Strategy and the DANUBE4all EU Lighthouse Initiative project²⁰ funded by Horizon Europe. These projects contribute to good governance by strengthening administrative capacity and creating strong institutions.

Several countries have national and regional platforms to promote civil society participation in macro-regional strategies. However, the inclusion of civil society in strategy governance structures and other working bodies needs to be continuously strengthened and regularly followed up. In the process of articulating and strengthening the voice and involvement of civil society organisations, the European House Budapest²¹ successfully initiated the setting up of an inclusive macro-regional civil society organisations network in 2024. This new collaborative arrangement has a cross-macro-regional character and a strong advocacy function.

¹⁸ <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/we-make-transition/>

¹⁹ <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/kidslikeus/>

²⁰ <https://www.icpdr.org/tasks-topics/tasks/river-basin-management/danube4all-project-brighter-future-our-danube>

²¹ <https://europeanhouse.hu/>

Macro-regional strategies and young people

The Alpine Strategy has been a frontrunner in involving young people and was the first to set up a youth council in 2021. In July 2023, the **Alpine Youth Council** produced a position paper setting out the priorities for its work. Well established initiatives to promote youth-related activities include the Pitch Your Project competition and summer camps.

In the Baltic Sea Strategy, youth engagement is promoted in particular by the **Baltic Sea Youth Forum**. The Council of the Baltic Sea States coordinates youth representation across different policy areas, providing resources to build the capacities of relevant stakeholders. The 2022 Baltic Sea Youth Declaration 2022, unveiled at the Annual Forum in Lappeenranta in September 2022, offers recommendations for policymakers on integrating young people's perspectives.

The **Danube Youth Council** was set up in October 2022. During the reporting period, two capacity building sessions were organised, and members of the Youth Council have participated in all the Strategy's governance meetings. The Strategy have also set up the Danube Youth Organisation Network. This body brings together national or regional youth organisations or other non-profit entities in the region that work on youth issues.

In the **Adriatic-Ionian Strategy**, 20 members aged between were nominated to the Youth Council in summer 2024 (two per participating country), all aged between 18 and 29. The Youth Council will ensure that young people can participate actively and that their perspectives are represented in all the structures of the Strategy, with the aim creating more inclusive policies that better address the needs and aspirations of young people from all kinds of backgrounds, and of fostering intergenerational dialogue and understanding.

8. IMPROVING GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY

In all macro-regional strategies, the political level is represented by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and in some cases, the ministers or authorities in charge of cohesion policy and EU funding. For those strategies that cover candidate countries in the Western Balkans, the national coordinators of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance coordinators provide political and strategic guidance. In addition, all candidate countries follow the provisions of the applicable EU financial instruments.

In the Alpine Strategy, regional authorities play a significant role in the political and strategic discussions at all levels of governance. Sub-national administrative levels are also included in the governance of the other strategies. However, their level of involvement varies and is less evident than in the Alpine Strategy.

Fixed rotating orders of presidencies and a trio format of consecutive presidencies (predecessor/incumbent/successor) are now in place in all strategies. The role of the rotating presidency is growing and has been further reinforced through the '**Trio Presidencies**' group of the four macro-regional strategies, which meets regularly to discuss issues of common concern. The benefits of such cooperation across the four macro-regional strategies have been particularly stressed by those countries participating in two or three strategies.

The trio format showed its strength in 2022 during the Ukrainian Presidency of the Danube Strategy when, due to the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the Presidency could not carry out all its tasks during a period of two months. In an act of solidarity, and given the situation in Ukraine, the other members of the Danube Trio Presidency, Slovakia and Slovenia, agreed to step in and the annual forum was organised in Slovakia close to the Ukrainian border.

To promote the further exchange of experience and transfer of best practice, the macro-regional presidencies, together with the Commission and with the support of the Interact Interreg programme, have continued to develop cooperation networks, training courses, methodologies, and tools. For macro-regional strategies with a maritime component, dialogue with the sea-basin strategies and engagement with maritime stakeholders is essential.

Technical support structures are now in place in all four macro-regional strategies. Overall, these structures are much appreciated by those responsible for implementing the strategies. However, they must be empowered with sufficient resources to be able to carry out their tasks properly.

National coordinators of macro-regional strategies are key players in strategy governance. They function 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. They coordinate the work at national level and ensure that all those responsible for implementation in their country are actively involved in the work.

The **thematic coordinators** and their steering or action groups are at the heart of strategy governance. They are the drivers of the day-to-day implementation of macro-regional strategy action plans and their role has grown noticeably.

All the countries involved agree on the importance of empowering those responsible for implementation with clear mandates, effective decision-making capacity and a clear vision that places their work in a broader policy context. They also agree on the need to link strategies more directly to national, regional and local stakeholders, as well as to the political level. Nevertheless, while the administrative capacity and governance structures within the strategies has evolved, challenges remain in sustaining political interest, ensuring full stakeholder engagement and in allocating sufficient resources for implementation. While some thematic areas and their steering and action groups have been successfully operating for a decade or more, other areas continue to face challenges.

A particular issue identified by many thematic coordinators is the need to ensure that all countries ensure a proper participation in the thematic action and steering groups. Low attendance in such groups hampers efficiency and means that the whole geographic area of the Strategy concerned is not fully represented. Good knowledge and awareness of assigned tasks is required when communicating with thematic and national coordinators. In addition, there is significant variation in the mandates of the members of steering and action group members. While some have the necessary means to take decisions, others have only limited capacity to engage. A constant fluctuation requires additional support for new members so they can contribute effectively to the achievements of the thematic area concerned.

Organised capacity-building activities, including on-boarding sessions for new members together with a thematic focus on achievable targets and regular contacts with steering/action group members could help to sustain their engagement. However, for the strategies to maximise their potential, all countries must ensure that thematic coordinators are given the proper resources to carry out their work. In particular, any vacancies should be filled promptly by nominating suitable replacements, and the active engagement of current members should be fostered and enhanced. And on their side, coordinators must work hand in hand with the political level to ensure coordination, synergies and a strong leadership.

9. ACCESS TO FUNDING AND THE CONCEPT OF EMBEDDING

Macro-regional strategies do not come with their own funding. They were set up to identify themes for cooperation by relying on the use of European, regional, national and other sources of funding. Due to the transnational character of macro-regional cooperation, Interreg

programmes play a key role in supporting the strategies. The four **Interreg transnational programmes** linked to the macro-regional strategies, Interreg Baltic Sea Region, Interreg Danube Region, Interreg Alpine Space, and Interreg Adriatic, have provided a unique framework for advancing the macro-regional strategies by integrating their objectives into programme thematic priorities. These programmes have set up a framework to support the governance structures, communication and capacity building of the macro-regional strategy coordinators in a transnational context through sophisticated project schemes.

The programmes have played a crucial role in implementing the macro-regional action plans, serving as a key funding source for many macro-regional projects across various areas of which numerous examples are provided in the accompanying Commission Staff Working Document and in the box on page 3 of this report. Moreover, the Interreg transnational programmes have actively helped the thematic coordinators of the macro-regional strategies to use programme funds to develop macro-regional initiatives and connect with organisations proficient in implementing projects. Similarly, the Interreg NEXT transnational programmes have effectively promoted regional cooperation in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, supporting a wide range of projects that align with the key policy priorities of the respective sea basin strategies.

However, the scale and ambition of the macro-regional strategies stretches beyond the funding available in the Interreg context. That is why the concept of ‘embedding’ was developed, notably during the 2021-2027 period so that other funds could also help to deliver the strategies. Such funding includes the **Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance** and the **Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument**. It is an additional challenge to combine these sources which work according to different regulations, methodologies and timings, and with different structures.

Funding has also been allocated from mainstream regional and national cohesion policy programmes via the **European Regional Development Fund** and the **European Social Fund**. Furthermore, programmes directly managed by the Commission provide support to the macro-regional strategies and contact points have been established in all Commission Directorates-General. As a result of discussions within the Commission, references to macro-regional strategies were included in some of the work programmes of these programmes, and several calls for proposals specifically target the macro-regional strategies. In particular, **LIFE**, **Horizon Europe**, **ERASMUS** and the **Connecting Europe Facility** and also the **European Union Civil Protection Mechanism**, are providing funding.

Close cooperation between the strategies and the managing authorities helps to put in place an effective embedding process. Networks of the authorities managing cohesion policy funds, and where relevant the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, have been established in the Baltic, Danube and Adriatic-Ionian regions. In the Alpine Strategy, the Financial Dialogue Networks continued their work, notably in the field of transport. These networks should step up their activity for the future.

Coordination and cooperation are more effective when national coordinators are also members or observers of the managing committees of cohesion policy programmes, and equally when representatives of these programmes take part in the national coordination structures of the macro-regional strategies. Finally, greater international competition calls for more diversified value chains. In this respect, the strategies would benefit from increased involvement of businesses and SMEs.

It is still too early to draw any firm conclusions from the results of the embedding of the strategies into a wider set of programmes. However, while initial information submitted by strategy stakeholders indicate that embedding may have been a successful practice in relation to centrally managed programmes²², there are fewer examples of strategy activities funded from the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund or the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

10. MEASURING THE IMPACT OF THE STRATEGIES THROUGH MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Over the years, the macro-regional strategies have delivered a substantial number of results and achievements, ranging from new coordination and cooperation processes to the facilitation and implementation of specific transnational projects and activities. To track progress, all the strategies have continued their work to establish effective monitoring and evaluation systems.

The Danube Strategy introduced comprehensive monitoring in 2022 bringing together different reporting strands in one comprehensive online reporting tool. In 2024, a call for tender was launched to carry out a process and implementation evaluation was opened. The final report is expected by spring 2025. The process of revising the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy provided an opportunity to substantially rethink its monitoring system, notably by determining indicators and targets for the priorities included in the new action plan. By the end of the reporting period, the monitoring and evaluation framework of the Baltic Sea Strategy had been completed but was not yet fully operational. Ongoing work to update the action plan includes the development of new monitoring indicators for the actions. The Alpine Strategy Monitoring Matrix is the main monitoring tool to monitor the progress of the strategy. It is currently under review, and indicators of activities will be updated.

To further enhance the capacity of all the macro-regional technical support structures to develop monitoring and evaluation systems, an initiative was taken under the Interact Interreg programme to organise a series of workshops during 2024. The aim was to offer a detailed and practical proposal for delivery, identifying relevant frameworks, methods and tools to capture and measure the impact of the macro-regional strategies, and develop ideas on how to work with evaluation questions. This could help to identify weaknesses and strengths and raise political interest in the macro-regional strategies.

11. COMMUNICATING THE STRATEGIES

With technical support units operating in all the macro-regional strategies, communication activities were reinforced during the reporting period. The Baltic Sea Strategy Point began operations in October 2022. It has focused on enhancing both internal and external communication efforts by refining messaging, improving stakeholders' communication skills, generating high-quality materials, and offering training to policy area coordinators on how to effectively demonstrate the Strategy's value-added effectively.

During the Slovenian Danube Strategy Presidency, a series of narratives was developed to highlight the influence of the Strategy within the region. Two distinct social media campaigns were conducted in 2022 and 2023 to raise the visibility of the Danube Strategy flagship projects. Subsequently, a subset of flagship narratives was adapted into twelve promotional videos and e-banners as part of an online campaign launched in 2024.

²² Examples provided in the Commission Staff Working Document attached to this report.

In the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy, activities focused on improving communication skills of stakeholders and engaging young people. The Communication Academies held online in 2022 and in Thessaloniki in 2023 were central to these objectives, ensuring the effective dissemination of the Strategy's main messages. Over the last two years, more than 20 thematic events have been organised to hold discussions with relevant stakeholders on issues encountered under each pillar of the Strategy.

The creation of the technical secretariat for the Alpine Strategy in 2022 and the launch of the Support Alpine Strategy project in 2023 were important steps in developing coordinated communications. Subsequently, technical audits of the Strategy's website led to its redesign to ensure greater security of the data it had gathered in line with data protection regulations and a more user-friendly interface in several language versions. By integrating the youth section into the website, the Alpine Strategy could better engage with young people from the region through various events and initiatives.

The annual fora organised by the strategies are major political gatherings with high-level political representation. Moreover, the EU's Macro-regional Strategy Week has become the biggest Brussels-based event dedicated to connecting Strategy stakeholders with representatives of the EU institutions, research and academia, civil society organisations and the general public. The 2023 Week focused on energy, skills and funding. In 2024, the Commission expanded the Week to also include the EU's sea-basin strategies to emphasise cooperation, coordination and synergies at all levels. It included a new feature, a 'speed-dating' event which brought together representatives from more than 20 Commission Directorates-General and stakeholders from the macro-regional and sea-basin strategies.

However, despite these efforts, macro-regional strategies remain relatively unknown. In 2023, according to Eurobarometer, the most well-known strategy recorded a regional awareness of 40%. This is below the figure for cohesion policy funds, which are known by 46% of respondents at EU level and considerably lower than Erasmus at 58%. This calls for reinforced efforts to further increase the public's knowledge of the macro-regional strategies and to make their impact and results more visible, for example by highlighting the many successful projects and processes generated by the strategies.

12. THE WAY FORWARD

All the strategies have been effective in advancing the green transition and to some extent the digital and fair transitions. In the future, work on the latter areas in particular should be intensified. Moreover, and although some progress has been recorded, there should be more emphasis on the energy transition, complementing the work of the four Political High-level Groups facilitating regional cooperation on the energy transition²³, the competitiveness of the European economy and on addressing demographic challenges including brain drain, ageing and the management of human mobility. To this should be added the topics of resilience, risks and security. Finally, the role of the strategies as accelerators for EU enlargement should be reinforced.

On governance, although all countries agree on the need to empower those responsible for implementing the strategies with clear mandates and effective decision-making capacity, many national and thematic coordinators are still left with insufficient resources and support, both in terms of staffing and funding. This is why all countries must ensure that coordinators

²³ The North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP), the South West Europe High Level Group and the Central and South-Eastern Europe Energy Connectivity (CESEC) High Level Group.

are given the proper resources to properly carry out their work so that the strategies can achieve their full potential. This is also why the macro-regional strategies should involve all key stakeholders in their work, including local and regional actors and underrepresented groups like civil society organisations, academia, businesses and clusters. To facilitate continuous dialogue and knowledge-sharing, the work to include young people in strategy governance should advance.

As to the embedding of the macro-regional strategies within funding streams, other than the success of the links with the transnational Interreg programmes, it is still too early to draw any firm conclusions. A principal task for the years to come will be to properly monitor and follow up on the extent to which these provisions have been taken up.

To amplify the socio-economic, environmental and territorial impact of cooperation efforts, synergies need to be strengthened between the macro-regional strategies and the sea-basin strategies. This will lead to further complementarities and coherence between these strategies, while enhancing cross-fertilisation of good practices and mutual learning.

Despite considerable efforts, more can still be done to raise awareness of the macro-regional strategies, both within their regions and across Europe. All of the strategies are continuously working to increase their capacity to communicate more effectively, especially as regards their impacts and results. At the same time, the macro-regional concept remains attractive and is receiving attention across Europe: the stakeholder consultation exercise carried out by the macro-regional strategies as part of the recent consultations on the future of Interreg generated significant interest and engagement. Nevertheless, if the strategies are to play a more active role in building a prosperous, sustainable and secure Europe, they must further develop the ability to constantly adapt to a changing environment. This is a necessity if the macro-regional strategies are to stay attractive and relevant.