

Macro-Regional Strategies in Europe – state of play and perspectives ahead

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Abstract

With the discussions around post-27 Cohesion Policy, one topic that often does not get the attention needed are Macro-Regional Strategies. They promote cooperation and alignment of funding to address common challenges and opportunities across specific geographical areas. While they have been studied in academic and political literature, no analysis of the preconditions needed to successfully create a Macro-Region has been undertaken yet.

This paper aims to analyse what enables Macro-Regions to mature quickly into successful structures by comparing the origins and governance of existing MRS. This allows not only to answer to our initial question, but also to identify which other geographical areas in Europe and beyond have the potential to become successful Macro-Regional Strategies.

We find that a precise geographical scope that aligns with the governance structure, a truly bottom-up approach to stakeholder involvement, a macro-regional identity and the harnessing of the driving power of regions are the four main elements to look out for in creating a MRS.

Taking a look at existing Sea-Basin Strategies around the Europe, we find that two in particular, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, unite those preconditions and could be successfully transformed into MRS, which would allow for an extension of stakeholder involvement and the variety of challenges tackled.



Glossary

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| MRS | Macro-Regional Strategy |
| SBS | Sea-Basin Strategy |
| ESIF | European Structural Investment Funds |
| CP | Cohesion Policy |
| EUSBSR | EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region |
| EUSDR | EU Strategy for the Danube Region |
| EUSAIR | EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region |
| EUSALP | EU Strategy for the Alpine Region |
| WestMED | Initiative for the sustainable development of the Blue Economy in the Western Mediterranean |
| PA | Priority Area |
| PAC | Priority Area Coordinator |
| NC | National Coordinator |
| NCG | National Coordinator Group |
| (T)SG | (Thematic) Steering Group |
| GA | General Assembly |
| EB | Executive Board |
| BAGL | Board of Action Group Leaders |
| AG | Action Group |
| GB | Governing Board |
| MS | EU Member State |
| EMFAF | European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund |
| TSS | Technical Support Structure |
| INTERREG CBC | Interreg Cross-border cooperation programme |
| INTERREG Transnational | Interreg Transnational cooperation programme |
| IPA | Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance |
| NDICI | Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument |
| CINEA | European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency |
| RTA-ATN | Réseau Transnational Atlantique - Atlantic Transnational Network |
| EP | European Parliament |
| CESE | European Economic and Social Committee |
| CoR | Committee of the Regions |
| ARLEM | Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly |



1. Introduction

Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS) have emerged as a response to the need for more coordinated and integrated approaches to address common challenges and opportunities across specific geographical areas. The rationale behind these strategies lies in the recognition that certain issues, such as economic development, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion, transcend regional and national borders and require a targeted collective effort. By promoting a holistic and inclusive approach, these strategies seek to enhance overall efficiency in addressing complex issues that affect multiple territories simultaneously.

The history of Macro-Regional Strategies in the EU can be traced back to the early 2000s when the concept gained prominence to address regional disparities and promote balanced development. Consequently, regional actors, with support from associations like CPMR, have been at the forefront of the promotion and advocacy efforts of this particular cooperation design. The first Macro-Regional Strategy, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), was launched in 2009. It served as a pilot and set the precedent for subsequent strategies. Since then, the EU has adopted three additional Macro-Regional Strategies, including in the Danube Region (EUSDR, in 2010), in the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR, in 2014), and in the Alpine Region (EUSALP, in 2015). Each strategy is tailored to the specific challenges and opportunities of its respective region, fostering collaboration and transnational partnerships among member states, regions, and various stakeholders.

While assessments of MRS have been undertaken in the past both at the political level (in the form bi-annual reports and Council Conclusions as part of the monitoring of the strategies) as well as the scientific level (with studies published by the European Parliamentary Research Service, CEPS, CPMR and others), those usually only look at the current strategies and possible improvements. What this document sets out to do is to find what preconditions and governance arrangements precisely make the current MRS effective and impactful, in order to be able to identify other geographies of the EU which might also benefit from the establishment of a new MRS.

To this end, this paper will first compare the goals and functioning of the existing MRS. It will then proceed to analyse the common preconditions and governance arrangements which make an area suitable for the establishment of a MRS. In the last part, we will apply the preconditions to existing Sea-Basin Strategies in Europe in order to determine whether they would be suitable in the short term for the transformation into a MRS.



2. MRS priorities and goals – tailored to macro-regional needs

This section aims to compare the set-up of goals and priorities in the different MRS in order to understand how the set-up affects the governance analysed in section 3. Macro-regional strategies address shared challenges within a defined geographical area, and particularly challenges such as pollution, climate change, and connectivity deficits that transcend national borders. By actively contributing to the EU priorities, Macro-Regional Strategies align with key overarching objectives, including the EU Green Deal, positioning the EU as a global force, and fostering a closer relationship between the EU and its citizens, as well as neighbourhood and enlargement countries.

To identify and leverage cooperation potentials, stakeholders have accompanied the establishment of each strategy with a respective action plan. These plans are designed to be regularly updated to adapt to emerging needs and changing contexts and provide a framework for enhanced collaboration. The table below showcases the thematic priorities and organisation of the existing strategies at the time of writing.

| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
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| <i>Main cross-cutting objectives (headings indicated as used by the strategy)</i> | <p><i>Main objectives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saving the sea • Connecting the region • Increasing prosperity | <p><i>Strategic objectives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counteracting Climate Change • Stimulating Sustainable Development • Establishing and enforcing Knowledge Society, stimulating the Economy and fight Poverty • Improving Mobility and Connectivity • Enhancing Democracy, sound Administration and strong Involvement of Civil Society and Youth | <p><i>General objective</i></p> <p>To promote sustainable economic and social prosperity in the region by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating growth and jobs • Improving the region's attractiveness, competitiveness and connectivity • Preserving the environment • Ensuring healthy and balanced marine and coastal ecosystems | <p><i>Cross-cutting objectives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting Digitalisation for the Alps • Accelerating the Energy Transition for a Carbon-Neutral Alpine Region • Promoting a Joint Water Management Transition • Boosting Circular Economy |
| <i>Pillars and respective priority areas (if applicable, headings as used by the strategy)</i> | <p><i>Sub-objectives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear water in the sea • Rich and healthy wildlife • Clean and safe shipping • Reliable energy markets • Good transport conditions • Connecting people in the region • Better cooperation in fighting cross-border crime • Improved global competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region • Climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management | <p><i>Pillars</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Connecting the region <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PA 1a Waterway mobility • PA 1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility • PA 2 Sustainable energy • PA 3 Culture, tourism, people to people 2. Protecting the environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PA 4 Water quality • PA 5 Environmental risks • PA 6 Biodiversity, landscapes and air & soil quality | <p><i>Pillars</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Blue growth <p><i>Objective: Promoting sustainable economic growth and jobs as well as business opportunities in the blue economy. Topics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue technologies • Fisheries and aquaculture • Maritime and marine governance and services 2. Connecting the region <p><i>Objective: To improve connectivity within the Region and with the rest of Europe in</i></p> | <p><i>Thematic Policy areas</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transversal policy area Governance <p><i>Objective: A sound macro-regional governance model for the Region to improve cooperation and the coordination of action</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Economic Growth and Innovation <p><i>Objective: Fair access to job opportunities, building on the high competitiveness of the region</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Group 1: Research and Innovation • Action Group 2: Economic Development |



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| | <p>Sub-objectives can relate to more than one main objective and are interlinked and interdependent.</p> <p><i>Policy Areas</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PA Nutri • PA Hazards • PA Bio-economy • PA Ship • PA Safe • PA Transport • PA Energy • PA Spatial Planning • PA Secure • PA Tourism • PA Culture • PA Innovation • PA Health • PA Education <p>Policy areas are interlinked and interdependent. Each PA has set of objectives and actions defined in a common EUSBSR Action Plan. 'Climate change' and 'cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries' are mainstreamed across PAs. Each PA has coordinators that might be association, national ministries or regions (e.g. PA Tourism). Each PA has a steering group made up of national representatives. CPMR BSC is observer in various Steering Groups.</p> | <p>3. Building prosperity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PA 7 Knowledge society • PA 8 Competitiveness of enterprises • PA 9 People & skills <p>4. Strengthening the region</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PA 10 Institutional capacity & cooperation • PA 11 Security | <p><i>terms of transport and energy networks.</i></p> <p><i>Topics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maritime transport • Intermodal connections to the hinterland • Energy networks <p>3. Environmental quality</p> <p><i>Objective: to address the issue of environmental quality, with respect to marine, coastal and terrestrial ecosystems in the Region. Topics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The marine environment • Transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity <p>4. Sustainable tourism</p> <p><i>Objective: Developing the sustainable and responsible tourism potential of the Region, through innovative and quality tourism products and services. Topics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversified tourism offer • Sustainable and responsible tourism management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Group 3: Labour market, education and training <p>2. Mobility and Connectivity</p> <p><i>Objective: Sustainable internal and external accessibility to all</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Group 5: Mobility • Action Group 6: Connectivity and accessibility <p>3. Environment and Energy</p> <p><i>Objective: A more inclusive environmental framework for all and renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Group 7: Resources • Action Group 8: Green infrastructure • Action Group 9: Risk governance <p>Action Group 10: Energy</p> |
| <p>Each priority area comprises a series of <i>actions</i> translating the objectives into concrete implementation <i>activities</i>. Action plans map out series of actions that can be complemented on a needs evolution basis.</p> | | | | |

Although the strategies use different wordings, they all follow a three-tiered approach to their thematic organisation. At the top, we see overall cross-cutting objectives tailored to the main challenges encountered in the area. They largely depend on the macro-regional geography and the socioeconomic situation. Those objectives are translated into pillars, which function as clusters around which a series of related priority areas are grouped. Those priority areas in turn



are split into actions and activities which represent the concrete output of the strategy on the ground while contributing to the attainment of the overall objectives. The EUSBSR represents a particular case, as it departs from the traditional cluster model which associates each PA to only one pillar. Rather, it embraces a complex cross-cutting approach in which the actions of each PA can contribute to several pillars (sub objectives), which in turn contribute each to one or more main objectives.

Cross-cutting objectives can help avoid compartmentalisation and duplication of actions and increase horizontal and vertical synergies. This is in line with an increased trend towards the setting of more precise cross-cutting objectives, as can be seen in the recently revised action plans and declarations for the MRS (see chapter 4). The abolition of traditional pillars in favour of sub-objectives points towards the innovative role of the EUSBSR in the establishment of MRS and the evolution of their governance structures.

3. Governance

The governance structures of MRS are not static. Indeed, one of the greatest advantages of MRS is their adaptability to local contexts and needs. But this also means that they are in constant evolution and the overview and analysis in this chapter can only mirror a certain point in time and outline trends and best practices as they stand at the time of writing. As academic literature on MRS has demonstrated, MRS governance and efficacy depends very much on the maturity not only of the strategy itself, but also the cooperation model and needs it is based on. Therefore, this comparative analysis will showcase how the different MRS operate at the moment, where the trends in governance are leading and what best practices could be applied to existing and potential future strategies.

3.1. Political ownership

This section aims to line out how strategic decision making is currently formalised throughout the strategies and how multilevel governance and subsidiarity are implemented at the strategic level.

| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
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| <i>Annual Fora</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The strategy holds an annual forum (since 2010) to communicate its work, objectives and achievements to stakeholders, policymakers and a wider audience. The sequencing of the MS hosting the AF is institutionalised by the NCG and part of the strategies' rules of procedure. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The incumbent presidency hosts an Annual Forum back-to-back with a ministerial meeting The AF discusses about the progress of implementation, exchanges best practices and identifies further opportunities for cooperation The ministerial meeting results in a declaration and provides political guidelines and visibility to the strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An annual forum is organised by the incumbent presidency to discuss progress and future actions. A ministerial meeting (Ministers and vice-ministers/state secretaries of Foreign Affairs) is organised back-to-back and, since 2016, merges the political level of EUSAIR with the one of the Adriatic and Ionian Council. It adopts an objective-setting declaration. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An Annual Forum is held back-to-back with a General Assembly of the strategy and organised by the incumbent presidency While the AF has the scope to create political awareness and communicate around the strategy, the GA lays down general political guidelines and formulates political declarations Composed of political representatives from each MS (national and regional) |



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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regularly attended and addressed by high-level representatives of the EC, MS and local and regional authorities | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministerial level attendance also at the Annual Forum in the form of round table participation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commission as co-chair and facilitator. Includes the Alpine Convention and the Youth Council as observers |
| <i>Presidency</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organised as annually rotating trio presidency as per rotating schedule Can only be held by MS Presides NCG and coordinates policy area coordinators | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organised as annually rotating trio presidency by alphabetical order Coordinates NCs and PACs Prepares annual work plan on how to improve the involvement of civil society, business, academia, social partners and the local level in the implementation of the EUSDR Organises Annual Conference of Parliamentarians of the Danube Region | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Held by the country chairing the All, rotating annually in form of a trio presidency based on alphabetical order Sets annual priorities Shared with and supported by DG REGIO | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annually rotating since 2023, in form of a trio-presidency to ensure continuity Can be held by all MS and/or Regions, upon agreement by the EC. F.ex. the Italian Presidency was organised by the Autonomous Province of Bozen Presides and hosts the GA, AF and EB, and organises conferences and meetings, ad prepares the annual work programme |
| <i>Main decision-making body</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Coordinators Group Meets at least four times per year Composed of National Coordinators Chaired by the Presidency General leadership, coordination and development of the Strategy, including establishing priorities Can initiate and decide on revisions of the strategy or the action plan Appoint Priority Area coordinators | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Coordinators Meetings Meet at least twice a year Chaired and organised by presidency Decide on annual work programme and events Initiates revisions of the strategy or action plans | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governing Board, meets biannually Co-chaired by country chairing the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative and DG REGIO Coordinates and issues strategic guidelines to the Thematic Steering Groups Initiates revisions of the strategy or action plans Sets agenda and guidelines for annual forum Unites national coordinators, pillar coordinators, permanent secretariat of All, representatives of the EC, EP, CoR, EESC, and INTERREG ADRION | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executive board Meets 3 times per year Each MS sends a delegation of maximum 3 national and regional representatives, including (but not only) the national coordinators Chaired by the presidency, co-chaired by the Commission In charge of coordination of the action plan implementation across AGs and governance levels, including endorsement of work plans by Action Groups Approval of proposals to be adopted by the GA |
| <i>National coordinators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MS representatives, delegated by the national line ministry Empowered to take decisions within NCG Main contact point and responsible for coordination within their respective MS Cross-sectoral national platforms have been established to support continuous dialogue amongst | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MS representatives, delegated by the national line ministry Empowered to take decisions within NCG Main contact point and responsible for coordination within their respective MS Cross-sectoral national platforms have been established in some MS to support continuous dialogue amongst | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two representatives per country <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry of Foreign Affairs for national coordination Authority responsible for managing CF/IPA funds for funding coordination | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can come from national or regional line ministry Empowered to take decisions within EB Main contact point and responsible for coordination within their respective MS |



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| | relevant national/regional/local stakeholders and about ongoing initiatives. | relevant national/regional/local stakeholders | | |
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The overview above demonstrates clearly the lack of involvement of regions in the strategic planning of the strategies. Except for EUSALP, Regions can only influence the strategic decision-making process via bilateral relations with the National Coordinators, and ad-hoc association of pillar-or priority area coordinators to meetings of the strategic decision-making body. This is contrary to the multilevel governance approach which should be at the heart of Macro-Regional Strategies and relegates Regions to an operational and implementation role. This poses the question whether the strategic priorities can accurately reflect regional needs, and how this influences the efficacy of the implementation at the operational level. While it should be appreciated that not all member countries of the strategies have Regions with the capacity and/or competencies to be part of a decision-making body, especially where candidate countries are involved, the possibility for countries to associate impacted regions to the strategic planning process should be considered. EUSALP demonstrates in any case that the association of regional governments can help in the alignment of thematic action plans with regional needs.

3.2. Operationalisation

This section will assess the operational organisation of the strategies, i.e. the bodies and rules translating the high-level strategic decisions into actions and outcomes. We see that again, the overall organisation of the strategies is similar, but that important differences lie in the details of the operationalisation (i.e. the decision over appointment of priority area leaders and the approval of work plans and rules of procedures).

| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| <i>Organisation of pillars</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring of objectives lies with the National Coordinators Group in cooperation with support from the Baltic Sea Strategy Point | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring of objectives lies with the National Coordinators Group in cooperation with support from the Danube Strategy Point | Monitoring of objectives lies with the Governing Board in cooperation with support from the EUSAIR facility point | Board of Action Group Leaders liaising with the EB and ensures horizontal coordination across Priority Areas. Dedicated Objective coordinators are in charge of horizontal coordination across pillars. |
| <i>Organisation of Priority areas</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Steering groups are in charge of each Policy Area Include voting representatives from states and regions Must convene at least twice a year Provides strategic guidance, hold policy discussions and identify key ways to achieve objectives Develop and adopt annual work plan The Policy Area Coordinator(s) of the steering group is/are nominated by the SG and decided by the NCG. They can be from a region or a member state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Steering groups are in charge of each Priority Area Must convene at least twice a year Provides strategic guidance, hold policy discussions and identify key ways to achieve objectives Develop and adopt annual work plan Voting members of the steering group are only national authorities. Other authorities and bodies can attend as observers Two or more Policy Area Coordinators from different states are nominated to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each pillar is managed by one Thematic Steering Group Subgroups can be set up if necessary Minimum one EU MS and one non-MS can chair the TSGs as pillar coordinators, some have 3 (one MS and two non-MS) Only national representatives are voting members. Sub-national representatives and other actors can participate where appropriate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include representatives from states and regions Voting members can be from national or regional level Take place at least twice per year Provide strategic guidance, hold policy discussions and identify key ways to achieve objectives Draft working plans Can be organised in subgroups Action group leader(s), maximum 2, can be national and regional and meet |



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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The SG may be an existing cooperation body within the PAC organisation, if appropriate and approved by the NCG | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> guide the SG and approved by the national coordinators Some PAs are divided into dedicated task forces | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide strategic guidance, hold policy discussions and identify key ways to achieve objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> in the Board of Action Group Leaders, liaising with the EB |
| <i>Existence of other (permanent) support structures</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baltic Sea Strategy Point Providing administrative and technical support for EUSBSR management, development and communication Coordinates capacity building, knowledge sharing between PAs Hosted by Hamburg and Turku regions BSP is guided by and accountable to the NCG who decides on the terms of reference | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Danube Strategy Point supports implementation, communication, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation at strategic and operational level Funded through the INTERREG Danube transnational programme and run by City of Vienna and the Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EUSAIR facility point gives operational and administrative, as well as communication, support to GB and TSGs Financed by the INTERREG ADRION programme Project partners are national, regional and local authorities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A technical Support Structure (or secretariat) has been set up in 2021 and is managed by Région SUD Provence Alpes-Côte d'Azur together with Région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes & Regione Lombardia. The cost is shared between the implementing bodies and the Interreg Alpine Space Project. It supports the management, monitoring and communication of the strategy and its actions. Financial Dialogue Networks connect EUSALP actions in specific domains to funding opportunities by facilitating exchanges between action group members and bodies in charge of funding management |
| <i>Rules of procedure for the strategy</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each Policy Area Steering group adopts their own rules of procedure based on a common template The national coordinators group adopts their own rules of procedure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each Policy Area Steering group adopts their own rules of procedure based on a common template | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> TSGs adopt their own Rules of procedures based on a common template GB adopts its own Rules of Procedures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each body of the structure is governed by a set of detailed rules of procedures outlining competencies and responsibilities. The rules are regularly updated to account for changes in governance. |

We clearly see a divide between strategies involving larger amounts of enlargement countries and those who do not. The Baltic and Alpine strategies give larger degrees of autonomy to their steering groups, and also allow them to include regions as regular members and even as Priority Area Leaders. On the other hand, regions are less involved in those strategies which include enlargement countries, i.e. the EUSAIR and EUSDR. This split is also visible in the organisation of the support structures or 'secretariats'. In the Baltic and Alpine, they are hosted and co-financed by regions, while EUSAIR and EUSDR rely more on national authorities and co-financing but the respective transnational INTERREG programmes.

3.3. Stakeholder involvement

Stakeholder involvement and the association of civil society actors is key to reach the overarching goal of MRS to create consensus between different networks on the actions and directions to take in order to tackle the overarching challenges. It is important, though, to see at where and how civil society and stakeholder networks are associated, and whether they can influence the MRS strategically or only at an operational level.



| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
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| <i>What networks/initiative preceded the MRS?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The strategy was established to better coordinate the broad range of cooperation activities in the Baltic Sea Cross-border integration, in particularly labour and trade, was particularly high already before the strategy A dynamic cooperation network at national, regional and sectoral level in fields of common interest preceded the strategy The CPMR Baltic Sea Commission, the Baltic Intergroup of the EP, and the High-Level Group on Baltic Interconnectors are examples of bottom-up initiatives for more cooperation in the Baltic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy was established in response to a specific challenge, i.e. the navigability, safety and protection of the Danube River as a major European export corridor The existence of physical borders between (non)Schengen-members lead to relatively low cross-border integration before the establishment of the strategy Interest and capacities between the members diverge, due to their geography, EU membership status and administrative structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The goal of the strategy was to complement and create synergies between existing structures. The governance of the strategy builds on the existing inter-governmental Adriatic-Ionian Initiative launched in 2000 Regional cooperation structures at national, regional and sectoral level predate the strategy, such as the CPMR Intermediterranean and Balkan & Black Sea Commissions (and CPMR Adriatic-Ionian Task Force since 2012), the Adriatic Ionian Euroregion, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Convention and others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The strategy was established to complement and align existing territorial cooperation structures The strategy builds on longstanding cooperation structures in the alps with different geographical and sectoral scopes, e.g. Alpine Convention, Interreg Alpine Space, Arge-Alp, Alpine NGOs Euregio Adria-Alpen, The Zurich Process, COTRAO, Espace Mont-Blanc These diverse networks between regional policy and administrative actors, mobilising resources and sharing power and responsibilities within the various structures precede the strategy |
| <i>How are stakeholders, networks and civil society associations involved?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National coordinators are to coordinate with national stakeholders to communicate about the strategy, gather input and facilitate their involvement Representatives of other countries, organisations and cooperation formats can be invited by the Presidency to participate in NCG meetings on an ad-hoc basis A SG may also invite permanent representatives of non-EU neighbouring countries or organisations to join the group as members or observers, upon a decision taken by consensus by the EUSBSR Member States' representatives in the group and endorsed by the NCG | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National coordinators are to create links with national stakeholders to communicate about the strategy, gather input and facilitate their involvement Non-governmental key implementers (e.g. international organisations, NGOs, trade unions, chambers of commerce, universities and local authorities) can contribute as observers to Steering Groups on invitation. This includes the reporting and evaluation of the SG work Other stakeholders can be invited to the PAC and NC meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National coordinators are to coordinate with national stakeholders to communicate about the strategy, gather input and facilitate their involvement The GB can associate non-permanent members on an ad-hoc basis Thematic Steering Group can include Regional Cooperation Organisations, International Financial Institutions and other participants on an ad-hoc basis, on invitation by the pillar coordinator. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National coordinators are to coordinate with national stakeholders to communicate about the strategy and gather input and facilitate their involvement Expert stakeholders from associations or public/private organisations can be permanent non-voting members of Action Groups on invitation The Alpine Council and the Alpine Space Programme are permanent observers in the Executive Board and General Assembly |
| <i>Institutionalisation of youth involvement</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 2020 EUSBSR Youth Declaration was prepared aims to institutionalise the Baltic Sea Youth Forum and | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Danube Youth Council is an advisory body to the NC and are involved on a thematically oriented | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EUSAIR is in the process of preparing the establishment of a youth council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Youth Council is a permanent advisory body which contributes and exchanges with GA, Presidency, EB, |



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| | coordinate the youth involvement in the EUSBSR policy areas | basis with all EUSDR governance bodies. | | BAGL and AGs. Members are appointed for one year by the EB and endorsed by the GA. It follows its own rules of procedures. |
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A common denominator of all MRS is that they build on existing stakeholder ecosystems in the respective region and associate those networks on ad-hoc basis to the governance of the strategy and its PAs. Still, we can see a difference between two groups of strategies. The first, which can be called the *organic strategies*, are those which can build on large, pre-existing networks bringing together local and regional actors on a wide variety of topics. Those are EUSBSR and EUSALP. EUSDR and EUSAIR, on the other hand, can be considered *thematically driven strategies*, as they have been created with specific goals in mind and are building on existing intergovernmental coordination bodies. This divergence is also reflected in the maturity of the overall strategy, where the governance system and association of stakeholders is much more fluid and systemic in the organic strategies, compared to the thematically driven strategies. In this context it should not be neglected, though, that the thematically driven strategies have large numbers of enlargement countries as members, in geographical areas that have not had the possibility to develop common cooperation spaces as was the case in the Baltic and the Alps, and first need to build those spaces up.

3.4. Communication

The relevance and added value of MRS is not always reflected in the level of awareness, especially in the general public, but also at the political level. While the technical level and the sectoral public is involved and aware of the strategies, the recent Council Conclusions as well as the report on MRS showcase the need for better communication. To communicate on the added value of the strategies to the political level, sound and reliable monitoring systems need to be put in place. At the same time, outreach activities towards the general public are needed to strengthen visibility.

| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
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| <i>What is the level of awareness of the strategy¹</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness in the General Public is slowly rising, up 1% on average year on year. It varies in participating countries between 63% in Finland and 18% in Germany and Denmark Awareness by sectoral public can be measured by the attendance of the hybrid Annual Fora, which attracts regularly over 1000 participants The political profile of the strategy is still low compared the scope and success of the work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness in the General Public is slowly rising, up 1% on average year on year. It varies in participating EU countries between 29% in Croatia and 9% in Germany, with awareness generally higher in eastern member states Awareness by sectoral public can be measured by the attendance of the hybrid Annual Fora, which attracts regularly over 700 participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness in the General Public is slowly rising, up 1% on average year on year. It varies in participating EU countries between 42% in Croatia and 9% in Italy Awareness by sectoral public can be measured by the attendance of the hybrid Annual Fora, which attracts regularly over 500 attendees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness in the General Public is unchanged year on year. It varies in participating EU countries between 29% in Austria and 8% in Italy. Awareness by sectoral public can be measured by the attendance of the hybrid Annual Fora, which attracts regularly over 1000 attendees |

¹ See Eurobarometer 531, June 2023, [Citizens' awareness and perception of EU Regional policy](#), page 26.



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| | <p>One interesting aspect concerning General Awareness for all strategies that some non-participating MS display higher degrees of awareness of certain strategies than those participating in the strategy. Examples are Italy, where awareness for EUSALP (9%) and EUSAIR (8%) is lower than then in Czechia (12%) and Luxembourg (13%) respectively.</p> | | | |
| <p><i>How is the added value of the strategy monitored?</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the ESPON macro-regional territorial monitoring tool Monitoring and evaluation framework set out in revised 2021 action plan endorsed by NCs PACs are in charge of monitoring and prepare annual reports, with the SGs endorsing and submitting them to the NCG NCs carry out monitoring at national level Managing Authorities report on their contribution to the strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A monitoring tool has been introduced in 2022, with the monitoring aligned with the Commission's report on MR NCs report on targets at national level SGs monitor and report on their respective areas PACs report activities according to rules according to the INTERREG Danube programme which finances the PAs Projects report according to the guidelines of the funding programme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Facility Point has implemented a monitoring system at pillar level in 2020 A comprehensive ad-hoc evaluation has been undertaken on ad-hoc basis in 2021 to feed into the EUSAIR revision process. Findings include the necessity to improve and streamline monitoring | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EB and the AGs are in charge of monitoring and evaluation A monitoring and evaluation tool (matrix with indicators) guides EUSALP implementation and progress Monitoring is also ensured through direct contact with the AGs members and through the regular exchange meetings |
| <p><i>How is the strategy communicated?</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication, information, publicity and targeted capacity building for stakeholders are to be ensured by the NCG, supported by the Baltic Sea Strategy Point The Let's communicate campaign centralises communication, outreach and branding activities, funded by Interreg, and is directed to citizens and sectoral public alike. Policy areas communicate via dedicated websites NCs coordinate communication and outreach at national level, with some countries having dedicated national websites | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication principles and activities are laid out (respectively) in a dedicated strategy, guide and annual plans. The DSP functions as communication hub National participation days and the Danube Participation day bring public administration representatives and civil society organisations together to strengthen trust and cooperation PAs communicate via brochures and social media NCs coordinate communication and outreach at national level, with some countries having dedicated national websites | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facility point lead partners is in charge of communication A EUSAIR communication academy was held by the Facility Point, to help key implementers together with young people and government communicators to communicate about the strategy and its impact Six out of ten countries engage communication experts to produce content or to launch articles around the strategy and pillars in national media The Do you know? campaign aimed at raising awareness of the Strategy in the General public The EUSAIR stakeholder platform strives to build an online stakeholder community A series of events and fora, hybrid and online, such as the Mediterranean Coastal and Macro-Regional Strategies Week, stakeholder, youth and embedding workshops | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The communication strategy is led by a dedicated communication officer in the TSS Annual adaptation of the communication strategy to target audience and objectives Focus on institutional communication to stakeholders, but also to general public through videos, podcasts and social media Regular attendance of relevant sectoral or geographical events and working groups Organisation of dedicated youth summer camps and road shows to communicated strategy to general public |



We see that the awareness and visibility varies significantly across strategies. While all have acknowledged the need for better monitoring and communication, the approaches differ. Nonetheless, the trend seems to be towards a clearly branded communication strategy, put in place and supported in the technical support structure. Similarly, coordinated monitoring systems, based on the ESPON MRS monitoring tool, are being put in place and implemented. What is yet unclear is the extent to which the outcomes of the monitoring influence the revision of work and actions plans.

3.5. Funding, embedding and technical assistance

One of the main factors for the success of MRS is the successful mobilisation of funding for projects of MRS relevance. This includes mobilising INTERREG and Cohesion Policy funding, but should also extend to other shared and direct management funds as well as local, regional and national funding opportunities. The maturity of a strategy can, amongst others, be judged by its capacity to coordinate the different funding streams and cooperate with other funding actors on projects of MRS interest.

| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
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| <i>What is the role of INTERREG transnational programmes?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INTERREG Baltic Sea Region transnational programme is thematically and geographically aligned with the strategy. • Finances governance of most policy areas, the annual Strategy Forum, the Strategy Point • Is the main co-financer of projects with MRS added value. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INTERREG Danube Transnational Programme is most utilised source of funding for implementing projects under the EUSDR action plan • Strategy is aligned with and integrated into the programme, also funding the PACs and the Danube Strategy Point | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INTERREG ADRIAN transnational programme supports finances both strategy governance and implementation • Project clusters have been aligned between the programme and the strategy for the 2021-2027 period | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INTERREG Alpine Space transnational programme is often the sole source of funding for both administration and implementation • Representatives are involved in each-others decision making processes |
| <i>How do other INTERREG programmes contribute?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmes covering the strategy are, such as Interreg CBC South Baltic or Sweden-Norway programmes • Also use IPA and ENI funding • Complement BSR funding but do not suffice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream cooperation programmes in the region also contribute, including those covering borders with non-EU countries where funding comes also from IPA and NDICI • Mainstream CP funds are needed to implement MRS action plan. To facilitate this, an embedding task force is in place | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some IPA CBC programmes have aligned their objectives with the strategy and/or | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCs are acting as liaison with mainstream and INTERREG programmes on an ad-hoc basis, by being associated to MAs, programming processes and organising information events |
| <i>What is the role of shared management funds?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream regional and national CP and EMFAF programmes are not yet aligned enough with the strategy due to their restricted thematic scope. • NCs and SG members have the role to coordinate with national Managing Authorities to embed MRS actions in their programmes • MA networks are in place and preparatory working groups for the | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding also considers the use of national and regional funding to complement EU funds • MA networks for the ESF, ERDF and NDICI/IPA are in place • In the programming for the 2021-2027 period, a shortlist of actions to be | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohesion Policy and IPA funds are the most important funding sources, particularly for flagship projects • While NCs and PCs are responsible for intra-country coordination and embedding of EUSAIR priorities, no systematic approach has been employed for the 2021-2027 programming period | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is mobilised from all shared management funds • National funding strategies increasingly take into account the MRS |



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| | <p>2021-2027 period included EUSBSR representatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DG MARE participates in the governance of EUSBSR providing the strategy with dedicated EMFF calls. • Possibility for joined international calls with MRS relevance | <p>embedded in the different funding instrument programmes has been developed between the different MAs and the PACs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance, tools and papers on embedding have been prepared by the DSP and the presidencies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MA networks for CP and IPA have been established (though they are very new and need to be reinforced) to coordinate dedicated calls (selection criteria etc.), exchange information and coordinate / complement projects • EUSAIR Facility Point is organising networking meetings and capacity building events to promote embedding | |
| <p><i>What is the role of directly managed funds?</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEF, Erasmus, LIFE and Horizon contribute to projects in the PAS corresponding to their thematic scope • Some MS have created links between the NCs and line ministries in charge of the funds to facilitate engagement of funding • Local and Regional level are less experienced in applying for DMF compared to SMF, resulting in a lack of capacity for systematic use of funding. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEF, Erasmus, LIFE, EaSI and Horizon contribute to projects in the respective PAS • CEF is particularly relevant due to the nature of the Danube programme (cantered, around others, around Danube navigability) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment with directly managed funds is still in the beginning stages. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of DMF is still rudimentary, due to lack of information and communication |

The fact remains that the most used funding instrument for MRS governance and projects are the dedicated transnational programmes. The technical assistance they provide is a key enabler for the further development and capacity building of strategies, including for embedding. While most contacts of strategies with national Managing Authorities (MA) and line ministries seem to be ad-hoc rather than systematic, the increased establishment of MA networks, the coordination during the programming of the 2021-2027 period between strategies and programmes and the links with national line ministries for direct management funds are all examples of an increasing maturity in the embedding process. Nonetheless, the capacity to embed is still varying between strategies, depending also on the differences of priority accorded to MRS in different MS. Furthermore, the embedding of non-EU funding opportunities remains scarce.

3.6. Enlargement and cooperation with non-EU countries

Three out of four MRS include countries which are not members of the EU. The particularity of MRS is that they allow all members, no matter their status vis-à-vis the EU, to work on an equal footing. Still, it is relevant to consider that, especially considering enlargement countries, the differences in structure, capacity and political interest between MS and enlargement countries will influence the work and structure of the strategy. In particular, the absence of a strong subnational administration can lead to a more national approach to administrating the strategy and its PAs. In return, the strategies allow candidate countries to get acquainted with EU decision making and procedures firsthand and to increase their knowledge of EU regional policy making.

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| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
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| <p><i>Which non-EU countries involved in the strategy?</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only EU countries are official members of the Strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova, Ukraine) out of 14 countries are candidate countries for EU enlargement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is the only strategy with more non-EU (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, San Marino) members than EU MS (Italy, Slovenia, Greece, Croatia) • San Marino it is the only non-EU, non-EFTA and non-enlargement country as member amongst all MRS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two non-EU EFTA countries: Liechtenstein and Switzerland. |
| <p><i>How are they contributing?</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate and Neighbourhood countries contribute IPA and NEXT funding to the strategy objectives • The participation of the non-EU countries is still contingent on administrative capacity, funding and political interest. Furthermore, their diverging administrative structures make it more difficult for regions to take an active role in the strategy, as not all of them have a corresponding governance level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum one EU MS and one non-MS can chair the TSGs as pillar coordinators, some have 3 (one MS and two non-MS) • The issues faced are the same as for EUSDSR in the Western Balkans (note that Albania is a Member of EUSAIR, but not EUSALP) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are involved at both national and regional level on equal footing with EC members. • During the Swiss Presidency, the cantons were actively involved in the planning and organisation. |
| <p><i>What is the impact of the strategy on EU neighbourhood and enlargement?</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the strategy cooperated with Russia and Belarus on EUSBSR objectives • Cooperation of the strategy with Norway and Iceland is ongoing, and specially relevant for the EU's Arctic and Northern Dimension | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite the involvement of enlargement candidates and the positive impact in creating experience in dealing with EU structures and funds, the impact of the strategy on the transfer of EU acquis is still low. This is one of the aspects highlighted by the 2022 MRS report as to be reinforced to increase the political relevance and visibility of the strategy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EUSAIR has been recognised as an important actor to facilitate the enlargement process in the Western Balkan candidate countries at sectoral level and by creating links at the political level • A 2021 report has made recommendations on how EUSAIR can contribute to the enlargement process, with a focus on the increase of regional capacities and identities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EUSALP does not have an enlargement or neighbourhood dimension according to the 2022 MRS report. Nonetheless, by including two non-EU states, and in particular regarding the particular relationship between the EU and Switzerland, it is a relevant tool in the relations between the EU, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. |

We see that the potential for MRS to positively influence the EU's relations with third countries. Both the neighbourhood as well as the enlargement dimension offer spaces for cooperation that can address specific challenges and needs. This has also been recognised in the The regional approach is of particular importance here, as it allows to bypass the mood swings of national relations and construct cooperation structures that can bridge geographic and political faultlines. At the same time, the flexible governance of MRS allows for adaptation to changing geographies and geopolitical situations, as has been seen in the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Finally, the transfer of knowledge and capacity from EU MS and regions to enlargement countries can contribute to regional integration into the EU and the faster uptake of the EU acquis.



3.7. Recent Action Plan revisions in the MRS

In recent years, all strategies have revised or started revising their action plans in order to account for the maturing of strategies as well as changing geopolitical, economic and societal environments. The first revisions process was undertaken by EUSDR and EUSBSR between 2018 and 2021. The timing was concentrated on the start of the new programming period 2021-2027 in order to closer align the strategy with the upcoming funding priorities.

| | EUSBSR | EUSDR | EUSAIR | EUSALP |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| <i>When was the last action plan revision</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started in 2019, finalised in 2021 To better take into account emerging global challenges (i.e. climate change, pandemics, demographic changes and migration), the EU's new strategic frameworks and 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework ('the EU budget'), as well as the governance challenges of the EUSBSR | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started in 2018, finalised in 2020 To update and concentrate the actions of the initial 2010 action plan, put them into a strategic background, and provides links to "embed" the EUSDR into other programmes Also aims to provide better strategic guidance to stakeholders on implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revision process ongoing, initiated in spring 2022 Adaptation necessary due to the new Multiannual Financial Framework, EU policies update, new members joining the EUSAIR (namely North Macedonia and San Marino), the ongoing enlargement process and the need to address current challenges | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revision process ongoing, started in 2022, expected to be finalized in 2025 Cross-cutting priorities have already been introduced in 2023 with a view to strengthen political relevance and success |
| <i>What were the main elements of the last or ongoing revision?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptation to, amongst others, the pandemic and recovery context Inclusion of resilience and social development with a focus on resolving cross-border issues as guiding objectives Two horizontal actions were mainstreamed across PAs (Climate change and cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries) Actions were consolidated from 73 to 44 Includes adaptation to the governance structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduced the Baltic Strategy Point as permanent secretariat and support structure to the strategy, funded by INTERREG Overall governance structure has been streamlined and clarified | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptation to a new strategic context, including the green and digital transition introduces five horizontal objectives relevant to all PAs Concentrating the strategies' actions by reducing them by 40% from 137 to 85 provides more strategic guidance regarding implementation Unchanged governance structure, including the four pillars and twelve priority areas as well as the lacking involvement of | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is likely that the revision process will follow similar lines, i.e. a reduction of actions with the introduction or streamlining of horizontal actions. | |



The consolidation of topics has been found to increase the possibilities for cooperation and to allow actors to be more creative by adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to finding solutions. It remains to be seen whether any adaptations to the governance structures will be undertaken. This would be particularly relevant concerning the involvement of regions in strategic decision making in EUSAIR, but given the outcomes of EUSBSR and EUSDR revisions this seems for the moment unlikely.



4. Conclusions and future perspectives for emerging Macro-Regional Strategies

In this section, we will take stock of the comparative overview from sections 2 and 3, and propose a series of best-case preconditions that ensure a maximisation of the added value of MRS. This will, in a second step, help us identify which other current geographies in Europe reunite some or all of these preconditions and might lend themselves to the establishment of a MRS. Finally, we will look at the most recent proposals for the establishment of new MRS, and the opportunities and challenges MRS face in the current European context.

4.1. What are preconditions for MRS to have an added value?

We have seen that while all MRS strive towards similar goals in terms of governance and cooperation (while of course keeping different thematic priorities), they show different grades of maturity in the different fields analysed. Even though MRS, due to their collaborative nature, develop over time and cannot be created ad-hoc, this section lines out the “ideal case” for creating a hypothetical new MRS with the aim to being able to identify potential regions that might benefit from further macro-regional integration.

A precise geographical scope that is reflected in the governance structure

All existing MRS are developed around a defining geographic feature which influences, if not determines, the economic, social and political development of the macro-region, and therefore creates common challenges and opportunities. The different geographies and related challenges in the four MRS showcase the adaptability of the macro-regional approach, while at the same time highlighting the need for precise geographical delimitation of the strategies in order to correctly and concretely identify the most urgent challenges. Seldom are entire countries, at least when considering larger ones like Germany, France, Italy or Spain, defined by only one geographical feature and face the same challenges everywhere. A nuanced approach to the strategies’ geographical scope at regional level is therefore necessary.

All MRS include at least one member where only one or more regions are covered. This creates a juxtaposition when compared to the strategic governing bodies in charge of outlining and defining the thematic priorities the MRS is to work on. Only in EUSALP are regional representatives, those closest to the issues, included in the strategic decision-making body. In the others, the voices of the single regions(s) need to be associated via the national coordinators or on an ad-hoc basis, but without having a vote or being continually associated to the high-level ministerial meetings. The strategic decision making is therefore (partly) dissociated from the geographical scope of the strategies, and those most closely affected by the common challenges cannot incise decisively on the strategic vision. Regional participation in the strategic governance bodies reflecting the geographic scope of the strategy is therefore of primordial importance.

Including existing bottom-up and inclusive cooperation ecosystems

Even though it might seem obvious, it should be remembered that the final goal, and added value, of a MRS, is to promote cooperation between a wide range of stakeholders around topics of MRS importance. The maturity of a MRS in achieving this can be estimated by looking at the involvement of diverse groups of actors in the different aspects of the strategy i.e. strategic goal setting, governance and implementation. As, due to the 3 NOs rule and the relatively little additional dedicated funding (via the respective transnational INTERREG programmes) financial incentives to participate in a MRS are relatively low, increased and streamlined cooperation has to be the main motivator for stakeholders to participate actively, whether those are public or private.



The interest to cooperate in a MRS will therefore be higher amongst actors which already have experienced the benefits of interregional cooperation and seek to expand, organise or strengthen it. Actors that are aware of the benefits of cooperation do not necessarily need dedicated financial incentives to participate as they are aware of the added value it can bring. When looking at the existing MRS, we see that all of them had some degree of pre-existing cooperation and coordination structures in place which benefited the development of a MRS. EUSBSR and EUSALP certainly had the most complex and mature pre-existing cooperation ecosystems, with horizontal and vertical links between actors at all governance levels (particularly the regional level) and across public and private sectors. This allowed them to more quickly build mature cooperation structures also inside the MRS and leverage the respective advantages faster.

This is not to say that regions with common challenges but less advanced cooperation ecosystems are not a good fit for a MRS. Especially across the outer borders of the EU, MRS structures can be the impulse needed to overcome divides and challenges to cooperation. But they will be slower to develop into a mature strategy, as actors need to be incentivised to cooperate, build trust between them and get used to new collaboration formats. This will take more time and effort on the part of all involved actors, and a variable geometry both in terms of governance, geographical coverage and thematic prioritisation will be needed. Still, here as in any MRS, the political will and capacity to work together on common challenges is determining for the success of a MRS, as we will see in the next section.

Harnessing regional political ownership

Macro-Regional cooperation must not necessarily take the form of MRS. As seen in the above section, diverse cooperation networks often precede the establishment of the strategies, forming around selective topics, challenges or objectives. The benefit MRS can bring here is to streamline objectives and actions, creating synergies and avoiding duplicating actions or working in silos. But for a MRS to work, and even to be established, actors need to recognise this added value and actively push for it. The multilevel governance approach of the MRS allows a broad variety of actors, including and in particular regional, to come together around shared issues and to act on them in their respective area of competence. The expertise and experience of regions at the strategic and operational level is often key to correctly identifying complex common challenges, thereby being the key political driving forces towards the establishment of MRS.

Still, most often their involvement once the strategy is established is (if any) relegated to the operational level, with strategic decision-making bodies (except for EUSALP) including purely national representatives. This has the adverse effect to exclude those most motivated to advance the strategy, and best placed to finding effective and efficient solutions, from the body responsible for advancing the strategy at the strategic, and sometimes even operational, level. EUSALP shows that, even though it was the last MRS to be established, the involvement of highly motivated regions has helped it to quickly develop into one of the most mature and successful MRS. Consequently, the involvement of regions at all governance levels has to be considered one of the most important success factors for any MRS.

Finally, the financing of MRS often comes out of ESIF funds under shared management, for which most of the time regions act as Managing Authorities. Closer associating regions would allow better alignment of funding streams, common cross-border calls of MR interest and the leveraging of public and private resources towards MRS projects. The financial dialogues in EUSALP, but also the MA networks in other strategies are good examples of the importance of associating regions to mobilise funding.

A (macro-) regional identity with an active civil society



All existing MRS have moved towards more systematic inclusion of members of civil society, i.e. experts, scientists, but also young people, trade associations and others. Civil society stakeholders are often perceived as key to reinforce the strategy and bring in outside knowledge and competencies, as well as potentially new and innovative approaches to the challenges at hand. The precondition for successful inclusion is, though, an active interest of the civil society in the macro-region and the challenges at hand.

To this end, a macro-regional identity, i.e. the identification of the stakeholders with the region covered by the MRS, is very important. This point is similar to what was discussed in the section on pre-existing cooperation structures, with the key difference that those pre-existing structures do not all necessarily cover or need to cover the entire macro-region to have a positive impact. The identification of stakeholders, on the other hand, with the distinct (macro) regional identity as a whole is important to incentivise active participation. Examples of this are the successful systematic inclusion of young people in separate youth bodies, but also the association of civil society experts to PAs, working groups and strategic decision-making bodies.

4.2. Identifying promising new geographies for Macro-Regional Cooperation

Apart from the MRS, the EU is also supporting Sea-Basin Strategies in the Atlantic, Western Mediterranean and Balkans, and is associated to the forming Great North Sea Basin Initiative. Sea-Basin strategies can be differentiated from fully-fledged Macro-Regional Strategies by a more restricted thematic focus on maritime issues, a lighter governance structure and a more centralised approach to strategic planning and, in particular, implementation. The last point in particular raises the question if, as maritime issues are inherently place-based and mostly impact the maritime regions located along the sea basin, rather than the countries as a whole, a development towards a Macro-Regional Strategy with more regional involvement might be beneficial to unleash the full potential of the sea basins. To this end, the matrix below assesses how the different SBS relate to the elements which give specific added value to MRS, and if there is the potential and need to transition into fully-fledged MRS.



| | Great North Sea Basin Initiative | Atlantic Strategy | Western Mediterranean Initiative | Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| <i>A precise geographical scope that is reflected in the governance structure</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National scope: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom Focusses on maritime spatial planning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to ensure there is space for all uses The marine ecosystem is significantly affected by human activities and in a dire state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National scope: France, Ireland, Portugal and Spain Focusses on maritime issues (four pillars): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ports as hub of the blue economy Ocean literacy Marine Renewable Energy Healthy Ocean / Resilient coasts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National scope: France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Malta, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lybia, Mauritania (national level) Focusses broadly on maritime-related issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maritime safety and the fight against marine pollution Maritime cluster development Skills development and circulation Sustainable consumption and production Biodiversity and marine habitat conservation and restoration Development of coastal communities and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National scope: Bulgaria, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Türkiye, Ukraine Focuses on generating sustainable growth in coastal regions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthy marine and coastal ecosystems A competitive, innovative and sustainable blue economy for the Black Sea Fostering Investment in the Black Sea blue economy Has a scientific pillar: Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda for the Black Sea (SRIA) |
| <i>Building on existing cooperation ecosystems</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Countries are already closely collaborating and have high ambitions for the development of renewable offshore energy CPMR North Sea Commission is associated as an observer and part of the working track on X F. ex. organisations for international cooperation on environment, fisheries, shipping, nature, and energy (Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic, North Sea Energy Cooperation, ...) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing cooperation bodies are official associated members, f.ex. CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission Secretariat, Atlantic Cities Secretariat, RTA-ATN Secretariat the association of economic and social committees of the Atlantic No link with the Atlantic association of chamber of agriculture or the different Euroregions in the Atlantic area. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows up on the Union for the Mediterranean 2015 Ministerial Declaration on the Blue Economy and the 5+5 dialogue Contributes to the Barcelona Convention and the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean Recognises the role of the CPMR Intermediterranean Commission, which is associated as observer. Has MoU with INTERREG and the Association of the Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce and Industry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly bottom down cooperation networks preceding the strategy due to local geopolitics: Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Convention on the Protection of the Black Sea against Pollution, EU initiatives, INTERREG programmes covering the Black Sea, Black Sea Littoral States Border/Coast Guard Agencies Cooperation Forum, Recognises the role of CPMR Balkan & Black Sea Commission, which is associated as observer. |



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| | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can build on BlueMed Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) for the Mediterranean | |
| <i>Harnessing regional political ownership</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political ownership is mainly at the national level • Possible coordination with ESIF MA/direct management funds still open | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic and operational decisions are made at the national level • No coordination between ESIF/MA. Only last year, the Atlantic Strategy made attempts to create an MA network following AAC lobbying in favour of involving more regions in the governance of the Strategy. • Assistance mechanism provided via EMFAF/CINEA, mainly there to logistically support the organisation of Committee meetings, pillar task force meetings and annual events | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the initiative comes out of a declaration by member states, the strategic political ownership lies still at national level, with support by CINEA through EMFF/EMFAF and INTERREG programmes (particularly MED) • Synergies with regular CP programmes/MA are not yet visible • Technical assistance provided via EMFAF/CINEA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic decision making is provided via ad hoc ministerial meetings at the national level on the initiative of the Steering Group • The Steering group is organised at national level, with CPMR and other regional and international stakeholders associated as observers. Regions can be associated only to technical groups together with other stakeholders • Technical assistance for the Black Sea Hubs and the central secretariat is provided via EMFAF/CINEA |
| <i>A common regional identity and an engaged civil society</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The declaration on the establishment of the GNSBI mentions the inclusion of civil society actors and stakeholders. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A yearly Atlantic Stakeholder Platform conference aims at publicising the accomplishments of the strategy, where stakeholders can be associated. A selection of stakeholders nominated by the States is involved in the Pillar 'Task Forces' to implement the priorities of the strategy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even non-WestMED member countries in the Mediterranean have been part of projects, including flagships, and have been supported by the WestMED assistance mechanism. This highlights the existence of a Mediterranean identity that goes beyond the area covered by the WestMED • Since 2021, organisation of annual community gathering event (e.g., 2023 WestMED Stakeholder Conference in Malta). • It yearly launches the WestMED project award to recognise the contribution of MED stakeholders to the Blue Economy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly engaged civil society organisations at Black Sea level, often supported via EU funding, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Black Sea NGO Network holds annual for a, connects stakeholders across the sea basin ○ Black Sea NGO Forum is part of the Black Sea Synergy framework, held annually • International Black Sea Action Day is celebrated annually on 31 October commemorating the signature of the Black Sea Strategic Action Plan |



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| | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• WestMED National Hubs assist stakeholders on the ground in finding funding opportunities, building partnerships and in project development. | |
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If we compare the different SBS, we notice that, except for the GNSBI, all of them include topics that are not only related to the sea itself, but also touch the communities living near to, and from, the ocean. Topics such as skills, ports and marine pollution are all related to the broader socio-economic structure of the sea-basin, be it the Mediterranean or the Atlantic. The move towards land-based issues around the sea basin furthermore highlights the potential to tackle other challenges affecting the broader region which are related to the sea basin, but not necessarily marine-based. Tourism, sustainable infrastructure, and climate change are only three areas which are intrinsically linked to the presence of the sea-basin but are not yet fully explored.

Similarly, the strategic and operational decision-making processes are for all SBS mostly in the hands of national authorities, with the regions and communities only associated as stakeholders or beneficiaries, and not in a systemic way in the governance of the strategy. This leads to the strategy missing out on the experience and expertise of the coastal communities and regions, while also hampering the knowledge transfer between regions and cross-dissemination of ideas and solutions.

Finally, it is often the coastal regions, their actors and civil society who have most at stake in relation to maritime and sea-basin related affairs and have therefore the most potential engagement and drive to cooperatively work on those topics, compared to national actors. This manifests in the multitude of existing interregional cooperation structures, of which many are only indirectly, if at all, associated to the existing SBS. Efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the strategies, should they be transformed into MRS with a strong regional component that includes the political and civil society level, could therefore increase significantly.

Calls for the creation of a Mediterranean and Atlantic MR in particular have made themselves increasingly heard, with the calls mainly emanating from the regional and interregional level, but also convincing national actors to push for EU MRS in the respective sea basins. Those two regions seem to already fulfil the preconditions for the transition towards a fully-fledged MRS in the short term and are also those where a MRS could bring the largest added value in terms of increased effectiveness and efficiency of cooperation.

4.3. Potential governance structure for an Atlantic and Mediterranean MRS

Having established that the Atlantic and Mediterranean sea basins are those with the most mature push towards a MRS and that they are the SB with the highest potential for developing a successful and efficient MRS given the preconditions needed as analysed in the sections above, we now propose to have a look how the driving actors, mostly regions and their allies at national and EU level, conceptualise what such potential MRS may look like and which actors are actively driving the agenda.



| | EU Strategy for the Atlantic Macro Region | EU Strategy for the Mediterranean Macro Region |
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| <i>Member States potentially involved</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • France • Ireland • Portugal • Spain | All countries in the Mediterranean, including the three main subareas (Western, Eastern and Adriatic-Ionian) and three shores (north, east, south). |
| <i>Non-EU members potentially involved</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Kingdom (in particular Wales) • Canada (Québec) • USA, Brazil, South Africa (potentially in the long term) | |
| <i>Existing strategies, initiatives, framework of cooperation and EU programmes that could converge</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atlantic maritime Strategy • CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission • Atlantic Cities • Chambers of Commerce of the Atlantic Area • Interreg Atlantic Area, North-West Europe and MAC • Interreg CBC programmes • Atlantic Economic and Social Committee Network (RTA-ATN) • Atlantic Corridor forum • Atlantic network of agriculture chambers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Med initiative • EUSAIR • Union for the Mediterranean • 5 + 5 Dialogue • Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean and ARLEM. • Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance (CPMR Intermediterranean Commission, Euroregions PMED and Adriatic Ionian, Med Cities...) • UNEP MAP - MSSD • Interreg Euro-Med programme and Next Med programme • Interreg CBC programmes • PRIMA • BLUEMED initiative |
| <i>Tentative key principles</i> | <p><i>Key principals</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horizontal and vertical integration of all governance levels • Inclusion of non-EU countries or regions of non-EU countries as full members on a variable geometry and voluntary basis | <p><i>Key principals</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the geopolitical nature of the Mediterranean geography, a multi-level governance system with a progressive and geometrically variable set-up is necessary • A gradual voluntary approach to integration including all governance levels • Existing strategies and support structures can be associated and streamlined, but not substituted (EUSAIR, WestMED etc.) • Special attention to islands due to their particular geography |
| <i>Key objectives and priorities</i> | <p><i>Key priorities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority 1: an innovative and sustainable Atlantic economy, leader in its key sectors of smart specialisations; • Priority 2: an interconnected Atlantic area not only in terms of transport but also in terms of digitalisation, production and use of green energies; • Priority 3: an Atlantic area resilient to climate change and front-runner in achieving a zero-pollution environment; | <p><i>Cross-cutting objectives:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital, green and technological transformation • Collaborative governance through a multi actor and multi-level approach • Youth inclusion <p><i>Thematic objectives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counteracting Climate Change, preserving the environment and promoting the ecological transition. • Increasing and improving sustainable growth and jobs. |



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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority 4: a socially and culturally cohesive Atlantic area to secure the attractiveness of territories and enhance skills in the main sectors of smart specialisation; • Priority 5: improving governance and cooperation in the Atlantic Area | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting Green Economy and Energy Transition, Accelerating Decarbonisation • Connecting the Mediterranean people and territories. • Promoting Mediterranean Citizenship and youth. • Enhancing integration, cohesion, and territorial development in the region. |
| <i>Proposed Pillars</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation and sustainable Atlantic economy, integrating <i>Pillar I: Ports as gateways and hubs for the blue economy</i> and <i>Pillar III: Marine renewable energy</i> of the Atlantic Strategy • A socially and culturally cohesive Atlantic area, integrating <i>Pillar II: Blue skills of the future and ocean literacy</i> of the Atlantic Strategy • Atlantic area resilient to climate change and frontrunner in achieving a zero-pollution environment, integrating <i>Pillar IV: Healthy ocean and resilient coasts</i> of the Atlantic Strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate Change Adaptation. • Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency. • Transition to a Protected, Restored and Resilient Environment • Water Management and Fight Against Desertification. • Sustainable Blue Economy. • Multimodal Transport and Sustainable Mobility. • Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Heritage. • Urban Living Areas. • Social Inclusion and Equality |
| <i>Proposed governance and main inspiration from existing MRS</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Follow the governance model of EUSALP</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Involvement of Regions in the strategic decision-making bodies and implementing bodies ○ Create a General Assembly that would gather high-level representatives of participating States and Regions, the European Commission and all interested parties the Atlantic civil society networks representatives ○ Involve different levels of governance in the Atlantic Macro-Region Steering Committee ○ Create detailed rules of procedure that would support the participation of the relevant stakeholders and the civil society organisations on the different governing bodies, so as to allow them to have a say about how to orient the future of the Strategy, decide on areas of cooperation to focus on, and appoint Priorities/Flagship projects' coordinators ○ Similar to the Financial Dialogue networks: Creation of an Advisory Board on funding opportunities attached to the Macro-Region, including different Directorates of the European Commission, Managing Authorities of INTERREG and Cohesion Policy programmes and as well as relevant national and regional authorities • <i>Include lessons and best-practices from EUSBSR</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Build the MRS on the bottom-up political ownership (mainly from regions) and existing organisational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Follow the governance model of EUSALP</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Involvement of Regions in the strategic decision-making bodies (General Assembly and Executive Body), implementing bodies (Technical Secretariat, Pillar Working Groups and Territorial Antennas) and other potential levels of government ○ Allowing regional authorities to be Territorial Antennas, i.e. the equivalent to national coordinators in EUSALP (<i>Territorial Antennas ensure mobilization of stakeholders on the ground and to guarantee horizontal Flagships' coordination at territorial level</i>) ○ Including non-EU countries, also at the regional level, the MRS can support the strengthening of ties with neighbourhood countries ○ Systematic involvement of other levels of government and stakeholders in the thematic action groups –i.e, Pillar Working Groups- (i.e. local and civil society stakeholders/associations) • Establish a rotating multilevel Co-presidency held by one member from the EU and one from a partner country embedding both national and regional/local levels and collaborating with the close rotating support of representative organizations of regional and local authorities and their respective networks • <i>Inspiration from EUSDR and EUSAIR</i> |



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| | <p>structures. In particular, build on the Atlantic Sea-Basin Strategy governance structures and CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission and political support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Connect the governance of the future Macro-Region to the Atlantic Corridor Forum, to the network of Atlantic chambers of commerce, to the Atlantic network of Agriculture Chambers (AC3A), to the ATN (Atlantic Transnational Network) and to Atlantic Cities and explore the possible foundation of new Atlantic networks (Universities, clusters...); ○ Align closely with Directly managed EU funds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align closely the <i>Interreg Atlantic Area transnational programme</i> with the emerging strategy to fund governance structures and projects, similar to the existing MRS • Creation of an Atlantic Observatory to gather knowledge and develop tools for monitoring the socio-economic trends affecting the Atlantic area. The Atlantic Observatory would provide advice for the General Assembly • Creation of a permanent Secretariat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Including candidate and potential candidate countries, the strategy can support the enlargement process and the transfer of the EU acquis, strengthen the governance of emerging regional governance structures as well as help potential new members navigating the EU way of working ○ <i>Streamline NDICI, NEXT, ESIF and Interreg funding</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Include lessons and best-practices from EUSBSR</i> ○ Build the MRS on the bottom-up political ownership (mainly from regions) and existing organisational structures (WestMED, CPMR Intermediterranean Commission, MedCoopAlliance...) ○ Create a permanent technical secretariat that supports the strategy. An existing institution (e.g. the Union for the Mediterranean – to be determined) or an ad hoc consortium of organisations/regional/local entities, could host the Secretariat and provide administrative and communication personnel, while the technical staff could be composed mainly of seconded experts from the participating regions and entities. ○ Align closely with Directly managed EU funds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Associate Euroregions to the strategy, in addition to the other governance levels</i> • <i>Align closely the Interreg Euro-MED transnational programme with the emerging strategy to fund governance structures and projects, similar to the existing MRS</i> |
| <p><i>State of play of the lobbying action and future perspectives</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favourable reports have been issued by the EP, CoR, CESE, with support from Atlantic regions and civil society stakeholders • Support for the strategy has been voiced by the Chambers of Commerce of the Atlantic Arc • Regional and ministerial level contacts have been frequent, to promote the strategy, with the CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission taking a leading role • Spain and Portuguese Secretaries of States have pronounced in favour of the MRS creation during AAC General Assembly. France, Spain and Portugal agreed in a Ministerial Declaration to explore the creation of an Atlantic MRS in November 2021. • The strategy was mentioned in the General Affairs Council on 12/12/2023 with Member States calling on the Commission to explore its creation. The Council is not preparing the mandate for the Commission on the creation of the strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections and discussions ongoing from 2010, • Favourable reports of the EP (2012 and 2023), of CESE (2013), of the CoR (2022), and ARLEM report (2014) • Large number of public and private stakeholders and associations signed the Declaration on Friends of the Mediterranean Macro-Region (2023) • Contacts at regional and ministerial level promoted by the CPMR Intermediterranean Commission (e.g., letters to and meeting with Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, letters to Spanish and Greek national governments, among others), specific requests from Italy during last General Affairs Council meeting in 2023 but topic was not treated) • Italy, France and Spain have pronounced themselves in favour of the strategies' creation |



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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Belgian Presidency considered the evolution of MRS and in particular the Atlantic and the Mediterranean as one of the most important aspects for regional policy• Sines Declaration from April 2024: “Vision and Action Plan for a prosperous Atlantic Arc by 2030. Towards an Atlantic Macro-Region” by the CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission, reiterating the need for an Atlantic MRS and making concrete proposals for a future governance structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• International Summit held in Barcelona and Declaration in favour of the Med MRS (2023)• Small IMC regions delegation in Mons (March 2024) during the 10th EU Summit of Regions and Cities. Bilateral contacts with French Minister Dominique Faure• First draft of the future EUSMED action plan drafted by CPMR-IMC regions in consultation and collaboration with key stakeholders (networks, programmes, initiatives...). It is a 'rolling document' that has already been shared and supported by all the IMC regions, some cooperation programmes such as EURO-MED and ADRION INTERREG and currently being shared and integrating feedback from other programmes (e.g. PRIMA), local and regional authority bodies (e.g. those belonging to the Med Cooperation Alliance) and Euro-Mediterranean (e.g. Union for the Mediterranean) and multilateral institutions (UNEP MAP, etc.).• European Parliament Pilot project on Water management drawing conclusions for a Mediterranean-scale integrated strategy on the matter is in preparation (2024), to be realised in 2025• ESPON targeted analysis to gather territorial evidence on the cooperation happening in the Mediterranean (i.e., highlighting the role of public investment policies to shape cooperation dynamics within the Mediterranean Macro-Region). The aim would be to support the establishment and development of new and existing bottom-up collaborations in formal settings (such a future Med Macro-Regional Strategy). It would provide empirical evidence of the exiting cooperation (actors, topics), showing the converging priorities and potential existing gaps, information key for the setting of a future Mediterranean Macro-Region (analysis to be conducted between mid-2024 until end of 2025).• The Belgian Presidency considered the evolution of MRS and in particular the Mediterranean and the Atlantic as one of the most important aspects for regional policy. As main lobby action, a coordination with IMC supportive regions (e.g., Calabria for Italy, Catalunya for Spain, Western Greece for Greece) is carried out to urge their respective central governments to pressure the Belgian Presidency and the European Council for a formal request to the European Commission to activate the EUSMED strategy by the end of the Belgian Presidency semester. |
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The way the proposed Atlantic and Mediterranean MRS are conceptualised is clearly inspired by a series of best practices from the existing MRS. But as their structure and organisation are not a copy-paste exercise, and emphasise a variable geometry and multilevel governance, they will be able to account for and adapt the local context in ambition, targets and operationalisation. In any case, they reunite the necessary preconditions for a successful evolution towards a mature MRS approach in the medium term, due to the high political ownership, the existing macro-regional identity and cooperation platforms and stakeholder networks. It should be remembered that MRS are not static but evolve and mature over time. Still, the more mature existing structures are, the quicker the added value of the MRS will become visible.



4.4. The future of MRS – Opportunities and challenges in a changing geometry

Macro-Regional Strategies seem to be here to stay. They have proven their added value to address regional challenges and promote opportunities at the macro-regional level. Despite governance structures that are often less than ideal at the strategic level, excluding, with regions, the actors closest to the challenges and therefore those that can best address them, they have done a great deal to promote transnational integration and promote multi-level governance in the EU and beyond.

Reflections on the future scope and design of MRS are making themselves increasingly heard. The existing strategies, with action plan revisions and the streamlining of governance, are taking stock of past developments and continue to align closer with EU priorities. At the same time, the past two EU Council presidencies, Spain and Belgium, have made the creation of new MRS in the Atlantic and Mediterranean a priority, raising expectations that the next MMF, and Cohesion Policy programming period, might start with six instead of four MRS.

This of course leads to further reflections what this will change for the future funding and embedding of funding sources for MRS. First, all MRS members are now either EU or EFTA Member States or candidate countries, leading to changes in funding (IPA likely replacing NDICI in the next MFF), but also the need to closer align the MRS to the enlargement process. Second, almost every EU region will be covered by at least one, if not several, MRS. More guidance relating to the alignment of funding to MRS and clear provisions for it in the Regulations for the post-2027 shared management funds will be necessary. Lastly, Macro-Regions will continue and expand their role as geopolitical actors, creating links across border at all governance levels, national and regional. Especially regions will need to be equipped to handle those responsibilities, raising the question of capacity building and technical assistance.

In conclusion, it is evident that a Europe of Macro-Regions can increase the resilience of the EU in as a whole by increasing cooperation and strengthening capacities at all governance levels. Under the condition that all governance levels, including regions, are allowed to bring their support and knowledge to the macro-regional governance structures and real strategic multilevel governance is achieved, a Europe of Macro-Regions will be a significant factor in bringing the EU added value to the local and regional levels, and finally to the individual communities and citizens.



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The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) represents more than 150 regional authorities from 24 countries across Europe and beyond. Organised in Geographical Commissions, the CPMR works to ensure that a balanced territorial development is at the heart of the European Union and its policies.



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