



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Council conclusions on added value of macro-regional strategies

*GENERAL AFFAIRS Council meeting
Luxembourg, 22 October 2013*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

RECALLING the Council Conclusions of 13 April 2011¹ inviting the European Commission (hereinafter: the Commission) to clarify the concept of macro-regional strategies, to evaluate their added value and submit the outcomes to the Council and the European Parliament by June 2013 and WELCOMING two Commission Reports – one concerning the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region of 8 April 2013² and the second one on the added value of macro-regional strategies of 27 June 2013³ (the latter hereinafter: the Commission Report).

RECALLING the Commission Report on the Implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) of 22 June 2011⁴ and the Commission Communication on the review of the EUSBSR of 23 March 2012⁵ which constituted the basis for the respective Council Conclusions on the review of the EUSBSR of 15 November 2011⁶ and on the completion of the review of the EUSBSR of 26 June 2012.

WELCOMING the revised EUSBSR Action Plan of February 2013 and NOTING the conclusion of the EUSBSR review process started in 2011.

ACKNOWLEDGING the successful start of the implementation phase of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) outlined in the first report on its implementation and WELCOMING the examples of projects and initiatives already started.

P R E S S

ACKNOWLEDGING a macro-regional strategy as an integrated framework endorsed by European Council⁷ and REITERATING that the macro-regional strategies are based on the guiding principles of no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures, no new EU legislation while relying on smart coordinated governance approach and synergy effects: better implementation of existing legislation, optimal use of existing financial sources and better use of existing institutions.

RECALLING debates on the implementation of macro-regional strategies and their added value conducted within the framework of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council and WELCOMING the important role of the European Parliament and its activities especially in supporting the macro-regional approach, of the European Commission as an overall coordinator and facilitator as well as the commitment of the Member States concerned, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee and other interested stakeholders.

RECOGNISING the parliamentary dimension as an important link between the macro-regional strategies and society as a whole, both at regional and national as well as European level.

Concept and added value

1. WELCOMES the clarified concept of macro-regional strategies presented in the Commission Report referring to an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council relating to Member States and non-EU countries in the same geographical area in order to address common challenges and to benefit from strengthened cooperation for economic, social and territorial cohesion. EMPHASIZES that in further evolution of macro-regional strategies priority should be given to the issues of coherence and strategic relevance for the macro-regions concerned, providing genuine value-added in relation to horizontal community policies, in particular to the Europe 2020 Strategy and to result-orientation.
2. RECOGNISES that the existing macro-regional strategies are proving their added value both strategically and politically by serving as a framework for:
 - a. strengthening integration of the Member States concerned and cooperation with interested non-EU countries in the areas of common interest and in addressing common challenges of the respective macro-region;
 - b. mobilising a variety of available financing sources and the relevant stakeholders towards improved policy development and implementation of different EU, national and regional policies in relation to, inter alia, environment, transport, education, energy, research, innovation, health and so contributing to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, completing and deepening the EU internal market and increasing competitiveness, in particular developing TEN-T core networks and completing the internal EU energy market by 2014, to the sustainable development of interested regions, as well as to the economic, social and territorial cohesion;

- c. improving existing cooperation mechanisms and networks and promoting where relevant the development of new ones within and between participating countries leading to greater coordination and efficiency of the efforts, better spending as well as promoting multilevel governance by encouraging cooperation between national, regional and local levels and between public and private sectors;
 - d. contributing to developing and improving access to financing of the new high quality projects and giving momentum to successful existing ones.
3. ACKNOWLEDGING the added value of existing macro-regional strategies, RECOMMENDS when considering creating new macro-regions in agreed geographical areas to ensure that a) there are particular needs of strategic importance for the macro-regions for improved high level cooperation in solving common challenges as well as using opportunities, b) involvement of the EU is appropriate and existing EU horizontal policies would be reinforced, c) the appraisal of the added value at EU and macro-regional level is evidence-based, d) there is clearly expressed political will from both the Member States concerned and their involved regions for such an approach.
 4. RECOMMENDS to the Commission and Member States to consider adapting where relevant the best practices of macro-regional approach also to cooperation areas of smaller scale and intensity.
 5. UNDERLINES the importance for macro-regional strategies to focus on clearly defined objectives with macro-regional aspects and a readiness of the Member States concerned to maintain political commitment in the long term and translate their commitment into administrative support in order to ensure effective delivery of these objectives.

Ownership and governance

6. UNDERLINES the importance of responsibility and ownership of the Member States concerned and their regions and local actors which should be strengthened through recognizing the strategies as horizontal responsibility of the governments as a whole, inviting more active participation of line ministries, allocation of adequate staff and enhancing political support in the implementation of macro-regional strategies at all levels (EU, national, regional, local). A clear and long-term commitment of the stakeholders is a prerequisite for the success of the macro-regional concept.
7. RECOGNISES the territorial dimension of the EU sectorial policies and therefore ENCOURAGES the inclusion of the macro-regional strategies on the agenda of the Council in its relevant formations as and when appropriate in order to ensure closer links to the respective EU policies, leading to added value in strengthening EU territorial cohesion.
8. EMPHASISES that the success of macro-regional strategies is based on both the political ownership and better involvement of the social and economic partners, including civil society and private sector. UNDERLINES the need to pay more attention to the effective implementation of multilevel governance and mobilisation of partners aimed at implementing EU policies at macro-regional level and LOOKS FORWARD to the debates at the Annual Fora in Bucharest on 28 and 29 October 2013 and in Vilnius on 11 and 12 November 2013 by the respective stakeholders.

9. UNDERLINES the importance of well-structured and proportionate governance tailored to the specific macro-region with regard to the cooperation framework based on the needs of the macro-region and added value of the strategy, that is essential for the effective implementation of the macro-regional strategies, REFERS to the defined roles and responsibilities of the main implementing stakeholders of EUSBSR⁸, ENCOURAGES other macro-regional strategies as and where appropriate to adapt and implement these roles and responsibilities and INVITES:
- a. the Commission to continue playing a leading role in strategic coordination of key delivery stages of the macro-regional strategies, in partnership with the Member States and in accordance with the subsidiarity principle,
 - b. the Commission and the Member States concerned to encourage their authorities responsible for the management of different financing instruments to align existing EU and other funds and instruments to the goals of the macro-regional strategies where appropriate,
 - c. the Member States concerned to encourage their authorities responsible for the management of different financing instruments to introduce, where appropriate, possibilities for transnational cooperation, which shall focus on actual implementation, in relevant programmes in order to facilitate cooperation activities in a macro-regional context,
 - d. the Member States concerned and the Commission to ensure that the governance of macro-regional strategies is coherent with the implementation of EU policies without compromising the coherence of the EU as a whole,
 - e. the Member States to strengthen the internal implementation structures (national contact points, priority area coordinators, horizontal action leaders, priority area focal points), to ensure these are as effective as possible to deliver the aim of the strategy, while avoiding unnecessary administrative burdens,
 - f. the Member States concerned to use the possibilities of new and existing programmes and European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) where relevant to provide development and implementation support and to develop key inspirational pilot projects as well as communicate the benefits to the public, and ensure sharing of good practice, making use, among others, of the support of the EU-wide INTERACT programme,
 - g. the Commission and the Member States to consider how to strengthen the role of the High Level Group using this forum for relevant policy-level discussions.

10. APPRECIATES the political guidance by foreign ministers or other high level political representatives appointed by the countries implementing the EUSDR guaranteeing significant regional leadership in combination with the comprehensive thematic orientation of the Annual Fora and CALLS for further work on improvement of the emerging governance mechanism of the EUSDR.

Implementation

11. EMPHASISES the importance to align available financial resources at the EU, national and regional level with the objectives, roadmaps and implementation plans of macro-regional strategies consistent with the needs of the programming areas as identified by the Member States, as well as to further engage the private sector. ENCOURAGES both the Member States and other relevant authorities concerned to embed these objectives into the programming documents of the new 2014-2020 programming period in a coordinated way taking into account possibilities foreseen in the Common Strategic Framework for 2014–2020 inter alia by cooperative governance arrangements and specific mechanisms like giving priority in the selection process to the operations deriving from these strategies or by organising specific calls for them.
12. CALLS on the Commission together with all other relevant actors to assess all options for a simple and reliable financial support of the priority area coordinators and horizontal action leaders utilising the available funds.
13. EMPHASISES the necessity for more active participation of the private sector, regional, local and civil society stakeholders in the implementation of the strategies, which can be achieved, inter alia, through setting the appropriate conditions for those stakeholders to apply with projects for funding under the programmes for the period 2014-2020.
14. RECOGNISES the usefulness of the seed and development funding as a means of preparing good quality projects and its importance in getting both local and regional stakeholders and representatives of organizations and civil society more involved in the project activities.
15. RECOGNISES the importance of strategy level targets of EUSBSR and EUSDR already in place and INVITES the Member States concerned jointly with the Commission to work further on setting indicators at priority area/horizontal action level where missing. ACKNOWLEDGES that while agreed indicators and targets are an essential factor to mobilize and focus efforts, progress under the strategies should also be assessed in a more general sense, in terms of policy coherence through notable improvements in integration and coordination of policies among Member States.
16. UNDERLINES that monitoring and evaluation of the approach should be based on realistic indicators and targets as well as an overview of priority area/horizontal action activities and AGREES that monitoring and evaluation processes should involve all the relevant stakeholders and support where appropriate development and revisions of the content of the Strategies.

17. TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the experience of the EUSBSR implementation, while realising that development of the macro-regional strategies is based on a learning process, ENCOURAGES the Member States and the Commission in order to maintain focus and relevance to introduce suitable mechanism, such as sunset clauses or agreed specific criteria, for those priority areas/horizontal actions that seriously fail to deliver progress on performance and added value, with the option of revising their content or on mutual consent merging them with another priority area/horizontal action and if that fails reducing their number.
18. ENCOURAGES the Commission and the Member States concerned to build on current work on information and promotional activities, such as the "Communication Initiative"⁹, with the aim of enhancing the visibility of macro-regional strategies, increased efficiency of information dissemination as well as awareness regarding the strategies' targets, results and their value to macro-regions' well-being. These initiatives must be proportionate and provide value for money.

Cooperation

19. NOTES the good practices of territorial cooperation of the macro-regional relevance and ENCOURAGES participating countries to utilize unused synergies between territorial cooperation and macro-regional strategies as well as to strengthen the exchange of best practices between existing macro-regional strategies, capitalization of results and synergies among projects. INVITES the Member States concerned and the Commission to develop and strengthen links between the EUSBSR, the EUSDR and with any future macro-regional strategies and sea basin strategies.
20. While ACKNOWLEDGING the integrity of the EU decision making in the implementation of macro-regional strategies, WELCOMES the efforts made so far in cooperation with interested non-EU countries in the regions in addressing common challenges and exploiting common opportunities and UNDERLINES the need to further enhance such cooperation by fully using the potential of all main regional cooperation platforms in the relevant fields.
 - a. In the EUSDR, WELCOMES the efforts of the respective countries to respond to the environmental, energy and social challenges affecting the area from the Black Forest to the Black Sea, to boost the smart and inclusive growth in the Danube Region and further ENCOURAGES to strengthen cooperation with non-EU countries, where such cooperation demonstrates added value, and thus supports integration processes, develops their political, socio-economic, sectoral links with the EU and builds socially inclusive prosperity in the Danube region. WELCOMES the cooperation platform established in the framework of the EUSDR and TAKES NOTE of the necessity to facilitate the access of the non-EU countries to the EU funding for the areas of cooperation of the EUSDR.

- b. In the EUSBSR, TAKES NOTE of the Commission's efforts and EEAS to develop dialogue with the non-EU countries concerning concrete projects and initiatives in the relevant areas of mutual interest, ENCOURAGES the Commission and the EEAS to continue these efforts in cooperation with the Member States concerned on the basis of the guiding principles of the macro-regional strategies and INVITES the Commission and the EEAS to inform the Council on a regular basis on the progress made.

Future prospects

21. UNDERLINES the importance to focus on the implementation of the EUSBSR revised Action Plan. TAKES NOTE of the specific recommendations for the EUSDR outlined in its first implementation report and ENCOURAGES Danube States and the Commission to use the Annual Forum in 2014 and to finalise the response to the recommendations by end 2014.
 22. INVITES the Commission to facilitate the discussions on improving the governance of the macro-regional strategies and to report to the Council by the end of 2014, including streamlining the reporting, reviewing and follow-up.
 23. INVITES the Commission to continue active assistance to the participating states in the preparation of the new EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region and welcomes the commitment of the Member States and interested non-EU countries in creating a result oriented macro-regional strategy with an added value at EU and macro-regional level. TAKES NOTE of the discussions on the future macro-regional strategies and LOOKS FORWARD to the presentation by the Commission of a new EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region before the end of 2014 as endorsed by the European Council of 14 December 2012¹⁰.
 24. CALLS on the Member States, Commission and other interested stakeholders to take into account these Conclusions while realising the full potential of the existing macro-regional strategies and preparing the new ones.
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