

MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF THE COMMITTEES ON ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND THE COMMITTEES ON STATE ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Macro-Regional Strategies: Development and Prospects

CONCLUSIONS

24-25 November 2013, Vilnius

The Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees on Environment Protection and the Committees on State Administration and Local Authorities,

Having regard to the European Parliament's resolution of 16/11/2006 inviting the European Commission (hereinafter: Commission) to prepare a strategy for the Baltic Sea region in the context of the EU's Northern Dimension policy;

Having regard to the Commission Communications on the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (hereinafter: EUSBSR) of 10/6/2009 and 23/03/2012,

Having regard to the EUSBSR Action Plan of 10/06/2009 and its updates of December 2010 and February 2013,

Having regard to the Commission Communication on the European Union Strategy for Danube Region (hereinafter: EUSDR) and the accompanying Action Plan of 08/12/2010,

Having regard to the Commission Report concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies of 27/6/2013,

Having regard to the debates at the Annual Fora of the macro-regional strategies in Bucharest on 28-29 October 2013 and in Vilnius on 11-12 November 2013 by the respective stakeholders,

The added value of the macro-regional strategies

1. Welcomes the Commission's report concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies; considers that macro-regional strategies provide a clear and tangible contribution to the EU's regional policy and have a major role to play in increasing social, economic and territorial cohesion of the different regions within the EU; considers that macro-regional strategies can significantly contribute to the goals of the EU cohesion

policy; calls on the Commission to consider appointing coordinators for each macro-regional strategy;

2. Is of the view that macro-regional strategies lead to improved policy development and implementation of different EU-level, 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; considers that macro-regional strategies have a role to play in increasing competitiveness as well as completing and deepening the EU internal market through the development of common transport and energy infrastructure projects;
3. Reminds that macro-regional strategies are based on the principle of no additional EU funds, no new institutions, and no new legislation; therefore stresses the importance of a more integrated governance of the strategies through the efficient use of existing financial sources, more effective implementation of the existing legislation, and better use of the existing institutions;
4. Underlines that macro-regional strategies have helped to develop new projects or have given momentum to existing transnational projects; highlights that flagship projects alone number over 100 in the Baltic Sea region, while over 400 projects worth €49 billion overall are being considered by the EUSDR, of which 150 are already in implementation;
5. Emphasises that the macro-regional strategies have the potential to engage non-EU countries in valuable regional cooperation with the EU Member States; for example notes that Russia and Norway, though not part of the strategy itself, have agreed on a list of common projects within the EUSBSR, while in the case of the EUSDR, the strategy contributes to the improvement of cooperation with EU neighbours, such as Moldova and Ukraine, and draws the accession countries, such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, into beneficial regional cooperation in preparation for the eventual accession to the EU;

Environmental dimension of the macro-regional strategies

6. Calls for the development of a strong environmental dimension in the macro-regional strategies; considers that the right balance between economic growth and the protection of environment should be found, that high environmental standards should be applied in such areas as forestry, agriculture, construction, transport and industry, and that macro-regional strategies can play an important role in promoting such standards;
7. Highlights the importance of the macro-regional strategies in efforts to realise a greener, more resource efficient and low-carbon economy envisaged in the Europe 2020 Strategy; stresses that the funding foreseen in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework should be fully used to promote energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy in efforts to combat the root causes as well as the consequences of climate change on a macro-regional basis;

8. Underlines that due to a number of factors, such as intensive shipping, agricultural activity and large infrastructure projects, the Baltic Sea remains one of the most polluted in the world; emphasises the need for the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea region to urgently address the serious environmental problems affecting the region, principal among which are eutrophication, the impact of hazardous substances deposited on the seabed and threats to aquatic biodiversity, with particular regard to endangered fish populations; recalls that the very idea of a macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea region arose primarily because of environmental concerns;
9. Stresses that protecting the environment in the Danube basin is an important aspect which will have a major bearing on the future development of the region and therefore calls on all parties concerned to promote sustainable development across priority areas;
10. Highlights that some macro-regional environmental projects have already given results, such as for example, the *CleanShip* project which reduces pollution from vessels and improves the health of the ecosystem of the Baltic Sea, the *Danube Floodrisk* project which prevents flooding by providing shared databases and flood mapping, or the *Baltadapt* project which brings together different actors to plan the actions in combating climate change in the Baltic Sea region;

The future of the macro-regional strategies

11. Considers that the key to the future success of the macro-regional strategies will depend on choosing the right objectives, maintaining political commitment as well as ensuring effective organisation and governance of the strategies, not least by providing adequate human resources in the Member States concerned;
12. Stresses that macro-regional strategies are representative of the EU's multi-level governance process as they involve regional, national, and local levels as well as the civil society, in their common efforts to develop projects as well as plan and align funding schemes; supports the strengthening of the bottom-up consultation process in the context of the macro-regional strategies and therefore encourages the local level municipalities and the civil society to get involved in the earliest stages of the planning and implementation of the projects and the broader strategy-level objectives; emphasises the importance of greater integration and coordination between participating countries and institutions, just as between authorities inside the participating countries; stresses that the success of the macro-regional strategies will depend on the political ownership and better involvement of the social and economic partners, including civil society, academic community and the private sector;
13. Stresses the significant role that the national parliaments have to play in the planning and implementation phases of the strategies as the parliamentary level provides an important link between the macro-regional strategies and society as a whole; recognises the importance of the European Parliament in supporting and developing the macro-regional approach;

14. Encourages 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; emphasizes the important role of macro-regional strategies in the future cohesion policy;
15. Is of the view that there should be a more periodic exchange of best practices between the existing macro-regional strategies as well as better capitalization of results and synergies among projects; deems important to set the right indicators, especially at priority area/horizontal action level, to periodically measure the progress achieved; emphasises that progress should also be seen in terms of networks created, projects successfully pursued, and improvements in integration and coordination; takes the view that monitoring and evaluation processes should involve all the relevant stakeholders and support, where appropriate, the development and revisions of the content of the strategies; supports the Commission's proposal to finalise the review process of the strategies before the 2014 Annual Fora;
16. Welcomes the launch of the consultation on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region which would, once in place, unite Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Albania; looks forward to the Commission presenting the proposal for the strategy by the end of 2014; supports the goals of the forthcoming strategy to promote economic and social prosperity, growth and employment in the Adriatic and Ionian Region by improving its attractiveness, competitiveness and connectivity and considers that this strategy has the potential to promote EU integration aspirations among the countries in the Western Balkans;
17. Emphasises the importance of the macro-regional strategy for the Alps, a cross-roads of major trade routes, with a view to fostering economic growth and innovation in this European region, while ensuring sustainable development in the Alpine territory, as already called for by the representatives of the regions and countries of the Alps macro-region in a meeting in Grenoble on 18 October 2013;
18. Considers that discussions on new macro-regional strategies should be based on the following criteria: a) there are particular needs of strategic importance for the macro-regions for improved high level cooperation in solving common challenges b) the 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;
19. Points out that these Conclusions do not bind national Parliaments and do not prejudice their positions; asks the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, as the Presidency Parliament, to forward these conclusions to all delegations, to the Presidents of national Parliaments and of the European Parliament, to the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission.

ANNEX 1 – PROCEEDINGS OF THE MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF THE COMMITTEES ON ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND THE COMMITTEES ON STATE ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Introductory remarks

The Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees on Environment Protection and the Committees on State Administration and Local Authorities took place on 24-25 November 2013 in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania in Vilnius.

The Meeting was opened by the host Mr Algimantas SALAMAKINAS, Chair of the Committee on Environment Protection of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. Participants were welcomed by H. E. Loreta GRAUŽINIENĖ, Speaker of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania.

In session I, entitled *Significance of the Macro-Regional Strategies in the European Union*, the following keynote speakers took the floor: Ms Connie HEDEGAARD, European Commissioner for Climate Action (presentation on *Integration of climate policy into regional development strategies*), and Mr Rimantas ŠADŽIUS, Minister of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania (presentation on *Results of the Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*).

In session II, entitled *Environmental Dimension of Macro-Regional Strategies*, the following keynote speakers took the floor: Mr Valentinas MAZURONIS, Minister of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania (presentation on *The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region vis-à-vis other forms of cooperation in environmental protection of the Baltic Sea Region*), and Mr Andreas BECKMANN, Director of the Danube-Carpathian Programme at the World Wide Fund for Nature (presentation on *Environmental dimension of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region*).

In session III, entitled *Contribution of the EU Institutions to the Development of Macro-Regional Strategies*, the following keynote speakers took the floor: Mr Johannes HAHN, European Commissioner for Regional Policy (presentation on *Development and prospects of European Union macro-regional strategies*), and Ms Danuta HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development at the European Parliament (presentation on *Macro-regional strategies and their significance from the perspective of the European Parliament*).

The Meeting ended with the adoption of the **Conclusions**. Six delegations tabled amendments to the draft Conclusions, which were adopted by consensus. The Danish delegation abstained citing the need to discuss the content of the Conclusions with another three committees in the *Folketing* responsible for the matters covered by the document.

Overview of the presentations and debates

SESSION I. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

In her presentation Ms Connie HEDEGAARD, European Commissioner for Climate Action, emphasised that the signals regarding climate change were unequivocal: the atmosphere and oceans had warmed, the amounts of ice and snow had diminished, sea level had risen, while the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere had dramatically increased over the preceding decades. It could be confirmed with 95% certainty that these changes had been caused by human behaviour. To tackle climate change action must be taken at all levels – EU, national and regional – and should rest on two pillars: firstly, we should mitigate climate change, for example, by reducing greenhouse gas emissions; and secondly, we should adapt to changing climate conditions, such as unpredictable weather patterns or rising sea level. In the Baltic Sea region, the *Baltadapt* project, for example, was helping to adapt to climate change. Regional cooperation could also be useful in other ways, for example, by helping with cross-border management of floods, trans-boundary coastal management or fighting forest fires in drought prone border areas. The Commissioner also stressed that climate change should be mainstreamed in all major EU policy areas, including regional policy.

Mr Rimantas ŠADŽIUS, Minister of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania, presented the discussions and results of the Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region held in Vilnius on 11–12 November 2013. The Forum was attended by those who coordinated and implemented the Strategy on the European, regional, national and local levels. Being held for the fourth time already, the Forum discussed how environmental challenges in the Baltic Sea Region could be turned into opportunities for creating jobs and stimulating economic growth. The Forum consisted of four plenary sessions that focused on the added value of macro-regional strategies and further steps to improve the implementation of the EUSBSR. Emphasis was put on the strengthening of the governance structure and promoting leadership of Member States. Member States were invited to integrate the Strategy objectives when programming the new financial perspective and the importance of greater cooperation among Member States in this field was highlighted. Discussions at the Forum provided a basis for further action. On 26 November 2013, the Ministers for Cohesion Policy of the Nordic, Baltic and Vishegrad Group countries would discuss synergies between macro-regional strategies and national programming documents. In early December, national coordinators of the Baltic Sea Strategy would debate ways and means of enhancing the government structure and leadership.

During the debate it was consistently stressed that macro-regional strategies could help solve issues related to climate change but that it was important to find sources to finance their implementation. It was also stressed that municipalities and the civil society should be encouraged to participate in the implementation of the strategies. National Parliaments should be more active in this regard as well. What was needed was better coordination and the exchange of best practice and information among the Member States. Other participants stressed the importance of including third countries in the strategy – in the case of the EUSBSR Iceland, Norway and Russia were mentioned. One of the priority areas, apart from

climate change, should be developing cross-border transport infrastructure. It was also mentioned that other macro-regional strategies, such as for the Alpine or the Mediterranean region, should become a reality in the nearest possible future.

SESSION II. ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION OF MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES

Mr Valentinas MAZURONIS, Minister of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania, focused on the EUSBSR. He stressed that the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was a complex system providing an integrated framework for addressing common environmental problems of the Baltic Sea, contributing to the economic success of the region, tackling social challenges, reinforcing territorial cohesion of the region and increasing the competitiveness of the EU. This strategic document combined three key aspects, i.e. environmental, economic and social. The minister emphasised that a very important objective set in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was to save the sea, i.e. to deal with very poor environmental status of the Baltic Sea. Mr MAZURONIS noted that the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was related not only to maritime conventions. River basins were the main source of pollution of the Baltic Sea. Therefore, the more we reduced pollution in river water, the less pollutants would travel to the Baltic Sea. It was vital that other sectors such as transport and energy complied with strict environmental standards. The Minister also stressed that the EUSBSR encompassed environmental agreements with third countries, on the basis of which countries exchanged information on improving the quality of water resources and sought to implement joint environmental projects.

Mr Andreas BECKMANN, Director of the Danube-Carpathian Programme at the World Wide Fund for Nature, focused on the other macro-regional strategy currently in place – the EUSDR. He stressed that the EUSDR was based on a current view, not a future vision. He spoke about the region's environmental problems, such as the protection and restoration of floodplains or the preservation of the Danube sturgeon. Mr BECKMANN noted that the latter problem was tackled in an integrated way and involved virtually all of the priority areas of the strategy – biodiversity, navigation, water management, risk, and law enforcement. Another important priority was managing inland navigation in the Danube region. The speaker praised the engagement of the Commission in the priority areas and stressed the importance of greater overall involvement of major stakeholders, especially the civil society. According to Mr BECKMANN, communities and civil society had a valuable contribution to make to the EUSDR – but that contribution was not being fully realised.

During the debate the issue of climate change was again widely discussed. Particular issues were raised, such as recurrent floods, coastal erosion, oil spills, as well as the planned construction of the nuclear power plant in Belarus, close to the Lithuanian border. It was stressed that the power plant did not meet the standards enshrined in the Espoo Convention. Several participants stressed that our attitude towards energy should change – more attention needed to be given to energy efficiency, greater use of renewable sources and better political coordination of the set targets. In times of economic restraint and limited financial resources, the overlap of activities should be avoided. It was also stressed that sharing the best practice of cooperation was very important, especially in the same geographical area (for example,

other countries could learn from the experience of Austria in implementing a successful project regarding inland navigation).

SESSION III. CONTRIBUTION OF THE EU INSTITUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES

In his presentation Mr Johannes HAHN, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, highlighted the importance of embedding the objectives and priorities of the macro-regional strategies in relevant existing national, regional and EU policy frameworks. He also stressed the importance of ensuring links with new policy programmes. The Commissioner spoke about the need for a more balanced ownership and leadership. Even if the Commission continued to play a key role, the ownership and leadership of the Member States or regions concerned should be further strengthened. Mr HAHN noted that the macro-regional strategies, such as the EUSBSR, represented a comprehensive and integrated approach to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the EU more generally. In the case of the EUSBSR, he emphasised the need to raise commitment and accountability among all political and economic stakeholders in the region, not only on maritime affairs, but also on economic, territorial development and social issues.

Ms Danuta HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development at the European Parliament, noted that the Meeting was taking place right after the European Parliament had endorsed the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The new MFF would create the conditions for the successful implementation of more than 300 national and regional operational programmes. If national co-financing was added, the amount allocated for productive investments would reach €500 billion over the next 10 years. Significant part of these funds would be devoted to macro-regional strategies. Ms HÜBNER noted that the first two strategies, the EUSBSR and the EUSDR, were decided, programmed and implemented on the ground of a strong political will, commitment and combined administrative effort. But the challenge now was to link smartly the evolution of the strategies with the whole variety of other European policies.

Participants in the debate called for new macro-regional strategies to be created in the future, such as for the Alpine, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean regions. Some called for separate legislation devoted to macro-regional strategies to be developed at the EU level. It was also mentioned that partner countries, not members of the EU, such as Norway, could be very important partners for cooperation and could help with the financial resources. Other stressed that among the main challenges to the success of the macro-regional strategies would be the harmonisation of different interests and the need for more effective administrative capacities in some of the Member States.