



European Economic and Social Committee

ECO/382
EU Strategy for the Alpine
Region

Brussels, 8 October 2015.

OPINION

of the
European Economic and Social Committee
on the

**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European
Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning a European
Union Strategy for the Alpine Region**
(COM(2015) 366 final)

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On 15 July 2015, the European Commission asked the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to draw up an opinion on the

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning a European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region
(COM(2015) 366 final).

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 9 September 2015.

At its 511th plenary session, held on 6, 7 and 8 October 2015 (meeting of 8 October), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 129 votes in favour, with one abstention.

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) notes that the launch of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) comes at a very particular time – a time marked, on the one hand, by the lingering damage of the financial crisis to the real economy and, on the other, by the endeavour to push forward and put in place economic, environmental and social structural changes whose special focus is on people's quality of life and wellbeing.
- 1.2 The EESC points out that the territorial entities in EUSALP – five EU Member States (Italy, France, Austria, Germany and Slovenia) and two non-EU countries (Switzerland and Liechtenstein) – enjoy levels of economic development, environmental sustainability and social cohesion appreciably above the European average, as well as a long record of territorial cooperation.
 - 1.2.1 Even so, the EESC sees the EUSALP as an element of value added for the Alpine region that will help preserve, and where possible improve, the high economic, environmental and social standards that distinguish these areas.
 - 1.2.2 The EESC sees the EUSALP as a driver for development that can nurture the competitiveness and cohesion of Europe as a whole, in keeping with the objectives of European cohesion policy and the principles of cooperation and solidarity that imbue it.

- 1.3 The EESC points out that the areas concerned share common traits, such as those embodied in the Alpine mountain areas.
- 1.3.1 The EESC notes that the Alps are not just Europe's second most important biodiversity reservoir, they are also the defining hallmark of the entire area. Such is their size and configuration that the Alps form in some cases a tangible and intangible dividing line and in others an economic, environmental, cultural and social nexus between the different territorial levels.
- 1.4 While the EESC welcomes the EUSALP, it does see a need for additional elements.
- 1.5 The EESC regrets that the EUSALP does not put the social dimension on the same footing as the environmental and economic aspects. The EESC would therefore like to see a clearly framed mainstreaming of the social dimension that would ensure the pursuit of a growth model that can secure competitiveness and, at the same time, social inclusion and protection, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- 1.5.1 Along the same lines, the EESC also thinks it vital to bolster the cross-cutting dimension of the EUSALP's objectives in order to better stimulate the harmonisation and balance between economic, environmental and social sustainability, in keeping with a holistic approach to development and social innovation.
- 1.6 While the EESC believes the objectives laid down in the EUSALP to be consistent with the Alpine region's strategic priorities, it nevertheless calls for additional measures to really turn challenges into drivers for competitiveness and cohesion, above all in the realms of economic globalisation, demographic trends, climate change, energy issues and geographical positioning.
- 1.7 With reference to the "Economic growth and innovation" thematic priority, the EESC thinks it essential to conceive innovation strategies that more effectively nurture competitiveness and generate jobs, attract new investment, strengthen action in support of agriculture and forestry and make the most of the varied forms of tourism in the area. *(See points 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7 for greater detail.)*
- 1.8 With reference to the "Mobility and connectivity" thematic priority, the EESC considers it essential to act to shrink goods and passenger road transport, to promote environmentally sustainable accessibility to tourist areas, to bring down road traffic noise in urban and suburban networks, and to make sure services and connectivity are available in all reaches of the Alpine region. *(See points 3.8, 3.9 and 3.10 for greater detail.)*
- 1.9 With reference to the "Environment and energy" thematic priority, the EESC believes it essential to maintain a balance between the conservation of natural and cultural capital and its rational use, ecological connectivity, the implementation of climate change mitigation and

adaptation measures, and a secure energy supply that is affordable and of a high quality. (*See points 3.11, 3.12 and 3.13 for greater detail.*)

- 1.10 The EUSALP must, in the EESC's view, enjoy an effective multilevel governance that can capitalise on both the horizontal dimension (civil society participation) and the vertical dimension (participation of local and regional authorities), with the former complementing and enhancing the latter, fully in keeping with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.
- 1.11 The EESC calls for the launch of a permanent capacity building process to support and enhance the participation of civil society in shaping the EUSALP and for the instigation of a standing forum to represent and support the Alpine region's social and economic partners, while also being active in individual regions affected by the strategy.
 - 1.11.1 To this end, the EESC proposes setting up a specific "Going local – EUSALP" programme that provides for the active participation of all the Committee bodies involved in and affected by the development processes proposed by the EUSALP. This "Going local – EUSALP" programme will thus make it possible to introduce – with local civil society – information and training on the activities set out in the action plan, along with opportunities for the various local bodies to participate, while at the same time ensuring that decisions on planned activities are taken jointly.
- 1.12 When it comes to the EUSALP's monitoring and evaluation systems, the EESC considers it vital to accompany quantitative measurement with qualitative indicators, in line with the "beyond GDP" approach.
- 1.13 The EESC would like to see the measures to be carried out under the EUSALP made more economically sustainable by means of a strategy geared to both exploiting synergies and complementarity between the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 and other European direct management programmes and to using the tools provided by Community-led Local Development (CLLD).
- 1.14 The EESC believes that in order to achieve the strategic objectives set out by the EUSALP, it is essential to use the funding opportunities provided by the European Investment Bank (EIB), as well as to promote the involvement of private investment as proposed by the "Juncker Plan".
- 1.15 The EESC welcomes the proposals set out in the action plan that aim to enhance the synergies between the EUSALP and other existing macrostrategies, including with a view to projecting the concept of macro-regions towards other European areas which are of strategic importance in terms of Europe's economic competitiveness and social cohesion, such as the Western Mediterranean and the Balkans.

2. The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region: general comments

- 2.1 The purpose of this opinion is to evaluate the action plan of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region¹ from the point of view of organised civil society. It draws and builds on the EESC exploratory opinion *An EU Strategy for the Alpine Region*² and the conclusions of the hearing held on 25 June 2015 in Ispra, Italy, as well as other opinions adopted by the EESC on other macro-regional strategies³.
- 2.2 To turn the challenges identified in the EUSALP action plan into factors for economic competitiveness and social cohesion, help needs to be given to implementing development policies in line with the aims set out in Article 3(1, 2, and 3) of the Treaty on European Union⁴ and to a holistic approach to development and social innovation.
- 2.2.1 Strengthening the holistic approach of the EUSALP will contribute effectively to the macro-region's competitiveness and cohesion through the implementation of policies and projects that make the economic, environmental and social targets truly interdependent.
- 2.2.2 The EUSALP must be planned and implemented with a view to social innovation – a process of development that will promote and underpin the implementation of new ideas that, in turn, must not just improve economic competitiveness but also serve to address the needs of people who live in the Alpine region and society as a whole.
- 2.3 If we look at the analyses and assessments produced by the EESC in its opinion *Taking stock of the Europe 2020 strategy*⁵ and its Mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy⁶, it is clear that the EUSALP is a useful tool for securing a resilient social and economic system – a tool that can guarantee "protection and development" for Alpine region civil society.
- 2.3.1 Strengthening the resilience of the Alpine macro-region is a decisive factor in increasing civil society's capacity to absorb, manage and prevent the impact of crises and structural change that increasingly afflict our socio-economic systems and in buttressing the Alpine region's economic competitiveness in terms of social cohesion and sustainability.

1 SWD(2015) 147 final.

2 [OJ C 230, 14.7.2015, p. 9.](#)

3 <http://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu>; <http://www.danube-region.eu>; <http://www.ai-macroregion.eu>.

4 [OJ C 83, 30.3.2010.](#)

5 [OJ C 12, 15.1.2015, p. 105.](#)

6 Mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy, Brussels, 4 December 2013.

- 2.4 In line with the decisions taken in the "Political resolution towards a European Union Strategy for the Alpine region" (conference in Grenoble)⁷, the action plan identifies the challenges facing this area of cooperation, the political priorities, objectives and actions, and some examples of project ideas.
- 2.5 The prime challenges and the objectives identified in the EUSALP action plan relate to economic globalisation, demographic trends, climate change, energy issues and geographical positioning. While welcoming the substance of the EUSALP action plan, the EESC considers it necessary to incorporate the objectives set out below.
- 2.5.1 Promoting a dynamic business system and assisting the competitiveness of businesses in the region through innovation in order to strengthen the capacity of the economic system to effectively tackle the challenges posed by economic globalisation, to respond to the needs of civil society and to guarantee employment and the creation of new high-quality jobs.
- 2.5.2 Helping to enhance potential derived from traditions and social diversity, thus contributing to preserving the hallmarks of the areas involved while at the same time building on local know-how and traditions as a way of furthering economic development and social inclusion.
- 2.5.3 Supporting initiatives that aim to tackle the demographic changes taking place in the Alpine region more effectively, with particular reference to managing the combined effects of an ageing population and new migration processes.
- 2.5.4 Promoting the climate change mitigation and adaptation schemes of the regions involved, with specific reference to impacts on the environment, on biodiversity, on economic activities and on people's living conditions⁸.
- 2.5.5 Helping to overcome challenges relating to energy: sustainability of demand, security and affordability for businesses and the public, stimulating investment in cheaper, cleaner energy sources, a more open and competitive macro-regional energy market, more cost savings through the exploitation of indigenous energy resources, conventional renewable sources (such as biomass, hydro and geothermal) and unconventional renewable sources (such as wind and solar).
- 2.5.6 Shaping policies and initiatives to make the most of the Alpine region's geographical strategic capital, especially in transport, while adhering fully to the principles of environmental protection and conservation. Backing must be given to new approaches in shared responsibility and fair cooperation between territories, such as vertical links between large cities and rural, mountain and tourist areas.

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Conference held in Grenoble on 18 October 2013 attended by government representatives and presidents from the EUSALP constituent regions.

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White paper – *Adapting to climate change: towards a European framework for action*, COM(2009) 147 final.

- 2.5.7 Promoting balanced, equal and universal access to services of general interest in order to meet the needs of those living in the Alpine Region, with particular focus on local systems that suffer from geographical handicaps.
- 2.5.8 Bolstering the protection and sustainable management of biodiversity, landscapes and natural resources, striking the proper balance between conservation work and initiatives to achieve a rational use of ecosystem services and products, as well as a more balanced distribution of the benefits deriving from their use.
- 2.5.9 Helping to get a social mainstreaming benchmark defined by planning measures on working conditions, social security, gender issues, people with disabilities and immigrants.
- 2.5.10 Defining and developing a distinct and recognisable "functional focus" in the preparation and implementation of development processes aimed at curbing imbalances between the economic, environmental and social dimensions, to be a test bed that can help capitalise on the results of cohesion policy across Europe.
- 2.5.11 Promoting as broad as possible a process at regional and local level that involves shaping, discussing and sharing the environmental, social and economic choices affecting the area. This process should use methods tried and tested in other contexts and locations conducive to bringing representatives of the public, the economic and social partners and civil society organisations together.

3. **The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region: analyses and evaluation**

- 3.1 The main challenge the Alpine region strategy should help to tackle is harmonising and improving the balance between economic, environmental and social sustainability goals.
- 3.2 The EESC welcomes the EUSALP action plan, but believes that the three thematic priorities ("economic growth and innovation", "mobility and connectivity" and "environment and energy") need to be expanded and fleshed out.
- 3.3 Although, according to the European Innovation Scoreboard⁹, the areas in the Alpine region strategy surpass the European average when it comes to innovation, it is clear that policies and strategies to cultivate traditional forms of innovation deliver a low return on investment in terms of competitiveness and jobs created.
- 3.4 Efforts must therefore be made to strengthen the operational tools that support "open innovation"¹⁰, a model based on implementation of the "quadruple helix" concept, through

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/innovation/facts-figures/scoreboards/files/ius-2015_en.pdf.

¹⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/growth-jobs/open-innovation>.

which public institutions, businesses, universities, and individuals (citizens) work together in processes typical of innovation (co-creation, exploration, experimentation and application) in order to develop new products and services focused on the real needs of end users.

- 3.5 The Alpine region's development depends on making the most of local production chains and the areas that are the backbone of the production system. Development policies need to be implemented to bring in fresh investment, especially in emerging industries, not only to maximise production efficiency, but also to combat depopulation in peripheral areas.
- 3.6 It is crucial to promote training and upskilling of workers in both traditional production sectors and emerging sectors (including the cultural and creative sector).
- 3.7 Agriculture, especially mountain agriculture, and forestry are economic sectors that must be given assistance in order to preserve anthropogenic landscapes, to encourage settlement in peripheral areas, to maintain the infrastructure in mountain areas, and to supply the raw materials for high-quality food and products.
 - 3.7.1 To make mountain agriculture and forestry more competitive, the priority is to promote initiatives designed to enhance specific quality brands of mountain product, to support more structured forms of collaboration among the Alpine region's mountain areas and between these and urban systems, not least by implementing projects under 2014-2020 Community programmes¹¹ (with specific reference to support for promoting mountain agricultural products).
- 3.8 What distinguishes tourism in Alpine area regions is the variety of activities sought by tourists: nature tourism, sports and activity holidays, health and relaxation, cultural tourism, conferences and events, and even shopping.
 - 3.8.1 The priority is to boost sustainable tourism through an integrated policy leading to the definition of rules for the protection of the Alpine region and the dissemination of sustainable development models. Backing also needs to be given to schemes that encourage year-round tourism by promoting kinds of tourism not yet fully exploited (such as health tourism) and through a general improvement in the quality of services in mountain areas.
- 3.9 Because of the distinct topography, transport in the Alpine macro-region is concentrated along a few corridors, resulting in a disproportionate increase in long-distance freight transport by road in areas that are highly environmentally sensitive. Mobility is a sine qua non in peripheral and mountain areas for maintaining social contacts; phenomena such as changes in lifestyle and demographic trends are increasing the use of private motor vehicles.

¹¹ <http://www.rumra-intergroup.eu/>.

- 3.9.1 It is essential to support the implementation of initiatives that seek to adapt and streamline transport infrastructure in all regional systems in the Alpine region, with particular focus on cross-border links, shifting the greatest possible quantity of goods and people from roads to rail and other modes and furthering the environmentally sustainable accessibility of tourist areas, paying attention both to long distances and to the "last mile".
- 3.9.2 With specific reference to urban and metropolitan transport systems, the transfer of individual traffic to local public transport, walking and cycling needs to be encouraged by upgrading infrastructure and taking measures to foster change in people's habits, providing incentives to use eco-friendly forms of transport and mobility.
- 3.10 Balanced, equal and universal access to high-quality services and connectivity are indispensable to ensuring an adequate quality of life for all the inhabitants of the Alpine macro-region, especially those living and working in areas with a geographical handicap.
- 3.10.1 It is a matter of priority to encourage the adoption of innovative approaches to providing basic services (education, healthcare, social services and mobility) in mountain and rural areas and to buttress information and communications infrastructure and technologies in order to ensure sufficient availability of public services to meet the needs of all those living in the Alpine region.
- 3.11 The variety of flora and fauna species and natural landscapes in the Alpine region constitute assets to be protected and promoted, since these are the essential elements underpinning the quality of life and attractiveness of these parts.
- 3.11.1 The protection and sustainable management of biodiversity and natural, cultural and landscape resources must be assisted, striking the right balance between conservation work and initiatives to achieve a rational use. It is also crucial to back measures supporting the area's ecological connectivity in line with the European Commission's stipulations in its communication *Green Infrastructure (GI) – Enhancing Europe's Natural Capital*¹².
- 3.12 While it is true that managing climate change and its ensuing natural risks is a common challenge for the whole Alpine region, it is also true that the Alps themselves, which are the most densely populated and most intensively exploited mountain system in the world, have a higher than average sensitivity to climate change.
- 3.12.1 It is crucial to launch transnational initiatives (the consequences of climate change do not stop at borders) for mitigation and the adaptation of the Alpine region to climate change: the aim of mitigation must be to avoid the unmanageable consequences of climate change by reducing

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COM (2013) 249 final. See also the EESC Opinion on *Green infrastructure – Enhancing Europe's Natural Capital*, [OJ C 67, 6.3.2014, p. 153](#).

greenhouse gases, while adaptation must serve to reduce vulnerability to climate change and to manage unavoidable impacts.

3.13 To guarantee and improve the quality of life and the advantages it enjoys, the Alpine region needs a secure, affordable and high-quality energy supply.

3.13.1 In addition to furthering actions designed to increase the share of energy from renewable sources, such as water, wood, biomass, wind and sun, it is crucial to foster energy efficiency in both the public and private sectors.

4. **The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region: specific aspects**

4.1 Not only has the economic crisis had an adverse impact on the real economy and on millions of lives, it has also clearly demonstrated the need for public measures to block the adverse effects of growth that is economically, socially and environmentally unsustainable and so to protect standards of living and welfare by stepping up action in the area of social and welfare policies and on the environmental front.

4.2 The EESC believes that the EUSALP's social dimension is inadequately addressed and needs further reinforcing in order to ensure the development of a growth model that secures competitiveness and, at the same time, social inclusion and protection, especially for those in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged situations.

4.2.1 To this end, the EUSALP should include measures to:

- ensure respect for decent work and labour standards and the adaptability of the workforce to ongoing developments in technology and production systems through re-skilling and lifelong learning processes that make the most of locally available human resources;
- mainstream, respect and enhance the gender dimension, especially in the labour market;
- encourage the setting-up of social infrastructure and promote social investment;
- promote all possible measures that effectively secure equal conditions and opportunities for people with disabilities;
- promote and support active ageing as a strategic local resource in the various fields of application (tourism, artisanal production, services, and so on);
- support measures that exploit the positive side of immigration in order to boost economic growth and social cohesion in the area.

4.3 Although the EUSALP's governance system is consistent with the EESC's findings in its opinion on the governance of macro-regional strategies¹³, problems and possible necessary additions can nevertheless be identified.

¹³ [OJ C 12, 15.1.2015, p. 64.](#)

- 4.3.1 The EUSALP's multilevel governance needs to be bolstered by the introduction of an effective horizontal dimension (participation of economic operators, social partners and representatives of civil society). This should complement and enhance the vertical dimension (participation of local and regional authorities), in full compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the application of which is crucial to ensuring the fair territorial redistribution of the benefits the EUSALP yields and to preventing the interests of particular countries and areas from prevailing over common ones.
- 4.3.2 It is essential to ensure the launch of a EUSALP civil society forum whose work should dovetail with that of the action groups and progress within a business model that enables the real involvement of representatives of economic and social partners in implementing the strategy at regional and local level. For this reason, it is desirable that regional (and, where possible, local) civil society forums be set up alongside the macro-regional civil society forum so as to ensure that all local elements are genuinely involved in managing the strategy.
- 4.3.3 It is also crucial to promote a permanent capacity-building process that will support and enhance the active participation of civil society in shaping the EUSALP and at the same time raise awareness of the Alpine region's main concerns and priorities. With reference to these priorities, the EESC proposes setting up a specific "Going local – EUSALP" programme.
- 4.4 The implementation of the strategy for the Alpine region must go hand in hand with an efficient monitoring system that can assess real improvements brought about by the EUSALP.
- 4.4.1 It is crucial to complement quantitative measurement with qualitative indicators consistent with the "beyond GDP"¹⁴ approach in order to gauge the impact of policies adopted on quality of life, environmental sustainability, social cohesion and the health and overall wellbeing of present and future generations.
- 4.5 The considerable funding the EU has already committed through the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2014-2020¹⁵ and European Territorial Cooperation (ETC)¹⁶ could, if coordinated and embedded in a unified strategic approach, secure the necessary financial resources to support implementation of the EUSALP.
- 4.5.1 It is important to develop innovative approaches aimed at exploiting the synergies and complementarity between the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 and other European direct management programmes, as set out in the European Commission's guide *Enabling synergies between European Structural and Investment Funds and Horizon 2020*¹⁷.

¹⁴ [Let's talk happiness – Beyond GDP, Brussels, 10 June 2014.](#)

¹⁵ Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013.

¹⁶ Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013.

¹⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/guides/synergy/synergies_en.pdf.

- 4.5.2 In order to achieve the strategic objectives set out by the EUSALP it is also essential to capitalise on the funding opportunities provided by the European Investment Bank (EIB), as well as to promote the involvement of private investment as proposed in the "Juncker Plan"¹⁸.
- 4.5.3 Another priority in supporting the EUSALP's financial sustainability is, where possible, to back initiatives to implement the tools provided by Community-led Local Development (CLLD), particularly the instrument of the same name¹⁹ and Integrated Territorial Investment²⁰, as proposed in the EESC opinion on CLLD²¹ and in the Italy-Austria Interreg V programme in the notice for submission of cross-local development strategies in relation to CLLD²².

Brussels, 8 October 2015

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee

Georges Dassis

¹⁸ An Investment Plan for Europe, COM(2014) 903 final.

¹⁹ Article 10 of Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013.

²⁰ Article 11 of Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013.

²¹ [OJ C 230, 14.7.2015, p. 1.](#)

²² http://www.interreg.net/download/0_CLLD_Aufruf_Avviso.pdf (in German).