



**European Committee
of the Regions**

COTER-VI/029

126th plenary session, 30 November and 1 December 2017

OPINION

The implementation of macro-regional strategies

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes the European Commission's first ever single report on the implementation of EU MRS and notes that the EU needs a territorial vision which goes beyond borders to develop a "global approach";
- underlines the potential role of MRS for integrated development beyond the borders of the EU and particularly in view of the UK leaving the EU; therefore suggests to explore how MRS could contribute to build the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU and demands a strong involvement of local and regional authorities in the future discussion on this matter on both sides;
- regrets that the added value of MRS is currently not sufficiently reflected in sectoral policies and their financing programmes. This leads to a practical difficulty when projects need to comply with the strategic requirements of the MRS and sectoral policies, which provide the funding and might be significantly different. As a result, projects falling under MRS need longer to prepare and thus are less competitive than "standard" sectoral policy projects;
- argues that the Three No's should be replaced by Three Yes's, to improve the use of existing legislation, institutions and funding. A practical approach should be adopted whereby the necessary measures are taken to improve the functioning of MRS rather than focusing on confusing principles such as the Three No's. The CoR says **yes** to better synergies with funding instruments, **yes** to better embedding of existing structures in MRS and **yes** to better implementation of existing rules.

Rapporteur

Raffaele Cattaneo (IT/EPP), Regional Councillor and President of Lombardia Regional Council

Reference document

Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies – COM(2016) 805 final

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – The implementation of macro-regional strategies

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. stresses that macro-regional strategies (MRS) represent a functional and deeply European vision, and welcomes the European Commission's first ever single report on the implementation of EU MRS. Notes that the EU needs a territorial vision¹ which goes beyond borders to develop a "global approach";
2. observes that despite their short existence², MRS have become an established bottom-up and place-based instrument for a more effective use of common potentials of macroregions by better implementing and coordinating policy responses to various challenges, such as economic growth, innovation, transport, energy, environment and climate change;
3. points out that MRS are a crucial element in the achievement of the EU's strategic objectives and are a critical part of the EU's multi-level governance architecture. MRS play an important role in dynamising development processes also in less developed regions. They also play a key role in transition, accession and non-EU such as neighbourhood countries;
4. emphasises the important role of macro-regional strategies in terms of supporting measures to combat climate change in vulnerable regions. Tackling floods or fires in border areas are ways in which these strategies can be used efficiently;
5. believes that MRS and other EU instruments for cross-border and transnational cooperation, such as EGTCs, other mechanisms for territorial cooperation such as the working communities, and the Interreg programmes, are essential building blocks of the future EU;
6. very much supports the concept of a single report on the implementation of four MRS and looks forward to the implementation reports to be prepared by the European Commission at the end of 2018;
7. underlines the potential role of MRS for integrated development beyond the borders of the EU and particularly in view of the UK leaving the EU; therefore suggests to explore how MRS could contribute to build the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU and demands a strong involvement of local and regional authorities in the future discussion on this matter on both sides;

¹ CoR opinion on Territorial Vision 2050: What future? (COR-2015-04285)

² The first MRS (EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)) was launched in 2009.

8. refers to previous CoR opinions relevant to the subject for specific comments on each macro-regional strategy³ and builds on those observations to make general comments in the present opinion that are applicable to all macro-regional strategies. Attention is drawn to the importance of greater efficiency and prioritisation of outcomes, as well as a more practical focus on the implementation of MRS;
9. underlines that the advantage of MRS is that national, regional and local actors come together under a common framework to work out an overarching strategy and joint programming processes that contribute to the achievement of the EU Treaty objective of economic, social and territorial cohesion and that address local needs effectively. Moreover, macro-regional strategies help to engage citizens in the European project and bridge the gap between EU and local policy-making;
10. remarks, however, that MRS are in a critical phase, in which their potential is increasingly recognised but their practical implementation needs further improvement to reap their full benefits. Providing the local and regional perspective on MRS, this opinion has a wider strategic aim in the context of the ongoing preparations for the next programming period and the future of Europe more broadly;
11. supports emerging initiatives to establish new MRS. However, a more systematic approach should be adopted in which functional needs are identified in a bottom-up process. Existing and established territorial cooperation structures should reflect whether MRS could add value and offer new opportunities to improve existing territorial cooperation structures;
12. moreover, it should be noted that existing MRS allow for partnerships between many EU countries. It should also be made possible, however, to establish MRS that involve fewer countries but several regions and that, in this territorial approach, find a suitable and effective instrument for solving common problems, with a particular focus on regions affected by natural disadvantages, island regions and the outermost regions;
13. believes that civil society and empowered local stakeholders, regions and cities can be very helpful in consolidating the European idea and achieving adequate leverage; therefore it is essential to include macro-regional key implementers and civil society in framing strategic programmes. This involvement will enable us to improve Europe's subsidiarity performance, not only in relations between policy-makers and institutions, but also in relations with economic and social stakeholders at local and regional level;

II. CONTEXT AND FUNDING

14. notes that MRS are in essence a policy instrument for coordinating the implementation of a wide range of policies. Their scope is much wider than the European territorial cooperation

³ Opinion on the Danube Region Strategy, CdR 86/2011 fin; Opinion on the Revised EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region CdR 1272/2012 fin; Opinion on The added value of macro-regional strategies, CdR 5074/2013 fin; Opinion on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, CdR 23/2014 fin; Opinion on the Alpine macro-regional strategy for the European Union, CdR 2994/2014 fin.

goal: on the one hand various different policy areas contribute to the implementation of MRS and on the other hand all EU policies would benefit from better coordination through MRS;

15. notes that the objectives of MRS must be included into the overall EU's strategy after 2020 in a concerted way and thus create a consistent framework for all programmes, which would lead to the strategic planning of all policies with an impact on regional development to take MRS into account. This applies to policies in all forms and at all levels, including policies under shared management, and also to policies directly managed by the European Commission and to national regional policies;
16. regrets that the added value of MRS is currently not sufficiently reflected in sectoral policies and their financing programmes. This leads to a practical difficulty when projects need to comply with the strategic requirements of the MRS and sectoral policies, which provide the funding and might be significantly different. As a result, projects falling under MRS need longer to prepare and thus are less competitive than "standard" sectoral policy projects;
17. considers that in order to ensure access to financial resources in the post-2020 programming period all EU policies (including cohesion policy) should provide specific implementation rules for projects contributing to an MRS that would facilitate access to financing and reduce administrative requirements. The implementation of EU programmes must be simplified as a matter of urgency;
18. calls for strengthening of links between the MRS and EU funding sources, during both the design and implementation phases of sectoral policies. Duplication of procedures and reporting must be avoided. On principle, funds need to follow policies and not the other way round. Unfortunately, at the moment the contrary seems to be the case as MRS are obliged to ask for support from funding programmes;
19. encourages Member States to initiate future discussions on how macro-regional strategies should be integrated in the EU multiannual financial framework post 2020, in compliance with the founding principles of the MRS. With regards to the next generation of funding programmes, the Commission should foresee adequate funding for those TNPs (transnational programmes) which correspond to MRSs and develop a mechanism which gives priority to eligible projects which are designated strategic by a MRS, complementing funding for projects covered by other EU instruments for cross-border and transnational cooperation;
20. urges the coordinators of MRS to waste no time in drawing up strategy documents on how different policies should contribute to the implementation of MRS. With a view to the preparation of legislative acts for the programming period post-2020, such strategy documents would encourage EU policy-makers to adapt legislation to the needs of MRS. Moreover, strategy documents would directly feed into the programming phase and be the basis for framing Operational Programmes;
21. calls on the European Commission in cooperation with the Interact programme, the thematic and national coordinators of the MRS as well as stakeholders of the existing and future MRS to support this process by organising and funding specific workshops tasked with drafting such

strategy documents. Calls on the European Commission in cooperation with the Interact programme to foster the exchange of experience between the four MRS, both with regards to the thematic priorities of the strategies and general aspects of their implementation. Preparation of new MRS should be equally methodologically supported;

22. notes that the European Commission should assume an increased/more pro-active role in the coordination and stimulating cooperation of the Macroregional Strategies (MRS). Besides DG Regio, other COM DGs should be involved more actively in the support of the implementation of the Macroregional Strategies' strategic objectives. MRS should be better connected with all EU policies and instruments in order to ensure an increased contribution to the overall EU objectives;
23. calls on the possibility to include incentives, i.a. economic, for regions and Member States with the support of the European Commission to facilitate new implementation methods for European policies and legislation in the context of macro-regional strategies. Such new methods could consist, for example, of trialling possible future European standards or policies or facilitating implementation of European laws and policies already adopted (possible faster achievement of certain objectives - e.g. climate-climate, energy, transport, etc. - or going beyond objectives set by European legislation in qualitative and quantitative terms, setting more ambitious targets). This incentive mechanism could be achieved by voluntarily associating macro-regional partners and the European Commission in a "programme agreement" setting out the aims, modalities and objectives to be achieved and providing incentives for committing to swifter implementation;

MRS and cohesion policy

24. stresses that cohesion policy is not only the EU's regional development policy which aims to reduce disparities, but also its most important investment tool. There is a need for a closer and direct relationship between the MRS and cohesion policy measures so that the MRS can benefit from an integrated and specific approach within the Operational Programmes;
25. points out that cohesion policy offers crucial support to MRS. On the one hand cohesion policy provides essential financial support to projects contributing to the implementation of MRS. On the other hand cohesion policy can ensure the everyday functioning of MRS by providing technical assistance to its governance mechanisms;
26. notes that cohesion policy works through national allocations, thus focusing primarily on national priorities. In practice, this means that even if one country/region decides to support projects under an MRS, there is no guarantee that the other country/region will do the necessary to also support its implementation. Unfortunately, in such cases the effectiveness of the project is reduced and the added value of the MRS is weakened. Member States should reflect MRS in the programming process of cohesion policy;
27. therefore favours further strengthening European Territorial Cooperation within cohesion policy in the future, while also increasing the transnational dimension of mainstream Operational Programmes – which represent about 95% of cohesion policy – and aligning them , where

applicable, with MRS. Synergies should also be improved between ESIF-based programmes and directly operated sectoral programmes such as Horizon 2020, Erasmus+ and Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). Relevant Operational Programmes should clearly take into account MRS of the respective territory; hopes that all the EU's internal and external land borders, together with its maritime borders (regions separated by a maximum of 150 km or, in the case of the outermost and island regions, by more than 150 km), can receive support and take part in cross-border and macroregional cooperation programmes;

28. reiterates the request in its recent opinion on *People-to-people and small-scale projects in cross-border cooperation programmes* that access to cohesion policy funding be made easier for small projects. Experience shows that some small-scale, transnational projects are compatible with the objectives of MRS. However, most EU funding programmes are not designed to support small projects: many local communities and civil society organisations cannot participate as they do not have the necessary financial and administrative capacity. In view of this, it is recommended that easily accessible and manageable funding instruments be developed, including pre-financing models and project preparation for smaller projects;
29. underlines that European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes have a crucial role to play when it comes to supporting MRS. However, ETC represents only a small part of overall funding and is therefore important in terms of quality rather than quantity. The main purpose of ETC programmes should be to support cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation together with piloting and innovative programmes as well as to provide technical assistance for financing the implementation of MRS. Competition between ETC and MRS projects for same funds is counterproductive and should be avoided;
30. highlights the role played by EGTCs in implementation of MRS and other transnational and cross-border initiatives, such as the working communities. However, EGTCs have not yet reached their full potential due to insufficient implementation of the relevant legislation in some Member States, a lack of knowledge of the opportunities provided by this tool, and other persisting administrative hurdles;

Reinterpretation of the Three No's principle

31. notes that a fundamental principle governing MRS is the Three No's: no new EU funding, no additional EU formal structures and no new EU legislation. However, in practice this principle has led to some confusion. For example, new structures, such as cooperation platforms and networks, have been set up in all MRS, but these do not qualify as formal EU structures. Implementation of MRS relies heavily on EU funding, yet technically the funding is not new but put to a different use. Moreover, despite MRS should not trigger new legislation, it should be allowed to propose or amend legislation at all levels if this would improve the implementation of MRS;
32. argues that the Three No's should be replaced by Three Yes's, to improve the use of existing legislation, institutions and funding. A practical approach should be adopted whereby the necessary measures are taken to improve the functioning of MRS rather than focusing on confusing principles such as the Three No's. The CoR says **yes** to better synergies with funding

instruments, **yes** to better embedding of existing structures in MRS and **yes** to better implementation of existing rules;

Governance

33. observes that the governance of MRS now needs to be strengthened, and to strengthen governance, the local and regional levels must also be strengthened. Governance cannot be entrusted only to the national governments because this contradicts the idea of the MRS;
34. believes that implementing the MRS requires a specific governance approach based on cooperation and coordination, and underlines that improved administrative capacity based on increased ownership and better cooperation are necessary to that end. This specific governance approach should be integrated into existing governance structures in a concerted way with the aim of avoiding any duplication and of achieving a streamlined approach. Under no circumstances should coordination efforts result in covert centralisation;
35. stresses that ownership by European, national and regional politicians and administrations is a requirement for improving administrative capacity, and regrets that in many cases MRS still suffer from a lack of ownership. Ownership can be improved by strengthening awareness of the decisive role played by regional and local authorities;
36. realises that processes for designing and implementing MRS and related projects may initially seem difficult and complex, as different administrative cultures and traditions meet and try to establish a common development strategy. MRS demand significant human resources and time in the initial stages for setting up new procedures and administrative structures. A new administrative ethos (more open and strategic) is needed, as well as learning of new approaches, legal contexts and languages;
37. notes that constant dialogue, effective cooperation structures and strong partnerships are essential to build ownership in the implementation of MRS. Shared management is the most suitable implementation method in multilevel governance contexts. It is important in this respect to clarify the responsibilities and competences of all individual players;
38. believes that the EU institutions should agree on an overall European vision and development strategy driven by national, regional and local needs. MRS are based on "functional" regions and are therefore best suited for implementing an EU development strategy and achieving its objectives by addressing the specific needs and requirements of a given territory (geographic area) and by effectively applying the partnership principle;
39. reiterates that effective partnership means participation of all stakeholders in the strategic planning and decision-making processes. Obviously this can only happen if local and regional needs are known, analysed in light of the EU context, and fed into the overall MRS. Similarly, the implementation of MRS can only be successful if regional and local players, as well as civil society, are given the flexibility, trust and financial incentives they need to implement goals of common European interest adapted to local and regional needs;

40. suggests that national coordination with all other policy-making, institutional and administrative levels should be based on a strong mandate and a dedicated budget for coordination activities. Coordination could also involve setting up a network of interconnected national coordination platforms for each MRS in order to provide for inclusive implementation in each participating country and to ensure coherence between different implementation strategies of participating countries and regions;
41. underlines that in order to improve governance, MRS require the support of the European Commission, which should actively support national and thematic coordination and should work to strengthen the link between EU policies and the implementation of MRS, paying particular attention to the regional and local perspective. The EC should organise frequent and regular meetings and seminars, which will give implementers and key stakeholders a better overview of EU objectives and enable exchange of best practice between existing MRS;
42. considers that the EC should significantly improve its internal coordination across different directorate-generals and address existing overlaps at the level of EU policies. The next Commission report on the implementation of EU MRS should put even more focus on good practices that could be transferred between strategies;
43. believes that future EC reports should also provide hard data on the financial contributions to MRS, including the number of projects supported. Finally, the EC should also do more as regards proposals to harmonise the terminology used to describe roles and processes in MRS;

Monitoring, evaluation and communication

44. underlines the need for monitoring and evaluation of the way MRS are implemented in order to assess their effectiveness and to facilitate policy-learning. However, the purpose of reporting needs to be clear, as well as the destination and expectations of the reports. Reporting without a clear objective and purpose is pointless red tape;
45. believes that reports on the implementation of MRS should serve to assess whether EU and national policies are still coherent and adequate for the implementation of MRS, and should alert the EU and national policy-makers to aspects that need to be modified. Whenever new legislation is proposed, a territorial impact assessment should be performed in order to identify potential impacts on MRS. Reports should also help those implementing MRS to understand progress made, improve internal processes and adapt to new developments;
46. underlines that territorial cooperation is somewhat risky and not easy to predict in detail. Monitoring and evaluation should therefore focus on outcomes and cooperation processes rather than figures. Failures and errors can and will happen and should not immediately lead to financial corrections or the end of measures, as this would prevent innovative but risky projects;
47. agrees with the EC's view that a strong communication strategy should be part of the MRS, and believes that given the current situation in the EU there is a need to communicate the added value of EU action. MRS are making European policy goals more visible and understandable to citizens on the ground. They thus offer a response to current political developments in Europe

and could provide substantial input for the future debate about the EU-27 recently launched by the EC with its White Paper on the future of Europe;

Comments on individual strategies

EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)

48. agrees with the EC's assessment regarding the implementation and challenges of the EUSBSR and would point out that in 2016 a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Managing Authorities (MA) Network was set up for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The purpose of the network is to find ways of providing more efficient financial support for EUSBSR implementation. Similar networks have also been set up for other funds. This is an example of best practice that can be applied in other MRS. Another best practice example is the participation of regional and urban networks in the EUSBSR;
49. notes that the EUSBSR Seed Money Facility has been an efficient tool in gathering partnerships and preparing cooperation projects which seek financing either from the BSR Interreg programme or other financing programmes. As EUSBSR being a first MRS, there are a lot of best practices for other MRS to benchmark, too;

EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

50. agrees with the EC's assessment regarding the implementation and challenges of the EUSDR. One of the most visible results of the EUSDR has been the setting up of an Interreg Danube Transnational Programme corresponding exactly to the geographical area of the Danube Strategy . A number of projects have been developed via the EUSDR, and many of them were approved by the Danube Transnational Programme or other sources of funding. Moreover, in 2014 the fourteen countries jointly set up a new body, the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), to facilitate implementation of the EUSDR and the involvement of all current and potential players. Both initiatives represent very good progress and should continue to receive support;
51. welcomes the fact that the EUSDR provides an innovative platform for regional policy and enlargement and neighbourhood policy and that it fosters the participation of sub-national authorities and civil society, including social partners;

EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)

52. notes that the refugee and migration situation has a huge impact on the Adriatic-Ionian countries. The 2nd Forum of EUSAIR, which took place in Ioannina (Greece) on 11 and 12 May 2017, focused on how EUSAIR can help strengthen the resilience of Adriatic-Ionian countries in coping with the crisis. The resolution adopted at the 2nd Forum invited the participating countries to set up a collaborative platform through which countries in the region could improve the coordination of their response to the crisis and learn from each other;
53. welcomes the efforts made to promote cooperation between the ESIF and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). This means that the ESIF, the IPA and other relevant national

and regional funding streams should contribute to the achievement of EUSAIR objectives. Further synergies in this respect could be explored with the EUSDR as well as regional international organisations. Unfortunately, different terminology to describe the implementation processes of different funding programmes still creates confusion and hinders the exploitation of synergies;

54. recognises the added value provided by the Strategy to the existing intergovernmental and multilateral cooperation which operate in the EUSAIR area;
55. believes that the gap between political statements and the means available for implementation should be bridged. The strategy's objectives can only be achieved if it receives the financial means and necessary governance tools;

EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP)

56. notes that EUSALP implementation began in the first half of 2016. It is too early to draw conclusions, but EUSALP has certainly made a flying start. It is positive that most of the seven EUSALP countries are involved primarily via their regional level. The national/federal level is involved in the Executive Board, but implementation of the strategy takes place mainly at regional level. Ownership at national/federal level, once achieved, could be a key factor in giving more impetus to the strategy in the near future. This engagement of the local and regional level will certainly help to build ownership and lead to inclusive and fruitful implementation of the strategy in the near future;
57. believes that the Alpine strategy can contribute to implementing a sustainable model of development, supported by the European macro-regions. In Europe the population and wealth are concentrated mainly in urban and metropolitan areas, but to ensure that the development of cities remains sustainable the rural and alpine areas around them must be preserved. Protecting natural assets enables citizens to benefit from oases of well-being, to obtain healthy, good-quality food and to preserve biodiversity. Interconnection between metropolitan areas, which are drivers and catalysts for creativity and innovation, and rural and mountainous areas, should be a key factor in developing strategic synergies and joint communication campaigns for citizens;
58. notes, however, that given the long history of cooperation in the region and a prosperous economy, the EUSALP players could be even more ambitious and go beyond the established Interreg cooperation and thereby serve as an example for other macro-regions. One option that might be considered is to establish a permanent coordination structure for implementing the strategy which would effectively underpin the governance system;
59. takes note of and welcomes the common position paper of the Bavarian presidency and of other participating regions to embed the strategies in the regulatory framework of the upcoming multi-annual financial framework;

United Kingdom Withdrawal from the EU

60. believes that the MRS' key premises provide a realistic foundation upon which the UK's devolved administrations, regional and local authorities and their communities can cooperate with their counterparts from the EU in the future, and calls upon the UK and EU negotiators to include this issue in their list of negotiation items for the UK-EU withdrawal agreement.

Brussels, 30 November 2017

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Karl-Heinz Lambertz

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Jiří Buriánek

III. PROCEDURE

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| Title | The implementation of macro-regional strategies |
| Reference(s) | Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies – COM(2016) 805 final |
| Legal basis | Article 307(4) TFEU |
| Procedural basis | Rule 41(b)(i) of the CoR Rules of Procedure |
| Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter | 17 December 2016 |
| Date of President's decision | 17 May 2017 |
| Commission responsible | Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER) |
| Rapporteur | Raffaele Cattaneo (IT/EPP), Regional Councillor and President of Lombardia Regional Council |
| Analysis | 15 July 2017 |
| Discussed in commission | 28 September 2017 |
| Date adopted by commission | 28 September 2017 |
| Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity) | Majority |
| Date adopted in plenary | 30 November 2017 |
| Previous Committee opinions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Opinion on the Danube Region Strategy, rapporteur: Wolfgang Reinhart (DE/EPP), CdR 86/2011 fin; – Opinion on the Revised EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, rapporteur: Pauliina Haijanen (FI/EPP), CdR 1272/2012 fin; – Opinion on The added value of macro-regional strategies, rapporteur: Pauliina Haijanen (FI/EPP), CdR 5074/2013 fin; – Opinion on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, rapporteur: Gian Mario Spacca (IT/ALDE), CdR 23/2014 fin; – Opinion on the Alpine macro-regional strategy for the European Union, rapporteur: Herwig Van Staa (AT/EPP), CdR 2994/2014 fin. |
| Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation | N/A |