



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**COTER-VI/057**

**137th plenary session, 4-5 December 2019**

## **OPINION**

### **Macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region**

#### THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- underlines that macro-regional Strategies improve the complementarity of various political strategies and programmes that are designated and implemented at different levels of governance. This pooling of jointly defined potential and coordination of actions is a significant added value at the European level;
- highlights the unique resources of the Carpathians, such as the natural wealth, unique multicultural heritage, human resources and common identity of mountain communities, all of which provide a great opportunity to work together towards more dynamic, sustainable and balanced socio-economic development in the area;
- considers that placing the Carpathian issue at the centre of a strategic document would highlight the problems of this area and make it possible to exploit the currently dormant and unique potential of the whole macro-region by focusing actions on the most important horizontal problems and challenges;
- reiterates and confirms the approval expressed many times of the initiative to develop a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region and sees it as a well-developed initiative undertaken at all levels of government;
- calls on the European Commission to support the initiative to create a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region as a further macro-regional strategy and the second one to address a European region with mountainous characteristics;
- considers that the macro-regional strategy instrument enables more effective use to be made of available financial resources as part of the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective, by creating a viable system for co-financing and implementing actions supporting the regions of Carpathian countries.

Rapporteur

Władysław Ortyl (PL/ECR), President of the Podkarpackie Region

Reference document

N/A

# Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region

## I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

The role of macro-regional strategies in achieving EU cohesion

1. points out that the provisions of European treaties<sup>1</sup> require the European Union to develop and pursue actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion;
2. believes that macro-regional strategies help meet common challenges for specific areas, which are understood in a broad, cross-border geographical context. By pooling the potential of cross-border regions, the strategies make a significant contribution to achieving territorial cohesion between countries and regions<sup>2</sup>. The CoR notes that the process of creating macro-regional strategies illustrates the natural evolution of the EU as the next step in strengthening cooperation between countries, regions and local communities across borders;
3. underlines that macro-regional strategies are an instrument of multilevel governance, bringing together the activities of bodies representing the EU, national, regional and local levels around selected objectives. They also improve the complementarity of various political strategies and programmes that are designated and implemented at different levels of governance. This pooling of jointly defined potential and coordination of actions aimed at eliminating barriers to development is a significant added value at the European level;
4. recognises that macro-regional strategies play an important role in the process of deepening integration of the EU by giving momentum to development processes at the regional and local levels. This is enabled by the possibility to exchange experiences and transfer successful good practices in the countries and regions covered by the strategy. This naturally creates the conditions for European solidarity and responsibility for the development of the entire macro-region, which makes it possible to overcome a particular viewpoint to see the wider context of the whole macro-region. They are also a catalyst for the initiatives of local and regional communities, enabling them to bring European ideas closer to the people;
5. recognising that local and regional authorities play a key role in promoting democracy, decentralisation and local and regional self-government, the Committee views their activity within existing macro-regional strategies and the process of creating new ones. Strategies are becoming a bottom-up tool for territorial cooperation and are based on the involvement of local and regional entities and civil society. Through joint actions aimed at achieving the goals of macro-regional strategies, a cooperation platform is created that promotes the European value

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<sup>1</sup> Including Title XVIII of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

<sup>2</sup> Like other instruments, such as the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), the Interreg programme or the European Neighbourhood Instrument.

system, strengthens democratic principles and raises standards of regional development management, including developing a model of multilevel governance;

#### The Carpathians as a specific European macro-region

6. points out that the Carpathians cover 190 000 km<sup>2</sup>, making them the second largest mountain region in Europe after the Alps, and have a population of around 68 million. The Carpathians represent a homogeneous mountain range with specific development challenges and possibilities in view of their geographical characteristics;
7. highlights the unique resources of the Carpathians, such as the natural wealth, unique multicultural heritage, human resources and common identity of mountain communities, all of which provide a great opportunity to work together towards more dynamic, sustainable and balanced socio-economic development in the area;
8. stresses that the Carpathians are an area of exceptional importance given the high level of biodiversity and the state of conservation of the natural environment, which is unique at European level. It is a source of European heritage that should be protected for future generations, and that entails the obligation to seek appropriate pathways for economic development that allow this heritage to be preserved and protected. It is therefore necessary to coordinate the actions of entities at all levels of governance in this field, taking into account the cross-border nature of environmental issues;
9. recognises the potential of the centuries-old neighbourhood of Carpathian societies and the rich culture of mountain regions that stems from being at the crossroads of influences from East and West, of shared historical experiences and pastoral traditions. Current initiatives in preserving and popularising shared cultural heritage<sup>3</sup> demonstrate the significant potential that unites local communities. Respecting the rights of ethnic minorities and preserving their cultural heritage is highly important in the Carpathian region;
10. notes that a significant part of the Carpathian macro-region is made up of the poorest regions of Member States and the GDP indicator per capita in most of them is below 50% of the EU average. Their development capacity is limited by their peripheral location in relation to European development centres, poor development of communications links due to conditions of mountainous terrain and historically inherited barriers in the form of borders. Another factor is the lack of infrastructure resulting from many years of underinvestment and processes of economic transformation, as well as neglect of development potential;
11. recognises that it is necessary to highlight the specific needs of Carpathian mountainous regions and take advantage of the specific endogenous potential of the macro-region. Carpathian countries and regions adopting partnership cooperation will enable actions to be better adapted to the specific development circumstances and needs that arise from their social, historical, infrastructural and geopolitical conditions;

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<sup>3</sup> Examples could be projects carried out within current ETC programmes, including programmes carried out by local authorities and NGOs.

12. considers that the European Commission placing the Carpathian issue at the centre of a strategic document would highlight the problems of this area and make it possible to exploit the currently dormant and unique potential of the whole macro-region by focusing actions on the most important horizontal problems and challenges;
13. points out that the Carpathians are a particularly important geopolitical region where strategic political and economic interests of Eastern and Western Europe intersect. This was even more the case after the 2004 EU enlargement, since the region now formed the eastern border of the whole EU;
14. points out that the Carpathian macro-region covers not only EU Member States, but also Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine, which makes it possible not only to increase integration between EU countries but also influence neighbouring countries by including them in more in-depth cooperation;

#### Establishing the macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region

15. recognises the range of initiatives undertaken at various levels and by many groups to create a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region (Carpathian strategy)<sup>4</sup>, the result of which is the accepted declarations of support for the idea of creating it<sup>5</sup>. It is worth noting that these initiatives are undertaken at the level of governments, national parliaments and regional and municipal authorities as well as local communities;
16. is satisfied that all documents have been adopted on the basis of dialogue between specific stakeholders in the future strategy as well as taking into account its trans-national, interregional and local nature. This points to the complementarity of actions taken, which in future may be the condition for success of the macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region;
17. commends the actions undertaken to implement the 2003 Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention) which is a multi-party international agreement on the Carpathian region established on treaty principles of international law. The parties to the convention are obliged to cooperate and pursue comprehensive policy for protection and sustainable development of the Carpathian region, also taking into account objectives and provisions of the Convention in their own sectoral policies (for example, concerning spatial planning, agriculture, forestry, transport and tourism), better coordination of these policies and applying integrated approach principles to management of land resources;

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<sup>4</sup> The topic of the Carpathian strategy was mentioned at the Europe of the Carpathians conferences that have been organised since 2011. As part of the Economic Forum in Krynica, panel discussions take place which are dedicated to the Carpathian strategy with the participation of international partners representing parliaments, governments and regions. Examples of local and regional government initiatives include: organising the International Carpathian Cooperation Forum, the Carpathian Days of Neighbourhood Community, numerous conferences and meetings.

<sup>5</sup> In September 2018 representatives of governments from Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine and Poland signed the Declaration of Intent to Create the EU Macro-Regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region.

18. notes that the Carpathian Convention is a multi-sectoral management mechanism covering the Carpathian region that enables inter-sectoral integration and widespread participation of stakeholders from various levels (national, regional, non-governmental, etc.) The multi-level cooperation standards that have been developed and have resulted in five thematic protocols on the Carpathian Convention<sup>6</sup> can be used as an important part of further cooperation<sup>7</sup>;
19. commends the experience and achievements of the Carpathian Euroregion, which was established in 1993 as a socio-political initiative supported by the governments of Carpathian countries and is the oldest organisation supporting the socio-economic development of this region. Over 26 years of experience have shaped the cross-sectoral, international and specialised cooperation structure that includes over 1000 entities;
20. notes that the European Committee of the Regions created the Carpathian interregional group in February 2016, involving representatives of local and regional authorities from the relevant countries interested in developing a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region;
21. refers to its opinion on Macro-regional strategies, such as the Danube: a framework for promoting transnational clusters<sup>8</sup> in which the CoR advocated the creation of a Carpathian strategy and expressed the belief that creating a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region would be an excellent complement to the existing initiatives such as the Carpathian Convention and the Carpathian Euroregion and would make it possible to exploit the existing potential of cooperation of authorities at all levels;
22. points out that the main objective of the Carpathian strategy would be to preserve the area's high nature value, and to boost the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Carpathian macro-region on the basis of its unique natural and cultural heritage, internal sustainable development potential and creating a competitive advantage. It is therefore a question of increasing the standard of living and quality of life of the population of the Carpathian region while preserving the unique ecological assets of the Carpathians;
23. takes the view that one issue that should be addressed as a matter of urgency is depopulation and the ageing population in the Carpathian region; therefore, developing the provision of basic social services in the Carpathian area, particularly those related to access to education, health and social inclusion, should be a key aspect of the cooperation within a Carpathian macro-regional strategy;

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<sup>6</sup> The Protocol on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological and Landscape Diversity – 2008, Bucharest; Protocol on Sustainable Tourism – 2011, Bratislava; the Protocol on Sustainable Forest Management – 2011, Bratislava; The Protocol on Sustainable Transport – 2015, Mikulov and the Protocol on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development – 2017 Lillafüred.

<sup>7</sup> Cooperation within the Carpathian Convention, in which the seven Carpathian countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine – are parties, is an important element in the process of European integration, as alongside the EU Member States, it also includes two countries directly bordering the EU: Serbia and Ukraine.

<sup>8</sup> CoR opinion 6422/2018 – Macro-regional strategies, such as the Danube: a framework for promoting transnational clusters, rapporteur: Dainis Turlais (LV/ALDE).

24. notes that the actions proposed in the strategy should focus on strengthening sustainable and economic cooperation in the strategic macro-regional sectors: clean industry, sustainable tourism and an agri-food sector through the development of Carpathian clusters and the macro-regional innovation ecosystem. The proposed actions should focus on effective use of local resources, including through certification and the introduction of a common Carpathian brand for products, and the shared potential of Carpathian countries and regions and strengthen the bringing of areas with less favourable socio-economic conditions into the development process to improve the competitiveness of the macro-region as a whole;
25. stresses that the environmental value of the Carpathian region is an integral part of the development of the macro-region. Improving macro-regional cooperation to protect and preserve the natural environment, manage natural risks, mitigate and adapt to climate change and its association with management of reproductive material through sustainable forest management and carrying out educational activities to increase ecological awareness will help improve the quality of the environment in the region. Coordination of actions throughout the Carpathian region will allow for economies of scale;
26. considers that the whole Carpathian mountain area must play an active role and make a major contribution to the European Union's climate change policy with the common aim of following through on the commitments made under the Paris Agreement. We underline the imperative of preserving Carpathian forests given the valuable role they play in reducing CO<sub>2</sub> and their importance in the process of water retention, soil protection and conservation of biodiversity;
27. believes that undertaking initiatives to increase the competitiveness and innovativeness of the region must be connected to making it more accessible. Actions cannot take place in other areas without sustainable transport and digital and social infrastructure. Joint actions in this area will help open up the Carpathian region and strengthen its internal cohesion, including strengthening cross-border connections;
28. points out that spatial planning and cooperation within the region are important elements of comprehensive development of the Carpathian region. The quality of the actions of institutions, including local authorities, is a factor determining the quality of cooperation, and therefore the prospects for the macro-region's development. The strategy should make particular reference to the specificities of the networks of Carpathian settlements (i.e. the large number of small towns located in valleys), as well as the traditional pastoral communities living at higher altitudes that have been weakened by socio-economic changes in recent decades). It is important to develop the functional ties between Carpathian mountain areas and surrounding areas and to strengthen urban centres;
29. referring to its previous opinion<sup>9</sup>, notes that the macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region will help complement actions undertaken within the existing Danube strategy, as it takes into account the specificities of the mountainous Carpathian region. The Committee points out that the strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR, 2010) is currently the largest macro-regional strategy in the EU in terms of area and part of this area is covered in the strategy for the Alpine

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<sup>9</sup> CoR opinion 6422/2018.

region (EUSALP, 2016) and the strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian region (EUSAIR, 2014), which does not lead to adverse effects. The Committee believes that it will be similar for the Carpathian strategy;

30. reiterates and confirms the approval expressed many times in its opinions<sup>10</sup> of the initiative to develop a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region and sees it as a well-developed initiative undertaken at all levels of government – European, national, regional and local;
31. recalls the Council's appeal for renewed political impetus for macro-regional strategies and its readiness to analyse initiatives that aim to establish new strategies<sup>11</sup>;
32. calls on the European Commission to support the initiative to create a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region as a further macro-regional strategy and the second one to address a European region with mountainous characteristics;
33. considers that the macro-regional strategy instrument enables more effective use to be made of available financial resources as part of the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective, by creating a viable system for co-financing and implementing actions supporting the regions of Carpathian countries. This will also improve their access to sources of European funding<sup>12</sup>;

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<sup>10</sup> Including opinions such as: Macro-regional strategies, such as the Danube: a framework for promoting transnational clusters, CoR 6422/2018; The implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, CoR 2554/2017; the opinion on the future of cohesion policy (2017/C 306/03).

<sup>11</sup> COM(2019) 21 final – doc. 5927/19 + ADD 1.

<sup>12</sup> Taking account of the conclusions of the European Council and the European Committee of the Regions' own opinions, including CoR opinion 2017/C/306/03, which calls for the basis for European Structural and Investment Funds to be an approach aimed at specific areas, indicating that EU policy and interventions should focus on problems affecting specific areas for which the socio-economic structural situation justifies, under TFEU, adopting specific measures.

34. acknowledging the positive impact of the Carpathian Convention, the importance of its objectives and their convergence with the EU's priorities, calls on the European Commission to take action towards the EU joining this Convention as a party, and points out that the EU is already a party to the Alpine Convention.

Brussels, 4 December 2019

The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Karl-Heinz Lambertz

The Secretary-General ad interim  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Pedro Cervilla

## II. PROCEDURE

<b>Title</b>	Macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region
<b>Reference(s)</b>	N/A
<b>Legal basis</b>	Article 307 TFEU
<b>Procedural basis</b>	Rule 41(b)(ii) of the CoR's Rules of Procedure
<b>Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter</b>	N/A
<b>Date of Bureau/President's decision</b>	25 June 2019 (Bureau)
<b>Commission responsible</b>	Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget
<b>Rapporteur</b>	Wladyslaw Ortyl (PL/ECR), President of the Podkarpackie Region
<b>Analysis</b>	19 July 2019
<b>Discussed in commission</b>	N/A
<b>Date adopted by commission</b>	23 October 2019
<b>Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)</b>	unanimity
<b>Date adopted in plenary</b>	4 December 2019
<b>Previous Committee opinions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Opinion 6422/2018 "Macro-regional strategies, such as the Danube: a framework for promoting transnational clusters", rapporteur: Dainis Turlais (LV/ALDE)</li> <li>– Opinion 2554/2017 "The implementation of macro-regional strategies", rapporteur: Raffaele Cattaneo (IT/EPP);</li> <li>– Opinion 23/2014 "The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region", rapporteur: Gian Mario Spacca (IT/ALDE);</li> <li>– Opinion 2994/2014 "The Alpine macro-regional strategy for the European Union", rapporteur: Herwig Van Staa (AT/EPP).</li> <li>– Opinion 5074-2013 "The added-value of macro-regional strategies", rapporteur: Pauliina Haijanen (FI/EPP);</li> <li>– Opinion 1272/2012 "Revised EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region", rapporteur: Pauliina Haijanen (FI/EPP).</li> <li>– Opinion 86/2011 "Danube Region Strategy, rapporteur: Wolfgang Reinhart" (DE/EPP).</li> </ul>
<b>Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation</b>	N/A