

**Meeting of the High-Level Group of Macro-regional Strategies**  
**- Summary of Conclusions**

**30 May 2016, Brussels**

Participants: See attached list

The High-Level Group met on 30 May 2016 to review the progress and discuss future developments in the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies (MRSs) for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), Danube Region (EUSDR), Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), and the most recent EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP).

The meeting was chaired by **Lena Andersson Pench** and **Andrea Mairate**, DG REGIO.

Mr Mairate pointed to the opportunity to reflect about the role of the HLG in relation to EU macro-regional strategies in line with the request by the Council to "improve the effectiveness" of this Group. FR noted the possibility to include the sea-basin strategies in the HLG field of competence.

Mr. Mairate presented the current state-of-play of the four strategies which will be the subject of the European Commission's report to the Council and other institutions on the implementation of MRSs due by the end of the year. He concluded that despite positive developments in implementing the MRSs, an uneven political commitment among countries and strategies, and the resultant insufficient resources and capacities hamper their implementation. For more details, see the attached presentation.

Regarding the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, Mr Mairate informed the High Level Group about the process of revision of the targets and asked to take note of the new targets adopted by the Priority National Coordinators and National Coordinators. The list is included in attachment.

**Jean-Marc Venineaux**, DG REGIO, presented the analysis of Kai Böhme (Spatial Foresight) on the relationship between MRSs and territorial cohesion which concluded that the macro-regional framework is necessary to go beyond geographical and policy areas and to achieve territorial cohesion. For more details, see the attached presentation.

The discussion of the HLG which followed focused on challenges, results and future developments in the implementation of MRSs, following the structure identified in Böhme's presentation.

With respect to the **challenges**, the participants considered the main problems, remedies, and the possible need to change the way strategies are designed and implemented. They concluded that the main shortcomings to overcome relate to:

- *Outlook/Perspectives:* Overcoming the prevailing national focus and cooperating not only at transnational but also macro-regional - European

partnership level (across borders and sectors). The European dimension should remain an important element of MRSs' cooperation. The external aspect and the role of EU external policies (beyond cohesion and internal EU policies) is crucial because of the participation of non-EU countries in several MRSs.

- *Focus*: Identifying which specific issues can and should be solved at macro-regional level. The macro-regional tool kit offers the possibility to better implement EU policies in the territorial dimension.
- *Governance*: Minimising the administrative burden. EST reminded that macro-regional cooperation requires sufficient administrative and technical resources. DE pointed out that the institutional knowledge on how to fund macro-regional projects should be improved, and RS noted that the transfer of experiences from EU MS to build the administrative capacity in the enlargement countries would be particularly beneficial. MRSs should fit with and make use of existing institutional mechanisms and cooperation frameworks (Alpine Convention, Berlin Process). DG ENV and DG MOVE reiterated the importance of such links and noted that the Alpine Convention has set up a working group on the EUSALP and that the EUSDR and TEN-T offer great opportunity for complementing and exploiting synergies.
- *Commitment*: Ensuring continuity of MRSs beyond the election cycle and maintaining the momentum of macro-regional cooperation. Coordination of cooperation, increased ownership, communication and particularly, reaching out to stakeholders, are necessary to maintain acceptance and visibility of MRSs. AT noted that the role of the European level should be reassessed to identify how EU institutions can further contribute to macro-regional cooperation.
- *Funding*: Convincing funding bodies of the added value of MRSs and addressing the disparity in the amount of funds available for the EU member states and the "not yet" EU member states, as RS pointed out. An initiative to establish a network of ERDF Managing Authorities in the thematic field of innovation in the Baltic Strategy will be piloted based on the good example of cooperation within the ESF Managing Authorities network in the Baltic Region. SI noted that for the sake of transparency, labelling criteria and procedures should be harmonised.

With regard to the concrete results, participants discussed what has been achieved within MRSs; which results can be highlighted in particular; have concrete projects and initiatives influenced policy decisions; to what extent have they reinforced cooperation in the macro-regions concerned; who has benefitted from cooperation and, has it modified the internal governance structure in the countries and regions concerned.

- The overall benefit of macro-regional cooperation is to identify projects which would not have been realised otherwise.
- PL, FI and HU highlighted concrete results, including projects which have influenced policy decisions and reinforced cooperation in the macro-regions (in the fields of energy, environmental risks, bio-economy).
- There is a need to go beyond quantitative results and look at the value added elements of the MRS including exchange of knowledge and cooperation networks. Based on experiences during its chairmanship of the EUSBR, PL highlighted the positive impact of macro-regional cooperation on improved linkages between line ministries, regions and municipalities. DE noted the better coordination with regions and NGOs. RO highlighted the usefulness of MRSs for joining all stakeholders around a given topic (e.g. on Roma). For CZ, MRSs allow to improve internal coordination of policies, and reach out to stakeholders, incl. the business community, in order to communicate emerging opportunities. For HU, MRSs offered a good opportunity for cooperating with neighbouring countries, notably with RS and UA. For LT, MRSs could give rise to common connectivity platforms.
- There is a difficulty in measuring results of MRSs. Many projects which support the MRSs' objectives cannot be solely associated with the Strategies themselves. Also, the mobilising effect of the MRS in improving inter-institutional cooperation and cross-policy coordination is hard to measure. A good monitoring and evaluation system and reporting are necessary to fine-tune targets, revise the Actions Plans and provide accountability.
- For the Commission intangible outcomes are no less important than quantifiable outputs and results. For DG ENV, the MRSs are important tools for reaching the targets set out in the EU Environmental policy.

In relation to future developments, the points discussed included: how the MRSs should evolve; the role they should they play in the post-2020 cohesion policy; what contribution/added value could the concept bring into this policy; and, how the MRSs could provide a more appropriate response to issues shared by all countries.

The discussion allowed the following points to be raised:

- Taking into account existing experience and reflecting on post-2020, IT emphasised the need to strike a balance between inter-governmental and EU law, in particular the role of the EC and the Council and its expert groups; shared vs. direct management and the related simplification measures; the future of Cohesion Policy itself; and the potential of functional areas beyond existing administrative structures. IT also suggested that MRSs could be reflected e.g. in multi-country Partnership Agreements.
- SE called for a closer linkage between MRSs and cohesion policy and noted that long term visions were required for investing in the future, hence the

scenario building under 'Vision 2030' for the Baltic Sea Region. The EUSBSR revised Action Plan covers future-oriented areas such as circular economy, bio-economy, digitalisation and maritime safety. SE also reminded that global agreements, in particular the Sustainable Development Goals and climate change objectives need to be taken into account.

- AT reminded that the European Commission's report to the Council and other EU institutions on the implementation of MRSs at the end of 2016 and 2018 will provide important input for discussion on the way ahead.
- Exchange of experiences between the different MRSs should be strengthened, not only on general issues (e.g. governance, funding) but also around concrete topics (e.g. transport, energy, innovation).

By way of conclusion, **Lena Andersson Pench** underlined that a balance need to be struck between, on the one hand, the requirements of flexibility and openness to qualitative assessments, coupled with the difficulty of establishing what would not have happened anyway, and, on the other, financing authorities' request for tangible, preferably quantifiable results. She saw a clear need for making a case for what kind of issues can best be tackled at the macro-regional level, hence requiring a collective effort. This wall all the more important in light of the growing euro-scepticism. The added value of cooperation should be demonstrated also for coping with the two major issues of the day, demographic change and migration, and highlighting opportunities which MRSs could create. The very useful comments and suggestions formulated during the meeting would be taken into account in the Commission's end-of-the-year report as well as in studies underway focusing on the contribution of MRSs and their links with cohesion policy.

#### Annexes:

1. Presentation "State of play of EU Macro-regional Strategies"
2. Presentation "Macro-regional strategies and territorial cohesion"
3. List of EUSDR revised targets (as adopted in the Joint Meeting of EUSDR National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators held in Bratislava on 23 May 2016)
4. List of participants