

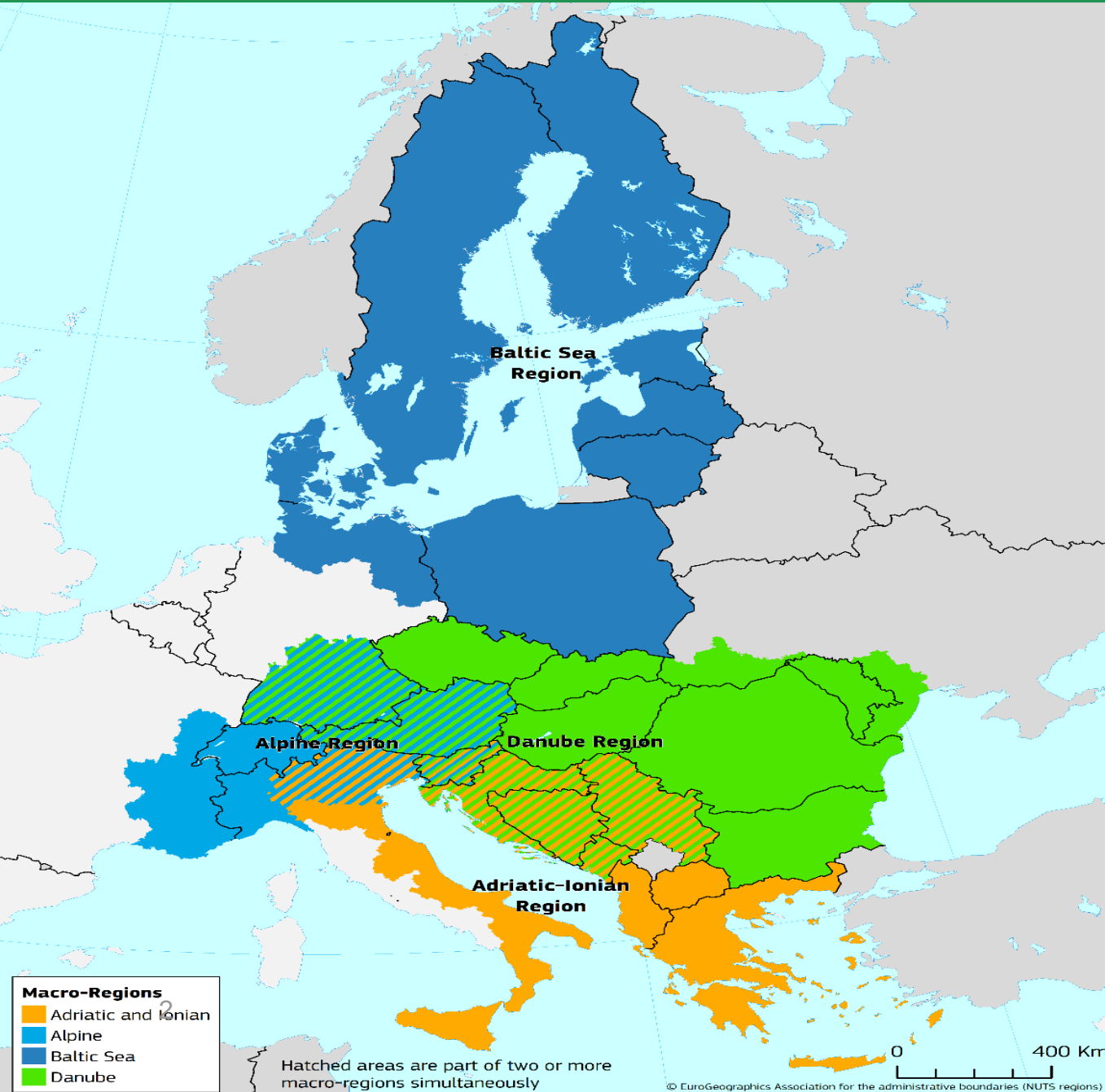


4th Commission report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

[COM(2022)705] and [SWD(2022)397]

Dialogue with Common Provisions Regulation partners 2021-2027

15 June 2023



Context

4th biennial report, covering the period from mid-2020 to mid-2022, on the implementation of the four EU macro-regional strategies, involving 19 EU countries and 10 non-EU countries:

- [EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region](#)
- [EU Strategy for the Danube Region](#)
- [EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region](#)
- [EU Strategy for the Alpine Region](#)

Background

- From 2016, as requested by the Council, every second year the Commission publishes an implementation report covering the four Strategies.
- Published while Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine continues.
- To this should be added the impact of the pandemic where Strategy stakeholders across Europe and beyond struggle to address the severe economic, fiscal and social impacts.

What differs from the 3rd Report?

- Simpler and more straightforward structure
- Characteristics and added value of Strategies set out in the introduction
- Consequences related to the war in Ukraine discussed
- Stronger focus on how Strategies can deliver on key European political priorities, cohesion and involvement of partners
- Stronger emphasis on results and upcoming issues. Boxes with project examples included
- More in-depth discussion on “the three Es”: *energy*, *enlargement* and *embedding* of Strategies in cohesion policy programmes

Structure of the report

- Introduction: What is so specific about the Strategies?
- Three blocks:
 1. The green and digital transitions, social change and the war in Ukraine
 2. Promoting cohesion and place-based development, partnership
 3. Governance and administrative capacity, funding, monitoring & evaluation and communication
- Conclusions

The report is accompanied by a Commission Staff Working Document with more detailed information on each Strategy

Introduction: What is so specific about the Strategies? What is their added value?

- The Strategies are cooperation frameworks establishing networks of stakeholders that form a transnational, cross-sectorial mosaic of expertise with a potential for further cooperation, value and prosperity creation.
- They are not about one-time activities with a predetermined beginning and a fixed end-date.
- Strategies address issues requiring several countries to cooperate based on a cross-sectorial and multi-level governance approach.
- The soft character of Strategy cooperation is an advantage as it enables solutions that are often difficult to achieve in more formalised contexts, often characterised by competing national interests.

The green and digital transition

- The Strategies are strongly linked to the European Green Deal and the European Digital Strategy by providing a cross-sectoral approach based on multi-level governance and a wide stakeholder involvement.
- They help to deliver on initiatives such as the the REPowerEU Plan, the development of a sustainable blue economy, the EU offshore renewable energy strategy and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.
- They have helped to stimulate coordinated investments in the field of hydrogen, promoted the use of electric vehicles in regional and local transport systems, and were instrumental in cutting red tape for the shipping industry by introducing harmonised and digitalised control documents.

Social change and the war in Ukraine

- Activities under the Strategies help to boost social innovation, promote active ageing and lifelong learning, and increase the innovation capacity as well as investment in skills and education.
- To respond to the war in Ukraine, many stakeholders help refugees and support humanitarian aid initiatives and activities have focused on the integration of Ukrainian refugees and on establishing safe corridors for freight.
- The pandemic has had negative effects on Strategy-participating countries but it also triggered new ways of working and provided a push for a shift to more sustainable tourism and digitalisation of the labour market.

Promoting cohesion and place-based development, strengthening partnership

- In the four Strategies, a wide range of processes and projects currently bridges local and regional action with European political priorities:
 - from using digitalisation to overcome natural handicaps and strengthen the resilience of mountain and rural villages to initiatives fostering equality between women and men in innovation and entrepreneurship.
- The role of civil society and youth in Strategy governance has increased over time but still needs to be strengthened.
- Intensified exchanges between Strategies as well as other regional cooperation networks could help to increase synergies.

Governance and administrative capacity

- Still need to strengthen the political ownership of the Strategies. Annual ministerial/political meetings back-to-back with annual fora has proven to be useful and should be standard practice.
- The role of non-EU countries in the Strategies is increasing. Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine have all had a presidency held by a non-EU country.
- The role of the Strategies as enlargement facilitators has moved to the top of the agenda with new candidate countries.
- Further work is needed to empower key Strategy implementers (notably thematic area coordinators) with clear mandates, effective decision-making capacity and a clear vision of how their fields of work contribute to the broader policy context.

Funding

- Interreg programmes have neither the resources (limited budgets) nor the thematic coverage to be able to address all objectives and priorities.
- This is why considerable efforts were made in all four Strategies to align 2021-2027 national/regional EU funding programmes. Networks of programme authorities still need to be set up in each Strategy and their roles clarified.
- Additional efforts made in centrally managed programmes - notably Horizon, LIFE and funding from DG ECHO - to specifically target Strategy stakeholders.
- Already political commitments on funding, but for the future these commitments made at ministerial meetings should be turned into action.

Monitoring and evaluation

- When moving from programming to implementation, important to monitor the practical use and uptake of provisions in cohesion programmes to implement Strategy actions.
- Initiatives to develop monitoring systems currently on-going in all Strategies but should be stepped up.
- This will help to have better and more robust data on the impact of the Strategies, including on amounts of funding mobilised.
- Comprehensive monitoring mechanisms would also help to maintain political support and help key implementers to better understand each Strategy's weaknesses and strengths.

Communication

- Communication activities have progressed well in all four Strategies.
- In 2020 a common narrative was developed by Strategy communication and policy officers.
- The EU Strategy Week organised during the first half of each year (24-28 April 2023) has become the biggest Brussels-based event specifically dedicated to connect Strategy stakeholders at all levels with representatives of EU institutions, research and academia, civil society organisations and youth.
- However, the Strategies are still not widely known. That's why the work to communicate them should be continued and expanded, notably by more targeted activities, exploiting synergies, improving coordination and harmonisation.

Way forward

- The Strategy contribution to the green, digital and social transitions is important. All Strategies are accelerating their delivery on these topics, and this will make them more politically relevant.
- Activities that help to address current challenges such as the Russian war against Ukraine, the climate crisis and the recovery from the pandemic further reinforces the relevance of the Strategies.
- However, the Strategies should also increase their efforts to support new activities in fields where cooperation at macro-regional level provides added value:
 - Energy security/energy efficiency and enlargement
- The efforts to embed Strategy priorities in relevant EU funding programmes needs careful monitoring

Thank you

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