

**Opening speech:
5th EU Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days**

12 June 2024

Director-General Vitcheva (dear Charlina),
Ambassador Stranzl,
Dear macroregional and sea-basin partners,
dear supporters of cooperation,
drawn from across Europe,

Welcome to this first joint event, for the macro-regional and sea-basin strategies. For the first time ever, we are bringing these two annual events together.

My thanks to everyone who has worked so hard to make this possible. Thanks to the various strategies themselves, and their presidencies and partners. And of course, thanks to our colleagues in DG Maritime Affairs. We always work closely together – today is a visible expression of this.

But, why the new approach? Why a joint event, bringing together sea-basin strategies and macro-regional strategies?

We do it because, today, more than ever, we see the need for cooperation. From the climate emergency to geopolitical instability – the challenges we face in the world today, can only be solved by cooperation.

This cooperation, at every level, is the firm foundation, on which our European Union is built. It is the goal and purpose of both the macro-regional strategies, and the sea-basin strategies.

And today we see 3 specific opportunities in bringing you together.

First, the opportunity of developing further synergies, between our four macro-regional strategies and three sea-basin strategies.

Second, the opportunity to collaborate and exchange on working methods, since we have similar frameworks.

And third, the opportunity to co-ordinate across the Commission, using the scale of the event to bring together representatives from 16 Commission services. So that every here today, can find the services and input you need for success.

So first, the opportunity of synergies. As you know, macro-regional and sea-basin strategies share a similar philosophy. They are central to territorial cohesion. They promote coordination and cooperation across borders for places and themes, where action at national level is simply not enough.

I am thinking of air and water pollution. Or congestion caused by cross-border transport flows. Or environmental threats, such as maritime pollution, rising sea levels, droughts, or flooding.

All of these challenges cross borders. And it is only by pooling our competence and experience, that we can address them. We learn from each other's experience – and we avoid the duplication of structures and of efforts.

And here I must say, that while the strategies have been successful in addressing many common challenges, more could be done on certain themes. For example, the triple transition – green, digital and demographic – will bring new activities, and a need for new skills. Vulnerable people, firms and regions will need support to make the transition.

But of course, for everyone it is important to acquire new skills – and to upgrade old ones. Especially in critical sectors such as energy efficiency, renewable green and blue energy sources and sustainable growth on land – and at sea.

And of course, you know the other topics that still need further reflection. For example, how do we better include civil society in the work? And how do we better use available resources – not just cohesion policy, but all the available resources – to fund high-impact investments and activities?

There will be a dedicated session on these issues tomorrow. I encourage you all to make the most of this.

The **second opportunity** created by bringing together macro-regional and sea-basin strategies is, of course, the opportunity to discuss **working methods and coordination**.

Not only are their goals complementary, both macro-regional and sea-basin strategies are built on common approach. As you know, this is transnational, cross-sectoral, and based on multi-level governance.

In other words, bringing together different levels of government, across different countries, to tackle problems across many different sectors. Because there are many problems in the modern world, that can only be tackled by this transnational, cross-sectoral, cross-border mosaic of expertise and experience.

And of course, this kind of macro-regional and transnational cooperation fosters a broader identity. It builds trust among neighbouring countries. This is true whether they are EU member states – or soon-to-be EU Member States.

One of the wonderful things about these strategies – one of their great strengths – is that all countries participate on an equal footing: equal conditions with equal rights and responsibilities.

So these strategies help facilitate enlargement. Because countries experience the roles and responsibilities of membership – including the management of EU funds. And these strategies are also a tangible sign of European support for Ukraine, as they continue to suffer from Russia's war of aggression.

But this broad network of stakeholders brings its own challenges. And we must work together to improve governance, as well as institutional capacities.

Because successful strategies can only come from a careful, organic approach. Building up from local, regional and national levels all agreeing unanimously on the way forward.

So as we all know, the development of a successful strategy is measured in years. It requires significant administrative and financial investment from all countries concerned. And it requires the unambiguous political support of all countries in the geographical area concerned.

We count on your support in this work. We also count on you to share your expertise and experiences – to inform and inspire others.

And this brings me to the **third and final opportunity** created by bringing together macro-regional and sea-basin strategies: to give you a **“one stop shop” to meet with Commission services.**

You have asked repeatedly for this opportunity. And today and tomorrow we bring together 16 Commission services, available to answer your questions, and hear your perspectives.

I find it symbolic too. This is a tangible expression of broad Commission support for your work. I encourage you to make the most of this opportunity.

And it is with this multi-disciplinary support, that this afternoon you will work on a whole series of questions. Important questions for the future.

Starting with the fact that energy consumption in eastern Europe is considerably higher than elsewhere – and in Ukraine, more than three times the EU average. How could macro-regional and sea-basin cooperation help to bring it down?

More broadly, we will discuss methods and tactics. For example, how could a more systematic involvement and participation of civil society in the strategies contribute to better decision-making? What can smart specialisation at sea-basin and macro-regional level do, to make sure resources and investments are directed towards the sectors and activities with the greatest potential?

These and many other issues will be discussed in five parallel workshops here at the Egg. There will be no formal panel discussions. You will be able to work practically and engage in debates and discussions with the workshop organisers.

Tomorrow morning, we will have a dedicated debate organised by young people in the strategies. This is a priority for us: bringing young people into everything we do.

And of course, macro-regional and sea-basin cooperation are an ideal opportunity for this. We are building on our Youth4Cooperation initiative, and will focus on cooperation from a youth perspective.

Not only will this improve the strategies. This will also promote and sustain European values and democracy, during these trying times.

And of course, we have included plenty of time for networking – for you to meet your peers from the other strategies. This is one of the key sources of added value for these meetings. We tested a new approach at last year's macroregional strategies week – and it was a success!

So this year we are taking it one step further, giving you the opportunity tomorrow afternoon to organise your own meetings. I encourage you to use this, to its full potential.

Because they say that: “If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together”.

We want to go far. Far in cooperation which brings European neighbours together. Far in partnership, including young people. And far in a green transition which benefits the economy and society, and makes our regions better places to live.

And we can only do this together. This is the spirit of cooperation. This is the spirit of both the macro-regional and sea-basin strategies. And this is the spirit of our first joint meeting. Let us make the most of today and tomorrow – and of this unique opportunity.