

# **The EU Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies in the EU Enlargement process**

**12 June 2024- 14:00-15:30**

The workshop started with opening remarks by Moray Gilland. He pointed out that enlargement, especially in the field of cohesion policy, is not a fast process and that it needs to be based on solid foundations. DG REGIO wants to bring most of the assistance to the strategies to advance this process. He also emphasized that MRS and CMA are long term and flexible cooperation frameworks to build capacity and learn EU principles, procedures and working methods.

He underlined that 10 years ago enlargement was not at all mentioned in the documents describing the established macro-regional strategies. He underlined that enlargement is above all a political and bilateral process which builds on events. In fact, 10 years ago, enlargement was not at all mentioned in the documents describing the established macro-regional strategies. But meanwhile, due to the current geopolitical context instigated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the enlargement agenda has regained new momentum and Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia were granted candidate country status.

As identified in previous Commission reports on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, macro-regional and sea basin strategies play a significant role in facilitating the EU enlargement process by fostering regional cooperation, promoting dialogue, enhancing a just and sustainable socio-economic development, while helping to improve the administrative and technical capacity of candidate countries. These contribute to the enlargement process by:

- allowing greater ownership of the processes by the EU candidate countries and hence easing the adoption of the EU acquis and preparing them for future membership;
- promoting a regional dimension that connects by enhancing regional cooperation and dialogue and helping the implementation of EU policies and strategies beyond EU borders;
- adopting an inclusive approach that empowers stakeholders as active participants in the shaping and implementation of the strategies by providing a platform for dialogue and cooperation on common issues;
- offering a framework where different levels, processes, policies, initiatives, and funds may converge and where the emphasis on territorial and sea basin cooperation stimulates positive dynamics between local authorities, the private sector, civil society and other relevant stakeholders at the local, national, and transnational level;
- providing a platform for candidate countries to participate, observe and learn, based on cooperation in different fields and at different levels, promoting a strong involvement of stakeholders and participatory policy-making.
- strengthening administrative and technical capacity generating competencies in the candidate countries by promoting investment, fostering innovation, and enhancing

competitiveness, through targeted policies, technical assistance, projects and sharing of best practices.

Sanda Šimić, Acting Assistant Minister of European Integration of Serbia, and National Coordinator for EUSDR and EUSAIR macro regional strategies mentioned possibilities in the framework of the strategies to exchange views between candidate counties on addressing issues in the framework of accession negotiations' clusters. She stressed that Interreg IPA programmes are the only programmes helping to build candidate countries' capacities to work under shared management and hence preparing them for future cohesion policy. She mentioned the topic of the reforms needed in the context of enlargement process and the importance of including the citizens behind these reforms.

Grigore Stratulat, Moldovan State Secretary for Environment, chair of the CMA in 2024 mentioned very useful discussions on the river basin management which took place in the course of the meetings on the Danube strategy. He pointed out the topic of pollution prevention as a major topic of common interest of the participating countries. He pointed to the issue of lack of capacities of project applicants to apply for funds. In this context, he mentioned the importance of the awareness of potential project applicants about the calls for proposals and their rules. Also, he pointed to the need to invest in capacities of project promoters to implement the projects. He encouraged forming associations of potential project beneficiaries from different countries participating in the strategies.

The panel discussion was followed by a roundtable discussion amongst participants on three topics: capacity building, projects, funding.

### ***Capacity building:***

European public sector expertise plays a critical role in providing technical assistance to address specific EU accession challenges. Participants acknowledged that institution-building tools, such as Twinning and TAIEX, are effective ways to build capacity and promote public policy reform processes in EU candidate countries. However, participants underlined that the strategies could expand this technical assistance by mobilising expertise available in the strategies. In this perspective, the strategies could create databases of qualified experts with relevant skills and expertise who are interested in the enlargement process of the candidate countries participating to the strategies and promote these databases across the candidate countries.

Intermediary and umbrella organisations should help in developing more horizontal governance structures within the strategies.

The introduction of new strategies' instruments for capacity building of local and regional authorities should allow not only to address specific problems, but is also a pre-condition for sustainable cooperation among regions and countries within the strategies.

### ***Projects:***

Participants identified several concrete examples on which the relevant stakeholders can coordinate their efforts via the macro-regional or sea-basin strategies. As for the common maritime agenda they agreed that the main added value can be found in projects linked to green and blue economies, especially concerning the climate change adaptation, for example with modernization projects of green ports.

A lot of concrete project examples were mentioned by participants acquainted with the Danube macro-regional strategy: projects mitigating impact of rivers and hydropower plants on fish migration, protection of habitats on Danube river basin, flood protection via collection of hydrometeorological data for better flood forecasting and projects aiming at increasing water quality. Participants identified other best practices in the Adriatic and Ionian macro-regional strategy, such as development of cross-border power system on trans-European networks, improvement of energy infrastructure in the Western Balkan countries, or coordination of energy grip plans between Member States and partner countries.

The participants mentioned the need to promote projects aimed at administrative capacity building at local level in the candidate countries. Twinning schemes with administrations of Member States were proposed in the context of advancing the enlargement process.

### ***Funding:***

The participants shared many ideas about funding, emphasizing the need to build capacities of potential applicants to access funding. Indeed, it was underlined that there are numerous sources of funding available, but the capacity of applicants is sometimes very limited as regards their absorption. It was also requested that for the next programming period post-27, the continuous efforts to simplify should not lead to more complex administrative procedures which as a result prevent new potential beneficiaries accessing the available funding.

The following proposed actions were harvested through the discussions:

- The embedding of Strategies in programming should be compulsory and clearly set out in the future CPR;
- The embedding of Strategies should also systematically covered in the Partnership agreements of the MS participating to EU strategies;
- The embedding of Strategies are no longer continuously monitored in the current programming period, following the suppression of the annual implementation reports. Alternative monitoring mechanisms should therefore be set-up.