



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



Speech by Commissioner Elisa Ferreira at the Closing of the Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days

Brussels, 13 June 2024

Dear ministers and state secretaries,
dear participants and friends of cooperation.

This event has been a landmark. Bringing together, for the first time, the three sea-basin strategies and the four macro-regional strategies.

Bringing together our synergies, and common interests.

Through these strategies we promote coordination, and cooperation across borders, where action at national level is simply not enough.

Essential actions, such as eliminating pollution in the Baltic and Adriatic and Ionian seas, as well as in the Danube, Sava and Tisza rivers. Or the restoring and preserving of the natural and cultural heritage in the Western Balkans. Or developing sustainable transport in the Alps. These are just some examples.

Yesterday and today, we have brought together competence and experience, in dealing with these unique challenges, and with an approach which crosses borders, crosses sectors, and crosses levels of government. Because projects require local and central engagement.

Building joint capacities, including of non-state actors. Creating a network, where solutions are found together, including with civil society, different types of institutions and citizens.

Because Europe's challenges, require greater cooperation. We need to escape the border mindset, and the sectoral mindset, to work together on the challenges of today – and of tomorrow.

And this is what you have been doing!

For example, the **Alpine strategy has been supporting green hydrogen ecosystems.**

This helps pave the way for a carbon-free economy in the Alps!

And fits with your work on smart villages and smart SMEs.

You are creating a future of smart, sustainable, and resilient communities in the Alps through the use of digital technologies.

The **Adriatic-Ionian region has been promoting maritime safety.** Supporting digital innovation to improve not only safety, but also logistical processes in maritime transport and ports. And working as well on social innovation, providing integrated healthcare services for an aging population.

The Danube strategy has been promoting healthy river eco-systems. Through projects dealing with issues such as pollution, plastic waste, and corridors for migratory fish. These projects make the Danube not just compliant with the environmental provisions, of the Water Framework Directive, but also more pleasant, and more liveable.

The Baltic Sea Strategy, has brought together public authorities, and civil society, to address the changes and transitions in our society.

Through projects such as the Civil Protection Faculty, bringing together experts from the Baltic Sea countries to prepare Ukrainian trainers, in areas such as emergency medicine, mine safety, psychological resilience, and democratic citizen engagement. By the spring of this year, over 60,000 Ukrainians had been trained in emergency medicine with the support of this project.

And as you know, these initiatives are just the tip of the iceberg. There are many more excellent examples across the macro-regional and sea-basin strategies.

But we cannot rest on the laurels of these achievements.

There is still significant room for improvement to make these Strategies and our cooperation more impactful.

Particularly as the EU faces key challenges ahead, for which the Strategies can play a vital role.

This requires a specific mindset and a specific approach.

An approach that will be needed more than ever in the future.

Needed in delivering the green, digital, and social transitions. Needed too in the context of enlargement, where the cooperation approach, and institutional capacity building, can help prepare candidate countries.

So as you leave today, I encourage you to take 5 specific actions to enhance your impact in the future.

First, while the strategies deliver well on the green transition, more could be done in the digital and social fields, as well as on energy topics.

I am thinking here specifically of energy security, energy poverty and green energy.

All these issues are growing in importance: macro-regional and sea-basin strategies have a specific role to play, including in the various skills that will underpin these transitions, helping build a resilient and adaptable workforce ready for today's ever-changing landscape.

Second, I encourage you all to make the most of your potentially unique contribution to enlargement.

I know you are aware of this. For example, the Slovenian and Austrian presidencies of the Danube Strategy both made enlargement a top priority.

The Adriatic-Ionian Strategy, currently under revision, aims to facilitate the successful accession of the Western Balkans.

And the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea has continued operating with Ukraine and Moldova in the frontline despite the difficult geopolitical context.

I am convinced that macro-regional and sea-basin strategies can help accelerate the enlargement process, and make a unique contribution to peace, stability, and security as well as to development and growth.

Third, I encourage you all to continue to work on partnership.

The importance of a broad partnership of local and regional stakeholders is well-recognised in all the strategies.

While the partnerships have been growing over time, especially regarding young people, macro-regional strategy governance can still be a top-down affair.

Let us encourage the mobilisation of more non-state actors, including academia, local and regional bodies, business associations, clusters, and civil society.

Fourth, I encourage you to empower strategy implementers with clear mandates, adequate resources and effective decision-making capacity.

Despite many declarations, and persistent positive words, political support for the strategies needs to be followed by concrete action, especially in relation to embedding the priorities and actions of these Strategies in cohesion programmes and national funds.

We want the strategies to maximise their potential.

This requires stability, and improved governance, giving the coordinators the proper resources, to carry out their work, including through organised capacity building activities.

Fifth, I encourage you to make the strategies more visible and to better demonstrate their impact.

Despite considerable efforts, the macro-regional strategies for example are still relatively unknown. In 2023, Eurobarometer found that even the most well-known strategy is known by 40% of citizens in the relevant area.

So let us do all we can to make macro-regional strategies, and sea-basin strategies, more visible. Especially relevant is measuring and reporting on the results of their achievements.

You need to step up activities in the fields of monitoring and evaluation, including on better and more robust data about the impact and added value that these Strategies bring to your territories.

Lastly, I would like to share some thoughts on potential new Strategies.

I believe it is important to recognise and value efforts aimed at enhancing cooperation across borders on a transnational scale.

Given the achievements of the existing strategies, and the emerging challenges ahead for the EU, it is only understandable that discussions about creating new strategies arise.

In this debate, there are a few important aspects to consider.

First, it is important to prioritise those territories or geographical areas that are not yet covered by existing strategies and where the transnational cooperation networks are less dense and need to be strengthened.

Secondly, interested members should identify objectively what value added a new Strategy could bring to existing cooperation frameworks.

We should avoid fragmentation and overlaps as much as possible. This means that any potential new strategy should retain the strengths of structures already in place.

Thirdly, any strategy is only as good as the effort put into its implementation.

Any potential new strategy should rely on ownership and leadership, at all levels, in all the countries concerned. It should also create a convincing and consensual roadmap, which mobilises the necessary resources in the long term.

As you are aware, it is not up to the Commission to propose new strategies.

Nevertheless, we are very attentive and listening, and will support the decisions made by Member States and the European Council in this matter because we recognise the importance of encouraging transnational, inter-regional and cross border cooperation.

I will conclude by reiterating what I have often said: cooperation is one of the foundational values of our Europe.

Our union is built on the principle that we are stronger together.

So do not underestimate the importance of your work. Building, brick by brick, the relations, and the solutions, which create our common European home.

The “de facto solidarity” which Schuman described in his declaration, Europe's birth certificate.

Be proud of this, do it well, and make it visible.

I wish you all success, and a safe journey home.

Thank you.

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