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To:	Ms Thérèse BLANCHET, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union
Subject:	COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the revised Action Plan of the EU Macro-Regional Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region

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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

on the revised Action Plan of the EU Macro-Regional Strategy for   the Adriatic and Ionian Region

{SWD(2025) 114 final}

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1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2009 and 2015, the European Council endorsed the creation of four European Union macro-regional strategies. By requiring countries to pool resources and take a cross-sectoral and multi-level governance approach to cooperation, the strategies tackle issues that no single country can effectively address alone. All the macro-regional strategies deliver results that support the green, digital and fair transitions, regional development and growth. The strategies have operated successfully for over a decade. The macro-regional concept is attractive and receives significant attention from public, private, academic and civil society stakeholders across Europe.

The European Council endorsed the creation of the **European Union macro-regional strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region** (hereafter 'the Strategy') in 2014. It was the third of four strategies to be created. The region is home to over 70 million inhabitants and covers 10 countries: four EU Member States (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia), five candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) and one third country (San Marino). The 10 countries participate on an equal basis and cooperate on a range of issues that can only be tackled together, for the benefit of each country and the whole region.

This Strategy is unique in that it is the only macro-regional strategy in which EU candidate countries outnumber participating Member States. It is also one of the most challenging in terms of the major socio-economic differences across the region. The participating countries share the need to tackle challenges affecting the region in a cross-border and transnational manner: the consequences of climate change, marine litter and waste do not stop at a border. Moreover, the region can prosper from coordinated and deeper cooperation between the countries, for example in transport, energy and sustainable tourism matters. Social disparities can also be better tackled by taking a consistent regional approach. By drawing on support under this Strategy, the Western Balkan countries benefit from deeper cooperation in five core areas, helping them along the path towards EU integration, for example in achieving the climate neutrality goal for 2050 set in the *European Green Deal*.

The Adriatic-Ionian region has a rich historical and cultural heritage, abundant natural resources and a high level of biodiversity. It has significant potential to develop renewable energy resources and quality food production. But the region also faces numerous challenges. Climate change has major consequences for the area. According to the analysis carried out for the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, the region will have to endure a rise in temperature of up to 4 degrees Celsius by the end of this century[1]. Wildfires and drought already cause significant challenges every year. The transport and energy systems are fragmented, often outdated and many areas are still not well connected. There is a need to accelerate the green transition. Sustainable fisheries and the aquaculture sector in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas need to be developed and overfishing prevented. Mass tourism in some parts of the region is leaving a negative footprint, illustrating the need for a joint, coordinated and stronger degree of tourism management.

Integrating the Western Balkan candidate countries into the European Union is a top priority of the EU. Similarly, for the candidate countries participating in the Strategy, accession to the EU is a high priority[2]. Nevertheless, the accession process has proceeded relatively slowly. The

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[1] Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans SWD(2020)223 of 6 October 2020 eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0223

[2] Standard Eurobarometer 99 – Spring 2023.

low level of convergence is a major problem for the Western Balkan region; its gross domestic product per head is currently around 35% of the average in the EU. This means there is a lack of funds for the accession process and related reforms, and gives rise to large-scale outward migration and the problem of depopulation[3].

The last decade has seen multiple crises, with the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine leading to a new, more unstable geopolitical situation. The general objective of the Strategy during this decade has been to promote economic and social prosperity and growth in the region by improving its attractiveness, competitiveness and connectivity. This objective remains valid. However, the Strategy needs to be updated to reflect recent developments and provide better solutions to the demanding and multi-faceted challenges the region faces.

This Communication looks at the revised action plan drawn up under the Strategy. It explains the background, the rationale, what has changed and how the Strategy will respond to new and future changes.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE STRATEGY

Delivering results on key EU priorities

From a standing start, the Strategy has delivered a series of positive and successful results across a number of topics. It has helped increase regional cooperation and networking under the four initial thematic pillars. The Strategy has been successful in delivering results in the region on EU priorities for 2019-2024. In particular, it has achieved results on the European Green Deal, the European Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the European digital strategy by providing a cross-sectoral approach based on multi-level governance and broad stakeholder involvement. It has also helped improve the integrated and sustainable governance of the maritime space and coastal areas of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. In addition, the Strategy has tailored key EU initiatives to the specific needs of and situation in the region.

The Strategy has also played a key role in supporting the Western Balkan countries which have benefited from their role as equal partners in the Strategy. The Strategy has helped put in place a comprehensive multilateral governance system and brought greater stability to the region, nurturing peaceful political and administrative dialogue on issues of common interest to the participating countries.

Tangible results for citizens

The impact of the Strategy for citizens can be demonstrated most effectively through examples of specific projects that were identified, delivered and implemented under the Strategy.

The Strategy has improved sea basin governance in the region by building administrative and institutional capacity in maritime governance. The 'PoWER' project (Ports as driving Wheels of Entrepreneurial Realm) supported the development of ports as innovation hubs to tap their business potential and boost collaboration among key players in the innovation supply chain.

The Strategy has also diversified the region's tourism products and services while tackling the seasonal nature of demand for inland, coastal and maritime tourism. In this context, the project 'ADRIONCYCLETOUR' (Adriatic-Ionian cycle route for sustainable tourism) aims to create

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[3]   *A new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, November 2023, European Commission.

a coastal cycling route along the entire coast of all partner countries, from Italy to Greece. It promotes the region's historical, artistic, cultural and natural heritage and focuses on eco-tourism. This project is a successful example of the 'embedding process', which means the ideas and priorities of the Strategy are embedded in several funding programmes in the region, with different programmes providing funding for different sections of the project[4].

The embedding process

This embedding process is vital to the success of the Strategy, because, as with all macro-regional strategies, it is without its own budget. Implementation depends on the ability to mobilise funds from other related sources (EU, national, regional and private sector) and on the well-coordinated use of funding available at different levels.

The main sources of funding to implement the Strategy are the EU's cohesion policy funds, the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, the investment and reforms in the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the European Investment Plan for the Western Balkans countries.

However, all sources of funding can be investigated and developed. For example, the project NAMIRS (North Adriatic Maritime Incident Response System), which consists of cooperation mechanisms and measures to achieve a high level of preparedness and response to emergency marine pollution in Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy was developed into a feasible project under the Strategy, and has since been funded via the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

Building a greater sense of ownership

The process to revise the action plan highlighted the need for a more strategic vision to implement the Strategy and a more systematic approach to improve ownership and awareness of the Strategy among all participating countries. This point was also highlighted in a report on cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2019[5].

3. THE REVISED ACTION PLAN

Over the last decade, a number of new challenges have emerged or have risen up the political agenda, including EU enlargement, climate change and digitalisation.

Since 2022, participating countries, in close cooperation with the Commission, have worked together in a multi-level, integrated and coordinated manner to produce a revised action plan that takes account of the geopolitical and policy developments since 2014. The revised action plan also reflects the lessons learned in implementing the Strategy over the years and includes changes in the governance and management of the Strategy brought in over the last decade.

This work has led to a revised action plan that more accurately reflects the needs and opportunities of the region and provides a more robust framework which will enable the participating countries to work more effectively together in achieving the aims of the Strategy.

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[4] Three separate cohesion policy programmes have funded sections of this project: Interreg Italy-Slovenia, Interreg Italy-Croatia, and the Friuli-Venezia Giulia regional programme.

[5] 'Territorial wide area cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region: Outlook on future Transnational Cooperation in the Region', OECD, 2019.

What is new?

a) The first, highly visible change in the revised action plan is a new **fifth pillar in addition to the original four.** This social pillar will focus on action to boost youth engagement, skills and employment, improve cooperation and coordination on equal and inclusive working conditions, and promote social innovation. It will also seek closer alignment with EU social policies.

b) The previous action plan contained two cross-cutting topics. The revised action plan has a new structure with **three horizontal** and **three cross-cutting topics**. Horizontal topics are of such importance that they should be integrated into all pillars. Cross-cutting topics are to be integrated where relevant and possible in the different pillars.

The three **horizontal topics** are: enlargement; capacity building; and research, innovation and development (see more details in Section 5 below).

The three **cross-cutting topics** are: the circular economy, green rural development and digitalisation (see more details in Section 6 below).

c) A new governing structure has been created to support effective implementation. The new structure will help improve institutional and effective multi-level governance in the region. It will be essential to secure the active participation of regions, local authorities, academia, young people, business and civil society organisations in the Strategy.

The governance system includes for the first time a Facility Point, which has already been set up and is providing technical and content-related assistance to implement the action plan. The Facility Point will continuously monitor and report on overall Strategy performance against the objectives and the output and result targets.

4. THE PILLARS

The following five pillars form the core of the revised action plan. They present the most urgent challenges and topics that stand to gain the most from cross-sectoral and cross-regional cooperation among countries across the region. With this focus, the revised action plan invites the partner countries to work towards greater policy coherence across all geographical levels.

Blue sustainable economy

Under Pillar 1, the Strategy aims to develop blue and green technologies for sustainable seafood production and consumption, as well as maritime and marine governance and services to bring prosperity to coastal communities and protect the aquatic inland, marine and maritime environment.

Action under Pillar 1 also aims to promote the EU Pact for Skills and Institutional partnerships, to strengthen the regional market by stepping up cooperation in the region, and to boost stakeholder involvement and business links. Building innovation ecosystems that promote research and innovation in green and blue technologies in the region will boost socio-economic competitiveness in related sectors, both in coastal and inland areas.

Action under this pillar will also tackle need to prevent overfishing. Effective and better fisheries management at sea and in relevant inland waters requires close coordination between participating countries. Coordinated action is needed to restore and protect freshwater resources to ensure access to healthy and sustainable freshwater. At present, high levels of pollution in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas threatens the marine environment in form of litter, microplastics, pesticides and antibiotics.

Transport and energy

Transport connections are key to economic development. The transport system in the region is disintegrated and infrastructure often outdated, which hampers economic development and hinders public use. Railway transport in the region lags behind the EU average both in terms of infrastructure and in freight and passenger volumes. In many participating countries, and especially in the Western Balkans, the quality of rail systems is poor and the roads unsafe.

Therefore, the revised action plan aims to **increase rail and road transport capacity and quality** by connecting links, easing bottlenecks and supporting comprehensive rail reforms. The Strategy will support the uptake of sustainable urban mobility plan initiatives, especially in urban nodes with strong urbanisation trends. It will improve the safety and security of port operations and develop a competitive, macro-regional interconnected port system.

The revised action plan also aims to foster the **security of energy supply** and **boost the competitiveness** of energy delivery. The ultimate objective is to develop well-functioning electricity markets, achieved by removing regulated retail electricity prices, easing network congestion, integrating renewable energy sources into power grids and enabling unhampered cross-border exchanges of power. Today, unavailable grid capacity to dispatch fluctuating energy from renewable sources is a factor limiting the shift to renewable energy. Bottlenecks in the uptake and distribution of solar and wind power need to be assessed and tackled. The decarbonisation of energy systems and the transition towards net-zero carbon economies will entail large-scale deployment of renewable energy sources and other low-carbon energy options, greater energy efficiency and increased electrification.

Environment

The Adriatic-Ionian region is increasingly affected by climate change, including rising sea levels, erosion, marine encroachment, saltwater infiltration, water shortages, droughts and biodiversity loss.

Maritime transport leaves a significant footprint on the marine environment and high-traffic maritime pathways are accident hotspots in terms of oil discharges. Overfishing is another major issue, and pollution from land sources is a significant marine challenge caused by the discharge of contaminants into the sea. Effective waste management is crucial, especially along coastlines, underscoring the importance of taking a holistic approach to tackle this problem.

Marine and coastal biodiversity in the region need protection. The focus of action under this pillar will include better management of biodiversity and greater coordination on maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal management. Environmental problems deriving from ballast water and other releases at sea from inland and transition waters need to be tackled. The management of nature resources in protected areas will be improved by stepping up cross-border cooperation.

Sustainable tourism

The region is heavily dependent on tourism. There is a clear need for better management of tourism streams to smooth demand across seasons, avoid unemployment in low seasons and the negative impact of overtourism on nature and the local environment in high seasons.

Action is needed to raise the level of knowledge of sustainable and smart destination management among small-scale tourism businesses and tourism stakeholders. Support will be provided to draw up national guidelines on training and education in the tourism sectors and to effectively implement the EU Pact of Skills in the tourism ecosystem.

There will also be support to boost rural tourism, organic products and to promote the concept of the Mediterranean diet. There is high potential to forget closer links between sustainable tourism and the food sector, leading to competitive advantages that boost the region's economic, environmental and social sustainability. More broadly, the action plan will boost the competitiveness, resilience and sustainability of the food and farming sector.

Greater social cohesion

The Adriatic-Ionian region faces significant social and economic challenges, including an ageing population, labour market imbalances, social exclusion, the inflow of refugees, pockets of poverty and depopulation.

Action under the new fifth pillar aims to align the region with EU strategies and policies to improve social cohesion and help boost youth engagement, skills, equal opportunities and access to the labour market. The Strategy will take an intersectional approach in those fields and will develop measures that empower young people and increase their capacity to participate actively in social and economic life. It will promote an equal and inclusive labour environment and develop and harmonise skills policies to boost job prospects. It will build on the concept of social innovation and the social economy by stepping up cooperation and knowledge transfer in this field, promoting an Adriatic-Ionian ecosystem conducive to social innovation.

5. HORIZONTAL TOPICS

Reflecting the integrated and coordinated nature of the issues tackled by the Strategy, all five pillars must cover the following three horizontal topics.

Enlargement

Rapid changes in the geopolitical situation in recent years following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has rewritten the political and economic framework for the region. Enlarging the European Union has become a top EU priority. This Strategy will support candidate countries in accelerating the accession process and in aligning more closely with the EU.

All pillars of the Strategy will factor in the enlargement dimension and will contribute to the accession process by pursuing related actions. This will include supporting reforms, producing plans and creating projects together in different areas, all leading to a better alignment with EU policies and faster integration of the candidate countries into the EU.

Capacity building

Robust and efficient administrative capacity is a pre-condition both for a successful governance process and for rolling out the measures planned under the macro-regional strategy. The multi-country, multi-partner nature of such work requires strong coordination mechanisms across and between the participating countries. In parallel, capacity building is an integral part of the enlargement process: candidate countries need to develop their own administrative capacities in order to be ready and able to handle the requirements of EU membership.

Consequently, all pillars in the Strategy will contribute, where relevant, to action to build capacity and improve the quality of governance in the region.

Research, innovation and development

Research and innovation are indispensable priorities for a country, and its wider region, to develop and thrive. The ability to convert innovative solutions into goods and services that can be sold on the market is also indispensable. The revised action plan will help align science and research in the candidate countries with the European Research Area and by so doing, support innovative SMEs and start-ups across the region.

All pillars will, where applicable, contribute to strengthening research and innovation in the region. The actions will be linked to smart specialisation strategies that countries and regions have put in place.

6. CROSS-CUTTING TOPICS

During the process of revising the action plan, a number of topics were identified that could have formed thematic pillars in their own right. However, upon examination, these topics were found to overlap with several other pillars. To avoid creating too many pillars, these three additional topics were designed as cross-cutting topics for action under several pillars.

Circular economy

It is not possible to achieve climate neutrality without transitioning to a fully circular economy. The circular economy model, which involves maintaining value and resources in the economy for as long as possible and minimising waste generation, reduces pressure on natural resources and supports sustainable growth.

The revised action plan envisages implementing circular economy approaches across a wide range of sectors. This will notably come under Pillar 1, with its focus on green & blue technology to reduce human impact on the environment and waters, Pillar 2, focusing on renewable energy, and Pillar 4, focusing on sustainable and green tourism.

Green rural development

A significant swathe of the Adriatic-Ionian region is rural. Identifying green rural development as a cross-cutting issue emphasises the importance and challenge of balancing the 'blue' and 'green' development of the wider region.

Action will be consistent with the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas[6] and the EU Rural Pact, aiming to advance towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040. It will cover demography challenges in particular and support citizens' effective right to stay in the place they call home. The revised action plan includes links to green rural development under all five pillars to various degrees, with emphasis on supporting local fisheries communities, sustainable energy production, mobility, environment and agricultural practices, and preventing brain drain. It is also reflected under the horizontal topics in relation with better living conditions and connectivity.

Digitalisation

The digital transition is essential to the competitiveness of companies in the region. The Strategy will support action on digitalisation in all sectors of the economy, ensuring the benefits are made available to all citizens and stakeholders. A priority under the Strategy is to create a network of digital innovation hubs in the region. After that, the focus will shift to supporting the establishment of stronger connections within the network. Digitalisation affects all sectors; action on this front will therefore be integrated in all pillars of the Strategy

7. IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

The Strategy's governance has a three-level structure: political, coordination and implementation. Across these levels, a number of challenges for the governance process still reveal room for improvement. Limited institutional involvement, a high level of staff turnover and limited results from the embedding process are all factors that have undermined the effectiveness of the Strategy in the past.

In this context, the participating countries and key stakeholders have made major efforts to build and ensure a more effective and efficient governance for the Strategy at all levels.

To this end, strengthening political commitment is essential: the national, regional and local authorities of the countries involved should provide more strategic leadership to bridge the gap between ambitious political commitments and the ability of administrations to meet them.

The governance of the revised Strategy will also strengthen management capacity at the strategic level, increasing effective decision-making and consolidating a results-based approach. Furthermore, it will empower stakeholders, build a greater sense of ownership and encourage them to network, cooperate and participate in implementing and developing the Strategy. Clear links to policymaking at national and regional level will serve to increase the involvement of line ministries, other public authorities and civil society and to solidify political support and implementation in the Strategy's participating countries.

Political, coordination and implementation levels of governance

The political level of governance is represented by Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Ministers of European Integration where applicable, and Ministers or authorities in charge of cohesion policy. They provide political and strategic direction for the Strategy. In the future, regional authorities are also expected to play an important role in these discussions.

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[6]   COM(2021) 345 final.

The annual rotating presidency plays a well-established role, as participating countries recognise its importance in driving the strategic direction of the Strategy. A 'trio presidency' system (previous, current and future presidency) has also been put in place to increase coordination and continuity between presidencies.

National coordinators carry out coordination of the Strategy within and between participating countries. Jointly, they act as an interface between the political level – to which they report on implementation and submit proposals − and the implementation level – to which they provide strategic guidance. Many participating countries have put in place multi-level coordination mechanisms at national level, which are producing encouraging results. However, there is a need for greater staff continuity and for sufficient administrative support.

The role of the key implementers (pillar coordinators and thematic steering group members) has grown noticeably, as these roles drive the day-to-day implementation of the action plan.

The multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance system of the Strategy involves a wide cross-section of transnational, cross-sectoral and cross-regional actors in different types of activities. The revised action plan will involve new stakeholders and create new dynamics and new ways of cooperating.

Civil society organisations play a vital role in contributing to better decision-making, by bringing local and regional communities closer to the Strategy. In this context, the forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce, the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities and the Association of the Universities of the Adriatic and Ionian region already represent networks of over 120 bodies and institutions. These organisations should be involved more closely in the Strategy. More broadly, further work is needed to mobilise civil society and local communities around the shared goals.

Following the establishment of the Youth Council, the revised action plan recognises the importance of bringing young people into the governance process too. It is important to reach out to young people to empower and enable them to carry out activities in line with their interests and concerns.

8. CONCLUSION

After 10 years of positive progress, it is time for the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region to change gear and adapt to the new geopolitical and policy challenges facing the region today. With a galvanised governance structure, a revised and expanded list of priority topics, and a stronger and more effective monitoring and evaluation system, the Strategy and its 10 participating countries are ready to begin a new era of macro-regional cooperation.

The Commission will continue to provide all necessary support and advice to the Strategy partners. It will invest time and resources to assist the region in meeting the overall objectives successfully. At the same time, the Commission underlines that the ultimate responsibility for implementing the Strategy rests with the participating countries and emphasises the importance of high-level, long-term political commitment from all countries involved to ensure that the Strategy meets its overall objectives.

The revised action plan offers solutions and provides new ideas on how to meet the challenges and opportunities that the Adriatic-Ionian region faces. The Commission strongly supports these endeavours and the revised action plan.