

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions — An Alpine macro-regional strategy for the European Union

(2015/C 019/07)

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THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the European Council conclusions of December 2013, which invited the European Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, to draw up an EU strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP) by June 2015;
2. stresses that this also significantly strengthens the role of the regions in the process of drawing up and implementing the EUSALP, the consequence being that, in order to promote further development, Europe needs to acknowledge and make the most of its own diversity rather than seek to suppress it. Macro-regional strategies are an instrument that can make a tangible contribution to capitalising on the specifics of development in different areas, respecting their natural potential and characteristics;
3. welcomes the concept of the macro-regional strategy as an integrated framework, endorsed by the European Council and supported by the European Parliament, for Member States and third countries in the same geographical area to tackle common challenges and step up cooperation regarding economic, social and territorial cohesion ⁽¹⁾;
4. is committed to continuing to support the development and implementation of macro-regional strategies, as previously stated in its opinion on the added value of macro-regional strategies ⁽²⁾, and stresses that the added value of existing macro-regional strategies is already recognised in both political and strategic terms ⁽³⁾;
5. notes that the EUSALP will be the fourth macro-regional strategy, after the EU strategies for the Baltic Sea region, the Danube region and Adriatic and Ionian region and, given the challenges facing other European macro-regions, declares its support for the establishment of additional macro-regional strategies;
6. welcomes the fact that the EUSALP will involve cooperation between five EU Member States (Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovenia) and two third countries (Liechtenstein and Switzerland), thus making a major contribution to pan-European integration. This integration component gives the macro-regional strategy particular added value ⁽⁴⁾;
7. stresses that it was the Alpine regions that took the initiative to produce a common strategic position for the Alps at EU level, and that the EUSALP was developed on the basis of a genuine bottom-up process, from the regions concerned, via national level in the Alpine States, up to European level;
8. welcomes the efforts being made by the European Commission, in consultation with the Alpine countries and regions, in the EUSALP steering committee to develop a specific action plan to implement the strategy;
9. welcomes the fact that a wide-ranging public consultation on the priorities developed to date for the EUSALP has given all citizens and stakeholders the opportunity to evaluate those priorities, to propose and prepare different or additional topics and to identify interested actors, in order to develop the right goals and the most appropriate tools to achieve the high level of development and prosperity sought by all local authorities in the Alpine region;
10. highlights the fact that there is already a long-standing tradition of cross-border cooperation in the Alpine region that has produced a variety of cooperation instruments since the 1970s. These include the Working Community of Alpine Countries, the Alps-Adriatic Alliance, the Alpine Convention, the EU Alpine Space Programme, bilateral and multilateral cooperation structures such as the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion and the European groupings of territorial cooperation *Senza Confini* and the Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino Euroregion, and various civil society organisations;

⁽¹⁾ COM(2013) 468 final.⁽²⁾ CDR5074-2013_00_00_TRA_AC.⁽³⁾ See Council conclusions of 22 October 2013 on the added value of macro-regional strategies.⁽⁴⁾ COM(2013) 468 final.

11. stresses that the EUSALP is heavily based on a bottom-up approach and is intended to incorporate the substantial work done by existing cross-border cooperation instruments in the Alpine region and further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of this wide-ranging cooperation under one roof;
12. points out that a key element of the added value provided by macro-regional strategies consists in tackling common challenges using targeted activities by interested actors, making the best possible use of appropriate financing instruments such as public-private partnerships;
13. notes that the EUSALP will provide joint responses to the challenges facing the Alpine region. These challenges include maintaining quality of life, a high level of environmental protection and sound economic development against a background of globalisation, climate change and demographic change, in particular fundamental structural changes in the fields of agriculture and tourism, deindustrialisation, the digital divide and limited access to services of general interest in certain areas;
14. stresses that the reference point for the strategy is the mountain range of the Alps, and that the Alpine region comprises both the mountainous region at its heart, as laid down in the scope of the Alpine convention, and its surrounding areas, including a number of large cities. These areas are linked together by close interactions and functional relationships, all of which influence economic, social and environmental development;
15. realises that the mountain areas often have different concerns and priorities from the surrounding areas and cities, and highlights the need to strengthen dialogue on an equal footing between the heartland of the Alpine region and the surrounding area, in order to strike the right balance between the interests of the people living in each area;
16. advocates taking a flexible approach to the EUSALP's area of application, so that the scope of strategic cooperation can be determined on a case-by-case basis, according to the requirements of the specific field of action and with due consideration for the functional relationships between the Alpine heartland and its surrounding area;

Objectives and themes of the EUSALP

17. shares the view that the EUSALP should be able to make a specific contribution, tailored to the needs of the Alpine region, to implementing the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, in order to further economic, social and territorial cohesion in Europe;
18. calls for the strategic priorities of the EUSALP to be chosen in such a way that the interests of the core Alpine mountain regions are prioritised and that those of the surrounding areas and their cities are given appropriate consideration, so that relations between these regions can be of mutual benefit;
19. believes that innovative approaches enabling the development-oriented components of the strategy to be reconciled with the need for environmental protection are of crucial importance in ensuring the success of the EUSALP; this is the only way of preserving and sustainably tapping into the potential of the Alpine region with its inhabitants, economic activity and nature in the heart of Europe;
20. refers to European Parliament Resolution 2013/2549 (RSP) of 23 May 2013 on a macro-regional strategy for the Alps, and also points out that the content of the strategy must be consistent with the Alpine Convention;
21. stresses that it is important for all local and regional stakeholders to work together as partners to develop and implement the EUSALP. It also welcomes the details so far drawn up by the EUSALP steering committee, with equal participation by the regions, States and European Commission, under the following three pillars: 'ensuring sustainable growth and promoting full employment, competitiveness and innovation by consolidating and diversifying specific economic activities with a view to reinforcing mutual solidarity between mountain and urban areas'; 'promoting a territorial development that is focused on an environmentally friendly mobility, reinforced academic cooperation, development of services, transports and communication infrastructures policy'; and 'promoting sustainable management of energy and natural and cultural resources and protecting the environment and preserving biodiversity and natural areas';

22. with regard to the integrated further development of these details in the action plan, calls for particular attention to be paid to the following themes: stimulating employment; developing alpine value chains, tourism and a network of Alpine businesses on the macro-regional scale; strengthening services of general interest and solidarity between people living in different areas of the Alpine region; improving networking and eliminating the digital divide in less favoured areas; boosting transport intermodality and interoperability, for example by linking local and regional transport networks to higher-level European transport infrastructure; seeking to shift freight transport from road to rail; improving energy efficiency and the sustainable generation of renewable energy, particularly hydroelectric power; making sustainable and efficient use of natural and cultural resources; and further developing natural hazard management in view of climate change, with particular attention to the protection of the hydrogeological structure and of the environment;

23. expects the action plan to develop synergies between the various existing programmes and to focus on a limited number of priorities so that resources can be concentrated;

Multilevel governance

24. notes with interest the European Commission's report on the governance of macro-regional strategies ⁽⁵⁾, but would point out that it does not take sufficient account of the decision-making role of the regions;

25. highlights the role of local and regional authorities in ensuring that the EUSALP takes the down-to-earth approach that the public expects. It is necessary to develop the right conditions so that local and regional authorities can also run flagship projects;

26. points out that the EUSALP can only be successful if the leadership of this multilevel governance process continues to be shared with regional and local political actors — including European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation — and if the subsidiarity principle enshrined in EU law is respected; it would be useful, in this connection, to encourage the participation of other social, economic and cultural stakeholders in the territories involved;

27. calls for methods to be developed for implementing the strategy that, in keeping with the principle of multilevel governance as set out in the Committee of the Regions' Charter ⁽⁶⁾, ensure that, within its competences, the regional level is involved on an equal footing with the national level;

28. stresses that its Alpine Macroregion interregional group, set up in June 2014, is intended to assist the European Commission and the Alpine states, via their national contact points, in developing and supporting a strategy for the Alps; to support the development of the action plan; to give the Alpine region a higher profile at regional, national and European level by emphasising its common identity; and thus to highlight the region's huge potential;

29. recommends that the EUSALP establish a rotating presidency, to be assumed by the Member States or regions from each of the Member States, to set the main guidelines for the strategy. On the basis of an agreed system of rotation, each of the Member States of the Alpine strategy would hold the presidency for one year. This would enable the states and regions involved to contribute in a balanced way to the development of the EUSALP and would spread the load of leading it evenly. The presidency could also be involved with establishing and organising a strategic forum;

30. recommends that the EUSALP Member States and regions create a coordinator position analogous to the European TEN-T coordinators. This coordinator would not hold any political office during his/her tenure or have any executive power, and would support the European Commission and the presidency and make it possible to embed the strategy more firmly within the European institutions;

31. recommends that the position of EUSALP coordinator should be filled by a public figure from the regions in question, with experience in the field of interregional and cross-border cooperation in the Alpine region. This is particularly vital in view of the bottom-up approach taken by the strategy;

32. takes the view that a balanced overall configuration of the political leadership structures should ensure that the interests of states and regions are given equal weight alongside the European Commission;

33. recommends that the European Commission play a key role in the strategic leadership of the EUSALP, in particular by ensuring that it is consistent with the EU's policies and positions and that the macro-regional concept is taken into consideration in EU measures, particularly in European financing programmes and instruments;

⁽⁵⁾ COM(2014) 284 final.

⁽⁶⁾ COR-2014-01728-00-00-PAC-TRA.

34. feels that governance of the implementation of the strategic priorities should start with the individual focal points within the 'pillars', with a view to spreading responsibilities widely, and that specific organisational forms will need to be developed, especially for cross-cutting issues such as climate change;

35. is quite convinced that it will be impossible to implement European strategies and policies effectively without multilevel governance, and recommends that the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation should also be envisaged as instruments for implementing strategies within their own areas of competence;

36. refers to European Parliament Resolution 2013/2549 (RSP) of 23 May 2013 on a macro-regional strategy for the Alps, and also points out that existing cross-border cooperation structures and networks should be involved in implementing the EUSALP;

37. realises that tangible results for ordinary Europeans can only be achieved by means of specific projects implementing the EUSALP action plan, and advocates removing legal and administrative obstacles to its implementation;

38. stresses that macro-regional strategies form an appropriate framework for involving civil society partners in the political decision-making process, in order to achieve synergies with existing initiatives and to optimise the use of resources; in this connection, and to make the involvement described above more tangible and the access and use of financial resources more effective, it seems expedient to establish cooperation agreements and protocols with these civil society bodies, such as industry associations, chambers of commerce, universities and other economic and social bodies in the participating areas;

39. advocates involving the Council of Europe, in particular the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, in the Alpine macro-regional strategy, particularly given that two of the states included in this macro-regional strategy — Liechtenstein and Switzerland — are not EU Member States, but are members of the Council of Europe;

Financing

40. welcomes the fact that the Common Provisions Regulation and European territorial cooperation mean that macro-regional priorities can be supported by all the Structural Funds, and urges the European Commission to determine how these funds can be used in line with the partnership agreements and regional operational programmes in the Alpine region;

41. recognises that the 'three noes rule' (no new regulation, no new EU institutions and no additional funds) helped ensure that European territorial cooperation funds were used more effectively in the regions where a macro-regional strategy is already in place. It would, however, underline the importance of longer-term funding. Long term funding is particularly necessary for organisations in charge of coordinating a strategy's implementation. The Member States concerned and their local and regional authorities must shoulder more responsibility, in the context of multilevel governance, and provide adequate resources for implementing the Alpine macro-regional strategy;

42. stresses, as it said in its opinions on existing macro-regional strategies ⁽⁷⁾, that there should also be 'three yeses' (more coordination in the use of existing funding, more institutional coordination and more new ideas and projects), and advocates getting local and regional authorities effectively involved in this coordination;

43. welcomes the fact that one of the priorities for the Alpine Space 2014-2020 cooperation programme will be used to support innovative governance models;

44. expects the EUSALP to achieve closer coordination of funding available at European, national, regional and local level. It therefore calls in particular on the European Commission and its services administering both operational programmes related to European Structural and Investment Funds and programmes under direct management to act within their remits in order to enable implementation of EUSALP objectives and actions within these instruments and policies.

Brussels, 3 December 2014.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
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⁽⁷⁾ See, for example, opinion CDR1272-2012_00_00_TRA_AC on the revised EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region.